The Way Brands Work: Consumers' understanding of the creation and usage of brands

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The way brands work

Consumers' understanding of the creation
and usage of brands

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Helsingborg, September 2009

Jon

1 Brands, Branding and Consumers

1.1 Background

The following interaction between me as a PhD student within consumer research, and an old acquaintance took place some years ago down town Helsingborg, a smaller city situated on the southwest coast of Sweden.

> A: Hi nice to meet you! It's been a while!
>
> S: Yeah it certainly has!
>
> A: How is everything? What are you doing these days?
>
> S: I'm a PhD student within consumer research
>
> A: Oh really! What is the focus of your research?
>
> S: I do research about brands.
>
> A: Wow Brands! That is so interesting! Brands are so important in today's society and it is crucial to have a strong brand for companies in order to survive!

My acquaintance is no marketer, brand manager, marketing consultant or marketing researcher of any kind so I found his reaction to my description of what I do interesting, and I began to contemplate. How did he, a layman on the street, come to the conclusion or understanding that brands are interesting and important, even crucial for business survival in contemporary society? This led me to ask myself another question. What do ordinary people know about brands and how they work, and how is this understanding of brands constructed? People and consumers are, in their daily life, constantly subjected to and forced to cope with the brand management activities executed by

brand managers, and they need to deal with the constant presence and exposure of brand symbols in public space (Klein, 1999; Bengtsson & Östberg, 2006). These branding activities do not just involve conventional ad campaigns, in newspapers, on billboards, radio commercials, TV-commercials, but also include more elaborate branding techniques such as celebrity endorsements (McCracken, 1989). They include the sponsoring of leisure events (Gwinner, 1997), tournaments, competitions, music festivals and concerts. They even stretch to more subtle brand building techniques such as product- and brand placement in movies (Gould, *et al*, 2000; Balasubramanian, 1999) and in TV-shows (Russel, 2002; Avery & Ferraro, 2000; d'Astous & Seguin, 1999), where the actual sender of the message is hard to identify. It has indeed become a brand permeated society, where it is increasingly hard or even impossible for consumers to escape corporate branding (Kozinets, 2002a), to liberate themselves from (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995), and to reflexively defy (Ozanne & Murray, 1995) the structure of the market.

From the beginning brands or a brand was simply being used to mark ownership of cattle or other forms of lifestock (Aaker, 1991). Later, during medieval times brands served as distinguishing symbols on goods created by craftsmen (de Chernatony & McDonald, 1992). In modern times, brands first functioned as symbols that enabled consumers to identify and separate one producer from another, with the ability to trace one good back to the manufacturer holding it responsible for its quality (Koehn, 2001), but they are today ascribed with almost divine characteristics serving as a strategic business asset essential for firms to develop if they are to compete successfully (Aaker, 1991; Kapferer, 2004). The marketing discourse stressing the importance of brands seems to have spread to the overall every day discourse of contemporary consumer society, where individual consumers nowadays are encouraged to regard themselves as personal brands in themselves, worthy of development and nurturing in the same manner as commercial brand objects (Montoya, 2002; Lair *et al*, 2005). Brands that from the beginning were a tool used to mark cattle to signify and distinguish ownership are thus, ironically nowadays happily and often un-reflectingly used by people on people to mark themselves in search for distinction. A phenomenon and a logic that for a long time have been confined to the business area serving as a

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marketing concept for how to create attractive objects marketed to consumers and customers are now used by people to market themselves as subjects. Thus the concept of brands has been disseminated to other spheres of society where people even use it as a lens through which they understand social phenomena and make sense of important aspects of their daily life. It seems that brands have developed into public property, and a concept that consumers should know, or at least, have some understanding of. It is precisely this consumer understanding of brands that I set out to investigate and conceptualize in this dissertation

An important question is, then, why the concept and idea of brands has spread to and been adopted by the general public as something of great relevance and importance. There are several plausible reasons for this development. One is that it is an outcome of the powerful marketing discourse emanating from the rise of the marketing management discipline during the second half of the twentieth century, an increased specialization, and the development of a global economy (Lury, 2004). Another explanation is that it has to do with the development of a media culture, where consumer goods are largely mediatized and made important by being linked to intertextual webs of meanings, images, symbols and discourses, which then are disseminated to consumers by means of magazines, television, film, radio, the internet, and perhaps most importantly, by advertising (Arvidsson, 2006). A third, and perhaps the most fruitful explanation for the purpose of this study, is that the importance ascribed to the concept of brands by ordinary consumers is a result or a consequence of the development of a consumer culture.

The concept of consumer culture has been defined in several ways. Holt (2002) explicitly refers to it as the ideological infrastructure that tells consumers what and how to consume things. Kozinets (2001) understands it as encompassing an interrelated system of commercially produced texts, images and objects that through the construction of overlapping and even contradictory identities, groups the practices and meanings consumers use in order to make collective sense of their world and to orient their experiences and lives. A consumer culture, however, represents more than just an abundance of consumer goods and brands. The emergence of a consumer culture, as a personal and cultural orientation towards consumption, implies a fundamental cultural shift

where consumption (rather than production) plays a key role in and for our economic and social life (Belk, 2004). In a consumer culture people have accepted and recognized consumption as an appropriate and desirable activity (Rassuli & Hollander, 1986), based on an interest in satisfying an escalating variety of desires and human needs, such as status competition, through the acquisition and purchase of consumer goods and services (Belk, 2004). Consumer culture then involves unlimited supply of desires, private and free consumer choices, mass consumption, market based capitalism, but perhaps most importantly, that people's values, ideas, aspirations, status, and identities are based on the consumption of unstable symbols, such as brands (Slater, 1997), and that people evaluate or judge others as well as themselves in the light of their consuming lifestyles (Rassuli & Hollander, 1986). As consumer activities and goods possess both material and symbolic features (Slater, 1997), and people's (brand) consumption has been found to reveal something of their identities, their aspirations, and their status both to them selves and to others, the symbolic aspects of consumption seem to become increasingly important for consumers within a consumer culture. Brands, perhaps being the epitome of symbolic consumption, are often conceptualized to serve as symbolic resources for people' identity construction (Elliot & Wattansuwan 1998), and as a way for them to create an extended self (Belk, 1988). Moreover, it has been argued that the proliferation of an increasingly post modern consumer culture has transformed the previous modern *Homo economicus*, an individual or creature defined by time and resource allocations, cost and benefits; into the post modern *Homo consumericus*, an individual defined and constructed (both by others and by his/her self) by consumption and the attached consumption experiences (Firat & Shultz, 1997). The Homo consumericus have learned and realize that we have several different and fragmented self-images that need to be marketed in the same way as traditional market symbols. The consumers, therefore, not only seek self images to be marketable, that is, to be represented in a fragmented and momentarily economic or social market, but that these self images are to be constructed by the very acquisition and bricolage of those market and consumption symbols.

If we assume a perspective where consumers' values, ideas, aspirations, status, and identities largely are thought to be contingent, even

dependent on the consumption of unstable brand symbols, and that the consumers themselves realize this, believing that life needs to be channeled though brands to have value (Holt, 2002). It is then not so strange that brands, as a social and cultural phenomenon, are nowadays ascribed with great importance, both for marketers as well as consumers, and that an understanding of how they work is of value for both parties. It is, however, important to acknowledge that marketers and consumers are interested in brands and how they work in different ways and for different reasons.

The findings generated by this study concerning consumers' understanding of how brands work, are relevant and important from two major perspectives. Consumption, and more particularly, the consumption of brands, is a social and cultural phenomenon involving various forms of human behaviour and practice, just like any other phenomenon in society such as for example stock exchange, group/individual behaviour, leadership, organization, finance, economics, communication and marketing. Various disciplines within the social sciences conduct research in order to advance our knowledge and understanding of these phenomena and the human behavior and practice on which they are based or constituted. This research is conducted because we want to know more about the world, about human behavior and practices in general, where the consumption of brands constitutes one important part of the whole. Studying how consumers understand brands will, therefore, add to our knowledge of consumption as a social phenomenon or a human practice, and also to our overall knowledge of how we, as human beings, behave and how we understand the social world in which we live. More specifically, this study, and the findings it generates, is relevant since it indicates to what degree the brand discourse, which is all the talk, text, research and views constructed by academics, consultants and firms into a logic of how brands work, has spread and been adopted by ordinary consumers and the general public. Consequently, it informs us, at least to some extent, of how socialized or entrenched people are in a consumer society where brands play an important role.

In addition to being relevant for contributing to our understanding of how people understand and relate to consumption and brands with the aim of gaining more knowledge about general human behavior and

practice, and thus of knowing for the sake of knowing; this study may also provide relevant contributions to research on how to manage brands to enable firms to gain higher profits. During the last decade there has evolved strong consumer resistance and an anti-branding movement opposing the growth of global brands, causing severe problems for companies. This movement rests and acts on a type of consumer understanding concerning what companies do to create brands and how brands work. Thomson & Arsel (2004) suggest that although the consumer conception that global brands homogenize cultural preferences and eliminate local businesses is faulty, at least according to studies carried out within anthropology, this conception may serve as a folk theory on which consumers may actually act upon. These anti-branding actions involving various activities to un-cool or diffuse certain big global brands has found to have a severe impact on their marketing-induced image, generating a doppelganger brand image containing unfavorable and negative connotations that are constructed from this anti-branding discourse (Thompson *et al*, 2006). Interestingly though, little research effort has been awarded explicit collection and analysis of what consumers' brand understanding involves and how it is constructed, even though consumers increased understanding of how branding works and the logic behind the various branding techniques performed by brand management have proved to have a negative impact on the effectiveness of those branding techniques, even making them obsolete (Holt, 2002). It is, then, both from a consumer research perspective and from a brand managerial perspective most relevant to gain more advanced knowledge of what this consumer understanding of brands involves and how it is formed.

So how has consumers' understanding of brands and how they work been explicitly treated in previous studies? The aim of the following sections is to provide answers to this question by explicating and delineating previous brand research stemming from two major perspectives, brand management research and consumer research.

1.2 Contributions from a traditional brand management perspective

Brand management research has been, and probably still is, the dominating research perspective on the formation and generation of brand theory and knowledge. This perspective on brands is an offspring of the more traditional North American approach to marketing, marketing management, largely propelled by well-known marketing gurus such as Philip Kotler and Theodore Levitt. The brand management perspective has inherited a lot of the epistemological and ontological assumptions from the marketing management approach where the world is portrayed as a fairly well-organized place that may be understood, described and managed by developing and implementing neat causal models constructed by boxes and arrows. Objective variables are extracted and operationalized from these models as key factors for developing strong brands. These variables or factors may then be quantified and measured so that the manager would get an indication of the strength and value of the brand.

As an outcome, brand management research has generated a rich body of knowledge and understanding of how firms should build, create or form strong brands optimally, generating fruitful constructs such as brand equity (Aaker, 1991), brand leadership (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000), brand identity, brand image (Kapferer, 2004), and corporate reputation (Gray & Balmer, 1998), to describe and explain how this ought to be done to gain a competitive edge over competitors. The view that building strong brands (Aaker, 1996) is a crucial strategic issue for companies aiming for excellence, stems from the realization that products are made in a factory, that they may be imitated or copied by a competitor, and can be swiftly outdated, while a brand is unique and could be timelessly successful (Stephen King, WPP Group London; from Aaker, 1991). Being placed on the balance sheet as an intangible asset the brand is from the conventional brand management perspective, regarded as a form of immaterial capital that may generate or add value to the firm, where the brand value refers to the present value of predictable future earnings it produces (Arvidsson, 2005). The earnings generated by the brand are understood as being produced not from the objects in themselves but from its brand equity, which in turn is accumulated by consumers' awareness of the brand, the associations

attached to it, the perceived quality of its products, and the loyalty paid to the brand by consumers (Aaker, 1991).

The specific brand creation process has, from the brand management perspective, been thought of as a rational and causal activity again based on the tenets of traditional marketing logic dividing the market into senders – receivers, producers – consumers (Salzer-Mörling & Strannergård, 2004), thereby constructing the firm as the (only) active meaning providing actor in this process. A first, and perhaps superficial reading of the brand management perspective and the models therein may give the impression that the role of the consumer in the brand creation process and the relationships consumers form with brands is acknowledged to be of great importance, but a closer reading of these models reveals that they have a highly simplified view of the consumers concerning these crucial matters (Bengtsson & Östberg, 2006). The consumers are here to a larger extent constructed and understood as mere passive meaning recipients of the marketers brand management activities (Salzer-Mörling & Strannergård, 2004), which consequently affects and is mirrored in the theories and knowledge produced about brands by brand management research. Research with a brand management perspective thus focuses attention to forming knowledge of brands and the people consuming them so that firms and their brand managers may create brands containing associations and meanings that appeal to consumers in a way that makes the brand strong, thereby generating value for the firm. It seeks to produce brand knowledge for managers to build brands successfully. As a consequence brand management research contributes with little theoretical understanding of how consumers themselves construct an understanding of brands and what this consumer brand understanding contains and involves.

1.3 A consumer research perspective on the understanding of brands

In contrast to brand management research the area of consumer research, and the research stream Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)[1] in

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[1]Consumer Culture Theory is a cross disciplinary research field that focuses on the dynamic relations between consumers, the market, and cultural meanings. It

particular, offers a more dynamic and therefore fruitful perspective of the consumers' understanding of brands. This line of research conceives of consumers as being more active individuals possessing elaborate competence and knowledge of product and brand consumption. From a consumer research perspective the firm is not the only active narrator trying to imbue a brand with one particular and company-preferred meaning generated through advertising or other branding activities. Consumers are not just reduced to mere passive receivers of pre-defined images, and signs are not turned into valuable brands until consumers themselves have immersed in, absorbed and used brands in the way consumers like or want (Salzer-Mörling & Strannergård, 2004). Brands are instead conceptualized as social constructions where consumers are active co-constructers of their meaning, where the brand's cultural meaning is considered to be negotiated in the marketing, individual and social environment (Ligas & Cotte, 1997) and discursively elaborated (Elliot & Percy, 2007) between producer and consumer, thereby lending the consumers agency over the brand (Muniz & Guinn, 2001).

Previous consumer research reveal that understanding brands and how they work are important to consumers since brands may be chosen and consumed because they fit with one's conception of oneself (Belk, 1988), being appropriated as resources for people's identity construction (Elliot & Wattansuwan, 1998; Elliot & Percy, 2007), or used to show affiliation with others (Pavit, 2000) and to show belonging to particular social spheres (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Consumers therefore form very strong and enduring personal relationships with brands in which they develop deep knowledge, of emotions about and devotion to one or several brands. Fournier (1998) suggests that the brand can be regarded as an active and viable relationship partner possessing similar characteristics as a human being. These relationships may therefore involve reciprocal exchange between active and interdependent relationship partners, ranging across several

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emphasizes how consumers actively interpret, rework and transform symbolic meanings encoded in advertisements brand retail settings, or material goods to manifest their particular personal and social circumstances and further their identity and lifestyle goals. For a more detailed description of the field read the article "Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research," (2005) authored by Craig Thompson and Eric Arnould

dimensions with benefits for each participant, changing, evolving, even breaching, through series of interactions responding to alterations in the environment where the brand relationship is situated. Understanding the dyadic relationships consumers form with brands, how they evolve and breach by regarding the brand as an active and viable relationship partner provides especially valuable insights for how to understand and conceptualize brand loyalty. Consumers have also been found not only to form deep relationships with brands individually but also communally; consumers form relationships with each other via the common devotion to a brand. This consumer-brand phenomenon is represented by the theoretical construct brand community (Kates, 2000; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al, 2002; Schau & Muniz, 2004; Muniz & Schau, 2005; Belk & Tumbat, 2005), and may be defined as specialized but geographically unbound social aggregations of brand users that form a fabric of interrelated relationships between each other grounded in the common or communal devotion of a brand. When brand communities become stronger and more intense they may develop into subcultures of consumption (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Kozinets, 2001), which is a more extreme form of brand communities where the brand becomes a religious symbol with its own ideology, often gaining a marginalized position in relation to the mainstream culture. Few brands though have the ability to generate this kind of subculture.

Most of prior consumer research on brands has thus mainly shed light on the relationships consumers forms with brands, what brands mean to consumers, how and why they consume them. In the theory developed about the consumption of brands in the majority of prior consumer-brand studies the constructs of identity and self seems to play a central role, sometimes even as the main explanatory factor for people's engagement in brand consumption. Although the mainstream and the majority of previous consumer research reward us with a vast amount of fruitful knowledge from the perspective of the consumer researcher regarding what, how and why people engage in various forms of brand usage of consumption. It provides us only with implicit knowledge regarding how consumers, from their own perspective, and on a more abstract level understand brands and how they work as a concept or a societal or cultural phenomenon. A few studies have been made that deals more explicitly with either the content of consumers

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brand understanding or how it is constructed. Some of these studies do not have any explicit focus on brands but may still offer valuable contributions to our knowledge of consumers' understanding of consumption phenomenon, while some of them deal specifically with brands.

1.3.1 The construction of consumers' understanding of consumption

The line of research referred to as consumer socialization gives an explicit and relevant theoretical conception of how consumers construct an understanding of and learn about consumer phenomenon. It has provided fruitful theoretical insights into how consumers, particularly children (Ward, 1974), develop conceptions and learn about marketplace concepts such as advertising, product categories and brands (John, 1999). The process through which consumers form consumption-related knowledge and the learning of various consumption phenomena are mainly conceptualized and understood as an outcome of peoples' social structural variables, their age or life cycle positions, and the agent relationships where knowledge is transferred from socialization agents to young consumers via modelling, punishments and rewards (Moschis & Churchland, 1978; Moschis, 1987). The lifecycles of people, in particular those of children, different age spans and their connection to the development of their cognitive capacity are considered as key factors when consumers' learn or form brand preferences (Bahn, 1986; Peracchio, 1992), conceptions of materialism (Lipscomb, 1988), and recognition of consumer symbolism (Belk, 1982).

Parents/family, the media and school are the socialization agents that are thought to have a major impact on the consumer knowledge learned by children through the socialization process (Moschis & Churchill, 1978). Parents and parental influence vary across products, across phases in the decision-making process, and depend on the characteristics of the consumer, in addition to the specific situation (Moschis, 1985). The family influences and can decide young adults' willingness to pay a premium price for a brand linking the brand's associations with nice memories in the young adult's mind (Bravo *et al*,

2008). Having various types of socialization styles, such as authoritarian, permissive, rigid and controlling (Carlson & Grossbart, 1988), they serve as an important socialization agent especially when it comes to teaching adolescents of the "rational" aspects of consumption. At the same time the amount of television viewing may predict the individual's social motivations for materialistic attitudes and consumption (Moschis & Churchill, 1978). Peer pressure is considered to have a marginal influence on the consumer socialization of children but tends increase with age (Ward, 1974). Older children (12-14 year olds) possess the most sophisticated sensitivity to the influence of peer groups and a capability to adapt to different social contexts. They are less susceptible to peer influence for private necessity products, but are more susceptible to influence when it comes to conspicuous and more luxurious products consumed in public. Younger children however (6-8 year-olds), are least susceptible to peer influence showing no difference across different product types as they have not yet reached an appreciation of the social significance and meaning of using certain products in various contexts (Bachmann *et al*, 1993).

Consumer socialization research thus conceptualizes consumers' construction of their understanding of consumption phenomena mainly as an socialization process. Children's age, their cognitive development and capacity are important antecedents to the actual socialization process where consumer knowledge is transferred from socialization agents such as parents, media and school, to young consumers through modelling, reinforcements, and punishments.

Consumers' construction of an understanding concerning consumption phenomena such as brands and marketing may, however, be conceptualized in other ways than those proposed by consumer socialization research. People are thought to construct knowledge of persuasion and advertising in persuasion episodes where the persuasion target (the consumer) is subjected to and forced to deal and cope with the persuasion attempts employed by the persuasion agent (marketer). These are then discussed and elaborated with peers, friends and family to be further made sense of (Friestad & Wright, (1994). In addition consumers are considered to construct their understandings of the practice of branding and the subsequent employed branding techniques from a macro level dialectical interplay between the prevailing branding

paradigm and the consumer culture. The branding paradigm represents the shared principles of how to build brands existing across firms and professionals during a period of time are referred to, while the existing consumer culture represents the ideological infrastructure that inform consumers of what and how to consume things (Holt, 2002). By drawing on countervailing social- and consumer discourses of the consumer culture's ideological infrastructure, individual consumers may then construct an understanding of brands and fashion phenomena (Thompson & Haytko, 1997).

1.3.2 Content of consumers' consumption understanding

The prior consumer research dealing specifically with the nature or the content of consumers' understanding of brands is also scarce. Keller (2003) conceptualizes consumers' understanding of brands as consumer brand knowledge. It pertains to the multi-dimensional knowledge that people may have of certain brands containing different kinds of information. He mentions eight different kinds of information which corresponds to eight different dimensions of brand knowledge. These contain awareness (category identification and needs satisfied by the brand), attributes (descriptive features characterizing the brand), benefits (personal value and meaning that consumers attach to the brand's product attributes), images (visual information, either concrete or abstract), thoughts (personal cognitive responses to any brand related information), attitudes (summary judgments and overall evaluations of any brand-related information), and, finally experiences (purchase and consumption behaviors and any other brand-related episodes. All these dimensions may become a part of the consumers' memory and their mental map affecting their response to brand building programs thereby influencing the brand equity. Keller's conception of consumer brand knowledge thus relates to consumers' knowledge of the brand per se, its meanings, associations, attributes, and the experiences derived from using them. However this does not relate to the knowledge consumers have of how brands work as a concept or a social phenomenon, or the branding practices, such as advertising, employed by firms to supply the consumers with the proper brand knowledge.

We know from Friestad & Wright's (1995) investigation dealing with the content of lay peoples' and consumer researchers' conceptions of

the branding practice advertising that there exists a folk knowledge of this branding practice that converges between people. They suggest that ordinary people share some fundamental conceptions of the psychology of advertising and persuasion, and that there is convergence enough between their conceptions detecting that lay people attribute distinctive roles to various psychological events in the persuasion process. In addition, lay beliefs are found to be similar to those of consumer researchers, and that there are also conditional differences in these groups' conceptions of persuasion and advertising processes. Friestad & Wright used common sense as a guiding construct for their study. Peoples' folk knowledge of persuasion was analyzed, measured and defined, depending on to what the degree their beliefs about advertising and persuasion converged enough to be considered commonsense.

Consumers' understanding of consumption phenomena such as brands may, however, be anything but commonsensical, which is revealed in Bengtsson & Firat's (2006) study of consumers' brand literacy. The brand literacy construct differs from that of Keller's (2003) brand knowledge concept since it does not only represents consumers' knowledge of the brand's attributes, associations, benefits and experiences, but relates to the skills and competence of consumers to consume or use brands knowingly and effectively in a way that makes the individual successful in his or her cultural context. The authors' suggest that there exists three different levels of brand literacy, low, medium and high level, which they found to correspond to consumers' knowledge and ability to reflectively read the branding technique of co-branding. Consumers with a low level of brand literacy presented production stories about co-brands. In these stories the consumer understands co-branding primarily as product sourcing tool, where one brand includes another brand as an additional ingredient in the brand offering. Consumers displaying a medium level of brand literacy conveyed strategic stories, involving analytical interpretations of co-branding activities by firms where the consumer could explain why and how this type of branding practice made sense or not. Consumers possessing high levels of brand literacy supplied critical stories containing a capability to question firms' co-branding activities, revealing an understanding of co-branding as a branding activity, and rejecting it as a symbolic game to make products more attractive to consumers.

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1.3.3 Critique of prior research

A general critique that could be wielded against prior research concerning how consumers' understanding of brands is constructed is that it mainly conceptualizes it as a vertical or top-down process. Within consumer socialization literature individual consumers form an understanding of consumption-related issues by being educated or informed by the authoritative voice of traditional socialization agents such as parents and school. Within consumer culture theory consumers are thought to construct an understanding of brands when they are subjected to the macro level discourses of the consumer culture, telling people what and how to consume things, and when they are subjected to and are forced to handle the authoritative voice of firms' branding tactics. Previous theory, however, offers little theoretical insights of how consumers construct this understanding of brands together and by themselves on a horizontal level, i.e. in their micro level peet-to-peer interactions.

More specifically the research stream of consumer socialization has generated conceptual or theoretical models resembling other traditional and causal consumer behavior models based on a cognitive psychological perspective where there is some form of external environmental input such as social structural- or demographic variables entering into the black box/machine; where various processes take place that eventually generate an output/outcome. There is an underlying conception that people construct an understanding of consumption-related issues and phenomena through a one-way transfer of consumer knowledge from socialization agents to the young individual, where the agents are the active knowledge/understanding providers and the young individuals are passive receivers. This conception implies a hierarchical knowledge transfer where younger individuals are educated by the older and authoritative agents. Consequently, consumer socialization research does not conceive of the consumers' construction of how brands work as occurring in people's micro level interactions, and in the discussions where consumers together make sense of and form an understanding of brands as a consumption-related phenomenon. Consumer socialization, therefore, fails to account for or explain consumers' understanding construction occurring between the consumers themselves and in their micro level interactions. It is also a bit strange that consumer socialization focus on individuals' cognition as a key theoretical

resource for how to develop insights into how consumers form understanding of consumer phenomena when a common conception of socialization implies a focus on sociality and social interaction. This has also been recognized by researchers within this line of research who encourage more research on peer influence and peer interaction, especially in relation to the development of consumer symbolism and materialism (John, 1999).

Holt's (2002) model of how consumers develop an understanding of brands and branding has, in contrast to consumer socialization, a more interactionist approach in that it builds on the interplay of discourses. However, his model deals with interactions on a macro discursive and ideological level; the interaction between a branding paradigm and a consumer culture – not consumers' micro level brand interactions. Holt thus omits how consumers' brand understanding first channeled from the ideological dialectical interaction between the branding paradigm and the consumer culture is revealed, played out, reformulated, manifested, but also understood, and made sense of in the micro level consumer brand interactions. Although Thompson & Haytko (1997) show how consumers make use of countervailing macro social- and consumer discourses to construct understanding of fashion and brands, they only account for how individual consumers form their understanding. They fail to conceptualize how consumers together and in their interactions discuss and construct an understanding of brands through these social- and consumer discourses.

A general critique of the studies contributing to our knowledge of the content of consumers' brand understanding is that the studies of Friestad & Wright (1995) and Bengtsson & Firat (2006) are fairly limited in scope, since they deal specifically with the consumers' understanding of branding activities and persuasion. Keller's (2003) conception of brand knowledge is also limited since it only deals with the information consumers' store in their memory about the brand regarding its attributes, the benefits it provides, the feelings and experiences it generates among the consumers. In addition he has a strict cognitive perspective of the knowledge consumers form and have about brands, where this knowledge is regarded to be a part of the consumers' mental map and not as a part and result of their social interaction. The consumers' understanding of how brands work as a

cultural or social phenomenon involves more than only their understanding of various brands' characteristics and associations, the practice of branding and persuasion, which requires conceptualizations that have a wider and more inclusive focus, being sensitive to others parts and types of understanding that are connected to a more overall understanding of how brands work. The nature of consumers understanding of how brands work may involve something more than merely being conceptualized as commonsense and as a part of ones cognitive map and memory. In addition the division of consumers' understanding of branding into three categories/levels of brand literacy probably lacks the conceptual capacity and sensitivity to capture the complexity, various degrees of reflexivity and the paradoxical nature of a more overarching an encompassing consumer understanding of how brands work.

1.3.4 Working out the purpose

As was argued before, prior research mainly conceptualize the construction of the consumers' understanding of brands as a vertical and top-down process where consumers receive messages and information from an authoritative voice, be it traditional socialization agents, the macro level discourses of the consumer culture, or the authoritative voice of the branding paradigm. The content of consumers' brand understanding is understood to involve common-sense beliefs about persuasion and as entailing knowledge of branding that may be divided into three levels of brand literacy, low, medium and high, depending on the individual's degree of reflexivity of a branding activity.

However from a social constructionist perspective most knowledge and conceptions, such as the ones formed by consumers about brands, are considered to be formed on a micro level, mainly occurring and being constructed in peoples' social interactions (Winther-Jörgensen & Phillips, 1999). Knowledge and understanding is there regarded as artifacts of social communities and forms of discourse rather than as a set of rules or cognitive schemata (Gergen, 1988), not being something that is represented in propositions and contained in disc drives, books or journals, or situated in the heads of individuals, but instead outcomes of social practices, thus being something that people actually

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are doing together (Gergen, 1985). In line with such an explicit social constructionist and interactionist perspective I argue that a substantial part of consumers' construction of their understanding of how brands work, are produced by consumer themselves in their micro level interactions, and that the content of their brand understanding is more paradoxical, complex and inclusive than prior theory may account for. There has been substantial consumer research with a micro level focus, for example Fournier's (1998) study where consumers have been found to engage in deep and long term relationships with brands, developing strong emotional attachments similar to those people develop with human relationship partners. In addition Thompson & Haytko's (1997) study illustrate that consumers, in their micro level fashion talk, may draw upon countervailing fashion discourses and different folk theories of fashion to assume various identity positions. This research, as with prior consumer research being accounted for here, also reveals little of consumers understanding of brands as a cultural phenomenon. Prior consumer research concerning consumers' brand understanding indicates that an explicit social constructionist perspective, with a focus on micro level interactions, has largely been overlooked as a way to view and conceptualize consumers' own construction of their brand understanding, and what this understanding entails. I dare to go even further and claim that an explicit micro interaction approach, to a significant extent, has been overlooked within many areas within consumer research as a useful approach to gain knowledge of how consumers understand consumption phenomena.

In other social science disciplines interactions has frequently been used to conceptualize, understand and explain several social phenomena. Goffman (1959) fruitfully describes that there are several types of interactions playing out in social life and that people strategically assume various roles when interacting with others. What types of micro level interactions are then prevalent in the brand understanding forming process, and what roles do various individuals assume in the micro interactions? Power and knowledge has been linked together for some time within social sciences. Possessing extensive knowledge may award individuals with recognition, higher positions in social structures and hierarchies, allowing those individual to exert power over others. Simultaneously greater power and higher social positions may also enable individuals to define what the right type of knowledge is, and to

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transfer this knowledge to other individuals within a social structure. How does the interactional or social structure then affect the brand understanding that is formed in the micro level interactions? We know from Bengtsson & Firat's (2006) study that consumers have various degrees of reflexive knowledge concerning branding activities and that consumers may possess various skills in using brands in the consumer culture in a way that makes him or her an effective member of that culture, and moreover, that consumers possess some converging commonsense beliefs about the psychology of advertising and persuasion (Friestad & Wright. 1995). A more encompassing brand understanding should involve not just an understanding of why, what and how firms do to create them, but it should also include why and how we as consumers actually use them. So what brands do we use, what do they mean, why do we as consumers use brands, and how should they be used?

Firms have principles, conceptions and an understanding of how brands should be created or built, and how consumers use them, which is something we know much about as an outcome of extensive brand management research. There are even brand management research investigating the understanding brand managers themselves have about brands (de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley, 1999) and consumer research studies of copy writers implicit theories of advertising (Cover, 1995). This study may then be regarded as a mirror of the previous stated studies of de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo and Cover, but instead dealing specifically with consumers' own understanding of brands as a consumption phenomenon.

If we are to develop a better, and more sophisticated knowledge and conceptualization of how consumers themselves construct their own understanding of brands and what this understanding entails. It is then important to investigate, not only how this occurs at a macro discursive or ideological level. But also how that understanding construction plays out in consumers' micro level interactions, and what kind of brand understanding that is revealed and constructed in those interactions. In order to develop a better and more sophisticated conceptualization, involving both a macro- and a micro level perspective, about consumers understanding of brands: *The purpose of my study is both to advance our theoretical knowledge of how consumers themselves, on a micro level,*

construct an understanding about how brands work, and to advance our knowledge concerning the nature and content of that consumer brand understanding.

In the study I have used a qualitative method that is sensitive to rich and deep descriptions and accounts given by informants. I have chosen to focus on and to investigate young consumers in their teenage years. The data is obtained from a Swedish website where young people converse, discuss and debate fashion, brands and branding in an interactive manner. The study is inspired by the tenets of social constructionism and interactionism and the tools of analysis is a combination of hermeneutics, micro discourse, social psychology and accounts. The theoretical contribution lies in the introduction of constructs that provide us with a better and more advanced micro theoretical knowledge of how consumers themselves, collectively and together through their peer-to-peer micro level interactions construct an understanding of how brands work.

Consumers are here found to form and share their brand understanding through three types of interactions, *consultative*, *disputative*, and *normative*. In each interaction individuals assume various discrepant roles such as advisor, advisee, debater, punisher and mediator. The social structure of the cultural field or context where the interactions play out (which are constantly constructed, and maintained in the interactions), has also an important impact on which understanding that is formed, and which understanding that is given privilege and recognition. It was found that individuals with higher status positions have a greater influence on the type of brand understanding that is constructed.

The outcome of the collective micro level interactions and the subsequent assumed roles, the nature of the consumer brand understanding, is theoretically conceptualized as a brand understanding structure constituted by to main types of brand understanding, *brand creation understanding*, and *brand consumption understanding*. In addition the construct of consumer cynicism is introduced to theoretically represent the underlying paradoxical nature of the consumers' brand understanding.

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1.4 Disposition

In order to facilitate the reading of this dissertation I will here briefly describe how it is organized. In chapter two I introduce the underlying ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the dissertation, in addition to spelling out the theoretical perspectives and constructs that aid in the sense making and analysis of the study's empirical material. The study is extensively influenced by the tenets of social constructionism and interactionism. Enculturation, socialization, typifications, strategies of action, cultural capital, vocabularies of motive, accounts, brand literacy, and folk theory are important theoretical constructs described in chapter two.

In chapter three I explain how this study was conducted. I describe the method I used as an unobtrusive form of "Netnography" where the researcher assumes the role of a complete observer. I also account for the nature of the empirical setting where the data was collected and how the data was analyzed. Chapter four contains a theoretical contextualization or description of the important particularities and characterizations of the research informants', their life world, and how it connects to symbolic consumption and young people as an important market segment. A particularly important construct described in more detail is youth style. Chapter five is an empirical contextualization of the symbolic landscape, or the culture of brands in which Swedish young consumers find themselves in, what kind of brands that exist there (which are discussed in the empirical setting where the data is collected) and some of the explicit and popular youth styles available for teenagers in the Swedish cultural context. The ambition with chapter five is not to supply the reader with an exhaustive image of their teenage life world and of the meanings of all brand symbols existing in the Swedish consumer society. Rather it is to provide some meanings of this world and the brand symbols in it that enables the reader to understand the empirical material supplied in the empirical chapters good enough to evaluate the credibility of my interpretations.

Chapters six, seven, eight, and nine are all empirical/analysis chapters where I simultaneously present data and do analytical interpretations of the empirical material. Chapter six deals specifically with the various types of interactions and interactional roles that are at play when

consumers construct their brand understanding. It also deals with how the social structure of an interactional setting may impact this brand understanding forming process, simultaneously as the brand understanding individuals posses may help them attain and maintain those status positions. In chapter seven the consumers' understanding of the symbolic landscape is analyzed. This understanding involves not only the more immediate knowledge the young consumers have of which brands symbols that exists, what they mean, how they may work as relevant symbols for their life projects, but also how they work as fashion objects. Chapter eight deals particularly with the young consumers' reflectivity of how brands and their meanings are created. Chapter nine involves the understanding the consumers construct concerning brand consumption. The motifs and morality of brand consumption is here intensively discussed and made sense of. The discussants here draw upon social discourses to argue for their conceptions and to assume different interpretive positions in relation to others. In chapter ten I conclude the findings, conceptualize them, relate and position them to contemporary consumer research. The limitations of the study is spelled out and reflected upon, and suggestions for further research are supplied.

2 Theoretical perspectives

As I set out to investigate consumers' understanding of brands, the purpose of this chapter is to supply, present or bring in theoretical perspectives that may able me to make interesting interpretations and a credible analysis of the data generated by the study. The perspectives are collected from different social science disciplines such as sociology, social psychology, anthropology, and consumer research. These are then integrated into an eclectic theoretical lens that is to capture the dynamic nature of the empirical material, comprised of the verbal interactions and discussions concerning brands and branding occurring between young people on a Swedish website. The chapter is divided into three major parts. The first deals with how to conceptualize the construction of consumers' brand understanding. The second part involves the explication of constructs that sensitizes the content of consumers' brand understanding. In the third part, the macro and micro theoretical perspectives, are composed or put together into a tentative model of the construction and content of consumers' understanding of brands.

2.1 Consumers' understanding construction

Highly important for the generation of an eclectic theoretical lens with a more holistic approach on consumers' construction of their brand understanding is the acknowledgement of the relationship between interaction and understanding/knowledge. One of the main objections to prior consumer research regarding consumers' construction of their brand understanding that I expressed in the previous chapter relates to the importance awarded macro/ideological level conceptualizations and explanations of this process compared to the neglect of previous researchers of an explicit micro theoretical perspective. However, although my main focus and ambition, as a response to this theoretical gap, is to advance our understanding on a micro theoretical level, macro theoretical constructs are needed to understand what goes on at a

micro level in the same way as micro theoretical constructs are needed to understand what happens on a macro level. These levels are thus inextricably connected in providing a more holistic knowledge of consumers' understanding of how brands work. The forthcoming text in this chapter therefore involves not only the description and explanation of both macro and micro level constructs.

2.1.1 A macro level perspective

From a macro level or an ideological perspective consumers' understanding of brands and other consumer phenomena is conceptualized as an outcome of the interplay between cultural discourses. This discursive interplay plays out or works in two major directions. Across, between the macro level discourse of the prevailing branding paradigm and the ideological infrastructure of the consumer culture containing macro level discourses telling consumers what and how to consume things (Holt, 2002). Downwards/upwards between the countervailing macro consumption discourses of the consumer culture, in addition to other social discourses, and consumers' individual micro level talk concerning consumption phenomena such as fashion (Thompson & Haytko, 1997).

During certain time periods in history, Holt (2002) suggests that there exists an array of principles and axiomatic assumptions fundamentally supporting and guiding how firms set out to build their brands. Big firms tend to share a single but consolidated array of conventions and principles providing a foundation out of which certain branding techniques are generated. These structured sets of branding principles are what make up or constitute the prevailing branding paradigm and may be understood as the dominating branding discourse telling marketers and brand managers how they should act to develop or create strong brands. This branding paradigm and the dominating branding discourse stands in a dialectical relationship with the ideological infrastructure of the consumer culture, telling people what and how to consume things. As the branding paradigm and the consumer culture dialectically interact, contradictions occur that propel institutional shifts simultaneously as consumers learn about the principles of branding and in the subsequent branding techniques employed by firms. This dialectic relationship is described in a two-step model.

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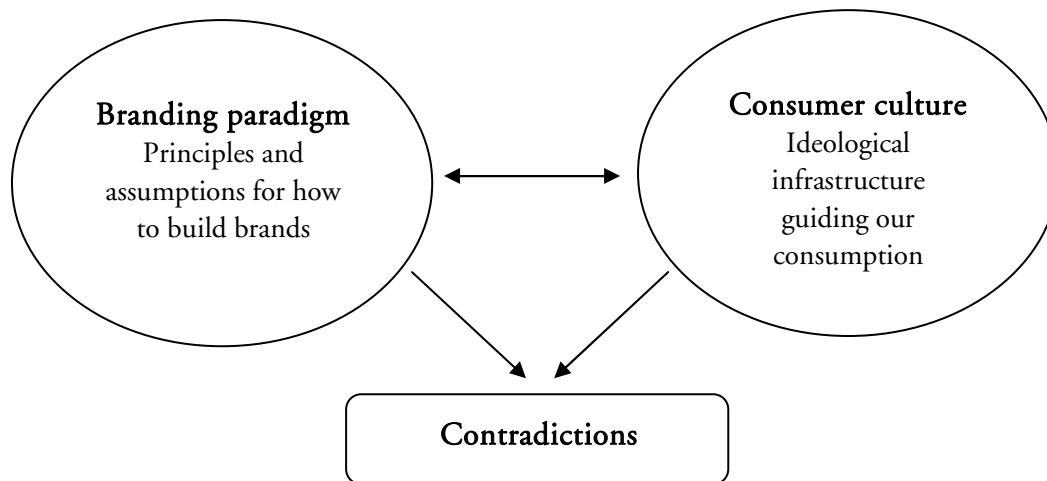
Figure 2:1: Simplified version of the Dialectical Model of Consumer Culture and Branding Paradigm (Holt, 2002, p.81)

From Holt's (2002) perspective the companies' battle in adding value to their brands, directed by the principles of the prevailing branding paradigm. As aggressive corporations repeatedly push the envelope, developing new techniques forcing the branding paradigm's principles to their logical extreme, creating contradictions in the consumer culture, the consumers generate reflexivity that challenges the very accepted and taken-for-granted status of marketer's actions. When consumers pursue the diverse desires and statuses handed down to them by the existing consumer culture's ideological infrastructure, they come collectively to be more knowledgeable and capable of enacting that culture, generating inflation in what is valued and desired. This inflation, in combination with an improved knowledge in how branding and brands work, generate a literacy of marketers branding practices.

