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## Brand-enchanted meaningful work

### Employees' constructions of their work as meaningful in luxury-brand organisations

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# Brand-enchanted meaningful work

Employees' constructions of their work as meaningful in luxury-brand organisations

RACHEL WALDO | DEPARTMENT OF BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION



# Brand-enchanted meaningful work

## Employees' constructions of their work as meaningful in luxury-brand organisations

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Brands play a role in employees' meaning-making, yet we know surprisingly little about how they contribute to employees' experiences of meaningful work. In *Brand-enchanted meaningful work*, Rachel Waldo examines how employees construct their work as meaningful in organisational contexts shaped by branding and symbolism. Based on in-depth interviews with employees in luxury-brand organisations, the findings identify the brand as a source of meaningfulness and illustrate the mechanisms that employees use to draw on this source. The thesis thus offers new insights for both research and organizational practice.

**RACHEL WALDO** is a researcher in organisation studies who specialises in employees' experiences of work, and particularly their construction of work as meaningful. Her research explores how brands contribute to employees' construction of work as meaningful in the context of luxury-brand organisations.



Brand-enchanted meaningful work



# Brand-enchanted meaningful work

Employees' constructions of their work as  
meaningful in luxury-brand organisations

Rachel Waldo



**LUND**  
UNIVERSITY

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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**Abstract:**

In this thesis, I explore how brands influence employees' constructions of their work as meaningful, and what this says about how they construct their work as meaningful. I take my cue from the literature about meaningful work, which has shown how various sources of meaningfulness interact, from the characteristics of the job and the self to interpersonal and material relations, and all their related mechanisms.

I have thus conducted interpretative qualitative research about the luxury-brand sector, using 39 in-depth interviews with employees of LVMH (Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy). Inspired by narrative research, I have taken a life-story approach in the interviewing process to understand my respondents' experiences of work in the broader context of their life trajectories. I also distinguish between three types of storytelling: organisational narratives; employees' stories; and my interpretative account. In the interpretative process, I draw on my own experience as a former LVMH employee to provide context and a deeper understanding of employees' stories.

Through multiple close readings of my transcripts, I identify recurring patterns and contradictions, resolved into five distinct categories of stories that employees tell to imbue their work with positive meanings and ultimately to construct it as meaningful. Drawing on these categories of stories, I develop two new concepts: brand enchantment and brand-enchanted meaningful work. I define brand enchantment as a process by which employees connect emotionally with the brand by embracing and sustaining its symbolic meanings and the emotions they evoke. I define brand-enchanted meaningful work as the experience of work as meaningful based on the brand's symbolic meanings and the emotions they evoke. I have also developed a model that shows their relationships, the role of the brand in constructing meaningfulness, and its related mechanisms by which work becomes meaningful.

These two concepts and model add to the current understanding of meaningful work by identifying the brand as a source of meaningfulness. They also deepen our understanding of the agentic and structural mechanisms involved in the construction of meaningful work, as well as the emotional mechanisms.

**Key words:** brand-enchanted meaningful work, brand enchantment, luxury brands, emotions, materiality, social recognition

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# Brand-enchanted meaningful work

Employees' constructions of their work as  
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Rachel Waldo



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# Abbreviations

|      |                             |
|------|-----------------------------|
| F&L  | fashion and leather         |
| HR   | human resources             |
| JCM  | job characteristics model   |
| LVMH | Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton |
| P&C  | perfumes and cosmetics      |
| W&S  | wines and spirits           |



# Acknowledgements

Je n'ai pas l'angoisse de la page blanche mais celle de la page écrite.  
Jean D'Ormesson

My PhD journey started more than a decade ago. I still remember the conversation with my long-time friend Anna Pfeiffer that led me to apply for a doctoral position. I cycled home excited by the decision I had just made, but also uncertain whether I would be able to do it. From the very beginning, doubt was a significant part of my experience. I had made a choice that took me outside my comfort zone. Looking back, this PhD has been both a professional and a personal journey during which I have learnt to trust my own ability and to take one step at a time in order to cross the finish line.

As someone who tends to think in big pictures but struggles with the small steps of implementation, I have learnt the importance of taking one step at a time. In the early years of my PhD, when dropping my youngest son off at school each morning, I would pass a block of flats being built. Day after day, I watched the project take shape: trees were cleared to make space, foundations were laid, cables appeared, walls rose. For more than two years, I witnessed how an entire building came into existence through a succession of small and often unremarkable steps. Each stage relied on the one before it, and the finished structure was only possible because countless individual pieces had been put in place over time.

Watching this process became a reminder of my own work. A PhD can easily feel overwhelming when viewed as a whole, but the construction site taught me that large projects are built gradually. When I felt stuck or uncertain, I tried to focus on the next step rather than the finished product. Over time, this became my guiding principle: one step at a time. Writing this thesis often meant searching for pieces that did not yet seem connected and trying to bring them together without always knowing what the final shape would be. There were moments of progress and moments of doubt, but like the building I observed each morning, the project advanced little by little. One step at a time, my project eventually came together.

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Thank you to my parents, Raymond and Josette, and to my step-parents, Mona and Ingemar, for your belief in me and your encouragement not to give up. I know how proud you are today, and I wish Ingemar could have been here to celebrate with us. To my sister Alexandra and my brother Yann, your resilience and strength have been an inspiration to me.

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Finally, I have the luxury of time to be glad I never gave up.



# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Meet my friend

Smile! It is a beautiful sunny day. The bride and groom have just come out of the magnificent church of Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois in central Paris. When the Louvre was a royal palace, Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois was its church. Ever since it was built hundreds of years ago, important people have crossed the threshold of the church – royalty, people of art and law – and it is still a fashionable venue today, for example hosting the wedding of Tony Parker and Eva Longoria in 2007, which attracted significant media attention.

A few steps away, the legendary Pont Neuf – the oldest bridge in Paris, despite being called the ‘new bridge’ – provides the perfect setting for their wedding pictures. The beautiful bride and her maids of honour smile for the camera and, in chorus, gracefully display their beautiful luxury accessories from the brand of the company that the bride works for.

From the historical setting of the church, the wedding celebrations moved on to the walls of a magnificent sixteenth-century castle in Burgundy, outside Paris. Throughout the wedding, the brand was there in multiple ways, from the little chocolates shaped like the brand’s products to the presence of my friend, who works for the brand, and her well-dressed colleagues literally wearing the brand in the form of accessories.

What struck me most about that day was not simply the omnipresence of the brand, but the way the brand, its products, and my friend’s colleagues appeared to reinforce the luxuriousness of the celebration itself. They seemed perfectly aligned with the atmosphere and image of the wedding. It brought home to me

the importance the brand held in my friend's life, and led me to wonder whether it also played a role in her perception and experience of work. I started to ask myself whether luxury brands shape how employees, like my friend, perceive their work, even when the reality may differ from the glamour and luxury associated with the brand. Does the brand make my friend's work more meaningful for her?

## 1.2 Meaningful work

Meaningful work has become a central topic in organisational research. It refers to individuals' association of work with positive meanings (Vuori et al., 2012), and their interpretation and perception of work as valuable both to themselves and to others (Rosso et al., 2010; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017). Further, it is understood as a subjective and relational experience (Lysova et al., 2023a; Bailey et al., 2025), which is constructed in specific episodes of work (Bailey & Madden, 2016) and closely tied to how employees see themselves (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003).

Organisational scholars have identified many outcomes of meaningful work (Bailey & Madden, 2016), which are generally regarded as beneficial not only for employees, but also for employers, such as employee motivation (for example, Bailey & Madden, 2019), work satisfaction (for example, Vuori et al., 2012; Allan et al., 2019), and employee well-being (for example, Allan et al., 2017; Scott, 2022). Studies also show that meaningful work is important not only for one's job, but also for perceiving life as meaningful (Yeoman, 2014; Bailey et al., 2017). Since the 1960s, several scholars have even argued that meaningful work constitutes an essential human need (Frankl, 1963; Chalofsky, 2003; Yeoman, 2014; Tommasi et al., 2020).

Considering how meaningful work can positively impact employees' life at work and beyond, organisational scholars have sought to understand its sources and the mechanisms by which it operates (Rosso et al., 2010; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017; Martela & Pessi, 2018). For my purposes in this book, I have taken the sources of meaningful work to refer to the origins of meaningfulness (Rosso et al., 2010), whereas mechanisms refer to the broad generative processes by which employees construct work as meaningful from the different sources of meaningful work.

As early as the 1970s, Hackman and Oldham (1975, 1976) defined the boundaries of the research field by identifying the objective characteristics of employees' tasks as a key source of meaningfulness. In their job characteristics

model (JCM), they highlight skill variety, task significance, and autonomy (Hackman & Oldham, 1975, 1976). While job characteristics remain one of the main sources of meaningful work (Martela & Pessi, 2018), meaningful work scholars have shown, for the past decades, the importance of the self (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso et al., 2010; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017; Martela & Pessi, 2018; Fletcher & Schofield, 2021; Scott, 2022), of interpersonal relations (Müller et al., 2019; Laaser & Karlsson, 2022; Laaser & Bolton, 2022; Lysova et al., 2023a; Humle & Frandsen, 2026), and of material relations (for example, Lepisto, 2022; Rostain & Clarke, 2025; Wiering, 2026). While the literature has identified these four sources of meaningful work and charted some of their complexity and interplay, I would argue that the same sources may not fully explain where meaningfulness comes from in workplaces overtly shaped around branding and symbolism. One potential source that is not only undertheorized, but has received limited attention in the literature of meaningful work and yet might be relevant in such organisational contexts is the brand.

Meaning and meaning-making, meanwhile, have been widely explored by scholars of critical management, especially those writing about brands and branding in the 2010s (for example, Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Brannan et al., 2015; Endrissat et al., 2017; Müller, 2017; Frandsen et al., 2018). However, while meaning-making plays a central part in these studies, the brand has not been directly discussed as a potential source of meaningful work. In this thesis, I follow the brand as a promising line of inquiry and explore its impact on employees and their work. Exploring the brand as a source of meaningful work might also help us gauge the nature of the relationship between the four recognised sources of meaningfulness, namely the characteristics of the job itself, the self, and interpersonal and material relations, because the brand is strongly associated with employees' identity construction (for example, Brannan et al., 2015; Endrissat et al., 2017) and is conceptualised as mediator of relations between stakeholders (Lury, 2004).

Further, existing research has identified various mechanisms by which meaningful work is constructed. Scholars have largely focused on the organisational mechanisms, and particularly the role of leaders in fostering meaningfulness through practices such as job enrichment (for example, May et al., 2004) and job design (Garg & Rastogi, 2006). However, some scholars have also singled out the employees' agency in constructing their work as meaningful (for example, Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Bailey & Madden, 2016; Müller

et al., 2019; Fontana et al., 2023). By recognising employees' agency, these scholars show that employees can ascribe meaningfulness to their work even in occupations that might not appear objectively meaningful (for example, Bailey & Madden, 2016). Notably, some scholars combine the two perspectives by demonstrating that meaningfulness is co-constructed by the organisation and its employees (Boje & Baskin, 2011; Endrissat et al., 2015; Carton, 2018; Lysova et al., 2019a). Lysova and colleagues (2019a) develop this more fully by introducing a multilevel framework of meaningful work, which includes the interaction between job characteristics, individuals, organisations, and society.

In the literature about meaningful work, scholars emphasise the cognitive dimension of its mechanisms, showing how individuals evaluate (for example, Martela & Pessi, 2018) or make sense of their work (for example, Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Yet, a few scholars highlight emotional mechanisms (Rosso et al., 2010; Lepisto, 2022; Martikainen et al., 2022; Wiering, 2026). Thus, a review of the literature suggests it is time for a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms by which employees construct their work as meaningful – and not only how the structural, agentic mechanisms contribute to the construction of meaningful work, but also how emotional processes are at play in these dynamics.

Exploring the brand as a potential source of meaningful work can also contribute to an understanding of these mechanisms of meaningfulness. Scholars of organisations (for example, Hatch & Schultz, 2001, 2003, 2008; Kornberger, 2010, 2015) and consumer research (for example, Holt, 2004) have concluded that brands are themselves co-constructed by the interpretations and meanings attached to them by organisations and their audiences, including employees. Organisational scholars have also confirmed the emotional dimension of brands (Allison, 2013; Holzer et al., 2016; Wang et al. 2018).

### 1.3 Brands as a source of meaning-making

Organisational scholars have shown that in brand-based organisations, the brand is a strategic tool for meaning-making (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008). Organisations and their managers use brand values and image to guide HR practices (for example, Russell & Brannan, 2016) and to shape expectations about how employees should feel, appear, and behave (for example, Pettinger, 2004). Scholars have also shown how employees use the brand as a meaning-making resource to construct a positive identity (Jeanes, 2013; Brannan et al., 2015;

Endrissat et al., 2017). As a result, the organisational literature about branding has almost exclusively explored and conceptualised the role of the brand through the lens of identity, with the brand's symbolic and cultural meanings (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008) 'speaking' to the employees' identity.

While this body of literature does not directly explore the brand's role in creating meaningfulness, scholars hint at its potential, particularly in the brand's significance in shaping employees' identity construction. Numerous studies have examined employees' experiences in organisational settings where daily work is routine or exacting, for example in call centres (Frandsen, 2015), consulting (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Brannan et al., 2015), or retail work (for example, Pettinger, 2004; Endrissat et al., 2017). Scholars have found that in such disenchanted organisational contexts, employees use the brand meanings to construct positive identities, even when performing demanding or monotonous tasks. For example, Endrissat and colleagues (2017) show how grocery shop employees, despite performing uncreative tasks, drew on the symbolic meanings of the brand to construct an identity linked to creativity. Similarly, Brannan and colleagues (2015) highlight how employees, who work in front-line service level (responding to clients' first calls) in consulting organisations, engage with the meanings of the brand to maintain a positive sense of self, even under routine or exacting working conditions.

## 1.4 Research aim

My aim with combining the literature about meaningful work with organisational research on branding is to deepen our understanding of how employees experience and construct meaningfulness in brand-based organisations. More specifically, I address the following question:

How does the brand contribute to employees' construction of their work as meaningful?

To explore this research question, I focus on luxury-brand organisations, which provide a particularly relevant context. The branding of luxury brands relies heavily on symbolic value (Kapferer, 2012), emotional appeal (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2009), and material aesthetics (Catry, 2003), constructed in branding narratives that emphasise exclusivity, extraordinariness, handcrafted products,

and the figure of a charismatic founder and his legacy (for example, Catry, 2003; Dion & Arnould, 2011; Kapferer, 2012). However, in the context of employees' work, the symbolic world of luxury brands often contrasts with the more disenchanted, routine realities of organisational life (Sieben & Haunschild, 2012). Exploring meaningful work in luxury-brand organisations is an opportunity to examine not only the role of the brand in the construction of work as meaningful, but also the ways symbolism, emotions, and materiality interact in employees' experiences of work, contributing to a broader understanding of meaningfulness in contexts shaped by strong branding.

## 1.5 Methodological approach

To address my research question, I conducted an interpretative qualitative study, which is well suited to explore how individuals interpret their experiences and construct meanings (Prasad, 2005). I also drew on insights from narrative research, which emphasises that individuals' experiences are understood through the stories they tell (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and that identities are constructed through stories (Fisher, 1984, 1985; Bruner, 1987; Gergen, 1999; Sacks, 2015; Brown, 2017). These insights informed both my interview and analytical processes.

First, the interviews were informed by a life-story approach, which emphasises understanding present experiences in relation to broader life trajectories (Essers, 2009). Accordingly, the interview questions invited participants to reflect not only on their current work experiences, but also on experiences preceding their employment in the luxury sector. My aim was to situate participants' experience of work within a broader personal and biographical context, and to capture dimensions of the self beyond work (Essers, 2009).

Second, narrative research informed the analytical distinction between stories, narratives, and accounts. Drawing on Boje and colleagues (2016) and Svane (2020), I have used 'narratives' to refer to the cultural and symbolic narratives constructed by organisations about the brand, its products, and its founder. 'Stories' refers to participants' recounting of their lived experiences. 'Accounts' refers to the interpretations developed in this thesis through the researcher's engagement with participants' stories and organisational narratives.

The primary data for my study was 39 in-depth, open-ended interviews with employees of luxury-brand organisations in LVMH (Louis Vuitton Moët

Hennessy), one of the world's largest, most prestigious luxury groups. Open-ended interviews allowed participants to tell their own stories, providing rich insights into how meaningful work is experienced and constructed (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017). In addition, I drew on my own past experiences as an employee of the LVMH group, and on more recent experiences interacting with employees working in the luxury-brand sector (for instance, at my friend's wedding). I used personal reflections as a secondary method to provide context to my interviewees' stories.

Data analysis followed an abductive process, involving repeated reading and rereading of all interview transcripts and a continual dialogue between theory and data. The iterative process of writing and rewriting allowed patterns and themes to emerge (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007), generating the categories of stories as presented in my findings (see Chapter 7). The interviewing and analytic processes focused on how individuals make sense of their social world and their experiences of work.

## 1.6 Theoretical contributions

From my findings, I develop two main concepts: brand enchantment and brand-enchanted meaningful work. I define brand enchantment as a process by which an employee connects emotionally with a brand by embracing and sustaining its symbolic meanings and the emotions they evoke. I define brand-enchanted meaningful work as an employee's experience of work as meaningful based on the brand's symbolic meanings and the emotions they evoke. I also develop a model (Figure 12, p.191) that shows how these two concepts relate to each other, the role of the brand as a source of meaningful work, and its related mechanisms by which employees construct work as meaningful.

I thus make two main contributions to the literature about meaningful work, expanding the current knowledge of its sources and mechanisms. The first contribution is the identification of the brand as a source of meaningful work. This adds to the literature about meaningful work by highlighting a source of meaningful work that is symbolic. It also adds a layer of complexity to our understanding of the sources of meaningful work by showing how it influences other sources, including work tasks, the self, and interpersonal and material relations.

The second main contribution is the identification of brand enchantment as a mechanism of meaningful work, which highlights the interplay between the structural, agentic mechanisms of meaningfulness, as well as the emotional dynamics within them. My findings also contribute to the literature by highlighting how emotions triggered by brand materiality (products, founder, brand-related events) and brand-based recognition contribute to employees' construction of work as meaningful.

Together, these two contributions add to the literature by demonstrating the role of the organisation, employees, and society in co-constructing meaningfulness. They also challenge the dominant cognitive perspective in the literature about meaningful work by demonstrating that it can emerge through an emotional process connected to the brand.

## 1.7 What comes next?

Having positioned my research in the relevant academic literature while critically engaging with the existing research, in Chapter 2 I turn to the theoretical foundations of my thesis. I define the concept of meaningful work and I review the literature, highlighting the different sources and mechanisms by which work can be experienced as meaningful.

In Chapter 3, I review the meaning-making role of brands as set out in the organisational literature about corporate and internal branding. I review not only how an organisation uses its brand to manage meanings within its organisation, but also how employees use the brand as a meaning-making resource with which they construct positive identities.

In Chapter 4, I zoom in on the world of luxury brands. I start by reviewing the literature specifically about luxury branding, and highlight three narratives created by organisations about the brand, its products, and its founder. I then review the literature about luxury work, and in particular its precariousness and its emotional and aesthetic demands. I end by considering the role of the brand in employees' perceptions of their work.

In Chapter 5, I introduce my methodological approach, explaining the interpretivist nature of my research, and providing insights into my research practice, and the demonstrable rigour and quality of the research process. I also reflect on my experiences and progress as a doctoral researcher.

In Chapter 6, I detail the empirical setting of the study, including the respondents – office workers in brand and non-brand related positions – and their luxury-brand organisations, the wines and spirits, cosmetics, and fashion houses at LVMH (Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy).

In Chapter 7, I analyse my respondents' stories, and present five key categories of stories that my interviewees tell to construct their work for the luxury-brand organisation as meaningful, framing both themselves and their work in a positive light.

In Chapter 8, I introduce and discuss the model of brand-enchanted meaningful work, with its interrelated core concepts of brand enchantment and brand-enchanted meaningful work, and how they extend the theoretical framework of meaningful work – the brand by being a source of meaningful work; brand enchantment by being a mechanism of meaningful work – highlighting the structural, agentic dimensions of how meaningfulness is constructed, as well as the emotional processes they involve.

In Chapter 9 I summarise the practical implications and limitations of my research.



## 2 Meaningful work

This chapter establishes the theoretical foundation for my doctoral research. I begin by defining the concept of meaningful work as it is understood in this thesis. I then review the literature about meaningful work, highlighting its multidimensional, complex nature (Bailey & Madden, 2019) by examining its various sources and the mechanisms by which it is experienced.

Here, sources refer to the key elements from which meaningfulness comes from (Rosso et al., 2010). They include job characteristics, the self, and interpersonal and material relations. When Rosso and colleagues (2010) use the term ‘mechanisms’, they mean psychological and relational mechanisms such as belonging, alignment, or authenticity. In this thesis, I define mechanisms as broad generative processes by which meaningfulness is constructed across different sources of meaningful work. While analytically distinct, sources and mechanisms are closely interconnected: sources provide the basis for meaningfulness, whereas mechanisms explain the processes by which meaningful work is constructed in relation to sources (viz. job characteristics, the self, interpersonal relations, and material relations). I identify first structural, agentic mechanisms. I then trace the dominance of cognitive processes and review studies about the emotional mechanisms of meaningfulness.

### 2.1 What is meaningful work?

Meaningful work was identified as a fundamental human need as early as the 1960s (Frankl, 1963; Chalofsky, 2003; Yeoman, 2014; Tommasi et al., 2020).

More recently, Tommasi and colleagues (2020, p. 8) have written that ‘considering that most of the people have to spend at least 40 h per week, for 40+ weeks per year, for 40+ years of their life, at work, the presence of meaningful work becomes fundamentally essential for workers, organisations, and systems.’

Research has shown the importance of meaningful work not only for individuals’ working life, but also beyond it (for example, Yeoman, 2014; Michaelson et al., 2014; Bailey et al., 2017; Allan et al., 2019). With its importance already accepted, meaningful work has been explored and conceptualised in multiple fields, including organisational studies, psychology, sociology, philosophy, and business ethics (Rosso et al., 2010; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017; Martela & Pessi, 2018), with particularly strong contributions from sociology and psychology.

In organisation studies, the first wave of research about meaningful work was in the mid-1970s (see Hackman & Oldham, 1976), before it re-emerged in the early 2000s in influential studies by Pratt and Ashforth (2003), Chalofsky and Krishna (2009), Rosso and colleagues (2010), and others. In recent years, there has been a resurgence in interest, reflected in special issues of journals (Bailey et al., 2019a; Lysova et al., 2023b), books (for example, Yeoman et al., 2019), and reviews (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017; Martela & Pessi, 2018; Bailey et al., 2019b; Lysova et al., 2019a; Blustein et al., 2023; Bailey & Madden, 2025) that have further advanced and consolidated the literature. Recent research highlights the continued evolution of the field, including ongoing work on how developments such as artificial intelligence may shape employees’ experiences of meaningful work (Bankins & Formosa, 2023).

In the organisational literature, research about meaningful work has shown the connection between meaningful work and a wide range of positive outcomes, both for organisations and employees (Bailey et al., 2019). Previous research has, for example, linked meaningful work as an antecedent to employee motivation (Chalofsky, 2003; May et al., 2004; Pavlish & Hunt, 2012; Bailey & Madden, 2019), employee engagement (May et al., 2004; Fairlie, 2011; Allan et al., 2019; Fletcher & Schofield, 2021), job involvement (Vuori et al., 2012), work satisfaction (Pavlish & Hunt, 2012; Bailey & Madden, 2016; Allan et al., 2017; Carton, 2018; Allan et al., 2019), and commitment (Bailey & Madden, 2016), as well as to lower levels of absenteeism and staff turnover (Soane et al., 2013) and better job performance (Bailey & Madden, 2016; Carton, 2018),

productivity (Pavlish & Hunt, 2012) and employee well-being (Steger et al., 2012; Allan et al., 2017; Scott, 2022).

However, while there is established research about meaningful work, there is no agreement as to its definition (Rosso et al., 2010; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017; Martela & Pessi, 2018; Bailey et al., 2019b; Lysova et al., 2019a). Martela and Pessi (2018) found as many as 36 definitions of meaningful work in their review of the literature, while Bailey and colleagues (2019b) point out that, in some studies, meaningful work is not even defined. Lepisto and Pratt (2017) find there is considerable variation in how meaningfulness is conceptualised. Some definitions of meaningful work overlap with some related concepts such as work satisfaction, organisational commitment, loyalty (Cheney et al., 2008), or work motivation (Chalofsky, 2003). However, according to Cheney and colleagues (2008), meaningful work is distinct from related concepts because it raises fundamental questions about what work means to employees.

The lack of consensus about what constitutes meaningful work has led to several recent efforts to clarify it and better understand all its dimensions (Rosso et al., 2010; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017; Martela & Pessi, 2018). In a review of meaningful work, Martela and Pessi (2018) identify three key dimensions that define meaningful work: significance, broader purpose, and self-realisation. They conclude that significance is an overall evaluation of the value of work, ‘a sense of work’s inherent value and having a work worth doing’ (p. 6), while broader purpose refers to the sense that work contributes to a greater good beyond oneself, typically by serving others while self-realisation refers to the need to experience work as aligned with one’s self-image, values, and personal. Martela and Pessi (2018) argue that the three dimensions of meaningful work should not be viewed in isolation, but as interacting with one another. From this perspective, significance refers to a broader dimension than the other two, with broader purpose and self-realisation as its primary pathways.

Some scholars use meaningful work and meaning of work as synonyms (for example, Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Chalofsky, 2003; Scott, 2022), while others differentiate between them (for example, Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso et al., 2010; Bailey et al., 2017; Martela & Pessi, 2018) or see meaningful work as a subcategory of the meanings of work (Cheney et al., 2008). Rosso and colleagues (2010, p. 94) explain that ‘while meaning is “the output of having made sense of something”, meaningfulness is about “the *amount* of significance” one attaches to something’. While meanings of work can be both positive and negative, Bailey

and colleagues (2017, p. 417) argue that the term ‘meaningful work’ ‘contains an implicit positive bias from the individual’s perspective’. Martela and Pessi (2018) make a distinction between meanings (descriptive) and meaningfulness (evaluative). For them, meaning describes how one understands work, while meaningfulness reflects the evaluation of how well work fulfils important values or purposes.

I use meaningful work and meaningfulness interchangeably (Rosso et al., 2010; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017). Aligned with an interpretivist, constructivist view, I define meaningful work as individuals’ association of their work with positive meanings (Rosso et al., 2010; Vuori et al., 2012; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017) and their self-perception of their work as valuable for themselves and others (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). In this view, Vuori and colleagues (2012, p. 233) posit there is ‘no objective criterion for defining which associations are positive’, adding that:

When people experience their work as meaningful, they associate it strongly with positive things that can relate to, for example, the outcomes of work or the way the person feels while working.

Meaningful work can thus be understood as a subjective personal experience (Vuori et al., 2012; Yeoman, 2014; Martela & Pessi, 2018; Bailey & Madden, 2019). It is also accepted that meaningful work occurs episodically in relation to specific events (Bailey & Madden, 2016; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Tommasi et al., 2020). It aligns with Lysova and colleagues’ conceptualisation (2023a) of meaningful work as a state-level experience, suggesting that it is not a stable characteristic, but rather something that varies from moment to moment or day to day.

Meaningful work may also be conceptualised as being shaped by individuals’ identity (for example, Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009), as experienced in relation to others (for example, Lysova et al., 2023a; Bailey et al., 2025), and as influenced by wider factors in and beyond the organisation (Kuhn et al., 2008; Fletcher & Schofield, 2021).

I will begin start by exploring the key sources of meaningfulness in the literature.

## 2.2 Sources of meaningfulness

As outlined above, sources refer to the key elements from which meaningfulness derives (Rosso et al., 2010). The literature shows that the experience of meaningful work is complex and emerges from multiple sources (Rosso et al., 2010; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017; Martela & Pessi, 2018, Bailey et al., 2019b; Bailey & Madden, 2019; Lysova et al., 2019a; Blustein et al., 2023). While work tasks have traditionally been regarded, and continue to be regarded, as one of the primary sources of meaningfulness (Martela & Pessi, 2018), organisational scholars have increasingly discussed and explored identity-related sources since the early 2000s (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009) and, more recently, relational sources (Madden & Bailey, 2019; Schnell et al. 2019; Laaser & Bolton, 2022; Lysova et al., 2023a; Bailey et al., 2025), including employees' relations with materiality (Lepisto, 2022; Rostain & Clarke, 2025; Wiering, 2026). The growing body of research about meaningful work has expanded our understanding of meaningful work, particularly by highlighting its complex multidimensional nature.

### 2.2.1 Job characteristics

In the literature about meaningful work, the nature of employees' work has been identified as a primary source of meaningfulness as early as the 1970s (for example, Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Martela & Pessi, 2018). Hackman and Oldham's JCM (1976) was an early contribution in establishing specific job characteristics as central sources of meaningful work, and they had a significant influence on organisational research in this area (Bailey et al., 2019b; Laaser & Karlsson, 2022). Although they took a positivist line, they have informed both positivist and interpretivist approaches to meaningful work. In the JCM, Hackman and Oldham (1976) identify three intrinsic, objective qualities of work tasks that contribute to employees' experience of work as meaningful: skill variety, task significance, and autonomy. Hackman and Oldham (1975; 1976) define skill variety as using multiple skills and talents in a range of activities; autonomy as having freedom, independence and discretion in how work is performed; and task significance as the job's impact on others' lives or work. Recent studies of meaningful work still draw on the job characteristics model (for example, Allan et al., 2019; De Boeck et al., 2019). This exemplifies

how foundational the model has been and its significant impact on the state of the art.

For example, in the literature, working conditions that foster autonomy, self-determination, and control over working methods are strongly linked to the experience of meaningful work (for example, Fairlie, 2011; Roessler, 2012; Allan et al., 2016; Anthun & Innstrand, 2016; Tims et al., 2016; Martela et al., 2021; Laaser & Karlsson, 2022; Rostain & Clarke, 2025). According to Anthun and Innstrand (2016), job autonomy is the most significant predictor of a meaningful experience of work among experienced, older employees in higher education. Bailey and Madden (2017) find that autonomy and control of working hours enhance the perception of meaningfulness among all three of their participant groups: refuse collectors, stonemasons, and academics.

Scholars also emphasise the importance of developing skills and knowledge at work if people are to experience work as meaningful (for example, Vuori et al., 2012; Berthoin Antal et al., 2018; Dhanpat et al., 2025; Rostain & Clarke, 2025). For example, Vuori and colleagues (2012) show that one of the tactics used by employees to construct their work as meaningful is to develop their skills and knowledge. As a result, meaningfulness is often associated with high-skilled jobs (Bailey & Madden, 2017; Rostain & Clarke, 2025; Schaefer & Schneider, 2026).

In the literature about meaningful work, it is job significance in particular that is considered central to how employees experience and construct their work as meaningful (for example, Humphrey et al., 2007; Rosso et al., 2010; Allan et al., 2018; Martela & Pessi, 2018; Martela, 2023; Tommasi et al., 2025; Bailey et al., 2025). It is standard in the literature for job significance to be associated with contributing to something beyond the self. For example, Martela and Pessi's review (2018) identifies a sense of broader purpose as a pathway to job significance. Rosso and colleagues identify 'contribution' as the dimension of meaningful work that refers to 'the meaningfulness of actions perceived as significant and/or done in service of something greater than the self' (2010, p. 115).

The centrality of the job's contribution as a source of meaningful work has fostered the view that some occupations are more meaningful than others (Rosso et al., 2010), because they provide 'objectively "meaningful" jobs' (Fletcher & Schofield, 2021, p. 2976) by contributing to the greater good. This has led to a concentration of empirical studies in occupational settings where contributions to the welfare of others are explicitly and widely acknowledged, such as healthcare

– for example, eldercare workers (Clausen & Borg, 2011; Tufte et al., 2012), nurses (Pavlish & Hunt, 2012; Pavlish et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2023; Bailey et al., 2025), paediatric and occupational therapists (Smith & Kinsella, 2009), hospital lab staff (Müller et al., 2019), healthcare workers (Lysova et al., 2023a), and doctors (Hussain et al., 2025) – religious roles such as priests (Bailey & Madden, 2016), police officers (Jermier et al., 1989), humanitarian workers (Mather, 2008; Florian et al., 2019), volunteers (Taylor & Roth, 2019; Toraldo et al., 2019; Hatami et al., 2025), social entrepreneurs (Symon & Whiting, 2019), teachers (Lysova et al., 2023a), lawyers (Bailey et al., 2025), and zookeepers (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Such studies reinforce the conceptualisation of meaningful work as being inherently tied to altruistic or prosocial contributions.

The centrality of the job's contribution as a source of meaningful work is also evident in the understanding that a personal calling makes work meaningful. A calling is defined as a career experienced as deeply meaningful and oriented towards serving the greater good (for example, Wrzesniewski et al., 1997; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Duffy et al., 2011; Duffy & Dik, 2013; Duffy et al., 2014; Dik & Shimizu, 2019; Duffy et al., 2019; Lysova et al., 2019b; Fontana et al., 2023).

A review of the literature about meaningful work thus points to the centrality of certain job characteristics as key sources of meaningful work (Martela & Pessi, 2018), and in particular the significance of one's job – the extent to which work contributes to something greater than the self (Rosso et al., 2010). However, in the last two decades, the scholarship about meaningful work has also shown the complexity of meaningfulness by identifying other sources and how they interact with work. I therefore focus first on the self as a source of meaningful work, before discussing relational sources.

### 2.2.2 The self

Since the early 2000s, research about meaningful work has shifted from focusing mainly on job characteristics as a source of meaningfulness to considering how the individual's self in relation to their work contributes to meaningfulness (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003).

Pratt and Ashforth (2003) emphasise that individuals interpret the world through the lens of their identity, including what is meaningful in the workplace. As a consequence, they argue that organisations can create meaningfulness at work by influencing the factors that have a positive influence on employees' identity. Wrzesniewski and Dutton argue that behind job-crafting lies the employees' motivation to create a positive identity through their work, because 'job crafting is a creative and improvised process that captures how individuals locally adapt their jobs in ways that create and sustain a viable definition of the work they do and who they are at work' (2001, p. 180). These scholars, in discussing how meaningful work is not only shaped by individuals' work identity, but also shapes identity, have identified the reciprocal relationship between identity and work.

In the literature about meaningful work, an employee's self is often framed relative to their values, interests, aspirations (for example, Martela and Pessi, 2018), motivations, and beliefs (for example, Rosso et al., 2010). In the past thirty years, some have addressed the importance of the alignment between work and an employee's self if work is to be experienced as meaningful (Kahn, 1990; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Chalofsky, 2003; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Rosso et al., 2010; Chalofsky & Cavallaro, 2013; Dik et al. 2013; Kira & Balkin, 2014; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017; Martela & Pessi, 2018; Fletcher & Schofield, 2021; Scott, 2022). According to Rosso and colleagues, one of the pathways by which meaningful work is created is self-connection, 'the meaningfulness of actions that bring individuals closer into alignment with the way they see themselves' (2010, p. 115). Pratt and Ashforth (2003) write that individuals make their work tasks purposeful by aligning them with their desired identities. According to Martela and colleagues (2018), what matters to individuals is a sense that their work aligns with how they see themselves as well as their values and interests.

Addressing the importance of alignment to experiencing work as meaningful, some scholars have suggested that meaningful work may also depend on the extent to which work enables individuals to express identities that remain coherent across work and non-work domains (Thompson & Bunderson, 2001; Rosso et al., 2010). One way to do that is for employees to integrate, in their work, activities associated with non-work domains, making work feel less like work and more playful (Rosso et al., 2010).

In the literature about meaningful work, alignment is also closely related to the idea of an authentic or true self (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Lips-Wiersma, 2002; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Martela & Pessi, 2018; Symon & Whiting, 2019). In Lips-Wiersma & Wright (2012), one subcategory of ‘developing and becoming self’ is ‘staying true to oneself’. Rosso and colleagues (2010) identify, in their review, authenticity, which refers to a sense of alignment and coherence with one’s true self. Chalofsky (2003) writes about the balanced self, one aspect of which is the balance of work self and personal self.

At the heart of this body of literature is the idea of realising oneself at work in order to perceive work as meaningful (for example, Lips-Wiersma, 2002; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Martela et al., 2008; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017). Martela and Pessi write that self-realisation is one way to attain meaningfulness, which they define as ‘self-connectedness, authenticity, and how much we are able to realise and express ourselves through our work’ (2018, p. 7). Lips-Wiersma’s framework identifies ‘developing and becoming self’ and ‘expressing self’ as key dimensions of meaningful work (Lips-Wiersma, 2002; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012). More recently, De Boeck and colleagues (2019) show that work becomes meaningful when it enables employees to realise their potential, especially when it bridges any gap between their actual and ideal selves. Alignment and realisation are thus connected concepts. For example, according to Martela and Pessi (2018, p. 9), ‘how much we are able to realize ourselves’ is connected to ‘the need to experience that our work aligns with our self- image, our view of who we are, our experience of authenticity, our values and interests’.

Over the past two decades, then, scholars of meaningful work have highlighted the importance of the self as a source of meaningful work, particularly when the self and work are aligned, or when work enables expression of the self (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Rosso et al., 2010). However, the self has not replaced job characteristics as a primary source of meaningful work (Martela & Pessi, 2018). Instead, organisational scholars emphasise the complexity of meaningfulness by showing how it emerges through the interaction between work and the concept of self. For example, De Boeck and colleagues (2019) build on both Hackman and Oldham’s JCM and self-concept theory to explain meaningful work. Other studies show not only that an employee’s self-concept impacts how they construct work as meaningful, but also how meaningful work

impacts how they construct themselves (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003).

In this body of literature, work and its associated tasks are still understood as the main avenue for attaining alignment and self-realisation. Recent studies, however, suggest that it may also involve employees redefining work beyond its traditional task boundaries, for example by integrating their hobbies or making work more playful (Rosso et al., 2010), though as yet there are few empirical studies that examine how employees actively shape work to reflect the interests and aspects of the self that extend beyond the work domain in order to construct meaningful work.

### 2.2.3 Interpersonal relations

Alongside the self as a source of meaningfulness, there is a consensus that meaningful work is rooted in interpersonal relations (for example, Bailey & Madden, 2016, 2017, 2019; Bailey et al., 2019a; Müller et al., 2019; Schnell et al., 2019; Robertson et al., 2020; Laaser & Bolton, 2022; Laaser & Karlsson, 2022; Martikainen et al., 2022; Lysova et al., 2023a; Bailey et al., 2025; Humle & Frandsen, 2026; Schaefer & Schneider, 2026). Some of this research highlights the interplay between employees' self-concept and their relationship with others (Rosso et al., 2010). For example, Robertson and colleagues (2020) find social networks shape how individuals perceive and reinforce their sense of self, because the social connections that individuals find meaningful are those which align with their authentic self.

Bailey and colleagues (2019a) write about the paradox that meaningfulness comes from employees' self-fulfilment and self-actualisation, while at the same time it is dependent on 'others' for its realisation. In this sense, relational sources of meaningfulness emphasise the social dimensions of identity as foundations of meaningful work. Employees construct their work as meaningful not only from who they are, but also from who they are with and how they are perceived by others in the workplace (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso et al., 2010; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012). The conclusion is that 'others' play a central role in shaping and reinforcing employees' identities and, as such, in constructing meaningfulness at work (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Kahn, 2007; Rosso et al., 2010; Dik et al., 2013). In other

words, the state of the art shows that others influence employees' identity formation, which in turn serves as a key source of meaningful work. For example, Laaser and Karlsson (2022) find that meaningful work is shaped not only by task design, but also by social relations.

Scholars of meaningful work have pointed to the importance of belonging and group membership in people's construction of work as meaningful (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Madden & Bailey, 2009; Schnell et al., 2019; Toraldo et al., 2019; Scott, 2022; Bailey et al., 2025). Drawing on social identity theory and the idea that one's identity is shaped by an individual's social group and membership (see Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Pratt and Ashforth (2003) distinguish between meaningfulness in work and at work. While meaningfulness *in* work connects meaningfulness to what an employee does at work (and what they do to what they want to be), meaningfulness *at* work connects meaningfulness not to what they do but to their membership of the organisation, 'in whom one surrounds oneself with as part of organisational membership, and/or in the goals, values, and beliefs that the organization espouses' (p. 314). Thus, Pratt and Ashforth show how social identification processes are involved in the construction of work as meaningful by identifying organisational membership as a source of meaningful work.

Rosso and colleagues (2010), in their review of the literature about meaningfulness, identify the importance of belongingness to the construction of work as meaningful. When people identify with and feel connected to groups at work, this constructs their work as meaningful. Being part of these groups helps employees feel as if they share a common identity with others, which contributes to their experience of work as meaningful (Rosso et al., 2010). On a similar note, Lips-Wiersma (2002), Lips-Wiersma & Morris (2009) et Lips-Wiersma & Wright (2012) identify unity with others as one of the four dimensions of meaningful work – unity with others entails belonging, sharing values, and working supportively together (Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012, p. 666).

According to Schnell and colleagues (2019), belonging is key because that is where acknowledgment and recognition occur. This brings into focus recognition and acknowledgment as important relational sources of meaningful work (Vuori et al., 2012; Oelberger, 2019; Laaser & Bolton, 2022; Laaser & Karlsson, 2022; Lysova et al., 2023a). Vuori and colleagues (2012) highlight that an employee's interpretation (as positive or negative) of the feedback they receive from others has an impact whether they experience their work as meaningful. However,

whereas positive recognition fosters meaningfulness, devaluation by co-workers has been shown to contribute to experiences of work as meaningless (Bailey et al., 2025).

Lysova and colleagues identify three cues from others that impact whether employees believe their work is meaningful – when others communicate on the worth of employees' work (2023a, p. 1242), when others show care and offer help (p. 1244), and when others emphasise a safe work environment (pp. 1244–1245) – and argue that when employees are cognitively flexible, they can better understand and respond to social cues of worth, care, and safety which enable them to experience their work as meaningful. Cognitive flexibility refers to a mental mechanism that enables individuals to adapt their perceptions, thoughts, and emotional responses to events at work, particularly by reinterpreting negative cues as positive ones.