These desires, statuses of the consumer culture and the understanding of how brands and branding work are, however, not just handed down to consumers by a dominating discourse that structure, for example, their local coffee drinking experiences in response to discourses of globalization and hegemonic global brands (Thompson & Arsel, 2004), or their experiences and view of natural versus conventional medicine as a response to mythical narratives and discourses of power circulating in the natural health market place (Thompson, 2004). In addition, the ideological infrastructure is thought to be composed of countervailing

discourses that consumers, according to Thompson & Haytko (1997), may appropriate in their individual or personal micro level narratives to obtain various interpretive positions and to construct understanding of consumption based phenomena such as fashion. From their perspective, these countervailing discourses enable individual consumers to access a panoply of folk theories that may help them understand and make sense of not only fashion/consumption norms, beauty ideals, store images, fashionable clothing brands, media icons, and social categories identified vis-à-vis fashion styles, but also more abstract issues of social class, economic equality, standards of taste, the morality of consumption, conditions of self-worth, the pursuit of individuality, the effects of media, and marketing. Moreover the interpretation and appropriation of the countervailing discourses and the encoded folk theories aid the individual consumer to not only view him or herself as an active creator of a personally unique style (as opposed to a passive trend-following consumer). They also help in constructing a coherent understanding of the various distinctive and fragmented existing styles and activities, employing interpretive strategies (such as mythical thinking of "I know, but all the same") to resolve the fashion-centred tensions and paradoxes. Therefore, it is not only merely by being subjected to a dominating branding discourse and subsequently one dominating consumption discourse, as proposed by Holt (2002), that consumers construct an understanding of brands. It is also through an, often reflexive, juxtaposition and comparison of the various countervailing discourses of the ideological infrastructure that consumers construct an understanding of how consumption phenomena such as fashion and brands work.

2.1.2 Interactions as a way to construct understanding and make sense

As argued in Chapter 1, consumers' construction of their understanding of brands may to a substantial extent be thought of as occurring in, or being an outcome of, not just macro level discourses, but also people's micro level interactions. This presumption has two important implications, one ontological and one epistemological. First, the construction of understanding and knowledge is thought of as occurring and being an outcome of social interaction, and second, if it

occurs in interactions, the construction of understanding may be understood by studying social interaction. The connection between social interaction and the construction of understanding is thus of great importance for this study.

In the social sciences, the link between interaction and construction has been recognized and established for several decades. It has been, and still is argued that the world as we know it, or reality if you may, to a large degree is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Hacking, 1999). Objects and subjects constituting the world obtain their meaning and are understood when people act upon or interact with them individually and together, socially. The world is thus given meaning, understood and made sense of through the interactions between individuals. An object's or phenomenon's meaning for an individual emerges from the ways through which other individuals act towards that individual with reference to that particular item. Consequently, the actions of others are involved in the creation of meaning for any individual regarding any specific object (Blumer, 1969). Interactions are also regarded as the prerequisite for the development of a mind. People become aware of and understand themselves, thus gaining a consciousness of their own selves only when they are able to take on the role of another individual, seeing self in the eyes of that individual (Mead, 1934).

It is also in social interactions that understanding and knowledge are constructed (Winther-Jörgensen & Phillips, 1999). Understanding and knowledge are regarded as the outcome of social practices, being forms of discourse, artefacts of social communities, and something that people do together (Gergen, 1985), rather than representing a set of rules or cognitive schemata and being situated in the books, disc drives or in the heads of individuals (Gergen, 1988). Even social facts of the world (Garfinkel, 1967), are considered to be constructed in the social interactions between people, generally played out in ordinary conversations of everyday life, where categories are formed, questioned, maintained and made visible. Understanding, knowledge and social facts are therefore to be viewed as a result of human accomplishments (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994).

2.1.3 Typifications, institutions, roles and knowledge

From the perspective of Berger & Luckmann (1966), people as subjects are not only products of reality and the prevailing social structure involving various societal institutions. Instead, the social structure and its institutions are from the beginning formed by the individual subjects and through their social interactions. The most common form of interaction is face-to-face situations. All other types of interaction are offshoots. In interactions, other individuals' subjectivity becomes both available and fully real to an individual where the other is made sense of or understood by means of reciprocal typificatory schemes, such as "a man", "a buyer" or a "happy type". Everyday life is then apt to be prearranged in a typical manner where "I" understand others as a type and interact with him or her in situations that are in themselves typical. The further away they are from the face-to-face interaction the more anonymous the typifications of social interaction become. If an individual typifies a person as belonging to a certain category he or she will interpret some aspect of that person's conduct accordingly.

One can speak of roles when individuals act out or are thought to act out or assume these kinds of typifications. Roles are then types of actors and actions in that respect and the roles objectified linguistically are an essential ingredient of the objectively available world of any society (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). By playing roles, the individual participates in a social world. Goffman (1959) posits that since social life may be understood as dramaturgical performance, individuals assume roles and engage in role playing in their everyday life, just as theatrical performers act out roles on the stage, in order to present and give a certain impression of themselves to others in their social world. This author means that individuals, in this case performers, may assume or play various discrepant roles. One is the role of the "informer" who pretends that he or she is a member of the other performers' team, obtains secrets, is allowed to come "backstage", but then discloses or sells the secrets to the audience or the others. Another role is referred to as "shill". He or she plays the role as someone who is an unsophisticated member of the audience but is in league with the performers and uses this unapparent sophistication to support the performer's role. The third role is labeled as the "spotter". A spotter is another imposter who uses his or her unapparent sophistication in the interests of the audience where that person is hired to check up on the

performers so that they uphold their standards, thereby ensuring that certain appearances will not be too far from reality. The fourth discrepant role is the mediator or go-between. The mediator may enable two hostile performers or teams of performers to come to a mutual and fruitful agreement by supplying each performer or team of performers a distorted version of the other part that is calculated to obtain as close a relationship between the two sides as possible. The mediator thus acts as a type of diplomat in this respect. However to learn or play a role, it is, according to Berger & Luckmann (1966), not just enough to acquire the routines immediately necessary for its outward performance. One must also be initiated into the various cognitive and even affective layers of the body of knowledge that are directly and indirectly appropriate to do this role. Roles are, therefore, also mediators of the common stock of knowledge, not only in the more constrictive cognitive sense, but also in the sense of knowledge of values, norms, beliefs and even emotions.

Moreover, Berger & Luckmann (1966) mean that roles as reciprocal typifications of individuals' conduct and actions are an important part of institutionalization since all institutionalized conduct involves roles, in the same way as they actually represent institutional order. Institutions then, which are formed whenever and wherever there exists a reciprocal or mutual typification of habitualized actions by types of actors, that is roles, tell us that actions of type x ought to be performed by actors of type x. When these typifications are habitualized and shared by or reciprocal to people they transfer from something that is created in the interactions between the subjective individuals to an objective reality that is taken for granted by people as an external and coercive fact. "This is how we do things" develops into "This is how things are done".

In turn, the construction of, and the function attributed to, institutions and the social structure they constitute are connected to and dependent on the socially available stock of knowledge that the members of society have of those institutions. This knowledge, being the aggregate of what everybody knows about a social world, an assembly of morals, maxims, pieces of wisdom, beliefs, values, myths and so on, is what Berger &

Luckmann (1966) refer to as pre-theoretical knowledge.[2] This knowledge first programs the externalization of the subjective reality and social structure into an objective world, and then mediates individuals' internalization of this objective reality and its social structure through the use of language. In this sense, knowledge is a fundamental dialectic of society. Knowledge about society is then a realization in a double sense, both in the sense of understanding the objectivated social reality, and the sense of continuously producing it.

2.1.4 Acquiring social and cultural knowledge

When individual subjects internalize the socially available knowledge about the objective reality, from the beginning constructed by the individual subjects themselves through the externalized typifications of their interaction, they are becoming socialized. Constructing and internalizing knowledge and understanding of the social world or the objective reality thus means that one learns about and becomes socialized into a social member of that world. Berger & Luckmann (1966) mean that individuals are socialized through two different and stepwise socialization processes, *primary* and *secondary* socialization. Primary socialization occurs in childhood and is the first socialization process that an individual goes through when becoming a member of society. In charge of the primary socialization is "the significant other," generally being the parents or other close members of the family. Secondary socialization presupposes the preceding process of primary socialization, consequently has to deal with an already formed internalized reality and a partly formed self, thus involving the subsequent process that introduces and educates an already socialized person into new sectors of the objective world of the society. In secondary socialization, the significant others are replaced by the generalized others, such as persons representing social structural institutions, or other subjects with whom the individual identifies him/herself. Secondary socialization is then detached from the individual performances of the significant others and therefore carries a

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[2]This construct representing the content and nature of cultural or social members' knowledge will do for now but will be further elaborated upon in following sections when I give an account of theoretical constructs supplying insights of the content of consumers' understanding of brands.

high rate of anonymity, therefore representing the internalization of institutional or institution-based sub-worlds. The low demand of a high degree of identification and its substance does not have the quality of inevitability, which means that the knowledge that is constructed about the world is not inevitable and is not the only description of one sole reality.

Since there is room for different versions of reality in secondary socialization, it has a weaker nature compared to primary socialization, and must therefore constantly be reinforced. Berger & Luckmann (1966) argue that this is done through both routine maintenance and crisis maintenance of one's own perceived reality in the interaction with other individuals. Individuals who may supply these reinforcements are partly the significant others such as the wife, boss or business associates, that is to say, our peers, and to some extent the less significant others such as distant relatives, chefs or traffic wardens. The significant others and the less significant generalized others are interconnected and work together to either confirm or deny your perception of the reality and yourself. Here, interaction and conversation are central for the individual to stick to a certain version of reality, where both non-verbal and verbal communication are crucial for preserving or perpetuating the individual's perception of the objective reality.

The process of acquiring knowledge of the social and cultural world may also be explained and understood fruitfully through the anthropological construct enculturation. Herskovits (1972) means that, in contrast to socialization, dealing with how individuals internalize a reality, a social world, and a society, enculturation refers to the process through which the individual learns or acquires his or her own culture. The enculturation process enables individuals to become fully functioning members of the culture in which they have been born, simultaneously allowing them to grow into their culture as it is presented. It is propelled by and perpetuated through the internalization of cultural symbols, and represents the mechanism that organizes and decides for each of the culture's members the form and extent of accepted ways of conduct and aspirations, in addition to delineating the boundaries within which variations in individual behavior and conduct are sanctioned. Members absorb the values, views, and norms of what is right or wrong, normal and abnormal,

beautiful or plain by observing the behavior of the group, thus learning the counter-norms, the "thou-shalt-nots" being the governor-bearings to conduct and the integral parts of the systems of moral values and ethical principles and rules of the culture. The enculturation process, Herskovits claims, then provides new members with the knowledge of their society so that they may form a living, it equips them with a belief system which enables them to meet and handle the power of the natural and supernatural world with minor psychological anxiety, and guides their creative desires in dance, poetry, music and art.

The enculturation of individuals proceeds throughout life and involves not only unconscious conditioning and adjustment containing characteristics, such as automatic conformity to the cultural patterns, but also conscious reflection and active choice among alternatives. This enables people to examine alternative possibilities, and therefore also allows for recondition to new conduct and new ways of thinking (Herskovits, 1948). When learning his/her culture the individual then not only conforms in response to pressures of a powerful and insistent force, but also evades, resists, selects, and experiments, and becomes a member of the culture through the process of "creative becoming" (Goodman, 1967). The learning process is, therefore, twofold involving both creative modifying of culture in a microcosmic sense, as well as creative adapting to it in a macrocosmic sense (Bramfeld, 1957). It includes the creation of reflective attitudes that not only help to modify traditional patterns of attitudes, behavior and traditions, but also to set off cultural novelty (Shimahara, 1970).

The enculturation process is thought to be reflexive in that people are "other-directed" which means that the source of direction of character is externalized. People seek their directions and orientations in external sources such as the massmedia and peer groups, or "contemporaries," rather than from traditional socialization agents and other reservoirs for idea systems (Riesman, 1961). In their enculturation process, especially young people are reflexively and consciously evaluating their relations with "contemporaries," partaking in new cultural axiological value sets Shimahara (1970). However, although the young ones automatically imitate, identify with and conform to their own cultural group as a crucial source of the standards for the values, expectations, and

judgments, they simultaneously construct these standards and alter them if the group agrees (Piaget, 1962).

2.1.5 Cultural navigation

Having constructed knowledge of society as an objective reality with social structures, and having learned the norms, beliefs, values, through-shalt-nots and proper behavior of a culture, social or cultural members construct an understanding of how to handle these cultural prescriptions, how to move around, navigate, and act within society by interacting with other cultural members. Swidler (1986) refers to cultural members' understanding of how to navigate within a cultural context as cultural competence. People construct a repertoire or "tool kit" of habits, skills and styles integrated into larger assemblies, out of which people form strategies of action. Strategy does not refer to a plan consciously developed to reach a goal, but instead to a general way in which action is organized. Consequently, strategies of action depend on and involve moods, sensibilities, habits, and views of the world. To adopt a certain line of action or conduct requires not only such things as how to talk, and dress in an appropriate style, but also the need for an image of the sort of world in which the individual is trying to act. You would also need a sense or feeling that you can read quite accurately, by the responses from others, how you are doing, in addition to a capability to choose between alternative lines of action.

The cultural context where people navigate Bourdieu (1986) refers to as a cultural *field*. These are defined areas in society or a culture where people gather around something they have in common, an interest, which they believe in and fight for since it is considered to have great value, and therefore worth fighting for. It is this belief or "croyance" that holds the field together (Bourdieu, 1986). Within the field of fashion design, for example, it is the good and thus the "right" taste of clothing that is at stake; within the field of literature it is the competition of what is to be considered as good literature; within consumer culture it might be the competition of what is the right or tasteful brand consumption. People then compete and fight for this croyance. In Bourdieu's view, people navigate in cultural contexts or fields to gain status positions awarding them with recognition and prestige. Cultural navigation is then really a struggle for status,

recognition and power, where an individual's status position corresponds to his or her amount of symbolic capital. The symbolic capital is prevalent in all fields and represents what people within the field consider being valuable. The symbolic capital is thus contingent upon what others think, it is built upon opinions, representation and reputations, therefore being more temporary than static and it is directly connected to status, prestige and honor. Hence, the greater the symbolic capital possessed by an agent or individual the higher the status and the more prestige and honor ascribed to an agent within a field (Bourdieu, 1990).

When navigating in a cultural context, struggling for a higher status position and a greater amount of symbolic capital, an individual may draw upon three main resources, each represented by three different types of capital; economic (financial resources) social (the sum of an individual's relationships in his or her network), and the most powerful resource, cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Cultural capital pertains to not only an individual's or agent's family background (potentially inherited title), upbringing, and to the individual's education (degrees and diplomas) in a stricter sense, but also to a more general ability and competence to speak, behave, and be well-oriented in the culture and the society (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital, therefore, encompasses individuals' implicit practical skills, knowledge, and dispositions; objectified in titles, family background, official credentials, diplomas and degrees, and in cultural objects (Holt, 1998).

Bourdieu (1984) claim that the most important expression of cultural capital is the ability to express, verbalize, judge and appreciate taste, particularly when it comes to the field of consumption and consumption practices not only of cultural objects such as art, music, and literature, but also of interior decor, popular culture, clothing, sports, and hobbies. Consumption is, in this case, a stage in a process of communication, that is, an act of decoding, deciphering, presupposing knowledgeable, practical, and explicit mastery of a cipher or code. In a way, you can say that the capability or cultural competence, as Swidler (1986) puts it, is to see a function of the knowledge, or concepts available for naming visible things and objects, which are in turn programs for perceptions. A work of art, from Bourdieu's (1984) viewpoint, has interest and meaning only for those who possess the

cultural competence, that is, the code into which it is encoded. The conscious or unconscious execution of implicit or explicit patterns of appreciation and perception that form musical or pictorial culture is the concealed condition for identifying a period's style characteristics, an author or producer, but more generally the internal logic of works, which aesthetic enjoyment presupposes. A consumer of an object or the beholder of a work of art who lacks the specific code or the competence to decode it, feels lost in a chaos of meanings, sounds, and colors. Tastes (i.e., manifested preferences) are the confirmation of inevitable difference. It is, thus, through the expression of taste that people distinguish themselves from others, marking their relative status position vis-à-vis other people within the field's status hierarchy, and in the constant struggle for higher symbolic capital or status within the particular field.

Cultural capital may, however, be used as a resource for social mobility and social status pursuit in other spheres than the fine arts (often expressed or manifested in the right taste and appreciation of various types of objects). Cultural capital and the ability to appreciate certain things are also most relevant in other fields often united by the very mundane and commercial. One such field is advertising, or more specifically, the way people talk about and discuss advertising. It has been showed that people do not only talk about advertising because it provides them with information concerning products, thus facilitating convenience, choice, competition, reassurance, and stimulated consumption-related desires. People talk about it for diversion, creative play, entertainment, and to scan the environment (O'Donohoe, 1994). Advertising talk then not only gives people something to talk to each other about, it serves as a source of interaction, as a social integrator, and is used by people to associate or dissociate from certain social or cultural values, promoting both social closeness, distancing, and distinction (Alperstein, 1990). It involves reflexivity and literacy skills that are anchored in peoples' broader life-world experiences where these advertising skills are formed by the urge for power and control in their everyday life interactions, serving as valuable cultural resource for demonstrating and developing power within the social sphere (Bartholomew & O'Donohoe, 2003). Talking about advertising, then, becomes a way to express, work through and reinforce certain attitudes and values, where discussing and understanding advertising might be a

source for ego enhancement and tools for obtaining status and forming relations with others (O'Donohoe, 1994).

However, if an individual is to participate in group interactions and thereby gain and attain recognition and status positions through advertising talk Ritson & Elliot (1999) suggest that the individual must first *experience* a particular advertisement, which serves as the ticket of entry into a social group's social exchange. When the advertising conversation shifts to the meaning content of the ad, an individual is required to have both experienced the ad and *interpreted* it in a meaningful way. Since advertising messages are often polysemic and opaque in character, interpretations are often made in the subsequent group interactions through a mutual aid (the individuals help or consult each other to make a meaningful and rewarding interpretation) where the advertising interactions serve to legitimize understandings and interpretations of the meaning of the ad. After experiencing and interpreting an ad, individuals evaluate or judge the advertisement in what Ritson & Elliot (1999) refers to as *critical evaluation* interactions. Elaborate advertising knowledge and literacy are needed if an individual is, as Bourdieu (1984) would have put it, to properly appreciate an ad or to make a competent but critical evaluation or judgment of an advertisement. For Ritson & Elliot (1999), having and developing the competence to critically evaluate an ad enables an individual to be a member of a certain interpretive community that tends to evaluate advertising text in similar ways and with similar semantic results. By evaluating or judging advertisements, individuals may subsequently show group affiliation at same time distinguishing themselves from others. The interpretation, judgment and view of an ad could therefore be used by individuals to navigate themselves into a position within the group structure, and to convey an identity within that group. Individuals' advertising literacy or their competence of interpreting and discussing ads then serve as a form of cultural capital for consumers that may be used within groups to obtain and strive for status positions. Advertising knowledge and the cultural competence of something mundane and commercial such as advertising may thus be an important resource, hard currency, for consumers to develop if they are to both attain and defend in-group status and power positions.

2.1.6 Strategic uses of talk

Navigating within a culture, playing the "cultural game" as Bourdieu puts it, also includes the use and appropriation of talk, language, verbal and linguistic expressions or tools to defend, explain, or motivate our actions to other people within a cultural or social context when handling the norms, rules or "thou-shalt-nots" of that particular cultural context. One such linguistic tool is accounts. These are linguistic devices employed every time an action is subjected to evaluative inquiry. An *account* is according to Scott & Lyman (1968) a statement conveyed by an actor to explain unexpected, inappropriate or unfortunate behavior of his or her own or of others, and when the proximate cause for the statement comes from the actor him- or herself or from somebody else. These authors claim that there are generally two main types of account: *excuses* and *justifications*, and that people tend to invoke both of them when they are accused or blamed for having done something wrong, inept, bad, unwelcome, or anything that is perceived as improper or inconvenient.

Excuses, Scott & Lyman (1968) maintain, are accounts where individuals confess that the actual act is wrong, bad or inappropriate but simultaneously deny full responsibility, thereby relieving or mitigating responsibility when their conduct is questioned. Justifications or "techniques of neutralization" are accounts where a person accepts responsibility for a particular act, but denies the derogatory quality connected to it, hence affirming its positive value when the opposite is claimed. Accounts may also be honored or not. This depends on the interactants' background expectancies, which means those sets of taken-for-granted ideas which allow the interactants to interpret remarks as accounts in the first place. If an account is honored it restores the equilibrium in a relationship, thus attaining status quo. When an account fails to be honored it is conceived as either *illegitimate* or *unreasonable*. An account is deemed illegitimate when it is given in a circle of people where its vocabulary of motives is intolerable, and when the seriousness of the occasion surpasses that of the account. An account is considered *unreasonable* when the stated motives for action cannot be normalized analogous to the background expectancies of what "everyone knows." Accounts tend to become routinized within cultures, subcultures, and groups and some become

specific in the social world in which they are used. An account that is honored in one social sphere may thus be dishonored in another.

A statement or a certain speech may not, however, only serve to justify a view or previous actions to others within a societal or cultural context after that view or action has been expressed, but can also justify future intended or anticipated behavior. For this to work, Mills (1940) claims that people need a *vocabulary of motives*, to choose from and put into use when a previous, present or future action is to appear sensible or understandable, and the success depends on whether it is possible, through a speech act, to present a credible motive for that particular view or action. The usage of the term vocabulary of motives involves an analysis of the controlling, integrating, and specifying function that a certain speech or statement fulfills in a given social situation or context. The model relies on the premise that linguistic behavior should be approached by being sensitive and observing its social function of coordinating various actions, and not so much by referring it to individuals' private states. Language is then, rather than something that is prior and in the individual, taken by other individuals as an indicator of future actions. There is, therefore, a link between the vocabularies of motive and systems of action. Being subjective springs of actions, motives are viewed as typical vocabularies filling ascertainable functions in enclosed societal situations and contexts.

Having a justifying function does not either, according to Mills (1940), deny the efficacy of motives since anticipations of acceptable justifications often inform, even control, conduct. "If I were to do this, what would I say? What would the others say?" Decision may then, partly or wholly, be made on the basis of answers to such questions. A person may start an act grounded in a certain motive, and in the course of it s/he may adopt an additional motive or change the old one. This secondary and apologetic motive is not, however, inefficacious where the vocalized expectation, or the reason for an act, is not merely a mediating condition for the act, but also a controlling condition. Motives are strategies of action when they appeal to others in one's act. Consequently, others, just as in the case of accounts (Scott & Lyman, 1968), must agree tacitly or explicitly in many social actions. Acts are not seldom abandoned if there is no reason for them being accepted by others. When a person imputes or vocalizes motives s/he is not trying to

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describe the experienced social action, and is not only stating "reasons" but is instead influencing both her- and himself and others, sometimes even finding new reasons that will mediate action. Therefore an act should not, from Mills' (1940) perspective be treated differently from its verbalization since the verbalization is a new act in itself, which is why there is no discrepancy between an act and its verbalization. In the same way as with accounts, the appeal related to a vocabulary of motives is connected to a norm agreed upon between members of a situation. Together with norms and rules of actions in different situations, people then learn vocabularies of motives which are relevant and suitable to them. These are the motives employed because they make up an important part of the language and the components of behavior.

2.2 Consumers' pre-theoretical knowledge

Earlier in this chapter I touched upon the knowledge that individuals construct in interactions about important aspects of their social reality. Berger & Luckmann (1966) referred to this as pre-theoretical knowledge involving the beliefs, maxims and values that individuals construct and possess about society. In this section I intend to dig deeper into and present constructs that aid our understanding of what this type of knowledge involves since it is most helpful in conceptualizing the content and nature of consumers' understanding of how brands work.

2.2.1 Folk theory in social science

One such rewarding construct collected from other disciplines within the social sciences, supplying a relevant and informative conceptualization when searching for advanced knowledge about consumers' understanding of brands, is the concept folk theory. This refers to the implicit or explicit personal theory ordinary non-academics without any particular expertise possess about important aspects of the world and about their lives, which inform us in what way we should categorize and divide things into taxonomies to make sense of them (Lakoff, 1987). It is a framework of concepts, roughly adequate for the

demands of everyday life, with which the humble adept comprehends, predicts, explains, and manipulates a certain domain or phenomenon (Churchland, 1991). The knowledge about persons and other nonhuman living creatures constituting it, is integrated and melts together into complex knowledge structures that include explicit ontological commitments, a level of conceptual integration (folk theories have to be comprehensive, capturing more than just incidental knowledge), and domain specific explanatory frameworks. Hirschfeld (2001) therefore claims that folk theory actually is theory-like and does not only represent separate or episodic beliefs held by people about important aspects of their lives and the world around them. It may, therefore, be assessed by its qualities in all of the dimensions that are used to evaluate or assess any other theory, consequently being rejected if it fails the measures of such a scrutiny (Churchland, 1991).

Folk theories may also involve and can be ascribed with different degrees of reflexivity concerning various phenomena in society, where individuals may have different abilities to question the conventions that guide cultural practices. One such type of folk theory, symbolized by a high degree of reflexivity, is what McLaughlin (1996) calls *vernacular theory*. It refers to "the practice of those who lack cultural power and who speak a critical language grounded in local concerns, not the language spoken by academic knowledge elites." From McLaughlin's perspective, ordinary people who do not come from academia or from a tradition of philosophical critique are also able to raise critical and theoretical questions of the dominant culture assumptions in society. Even though vernacular theories do not have the same intellectual prestige as scientific theories, he claims that they are widely spread and used within society and enable ordinary people to challenge the embodied cultural system. People are, therefore, through the usage of vernacular theory, able to see through the game of the culture industry's efforts to create a mass culture, reinforcing certain preferable cultural assumptions.

Another type of folk theory, which does not ascribe people's own theories concerning phenomena in society with the same reflexivity and questioning capacity is *lay theory*. This represents the informal, implicit, non-scientific, and commonsense explanations people give for particular social behaviors (Furnham, 1988), harboring an organized

knowledge structure that directs people's judgments, evaluations and behavior. As with scientific theories, lay theories serve the epistemic function of sense making, providing individuals with a tool for understanding events and making inferences about the social reality (Hong *et al*, 2001). They thereby generate psychological meaning systems that people utilize for interpreting the infinite stimulus and events they are subjected to in their daily lives. Thus, as complex knowledge structures, these personal theories provide people with a framework for attributing and ascribing meaning and for making inferences about the world around them. People then construct and develop their own lay theories about phenomena important to their lives to make sense of the social and physical world as an orderly, stable, predictable and understandable place (Furnham, 1988). When the world has been made sense of and understood by people, this lay theory may, according to Hong *et al*, (2001), even enable individuals to not only control, but also even to manipulate their environment.

Another concept that is often paired with the construct folk theory is common sense. If vernacular theory is a type of folk theory that represents people's ability to critically and reflexively question the taken-for-granted phenomena and practices of a culture, *common sense* could be considered as the opposite type of folk theory since it represents those taken-for-granted views, practices and knowledge within a culture that vernacular theorists reflect upon and critically evaluate. It is this type of common sense knowledge that Berger & Luckmann (1966) primarily talk about when they discuss the knowledge of the social world that individuals construct in their interactions. Common sense refers to people's natural attitude, the taken-for-granted set of beliefs, maxims, and ideas that shape their understandings of the social world; it is essentially the reasoning process by which people of everyday life make out their social world (Brewer, 1984). It is also understood as "a cultural group's body of shared beliefs about the world," and it may refer both to certain beliefs that people regard as true, because they are just common sense, and therefore a piece of our common sense knowledge, but also as the shared principles or rules that guide the correct way of thinking and reasoning, especially when making decisions or judgments (Fletcher, 1984). Without a stable and shared rule system grounded in common sense conceptions, the mission of handling everyday, face-to-face

interactions and maintaining societies would not be possible (Smedslund, 1986).

There have been some arguments between social psychologists about the characteristics of common sense conceptions and beliefs, especially concerning their uniformity and generality across members of the society, as well as about their stability over time. Brewer (1984) claims that there is no finite set of beliefs, maxims and ideas that transcend each individual. The confined set of maxims, beliefs and ideas constituting each individual's common sense knowledge stock is therefore not uniform nor general. What is in fact general and uniform, Brewer argues, is the reasoning process by which the common sense stock of knowledge is constructed. It is not the common sense knowledge stock per se that is uniform and general, but instead the process of common sense reasoning. What actually characterizes the common sense reasoning process is that the beliefs, maxims and ideas constituting each individual person's common sense knowledge are in fact *assumed* to be common, general and shared. Brewer means that it is through this assumption embedded in the common sense reasoning process by which the social world becomes, as Berger & Luckmann (1966) put it, a factual reality or factual object. The meaning ascribed to the social world constructed by the individual member of society is assumed by the individual to be the same for all other members of the society. Therefore, the social world becomes real and factual, based on the assumption of the existence of communal or mutual stocks of ideas, beliefs and maxims, not because these shared ideas, beliefs and maxims really exist (Brewer, 1984).

Smedslund (1986), however, argues that common sense conceptions are more of a stable than dynamic nature and therefore only change moderately, since they must stay within the boundaries of culture to remain understandable. Since the common sense conceptions are stable and shared by every member of the culture it is possible to derive determined common sense conceptions by studying the degree of consensus people hold concerning various issues in society; a consensus that is developed by the dialog between individuals (Smedslund, 1982). In contrast, Sjöberg (1982) argues that common sense is not consistent or stable but rather ambiguous and can therefore have several different meanings, thus varying across cultures and between individuals.

Common sense, therefore, exists in many forms, both within and across cultures, but also over time. Consequently, common sense changes when culture does, making common sense an integral brick of culture rather than a sort of absolute measure of things (Valsiner, 1985).

2.2.2 Pre-theoretical knowledge in consumer research

Within consumer research, various types of pre-theoretical knowledge have been used to conceptualize the nature of consumers' understanding of consumption phenomena. One type is the previously presented folk theory, another is brand literacy. It has been recognized that folk knowledge or folk theory, as a type of consumers' pre-theoretical knowledge, forms our mode of reasoning and thinking about persuasion and advertising without our conscious awareness, resulting in a set of broadly shared causal beliefs providing both consumers and marketers with "common sense" concerning advertising and selling Friestad & Wright's (1994). One essential characteristic of folk knowledge of persuasion is that across people beliefs about persuasion should converge. This is a necessary indicator of folk knowledge, which ought to form shared belief systems with a discriminating capability, so that the typical beliefs of lay people would not be invariant from one sort of belief to another (Friestad & Wright, 1995). From these authors' perspective, folk knowledge of persuasion then exists when it contains a core set of shared beliefs concerning the fundamental nature of the persuasion process as it occurs across persuasion contexts that are prominent in the lives of a culture's members. In essence, it therefore gives people a stored implicit conception, model, or theory that they employ to form situation-specific beliefs, which are of immediate interest. Consequently, people then use these common sense conceptions of persuasion to interpret everyday interpersonal and media communications of all kinds.

In contrast to previous views of folk theory's link to consumption phenomena, Thompson & Haytko (1997) pair folk theory with discourses rather than with common sense or lay theory. From their perspective, consumers make use of several and implicit folk theories to interpret different features of everyday life, intimately connected to the fashion sphere in terms of store images, beauty ideals, media icons, and fashionable brands. The dominance of certain shared beliefs and

underlying folk theory is not fixed, instead, shared beliefs and underlying folk theories are constantly renegotiated, following the changes in the ways people conventionally talk about consumption. Consequently, developments of a countervailing narrative in the mass media, or the active resistance to a hegemonic aesthetic by a group of individuals within the consumption culture, are plausible factors that could change the ways people talk about consumption, thus also altering their folk theories of fashion.

Compared to folk theory of persuasion and folk theory of fashion, the construct brand literacy does not couple consumers' pre-theoretical knowledge of consumption phenomena with either common sense or discourses. Instead it conceptualizes the nature and reflexivity of consumers' knowledge of brands and branding as brand literacy. The construct brand literacy, developed by Bengtsson & Firat (2006), rests on the underlying premise that in the iconic consumer culture of today, where brands have achieved a position as resources for social bonding and interaction, consumers form and construct competencies and knowledge of how to consume and use brands knowingly in certain and specific social contexts. It is in this manner that consumers cultivate what the authors call "brand literacy." The authors define the construct as "the ability of the consumer to decode the strategies used in marketing practices in introducing, maintaining, and reformulating brands and brand images, which then further enables the consumer to engage with these processes within their cultural settings." It involves the capability of consumers to make sense of and organize the signs of a brand culture, in addition to understanding the prevailing meaning systems. The authors mean that the consumers' understanding extends beyond the instantaneous surface meanings of the symbols and words connected with the brand. A brand literate consumer is a person who is aware that the particular brand name and the symbols that are attached to it are signs that not only separate one producer/company from another, but are signs that bear and convey meanings that are culturally complex. Brand literate consumers have the ability to express and communicate the culturally agreed meaning and to use the particular brand in such ways that s/he becomes effective in the cultural context.

For Bengtsson & Firat (2006) brand literacy is a multi-level construct where it is possible to distinguish between three different levels of

literacy, low, medium, and high. *Low level of literacy* refers to people who buy and use brands but have very little, or no knowledge at all, concerning the symbolic meanings that brands have acquired in the consumer culture. *Medium level of literacy* is linked to people possessing the capability to read and understand the cultural meanings and strategies underlying brands. *High level of literacy* refers to people who have the capability to completely partake in a culture of brands. These consumers do not simply follow the cultural meanings, but are also capable of reformulating and playing with them. Consumers with a high level of brand literacy are even able to unmask branding processes and strategies employed by brand managers to blur product properties and characteristics. Bengtsson & Firat (2006) mean that people who demonstrate a low level of brand literacy construct tell what the authors call *production stories* about co-brands. In these stories informants understand co-branding first and foremost as a way of signalling and tracking down the source of the product, where one of the brands is depicted as a supplier of a product, bought by the other brand in order to be employed as an ingredient in the actual product, which then is bought by the consumer. Consumers conveying a medium level of brand literacy produce *strategic stories*. In this case consumers give analytical interpretations of co-branding activities by brand managers at companies, explicating how and why these activities may or may not make sense and how they could sway or affect their idea about the brand. People showing a high level of brand literacy convey what the authors call *critical stories*. Here consumers display a capability of critically questioning the co-branding activities employed by corporations. Consumers, being high level brand literates, realize that co-branding has marketing implications. In addition, these types of consumers criticize and even discard this brand managerial practice as a symbolic game with the purpose of making the products more attractive and tempting to consumers.

2.3 Designing and assembling a tentative model

The purpose of this section is to construct or assemble a tentative model from the previously explicated theoretical constructs to aid in the analysis of consumers' micro level construction of how brands work as a

phenomenon. The constructs that are put together into the tentative model are used because they contribute to a theoretical conceptualization of how consumers construct an understanding of brands on a micro level. Holt's (2002) dialectical model of consumer culture and branding serves as the overarching organizing principle for the model's design, much because the interplay or the dialectical relationship between the branding paradigm and the ideological infrastructure of the consumer culture is thought to be reflected in and to affect the discussions of brands occurring in consumers' micro level interactions. But also because it, in a pedagogic sense, illustrates that just as the brand managers, the firms and the branding paradigm have a knowledge of brands and how they ought to be built and used, consumers of the consumer culture also have some sort of brand knowledge or understanding of brands, of how they are built and how they are consumed. This less formalized knowledge, that is to say, the understanding consumers have of brands, may fruitfully be thought of as a type of reflection or mirror of the more formalized brand knowledge of brand managers, consultants and firms. It is particularly this understanding of how brands work that is the focus of this study.
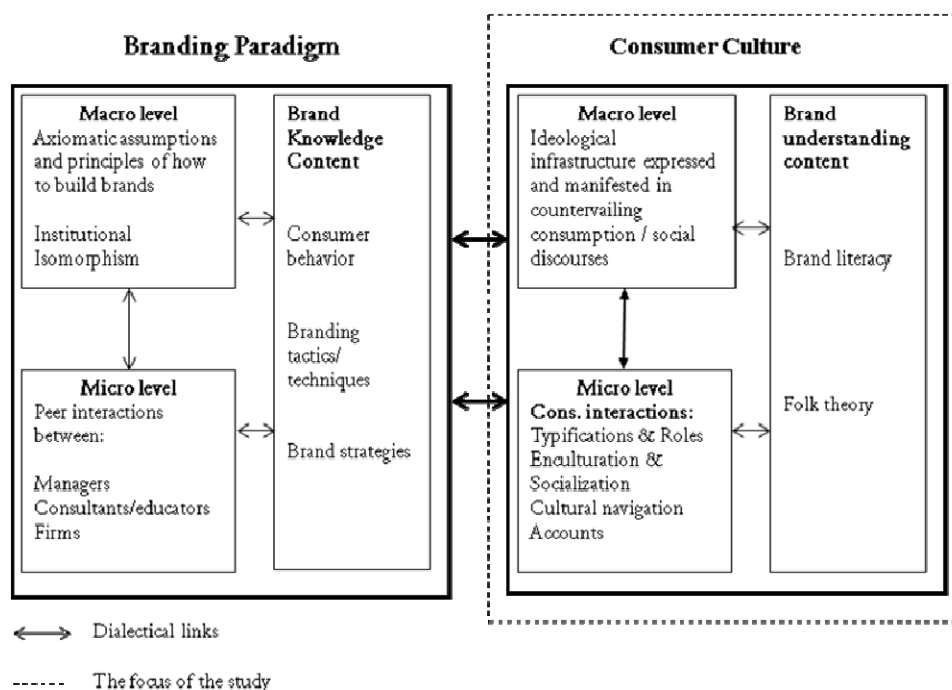
Figure 2:2: A tentative model of the construction and content of consumers' brand understanding

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In this model, consumers are considered to construct a part of their understanding of brands through the interplay between the prevailing branding paradigm and the consumer culture on the macro theoretical level, subsequently channeled down to the individual consumer by the consumer cultures' ideological infrastructure providing assumptions and principles of what and how to consume things. This ideological infrastructure contains what Thompson & Haytko (1997) refer to as countervailing consumption and social discourses that individual consumers appropriate to attain interpretive positions that allow them to construct an understanding of brands. This largely takes place when consumers, in micro level interactions, make sense of and together try to gain an understanding of the various countervailing discourses offered by the ideological infrastructure, touching upon brands, branding and brand consumption. When the consumers discuss brands in relation to the countervailing discourses in these micro level interactions, together critically evaluating, appreciating or making sense of marketing offerings (Ritson & Elliot, 1999), engaging in socialization (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and enculturation (Herskovits, 1948:1972) processes, assuming various roles (Goffman, 1959), they simultaneously produce micro level discourses of brands that may alter the existing macro level countervailing discourses, and their understanding of how brands work as a phenomenon.

The arrows in the model go in two directions between the macro discursive level and the micro discursive or micro interactional level. This is because the ideological infrastructure of the consumer culture is considered to affect consumers' understanding of brands simultaneously as the micro level consumer interactions concerning brands are, in the long run, thought to affect the macro level consumption discourses constituting the ideological infrastructure of the consumer culture. In addition, the arrows representing the link between consumers' brand understanding and their micro level interactions run two ways. This is because the existing brand understanding has implications for the new understanding constructed in the micro level interactions, simultaneously as the understanding constructed in those interactions re-forms the nature of the consumers brand understanding. The connection between the ideological infrastructure and the consumers' understanding also runs two ways because this understanding may affect and create new discourses or

narratives simultaneously as the existing discourses affect the content of the consumers' brand understanding.