Laaser and colleagues (Laaser & Bolton, 2022; Laaser & Karlsson 2022) discuss recognition as a social mechanism of meaningful work, concluding that recognition is about co-workers, managers, customers, patients or even society showing that they value the individual's work. Acknowledgment, respect, and appreciation help workers feel dignified and that their work is meaningful. Laaser and Karlsson argue that respectful relationships with co-workers help create 'patterns of esteem and dignity' (2022, p. 809), reinforcing employees' sense of meaningfulness.

In addition, drawing on Honneth's framework (2012), Laaser and Bolton (2022) distinguish between two types of recognition: conditional and unconditional. Conditional recognition is based on specific achievements and individual performance, whereas unconditional recognition stems from inherent worth in a shared value system and is linked to specific achievements. They further conceptualise recognition as self-esteem which according to them depends on how one's work is perceived and valued by others in a social context: how employees are recognised and relate to others depend on the tasks they perform. Here as in Laaser and Karlsson (2022), the centrality of what employees do, the tasks they perform, is a basis for recognition and, therefore, a central source of meaningfulness.

A few studies also point to the importance of relatives outside the work domain (Rosso et al., 2010; Oelberger, 2019). For example, Brief and Nord (1990, cited in Rosso et al., 2010, p. 102) show how family members impact employees' construction of meaningfulness by creating a supportive environment that helps

people recover from work pressures and by reinforcing the value of work through expressing respect. Oelberger (2019) also explores how close, non-work personal relationships are experienced by aid workers engaged in work that they find meaningful. However, there remains a need to understand how meaningful others, particularly outside the workplace, influence employees' construction of meaningfulness (Rosso et al., 2010).

Organisational scholars have thus shown how meaningful work can be understood as emerging from individuals' relations with meaningful others, and in particular from group membership and belonging (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009) as well as recognition and positive feedback (Laaser & Bolton, 2022; Lysova et al., 2023a). In this perspective, meaningfulness arises not only from job characteristics, but also from employees' social relationships. Yet, in this body of literature, work tasks remain central in triggering recognition or positive feedback (for example, Laaser and Bolton, 2022), and meaningful others are often work-related (Rosso et al., 2010). This points to the need for further research about relational sources of meaningfulness that are not confined to workplace interactions or work tasks themselves.

## 2.2.4 Material relations

While relational sources are often understood primarily in terms of interpersonal relationships (Symon & Whiting, 2019), a few studies of meaningful work extend relationality to include the materiality of work, exploring employees' interactions with material objects and the physical workplace (Bailey & Madden, 2017; Symon & Whiting, 2019; Lepisto, 2022; Rostain & Clarke, 2025; Schaefer & Schneider, 2026; Wiering, 2026). These scholars introduce additional layers of complexity to the construction of meaningful work by showing how materiality, as a source, contributes to shaping employees' experiences of meaningful work. Some of these studies position materiality as a mediator of meaningfulness (for example, Lepisto, 2022; Wiering, 2026). In this body of literature, materiality refers to the physical workplace, the objects in it, the employees' embodied work practices (Rostain & Clarke, 2025; Wiering, 2026), or individuals enabling these practices (such as the gym instructors in Lepisto, 2022). For example, in Wiering (2026), materiality includes donkey droppings, bodies, blood, fluids, and the tools used in caring tasks (for example, wheelbarrows and cleaning equipment).

It also includes the workplace environment, the mud and the rain, the stables, and the courtyard where work is taking place.

Interestingly, some of these studies show that materiality plays a role in the construction of meaningful work both in contexts where meaningfulness is expected – for example, social entrepreneurs in Symon and Whiting (2019) and in types of work where meaningfulness is less likely to be anticipated, such as low-skill factory work (Rostain & Clarke, 2025) or dirty work (Wiering, 2026). The studies all look at different processes. Lepisto (2022) and Wiering (2026) emphasise that materiality contributes to the construction of meaningful work by the emotions it generates, which in turn shapes individuals' experience of work as meaningful. In these studies, employees' emotional responses to materiality are key to constructing work as meaningful. Lepisto (2022) argues that organisational materiality (for example, the training space where employees gather to do their workouts, the gym instructors, the gym equipment) facilitates interaction rituals (fitness workouts), which creates a shared feeling of meaningfulness among organisational members, and ultimately a shared meaningfulness communicated by managers. Wiering (2026) uses a two-stage reciprocal approach to explain how materiality mediates meaningful work for grooms at a donkey sanctuary. In the first step, materiality reveals whether the grooms' values align or clash with work practices; the second step refers to their affective responses from this materiality that shape how they evaluate their work as meaningful (positive emotions) or not (negative emotions).

Further, some study work settings where meaningful work is challenged, such as the grooms' working conditions in Wiering (2026) or the low-skill shop-floor workers in Rostain and Clarke (2025). Rostain and Clarke argue that materiality enables workers to construct meaningfulness even in contexts traditionally associated with meaninglessness, because 'workers can use craft to activate or re-establish meaning in contexts where work has been stripped of significance' (p. 7). Materiality plays a central role in how factory workers construct meaningfulness in a controlled, low-skill work environment.

Rostain and Clarke (2025) identify three processes by which materiality plays a role in constructing work as meaningful through craft objects and craft practices. The first process refers to workers using time over to do 'quality-oriented craftwork' (p. 17), by improving the product to meet their own quality standards. The second process refers to workers developing craft-based tools to enhance efficiency. By this, Rostain and Clarke mean that they use 'a craft

mindset of exploration' (p. 22). The third process refers to workers drawing on their expertise to solve complex problems beyond what is officially expected of their roles.

In Rostain and Clarke (2025), the materialisation of craft plays a central role in the construction of meaningful work. While they do not write about the symbolic aspects of materiality *per se*, it underlies their discussion of the material processes by which employees construct their work as meaningful. Throughout the discussion, craft objects serve as symbols of the workers' skills, autonomy, and personal investment in their work. When workers create or improve tools to make their work a better standard and more efficient or when they contribute to solving complex work problems outside their remit, drawing on their competence and expertise, these objects and actions symbolise their skill and autonomy, and lead to some forms of recognition in the workplace. Through these material expressions of craft, workers are able to reclaim a sense of autonomy, competence, and recognition, which contributes to experiencing their work as meaningful. Thus, while in most studies, materiality is rooted in workplace realities, including harsh elements such as blood or donkey carcasses in Wiering (2026), Rostain and Clarke (2025) indirectly point to the symbolic dimension of materiality.

While most studies identify the positive role of materiality in the construction of meaningfulness, Symon and Whiting (2019) bring a more nuanced perspective in their study of socio-entrepreneurs and digital technology. They show that (digital) materiality plays an important role in both supporting and challenging meaningful work.

The latest research about meaningful work and materiality thus offers interesting insights into the role of materiality as a mediator of meaningfulness in work where meaningfulness is either expected (Symon & Whiting, 2019) or not (Rostain & Clarke, 2025). In particular, it shows how materiality can generate (Wiering, 2026) or enable emotional responses (Lepisto, 2022). They also illustrate how specific forms of materiality, such as the symbolic dimension of craft in Rostain and Clarke (2025), can enable workers in low-skill, highly standardised work environments, where meaningfulness is often challenged, to construct their work as meaningful.

In reviewing the sources of meaningful work from which meaningful work emerges, I have highlighted the multilayered, complex nature of the sources of meaningfulness (Rosso et al., 2010; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017; Bailey et al., 2019a), by showing how the job characteristics, the self, and relationships with

meaningful others and with workplace materiality can contribute to meaningful work. I have discussed how identity-related, relational sources are closely intertwined with, and interact with, the nature of work itself, which continues to be regarded as the main source of meaningfulness (Martela & Pessi, 2018; Laaser & Karlsson, 2022).

However, as the nature of work has evolved (Bailey et al., 2017) and meaningfulness varies according to time and context (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Bailey & Madden, 2020; Yeoman et al., 2019), so too may the sources from which employees construct work as meaningful. Existing sources may not fully explain where meaningfulness comes from in workplaces strongly shaped by branding.

For the past two decades, organisational scholars have increasingly recognised the brand as a powerful meaning-making tool (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008) in brand-based organisations, defined by their brand values and image (Land & Taylor, 2010). The focus has been on the influence of the brand's meanings on employees' identities (for example, Land & Taylor, 2010; Endrissat et al., 2017; Frandsen et al., 2018), and the role of the brand as a relational interface and mediator of relationships between different organisational stakeholders, both in the organisation and beyond (Lury, 2004; Hatch & Shultz, 2001; Ind et al., 2013; Müller, 2017). Yet, the role of the brand in shaping employees' experiences of meaningful work has received little attention in the literature. At best, a few studies have hinted at its potential role (for example, Brannan et al., 2015).

Looking at the brand as a source of meaningfulness could increase our understanding of the interaction between work, identity, and relational sources of meaningful work, including how work is aligned with workers' interests (Rosso et al., 2010; Martela & Pessi, 2018). It might also help us understand how discursive (Kuhn et al., 2018) and material resources provided by the organisation are appropriated by employees in constructing their identities and in making sense of their work as meaningful.

## 2.3 Mechanisms of meaningful work

I use 'mechanisms' to refer to the broad generative processes by which meaningfulness is constructed from different sources of meaningful work. Turning now to the structural, agentic mechanisms of meaningful work, structural mechanisms refer to organisational or societal conditions that shape the

possibilities for meaningful work (Laaser & Karlsson, 2022), while agentic mechanisms refer to employees' active role in shaping their work as meaningful (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). While most studies focus on either agentic or structural mechanisms, I address the interaction between the two in order to better understand the complexity of how meaningful work is constructed (Bailey et al., 2019a; Lysova et al., 2019a). In this, I emphasise the dominance of cognitive mechanisms and the need to further explore emotional mechanisms (Lepisto, 2022).

### 2.3.1 Structural, agentic mechanisms

Structural mechanisms are considered an important analytical lens, particularly regarding the organisation's role in shaping meaningful work. In the literature, with its largely functionalist view, there is a strong emphasis on managers and leaders as primarily responsible for designing work that enables employees to experience meaningful work (Bailey et al., 2017; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2020). This reflects a managerialist perspective that suggests 'meaningfulness can be supplied' (Lips-Wiersma, 2009, p. 503), an approach Bailey and colleagues (2017, p. 417) characterise as 'the management of meaningfulness'.

Many studies underscore the role of organisational design, leadership practices, and workplace culture in constructing meaningfulness (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2020; Bailey et al., 2017). For example, some focused on identifying how the organisation and its managers can design work tasks that are meaningful for their employees (Garg & Rastogi, 2006; Humphrey et al., 2007; Bailey et al., 2017; Allan et al. 2019; De Boeck et al. 2019), with discussions about job enrichment and work-fit (for example, May et al., 2004; Schnell et al. 2013), as well as autonomy and control over working methods (for example, Fairlie, 2011; Allan et al., 2016; Scott, 2022). Some studies also argue that meaningful work can be enhanced through organisational practices (for example Kubiak, 2022 with performance management practices that support employees' well-being and engagement). Other studies have linked meaningful work to leadership (for example, Duchon & Plowman, 2005; Tummers & Knies, 2013; Bailey et al., 2017; Tourish, 2019; Choden et al., 2025), with some focussing on specific leadership styles, whether, for example, servant leadership in Jiang and

colleagues (2015), responsible leadership in Lips-Wiersma and colleagues (2020), or transformational leadership in Arnold and colleagues (2017).

In the past two decades, organisational scholars have explored agentic mechanisms, and have established that employees have agency in constructing their work as meaningful (for example, Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003; Vuori et al., 2012; Berg et al., 2013; Tims et al., 2013; Tims et al., 2016; Bailey & Madden, 2017; Lysova et al., 2019a; Müller et al., 2019; Toraldo et al., 2019; Fontana et al., 2023; Haugan & Klemsdal, 2025; Rostain & Clarke, 2025). In their seminal paper, Wrzesniewski and Dutton introduce job-crafting, which they define as ‘the physical and cognitive changes individuals make in the task or relational boundaries of their work’ (2001, p. 179): job-crafting emphasises how employees *actively* construct their work tasks as being significant by changing how they see.

Müller and colleagues (2019), meanwhile, identify sense-making practices that medical laboratory staff use to craft their work as meaningful. Vuori and colleagues explore meaningfulness-making as ‘a process during which people actively influence their work and their interpretation of their work to make it more meaningful’ (2012, pp. 233–234), and the tactics employees use to construct their work as meaningful – including employees emphasising positive work qualities, developing skills that have a positive impact on work situations, or influencing work content to make their work meaningful. Fontana and colleagues (2023) similarly discuss how sustainability managers craft meaningfulness in their work at various stages in their careers.

Toraldo and colleagues (2019) show that volunteers move back and forth between passivity and actively constructing their work as meaningful: at times, they frame their work as dull and without meaning; at other times, they take an active role and construct their work as meaningful, for example by imbuing it with a sense of ‘communitas’ (‘a sense of social unity’, p.619) by willingly doing unpaid or uninteresting tasks in order to gain access to more valued leisure activities at the festivals, or, more cynically, by doing it for personal gain.

The job characteristics of skill variety, autonomy, and significance as key sources of meaningfulness remain a central theme in the literature. Vuori and colleagues (2012), for example, show how employees shape the qualities of their work to construct it as meaningful. One of the qualities is a high level of autonomy at work. Rostain and Clarke (2025) find that French factory workers construct their work as meaningful by exercising their craft skills in the work

process, which brings them greater autonomy and recognition from their peers and line managers, when theirs was low-skill work with no possibility of deviation from established procedures.

Unlike positivist scholars who emphasise that some forms of work are more meaningful than others (Rosso et al., 2010), studies show that employees in professions not typically viewed as serving the greater good also construct their work as meaningful – refuse collectors in Bailey and Madden (2016), low-skill workers in Laaser and Bolton (2022) and Rostain and Clarke (2025), or employees in grocery shops in Haugan and Klemsdal (2025).

Organisational scholars have pointed to the interplay of the structural, agentic mechanisms of meaningfulness by showing the joint contributions of the organisation and employees in the construction of work as meaningful (Boje & Baskin, 2011; Endrissat et al., 2015; Carton, 2018; Bailey et al., 2019a; Lysova et al., 2019a; Laaser & Karlsson 2022; Lepisto, 2022). While meaningfulness is found to be co-constructed by the organisation (its managers) and employees, managers are often identified as initiating the process of meaningfulness. For example, Carton (2018) shows the role of leaders at NASA in fostering meaningfulness through their sense-giving actions: they formulate concrete objectives from NASA's aspirations and connect them to employees' day-to-day work, and then the employees actively engage in connecting their day-to-day work to the specific objectives. Similarly, in Lepisto's study (2022) of a footwear company, leaders play a key role in initiating the process of meaningful work by putting in place the material conditions for employees to engage in rituals (workouts), while employees contribute by communicating positive emotional energy and feelings of meaningfulness.

Two papers (Boje & Baskin 2011; Endrissat et al., 2015), while not about meaningful work per se, refer to meaningfulness as enchantment. Endrissat and colleagues introduce the theoretical concept of enchanting work, defined as 'the aura found in certain forms of service work, in contrast to the disenchantment commonly associated with it' (2015, p. 1554), and identify three conceptual categories that leads to the theoretical concept of 'enchanting work': (i) work is enchanted, (ii) work gets enchanted to disguise work reality, and (iii) work is about enchanting (consumers, colleagues, oneself). In the categories 'work is enchanted' and 'work is about enchanting', they find employees create meaningfulness in narratives and practices. In the category of 'work is enchanted', employees describe their work environment as enchanted by sharing positive job

experiences. They refer to authenticity, self-expression, autonomy, and creativity. For example, employees' freedom to choose their attire and express their individuality is interpreted as a form of authenticity. Employees also emphasise craft-making and aesthetics in their work, and a sense of community. The category 'work is about enchanting' refers to employees being engaged making the workplace feel more authentic.

For the second category, 'work gets enchanted', Endrissat and colleagues (2015) point to the organisation's role in creating meaningfulness. This category refers to organisational practices designed to use aesthetic and cultural elements to hide strict control and the reality of low-pay or precarious jobs, for example by encouraging artistic expression.

Boje and Baskin's discussion of enchantment (2011) covers the co-construction of meaningfulness by both the organisation and its employees, as reflected in the concepts of enchantment by design, which suggests that meaningfulness can be guided by specific organisational narratives that shape employees' experiences of meaning, and enchantment by emergence which highlights employees' active role in creating their own enchantment, constructing meaningfulness through their own personal stories and interpretations. Boje and Baskin acknowledge that the two modes of enchantment can overlap or merge, whereas much of the literature about meaningful work tends to focus exclusively on either the organisation's or the employees' construction of meaningfulness.

In the literature about meaningful work, discussions about the co-construction of meaningfulness go beyond the roles of the organisation and employees. In their review, Lysova and colleagues (2019a) highlight the importance of considering multiple levels when exploring meaningful work, and thus their framework of factors that create meaningful work includes not only individuals and organisations, but also society and job characteristics. They explore the interrelationships – for example how individual factors interact with job and organisational factors, or how societal factors impact individual, job, and organisational factors. At the organisational level, they identify leadership, organisational practices and processes, and culture; at the individual level, the personal narratives that individuals construct to give meanings to their experience of work, and their personal values and motivations; and at the societal level, they emphasise societal norms and overall access to decent work. This aligns with studies that situate meaningful work in broader societal and institutional conditions, particularly the concepts of decent work and dignity (for example,

Bowie, 2019; Lips-Wiersma, 2019; Allan et al., 2020; Laaser & Karlsson, 2022; Blustein et al., 2023).

Lysova and colleagues (2019a) consider the relationship between the different levels to be key, because ‘meaningful work is an individual experience that tends to occur when an individual’s motivations, values, and goals are in congruence with those of their environment (job, organization, and society)’ (p. 385). They conclude that organisations can create meaningfulness by designing jobs that let employees engage in job-crafting, encourage facilitative leaders and culture, and promote high-quality relationships as well as contributing to decent work.

Consideration of the agentic, structural mechanisms of meaningful work is part of a wider discussion about the subjectivity or objectivity of meaningful work (Bailey et al., 2019a; Yeoman et al., 2019; Michaelson, 2021; Mortimer, 2023; Laaser & Karlsson, 2022). Some scholars argue meaningful work can be both subjectively experienced while at the same time normatively imposed (Bailey et al., 2019a; Michaelson, 2021; Laaser & Karlsson, 2022). Bailey and colleagues (2019a) refer to this as a paradox in the literature about meaningful work. They underline that meaningfulness is subjectively experienced and resists direct managerial control, reflecting individual agency, while also being shaped by the normative expectations of organisations and wider society. Bailey and colleagues (2019a, p. 494) concentrate on normative forms of control and the symbolic manipulation of meanings to encourage employees to accept poor or even harmful working conditions by appealing to their desire for meaningful work.

Michaelson (2021) likewise distinguishes between experienced and normative meaningful work; however, while recognising the subjectivity of meaningful work, he argues for a normative meaningful work independent of whether it is meaningful to oneself and to others, therefore pointing that some works are more meaningful than others, as well as the dominance of structural factors above agential factors.

Laaser and Karlsson present a framework for meaningful work that includes the objective and subjective dimensions of autonomy, dignity, and recognition, experienced at the employee level and shaped at the structural level, as ‘in this way, a framework is presented that analyses how meaningful work is created, experienced and defended at the agency level, but shaped, constrained or denied by wider dynamics at the employment and workplace level’ (2022, p. 799). Drawing on the politics of working life and critical realism, Laaser and Karlsson’s perspective aligns with the view that structures influence people without

completely determining their actions. Individuals retain their own intentions and capacity to resist, create, and innovate, and may therefore shape or transform structures in unexpected ways.

From my review of the literature about meaningful work, it is evident that either structural or agentic mechanisms determine the construction of meaningfulness. Some scholars emphasise the central role of organisations and their management in making work meaningful while others show employees' own agency in crafting their work as meaningful. Recently, a few studies have discussed how meaningfulness emerges through the joint contributions of organisations and employees as well as society (Lysova et al., 2019a). Like these studies, I argue the interaction of structural, agentic mechanisms should be further explored, hence the potential for the literature of the brand as a source of meaningful work, because brand meanings are created by both organisations and individuals, and so reflect and reproduce wider societal discourses (Holt, 2004; Hatch & Schultz, 2008; Kornberger, 2010, 2015).

### 2.3.2 Cognitive mechanisms with limited insights into emotional mechanisms

Much of the organisational literature concerns the cognitive mechanisms of meaningful work (Rosso et al., 2010; Vuori et al., 2012; Lepisto, 2022), showing how individuals evaluate work as meaningful (Martela & Pessi, 2018; Lysova et al., 2023a) and make judgements about the meaningfulness of work (for example, Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Meaningful work remains a matter of thought and interpretation, and sense-making (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003; Rosso et al., 2010; Haugan & Klemsdal, 2025). For example, Wrzesniewski and Dutton write about job-crafting as 'the physical and cognitive changes individuals make in the task or relational boundaries of their work' (2001, p. 179). Vuori and colleagues (2012, p. 232) explore how employees consciously emphasise positive work qualities as a meaningfulness-making tactic. Lysova and colleagues (2023a) explore individuals' cognitive focus in social contexts when reflecting on the most meaningful weekly events at work, and single out the part played by self-awareness and cognitive flexibility in finding work meaningful. Cognitive flexibility refers to a psychological state in which individuals change how they think, feel, and act in order to cope with new situations.

In the literature, identity and the relational sources of meaningfulness are generally assessed in cognitive terms. Employees process their relationships and group memberships, interpreting how their belonging to teams, organisations, or communities contributes to who they are (for example, Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). When discussing recognition as a social mechanism of meaningful work, Laaser and Bolton (2022) and Laaser and Karlsson (2022) similarly focus on its cognitive dimension and do not explore the emotions involved.

However, some scholars of meaningful work acknowledge that to experience it requires an affective component; hence Martela and Pessi, who suggest that meaningfulness is primarily a feeling experienced during work or one that emerges thinking about work, because ‘Work feels or doesn’t feel meaningful. When we are asked to cognitively evaluate whether our work is meaningful, we thus would typically look for how strong this feeling is present in our recollected experiences of work’ (2018, p. 3). In the literature, emotions are used mainly to describe employees’ experiences of meaningfulness (for example, Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Pavlish & Hunt, 2012; Vuori et al., 2012; Bailey & Madden, 2017; May et al., 2019) – ‘the way the person feels while working’ (Vuori et al., 2012, p. 233). In one study, nurses, when describing meaningful moments in their professional lives, spoke about emotions such as feeling good (Pavlish & Hunt, 2012, p. 116), feeling appreciated, feeling happy, or feeling a sense of accomplishment (p. 117). When scholars research meaningful work, they are also looking for feelings (for example; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009, p. 35); yet, while emotions are mostly treated as descriptors of meaningful work in organisational research, the emotional mechanisms underlying meaningful work remain underexplored (Yeoman et al., 2019), with little apart from a few reviews (for example, Rosso et al., 2010) and empirical studies (for example, Lepisto, 2022; Martikainen et al., 2022; Wiering, 2026).

In such studies, employees feel first, and that feeling informs their construction of meaningfulness. Rosso and colleagues (2010) consider the emotional dimension of meaningful work mechanisms, noting that belongingness operates through the affective experience, specifically a feeling of interpersonal connectedness. Martikainen and colleagues (2022) set out to understand how individuals experience and narrate moments of meaningful and meaningless work, focusing on the emotional component in the experience. They show that feelings are part of the construction of work as meaningful, and use the term ‘affective eudaimonia’ to refer to the affective components of employees’ narrated

moments of meaningful and meaningless work. Interestingly, they found that employees' narratives of meaninglessness are more intense than those of meaningfulness; however, they are also more static – and work feels like a dead end – whereas meaningful work narratives include more growth, moving towards a goal.

Studies of materiality and meaningfulness likewise stress the emotional mechanisms underlying meaningful work – the emotions triggered by materiality shape how work is experienced as meaningful (Lepisto, 2022; Wiering, 2026). As Lepisto (2022, p. 1346) writes,

Organizational members do not just think 'what we do' is meaningful, they can first feel 'what we do' is meaningful. This finding invites us to rethink whether our scholarly conceptions of meaningfulness as a cognitive phenomenon are misaligned with the lived experience of meaningfulness in organizations.

Lepisto picks out the fitness classes (ritual interactions), which the managers at a footwear company organised and where employees cheered one another on as they worked out (emotional energy): participants talked and gestured, high-fiving and encouraging one another (shared feelings). Leaders spoke about the company's transformation, and the personal stories that connected employees' shared feelings of meaningfulness, constructing a shared representation. They put employees' shared feelings into words, creating a group understanding of meaningfulness. Emotional energy refers to the feelings generated during rituals (for example, excitement during a workout), whereas shared feelings of meaningfulness are a collective sense that such activities are meaningful. Lepisto thus shows that shared feelings of meaningfulness come from personal feelings of emotional energy, openly expressed. It is employees together displaying emotional energy that generates feelings of meaningfulness. For Lepisto, shared feelings among employees come before – and so justify – accounts of shared meaningfulness by the organisation's managers.

While Lepisto (2022) refers to the emotions in the broadest sense, Wiering (2026) and Martikainen and colleagues (2022) identify specific emotions. For Wiering (2026) in particular, emotions serve as indicators that the grooms' values and work practices at the donkey sanctuary are aligned or misaligned, with pride a positive emotion generated from materiality, and moral discomfort and frustration as the negative emotions. Positive emotions signal an alignment

between employees' values and their work practices; negative, a misalignment. Both shape the experience of work as either meaningful or meaningless. Martikainen and colleagues (2022) also identify specific emotions such as pride, contentment, or satisfaction about meaningful work, and anxiety and sorrow about meaningless work. The feelings come from employees' connections with and contributions to others.

In the literature about meaningful work, while the majority use the emotions as descriptors of meaningful work, only a few recent studies have considered its emotional mechanisms (Lepisto, 2022; Martikainen et al. 2022; Wiering, 2026). While these studies increase our understanding of the role of emotions in constructing work as meaningful, they do not explore how the emotional mechanisms operate in the agentic, structural mechanisms of meaningful work.

### 2.3.3 Overlooked mechanisms of meaningful work

Further analysis of the role of the emotions in the construction of work as meaningful (Lepisto, 2022) and the relationship between agentic and structural mechanisms of meaningful work (Lysova et al., 2019a) is needed. Fresh theoretical insights would help clarify how the emotions function as mechanisms by which employees construct, sustain, negotiate, and contest meaningfulness in organisational structures.

To investigate the interplay of structural, agentic mechanisms, and the role of emotional processes in those dynamics, I address branding, because any brand is not only created by the organisation, but by its employees and society too (Hatch & Schultz, 2001, 2003, 2008; Kornberger, 2010, 2015) and employees connect emotionally with it (Allison, 2013; Holzer et al., 2016; Wang et al. 2018). Exploring the brand as a source of meaningful work may therefore deepen our understanding of the structural, agentic mechanisms of meaningfulness, and the emotional processes involved.

## 2.4 Unexplored source and mechanisms

In defining meaningful work and reviewing the sources of meaningfulness – sources which for analytical reasons refer to the key elements which meaningful work comes from (Rosso et al., 2010) – I have highlighted the central role of work

tasks as a primary source of meaningful work (Martela & Pessi, 2018), and how they relate to additional sources including the self (for example, Pratt & Ashforth, 2003), interpersonal relations (for example, Laaser & Bolton, 2022; Lysova et al., 2023; Bailey et al., 2025), and material relations (for example, Lepisto, 2022; Rostain & Clarke, 2025; Wiering, 2026).

In reviewing the literature, I identify an unexplored source of meaningful work – the brand – and its meaning-making role in organisations (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008). There is an opportunity to understand how meaningful work emerges in the context of brand-based organisations shaped by branding and symbolism, as well as how work, identity and relational sources interplay with the brand to construct work as meaningful. Having defined ‘mechanisms’ as broad, generative processes by which meaningfulness is constructed from different sources of meaningful work, I have highlighted two important areas of research: the interaction between agentic and structural mechanisms (Lysova et al., 2019a), and the accompanying emotional mechanisms of meaningful work (Lepisto, 2022). Exploring the brand as a source of meaningful work might help us further understand these mechanisms. I will now turn to the literature about brands and their meaning-making role in organisations.

### 3 The brand as a source of meaning-making in the organisation

Brands today are about creating lifestyles, cultural meanings, and identities (Holt, 2004; Arvidsson, 2005; Klein, 2010). They offer 'ready-made identities' that consumers can draw on (Kornberger, 2010, p. xii) to express themselves and construct a desired identity (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967; Fournier, 1998; Schembri, 2009; Kornberger, 2010). Thanks to an army of marketers and branders, brands appeal to consumers' subconscious (Packard, 1957; Bernays & Miller, 2005) and project them into a fantastic world, away from the routine and anxieties of ordinary life (Holt, 2004). And brands not only matter to consumers, because in recent decades they have become important for the employees of brand-based organisations, defined by their brand (Land & Taylor, 2010). In the corporate branding era, organisations have moved from a product-centred to an organisation-centred perspective (Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Balmer & Gray, 2003) to differentiate themselves from their competitors. They draw on their brand values – a combination of the organisation's values and its products or services (Balmer & Gray, 2003) – to communicate what makes them special (de Chernatony, 1999). Hatch and Schultz describe the corporate brand as a 'powerhouse' (2001, p. 134) and 'a single umbrella image that casts one glow over a panoply of products' (pp. 129–130).

In the era of corporate branding, employees are seen as crucial in representing and communicating the brand in the organisation and beyond (Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Hulberg, 2006; Lomax & Mador, 2006). They are expected not merely to understand the brand, but to *live* the brand (Ind, 2001). Consequently, organisations invest not only in building attractive brands for consumers, but also in branding initiatives directed at their employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Edwards, 2005; Moroko & Uncles, 2008). Employees have become the targets of the organisation's branding messages to make sure that they understand brand values and think and act accordingly (Miles & Mangold, 2004; Mosley, 2007).

Organisations use their branding to present themselves as desirable employers and to attract the 'right' kind of employee, whose values align with the brand's (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Edwards, 2005). In parallel, internal branding initiatives aim to ensure that employees not only understand brand values, but also align their attitudes and behaviour accordingly (Maxwell & Knox, 2009). Collectively, these branding efforts are expected to align with and reinforce the organisation's broader corporate branding strategy (Hatch & Schultz, 2003).

The growing importance of brands within organisations has impressed itself on practitioners and academic researchers alike (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Interpretivist scholars in particular have shown their multifold meaning-making role (for example, Pettinger, 2004; Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Land & Taylor, 2010; Brannan et al., 2011; Russell, 2011; Smith & Buchanan-Oliver, 2011; Jeanes, 2013; Vásquez et al., 2013; Frandsen, 2015; Frandsen & Kärreman, 2016; Müller, 2017; Frandsen et al., 2018; Kärreman & Frandsen, 2020; Frandsen & Huzzard, 2021). Brands are tools with which organisations shape how employees are expected to look, behave, and think (for example, Pettinger, 2004; Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Land & Taylor, 2010; Russell, 2011; Müller, 2017). They are also symbolic resources that employees appropriate, reinterpret, or resist when constructing their own identities (Land & Taylor, 2010; Smith & Buchanan-Oliver, 2011; Vásquez et al., 2013; Brannan et al., 2015; Endrissat et al., 2017; Frandsen et al., 2018). Brands offer a symbolic world – a reservoir of symbolic meanings (Brannan et al., 2015) that organisations use to shape their practices and impose expectations, and which employees can draw on in constructing their identities. A brand's symbolic meaning refers, in particular, to its ability to symbolise a person's identity, lifestyle, values, or social status, rather than just providing a functional benefit (Levy, 1959; McCracken, 1986; Tsai, 2005).

Adopting an interpretivist, social constructionist perspective, I conceptualise the brand as socially constructed and negotiated (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), and thus a system of symbolic meanings, both strategically articulated by organisations (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008) and interpreted, and at times contested, by employees (Frandsen et al., 2018; Smith & Buchanan-Oliver, 2011).

### 3.1 A tool to manage meanings in the organisation

Organisations and their managers use brands to impose preferred meanings on their employees (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008). Kärreman and Rylander conceptualise branding as 'systematic efforts from top management to influence and shape frames of references, norms and values among organisational members' (2008, p. 108).

In brand-based organisations, brand values are used to guide organisational practices. For example, brand values steer recruitment practices. They define who should be hired, because organisations want to recruit employees whose values align with the brand (Pettinger, 2004; Miles & Mangold, 2005; Russell, 2011; Frandsen, 2015; Frandsen & Kärreman, 2016). Brand values also steer promotion, training, and reward as part of creating pro-brand employees (Miles & Mangold, 2004). As Hulberg writes, 'The intention is to have workers who love their organisation's brand and who show this through their interaction with stakeholders' (2006, p. 64); they are looking for brand ambassadors (Miles & Mangold, 2005) or brand champions (Ind, 2001).

Meanwhile, brand-based organisations generally encourage employees to bring their self to work (Land & Taylor, 2010, 2011; Smith & Buchanan-Oliver, 2011; Jeanes, 2013; Mumby, 2016; Endrissat et al., 2017). Management seeks candidates whose lifestyles can contribute to the brand's image and values (Land & Taylor, 2010; Jeanes, 2013; Endrissat et al., 2017) – they want to recruit 'lives as much as workers' (Land & Taylor, 2011, p. 48). For example, at Ethico, an employee's surfing hobby was celebrated as it matched the brand's sporty, alternative image (Land & Taylor, 2010). To add value to the corporate brand, employees' lives are incorporated into the narrative of the brand. This means that employees are encouraged to share, on the company's blog, what they do outside work (Land & Taylor, 2010). Like Land and Taylor (2010), Jeanes, in her study of a moral brand – 'a brand that communicates moral or ethical issues' (2013,

p. 163) – highlights how employees’ brand engagement or ‘individuality’ helps to build a successful moral brand (p. 169).

Further, brand values are used by brand-based organisations to shape how employees are expected to behave, dress, and even think at work (for example, Pettinger, 2004; Russell, 2011; Müller, 2017). They set the expectations for the emotional and aesthetic labour required of employees in their day-to-day work (Pettinger, 2004). The organisation’s management of meaning also extends into the private lives of employees, because they are expected to live their lives according to brand values (for example, Russell, 2011; Jeanes, 2013; Müller, 2017; Frandsen et al., 2018). For example, Russell (2011, p. 102) mentions an employee who uses some elements that she was exposed to during brand training to discipline her young son and teach him about self-responsibility.

To ensure employees internalise the brand’s meanings, they are consistently reminded of them in brand training (Hancock & Taylor, 2000; Miles & Mangold, 2005; Russell, 2011) or by designing the physical work space to reflect the brand’s core values (Hancock & Tyler, 2000; Hancock & Spicer, 2011; Russell, 2011), for example decorating the office in brand colours (Russell, 2011).

Further, brand-based organisations use brand values in their HR practices to shape employees’ understanding of work (for example, Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Smith & Buchanan-Oliver, 2011; Besen-Cassino, 2013; Brannan et al., 2015). In service organisations, such as consulting firms (for example, Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Brannan et al., 2015) or universities (Frandsen et al., 2018), brand values are operationalised to frame work in a positive light, for example as prestigious and status-enhancing.

In some consumer-brand organisations (for example, Pettinger, 2004; Besen-Cassino, 2013; Jeanes, 2013; Müller, 2017), work is depicted relative to the brand’s consumer values. As a result, values such as fun and enjoyment become part of how work is depicted, for example in recruitment strategies (Besen-Cassino, 2013) and workplace practices (Müller, 2017). This results in situations where employees are invited to ‘Join the Party!’ That was how Spencer’s, a high-street retailer that specialises in entertainment, communicated to prospective employees in a job advert (Besen-Cassino, 2013, p. 45). It could have been an advert aimed at Spencer’s consumers, yet it targeted prospective employees. It conveyed the promise (Anker et al., 2012) that working at Spencer’s would be fun – and aligned with the image and values of the corporate brand. To attract employees who are the best fit for the organisation and its brand, organisations

integrate the values and practices of consumption into HR, positioning employees in the brand consumption experience (Dale, 2012).

The organisation's management of meaning through the brand and its values has been conceptualised as a form of normative control (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) by attempting to align employees' identities with the brand meanings. It has also been conceptualised as a form of neo-normative control (Fleming & Sturdy, 2009, 2011) by mobilising employees' preferred identities and encouraging them to be themselves as long as it adds value to the brand (Land & Taylor, 2010; Jeanes, 2013; Müller, 2017). With her concept of brand-centred control, Müller (2017) shows that control extends beyond the organisation, with the external audience shaping employees' identities through its interpretation of the brand image and values.

When organisations attempt to control employees' thoughts and behaviour to align them with the values of the brand, it creates various expressions of resistance (for example, Cushen, 2009; Russell, 2011; Smith & Buchanan-Oliver, 2011; Brannan et al., 2015; Frandsen & Kärreman, 2016; Frandsen et al., 2018). Russell (2011) finds some employees engage in behaviour that goes against brand values by nominating colleagues who do not meet award criteria for recognition awards, undermining the brand's image.

Resistance arises not only as pushback against attempts to control how employees think and behave, but also when they experience a gap between the brand's values and image and actual working conditions (Cushen, 2009; Brannan et al., 2015). For example, Cushen (2009) shows that managers often encountered employee resistance and disillusionment when communicating the brand essence (emphasising passionate, reliable, and innovative behaviour) because these expectations clashed with job reductions and other cost-cutting measures. Brannan and colleagues (2015) point to a subtle way of resisting when employees imbue mundane work with prestige, success, and glamour, while Frandsen and Kärreman (2016) noted employees' resistance when they wanted to enact the brand's customer-focus value in their work, but were constrained by the organisation's technocratic controls.

Studies have thus shown how a brand can be used by management to impose and promote specific meanings in the organisation, defining who should work there and how employees are expected to think and behave not only at work, but outside work. These meanings also shape how the organisation presents itself and what it signifies to work there. Branding addressed to employees has been

conceptualised as a form of normative control (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), and especially its neo-normative (for example, Land & Taylor, 2010) and brand-centred mechanisms (Müller 2017). Employees respond in complex ways to organisational attempts to control the way they think, act, and even feel, resulting in both alignment and resistance (Frandsen et al., 2018). By identifying various forms of employee resistance, organisational scholars have drawn attention to the dynamic relationship between employees and brand meanings. This begs the question of how employees actively engage with brand meanings for their own benefit.

### 3.2 A resource for employees' meaning-making

Organisational scholars have shown how employees actively engage with brand meanings to fulfil their own identity needs and construct identities valued not only by the organisation, but also themselves (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Jeanes, 2013; Vásquez et al., 2013; Brannan et al., 2015; Mumby, 2016; Endrissat et al., 2017; Müller, 2017; Frandsen et al., 2018). Employees are interested in what the brand can do for them and how they could benefit from the brand (Frandsen et al., 2018). They use the brand so others associate them with an image and values that fit their own work ambitions and expectations (for example, Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Brannan et al., 2015; Frandsen et al., 2018). In some cases, the brand signals success and so impresses outsiders (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Brannan et al., 2015), and the prestige of the brand reflects on all its organisational members, regardless of the role they have in the organisation (Brannan et al., 2015).

For employees, a brand offers symbolic capital in the form of an attractive, recognised name to put in a CV (Brannan et al., 2015; Frandsen et al., 2018), and signifies to others the type of employees who work at that brand-based organisation (Pettinger, 2004; Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Brannan et al., 2015; Müller, 2017). A brand not only says something about the sort of employees who work there, but also about the type of work done there and how (Brannan et al., 2015). As a result, employees use brands in their external interactions to align their identities with values and images that reflect or support their personal and professional aspirations (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Brannan et al., 2015; Frandsen et al., 2018). The brand provides symbolic capital,

signifying competence, prestige, and quality to others, enhancing employees' personal branding (Brannan et al., 2015; Frandsen et al., 2018).

Many studies explore employees' experiences in routine or exacting work, such as call centres (Frandsen, 2015), consulting (for example, Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Brannan et al., 2015), or retail (for example, Pettinger, 2004; Endrissat et al., 2017). In disenchanted organisational contexts, employees use brand meanings to construct positive identities, despite their routine tasks (for example, Brannan et al., 2015; Endrissat et al., 2017). Brannan and colleagues (2015) have studied recent graduates working as call centre employees at Cygnus, a prestigious multinational consultancy: they aspire to become consultants at Cygnus, but are not yet consultants, and probably never will be. These employees perceive their work at the call centre as 'a foot in the door' as one interviewee said (p. 41), in the hope that they will go on to better things. The brand is associated with meanings of professionalism, high quality, prestige, and success. Yet, the call centre work is not aligned with those meanings, because employees do frontline service work described as highly repetitive, standardised, and monitored. Even so, call centre workers draw on the values of the brand to sustain a sense of individual aspiration despite the low-key tasks they perform at work, and to construct themselves as professional workers (in waiting) both in their own eyes and those of others they meet outside the organisation. The brand values appeal to employees' idealised, consultant-in-waiting identity, filling the gap between the idealised self of a skilled and professional worker and the realised self of an unskilled call worker. Thus, Brannan and colleagues show that employees construct positive meanings about their work, despite their low-skill tasks, by constructing an identity as a professional, skilled worker.

Endrissat and colleagues (2017) draw on a case study of a North American supermarket chain employing art graduates and other creatives in both creative and non-creative roles. They find that employees, engaged in routine non-creative tasks, use the brand's symbolic meanings to construct an identity associated with creativity. They coin the concept of 'identity-incentive branding' to capture its dual role, arguing that the control that the brand exercises is not only constraining, but can also be engaging. They show how the organisation builds brand meaning by incorporating employees' brand-relevant identities. At the same time, the brand provides identity incentives that employees use to construct a desired sense of self: a creative self.

Additionally, brand meanings are not simply imposed and controlled by organisations, they are also produced and negotiated in employees' everyday practices (for example, Vásquez et al., 2013; Frandsen et al., 2018). As Vásquez and colleagues (2013) illustrate, brand meanings emerge through employees' routine communication practices and are drawn on in employees' identity work. In this sense, the brand is not a fixed set of managerial prescriptions but a dynamic resource that employees appropriate, reinterpret, and mobilise in constructing their identity

### 3.3 Brands and meaning-making

Brand meanings plainly serve a dual role in organisations: they are mobilised by organisations and their managers to shape employees' behaviour and thinking in line with brand values, while simultaneously acting as a resource that employees draw on to construct their own identities. Across both perspectives, identity construction emerges as the central arena in which brand meanings operate, whether in organisational attempts to regulate who employees should be, or in employees' own efforts to construct their identity.