The nature of the brand understanding being constructed by the consumers is considered dynamic where some of the knowledge may be considered as a folk theory both with common sense characteristics (Brewer, 1984; Smedlund, 1984:1986; Fletcher, 1984; Friestad & Wright, 1994:1995) but also having reflexive characteristics corresponding to vernacular theory (McLaughlin, 1996) and various degrees of brand literacy (Bengtson & Firat, 2006). However, consumers' understandings of how brands work may be considered reflexive, critical and perhaps novel at a point in time, but may later develop into something that is considered as common sense. What is considered as reflexively critical for some people may be common sense to others, and the degree of criticalness and reflexivity concerning the workings of brands may differ between individuals. The nature of consumers' folk theory or understanding of consumption phenomena is thus, as proposed by Thompson & Haytko (1997), not viewed as fixed. Rather, it is thought to change and to be constantly renegotiated following the ways people interact and discuss about consumption and brands. Therefore, the development of a countervailing discourse or narrative in the mass media or the resistance to a dominant discourse or aesthetic by a group of consumers in the consumer culture may change the ways consumers converse about or discuss brands, thereby altering their understanding of how brands work.

3 Net work

In this chapter I present how the study was conducted. I motivate the choice of the research informants and introduce the method that I use as "Netnography," positioning and motivating my choice of this method in relation to traditional offline qualitative methods. I describe the nature of the empirical context and discuss ethical aspects. Finally, I describe how the empirical material is analyzed, the trustworthiness of the study and the interpretations made, in addition to the advantages and disadvantages of the chosen method.

3.1 Capturing interactions and naturally occurring talk

There are some central questions or issues that need to be treated explicitly in this methodology chapter. Perhaps the most important one is to identify and choose a method that may capture both micro-level interactions between people and the text such interactions generate. Obviously, there are several plausible methods that could be put into use. However some sort of qualitative method that is sensitive to wider, deeper and richer descriptions of societal phenomena (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000), such as consumers' understanding of brands, appear as a reasonable choice. There exist a number of fruitful qualitative research methods available to researchers within the fields of social science and consumer research. Document studies (Bryman & Bell, 2003), the study of already produced documents, is one such useful qualitative method. Perhaps the most recognized and commonly used qualitative method is various forms of qualitative research interviews (Kvale, 1997), such as the long in-depth interview propagated by McCracken (1988), or the phenomenological interview that serves to obtain first-person descriptions of specific experiences of an individual's life world (Thompson & Locander, 1989). No doubt, the qualitative interview enables a researcher to generate plentiful descriptions and thus rich and

interesting textual data. It would be possible to obtain reflections of various types of consumption discourses and the ideological infrastructure, telling people what and how to consume things. In addition, by enabling the collection of consumers' personal micro level accounts, qualitative interviews may capture some of the content of consumers' understanding of how brands work. But what the qualitative interview cannot do is to capture the micro level interactions occurring between several individuals in real time. Since these micro level interactions are the main focus of this study, much because it is in these interactions that a great deal of consumers' understanding of brands is thought to be constructed, the use of interviews as a method does not offer the proper means to capture what occurs in micro level interactions. Therefore, it does not generate the kind of interactionally inspired data that is needed in order to fulfill the purpose of this investigation.

However, a very useful qualitative method, often employed in social science research that may capture people's interactions is ethnography. This method emanates from the discipline of anthropology but has for some time been adopted within the field of consumer research to investigate the formation, maintenance and dynamics of subcultures of consumption (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Kozinets, 2001), of brand communities (Kates, 2000; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al, 2002), or of other forms of market place cultures (Thompson & Arnold, 2005). Ethnography is a method where the researcher immerses him- or herself in a group of people or culture under study, generally involving observation of people's actions/interactions, shadowing group members, and carrying out interviews with the members (Bryman & Bell, 2003).

However, although ethnography is sensitive to people's interactions, it has one major disadvantage in relation to the purpose of this investigation, which it also shares with qualitative interviews. It is the presence of the researcher and his or her influence on the research context/situation and the data that is produced in that setting. The interview situation is a socially and linguistically very complex and unnatural research constructed situation and the interviewee need not be a competent and moral truth teller, correctly and candidly conveying their inner knowledge, attitudes and experiences to the researcher

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(Alvesson, 2003). Consequently, what the researcher would obtain from an interviewee and the interview may just be an outcome of a constructed (maybe perceived as weird and awkward by the informant) situation where the researcher and the informant construct the interview situation as a meaningful topic. The interviewee may say things in accordance with his or her perception or view of what is relevant for the researcher to know. Interviews are, from the social constructionist perspective, assumed in this study therefore, as Silverman (2001) puts it, not privileged. The ethnography does not bring about those exact problems since it does not include a context that from the beginning is constructed by researchers. However, the mere presence of the researcher may have implications on the particular situation and what is being said between the members of the group. Words may be said that wouldn't have been said, or more importantly words that would have been said may not be uttered because of the researcher's presence. The talk occurring in a culturally confined area studied by a researcher may partly be an outcome of that researcher's presence, and would consequently not be natural. Ethnographic studies thus involve various degrees of researcher participation which can carry with it influence, obtrusiveness and interference (Bryman & Bell, 2003), and this may affect the interaction and the talk between the researcher and those being studied. People may act, behave and talk in ways that are not normal for them just because there is a researcher present. The interaction and conversations obtained between several individuals by means of ethnography are then not really naturally occurring "talk", or naturally occurring reflections of various forms of social discourse (Silverman, 2001), but rather empirical accounts co-constructed between researchers and informants.

3.2 Netnography

The development and proliferation of the Internet have generated increased possibilities for people to not only share and obtain information, but also to interact, socialize, and communicate with each other regardless of geographical distance. The Internet has provided communicative platforms where people can interact in real time, enabling them to form far-reaching networks and communities

centring on various forms of interests showing social structures, hierarchies and processes of socialization and enculturation. Communities centring on, for example, the common consumption of a brand (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001), television series such as X-files (Kozinets, 1997), or the activity of coffee consumption (Kozinets, 1999) have formed and are to a large extent perpetuated through online interaction. Although this communication dominantly occurs through textual interaction, communication and expression, putting certain constraints on the various modes of how one can interact, it allows many individuals to interact and communicate simultaneously regardless of where they are. The Internet and its platform for communication and interaction between people thus open up great opportunities for researchers to collect and analyze data concerning both interactions per se as they are played out in an online setting compared to offline, but also concerning the topics that are communicated and interacted upon. These topics or social phenomena that generate the online interactions, have often a strong link to offline life events and phenomena. Researching communication and interaction on the Internet may therefore enable researchers to access offline or "real life" phenomena and topics that would be hard to access through methods developed for offline settings. Observing online interaction, communication and conversation offers the researcher a better opportunity and ability to obtain people's naturally occurring talk than existing methods designed and developed for obtaining such talk in the offline world.

I use a qualitative observation-based online research method in this study, which is referred to as "netnography". A netnography, or ethnography on the Internet, is an interpretive and qualitative method adapted from ethnographic research techniques and constructed for the specific purpose of investigating the consumer behavior of cultures and communities existing on the Internet (Kozinets, 2002b). It involves a written account or story coming from fieldwork investigating the communities and cultures emerging from online, computer mediated, or internet-based communications (Kozinets, 1998). Netnography differs from traditional ethnography mainly on two points. It is much less time consuming and less elaborate, and it is capable of being conducted entirely unobtrusively without the presence of a researcher affecting the research situation. Although the most common strategy in

netnographic studies is for the researcher to reveal him- or herself, to go native and to become a participant observer in the online community being studied, the researcher may also assume the role of a complete observer (Kozinets, 2002b). This enables the researcher to analyse a situation and follow occurring talk without being visibly present and affecting what is said and done simply by being there.

It is the less commonly used unobtrusive and complete participant type of netnography that I have employed as a method in this study. This has enabled me to follow naturally occurring interactions, talk and text played out in a natural context. The complete observer position assumed here thus involves what Eysenback & Till (2001) refer to as a passive online analysis of websites or interactions of discussion groups or forums without the researcher interfering or involving themselves in those discussions or interactions. By exclusively observing the interactions taking place between people or consumers textually communicating or conversing online concerning various social and consumer topics or phenomena, the researcher captures naturally occurring talk in interactions, the production of micro level discourse, and the reflections of macro level social discourses being handled, appropriated and discussed in those very same micro level interactions. It is this capability and, at the same time, advantage over other forms of qualitative methods, which was the deciding factor when choosing virtual observation as the most appropriate method for collecting the consumers' micro level naturally occurring talk about brands.

What, however, discriminates the type of netnography that I have used here from the one normally used in prior consumer research is the actual purpose of or motif behind the investigation. The customary purpose of a netnography is, in an online setting, to study the construction, reproduction and consumer behavior of cultures and communities centring on a certain consumption activity or brand symbol. However, the major purpose of my study is to capture the content of consumers' micro level talk or discourse of brands, and thereby obtain their understanding of a social phenomenon such as brands.

3.3 Research informants

In this study, I have chosen to focus on young Swedish consumers in their teenage years. For unsure teenagers who are cognitively mature but emotionally still growing, seeking to become adults and finding their place in their world, brands and products become particularly important resources for their construction of a self image and a self identity (La Ferle *et al*, 2001). Fitting in with peers, conforming to certain social norms and at the same time expressing individuality, are often crucial issues for teenagers. Here clothing symbols such as brands may be used to symbolize the relation between the actual person and the social group he or she wants to affiliate with and be accepted by, and refraining from certain symbols used and recognized by the majority is a way of demonstrating individuality (Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). A young person may therefore love a brand's image but still needs and wants confirmation and approval from the peer group (Elliot & Percy, 2007). However, young people may also make consumer choices based on the elimination of what is not acceptable (Auty & Elliot, 1998), which means that young individuals then conform to a certain subgroup, by being a non-conformant to the mainstream (Piacentini & Mailer, 2004). Teenagers and young people are thus in a transitional period of their lives, developing from children to adults, actively seeking and forming their identity in relation to the social environment, in relation to peers or the generalized others. Since brands are appropriated as important resources for handling these processes, brands and an understanding of how they work, most certainly are something that these young consumers need to discuss diligently and thoroughly to be understood or made sense of as they seem to play a particularly important part in their everyday lives. In this respect, teenagers are therefore considered to produce particular rich data involving intense discussions of brands as a cultural or social phenomenon, which is the main reason for choosing them as research subjects.

3.4 Empirical sites

An important issue is then not only to identify where one can find and obtain young or teenage consumers' brand discussions in, for them, a

natural setting or context, but also to give an adequate description of the characteristics of such a natural setting or site. There are several such contexts in the offline world where traditional qualitative research methods excel. It would be possible to join in and observe young consumers' conversations in, for example school yards, class rooms, at discos or in other contexts or situations where young people hang out or interact. However, it would, as was discussed before, be hard to record conversations that explicitly deal with brands, and to be able to observe such interactions at all without the researcher interfering in the natural situation, affecting what is discussed in those interactions. I have therefore chosen to observe the young people's online interactions and discussions of brands and brand related issues on the Swedish Internet website "Hamsterpaj" (Hamster pie). This website would in contemporary social vernacular be referred to as an Internet community. However it is not an online community in the same sense as those consumption communities investigated within consumer research that center on a particular consumption activity such as coffee consumption, a television series such as X-files (Kozinets, 1997), or boycotting behavior (Kozinets, 1998). "Hamsterpaj" as a community also differs from "real world" brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander et al, 2002), and the stronger form of brand communities referred to as subcultures of consumption (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) since it is not formed and or perpetuates on a common devotion of a market symbol. Instead "Hamsterpaj" is a type of wider lifestyle community where people simply meet, "hang out", interact, and communicate about pretty much everything, which then also includes consumption phenomena such as products and brands. It is not the particular consumption of a special activity, product or special brand, based on specific interests that are the pillars on which the whole community is founded. Instead it provides young Swedish people with a platform where they may meet, discuss, inform themselves of, and together construct understandings about, for them, phenomena and issues important to their everyday youth life. Through communicating and interacting on "Hamsterpaj" these teenage consumers together help each other to construct a meaningful and understandable world where brands seem to play an important role.

"Hamsterpaj" is a public website available for everyone, but it particularly and explicitly appeals to 13-20-year-olds. Individuals may

enter either to participate in any of the various options or activities offered by the website or merely observe the chat and textual interactions occurring between the individuals on the website. In order to participate actively such as partaking in discussions on the forum and posting messages, you are required to login with a username. However, if you merely want to observe and listen to the "talk" of the people spending time and hanging out on the website no such login or username is required. It is therefore possible to collect, obtain, and analyze textual data or accounts produced by these young consumers in a natural setting without the participation and interference of the researcher in question. On the website there are rooms about entertainment where you can download online computer games, cartoons, and film clips. You can find "fun spaces" containing funny stories, funny pictures, and sex tests. There are sections where you can get links, and tips of where to find good computer programs to download, and guides for how to do it. There are also places where you can meet new people, look up old acquaintances, look at a photo gallery including pictures of other users uploaded by themselves, and even listen to web radio run by the chat site.

The most important section on the website for this study is, however, the forum and its clothes and fashion section. The forum is a place where individuals discuss various predetermined and categorized themes, such as Cafe that has sub-topics such as music, food, humor, movies, and television. Every sub-topic (if one chooses to click into the topic of music a sub-topic or thread might be The Beatles) consists of a number of "threads" posted by any of the members of the website. At the time of the data collection, there were over 300 000 members. People then post messages about the particular topic, and get replies from other users. The discussion thus starts and can continue for a longer time period, with a high intensity involving eloquent formulations, but also hard language, and the usage of smilies to indicate underlying emotions, intentions, or sometimes irony behind their posted messages. There are moderators on the forum who see to it that the posted messages from the users are not too "off topic" and they have the authority to erase messages that are inappropriate in some way or to close down the thread if it develops in a non-preferable direction leading to meaningless discussions.

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3.4.1 Complementary empirical sources

Although "Hamsterpaj" was the main empirical source, I also collected data from a few complementary but traditional websites. The purpose of this was to empirically contextualize the data collected and conveyed from the online forum and supply some meaning to the various brand symbols discussed there and the meaning that may be attributed to the various youth styles that are also widely discussed and integrated into the brand talk. The information about the various brand symbols, of which many are Swedish, has been collected and conveyed from the various brands' homepages in an attempt to add some, at least initial, meaning to those brands so that the discussions on the forum will make better sense for all readers. Descriptive images or pictures in addition to textual information about frequently discussed brands are therefore conveyed in the next chapter. In order to supply readers with more tools to make better sense of the following empirical chapters, I also in Chapter 5 provide descriptions of some of the frequently discussed Swedish youth styles after studying how their meanings are conveyed or constructed on the website of Wikipedia.org and "Susning.nu". These websites are to be regarded as empirical sites or objects just as the discussions or interactions occurring on the online forum were described earlier. Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia perpetuated by the collective users on the Internet. The information and meaning supplied to various words, concepts or phenomena are uploaded by the users themselves, and are subjected to peer reviewing. This means that Internet users control the correctness of the information and knowledge uploaded and conveyed at the website. If any of the users believe or know that the information or meaning ascribed to a concept or phenomenon in the world is wrong, they may change it. In that way, the meaning of a phenomenon is constantly being updated by peers as it changes over time and in (popular) culture, which is why it is very helpful when trying to find and convey the meanings of the different Swedish contemporary youth styles. However, at the same time, its credibility as a legitimate knowledge and information provider may be questioned since the knowledge and information constructed there are not scrutinized or checked by any legitimate authority. The webpage "Susning.nu" is a Swedish, but smaller, equivalent to Wikipedia that often uses or provides links to its international counterpart. Neither of these complementary empirical sources is considered to give correct mirrors or representations of the actual world. Rather, they are looked

upon as information and knowledge constructors that aid our understanding by supplying meaning to the context within which this study is conducted.

3.5 Conducting rigorous and trustworthy online research

It should be emphasized that doing research in an online setting requires, as Kozinets (2002b) puts it, the same demand of trustworthiness, rigor and ethical consideration as with other traditional offline research. Doing research on the Internet needs more than just downloading a couple of postings and then doing a swift analysis. It involves a systematic collection of a substantial amount of text and a diligent analysis grounded in theoretical models or constructs in combination with insightful reasoning, and it should be emphasized that anything does not go. Kozinets (2002b) has appropriated methodological procedures and guidelines from ordinary ethnographic research to guide netnographic research. An important part of these guidelines is also applicable and helpful when conducting virtual observation although netnography builds on full member participation of the researcher and virtual observation is based on complete observation. The research procedure for netnography involves (1) making entrée, (2) collecting and analyzing data, (3) assuring trustworthy interpretation, (4) conducting ethical research, and (5) enabling cultural members to give feedback. Stages 1-4 may be used effectively to guide the conduct of virtual observation. However, the last stage involving member checks makes it impossible to adopt the virtual observation method with a strict observational approach since member check would encompass researcher participation, which in turn precludes the collection of naturally occurring talk.

3.5.1 Approaching the empirical context

This first stage in the research procedure is equivalent to what in netnographic research refers to as making entrée. Although never making a real entrée in virtual observation, since the researcher does not participate or strive to be a member of the community under study, it is

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still both relevant and important for the researcher employing virtual observation to become familiar with the community or the context where he or she carries out the observations. Otherwise it becomes hard for the researcher to form a necessary understanding and consequently to be able to give trustworthy accounts and to make credible interpretations of the discussions taking place in the empirical setting. Before collecting the data, I spent a substantial amount of time, about two months, at the beginning of 2006 getting familiar with the empirical milieu. I developed an understanding of how the website of "Hamsterpaj" works, learnt to find my way around, and finally started to put a focus on the forum part where the majority of the teenage interaction takes place, especially on the themes that contained discussions about clothing, fashion and lifestyle. I was able to observe characteristics on a more detailed level involving the various forms of interaction and the usage of certain kinds of jargon.

3.5.2 Data collection

The data was collected between March 2006 and January 2007. I frequently visited and hung out on the website during this time. Each occasion differed time-wise. Sometimes I spent several hours at a stretch and occasionally I made shorter visits. When I was observing on the forum at "Hamsterpaj" I first scanned various discussion threads to get an overall initial impression or understanding of them. If they were rich in scope, interesting and relevant in relation to the study's purpose I downloaded them on my computer, and printed them out for later and more thorough categorization and analysis. Data was selected or discarded based on the criterion if it (the particular interaction or discussion) did or did not contain postings or comments that in any way, either implicitly or explicitly, touched upon brands and branding. This selection criterion was used out of necessity. It made it possible to sort out, encircle and later interpret relevant data concerning brands from big quantities of data touching upon other topics discussed by the teenagers communicating at "Hamsterpaj."

The resulting data material, which was saved, printed, and then analyzed, contained 46 discussion threads of various lengths, generating about 6370 postings or comments made by 1650 different users/individuals, which meant an average of approximately 4 postings

per individual user. However, the number of postings was distributed among the users in a much more uneven or disproportional way compared to what the average postings per user disclose. The distribution of the postings among the members is important and relevant since it says something about users' degree of commitment to the forum which in turn has implications for its structure. The greater the number of posted comments made by an individual user, that is to say, the frequency with which a user engages in conversation on the forum, the higher the commitment he or she displays.

The structure of the "Hamsterpaj" forum displayed some characteristics common with the one conceptualized by Kozinets (1999) who divided the members of a virtual community into Insiders, Minglers, and Tourists according to individual's ties and commitment to the community. The activity on the forum, however, reflected a very similar 3-level concentric commitment structure as identified by Fox (1987) in her study of the subcultural punk style. The structure of the punk style, grounded in the various members' degree of commitment, contained hard core members at the center, soft core members in the middle, and pretenders at the periphery. The hard core members/insiders of the "Hamsterpaj" fashion forum represented only 0.6 per cent of the whole population but accounted for a fourth of the total number of collected postings. These users or members are very active and most frequently visit and participate in discussions on the forum. However, even within the hardcore/insider group, there are differences in visiting frequency and commitment. Some participate in discussions almost every day, while others take part a number of times a month. Proportionally they represent the largest share of produced postings and displayed commitments to the forum. They constitute the core around which the fashion forum revolves. The softcores/minglers represented 9 per cent of the collected population and also accounted for a fourth of the total number of collected postings. These members show less commitment to the forum compared to hard cores and only occasionally participate in the online discussions. The pretenders/tourists, the periphery members of the forum, represented 90 per cent of the entire number of users and stood for half of all postings made and recorded. The tourists only make a few visits to the forum, participating limitedly in the online discussions. They more or less enter the forum to see what is going on, to see how things work and

to obtain answers to what kind of place it is. When adding the hardcores with the softcores, their total amount of postings and number of users, 10 per cent of the collected number of users account for half of all the 6370 postings made. At the same time, the tourists/pretenders represent 90 per cent of all the users while only representing the remaining 50 per cent of all the postings. It is thus clear that there is an interesting, yet disproportional, distribution of the number of postings among the users or members of the forum, and it is obvious that different users/individuals display varying degrees of commitment to the forum.

3.5.3 Analysis and interpretation

In order to make interesting and useful interpretations of the micro level data produced in an interactional mode, it was necessary to use or develop an interpretive logic, an analysis method, that is able to connect what happens in the micro level accounts and discourses to what happens in the macro level discourses. Moreover, such an analysis method was to capture how this connection between micro level conversation and the macro level discourses is played out, how it is appropriated or handled in those micro level interactions. Such an interpretive logic is offered by the discourse analysis referring to discourse (social) psychology (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Given that knowledge and understanding are here regarded as artifacts of social communities and forms of discourse (Gergen, 1988), and that online research of communities generates a wealth of text-based data, a form of discourse analysis may be a useful interpretive tool when analyzing the data produced at the Internet site "Hamsterpaj". Discourse social psychology is a genre of discourse analysis but with a social constructionist approach, investigating how social objects, attitudes, attributions and other psychological material are constructed and transformed in people's talk-in-interactions and micro level discourse (Fairhurst, 2007). Hence, by focusing on action rather than cognition, particularly examining how language is used by people to make sense, understand, and construct the social world, discourse psychology shifts the focus from the individual to the interactions and talk between people. This makes it particularly relevant for studying virtual interactions that are continuously documented (Maclaran et al, 2004).

In addition, since discourse psychology combines a micro conversation analysis approach on talk-in-interaction with a Foucauldian perspective of discourse as systems of thought (Fairhurst, 2007), thereby connecting the micro level interactions or the talk-in-interaction with marketing and consumption phenomena in wider cultural and socio-economic structures or ideologies (Maclaran *et al*, 2004), this analysis method was found most helpful. This interpretive logic has similarities with the interpretive case method (Burawoy, 1991), which builds on the assumption that the micro level or particular case represents concrete evidence of macro level structures or cultural processes, and consequently where the analysis of accounts on the micro level may supply insights or understanding of the larger macro level societal processes. However, since discursive psychology, in contrast with the interpretive case method, is also sensitive to micro level talk-in-interaction, it enables the researcher to analyze how people in micro level interaction with others discuss, handle and appropriate the macro level discourses, which is done by drawing upon their interpretive repertoires, to construct interpretive positions, identities and representations of the world (Fairhurst, 2007). This is made explicit, practiced and executed by people in micro interactions by using language as an act in itself, employed, concretized and manifested through the production and supply of strategic linguistic devices referred to as accounts (Maclaran *et al*, 2004).

Initially, the interpretation and analysis was informed by an iterative hermeneutic circle proposed by Thompson *et al* (1994), involving a part-to-whole reading of the data material. Here, a holistic understanding was achieved by analyzing and comparing the different parts of the text in relation to the whole, and the whole in relation to the various parts. At the same time, the parts were understood in the light of the whole. I used the theoretical constructs to enrich the analytical interpretation by a constant alternation or oscillation between the theoretical perspectives and the brand discussions, playing out in the informants' micro level interactions, in a process similar to what Alvesson & Sköldberg (1994) refer to as abduction. In abduction, the researcher starts out from the empirical material but then includes theoretical constructs as a source of inspiration and to discover new patterns that improve our understanding.

As the interpretation of the micro level data developed past the initial stage containing a hermeneutic part-to-whole analysis process, it moved to the second stage involving the focus and identification of central underlying themes, which were traced to various units of the informants' micro level discourse concerning brands. These underlying themes cut across the textual content of the various discussion threads collected from the online forum at "Hamsterpaj". In the third interpretive stage the micro level discourse produced by the informants in interactions on the forum were connected and traced to prevailing macro level social and consumption discourses existing in contemporary Swedish society, where the micro level text produced by the young consumers reflected evidence of such macro level discourses. By using a relational control coding scheme for interaction analysis of organic organizational systems put forward by Courtright *et al* (1989) as an inspirational interpretive logic, I identified and conceptualized various types of interaction in which the conversations of the "Hamsterpaj" forum were played out. In such a coding system interactants jointly define their interactional positions by using three types of control moves. These are manifested and expressed in messages that attempt to define or control a situation. Instructions or orders are coded "one-up", while acceptances or requests of another interactant's definition of a situation are coded "one-down". Non-demanding, leveling moves are coded "one-across". Extensions, elaborations, or messages that continue the theme of a previous message are examples of such leveling moves. In these micro level interactions I then looked for what Potter & Wetherell (1987) refer to as accounting practices i.e. how something is warranted or made plausible in linguistic interactions with others. The accounts actually helped reveal the various and sometimes, as Thompson & Haytko (1997) put it, existing countervailing consumption discourses concerning brands. Searching for these accounts also helped me interpret how these were being used by people in their talk-in-interactions to creatively handle, resolve or bridge paradoxical views, understandings and discourses of brands and brand consumption.

The identification of accounts made it possible to analyze and interpret how the informants appropriate and reformulate the macro level discourses in their micro level interactions with each other and thereby assuming not only various interpretive and identity positions or roles,

but also together making sense of, and constructing an understanding of how brands work. The analysis process involved constant iteration between the textual content emanating from the micro level interactions between the consumers (involving accounts, various forms of interaction and roles), the existing macro social and consumption discourses, the existing research of brands, and the prior introduced theoretical constructs. The identified themes, macro discourses, accounts, and interactional roles were, thus, during the analytical process, continuously and explicitly related to the theoretical constructs presented earlier, as well as other existing and relevant research of brands and consumption.

3.5.4 Conducting ethical online research

What is often considered a bit problematic is that there has not yet emerged a clear consensus of ethically appropriate procedures for conducting qualitative online research Kozinets (2002b). This discussion among scholars about ethical concerns mostly hinges on two main points: whether online forums are to be considered as private or public sites, and what constitutes "informed consent" in cyber space. According to Eysenbach & Tell (2001) we can determine if informed consent is needed by defining whether the postings on an Internet community are private or public communications. When the community's communications are considered private, informed consent is required. The authors mean that there are three measures to estimate the level of privacy. If there is some type of registration or subscription demand for gaining access to a discussion group, most subscribers will probably consider the group or community a "private place" in cyber space. The number of real or assumed members or users of the community determines how "public" the space is perceived to be, hence the more users the more public. Third, the perception of privacy is contingent on the community's codes and norms, target audience, and aim, most often mirrored in the information files, and the frequently asked questions of the online community. In addition, informed consent is not needed when the research method only incorporates non-intrusive and passive analysis of online postings and if the empirical material is anonymized at the earliest possible stage.

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I have let these prescriptions guide the study and the data that has been collected on the online forum in order to ensure an ethical research process. At the time for the data collection, the "Hamsterpaj" website had over 300 000 members or users. In order to access the textual interactions playing out on the "Hamsterpaj" forum, which would enable a passive analysis involving only the complete observation of those interactions, no registration or subscription was needed. The aim of the "Hamsterpaj" site is to offer a place were young people, especially those of 13-20-years-old to, can hang out and spend time in cyberspace. It offers a site and a communicative platform where relevant popular cultural issues and other significant topics important for young people in their everyday life may be brought up, discussed, and be made sense of by interacting with other contemporaries or peers. It has an atmosphere of openness where the young users seem to make a point of being seen or heard by their peers or contemporaries, uploading pictures of themselves, stating their age and their location. Comparing the characteristics of "Hamsterpaj" with the guidelines proposed by Eysenbach & Tell (2001) the website appears, in addition to the fact that a passive and complete observational analysis is conducted, as a public site where no informed consent is needed. As it is a passive analysis where the researcher is a complete participant, member checks, proposed by Kozinets (2002b) as an important factor in the achievement of ethical and trustworthy online research therefore loses much of their relevance in this particular study. In order to ensure an ethical research process I also anonymized the informants by removing headers, pictures, avatars and altering the nicknames of the users posting messages and partaking in the discussions being recorded and analyzed. In addition, I contacted the founder and the editor of the "Hamsterpaj" website and got his permission to collect data from the forum.

3.5.5 Trustworthy interpretations and degrees of transferability

In most qualitative research there are, in contrast to quantitative research, no statistical calculations aimed at establishing correlations between certain stated variables, with the ambition to give an exact representation of an objective reality "out there". The trustworthiness

of interpretive qualitative research is, therefore, not, as in quantitative research, evaluated according to its validity and reliability, thus its degree of truthfulness and accuracy in its representation of the reality. Rather, qualitative research, and especially participant observation or ethnographic fieldwork should, according Wallendorf & Belk (1989), be evaluated on how it meets the five criteria of: Credibility (adequate and believable representations of the construction of the reality studied), transferability (extent to which the working hypothesis or constructs can be employed in other empirical contexts), dependability (extent to which the interpretations are constructed in a manner that avoids instability), Confirmability (ability to track a researcher's interpretation construction by following the data and other kept records), and finally integrity (the extent to which interpretation is unimpaired by lies, evasions, misrepresentations, and misinformation by the informants). The trustworthiness of interpretive qualitative research, therefore, greatly hinges on the researcher having integrity, being systematic, being well-trained in the methodology being used, and practicing high degrees of reflection (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 1994). The elaborate contextualization of the empirical context, the systematic collection and interpretation of the data generated in the online interactions on "Hamsterpaj", involving a continuous iteration and alternation between the micro level data, the theoretical constructs and prior consumer research, the macro level discourses, the underlying discovered themes, in addition to a critical, creative and reflective stance of the researcher are here to ensure a correct analysis, trustworthy research, and a credible argument developed throughout the dissertation.

A common criticism of interpretive qualitative research is that it does not allow for credible generalization, and that this is a weakness compared to quantitative research (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 1994). This, however, depends on what is considered by generalization. When referring to generalization within quantitative research, it is considered to pertain to the search for universalities on surface-level, across numerous empirical observations, and extensive empirical populations. This type of empirical generalization and the search for universalities is thought to be impossible within qualitative research since it, instead, represents in-depth investigations and analysis of a few and specific empirical observations, which then make it close to impossible to focus

on finding patterns in extensive empirical observations or populations. Silverman (2001), however, maintains that it is possible to generalize from a few observations if one assumes the more theoretical logic of qualitative research instead of the more statistical logic of quantitative research, where the generalizability should be connected to theoretical propositions and constructs, instead of to empirical populations or universes. Within qualitative research it is possible to make a theoretical generalization rather than, as within quantitative research, to make an empirical generalization.

In interpretive qualitative research one usually speaks of transferability when the researcher, by studying individual cultural phenomenon or certain particularities, may generate theoretical constructs, models or a theory, which then may be conceptually transferable to other research areas or research contexts. The discussion of transferability is important for the purpose of this study, which is to advance our micro theoretical knowledge of how consumers form an understanding of how brands work in society and the nature of that understanding. This advanced theoretical knowledge will involve constructs and even a model that may be transferred from consumers' understanding of brands to other people's understanding of other cultural, social or consumption phenomena existing in the world. Studying how teenagers or young consumers interact and talk about brands in a natural but online setting thus enables me to develop constructs or models that help researchers within the social sciences to conceptualize how people construct an understanding of other social and cultural phenomena besides brands. It is, thus, possible, from this qualitative and interpretive research perspective, to transfer or theoretically generalize the findings of this study to other empirical contexts or areas within the social sciences. However, from a quantitative standpoint it would be argued that my findings are not (empirically) generalizable, since the sample or the population of empirical observations, the number of individuals being studied, does not constitute an adequate representation of the reality "out there". It would then not be possible to identify universalities and generalize beyond the actual group of people being studied, the teenagers, and to capture and generate a truthful and correct representation concerning all consumers' understanding of brands in Sweden. Exactly how far my findings and the generated theoretical constructs may be transferred is hard to predict and is perhaps of lesser

importance. Hopefully, though, they can serve as valuable theoretical tools for other researchers when they investigate phenomena and topics in different empirical contexts or areas within the social sciences.

Another important issue for this type of interpretive qualitative study is how, or to what extent, the particular characteristics of the group of consumers studied here has affected the nature of textual conversations that have been collected, analyzed, and which finally generated the findings of this study. This is very hard to deal with and it does not lend itself to clear answers, rather it leaves us mostly to speculation. This insight may, however, not only aid in noticing topics that seem especially particular to the group of research subjects but also to maintain a critical and reflective stance towards the data being analyzed throughout the investigation. This adds to the overall trustworthiness of the analysis and the subsequent findings.

3.6 Methodological tradeoffs

As with all methods, the one used here, a complete observational and unobtrusive netnography, has advantages and disadvantages, strengths and weaknesses. The major advantage of this method, which was also the main reason for using it, is that it enables the capture of rich qualitative data produced in interactions between young people without the interference of the researcher. The data obtained and analyzed is produced in, from the informants' perspective, a natural situation or setting. Some might argue that cyberspace or the Internet is not a natural setting, but I claim that interacting and communicating via forums on the Internet is as natural for contemporary teenagers as it is for them to chat, talk or converse in such places as the school yard. Studying and observing the forum on "Hamsterpaj" as a complete observant therefore enabled me to obtain naturally occurring talk produced by Swedish young people in, for them, a natural environment. At the same time, the actual interactions playing out on the forum presented themselves as textual interactions, which made it possible to make fruitful and interesting interpretations. Collecting the online interactions, therefore, meant gathering the informants' ready-made text. The textual accounts supplied by the online interactions could thus be downloaded and then printed without being listened

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through via a tape recorder and then transcribed, which is the customary process in most traditional qualitative research methods. This allowed me be more time-efficient when collecting and printing the data that was analyzed later.

However these strengths or advantages of virtual observation also have their downside. Being a complete observer collecting naturally occurring text or talk means that although users on the forum may express some feelings or sentiments by posting smiley's with various face expressions, the researcher misses out recording most of the informants' body language, sentiment or mood, which is possible in other traditional qualitative research methods such as interviews or ethnographies. Since there is no interaction between the researcher and informant in this type of unobtrusive netnography it is not possible either to ask the informant follow-up questions, to ask them to elaborate on or develop certain comments being made. It is, therefore, hard to ask the informants questions that the researcher thinks are particularly relevant or interesting, steering the informants in certain directions. This means that since the researcher receives and obtains an already produced or constructed text, without having interacted with the informants and therefore is not able to affect its construction, all interpretation of the text is left to the researcher alone. In addition, since a strict observational approach was employed in this study, it cannot be denied that a complete participant role would have enabled me as a researcher to probably obtain an even better understanding of the research context under study, which had maybe resulted in even more fruitful interpretations.

The reason for still choosing this type of netnography as a method is, of course, that the advantages are considered to exceed or surpass the disadvantages. It should be noted that the main focus here lies on the actual text or the micro level discourse of brands being produced in the online micro interactions, and not so much the personal characteristics and life story or narrative of each informant, which is often given prominence in qualitative research interviews. It is, instead, the position each user occupies in the social structure of the forum at "Hamsterpaj" that is considered important and therefore awarded attention. The disadvantage of the researcher not being able to interact with the informants is, therefore, somewhat lessened. The fundamental and

deciding factor for the choice of method here is that it was able to capture the naturally occurring micro level interactions between consumers concerning brands, in, for the informants, a natural setting. This, in turn, makes it possible to advance our micro theoretical knowledge of how consumers construct an understanding of brands and what this understanding entails. This is why it was chosen as the most credible method in favor of other more traditional qualitative research methods.

3.7 Summary

In this study, I have used an unobtrusive and complete observant form of the online research method netnography in order to obtain the naturally occurring micro level talk-in-interaction between young people concerning brands. The website where I collected and observed young consumers' micro level interactions concerning brands is called "Hamsterpaj" and had at the time of the data collection over 300 000 members. The data collected contained textual material composed of about 6350 comments posted in 46 different discussion/conversation threads between 1650 individual members/users. The data was collected between March 2006 and January 2007. It was analyzed by initially using a hermeneutic part-to-whole process, then moving to the identification of central and underlying themes emerging in the micro level talk, and finally connecting these themes to macro level social and consumption discourses. Discourse social psychology and accounts were very helpful tools in this final analysis stage.

4 Brands and consumption from a youth culture perspective

To better describe the empirical context, and to prepare for a clearer and more extensive analysis further on in this dissertation, I will now describe in greater detail the life world of the research subjects and include some interesting theoretical concepts concerning youth culture, teenage behavior and their links to consumption. This section is therefore to be regarded as a theoretical chapter dealing specifically with the actors in the empirical context. However, I would like to stress that this dissertation is not primarily a work within the field of youth culture research, or cultural studies. Instead, youth culture and cultural study concepts are used here to better contextualize the empirical material and the empirical subjects, and to contribute to a better understanding of a research purpose in the field of consumer research.

4.1 Youth culture and teenagers as a consuming segment

Youth is a socially constructed category, generally referring to what is considered young and new and therefore strongly connected to the future, being culturally determined in the discursive interplay with visual, musical, and verbal symbols and signs (Fornäs, 1995). Youth is often considered as a product of the development of the Western modern society (Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006), where the concept of the teenager is thought to have emerged in the post-World War 2 era of the 1950s and 1960s as a result of the economic growth during that period, when the rise of the middle-class young consumer generated a new, expanding, affluent and lucrative consumer group in its own right for corporations to attend to (Willis, 1990). Since these teenage middle-class consumers were relieved of wage-earner responsibilities their identity as a social category became inextricably connected to free time, fun, and hedonic consumption, thereby representing the

emerging popular culture of the masses. Companies immediately seized the opportunity to capitalize on this new and quickly growing consumer segment. Marketers developed and employed marketing strategies for products and brands sensitive to the particular characteristics of this specific group of consumers. Their increased independence from parents granting them greater autonomy concerning the purchase and consumption of consumer goods and brands, a greater influence on their discretional income, as well as on the household purchasing decisions, has made teens and tweens a multi-billion-dollar market for which companies continuously struggle for market shares (Siegel, *et al* 2001). As a consequence, young consumers are targeted as an important and profit generating market segment by companies and are heavily affected by commercialization and consumerism. Teenagers are regarded both as a lucrative current market but are also viewed as the crucial future market since adolescence is the life stage when individuals tend to develop the identity they will draw on as adults, forming preferences and tastes that will possibly be life-long. However, despite being targeted heavily by marketers and their elaborate branding activities, teenagers are not to be regarded as dupes, entirely manipulated by the media and marketing. Brands, products and styles marketed to teenagers repeatedly fail because "the kids" do not think they are "cool" (Milner, 2004). Marketers even praise the endlessly innovating youth culture as a generator of future market growth and profit (Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006).

4.2 The life world of the young

The process of evolving from a child to a young person or teenager, and then to an adult, is not only a physiological phase of development beginning with puberty or at a certain age and ending when the body has stopped growing. It is also a psychological phase in life spanning various phases of adolescence and post-adolescence of a social category, framed by various institutions, and in rituals such as confirmation, graduation, marriage, coming of age, leaving home, forming a family, and finding a profession (Fornäs, 1995). The youth phase is often experienced by teenagers (and by their parents too) to be fairly

complicated and involving a high degree of frustration, which is really not that strange given the conditions and circumstances of their situation. First of all, although having more autonomy than younger children, they have, in comparison to adults, very limited or no economic or political power to influence their situation and the environment they are finding themselves in. Secondly, they need to handle the somewhat paradoxical expectations and attitudes coming from the adult world. Concurrently as they are supposed to behave as grown ups, they are often treated as inferior citizens who are refused the right to buy alcohol, to watch adult movies, are subjected to the control of parents, school teachers, police, and petty clerks who want to check their IDs when renting movies and going to nightclubs (Milner, 2006). In addition, they need to deal with the somewhat paradoxical expectations and attitudes coming from the adult world, where they are often regarded in a positive light, associated with the new, experimentation with novelties, and future hopes, but are also associated with the dangers of future, the degeneration and decay of values, norms and moral (Fornäs, 1995; Ziehe, 1992). It is then not that strange that young people find it difficult to answer the question of who they are, as the answer requires forming an identity of their own (Melucci, 1992), and that in this process they tend to display anti-establishment views, protest against authority and act rebelliously (Milner, 2006).