In the literature, some organisational scholars show how employees use brand meanings to construct positive identities in routine or exacting work contexts (for example, call centres). While not directly examining the role of the brand in creating meaningfulness, some of these studies nevertheless hint at it by pointing to how brand meanings help employees cope with routine work tasks (for example, Brannan et al., 2015). Yet, there is only a limited understanding of how organisations actively use brand meanings to create meaningfulness, or how employees use them to make their work meaningful.

Looking at the sources and mechanisms of meaningful work by building on the existing scholarship, I examine how brands affect the way employees construct their work as meaningful. I connect insights from the literature about meaningful work with organisational research about branding for a fresh perspective on how employees experience and create meaningfulness in workplaces characterised by branding and symbolism. Hence my research question:

How does the brand contribute to employees' construction of their work as meaningful?

My answer lies in luxury-brand organisations. In the luxury sector, the enchanting world of the brand often contrasts with the disenchantment of work (Sieben & Haunschild, 2012). The branding of luxury brands relies heavily on symbolic value (Kapferer, 2012), emotional appeal (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2009), and material aesthetics (Catry, 2003), but we do not know how a brand's symbolic meanings might shape employees' construction of meaningfulness. Meaningful work in luxury-brand organisations offers an opportunity to explore meaningfulness in work contexts characterised by strong branding and symbolism. Thus I will now turn to the specificities of luxury branding and the research on luxury work and the role of the brands.



## 4 The world of luxury-brand organisation

Brands were first created to indicate the place of origin or the manufacturer of a product (Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2004). Later they were used to differentiate similar products in the minds of consumers (Klein, 2010). Over time, brands have become more important than the products themselves (Lury, 2004; Klein, 2010; Manning, 2010). This is illustrated by the success of some fashion brands, despite being known to manufacture their products in run-down factories by underpaid workers (Klein, 2010).

In their branding, luxury-brand organisations construct their worlds as above the ordinary (Kapferer, 2012), imbuing them with strong emotional appeal (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2009). However, organisational research has also shown the harsh working conditions in some of these organisations, which contrast with the values and image of the brand (Sieben & Haunschild, 2012).

In exploring the world of luxury-brand organisations, I begin by reviewing the narratives they craft around the exclusivity and prestige of their brands, the uniqueness of their products, and the charisma of their founders, and how enchantment underpins all types of narratives. I chart both the emotional impact of luxury brands and the narratives that shape them, before moving on to the disenchantment often present in luxury work (Sieben & Haunschild, 2012), noting that while some studies do not directly address how employees construct meaningfulness, they hint that the brand may play a role in the process (for example, Sherman, 2005, 2007; Smith, 2011).

## 4.1 Constructing the symbolic world of luxury brands

Enchantment permeates modern consumer culture (Campbell, 1987; Bennett, 2001; Ritzer, 2005). It refers to the process of making the ordinary special, ‘rendering the ordinary into emotionally charged, exciting, magical, and special market resources’ (Hartmann & Brunk, 2019, p. 669). Enchantment is central to marketing and branding activities (Arnould et al., 2017; Hartman & Brunk, 2019) that imbue objects of consumption with an aura and construct them as possessing extraordinary power (Langer, 2002; 2004; Arnould et al., 2017). Badot and Filser (2007, p. 167) stress the symbolic and hedonic dimensions of enchantment, describing it as ‘a set of practices initiated by both manufacturers and consumers to incorporate non-functional sources of value in goods and services, and turn them into sources of hedonic, symbolic, and interpersonal value’.

Luxury brands exemplify the enchantment of modern consumer culture by creating a dream world (Kapferer, 1997; Vigneron & Johnson, 2004; Daswani & Jain, 2011; Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2016b) around the consumer’s desire for the brand and its hedonic pleasure (Dubois & Paternault, 1995; Johnson & Vigneron, 1999; Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2009; De Barnier & Valette-Florence, 2013). The enchanting world of the brand is created by powerful branding narratives. Brand narratives are strategically crafted stories by the organisation to communicate desired brand meanings to internal and external stakeholders alike (Mills & John, 2025). They constitute a distinct form of branding practice that shapes the emotional dimension of brands (Mills & John, 2025) and projects audiences into the world of the brand (Pfannes et al., 2021). They are instrumental in translating brand values into coherent stories (Mills & John, 2025). In doing so, they seek to evoke emotional responses. Twitchell (2004, cited in Mills & John, 2025, p. 43) notes that brand narratives communicate meaning through emotion and used storytelling to encourage audiences to think and feel in specific ways.

In luxury branding, the narratives construct luxury brands as above the ordinary (Kapferer, 2012). They engage the consumers on a deep emotional level, fostering strong attachments between consumers and their brands (Kim & Sullivan, 2019; Pourazad et al., 2019). They also evoke aesthetic emotions that arise ‘when a person perceives and evaluates a stimulus for its aesthetic appeal or

virtues' (Schindler et al., 2017, p. 2), which are linked to liking and pleasure (Schindler et al., 2017; Menninghaus et al., 2019). The emotional dimension of luxury brands is also reflected in their appeal to consumers' social identity and personal values (Dubois & Duquesne, 1993), as well as their desire for social recognition (Vickers & Renand, 2003).

Here I explore three key branding narratives used by luxury organisations to shape an enchanting brand world: the brand as prestigious and exclusive (Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2016a); the luxury-brand products as unique and handcrafted objects (Catry, 2003; Daswani & Jain, 2011); and the brand's founder and his legacy as charismatic (Dion & Arnould, 2011). These narratives not only speak to consumers' identity aspirations, but also evoke emotional responses with aesthetics and charisma. In examining the branding narratives constructed by luxury organisations as part of their branding strategies, I also acknowledge, in line with the interpretivist, social constructivist orientation of this study, that brand audiences are active meaning-makers who interpret and rework the narratives, thereby co-constructing them (Holt, 2004).

#### 4.1.1 The construction of exclusivity and prestige in luxury branding

Centuries ago, luxury consumption was associated with class distinction and power (Heller, 2004; Muzzarelli, 2009). Those associations remain central to luxury branding, where exclusivity and prestige are carefully cultivated by luxury-brand organisations (Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2016a).

Initially, luxury consumption was restricted to a small elite, making it inherently exclusive. For example, during the thirteenth century, sumptuary laws in Europe were introduced to regulate luxury consumption based on status and income (Heller, 2004; Muzzarelli, 2009), underscoring the privileges of the elite. By the eighteenth century, the consumption of luxury goods played a central part in distinguishing aristocrats from commoners (Maza, 1997). The Industrial Revolution expanded access to luxury products, enabling a growing bourgeoisie to participate in luxury consumption. Despite this broader accessibility, luxury consumption remained closely tied to individuals' search for distinction and upward social mobility (Veblen, 2005). Veblen (2005) coined 'conspicuous consumption' to refer the purchase of luxury goods and services to show off one's

economic power. The concept remains relevant today in understanding consumption behaviour (Scott, 2010).

In the second half of the twentieth century, luxury consumption expanded from the rich and powerful to the middle classes, triggered by class emulation (McKendrick et al., 1983; Campbell, 1987). Luxury brands also started to offer more affordable products (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009) by promoting 'everyday luxury' (Rambourg, 2014) or expanding their range to include items that are not traditionally considered luxurious (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). Despite their loss of exclusivity and rarity, luxury products have remained high in demand (Kapferer, 2012). The luxuriousness of the products does not lie in their actual rarity or exclusivity, but in belonging to a well-known luxury brand (Phau & Prendergast 2000). Even today it is predominantly understood in relation to class distinction (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009), reflecting the aspirational privileges and status of the elite, as well as symbolic dominance (Dion & Arnould, 2011).

In modern consumer society, luxury brands are a strong signifier of status (Nelissen & Meijers, 2011; Dion & Borraz, 2017). Some argue that 'man's need for social stratification' (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009, p. 313) or recognition only stimulates demand for luxury brands and their products (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009; Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2016a). Kapferer & Bastien (2009, p. 314) writes:

The DNA of luxury, therefore, is the symbolic desire (albeit often repressed) to belong to a superior class, which everyone will have chosen according to their dreams, because anything that can be a social signifier can become a luxury. By the same token, anything that ceases to be a social signifier loses its luxury status.

In luxury branding, exclusivity and elite status continue to play a central role in the construction of luxury brands, despite their increasing accessibility, because branding practices sustain images of exclusivity and prestige by drawing on consumers' desire for social distinction (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009, 2012; Kapferer, 2012). Luxury branding appeals to consumers' aspirations for status, an essential element of its enchanting power by cultivating a 'social dream of distinction' that reinforces its allure and symbolic value (Kapferer, 2012). As Daswani and Jain (2011, p. 135) write, 'luxury brands are like a reward and its inaccessible attributes cultivate an even greater desire to own them.'

Luxury brands' branding and marketing strategies actively construct their exclusivity and prestige. They offer limited editions (Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2016a), highly personalised services, selective distribution (Catry, 2003), and tell stories about their heritage and the rarity of their products (Beverland, 2004; Heine, 2010). Thus, while exclusivity was once inherent, it is now a narrative carefully crafted by luxury-brand organisations to maintain their elite image in a more accessible market (Beverland, 2004; Kapferer & Bastien, 2012).

Branding thus constructs luxury brands as prestigious and exclusive, appealing to consumers' desire for status and distinction, and fuelling their enchantment. Branding also constructs the luxury product as unique and handcrafted, shaping both the brand and its world as enchanting, to which I turn next.

#### 4.1.2 The construction of the luxury product as unique and handcrafted

The luxury product is the heart of luxury branding (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009), embodying the exclusivity and allure that define such brands. Through branding, the luxury product is constructed as unique and handcrafted. Its exceptional craftsmanship and the use of precious, high-quality materials are given particular prominence (Catry, 2003; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009; Anido Freire, 2014), and help associate the product with sensory and emotional experiences: pleasure and aesthetic enjoyment that goes beyond the product's functionality (Vickers & Renand, 2003).

Historically, the rarity of luxury products was connected to the use of scarce materials such as gold, silver, or diamonds and the exceptional work of the craftsman (Catry, 2003): with the democratisation and mass-production of luxury products, the luxuriousness of the product relies now on virtual rarity and exclusivity, constructed in an *evocation* of exclusivity. It is not only the *perception* of quality (Phau & Prendergast, 2000). Rarity is created by the illusion of scarcity (Catry, 2003) as retail strategies make it difficult for consumers to buy the brand's products: high prices (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009); controlled shortages (Catry, 2003; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009); limited series (Catry, 2003; Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2016a); selective distribution (Catry, 2003); and the concentration of luxury shops in large cities or capital (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009).

To access luxury brands and their products, the luxury consumer also needs to show a taste for luxury (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009).

In luxury branding, rarity is also constructed around the product being crafted by hand from the finest materials. This is what Hartmann and Östberg (2013) describe as re-enchantment in modern culture, where organisations use the discourse of craft production to re-imagine and authenticate their products and brands: by invoking the idea of craft, luxury branding makes luxury products seem more special (or less ordinary) and rooted in tradition. The aim is an emotional connection with consumers, because craftsmanship is key in conveying symbolic significance and nurturing an emotional bond with the product (Morais & Brito, 2025).

Further, luxury branding constructs the luxury product as an extraordinary object not only by perpetuating its traditional image as a handcrafted object (Catry, 2003), but also as a work of art (Joy et al., 2010; Dion & Arnould, 2011; Dion & Borraz, 2015; Anido Freire, 2014; Kapferer, 2014). Luxury-product adverts might collaborate with known artists – photographers, filmmakers, painters (Anido Freire, 2014). Anido Freire (p. 2672) describes an ‘LV advertising campaign film’ (Fr. ‘L’invitation au voyage’) set in the renowned Louvre Museum in Paris:

the model Arizona Muse, dressed in a skirt and a brown knit (recalling the colour of the Monogram canvas created by LV in 1896), walks the Court square of the Louvre Museum (Symbolic: Art/Elitism) with rapid steps performed by her shoes, equipped with a Monogram Speedy bag with two handles and shoulder strap, printed with the imprint of the luxury brand. She passes through the corridors of the museum and, after looking furtively two masterpieces, *The Wedding at Cana* (Veronese, 1562) and *Mona Lisa* (Leonardo da Vinci, 1503–1506) and having opened a large trunk also signed LV, using a golden key, jealously guarded as a pendant around her neck, she gets an envelope (implicit symbols: message, secret, initiatory itinerary) and then closes the trunk.

In this advert, the world of one of the leading French luxury brands is associated with the world of classical art, and the luxury product (for example, the LV bag and truck) is portrayed as an artistic masterpiece (Anido Freire, 2014), staged artistically in an advertising campaign. In luxury advertising, the artistic touch is a central and often distinctive element in luxury advertising (Anido Freire, 2014).

In recent years, luxury advertising has increasingly used works of art to promote products (Peluso et al., 2017). A few years ago, Dior used an image in its advertising inspired by Édouard Manet, *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (Peluso et al., 2017). Manet was a controversial French artist of the nineteenth century, inspired by the Impressionists, who developed his own style. The choice of artist therefore fits well with the luxurious, but also provocative image that Dior has constructed. This recent 'artification' of luxury brands is designed to reinforce the perceived luxuriousness of the brand and its products (Huettl & Gierl, 2012) by the 'art infusion effect' (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2008a, 2008b).

By constructing the luxury product as an art object, luxury branding also constructs it as a product that engages all the senses, providing sensory and emotional pleasure (Daswani & Jain, 2011). More specifically, Daswani and Jain (2011, p. 133) write:

Luxury products become pieces of art and their experience gives hedonic pleasure and touches all the senses. Luxury products apart from beauty are pleasant to hear, smell, taste or touch. Luxury is a spring of sensual pleasure and also adds to one's self-concept.

Thus luxury brands are strongly defined by their products (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). Although the production process increasingly resembles mass-produced goods, luxury branding continues to construct the luxury product around notions of uniqueness and craft. Which brings me to the branding narrative of founders and their legacies as charismatic (Dion & Arnould, 2011), so central to shaping brands and crafting their enchanting world.

#### 4.1.3 The construction of the founder and their legacy as charismatic

The third branding narrative that constructs the brand and its world as enchanting is the one of the charismatic founder and their legacy. In luxury branding, the brand is strongly associated with its founder. Kapferer and Bastien (2012, p. 160) write:

A luxury brand is a real and living person. It was founded by a person, often the person whose name it bears, and contributes in some way to that person's

survival after death (Coco Chanel, Hilton Hotels, Guerlain). You can provide it with a more or less mythical ancestor (Dom Pérignon, Dom Ruinart, Veuve Clicquot), whose history is then rewritten.

The founder plays a crucial role in the branding of luxury brands, significantly contributing to their enchantment. Luxury branding in particular relies on the construction of the founder and their descendants as charismatic to create a 'relationship of adoration' in the consumer-brand relationship, transforming 'the bewitched consumer' into 'a willing adorer' (Dion & Arnould, 2011, p. 514).

The charisma of the founder is kept alive as the 'spiritual legacy of the founder' (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012, p. 152), handed down not only to the founder's family descendants, but also to their creative successors, the brand's artistic directors, who further carry on the founder's vision and authority (Dion & Arnould, 2011). It is not unusual, however, for the creative director to be a direct descendant of the founder, since many luxury brands have been or remain family organisations. The artistic director of the brand is portrayed with an exceptional personae, as a magician who transforms everything in his proximity into art, 'a kind of magical being who not only passes on his/her revelation, but also "transmutes" (rewrites) codes of beauty and fashion and creates a distinctive imaginary world' (Dion & Arnould, 2011, p. 517).

In addition, the story of the founder is written as a myth, 'a traditional story about heroes or supernatural beings' (Woodside et al., 2008, p. 98) or as a form of enchantment according to Benjamin Walter (Mali, 1999a, 1999b). This myth is central to constructing luxury brands as having a long history (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). Roll (2018), writing about the French luxury brand Hermès, notes:

Thierry Hermès founded the company in 1837 as a harness workshop in Paris. Originally, his intent was to serve the needs of European noblemen by providing saddles, bridles and other leather riding gear. In the early twentieth century, Thierry's son Charles-Émile Hermès moved the company's shop to 24 Rue Du Faubourg Saint-Honoré in Paris, where it remains to this very day and is the company's global headquarters.

This gives luxury brands an 'identitary narrative', retracing the history of the brand (Anido Freire, 2014). It further inscribes the brand into the legacy of a country and of its people, of a family and of a specific region (Anido Freire, 2014).

Hartman and Brunk (2019) discuss how marketing taps into consumers' desire for nostalgia, evoking enchantment by appealing to their longing for the past.

Further, luxury brands keep alive the founder's myth and charisma in their displays in historic retail spaces of photos, images, and artefacts that belonged to the founder or bring them to mind. For example, in the Chanel flagship store in rue Cambon, as Dion and Arnould (2011, p. 509) write in their field notes:

The aura of Coco Chanel is all around, as if she were still there through portraits, reconstitution of her living room, and personal objects.

They add:

the Dior shop in avenue Montaigne uses several architectural devices to refer to Christian Dior: the large windows of the entrance open onto videos of his villa in Normandy, and a portrait of Christian Dior by Bernard Buffet is displayed.

The perpetuation of the founder's myth is further implemented by sales staff, who receive extensive training in the history of the brand and its founder (Dion & Arnould, 2011). Luxury brands further construct the myth and charisma of the founder by preserving their workshop and limiting public access. For example, the Dior workshops are referred to as 'the holy of holies' (Dion & Arnould, 2011; Dion & Borraz, 2015).

While the founder and their myth are central to the narratives of luxury branding aimed at external audiences, they also form a strong element of luxury brands' corporate culture, shaping internal meanings, values, and organisational identity. The founder and their myth communicate the brand's heritage, preserving founding values and ensuring continuity over time. It is designed to help employees interpret those values and provide a shared frame of reference that supports organisational identity (Urde et al., 2007; Boers & Ljungkvist, 2019).

Of the three key branding narratives that luxury-brand organisations use to construct the brand and its world as enchanting – the brand as prestigious and exclusive; the luxury products as unique and handcrafted; and the founder and their legacy as charismatic – the latter two also contribute to the construction of prestige and exclusivity in general. Yet, against these consumer and marketing perspectives, there is the disenchantment of luxury work, and the role the brand plays in employees' experiences of work in the luxury sector.

## 4.2 Luxury work and the role of the brand

The concept of enchantment is rarely associated with the domain of work and organisations (Moore, 1997). Instead, narratives of disenchantment are connected to organisations (Boje & Baskin, 2011), bearing the strong imprint of Weber's depiction of modern work as disenchanted (1958a, 1958b). The presence of enchantment in organisational life challenges the disenchanted view of the workplace as a purely rational space, one that excludes irrationality, emotion (Mestrovic, 1996; Hartley, 1999), and spirituality (Bell & Taylor, 2003; Casey, 2004). That is in contrast to the rational model of management, exemplified by Taylorism and Fordism, that dominated the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century (Hartley, 1999). Luxury work is no exception. While branding constructs the brand and its world as enchanting, luxury work connects to a world of disenchantment (Sieben & Haunschild, 2012). Thus beginning with the organisational literature about the disenchanting conditions of luxury work, I consider how luxury brands impact employees' experiences of work.

### 4.2.1 Precariousness and emotional and aesthetic demands

The luxury sector has evolved from family-owned businesses to domination by a handful of international conglomerates (Kapferer & Tabatoni, 2012). In 2017, the two largest luxury groups, LVMH and Compagnie Financière Richemont SA, together represented some one-fifth of total sales by the world's 75 largest luxury companies (McCarthy et al., 2017). Many luxury brands are now subjected to the pressure of stakeholders who focus on profitability, and 'must chase sales to amortise their investments and ever-growing marketing and distribution costs' (Catry, 2003, p. 11).

To satisfy stakeholder demand for profits and consumer demand for luxury goods, luxury brands have gone from craft production to mass production (Dion & Arnould, 2011). For the workers in the luxury sector, the increased marketisation and commercialisation of luxury brands and their products mean that the luxurious image of the brand co-exists alongside productivity and profitability (Sieben & Haunschild, 2012). When the values of exclusivity, craftsmanship, excellence, and others co-exist alongside the commercial values of productivity and profitability, workers must make sense of the co-existence of these paradoxical values while performing their work. Yet, research in

organisational studies has so far provided limited insights on the diverse experience of work involved in the production, marketisation, and commercialisation of luxury brands as current studies have primarily explored workers' experiences in the retail and hospitality sectors (for example, Adler & Adler, 2004; Davidson et al., 2006; Otis, 2008, 2016; Sherman, 2005, 2007, 2011; Smith, 2011). These studies show that employees' disenchanting experiences of work are in sharp contrast to the enchanting world of luxury brands (Sieben & Haunschild, 2012).

Scholars have set out the precarious working conditions in the luxury sector, including low pay, part-time work, and overtime (for example, Adler & Adler, 2004; Davidson et al., 2006; Sherman, 2007). Others have shown that luxury-brand organisations impose emotional and aesthetic demands on employees to ensure they align with the brand's values and image, as well as with the experiences expected by their clientele (for example, Pettinger, 2004; Otis, 2008; 2016). In these studies, luxury workers do not only have to show the right emotions (Hochschild 2003), but also the right physical attributes and way of expressing themselves (Warhurst et al., 2000; Warhurst & Nickson, 2009). Workers are asked to always look happy, service-minded, and embody the brand (Pettinger, 2004), for example.

Otis's studies (2008, 2016) show how employees of international (American-owned) luxury hotels in Beijing are controlled by the values of the hotel brand (American/international/white) and are forced to embody these values to meet the aesthetic, interactional demands of an international clientele (overwhelmingly white men). As representatives of a luxury brand, employees in Otis's studies (2008, 2016) are not only expected to 'look good and sound right' (Warhurst & Nickson, 2009), but also to embody 'an American-style, middle-class femininity, based on whiteness' (Otis, 2016, p. 915) unfamiliar to staff and quite different to the Maoist worker of the past.

In addition, Smith (2011) shows how the management of a high-end retail shop called HappyHomes use the class-based meanings of the brand to control front-line employees. Smith (2011) coins the terms 'identity labor' and 'branding consent'. She argues that the class-based meanings of the brand are used to allay workers' anxieties about not having the same social status as the consumers of the brand. The brand is used as a cultural form of control, which explains why workers are expected to 'consent' to conform to a prescribed identity imposed by the organisation.

Smith's study (2011) illustrates the strategies employed by the organisation to transform workers' class anxiety into the labour process, and how the employer brand is used to transform workers' class identity. The outcome is low-paid, low-status workers identify with their high-status wealthy consumers, since the shop manager persuades them that brand identification can increase their status. As a result, Smith conceptualises brand identification as repairing class anxiety, because 'brand identification is the conduit by which the worker can embody high class cultural forms' (2011, p. 10).

In the literature about luxury workers, I find most studies concentrate on people who work in luxury retail and hospitality. While emphasising the exacting working conditions in the luxury sector (for example, Adler & Adler, 2004; Davidson et al., 2006; Sherman, 2007), they conceptualise luxury through the lens of aesthetic and emotional work, situating it in a broader academic conversation about contemporary forms of organisational control, targeting not only employees' physical and mental capacities, but also their sense of self. Brand values and image play a central role as they define how employees should behave in their interactions with the organisations' clientele. I now turn to how employees mobilise brands as a resource with which to frame their work positively.

#### 4.2.2 Luxury brands shaping employees' experiences of their work in a positive way

For Sieben and Haunschild (2012), one of the paradoxes of the luxury service sector is that despite the demanding conditions, luxury workers see their work as luxurious. Based on their re-interpretation of empirical studies, Sieben and Haunschild argue that this perception is linked to the way workers associate their work with certain lifestyle: shaped by their interactions with affluent, high-profile clients and the luxurious environments in which they work. According to them, this compensatory effect is further reinforced by the emphasis on aesthetic norms that shape the delivery of luxury services.

Some studies hint that the brand – its image and values – might play a role in employees' positive perception and construction of their work (for example, Sherman, 2005, 2007; Smith, 2011; Dion & Borraz, 2017). For example, Smith (2011) finds that luxury workers perceive their tasks positively when they identify

with the brand. In Smith's study (2011), the employees of HappyHomes do not see cleaning as a lowly task, because, using identification with the brand, the organisation re-constructs trivial tasks as high-class hospitality strategies, and low-level shop assistants as high-class brand ambassadors. As Smith (2011, p. 14) puts it:

During my time in the field I rarely saw Don instruct his clerks to clean and maintain his departmental area, yet they did so with consistency and close attention. In fact, these clerks did this so well that Don (who doesn't do much of this work himself) received regular praise in staff meetings for how tidy, clean, and fully-stocked he kept his department. It is also telling, given Don's personal abrogation of these responsibilities, that his subordinates voiced no resentment.

Sherman (2005, 2007), meanwhile, shows how workers in two luxury hotels in the US constitute themselves as superior to other workers *and* to their clients in order to compensate for being subordinate to the guests of the hotel (2005, p. 133):

luxury hotels are sites of cross-class interactions in which inequality must be actively managed and negotiated in ways that are not necessarily explicit or available for description in interviews. Workers are constantly confronted with the greater entitlement of guests to material and symbolic resources, including workers' own labor.

These workers 'constitute superiority' (p. 133) by using various strategies to establish a higher status in relation to their colleagues: for example, by portraying their own jobs as the most challenging, by looking down on colleagues' tasks (pointing to their lack of rigour and professionalism), or by emphasising their cultural capital or advantages related to their position (free meals in expensive restaurants, free theatre tickets, expensive gifts).

In Sherman's study (2005), employees use the prestige of the hotel to construct themselves and their work as superior to other workers in lower-prestige hotels. Other workers without high status did not compare themselves with their co-workers, but with other workers in lower-prestige hotels. All these strategies were used to 'constitute status' (p. 138). Interestingly, Sherman also shows that workers deploy specific strategies towards the hotel's clientele: making a show of

empathy for guests; being condescending to guests; or showing superior knowledge and experience.

Dion and Borraz (2017), meanwhile, show that employees construct an identity based on the values of the brand by affiliating with upper-class customers, placing themselves in a dominant position. They find that the brand will shape not only consumers' class subjectivities, but also the sales staff's identity. Shop assistants and managers at luxury boutiques contribute to the shaping of these subjectivities by their reinforcement of, say, social intimidation or exclusion. Dion and Borraz write that 'sales staff may adopt a dismissive attitude towards customers to reinforce their lack of social legitimacy' (p. 73), and argue that brand materiality influences some service workers' perceptions of their role, leading them to view themselves not as subordinate workers, but as affiliates of upper-class consumers. They write about the materiality of the shop, of its 'servicescape' (p. 72), and how 'the representations of luxury that are strongly embedded in the architecture and history of the heritage store' (p. 73) affect how luxury workers behave towards their customers. They also mention uniforms and logos as examples of brand materiality. For example, Marie, one of their respondents, explains that when sales personnel wear uniforms with luxury brand logos, they tend to behave like divas (p. 73). She also points to a difference in attitudes between the staff working for luxury brands in department stores, who are more relaxed and friendly to customers, and the ones working in historic flagship stores on prestigious venues, such as rue Montaigne in Paris, who show more distance towards customers.

To conclude, studies about luxury workers' experiences of work have shown the disenchantment of luxury work and how it contrasts with brand values (Sieben & Haunschild, 2012). Some studies have established the low pay, overtime, and exacting working conditions in the luxury sector (for example, Adler & Adler, 2004; Davidson et al., 2006; Sherman, 2007), while other studies have found more subtle types of exacting working conditions – the emotional and aesthetic demands placed on employees (for example, Otis, 2008, 2016). While working conditions might contrast with the brand's values and image, some studies (for example, Sherman, 2005, 2007; Smith, 2011) hint at the brand's role in the employees' positive perception and construction of work without directly exploring how it impacts meaningfulness in the luxury-brand organisation. As a result, as in the literature about the meaning-making role of the brand in organisations (Chapter 3), studies about luxury-brand workers offer limited

insights about the role of the brand in employees' construction of their work as meaningful.

Most of the literature concerns retail or frontline employees – a narrow focus that leaves out many other workers in the luxury-brand sector, such as those in office roles. To better understand what it means to work in luxury, we need a more diverse picture of luxury workers. This includes looking at how people in non-retail roles experience their work.



## 5 Research practice, research process

I consider it important to reflect on the journey that is my research practice, while establishing the quality of the research process. While I take a step-by-step approach (entering the field, gathering data, interpreting the empirical data, and writing up my research findings), it is important to underline that my research practice was less linear than what I portray here. It entails going back and forth between the different research stages as well as numerous tours and detours. There is also that element in research that remains unaccounted for, when ideas come unexpectedly, as the researcher does not just sit at her desk ‘doing research’. As Weber (1958a, pp. 113–114) writes:

Ideas occur to us when they please, not when it pleases us ... In any case, ideas come when we do not expect them, and not when we are brooding and searching at our desks. Yet ideas would certainly not come to mind had we not brooded at our desks and searched for answers with passionate devotion.

Here I clarify the underlying beliefs in my research practice: the social constructionist, interpretative nature of the research, and how the interviewing and interpretative processes were inspired by a narrative approach to the exploration of the social world. I explain my choice of methods – the conduct of in-depth, open interviews to let respondents tell their own story. I also mention the integration of the researcher’s memories of past and ongoing experiences as a research method, which informs both the generation and interpretation of the primary data.

In the third part, I describe the analytical process of my research material, best described as an abductive process due to the centrality of the dialogue between theories and data and the central role of imagination.

In the fourth part, I discuss what makes my account trustworthy. I explain how sincerity, credibility and ethical concerns have led the practice of research.

I conclude with reflecting thoughts on the research process.

## 5.1 The underlying beliefs

The purpose of my study is to contribute to existing research about meaningful work by exploring how employees in luxury-brand organisations construct their work as meaningful, with particular attention to the role of the brand in this process. To explore meanings, feelings, and experiences, I decided early in the research process to conduct a qualitative study, as being best suited to this aim (Prasad, 2005). My qualitative research takes an interpretivist view of knowledge creation, largely inspired by a narrative view of human communication (Fisher, 1984,1985), which sees narratives as central to exploring the meanings of human experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and identity construction (Fisher, 1984, 1985; Brown, 2017).

### 5.1.1 The interpretivist paradigm

In the interpretative paradigm, the world is not out there as a fixed reality to be discovered, ‘the world is never a world of itself: it is always an experienced world’ (Sandberg & Targama, 2007, p. 27).<sup>1</sup> Human interpretations are the starting point for knowledge creation, and social phenomena are built from the perceptions and actions of individuals, including those of the researcher (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Thus, interpretivist researchers aim at understanding the social world at the level of *subjective* experiences (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). They study a phenomenon by taking into consideration various points of view, including their own (Tracy, 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> Paradigm generally refers to ‘a shared set of ontological and epistemological assumptions that unites a community of scholars and prescribes specific guidelines for conducting research’ (Prasad, 2005, p.7)

An interpretivist view of reality and knowledge challenges the well-anchored belief that the social sciences are value-free and neutral (Ellis et al., 2011). Positivist researchers emphasise objectivity in the research process (Etherington, 2004). They claim, for example, they see the world ‘through others’ eyes’ (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 416), minimising the impact of their subjectivity in describing the world they encounter; however, this objectivist stance fails to fully account for the complexity of social research, as researchers ‘are not and cannot simply be conduits for the things they see and the words they hear’ (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 407).

Interpretivist researchers, meanwhile, emphasise the importance of analysing a social phenomenon from the participants’ viewpoints, but they also acknowledge that it is not fully achievable (Tracy, 2013). They practise *Verstehen*, a concept developed by German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey. It refers to ‘the practice of striving towards empathic understanding’ (Tracy, 2013, p. 41). In interpretivism, the subjectivity of the researcher is central to the research (Van Maanen, 1988) because it impacts how the world is interpreted. The researcher’s subjectivity includes values, feelings, knowledge about the researched phenomenon as well as past and present experiences, including the researcher’s relation to the research participants. As a result, interpretivist researchers are not on a quest to discover and tell the truth, as that is unattainable given the arguable nature of the social world. They instead offer a meaningful, trustworthy interpretation of a phenomenon of interest.

Further, interpretivism takes a social constructionist view of knowledge creation, which means that it sees knowledge as created and negotiated in social interactions (Tracy, 2013), ‘being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world’ (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). In social constructionism, the social is ‘constantly “in the making”’, not an external reality to be observed and described (Elliott, 2005, p. 18). Social constructionism emphasises the centrality of language in the creation and negotiation of meanings: the world is constantly created and recreated through communication (Tracy, 2013).

Thus in taking an interpretivist, social constructionist view, I acknowledge the subjective nature of research – devoid of notions of truth, objectivity, and value neutrality – and the centrality of language and social interactions in the construction of the social world. Together, researcher and respondent, the interpreters and creators of their own social worlds, bring their subjectivity

(including assumptions and bias) to the research process and collectively create the knowledge that is being produced.

### 5.1.2 Inspiration from the narrative approach

In the narrative approach, research practice is shaped by the belief that the study of narratives is essential to explore and understand the meanings of individuals' experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and that individuals construct themselves through stories (Fisher, 1984, 1985; Sacks, 2015; Bruner, 1987; Gergen, 1999; Brown, 2017). According to Bruner (1987, p. 15), 'we become the autobiographical narratives that we tell about our lives'.

In this study, narratives are understood broadly, not only as having a beginning, middle, and end and a plot (Riessman, 2008), but also as encompassing all the elements of a meaningful pattern that may not be expressed at the same time or in a single set of sentences by participants (Humble & Pedersen, 2015). As a result, my part as the researcher includes putting all the pieces together to construct a meaningful narrative (Humble & Pedersen, 2015).

In the narrative approach, words are central to understanding individuals' experiences (Miczo, 2003). This could be seen as a kind of 'word fetishism' or 'the treatment of words as real entities that stand for the experiences they represent' (p. 469), but aligned with interpretivist, social constructionist views of social reality, these words are not taken at face value. As Cunliffe & Coupland (2012, p. 66) write, 'narratives do not necessarily describe what is real, but are imaginative constructions of order'. This approach has thus determined both the conduct of the interviews and the design of the questions in the present study, because it encourages interviewees to tell their stories (Francis, 2018) – the interviewer asks questions inviting participants to select and summarise their experiences of one or more phenomena. The chosen interviewing approach has also been inspired by life-story narratives, which draw on other facets of the self than the work-related (Essers, 2009) and gives importance to the exploration of the broader context in order to understand life experiences. It entails, for example, talking about the respondent's private life to get different facets of the individual, acknowledging the interconnection of private and work self. A life-story narrative also includes a time approach, starting with the past to understand the present

(Essers, 2009). For example, I designed the interview guide used in my study to elicit stories about interviewees' lives prior to working in the luxury sector.

The same narrative approach has informed my analysis of the interview data. Inspired by grand narrative and living stories (Boje et al., 2016; Svane, 2020), I identify 'narratives', 'stories', and 'accounts'. The term 'narratives' refers specifically to the cultural and symbolic narratives constructed by an organisation about its brand, products, and founder. The term 'stories' refers to my respondents' living stories (Boje et al., 2016; Svane, 2020), organised around several themes, one of which – the focus of the analysis – is the respondents' stories about the meaningfulness of their work and the role of the brand in creating it.

In the narrative approach, the interviewee is a storyteller (Fisher, 1984, 1985) who portrays a specific view of their world through their choice of words and the stories that they have chosen to share. The construction of a narrative experience especially encompasses 'a reflective relationship between living a life story, retelling a life story, and reliving a life story' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, in Francis 2018, p. 382). Retelling depends on the speaker's goals, the audience, and the social context (Marsh, 2007). Accuracy or truth is not the primary concern when retelling an event. As Marsh explains, 'Re-tellings of events are often incomplete or distorted' (p. 16). Memories, therefore, should not be seen as truthful reproductions of reality; rather, they are understood as fictionalised accounts of the past (Siegel & Payne Bryson, 2011). Siegel and Payne Bryson argue that each act of recalling a memory alters it, sometimes in meaningful ways, while for Richie and colleagues (2016), recalling significant life events not only influences the emotions, it fosters a sense of meaningfulness by reinforcing self-esteem and self-continuity.

With this in mind, the choices individuals make to construct their stories in a particular way will be key. For example, having worked in the luxury sector, at times in the same organisation or department as some of the respondents, closeness is an important factor in my study, as some details may not have been explicitly stated, given that they were probably assumed to be mutually understood. At the same time, a shared professional background and mutual rapport because I was thought 'one of them' may have elicited more in-depth, emotionally rich stories. My familiarity with the industry's idiom and culture – the organisational 'lingo' – may have fostered a sense of trust and openness in the interviews.

The third narrative is my own account and memories. In the narrative approach, the researcher is a storyteller who constructs an interpretative account, 'a story about stories' (Riessman, 2008, p. 6) and thus becomes a co-author of the story (Essers, 2009; Gabriel, 2013). This conceptualisation further acknowledges the centrality of the researcher's subjectivity to the research process and the account they craft. In this, how much is told depends on how much the audience needs to know (Marsh, 2007).

Having outlined the interpretivist foundations of my study and how the narrative approach has informed both the interview process and the analysis, I now turn to my research choices in the field and the integration of past and ongoing personal experiences as a research method.

## 5.2 Doing field work

In accordance with the interpretivist paradigm, this study relies on open-ended and in-depth interviewing, in conjunction with my personal experiences of working in the luxury-brand sector. Here I explain how I have selected my research respondents, conducted the interviews, and incorporated my personal memories of the luxury-brand sector.

### 5.2.1 Selecting research respondents

The first choice to be made was the respondents, and I chose to interview people working for companies that produce and sell luxury fashion items, silverware, perfumes and cosmetics, or wines and spirits – the product categories commonly associated with the conventional idea of luxury (Ricca & Robins, 2012). My decision was motivated by the understanding that luxury organisations offer a compelling context for exploring the role of brands in creating meaningfulness. Luxury branding has a strong symbolic dimension, often linked to identity and status (for example, Dubois & Duquesne, 1993; Kapferer & Bastien, 2009; Kapferer, 2012). It also relies on an emotional appeal that constructs luxury products as aesthetic, handcrafted objects (for example, Catry, 2003) and the founder and their legacy as extraordinary, charismatic figures (Dion & Arnould, 2011). However, the symbolic, emotional world of the brand often contrasts with the more disenchanted and routine realities of organisational life (Sieben &

Haunschild, 2012). This tension makes luxury-brand organisations particularly relevant for examining how employees construct their work as meaningful.

At an early stage, I chose to focus on employees working in Paris for the same group, LVMH (Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy). The LVMH particularly interested me, since it has often been criticised for turning exclusive family-owned luxury brands into commercial luxury brands (Kapferer & Tabatoni, 2012). Most of LVMH's brands, especially the perfumes and cosmetics and wines and spirits sectors, exemplify the contemporary paradox of luxury by selling products best defined as 'everyday luxury' (Rambourg, 2014) or 'accessible luxury' (Dubois & Duquesne, 1993, p. 38; Ricca & Robins, 2012, p. xi). In such organisations, the luxurious values and image associated with luxury brands may stand in stark contrast to the actual working conditions (Sieben & Haunschild, 2012), offering an interesting context for exploring how employees construct meaningfulness in their work.

Selection fell into three distinct phases. In the first phase, I chose interviewees from my own network in the luxury-brand sector, and mainly people I had worked with. This had the advantage of not having interviewees chosen by the management of the organisation. In this selection phase, I selected employees from sales, marketing, and communication functions, as they are directly involved in brand communication as part of their work.

For the second phase, when I recruited the majority of participants, I broadened the interviewee profile in order to explore whether employees' stories differed between those who work closely with the brand and those who do not. I reached out to employees who do not work with the brand *per se*, and also employees with different levels of responsibility and seniority. I increased my pool of respondents with the snowball sampling method or chain-referral sampling (Penrod et al., 2003). After each interview, I asked my respondent if they know someone who might agree to be interviewed.

The snowball sampling method is recommended for 'hidden and/or hard to reach populations' (Cohen & Arieli, 2011, p. 427), because it helps build up a wider network of interviewees from a first set of contacts. Cohen and Arieli emphasise that populations avoid exposure for various reasons, including religious, cultural, and social affiliations, as well as economic or political activities. The luxury sector is notoriously difficult to access, and both management and employees in luxury-brand companies tend to be highly protective of the brand's carefully cultivated, dreamlike image, so it is often difficult to arrange interviews by making a formal

request to the organisation and its management. This was illustrated by the wariness of one of my interviewees who worked as a brand manager, and at first refused to be interviewed on the grounds that the company did not want its branding strategies made public. He feared that the aim of my study was to harm the brand's image; what reassured him was the research protocol and specifically the anonymisation of organisations, brands, and participants.

I did not set a specific number of respondents to recruit in the second phase. Instead, I stopped contacting new interviewees when I reached data saturation – when the new data collected seemed to repeat what had already been said in previous interviews (Saunders et al., 2018).

In the third phase of participant selection, I contacted additional interviewees to ask direct questions about meaningful work. One of the aims of this phase was to discuss my findings and insights thus far with a small number of interviewees.

### 5.2.2 Open-ended, in-depth interviews

Recorded interviews have been central in answering my research question. Critics of interviews as a research method point to the possibility of verbal manipulation by respondents and the scripted nature of talk in an interview setting (Alvesson, 2003; Miller, 2009), because interviewees might give a specific answer to please the interviewer or to project a positive identity by engaging in impression management (Goffman, 1961, 1990) and boost their selves (Alvesson, 2003). For example, the lack of expression of bitterness, cynicism, or resistance in some of my respondents' accounts thus could be explained by their desire to project a positive image of themselves and their work (Goffman, 1967). However, aware of the risks and in the spirit of interpretivism, I consider interviews to be an excellent source of empirical insights (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011) and exploring possible interpretations (for example, Alvesson, 2003), not as a mean of grasping the 'true' insights of interviewees. Whatever the reasons for the words spoken by respondents, what matters is what interviewees remember and find meaningful to share (Francis, 2018).

The majority of the 39 in-depth interviews with 36 employees working primarily in the French capital, Paris, for well-known luxury brands were conducted over several years. A limited number of interviews were conducted a few years later in the final stages of my study. All interviews lasted between 35 minutes and 2 hours

(average 70 minutes) and were fully recorded. The interviews were conducted in French so respondents could express themselves in the language they felt comfortable with, and I translated the most interesting parts into English.

For the most part, the initial interviews were relatively easy to secure, primarily due to existing personal contacts. The promise of confidentiality encouraged participants to take part. However, the process of scheduling and conducting interviews was complex: while most people whom I contacted agreed to be interviewed, the problem was finding a time to meet, because their busy schedules allowed little flexibility.

Most interviews were done face-to-face, especially in the first two phases (27 out of 32). A few times, when I was not able to meet physically with a respondent because of their lack of availability, we decided to conduct the interview online. This type of interview is increasingly seen as a viable alternative tool for qualitative interviewing, as it allows the researcher to connect with participants who might not otherwise be reachable (Lo Iacono et al., 2016): online interviewing makes research more democratic, since it is less time-consuming and does not require money to travel and meet participants. While I was reluctant at first since I feared that it would impact my connection with them (Lo Iacono et al., 2016), I did not find it so different from the face-to-face interviews, especially since I generally used it to interview people I had already met. Deakin and Wakefield (2014) have even argued that interviewees are more responsive online, and that the researcher and interviewee may connect quicker than in some face-to-face interviews.

In the final phase of my research, the last seven interviews were online using Google Meet or Microsoft Teams. By then, after Covid, online meetings had become an accepted way of meeting. Again, I did not find that online interviewing impacted my relationship with participants or the quality of interviewees' answers.

Most of the interviews were held out of office hours, in the interviewees' own time, mainly during lunch or after work in a café or restaurant. While it might be thought a disadvantage because it is not possible to observe individuals in their work environment, it also creates a more intimate atmosphere, which may help a researcher access 'in-depth knowledge' (Alvesson, 2003). Most interviews were conducted in an informal atmosphere, which I felt helped respondents to be more open about their experience of work, and not to engage exclusively in impression management (Alvesson, 2003).

I consciously adopted emotional attentiveness and engagement in the interviews, meaning that I focused on listening to respondents and showing interest in what

they were saying to facilitate the sharing of rich stories (Riessman, 2008; Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). As an early career researcher this was challenging, since at the same time I was concerned about what the next question should be.

While I pursued my research interests in an open manner, I conducted semi-guided interviews. I wrote down some specific themes and questions to orient or stimulate the discussion around a few themes: personal background, work, the brand, the company. In the first round of interviews, I introduced my research interest in broad terms, allowing respondents to interpret it in their own way and share their stories. Specifically, I told them:

I am interested in hearing about your experience, how you came to work here, what it means to be part of (name of the brand/organisation), and how you perceive its impact on both your professional and personal life.

Wanting to understand where my interviewees came from, how they ended up working for a luxury-brand organisation, and what it represented for them to work for a prestigious luxury brand, some of my questions were:

Where do you come from?

What university did you attend? What type of studies?

How did you start working in the luxury-brand sector?

What attracted you to work for this organisation or the luxury sector?

What do you do when you get to work in the morning?

What does the brand mean to you? Did you know about the brand before starting to work in the luxury sector?

What do you like about your work? What do you dislike?

What is your best memory from working in the organisation or in the luxury sector?

Importantly, in line with a semi-structured style of interviewing, I remained open to what the interviewee felt was important to talk about within the framework of the research project (Alvesson, 2003). I tried not to intrude a theory or concept into the conversation. For example, I did not want to impose a specific conceptualisation of a brand. Since the organisation's and the brand's names were

often the same, I kept the wording intentionally vague and asked, ‘What does [organisation/brand name] mean to you in your work?’, adjusting in cases where employees worked for the LVMH parent company.

In response to my evolving research focus and insights gained from earlier interviews, I progressively adapted the interview questions. The first 12 interviews could be defined as a pilot study (Schreiber, 2008) and were a key source of insights to narrow down my interests and themes. Early in the process as I transcribed my first interviews, I engaged from the second interview on in a dialogue with my empirical data. Each interview gave me telling insights that I followed up in the next interview. Graugaard (2012), reflecting about ‘The interviewer and their role as a “seeder” of concepts between the conversations’, writes:

What strikes me, sitting here looking back at these conversations, is how they interacted with each other, not only in my memory of them, but also when they actually unfolded. Imagery or concepts that I had been discussing with one narrator would come up in conversation with others ... This points to my role as a participant in the creation of the narratives rather than an external onlooker who ‘discovered’ the narrative through a set of predefined questions. (Diary entry, 18 Mar. 2012)

My interview style became progressively more structured. I was increasingly interested in hearing about my respondents’ most important work-related memories or their daily work tasks. I added questions such as:

What is your most unforgettable memory of the luxury-brand sector?

Describe a typical working day.

I reformulated certain questions once I realised they may have been too leading. For example, in the first interviews, I asked participants to recall their best memory of their organisation or since they started working in the luxury sector. In French, this was formulated as ‘votre plus beau souvenir’. Since ‘beau’ guides respondents to describe an agreeable memory, I reformulated the question to ask about their most unforgettable memory. Some respondents asked for clarification, and I encouraged them to interpret the question in their own way.

While conducting the interviews, it was challenging at times not to react to my respondents' stories, especially when they echoed my own experiences in the luxury sector or referred to events that I had personally been involved in.

In the later stages of the study, my questions were more structured in order to test certain ideas and explore some of my initial insights. For example, I asked direct questions such as:

In what ways do you feel connected to the brand's values?

How does the brand's reputation or image outside the organisation affect how you feel about your work?

Can you describe a moment when you felt proud of your association with the brand? What was it about that experience that made it meaningful to you?

Why is it important for you to work for a luxury brand? (When they mentioned it was important for them.)

Open interviews meant my respondents could talk about what matters to them within the framework of my research interest. I used semi-structured interviews about main themes and questions, and after each interview narrowed down my themes based on the insights gained in the interviewing phase. I also had my personal memories and experiences to draw on, which I will turn to now.

### 5.2.3 Personal memories of ordinary experiences

In line with the interpretivist nature of this study, I not only acknowledge the researcher's subjectivity in the research process, but embrace it. More specifically, I acknowledge that I enter the field with previous knowledge of some organisations, of some interviewees, and of the luxury-brand sector – I did not start with a blank sheet of paper. Thus a secondary method of answering my research question was to reflect on my memories of the luxury-brand sector and more recent experiences outside the research context. These personal memories informed the generation and interpretation of the primary data.

This secondary method is important to the context of my study, because it adds layers of meaning to the interpretation process. It is a response to the idea that the social scientist must connect individuals' stories to the world they live in (Mills, 1959), and the importance of understanding various levels of social life

(Watson & Watson, 2012). I consider my past experiences as an employee of a luxury-brand organisation as a valuable source of insights to understand the context in which my respondents live, and to interpret the phenomenon under study. It brings to the study an understanding of the culture and language of the sector and organisations that I am well-acquainted with. It is a key to the repertoire of the interviewees (Briggs, 1986; Alvesson, 2003). This understanding is usually acquired through long experience of the organisation and observing people in their context. My relationship with some of the respondents helped me understand the individual outside the interviews.

However, I am aware that personal memories risked limiting my interpretative openness during the research process, since they carry with them certain assumptions. For example, from the start, my interest was partly motivated by remembering past observations when some colleagues seemed to accept difficult working conditions, or did not want to leave the organisation despite an unpleasant working environment. I interpreted their behaviour as a desire to identify with luxury, and therefore entered the research process with this assumption.

To my knowledge, this research approach has not been given a name. Yet, it is inspired by research methods that recognise the importance of the researcher's lived experiences to the research process: home-ethnography (Alvesson, 2009), memory-work (Haug, 1987), auto-ethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), and ethnographic memoirs (Van Maanen, 1988) among others. Common to these methods, the researcher's lived experiences are written down in diaries or journals (for example, Etherington, 2004), and are not limited to observations but to what the researcher feels and thinks (Smith-Sullivan, 2008). When I started this research project, I tried to recall and write down events, experiences, feelings, and the nature of my relationships with colleagues, friends, or acquaintances when I worked for luxury-brand organisations. Later, I incorporated some of my memories by writing them down in my field notes or as short comments when writing my thesis. These memories mostly emerged spontaneously when triggered by new experiences. For example, hearing or reading a respondent's comment, the description of an event or a person brought back my own memories of similar experiences. At other times, I forced myself to remember personal details about a topic of interest.

More specifically, my approach presents similarities with at-home ethnography and memory work. Like at-home ethnography (also referred to as insider

ethnography), I research a milieu that I know well, and I access a cultural setting to which I have a 'natural access' (Alvesson, 2009, p. 159). It builds on in-depth involvement with the subjects in a familiar environment. On some occasions, I was perceived as 'one of them' because of the strong connections I had maintained with ex-colleagues in the industry. For example, once after conducting an interview, the interviewee and I went back to her office, my previous workplace, and I stayed the entire afternoon without being asked to leave or people wondering if I was allowed to be on the premises. Another time, an employee even asked me if I was still working for the organisation.

Like memory work, my approach draws on the past to understand the present, more specifically it acknowledges that the researcher's identity builds from past experiences (outside research). My approach also relies on inter-subjectivity – the belief that common meanings are negotiated with others and that individuals tend to settle on common understandings and constructions (Prasad, 2005). Indeed, an important part in memory work is that memories are collectively analysed, compared, or confronted, and thus arrive at new meanings from collective work (Onyx & Small, 2001).

At times, I engaged in a shared reflection with my interviewees. Through this process, my understanding of people and events was challenged, leading to new insights and perspectives. For example, at first my memories of some respondents influenced the way I pictured them and led to some assumptions about their reasons to working for a luxury brand and their relationship with the brand that they work for. Insights into their life stories brought new perspectives on their motivations and brand relationship. Hearing them describe an event that I had been present for or a person whom I knew also challenged my own memories of the event or person. As a result, the acknowledgement of my memories in the research process and the confrontation of some of these memories with other interviewees gave me the opportunity to challenge my assumptions and be open to other interpretations.

However, my approach also differed from these research methods. For example, at-home ethnography takes place in the current work or social environment of the researcher, whereas I had stopped working in the luxury-brand sector to become a researcher. I recalled events, impressions and feelings many years after they took place. Importantly, I was not only an insider, I was also an outsider. I was no longer working in the luxury-brand sector and made that clear to respondents.

Further, I can draw on ordinary happenings to help me understand not only the organisational contexts, but also the societal context. My stories of the past are complemented by new stories from the present; not only those which are part of the research process (interviews), but also those 'outside the research process'. I integrate the method of 'everyday ethnography' (Watson & Watson, 2012) in my approach to the topic. I take seriously the potential of everyday experiences and observations in a researcher's life, and how they greatly add to the understanding and framing of the subject studied. Watson and Watson (p. 700) write:

The social world surrounds us and 'playing the anthropologist' in our daily lives has immense potential for creating insights and, indeed, if one is happy with the term, collecting 'data'.

The significance of everyday events is highlighted by an observation I made at my friend's wedding, which I opened this book. When my friend got married, I had been a PhD student for several months, and though I did not go to her wedding to conduct research, but to celebrate her marriage, it triggered some ideas about my research project. From the start, I have had numerous opportunities to reflect on my discussions with friends or observations of events (my Facebook contacts for example), which are not officially part of the research process. Everyday ethnography is an interesting concept that blurs the lines between the researcher's work and personal lives. It further connects research to the social world (Mills, 1959). Even outside the organisation the researcher thinks about his/her project. Observations and thinking are therefore continual, not limited to a research timeframe.

Thus I conducted open-ended, semi-structured interviews, complementing them with my own memories and everyday experiences in the research context and beyond. These personal memories and experiences served as secondary data and were used to generate and interpret the primary data. I will now turn to the analysis of that empirical data.

### 5.3 Interpreting the empirical material: From disorder to order

Each aspect of the research process offers its own challenges and sources of anxiety. I experienced the analytical process as one of the most challenging. The interpretative process was not a neat procedure performed at a particular moment in the study (Bryman & Bell, 2007). It was, instead, an overwhelming, ongoing process that had already started when conducting interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The challenges of the analytical process were reinforced by the open-ended approach to interviewing, since with such a format ‘the researcher follows the lead, and the result is rich in content, but more diverse in nature’ (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p. 75). Here, I use the term ‘interpret’ interchangeably with ‘analyse’, in line with the interpretative precept of this study that analytical work is reliant on the researcher’s interpretations (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

My analytical process can best be described as an interactive, iterative approach involving multiple readings and rereadings of transcripts, a dialogue between the literature and empirical material, discussions with my supervisor and other researchers, and the continual writing and revising of my empirical chapters. I took an abductive approach in the process, as my interpretation emerged from the interplay of theory and data (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007).

As will be seen, the process of creating order and reduction (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018) was central to identifying first-order themes (ordering concepts based on respondents’ words) and second-order themes (more abstract theoretical concepts from the grouping of first-order themes), and to ordering the second-order themes into even more abstract overarching themes. These themes provide the structure for my analysis. I also discuss the central role in the interpretative process of imagination, which I define as a researcher’s dialogue outside their knowledge and assumptions to promote a diversity of ideas – becoming aware of concepts and ideas that not only move the interpretation process forward, but also blind it (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011).

### 5.3.1 Sorting

According to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), the first analytical activity is sorting, which they define as creating order by spending time with the data. This phase was a major part of the analytical process. I first sorted my material by listening to my interviewees, transcribing their words and translating important parts from French to English (French being my native language). I then sorted my material by reading and rereading my transcripts and writing and rewriting my analysis, while engaged in a dialogue between my data and theories and with my research colleagues and respondents, all of it multiple times throughout the research process, and resulting in the categories used in my empirical account (Chapter 7).

I first engaged in sorting by listening to what the respondents said during the interview. I became aware of repetitions, similarities, and contradictions in and between interviews. Later, transcribing the interviews was central in *really* focusing on what the respondents said. While I first experienced it as a mechanical, mundane activity, it turned out to play an important interpretative role (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999; Tilley, 2003). Listening again to my respondents' spoken words and writing them down in a Word document allowed me to project myself into the interview situation in a more reflective manner, liberated from the stress of coming up with the next question. While transcribing, I wrote down some words and highlighted some quotes that I found interesting and that further guided the analysis.

I especially realised the importance of the transcription process in triggering ideas and closeness with the empirical material when I decided to outsource six transcriptions from the first rounds of interviews. While I thought it would save time, I realised once I had pages and pages of words that someone else had transcribed that I did not connect in the same way than to the interviews I transcribed myself. (The solution was to reacquaint myself with my respondents' words by listening to the audio file while reading the transcriptions.)

Once my transcriptions were done, I read and reread the transcripts. In a more systematic manner than previously, I actively searched for repeated words, contradictions, and similarities (Bell et al., 2022) in interviews and between interviews. The reading and rereading of my material led to the discovery of what I consider 'an empirical mystery' (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007), prompted not by the bulk of what was said, but by being puzzled by a few paradoxical words (Ginzburg, 1980) in the stories: employees spoke highly about the brand while at

the same time describing routine work or even challenging working conditions. Specifically, some respondents used extremely positive words such as love, fascination, and beauty to describe their brand-related experience of work, while at the same time talking about repetitive work tasks. This empirical mystery called for further theoretical understandings and empirical explorations.

Importantly, I did not read and reread my transcripts once but multiple times, until almost the end of the research process, to sharpen my analysis and challenge my interpretations. Multiple readings are essential to be open to the unexpected, as Alvesson & Kärreman (2011, p. 34) write:

Through multiple readings we increase the chance of encountering/ producing unexpected constructions-opening up rather than letting common sense (as in grounded theory) determine 'reality' – and also the chance of establishing that the unexpected is not just the outcome of a specific and narrow way of seeing.

One challenge in the sorting process was to sort 'by increasing the level of abstraction' (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p. 77): to move from the themes taken from what my respondents said to meaningful, theoretically framed categories. Kvale refers to this phase as critical common sense, where the researcher goes 'beyond the interviewees' self-understanding as the analyst introduces general knowledge about the subject' (cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p. 31). This is a difficult but essential move in qualitative research that many researchers fail to do (Silverman, 2007, cited in Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). The movement from first order (the respondents' own words) to second order (theoretical understanding of those words) was a cumulative process. It was empirically and theoretically driven, thus acknowledging the critical part played by the confrontation of theory with the empirical world (and vice versa) in the analytical process.

At the same time as I read my transcripts and my notes, I engaged in a dialogue between data and theory. I read about a multitude of theoretical concepts to make sense of my empirical data, such as contradictions, ambiguities, paradoxes, brand love, enchantment, emotions, materiality, and so on. I was also guided in my interpretation of the material by the concept of identity, influenced by my research group colleagues, who have shown a strong interest in understanding identity in organisational contexts. My growing theoretical knowledge led me to see connections between my respondents' stories, where at first glance they did

not seem to share a common theme. As connections started to emerge, my analysis became increasingly refined.

The difficulty when reading about these theoretical concepts was not to lose myself in the vast literature. There were times my interest in a concept, such as enchantment, left me dazzled by the theories and not listening to what my empirical data was saying. In that instance I had to distance myself from the concept to be able to look at my empirical material with fresh eyes and write my own account.

Feedback from my supervisors and fellow researchers was key in establishing a sufficient distance from my own interpretations and engaging in the analytical process with new ideas. Here, the translation from French to English was central. While it seems trivial, it played an important role in the interpretation of my material. To discuss my material with my supervisors and colleagues, I translated parts of my transcripts into English. While I tried to keep close to what I assumed my respondents meant at the time of the interview, I sometimes deviated from a literal translation and used a word that better expressed what I thought the respondent meant. This process reinforced my role in the creation of my findings, since the translation was guided by my understanding of what was going on.

Further, in the second phase of interviewing I started to share ideas with interviewees as we approached the end of the interview. This was an opportunity to discuss my interpretations outside my academic circle and to distance myself from using theoretical concepts. In some cases, interviewees challenged my interpretations and offered alternative ones, which forced me to reconsider my analysis (Prasad & Prasad, 2000).

Lastly, writing and rewriting my analysis was a central part of the sorting process. I wrote and rewrote my analysis repeatedly. I ordered and reordered the themes and ideas until I felt that nothing could be added. This process of ordering and reordering was key to a full interpretation of my material. While writing my analysis, I 'zoomed in' on new themes as they emerged (Gioia et al., 2013). This forced me to read and reread my interviews again to understand the alternative layers of interpretation. Gioia and colleagues (2013, p. 24) refer to the use of a 'magnifying glass' as a writing strategy:

If you zero in on some parts of the whole image, you can find the most interesting and incisive parts to work with and emphasize.

The process of identifying theoretically framed categories from the participants' everyday words has been a complex process – messy even. It has required me to read and reread my transcriptions and write and rewrite my analysis: multiple readings and writings of my empirical material that have helped me connect the respondents' words to my theoretical concepts. It has also relied on a continual dialogue between theory and data, and discussions about my interpretations with fellow researchers and my research respondents. What followed was the equally challenging task of reducing.

### 5.3.2 Reducing

With an estimated thousand pages of transcriptions (12-point Times New Roman with 1.5 line spacing), I had to decide what to focus on and what to disregard. Another important and challenging analytical activity is reducing, or choosing 'among categories, but also within a set of categories' (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p. 107). It involves including and excluding and is linked to the problem of representation (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p. 107). For me, reducing was a source of frustration about not being able cover everything I knew about the respondents and their stories, and not knowing at first what to incorporate and what to leave out. When reducing, I realised that I had become attached to some quotes and found it hard to let them go.

In the first stage of the analysis, I tried to include everyone as something I owed my respondents. As a result, the first act of reducing was deciding to focus on some respondents. When listening, transcribing, reading, and rereading my interviews, differences emerged between the stories told by respondents who expressed some emotional attachment towards the brand or luxury brands and those who did not. I was interested, if not to say riveted, by the stories of their own fascination with, for example, the brand's products or the founder and how this contributed to construct their work and themselves in a positive light. This led me to the concept of meaningful work and to reformulate my research question as it is today.

Respondents mentioned the brand to varying degrees in their stories. Some referred to it only briefly, while others emphasised it more extensively. For some, the brand was mentioned instrumentally, such as highlighting it on their CV, whereas others expressed strong emotional connections, describing experiences

such as seeing the products or attending brand events. This variation sparked my curiosity about the dynamics in the stories where the brand and emotions were particularly prominent. Consequently, I chose to focus my analysis on those stories in which an emotional connection with the brand emerged most strongly or was most clearly communicated. Among these stories, the voices of some respondents have also emerged as stronger and more dominant in my analysis, because they were more talkative and reflective about their experiences, providing rich empirical details.

In addition, during the analytical phase, I practised ‘illustrative reduction’, a process of reducing based on ‘the desire to illustrate a chosen phenomenon in as much detail as possible’ (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p. 108). When selecting quotes to illustrate a theme, I considered whether *each quote* contributed to a better understanding, rather than aiming to include as many quotes as possible. In other words, I deliberately distanced myself from illustrating the phenomenon quantitatively, focusing instead on the quality and relevance of the selected excerpts.

I have also practised ‘categorical reduction’, or ‘a reduction of the material that (more or less) excludes certain categories in it’ (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018, p. 109). Once it became clear which categories were important to illustrate my main themes, it also became easier to remove some categories.

Reducing was thus a complex analytical process, but a necessary one. I reduced my categories by first deciding to focus on the stories of one-third of my participants, retaining the categories and stories that were important to illustrate a theme. That left the role of imagination in the analytical process, which I define as moving away from empirical and theoretical blindness.

### 5.3.3 Imagining

Imagination was an important tool in transitioning from first-order to second-order themes and then moving forward the analytical process of this study. It helped me see beyond the words spoken by my respondents and become aware of my own theoretical and empirical blindness. During the analytical process, I came to realise that, on several occasions, I had been blinded by assumptions, that I had missed clues that I took for granted, or that I had overinterpreted data. Imagination is, here, understood as the cultivation of diversity in the practice of

research in order to avoid theoretical and empirical blindness. My understanding of imagination has been inspired by Mills's concept of sociological imagination (1959), Alvesson and Kärreman's idea of broad scholarship (2011), and Weick's 'disciplined imagination' (1989).

Mills (1959, p. 6) writes of 'the sociological imagination' that 'enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society'. Mills's sociological imagination was especially useful in the analysis of the empirical material with a view to the respondents' states of mind, use of language, and societal influences. It forces the researcher to see beyond the interview situation and understand the respondents' cultural context. In my case, it inspired me to actively reflect on my analysis and my own experiences in the luxury-brand sector to understand those of my respondents. It also challenged me to better understand the luxury context outside my lived experience. I read up on the historical evolution of luxury from Plato to the present to understand its societal, economic, and political importance. I also read about the development of the luxury sector and the branding of luxury brands. From this, I started to understand that luxury branding relies today on specific narratives and to spot manifestations of these narratives in my participants' stories.

My understanding of Mills's (1959) concept of sociological imagination also includes the practice of research in connection with society, not as an obscure practice in ivory towers. Any researcher will nurture their imagination by looking to the wider world, talking to individuals outside the frame of the study and drawing on daily experiences.

Further, my familiarisation and defamiliarisation (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) between the world of academia and the world of the luxury-brand sector offered interesting opportunities to cultivate diversity and challenge my assumptions. Alvesson and Kärreman write about the familiarisation of the researcher with the research setting, which is necessary to 'spot' the cultural and political influences on the subjects and objects of study. They also write about defamiliarisation in order to 'spot' taken-for-granted assumptions and to deepen interpretations. Thus when going to France to conduct interviews I first encountered the defamiliarisation process, leaving the academic world to enter the world of luxury-brand organisations. After a few days in Paris, I connected to my respondents' stories that brought back memories of my own experiences. I became familiar again with the world of luxury-brand organisations. When I came back to Lund to work at the university, I embarked on a process of

defamiliarisation when the language and practices of the university felt unfamiliar. Yet after a few days I felt again familiar with them. Each movement of familiarisation and defamiliarisation became a source of inspiration and interpretation, since it offered opportunities for reflexivity based on the cultural diversity of these experiences.

Further, my understanding of imagination integrates the idea of broad scholarship (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011). Alvesson and Kärreman argue for the need of a diverse interpretative repertoire, since the researcher's interpretative repertoire not only guides research work, but also restrain it. The restraining effects of the researcher's interpretative repertoire can be spotted during the analytical process when main themes or 'interests' are quite present in the researcher's mind and exercise an influence on the analysis and interpretation of the empirical material (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). When transcribing interviews, I most probably understood some sentences and words from an identity and status perspective aligned with my first theoretical interests (Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). This interpretation delayed to some extent other interesting and possible understandings of what was going on in the interviews.

To develop a rich interpretative repertoire to stimulate an interpretation beyond taken-for-granted ideas, assumptions and theories, I engaged in dialogue not only in my own academic circle, but also with researchers in other disciplines and from other paradigms. I, for example, presented my ideas to marketing seminars or attended courses in the department of social studies. I also discussed ideas with some of the respondents, as well as talking to people who were not part of this study but had worked in the luxury brand sector.

The concept of imagination thus points to the need for the researcher to see beyond the interview situation and to understand the context that respondents live in, as well as to enrich the researcher's understanding by being connected to what is going on outside their own academic circle and the walls of the university. It highlights the importance of empirical and theoretical sustenance to move the analysis forwards. As a result, the practice of imagination could be seen as adding to the messiness of the analytical process, since it argues for a very open and encompassing view of research. Yet imagination in research is not limitless but framed. This idea is especially developed in Weick's 'disciplined imagination' (1989) that comes from 'deliberate diversity introduced into the problem statement, thought trials, and selection criteria that comprise that thinking' (p. 516). The use of 'deliberate' is very important, as it implies careful thinking

before making a choice. It is therefore not a call for ‘just letting one’s imagination flow’. As Alvesson and Kärreman (2011, p. 61) also point out, ‘some constructions make more sense than others’. This conceptualisation of imagination contrasts with the common understanding of imagination as an enigmatic cognitive process, instead it points to the graspable nature of imagination.

For the analytical process of my study I thus decided to focus on three main aspects: sorting, reducing, and imagining. I have emphasised the continual dialogue between the data and the theory, and discussions of my interpretations with fellow researchers as well as the respondents, in helping me look beyond my own assumptions, be open to other interpretations, and, crucially, to understand the wider context beyond the interview situation. The challenges I encountered when analysing my material – the difficulty of choosing what to say and what to silence, and to not be blinded by the data or theoretical concepts – are too important to ignore. Which brings me to the question of how best to craft a trustworthy account.

## 5.4 Crafting a trustworthy account

During the research process, I have struggled with why my work should be given any value and why the reader should trust my interpretation. The legacy of a quantitative approach in defining research quality has contributed to these doubts and questions, since validity and reliability in quantitative research are theorised as the importance of the researcher’s objectivity and of the generalisability of the research findings (Clavarino & Najman, 1995; Tracy, 2013). However, this study, being qualitative in nature, not only acknowledges the subjectivity of the researcher, but also embraces it. The aim is to enrich our understanding of human experience and not to generalise (Elliott et al. 1999). What makes this account trustworthy, given its interpretative nature, centres on the sincerity, credibility, and ethics of my research – its rigour.

### 5.4.1 Sincerity

Throughout the research process, sincerity has played an important part. According to Tracy (2013), it is characterised by transparency and self-reflexivity.

I have worked to be open and honest, for example about how I got access to my respondents thanks to my own professional network in the luxury-brand sector, or how I decided to delegate the transcription of some interviews. As an approach, it often created opportunities to be self-reflexive about the advantages and limitations of my choices. For example, I am open about the fact that my prior experiences in the luxury-brand sector were an advantage when obtaining interviews in the luxury-brand sector and being familiar with the empirical setting of my respondents (the language and the culture of the organisations). I am also open that it sometimes creates empirical blindness.

### 5.4.2 Credibility

Trustworthiness is central in determining the quality of research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba place it above all else, including the criteria of validity, reliability, and generalisability (Loh, 2013). Close to the concept of trustworthiness, Tracy refers to credibility as ‘expressing a reality that is plausible or seems true’ (Tracy, 2010, cited in Tracy, 2013, p. 235). Here, credibility is reflected in choosing to interview in-depth (for an average of 90 minutes) 36 employees. This resulted in more than 340 000 words of transcription, which shows the richness of the data set.

Credibility, as Tracy writes, is also connected to tacit knowledge, ‘the body of implicit meanings floating just below the surface’ (2013, p. 236). It is important in this research and has been acquired by spending time with the respondents and in their cultural environment (Tracy, 2013). Tacit knowledge was especially useful to understand the cultural meanings at play in the interview situation, and added a thick description to my account, giving details about the people and the cultural meanings of the specific settings (Tracy, 2013).

More specifically, to bring additional layers of understanding of the research setting, I have focused on becoming aware of this tacit knowledge acquired from years of experience of work in the luxury brand sector, and even more years of keeping in touch with ex-colleagues. Some of them have become friends. However, the difficulty with tacit knowledge is to make it visible and to articulate it, since it is often self-evident (Hadjimichael & Tsoukas, 2019). Becoming aware of my tacit knowledge was achieved through defamiliarisation and familiarisation, engaging openly in discussing my material with others.

Further, the credibility of qualitative work relies on multivocality ‘the inclusion of multiple voices’ (Tracy, 2013, p. 235). This is especially important since in this study, my past and ongoing experiences are not only acknowledged, but also embraced, as is my role as the co-creator of the story. This can lead to giving too much space to the researcher’s own voice and to a preferred interpretation aligned with existing assumptions and bias, as well as to increasing the power asymmetry between researcher and researchee. Throughout the research process, I have aimed at respecting my respondents by giving them a voice by discussing my interpretations with some of them and by staying accurate to their words when writing my analysis.

In this study, multivocality was thus achieved by collaborating with some research participants or other individuals whose input could bring additional perspectives to the interpretations that emerged from my study. I did not search out collaborations in a systematic manner, but I was interested in discussing my findings with others, in or outside the research context, especially with individuals who were working or had worked in the luxury-brand sector. For example, on a few occasions I talked with respondents about some of my interpretations; however, I waited for them to tell their stories first.

### 5.4.3 Ethics

In this study, the research setting calls for reflection on the unequal relationship between the researcher (who takes) and the researchee (who gives). There were times when I felt that I was using my friends and acquaintances to get information, and wondered if I could use, in my research, pieces of information that I got outside the official research context (Essers, 2009). For example, I opened this book with a personal event: going to the wedding of a good friend and realising the strong presence of the brand at her wedding. I found this experience important to my understanding of the research material and decided to start my thesis with some observations around this event. This not only highlights the personal dimension of research, but it also brings into focus the situation of remaining a researcher outside the office and field work: it complicates the researcher’s relationship with the outside world, as qualitative researchers nourish themselves from all types of experiences, including encounters with friends and acquaintances. Lincoln (1995, p. 285) writes about ‘the debt

that we owe as ethnographers, anthropologists, and qualitative researchers to the persons whose lives we portray'. This dimension calls on researchers to reflect on their obligations to the individuals whose life they scrutinise. As Adams and colleagues (2015, p. 59) write:

Although our insights may be grounded in our experiences, our recollections, accounts, and interpretations might embarrass, harm, or expose others.

As much as I think that my observations at my friend's wedding capture the essence of this thesis, I did not feel completely at ease with using them without her approval. It was important for me to let her know since this experience was not only mine, it was also hers. Essers (2009, p. 168) tackles the issue of friendship in the research process, writing in her research notes:

With one of my interviewees confused me: Was I her ethnographer or her friend? And what should I do with the personal information I got during these informal conversations?

Throughout the research process I compensated for this power asymmetry by guaranteeing my respondents confidentiality. I have anonymised my respondents and the specific brands they work for to avoid exposing them. Though I only changed respondents' names in the final writing phase (during the analytical process I used their real names to help me connect to the interview situation and the stories they told me), I was careful not to overshare their stories with outsiders and to keep the transcription of my interviews to myself and a close circle, avoiding their instrumentalisation.

The promise of confidentiality comes with challenges. For example, to what degree does the researcher need to anonymise data? Can the researcher guarantee anonymity at all? I realised that keeping my respondents anonymous was a difficult task, as some features are essential to understand my respondents' stories and where they come from. The problem of confidentiality was more problematic when I decided to rely on my own experiences, as the story of my friend's wedding illustrates. In the case of past experiences, it is also difficult to ask for permission retroactively.

I have written my respondents' stories in what I hope is a respectful manner, trying to avoid judgement of any kind. I hope that the respect I felt – and demonstrated – for my interviewees as knowledgeable individuals, counteracts the

seemingly instrumental nature of my research. The respectful treatment of my respondents' stories is also exemplified by the importance of contextualising, as much as possible, the quotes that I use, and not to instrumentalise these quotes to support my own argument (Silverman, 2017). These considerations are in line with Tracy's ethical criteria (2013, p. 243), and more specifically procedural ethics: 'do no harm', 'avoid deception', 'get informed consent', and 'ensure privacy and confidentiality'. Interviewees were informed of the broad purpose of the research and were told that both their names and the names of their organisations would be anonymised. They provided informed consent prior to participation.

## 5.5 Concluding thoughts

In this chapter, I have clarified the interpretivist, social-constructionist epistemology of my research and highlighted its inspiration from a narrative approach. In light of this, I have explained how I conducted research by doing in-depth interviews and relying on memories of past and ongoing experiences to understand the interviewees' cultural context. I have highlighted the role of reading and rereading, a dialogue between theory and data, writing and rewriting, and imagination to construct the stories presented in my empirical chapter. And I have discussed the importance of sincerity, credibility, and ethics to produce a trustworthy qualitative study.

On that note, I should point out that the long doctoral research process has allowed me to reflect and change, and to become aware of how ideas and concepts impact and connect with one another. My views about interviewing have evolved, for example. In the beginning, I had a romantic notion of the interviewing process, and put a lot of energy in establishing a connection with my respondents before and during the interview, hoping to access their 'true' self (Alvesson, 2003). I later came to the realisation that this 'true' self is not only inaccessible, but also that it does not exist. I now share the view that different kinds of selves can be expressed at different moments, in different situations (Tracy & Threthewey, 2005). This does not make them fake, or indeed true. At the beginning of my analysis, I cherry-picked quotations to illustrate my interpretations of my empirical findings, but progressively realised that I needed to understand the context in which the words were spoken. I began to understand the interview process as an interactional process (Silverman, 2017), in which the

interview dynamics and the words spoken both by the researcher and the respondents matter. As I grew as a researcher, my view of knowledge and reality became clearer. This allowed me to understand my choices, but also to decide accordingly.



## 6 Entering the respondents' organisational world

It is a challenge to paint a vivid portrait of the participants of this study and of the organisations they work for, especially to account for the diversity and uniqueness of their profiles. I have met and interviewed 36 individuals prepared to share with me their experiences working for a luxury brand. I knew some of my research respondents before interviewing them and got to know the others during the interview. In what follows I outline the characteristics of the respondents and then detail the types of organisations and brands they work for. My descriptions are based on my own experience and knowledge as well as my interview material, with information taken from the organisations' corporate websites and in newspapers and research articles.

### 6.1 The respondents

I interviewed 36 individuals who were working, or had previously worked, for brands in LVMH. Many had spent their entire careers in the luxury-brand sector; some had worked for more than one LVMH luxury-brand organisation; others had prior professional experience in non-luxury brand organisations. In addition, I integrated a couple of employees who had left LVMH and the luxury-brand sector altogether, as I thought they might be willing to reflect on their working experiences in a luxury-brand organisation.

The 36 individuals are white-collars office workers (Hopp et al., 2009), most of them graduates of a business school. Many of them work in communications, sales, customer relationship management, operational marketing, and product development. Initially I was interested in interviewing employees who work with brands and their products, and later I moved on to interview employees in support positions, for example administration and finance (Table 1, p.126).

83% of respondents are women aged between 30 and 40 in middle management. The high percentage of women reflects the proportion of female LVMH employees: 71% of its 213,268 employees were women in 2023 (LVMH, 2024, p.137). Since I was looking for people with a few years of work experience in the luxury-brand industry, most of my respondents were in their thirties.

The respondents of this study lived in Paris at the time of the interview or had lived in Paris when working in the luxury sector. Paris is central when defining luxury culture. In Paris, one finds ‘a true cult of luxury, maintained by haute couture *défilés* and fashion shows, parties to launch a new product (perfume, cosmetics, fashion accessories), magazines and specialised press (articles and advertisements devoted to luxury), windows of parent Houses and many “luxury boutiques”’ (Anido Freire, 2014, p. 2674).

## 6.2 LVMH

### 6.2.1 One of the most prestigious luxury groups

In 2019, the 15 leading luxury companies employed approximately 537,339 people worldwide, with LVMH alone accounting for 156,088 employees (O’Connell, 2019). As of 2023, LVMH’s workforce has grown to 213,268 employees, of whom 39,351 employees work in France (LVMH, 2024, p.11).

In recent decades, LVMH has acquired many luxury brands, and now owns 75 prestigious brands including Louis Vuitton, Berluti, Dior, and Guerlain to name just a few (LVMH, 2024, p.11). Among these 75 brands, 31 of them are a century old or older (LVMH, 2024, p.11). The 75 prestigious brands are divided into six business sectors: wines and spirits, fashion and leather goods, perfumes and cosmetics, watches and jewellery, ‘selective retailing’, and other activities.

LVMH is one of the most prestigious luxury groups in the world. It is an undisputed leader in the luxury sector, with reported revenues of €86,153 million in 2023 (LVMH, 2024, p.2). The group’s expansive strategy can be partly

explained by its listing on the international stock exchanges, and thus its pursuit of constant sales growth and increasing turnover to please shareholders. Consequently, the LVMH conglomerate has been a driver in changing the face of the luxury industry, introducing mass-market methods and bringing in people from mass-market industries to make the luxury business more profitable (Daneshkhu, 2013).

Importantly, LVMH claims to reunite all these brands under a shared understanding of luxury, a common culture of excellence, heritage, creativity, and innovation. They embody the ‘Art of Crafting Dreams’ (LVMH, 2025a).

In its brand communication and management, LVMH cultivates its image of luxury by using the language of exclusivity and constructing a luxury world with images of craft, arts, and tradition. For example, despite its large global workforce, the group describes itself as family-run and uses the term ‘houses’ to refer to the brands it owns. Not only does the use of this term give the impression of intimacy amid such a large group, but it also reinforces ‘an aura of elitism’ (Catry, 2003, pp. 15–16).

The group corporate website ushers visitors into an exceptional world, exemplified by narratives about the life of the brands’ artistic directors, perfumers, or master blenders. There are pictures of the brands’ beautiful historic headquarters or birthplaces and a display of the brands’ iconic creations. There are images of castles, vineyards, cellars, historic boutiques and workshops that are part of the brands’ narratives and heritage. The group’s website is designed as an aesthetic experience – a world of beautiful hand-crafted objects and artistic creativity in exceptional history-rich settings.

The brand’s luxury image is further reinforced by the group’s strong connection to the world of the arts (Dion & Arnould, 2011), not only in its own artistic creations, but also in various collaborations and philanthropic actions to support emerging artists and help artistic projects to reach a wide audience. For example, LVMH has established its own foundation, the Foundation Louis Vuitton, to support French and international art. It has also created its own fashion design prize to support the designers of tomorrow, it collaborates with prestigious art colleges, and it sponsors various art events and festivals. In 2011, LVMH also created ‘les Journées Particulières’ (Special Days) to show the public its artisans’ *savoir-faire* and creativity. Yet, many of LVMH products are not made by hand by craftsmen but instead by machines (Daneshkhu, 2013).

### 6.2.2 LVMH employer brand

In France, LVMH has succeeded in developing a strong employer brand. In 2025, it was named for the 21st year in a row as one of the most attractive employers for young business graduates (LVMH, 2025b). The group's attractiveness as the employer of choice for young graduates and professionals lies in its position as the first luxury group in the world, and its ownership of some of the most prestigious luxury brands. On its website, the group portrays an exciting and attractive work environment for talented and excellence-driven individuals. To prospective employees, the group presents itself as a place where personal ambitions can be realised, with career opportunities in dynamic international organisations located all over the world. It also highlights creativity, talent, and excellence as workplace drivers, in line with the luxury values of its brands.

LVMH seeks individuals who embody creativity, entrepreneurial energy, and the pursuit of excellence as part of its talent community. Its career page announces:

DREAM TOGETHER Our products spark dreams ... and so do our talented people. Our culture of excellence embodies the Group's mission, *The Art of Crafting Dreams*. We encourage people to dream everywhere, at every instant, without restraint, and always looking ahead to the future. We pursue this quest with – and thanks to – our current and future talents. Because above all, the art of crafting dreams means believing in your own dreams. (LVMH, 2025c)

To reach these talents, the group targets the best universities in France and internationally:

The campus management in France handles the relationship with the *Grandes écoles*. We have 12 targeted schools in the group, business schools, engineering schools, plus Dauphine, Sciences Po, and IFM ... on the international side, I take care of the relationship with MBAs. We have selected 17 MBAs in the world between the US, Europe, and Asia. (Corentin, corporate employee brander)

LVMH's communications about its exclusive recruitment processes and criteria seem also important to maintain the luxury aura of the brand (Catry, 2003; Dion & Arnould, 2011). It emphasises to prospective employees that the group is not

accessible to everyone: it only hires the best. This is further illustrated in its management of student relationships. The group scarcely participates in MBAs forums with other brands; instead it organises its own workshop days with small groups of selected students, during which they invite general managers to come and present their house. In other words, LVMH carries the values of luxury into its communication with prospective employees, translating these values into what it means to work for one of its Houses, and in its portrayal of its ideal employee.

### 6.3 The houses in this study

LVMH's houses are active in six business sectors: wines and spirits; fashion and leather goods; perfumes and cosmetics; watches and jewellery; selective retailing; and other activities. Interviewees work mainly for brands in the perfume and cosmetics, wines and spirits, and fashion and leather goods sectors, reflecting my greater access to respondents in these sectors through my previous work in the luxury industry and referrals from other respondents. I have focused on houses with histories ranging from several decades to several centuries. Like many European luxury brands, they all have an old history that is central to their brand narrative (Ricca & Robins, 2012), and all are French luxury brands. This is important since France is one of the major sources of luxury culture in the world (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012).

Further, while the luxuriousness of some of the products could be contested based on their price range and accessibility, these brands have become symbols of a luxury (French) lifestyle. Some of them could even claim to have reached the status of luxury iconic brands (Holt, 2004).