4.3 Youth style and consumption

One major way by which young people try to resolve the identity confusion of being regarded as adults, but at the same time lacking the autonomy and power to make decisions that impact their life world, and the ability to handle the paradoxical expectations and attitudes regarding them, is by creating various types of styles. From a modernistic perspective on youth style, mainly supplied by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the Birmingham School, style is mainly understood as a manifestation and expression of working-class youth subcultures. Arising at the intersection between the parent culture and the mediating institutions of the hegemonic mainstream (Clark *et al*, 1976), and being constructed and expressed in young people's leisure sphere, between school and work, these styles

provide young people with an identity by sub-culturally resisting a modern, hegemonic and class-based society (Clark, 1976). Styles provide the opportunity for young people to express and create autonomy and difference from parents at the same time as retaining identification with the parents (Cohen, 1972). This autonomy and difference from the parents and the dominant culture is manifested by the deviation and resistance to what is considered normal within the dominant order of the mainstream culture. Members of the Punk style, for example, engage in the do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic where young people themselves design or redesign their outfits, often including provoking symbols/signs such as the swastika in order to generate disgust and distaste among members of the hegemonic and mainstream culture. Consequently, since the hegemonic culture and its ideology are made up of symbols and signs, resisting by expressing deviation to hegemony, therefore, means making subcultural resistance at a sign/symbol level. As styles are also made up or constructed by the assembly and consumption of various signs, mainly communicating through conspicuous consumer goods, it is by joining these that young people, resist the hegemonic and parent culture, and are able to form an identity of their own (Hebdige, 1979).

However, this modernistic perspective on youth culture and youth styles propagated by CCCS at the Birmingham School has been subjected to criticism. It is claimed that their modern perspective lacks the sensitivity to the pluralistic and shifting subcultural experiences and styles of an increasingly postmodern society (Bennet, 1999). Such a society has been claimed to generate a postmodern consumer culture symbolized by fragmentation, hyperreality (social reality is constituted by hype or simulation and is constructed by signs devoid of a deeper meaning as these have been decoupled from the objects they represent), decentring of the subject, paradoxical juxtapositions, emphasis on style/form instead of content, and the reversal of production and consumption (Firat & Shultz, 1997). Individuals are, in contrast to modern thought, no longer understood to possess a stable, essential and continuous self-identity. Rather, social life is symbolized by people's membership in a multiplicity of overlapping and temporal postmodern neo-tribes in which the roles people play become sources of identity that serve as masks of temporary identifications (Maffesoli, 1996). In a postmodern society and consumer culture of shifting images where

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there is no single lifestyle or no sense of being to which individuals have to commit (Firat & Venkatesch, 1995), a young individual would not only unproblematically and comfortably switch identity roles but could switch between and become a member of several different styles (Kjeldgaard, 2009). Young people in Britain experiencing the "rave" dance phenomenon have, for example, been found to engage in this type of fragmented and compartmentalized switching behavior where the responsible working role, complete with the pressures of everyday life, is abandoned at the weekend in favor of the hedonist and self-expressive "rave" dancing style (Goulding *et al*, 2002). From a postmodern perspective on styles young people do not, as is proposed by a modernistic perspective, gain only one essential and consistent identity by resisting and deviating from a hegemonic culture and a class-based society. Rather, young people assume various and fragmented identities derived from the membership and switch between different available styles. In this way individuals may have, assume and display several possible selves in various situations (Markus & Nurious, 1986).

4.3.1 Constructing, perpetuating and enacting styles

What the two different perspectives on youth style have in common, however, is that consumer goods and consumption practices are considered crucial not only for the formation and maintenance of youth styles, but also for young people's style membership and style switching. It is the very activity of stylization - the active organization of objects with activities and outlooks - that constructs an organized group identity in the form or shape of a distinctive and consistent way of being in the world (Clark, 1976). Clothing brands, music bands and other leisure venues serve as material bases enacting the different style codes, constructing an assemblage of material resources, a style repertoire, which could be used as props to convey and maintain style membership and identity (Elliot & Davis, 2006). Young people are, therefore, in their daily lives not only constantly occupied with what clothes to wear, how to fix their hair, what cars to drive, and what music to listen to (Milner, 2006), but they are also constantly searching for suitable consumer objects to be appropriated for their style creation, maintenance and membership (Hebdige, 1979).

This search and appropriation of consumer objects are not just carried out randomly by young people, but rather intentionally and consciously. The style and its members only choose and appropriate the objects and commodities, in either their adapted, re-signified or intrinsic form, that are considered to be homologous with the style's and the subculture's focal concerns, its group structure, its activities, its collective self- image, and if the members are able to see their central values held reflected in those particular objects/symbols (Hall *et al*, 1976). When being appropriated by a subcultural style, these consumer objects are recontextualized and placed in another symbolic ensemble, which often subverts their previous meanings, opening up the society to new and perhaps covertly oppositional readings of those objects (Hebdige, 1979). This subverting process of meaning is often understood as bricolage, which is a construct developed in anthropology, representing the process where artifacts, objects, or elements of a culture are used in various kinds of improvised and creative combinations, forming a symbolic ensemble of objects that generates new meanings within and between those objects (Hebdige, 1979; Thompsson & Haytko, 1997). This type of phenomenon has also been referred to as grounded aesthetics (Willis, 1990), which pertains to the symbolic work that teenagers perform within the realm of the common culture (cf. Bourdieu, 1984), encompassing the ways in which young people use, humanize, decorate, and invest with meaning their common and immediate life spaces and social practices, especially in relation to the consumption of conspicuous goods. The meaning subversion or re-signification of (consumer) objects may be executed in different ways by the style and its members. One is to inflect already established meanings by blending things and objects borrowed from one meaning system into a different code generated by the subculture itself, manifested in the subcultural use of those things and objects. Another is to modify by adding things to what had earlier been used or created by a different social group. A third is to isolate, exaggerate or intensify given meanings and thereby altering them (Clark, 1976). If youth styles, despite their efforts to find appropriate and subvert certain commodities or consumer objects into the right meanings suitable for the style's identity and meanings, fail to find the right symbols and objects to do so, they sometimes even perform symbolic plundering (Hebdige, 1979). This means that one style snatches or steals subcultural symbol/s considered sacred by another style, contaminating

them (through usage and reformulation) with new and unfavorable meanings, rendering those symbols inappropriate as markers and constructers of the original group's style.

One of the most crucial factors for the creation and perpetuation of a style, is its meaning and identity, to maintain its originality or authenticity, both in relation to the hegemonic culture and to other styles. Otherwise, it will dilute and lose most of its distinctive features and thereby it's identity-forming and identity-supplying function. Therefore subcultures and styles are often characterized by orderliness and a social structure, based on various individuals' levels of commitment to the style and its ethos, leading to a clear distinction between hardcores, softcores, and pretenders (Fox, 1987), originals and hangers-on (Hebdige, 1979), in addition to authentic vs. inauthentic members (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Muniz & Guinn, 2001).

However it is difficult for a style to remain the same and to stay authentic or original for a long time (Hebdige, 1979). It has even been considered by researchers to be a pointless strategy for individuals to define themselves as young by creating and being a member in subcultural styles (Ziehe, 1992). This is often explained by the notoriously ambiguous relationship existing between spectacular styles and the various industries which service and exploit them (Hebdige, 1979). Marketing departments often seek to capitalize on young peoples' style creativity by using marketing research tools such as "cool-hunting" (Klein, 1999), in order to capture the newest styles and trends, incorporating and refurbishing them in their offerings and ultimately selling them back to the young people who, from the beginning, created those styles and trends. The formation and spread of new styles is therefore inseparably tangled up with the process of production, packaging, commercialization and publicity, which, in a longer perspective, inescapably leads to the dilution of the subculture's subversive power. Immediately after the original innovations signifying a style are translated into commodities and consumer goods, being made publicly and generally available, they become what Hebdige (1979) defines as "frozen." The style and its signs and symbols become codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise the minute they are removed form their private context by the small entrepreneurs and big fashion interests that

produce them on a mass scale. Youth culture styles, therefore, perhaps start by issuing symbolic challenges, but they must inescapably end by founding new series of conventions through the creation of new commodities, new industries or the rejuvenation of old ones. It is therefore hard to maintain any absolute distinction between commercial exploitation on the one hand and creativity/originality/authenticity of a style on the other, although these categories are often empathically opposed in the value systems of most styles subcultures.

4.4 Summary

The constructs presented in this chapter about youth, style, consumption and the market emphasize and explicate the strong relationship existing between these categories. It describes how youth and their leisure sphere have always had a strong link to the marketing apparatus. They explain how consumer objects and symbols, such as brands, are important to consumers when forming youth styles, providing them with identity resources that aid them to resolve their identity issues. The young individuals are either considered to obtain one essential and continuous identity by the creation and membership of a subcultural style that resists and deviates from the hegemonic culture and a class-based modern society, or are considered to have several and fragmented identities by joining and switching between several styles or various social groups. In each case, consumer objects and consumption practices are important for the creation and perpetuation of these styles, which often appropriate and subvert the meanings of suitable consumer objects by putting them in their symbolic ensemble. Since youth culture is inextricably connected to the marketing apparatus that capitalizes and commercializes new and localized styles and trends that from the beginning were invented by the young, it is hard, even impossible for a style to remain original and authentic for a longer time.

The previously presented perspectives and constructs concerning youth and style are relevant since they provide a lens that is sensitive to, and help me discover and identify, the important nuances and subtleties of my research subjects' brand discussions. Moreover, they aid me in my

study of the impact the particular characteristics of my research subjects have on the interactions taking place and the knowledge/conceptions that are actually formed in these interactions.

5 Components and characteristics of the empirical milieu – a youth perspective

This section is to be regarded as an introductory part of the empirical study. A description is given of the nature of the empirical context, where the informants find themselves in their daily life; which, despite its cyber cultural setting, has links to and reflects the brand symbols and youth styles existing in Swedish consumer culture. This part or section of the empirical study involves the description of some of the most frequently debated (see the empirical material presented later on) brand symbols in the forthcoming empirical material and the nature of the various youth styles elaborately discussed on the online forum. The descriptions conveyed here are put together from material that has been collected from Internet encyclopedias such as Wikipedia and "Susning.nu", in addition to various company home pages. It gives the reader some idea of the meaning of the brands and youth styles that re-appears in the online brand interactions.

The informants' discussions involve frequent name-dropping of brands, where the knowledge formed involves associations and links made continuously to many different brand symbols and various styles. Since several of the brands and styles referred to in the later sections of this thesis are specific for Swedish consumer culture it is crucial to understand and convey how their meanings are constructed by various cultural actors. This will enable readers in countries outside Sweden to make better sense of the forthcoming interpretations of the young people's discussions about brands.

5.1 Brand symbols in the empirical context

Swedish consumer culture embraces an immense selection of various brand symbols, and it is, of course, impossible to give a proper description of each of them within the limits of this study. I will, therefore, focus on the brand symbols that frequently appear in my empirical material. These are brands and products that are consumed in public, such as clothes, watches, shoes, perfumes, and glasses, often referred to as fashion brands. This wide-reaching span of consumer symbols encompasses both global/multinational brands, but also specifically Swedish brands. More extensive attention and descriptions will be awarded brands that are Swedish, since they and the specifics of the Swedish consumer culture may not be that familiar to a reader from another country.

Global life style and streetwear brands such as (1)Nike, (2)Converse, (3)Adidas, (4)Puma, and (5)Levis are significant brand symbols in the Swedish consumer culture, frequently discussed and debated in the empirical material. However, there are also more expensive and upscale (at least in a Swedish context) multinational fashion brands such as (6)Lacoste, (7)Fred Perry (FP), (8)Stone Island (SI) as well as the classic and purely luxury brands such as (9)Burberry (10)Gucci, (11)Prada, (12)Dolce Gabbana (D&B) that are important symbols in the Swedish consumer culture. These are highly debated in the interactions between the young informants, as shown in the data reported later.

(1)　　(2)　　(3)　　(4)　　(5)

(6)　　(7)　　(8)　　(9)

(10)　　(11)　　(12)

Although their image or meaning is not exactly the same across countries, the multinational brands listed above are familiar to many

members of the global consumer culture. However the Swedish brands occurring in my informants' interactive talk are less known to the consumers of a global consumer culture and an international audience.

5.1.1 Tiger of Sweden

When looking up the brand Tiger in the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, the information conveyed is that Tiger is a Swedish fashionable ready-made clothing brand predominantly for men, and that the company was founded in the Swedish town of Uddevalla in 1903 by two tailors, but was bought up in 2003 by the Danish firm, IC Company.[3] On the Tiger's homepage the brand communicates that it makes clothes for men who are interested in fashion but who do not wish to dress up. Using materials ranging from updated tweed to retro fabrics such as flannel, they try to convey the hallmark of the brand as "masculine perfection." The perfect fit is to be developed from modernistic and traditional functionality in combination with attention paid to the importance of details. Tiger draws on its long and traditional history when building their image, emphasizing its heritage in the authentic quality craftsmanship that is associated with traditional tailoring to differentiate from other brands. According to the firm this image of tradition enables the brand and the fashion is represents to appear less superficial and short-lived, and its trendiness is more timeless; people may wear the Tiger clothes for several years.[4] Some time ago, however, Tiger started to tap into more streetwear clothing, increasing their exposure in the market, to some extent abandoning the making of more traditional, upscale, fashion-oriented and tailor-made clothing. This did not, however, pass unnoticed by consumers, and the informants of this study, which is something that will be illustrated later on in the empirical chapters.

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[3] www.wikipedia.org 11-06-2007
[4] www.tigerofsweden.com 11-06-2007

5.1.2 JL (J Lindeberg)

The Swedish online encyclopedia "Susning.nu" refers to J. Lindeberg as the clothing brand created by the Swedish designer Johan Lindeberg.[5] Wikipedia claims that the brand was initially marketed and positioned foremost by the Swedish golf star Jesper Parnevik who allegedly is a friend of Johan and who serves as a celebrity endorser for the brand. Consequently, the brand has been strongly associated with golf, a sport which conveys particular connotations and a certain ambience. However, during the last years the brand has captured the interest of, and become increasingly popular among many teenagers. Lately the company has not been doing very well financially due to conflicts between important stockholders and the founder, Johan Lindeberg, which has jeopardized the development of the company. Through a new issue of stocks in 2007 the venture capitalist firm Proventus seized control of the company, where Johan has been given the position as "independent director of creativity." [6]

5.1.3 WeSC

In Wikipedia, WeSC (We are the Superlative Conspiracy), or We, is a Swedish clothing brand focusing on streetwear with strong connections

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[5] www.susning.nu 11-07-2007
[6] www.wikipedia.org 11-07-2007

to the Swedish skateboard scene.[7] According to "Susning.nu" the company was founded in the Swedish town of Örebro on January 7, 2001 by avid skateboarders and snowboarders.[8] We (the brand) has, according to Wikipedia, in a short period of time become one of Sweden's most successful brands within the fashion industry, both nationally and internationally, with stores in Tokyo, Beverly Hills, Munich and New York. Wikipedia conveys the information that the brand initially became known through its extensive use of celebrity endorsement or celebrity sponsoring where they got several Swedish music bands (e.g. Timbuktu, Millencollin and Looptroop), musicians and skaters to wear their brand. These sponsors are by the company called "We-activists" and also include actors such as Jason Lee, Peter Stormare, Mikael Persbrandt, as well as well-known and international skaters such as Chad Robertson and Jerry Hsu[9]. A We-activist is, according to the company, someone who is extremely good at what they do, world famous or totally unknown, but they need to have a "streetwise" mentality, choosing his or her own path. The We-activist is an informal ambassador who is supposed to fly the flag of the brand in a variety of subcultures such as skate, music, film, and art. The company means that WeSC is a street fashion brand for intellectual slackers, addressing people with awareness, regardless of race, religion or financial background. The brand is constructed as having its roots in the skateboard culture, but delivers "life after skate", which is a more developed style that also targets people outside the skateboard community, but still shares its values. The particular "We-feeling" and community feeling in skateboard culture is supposed to be an ever present important key element in day-to-day operations.[10] It is, however, interesting that WeSC lately have joined forces with J. Lindeberg (JL) in their branding activities by co-branding their logos (We/JL) on various products. For some reason the two brands want to be paired up and strongly associated with each other.

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[7] www.wikipedia.org 11-07-2007
[8] www.wesc.com 11-07-2007
[9] www.wikipedia.org 11-07-2007
[10] www.wesc.com 11-07-2007

5.1.4 Cheap Monday

According to Wikipedia, Cheap Monday is predominantly a Swedish jeans brand, which was created by Örjan Andersson and Adam Friberg, opening its sales during March 2004 when the tight denim jeans with the characteristic scull logo hit the market. Initially, the jeans had a very tight fit and the brand has been associated with an alternative music style. Today the brand does not only sell jeans but their product selection includes everything from shoes to sweaters.[11] According to the company homepage, the founder of the company identified a need for cheaper, but still fashionable, jeans. Their idea to offer customers fashion at an extremely good price (about half the price of other fashionable jeans) has made the brand successful. The company's ambition is to position Cheap Monday alongside more expensive brands in the "right" stores in order to create clothes that compete with high-end brands both in attitude, at fashion-level, as well as in quality. With a strong idea on how to present the brand, without using traditional marketing, Cheap Monday can, according to its website, now be found in 28 countries and in 1000 stores all over the world. With distributors and agents in USA, Europe, Japan, Australia, Canada and the Middle East, Cheap Monday is now ready to take the next leap as an international brand.[12]

5.1.5 Acne

The company website informs us that Acne is a multi-division company that was founded in Stockholm in 1996, with operations within

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[11] www.wikipedia.org 11-07-2007
[12] www.cheapmonday.com 11-07-2007

advertising, graphic design, Internet games and TV-production. Acne has the ambition to create and develop products of their own in addition to helping other firms to build their brands. As an outcome of the firm's creative abilities, the founding pillars of the jeans division was formed in 1997 when one hundred pairs of jeans were designed and handed out to family, friends and clients. Soon enough, a number of boutiques and stores picked up the characteristic jeans with raw denim and bright-red stitching. Ever since then the firm's home page states that Acne Jeans' Creative Director, Jonny Johansson, has worked with a skilful design team to create a strong identity for the brand. Acne Jeans' ambition is to unite innovative jeans styles with a flexible wardrobe, encompassing everything from basic cotton T-shirts to tailored jackets to luxurious accessories and shoes. Although each particular collection has a concept of its own, the brand's aim is that every piece can be worn separately and be naturally mixed with other brands. By means of the design of functional and simple clothes, Acne Jeans has the ambition to create a modern framework for individuality.[13] Wikipedia means that Acne's collections have a sterile, yet new-creating style, possessing particular features of "Swedish fashion", making collections for both men and women, but focusing on consumers between 18-30-years-old.[14]

5.1.6 Nudie

Wikipedia communicates that Nudie Jeans is a Swedish jeans company with its headquarters in Gothenburg[15]. The company conveys on their website that they regard themselves as a true jeans brand sharing the same spirit and attitude as music, not pursuing short-term trends and, receiving their inspiration from rock bands and rock music reflecting everyday life far from glamour and catwalks. The brand has the

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[13] www.acnejeans.com 11-08-2007
[14] www.wikipedia.org 11-08-2007
[15] www.wikipedia.org 11-08-2007

philosophy that jeans are more than merely a piece of clothing. Nudie aims at not only designing jeans just to fulfil a function or a need but to become a part of people's dreams, creating jeans with a natural built-in attitude.[16]

5.1.7 H&M (Hennes & Mauritz)

Hennes & Mauritz AB, abbreviated H&M, is according to Wikipedia, a Swedish retailer (listed on the stock market) within the ready-made clothing industry that designs, markets and sells their products in more than 28 countries across the globe.[17] H&M convey, via their webpage, that their mission is "Fashion and quality at the best price" which is to be achieved by offering a wide and varied assortment of clothes, underwear, shoes, accessories, and cosmetics for women, men, teenagers and children. H&M offers a wide and extensive assortment so that everybody may find their own personal style. The collections are therefore created to cater to everybody who is fashion oriented, thus to a wide customer segment with the aim of satisfying several different preferences and needs.[18] Wikipedia informs us that during recent years H&M has received a lot of attention for its co-operation with famous designers and popstars. Karl Lagerfeld made a collection for H&M in 2004, Stella McCartney in 2005, Viktor & Rolf in 2006, and Roberto Cavalli in 2007; all were a success for H&M. In addition, Wikipedia conveys that the famous popstar, Madonna has, started a longer co-operation with company, and just before her "Confession Tour" in the summer of 2006 she, together with H&M, issued a specially designed track suit, and during the spring of 2007 the collection M personally designed by Madonna herself was issued by the company.

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[16] www.nudiejeans.com 11-08-2007
[17] www.wikipedia.org 11-08-2007
[18] www.hm.com 11-06-2007

5.1.8 Filippa K

According to Wikipedia, Filippa K is the name of a Swedish clothing brand founded in 1993 by the fashion designer Filippa Knutson. Filippa K allegedly has its own stores in Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Germany, Belgium and Holland, but the brand is also sold in a further 700 stores and boutiques in 17 countries across the globe.[19] The firm's homepage conveys that the philosophy of Filippa K is based on the concepts of simplicity, style and quality. These are to be used as guidelines for the operations, for the look and feel of fashion, the ambience, and the design of stores, the nature of the shows, and the photographic artistry of the ads. Filippa K aims at making distinctive fashion for modern urban people with personal integrity and an eye for good design who are confident enough to be sophisticated yet curious enough to be fashionable, by combining timeless simplicity with contemporary edge. The firm celebrates the beauty of simple lines, a gentle touch and perfect balance. The design is supposed to be clean, the materials subtle and the minimalist details of their clothes is meant to instil a strong sense and feeling of purpose and beauty.[20]

5.2 Examples of various youth styles in the Swedish milieu

Style plays an important part in the everyday life of young people, as suggested by Hebdige (1979), and is evident in my forthcoming empirical accounts of the brand discussions produced in the young informants' interactions. Therefore, in order to enrich the understanding of my material a description is required of some of the youth styles existing in the Swedish context that are discussed in relation to brands by the young informants of this study. I will

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[19] www.wikipedia.org 11-08-2007
[20] www.filippa-k.com 11-08-2007

therefore try to delineate and describe some of the most common and available youth styles for teenage consumers to adopt in contemporary Sweden. As showed by Hebdige (1979), certain styles do not exist forever, and if they stay around for longer periods their meaning may change over time, they even tend to build on, and be developed from each other, rendering them particularly contemporary and a reflection or a production of the society at a point in time. When studying and delineating the meaning of some of the relevant youth styles, it is necessary to use non-academic sources such as Wikipedia and "Susning.nu" that are able to capture and convey these contemporary and changing meanings.

One of the youth styles frequently appearing in the empirical material is "Fjortis", which is one of several styles existing in contemporary Swedish society. "Susning.nu" refers to "Fjortis" as a disparaging word or sign for someone, often in their younger teens or puberty who acts immaturely, insecurely, and naïvely without realizing it her- or himself, but will emphasis deny that they do. The "fjortis", though, uses every opportunity to show how mature, confident and adult he/she is. The actual word "fjortis" refers to fourteen years but is also frequently used when describing both younger and older persons with similar behavior. Consequently "fjortis" is not just an age but a lifestyle. Concepts such as being "cool" or "in," "to have a life," and to be "normal" are constructed and conveyed by "Susning.nu" as central to the "fjortis." These concepts and their content, however, constantly change since "Fjortisar" (plural form) are easily affected. What is considered in or cool is decided by weekly magazines, tabloids, soap operas, peer pressure, and advertising.[21] Wikipedia constructs the meaning of the "Fjortis" style as a relentless experimentation with clothes, drug abuse, and the excessive use of make up, very bad behavior, use of bad language, and bad relations with adults, friends and family. "Fjortisar" are usually attracted to very cheerful, sickly-sweet and catchy pop songs that most other people would consider garbage.[22]

"Popparna" or *"Poppare"* refer to a particular dress and music style among young people in Sweden. "Susning.nu" conveys that many of these "Poppare" listen to indie pop music and identify with certain

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[21] www.susning.nu 11-09-2007
[22] www.wikipedia.org 11-09-2007

Swedish performers and pop bands such as Broder Daniel, Håkan Hellström, The Ark, Kent, and Lars Winnerbeck. Converse shoes, pantyhose, black make up, scarves (the type used in Palestine by Palestinians), often together with left wing political sympathies critical to capitalism and global brands, are according to "Susning.nu" the distinguishing characteristics of the young people who have adopted the "Poppar" style. This group could easily be confused with *Indiekidsen"* or in English; the Indie kids, since the difference between the styles is so small and much because "poppare" also listen to indie pop music. "Indikidsen" usually go around in groups of four of five people. Everybody looks similar and it is almost impossible to tell the difference between girls and boys. Their aim is to be independent and autonomous, at the same time as they want to appear as fragile as possible.[23]

"Estetare" is another youth style existing in contemporary Swedish society. The word could be directly translated to English as Esthetics which refers to the individuals who studies at the "Estet" program, the Esthetics program at the Swedish senior high school. An "Estetare" is according to "Susning.nu" a person who has esthetic characteristics, such as an artist, a dancer, or a musician.[24]

"Emo" is also a style appearing in my data. Wikipedia describes "Emo" as a style originating from the rock influenced music style "Emo" or Emocore, that emerged in the middle of 1980s as a blend of hard core and punk music. "Emo" stands for emotional, thus referring to "Emo" hardcore with lyrics focusing more on emotions than on politics. According to Wikipedia the hallmark and foundation of "Emo" is the emotional perspective of the music where there is an emotion between every drum and riff, an emotion that not necessarily needs to be negative. The vocals are shrill and sometimes whispering, not angry but devout and desperate, and always very emotional. During the 1990s the clothing style of Emo-individuals varied extensively between baggy clothes and very tight outfits, however most often they displayed band-shirts with screen prints worn and bought at concerts. During recent years "Emo" has become increasingly popular receiving more attention from the media and has been more associated with the clothing style

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[23] www.susning.nu 11-09-2007
[24] www.susning.nu 11-12-2007

Fashioncore, which includes tight clothes, often black tight jeans from the brand Cheap Monday, belts with rivets, tight band t-shirts, and black or red and white striped sweaters and shirts. Wikipedia reports that Emo-individuals often wear flat textile shoes of the brand Converse or thin/tight skate shoes from Vans. They often have coal-black hair, sometimes mixed with other conspicuous colours and a long side fringe covering half the face. The eyes are usually brushed with black, pink or red eye shadow with an X (standing for straight edge) painted beside the left eye.[25]

Punk and punk style also emerge frequently in the informants' discussions. "Susning.nu" claims that the Punk style is generally linked to the clothing style of people listening to punk music, affiliated to the particular music style punk.[26] Wikipedia conveys that Punk emerged from the beginning in New York and broke through with the American band Ramones in the middle of the 1970s. The name of the genre emanates according to Wikipedia from the American word punk, which is slang for something that is worthless or no good. The punk music is uncomplicated, noisy and aggressive and it quickly spread to Great Britain, becoming associated with the band Sex Pistols, taking on more political and provoking characteristics than its American counterpart, much due to Britain's stricter class society and traditional values. In Britain it developed into something more than just a music genre. It developed into a subculture of its own causing disgust among the public through shocking and obscene behavior, which was exactly what it wanted.[27] The idea was (and still is) to provoke by using shocking symbols of anarchy and fascism. The main traits of the punk style are, according to Wikipedia, constructed to involve sensational and conspicuous hairstyles, often with dyed hair in bright colours, boots, a leather jacket with rivets and scribbled band names. Since the 1980s, the style has, however, had several revivals and numerous sub factions have been formed. Contemporary factions of the punk subculture have various clothing habits, although there are often crossovers between the different subgroups, in terms of style. One of the elements in every form of punk fashion is though a T-shirt with a band logo on it. Punk style clothing has in general always centered on

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[25] www.wikipedia.org 11-11-2007
[26] www.susning.nu 11-12-2007
[27] www.wikipedia.org 11-11-2007

an anti-fashion DIY-ethic (Do It Yourself). Stenciling, screen-printing, and painting your own clothes, is almost a philosophy in itself, relating to the anti-commercialism of clothing, and also an expression of your views by painting them on your shirt. [28]

Being a hooligan or a "casual" is also considered a viable youth style for teenagers to adopt. Wikipedia convey that "casuals" emanate from a British soccer or European football subculture that developed on the soccer arena terraces in Liverpool at the end of the 1970s. It is primarily associated with a fanatic interest for both violence and clothing in relation to football or soccer games. The hooligan firms that emerged in Britain and in the rest of Europe during the 1980s have often been composed and constituted by proponents of the casual-culture. Wikipedia means that the hooligans or casuals started to wear expensive established fashion clothes to avoid attracting the attention of the police. It also made it easier to infiltrate rival groups, to mix together with the ordinary supporters, fans of the opposing team, and get into bars if you did not wear soccer jerseys or other garments that showed the team you supported. In the mid-1990s, the casual subculture style changed slightly. A great number of soccer fans adopted the casual look as a type of uniform, identifying them as being different from the ordinary club supporters. Brands such as Stone Island, Aquascutum and Burberry were, according to Wikipedia, seen at nearly every arena and game, in addition to the classic favorites such as Lacoste and Paul & Shark. In the late 1990s however, numerous football fans started to distance and exclude themselves from the brands that were considered as the casual uniform, because of attention from the police attracted by the casual styles. Many designer brands also withdrew designs from sale and marketing when they became props of the common casual uniforms. The brand Stone Island had become so strongly connected to hooliganism in Britain that ordinary people could run into trouble wearing it. In the 2000s some casuals have continued to wear Stone Island clothing, but to appear as less obvious casuals they have detached the compass badge (Stone Islands brand symbol). [29]

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[28] www.susning.nu 11-11-2007
[29] www.wikipedia.org 11-11-2007

6 Forming brand understandings

This chapter deals with the characteristics of the social structure of the forum, or the online cultural field under study, and how it affects and structures the brand understanding forming process of the young consumers. The chapter recognizes that interacting on the forum may be regarded as a power game where users navigate and struggle for status, both within a formalized social structure containing typified status positions, and a more implicit informal structure involving three main types of micro level interactions where different users may assume various discrepant micro interactional roles. It is in these identified three main types of interactions, consultative, disputative, normative, and the subsequent interactional roles, in which consumers' brand understanding on a micro and horizontal level is thought to be formed.

6.1 The formal and typified structure of the cultural field

When entering the "Hamsterpaj" forum it does not take long before one recognizes the fervency, intensity and passion with which the young people engage in long and energetic conversations concerning brands. These brand conversations involve everything from foul language and slang (especially abbreviations and expressions particular to young people, developed to facilitate effective communication within the communicative confinements of an online forum setting), to more well-argued and eloquent formulations containing concepts collected from a business or marketing discourse. The nature of these interactions and conversations indicates that brands as a concept and as a social phenomenon play an important part in young people's everyday life and that they therefore need to be discussed understood and made sense of. Interestingly though, as will be illustrated more clearly further ahead in this book, these young consumers engage in effortful and elaborate discussions to deny, ignore and obscure the importance of brands. The

reasons for this paradoxical denial or obscuration will also be elaborated and shed light on in a later section of the dissertation. One paradox lies in the fact that if these young consumers did not consider brands to be an important and interesting phenomenon they ought to have an understanding of, they would not engage in those types of discussions at all.

Nevertheless, in the micro level interactions playing out on the "Hamsterpaj" forum the young consumers together display, share, construct and position an understanding of brands that sometimes may be regarded as sophisticated or primitive, elaborate or simple, paradoxical or consistent, and naïve or cynical. This diverse nature of their brand understanding makes it even more interesting to study.

Interactions, as discussed in Chapter 2, is here considered to be of central importance for people's understanding construction and sense making processes of a world or reality that itself is socially constructed. From the vantage point of this dissertation it is, thus, in interactions that understanding, conceptions and even knowledge are structured and produced. These interactions are also recognized to produce a social structure (and a cultural context) that is objectified and made real (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), which, in turn, structures and reproduces the very interactions in which people's understanding is constructed.

The actual interactions taking place on the "Hamsterpaj" forum where the young people's brand understanding is formed, are thus affected by the nature and structure of the cultural context where these conversations and interactions play out. Hence, although these online Internet forums where hundreds of young individuals interact to discuss important and relevant life-related topics without the supervision of socialization agents such as parents or other societal institutions (see e.g. Moschis & Churchill, 1978; Moschis, 1985; Carlson & Grossbart, 1988), these interactions are not without an order and a social structure. The vast number of conversations taking place on the online forum are collectively self-organized around a social structure with various established roles, titles and status positions to facilitate an effective and orderly communicative interaction. This is not really that strange because whether they are unconscious or conscious, intentional or unintentional, social interactions implicate status positions and the search for status Bourdieu (1984). The forum

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under investigation here is of no difference and involves a certain formalized social structure containing certain explicit status positions. Since this social structure shapes the nature of the brand understanding that is displayed, shared and constructed, it is necessary to describe this structure (and how it operates), and the various status positions (and their functions) existing on the forum, in more detail.

6.1.1 Titles, formal status positions and typified roles

The online forum is, as shown in the method chapter, one section of a more all encompassing website primarily designed for teenagers to hang out, educate and entertain themselves through the various functions or sections it offers. The member or user of the website and subsequently the forum part displays what Berger & Luckmann (1966) refers to a socially constructed and objectified social structure involving several explicit, formal and hierarchical status positions, each with its own formal title. Each position is ascribed with a formal, typified and legitimized role that comes with a certain amount of power and authority that they may exert on other users of the forum. Each typified role and position is connected to a certain limit or degree of power and authority that may be put into use. The further up in the formal structure a position or title has, the more authority and power may be exerted from that typified role and position. These roles are, as proposed by Berger & Luckmann (1966), considered typified because they have been linguistically and mutually objectified by the members of the forum, where their actions are habitualized and considered to pertain to the very actors of a certain type. These roles tell the users of the forum that actions of a certain type should be performed by a particular role type. The reciprocal typifications of the various roles on the forum serve as an important part of the institutionalization of the social and hierarchical structure of the forum.

The member or user of the "Hamsterpaj" forum with the highest formal title, formal typified role and status position is the actual founder of the entire website. The second highest status position is held by the administrators who are members or users who are responsible for the operation of one of the various sections of the website, such as the forum part. (One of the administrators may also be at the same time responsible for the overall maintenance of the entire website and is then

entitled system operator, SysOp). They are the ones who draw up directions and restrictions, even rules for how people ought to behave/interact/discuss on the forum. The administrator with the title SysOp, Number 1, illustrates and manifests his typified role on the forum when making the power and authority of his role perfectly clear to the other members of the website:

> People are so lousy that I felt a need to create a thread dealing with some of the guidelines regarding this part of the forum. Read these through before you come up with the idea to reply a posting or to create a new thread. Otherwise I will personally hunt you down and beat some sense into you (and maybe some taste too) so that you learn to behave properly…
>
> First of all it should be made clear that this part of the forum is for the ones that are interested in clothing and fashion, if you want to complain, do it elsewhere.
>
> Secondly, this is absolutely not a forum for personal finance and politics. I think I speak for most of us when I say that nobody is interested in how much you can spend on clothes every month, just as we have equally little interest in how poor you are. Neither do we care squat if you think that it is immoral to shop clothes (or even worse, expensive, clothes, oh no). This should also be discussed in a more appropriate forum.
>
> To ask what a certain piece of clothing costs is not wrong, but don't complain if someone buys expensive clothes, god damn it! Again, one may mention if it is worth the price or not, but to start a discussion whether it was a good purchase or not depending on the price, is not allowed.
>
> Clothing styles are ok to discuss but that does not mean that we should have 23 threads "describing the differences between EMO and GOTH. All talk about "don't care about fashion, dress the way you like," will be removed. Surely, you can have your own style and you do not need to be a slave under fashion, but right now I'm so eternally tired of that bullshit. Just face it! We are constantly affected by newspapers, advertising, other people, fashion etc.
>
> There is probably a lot more that I should add to this list, and there will be more as we go along. From now on I'm going to be more or less rock hard in this forum, and I think that other guards of order will follow my example.

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By drawing up guidelines for the forum of what is allowed to be talked about and what is not, in addition to threatening with some sort of punishment (executed by guards of order being users having other typified roles further down in the social structure) for breaking these guidelines, this user manifests and reproduces his formal status position and typified role. It is, according to Number 1, not supposed to be a forum that deals with finance and politics, but with fashion and brands. However, as will be illustrated further ahead, fashion and brand consumption is often understood by the young consumers as having strong links to social class, politics and people's financial position.

Third in the typified status order is what Number 1 mentions above, the guards of order whose task is to ensure that the rules of discussion are enforced in the various discussion threads. They have the authority to lock threads if the discussion is considered unproductive or is conducted in an unacceptable way by the users' interactions concerning a certain topic. These guards may warn discussants if they run the risk of sliding or floating away from the subject initially being discussed or the original purpose of the posted thread. Users are then considered to be off topic, and are encouraged to discuss the diverging topic in another thread where those matters are explicitly dealt with. This is evident in a discussion about shoe brands where the guard Zeb corrects the other discussants: "Cute that you guys talk about economy but try to stick completely to the topic and discuss the other stuff in the chat or something like that." If the warnings are disregarded and the discussion continues to be too off topic, or the discussion is regarded to be not leading anywhere, the guard may lock the thread. This is illustrated by the guard Cracker who sets out to enforce the directions formerly given by the administrator Number 1 when the thread "Clothes suck and clothing stores are worse" gets out of hand:

> But don't bother buying clothes for your money if you don't think it's worth it. It is not harder than that…This is a section for those who are interested in clothing, if you want to complain do it somewhere else. Locked.

When the thread "Brand freak or ordinary" does not lead anywhere and the topic of discussion does not add any insights with substance even an administrator such as Rock sets out to enforce the rules for productive interaction and discussion:

This is a perfect example of a worthless thread. Biased issue, no real topic to discuss. What does a fashion freak look like? Fashion may involve an infinite number of styles, and it is constantly changing. No, locked.

Fourth in the formal status position are the assistants. Their task is also to encourage users to stay on topic (without having the authority to lock a thread), and to assist with and to share their knowledge of the topic discussed with ordinary users and newcomers to the forum (who are the users with the lowest formal rank or typified role), in addition to providing ordinary users and newcomers with guidance of how to behave on the forum so that they follow the established rules of interaction. The assistants are also monitoring each other by occasionally pointing out when other assistants should think of their responsibility as assistants to help ordinary users, instead of mocking them, thus to live up to their status position within the forum and the responsibility that such a position entails. At the bottom of the formal status hierarchy are the ordinary users. They occasionally also encourage each other to follow the directions of a conversation, such as staying on topic. When realizing that they are diverging from the core topic they sometimes tell each other to get back on to the right topic track, and go on topic (OT). There is, thus, a certain amount of peer control involved when ordinary users interact.

The ordinary users represent the largest number of members of the forum and the website; moving up the hierarchy, the number of users holding higher positions become fewer and fewer. There are, for example, only one founder and a limited number of administrators. It is the restricted available number of users reserved for every position or title, thus the title's rarity as Bourdieu (1984) puts it, which gives a particular position its recognition and status. The surest way to devalue a title or status position would therefore be to increase its numbers. In this case to either increase the number of different user titles on the forum or to increase the number of users in every position. According Bourdieu (1984), a title is what legitimizes and formally guarantees a specific competence or a proper view. People with similar competences but lacking the appropriate formal title can always be required to prove themselves since they are only what they do, a by-product of their own cultural production and know-how, while the person holding a title only has to be what they are since their competence is assured merely

through the possession of that title. This is occasionally experienced by the users on the forum when discussing brands, where those with a lower or no formal title more often have to account for, motivate or explain their conceptions and views in more detail, while users with a title and higher formal position escape that requirement. It may even be so that certain, or even the "right" conceptions, views or knowledge put forward and shared are praised or given prominence just because the ones expressing them have a certain formal title. When discussing the topic of how much more you pay for a product just because it is of a certain brand, the ordinary user Itchy illustrates this in a clear way:

> This thing that stuff costs so much more just because there is a certain brand symbol on it, is nothing new. Not to me anyway. But it's a bit funny to see that when a "high person" = the founder of "Hamsterpaj" brings this up. Then the people see "the truth," and rally round him. However if a person with "lower status" states this in another thread without support from any other "leader" you are regarded as an idiot who doesn't get that the quality of a good with a brand is a lot better than a similar good without a brand.