According to Holt (2004), iconic brands provide a cultural myth resolving a social tension individuals relate to. For example, one of them built its cultural myth around the post-war ideal of modern femininity, offering women a means to express independence, elegance, and liberation. All of them offer cultural significance through identity status. More broadly, all of the brands convey cultural significance through a status-based identity, in which consumers use luxury products to signal their social position and construct a personal and collective identity (Veblen, 2005; Bourdieu, 1979; Belk, 1988).

The symbolic power of the brands has turned these organisations into corporate brands (Salzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2004). The brands have become so powerful that they define the entire organisation: how people see it

and what it stands for. This is reflected in the name of the organisation, which is, often, the same as the consumer brand (often the name of the brand's founder).

To give a sense of the respondents' contexts, I outline some of the visuals and narratives that the LVMH corporate website uses to present its sectors and respective houses. Although each house is positioned as embodying LVMH's core values of innovation and excellence (LVMH, 2025a), each sector also communicates with distinctive visual cues and narrative elements that reflect shared identities and traditions. I present some named examples of houses in each sector that may or may not be included in the study, but thereafter, to preserve the anonymity of the respondents, all the specific houses in the analysis are left unnamed, and instead I write about them in general terms, for example about the key elements in their brand communication on the LVMH corporate website.

### 6.3.1 The perfumes and cosmetics brands (P&C)

I have focused on three main P&C houses. These houses manufacture and sell cosmetics (eye shadow, lipstick, mascara, and so on) as well as fragrances for men and women. Two brands are brand extensions of a parent haute couture brand and share the brand identity of the parent brand. In the P&C sector, LVMH's houses share common values centred on excellence, creativity, and innovation, alongside a strong commitment to product quality and the careful curating of their brand image.

The visual storytelling is particularly rich and sensory for the P&C houses and includes pictures of the founder, the artistic director, iconic products, and historic boutiques. For example, for Parfums Christian Dior, the site highlights its founder Christian Dior (Figure 1) and his perfume creation director, Francis Kurkdjian (Figure 2). It also features visuals from campaigns such as 'Inside the Dream', offering a behind-the-scenes look at how their signature fragrance J'adore is created, with interviews, film clips, and glamorous shots of brand ambassadors such as Charlize Theron.



Identity

## PARFUMS CHRISTIAN DIOR

Christian Dior described himself as a fashion and perfume designer. The House of Dior, founded in 1946, changed the face of ladies' style forever when its New Look was unveiled in the halls of 30 Avenue Montaigne on February 12, 1947. The revolutionary look was accompanied by a fragrance, Miss Dior, the finishing touch designed to "leave a trail of desire in a woman's wake". This timeless perfume was the first fragrance created by a visionary brand which invented the concept of global beauty with its Rouge Dior and subsequent cosmetic lines.

The current-day trustees of this legendary expertise – Francis Kurkdjian, Perfume Creation Director, and Peter Philips, Creative and Image Director for Dior Makeup – are the heirs to Christian Dior's perfectionism. Their creations are renowned the world over thanks to Rihanna, Natalie Portman, Johnny Depp and Robert

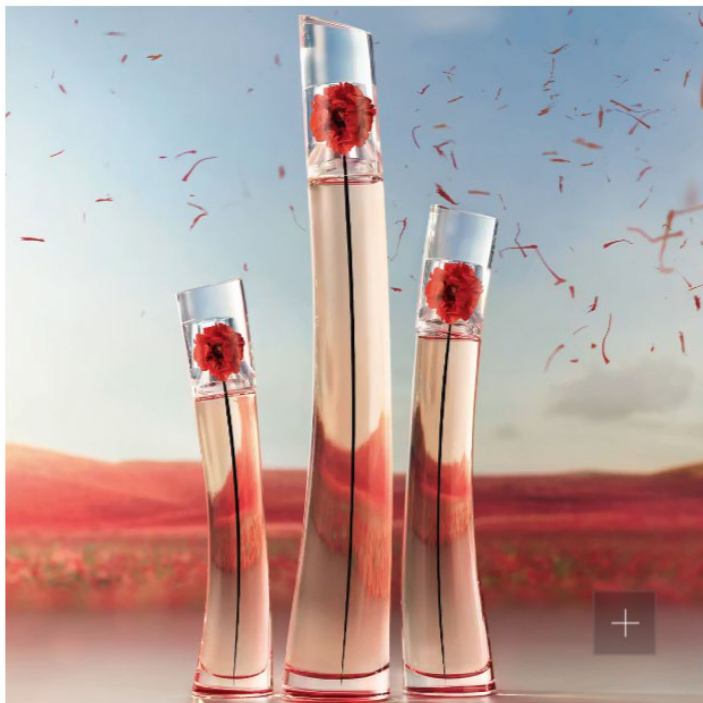


**FIGURE 1** Screenshot of LVMH website, LVMH Group, showing Christian Dior, founder © Parfums Christian Dior (LVMH, 2025d).



**FIGURE 2** Screenshot of LVMH website, LVMH Group, showing Francis Kurkdjian, perfume creation director, Parfums Christian Dior © Parfums Christian Dior (LVMH, 2025d).

Another example is Kenzo Parfums, the perfume division of Kenzo, the fashion house founded in Paris in 1970 by Kenzo Takada. The LVMH corporate website features product images of its iconic fragrance, Flower by Kenzo (Figure 3).



© KENZO Parfums

**FIGURE 3** Screenshot of LVMH website, LVMH Group, showing Flower by Kenzo © Kenzo Parfums (LVMH, 2025e).

Guerlain, another P&C house, is visually represented by elegant pictures of its historic boutique at 68 Avenue des Champs-Élysées (Figure 4), its ateliers, and portraits of perfumers, illustrating both its heritage and the artistic soul behind creations such as Shalimar.



*Maison Guerlain - 68, avenue des Champs-Élysées, Paris. © Tous droits réservés Guerlain*

**FIGURE 4** Screenshot of LVMH website, LVMH Group, showing Guerlain's historic Champs-Élysées boutique © Guerlain (LVMH, 2025f).

### *P&C House 1*

The identity of P&C House 1 is built on the identity of its parent brand, an haute couture house. The brand communicates its combination of *savoir-faire* and audacity, which originated in the founder's life as an haute couture designer, whose (first) creations are described as revolutionary, and whose innovation and creativity are said to have highly impacted the face of luxury fashion. The founder is also credited with having helped bring French fashion to the forefront after the Second World War. In the brand communication, the brand's connection to fashion is central.

On the group's corporate website, the brand is visually represented by pictures of its founder and iconic products. It shows, for example, product advertisements

with the product staged alone or with one of the brand's muses (well-known contemporary actresses and actors). It is associated with art and craft (*savoir-faire*). The brand's products are staged artistically. The brand's audacity is illustrated by the image of a sensual, liberated, and trendy woman in one of its product adverts. The corporate website highlights the brand's commitment to craftsmanship, particularly in the design and production of its perfume bottles. It is also associated with the use of rare flowers from renowned growers.

### *P&C House 2*

The identity of P&C House 2 is also built on the identity of the parent brand, an haute couture house. Like House 1, it was originally an haute couture brand, as the founder was a leading couturier after the Second World War. The brand became internationally known because of its connection to the founder's muse, a renowned post-war actress who has remained a symbol of timeless elegance. As a result, the brand communicates its haute couture origins and connection to the world of cinema. It also emphasises aristocratic elegance and chic. The brand is visually represented on the LVMH website with the same visuals as P&C House 1: with a picture of its founder and adverts of its iconic products, either artistically staged alone or with famous celebrities.

### *P&C House 3*

The third P&C house differs from the other two because it was originally a perfume house and its founder was a perfumer. A long-established brand, it boasts a long tradition of expert *savoir-faire* 'made in France', and thus emphasises the manufacturing process of its products – it has pictures of its production centre on the website, for example. The brand's identity and image are based on its timeless elegance. Like the two other brands, it is visually represented on the group website by product adverts with the products alone and some celebrities. It also shows its architectural heritage with pictures of its first boutique.

Thus the three P&C brands in this study are portrayed on the LVMH corporate website as sharing the common values of the group and of the P&C sector, but also as unique houses that reflect the lives of their founders. In their brand communication they focus on beauty, and invoke art and craftsmanship in the artistic staging of their products and images of their production processes.

### 6.3.2 The wines and spirits houses (W&S)

I have focused on three of LVMH's W&S houses in my study. Two manufacture and sell champagne, one spirits. All three W&S houses are historic houses. Their stories are synonymous with the history of France and French luxury. They represent a French *art de vivre* and heritage, united by shared values, combining heritage and authenticity with creativity and innovation. The brand communication on the LVMH website centres on their heritage and authenticity, and emphasises their unique identities built around the lives of their founders, focusing on them and their descendants as well as their association with historical landmarks and well-known wine-growing regions and terroirs.

An example from the LVMH website is Hennessy, a house with deep roots founded by Richard Hennessy more than 250 years ago, with the blending tradition carried on by the Fillioux family. Its visual identity on the site includes the rich imagery of cognac bottles, historical portraits, and vineyard landscapes that evoke its terroir and long lineage (Figures 5, 6).

#### ENGAGEMENT

From Cognac to the entire world, we work together to cultivate the future and become the benchmark for exemplary sustainability in luxury wines and spirits.

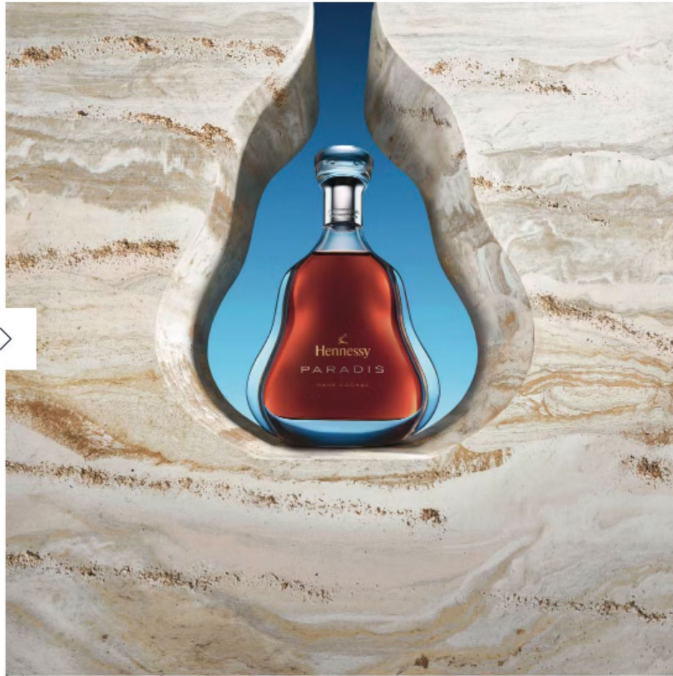
We preserve and enrich our natural ecosystems, practicing agro-ecology, reforestation and reducing our carbon footprint and water consumption.

We are committed to fostering progress for both the communities close to our heart – our employees, our partners and cognac artisans – as well as communities the world over.

We do this with an emphasis on inclusion, diversity and support for the development of these communities.



**FIGURE 5** Screenshot of LVMH website, LVMH Group, showing Vineyard landscapes © Hennessy (LVMH, 2025g).

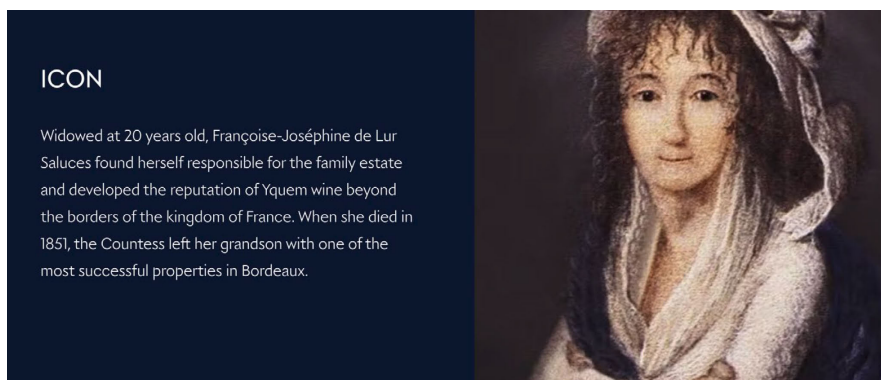


**FIGURE 6** Screenshot of LVMH website, LVMH Group, showing Hennessy Paradis © Hennessy (LVMH, 2025g).

Château d'Yquem is showcased with visuals of its historic estate, vineyards, and cellar, emphasising its heritage, craftsmanship, and exclusivity (Figures 7 and 8). The LVMH website highlights the careful grape selection and traditional techniques that create its renowned sweet wines, reinforcing a narrative of mastery and excellence.



**FIGURE 7** Screenshot of LVMH website, LVMH Group, showing Château d'Yquem's cellars, façade and gardens © Deepix (LVMH, 2025h).



**FIGURE 8** Screenshot of LVMH website, LVMH Group, showing Françoise-Joséphine de Lur Saluces, the woman behind Château d'Yquem's legacy © Château d'Yquem (LVMH, 2025h).

### *We'S House 1*

The first house sells spirits. On the LVMH website, it emphasises its heritage and *savoir-faire*. The founder's life story is central to its brand communication, and a picture of him is included on the website. The brand is also visually represented by one of its most iconic, exclusive products created more than a century ago. The brand communicates its *savoir-faire* and core business with pictures of barrels in cellars, experts engaged in sensory evaluation of products, or tastings taking place in heritage settings. In sum, the brand communication is about centuries of tradition and *savoir-faire*.

### *W&S Houses 2 & 3*

The second and third W&S houses sell champagne. For both, their visual and written brand communication follows the same pattern: each founder's history underscores the uniqueness of the house as well as its long history; each brand's heritage is illustrated by pictures of their landmarks and birthplace (castles, houses, vineyards, landscape) that have become a symbol of the brand's heritage. Yet despite their common core values – innovation and *savoir-faire* – the brands are portrayed with distinctive identities and images. For W&S House 2, innovation means developing new trends and bottling methods, for example. The brand emphasises *savoir-faire* and a pioneering spirit aligned with the distinctive trait of his founder 'a pioneering and visionary mind'. For W&S House 3, innovation means uniqueness and rarity. It is linked to the founder's vision of providing the best.

### 6.3.3 The fashion and leather goods house (F&L)

The brands in LVMH's F&L sector emphasise their creativity and timelessness. Their identity is built around the legacy of their founders, who were renowned haute couture designers, the iconic products that contributed to their founders' success and recognition, and their distinctive *savoir-faire*.

LVMH uses the history of its houses to tell stories of creative visionaries. In an example unrelated to the present study, take Patou, founded in 1914 by Jean Patou: he is presented as a pioneer who liberated women's fashion by designing sportswear for tennis legend Suzanne Lenglen, and he even invented the 'JP' monogram. The site's visual galleries for Patou show archival black-and-white fashion photographs, sketches, and campaign shots, underlining both the Maison's heritage and its modern revival under creative director Guillaume Henry, the artistic director (Figures 9, 10, 11). LVMH's F&L houses visually support their fashion narratives with design atelier images, runway silhouettes, and references to iconic bags or couture garments, which emphasise both timelessness and innovation.

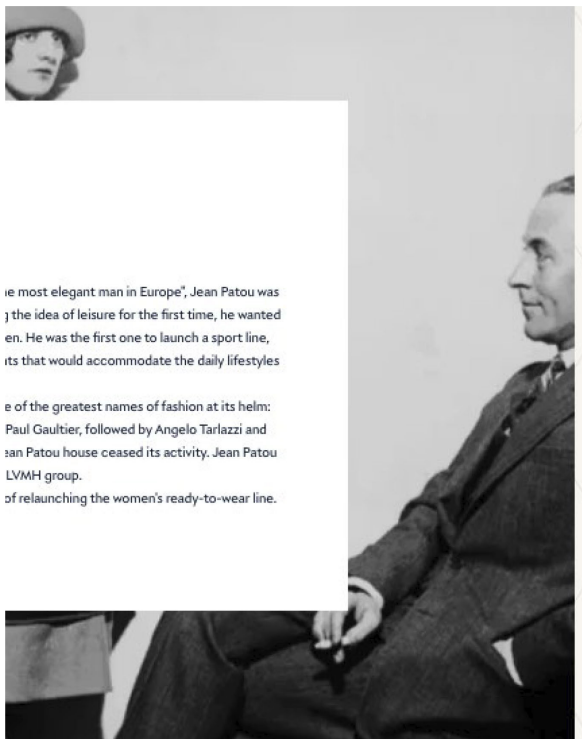
ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

## GUILLAUME *HENRY*

Guillaume Henry designs ready-to-wear collections for Patou inspired by couture, with a delicate and accessible style, joyful and refined. His desire is to dress real women – his friends, colleagues, and women who inspire him. For them, Patou should be easy to approach and embrace.



**FIGURE 9** Screenshot of LVMH website, LVMH Group, showing Guillaume Henry, Patou's artistic director © Patou (LVMH, 2025i).



**FIGURE 10** Screenshot of LVMH website, LVMH Group, showing Jean Patou, founder © Patou (LVMH, 2025i).



**FIGURE 11** Screenshot of LVMH website, LVMH Group, showing a Patou design © Patou (LVMH, 2025i).

### *F&L House 1*

The F&L House in question is a renowned haute couture brand with a history spanning several decades. On the LVMH corporate website, the founder's life story is central to its brand communication, emphasising the founder's revolutionary vision and significant impact on both the fashion industry and people's lives. The brand's values, rooted in the founder's legacy, focus on innovation and audacity. Visually, the brand is represented by one of its most iconic products, highlighting the meticulous attention to detail and the *savoir-faire* of which the F&L House is so proud. Its visual identity includes images of haute couture pieces, individual products, and its first boutique at a prestigious Parisian location, all of which contribute to the brand's narrative and identity.

Thus the LVMH houses in this study are communicated and portrayed on the corporate website in specific ways. While they all share a common understanding of luxury and a set of core values, they are expressed differently depending on the business sector. The P&C houses focus on excellence and perfection; the W&S

houses emphasise heritage and craftsmanship; and the F&L house plays on its creativity and timelessness. For all seven houses, the lives of their founders and their descendants remain central in portraying the aura of the brand (Dion & Arnould, 2011), together with their roots in the French luxury lifestyle and tradition.

LVMH's website does not just rely on text, whatever the sector. Its galleries and campaign visuals, founder portraits, creative ateliers, and product close-ups amplify its narrative of long-standing heritage, artisanal mastery, and contemporary innovation. Together, these visual and narrative elements reinforce LVMH's claim to being a curator of timeless luxury.

## 6.4 Overview of the respondents

Table 1 shows all the respondents in the study. Names and brands have been anonymised and the master key linking names and data is held securely by the author. For reasons of confidentiality, each respondent's position at the time of the interview or their last job with the LVMH group is also anonymised. Some respondents spoke about their experiences in more than one LVMH sector.

**Table 1** Respondents in alphabetical order

| New names | Nb of interviews | Type of work                       | Sector          | Words transcribed | Interviews in mn |
|-----------|------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Adeline   | 1                | Communication                      | W&S             | 5544              | 66               |
| Adrien    | 1                | Office management                  | P&C             | 6973              | 95               |
| Aline     | 1                | Customer Relation Management (CRM) | P&C             | 4687              | 51               |
| Amelie    | 1                | Sales                              | W&S             | 8987              | 55               |
| Ariane    | 1                | Marketing/Sales                    | F&L/W&S         | 4503              | 47               |
| Aurore    | 1                | Marketing                          | W&S             | 4375              | 55               |
| Axelle    | 1                | Purchasing                         | P&C             | 22467             | 117              |
| Blandine  | 1                | Sales                              | P&C             | 8811              | 89               |
| Camille   | 1                | Sales                              | F&L             | 9865              | 69               |
| Cecile    | 1                | Communication                      | P&C             | 7125              | 35               |
| Chantal   | 1                | Operational Marketing/Sales        | P&C             | 9768              | 73               |
| Clarisse  | 1                | Communication                      | W&S             | 4446              | 55               |
| Corentin  | 1                | Employer Branding                  | Holding Co.     | 4981              | 50               |
| Eloise    | 2                | Brand training                     | P&C             | 11511             | 92               |
| Emeline   | 1                | Indirect purchasing                | P&C             | 9818              | 64               |
| Fabrice   | 1                | Visual Merch                       | F&L             | 9249              | 57               |
| Florence  | 1                | Communication                      | W&S             | 21340             | 112              |
| Gaelle    | 1                | Supply Chain/ purchasing           | P&C             | 10071             | 63               |
| Helene    | 1                | Brand management                   | P&C             | 13808             | 87               |
| Julien    | 1                | Forecasting                        | P&C             | 4247              | 55               |
| Maele     | 1                | Purchasing                         | W&S             | 19565             | 100              |
| Mathieu   | 1                | Sales                              | P&C             | 9777              | 86               |
| Mireille  | 2                | Communication/Marketing            | W&S             | 14325             | 93               |
| Morgane   | 1                | Legal                              | Holding Co./F&L | 8272              | 64               |
| Ophelie   | 1                | Sales/Brand training               | P&C             | 6480              | 55               |
| Roxane    | 1                | Communication                      | W&S             | 11993             | 94               |
| Sabrine   | 1                | Sales                              | P&C             | 4800              | 78               |
| Salomé    | 1                | Visual Merchandising               | F&L             | 7860              | 45               |
| Selene    | 1                | Customer Relation Management (CRM) | P&C             | 21167             | 105              |
| Sienna    | 1                | Marketing/Communication            | P&C             | 12521             | 76               |
| Solene    | 2                | Customer Relation Management (CRM) | P&C             | 21480             | 145              |
| Sylvie    | 1                | Sales                              | P&C             | 2896              | 50               |
| Thalia    | 1                | Communication                      | W&S             | 3720              | 51               |
| Violaine  | 1                | Visual merchandising               | P&C             | 6575              | 95               |
| Yseult    | 1                | Sales                              | W&S             | 3269              | 51               |
| Zahra     | 1                | Logistics                          | P&C             | 4554              | 56               |
| <b>39</b> |                  |                                    |                 | <b>341830</b>     | <b>2631</b>      |

## 7 Crafting meaningful work: Employees' stories of their emotional connection with the brand

In this empirical chapter, I present five categories of stories that respondents tell to construct their work as employees of a luxury-brand organisation as meaningful, framing both themselves and their work in a positive light. These categories centre on their emotional connection with the brand: personal memories of the brand from childhood and early adulthood; the emotional encounters with the brand's products; the emotional encounters with the founder and their legacy; brand-related exclusive experiences of work; and the social recognition that comes from being associated with the brand.

In the first category of stories, employees connect emotionally with the brand by sharing their personal memories. These include their exposure to luxury products in childhood and their first emotional encounters with the brand's products. I argue that by telling these stories, employees associate their work with positive meanings tied to their personal memories of the brand, which makes their work for the brand personally meaningful. These stories also reveal how employees' work aligns with their interests and identity, highlighting the centrality of luxury in their upbringing and of luxury brands in representing who they are.

In the second category of stories of their emotional connection with the brand, employees share being moved emotionally by the brand's products. In this category of stories, the brand's products are perceived and constructed by employees as beautiful, and serve as a link to the enchanting world of the brand, which evokes affection and attraction. Employees tell these stories to construct their work emotionally engaging and purposeful.

In the third category of stories, employees highlight the powerful emotional impact of the founder and their legacy by sharing stories of being moved or inspired. In this category of stories, much like the brand's products, the founder and their descendants play a central role in connecting employees to the enchanting world of the brand. Employees tell these stories to construct work as emotionally moving. Engaging with the brand's heritage gives them a sense of purpose, reinforcing the importance of their work in a broader, prestigious narrative.

In the fourth category of stories, employees share their joy and fascination at their participation in luxurious, exclusive brand-related work events, because they have the opportunity to experience first-hand the luxury that is typically out of reach. Employees tell these stories to construct their work as a privilege, as such events make them feel part of an exclusive world and reinforce their emotional connection with the brand.

In the fifth category of stories, employees share anecdotes about being recognised and admired because of their association with the brand's prestige. Employees draw on the recognition and admiration they receive from their colleagues, family, friends, and random people to construct their work as socially meaningful. This validation reinforces their sense of belonging and pride, making their work socially valued.

Together, these five categories of stories illustrate how employees, in narrating their emotional connection with the brand, construct their work in the luxury-brand organisation as meaningful.

## 7.1 Early personal memories: Making work feel personally significant

When I asked employees what the brand means to them and why they were interested in working for the brand, many told personal stories from their

childhood or early adulthood involving luxury products and brands. These stories were often positively emotionally charged, involving fond childhood memories or their 'love-at-first-sight' first encounters with the brand's products. These memories were also often tied to their parents or significant adults in their lives, and this had the potential of evoking a nostalgic feeling. Their stories not only highlight their emotional, personal connection with the brand, but also how deeply ingrained it is to draw on these emotional connections to attach positive meanings to their work.

### 7.1.1 Fond childhood memories of luxury products

When I asked my interviewees why they initially wanted to work for the brand or in the luxury-brand sector, some told stories connecting the brand to positive memories of their childhood. These memories attach personal and positive emotional meanings to their work in the luxury-brand organisation.

Some interviewees explain that working for the brand is associated with positive memories tied to one of their parents, suggesting a personal and emotional connection with the brand. For example, Gaelle recalls that her mother has been wearing one of the brand's fragrances for as long as she can remember.

I was somewhat immersed in that world because my mum always wore [brand] perfumes. She had been wearing them even when I got my first perfume. She wore several from the brand, especially a lot of [brand perfume]. So, I've been familiar with the scent of [brand perfume] for years. To me, it really represents my mum ... and that luxury aspect was really about that connection.

Gaelle's story suggests her work for the brand is associated with positive emotional meanings as it is intertwined with her family history, particularly memories of her mother. Gaelle's experience of working for the brand is connected to someone she loves. This emotional connection with the brand, linked to the smell of the perfume, not only sparked her desire to work for the brand but it also imbues her work with personal significance, constructing it as meaningful. For Gaelle, the brand is more than just a place of employment or a symbol of luxury; it connects to personal memories.

Employees see the products their loved ones used as beautiful, adding a layer of emotional and aesthetic value to their connection with the brand. For example,

Chantal fondly recalls her mother's makeup, and how beautiful the products and their packaging were.

It is a pretty brand. It is classy. I remember my mum's makeup. It is so beautiful. The packaging is so beautiful.

Respondents alternate between present-tense descriptions of the brand's aesthetic qualities and references to past memories, suggesting that the product evokes a sense of nostalgia. Chantal's story reflects her emotional connection with the brand, as it reminds her of her mother and the makeup she used to wear, further enhanced by her appreciation for the brand's aesthetic qualities, which again is intertwined with fond memories of her mother. For Chantal, the brand is both personally meaningful and beautiful. The brand's aesthetic appeal enhances the emotional significance of her memories, which in turn strengthen her connection to the brand, imbuing her work with both personal and aesthetic meaning.

Employees also associate certain brands with their parents' professions, when those professions involve luxury goods. For example, Eloise reflects on her father's work in the P&C industry:

The world of perfumes is a world that I really love ... My dad was the manager of a perfume shop. He first started to work in the clothing sector. Then he quickly changed and worked with perfumes, makeup, skincare. I grew up a bit with this ... I cannot see myself working with something else.

Eloise's connection to the 'world of perfumes' goes back to her childhood, especially in her father's work, which she recalls fondly. Through her father's work in the perfume industry, Eloise was exposed to the world of luxury at a young age. Eloise's story associates her work for the brand with positive memories of her dad and his work. The quote suggests that this early exposure to luxury, connected to her father's work, has shaped Eloise's perception of the world of perfumes and her own professional path. For Eloise, luxury products are more than nostalgic reminders; they make her work personally meaningful by connecting it to her family history.

The connection to their parents' professions often brings employees back to happy memories associated with specific products. This idea is illustrated in Mireille's story:

First of all, I love champagne. It's something that, for a long time, even before joining [brand] ... I'm from the Champagne region, so for me, Sundays are festive days, there's always a bottle of champagne on the table ... My parents' friends were winegrowers, so I was kind of immersed in champagne. I used to do the grape harvests before joining [brand]. So for me, champagne – one, I love it, and two, [brand] is really one of the luxury champagne brands back at home. So I was very proud. I really love the product.

By associating luxury products with a parent's work, employees make them an integral part of their childhood and upbringing, establishing a connection to luxury that began early in life and remains strong and enduring. For example, Chantal ascribes her bond with luxury brands to her mother's profession:

I also think it comes from my mother. She had a clothes shop for children and adults, and she sold quite a lot of luxury brands. So if you want luxury it has always been part of my world.

Chantal's story further suggests that an employee's emotional connection with the brand can originate in early exposure to luxury by their parents. She emphasises how luxury has always been present in her life, well before she started to work for a luxury brand. The fact that her mother worked with luxury brands implies that an appreciation for luxury products was central to Chantal's upbringing. Personal and emotional childhood memories are a central part of the employees' connection with the brand at an emotional level.

Other employees such as Maelle also underscore the influence of their mother in fostering their love for luxury products:

So yes, I get that [appreciation for luxury products] from my family, and mainly from my mum.

Powerful words that show how an employee can situate their current relationship with luxury products in their family history, highlighting how meanings attached to luxury can extend across generations. The employees' connection to luxury is constructed as a personal familial legacy. This suggests that they acquire their parents' affinity for luxury, which enhances the personal significance of working for a brand that has long been part of their lives.

Moreover, employees explicitly associate luxury with happy family moments and personal happiness, as Roxane's story exemplifies:

Well, my parents. I have been lucky to be well taken care of and spoiled by my parents. I had the chance to discover beautiful places and beautiful brands.

She credits her parents with introducing her to luxury, further illustrating the significant role that childhood experiences play in shaping employees' identification with luxury and luxury brands. Roxane associates luxury brands with cherished family moments: discovering beautiful places and brands and creating lasting positive memories with luxury products. Here again, luxury brands are associated with the beautiful and enjoyable.

Some employees' association of luxury products and brands with something positive is further reinforced when Roxane describes what luxury means to her today.

I identify with the values of luxury. If I want to make myself happy, I buy a real luxury brand, because I like the history of the brand, the craft ... If I want to buy a gift for someone, for example for my husband, I choose a beautiful scarf in cashmere, maybe from a brand that specialises in cashmere. Or a nice leather wallet. I will not specially go to Dior or Vuitton. Maybe Vuitton but I will not specially buy something with the LV logo.

For Roxane, buying luxury goods is a way to express care and appreciation, particularly when selecting gifts for loved ones. Luxury products are linked to her personal happiness and familial relationships, reinforcing her emotional connection with luxury brands.

Other employees, however, do not depict luxury consumption as part of their everyday life when growing up. Rather, it is described as something exceptional, connected to desires, aspirations, and special occasions. For example, Maelle recounts her mother's rare indulgences:

My family consumed luxury products. My mum was a fashion fan. Well, when she wanted to spoil herself. It's a bit horrible but when she had her little bonus on her account, if she needed to spoil herself, she would buy a little bag in a very nice shop. Back then, my mum must have owned one bag. She has always told me that when she got her first job and her first salary, her pleasure was to buy herself a beautiful product ... It was not like she could say 'Oh, I am

going to buy myself a pair of shoes or a bag from Vuitton'. She could not do that at the drop of a hat!

Maelle's story suggests that luxury consumption was a special treat rather than an everyday occurrence. Luxury products were an indulgence and symbols of reward, reinforcing their status as extraordinary and desirable. The idea of luxury as a rare pleasure further enriches the employees' emotional connection with these brands.

For some employees, luxury consumption was not part of their upbringing, yet even so they connect luxury brands to their parents and social background, giving them personal meaning. For example, one reason Fabrice wanted to work in the luxury sector was his modest background. He explains:

It's also a source of pride. Because my parents come from a very working-class background and saw brands like this as very prestigious and out of reach, it was a great source of pride for them that I joined this world, this brand. These are things I think about too. If I ever want to change brands or apply somewhere else, it always stays in the back of my mind.

Thus the first category of stories includes employees' personal memories of the brand from their childhood. When employees were asked why they wanted to work for the brand or in the luxury sector, they shared memories full of positive emotion – affection, happiness, nostalgia, and desire, all linked to luxury brands. These emotionally charged memories suggest that employees assign an emotional and personal meaning to their work in a luxury-brand organisation.

### 7.1.2 Love at first sight with the brand's products

When I asked interviewees what the brand means to them, they also shared personal stories about their love-at-first-sight encounters with the brand's products. These experiences, often long before they entered the luxury-brand sector, typically took place in their teenage or young adult years. Mathieu, for example, vividly recalls when, as a teenager, he first fell in love with one of the brand's fragrances:

The choice to work for [brand] ... The more irrational aspect is that I have been wearing [brand fragrance] since it came out. [Brand's fragrance] has always been the fragrance that is different from the others. I fell in love with

this perfume from the start since it came out. At that time, there were two fragrances that made history, [brand fragrance] and Paco Rabane for men. At that time, you had only fern and fougere fragrances. You see the man of the 70s, he is a man who was really put into a box with strict codes. Not like today. These fragrances offer men spices and flowers. Never before have there been flowers in men's fragrances ... When I came in for the first time to choose a perfume as a teenager, the salesperson proposed to me Monsieur Chanel and Monsieur Rochas. You can already see how the salesperson was. And I said no. These are perfumes for dads or granddads that any young man could have those days. For me, it represents the past. It is not me. She got it and presented to me [perfume] with a high percentage of patchoulis and wood. It was a revelation.

For Mathieu, the brand is inseparable from his emotional bond with its products. His use of words such as 'love' and 'revelation' conveys the intensity of the emotional impact this first encounter had on him. His recollection expresses feelings of excitement, discovery, and delight. He was, in his own words, 'under the spell' of the fragrance. This positively emotional experience, so vividly expressed, indicates that Mathieu's relationship with the brand is far more than a professional connection; it appears personal, fulfilling his self-expressive needs as a young man eager to differentiate himself from others. The fragrance, which he describes as a unique combination of patchouli and wood, struck a chord with Mathieu, allowing him to express his identity. Mathieu strongly identified with the brand's perfumes as a young adult. As his story illustrates, this emotional connection was instrumental in his decision to work for the brand.

Similarly, Helene recounts her immediate love for the brand's products when she was just 18 and working in a shop:

So, I was there for four years. And then we did not have [brand] and we did not have Yves Saint Laurent at that moment in that shop. So when these two brands were new, I got them in. That was back in, in 1989 or 1990, I think. At that time the brand and Yves Saint Laurent were equal ... They were selling equally and I was the one who wanted Yves Saint Laurent, and my boss was the one who wanted [brand]. And when I saw the products, I immediately fell in love with [brand] instead of Yves Saint Laurent and I don't know what it was, but I knew that I wanted to work with [brand].

Like Mathieu, Helene describes an almost instant, irresistible attraction to the brand's products, using the phrase 'immediately fell in love' to highlight the sudden and overwhelming nature of her emotional response. Her story constructs her relationship with the brand as emotionally loaded and unique. Despite initially wanting to sell Yves Saint Laurent, another prestigious luxury brand, her unexpected connection with the brand's products made her change her mind. Her choice of words suggests a deep emotional connection that transcends her work as a shop assistant and highlights her fascination for the brand and its products. This emotional connection constructs her relationship with the brand as unique and personal, fuelled by admiration and fascination.

These employees share meaningful emotional connections with the brand, expressed in words such as 'love', 'revelation', and 'immediately'. Their stories are central to their desire to work for the brand. Employees such Helene spoke of the depth of their connection with the brand's products:

I just felt the story behind [brand]. To be able to work with products where every step had been thought of so much was really something I loved and could identify with. So, I knew right away that I wanted to work with it somehow in some way.

Helene expresses her admiration for the brand's attention to detail and craftsmanship, highlighting that her love for the brand's products goes beyond their aesthetics. It suggests that what captivated Helene is the brand's narrative about the product: the thought, passion, and dedication that went into it. The brand's narrative appealed to Helene because it aligns with her values, allowing her to see a reflection of her own values and passions in the brand she admires.

And they are lasting connections. Mathieu and Helene, years after their first encounters with the brand, still maintain strong personal ties to its products. At the time of the interviews, Mathieu had worked for the brand for over two decades, and Helene for more than a decade. Both continued to wear the brand's products, reflecting the enduring nature and strength of their emotional connection with the brand. In Helene's case,

All the time I only wear [brand] ... Makeup and powder and eye shadow and mascara and everything.

Similarly, Mathieu continues to wear the same fragrance he fell in love with as a teenager, even personalising it over time:

I wear [brand perfume] that I reinforce with the essence of patchouli ... I personalise it. I make a re-interpretation of it.

Mathieu's personalisation of the fragrance is a mark of the depth of his relationship with the brand and constructs it as exclusive and strong. His intimate knowledge of the product allows him to reinterpret it in a way that reflects his evolving identity, reinforcing the unique bond he has cultivated with the brand over the years.

In this category of 'love-at-first-sight' stories, employees speak of their attraction and awe when seeing the brand's products, revealing that their emotional connection with the brand not only stems from feelings of love and fascination for the brand and its products, but also from seeing the brand as a reflection of their own identity, embodying values and qualities that resonate with them. Respondents' stories suggest that their emotional responses are driven not only by the products' aesthetic appeal, but also by the values and symbolic meanings they associate with them – meanings that resonate with their sense of self. By recalling these formative encounters, employees imbue their work with a personal sense of meaning, aligning their own values and identity with the qualities they admire in the brand, making their roles in the luxury-brand organisation feel personally fulfilling.

### 7.1.3 A lifelong attraction to luxury products and brands

Theirs may not have been love at first sight with a specific product, but employees still have stories of being attracted by the world of luxury and luxury brands more generally since childhood. Chantal emphasises her lifelong fascination with luxury, framing it as something that has always existed.

The luxury product is something that has always attracted me.

She expresses a sense of wonder about luxury products that began a long time ago and remains strong, contributing to her emotional connection with luxury brands.

Employees emphasise how, since a young age, luxury products have always been evocative.

When you are young, these products always make you dream. You are fascinated by them. They seem so out of reach ... The products seemed out of reach and made me dream.

Notably, this dream of luxury products is grounded in their unattainability and exclusivity. Luxury brands seem 'out of reach', creating a sense of desire and admiration for something that is rare and unattainable. The employees' sense of longing is fuelled by the aura of exclusivity and allure of the brand, making the products even more captivating. The brand is captivating not only because of its rarity, but also because of the dream-like world it creates, drawing employees into a narrative that feels both aspirational and transformative.

The employees' attraction to luxury brands is a central driver in wanting to work for a specific brand or in the luxury industry more generally. For example, when I asked Solene why she wanted to work for the brand, she explained,

I dreamt about it when I was little. I told my mum 'I want to work for [brand] or Chanel'.

Solene highlights how working for the brand represents, for her, the fulfilment of her childhood dreams. Her mention of names such as 'Chanel' underscores the cultural significance these brands hold for her, reflecting a long-held personal aspiration. This example illustrates how luxury brands can inspire lasting dreams and ambitions, creating a deep emotional connection for employees who see their work for the brand as the realisation of these dreams. When I asked Solene how she learnt about the brand when she was young, she explained:

In fact, I was watching fashion shows and magazines. I really liked the perfume adverts. I found them very pretty. I found them beautiful. At 10 years old, I loved perfume adverts. As soon as one came out, I found them pretty. I liked the artistic side, the beautiful models, the make-ups that are well done. It is the dream of a little girl.

Her dream of working for the brand clearly stems from her childhood fascination with perfume adverts and her admiration for the luxury branding's aesthetic. Her

focus on the ‘artistic side’ and the beauty of the imagery reflects an emotional connection to the dream-like world these brands create. The enchanting appeal of the brand lies in its ability to weave a world of beauty, elegance, and exclusivity; one that feels both aspirational and just out of reach. This attraction goes beyond the products themselves, symbolising childhood aspirations of sophistication and artistic refinement. Solene’s emotional connection with the brand is rooted in how it represents not just luxury items but an idealised world of fashion shows, glamorous TV adverts, and magazine spreads. This example illustrates how employees such as Solene develop deep emotional connections with luxury brands, drawn in by the dream-like worlds they represent.

The first category of stories about employees’ emotional connections with brands includes their childhood memories of luxury products, whether by association with their parents’ careers or their luxury consumption. Their stories also extend into early adulthood, with employees sharing details of their love at first sight with the brand and its products. For many, working for a luxury brand represents the fulfilment of a long-held dream, as they often describe being drawn to the brand and its products from a young age. Such stories both illustrate and reinforce the employees’ emotional connection with the brand, imbuing their work for the brand with personal meaning.

## 7.2 Emotional encounters with the brand’s products: Making work feel emotionally engaging and purposeful

From emotionally freighted personal memories that ascribe work with positive meanings, I move on to another category of stories about the employees’ emotional connection with the brand. These are stories of emotional encounters with the brand’s products, including direct encounters and associations with their work, where the products serve as a bridge to the brand’s enchanting world, connecting employees’ work to the prestige and success of the brand. I argue that employees use this category of stories to construct their work as emotionally engaging and purposeful.

### 7.2.1 Direct encounters with the brand's products

In employees' stories, direct encounters with the brand's products, including sensory ones (for example, seeing, smelling or touching them), have a key role in shaping how employees construct their work as meaningful in their own eyes. These experiences of engaging with the products deepen employees' emotional connection with the brand by bringing the abstract concept of luxury into their daily lives in a more immediate way. The luxury products, far from being ordinary in their minds, appear to be physical manifestations of the brand's exclusive and prestigious world, making its essence more tangible. I consider how employees' direct encounters with luxury products appears to bring enjoyment and purpose to their work, compensating for routine work and helping them overcome the challenges and disappointments of work.

#### *7.2.1.1 The products bring enjoyment and purpose to their work*

In employees' stories, the sight of the products evokes joy and admiration, playing a key role in how they construct their work as emotionally engaging. Helene's words offer a glimpse into how employees' emotional connection with the brand manifests in everyday work. When asked if she remains passionate for the brand after so many years in the organisation, she answered:

Absolutely. Every day. That's what is so amazing. I must say that it's because it's a very dynamic brand. We launch a lot of new products. And every time we see a new look, we are so amazed about the colours. It's like, can you keep on making a new red lipstick? Yes, you can. It's amazing and I really feel that it's easy to go to work. The people who work here, we don't work here because we must get paid. We work here because it's a passion. It's a lifestyle ... We all often talk about it because it's really, really magic. It's fantastic to be working with colleagues who feel the same ... We can laugh about how amazing it is that we still think that this eye shadow is fantastic.