The users with status positions serve as the "gate keepers" of the brand understanding and conceptions shared and formed between the discussants, therefore having a more extensive possibility, even power, to affect the brand knowledge and conception forming process than ordinary users. The social structure then seems to have implications for what kind of conceptions and understanding about brands that are formed and shared in the online interactions. Certain individuals/users with typified roles and formalized status positions have a greater authoritative power than, for example, ordinary users to educate and guide others into the "right" type of brand conceptions and understanding. Kozinets' (1999) taxonomization of the members of a virtual community is both relevant and interesting in this respect. He conceptualizes the social structure of an online consumption based community according to two dimensions, the degree of commitment to the community and the degree of centrality to a consumption activity. Out of these two dimensions Kozinets derives four different types of members, insiders, devotees, tourists and minglers, where insiders and devotees show the highest degree of commitment to the community. The insiders and devotees would, in Fox's (1987) conceptualization of the concentric informal social stratification of a punk community,

correspond to the hard core members. The hard cores are the most committed members (to the punk ethos) of the punk community. They constitute the core that holds the (punk) community together, followed by soft cores, preppies and the spectators who are furthest out in the punk periphery. Members of the "Hamsterpaj" forum possessing higher formal status positions closely correspond to Fox's hard core members and Kozinets' insiders and devotees. One important difference is, however, that while Kozinets' virtual community is created around and centers on a common interest in a consumption activity and Fox's punk community centers around the interest or devotion to the ethos of a youth style, the "Hamsterpaj" forum part centers around a more general interest in brands and fashion and how they work. The young consumers interacting on the "Hamsterpaj" forum thus display a mutual engagement (in brands and fashion), which according to Elliot (2004) represents one of two crucial dimensions that defines a community of practice, where the second dimension represents shared repertoires. Just as a community of practice, the "Hamsterpaj" forum entails both diversity and homogeneity, which means that a membership in such a community involves the constant negotiation of meaning between individuals, and the engagement in community maintaining activities.

6.1.2 Status mobility – playing the power game

The status positions previously discussed and delineated are not to be considered as totally fixed, but rather as changeable, dynamic and attainable. These status positions are, as was just illustrated, maintained, and reproduced in the textual interactions between the users on the forum through the power and authority that the users in these status positions are able to exercise towards other users. The status positions thus constantly need to be formed, attained reformed and upheld through the exercising of authority and power in interactions with others. This is illustrated in the rules that certain users with high positions are able to both create, but also to enforce, such as locking down threads and suspending users for not staying on topic (OT). It may even be argued that it is these status positions and the interactions where these are produced and reproduced that is what forms and perpetuates the existence of the forum, giving it a formal, perhaps even

a pre-institutional structure similar to other established institutions in society. It may even be so that the forum as an interactional and communicative platform would not exist without status positions and interactions where these are manifested, attained, produced and reproduced.

Interacting with other online users and navigating within the social or cultural sphere of the forum, perhaps in order to achieve or attain certain formal and typified status positions, may then be understood as playing a type of a power game. If we want to understand this process, the theoretical constructs developed by Bourdieu serves us well. First we need to identify and define what he terms a cultural field (Bourdieu, 1986). This constitutes a common interest that people gather around and fight for since it is believed to have great value. It is this "croyance" or belief that unites and holds the field together. The immediate field defined in this study would, of course, be the forum involving threads and the great number of users who specifically interact concerning fashion and brands. It is the interest in fashion and brands on which the forum centers. However, it is more unclear what it really is within this particular field that is considered to have great value, representing what Bourdieu terms symbolic capital, which, in turn, is inextricably connected to status (the higher amount of symbolic capital an individual possesses, the higher prestige and status is ascribed to that individual).

For the users of the forum to navigate within its cultural field, and successfully play the power game taking place they need what Swidler (1986) refers to as a cultural competence containing a toolkit of habits, skills and styles out of which they form and execute different strategies of action. The cultural competence and the available toolkit involve the handling of different resources that people or users on the forum may take advantage of to increase their symbolic capital and thereby attain higher status positions within the frame of the online cultural field. Bourdieu (1984) suggests that people in a cultural field may draw upon the resources of economic, social, and cultural capital to attain a higher amount of symbolic capital, and thereby move up the status hierarchy. However, on the particular online cultural field of this study, economic capital has very low currency, even no currency at all, since actual money cannot buy you anything, not even recognition and cannot

therefore signal a certain status position to others. Money or its amount, is thus per se not a valuable resource to draw upon when navigating within this cultural field aiming at more status and recognition. Mentioning that one's parents are wealthy often has the opposite effect and is dismissed, even ridiculed as pathetic bragging. Neither may social capital be an explicit valuable resource to use when trying to attain more esteemed positions within this particular cultural field. You do not automatically gain more status and recognition through your social network and by knowing people held in high regard and possessing a great amount of symbolic capital.

Cultural capital, instead, seems to be the most effective resource to use when aiming for higher symbolic capital and higher status within this field. It does not refer to cultural capital in a more traditional "Bourdieuan" way consisting of your inherited family background or potential title and your educational level (degrees and diplomas). It refers more to a general ability, competence or knowledge to speak, behave, as well as being well-oriented in the cultural context; in short, being cultivated to a certain extent. On the online forum the cultural capital (directly affecting the amount of the symbolic capital) consists of other resources particular to a context where individuals interact solely through posted textual messages. One type of cultural capital resource is the time and frequency spent discussing with other users on the forum. This is conveyed through the number of posted messages made by a certain member, which emerges on the profile shown every time he or she logs in and joins a discussion. The number of postings indicates the degree of experience one has of navigating on the forum, being sensitive to the directions and rules existing there and being well aware of what is being treated in the various conversations taking place at the forum, which in turn expresses one's commitment to the cultural field. Although not always being among the people with the highest number of postings and activities on the forum, the users with formal positions exclusively have a high rate of activity and a very high number of postings on the forum. This finding is similar to how certain individuals in brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander & Schouten, 2002) and subcultures of consumption (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) have been found to be ascribed with status positions depending on their commitment to the community at hand, its values, rituals, and the usage of the particular brand or

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consumption activity around which the community or subculture is formed.

Another, and perhaps even more important resource of relevance for status mobility on the forum is the amount and the quality of the knowledge a user possesses about the certain topic being discussed. Here are also similarities to the literature on brand communities and subcultures of consumption but with the important difference that the knowledge and conceptions discussed within this field incorporate a vast number of different brand symbols, and contain more abstract knowledge about brands in general and their function in society. This means that your understanding, knowledge and competence of brands, may be used as a resource to gain a higher status position. This is much in the same way as knowledge of, and the ability to talk about, interpret and make sense of certain advertisements, as proposed by Ritson & Elliot (1999), can be appropriated by individuals to attain and defend certain positions within a group structure. A user with a lower position can, through conversing and getting to know a more esteemed position holder (whose position largely depends on his or her extensive knowledge of a certain topic), gain or acquire precious knowledge and conceptions from those status users. This could later be put into use when striving upwards in the status hierarchy. Social capital then, although more implicitly, also has a certain currency when users strive for more recognition and a higher status position within this particular cultural field.

A third type of cultural capital resource relates to the finding that it is not only the knowledge and conceptions per se that are important, but also the way in which you present them, the degree of eloquence, and how well you argue for your views about brands. According to Bourdieu (1991), language and the way you present your arguments should not only be regarded as means of communication but also as a medium of power by which individuals pursue their own interests and display their various competences (such as how brands work). Every linguistic interaction, therefore, reveals signs of social structure, which it both expresses and reproduces (Bourdieu, 1991). When presenting your conceptions, views or arguments about brands on the forum you may draw upon different resources or tactics in order to be perceived as sensible and convincing, and that the understanding or perceptions you

present has value. How a user presents his or her brand understanding and argues for their conceptions and views about brands also constitutes a piece in the toolkit of what Swidler (1986) refers to as cultural members' cultural competence that may be put into play when navigating within the cultural field. Here, the members of the forum even appropriate a system of references in their brand discussions, just as researchers do in academia, with the difference that the references are not other scientifically produced writings. One often used reference or the demand for that type of reference when stating a certain conception is the degree of a user's experience of various brands, which is illustrated in the following discussion about jeans brands.

> Cheese cake (ordinary user):
>
> The only sensible jeans brand in this world is Levis 782
>
> Rock (administrator):
>
> In what way are they better then all the other jeans? Do you really have that extensive experience?
>
> Cheese cake (ordinary user):
>
> They just are!!! What do you mean extensive experience?
>
> Rock (administrator):
>
> Do you have such extensive experience so that you really can exclude all the other jeans, except these, even though there are loads of jeans that are better, nicer, more functional, you name it. Or maybe you just mean that they are nice, but use a little too big words?

This quote is interesting because first of all it reveals or illustrates how members with a high ranking title or typified and formalized role may exert power and authority over a user further down in the power hierarchy. The ordinary user Cheese cake states his/her conception, view and taste about a certain jeans brand and a particular model designed and sold by that brand. Rock, who is an administrator with a more powerful status position, questions Cheese cake's expression of jeans taste and is urged, as Bourdieu (1984) puts it, to give account for his or her know-how, which here is connected to the user's degree of experience concerning the consumption of various jeans brands. If it were to be the other way round, where Rock would state his taste in the same manner as Cheese cake, the chance is considerable that Rock,

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instead, would gain approval and recognition from other users of the forum. This is because he possesses a certain highly esteemed formal status position where the title assures that Rock has made a sound and sensible judgment when it comes to the proper or right taste concerning a particular jeans brand. What is important here is the relationship between experience, knowledge or competence, and the judgment of taste. Bourdieu (1984) means that in order for a person to pass or express a credible and a "right" judgment of taste of both products of the high arts and of common consumer objects, one has to have the competence and knowledge to do so, which, in turn, are obtained through a slow familiarization and extensive experience of a certain phenomenon or area in society (such as art work or other works of common culture). This extensive experience and slow familiarization generates and entails detailed knowledge enabling the person to verbally estheticize, label, compare and categorize various brands and consumer objects in a competent manner. He or she would possess the cultural competence for demonstrating authoritative appreciation and expressing the fine and right taste concerning particular phenomena in society, such as the consumption of brands. Hence, when Rock questions Cheese cake's jeans brand experience, Rock also questions Cheese cake's knowledge or competence, and thereby also his/her credibility to pass correct, sensible and trustworthy judgment on a particular form of brand consumption.

Other references that are used frequently to support our conceptions of, or views on brands are the uploading of pictorial illustrations, and the supply of web links to credible sources that are in line with the knowledge. If you cannot support or motivate your arguments and claims with credible sources you should be able specify that it is only your own personal opinion and no established truth. This is conveyed in the discussion about the style of punk in relation to clothing and brands.

> **Enemy (ordinary user):**
>
> You have to support that with sources, I just submitted 3 very credible sources. If you don't have sources or anything else that may support your view, you should write that it is just YOUR view.

These quotes reveal that it is not just enough to have extensive experience and understanding of brand issues; it is almost equally

important that you have the knowledge or competence for presenting and arguing for the correctness of that understanding or those conceptions in a proper and successful way. You are, thus, required to possess a competence of how to express, present, and textually verbalize, even esthetisize your brand understanding and conceptions in a manner that makes you appear as a knowledgeable and therefore trustworthy, authentic and credible brand consumer and an important user on the forum. It is not just the content of your brand understanding, but the form of how you express, convey and present it that is important in your endeavor to reach status positions when interacting and discussing various brand matters on the forum. In line with the second dimension that according to Elliot (2004) defines a community of practice, the "Hamsterpaj" and its members thus have, in the course of its existence, developed a shared repertoire including not only words, ways of doing things, symbols, a discourse that helps the users make sense of the world, but also styles by which they express their forms of membership and the existence of the forum. In sum, the preceding various forms of cultural capital and the implicit social capital that decide a user's symbolic capital and status position on this online cultural field, point to what is actually considered to have value for the individuals interacting within its boundaries and therefore worth competing for. It is not only which user who has the most vast and elaborate brand understanding, but also what is considered to be the "right kind" of brand understanding.

6.2 The informal social structure of the cultural field

Parallel to the formal social structure constituting the fairly easily observed typified roles and titles in a hierarchical order, is the existence of a complementary informal and implicit structure. This informal structure consists of three main but specific types of interactions in which various users assume a number of discrepant but informal and non-typified roles. It is in and through these three types of interaction that both the informal but also, in the end, the formal social structure of the cultural field is formed, perpetuated, and reformed. At the same time, however, as these interactions affect the social structure of the cultural field, which in turn structures and affects the conceptions and

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understanding that the young consumers form of brands, it is in these very same three types of micro interactions that the young consumers together form or construct their understanding of how brands work. The three types of micro interactions, consultative, disputative, and normative, identified here are characterized by individuals' search for other contemporaries' opinions, conceptions. The young consumers are eager to not only share their understanding, opinions, and conceptions about brands per se but also to share and form an understanding about other issues that somehow are considered to be closely related to the phenomenon of brands. The interacting users seem anxious to obtain deep understandings and conceptions about brands, and the outcome of these discussions, even debates, is a constant brand knowledge sharing and brand knowledge forming process, where conceptions, knowledge, and opinions are continuously exchanged between individuals. The micro level interaction pattern based on a relational control coding scheme put forward by Courtright *et al* (1989) served as a particularly valuable tool in identifying these three different types of interaction.

Here various users (from ordinary users up to the administrators and even the founder of the website) assume what Goffman (1959) refers to as discrepant roles in the actual process of forming understanding. These roles are assumed by those interacting not to be necessarily connected to certain formal positions. This means that even users with high status positions, often being considered to possess an elaborate and vast knowledge about the topics discussed, may assume both roles with a normative and educational voice simultaneously as they may in other interactions assume a more defensive role that involves seeking for opinions and knowledge from others.

6.2.1 Types of interactions and informal discrepant roles

A great number of the created discussion threads often start with a consultative interaction, but often change in nature as the discussion continues and more discussants join in, or as a consequence of a posted comment that moves the conversation into a different direction. However, if the direction diverts too much from the initial topic of discussion, a guard of order, or another user with a higher formal position will encourage the discussants to stay on topic. A consultative

interaction is characterized by a positive, creative and advisory spirit where users seek inputs, opinions and knowledge from other users. Such discussion or interaction generally starts with a user (could be anyone from a low rank to a high ranking formal position) posing a question, having a query about a certain brand/s or about topics relating to brands in general, looking for support, opinions, or for knowledge from fellow discussants, thereby assuming the role of what I term an advisee. The users helping out by sharing knowledge and feeding back opinions to the advisee assume the role to which I refer as advisors.

Soccer Sucker (assistant), advisee:

Is there any way to remove a printed logo from clothes, some kind of substance, anything at all?

Goalie (guard of order), advisor:

Sandpaper?

SorryAss (ordinary user), advisor:

Sulphuric Acid?

Soccer Sucker (assistant), advisee:

Does that work? In that case I will try it

Piglet (ordinary user), advisor:

No, then you will ruin the garment. Get it?

Soccer Sucker (assistant), advisee:

Any better idea?

Piglet (ordinary user), advisor

What kind of print is it? What's the color of the sweater?

Soccer Sucker (assistant), advisee:

It's a white shirt with a blue Adidas print

Egon (assistant), advisor:

It's often hard enough to remove or erase a print on a dark sweater. If it now is a white garment it will surely leave an ugly mark. But if the brand print is discrete you can try to remove it with a knife or so. If the

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print is of any ordinary color and plastic material, it is easier to remove. I you are willing to risk the garment you can just start with a lighter solvent and then increase the strength if required.

The previous consultative interaction is conducted in a positive light where the users are helping each other out by sharing, exchanging advice and understanding with each other. Both the intensity of the discussion and the interactive tone is kept on a fairly low and sober level. The interaction is characterized by an implicit form of mutual co-operation where the discussants' aim that together in a consensus mode attain and formulate the best or the right kind of knowledge or conceptions concerning brands or issues tightly connected to them – in this case how to remove a brand logo printed on a piece of clothing. It is interesting how the advisors try to help the advisee by, almost as doctors or other experts/consultants within a particular area, diagnosing the problem through asking the patient, in this case the advisee, about the nature and status of the perceived problem in order to provide him or her with the right kind of advice, tip, even knowledge and subsequently the solution to the problem. Sometimes the knowledge sought for merely touches upon where to find a certain brand, in the following case the shoe brand Emerica.

> **Happy (assistant), knowledge seeker:**
>
> Wow Emecia, I haven't seen those for a long time. I had a pair when I was like 11, when I was skating, and I bought them at Stadium for 500 "kronor"….Do you know where to get hold of a pair?
>
> Edit: Rather not on the Internet, but in Skåne
>
> **Maggot (assistant), knowledge provider:**
>
> www.oneoff.se sells them. Their store is situated in Ängelholm too. That's where I buy my shoes anyway, so if you visit Ängelholm you will find the best shoe store in the world.
>
> **Happy (assistant), knowledge seeker:**
>
> Thanks I found really nice pair right away. I better swing by Ängelholm soon, because I soon need to buy new shoes. By the way; they used to have Oneoff in Malmö too, didn't they?

This consultative interaction has a lot of similarities with the informational interactional mode introduced by (Kozinets, 1999)

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where people use the communication to inform themselves about the availability, existence, or location of various products or brands, or particular to this study, how to deal with other issues that are closely related to brands as a phenomenon. However, this does not mean that the users (advisees) entering into or starting a consultative interaction merely are there, as Kozinets puts it, to take advantage of other members' resources without giving something in return. They may by initiating a consultative interaction, get lots of replies containing valuable knowledge, and actually bring this knowledge to the fore, thus materializing it for the benefit of everybody else. The ones sharing their tips, conceptions or knowledge may, at the same time, be given praise or thanks in return, thereby being rewarded as brand knowledgeable members or users of the forum. Kozinets' relational mode of interaction also has links to the disputative and normative types in that those who are disputing and those who are normatively mastering or educating others are often users with stronger ties to the forum, its rules and its social structure.

However, not all interactions are as the consultative one, characterized by this calm atmosphere and low conversational intensity where the users share knowledge and opinions smoothly with the purpose of helping each other out by supplying conceptions and knowledge of relevant and important brand issues in a consensual spirit. The disputative interaction type represents discussions involving a more energetic atmosphere where the climate of discussion may be fairly harsh and loaded with tension, characterized by intense debates between various users. If the atmosphere in the consultative brand interaction was characterized by consensus, the disputative type of interaction is more symbolized by disagreements, leading to negotiation of what are the right types or preferred brand conceptions. The following interaction actually starts by a knowledge/opinion seeker posing a question to the other users, but it then develops into a disputative interaction as a user posts a comment that sets the interaction off in a more disputative direction, which makes the users assume the role of what I conceptualize as debater.

> **Lime (ordinary user), advisee:**
> Me and my friend Therese were at my other friend's (Felie) house. Both Felie and Therese are 14 years old just like me. Therese went

home but I stayed. Then her mum told me: Are there many in your class who are snobs just like Therese?

Then Felie said: What do you mean snobs?

Her mom said: Well she's wearing a Canada Goose jacket and Victoria Beckham jeans!

Then I thought….Are you a snob just because you wear name brands?

Do you think it's snobby to wear the Canada Goose or Victoria Beckham brand or something just like that?

Tush (ordinary user), debater:

Now, this is surely going to sound like I'm very self involved and a real wannabe, but it's not that bad really, because it's just the start of getting to know me.

I don't think you are a snob if you do your entire shopping every day at NK[30] every Friday, showering in champagne and that crap. My family is actually very wealthy so I almost only buy name brands. I consider snobs to be those whose parents have an average income but spend all their money on name brands, and then possibly may afford a charter trip every year. It also feels as though snobs are those who buy name brands (but only the ones to be found at Åhlens since these people do not have that much creativity) in order to be called snobs, to only laugh it off when being confronted, "hi hi hi noooo I'm not even rich." But correct me if I'm wrong.

Donna (ordinary user), debater:

I correct you because I think you are wrong. I would rather call you a snob than the wannabes you wrote about. Why you are a snob? It was important for you to write that your parents are rich and that you almost exclusively buy name brands. Then I'm a bit curious about your theory about snobbery…

It is not supposed to be snobby when wealthy people buy name brands, but it is snobby when people that are not that wealthy buy them? Hence, you should adjust your brand purchase according to your budget, or what? That would be a way of identifying who is wealthy and who is not that wealthy. Maybe that's what you are trying to say?

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[30]NK is a Swedish upscale department store situated in central Stockholm

Tush (ordinary user), debater:

Well, since this is specifically what this thread is all about, I used myself as an example, but sure I could as well have used somebody else, but then you would probably not have understood that much about who it would be about, and I'm not very humble either, so if you consider snobs to be arrogant persons who are good at saying nice things about themselves, maybe you confuse it with…bragging?

Anyway, to answer you, I don't consider snobs to be the same thing as a rich man's child, which some might think (which is as right as anything else), but rather to be people with ordinary jobs, being ok financially, living in some suburb in a terrace house or something (not that it is poor, but you understand what I mean,) but exclusively buy name brands and really expensive cars and only shop at ICA[31] or the market-halls (or something like that), just to convey a image of being rich, without really affording it, in brief, an average Joe with a too fancy car compared to the house.

Ah well something like that anyway, sorry if you were offended by that stuff about my parents (or folks as you put it,) being soooo rich.

Damn it, there I said it again!

Donna (ordinary user), debater:

Well, as the matter of fact, I may think that some snobs are a bit arrogant. But alright…Now I have gotten an impression of you through your writing, I realize that I must have confused your with a diva instead.

I don't have that much to comment on the last thing you wrote, since principally it is almost the same as you wrote in your previous posting, which does not at all give me an explanation for the thoughts I had about your reasoning. I don't give a rat's as if your parents are rich. It doesn't bother me at all. What I reacted to was that you had to brag about it, maybe in hope to gain respect, or maybe it was just a brave cry for attention

If you would have had just anything reasonable or sensitive at all to bring forward then you would have no need at all to brag about your parents.

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[31]ICA is the market leading food retailer in Sweden

First of all, it is quite clear that these debaters are well aware of the symbolic connotations of certain brands and that consumption of those brands may communicate and reproduce social class boundaries and convey social class belonging. In this interaction, different conceptions of what constitutes snobbery are being intensively debated. Tush connected snobbery to pretending acts (in this case consumption), giving the false impression that one belonged to a certain type of people or social class, while one's entire lifestyle would reveal the opposite. Donna, however, connected being a snob to the conceptions of snobbery put forward by Tush in addition to her need for bragging about wealthy parents. This again illustrates that money, or economic capital in Bourdieu's (1984) sense, does not constitute a powerful resource to be put into use when navigating within this cultural field. We can almost feel or touch the tension existing in the previous disputative interaction where the debaters argue about or defend their conceptions of the relation between name brands and snobbery. It is an intense discussion which shows that (tough) negotiations such as the one dealing with the conceptions and knowledge of brands and snobbery, does not always lead to an agreement or some kind of consensus but instead ends unsettled, where the various debaters stop conversing since they do not think they are getting anywhere. The discussions also reveal other interesting things than the nature of this type of disputative interaction. It says something about the more abstract knowledge or conceptions that the interacting individuals possess; this is put up for public display when discussing the matters of name brands and snobbery. The content and nature of these conceptions or knowledge, in this case about name brands and snobbery, are used as resources or as a base from which to argue for your views regarding these kinds of brand issues.

Another role emerging in this kind of disputative interaction is that of the mediator. It has many similarities with the mediator and go-between role introduced by Goffman (1959) where the mediator tries get two hostile parts to reach an agreement. In this context this role represents a user who participates in a disputative interaction by trying to defuse the tension created by the intensive discussion between some of the users so that some sort of mutual agreement may be reached. The mediator often states that no opinion should be considered as being either right or wrong and that everybody should be allowed to think

what they want and do what they like. The role of the mediator is assumed by the user Xerxes in the discussion about the style "poppare" and what brands the members of that style wear: "But for God sake…why worry if you are called "poppare"…wear what you like and don't care so much about what other people think…why is it so bad to be called "poppare?" The role of the mediator is also assumed by the user Lorelei in the discussion about the style of "fjortisar."

> It's this harping on about these "fjortisar." Can't you just try to accept that everybody is different (or in this case alike). It will pass (the behavior) as they are getting older. I don't have the energy to care about them anymore, which is something that more people should try

The third type of interaction identified, the normative interaction, involves explicit and traditional patterns of what Herskovits (1948; 1972) includes in the enculturation construct, such as punishment for not respecting the "thou-shalt-nots" and deviating from a common understanding, rule or norm, either explicit or implicit. The normative interaction includes the roles termed as the provoker and the punisher. The following normative interaction concerns the type of brands that are to be considered as authentic or real name brands.

Bumble bee (ordinary user), provoker:

…We and JL are not expensive brands, not Lacoste either for that matter, I can tell you that those are a kind of cheaper name brands, and if anybody thinks Peak is a name brand I only say no no no no, it is not! Expensive name brands are Gucci, Burberry, DKNY, D&G, for God sake, and I think that almost everybody has something with that type of brands. Not too long ago I got a really nice Burberry dress from my dad that must have cost many thousand ("kronor"), but it is fun to spoil yourself with expensive clothes.

Chaos (guard of order), punisher:

Do you know how much I hate people with that kind of attitude?

Ohhhh! "I'm so rich that I don't consider Lacoste, We or JL to be name brands, all of them are name brands, just more or less expensive.

By the way I don't think ANYBODY cares that your dad gave you an expensive dress!

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Lizzy (assistant), punisher:

Chaos described it pretty well, but I'm in a bad mood today.

This thread is not about if it is good or bad to spoil yourself, neither is it a disgusting little bragging snob "fjortis" thread, which you seem to think.

"Not long ago I got a really nice Burberry dress from my dad that may have cost thousands"

What do you mean that WE, J Lindeberg and Lacoste are not expensive name brands, Hello? Is it your task to say what is expensive and what is cheap? It is not we who are spoiled brats

For your information, this is a thread that deals with a girl who wears name brand clothes and looks down on others who don't

Don't call me jealous, because I'm not, I'm educated

Painkiller (assistant) punisher:

Ohh but please. Just like Lizzy I was pretty upset by your fucking crappy comment. Like Lizzy said: This thread is about why people look down on others because they do not wear name brands, not that you boast about what your little right-wing-executive-dad gave you. If you are a tiny and disgusting spoiled bastard who does not regard Lacoste and JL to be expensive name brands, keep that to yourself. For people with an average financial position it is a lot of money, maybe not for you and your pretentious dad, but to most people. The existence of more expensive clothing such as e.g. D&G and the like does not mean that JL is not a name brand, it is, only with a lower price.

If you want to be extremely spoiled for the rest of your life, that's your problem. You have to make sure to have a really good financial situation yourself in the future if you want to maintain the same standard your right-wing-executive dad has given you. And don't call me poor, because that is not an argument, it would only proof your stupidity. And if I'm poor? Does it make a difference? Do you think I'm jealous? In that case you are completely wrong and if you downgrade me for that it's your problem, not mine.

First of all the nature of this discussion clearly reveals that discussions about name brands really invoke a lot of energy, strong emotions and views among these young people. One plausible explanation for this

may be that these young consumers actually understand brands as a form of a distinguishing and classificatory symbolic vehicle that labels and classifies or organizes people into certain groups or categories, where some people are feared to be considered better or worse than others. The previous interaction is educational, but in a more negative light in that the other users replying the provoker, are telling Bumblebee that his or her conceptions are faulty, they are in some sense mastering Bumblebee, "educating" her or him to arrive at a proper way of thinking. The content of the discussion reveals that name brands cannot be equated with luxury brands such as Gucci and Dolce Gabbana. It points in the direction that it is often easier to define what is not liked or not allowed than what is. Bumblebee's deviating comment and the other users' reaction to it uncovers the implicit and underlying norm of how you should think and reason concerning brands. An authentic or real name brand may be defined in various ways involving uncertainty and ambiguity of what it really means, but it is quite clear that it is not equated with luxury brands. The conception that authentic brands are only the most expensive luxury brands, which few can afford to buy, especially young people in their teens, is considered inappropriate, even wrong. Assuming the interactive role of a provoker Bumblebee and her posted comment thus reveals what Herskovits (1972) refers to the counter norm by not conforming to what is considered to be right (although in this case with the authenticity of brands and what is right or proper is open for a fairly wide interpretation) or what is allowed within a cultural field. Bumblebee is viciously and insultingly attacked verbally, or "flamed" as Kozinets (1998) puts it when this occurs in an online setting, by the users assuming the role as punishers after expressing her counter norm conception of what is to be considered as authentic brands. This flaming is thus a form of punishment for improper thinking, knowledge or behaviour, where it serves to educate the individual in what is right and wrong and to steer the individual back to proper thinking, and the conformity to the norms provided by the cultural field. The knowledge about a norm and counter norm, in this case of brand authenticity, is thus something that is made clear between and acquired by young consumers through a fairly elaborate enculturation process involving punishment, the formation of, and the conformity to norms concerning brands and issues related to them.

6.3 Summary

This chapter shows how important micro level interactions are for the construction of these types of communities as a cultural field, and how important they are for people's formation of understanding consumption phenomena such as brands. The cultural field, here is the "Hamsterpaj" forum, containing both a formal and typified social structure constituted by hierarchical formal status positions, which are attained and maintained by navigating on the forum where the understanding of brands is used as an important strategic resource. Individual users possessing status positions have power to affect the understanding that is formed since they have the authority to define what the discussions may touch upon and to both set and enforce the rules for the interactions taking place. At the same time, there exists a complementary informal social structure that is formed in three main micro level interactions: Consultative, disputative and normative interactions. It is in these interactions that the brand understanding construction explicitly occurs. In each interaction, individuals may assume discrepant interactional roles. Even here, users with higher status positions have more power to affect what kind of understanding that is formed, since their formal title signifies that they have extensive brand understanding, inplying that their views have a higher credence than those of others. They know better by virtue of their status position. It is, thus, in the three main types of interactions, when the formal status positions exert their influence and power, that the status positions are produced and reproduced, which, in turn, means that it is in these interactions that the entire cultural field is formed and perpetuated. This chapter also revealed how central the cultural navigation and struggle for status seemed to be for the young consumers interacting on the forum.

7 Making sense of the symbolic landscape

Moving the focus away from the social structure of the cultural field and how it builds the understanding that young consumers form of brands, this chapter deals more particularly with the consumers' understanding of the symbolic landscape. This involves their immediate understanding of which brands that exist in a Swedish setting, their various meanings, and how they relate to each other. What the young consumers really do in this chapter is to develop an understanding of how brands enter into their youth life world, how they may be used or appropriated to solve important life projects such as answering the question of who they are. Creating and perpetuating youth styles by incorporating brand symbols in their symbolic ensemble is one way of doing that. Consequently, the meaning of styles and brands and how they go together is something that needs to be made sense of. In order to be successful in this undertaking the young consumers also need to develop an understanding of how brands and their meanings dilute, and how they shift from being an authentic and attractive symbol for identification, to an unauthentic and destroyed symbol signifying the disgusting mainstream. The brand understanding displayed here is, thus, necessary for the young consumers, if they are going to be able to consume brands knowingly, and as put forward by Bengtsson & Firat (2006), be effective consumers within a cultural setting.

7.1 Staying brand alert

On the "Hamsterpaj" forum, young people in their teens gather together for lively and comprehensive discussions on brands, brand related issues and phenomena. One of the reasons for discussing brands in that manner, which was explicated in greater detail Chapter 6, is that it allows individuals to navigate themselves to and maintain various status positions within a cultural field and to gain recognition from

other peers. Another and perhaps even a more important reason for discussing the phenomenon of brands the way they do is that brands are considered to be, if not crucial, then at least valuable tools for young people to employ when they work on what Mick & Buhl (1992) refer to as an important life project. Life projects are referred to as each individual's refinement, development and disposal of specific concepts (e.g. manliness), collected from an array of cultural established alternatives that are connected to that person's sense of self. An important life project in this respect is the young consumers' need to answer the question of who they really are. A common view is that adolescents predictably undergo an identity crisis (Erikson, 1959), which may be resolved through the forming of youth styles allowing them to form an autonomous identity of their own by subculturally resisting a modern, mainstream and hegemonic class-based culture (Clark, 1976). As these styles are constructed within the leisure sphere where brands serve as material bases for the enactment of the style code and repertoire supplying the style members with an identity (Elliot & Davies, 2006), adolescents or young people in this stage seek identity largely through acquiring and accumulating certain consumer objects (Belk, 1988). Thus, brands serve as valuable tools for young people in their efforts to resolve the life project of forming an identity of their own. Teenagers' everyday preoccupation with what clothes to wear, how to fix their appearance, what cars to drive is not from their perspective just an irrational teenage compulsion, but rather a fairly sensitive way of dealing with the question of who they are.

Consumers' ongoing life projects are, however, in constant flux, following changes in circumstances (Mick & Buhl, 1992). As brands and their meanings are a part of the circumstances, they may, moreover, serve as important resources for the consumers to draw on when trying to resolve the life project of establishing their own identity. The discussions on the "Hamsterpaj" forum indicate that young Swedish consumers constantly need to be aware, keep track of and update themselves concerning existing and new brand symbols, what they mean, how they relate to other brands and which groups of people and styles that are associated with them. Keeping track of and knowing which styles or what groups of people are associated with or use certain brand symbols seems important here because people, to a large degree, are considered to define who they are in relation to their collective sense

of self, or their group identity (Belk, 1988), at the same time as shared consumption symbols are thought to be one of the key ways for defining and expressing group membership (Boorstin, 1973). If these young Swedish consumers are to be successful in resolving their life project of resolving who they are, they need to form an understanding of how the symbolic landscape is organized. From this knowledge they may plot out the various symbolic meaning positions held by different groups of people or styles and the symbolic meanings provided by the different brands in their Swedish life world.

It is these matters containing many brand symbols and youth styles that are made sense of and understood through discussions with other contemporaries on "Hamsterpaj". In this way the young people can avoid making fools of themselves by wearing the "wrong" brands when striving for the membership of a certain style and certain identity as a "punk", "poppare", "fjortis" or even hooligan. It is particularly important for the young consumers to discuss these matters with people in their own age group because it is largely through these peer interactions that they make up or construct a teenage reality or life world of their own that constantly, as Berger & Luckmann (1966) propose, needs to be reinforced, maintained and understood in interactions with the generalized other. Here, however, the generalized other does not refer to traditional socialization agents, such as parents or school but rather the contemporary young peers themselves, evaluating, judging and reproducing each other's views, knowledge and behavior. Since the discussions and interactions concerning brands that are being played out on the online forum are so other-directed, where the young consumers search for directions and orientations in external sources such as peers or contemporaries rather than the more traditional socialization agents, they may be understood as what Riesman (1961) refers to as a reflexive enculturation process.

7.1.1 Brands as the symbolic markers of style

The interesting thing with the young consumers' life project to answer the question of who they are by forming youth styles and appropriating certain brands for that purpose, it does not always, as Fournier (1998) puts it, fit with the goal derived categories developed by brand managers. The discussions on "Hamsterpaj" reveal that young

consumers engage in the consumption of brands because they fit in with their life projects and purposes, not necessarily because the brand managers tell them to. The agenda for these young Swedish consumers' brand consumption may thus be totally different from the agenda of brand managers. When brands enter into contexts and are appropriated by certain groups of young Swedish consumers that differ from the ones intended by the brand managers, interesting things seem to happen. One example of that is when a brand is appropriated by a style that integrates it into the style's symbolic ensemble, thereby placing it together with other types of symbols signifying the style. This may cause the brand to attract some of the meanings of the other symbols in the style's symbolic ensemble, which may have negative consequences for the brand's meaning. The following brand discussion on the "Hamsterpaj" forum took place because these young consumers needed to sort out the meanings of several brands in relation to a particular style and whether or not these brands may be used or appropriated as symbolic markers for the identity of that style. While the discussions are to aid young consumers to make sense of the symbolic landscape in order to help them answer the life project question of who they are, the content and the outcome of the interaction may appear as most troublesome, even frightening for the managers of the brands involved.

Lenny (ordinary user):

The favorites are Fred Perry (FP) and Burberry. The "Ultras-culture" is the only right one.

Kane (ordinary user):

Lenny, you are a hooligan, you are extremely hooked on Burberry, FP, and Adidas shoes.

Number 1 (administrator):

Stone Island (SI) is the real hooligan brand :)

Lenny (ordinary user):

Unfortunately there are many brats who started using it just because it's cool with the most expensive clothes. The really tough guys buy Stone Island but remove the patch, a brat would never do that because then you can't tell that it is a "cool," expensive sweater. It is the

strongest hooligan brand. But it has started to die out because of all brats using it.

Aron (ordinary user):

All you damn wannabe casuals, fuck sake, cut it out. You got no clue. The thing with removing the patch is common in UK but not in Sweden". Those who do not belong on stage and wear SI will most certainly realize that they are nothing but freaking pretenders I may also add to Kane that sneakers of any brand are equally attractive. And FP is ruined…a sure brand in a casual's wardrobe is Lacoste. Burberry is on its way out because all the kids and wannabes are running around in it.

Number 1 (administrator):

Do you mean SI particularly or generally? FP is hardly more ruined than Lacoste? I don't know how it's down in Helsingborg but in Gothenburg there is one FP-garment to ten Lacoste. Burberry on its way out? I wouldn't think so either? A classical brand that surely will last for many more decades from now.

Lenny (ordinary user):

I agree with Number 1, since Stadium added Lacoste shoes to their assortment every bastard walks around in them. Then it's hardly the case that Burberry is on its way out, rather Lacoste since it's so much easier to get hold of in Sweden. What brands the boys go with changes a lot, e.g. Pringle is not as common as it was in the beginning. We'll se what comes next, and if the brats can keep their hands off it.

Aron (ordinary user):

That might be the case, but Lacoste has been around since the beginning, just like Burberry…But Lacoste has unfortunately prostituted itself. But I guess it will be around just as long as it already has…Burberry unfortunately…damn nice and pure but what the hell when all the kids are trotting around in it…no thanks. I rather go with Tacchini or something older like FILA.

FP has also totally prostituted itself with all the "fjortis" suitable garments. However the new shoes are damn fresh. Everything however differs from city to city but here are a lot of wannabes wherever you go.. fake or not.. they only have one or two garments and on the bus and in stores you could hear them brag to their completely disinterested buddies.

This discussion between users possessing deep insights concerning the meaning of the hooligan/casual youth style contains an elaborate name dropping of brands and an analysis of which brand is the proper "casual" one. It becomes clear that some brands have lost their "touch" and can no longer be regarded to be authentic markers of the hooligan style, and are therefore discarded since it has been tainted by others, people with a "brat" style, to the degree that it has become ruined. The brand symbol and style discussion taking place in the interaction may not only be understood as a form of brand meaning negotiation (Ligas & Cotte, 1997) where the users in their social environment, through interacting with each other about the brand, negotiate its meaning; or as a discursive elaboration (Elliot & Percy, 2007) where a brand does not gain its full meaning until it has been verbally discussed or socially consumed with other individuals in the social sphere. It is also a discussion in which the users make sense of a symbolic order where they try to reach an agreement of which of the brands are to be typified as typical hooligan symbols to help them act out their role as authentic hooligans. The need to make these brand symbols typical for their style in order to, as Berger & Luckmann (1966) would have put it, reciprocally understand themselves as hooligans at the same time as other subjects understand them as typical hooligans, and consequently interact with them accordingly. In order for these young consumers to act out the role of being a hooligan, and being perceived accordingly by others, they need to have an adequate degree of what Bengtsson & Firat (2006) refer to as brand literacy, a competence or knowledge of how to use brands knowingly in certain social or cultural contexts in order to assume and act out these typificatory roles. The typification process cannot be conducted or handled by the individuals themselves, but needs the interactional support from other subjects. As stated before, these are complicated matters for the young individuals to deal with, much because when leaving childhood and entering into adolescence and the adult world, their perceived reality involving various typified roles is constantly contested, and various subjective realities are frequently offered (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). If you do not have enough knowledge or cultural competence, as Swidler (1986) puts it, to decode the existing typified scheme of various styles, their meanings and their appropriated brand symbols, you would not only be running the risk of suffering unpleasant psychological consequences, such as

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being laughed at or mocked by other peers for using the wrong symbolic markers, but you may also suffer physically.

> **Trey (ordinary user):**
>
> Casual (clothing) is nice, it's a pity though that all soccer-hooligans give it a bad reputation…They have even gotten Burberry to stop making the hats…

> **Aron (ordinary user):**
>
> In the early 1980s the hooligans in northern England started to dress casual to avoid being hassled by the cops…nobody knows what they are talking about here… That with the hats though is true: since the Burberry hats were so strongly associated with violence Burberry stopped making them.

> **Burger (ordinary user):**
>
> I really think that the casual style (how to dress) is really nice, but it's a shame that you get beaten up just because you dress like that. It was hardly the hooligans that started to dress casual.

> **Aron (ordinary user):**
>
> How nice that you are well educated about "your" style – NOT
>
> No wonder that you are beaten up when you dress "casual" without "walking it". I want to preserve the style but there are a lot of kids running around with "mummy's curtains[32]" on their heads or they have managed to save up for one of the cheaper garments from Henry Lloyd. SI (Stone Island) the most sacred on the "terrace" should not be touched if you cannot stand up for your choice of clothes.

It is truly doubtful if the brand strategists and marketers at Burberry, Lacoste, Fred Perry and Stone Island are particularly delighted to find out that their precious and high premium brands are discussed about, made sense of, and defined as either fully authentic or quasi authentic hooligan brands. It is only possible to speculate about the implications these consumer authored stories or narratives may have on the previously discussed brands' actual and overall brand meaning. However, it has been acknowledged that brands' meanings are thought

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[32]Mummy's curtains is here referring to a witty connection made between the characteristics of the symbolic mark of the Burberry brand and its resemblance to the squared fabric (pattern) often found on kitchen curtains

to be co-authored or co-constructed by four main authors where the brand stories authored by consumers contribute to the overall meaning of the brand (Holt, 2003). This phenomenon is often referred to as consumer agency (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). This involves the conception that consumers are considered to have agency/power over brands because in their acts of consumption there are elements of production (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995), which in the end contribute to the production and construction of the brand image (Arvidsson, 2005). What is perhaps even more worrying for the brand managers of the previously discussed brands is that the interaction indicates that a style or even a subculture within society associated with tarnished meanings have done what the branding consultant Wipperfürth (2005) refers to as brand hijacking. This pertains to the phenomenon where consumers or groups of consumers take over the brand by contaminating the brand symbol with other/different meanings than those intended by the marketers, in this case by a tarnished and unfavorable youth style. Again it is hard to say something about the actual implications the brand hijack has had on the overall meaning of, for example, Burberry.

However, recent research has shown that certain consumer groupings within the consumer culture, such as the anti-branding movement, may actually have significant impact on a brand's marketing induced image, generating a doppelgänger brand image. As a result of being caught up in an anti-branding discourse, Thompson et al (2006) mean that this image may take on unfavourable, corporate-mainstream, uncool and unauthentic features, making it a less valuable symbolic resource for consumers' identity projects, which ultimately may lead consumers to avoid the brand. In this study, however, it is not only the anti-branding movement, or the actions and activities of members of other consumer activist movements that may impact and affect the meanings of brands, but also other groups of consumers without the explicit objective to hurt companies and their brands through various uncool tactics. Instead, other groups of consumers, in this case hooligans, affect brands and their meanings through their appropriation and daily consumption of brands as symbolic markers of their style with the objective to resolve a life project, which here is to form a youth identity of their own, not so much criticizing and hurting the actual brand/s per se.

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What emerges as significant or important here, as also shown in the study of Thompson et al (2006) study, is the theme of inauthenticity/authenticity. Some brand symbols are to be, or are appointed as, the true and authentic markers of the hooligan style. Thus, in order for young people to become or stay authentic hooligans, as opposed to ridiculous pretenders, they need to be able to show it to others by using those brands. This, of course, requires knowledge or competence concerning which brands that are authentic enough to use for the very purpose of displaying their style belonging, both to others but also to themselves. As other styles or other groups of people may start using the once authentic brands, contaminating them with unfavorable associations, making them lose their differentiating power as authentic symbolic marks of the hooligan style, this cultural competence needs to be constantly updated.

Brands as symbolic markers of a style may, however, also become inauthentic if they are used by inauthentic members of the style, here referred to as wannabes or pretenders. If you cannot "walk the style" (as it was put by one of the discussants), that is, if you are not committed enough to the style's ethos, you should not use or wear the brands considered to be its authentic symbolic markers. Hebdige (1979) mean that it is this commitment to the ethos of the style that allows its members to fairly easily distinguish between originals and hangers on, and authentic vs. inauthentic members. Styles have been recognized to follow a concentric order or structure based on the members' commitment to the style ethos. The hard cores represent the few but very committed members on which the entire style centers, followed by, in line with a declining degree of commitment, soft cores, preppies and the peripheral members (Fox, 1987).

One of the discussants in the previous interactions also expressed frustration, perhaps even fear that pretenders, that is, the inauthentic members of the hooligan style, actually may de-authenticate the meanings of the style to the degree that could threaten its very existence. He only wanted to preserve the style, which Hebdige (1979) means is a very difficult task to achieve in the long run. In this case, the style preservation activities involve urging pretenders or other inappropriate people to keep their hands off the style's authentic brand symbols. To the original or authentic members of a style group, it is

then almost a good thing that other people who do not belong to the style or who are only pretenders get beaten up for using the brands that serve as authentic symbolic markers of that style. It would most probably make other people stay away from those authentic symbolic markers. Interestingly, this works almost as a kind of sanction against a "conventional" trade mark infringement where, as in this case, actors are punished for wrongfully using symbols that belong to other members/consumers. Instead of a lawsuit they are getting a smack.

As authenticity emerged as such an important theme for these young consumers when discussing the membership of style in relation the consumption of brands, it would appear sensible in this case to further elaborate on what kind of authenticity the young consumers are dealing with. Grayson & Martinec (2004) discriminate between indexical authenticity and iconic authenticity, where the former refers to signs or cues that are thought to have a factual and true spatio-temporal link to something else. The latter refers to something being authentic because it is a physical or psychological manifestation resembling something that is indexically authentic, thus being an authentic reproduction, a mimic, of what is physically or psychologically real. Judging from the previous empirical excerpts it appears that what counts as an authentic brand or being an authentic hooligan refers to that which is indexically authentic, thus the true and real production of something. Pretenders or wannabes are looked upon with contempt since they are merely reproductions or mimics of the indexically authentic. Being iconically authentic has therefore no credence when it comes to issues of style and brand authenticity, or when being or striving for becoming a real or true hooligan.

Important to remember, though, is that authenticity does not reside in the objects, persons and performances themselves (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Rather authenticity is socially constructed (Peterson, 2005), and therefore something that is claimed by or for someone, thing or performance that is either rejected or accepted as authentic by relevant others (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). What then is considered or deemed as an authentic brand or an authentic member of a style lies in the judgment of those relevant others. Which people who are included in those relevant others is hard to specify, but one may speculate that the hard core members, which, according to Fox (1987),

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constitute the essence of a style, have a big influence over the judgment of the authenticity of both brand symbols and other members of a group or a style. This would imply that a brand is authentic only as long as it clearly is considered to reflect and represent the expressions and actions of the true and hard core members/people of a style or a group of consumers.

7.1.2 Style typifications and brand symbol plundering

It is not only members of the often considered extreme hooligan style who discuss which are the authentic hooligan/casual brands to be appropriated and included into the style's symbolic ensemble in order to serve as symbolic markers perpetuating the style and its meanings. Other more "appropriate" styles and people affiliating with these styles that have a less tarnished image or reputation than hooligans, occupy themselves with matters of discussing, describing, analyzing, decoding and interpreting the meanings of brands and the meanings of various styles. The various styles' symbolic ensemble do not, however, only consist of brands, but also of other symbolic properties such as haircuts, music, and an overall clothing style manifested in the use of several consumer objects. The symbols constituting each style's symbolic ensemble become reciprocally typical (signifiers or symbolic markers) not only for the style's members themselves, but also members of other styles. In their micro level interactions these young consumers thus again create what Berger & Luckmann (1966) refer to as typificatory schemes involving typical consumer objects. Here, however, individuals are not typified among each other as "a man", "a happy type" or "a buyer", but instead as a "hooligan, a "poppare" or a "fjortis". These young consumers' everyday life is thus arranged in a typical way where "I" understand others as a type e.g. a "fjortis" and will interact with and interpret some of their conduct in a typical manner. It is through this scheme of typifications, or a scheme of various styles constituted by their typical consumer objects by which these young consumers understand themselves, each other, and the reality they are living in. Hence, in order that the young consumers can make sense of their reality and understand themselves and who they are in relation to others, they seem to need knowledge of the existing typificatory scheme/order of styles, and the subsequent typical consumer objects

constituting each style. That knowledge is also needed if and when they are to act out or assume these typifications, thus in order to act out any of the existing styles in an authentic manner. Berger & Luckmann (1966) speak of roles when individuals act out or assume these typifications, which means that individuals need to obtain or possess specific role knowledge in order to, precisely as in the interaction concerning the hooligan style and hooligan brands, carry out their roles in a competent and authentic way. However, the boundaries between the various typified styles and their subsequent typical consumer symbols is sometimes a bit blurred and it is not totally clear which brands are typical for certain styles, making it hard to assume and play out certain style roles competently. Consequently, it is important for the young consumers to sort these things out – which symbols and consumer objects that are typical for certain styles. This is illustrated in the following conversation dealing with the contents of the "fjortis" style, and the consumer objects and brands associated with it.

> **Geek (ordinary user):**
>
> Almost all "fjortisar" dress the same, they have bronze on their lips, sailing scarf, fluffy hair, Svea-bonnet, SSS-sweaters, oversize sun glasses from H&M, and too much make up on their face…
>
> If you happen to like and think that any of these things are nice and use them, then everybody would tell you that you are a "fjortis." My question is if "fjortis" is a clothing style or a way of being?
>
> **Kurt (ordinary user):**
>
> Of course you are categorized as a "fjortis" If you dress like one
>
> **Lindsay (ordinary user):**
>
> In the same way as "emo" is a clothing style you could say that "fjortis" is that too. But I have to correct you, it's not bronze on their lips, its foundation/idomin.

It is quite interesting to observe here how the brand Svea and SSS, together with other consumer objects, seem to have been included in the "fjortis" style's symbolic ensemble in a way that has made them typical symbols or signifiers of that style – at least from the viewpoint of other individuals. The user Geek seems to express a worry that using certain consumer objects and symbols would automatically typify her as

"fjortis" because those symbols were considered so typical for that style. As was conveyed in Chapter 5 the "fjortis" style is often associated with immature and pathetic behavior where style members seek to mimic more mature people's behavior but also to try to get their hands on those things that are starting to become popular. SSS- clothing or the SSS-brand emanates from KSSS, which stands for the Royal Swedish Sailing Society, which has issued smaller collections particularly for the sailing members of that society. The logo bears a golden royal crown, and since sailing is an activity connected to a certain ambiance, sometimes with status, these clothes (with their brand) have become an attractive symbol for young consumers, and especially for "fjortisar" who are very anxious to adopt novelties because of their fear of being "out." These style meanings or associations did not seem to appeal to Geek at all. This put her in a bit of a quandary because she fancied some of the symbols typified as signifiers of the "fjortis" style at the same time as she did not want to be typified or stamped as a "fjortis" individual by others. This again reflects how certain brands and their meanings so strongly may be tangled up or associated with a certain type of style.

As suggested by Willis (1990), the young consumers discussing on the forum are fairly skilled not only in developing their own styles but also in scanning, interpreting and decoding the style of others, linking them to music, politics, and consumer objects. Again, this is not that strange since it is taste in music, clothing brands or other leisure venues that serve as the material tools for constructing and enacting a style repertoire and style code that may supply the young people with style membership and identity (Elliot & Davies, 2006). This implies that young people are, as Hebdige (1979) suggests, on a constant and relentless search for suitable consumer objects to be appropriated for their style creation, preservation, membership and enactment.

With the online discussions at "Hamsterpaj" in mind it is really not that strange that style members constantly need to identify and appropriate the symbolic meanings of new or other consumer objects. The discussions strongly indicate that it has to do particularly with the ambition to perpetuate or preserve the style as it is, thus see to it that its meanings remain the same as before. However, as the meanings of various consumer symbols for various reasons change over time, a style

might need to find and make use of other or new brand symbols that better reflect its ethos and meaning. At the same time, the meaning of the style might also change as society changes. What constitutes being "punk" today probably differs from what constituted "punk" in the late 70s and the early 80s when bands such as Sex Pistols were prominent. The Do-It-Yourself ethic being central to the "punk" style most probably means something else today compared to how it was practiced and what it meant back then. Styles thus seem to be in the need of re-inventing themselves every now and then in order to stay the same, or at least close to the same; this is often done partly by appropriating other/new consumer objects as symbolic constituents of the style. Holt (2004) has presented a similar thought in his cultural-historical analysis of the meanings of brands that have been able to develop into and stay as cultural icons. He means that brands that develop into cultural icons always manage to remain the same, or more or less so, by continuously throughout history re-inventing their meanings by creating myths around the brand that are able to bridge or resolve (nation) cultural identity gaps.

What appears as both interesting and relevant in this respect, is how various consumer groupings and styles in a Swedish context actually pick out and appropriate certain brand symbols. The brand symbols connected to the previously discussed styles have most probably, as Hall *et al* (1976) suggest, been picked because they are thought to somehow be homologous with the style's purpose, ethos and its collective self-identity, and that the members of the style can see their values be held or reflected in those symbols. The Cheap Monday skull logo and the company's focus on darker, grey and black jeans models, for example, seems to be the absolutely right fit for the darkish and gloomy youth style of Emo. For the hooligans in the previous section they appropriated a casual clothing style with premium name brands as symbols in order to escape the surveillance and hassle from the police when fighting with or looking for fights with fans of other soccer teams. Instead of wearing explicit symbols of their team such as scarf, hats or soccer jerseys, which would reveal their club affiliation and their trouble making, they started wearing brands and clothes that made them look like respectable, even a bit snobby people, thereby avoiding trouble with police disturbing their violent plans. However if there are no appropriate brand symbols available for a style to lay their hands on,

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that is to say, no brand symbol that is homologous with the perceived meaning of the style to be used as a symbolic marker of the style, problems may arise. There is, however, a possible solution to this problem, which presents itself in the following conversation concerning the "Poppare" style.

Popcorn (ordinary user):

First they snatched the Converse, then the Palestine-scarf, then striped clothes, then the tight down pipe jeans, then the pyramid shaped rivets, and now they are snatching back-comb hair too!

What will come next?

Maggot (assistant):

You don't say. "Poppare" did the right thing to snatch the Converse shoes, that's for sure

Bowie (ordinary user):

What?! "Poppare" and Converse don't belong together

Maggot (assistant):

Oh yeah, all "Poppare" snatch from other styles. Converse is nowadays a mainstream shoe

Larry (ordinary user):

Where did we steal that from :O?

Popcorn (ordinary user):

From everybody else .You have done so that nobody else dares to use it because they're afraid of being called "poppare"

Painkiller (assistant):

They have snatched everything. I want to have back-combed hair sometimes, I would also like to wear my Converse and pyramid shaped rivets on my jacket, without being called a fucking "Poppare"

The prior interaction reveals that there are individuals who are upset about the conduct of the "Poppare" style – that they constantly steal or snatch brands and consumer objects from other styles or other people. However, it is also acknowledged that although that kind of style

performance is regarded as improper behaviour it is a fairly common phenomenon and that all styles actually steal or borrow artifacts and symbols from each other. This type of style performance Hebdige (1979) refers to as symbolic plundering and it means that one style steals or snatches a symbol considered important for other people or other styles, rendering those symbols as inappropriate markers or signifiers of who people are and with what style they are affiliated. In this case "Poppare" have plundered and stolen the Converse brand, perhaps because there were no other suitable symbols to use as a style marker. By including Converse in their symbolic ensemble, combining and arranging it with other artifacts in the "Poppare" style repertoire they may succeed in subverting the previous meanings of the brand by contaminating them with new and unfavourable "Poppare" meanings. When plundering and appropriating the Converse brand the members of the "Poppare" style perform bricolage, which represents the creative and improvised combination and re-arrangement of objects, symbols or artifacts issued by cultural members creating new meanings within and between those very cultural symbols, objects and artifacts (Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Hebdige, 1979). Such creation of meaning Willis (1990) refers to as symbolic work and it entails the ways in which young consumers use, decorate and invest meanings into their immediate life spaces and social practices, especially when it comes to the consumption of conspicuous goods. When creating such (new) meanings for brands Arvidsson (2005) points out that consumers perform unpaid immaterial labour that in the end may contribute to a brand's monetary value. This again indicates that people's consumption of symbols actually may produce meanings and value for those very symbols, thereby supporting the post modern view that production actually occurs in consumption (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995).

Still, to the disappointment and irritation for some young people, new meanings seem to be created or produced for the Converse brand when it is arranged in relation to other objects and symbols existing in the "Poppar" style repertoire, which makes it a less attractive symbolic resource for those other people's identity construction (Elliot & Wattansanuwan, 1998) and style creation (Hebdige, 1979; Hall et al, 1976; Clark, 1976). It may be this loss of an identity resource caused by the brand's subverted meanings that disappointed or irritated the other discussants. The previously attractive, perhaps even sacred brand

symbol (Belk *et al*, 1989), has been contaminated, polluted, even defiled by the "dirty" meanings of the "Poppare" style to the degree that it has become what Douglas (1976) refers to as impure or unclean. For Douglas dirt and pollution signify disorder and thereby express the existence of symbolic systems, symbolic order and the classification of matters. In chasing and controlling dirt we are not really driven by an anxiety to dodge disease, rather we are trying to order or re-order our environment. Our pollution behavior is then actually the reaction that condemns any idea, object or symbol that will confuse or contradict the cherished and established symbolic order and classifications. In addition, the idea of dirt is relative. Things only become dirty when they are out of place or are situated in the wrong context. Shoes are not dirty in themselves but they become dirty when they are placed on the kitchen table. Things also become dirty and disgusting when it is possible to find traces of another person's presence or identity such as bite mark on a sandwich or a hair in a hamburger. In light of Douglas' conceptualization of dirt and pollution, the young consumers conversing in the previous interaction concerning the symbolic plundering performed by the "Poppar" style may then feel upset and be irritated because the style's plundering of the Converse shoe ruptures the already typified symbolic order consisting of the existing styles and the symbols they keep in their respective repertoire. Snatching the Converse symbol thus causes disorder in the previously ordered symbol system – a disorder that first needs to be made sense of by discussing it with contemporaries online, and then to be dealt with in some way to restore the order of the symbolic system. The plundering actions of the "Poppar" style thus misplaced the Converse symbol by putting it in the wrong context - their symbolic ensemble. Converse was therefore regarded as out of place and therefore dirty, polluted and unclean by those users who previously were attracted to this brand, users who perhaps even regarded it to be sacred for resolving their life project of forming an identity of their own.

7.1.3 From delight to disgust - the logic behind brand meaning dilution

When making sense of the symbolic landscape in order develop a brand literacy (Bengtsson & Firat, 2006), which allows young consumers to

navigate successfully in that landscape and in their respective cultural field, the discussions on "Hamsterpaj" reveal that it is not enough to have an understanding of what brands exist, what they mean and which brands to use when being affiliated to a certain style. The online discussions give at hand that it is not even enough to be able to decode the meanings of the various existing styles and the meanings of the brand symbols used as symbolic markers of those styles. The young consumers interacting on the online forum are also putting a lot of effort into discussing, sorting out, and decoding what brands that are generally "in" or cool and what brands that are "out" or uncool. The particular interactions indicate that the young consumers have a fairly elaborate understanding of the logic behind how distinguished brands lose (at least some of) their distinctive, and attractive meanings. They have an understanding of what may be conceptualized as the logic behind brand dilution or brand degeneration. This understanding seems to constitute an important tool or competence for performing a sensible analysis of separating out brands that successfully could be employed to solve any of their life projects (Mick & Buhl, 1992), such as creating an identity of their own (Hebdige, 1979; Clark, 1976; Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Elliot & Davies, 2006), or handling the teenage power structure in which they live (Milner, 2004), from brands that are inadequate or inappropriate resources for these purposes. The following interaction, dealing specifically with the logic to use when analyzing, decoding and judging whether and when brands are to be considered in or out, illustrates this in an interesting way.

> **Luthor (ordinary user):**
>
> Canada Goose is so incredibly ugly, and SO out. This is Sweden not the North Pole. We don't need such warm jackets/vests. If you are interested in fashion you would never wear one of those. That jacket used to signify status. But now it is called "fjortis" jacket by most people.

> **Facer (ordinary user):**
>
> What do you mean that Canada Goose is out? They are so much in, like everyone has one and if you're down town there is like at least a 1000 people wearing them at the same time.

Luthor (ordinary user):

It's out. Doesn't matter how many that wear them. If everybody would walk around dressed as middle aged people, would that be considered "in"?

Facer (ordinary user):

But why would it (the brand) be out?? Do you think that you would by a 5000 kronor jacket because it's "out," or what?

Nemesis (ordinary user):

Obviously, yeah…

Chaos (guard of order):

No, they are bought because they are expensive and people think it provides them with status.

Luthor (ordinary user):

There are even more expensive jackets that are in, and cheaper ones too. The price has nothing to do with if the jacket is in or out. It used to convey status (3-4 years ago) but not any longer.

Facer (ordinary user):

Ok now I get it. I thought that they were in just because everybody wore them, but now I understand that it doesn't work the way I thought it did. You buy for 5000 kronor because you think it gives respect, but in that case everybody buys Converse shoes because they believe they that would award them with status.

This discussion clearly illustrates that brands are not "in" or popular because a lot of people use them. On the contrary, the relationship seems to be inversed. Brands that are used by many people, and by definition are popular, are instead regarded to be out, regardless of whether they cost 5000 kronor. Holt's (1998) provides some clues to this inverse relationship. He means that when brands turn into mass produced symbols they are perceived as being contaminated by the unfavorable commodity form. They are then considered belonging to a disavowed objectified mass culture that robs the ones consuming those symbols from their uniqueness as subjects, and from their capacity to make individual and autonomous consumption choices. There are thus certain areas of human existence and behavior that, according to Belk *et*

al, (1989) ought to remain sacred and separated from profane areas of commercialization and profit pursuit. De-identifiying with or criticizing a popular and now mass cultural symbol as the Canada Goose brand shows that one is not, what Thompson & Haytko (1997) names a "walking name-brand" that in a conformable way just un-reflexively follows the popular and mainstream brand fashion.

The (high) price itself does not then decide if the brand is in or out, and if it supplies the user with what Bourdieu (1984) refers to as symbolic capital, which is the equivalent to the social recognition and status one receives from other cultural members within the cultural field. The interaction reveals that these young consumers instead connect "in-ness" with status or social recognition, but that this status is linked to a limited supply or edition of a particular brand. Milner (2004) means that the most attractive status symbols or those that come in limited supply, are only meant for certain individuals and which you cannot buy for money. He provides the example of the "letter-jackets" at American high schools which are only given to those individuals who are members of the high school football team. These jackets are only allowed to be worn by those who possess an exclusive skill or competence in American football and cannot be bought for money. They could only be achieved through talent, hard training and character. Of course, in this case, the (high) price of a brand would exclude some people from getting it (limiting its supply to some extent), thereby adding something to the recognition and symbolic capital of individuals who may afford them. However, economic capital, in this case the amount of money enabling someone to buy an expensive brand, is, according to Bourdieu (1984), not the only and not the strongest resource contributing to the aggregated symbolic capital, thus to the social recognition and status of an individual. This comes as an unpleasant surprise for the user "Facer" when he is being educated and told that just because one may afford to buy a Canada Goose jacket for 5000 kronor, a jacket that he proudly claims is worn by numerous individuals, he really would not get any recognition or status from others since it has become so popular and thereby a common and highly ordinary brand in Sweden. Hence, the brand does not have the same distinctive and distinguishing property any more as this distinctiveness has been blurred and diluted by the increased number of people using it. It has even become so popular, ordinary and

even common that it is "out". Not knowing this may be a mistake because using such a diluted and common brand would perhaps even have a negative affect on the overall recognition and status "Facer" is awarded by others. When brands become too popular, and thereby too common, or as these young consumers often say, too mainstream, strong labels may be used to represent such a dilution process.

> **Paul (ordinary user):**
>
> I think we already have our next plague here…Cheap Monday jeans. Only a month ago it was considered cool and high status to own a pair of Cheap Monday. But now that all "fjortisar" know that they are design jeans for only 400 kronor it is like the worst JL-hysteria. Soon it will probably be as out with Cheap Monday as with JL…
>
> **Rock (administrator):**
>
> It has never, to my knowledge, been considered status to own a pair of Cheap Monday, the accessibility is too easy. I agree, however, that they are the new plague.

In this consultative interaction it is conveyed that the Cheap Monday brand has become so popular so fast that it soon runs the risk of becoming "out". Its popularity, and the spread of the brand among young consumers has been so quick that it is equated with the spread of a highly contagious plague, generating a form of hysteria similar to a previous hysterical popularity around the brand JL. Again a link is made between the levels of accessibility or supply of a brand and the level of status or recognition one would get from using it. The young people interacting on the forum seem to have a fairly good understanding of how consumer objects and brands fairly quickly may move from being "in" to being "out" as the brand increases in popularity among a great number of consumers. This indicates that they possess some sort of insight of how fashion (in this case the fashion of the Cheap Monday brand) trickles from what Simmel (1904) conceived to be the upper class down through the social hierarchy or structure. When the fashion of the upper class has trickled down to and been adopted by people of the lower classes or people of the masses, the upper class with high symbolic capital changes their fashion behavior.

When it comes to the social structure or social hierarchy among young consumers conversing on the forum it is, however, not necessarily

understood to be stratified according to a more traditional social class perspective put forward by Simmel (1904), where there is an upper class, a middle class, and a working class often structured by their access to different sorts of capital (Bourdieu, 1984). This, however, does not imply that the young people are unaware of the existence of such a stratum in society, how it works, and that it may be used to distinguish, categorize and separate people from people. On the contrary, they seem to be very conscious of such a stratification and its implications. Still there is social stratification among the young consumers too, which is based on the distribution of social recognition and status among the various young individuals. The ones serving as the upper class are the ones, who for various reasons, are awarded with a lot of recognition and thereby status from other young individuals. It may because those few have a particular skill or talent within a particular area (such as football), or that they, in this case, possess extensive experience and knowledge of which brands to use, when to use them, and how to use them in order to be "in" vogue. To stay in vogue then, being an early adopter, perhaps even a trend setter, the young people develop and maintain a fairly reflective understanding of how the (brand) fashion/dilution process works. As the Cheap Monday brand, as fast as a contagious plague, then trickles down from the illustrious few trend setters or early adopters to the undistinguished and grey masses, it is understood to lose much of its distinction and turns into a symbol of the common and the vulgar. Bourdieu (1984) means that when something, such as a consumer object, is considered common and therefore vulgar by the distinctive and cultivated people, it will symbolize distaste and disgust. This is often expressed or manifested by repulsion. It is therefore interesting that the discussants in the previous interaction used the term plague, which would indicate that the Cheap Monday brand has developed into a disease that can contaminate people and make them sick – how disgusting! Hence a brand such as Cheap Monday, which previously was considered by some of the young consumers to be clean, pure, sacred and associated with delight, suddenly and as a result of its fast increased popularity, turned into a sick-making ugly plague, conjuring up associations and feelings of disgust. By passing such a judgment of taste, stating their repulsion and disgust over the popularity of the Cheap Monday brand, the young consumers may then distinguish themselves among other young people in social contexts such as the "Hamsterpaj forum". This finding is in

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line with Piacentini & Mailer's (2004) claim that young people often express their individuality not only by the brands they like and use but also to a large degree by the rejection of certain brand symbols.

A strong indication of when a brand has become substantially diluted, or has lost most of its flair and its recognition as a symbol of delightful distinction, is when it has trickled down to those young people ascribed with the lowest status, possessing the least amount of symbolic capital in the social hierarchy.

> **Pfifer (ordinary user):**
>
> JL can be pretty nice but if you walk around down town with the buddies who only wear JL clothes and a gang of "fjortisar" walk by it's not that nice anymore…12 year olds also start to wear JL clothes now… Man! Is it trite or what?
>
> **Monica (ordinary user):**
>
> Listen, I've got a neighbor who is in 2nd or 3rd grade, and he and his buddies wear JL clothes. I'm freaking out
>
> **Omar (ordinary user):**
>
> I saw a girl in 1st or 2nd grade on my school with JL…It's getting absurd.

This discussion reveals that members of the "fjortis" style are among those who are awarded with the least status and recognition in the Swedish youth sphere, perhaps because members of this style tend to be in their early teens and are not taken that seriously by older teens. Age thus seems to be an issue in this respect, which is not really that strange because age and seniority often seem to reflect people's status positions in various forms of social hierarchies. A good indication for when a brand is seriously on its way out, is when the young teenagers adopt them, here signified by the "fjortis" style, a style that is often looked down on and ridiculed by other teenagers interacting on the forum. It, however, becomes even worse when really young children start to use (what at least was) fashionable and expensive brands such as JL. Then the brand really has reached rock bottom as a symbolic resource that may be used to construct an identity, for instance (Elliot & Wattansuwan, 1998). The brand has become so filthy and disgusting

that it has almost become useless as any sort of symbolic mark, for any type of style, or any type of individual with sensible taste.

What is also interesting is that when it becomes clear that the brand JL has become popular among 2nd and 3rd graders, the teenagers on the forum claim that it is getting absurd that such young and innocent children have actually become so brand fashion oriented. In these discussions the teenagers complain and even pass moral judgment on a society where innocent children are no longer allowed to be children anymore since they are so soon forced to enter into the world of fashion goods. Such complaining or moralizing is often reserved for adult people judging the behavior of the young. It appears that the young people, by engaging in that kind of moralizing reflections try to act or pass judgment in the same way as adults normally do. At the same time, as proposed by Clark (1976), they distance themselves from other things that are significant for the dominant parent culture. This becomes a way for them to create an identity of their own in relation to both the adult world and childhood. They are thus not innocent children any more, and they are not yet boring old adults who have no clue of which consumer objects that are "in", hip, cool, or totally "out". Likewise, they are not just innocent young children who are totally inexperienced when it comes to navigating in a fashion-oriented consumer society. Rather, they seem to be quite confident in handling the complexities of the symbolic landscape of such a society.

7.2 Summary

By conversing online, the young members of "Hamsterpaj" develop an understanding of the brand symbols that exist in the Swedish context, their meanings, and how they relate to various youth styles. It was found that the young people discuss these matters because it is important to know and to develop competence for using certain brands in order to resolve one of their most important life projects, which is to establish their own personal identity. This is often performed by creating youth styles, which in turn are formed by using certain consumer objects and putting certain brands into their symbolic repertoire. If no suitable brand symbols exist for the style construction and preservation the styles they snatch brand symbols from other styles

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or consumers, which may render those brands polluted or dirty in the eyes of the previous consumers since they become contaminated by unfavorable identity features. The online discussions also reveal that the young consumers understand that brands dilute when they become too popular. Then they are transformed into symbols of the vulgar and mainstream, thus shifting from what was once considered a delightful symbol of distinction to a dirty symbol associated with disgust.

8 The reflectivity of brand meaning creation

This chapter deals specifically with the young consumers' understanding of how brand meaning is produced or created. It touches on their understanding of what the concept of name brands really means or implies and their understanding of the strategies and techniques through which brand managers seek to create attractive and appealing meanings for brands. Interestingly, though, some uncertainties and paradoxes emerge, especially of how one ought to define the concept of name brands and how one should understand firms' underlying motives behind the creation of brands.

8.1 Negotiating the meaning of the name brand concept

In the previous chapters the young consumers discuss brands and brand related topics with certainty and confidence. Therefore, we might expect that they would have a fairly clear understanding and definition of the concept of name brands, much because it is around name brands that the discussions on "Hamsterpaj" centers. However, the discussions dealing with the understanding of the name brand concept reveal something else. A lot of energy is spent on collectively trying to make sense of its meaning. This is important because for the users to fruitfully discuss brands they need to have at least fairly common knowledge or an idea of what the concept of brands means or refers to, thus to have something that serves as base or platform for their brand discussions. The following consultative interaction illustrates this sense making in a clear way.

> **Willy (assistant):**
>
> Well, it's doubtful if JL and WE can be included in the category of name brand clothes…

Cactus (administrator):

Actually all clothes that are manufactured with anything else than a No-name, are in fact name brand clothes, since they are labelled with a brand :)

Rainbow (ordinary user) replying Willy:

I just felt that I had to point this out. JL, WE and Bikbok are name brand clothes, however not in the same way as Lacoste. If you buy a JL sweater then I'm pretty sure you do it because everybody else does it, for god's sake! A 1000 "kronor"- sweater.

Summer (ordinary user):

Why doesn't Bikbok count as name brand clothes? Things that are printed or attached to sweaters do count as brands, don't they? (Well, not the note with the washing instructions though)

Sweet (Ordinary user):

Yes of course that is a brand, but that types of clothes are not "name brand clothes," as in being expensive, are they? But hey I might be wrong. Have a nice life!

Jerry (Ordinary user):

All clothes are not name brand clothes, are they? But if you mean a little more expensive clothes with a more recognized brand, I have one garment like that. It's a pair of Tiger-jeans, and when I tried them on they were far too small, but I love them now.

Rainbow (ordinary user) replying sweet:

What I meant was that I regard Bikbok as name brand clothes since people purchase them because others wear them, and you can't really say that they are for free either, even though they are cheaper than many other name brands.

Lara (ordinary user):

Well, there are brands, and then there are brands. Those with ok prices for us ordinary people, and those design clothes such as Gucci, Versace, and Prada. I could never walk around in them myself; it would feel wrong in some way, very snobbish. I mean, people walking around in that type of brands, could they really give a sober impression. You probably have to work hard to show that you are not something more than a regular human being.

It becomes pretty clear that the young consumers are not that sure and confident when it comes to defining the meaning of the concept of name brands, rather it reveals substantial uncertainty. The discussants try to negotiate an agreement of what the concept really means but they do not, however, seem to reach a clear and shared consensus, or a "common definition". The young consumers express a fairly wide spectrum for interpretation and nuances about the meaning of the concept of name brands. There seems to be an understanding that a name brand could be anything from a product that has a label or name on it (the discussants often also refer to these brands as cheap brands or cheaper brands) being brands with an inexpensive price, which corresponds to the classical definition of a brand as a symbol or name that distinguishes one manufacturer of a product or service from another, to other fairly expensive premium name brands such as We, JL, and Lacoste to the most expensive luxury brands such as Dolce Gabbana and Gucci. The consumers' knowledge of name brands as a category may partly be conceptualized or understood as a folk theory, proposed by Lakoff (1987), consisting of a taxonomy dividing name brands into three subcategories: brands that are name brands just because they have a brand symbol, more expensive premium brands, and luxury brands. Still, there is no stable and exact taken-for-granted, wide-spread, common belief, view or conception that may be termed commonsense knowledge from Smedslund's (1986) point of view. However, the nature of the young consumers' conceptions concerning the category (and its contents) of name brands is more in line with Sjöberg's (1982) view of commonsense (knowledge??) as something ambiguous and unstable, having several meanings, varying across individuals and cultures.

When defining the category of name brands it is quite obvious that the young discussants do not form the more abstract and clear definition that is common in the academic world. Rather, they use certain brand symbols as examples and signifiers of the category when together trying to make sense of what name brands really are considered to be. It is not so much the confined commonsense knowledge stock of every individual, thus the content of the young consumers' conceptions about brands and name brands that is uniform or general and therefore commonsense, but instead, as Brewer (1984) suggests, the very reasoning process, in this case the communal negotiation and

knowledge sharing taking place in a consultative interaction, by which the commonsense knowledge stock is formed. It is not (at least when it comes to the definition of the name brand category) the interesting nuances and content of the knowledge and conceptions of name brands as a consumption category that are commonsense, but rather the reasoning process of how that particular knowledge is constructed. What is particularly interesting about the young consumers' negotiation of the meaning of the concept of name brands, is that it indicates that their overall understanding of how brands work as a social phenomenon contains elements of considerable uncertainty, which in turn projects a slightly different picture than the brand understanding conveyed by these young consumers in the previous chapters of this dissertation.

8.2 Understanding branding

When discussing how brand meanings are created, which generally involves the branding activities that companies perform in order to create attractive meanings around the brand which, in the end, are supposed to add to its value, the young consumers again express a higher degree of certainty and confidence. One may even notice a slight arrogance in their interactions since they occasionally seem to regard themselves as smart as or better than the marketers. However, as the young consumers excel in cynical reasoning concerning the firms' branding activities interesting paradoxes emerge.

The interactions give at hand that the young consumers understand firms' branding efforts as means of creating an attractive premium symbol that has a vague correlation to product quality in relation to the price charged. From their perspective, firms are thus able to charge consumers with highly priced products because they have managed to create a nice brand symbol containing certain favorable associations, even though the quality is not that much better compared to other cheaper brands and products; in the end this enables firms to make big profits. In the eyes of the young individuals, companies then try to take advantage of the nice brand symbol by, for example, producing other types of products under the same brand. This conception shows similarities to the often used strategy of brand extension promoted by

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brand gurus such as Kapferer (2004). These fairly reflexive understandings of the workings of branding may be understood through not only the folk theory construct presented by Lakoff (1987) and Churchland (1991) where folk theories are thought to provide the humble adept with concepts of how to make sense, navigate and manipulate his or her world, but they involve the type of folk theory that McLaughlin (1996) terms as vernacular theory. Although the young consumers interacting on the forum are ordinary people without cultural power, not belonging to the academic critical knowledge elite, they still seem to have the understanding that enables them to critically question and analyze at least some of the principles often guiding the cultural practice of branding. On a first and initial observation these young consumers then seem, although lacking the same intellectual prestige of scientific theories, to be able to see through and decode important parts of the symbolic game of the cultural industry in which marketers and brand managers have important roles.

Moreover the consumers, perhaps as a result of an extensive experience of handling the persuasion attempts by marketers (Friestad & Wright, 1994), or because of their constant interaction with the prevailing branding paradigm and its subsequent branding techniques (Holt, 2002), appear to have developed a deep enough cynicism concerning the logic of marketing and branding. When then faced with a situation where a marketer does not act in accordance with the expected branding logic, they become utterly surprised. The following consultative interaction concerning the Swedish brand Peak Performance is an interesting illustration of this.

Hank (the founder):

I stopped by the Peak Performance store at the "Arcade" in Gothenburg this afternoon. I thought I would check out some clothes and stuff. Along the wall with golf-stuff hung some hats and a golf towel with a Peak Performance logo. Nonsense I thought. Peak is (was?) good at making durable clothes that work well – but towels? It's just a good way of making money from people who buy expensive stuff with the "right brand," I thought. Curious as I am, I asked the shop assistant:

-That Peak-towel. Is it special in anyway, or is it just a regular towel that is more expensive just because there is a Peak-logo on it?

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-It's just the brand that costs, well yeah, there is that snap-hook too. It probably cost 50 "öre[33]" to make.

-So you mean that that towel is a lot more expensive just because it says "Peak" on it, and that it is no different from a regular towel?

-Yeah!

It's a pity about Peak, a real pity. It's sad when even the employees start to doubt the brand and that it has become so obvious that they ride on the "hype." I bet that the Danish IC Company who owns Peak are going to try to squeeze out as much money as they can while the brand is still cool. It's sad that they do not continue to focus on quality instead of making bigger and cooler logos…I wonder when we're down to the Dolce & Gabbana-level…

Fence (ordinary user):

Ha ha cute co-worker =D It's like those idiots at SIBA[34] who don't know anything about marketing.

Kitty (assistant):

The most stupid shop assistant in the world!

Raz (ordinary user):

It's funny that the staff actually admits this

Tigger (ordinary user):

…It's just nice to hear that they actually are honest! It would have been worse if he told a story that the towel had a special ability to attract water and that it therefore dried much quicker, like with the double speed compared to regular towels."