Helene's story exemplifies how employees like her do not view the brands' products as ordinary, but as unique and captivating. Her example of a red lipstick, a common colour, becomes something extraordinary, eliciting admiration from her and her colleagues. For employees such as Helene, these daily encounters with the brand's products evoke awe and pride: emotional connections that help employees frame their work as emotionally engaging.

Helene expresses a strong enthusiasm for her work, reflected in her use of positive language such as ‘fantastic’, ‘magic’, and ‘amazing’. She describes work as ‘a passion’ and ‘a lifestyle’, suggesting that her connection to the brand goes beyond traditional employment. For employees like her, the products appear to hold a symbolic, almost magical significance, turning work into something joyful and effortless. This sensory connection with the products works as a reminder of employees’ emotional connection, constructing work as meaningful in their eyes. Daily interactions with the brand’s products mean employees cultivate an emotional connection with the brand and enables them to reframe their work as enjoyable rather than a series of monotonous tasks.

Helene mentions that she and her colleagues talk about new products ‘every time’ they see one, suggesting they keep on being captivated by the brand’s products with each launch. Their shared enthusiasm appears to strengthen their emotional connection with the brand and thus the meaningfulness of their work. The excitement about new releases appears to foster a sense of community and alignment with the brand’s values – a supportive environment where employees find motivation in their collective admiration of the products. The emotional connection they experience seems to be both ongoing and mutually reinforcing among their peers.

For some employees, simply having the products nearby, where they can see and touch them, creates a tangible connection to the enchanting world of the brand, making their work more enjoyable and fulfilling, as Yseult’s story illustrates:

I immediately preferred working in the luxury sector. In particular, we had products in our office, and we could touch the products. We felt close to the products ... I like working more with products that are attractive. It can be watches, perfumes, or fashion. It gives you more pleasure than selling hard disks.

This underscores the impact that the nature of luxury products has on employees’ experience of their work. Yseult emphasises the importance of physically interacting with the brand’s products, suggesting that having them in reach in her office offers a direct, tactile experience that enhances her connection to the world of the brand. She highlights how luxury products bring a sense of pleasure and enjoyment to her work, contrasting them with more utilitarian items – in her case, hard disks.

For employees, like Yseult, the products act as a reminder of the emotional power of the brand:

In fact, it is always nice to work with luxury products. It makes everyone dream even if the everyday work is like any other type of work ... I really like, in fact, working for a luxury product because before when I worked in property development the product was different.

Yseult highlights that the work performed by employees in a luxury brand organisation is not fundamentally different from that in a non-luxury brand organisation; however, she also indicates that luxury brand products provide employees like her with an escape from the ordinariness of work, whereas non-luxury products do not elicit the same effect. This quote highlights that for employees, like Yseult, to be surrounded by luxury products evoke a sense of wonder and excitement. Several other employees also mention the importance of the brand's products in the 'dream' at work. These employees draw on the emotional appeal of the products to construct their work as attractive in their eyes.

#### *7.2.1.2 The products compensate for routine work*

In employees' stories, the products seem to compensate for routine work. Coming back to Helene, while each launch of new products and colours brings added stress and mundane tasks (such as making a new presentation for client meetings), it still reinforces Helene's emotional connection with the brand that she can draw on to construct her work as enjoyable. Each new launch evokes not only excitement, but also pride in being part of a brand that continually creates something extraordinary. From Helene's description of a typical day, she does not seem to see her tasks as routine or repetitive:

I always start by checking my emails. And then there can be different projects that are ongoing. For example, I do all of our sales material, and we have a sales cycle every six weeks. So, after six weeks we have a sales meeting and then I present the sales presentation. It's a PowerPoint presentation, normally forty slides or fifty slides of what we will launch in the next six months ... So, I prepare that presentation. I prepare everything. I'm also the one to say 'Should we have five thousand lipsticks or four hundred lipsticks? ... And then I prepare all the hand-out materials we use for the sales meeting. I have to do

this every six weeks. I do all our marketing presentations when we have a big meeting with a customer. We meet them twice a year so it is a presentation of what the marketing plan for the next six months will be.

Although Helene's story includes what many might see as repetitive tasks, such as preparing materials and presentations, she does not describe her work as routine. Not once does she comment on the repetitive nature of her tasks when recounting her day. Instead, she focuses on the dynamic aspects of her job, particularly the excitement of new product launches, which seem to prevent her from viewing her work as monotonous. For employees like Helene, there seems to be no sense of routine as interactions with the brand's products redefines work in their eyes as enjoyable, where routine tasks are seamlessly integrated into a larger, more compelling narrative.

In employees' stories, the brand's products trigger an emotional connection that, more specifically, helps employees cope with the routine of their work. Sabine, for example, explains how, when she first started working for the brand, she found the job to be far more administrative than she anticipated:

People are overqualified for their jobs. When I first started, and I realised that I had to fill in templates with numbers I cried. I told myself that I could not do that ... The job is very much administrative. I almost left after three days. I cried on the first day when I had to fill in numbers in the tables.

Sabine's words leave no doubt that her initial experience of the work fell short of her expectations, being far more administrative than she had imagined. Interestingly, when I asked her what made her stay, she mentioned the importance of product training and launches.

I found work too administrative. So, I learnt a lot about the brand. I took part in product training. What motivated me were the product training sessions and product launches. We were then very much associated with the product launches. So even if the job does not exactly meet your expectations, you tell yourself that you need to be patient. It may look off-putting and boring but progressively you discover new aspects ... After you tell yourself that you like the products. It is great to work with products you like.

Although Sabine describes her work as boring and administrative, her direct encounters with the brand's products in training and launches seems to provide

an escape from the routine of her work. Importantly, occasional sensory experiences with the brand's products seem to play a role for employees like Sabine in how they cope with the mundane aspects of their jobs. This suggests that the appeal of working with the brand's products one loves, helps employees like Sabine find meaningfulness even in dull tasks. The statement 'it is great to work with products you like' hints at how emotional connection with the brand and its products compensates for an otherwise monotonous job.

Sabine mentions product training and launches being only twice a year, yet their infrequency seems to have a lasting impact on her emotional connection. The emotional appeal of the brand, sparked by its products, appears to endure over time, even for employees who are not involved daily. While these training sessions may not entirely change how Sabine views her work, they appear to offset the routine and administrative nature of her tasks, helping to maintain her emotional connection with the brand.

Their direct encounters with the products mean employees can tap into the emotional and prestigious aspects of the brands, which contrast sharply with their day-to-day work. Many employees spoke of the products having a significance beyond their functional value; they serve as a gateway to the enchanting world of the brand, a realm of luxury, beauty, and glamour. Occasional experiences serve as a bridge to this world, infusing employees' daily tasks with elements that are more exciting and emotionally engaging. As one employee, Ariane, said,

When I was there, we worked on the advertising campaign with [famous international actress]. We had to hide her dress at the weekend so that nobody would touch it. We did not want the cleaner to touch it. It was one of the more fun aspects of my work. It felt like working in the movie industry [laughing]. It's like psychotherapy what you are making me do! How should I explain? You see you have your work and on the side you have stuff that spices up your work.

For employees like Ariane, working with the products is perceived as enjoyable, standing in contrast to more routine aspects of their work. The joy Ariane feels seems to come from engaging with the enchanting world of the brand, which evokes entertainment, glamour, and celebrity, much like the movie industry. This glamorous, entertainment-driven realm is part of the brand's identity, and by drawing on it, employees like Ariane imbue their otherwise mundane work with joy and excitement.

In employees' stories, sensory interactions with the products, seeing and touching, act as crucial links to the world of the brand. By physically engaging with the products, employees gain access to the brand's world of glamour and exclusivity, in sharp contrast to their routine work. This connection is not only emotionally resonant, but also allows employees to participate in and project themselves into the brand's prestigious narrative, reinforcing their sense of pride.

These stories thus suggest that products serve as tangible representations of the brand's narrative, acting as gateways that facilitate access to the broader universe of the brand. Each item embodies the brand's values and aesthetics in the employees' eyes. This materialisation of the brand's world enables employees to project themselves into that realm.

By interacting with the products, employees, in their view, are not merely handling merchandise; they are engaging with artefacts that encapsulate the essence of the brand. The products thus become a supportive tool, enabling employees to immerse themselves in the world of the brand, and reminding them of its exclusivity and craft, thus enriching their work with purpose and joy.

Further, employees' stories indicate that even mundane tasks connected to the products are perceived as purposeful and fulfilling. Employees frame the tasks as essential and high-stakes, contributing directly to the brand's overall success, as further remarks by Ariane suggest:

What was great is that I saw all the accessories that we had for the fashion shows. You could see the shoes as well. It was funny. Before a fashion show they needed someone to go and get the accessories. Two days before Friday evening, like on Wednesday, my boss asked me if I could get the shoes in Venice. So, I said yes! I just flew there and back home to go get two huge boxes of shoes for the fashion show on Sunday. That was nice. Those are nice memories. Boxes that cost a fortune to fly home because they were very heavy. It was just to go there and come back to bring back the boxes with all the shoes because the production was late, and I had no time to deliver them ... This is the kind of thing that is fun. You do not see that everywhere. The unexpected.

Ariane perceives a somewhat mundane task (a round trip to collect shoes) as exciting and significant because of the luxury context in which it occurs. Her description conveys a sense of pride and enjoyment, not just in the task itself, but in its connection to the high-stakes world of luxury fashion. The unexpected nature of such assignments, combined with the importance of ensuring the

success of a high-profile event like a fashion show, transforms what might be seen as a routine logistical job into something special. Ariane constructs her experience as both fun and significant, tied to the exclusivity and grandeur of the brand, which adds to her perception of her work as enjoyable and purposeful.

Ariane's story not only illustrates how mundane tasks are imbued with purpose and excitement, but also how they are constructed as luxurious experiences. Ariane emphasises the cost of flying the heavy boxes of shoes, framing the task as part of an elite, high-value operation. The focus on the expense reinforces the idea that she is not working for just any brand, but for a prestigious luxury brand. Thus, for employees like Ariane, occasional experiences with the products serve as a reminder that they are part of something beyond the ordinary. This sense of privilege and distinction is central to the enchanting world of the brand.

#### *7.2.1.3 The products help employees overcome work challenges and disappointments*

The brand's products are not only important in compensating for routine work, but also in overcoming work challenges and disappointments. They serve as powerful materialisations of the brand's world in the eyes of employees, offering them a meaningful escape from workplace challenges and difficulties, as Mathieu illustrates:

To work for [brand], to work in this sector has allowed me to be in the world of haute couture. There is nothing that moves me more than when I go to [the brand's historic boutique] and meet Annabelle who works at the couture house. She shows me the dresses. She makes me touch them. Of course, nobody usually touches them except the clients. And it is true that spending one hour or an afternoon in the couture house gives me back this vibrato (positive energy). To be honest, like everyone who works at the same place, you can meet someone who tries to suck all the positive energy out of you. It happens in the work environment. A negative energy must go back to a positive energy.

In employees' stories, their emotional connection with the brand's products do more than simply compensate for routine work; they play a crucial role in helping employees overcome challenges and setbacks at work. For employees like Mathieu, his story suggests that engaging with the unique items of the brand allows them to immerse themselves in the world of the brand (haute couture and glamour for Mathieu), temporarily detaching themselves from the tough reality

of work. Acting as powerful embodiments of the brand's world, these products offer employees a meaningful escape from the pressures of their work.

The brand's historic boutique, which Mathieu mentioned, was the first opened shop by the founder, and therefore is significant because it embodies the founder's legacy and the brand's rich heritage. Mathieu's emphasis on haute couture dresses that 'nobody usually touches except the clients' underscores a distinction between these exclusive garments and the more accessible perfumes and cosmetics he sells. While the latter are integral to his daily work, it is the haute couture dresses that represent a deeper connection with the brand's identity and heritage, serving as powerful symbols of prestige and artistry.

Mathieu thus suggests a hierarchy of products within the brand, with employees drawn particularly to those that are perceived by them as most authentically embodying its history, values, and the founder's vision. Notably, it appears that Mathieu seeks out these exclusive haute couture pieces not just for their beauty, but also as a means to overcome the challenges he faces in his work. In contrast to the perfumes and cosmetics he sells, these exceptional garments provide him with a source of inspiration and motivation, reinforcing the idea that they are more than mere products for sale; instead, they serve as meaningful symbols of a larger brand narrative, one that intertwines craftsmanship, artistry, and the enduring influence of the brand's founder, offering employees a meaningful escape from the routine demands of work.

When touching the haute couture dresses, Mathieu connects with the exclusive world of the brand and its founder, allowing him to project himself into a world that he holds in particular affection for. As he mentioned during our interview, he had always aspired to become an haute couture designer. For employees like Mathieu, the brand's products serve as a means of escaping workplace disappointments, providing relief from the negative side of work. Engaging with the brand's world offers an emotional refuge, rejuvenating and motivating employees, helping them regain their energy and enthusiasm. These experiences remind employees of the significance of their work, connecting it to the broader narrative and prestige of the brand, and fostering a deeper sense of purpose.

In the stories of employees' emotional encounters with the brand, employees' direct encounters with the brand's products, whether daily or occasional, shape how they construct their work as both enjoyable and purposeful. Through these experiences, employees connect to the enchanting world of the brand: a world of exclusivity, beauty, and prestige. The world of the brand, evoked by the products,

brings excitement and purpose to routine tasks and helps employees overcome work challenges and disappointments. These encounters immerse employees in the brand's rich narrative, triggering positive emotions such as joy, excitement, and fascination. In turn, this connection imbues their work with a sense of purpose, as they view their contributions as part of something extraordinary.

### 7.2.2 Associating work with the brand's products

The brand's products connect employees to the enchanting world of the brand in ways that go beyond direct encounters. By forming symbolic associations between the products and their own work, employees connect their work to the emotional and prestigious world of the brand, framing their routine tasks as contributions to the products' beauty and the brand's success. Symbolic associations with the products, such as direct encounters, serve as a bridge to the enchanting world of the brand.

Some employees ascribe positive meanings to their work by engaging with the brand's name and products. For example, Morgane, who now works in the legal department at the parent company LVMH, previously managed intellectual property for an haute couture brand in the group. In her earlier role, she derived satisfaction from working on contracts that directly involved the brand's iconic creations – the dresses, the unique pieces of haute couture:

Even when working on contracts, these are still contracts tied to the company's universe, and that's something I really enjoy. ... Actually when I started my career, I was an intellectual property lawyer, so I was very connected to the brand's creation. For example, I often dealt with collaboration contracts with artists for unique prints or specific developments, as well as product protection. By that, I mean how to protect a design. When we say 'design', it could mean the shape of a new handbag or even a piece of clothing. Then, we would also need to use all this legal protection we had set up to defend the brand against counterfeiting or parasite companies. So, it required a deep knowledge of the company and its universe.

For someone like Morgane, working with intellectual property, contracts are more than legal agreements: the products and their design connect their work to the brand's creative essence. Employees do not need to see or touch the actual

products to connect with the brand's world of glamour, beauty and prestige. Working on a legal contract related to the brand's creations, as Morgane does, is sufficient to immerse her in the brand's narrative, and connect her work to the world of the brand.

Plainly, the products themselves play a central role in connecting her work to the world of the brand, as Morgane must seek out detailed information about each item, whether it is a unique handbag design or a specific garment shape, to ensure proper protection. For employees such as Morgane, the products act as a bridge to the brand's narrative. It not only links the employee to the brand's heritage and values, but also transforms routine legal tasks into meaningful work that actively supports and preserves the brand's identity and prestige. For Morgane, providing legal protection for its products was a way of feeling part of the brand's creative legacy, allowing her to view her work as a direct contribution to the brand's success and prestige.

Further, for those working in roles where the brand's image is challenged, learning about the products serves as a vital reminder of their beauty and craftsmanship. Maelle, who works on packaging development for a W&S brand in the group, voiced her frustration about the perceived cheapness of the packaging she creates. She frequently describes her work as 'getting her hands dirty', revealing a conflict between her responsibilities and the luxury values she associates with the brand.

Well, I started to have problems with the fact that we ended up buying almost like in the mass-market. What started to be a problem for me is that we almost ended up buying huge quantities to earn a bigger margin on the ordered products. I did not like that ... I ended up negotiating cents to buy, whatever, the stopper on the bottle. To buy it for 3 euros. When you see that we sell the bottle for 33 euros and I do not know the margin they make on the bottle, I tell myself 'This does not match the values that I had in mind of know-how, luxe, rarity, or made in France'.

Maelle's disappointment stems from the stark contrast between the brand's luxury values and the cost-driven approach dominating the packaging development process. Maelle's daily tasks, focused on cost rationalisation, seem at odds with the luxurious narrative of the brand that she has bought into.

For many employees, engaging with the brand's products by learning about their design, craftsmanship, and heritage, allows them to connect their work with

the brand's values, making their work feel purposeful and connected to something prestigious and luxurious. For example, while Maelle expresses her concerns about the disparity between the brand's values and her tasks of developing cheap packaging, she simultaneously constructs her work as meaningful by connecting it to the luxury brand's products and their craftsmanship. When asked why she has remained with the organisation for so long, she shares:

But I like the products. I like the know-how as I told you. And in my work, I was quite close to production. So yes, every day I was learning about the fabrication process of these products. I am talking about the product, the real product, not the packaging like I mentioned earlier. So, it is anyway an exceptional know-how ... They remain beautiful products. I bring more forward in my work the know-how that I discover and the story of the brand.

By learning about the products, Maelle connects her work to the brand's heritage and quality. This process of association enables her to construct her work as less ordinary and more meaningful. By distinguishing between 'the real product' and the packaging, she maintains a positive perception of the brand, even amidst challenges such as cutting the cost of packaging. This association with the brand's legacy of quality enables her to construct her work as a contribution to the brand's ongoing narrative and success.

Employees who indirectly support the brand's products through related tasks construct their work as meaningful by linking it to the exceptional qualities of the products. For example, Solene works in customer relationship management and as part of her work contributes to the creation of customer magazines with product information. She draws on the association with the brand's products to describe what she does as a 'search for excellence':

I like the search for excellence. To create a perfect product. It's true that sometimes we spend hours, days, or months deciding if the blue is really blue or if it is not too yellow or too red. But in the end, you feel like you have developed the perfect product.

This suggests that employees like Solene construct their work as contributing to the brand's narrative of excellence. The quote also indicates that even though they do not work directly on luxury products, employees connect their work with elements that support the brand, such as promotional magazines in Solene's case.

This enables them to construct their contributions as extensions of the brand's excellence, at least for themselves, and to derive a sense of accomplishment from their work.

Interestingly, Solene's work is peripheral to the production of the magazines:

Well, it is not me who develops the magazines, for example. There are people doing the content. I communicate the needs of my markets to them.

Yet although Solene does not directly produce the magazines, she draws on her role as a connector between creative teams and the market needs to associate her work with the products' perfection. Employees, by positioning their contributions in this framework, associate their work with the brand's luxury image even when their tasks are peripheral.

This association to the products is key to how employees construct their routine work as purposeful. For example, despite her acknowledgment that a significant portion of her work involves calculations, Solene still refers to her work as 'creative':

I challenge our markets to get the results of our promotions and events that we organise with our retailers ... to measure the profitability of our actions. You can calculate your revenues. You say, OK my average revenue is 70,000 euros. I paid 25,000 euros so I earned 45,000 euros. Sometimes you calculate and you realise that you lost 20,000 euros ... The calculations are simple. There are many numbers. There is the creative part so that the action is impactful and you choose a gift that fits well. Then after you have the part with all the calculations. Some markets have no results. I spend my time challenging them to go and see the retailers and get the numbers.

Solene's association of her work with the brand's products allows her to see what might otherwise be mundane tasks as purposeful. By connecting her work to the brand's excellence, she constructs it as part of a larger pursuit of perfection and a creative act, giving her a sense of purpose and pride in her contributions to the brand's overall success.

Further, the employees' indirect contribution to the final product makes them construct their routine work as the creation of something beautiful and distinguish it from ordinary work for mass-consumption brands. Axelle, who

works in gift development for a P&C brand, exemplifies by describing the gifts she creates as beautiful:

We develop gifts with lots of added value. It is nicer to develop a pretty key chain with pretty flowers instead of developing a basic box to put three perfumes in.

Axelle emphasises the beauty of the gifts that she develops which enables her to construct her work as a creative endeavour that results in aesthetically pleasing items. Her characterisation of the gifts as beautiful seems key in differentiating them from non-luxury items, as illustrated by her reference to the 'basic box'. This distinction not only highlights the unique value of the gifts in a luxury-brand context, but also implicitly contrasts her work with non-luxury organisations, where the emphasis may be on developing more conventional, less inspiring products.

Interestingly, like Solene, Axelle does not have a hand in creating the miniatures or gift packs; rather, she contributes to their development by doing the desk work. As she explains,

It is the packaging department that develops the miniatures. But I still have all the administrative parts that I need to decide. Well, it is the marketing who decides what goes in what. But it is me who needs to enter it in SAP [software program]. Well, the administrative and boring parts.

While Axelle initially describes her work as developing beautiful gifts, she later acknowledges that her primary role is administrative and often 'boring'. Nevertheless, her involvement in the gift creation process allows her to connect with the beauty of the brand's products, reframing her routine tasks as part of a larger creative effort. This association provides meaning to her work, enabling her to view her contributions as significant, and ultimately constructing her work as one that embodies beauty and creativity.

While the employees are not directly involved in the creation of the final luxury products, they still construct a strong association between their work and the prestige, beauty, and excellence of the final product. This association plays a critical role in how employees find meaning and pride in their work.

Interestingly, the employees' association of their work with the brand's beautiful products constructs, in their eyes, their own work as something

beautiful beyond the organisational context. Axelle mentions that she feels proud of the gifts that she develops:

When I went to a perfumery, I saw my work since it is me who develops them with the Chinese factory. It is not with my little hand, but I have greatly participated in their development. When I went to a perfume shop and felt, 'Ah, I did this'. Well I really like [brand she works for], because they are beautiful products, and you are always proud of the products that you developed ... It is very nice to be able to develop pretty things, even if it is not to your taste, at least they are pretty objects. You see what I mean?

By associating their work with the brand's products, employees perceive their own work as fascinating. Axelle's recognition of 'her' gifts, in the setting of the shop, together with the gifts' association with a well-known luxury-brand and its products, suggest it greatly contributes to Axelle's fascination with her work.

The recognition of employees' work outside the organisational setting transpires to be as important, because it contributes to their positive perception of their own work. Florence, for example, says,

You do not work to produce bolts. You work to make a product that is appreciated all over the world.

By contrasting the brand's products to mass-produced objects like 'bolts', Florence reinforces their luxuriousness. While Florence does not work on the fabrication of the brand's products (she works with internal communications), she includes herself in the fabrication of the brand's products. By doing this, Florence associates her work with the popularity of the brand's products outside the organisation.

The second category of the emotional connections with the brand includes employees' stories about their direct encounters and the symbolic association of their work with the brand's products. Their stories draw on their emotional connection with the brand's products to connect their work to the enchanting world of the brand and construct their work as emotionally engaging and purposeful. Direct encounters with the products immerse employees in the emotional and prestigious world of the brand, evoking emotions such as joy, excitement, and fascination, and constructing their work as enjoyable and purposeful. Similarly, by associating their work with the brand's products,

employees construct their contributions as part of the brand's beauty and success, strengthening their sense of connection to its world. In both cases, whether in direct encounters or symbolic association, the products serve as a bridge to the brand's narrative, constructing employees' work as emotionally engaging and purposeful.

### 7.3 Emotional encounters with the founder and their legacy: Making work feel emotionally engaging and purposeful

In this category of stories about the employees' emotional connection with the brands, employees share details of their emotional encounters with the founder and their legacy, including direct encounters and symbolic association of their work with the founder and their legacy.

#### 7.3.1 Direct encounters with the founder and their legacy

In addition to employees emotionally connecting with the brands through early personal memories or emotional encounters with the brand's products at work, there were also stories about employees' direct encounters with the founder and their legacy. Since the founders are no longer alive, employees share stories about both their direct heirs and their artistic successors, the brands' artistic directors. Such stories contribute to shaping employees' experiences of work and work-related events, constructing their work as emotionally engaging and purposeful.

Many of the luxury brands in this study are closely tied to their founders and their legacies, carried on by either direct descendants or artistic successors (Chapters 4, 6). Indeed, many of these brands even bear the names of their founders. In their branding strategies, luxury organisations construct the founder and their legacy as charismatic figures (Dion & Arnould, 2011). I found that many employees describe the founder and their legacy as extraordinary, dwelling on how their physical or symbolic presence imbues work and work-related events with positive emotions.

Employees' direct encounters with the founder's descendants at organisational events transform work-related gatherings into memorable and emotionally

engaging experiences. For example, Florence recalls the founder's presence at a company event and how it elevated the occasion's significance and enjoyment:

it is when [one of the descendants of the founder] turned 100 years old. I was still working for [brand]. We took the opportunity of a company event during the summer. He was almost blind, but he could think clearly. He was a handsome man ... He came up on the scene. He talked without notes for 10 minutes and it was absolutely fantastic. We all stood up to applaud him and we were crying. I swear ... It was the big moment of the event. And we did not think that we would share this emotion. Like a show with suddenly a standing ovation, completely spontaneous. We were outside. Sitting. And suddenly we all stood up with tears in our eyes for I do not know how long. It was unique. It was like an old actor giving his last show. He had been absent from the company for many years ... we knew that he had carried the brand in his arms ... We knew that he was not going to live much longer. He died at 102. Maybe two years later. It was like a farewell. And at the same time, he was 'passing the baton' because we were there to applaud him because he carried this name.

The company event Florence recalls here was open to all employees. While she does not remember the specific purpose of the event, it remains memorable to her primarily due to the presence of the founder's descendant and the celebration of his birthday. Florence describes the founder's descendant's remarkable performance, emphasising its impact by adding, 'I swear', to convey its credibility. She recounts how this elderly man, nearly blind, delivered a ten-minute speech without notes. In Florence's description, the founder's descendant is portrayed as an extraordinary figure, with his actions perceived as nearly superhuman, who evokes a profound emotional response among employees, fostering an emotional connection he triggers as the living embodiment of the brand's heritage. His presence at company events, as Florence describes it, transforms an ordinary gathering into a memorable experience. The emotional impact of seeing someone who embodies the brand's history and values suggests that this type of emotional experience strengthens employees' pride and attachment, and makes their work seem part of a shared, meaningful story.

Florence's account compares the descendant's appearance to a theatrical performance, with the descendant as the 'actor' and employees as the 'audience' – a source of both emotion and inspiration that enhances the appeal of working

in the organisation. This constructs this company gathering not just as a formal corporate event, but also as something enjoyable and inspiring, increasing employees' sense of connection to the brand's legacy. According to Florence, the descendant's presence left a lasting impression, not only on her but on all employees there that day. She does not entertain the notion that anyone might have remained unmoved, underscoring the event's collective impact.

Such memorable moments become part of the company's culture, giving employees a sense of belonging and further shaping their view of their work as meaningful. The man's speech on his hundredth birthday became a shared narrative, a legendary story: 'We were all present, and those who were not there, they have heard about it', as Florence says. The story has become a 'symbolic landmark' in the cultural memory of the organisation (Gabriel, 2000), with the founder and his descendants as emblematic figures whose presence lends a sense of purpose and continuity to employees' work.

Further, much like employees' direct encounters with the brand's products, their direct encounters with the founder's descendants help offset the routine and administrative aspects of their work. Beyond formal company events where they meet the founder's family, these interactions bring an element of excitement and inspiration to employees' day-to-day work, connecting them more closely with the brand's world. For example, Ariane describes how she used to regularly meet the brand's artistic director:

He had a quite surprising personality. He could just appear on our floor and be very nice or just odious. I have heard some incredible stories. In your daily routine, when you write your little email, that you are serious and rigorous in your work, and someone suddenly appears and says some odious things to the division director. This is it. You kind of feel that you are in a movie. It is out of the ordinary. You won't see this everywhere ... You come back home, and you tell yourself 'Today I had a funny day'. I think that it removes, in the end, the administrative side of work. It erases the dull side of administrative work. Of assistant work.

Ariane's story suggests that her encounters with the artistic director bring excitement to her routine work. His unpredictable personality and confrontations with other managers inject, for Ariane, a sense of drama, almost like being 'in a movie'. Traits that might ordinarily be perceived as negative, such as abruptness or moodiness, are, in Ariane's story, reframed as marks of the artistic director's

brilliance, adding a level of fascination to his character. These encounters break up the routine and, as she says, ‘erase the dull side’ of her administrative duties.

For employees like Ariane, encounters with one of the descendants of the founder transform their perception of their daily routine tasks, bringing joy and excitement to their work and allowing them to reframe administrative work as emotionally engaging. In Ariane’s story, her encounters with the artistic director trigger positive emotions that transform how she perceives the ordinariness of her work. The artistic director’s unexpected visits become a welcome disruption that not only brightens her day, but also contributes to her sense of emotional connection with the brand.

Additionally, employees’ direct encounters with the founder’s descendants are constructed, in some stories, as a way to (re-)motivate employees. For example, Chantal explains that after a long period of stress, hard work and disappointment, she and other employees were rewarded by the marketing director with a trip to visit the brand’s headquarters. She explains,

[Marketing director] got a team who had suffered ... all the people who had worked like crazy. It was crazy. Completely crazy. They worked to develop new products from A to Z and, one and a half years afterwards, they were told that it does not work, so everything was stopped. It was hard ... So it was part of ‘I am going to remotivate the troops’. And this takes place through the brand, and to make people proud again to work for the brand.

Chantal’s story suggests that the team’s visit to the brand’s headquarter was not just a morale boost; it was a symbolic reminder of the brand’s heritage and values, aiming to reconnect employees with the brand’s mission after a demanding product development cycle. She describes how this connection was designed to help the team recover from the disappointment of a project being unexpectedly halted. Although Chantal joined the team at a late stage of development, only shortly before the project was stopped, she still joined in the visit to headquarters:

It is completely private. They have their offices, their meeting rooms and their workshop as well as their creative studio. It was an extraordinary visit ... You see, at [the brand’s headquarters] she [the daughter of the founder] came to talk to us for at least two/three hours about the brand. It was her dad who created the brand so it was really very interesting. Even to discover the brand

it was great. It is even better than when you read something on the brand. It was alive with lots of anecdotes.

Chantal's description of her visit to the brand's headquarters and the conversations with the founder's daughter highlights how such encounters immerse employees in the brand's inner world, providing access to exclusive, personal stories that few others experience. For employees like Chantal, this privileged insight into the life of the founder and the intimate story of the brand deepens their emotional connection with the brand, helping them view their work as part of something larger and more significant. By connecting with the brand's history and legacy first-hand, employees are reminded that their efforts contribute to something exceptional. This sense of belonging to the brand's heritage motivates them, transforming challenging work into experiences worth enduring. Direct encounters with the founder's descendants reinforce their pride and purpose, making them feel their work is valuable, even in the face of setbacks.

### 7.3.2 Associating work with the founder and their legacy

In the interviews, employees emphasised the significance of the founder to them. His extraordinary character was not only visible in their stories of their encounters with the founder or their legacy, but also through symbolic reminders, such as their photograph. Helene emphasised during the interview how it is important for her to have the picture of the founder in her office while pointing to his portrait above the entrance door. She talked about him with the highest respect even though she has never met him since he died more than half a century ago:

But, but for me, it's very important with him [the founder]. I have him in my office. He's hanging on the wall'

After telling me the story of the founder of the brand, she explained how important it is to have a face to represent the brand:

The founder personalises everything. That is the story we buy, you can say, when we like [brand]. It's his story. His passion.

Other employees had pictures of the founder in the office. For example, when I visited Mathieu's office, I noticed there were a great many photos, most of him

at various company events. One in particular caught my attention. It was a picture of the founder with his muse. Later in the interview, I realised that Mathieu talked about the founder as if he knew him personally. However, the closest Mathieu ever came to the founder was at the celebration of the house's anniversary. The founder, who had by then retired a long time ago, came to the main office. Mathieu got a glimpse at him like all the other hundreds of employees who came to welcome him. However, this does not stop Mathieu talking about him as if he knew him personally.

As in the previous category of stories, employees share stories of the founder or his legacy's symbolic presence and how this impacts how they perceive their work. For example, when asking Sabine what she does at work, she chose to tell me about the time she transcribed an interview with the artistic director:

I do not do it often but at the press department they asked me to transcribe an interview of [artistic director]. It was very interesting to know his vision.

This suggests that transcribing the interview with the artistic director was a rare but meaningful task for Sabine. Despite not doing it often, the opportunity to engage directly with the artistic director's vision gave an insight into the brand's direction. It also suggests that the act of transcribing, a task that might seem mundane, becomes significant in her eyes because it connects Sabine to the brand's core values and the artistic director's creative vision. This underscores how even small symbolic interactions with the founder's descendants, such as the artistic director, can be a source of inspiration and contribute to a greater sense of connection to the brand's heritage.

I asked Sabine what difference it made to transcribe his words compared to reading the interview in a magazine. Her response was,

Yes, I could have read it but it is always coloured/changed. There I was really in the mind of the artist. It is the original interview.

The extraordinariness of the artistic director is something to be experienced best by hearing his words. For Sabine, authentic information about the brand from the artistic director's words imbues her transcription work with meaning in her own eyes. It makes something as mundane as transcribing 'interesting', and deepens employees' connection with the brand.

Thus in the third category of stories – emotional encounters with the founder and their legacy – employees share their emotional encounters with the founder’s descendants, whether at formal events, in personal encounters, or by working on things that represent them. They tell these stories to construct their work as emotionally engaging and purposeful. Formal events, such as company gatherings, offer employees emotional connections to the brand’s heritage, while personal encounters create opportunities for inspiration and motivation. Working on materials associated with the founder’s descendants, such as interviews, allows employees to engage with the founder and their legacy in more subtle but equally significant ways. These diverse encounters reinforce employees’ sense of belonging and pride, making their work feel connected to something larger and more enduring. These experiences also add an emotional dimension by bringing excitement and inspiration to the workplace and making work moving. Employees’ emotional encounters with the founder and their legacy counterbalance the routine and ordinariness of everyday tasks, transforming both their work and organisational events into more purposeful and emotionally engaging experiences.

## 7.4 Brand-related, exclusive experiences of work: Making work feel like a privilege

While the brand’s products and legacy help employees project themselves into the enchanting world of the brand, exclusive brand-related experience of work offer them direct access. In exploring the fourth category of stories – employees’ participation in brand-related exclusive experiences of work – I show how employees have opportunities to immerse themselves in the world of the brand, deepening their connection with it and making work feel like a privilege.

### 7.4.1 Moments of wonder: Meaningful participation in exclusive organisational events

In the interviews, employees often mentioned the organisation’s lavish events, underscoring how these experiences seemed significant and impactful to them. They shared examples such as extraordinary Christmas parties on the Seine in

Paris and team-building activities in exclusive, opulent venues such as the Palais Garnier. Eloise, for example, describes ‘magnificent dinners’ and adds,

When it comes to company events, it is almost always ‘wow’. It is always extremely luxurious.

Eloise’s ‘wow’ not only suggests that she appreciates the luxuriousness of the events, but that she is also impressed by it. By saying as much, Eloise constructs working for the brand as something special in her own eyes.

For employees, it is the extravagance of organisational events that stands out as the most memorable aspect, rather than the specific reason for the event. Axelle, for example, recalls an event organised for the CEO’s new year speech. All the employees were invited, including those working in Paris (Axelle among them) and those based in a town outside Paris where the production facilities are located.

They had rented the whole of the Salle Wagram.<sup>2</sup> It was incredibly luxurious. They had organised it with great fanfare. They went big. There were shuttles bringing back employees to [town outside Paris]. There was a buffet with really excellent caterers. It was really fine food. Open bar with champagne the whole evening ... At [brand], every year there is the CEO’s speech for the new year. It is the evening that everyone waits for impatiently. And if it were not like this, everyone would be very disappointed.

Axelle mentions nothing about the CEO’s speech itself. This suggests that employees’ interest in this event (including hers) was not in hearing the speech, but in experiencing an ‘incredibly luxurious’ evening with good food and champagne.

Additionally, corporate events are remembered as opportunities to get free luxury products. Axelle describes her participation in a seminar organised for all the purchasing departments in the LVHM group:

Each brand gave a gift to each participant. There must have been 200 people. We ended up with a big bag of products. [Brand she works for] was very generous with a serum and a day cream for everyone. Bulgari gave a fragrance. Makeup forever gave an eye shadow and mascara. Dior gave us a travel kit.

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<sup>2</sup> The Salle Wagram is historical monument and one of the oldest entertainment venues in Paris, located in the 17th district.

Well, it was just incredible. It was excessive. It was luxurious. We left with a big bag filled with products ... It was nice. Well, the seminar itself was quite boring because it was only about purchasing, and for me this is the part that I like less.

Axelle frames the seminar as an opportunity, and the highlight was not the discussions but the chance to get free luxury products. In fact, the freebies seem to compensate for her lack of interest in the seminar's topics, transforming what would have been an unremarkable work event into a memorable experience. Evidently, this type of event has significant value for employees like Axelle, as they offer expensive products that are typically out of reach, contributing to the sense of exclusivity and allure associated with the brand.

Axelle mentioned the seminar in the context of discussing one of the brand's products, a scented candle she really would like to have but has not purchased due to its high cost, even with her employee discount. When I asked if she would be pleased to receive it as a gift, she responded:

I would be delighted to get it. But if they do not give it to me, it is not a big deal. They have given me so much. The managers here are not cheap at all.

For Axelle, receiving free products at seminars exemplifies the brand's generosity and reinforces the sense of privilege that comes with being part of a luxury brand organisation. This example underscores how the opportunity to acquire luxury products without bearing their high cost contributes to employees' construction of their work as meaningful. For employees like Axelle, such events not only allow them to experience the brand's exclusivity first-hand, but also fosters a deeper emotional connection to the brand's world of inaccessibility, reinforcing their sense of pride and purpose in working for a luxury organisation.

For employees, the luxuriousness of events in the luxury-brand organisation sets their work apart from the non-luxury sector, contributing to a deeper sense of meaningful work. As Yseult explains,

The luxury world is very nice. All the events. The world of luxury is nicer than what I saw when I worked with hard disks or property development.

For employees, then, the experience of luxury has a pivotal role in how they construct their work in a luxury-brand organisation as distinct from work in the

non-luxury sector. Exposure to luxury helps employees frame their work as not only more enjoyable than work in the non-luxury sector, but also align it with the enchanting world of the brand. This distinction is further illustrated by Sabine, where she contrasts her current work in the luxury sector with her previous experience in a small, struggling organisation:

For me, to work in the luxury sector, it is not real life. When you come from a small organisation, very small, the end of the month is difficult, economically. For me, that was real life.

Sabine constructs her work as far removed from the financial struggles inevitable in small non-luxury organisations. Working for a luxury-brand organisation allows employees like Sabine to experience the brand's world, especially the allure of luxury, offering something they would not typically encounter in non-luxury sectors or in the routines of everyday life. The contrast between the 'dream' of the luxury brand and the 'reality' of economic challenges in non-luxury organisations shapes how employees find meaning in their work, making it feel like a privilege.

Among respondents, product-related events get a special mention as very luxurious. These include seminars where new products are introduced to employees of the organisation. For example, Solene talked about ski trips to prestigious places such as Méribel (in the French Alps) and seminars in exotic places such as Mauritius or at the Hilton hotel in Paris. When I asked Sabine if she remembered her first product seminar, she described going to Courchevel, one of the most famous upmarket ski resorts of Les Trois Vallées.

Well, it was at Courchevel. It was over five days. We could choose between skiing or the spa.

It is striking that what Sabine recalls most vividly from her first product seminar are the high-class leisure activities in a top ski resort. This highlights the importance of experiencing luxury in constructing a work event as memorable for employees. Just as Axelle emphasised getting free products or drinking champagne at the CEO's end-of-year speech, Sabine's focus on indulgent activities such as 'spa and skiing' points to how the consumption of luxury, whether through leisure activities or material goods, plays a central role in framing work events as extraordinary and meaningful for employees.

The luxuriousness of product-related events is especially illustrated by Helene's vivid memory of her participation in the launch of the brand's new perfume in 1999 for all the salespeople in the organisation. Back then, Helene worked in sales. She described it as her most abiding memory since going to work for the brand. She remembered it in great detail even though it took place more than a decade ago.

All salespeople were invited to Cannes, on the French Riviera. Helene explained that employees, first, had lunch in the Boulevard de la Croisette, internationally known for its Palais des Festivals et des Congrès, where the Cannes Film festival takes place. As such, Cannes evokes its connections with cinema – the 'Seventh Art' – and the glamour of its many expensive hotels, restaurants and shops. In the late afternoon, employees went back to the hotel to change clothes, as all guests were asked to dress in white. Finally, employees were transported by bus to the mountains where the company had hired out the house of a famous sculptor to host the event. Helene gave a detailed account of the event at the house:

You were only allowed to wear white. Then we were picked up and then we were driving up into the mountains to, I do not remember his name anymore, but he is a famous French architect ... who has a house up in the hills where we were driven up to by buses. And then we came into his house and saw all his beautiful sculptures. It was private ... And then we came into the yard or whatever you call it and there was a big swimming pool. And then there were white puffs or white seats ... And then I don't know how many, if we were one thousand or something, dressed in white sitting there next to the swimming pool. And then there was a big, big, big glass bubble with a girl inside it ... and then she was put on the water and came to us. It was such an amazing moment.

I asked Helene if she still remembered every detail. Her answer was,

Every part of it. Every part of it. And then we had a huge dinner afterwards and a dance. And there was champagne served all night. It was magic to be with so many people dressed in white ... You feel that it was really, really something. That was the beginning of something quite big ... It really took your breath away. I felt amazed. That's really how we feel. It's really, really

beautiful. That was something very big and, to date, I think that this is the biggest event [brand] has ever had, probably the most expensive one.