The interactants express surprise that the shop assistant actually confesses to "what is common knowledge," that brands, at least in their view, are more expensive than they really have to be, and where the quality of the good is not proportionally reflected in the price. They seem to expect that the shop assistant or the seller would supply what

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[33]"Öre" is the Swedish currency equivalent to (US) cents, and 50 "öre" represents approximately 10-15 cents

[34]SIBA is a big Swedish retailer chain that sells TVs, stereos, DVDs, Video games etc.

Scott & Lyman (1968) refer to as an account to motivate or justify the brand's premium price with a superior functional and quality performance. It therefore comes as a surprise when a company employee or someone else who benefits to keep or preserve a neat and favorable brand image vis-à-vis the consumers does not act in accordance with what is thought to be proper and logical marketing actions. In light of Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective for understanding the acts of people in everyday life, the young consumers are, although they belong to the "audience", able to put themselves in the shoes of, or assume and play the role of a seller/marketer. They appear to have what Berger & Luckmann (1966) refer to as role specific knowledge, enough to act as a member of the "performing team", which here are thought to constitute the marketers/brand managers of firms. The young consumers are, by realizing what would constitute the appropriate performance or act from a marketer's point of view, then able to pass judgment on the performance and acts of the seller/marketer. The micro level interactions thus indicate that the young consumers have adopted, or are familiar with, important elements of the marketing discourse, telling marketers and brand mangers how they ought to act when they are faced with questions like the one allegedly posed by the forum member Hank.

Given their understanding of the appropriate role specific knowledge pertaining to playing the role of a marketer, the young consumers deem the respective seller in the store as stupid because he or she not only has inadequate knowledge for playing the role as a trustworthy marketer, but perhaps also possesses inadequate understanding of how the entire theatrical play occurring between the marketers and consumers works, (the feel for the game or play) and what is required of him/her as a performer of the team of marketers. The "stupid" seller or marketer then reveals the secrets of the team of marketers to the consumer audience by breaking the performing team's rules of performance. Either because he/she does not understand them, or because he/she deliberately acts out the role which Goffman (1959) refers to as the informer, which is a role character who pretends to be a member of the performance team and is allowed to come backstage and learn the team's secrets, but then discloses them (here the secrets of the team of marketers) to the audience (the consumers). The informer's disclosure of the secrets of the branding- or marketing team, or what Holt (2002)

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refers to as the branding paradigm, may thus be one of the ways by which consumers form an understanding of the principles and techniques guiding the work of brand managers. One may even interpret the critical stories posted about the acts of the seller of the Peak Performance brand as an indication of that the young consumers actually consider themselves to have role specific knowledge (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), or a sufficient degree of brand literacy (Bengtsson & Firat, 2006) to perform the role of the marketers better than the marketers themselves.

The surprise the discussants express in the quoted interaction above concerning the unexpected and counter-logical marketing acts displayed by the shop assistant or seller, however reveals that these young consumers are cynical about this type of marketing behavior or acts since it is regarded as an exception that actually confirms the proper rules and secrets of marketing action held by the team of marketers or brand managers. The seller would, from the young consumers' perspective, then try to make use of accounts to justify the premium price of the Peak Performance towel in his efforts to uphold a favorable brand image to the consuming audience, thereby defending the secrets of the performing marketing team.

 Nevertheless, this consumer cynicism about firms' branding activities and the secrets of the team of marketers extend beyond the branding activities performed in selling situations to even include companies' production of branded products. A common conception among these young consumers seems to be that the more expensive name brands are produced in the same mass-producing plants, often somewhere in Asia, in the same factory line by the same underpaid workers who make cheaper brands and no-name clothes. This understanding is made explicit in the following consultative interaction.

> **Spoon (ordinary user):**
>
> …I'm not that naïve that I believe that the quality is better just because it's expensive. Everything is made in the same factory in China anyway.

> **Suzie (ordinary user):**
>
> The quality is the same since they are made in the same country as "ordinary" clothes, and then they brand them with a cute little logo that is supposed to convey status.

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Rainbow (ordinary user):

Many brands like, for example, Prada brag that they are made in Italy. That's just because the material is created in Italy and then it is shipped to and sewn together in China or in any other cheap country.

The conversation reveals an understanding of the process of branding, which has similarities to the central conceptions and ideas of the anti-branding movement. This movement, propelled by Klein's (1999) book "No Logo: Taking aim at the brand bullies", centers on the conceptions or folk theories that big global firms marketing well-known brands move their production to poor countries to take advantage of low wages and unfair labor practices in order to cut costs but still in the end offer us western consumers with appealing brands at premium prices. These conceptions that are prevalent within the anti-branding movement of the logic of branding, and previously only believed to skulk around in more marginalized groups of society, have lately become a common trait of the mainstream consumer culture, thereby constituting an "image uncooling" threat to brand managers trying to develop a particular brand image (Thompson *et al*, 2006). Central elements of the anti-branding movement's understanding of the logic of branding seem here to have even trickled down to the Swedish teenagers discussing brands and fashion on the online forum of "Hamsterpaj. The young consumers' understanding of how branding works contains elements of what Bengtsson & Firat (2006) call critical stories, which are considered to be an indication of a high level of brand literacy. The young consumers there seem to discard the fact that expensive brand symbols really are worth their money in quality since all brands anyway are made in the same factories in poor countries in Asia with low wages and bad working conditions.

These young consumers' understanding of the logic of branding also contain reflections of another interesting branding technique, which the prior interaction quote concerning the Peak Performance also touched upon. It is a branding technique that the consumers themselves call brand hype. According to these young people, this refers to when a brand and its image have become popular and well-recognized to such a degree that the company and its brand managers try to take advantage of it to the greatest possible extent, increasing the number of products under the brand, a so-called line extension (Kapferer, 1997). In this way the brand is exposed to a maximal extent,

often with magnified logos that are easy to recognize for everybody in the wearer's surroundings. Hank took Dolce & Gabbana as an example of how companies put a visibly big logo on their clothes that nobody would miss. This branding technique became poplar a couple of years ago in Sweden where brands such as Tiger of Sweden and JL mimicked this tactic from their Italian counterparts. This conduct echoes what Holt (2002) describes as institutional isomorphism where firms constantly mimic each other's branding techniques. In the long run this means that firms will tend to share the same principles and techniques for how to build brands.

However, as this technique with big logos was employed on a greater scale, especially by more expensive name brands, consumers in Sweden started to question this technique since the big logos generated a feeling among the consumers of being mobile billboards for these brands, running their commercial errands. The consumers, who from the beginning when this branding technique was new, felt a kind of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) from other consumers when being able to show to all that they were able to afford a particular brand, did feel a bit ridiculous when eventually everybody was running around with the same big logos on their fronts. What was from the beginning a distinctive and distinguishing mark for only a few, and a valuable symbolic resource for a person's identity construction (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998) and an integral part of the person's extended self (Belk, 1988), eventually became the vulgar display of the mainstream. This is illustrated in the consultative interaction concerning the jeans brand Evisu and the luxury brand Prada.

> **Glam (ordinary user):**
>
> There is something called style. You don't want anything that anyone else has so why buy Evisu? It's more original to buy Gucci, D&G, Armani, Prada or something like that, I mean Evisu is not prestigious at all.

> **Trey (ordinary user):**
>
> I rather go with the somewhat discrete Evisu jeans in raw denim than a pair of worn out crappy jeans from Prada.

Glam (ordinary user):

The Prada brand in particular has a collection which is designed according to stylish but still fashion created garments. Of course there are worn out Prada jeans just as there are worn out Evisu jeans. However a big difference between Evisu and Prada is that the Evisu collection appears like a big billboard compared to Prada.

So why does Evisu do something like that? Well, it's called shortsighted efficiency thinking, which means that when the consumers have become tired of walking around with a big logo on their ass, they will stop doing that, and will change to a more sophisticated style. They then have the chance both to retrieve old customers and to get new ones. Prada have already found themselves and do not need to do anything special with their garments to be something. Prada thus has ST Y L E and you do not look down on those wearing it. If you want to be something you have to stand out in the right way. So think again before you purchase a pair of Evisu jeans! Believe me, you don't get any respect, only weird looks.

Trey (ordinary user):

I was more referring to the fact that the pursuit for brands is ridiculous, to buy because of the brand is nothing that appeals to me.

Thus, when the brand managers started, as described by Holt (2002) and his dialectical model of consumer culture and branding, pushing the envelope and using these tactics to their logical extreme, people (in this case the young consumers communicating on the forum) became aware, generated reflexivity, knowledge or a literacy of these branding techniques. The consumers' increased knowledge and reflexivity of the employed branding techniques then made them lose their efficacy. In the discussion, the users occasionally express their dislike with these distasteful and vulgar big brand logos, even claiming that they are the ones who should be paid by the companies to wear the brands, and not the other way round.

A common branding technique employed in the United States, which during recent years in an institutional isomorphic sense has been adopted frequently and been put into use by companies operating in the Swedish consumer culture, is the one that Bengtsson (2002) refers to as co-branding where two different brand symbols are combined in a market offering to generate together or supply a higher total symbolic

value in the eyes of the consumer by drawing on each symbol's strong meanings or associations. However, just as Holt (2002) suggests in his dialectical model of the consumer culture and branding, this frequent use of such a branding technique has generated reflexivity and understanding among the consumers about how it works. This is illustrated in a consultative interaction touching upon how the brand Evisu has lost some of its flair.

Medium (assistant):

Well but that's because Evisu started to work with Puma, in Puma's store in "Gallerian" in Stockholm you get a pair of Evisu for 1300 at the same time as they sell the much nicer models at Gate One for like 3500.

Jerry (guard of order):

The price doesn't matter because if you are normal you don't shop because of the price but because of the total characteristics of the garment.

Medium (assistant):

Yeah I know but what I meant was that when they started working with Puma and beginning to make "cheap" jeans a lot of the status of wearing the brand and the garments disappeared, precisely as when a brand becomes less original and "cool".

Puma and Evisu makes some clothes together just like Adidas and We (if they still do it). Therefore they have Evisu jeans there (at the Puma store) for just a little more than 1000 kronor.

The young consumers seem to be well aware of what could happen when two different brands work together in different ways. They know that this is a fairly common brand management activity employed by firms when trying to make their brand image even more attractive. However, sometimes that technique does not turn out that well, as in this case when Evisu perceived as a more expensive, upscale and elegant brand, pairs up with Puma that has another, perhaps more street type of style and less elegant meaning, thereby becoming contaminated with Puma's street type associations. The consumers seem to think that there is some sort of symbolic misfit between the two brand symbols. This might be the case because this combination of the symbols ruptures what Douglas (1976) refers the symbolic order, the order of

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classification. The clean and pure Evisu brand symbols are polluted or defiled by the less pure Puma brand and become dirty. The dirt then illustrates the disorder of how things ought to be organized. The Puma symbol is then perceived to be out of place, it should not appear together with or in the context of the Evisu brand because it breaks the order of things, and it might be therefore that the young consumers perceive that there is a misfit between the two brands. This symbolic misfit is also confirmed by the inconsistency in the price setting of the Evisu brand in the two different contexts/stores, which here appears to have a negative impact on the status of the Evisu brand, perhaps even diluting its symbolic status value for these young consumers. However, what is perhaps a bit strange is that the young consumers, in this branding reflexive interaction, do not express any form of understanding of why the Evisu brand or company acts the way they do. The company probably has some intention behind their decision to issue a cheaper model of their jeans in concert with the Puma brand, but of this we learn nothing from the previous interactions.

The consumers' reflexive knowledge and conceptions of branding also extend even beyond the knowledge pertaining to the anti-branding movement, the technique of putting magnified brand logos on products to enhance the consumers' well-being when communicating to others the associations attached to a certain brand. This co-branding tactic is employed to derive or borrow symbolic features from pairing up with another brand and in that way enhance one brand image and meaning. Their understanding of branding and how it works also involves the branding technique that McCracken (1989) refers to as celebrity endorsement, which aims at transferring the attractive and sometimes glamorous cultural meaning of a certain celebrity to a product or a brand by persuading the celebrity to endorse it. This is illustrated in the following consultative conversation.

> **Punk (ordinary user):**
>
> God I hate those "Foppa " shoes, I think it's snobbish to pay 800 "kronor" for a pair of UGLY rubber shoes. But that's just my opinion.
>
> **Chrystal (ordinary user):**
>
> If they hadn't been named "Foppa" shoes, hardly anybody would have bought them. Everybody believes that he is the one that designed them, and hatched the idea. Personally I have always hated the "Foppa" shoe

and I find it very uncomfortable, which most people don't. They are plain and simple terribly ugly.

Punk (ordinary user):

That is exactly what I think too! By the way, do you know why they are named "Foppa[35]" shoes? I mean, what has he REALLY got to do with the shoes? I haven't figured that out yet. Is it just advertising?

Jerry (assistant):

What do they look like? Could anybody show a picture?

Chrystal (ordinary user):

This is what they look like. You can find them in other colors too. But this was the first picture I could find.

Lizzy (assistant):

They look like children's shoes?

Chrystal (ordinary user):

Yes exactly. Still there are a lot of grown ups running around in them. I can actually understand them if they think that they are comfortable. But it's a pretty ugly shoe and comfort is not enough to counterweigh the ugliness. But 799 "kronor" for a plastic shoe is unreasonable. Considering the only reason for it being expensive is that "Foppa" designed it. Bah! He hasn't done crap. He's only advertising.

It's a pity about Peak, a real pity. It's sad when even the employees start to doubt the brand and that it has become so obvious that they ride on the "hype." I bet that the Danish IC Company who owns Peak are going to try to squeeze out as much money as they can while the brand is still cool.

The previous dissection or deconstruction of the celebrity endorsed "Foppa" shoe indicate that this is a branding technique, of which these

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[35]"Foppa" is the nick name of Peter Forsberg who is a famous Swedish ice hockey player

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young consumers have the capacity to see through; it is revealed as a marketing and advertising stunt employed by companies to sell more products and to create an appealing brand. The reasoning that the high price of 799 "kronor" is a rip-off being only a plastic shoe that is so incredibly ugly (exceeding its remarkable comfort) and that the company is only allowed to charge that kind of price since it is connected to the celebrity, in this case a big ice hockey star, Peter Forsberg, conveys that these young people seem familiar with how this branding technique works. They are of the opinion that the celebrity generally doesn't do "crap" and that in this case the hockey star, although allegedly designed the shoe himself, is "only advertising. If it had not been for the celebrity nobody would have purchased it. The young consumers' understanding involves a reflexive conception that the cool image or the cultural meanings of the iconic celebrity, here personified by the hockey star Peter Forsberg, are transferred to the product or the brand so that it would make it more appealing to consumers who eventually would purchase it. These young consumers are thus able to decode the meaning transfer process which McCracken (1989) points out is crucial for the understanding of why this branding technique is, or was so successful. This marketing- or branding technique has, however, been employed so frequently, perhaps even, as Holt (2002) proposes, to their logical extreme, that these young consumers have developed a literacy of how they work.

This is insights or understandings which, at the same time as they are displayed by some people are collected and learned by others. Jerry did not first know about the shoe and what it looked like, but fellow actors participating in the discussion sorted him out by uploading a picture of it. Jerry was thus educated by contemporaries about another consumer good and its symbolic meaning that recently had been made available to him in the consumer culture. Punk did not first understand what the sport star "really" had to do with the shoes, asking if it just was an advertising trick. The other actors then educated her by stating that "he hasn't done crap" and that he is nothing but part of the advertising. Consumers, thus, form knowledge and conceptions about branding, and branding activities through the dialectic interplay between the consumer culture and the branding paradigm, as proposed by Holt (2002). This can also come about in the persuasion episodes that continuously take place in the interaction between the persuasion

agent/marketer and the persuasion target/consumer (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Moreover, as argued throughout this dissertation, knowledge and conceptions about branding and its activities is formed through a thoughtful, conscious and creative enculturation process (Shimahara, 1970), where peers or young contemporaries in their conversations reflectively discuss and learn (from each other) the workings of brands and branding.

In this case it is particularly interesting that Peter Forsberg actually has invested a lot of effort to market this shoe in Sweden and is allegedly one of the center figures in the company marketing and selling of it. He is then in this case not just a celebrity that "hasn't done crap," but is (or was) seriously engaged in the business of marketing and selling the shoe, which perhaps even works more efficient as a marketing and brand building tactic since one cannot then so easily reject the Peter Forsberg shoe as merely a marketing stunt. What the previous discussion indicates, however, although their conceptions are not fully correct concerning "Foppa" and the ugly shoe, is that the young consumers actually understand celebrity endorsements as a more abstract and theoretical concept or phenomenon, and although they do not use that precise construct they have elaborate knowledge of how it works and why it is used. This (folk) reflexive and critical theorizing has several similarities with what McLaughlin (1996) terms vernacular theory, implying that these young consumers have the theoretical knowledge to question and challenge the cultural practice of branding.

Taken together, it would not be unfair, in light of the previous interactions, to ascribe the young consumers to an elaborate and insightful understanding of the logic behind branding and the various branding techniques employed by the marketers. The interactions even reveal that they possess enough role specific knowledge of the role of marketers to be able to put themselves in their shoes and judge or evaluate the activities of other professional marketers. These young consumers, thus, seem to possess a well-founded and deep cynicism not only regarding the action of marketers, but also about the logic behind branding and the underlying motives behind the firms' conduct. However the young consumers surprisingly, given their previously displayed reflexive understanding of branding (see the quote about Peak Performance), express not only astonishment but also anger, resentment

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and disappointment with some of the actions performed by the brand managers of a certain brand. This discloses the paradoxical nature of the understanding these young consumers have concerning the creation of brand meanings.

Nina (ordinary user):

Tiger sucks big time, they have ruined the brand to such a degree that all their clothes are nothing but embarrassing.

Rock (administrator):

Motivate your opinion. In what way has Tiger as a brand been ruined? By becoming too fashion oriented instead of being oriented towards older-men-confections?

Nina (ordinary user):

I mean that they sold themselves out. And I strongly oppose that they have become more fashion oriented. Tiger is for me incredibly much more white trash than fashion.

Rock (administrator):

White trash? Oh really? If you check out the model pictures on their homepage many outfits are more "preppy" than white trash. I would probably rather describe it as a blend of "preppy" and "street."

Chip (ordinary user):

I don't know but I have gotten the vibe that Tiger is pretty… "ghetto"? Hmm, how should I explain? Oh well, I'm not that fond of Tiger, it doesn't feel right.

Nina (ordinary user):

Yeah surely that's the way it is, but they haven't been very smart, or alternatively, they have been very smart. The college sweaters, the t-shirts, and the belts ruined the brand image. When you wear a brand you make a statement, regardless of what it is. If it is H&M you make one statement, if it is Armani you make a different statement.

Personally I get rashes and I get pissed off only by seeing a garment and realizing that it is Tiger, I get irritated and immediately connect it to those hideous sweaters and belts. It's not so much the clothes themselves, but rather what the clothes/brand stand, or has stood for. And that's what I mean when I say that Tiger is white trash, and to me

it has even ruined the entire Tiger brand as such. And I can assure you that I'm not the only one having that opinion.

Number 1 (system operator, administrator):

This thing with statements, I would be happy if you could explain a little further what you mean by that.

Nina (ordinary user):

Well in principle yeah since it makes me associate to all the sins the brand has committed. Hence, with all the garments you buy you signal something, if you then make those choices consciously or unconsciously is another matter. But if you buy a sweater at H&M it says a number of different things about you as a person. Everything from "it was at the end of the month and I was a bit low on cash" to "I don't care where I buy my clothes." It's usually relatively simple to understand what the deal is since it's explained by the person's other clothes. It's a bit tricky but what I mean is, is that you say something with all the garments you are wearing. It's supposed to give people an image and a first impression. I make that connection, and I think that they have ruined their brand. Exactly in the same way as J.Lindeberg (JL) and to a certain extent Canada Goose.

Surely the previous discussion is an example of what Ritson & Elliot (1999) term as a critical evaluation interaction but where the meaning of a brand is critically analyzed and examined instead of the meaning of an advertisement. One may also understand what happens in the interaction as form of brand meaning negotiation (Ligas & Cotte, 1997), where the mediated and experiential experiences of the brand are discursively elaborated in the social sphere with contemporaries (Elliot & Percy, 2007). The interaction, however, indicates that it seems hard to reach an agreement through the negotiation process of what the brand really means or stands for. Rather, the brand meaning seems to be dynamic and in constant flux, continuously re-negotiated without the identification or agreement of a common brand meaning denominator. The brand Tiger was considered to be boring, white trash, a blend of "preppy" and street, and even "ghetto." Although one could argue that a brand meaning negotiation process took place, a common meaning denominator seems hard to identify. It would also be possible to understand this interaction as brand narratives authored and shared by consumers that in the end would affect the overall meaning of the brand (Holt, 2003). However, none of these interpretations

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provide some answer to why the young consumers' reflexive understanding of branding contains paradoxical elements.

In order to make that connection one needs to focus on the nature of comments posted by the user Nina. For some reason she seems very upset and angry about the conduct of the brand Tiger of Sweden. She thinks that they have sold themselves out by including street wear products such as sweaters, belts, and t-shirts in their portfolio that have ruined the brand beyond recognition. The brand has committed sins that have turned it to nothing more than an embarrassment, by becoming too mainstream and fashion oriented. She means that they have not been very smart, or alternatively, they have been very smart since they have issued products that appeal to the mainstream, thereby diluting and polluting the once pure and attractive brand symbol with vulgar and mainstream associations, perhaps making the brand an unattractive symbolic resource for identity construction (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Belk, 1988). The brand has thus somehow broken the previous felt trust between the consumer and the brand, which according to Elliot & Yannopoulou (2007) may generate very strong negative reactions from the consumer, particularly when it concerns symbol brands that often are connected to a high (social) perceived risk. Moreover, Fournier (1998) maintains that the relationships consumers form with brands may be understood as the relationships one forms with real human beings, involving love and affection, where the transgressing acts of either the brand or the consumer may cause the relationship to break, with painful emotional suffering on part especially of the consumer as a consequence. This is just as an individual would suffer emotionally when breaking up a relationship with a real person, which would conjure up very strong emotional expressions from the prior relationship partners. For as Nina puts it, personally she gets rashes and gets pissed off merely by seeing a garment that is Tiger. She becomes irritated and immediately connects it to the hideous sweaters and belts. In addition she means that it is not so much the clothes themselves, but rather what the clothes/brand stands, or has stood for. Apparently the brand has done something, which here relates to putting it on street clothing and targeting other consumers, making it a mainstream symbol that perhaps has forced her to break up the deep interpersonal relationship she had with the brand, and she cannot picture herself living with it any more.

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It might be this that stirs up these strong feelings and hard words and that she cannot live with it any more, which is why she reacts so strongly. It is in this emotional uproar that the paradoxes of the young consumers' understanding of branding reside. Nina feels betrayed but what would she/they really expect from the firm? Hence, despite her elaborate and reflexive understanding of the logic behind branding and the various branding techniques employed by brand managers she is still surprised and feels betrayed when the firms only implement brand strategies or tactics in order to obtain their main purpose, which is to grow and to earn more money for their owners. At the same time as the young consumers express deep cynicism about the logic of branding and firms' branding activities, they convey a surprising naiveté about the main motives behind launching certain brand strategies or tactics such as extending the brands to include more products that are targeted at a larger segment of consumers, which is to make money. Here lies one of the main paradoxes of the otherwise so reflexive consumer understanding of the creation of brand meanings.

8.3 Summary

This chapter shows that young consumers together form and possess elaborate and insightful understandings of the various techniques that brand managers employ to build brands, which enables them to question the underlying logic of how branding works. This knowledge even enables these young consumers to put themselves in the role as a marketer or brand manager and then evaluate their actions in light of the established marketing and branding discourse of how one marketing and selling should be done. The consumers even seem to regard themselves as experts on branding, being smarter than marketers and brand managers themselves. However, this reflexive understanding is paradoxical because the young consumers express a surprising disappointment and feelings of betrayal when firms implement brand strategies and tactics, such as becoming more mainstream focused on a larger segment, in order to make more money. Hence, despite their reflexive understanding and displayed deep cynicism of branding, the young consumers express naiveté about the basic purposes of firms and their branding strategies.

9 Making sense of and handling the issues of brand consumption

This chapter focuses particularly on the young consumers' understanding concerning the phenomenon of brand consumption. It involves reflections concerning their underlying motives or reasons for using brands at all, which of these reasons that are just or sensible and which are considered pathetic. Cultural prescriptions of how one should relate to and understand brand consumption, how one ought to practice it in a tasteful manner, as well as how one may strategically handle those prescriptions are discussed. Macro consumer and social discourses are here brought into play when discussing these matters. By drawing on such macro discourses, individuals are able to assume and defend certain interpretive positions in relation to brand consumption issues. Again interesting paradoxes emerge.

9.1 The proper and improper motives behind brand consumption

The young consumers engage in energetic discussions serving to make sense of and together create an understanding of why they themselves, or other people for that matter, consume attractive name brands. Their discussions convey that a common understanding among these young people is that there is a clear connection between the consumption of name brands and people's pursuit of status and recognition. The young consumers seem to be well aware of how name brands may be used as symbolic identity resources (Elliot & Wattansuwaran, 1998; Belk, 1988) to join in a status game where brand symbols may be appropriated as social markers of status. The inextricable connection that Bourdieu (1984) describes between conspicuous consumption and social position seems also to be clear to these young consumers. This understanding of a connection between the consumption of brands and status pursuit is a part of these young consumers' folk theory (Lakoff,

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1987), which according to Churland (1991) contains concepts, such as status and brands through which these individuals comprehend, explain, and predict the domain or phenomenon of brand consumption. This is conveyed in the following consultative interaction when discussing precisely why people really buy name brands.

> **Superman (guard of order):**
>
> I will put forward my theory concerning the purchase of name brand clothes, and I mean it could be explained by one thing only, and I now that I will get a "No" from the ones who wear name brand clothes but that is only because they know I speak the truth. The purchase of name brand clothes could be explained by one thing – Status. That is to say, that you have spotted someone else wearing it, or you want to emulate the ones who are already wearing it.
>
> You can't say that it's nice. They have at least as nice clothes at Ullared, but at a 500 "kronor" lower price.
>
> **The Vet (ordinary user):**
>
> The more expensive clothes you have the more status you get. It's weird but that is just the way it is.
>
> **Lightning (ordinary user):**
>
> Status
>
> **Chaos (ordinary user):**
>
> Quality and social status

The previous interaction gives at hand that the young consumers' understanding of the connection between name brands and status or recognition, and that people buy brands mainly for the purpose of gaining status. This was a very commonly accepted, almost taken-for-granted idea, indicating some kind of commonsense knowledge (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Brewer; 1984; Smedslund, 1986) that these young consumers use to categorize and make sense of their social world (Brewer, 1984).

At the same time as name brand consumption is largely understood to be a way to attain status and recognition, or simply for showing off, for example, that one can afford to buy those types of brands because of wealthy parents, the status or showing off motive is, however, looked

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upon with disdain by the young consumers. The pursuit for status through brand consumption is considered pathetic and ridiculous by many of the discussants on the forum. This serves as one of the shared principles or rules of the specific cultural group's shared beliefs about the world that guides the correct or right way of reasoning and thinking (Fletcher, 1984), in this case concerning the motives behind people's brand consumption. These commonsense principles or rules guiding the proper way of acting, reasoning and thinking about brand consumption emerge and become evident only when they are broken. Those principles or rules are made explicit in the following normative interaction concerning the brands of Converse, Gucci and Prada where the user, Goon, assumes the role of the provoker by posting an argumentative and rule breaking comment.

> **Goon (ordinary user):**
>
> Why do you have to be called a "rich man's child" just because you wear Gucci and Prada?? Hellooo I may also wear Converse too but only if I'm out in the woods or something like that…is there something wrong with that or what?
>
> **Rambo (ordinary user):**
>
> Hrmm well the brands are expensive so either you're dealing drugs or YOU have rich parents, which makes you a spoiled "rich man's child.
>
> **Goon (ordinary user):**
>
> So my parents have money but I shouldn't be bullied or mocked for that or…?
>
> **Miller (ordinary user):**
>
> But you're getting bullied if you run around showing off in expensive clothes acting as if you are better than others. But you would never do that now would you?! ☺
>
> **Goon (ordinary user):**
>
> I get it but can I really help that I look like a bum in a pair of Levis jeans or something like that?? It sort of depends on how you're brought up!! I have always gotten what I wanted so DAAH!!

Miller (ordinary user):

Riiiight...and I'm sure that you wouldn't do that on purpose. Stuff like that shows! Particularly from people who didn't get everything they wanted. People who had to struggle and save to be able to afford that special thing that everybody else had 3 weeks ago and so forth.

Then your tactfulness at the end with: "so DAAH" Does not help you very much if you want people to feel sorry for you, just because you're wearing clothes that are worth more than their car.

And the fact that you are so occupied with how you look and what you wear and what other people think about that doesn't help you either! Wear what feels good, whatever the cost, then people may think what ever they want!

Goon seems to have hit a sore spot with his comments since he is flamed or punished by the other users in the interaction, accused of having wrongful conceptions and views in relation to name brand consumption. Goon implicitly connected the consumption of luxury brands with being wealthy, having higher status positions, and thereby being better than others and for that he was being punished or verbally insulted by several other users on the forum. Obviously Goon felt that he had been mistreated just because he happened to be fortunate enough to have wealthy parents who could buy luxury brands that very few young people could afford. However, he presents this in a rather provoking way by degrading the much popular and to some people fairly expensive symbol of Converse, sometimes being used as an identity construction resource, to a object that one only may wear when walking in the woods. The Converse shoes are, from Goon's perspective, a very disposable object that one may buy or dispose of as one sees fit – thus it has much lesser value than, for example, Prada & Gucci.

It is then not that strange that the others react because when degrading the Converse shoes he indirectly degrades the people who regard it as an appealing and identity sensible tool. The brand symbols here become evidence of difference and distinction, that people, when being able or not able to use certain types of brands actually are different, where some may be regarded to have higher status positions, to be wealthier, and therefore better than others. This seems very important

for the young Swedish consumers to handle when discussing these matters in the micro level interactions played out on "Hamsterpaj".

Kjeldgaard & Östberg (2007) maintain that Scandinavia, of which Sweden is a part, has had a long term domination of social-democratic ideas which have generated a cultural ethos dominated by the macro discourse of equality and egalitarianism. This macro discourse has contributed to an ideology symbolized by commonness, in which everyone, both high and low; struggle to identify with the middle. The Scandinavian consumer culture is therefore understood to be characterized by a consensus making ideology where equality and egalitarianism are considered legion. In a culture like that it becomes increasingly important not to stand out too much from the middle and the common. Interestingly, this dominant macro discourse of equality and egalitarianism reveals itself in the young consumers' micro discursive elaborations when Goon posts his provoking comments. Bragging about one's name brand consumption, thereby implicitly saying that one is a little better or wealthier than others, like Goon does in the previous interaction, contradicts the macro discourse of equality and egalitarianism and breaks what Herskovits (1972) refers to as the cultural norm of commonness, where people ought not to deviate too much from the middle, thinking better of him- or herself compared to the collective. The verbal punishments thrown at Goon by the others thus illustrates the enculturation process where individuals acting in a culturally wrongful way are educated in the proper way of thinking and acting (Herskovits, 1972), in this case about the consumption of name brands and its connection to being distinguished from the others. The users, here assuming the role of punishers, try to counter Goon's derogatory remark about certain brands in light of his own luxury brand consumption, by instead deeming him as a ridiculous and pathetic figure who gets everything from his parents.

Status is, however, not the only major explanation for name brand consumption derived from the elaborate online discussions. A second explanation has to do with group conformity, and people's need to fit in. However, the need to fit in together with the need to projecting status is here coupled with very poor self-esteem and a weak personality where the usage of expensive brands is regarded as a compensator and an antidote or remedy for low self-esteem, personal insecurity, and

scant recognition from peers. People who consume expensive brands because they want to fit in or gain recognition and appreciation from their peers are, therefore also, just as with the status ambition, looked upon with contempt. The subsequent consultative interaction illustrates this in an interesting manner.

Pie (ordinary user):

My opinion is that the clothes you are wearing tells a lot about you as a person. Sure name brand clothes is not a necessity but it is fucking important.. It 's the clothes that make you…and that's just they way it is

Rainbow (ordinary user):

If you would buy a JL shirt then I'm pretty certain you do it because everybody else does it. For God's sake, a shirt for 1000 "kronor"! Moreover I believe that the purchase of name brand clothes has to do with that it provides a certain status, depending on what circle of people one belongs to. To the people who acquire good confidence thanks to name brands:

-Sure thing, be that superficial!

It's expensive, stupid, and unnecessary. I have never noticed any bigger difference quality wise between name brands and other clothes. Sure name brands might be 100% cotton and others might have 5% polyester, but can you tell a clear difference? -No. It should be pointed out that it's your own choice, but remember, if you purchase a Lacoste shirt, advertising has won a battle. Status symbols back and forth, buy at ICA!

Superman (guard of order):

They are insecure in their personality and buy name brands just to fit in

Rainbow (ordinary user):

Jepp that's my opinion too. This may often be explained by that you are insecure on how you are and what you stand for, so it becomes a lot easier to just "go with the flow" instead of risking to be shut out from the group. This (buying name brands) will be expensive in the long run so please people! Try to choose for yourself.

An interesting question to both ask and to answer, in light of the previous interaction, is why they consider it to be ridiculous or wrong to buy brands with the idea of fitting in, to go with the flow, and to weigh up for that one is unsure of one self. Consulting Bourdieu (1984) give valuable insights to this question. What seems central for these young consumers, as with the pure artist in Bourdieu's work, is the autonomy of the individual enabling him or her to master his or her product without the imposition of hierarchies or the sayings and doings of others. To assert this autonomy is really to give primacy to those things of which the pure or authentic artist, in this case the young consumer, is master. These important things are style, form, and manner rather than the subordination to functions. While the product of the artist is an artistic work such as a painting, the product of the young consumer is here thought to be his or her identity. The work that pertains to answering the question of who they are is presumed to be autonomous as opposed to depending on conformity. It involves the personal mastery of one's own form, manner and style, although that identity, according to Thompson & Haytko (1997), does not mirror a stable set of essential characteristics but is rather negotiated in a dynamic field or in relations, and is constantly redefined through perceived contrasts to others.

From the young consumers' perspective it should not be in compliance with and under the influence and views of others, where you behave to fit in and to be accepted by others. You should thus be a product of your own personal mastery and not a product of subordination to the opinions of contemporaries or to other social phenomena such as brands and fashion. Autonomy is sought while conformity is rejected. Thompson & Haytko (1997) point out that reproducing well-known brand symbols or highly commercialized styles constitutes the direct opposite to autonomously developing your own style and identity, which is why the authenticity and the uniqueness of the images conveyed through ready-to-wear brands, in this case by young Swedish consumers, requires to be cautiously reformulated and cultivated into more context-specific and personalized meanings.

The conception that you should be totally autonomous and master of your own consumption and self creation without the influence of others, conforming to the group in order to fit in, however, appears a

bit paradoxical. If they would be true to their views and conceptions, disdaining the need to buy name brands in order to fit in and to show conformity and acceptance by the group. Thereby thus regarding their identity product or life project to be a strictly autonomous process and a result of their own mastery, they would probably not be on the "Hamsterpaj" forum to discuss these matters with such energy. They would have enough confidence in themselves and who they are without needing the approval of other contemporaries.

9.2 Brands - good or bad?

What is also discussed with great energy on the "Hamsterpaj" forum is the concern about whether brands are to be considered as a bad/unfavorable or a good/favorable phenomenon in society. In these discussions the members of the forum assume what Thompson & Haytko (1997) refer to as interpretive positions by drawing on various social discourses. Here the young individuals have been found to assume two main interpretive positions, *Brand proponents* and *Brand opponents.* From these positions they ascribe various meanings and motivations both to their own and other's brand understanding and brand behaviour. In their sense making process of the rights and wrongs of brand consumption, the consumers assuming the respective interpretive positions draw on macro social discourses to manifest, defend and argue for the rightfulness of their position in what Thompson & Haytko refer to as a complex interpretive dance.

Individuals affiliating with the *Brand opponent* position convey a more negative stance to (on their part unnecessary) the existence of name brands and their functions, while individuals assuming the *Brand proponent* position mirror a more positive orientation to expensive brands and their functions in society. Both positions share some overlapping conceptions and may recognize some of the points and conceptions of the other side as sensible but when aggregated together the majority of conceptions attached to either position differs. This also becomes evident when analyzing the various arguments concerning brands put forward by individuals assuming the two different positions. Assuming these positions is not always an easy task for the young consumers communicating on the forum. It is not always clear to all of

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them which of the two main interpretive positions they are to assume. The position should somehow reflect their attitudes and conceptions about the phenomenon of name brands. The following consultative interaction touches on this uncertainty.

Gunny (ordinary user):

Hi! I wonder if it's wrong to wear name brands. It feels a bit awkward to ask something like that but I'm just wondering.

One in my class is really obsessed with name brands. She wears name brands all the time…even during Handball practice. I think it's too much. She only has expensive name brands. It's just not enough with Peak sweater or a pair of Converse but it has to be name brands like WE, JL, Lacoste etc, which cost thousands of "kronor." She is so spoilt that you don't know if you're going to laugh or cry. She looks down on everyone who doesn't wear name brands. I think it is bad behavior. What do you think? I can take criticism…

Painkiller (assistant):

Of course it's not wrong to wear name brands. It's up to every person to decide. I don't shop name brands, unless it's the absolute nicest I can find. I shop what I think is nice and what fits me, nothing else. I really don't blame those who only use name brands, because that would be wrong too. But as your classmate, to look down on people that don't have overly expensive clothes is just pathetic and lame.

Dude (ordinary user):

Who cares really? Why do you really care about what others wear? Everybody who complains about name brands are those who feel that they can't afford them, but really want them, that's the way it is.

Gunny (ordinary user):

But it's so annoying when people look down on you when you're not wearing name brands and maybe think that the sweater you bought at H&M was nice, but they think that it's just some fucking piece of garment that is not good enough for them…

As I said, I can take criticism.

Dude (ordinary user):

Gunny, you obviously look down on that person. My advice: Don't care that much.

Gunny (ordinary user):

I don't look down on that person, she who has all the name brands is the one that looks down on me.

Geek (ordinary user):

There's nothing wrong with wearing name brands, no, but of course you don't have to look down everybody who doesn't have name brands, wearing them when training and so forth. Then you don't always need to wear name brands, and if I would perhaps wear a JL sweater (which I never would) I would only wear it every now and then so I wouldn't ruin it, maybe at a party sometime or so, but I think that you could say to that person something like: why do you look at me in that weird way?

Omar (ordinary user):

There is really nothing wrong with name brands as long as nobody looks down on anybody because they cannot afford to spend 2800 kronor on a pair of Lacoste shoes or 1500 on a pair of jeans, that's bad behavior. It's not the clothes themselves but the people wearing them, I have friends that wear name brands who are really cool. But there are also many people at my school who look down on people who don't wear name brand clothes…

Neil (ordinary user):

There is really no good answer to if it's right or wrong with name brands. But to walk around bragging about it is pathetic. To look down on others just because they don't have name brands is just so unbelievably ridiculous that it hurts…

Rock (administrator):

I may agree that it's idiotic to buy just because of the brand. There is no real difference between some garments. But I think it's equally idiotic to say that name brands are totally out, if you ask me it's about finding your favorites from both sides.

Gunny expresses queries about the appropriateness of name brand consumption when asking if brand consumption is all wrong. What she is really doing is trying to get sympathies from others about her own views of the classmate's excessive brand consumption. The name brands are used too much, all the time, and the classmate only wears upscale expensive name brands. They are all the time there, and in full view, bugging her. The advice Gunny gets from the other users is quite

interesting. The matter of whether brand consumption is principally and generally either clearly right or wrong is just as Neil said, hard to settle, and involves more nuance than is allowed by the dualism of good and bad or right and wrong. There seem to be two main criteria, adding subtle distinction to this dualism that decide if and when brand consumption is inappropriate and wrong or not. The first criterion has to do with the degree of frequency and magnitude with which you use or wear name brands, thus the degree of excessiveness. If you are to consume name brands it has to be done in a balanced manner, consequently excessiveness is, in this respect, frowned upon. You have to, as Rock claims, find favorites from both sides, involving both the usage of expensive name brands in combination with less expensive brands or no-name clothes. You should thus act, what Thompson & Haytko (1997) refer as to a brand bricoleur, which means being able to creatively combine various forms of cultural artifacts, such as brands, thereby forming a symbolic ensemble of objects that even generates new meanings for those symbolic artifacts. A consumer using name brands then needs what Bengtsson & Firat (2006) refer to as high brand literacy, or a sufficient cultural competence (Swidler, 1986) to perform brand bricolage and to use brands in the "right" way. The "right" way here means to not use brands excessively, but instead moderately and with temperance. Using nothing but name brands, thus consuming name brands excessively, is connected to a form of vulgarity, which reveals that one does not, as Bourdieu (1984:1986) puts it, have the appropriate competence to consume in a tasteful manner. Brand consumption excessiveness is, thus, regarded to be vulgar, disgusting, therefore distasteful and inappropriate. Using name brands is alright and not principally or generally wrong, if you practice your brand consumption in a tasteful manner, with discipline and temperance. Therefore, assuming one of the two interpretive positions seems to be anything but a simple an uncomplicated matter.