Helene describes a sales meeting for the launch of a new fragrance as a dreamlike event, an almost unreal experience. Her description of the event constructs a sales meeting in the luxury-brand organisation as an extremely luxurious event. Its luxuriousness for Helene derives from its exclusivity, extravagance, and refinement. The extravagance of the event (the girl in a bubble moving on the water, the thousands of employees dressed in white, champagne served all night), its exclusivity (in a famous city in the south of France, the famous artist's villa), the refinement (the champagne, the sculptures, the white-clad elegance) made the event 'amazing' and 'magic', in her words. The dress code is reminiscent of a 'Dîner en blanc' (lit. dinner in white), originally a French tradition but now known worldwide: a public gourmet dinner meets flash mob of thousands all dressed in white, assembling in a beautiful place. No one knows until the last minute where it will take place, adding to the secrecy and exclusivity of the event. From Helene's description, the whole event has a magical, mysterious aura, reinforced by the divine-like image of all employees dressed in white. Helene also depicts a world out of proportion where everything is 'big': thousands of employees; a big pool; the glass bubble was not only big, it was 'a big, big, big, big glass bubble' with a girl inside; the dinner was big; it was not only an expensive event, it was 'the most expensive'.

The grandeur of the event remains unmatched and unforgettable, not only for Helene but for others as well, as she explains. Such rare organisational events provide employees like Helene with compelling stories with which they immerse themselves in the brand's world and draw others in with them. While there are product-related events a few times a year – or in the case of Helene's product launch, once in a decade – they play a crucial role in helping employees construct their work in the luxury-brand organisation as meaningful. These exceptional experiences, shaped by the brand's luxurious and emotional appeal, elevate their sense of purpose and pride, reinforcing their emotional connection with the brand and transforming work into something extraordinary.

Further, the luxuriousness of product-related events contributes to their popularity among employees. They experience an invitation as something special, as a reward, especially since some are limited to brand workers. For example,

Maelle explains that after working on a project, she was invited to a VIP brand event.

The most important event? It was an event for the launch of a new product that took place at [famous venue in Paris] where I was invited. Normally they invite only the press and the marketing people. I was invited because they liked me and because I helped them with the event. I still remember this event because I felt privileged to assist at this exclusive event. It was so luxurious. The room was magnificent. It was just so well decorated. There were lots of high society people. The product was magnificent. It was just crazy. ... It was an exceptional evening. It made me dream. I could fit into my Louboutin back then. It was my first glimpse into the VIP world: customers, business people, those who drink champagne. But at the same time there was this aspect of 'Well it's a family'. 'We want you to come because you worked on this project with us. We like you. You fit in at this type of event.'

Like Helene, Maelle describes the launch of the brand's product as an incredibly luxurious event. Different from Helene's sales meeting, the product launch that Maelle describes above is an event for the brand's top customers, not for employees. Yet, a few employees are invited to these events – as Maelle mentioned, usually the marketing and press people. Maelle considers her participation in this event as a reward for several reasons. First, Maelle is invited to an event where only employees in brand-related positions (the marketing and press people) are invited, and by being so Maelle becomes 'one of them', one of the few employees who are invited to exclusive brand events: it sends a strong message to an employee such as Maelle that she is special and that she represents the brand. Then Maelle gets to mingle for an evening with valued customers and in some ways to become one of them – 'those who drink champagne'. She dresses like one of them with her luxury shoes. And she drinks champagne with them, something that for her signifies being part of an elite, associating with luxury and money.

Employees' invitation to these types of events reinforces their emotional connection with the brand by experiencing luxury like the high-end consumers of the brand. It gives meaning to employees' work in the luxury-brand organisation, and is seen as recompense for their hard work.

This is reinforced in Morgane's story of being invited to the fashion show when working in the legal department of one of LVMH's fashion houses:

We were a small team, so those of us working on the shows had the chance to attend, a bit backstage, standing with the guests. But it was a really great opportunity. I worked a lot on preparing the shows, both on contracts and also on intellectual property. And well, it was both a reward and also to be present in case there were some questions. So she [the legal director] invited me to every show, and honestly, it was something I really enjoyed because it was a reward after a lot of work. Shows involve significant peaks in activity and a lot of stress. It is true that after this stressful peak, being able to participate in a show and discover the collection at the same time as everyone else, well, that's something grand, quite magical. The world of a fashion show is very special ... I had backstage access where I saw models getting ready, having their makeup done, and their outfits. It was quite fun. I was lucky to work for a house I liked, so naturally I found it very, very beautiful. Very, very beautiful. And yes, everyone, all the work behind the scenes, all the work afterwards, which actually leads to the launch of a new collection. We know there's a lot of work behind it, passionate teams, decisions taken to create that.

We see the next collection, really, the tone that will come. And then you start going, oh, this is too ... This is too beautiful, I'd like to wear it, oh wow, this is so beautiful, it's magnificent, it looks like haute couture, it's so beautiful, so fine, so refined. And then you look and start dreaming. It's really beautiful, really, yeah, it's quite unprecedented. And it's something, like you said, kind of like a reward, so you take it as a reward for the hard, intense work. For me, that's the reward for the work. A privilege, because also I was aware that lawyers' roles aren't necessarily on the front lines of these projects.

For employees, participating in such events gives them access to the magnificent world of the brand, a world they often dream of but have not typically been part of until then. Mireille, for example, recalls an event she was invited to at the start of her career:

Ah well, for me, the first gala in the [brand] cellars, where people are dressed up, we opened 400-euro bottles with about 100 people, and we had a party in the cellars ... everyone looked beautiful, in evening gowns, and people were happy, and the food was good, and the drinks were good.

I was curious to know if she remembered how she felt when participating in this event. She explained:

At 20, in the beginning, I was quite uncomfortable, actually. I didn't have the budget to buy a beautiful dress yet, and I bought my first long evening gown at 20, when I was doing an apprenticeship. So yes, it marked me a bit, because I took a long time to figure out if I could measure up to all those well-dressed people, since they were the best clients. So yes, it stuck with me a little, but I managed very well.

For employees such as Mireille, attending luxurious events feels like a test, proof that they belong in the brand's luxurious world, that they can fit in among its wealthy and prestigious clientele. And *not* being invited is experienced as deeply frustrating. Sabine, for example, expressed her disappointment that she and other employees could no longer participate in the seminars for new product launches due to the growing number of employees in the organisation. She also shared the example of her manager, Mathieu, describing him as 'revolted' by this decision because he 'loves it'.

#### 7.4.2 Enchanting the everyday: Brand-related work as a daily luxury experience

While in employees' stories, their participation in luxury events remains rare, making it feel even more of a privilege, employees also tell stories of their daily experiences of luxury at work. Those in brand-related roles (including marketing, brand management, sales, and communications) talk of their involvement in brand-related activities bringing them into contact with luxury on a daily basis. This, I argue, enables them to access the enchanting world of the brand, making their work feel like a privilege.

Employees in brand-related roles often share their luxurious experience of work, such as travelling in first class, staying in five-star accommodation, and engaging with high-end products. In their eyes, these experiences become a defining aspect of their work, strengthening their connection to the brand and the luxurious lifestyle it represents. For example, when I first interviewed Eloise, who works in product training for a P&C brand, she emphasised how she had been impressed by her stays at luxury hotels when she started to work for the brand as a make-up artist. In our second interview, she portrayed her work as a make-up artist as involving travelling to many countries and living a luxurious life.

It was 'wow'. It was amazing. I stayed in luxury hotels. I travelled business class. I had dinner in luxurious restaurants. It was incredible!

Eloise's sense of awe and excitement about her experiences is captured in her description of business travel extraordinary, using words such as 'wow', 'amazing', and 'incredible' to convey her admiration. For employees like Eloise, such experiences are integral to how they construct their work as meaningful by linking it to the affluent lifestyle the brand offers. Mireille, recalling her experience working in the communication team for a luxury W&S brand, added,

To be in a beautiful environment, really. I don't quite know how to put it, but everything is beautiful, there's attention to every detail, really.

I asked Mireille if this was something she ordinarily experienced at work. Her answer was,

Oh yes, yes, in everything ... I was lucky to be invited to beautiful restaurants, I did events in beautiful places, the office was beautiful, we did ... everything was beautiful, really.

Stories like Mireille's highlight how, for some employees in luxury-brand organisations, everyday life is a succession of luxurious experiences. And these luxurious experiences are especially significant for employees such as Chantal, who, working in sales and operational marketing for a luxury P&C brand, cannot afford a lavish lifestyle outside work:

You see, just with my job I have travelled quite a lot. My job has allowed me to discover many countries. It is extraordinary. And I have travelled in nice conditions. Before travelling for [brand] I had never flown business. So here it is. To stay in nice hotels. To be welcomed by our subsidiaries. They take you to nice restaurants when you are on market visits. You see, recently I was in Brazil, as I told you, 10 days ago. I did not know Brazil and you enter these shopping malls that are just extraordinary ... You are just dazzled! It is the El Dorado of luxury, and I like it.

For employees like Chantal, living a luxury lifestyle at work constructs work in their eyes as extraordinary. Her role with the brand has not only allowed her to travel extensively, but also to experience the luxurious perks that come with it,

such as flying business class, staying at the best hotels, and dining at fine restaurants. Chantal's story suggests these experiences are significant because they offer her a taste of the luxury lifestyle that, outside work, she cannot afford. Employees like her relate these immersive experiences in the world of luxury, which deepen their emotional connection with the brand, to construct their work as meaningful.

Luxury brand employees often experience a significant disparity between the lavish lifestyle they are exposed to at work and the income they actually earn. For example, when discussing the benefits of working as a communications manager for a luxury W&S brand, Roxane said:

They tell you to go have a drink with this person and in an evening you spend your whole salary. It's your whole monthly salary that just disappeared! [laughs]

Roxane highlights the contrast between the extravagant experiences and expenses she encounters in her work and the reality of her own financial situation. The fact that a single evening can leave her spending her entire monthly salary suggests the luxurious nature of the brand's world, which often involves high-end social events and lavish expenditure. It further implies that such lavish experiences, while part of the brand's culture, may not be financially sustainable for employees, reinforcing the idea of the luxury brand's allure as both aspirational and somewhat out of reach for those who do work for it.

These luxurious experiences contribute to employees' construction of their work as something more than just a job, making it feel as if they are living a dream rather than simply working, as Helene's story exemplifies:

I try to tell myself that thanks to my work I discover beautiful places, but it is not in parentheses 'the real life', it is not the life that I can have every day.

Helene interestingly makes a distinction between her discovery of beautiful places and her ordinary life. This emphasises, as in Chantal's case, that employees' luxury lifestyle at work is not experienced or accessible outside work. The difference between life at work and outside work reinforces the importance for employees of working for a luxury brand. The high-end events, extravagant social engagements, and lavish expenditure create a sense that their role is part of an exclusive lifestyle. It blurs the line between work and leisure, making it feel less

like a traditional job and more like a privileged experience. The luxury they encounter at work reinforces the idea that their role is unique and significant, further enhancing the appeal and prestige of the brand.

By their own accounts, the brand workers' luxury lifestyle at work also constructs their work as a form of leisure, at least in the eyes of outsiders, as Roxane says:

Sometimes my husband tells me 'It does not look like you are working when you tell me what you did today. When you spent three hours having lunch in a Michelin-star restaurant.'

Roxane constructs her work in the luxury-brand organisation as a positive by sharing stories of how outsiders, such as her husband, perceive it as an enjoyable activity. The fact that outsiders view her work as a form of leisure adds to the desirability of working for a luxury brand in the eyes of employees like Roxane. This external perception strengthens employees' connection to their work, reinforcing the idea that their work is both significant and rewarding.

However, Roxane also expressed some criticism towards this luxury lifestyle.

It is true that it is part of human nature to let yourself be seduced. I think that with maturity I am ready to leave the group today and to work in a sector that is maybe a bit less luxurious, a bit less comfortable. I can see behind all the glitter. It is true that I would have never been able to eat in so many renowned restaurants, to attend incredible events, to travel like I travelled, to meet the people I met. For sure, in my private life, I would have never been able to experience all of these, so it is very tempting. But I can also see beyond it ... It would be amazing to work all my life in these conditions. Yes, amazing. But not at any cost just because it is comfortable ... I think that at some point you become a bit disgusted by this, well they know how to make your eyes sparkle, to make you stay and invest yourself in your work, not to count your hours at work. I have so much invested in my work. At [brand], I spent my life there, during the weekends, until 11 pm. It was a crazy pace.

The attraction of this luxury lifestyle, however, seems to be fleeting and fades with time. For Roxane, the luxury lifestyle at work comes at a cost: long hours that take a toll on her personal life. While the luxury experiences are tempting, she recognises they are part of a strategy to keep her invested in her work and

committed to the organisation. Despite the appeal of living a luxury lifestyle, she acknowledges that it can no longer fully compensate for the demands of the job. This quote suggests that for employees such as Roxane, the pleasures of luxury consumption cannot completely outweigh the toll of the relentless pace of work, exposing a darker side to the glamour of working in a luxury brand.

In this fourth category of stories, the employees' emotional connection with the brand is illustrated by their participation in exclusive, sometimes extravagant, brand-related events and luxurious business trips that include flying business class and staying in luxury hotels. Employees tell stories where luxury experiences become a defining aspect of the job in order to make their work feel like a privilege as it immerses them in the brand's luxurious world. I find that employees' participation in high-profile events, product launches, and international travel not only elevates their professional lives, but also deepens their emotional connection with the brand. However, for some the attractions of luxury can begin to pall as the demands of the job outweigh the appeal. This underscores the complex nature of luxury brand work, where early fascination may fade, exposing the personal cost of maintaining such a lifestyle.

## 7.5 Employees' social recognition linked to the brand: Making work feel socially valued and significant

The fifth and final category of stories about employees' emotional connection with the brand centres on outsiders' recognition and admiration of employees because of their association with the brand's prestige, and how they use that to construct their work in the luxury-brand organisation as socially valued and significant. The stories unfold in employees' exchanges with their work colleagues and with friends, family, and even strangers. The stories highlight positive social situations in which they feel valued and their work for the brand is associated with positive meanings of social significance. The brand serves as a symbolic resource that communicates worth in and beyond the organisation.

### 7.5.1 Admiration and brand closeness in the organisation

Employees' stories suggest that when interacting with colleagues, the closer to the brand they are thought to be, the more fascinating and admired they are. I consider different types of closeness that associates employees with the brand – respondents portray other employees whom they perceive as being close to the brand as fascinating.

Florence, for example, remembers part of her onboarding as a new employee, when she spent a week in the town where the brand was founded and met employees who worked there.

I felt the power of [brand], and the richness of the brand. When you participate in this integration week during which you meet people, key people who are in [town] ... I thought that it was an incredible immersion. I thought that it was an incredible welcome. And this feeling after my meeting with each of these people. A feeling of belonging and of pride to belong to this brand. It was incredible! Incredible! And you leave dazzled.

By her account, closeness to the brand and its products is a key factor in how employees are admired and fascinating to their colleagues in the organisation. Florence's story illustrates two types of closeness: geographical and professional.

First, geographical closeness emerges as a central theme. Florence, who works in the Parisian office, thinks of employees working in the town where the brand was founded as being closer to the 'heart of the brand', as she herself refers to the town in the interview. This town has symbolic importance as both the birthplace of the brand and the site where its products have been crafted since the eighteenth century. By referring to the town as the 'heart of the brand', Florence constructs it as a vital, almost sacred space. Employees are not just physically closer, but are perceived as being more intimately connected to the brand's origins, products, and legacy than those working in Paris. This closeness to the brand's birthplace and production processes imbues these employees with a special status in the eyes of those from other offices.

Geographical closeness also constructs them as embodiments of the brand. For Florence, employees from the brand's hometown embody the brand itself, as their closeness to both the historical and material essence of the company makes them living representations of its values. Meeting these individuals was, for her, akin to 'meeting the brand'.

Second, professional closeness plays a crucial role in shaping admiration in the organisation. Florence's role in internal communications, based in Paris, contrasts with the employees in the brand's hometown, outside Paris, who work directly with the production of its products. This closeness to the material aspects of the brand fosters a sense that these employees are more intimately tied to the brand's core identity. These employees are admired for their perceived closeness to the brand's heritage and craftsmanship, which enhances their status in the company. Working directly with the craftsmanship and material aspects of the brand's products strengthens their connection to the brand, reinforcing their status in the organisation. Thus, both geographical and professional closeness enhance admiration for these employees, as their closeness to the brand's legacy makes them fascinating representatives of the brand in the organisation.

Florence's quote also suggests that when employees meet people they perceive as close to the brand, the experience evokes strong emotions, such as admiration and fascination, which in turn deepen Florence's personal connection to the brand. Meeting these people further intensified Florence's sense of being part of something prestigious and important. The repeated use of 'incredible' and 'dazzled' reflects her strong sense of awe and amazement, signifying that the experience was transformative, leaving Florence deeply impressed and emotionally invested in the brand.

Employees specifically in brand-related positions also tell stories of how other employees of the organisation admire them. For example, Chantal, who works in operational marketing and sales for a luxury P&C brand, remembers the first time she went to Brazil to meet her Brazilian colleagues.

I recently went to Latin America. A week ago I went to Brazil and Mexico. When I arrived I met with the team members. The brand manager when I arrived told me 'It was my dream to meet you' She told me 'My dream, well one of my dreams was to meet you and then to meet [marketing director]'. I think that there is an image and that it is crazy.

The admiration expressed by Chantal's Brazilian colleague is closely linked to her professional and geographical closeness to the brand. Chantal's role involves working directly with the brand. This professional involvement, combined with her geographical closeness at the Parisian headquarters, boosts her perceived value and appeal in the eyes of her colleague, and makes her the embodiment of the brand.

The Brazilian brand manager's comment that meeting Chantal and the marketing director is a personal dream highlights that her admiration is rooted in Chantal's embodiment of the brand's image. Consequently, her colleague's admiration for Chantal can be seen as an extension of her admiration for the brand itself. Moreover, Chantal leverages the admiration to frame her work as socially valued. By portraying the meeting as a significant event for the Brazilian brand manager, Chantal underscores her own elevated status in the organisation and how others think her an important figure. By positioning herself as a representative of the brand, Chantal not only affirms her own sense of pride and significance, but also enhances her perception of her work's value and purpose. Personal recognition points to how representing the brand and being admired for it can impact an employee's sense of meaningful work and self-worth.

Employees such as Chantal draw on their emotional connection with the brand, illustrated by stories of recognition and admiration from colleagues in the organisation, to construct their work as important and socially valued. This internal validation enhances their sense of status among peers, making them feel that their contribution is essential to the brand's success. At the same time, these emotional experiences deepen their connection to the brand.

Further, the employees' embodiment of the brand is presented as central to being recognised and admired in the organisation, and hence they reinforce it by wearing the brand's products. Returning to Chantal, when visiting one of the brand's markets she is careful to wear the brand's products.

Then after you see it is true that I always make sure to wear the fragrance of course. In this case [the Brazil visit], I also try to wear some of the fashion brand accessories. I try to showcase the brand, and often ask the press department to lend me a bracelet, a T-shirt, or I buy something. We have some private sales so I can buy a few things. It's true that every time I try to wear some items from the brand.

Chantal (who works for a P&C brand, an extension of a larger fashion brand) tells a story of consciously making an effort to represent the brand in her personal appearance in her interactions with other employees in the organisation. She wears the brand's fragrance, but also extends this to accessories and clothing from the fashion brand. This suggests she is prepared to be an extension of the brand in her own eyes and those of others by wearing the brand's products. She constructs herself around the brand and its products.

Like her colleagues, Chantal has access to private sales, allowing her to purchase luxury accessories, while her position gives her the privilege of borrowing exclusive items from the fashion brand. This access allows employees like Chantal to distinguish themselves in the organisation and more fully embody the luxury values of the brand, further aligning with the brand's image. This idea is further illustrated by Helene who talks about wearing a fragrance that is not yet on the market.

Today I'm wearing the new [brand fragrance] that we will launch in September ... I am wearing it before it's launched.

Employees like Helene have privileged access to the brand's newest products even before they are released to the market, thanks to their role in the luxury-brand organisation. This means they wear or use products that are unavailable to consumers and many other employees in the organisation. This exclusive access sets them apart and allows them to elevate their status in the company.

The ability to access these new products positions brand employees as key figures in the eyes of their colleagues, making their work feel socially valued and significant. For example, several employees said when interviewed how much they valued receiving product samples from the marketing department. Similarly, Selene, who works in customer relationship management for a P&C brand, mentioned her team's disappointment when they stopped receiving free samples from the marketing team, underscoring the significance of such perks.

Typically, there is something we used to do to keep collaborators motivated to work on product launches or product mailings. Before the marketing team gave samples, but they do not do it any more. It was nice that all colleagues got their sample, their small gift. Now we do not have anything. Nothing.

She hints at the importance of product samples to employees. It also positions employees in the marketing team as having power of a kind over other employees in the organisations because they can give product samples to other employees (or not).

Thus the employees' symbolic closeness to the brand is crucial for earning admiration and status among their colleagues in the organisation, and their embodiment of the brand by wearing its products facilitates recognition by their

peers. By drawing on stories of recognition and admiration, employees construct their work as socially valued and significant.

### 7.5.2 Admiration and name of the brand

In their interactions outside the organisation, employees' associate with the name of the brand. For example, when anyone asks Maelle 'What do you do?' she answers,

I work at [brand]. It is enough for them.

Employees take the brand as the defining characteristic of their organisation to present themselves as employees in the eyes of outsiders. Employees like Maelle frame the nature of their work at the luxury-brand organisation as 'working for a luxury brand'. By their own account, telling outsiders they work for the brand is enough to define them as employees, as Axelle explains:

They might want to know more. In this case they ask 'Oh! What do you do?' But most of the time it is enough to say the name of the brand. It is enough for people to know which company I work for. I have never encountered that [the name of a brand being sufficient] before.

According to Axelle, she does not need to be specific about her work at the luxury-brand organisation, which suggests that to outsiders the employees' association with the name of the brand is more important than the work they do. This is further emphasised when Axelle adds:

When you say that 'I am a project manager at [brand]' it has a bigger impact than 'I am number 2 at an agency'. For sure. You cannot compare ... Before when people asked me what I work with, I told them that I managed a team of buyers in a small company that produces promotional gifts. Since nobody had heard about the company, I had to explain a bit. And now when people ask me, I say I work for [brand].

According to several other employees, having a top position in an unknown company has less social value than working for a well-known luxury brand. It appears that the luxury brand has a halo effect, creating a positive impression of

its employees. According to Axelle, when she meets people outside the organisation, working for the brand is perceived as more prestigious than holding a senior management position for an unknown organisation. Employees receive recognition not for what they do at the luxury-brand organisation but for their association with a luxury brand.

Further, working for a luxury brand is constructed by the employee as having more social value than earning good money. Sabine explains:

When you work in the luxury sector, you expect to be well paid. But people told me 'You are so lucky to work in the luxury sector'. I heard it constantly. It kind of holds me back. People told me 'So you are not very well paid, but you work in the luxury sector. You should consider yourself fortunate.

Sabine's point is that working for a luxury brand is seen as a privilege by outsiders, as something employees should be grateful for. According to Sabine, for outsiders, the monetary aspect of work is relegated to a secondary position, after the prestige of working for a luxury brand.

Employees, such as Ariane, tell stories of how others admire them or are fascinated by them when they learn that they work for the brand.

Socially, when someone asks you 'What do you do?' and I answer, 'I work for [brand]', there is immediately this 'wow' reaction.

The 'wow' reaction could be brand recognition and even politeness, but the employees' remarks suggest that they interpret it as the outsiders' admiration. This is further illustrated by something Axelle says:

When you say that you work at [brand], people look at you with admiration, not like when you say that you work for an organisation that nobody has heard of.

Some outsiders might be really impressed, some not so much, but what matters is that Axelle, like other interviewees, thinks that all of them are impressed. This makes them perceive themselves as these fascinating employees. When the employees meet people outside the organisation, they draw on their association with the brand to trigger what they believe is others' admiration. They construct

themselves positively by imagining or accurately perceiving that the people they meet perceive them as fascinating because they work for a luxury brand.

By comparing her actual job at the luxury-brand organisation to her previous job for an agency, Axelle connects outsiders' admiration to the popularity of the brand, as a recognised and well-known brand, as opposed to the anonymity of the agency. This type of story suggests that outsiders' admiration for the brand triggers their admiration for its employees. It further connects others' admiration for employees to their association with the name of the brand as a well-known luxury brand.

As a result, the employees' association with the brand appears important in fuelling their self-esteem – a self-esteem that is connected to outsiders' envy, as Solene mentions.

Well after, to see people who envy you, to tell yourself I work for [brand]. It is quite nice. It is true that it is pleasant ... There is a kind of prestige to work there. People are impressed. They think 'this girl must not be stupid'.

This was in the second interview with Solene, by which time she had left the brand. I had asked her what she missed the most. Her remarks highlight the importance of the employees' association with the brand in boosting their self-image, and that employees like Solene think that being an employee of a luxury-brand organisation has positive connotations for outsiders. According to Solene, in her case it implies others think you are intelligent. An employee's association with the brand defines the type of person the employee is.

Some employees said they were attracted to working for a luxury brand because of its prestige and the image it gives them. When Fabrice said as much, I asked why that image was important. He explained:

There's also a personal and somewhat psychological aspect to it. It's about the image I project as well. Joining a prestigious company implies a certain level of success, at least in the collective imagination.

This idea is echoed by Chantal:

There is a bit of admiration for people who work here, a form of recognition to work for the group. Because it is said that the people who work in this type

of group, they are of course chosen after many obstacles and barriers or whatever. It is thus quite selective. And this increases one's prestige.

According to Chantal, the employee of a luxury-brand organisation is perceived by others as someone special. Working for a luxury brand – obtaining the job, even – is seen as an achievement. It comes with the expectations that the employee must be someone special to have succeeded to work for a luxury brand. Working for a luxury brand is perceived, by others, as something that is not accessible to all.

Moreover, employees view their association with the brand as an advantage in social situations outside the organisation. Florence, for example, describes how her job opens doors in contexts unrelated to work:

For instance, when you are looking for an apartment and you say that you work for [brand]. It opens doors. Even for my children when they needed someone as a guarantor for their flat. When you say that you work for [brand], people say 'Ah, OK'. Like this type of situation.

In Paris, where finding a flat is notoriously difficult because of limited availability and fierce competition, Florence's experience highlights how her association with the brand boosts her credibility and reliability in the eyes of others, even extending this benefit to her children. Working for a luxury brand, in this case, enhances her perceived trustworthiness as a guarantor and makes her children desirable tenants for landlords.

Selene echoes a similar sentiment about social recognition:

I think that for some people in my team, the brand brings lots of pride in terms of recognition, well in terms of social recognition. For these people, it is a double portion of dessert if they say that they work for [brand]. This type of thing.

She emphasises the brand's importance in shaping employees' social interactions. While acknowledging the appeal of this social recognition, Selene is also critical of employees who may place too much emphasis on it.

Employees also notice that their brand association affects how strangers treat them. Florence shares an instance where working for the brand led to unexpected warmth from a US customs official:

I remember the first time I went to the US for work. At the US customs, there was a black man, and he asked me for my business card. I showed [brand], and he told me, 'Come in, come in'. I was a bit surprised [laughs], especially in the United States. They [customs officials] are not really nice, but this time, I can tell you that he knew the brand well. He knew [brand] well.

In her story, Florence interprets the US official's unusually welcoming behaviour as a response to her affiliation with the brand, which was evident from her business card. Her encounter demonstrates how employees believe their brand association influences the attitudes of others, including those who are otherwise unlikely to be receptive. Florence's experience underscores her sense that the brand name alone can create favourable interactions and suggests the brand's widespread recognition and appeal.

### 7.5.3 Admiration and the brand's products

The brand's products also play an important role in eliciting outsiders' admiration for employees. In the interviews, employees discussed their family's and friends' consumption of the brand products more than their own. Giving products to family members or friends, buying them discounted products, or consuming products with them appear to be an integral part of their work. And by enabling family members to consume luxury products, employees make their families happy. For example, when I asked Solene what her family thinks about her working for a luxury brand, she answered,

My family. They like it. They get products at discounted prices. My grandmas like [brand facial cream]. For them, they see the advantage of getting products ... My mum, she is happy.

Their family and friends' consumption of luxury products is central for employees when constructing their work as meaningful, because it brings happiness to the closest members of their family. According to Solene, getting discounts on luxury products is important if those close to her – here her mother and grandmother – are to think of her as having a good job, because family and friends benefit from her work discount and consume luxury products at a reduced price.

Buying brand products at a discount for friends and relatives is constructed by employees as being an integral part of their work. For example, when Axelle is asked by 'people' if she gets a special price on the brand's products because, as she says herself, 'the products are quite expensive', she usually answers,

I have a 40% discount and if you want, I can buy products at the employee shop. I do not tell everyone. My mother-in-law asked me once in a while. Because you cannot pay cash and you need to pay with your credit card. You cannot pay with a cheque from your friend. It does not work.

The time and energy that Axelle expends at work to buy products for her relatives (the employee shop is only open in office hours) suggests that it is meaningful to her.

For employees, it is important to facilitate consumption of the brand's products by their close acquaintances. And they share their knowledge of the brand's products with family and friends, educating them about the right way to consume luxury products, as the following quote by Maelle illustrates:

When you invite people for dinner. So you say 'Look I am going to make you try this champagne that is very good ... What is very good about this champagne is the way it is produced, and I would like you to taste it. I am going to make you taste it the same way that I discovered it. Instead of drinking it at a party and getting drunk with it I will make you taste it with a dish that pairs brilliantly with it as I have learnt and you will see the product is exceptional.' I really like to get my friends to discover the products.

This suggests that in their social interactions with family and friends, employees like Maelle portray themselves as knowledgeable about how to consume the brand's products. Working for a luxury brand is constructed by Maelle as acquiring valuable knowledge about the brand and how to consume the brand's products. I would argue that Maelle draws on her inside knowledge to construct her work as meaningful by making her work in a luxury-brand organisation valuable in the eyes of her family and friends. Working in a luxury-brand organisation enables employees such as Maelle, to acquire the cultural capital – a set of distinctive tastes, skills, and knowledge (Bourdieu, 1979) – to consume luxury products in the 'correct' way. For Bourdieu, cultural capital is used to

create a distinction between consumers based on taste and to identify with the upper classes.

Work in a luxury-brand organisation is constructed as meaningful based on the knowledge employees acquire about the brand's products and their use, which they can then share with others outside the organisation.

Employees' self-enhancement derives from their friends' positive reactions when they give them expensive gifts, as Solene illustrates:

There are some accessories that are very cute for 15 euros. It makes them very happy. I bought a pair of pyjamas for 30 euros for a friend. She went crazy. They normally sell for 150 euros.

In Solene's story, expensive pyjamas become something nice to give away: a special gift that will be greatly appreciated by her friend. Importantly, employees like Solene boost their self-esteem and construct a desired identity through the positive reactions they get from family and friends when giving them expensive gifts from the luxury brands. To get this positive reaction, the above quote suggests that it is important that the recipient of the gift, Solene's friend in the above example, is aware of how expensive the brand's products are, and is interested in luxury brands and products – they must understand the social value of the gift.

For employees, it is about offering luxury products to the right people to get a positive reaction from them, and to have a sense that they did something that is valued by others. Eloise, for example, gives products to friends who are fans of the brand.

I have a friend who absolutely loves [brand fragrance]. So, every time it is her birthday or there is a special occasion I go to the employee shop on the first floor of the building and I buy her the fragrance. I got her the new fragrance that has just come out. She is so happy. I usually buy for people who are fans, who like perfumes, luxury products. I am not going to give them something that is not going to make them happy.

It is important for the employees' self-enhancement that the recipient of the gift understands the meanings associated with the product (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967) and that the product is 'a publicly recognised symbol' (Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967, p. 25). Only fans of the products would be sufficiently grateful, which is important for employees to reconfirm their status as being associated

with the brand. By specifically giving the brand's products to family members or friends who like and desire the products, employees like Eloise construct themselves as fulfilling their friends' wishes and desires, and as contributing to their friends' happiness. This boosts their self-esteem and enables them to construct a desired identity as employees who do something they believe is important and meaningful for others.

While employees are transparent in the interviews about getting discounted or free products, they (re)construct them as exclusive and rare when talking with family and friends. For example, when I asked Aline if she gives products to family and friends, she answered:

It depends on who. Then it is more among friends that you will find people saying 'Can you give me some products?' I remind them that it is true that we get a gift for Christmas, a gift for our birthday, these kinds of things. Once in a while we get things like this for free. But most of the time we pay something. You see I say clearly that it is not something that we get for free all the time. So it must not be something that they expect automatically. Well, this does concern only a few people. They believe that it is a must.

Employees protect the exclusive image of the products. For it to remain a valued gift, it is important that Aline keeps the brand's product desirable in the eyes of their family and friends. Aline constructs the value of the products that she gives to her friends and relatives based on their rarity by emphasising that it costs her something, and that employees do not get free products all the time.

Employees also construct luxury products as exclusive by offering them to only a limited group of people (Axelle's 'I do not tell everyone') and only on special occasions (Eloise's 'every time it is her birthday'). I would argue that this perception of exclusivity is important for employees to keep on getting positive reactions from friends and family, and to boost their self-image.

Thus employees construct their work as meaningful by linking it to stories of social recognition and admiration. Because of their association with the brand, they access the brand's prestige and allure, positively influencing how they believe they are perceived both in the organisation and beyond. In their stories of interactions with colleagues, friends, family, and even strangers they generate positive emotions such as pride, fascination, and admiration, which boost their self-image and reinforce the value of their work. Equally, their association with the brand and its halo effect elevates their social status. Employees' symbolic

closeness to the brand also plays a critical role in eliciting recognition and admiration from colleagues and enhances their sense of significance in their work.

## 7.6 Emotional connections with the brand and the crafting of work as meaningful

Of the five categories of stories that employees tell to construct their work at luxury-brand organisations as meaningful, framing both themselves and their work in a positive light, the first is their stories of their early personal memories of the brand, often in childhood or young adulthood, which highlights how the brand is part of their personal journey. This constructs work as personally meaningful, in line with the employees' sense of who they are and where they come from. In the second category of stories, employees' emotional encounters with the products are pivotal in connecting them with the world of the brand. The beauty and prestige of the brand help frame their work as both enjoyable and purposeful in the eyes of employees. In the third category of stories, employees recount their emotional encounters with the brand's founder or their legacy. As with the brand products, the founder's descendants have a key role in connecting employees with the world of the brand. Engaging with the brand's heritage gives employees a sense of purpose, reinforcing the significance of their work in a broader, prestigious narrative. In the fourth category of stories, employees describe their participation in exclusive brand-related events and similar, which they use to frame their work as a privilege, giving them access to the luxurious world of the brand and its affluent consumers. They also share stories of their everyday consumption of luxury as part of their brand-related work. In the fifth and final category of stories, employees recount how they are admired by both co-workers and outsiders because of their association with the brand. This category of stories connects their work with positive emotional experiences, constructing it, in their eyes, as socially valued.

Together, these five categories of stories illustrate how employees relate emotional brand-related experiences in order to construct their work in the luxury-brand organisation as meaningful. This underpins the development of two organisational concepts – brand enchantment and brand-enchanted meaningful work – and the model of brand-enchanted meaningful work to which I will now turn.

## 8 Discussion

In the previous chapter, I set out the five categories of stories that emerged from my interviews with respondents, *(i)* stories of employees' early personal memories of the brand, *(ii)* stories of emotional encounters with the brand's products, *(iii)* stories of emotional encounters with the founder and their legacy, *(iv)* stories of brand-related exclusive experiences of work, *(v)* stories of employees' social recognition linked to the brand. This has led me to coin two new organisational concepts, brand enchantment and brand-enchanted meaningful work, and to model their exact relationships.

As a reminder, I use *sources* to refer to the key elements from which meaningfulness derives (Rosso et al., 2010) and *mechanisms* to refer to the broad generative processes by which meaningfulness is constructed from different sources of meaningful work. I thus identify the brand as a *source* of meaningful work, and with it the two *mechanisms* by which employees construct work as meaningful: brand enchantment and the co-construction of brand meanings by employees and organisations. There are various ways in which this can contribute to the scholarship on meaningful work.

### 8.1 Theorising brand-enchanted meaningful work

The concept I posit of brand enchantment is integral to my concept of brand-enchanted meaningful work, and together they identify and explain the brand as a source of meaningfulness and its related mechanisms.

### 8.1.1 Brand enchantment

I would link the concept of enchantment to marketing studies (Chapter 4), because some scholars argue that enchantment characterises modern consumer culture (for example, Ritzer, 2005). In the literature, it refers to the process of ‘rendering the ordinary into emotionally charged, exciting, magical, and special market resources’ (Hartmann & Brunk, 2019, p. 669) by marketing and branding activities (Arnould et al., 2017; Hartman & Brunk, 2019) that construct objects of consumption as having extraordinary power (Langer, 2002; 2004; Arnould et al., 2017).

I define brand enchantment as a process by which employees connect emotionally with a brand by embracing and sustaining its symbolic meanings and the emotions they evoke.

As set out in Chapter 3, I understand the brand as a socially constructed and negotiated system of symbolic meanings, strategically articulated by organisations (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008) and interpreted, at times contested, by employees (Smith & Buchanan-Oliver, 2011; Frandsen et al., 2018). Brands with high symbolic value, like the ones in this study, offer rich symbolic meanings that individuals use to express their identity, values, and social status (Levy, 1959; McCracken, 1986; Tsai, 2005).

I find that the process of brand enchantment takes place through employees’ active engagement with the symbolic meanings of the brand, expressed as three interconnected dimensions: self, interpersonal, and material. At the level of the self, employees are enchanted by the brand by actively engaging with its identity dimensions, constructing alignment between their self-concept and what the brand represents. For example, some employees recalled the brand as a childhood memory, linking it to formative experiences and early exposure. Others, particularly in early adulthood, explained that encountering the brand’s products led them to see it as embodying aspects of who they were or who they aspired to be. In their stories, employees actively engaged with the brand’s symbolic meanings and develop an emotional connection with it.

At the level of interpersonal relations, employees are enchanted by the brand by actively engaging with the brand’s social recognition and value in interactions with others, where they are associated with or actively associate themselves with the brand. Recognition stories reveal the importance of being acknowledged by others as representative of the brand. For example, they recounted moments when they felt valued or important because others saw them as embodying the brand.

Caroline, for example, described travelling to Brazil to meet her colleagues, where she was welcomed with the words, 'It was my dream to meet you', reflecting how she was seen as representing the brand.

At the level of material relations, employees are enchanted by the brand by actively engaging with the symbolic meanings embodied in the brand's material manifestations. Some employees described being moved when encountering the brand's products, often emphasising their beauty and aesthetic qualities. Others reported their emotional response on meeting the founder, describing such encounters as powerful because of the founder's perceived extraordinariness. In addition, employees also connect emotionally with the brand by associating their work practices with the products or the founder. For example, one of the respondents, Morgane, explained that she enjoyed working on legal contracts to protect a design or product, as it made her feel closely connected to the world of the brand. In all these examples, employees emotionally connected with the brand in its materiality that embodies its symbolic meanings.

Brand enchantment thus operates through experiences of the brand's meanings relative to all three dimensions: self-brand congruence, brand-based recognition, and brand materiality. As such it does not lead to a permanent sense of emotional connection with the brand, but retains something temporal in the experience and the recalling of these experiences. Moreover, the employees' brand enchantment is expressed in distinct emotions associated with its underlying symbolic dimensions. Self-brand congruence gives rise to identity-related emotions such as felt belonging, pride, and admiration, reflecting the perceived alignment between self and brand. Brand-based social recognition generates emotions such as pride, admiration, and social validation arising from being perceived as associated with the brand. Brand materiality evokes emotions including fascination, excitement, and awe in response to the aesthetic and sensory qualities of the brand's material manifestations. Together, these emotions illustrate how brand enchantment is constituted in emotional responses to the brand's symbolic world.

Further, I find that the self-brand congruence is an important dimension in the enchantment process. Employees who tell stories about their early memories of the brand often also tell one or more of the other categories of stories. This suggests that the employees' brand-self alignment makes the other dimensions in the enchantment process more likely.

My findings suggest that the employees' enchantment with the brand is fostered by the organisation that provides access to the brand's products, opportunities to engage with the founder, and participation in brand-related events, all in the organisational context. While the first category of stories is based on experiences in childhood or early adulthood, when employees did not work for the brand, in the other four categories the employees' enchantment took place while working for the brand. Access to such experiences is not uniformly distributed, however; some opportunities are available to certain employees because of their roles, while others may not have the same access.

### 8.1.2 Brand-enchanted meaningful work

Based on my empirical findings, I introduce a second concept which, being new to the organisational literature, I have termed brand-enchanted meaningful work. I define it as the experience of work as meaningful based on the brand's symbolic meanings and the emotions they evoke. Brand-enchanted meaningful work is a specific form of work meaningfulness in which the brand serves as the primary source of meaningfulness.

My findings show that employees construct work as meaningful when work is seen as an alignment between who they are and the brand, when they engage emotionally with the brand's materiality, when they see themselves as contributing to the brand prestige, or when they see work as being socially valued and as a privilege. For example, when talking about their direct encounters and associations of their work with the brand's products and legacy, employees construct routine tasks as emotionally engaging. When talking about meeting the founder and their descendants, employees feel part of something significant, constructing their work in the luxury-brand organisation as part of a larger, meaningful narrative of the brand and its prestige. In their stories of brand-related exclusive experiences of work, employees draw on them to construct their work as accessing the exclusive world of luxury and experiencing first-hand luxury. Some of them tell stories of mingling with the rich and famous consumers of the brand when invited to exclusive brand launches. Others tell stories of staying in luxury hotels and having dinner in luxury restaurants. Employees draw on these stories to make their work feel as privilege, considering that this type of luxury is not accessible to some of them beyond their work.

A key aspect of brand-enchanted meaningful work is the recognition and admiration that employees experience based on their association with the brand. In my findings, this type of experience makes employees feel that their work for the luxury brand is valued by others, enhancing their self-image. Employees share stories of receiving a 'wow' reaction when they tell others they work for the brand. In interviews, they also acknowledge that it feels good to receive this admiration. By being associated with the brand, employees carry its aura and prestige, which positively impacts how others perceive them.

Further, my findings suggest that work is constructed as meaningful when it aligns with the brand's symbolic meanings. The employees construct work as meaningful by connecting it to the brand's symbolic meanings of prestige, exclusivity, heritage and aesthetics. Since the construction of work seems to not be connected to their actual job characteristics, employees can construct work as meaningful despite doing routine-based tasks. For example, some employees describe their daily work as doing presentations and calculations, but seeing the brand's products and being amazed by the uniqueness and extraordinariness of these products make them see their work as meaningful.

Thus, brand-enchanted meaningful work differs from other types of meaningfulness because the brand provides an interpretative framework for employees to construct their work as meaningful. Employees' construction of the work as meaningful is therefore highly dependent on the brand's symbolic meanings, how employees actively engage with these meanings, but also how others engage with them. By drawing on the brand as an interpretative framework in constructing work as meaningful, employees direct their attention to aspects of work that align with the brand while diverting attention from those that do not, such as routine tasks.

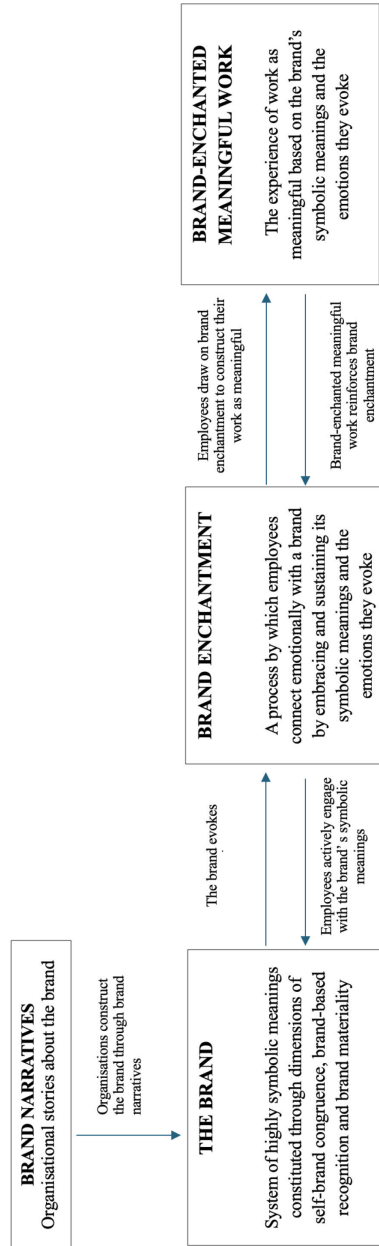
Crucially, the brand's symbolic meanings are not only shaped by organisational branding efforts, but also by a range of internal and external stakeholders, including employees themselves (Holt, 2004): brand meanings are not fixed but negotiated among different stakeholders. This highlights that the symbolic meaning that employees draw on are negotiated by external stakeholders. Employees' construction of meaningful work thus depends not only on how they interpret the brand meanings, but also on how these meanings are interpreted by others.

Further, the brand's symbolic meanings are constituted through three dimensions: the self, interpersonal and material relations. Thus, the brand is not

only a source of meaningful work but relates to other sources by imbuing them with symbolic meaning. Employees integrate the brand's meanings as part of their self-concept. They identify with the brand's symbolic meanings of prestige, exclusivity, heritage, and aesthetics, so they experience their work as meaningful because it reinforces a desired identity. Social relations in the organisation and beyond are mediated via the brand as employees receive recognition and positive feedback from others based on their association with the brand. The brand provides a symbolic framework by which employees' identity, interpersonal relations, and material practices become imbued with symbolic meaning.

### 8.1.3 The model of brand-enchanted meaningful work and its mechanisms

In introducing a model of brand-enchanted meaningful work (Figure 12), I seek to illustrate the relationships between the brand, brand enchantment, and brand-enchanted meaningful work. More specifically, it identifies the brand as a source of meaningful work, and the two brand-related mechanisms by which employees construct their work as meaningful: employees' active co-construction of the brand meanings in their storytelling and brand enchantment.



**FIGURE 12** The model of brand-enchanted meaningful work.

From left side, the model shows the co-construction mechanism of the brand's symbolic meanings by the organisation and employees. One way that organisations shape a brand's symbolic meanings is with brand narratives – strategically crafted stories told by the organisation to communicate desired brand meanings to internal and external stakeholders (Miles and John, 2025), as part of brand management. I have outlined the specific brand narratives created by luxury-brand organisations (Chapter 4). The first narrative emphasises prestige and exclusivity by positioning the brand as a means of social distinction and the construction of a desirable consumer identity (Kapferer et al., 2016). The second narrative highlights the uniqueness and craftsmanship of the brand's products, materialising beauty, exclusivity, and heritage (Daswani & Jain, 2011; Catry, 2003). The third narrative constructs the founder and their legacy as charismatic (Dion & Arnould, 2011), linking the brand to prestige and heritage. Although consumer-facing brand narratives are not directed at employees, employees may nonetheless be exposed to them outside the organisation, as they circulate widely in public space, particularly in the case of well-known brands. Some employees may also be consumers of the brand or have a consumer interest in it.

By providing stories about the brand, brand narratives offer symbolic meanings that consumers, including employees, can draw on in interpreting the brand. Thus, it is important to highlight that brand narratives represent a specific form of branding practice that shapes the emotional dimension of brands (Mills & John, 2025). They play an important role in translating brand values into stories (Mills & John, 2025) and projecting audiences into the world of the brand (Pfannes et al., 2021). In doing so, they aim to evoke emotions; as Twitchell (2004, cited in Mills & John, 2025, p. 43) argues, they convey meaning through emotion and invite audiences to think and feel in particular ways through storytelling.

In my findings, the brand narratives construct luxury brands as above the ordinary (Kapferer, 2012). They engage the brand audience at an emotional level, enabling strong attachments to brands (Kim & Sullivan, 2019; Pourazad et al., 2019). They evoke emotions by constructing the founder as charismatic or the brand products as unique and work of art, as well as by constructing the brand as prestigious and exclusive. These evoke, in particular, what Schindler et al. (2017, p.2) describe as aesthetic emotions that arise “when a person perceives and evaluates a stimulus for its aesthetic appeal or virtues”. They also construct the

emotional dimension of luxury brands based on consumers' desire for social recognition (Vickers & Renand, 2003).

Employees also shape the meanings of the brand (Holt, 2004). One way is through their own storytelling. Interestingly – and as illustrated by the model – in my findings, employees' stories align with the brand narratives created by the organisation. For example, in their stories about the founder's descendants, employees describe them as charismatic, illustrating how employees' stories align with the brand narratives about the founder and their charisma. In their stories of exclusive events, employees describe the world of the brand as exclusive and prestigious; in their stories about the products, employees describe them as beautiful, unique, and handcrafted, aligning with organisational brand narratives. My model shows that by aligning their stories with the brand narratives constructed by the organisation, employees sustain the brand's meanings through their own storytelling. This process is important because of the role of brand meanings in employees' enchantment with the brand.

On the left side, the model shows how employees actively engage with brand meanings to connect emotionally with the brand. Brand enchantment, defined here as the process by which employees connect emotionally with a brand by embracing and sustaining its symbolic meanings and the emotions they evoke, is therefore based on the brand symbolic meanings and employees' engagement with these meanings. By sustaining the brand meanings through their own storytelling, employees also contribute to their own enchantment to the brand.

On the right side, the model illustrates how brand enchantment and brand-enriched meaningful work are interconnected. Employees construct their work as meaningful by drawing on their enchantment with the brand. Brand enchantment is the basis for how employees interpret their work, with the brand serving as an interpretative framework with which they construct meaningfulness in their work.

The model thus shows how employees' co-construction of the brand by sustaining brand meaning is not only important for employees' enchantment with the brand, but ultimately for their construction of work as meaningful. Considering the overall framework, the model shows that brand enchantment reveals employees' active engagement with brand meanings and the brand narratives that shape them, and how that translates into meaningfulness at work. Through their storytelling, employees not only co-construct the brand's symbolic

meaning, but also reinforce their own enchantment with the brand and actively shape their work as meaningful.

The importance of the brand in employees' construction of work as meaningful demonstrates why they tell stories of the brand's prestige, exclusivity, and beauty, despite being confronted with workplace realities to the contrary. For instance, in my findings, employees mention that some of the products are produced in factories in China, or that some descendants are also known for their rudeness and temper outbursts. As the brand serves as an interpretative framework for employees to construct work as meaningful, it is central, in my findings, that employees protect the meanings of the brand and co-construct them in alignment with the organisational brand narratives editing out experiences that contradict the brand. By identifying brand enchantment as an emotional mechanism of meaningful work and the brand as an interpretative framework for meaningful work, preserved by the employees' co-construction of the brand meanings, my findings highlight the interplay of emotional and cognitive processes in the construction of meaningful work.

The concepts of brand enchantment and brand-enchanted meaningful work, and a model that shows their relationship and identifies the brand as a source of meaningfulness and the related mechanisms – the emotional mechanism of brand enchantment and the interplay between employees' stories and organisational brand narratives in the co-construction of the brand symbolic meanings – together have implications for the theory and specifics of meaningful work

## 8.2 Theoretical contributions

The concepts of brand enchantment and brand-enchanted meaningful work, as well as the proposed model of brand-enchanted meaningful work, are a contribution to the literature about meaningful work. With them it is possible to identify the brand as a source of meaningful work in brand-based organisations, and the implications of that. I highlight in particular the role of employees, organisations, and society in creating meaningfulness by co-constructing the brand's symbolic meanings. My contribution here is to the understanding of emotional mechanisms of meaningful work by identifying brand enchantment in the construction of meaningful work.

### 8.2.1 The brand as a symbolic source of meaningful work

The primary contribution of my thesis is in the identification of a previously underexplored source of meaningfulness: the brand itself. To my knowledge, this study is among the first to empirically and theoretically connect the brand to employees' construction of their work as meaningful. It provides empirical data showing how the brand plays a crucial role in how employees construct work as meaningful, and contributes to the existing understanding and conceptualisation of the sources of meaningful work in modern organisations.

Scholars of meaningful work have shown the complexity and multidimensions of meaningful work by identifying several sources of meaningfulness. In the literature, meaningfulness is derived from the nature of the work itself. More specifically, it emerges when the tasks are varied (Vuori et al., 2012; Dhanpat et al., 2025; Rostain & Clarke, 2025), when employees have autonomy in their work (Allan et al., 2016; Bailey & Madden, 2016; Martela et al., 2021; Laaser & Karlsson, 2022) or when employees' work contribute to something bigger than the self (Rosso et al., 2010; Martela & Pessi, 2018; Martela, 2023; Bailey et al., 2025). Meaningfulness is also derived from the connection between work and the self. Work becomes meaningful because it expresses personal values (Martela & Pessi, 2018), it aligns with employees' self (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009), and it enables employees to realise themselves (Lips-Wiersma, 2002; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017).

Additionally, meaningfulness is derived from employees' relations with meaningful others (Müller et al., 2019; Robertson et al. 2020; Lysova et al., 2023a), the recognition and positive feedback they get from these meaningful others (Laaser & Bolton, 2022; Lysova et al., 2023a), and belonging and group membership (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009). It is also derived from employees' relations with materiality (Bailey & Madden, 2017; Symon & Whiting, 2019; Lepisto, 2022; Rostain & Clarke, 2025; Schaefer & Schneider, 2026; Wiering, 2026). The self, interpersonal relations, and relations with materiality remain strongly connected to the nature of work, which the literature identifies as the primary source of meaningful work (Martela & Pessi, 2018).

Identifying the brand as a source of meaningful work is important because the brand differs, in several important ways, from the other established sources of meaningful work. The brand operates primarily at a symbolic and constructed

level. It functions as a form of collective illusion (Holt, 2002), actively sustained and believed in by employees in their stories. In my findings, the brand communicates symbolic meanings related to aesthetics, prestige, exclusivity, and heritage (Kapferer, 2012). Rather than autonomy or task variety, what is central to constructing work as meaningful is the extent to which employees' work aligns with the symbolic meanings of the brand. For example, in my findings, meaningfulness is derived from producing work that is perceived as prestigious, exclusive and aesthetic.

The identification of the brand as a source of meaningful work emphasises that, in brand-based organisations, meaningful work can also originate from a symbolic source created originally by branders and representing ideals and values that go beyond the functional aspects of the job. This symbolic dimension of the brand contrasts with the typical disenchanted organisational world (Weber 1958a, 1958b), as illustrated in my findings, where work is linked to the brand's symbolic meanings.

Thus, the relationship between the brand and work operates differently than the self or relational sources, as shown in the literature, because the brand remains a source of meaningful work even when the work performed is routine-based or challenging.

This is novel, since the literature tends to connect sources of meaningfulness, such as the self and interpersonal relations, to the nature of the work itself. For example, employees' recognition, from which meaningful work comes from, is based on the value attributed to employees' work (Laaser and Karlsson, 2022; Lysova et al., 2023a).

The brand as a source of meaningfulness works differently than other established sources because it remains so even when the work performed is routine or challenging. It shapes how employees interpret their work by directing attention towards aspects that align with brand values, while diverting attention away from aspects that conflict with those values, such as routine tasks. The brand can also imbue routine, uninteresting, even challenging tasks with meaning by linking them to brand meaning, for example in my findings to prestige, heritage, craftsmanship, exclusivity, or aesthetics.

This invites a more critical reflection on how brands operate in contemporary capitalist logics, where they function as cultural myths or symbolic 'illusions' shaping identity and experience (Holt, 2002; Arvidsson, 2005; 2006). The meanings associated with prestige, exclusivity, and aesthetics are not inherent to

the work itself but are produced and maintained through branding processes, especially as pointed earlier through the branding narratives. As a result, employees' experiences of meaningfulness may be shaped not only by their work practices, but also by commercially constructed ideals and identities that brands promote and circulate (Holt, 2002; Arvidsson, 2005, 2006).

Additionally, the brand is unstable and socially contingent. It is shaped not only by organisational branding efforts, but also by a variety of internal and external stakeholders (Holt, 2004). As a result, its meanings and attractiveness can shift over time, giving it a dynamic and somewhat autonomous character that is continually negotiated rather than fixed. Notably, even when employees are confronted with discrepancies between this symbolic image and organisational reality, they may continue to actively engage with the brand's meanings.

One of the implications of meaningful work originating in the brand is that employees' construction of meaningfulness becomes reliant on the brand and its symbolic meanings. If employees work for an organisation where a brand is thought less attractive or valuable, this might impact the meaningfulness of their work as employees may derive meaning from the prestige and symbolic value associated with the brand that fulfil employees' need for status and recognition.

Further, the brand connects to the other sources of meaningful work, namely the self and relations with people and objects. It is a part of employees' self-concept: employees identify with the brand's symbolic meanings of prestige, exclusivity, heritage, aesthetics, and therefore experience their work as meaningful because it reinforces a desired identity. Relations with colleagues, families and other people outside the organisation is mediated via the brand, with employees receiving recognition and positive feedback based on their association with the brand. Rather than replacing identity or relational sources, the brand is an additional element in how identity and interpersonal relations provide meaningfulness. The brand provides a symbolic framework that influences how employees interpret their tasks, relationships, and identities. Thus, the brand becomes the central element that connects all these sources of meaningful work.

### 8.2.2 Brand-based recognition

The literature have shown that relational sources contribute to meaningful work (for example, Bailey & Madden, 2016; 2017; Bailey et al., 2019a; Bailey &

Madden, 2019; Müller et al., 2019; Schnell et al., 2019; Robertson et al., 2020; Laaser & Bolton, 2022; Laaser & Karlsson, 2022; Martikainen et al., 2022; Lysova et al., 2023a; Bailey et al., 2025), while my findings identify the brand-based relational sources from which meaningful work emerges. Brand enchantment is reflected in a category of stories where employees gain social recognition because of their association with the brand, both in the organisation and beyond.

As a consequence, my findings add to the understanding of relational sources of meaningful work by showing the role of social recognition associated with the brand. In the employees' stories, social recognition associated with the brand enhances their emotional connection with the brand, which in turn contributes to their construction of work as meaningful. In particular, employees tell stories of how they elicit admiration in others because of their association with the brand. These stories highlight emotions such as their pride of being associated with the brand, which works as an illustration as well as reinforcement of their emotional connection with the brand. These emotions are central to how the employees construct their work as meaningful, as they interpret the admiration expressed by others upon hearing they work for the brand as evidence of its social value, constructing their work as socially valued and significant.

In the literature about meaningful work, recognition or feedback from colleagues, managers or beneficiaries is mostly work-related (Laaser & Bolton, 2022; Laaser & Karlsson, 2022; Lysova et al., 2023a). Lysova and colleagues (2023a) identify social cues that shape employees' perceptions of their work as meaningful. One such cue is how others communicate the worth of employees' work (p. 1242), when they show care and offer help (p. 1244), and when they emphasise a safe work environment (pp. 1244–1245). Laaser and Bolton (2022) identify conditional recognition, which is tied to employees' job performance; however, they also show that it can go beyond employees' work by identifying unconditional recognition, based on individuals' inherent worth in a shared value system. Unconditional recognition is to be appreciated and esteemed by others for who employees are, in a system of mutual respect and care.

I agree with Laaser and Bolton (2022) that meaningful work can emerge from forms of social recognition that are not directly tied to employees' work or performance. I identify a specific form of social recognition as a source of meaningful work: one that is linked to the brand. This is a value system that differs from the one in Laaser and Bolton (2022) (a workplace where individuals

treat one another with care and dignity) and indeed those discussed in the literature (for example, Laaser & Karlsson, 2022; Lysova et al., 2023a), because of its strong association with the brand. In my findings, for example, it is reflected in the exclusivity and prestige linked to the brand.

Some of the interviewees in my study have stories of their association with the prestige of the brand eliciting positive feedback and validation from others, either in the organisation or beyond. Importantly, they used luxury brands as a cultural reference point. The brands I have studied are not only widely recognised and culturally significant, they are powerful symbols in the social and professional environments where employees live and work. As a result, employees bask in reflected glory, associating themselves with the success of others (Cialdini et al., 1976, p. 366), including the organisation itself (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Dutton et al., 1994). In this case, however, the glory does not belong to an individual or even the organisation, but to the brand itself.

However, my findings also add to the literature on work-based recognition as a source of meaningful work (Laaser & Bolton, 2022; Laaser & Karlsson, 2022; Lysova et al., 2023a) as they show the importance of closeness to the brand for employees to be perceived positively by others. More specifically, the closer to the brand some employees are perceived to be by other employees of the organisation, the more fascinating and admired these employees are. Closeness to the brand in the luxury organisation is connected to specific jobs, with some employees thought more closely connected to the brand and its products. For example, some interviewees described a certain aura surrounding those who work at the brand's birthplace or manufacturing sites. Others, particularly those in marketing roles, mentioned being admired by colleagues who are less directly connected to the creation of the brand. This perception of closeness operates in two dimensions: geographical closeness, referring to physical closeness to the brand's origins (for example, its headquarters or manufacturing locations), and professional closeness, which includes roles directly involved in the manufacturing of the products or the creation of the brand. There seems to be a kind of hierarchy in the organisation, where those who are geographically and/or professionally closer to the brand are placed at the top. In employees' stories, this closeness often triggers admiration from others and reinforces a sense of prestige in the organisation.

Additionally, I find brand materiality to play a central part in triggering recognition, highlighting the material aspects of brand-based recognition. My findings are in line with existing studies, which have identified materiality as

enabling meaningful work (Lepisto, 2022; Rostain & Clarke, 2025; Wiering, 2026), but I add to this body of literature by identifying the role of materiality in triggering social recognition. I have shown that employees use the brand's products to reinforce their association with the brand in social contexts, both in the organisation and beyond, whether by wearing the brand's products at work or consuming them with family and friends. Employees seek to reinforce their association with the brand to trigger recognition, an example being Caroline, who consciously wears some of the brand's accessories when visiting her colleagues in Brazil. This underscores the significance of brand materiality in the construction of social recognition and meaningfulness at work.

Unlike other forms of recognition discussed in the literature about meaningful work, brand-based social recognition relies heavily on the brand's symbolic meanings. This recognition is derived from the employees' association with the brand, creating a dependency on the brand's meanings. Employees' social status, and their perceived value through the construction of their work as valued by others are enhanced through their connection to the brand, as the brand's values, culture, and image resonate with broader societal ideals. However, this connection can make employees' self-image and sense of self-worth susceptible to changes in the brand's reputation.

This process can also be understood through the lens of social identity theory, which holds that individuals derive part of their identity and self-esteem from membership of socially valued groups (Tajfel et al., 1971). In my research, the prestige and exclusivity associated with the luxury brand serve to strengthen employees' identification with the organisation as a valued in-group and their distinction from relevant out-groups. Meaningfulness therefore derives not only from social recognition, but also from employees' identification with the socially recognised status and symbolic value of the brand. This aligns with the likes of Pratt and Ashforth (2003), who point to the role of employees' membership in the organisation in the construction of meaningfulness.

### 8.2.3 The co-construction of meaningful work

My findings contribute to the literature about the interplay between agentic and structural mechanisms in the construction of meaningful work (Boje & Baskin, 2011; Endrissat et al., 2015; Carton, 2018; Bailey et al., 2019a; Lysova et al., 2019a;

Yeoman et al., 2019; Michaelson, 2021; Laaser & Karlsson, 2022; Lepisto, 2022). In this body of literature, scholars have emphasised that meaningfulness is co-constructed by the joint contribution of the organisations and their employees (Boje & Baskin, 2011; Endrissat et al., 2015; Carlton, 2018; Lysova et al., 2019a; Lepisto, 2022). My findings align with these studies by showing the roles of *both* the organisation and employees in creating meaningfulness by actively shaping the source of meaningfulness: the brand. More specifically, I identify an interplay between the brand narratives created by the organisation and the employees' stories. They show that employees play an active role in sustaining the meanings of the brand, which in turn contribute to reinforcing the emotional appeal of the brand on which brand enchantment and meaningfulness are constructed. They also show that the brand narratives constructed by the organisation are central to the categories of stories of enchantment told by interviewees, since their stories are aligned with the brand narratives.

Thus, at the employee level, my research agrees with previous studies that have shown employees' agency in their storytelling (for example, Boje & Baskin, 2011; Endrissat et al., 2015). In my findings, employees' active role in sustaining the brand meanings by aligning their stories with the brand narratives points to their agency in constructing meaningfulness through storytelling. However, the extent to which employees engaged in this process varied. While some interviewees had participated in sustaining the brand meanings as a way of making their work meaningful, others did not. Instead, they either derived meaningfulness in other ways or did not experience their work as meaningful at all.

In the literature, employees' stories of meaningfulness are often about autonomy or other characteristics of work identified as being linked to meaningfulness. For example, Endrissat and colleagues (2015) show how employees construct meaningfulness with work narratives about authenticity, self-expression, autonomy, and creativity. My findings suggest that employees' stories serve to construct work as meaningful by shaping experiences of work in ways that align with the brand.

At the organisational level, these findings add to our knowledge of how organisations contribute to the construction of meaningfulness. Previous studies, for example, have shown how managers are involved in sense-giving (Carlton, 2018; Lepisto, 2022). Endrissat and colleagues (2015) show organisations hide control mechanisms and the reality of low pay or precarious jobs using aesthetic and cultural elements (for example, encouraging artistic expressions of store employees). My findings show that the organisation can shape meaningfulness with other tools,

including branding narratives and the brand. This illustrates Boje and Baskin's (2011) enchantment by design, which refers to the deliberate and strategic crafting of narratives by organisations to shape meaning.

In the literature about meaningful work, the co-construction of meaningfulness is presented as top-down, meaning that it originates from the organisation through its managers, and is then adopted by employees who exercise some agency with the structural framework given by the organisation. For example, Carton (2018) traces the role of leaders in creating meaningfulness through their sense-giving actions by translating the organisation's objectives into their day-to-day work, and then shows how employees actively engage in integrating these objectives in their work, co-constructing meaningfulness. In Lepisto (2022) the process of meaningfulness is also initiated by managers that provide the material conditions for employees' to exercise.

However, in studies such as Lepisto (2022), the process also appears more iterative, with meaningfulness initiated by managers, taken up by employees, and reinforced or reshaped by managers. My study contributes to understanding this iterative process by showing how organisational brand narratives are taken up by employees in their storytelling, which in turn reinforces the organisation's brand narratives

In this I echo Laaser and Karlsson's view (2022) that, although structures shape human action, individuals remain capable of interpreting, negotiating, and transforming those structures by their own agency. My findings show that employees simultaneously draw on organisational brand narratives and actively reinforce them through their own storytelling. Rather than being passive recipients of pre-designed narratives or autonomous creators of new meanings, employees participate in a co-constructive process. This interaction between organisational narratives and employees' stories contributes to the ongoing co-construction of the brand's symbolic meanings.

As a result, my findings are a contribution to the literature about meaningful work that emphasise the importance of not only looking at the interplay between employees' agency and organisation structures, but also to take into consideration society at large (Bailey et al., 2019a; Lysova et al., 2023a). Bailey and colleagues (2019a) point out that meaningfulness is both a subjective experience that reflects individual agency and that is shaped by normative expectations embedded in organisations and wider societal discourses.

In my findings, the stories that employees tell are shaped by brand narratives promoted by the organisation. Importantly, these narratives are themselves embedded in broader societal discourses and normative systems of value. Through luxury brand narratives, societal ideals associated with prestige, exclusivity and aesthetics are integrated into employees' constructions of meaningful work. In the literature about meaningful work, though, while previous discussions about societal norms and value system have so far been focused on decent work (for example, Yeoman et al., 2019; Laaser & Karlsson, 2022; Lysova et al., 2023b), my findings bring forward other societal norms that are anchored in consumer-based ideas, brand discourse, and that shape the construction of meaningfulness. I also show the interplay between different levels (society, organisation, and employees) that sustain and reproduce this system of values. They exemplify the interaction between these levels in the construction of meaningful work, as organisational branding helps express values and norms that are then taken up and interpreted by individuals in their own experience of work, and that employees also actively maintain in their storytelling. In this sense, the organisation provides the conditions for meaningfulness by actively shaping symbolic frameworks by which employees interpret their work and construct meaningfulness. In my findings, these brand-based meanings reflect broader societal ideals associated with luxury, prestige, and aesthetics, which are co-constructed at the individual level in the employees' storytelling. Thus, employees actively shape the symbolic frameworks that impact how they construct their work as meaningful.

In other words, when employees' storytelling aligns with the organisation's branding narratives, it actively reinforces these narratives. In doing so, employees not only interpret organisational meanings, but also contribute to sustaining the broader normative system by which work is interpreted and constructed as meaningful. It shows, as Karlsson and Bolton (2022) posit, that the organisation's structure not only constrains employees' agency, but employees' agency also acts on this structure, not by changing it but by conserving it for their own purposes.

## 8.2.4 Brand enchantment as an emotional mechanism of meaningful work

Current theories of meaningful work have primarily focused on its cognitive aspects (Rosso et al., 2010; Lepisto, 2022); however, a few studies have emphasised some

emotional mechanisms in the construction of work as meaningful (Rosso et al., 2010; Lepisto, 2022; Martikainen et al.; 2022; Wiering, 2026). These studies show that employees feel first, and these feelings influence how employees interpret their work as meaningful or meaningless (Rosso et al., 2010; Lepisto, 2022; Martikainen et al., 2022; Wiering, 2026). For example, Martikainen and colleagues (2022) use the term ‘affective eudaimonia’ to refer to the affective components of employees’ narrated moments of meaningful and meaningless work. My findings agree with these studies by identifying emotions as coming first in the construction of work as meaningful.

Martikainen and colleagues (2022) and Wiering (2026) do not seem to identify a specific emotional mechanism. However, Lepisto (2022) identifies feelings of shared meaningfulness, while Rosso and colleagues (2010) note that belongingness (which impacts how work is experienced as meaningful) operates through a feeling of interpersonal connectedness. My study points to an additional mechanism: brand enchantment. I define brand enchantment as the process by which employees connect emotionally with a brand by embracing and sustaining its symbolic meanings and the emotions they evoke.

Additionally, while studies such as Lepisto (2022) do not discuss specific emotions, studies such as Wiering (2026) and Martikainen and colleagues (2022) identify specific emotions. Both identify pride; Martikainen and colleagues (2022) also identify specific emotions such as contentment or satisfaction. Both studies also identify negative emotions: in Wiering (2026), moral discomfort and frustration; Martikainen and colleagues (2022), anxiety and sorrow. In both studies, positive emotions are connected to meaningfulness while negative emotions to meaninglessness. In Wiering (2026), positive emotions are generated by materiality and signal alignment between employees’ values and their work practices, but negative emotions signal misalignment between employees’ values and their work practices. In Martikainen and colleagues (2022), the emotions come from employees’ connection with others and contribution to others.

My findings add to this literature by identifying the specific positive emotions triggered by brands. In my findings, emotions such as pride, love, awe, excitement, and admiration illustrate and enhance the employees’ emotional connection with the brand, which in turn contributes to their construction of their work as meaningful. These emotions are connected to the brand prestige, product aesthetics, and the founder’s charisma. Some of these emotions are also social in nature, as in Martikainen and colleagues (2022), and are involved in identity

formation, as in Wiering, 2026. Emotions such as pride and admiration do not arise in isolation but in a social context and through interactions with others (Schindler et al., 2013; Salice & Montes Sánchez, 2016; Frandsen et al., 2024). Pride and admiration involve reflecting on one's social status and identity. These emotions play a central role in shaping how individuals construct themselves and how they connect with others. They are important in forming self-esteem and self-worth, contributing significantly to one's identity and self-concept (Schindler et al., 2013; Salice & Montes Sánchez, 2016).

Further, my findings align with studies such as Lepisto (2022) and Wiering (2026) that single out the role of materiality in the construction of meaningfulness by triggering emotional processes. Lepisto (2022) identifies organisational materiality as a facilitator of interaction rituals (workouts), which creates a shared feeling of meaningfulness among organisational members, then a shared meaningfulness among organisational members. Wiering (2026) identifies that the grooms' affective responses to materiality come first, then impact how they evaluate their work as meaningful (positive emotions) or not (negative emotions). My findings confirm these studies by identifying the role of materiality in emotionally connecting employees with the brand. In my findings, brand materiality generates positive emotions, which illustrate and enhance employees' emotional connection with the brand, and in turn results in constructing their work as meaningful.

In the aforementioned studies, materiality refers to the physical workplace (for example, the gym where employees work out in Lepisto, 2022, or the donkey sanctuary in Wiering, 2026), the broader workplace environment (mud and rain in Wiering, 2026), the objects in it (wheelbarrows and cleaning equipment in Wiering, 2026; workout equipment in Lepisto, 2022; and work optimisation tools in Rostain & Clarke, 2025), employees' embodied work practices (craftwork in Rostain & Clarke, 2025), and the individuals who enable these practices (the gym instructors in Lepisto, 2022). My findings, however, point to a different kind of workplace materiality; one that is linked to the brand. Brand materiality, in my study, refers to the tangible and physical elements of the brand that employees engage with, such as its products, key representatives (including the founders and their descendants), and the physical workspace (including the exclusivity of brand-related events). As a result, my findings draw attention to a previously overlooked form of materiality in the literature about meaningful work and how its distinctive qualities contribute to employees' enchantment with the brand and to their construction of work as meaningful.

In my study, employees perceive and construct the brand materiality as something above the ordinary. It is this construction of the brand materiality as extraordinary that elicits positive emotions illustrating and reinforcing their enchantment with the brand. For example, Heidi describes the brand's red lipstick as extraordinary. The constructed extraordinariness of the lipstick triggers Heidi's amazement and fascination with the products and the brand, illustrating her emotional connection with the brand and compensating for the routine of her work.

Unlike other forms of organisational materiality, the way employees construct brand materiality as extraordinary is shaped not only by the material features themselves, but also by branding strategies, particularly the branding narratives that depict the brand's products as meticulously crafted and the founders and their legacy as charismatic. Thus, while general organisational materiality includes functional elements such as office tools and equipment, leaders, and office space (Lepisto, 2022; Rostain & Clarke, 2025; Wiering, 2026), brand materiality, in my study, is replete with symbolic meanings. It has a powerful symbolic and tactile value that plays a role in the construction of work as meaningful.

While not discussing the role of materiality in triggering emotional processes, Rostain and Clarke (2025) hint at the symbolic role of materiality through examples such as craftwork and practices that symbolise autonomy. My study extends this insight by spelling out how the symbolic dimensions of brand materiality are central to the enabling emotional processes.

Moreover, studies such as Wiering (2026) point to the connection between materiality and identity: the grooms' positive emotional responses are interpreted as an alignment between their personal values and their work practices. In my findings, brand materiality evokes strong emotional responses linked to the employees' sense of who they are, and an alignment between their values and brand values. When employees tell stories about being moved by the beauty of the brand's products or the luxuriousness of the brand's events, they, at the same time, emphasise their sensitivity to the aesthetics and luxurious world of the brand. Their emotional reactions to the brand's materiality show that they are receptive to the beauty and refinement the brand conveys. These reactions communicate that the brand's luxurious aesthetic resonates with their own sense of identity. For example, by engaging with the aesthetic qualities of the product, employees signal that they are the kind of people who value luxury and design. In doing so, they construct themselves in alignment with the symbolic world and image of the brand. Thus, by

understanding how employees interact with physical brand elements and the emotional responses these interactions generate, my findings offer insights into the emotional influence of brand materiality on employees and the construction of meaningful work.



# 9 Conclusion

## 9.1 Overview of my research

I began this book by reminiscing about my friend's wedding. The brand's presence was undeniable, with the chocolates shaped like the brand's products and my friend's chic colleagues wearing some of the brand's accessories. This perfectly reflected the brand's luxury image that is both constructed by the organisation's brand narratives, but also the co-construction of this image by my friend and her guests. Even my friend herself had chosen to wear brand accessories on her wedding day, adding a touch of luxury to her stunning designer dress. This experience made me reflect on the brand's role in my friend's life and in her work, as well as in the lives of others employed by similar organisations. In particular, it made me wonder how the brand contributed to their construction of work as meaningful.

Current research about meaningful work has identified some sources of meaningfulness and their related mechanisms. In my definitions, 'sources' refers to the key elements from which meaningfulness comes from (Rosso et al., 2010) and 'mechanisms' to the broad generative processes by which meaningfulness is constructed from different sources of meaningful work. The literature about meaningful work has highlighted the complexity and multidimensionality of meaningfulness by showing that it arises from the interplay of four main sources: specific job characteristics, particularly the extent to which one's work contributes to others or serves a greater purpose (Bailey et al., 2019b); the self; and interpersonal and material relations. In this literature, the characteristics of work remain one of the main sources of meaningfulness, providing the foundation on

which the self, interpersonal, and material relations become sources of meaningfulness. However, the brand as a source of meaningfulness has received limited attention.

Meanwhile, since the later 2000s, organisational researchers have demonstrated the role of the brand as a source of meaning-making in organisations (for example, Kärreman & Rylander, 2008). They have shown in particular how organisations use the brand to shape employees' behaviour and thinking in line with brand values, and how employees use the brand to construct their identities. While not directly discussing how the brand contributes to meaningful work, some scholars have hinted at it by showing how it helps employees cope with routine tasks and construct positive work identities (for example, Brannan et al., 2015).

Further, studies have identified various structural and agential mechanisms by which meaningful work is constructed. Structural mechanisms refer to the conditions that enable meaningfulness, including the role of organisations in designing jobs, shaping cultures, and creating contexts that foster meaningful work. They also include broader societal norms that inform an understanding of meaningfulness, such as the notion of decent work (for example, Lysova et al., 2019a). Agential mechanisms refer to employees' active role in constructing meaningful work in, say, sense-making processes (for example, Müller et al., 2019; Fontana et al., 2023). While the literature has predominantly identified cognitive mechanisms, there are a few studies which identify emotional mechanisms (Rosso et al., 2010; Martikainen et al., 2022, Lepisto, 2022; Wiering, 2026). Yet, it remains unexplored how these emotional mechanisms interact with structural and agential mechanisms.

My review of the literature led me to formulate the following research question:

How does the brand contribute to employees' construction of their work as meaningful?

To answer it, I chose the setting of luxury-brand organisations, drawn by the contrast between the image of the brands' prestige, glamour, and exclusivity and working conditions at these organisations (Sieben & Haunschild, 2012). I also found luxury-brand interesting for my research as its branding relies heavily on symbolic value (Kapferer, 2012), emotional appeal (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2009), and material aesthetics (Catry, 2003). Luxury brands are shaped by brand narratives crafted by these organisations around the exclusivity and prestige of

their brands (Kapferer & Valette-Florence, 2016a), the uniqueness and handcraft of their products (Catry, 2003) and the charisma of their founders and their descendants (Dion & Arnould, 2011).

I interviewed employees from various LVMH brands, which illustrate the contrast between the luxury image they project, as some of Europe's oldest and most iconic luxury brands, and the working conditions in a multinational group driven by productivity demands and stakeholder expectations (Catry, 2003). I identified five categories of stories that the employees used to make their work meaningful, in which they shared personal or work-related experiences that highlight their emotional connection with the brand. The brand's products, its founder, and the exclusive and luxurious aspects of work held a central place in all the categories of stories. This led me to develop two new concepts – brand enchantment and brand-enchanted meaningful work – and a model illustrating their relationship. This model of brand-enchanted meaningful work (Figure 12) also shows the role of the brand in constructing meaningfulness. I define brand enchantment as a process by which employees connect emotionally with a brand by embracing and sustaining its symbolic meanings and the emotions they evoke. I define brand-enchanted meaningful work as the experience of work as meaningful based on the brand's symbolic meanings and the emotions they too evoke.

These findings extend existing research about meaningful work by positioning the brand as an underexplored source of meaningfulness. Specifically, they demonstrate how brands function at a symbolic level and provide new insights into the ways they intersect with other sources of meaningfulness, including work itself, the self, and interpersonal and material relations, in the construction of meaningful work. My findings imply, for example, that meaningful work is not only shaped by employees' work tasks and practices, but also by ideals that brands communicate and represent (Holt, 2002; Arvidsson, 2005, 2006).

My results extend our understanding of the interplay of structural, agentic mechanisms in the construction of meaningful work by illustrating how organisational branding narratives, employees' stories, and the broader normative systems of value embedded in branding narratives jointly contribute to the experience of meaningful work (Lysova et al., 2019a). Finally, my findings identify a specific emotional mechanism in the construction of meaningfulness: brand enchantment. By doing that, they bring forward specific identity-related emotions as well as the role of brand materiality in triggering emotions. Together,

my findings offer a novel framework for understanding how meaningfulness is constructed in brand-based organisations characterised by a strong symbolic dimension.

## 9.2 Practical implications

For organisations and their managers, the practical implications of my study derive from the important role branding can play in fostering employees' sense of meaningfulness at work. More specifically, organisations can leverage the emotional and symbolic dimensions of the brand by integrating them into internal communications and everyday experience of work to create conditions for meaningful work. This may include emphasising the brand's symbolic meanings in internal storytelling, creating opportunities for employees to engage directly with brand manifestations (for example, products or the founders and their descendants), as well as providing opportunities for employees to be publicly associated with the brand.

However, these practices also involve potential risks. While brand-based initiatives can expand opportunities for employees to construct meaningfulness, they may also contribute to a form of symbolic compensation, where the emotional and symbolic appeal of the brand obscures the routine or demanding aspects of actual work. In such cases, meaningfulness may become increasingly detached from the material conditions of work. For employees, the findings emphasise their agency in creating meaningfulness in their stories of brand enchantment and open the door to meaningfulness beyond the type of tasks they perform. The brand may not change the reality of mundane tasks, boring work, or feeling insignificant; however, it offers some respite if employees reach out to it by interacting with material manifestations of the brand, associating more with the brand in their interaction both in the organisation and beyond. For some – for example those who already had a strong connection to the brand before working for it – this process of reaching out to the brand to construct their work as meaningful might feel natural and easy. For other employees, engaging in this process might require more effort.

Thus my study suggests that a brand can provide opportunities for employees to find meaningfulness in their work. On the other hand, the brand as a source of meaningfulness may risk masking the less meaningful aspects of work by

shifting employees' attention towards its symbolic and emotional dimensions, which might lead to employees' acceptance of challenging working conditions.

Finally, although these findings are particularly relevant in luxury contexts, where brand symbolism is especially strong, they are not limited to luxury organisations. Any organisation with brand symbolism constructed by brand narratives may, to varying degrees, mobilise its brand as a resource for constructing meaningful work.

### 9.3 Limitations and future research

As one of the few studies to directly identify the brand as a source of meaningfulness for employees, my research inevitably has its limitations, but it also opens up a broad range of possibilities for future research. One of the limitations of this study is what makes it particularly intriguing: its focus on luxury brands.

Luxury brands are an extreme case because of their strong emotional (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2009) and status appeals (Kapferer & Bastien, 2009). Although useful for uncovering new insights (Eisenhardt, 1989), an extreme case requires consideration of how findings translate to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It could be argued that the specific characteristics of the brands in this study are central to their role as sources of meaningfulness. Consequently, brands lacking these features may not function in the same way in constructing employees' work as meaningful.

Future research could therefore examine how different brands (and different symbolic worlds), whether in the luxury sector or not, influence employees' construction of meaningful work. Some interesting brand settings include symbolic worlds that are less prestigious, less exclusive, or less well known, as well as marginalised brands and stigmatised brands as they may elicit different meaningful work dynamics.

Another limitation of this study is that not every respondent draws on the brand as a source of meaningfulness, raising questions around the conditions of brand enchantment. Future research could consider why some respondents use the brand as a source of meaningfulness while others do not.

My study focuses on office workers. While this contributes to a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of luxury workers beyond the commonly studied retail or hospitality roles, it still overlooks how other groups, such as those

involved in the production of luxury goods, construct meaningfulness in their work. Given that my findings highlight the role of professional and physical closeness in triggering admiration as well as the role of brand materiality in constructing meaningfulness it would be particularly valuable to explore how, say, factory workers construct their work as meaningful in these organisations.

My research establishes that there is an alignment between employees' stories and the organisation's branding narratives, which contributes to employees' brand enchantment. As a result, this co-creation process plays a key role in how employees construct their work as meaningful. It also highlights employees' agency in shaping the brand according to how they want to see it, even when their working conditions sometimes contradict the brand's symbolic meanings. Future research could examine the different sense-making practices (for example, Müller et al., 2019) employees use to make the brand a source of meaningfulness.

This study does not look at the dark side of meaning management (Tourish, 2019) or whether employees buying into the narratives of the brand represent a form of resistance to the meaninglessness of the work tasks that they perform. Similarly, as work contexts continue to evolve, future research could examine the role of brands in settings where work tasks are increasingly influenced or even replaced by artificial intelligence (Bankins & Formosa, 2023).

On a final note, because my research focuses on the role of the brand in influencing employees' construction of work as meaningful, it could be interesting to explore if it also plays a role in influencing employees' experiences of meaninglessness.

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