In addition to the previous complexity, there is another criterion that is used to evaluate whether brand consumption is good or bad, right or wrong, which is connected to people's acts, behavior, manner, or practices when actually using or wearing brands. There are prescriptions that name brand consumers ought to follow of how to act or behave when using and wearing name brands. One should not act arrogantly, looking down on people who do not use name brands and judging

these consumers as not being good enough, thus being lesser individuals only because, they for various reasons, do not use name brands to any recognizable extent. It is, then, not wrong in all instances to buy and wear name brands. It is not really the consumption of expensive brands per se that is problematic, inappropriate, or even wrong. It is a question of *how* you consume brands, encompassing the extensiveness and how you behave or act towards other people when wearing these types of brands. It is not just what brands you consume, but also, and perhaps more importantly, how you as an individual choose to consume them. It is, as Omar puts it, "not the clothes themselves but the people wearing them", which has effects on the appropriateness of brand consumption. Having knowledge and competence about the appropriate, right and tasteful consumer practices, (Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 1988), in this case acting in a non-offensive manner when using brands is what decides if brand consumption in various situations is right or wrong. Knowledge about the proper and appropriate practices of brand consumption, therefore, becomes important for brand consumers if they are to use brands in an appropriate and correct way.

The reason why some consumers express a worry or anxiety over being regarded as good enough or as lesser individuals by those who use name brands to a recognizable extent, may be that name brands are, since they generally have a fairly high price, connected to their (or that of their parents) amount of economic capital, status position, even social class. Not being able to afford expensive brands then indicates that you (or your parents) have less economic capital or resources, and you thereby belong to a lower class with lower status position, which is something that these discussants are well aware of. Some of the discussants, often those opposing the consumption of name brand clothes referring to them as unnecessary, almost ridiculous, therefore often express a fear of being downgraded or looked down on just because they do not wear or cannot afford to buy publicly visible name brands.

> Omar (ordinary user):
>
> There's really nothing wrong to use name brands, but that someone looks down on you because you "can't afford" spending 2800 "kronor" on a pair of Lacoste shoes or 1500 "kronor" on a pair of jeans, that's just bad.

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Kicker (ordinary user):

You can notice clear envy among people of those who wear more expensive and nicer clothes and can afford them. It's typical Swedish envy

Gandalf (ordinary user):

Haha I'd rather wear an Armani suit than a Batistini[36] from Dressman[37].

Rainbow (ordinary user):

You may believe what you want, but you should NOT try to downgrade us who do not wear name brands en masse! Name brands are shit, an expensive pile of shit that is.

Superman (Guard of order):

I let them wear what they want...as long as they don't mock me because I don't feel like spending 3000 kronor on a pair of jeans...For 3000 you could get a weekend trip to Madrid...Then I rather buy at Ullared[38] and go to Madrid instead.

There seem to be awareness among the consumers that brand consumption may both involve what Davies & Elliot (2006) refers to as social inclusion and exclusion. It might be this fear, anxiety or bad feeling of not only being excluded, but even regarded as lesser persons, running the risk of being bullied or mocked just because they cannot fully afford to participate in expensive brand consumption. It might be seems this fear or anxiety of exclusion and downgrade that is the drive behind their criticism of name brand usage. Interestingly, though, it seems fine to consume name brands extensively as long as you do it in the right way, for the right reasons or with the right motive. As I showed before that does not, from the brand opponent and the brand proponent positions, include either the status motive or the idea of fitting in, which here refers to what Herskovits (1972) claims to be the "thou-shalt-nots" of a culture.

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[36]Batistini is a low price clothing brand sold at the low price Dressman stores

[37]Dressman is a low price clothing retailer

[38]Ullared is a small municipality in the South of Sweden where an enormous low-price retail outlet is located. It has almost developed into a consumption amusement park where people go for a weekend holiday to get good value for money on consumer goods

However, those who are actually wearing name brands or are supportive of wearing name brands do not, at the same time, want to be deemed or labeled as being mean status achievers, acting in a snobby and arrogant way, looking down on others, and mocking them for not being able to buy expensive brands and therefore being lesser individuals. The underlying reason for brand proponents' worry concerning this matter might again be traced to the macro equality and egalitarianism discourse of the dominating ideology prevailing in Scandinavian countries holding in check people who stand out too much from the middle (Kjeldgaard & Östberg, 2007). Here the collective consensus in most cases is regarded to be more important than the well-being of the individual. It, thus, lies in the interest of the brand proponents or the ones favoring name brands, to play down their brand consumption and the higher status or better person associations it generates, so it appears less conspicuous, not teasing or "winding up" other consumers who do not consume name brands, or risking disruption in the consensus of the collective that all individuals are, or are supposed to be equals. What these discussions of how you should reason, think about, and relate to name brand consumption boils down to is labeling other people and the cultural norm of not doing so (Herskovits, 1972). Nobody is allowed to stamp or label others as lesser individuals, either because they cannot afford to consume name brands, or because they consume only name brands and look down on people who do not. There seems to exist what Herskovits (1972) refers to as a cultural norm a result of the Scandinavian equality and egalitarian discourse that "we" all are, or should be equals (Kjeldgaard & Östberg (2007), regardless of whether we consume or not, or are able to buy expensive brands or not. This becomes evident in the following normative interaction where the ordinary user, Eager, posts a provoking remark about brand proponents.

> **Eager (ordinary user) provoker:**
>
> Brands are for young stupid "IQ-less" people
>
> Ok if you buy expensive clothes because of their good quality, but all name brands are really not good quality. Take Diesel for instance, you have to look for worse quality

"I buy name brands because its sooo much better quality and nice"….no you buy it because you're a slave under fashion and afraid what everybody else would think, and that's it!

Elaine (guard of order) punisher:

Well yeah, I like to buy a little more expensive clothes, and yeah I like to be inspired by fashion. But am I teenager without IQ for that? No you…Don't judge all alike.

Number 1: (administrator) punisher:

Eager: Pardon my French but are you totally stupid or what?

Can you explain to me why I am "IQ-less" when I choose a tennis-shirt from Ralph Lauren instead from H&M? Have you ever tried that yourself? Noticed the difference? Oahhh, today's youth…"

Eager (ordinary user) provoker:

No maybe not. But everybody who claims that they buy just because…ahh you know… if you like fashion and to spend money…I have some name brands myself, but people who refuse to stand up for why the are buying it, they are really pathetic.

Alfie (ordinary user) punisher:

Haha ☺ Eager starts with personal abuse. Just because you can't afford name brands, you can at least accept us who can and who likes these clothes better than other clothes.

Elaine (guard of order) punisher:

Eager, could you elaborate on that because I don't get it at all. And I don't understand how you can call people pathetic either. Some people don't dare "walk it" just because there are people like you who judge them faster than you say ouch.

By claiming brand proponents to be IQ-less and pathetic Eager breaks the norm or rule that no one has the right to judge anyone for being a bad or lesser person regardless of their conception of brands as a phenomenon, and regardless of how they relate to brand consumption. She immediately becomes aware of that norm, when being punished by other discussants for her, as Herskovits (1948) puts it, unacceptable behavior. This is manifested in her posted verbalized thoughts and

views taking the form of what Mills (1940) maintains is a verbal act, an act in its own right just as with any other behavioral act.

The individuals assuming a brand opponent position and those assuming a brand proponent position try to resolve the major part of this problematic issue regarding the stamping or labeling of others in a fairly creative manner. They make an implicit deal or reach an agreement where the brand opponents do not stamp the brand proponents as mean and superficial status achievers with a need to be special and stand out, if the brand proponents do not look down on and regard brand opponents as lesser human beings or persons. The user, Eager, breached that very implicit agreement in the previous interaction when she stamped people within the brand proponent position (those in favor of name brands) as IQ-less and pathetic, thereby both confirming that norm and making it visible for everybody.

9.2.1 Justifying brand consumption – appropriating social discourses

Not all quarrels about brand consumption are, however, solved through the implicit non-stamping deal, and conceptions about brand consumption still generate differences and anxiety for both those who oppose name brand consumption and those more in favor of it. There is still a continuous discussion and debate between these groupings and various users on the forum where some users try to convince others about the appropriateness of brand consumption and the legitimate reasons for buying and wearing name brands. The implicit non-stamping agreement only provides the users with a temporary truce and a productive platform for continuous discussion and communication between individuals on a forum that harbors young peoples from different locations and varying social backgrounds.

Both the brand opponents and the brand proponents still constantly need to deal with their worries connected to name brand consumption. From the perspective of brand opponents, a way to deal with the anxiety of perhaps not being able to fully participate in name brand consumption is to devalue or degrade the meaning or importance of name brand consumption per se. The brand opponents do that by

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drawing on social discourses when defending their interpretive position in relation to the brand proponents. The first discourse informs people that brand consumption is inextricably connected to prestige and the individual's striving for social recognition and status. This discourse is a powerful resource when arguing with brand proponents since it is linked to the macro social discourse of equality/egalitarianism, which tells people not to stand out from the middle. By consuming name brands you are understood as a particular status striver with the typical purpose of doing just that. These discourses supply the brand opponents with the credible argument that those who buy a lot of name brands only do it because of the brand symbol, the high price, and its symbolic meanings and associations, which is linked to status achievement and thereby they want to stand out from the middle; perhaps even to appear as a little better than others. From the perspective of the brand opponents and in light of the equality/egalitarian macro discourse, the conceptions and perhaps behavior of the brand proponents then become wrong, ridiculous even pathetic. Those assuming the brand proponent interpretive position are considered to only "be in it for the symbol" and the status it may provide.

The brand proponents then try to rationalize their understanding and conception of brand consumption by supplying what Scott & Lyman, (1968) refer to as accounts. An account is, as was conveyed in chapter two, a linguistic device employed every time an action is subjected to evaluative inquiry to explain unexpected, inappropriate or unfortunate behavior. The authors discriminate between two varying forms of accounts, excuses and justifications. With excuses, people acknowledge that an act is wrong or inappropriate but deny full responsibility, while justifications are "techniques of neutralization" where an individual accepts responsibility for a certain act, but denies its derogatory quality. To justify an act or behavior is then to assert its positive value when the opposite is claimed. Here, brand proponents mainly use justificatory accounts when defending their name brand consumption to others in that they try to assert and convince brand opponents that, given the right motives, name brand consumption is not at all that inappropriate and bad. The brand proponents try to justify their brand consumption by drawing on what Mills (1940) refers to as vocabularies of motives, which means that people may pick from their vocabulary of motives to

supply credible motives that make both previous, present and future action appear sensible and understandable in the eyes of others. It is, from Mills' perspective, not the act per se that is deciding but the actual motives one is able to supply for those actions. An individual may start an act grounded in a certain motive, and in the course of it s/he may adopt an additional motive or change the old one. The initial motive, to buy brands for their symbolic characteristics and the (status) associations and connotations they convey, may then be changed (thereby obscured) afterwards if this motive appears to be inappropriate or even ridiculed by others.

> **Cracker (ordinary user):**
>
> I like name brands and have a lot of them…But you don't buy clothes just because they are a certain brand…However I think that some brands have more nice things (such as Peak etc). But you know…if you find something nice at H&M you don't just neglect it just because it's not a recognized brand

Users thus deny, or try to give the impression that they deny, that it is the symbolic character of a brand and its connotative meanings and associations that lead to people buying and consuming it. This is particularly interesting and paradoxical since it is precisely the symbolic meanings of a brand often mirrored in its price level that enables companies to earn money on a strong brand by charging a premium price (Aaker, 1991, Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Kapferer, 1997). It is also a brand's symbolic properties that make it a viable resource for people's identity construction (Elliot & Wattansuwan, 1998; Elliot & Percy, 2007), and may serve as a unifier of communities where people feel belonging and are trying to fit in (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; McAlexander *et al*, 2002). As an important phenomenon within the concept of symbolic consumption, how it is consumed (encompassing what is consumed) may even serve as a marker and reproducer of social class (Boudieu, 1984; Holt, 1998). However, by claiming that you do not buy a brand because it is a certain brand, you are trying to escape the apparent connections that people would make to the linkages between the brand's symbolic meaning, status, group belonging, and social class. Name brand consumers thus execute what Ulver-Sneistrup (2008) calls status smoothing, which means that people try to obscure, smooth over, or downplay the connection between consumption and status, and that status really is not that important when buying

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consumer objects. These symbolic motives for brand consumption are, though, as shown before, deemed as pathetic, ridiculous, being directly associated with status achievers and weak individuals falling for peer pressure, which is something that the brand consumer really wants to avoid.

There are several motives and accounts to be put into use when justifying one's brand consumption. These types of accounts, being strategic linguistic devices, are, in turn, connected to and reveal macro level discourses and representations of the world (Maclaran *et al*, 2004). The accounts being displayed or supplied in these micro level interactions are, therefore, a way for people who communicate in micro level interactions to handle and appropriate macro level discourses (Fairhurst, 2007), which are then connected to various interpretive positions, such as the brand opponents and brand proponents. The accounts or justifications that the brand proponents use to rationalize their brand conceptions and understanding, therefore, have a link with macro level discourses. The accounts of *niceness* (that the name brand garment actually was the nicest one when selecting between various brands or products), *likeness* (the product the person actually likes the most and it just happens to be a certain name brand but it could just as well be a no-name), *fit* (name brands actually have better fit than no-names or less expensive brands), *design* (name brands/more expensive brands are acknowledged to have better, nicer, and neater design), are appropriated because they connect to a social discourse of self autonomy. Just as was conveyed before, this discourse informs people that they are a product of their self mastery and that you subsequently make consumer choices based on that autonomy and your own mastery of the symbolic landscape. You ought to be yourself and not conforming to the views of others.

The accounts of *quality and durability* (these are often considered to go together where name brands are claimed to have a better, finer quality and a longer durability than no-names and cheaper brands) reflect the macro discourse of functionality. Buying name brands is thus alright because brands with higher prices have a high level of quality and durability, which means that paying a premium price gives more value to the consumer in the long run. Interestingly this discourse of functionality, conveying a good value for money message has a fairly

modernistic character in that it represents the functional features and benefits the physical product of a brand – that the brand and its product keeps and delivers on its quality promise. It is a discourse that, according to (Holt, 2002) dominated a modern branding paradigm and modern consumer culture. However, contemporary consumption is largely understood to have postmodern characteristics (Firat & Venkatesch, 1995), where the brand symbol is often separated from the physical product and becomes the actual and esthetic product (Salzer-Mörling & Strannergård, 2004). It is, therefore, interesting that such a modernistic discourse is drawn on in order to understand and defend one's highly symbolic and post modern consumption. Both these macro discourses may be employed by brand proponents when defending their conceptions and understanding of brand consumption. However, one of the discourses and its subsequent accounts are more often honored by the brand opponents as a legitimate justification than the other. Although this is not clear-cut in all instances, an overall pattern seems to emerge.

> **Trumpet (ordinary user):**
>
> This is generally how it works: name brands usually have a better fit or shape, but then you maybe pay 50% of the price for the brand symbol alone. However for less recognized brands you generally don't pay for the brand, but more for the cost of producing the garment.

> **Willy (assistant):**
>
> My view is that that is mostly bullshit, at least when it comes to the more exclusive brands. To claim that a pair of stone washed Nudie or ACNE jeans are better quality than a pair of Crocker is just pathetic, likewise that a Tiger of Sweden sweatshirt is more durable than an H&M sweatshirt.
>
> There are of course exceptions but those are foremost companies with a clear profile concerning the purpose of their clothing, having years of experience of research & development and such. A wind- and waterproof backpack from Peak Performance or Fjällräven probably fulfills its purpose much better than a Chinese counterfeit would do.

Trumpet (ordinary user):

First it should be said that the JC stores are freaking expensive given the goods they are selling. I rather buy clothes at Jack & Jones where the clothes fit me, especially the pants. But the shape and fit of name brands is usually better. Then I don't mean brands like JL, but Armani, Dolce & Gabbana and so forth. I'm though in favor of that you should buy the clothes that fit you the best, not because it's a particular brand. However real name brands have a better fit and shape.

Nelly (ordinary user):

Yeah that's the way it is, if I see a We sweater that is cheap, but ugly that does not fit me, I won't buy it just because its We. I admit that I have some name brand clothes, but that is because they are nice and fit me well.

The discourse of self autonomy and its subsequent micro level accounts of niceness and likeness are honored as legitimate justifications by most of the users on the forum from both main groupings of brand opponents and brand proponents. This could be connected to the fact that niceness and likeness are more associated with everybody's cherishment of individuals' own subjective views, their autonomy and being masters of their own brand or product decisions without the immediate impact of peer pressure and following others/the group, or striving for recognition and status from others through their brand consumption. It is still interesting to see how users who favor name brand consumption quickly and strongly point out that their motive for buying name brands has nothing to do with their symbolic and communicative characteristics. When putting forward quality as the main reason for buying expensive brands, thus drawing on the modernistic functionality discourse, the discussion becomes more intense where quality as a reasonable and legitimate justification for name brand consumption is criticized, contested, and dishonored. The brand opponent position has a couple of ways of dishonoring or discrediting the quality justification. One is to claim that name brands may have better quality but it is absolutely not a natural law. The anti-branding discourse informing people that many premium brands are made in the same sweat shop factories, and on the same assembly line in cheap countries as no-names, and that the quality of no-names and name brands therefore does not really differ, is another discourse that brand opponents draw on. Referring to personal observations and

experiences where they take up examples of how they bought expensive name brands, but where the clothes have started to fall apart after a couple of weeks are sometimes used as an argument. Zebra (ordinary user) going: "I bought a pair of Peak Performance pants for 1300 kronor and they wore out after the first wash. I wouldn't call that quality." Cutie (ordinary user): "My Tiger belt managed to hold out for a week, and then it looked like I found it in the city dump." A counter argument from those assuming the brand proponent position is that "you probably just got a bad specimen," stated by Zeb (guard of order). Another method that the brand opponents use is to argue that name brands have better quality but that it does not stand in parity with the premium price charged.

Cow (ordinary user):

Name brands do MOSTLY have better quality than regular clothes. All my name brand clothes have been much more durable than the other clothes I have worn. Then there are clothes that are expensive just because of the brand while the quality sucks.

Vicious (ordinary user):

Oh really? You can look at it from different angles….Let's say that the sweater that was a name brand garment was twice as expensive, was the quality actually two times better? Was it twice as durable too? Better quality? Maybe. But worth its price? Ha ha!

Cow (ordinary user):

Ok but don't be so fussy now. I like name brands so let me. But you actually have a point there.

Another argument used to discredit the legitimacy of the quality justification is that since there is only a marginal difference in quality between name brands and less expensive brands or no-names one should get more pieces of clothing for the price of one name brand garment. The price/quantity ratio should thus rule over the price/quality ratio if the difference in quality is marginal. The counter argument from brand proponents is that more is not always better, still claiming that there actually is a substantial difference in both quality and niceness between name brands and other clothes. The brand opponents then draw upon the environmental discourse, claiming that expensive name brands are better from an environmental viewpoint

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since they are not mass produced to the same extent as cheaper clothes, which also makes it easier to check that the clothes are not manufactured unethically, especially when it comes to the working conditions for the factory workers. This justification process thus goes on and on where the brand proponents constantly need to defend their position in relation to the equality/egalitarian discourse and the brand-status discourse that is continuously drawn up by the brand opponent position.

The most effective way for those who oppose name brand consumption to dishonor the quality justification in order to establish that name brand consumption really is a ridiculous and pathetic pursuit for status and recognition, is, however, to reveal, make visible, and attack the justifying tactic itself. This, in turn, may cause brand proponents to drop their guard admitting what they really are thinking and how they really conceive of brand consumption. This is illustrated in the following disputative interaction about name brands that do not keep their quality promise and show wear or fall apart just a short time after they have been purchased.

> **Rock (administrator):**
>
> But stop whining. Everybody knows that is usually not what happens when you buy expensive clothes, but that it happens every now and then. Do you really think that ONE pair of pants from ONE brand is enough to generalize?
>
> **Zebra (ordinary user):**
>
> Ha ha no but that was my latest mistake. Not the first time it happens to me. I just think that the thing that everybody says that "the quality is so much better" is a terribly bad excuse for walking around and showing off one's expensive clothes. I don't have anything against people who wear name brands, I wear them myself. But when people start to go on and on about the quality of brands that are no better than, for example, clothes of Gina Tricots, it's just sad...
>
> **Felix (ordinary user):**
>
> People buy brands since they are afraid of being abnormal = they buy what everybody else buys. Then they tell themselves that name brands are much better quality so that they won't feel so weak. Sure it's better quality but not that much better for a garment to be marked up with 500 kronor.

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Rock (administrator):

…this is a useless topic here on the forum. A bunch of left-wing haters who can't handle some people having more money than they do, or that these people have other priorities than they have. Why this focus on clothing? Do you question in the same way when someone rolls up in a new BMW despite Toyota scoring better in all safety-tests?

You buy name brands for several reasons. It's generally better quality. You get the real deal, not some lousy copy from H&M. Some buy brands for status. Or just to provoke. Even because it allows you to smile at people who don't know what they are talking about. But the most important thing is probably the feeling. It's so fucking fun to buy expensive clothes. The feeling that not anybody can put on a similar pair of swimming shorts, that only a few know why particular jeans are better than all the others. It feels a lot better when it says Dior in the waistband instead of Cheap Monday. The funniest part is though that all of you who bitterly think that it is wrong to waste money, will do exactly the same the moment you can.

Prove me wrong!

Finally the user, Rock, here assuming the interpretive position of brand proponents, becomes tired of justifying or defending the brand proponent position in relation to the equality/egalitarian macro discourse, and really admits why he, as a brand proponent, consumes name brands. Surely it is partly about quality but primarly it is about being able to distinguish oneself from the middle by being able to buy expensive brands, and that the ability to do so gives a really nice feeling of fun and excitement. Moreover, he argues that everybody would do it if they could, implying that the brand opponents are the ones being bitter and jealous of not being able to participate in that type of fun, distinctive, and liberating brand consumption. Essentially, Rock means that if you could afford a more luxurious car brand like BMW, nobody would buy a Skoda, anything else would be hypocritical. At the same time, the brand opponents think it is hypocritical to argue that consuming name brands is only about the quality, when the real, underlying reason is that it provides people with the feeling of distinction and standing out from the middle. What is interesting though is that these young consumers seem to be fairly honest about being hypocritical.

Willy (assistant):

The question is though how you as a consumer "buy" that a piece of clothing may cost about 200-400% more just because it is made by a certain company...So what do I buy myself? Almost exclusively name brands, I think they are the nicest, but I can't really pretend that I most certainly wouldn't have been able to find almost as nice clothes at Dressman, JC, or H&M.

Adrian (ordinary user):

When I walk around in branded clothes I feel a little better in some way, but that doesn't just go for name brand clothes but also when you for instance walk around in any sweater that you think looks really nice, I think my name brand clothes look really nice." I can't really understand why. But I guess it has something to do with status

The previous quotes convey both interesting, and conflicting feelings of status-pride and discomfort, similar to those found by Davies & Elliot (2006) in their study of old female consumers' conceptions of brands. From an economic rational perspective the quotes indicate that name brands or more expensive brands are unnecessary where the money paid for overly priced brands may be spent more wisely elsewhere. However, at the same time, from a hedonistic or psychological perspective brands provide individuals with well-being and good feelings. The participants conveyed in their interactions that "we" must be allowed to feel good sometimes, breaking free from the constraints and seriousness of everyday life, rewarding themselves with some excess or luxury manifested in the hedonistic consumption of brands. Hedonism is often connected with the unconcerned and pleasured life world of the young, free from the seriousness and stressfulness of the dominant adult parent culture, signified by an economic and ascetic living. Youth culture is therefore connected to hedonism while the dominant parent culture is signified by asceticism. The young consumers then typify themselves and create an identity of their own in relation to the dominant parent culture (Clark *et al*, 1976; Hebdige, 1979), by engaging in hedonistic living, which involves the pleasurable consumption of premium name brands such as Converse, JL, Tiger, Burberry, Lacoste, Prada and D&G. These brand symbols are then used to construct various styles that enable the young to create and express difference and autonomy from the parental culture while simultaneously keeping some of the parental identifications (Cohen,

1972). The former interaction dealing with the queries of how to evaluate symbolic consumption in relation to more economical terms such as price, reveals how these young consumers try to handle the balance between pleasure-loving youth life symbolized by the consumption of name brand symbols, in relation to a more ascetic consumption attached to dominant parent culture. The data illustrate that there is a realization among the young consumers that "we" or the young people of today, despite the irrationality grounded in the price-function logic of buying and using overly priced name brands, still buy these brands. This self realization involves both a paradox and some degree of hypocrisy that "we know that it is unnecessary (from an economic rational and ascetic parent perspective) but we do it anyway." These sentiments are not, however, always easy to handle and might be, as the previous posting showed, experienced as a bit awkward.

However, what has emerged as a clear theme in the discussions about the rights and wrongs of brand consumption is that people assuming the two different interpretive positions of brand opponents and brand proponents, need to develop what Swidler (1986) refers to as a cultural competence that involves a strategic cultural toolkit encompassing legitimate justifications and motives to employ when defending one's position towards brand consumption and the type of brand consumption one normally practices. Consuming or using brands is thus not only a strategic activity because it involves knowing how to combine and assemble them (bricolage) in order to authentically enact a youth style (Hebdige, 1979; Clark, 1976), to construct an identity (Belk, 1988; Elliot & Wattanasuwan; Piacentini & Mailer, 2004), to practice a tasteful and tactful brand consumption symbolized by temperance (no overuse of name brands), but also because it involves a strategic cultural competence to verbally or linguistically motivate, justify and defend one's brand consumption in the eyes of others. This seems also to be highly important strategic competence for these young consumers, especially in cultures where a macro discourse of equality and egalitarianism is a significant constituent of the ideology.

9.2.2 Moral aspects of counterfeit brand consumption

Another important and very relevant issue concerning the rights and wrongs of consumption that was discussed by the young individuals is

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the one of counterfeit consumption. Counterfeits of expensive and luxurious brands, with their low prices, offer individuals who from the beginning were unable to fully participate in name brand consumption, the opportunity and ability to do so. Counterfeits thus offer people and consumers a monetary shortcut to symbolic consumption. Buying counterfeit brands enables consumers to acquire the symbolic associations such as prestige, status, even the coolness that is connected to a certain brand symbol, at the same time as avoiding an expensive premium price. For people with an anxiety of not being able to enter the "paradise" of name brand consumption, counterfeit serves as a backdoor through which these consumers may sneak in. Some discussants even express joy over the fact that through buying counterfeit name brands they deceive other name brand consumers about the authenticity of a brand symbol, for which they have paid a much lower price. However, far from everyone is amused with counterfeits. When discussing these issues the young consumers may here again assume two main interpretive positions. The discussants who are really upset with and show a great dislike about the consumption of counterfeit brands assume the position of *counterfeit opponents*. At the same time, those users who do not see a problem with it at all, in fact, even encourage it, assume the position of *counterfeit proponents*. These polemic positions emerge in the forthcoming discussions dealing with these issues.

There are several reasons for the dislikes of counterfeit phenomena expressed by those who assume the counterfeit opponent position. The most explicit, which also seems to be the most applicable and effective one when trying to fend off the arguments, is connected to the legal and ethical discourse prevalent in society saying that counterfeits are a menace because they support and benefit illegal business. This is illustrated in the following consultative interaction.

> Cracker (ordinary user):
>
> It's a pity that companies lose income just because some little prick makes the same thing in China and sells it cheaper…That's really my opinion. I don't like counterfeits…I regard counterfeit clothes as no-name brands since I associate name brands with quality, which I don't do with counterfeits…Does anybody have a counterfeit Diesel sweatshirt? It's just crap, it falls apart, and threads hanging…I don't like counterfeits.

Rock (administrator):

Counterfeits suck!

Those who design clothes should get credibility for it. All counterfeits have bad quality. It doesn't matter since it is motivated by the low price. What makes a difference is that your morals should tell you to keep your dirty little fingers off the counterfeits, since the ones making them haven't done crap to earn their money. That the clothes also are made in sweat shops by children in poor countries might also make you think again. The pricing of authentic products is ALWAYS motivated in one way or another. There is something that allows firms to charge huge loads of cash for a garment. It could be quality, a feeling, good marketing, an image that one wants to create. It's always something, and as long as the company exists their pricing is motivated. What legitimizes them to always make money is that they themselves are the authentic originators of what they are selling, which is not the case with the counterfeits.

Chrystal (assistant):

Yeah counterfeit sucks!

Sure, there is no huge difference product-wise, but the whole deal with walking around in counterfeits is just stupid. Even Converse, or Vans counterfeits, it's a drag seeing many others running around in them. Personally I would never buy an "unauthentic" garment, or an "unauthentic" accessory, provided that I know it's authentic of course. It just feels bad to support counterfeiters. However it's not that much you can do about counterfeiting, more than punish them harder for the crime. As I see it, it is a serious offence. I can't go and snatch or mimic other's design and then sell it as I see fit. I would feel pretty frustrated over that if I was a famous designer. But I have no clue about what the law says about these things.

One may here observe how the discourse of legal, ethic and moral business conduct is reflected in the young consumers' micro level interactions. The dominating view among the users conversing in the previous interaction is, perhaps as a consequence of the existence of this quoted discourse, that from a societal and legal perspective it is against the moral norm to consume counterfeit brands since it contributes to illegal forms of business conduct, where producers wrongfully capitalize on another company's or designer's good name through the violation of their trade marks and copyrights. The view that it is against the moral norm to support illegal counterfeiting is something that most people

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probably would agree about. From the legal-moral perspective it is therefore difficult to understand why some people actually support the immoral counterfeit consumption and the illegal counterfeit business. Consequently, just as is proposed by Herskovits (1972) and his theory of enculturation, those who favour counterfeits are sanctioned for not conforming to the dominating cultural moral norm, that "you shalt not" support and benefit illegal forms of business through the employment of a "flaming", which according to Kozinets (1998) refers to when someone verbally attacks or insults another person/user online. Breaking that norm means that you are subjected to some sort of punishment for your deviating behaviour or view.

However, what those who support counterfeit consumption, counterfeit proponents, do to argue for their view is to turn the focus from the actions of the counterfeiters to the legal firms developing, marketing and selling the authentic premium brands, letting the discourse of ethic and morality bounce back to the authentic name brands. They change the moral point of reference from the legal to the ethical and political. What is morally right or wrong from a political-ethical discourse, being an important brick in the anti-branding movement, however may be completely different than from a legal perspective. Here the authentic companies are thought to be the ones that are immoral since they charge overly expensive prices just because it is a special brand that only certain consumers may afford. They are really the "criminals" since they contribute to reproducing clashes between social classes and create an elitist society where people's worth is defined in monetary terms and their ability to engage in expensive brand consumption. Those brands and companies thus contribute to the creation of what the anti-branding movement according to Holt (2002) claims as an unhealthy and harmful consumer culture. The branding activities of companies that market premium and luxurious brands are by counterfeit proponents considered to reproduce social strata and enhance or amplify the difference between people. This is being manifested and materialized in the marketing of their exclusive and distinctive symbols directed at and reserved for the right type of people. These companies are thus immoral or unethical from the counterfeit proponent consumers' standpoint since they evoke an anxiety among people of not being good enough by communicating that you are really nobody if you don't have the means to consume

certain kinds of brand symbols. Buying and consuming counterfeits then becomes a way to get back on those anxiety generators by hurting them financially. This view is expressed in the following disputative interaction dealing with counterfeits and the brand Louis Vuitton.

Elaine (guard of order):

If you can't afford a Louis Vuitton bag for example, then you don't have to buy it. But what's wrong with charging a high price for something that you yourself have created? Does it sound more immoral than to steal someone else's idea and logo? To me that's pretty obvious.

Gandalf (ordinary user):

And now the elitism emerges, which means that "only the ones who can afford" get to buy, for example, a Louis Vuitton bag, those who can't afford it are not supposed to have "nicer" things.

What I mean is that it's immoral of the design firms to charge an extreme over price for a goddamn brand, only because they can, not to make a profit. One would think that those who buy these kinds of brands ought to GET that they are totally exploited by the producers, the prices ought to be twice as low. I ask again, if a bag cost lets say 20 "kronor" to make and Louis Vuitton or anybody else sells it for 10000 "kronor" when the brand has been sewn on, is it RIGHT to be able to create a margin of 9980 "kronor" just because of the brand.

Elaine (guard of order):

I don't think it's wrong to charge a high price just because you can, with the insight that people will buy it anyway. And as an answer to your question, no I don't think it's morally wrong to charge a high price. Because even if I don't buy bags for 10000 "kronor" I'm not violated or humiliated just because they charge those kind of prices. I don't need that bag so why should be upset about how much it costs?

Gandalf (ordinary user):

Just because it costs that much. It's elitist thinking by the company: "Now we set the prices so high that only those who have money, those who are worth something, can buy it." They regard themselves to be better than others since they make billions, just as everybody else with money. And name brands do not contribute with anything at all, except for more elitism and an even greater "class hate" between different social classes in society.

Number 1 (administrator/SysOp):

This is actually a forum for fashion and clothing, not politics. You don't seem particularly interested in clothing and do not seem to have any extensive knowledge about the topic. I had the same view as you before I developed an interest in clothing. If you're interested you know.

Rock (administrator):

"What is it then that says that those who can't afford deserve the expensive stuff? You make your choice here in life, some choose to work and earn money, then you can buy things. Some people prioritize other stuff. That doesn't have to be wrong, but you can't both have the cake and eat it at the same time."

Gandalf (ordinary user):

So you mean that a truck driver who busts his ass between 7 and 4 every day does not deserve anything expensive? A truck driver works both with the body and the mind every day and earns around 15000-17000 "kronor" a month before tax, and has to pay the rent, bills, food etc. There are for fuck sake more jobs than high salary white collar jobs that pay good enough to buy a name brand bag every second month or so. Honestly I think that it's particularly the hard working men and women who deserve some luxury every now and then. And some people prioritize other stuff! For instance the family and life instead of ruining oneself over a bag, which they could have given their daughter if it was a couple of thousand cheaper.

Rock (administrator):

Luxury is not for everyone, luxury is for those who have the ability to supply themselves with it. Therefore the truck driver deserves his expensive bag when he can afford to buy it. If the person in question strives for expensive things, he has simply to choose a way of life that may provide him with this. If he doesn't he has only himself to blame.

It is quite clear that what is discussed here is social class, the class struggle, people's class and political belonging, and their connection to expensive brands. Although this counter-argument supplied by those assuming the counterfeit proponent positions, claiming that firms that take advantage of and reproduce elitism and social class by focusing on a certain type of consumers through their high price brands, while shutting out others, thereby are those that really are the immoral ones, is a viable and interesting argument; it does not convince the majority

of the users to be the "right" view. One viable explanation for this is that the views and conceptions of those who are counterfeit brand proponents are similar to the ones that Kozinets & Handelman (2004) term consumer activists. These counterfeit positive consumers have to deal and argue with, not the type of mainstream, numb, couch potato, and easily duped consumers described as being as big adversaries of the consumer activist movement as the companies themselves. Instead they need to argue and deal with reflexive, knowledgeable and interested young consumers being auto-didactically educated in how brands and branding work. This makes them a lot harder to win over or for the right cause, which is developing the view and conceptions of firms as immoral actors that benefit from the young consumers' anxiety of not having a value without consuming expensive name brand symbols. Interesting then, is that the counterfeit opponents actually defend the actions and conduct of companies that market and sell expensive name brands, siding with them instead of as was shown in previous sections of the study, criticizing their conduct when trying to sway consumers through their use of brand building strategies and techniques. Paradoxically, the consumers thus seem to change side or loyalties for some reason that not necessarily has to do with moral and legal aspects.

Among several informants, especially the ones assuming the position of counterfeit opponents, counterfeit consumption is regarded as a form of cheating where individuals engaging in counterfeit consumption are considered to cheat and fool not just the authentic companies and their name brands (financially and symbolically). They are also considered to mislead other fellow consumers about the symbolic meanings of a brand often attached to a higher and premium price connoting certain meanings such as status, prestige, coolness or authenticity. Individuals consuming counterfeits are thus thought to gain symbolic capital (see Bourdieu, 1984) from their symbolic consumption without really paying for it. From the perspective of those who assume the counterfeit opponent position; counterfeit consumers are symbolic free riders, travelling first class on the conspicuous consumption ride without paying full price for the expensive ticket. While the counterfeit opponents feel cheated, the counterfeit proponents seem to express satisfaction from this symbolic deception since it allows them to slip back into the symbolic game from which they have been shut out without anybody having the ability to stop them. This is clearly

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conveyed by the assistant user "Zelda:" "It must be the funniest thing there is to see someone whose sweater is like a thousand "kronor" more expensive then your own…even though they look identical. More counterfeits! Support the clothing class struggle!" Again it is also emphasized how name brand consumption, according to these young consumers, is connected to their social position and the social classes of a society, where sporting counterfeits, from a counterfeit proponent perspective, means setting up resistance and taking a political stand against a capitalist world propelled by brands reproducing a stratified society, and where supporting name brands means supporting a capitalist class divided world.

As if this is not enough, counterfeit consumption also seems to devalue or defuse the symbolic meanings of both premium and more luxurious brands, both from the perspective of the companies marketing the authentic brands but also for those who consume them. The meanings of these types of brands (connoting status and prestige) depend on limited supply and a constrained availability. These brands are only accessible to a smaller group of consumers, thereby shutting out large groups of consumers because of the high price. Therefore, the counterfeits breach this limited accessibility. It increases the supply of the brands making them available to a larger group of consumers. As was discussed in Chapter 7 this causes the brands to lose their distinguishing factor thereby diluting their status and prestigious meanings, not just for the firms, but also for the consumers buying them. For young people who put a lot of effort into being able to afford premium or even luxury brand consumption, counterfeits make this effort seem less meaningful and become a poke in the eye for premium name brand consumers. The deal between the name brands and the consumers using them (authentic ones) where the consumers are willing to pay a premium to get access to attractive (often containing status, prestige or coolness) brand symbols for their life purposes, is if not breached then at least jeopardized by counterfeit consumption and counterfeit consumers since they devalue the meaning of the brand symbol both from the perspective of the company but also for the name brand consumers. If the meaning of a name brand were to be diluted or deteriorate, the consumer would feel awkward, even uncomfortable to pay a premium price for a brand symbol that no longer provides him or her with the appropriate symbolic properties initially received in the

premium price-symbol deal. At the same time, the company would suffer both from a diluted brand as well as its negative aspects on their sales. It is therefore in the common interest of both the firms that promote authentic name brands and the consumers using them to try to prevent or deem counterfeit consumption as both illegal and immoral. It thus becomes relevant for consumers to try convincing others that counterfeit consumption of certain name brands that they themselves appreciate, is inappropriate and unnecessary since it would perhaps have negative effects on the esteemed meaning of those brands. Consumers of authentic name brands may actually try to protect them from inappropriate consumption and inappropriate consumers. This is illustrated in the disputative interaction below about the brands Louis Vuitton and Rolex.

Elaine (guard of order):

Quit faking it! All these counterfeits have caused exclusive brands to lose their charm. If everyone were supposed to wear Louis Vuitton, it would be cheap. If you like the design or the collection of a brand then I'm sure that you may find similar clothes in cheaper stores, without wearing a trashy counterfeit – because that's just what counterfeits are!

Deer hunter (ordinary user):

But if you are going to buy a Louis Vuitton bag, say that it costs about 15000 "kronor," do you really rather buy that one instead of a counterfeit for a 100 that is identical? I think it's just sick that people pay 15000 for a bag, just to be able to "flash" with it as an authentic one. Buy a counterfeit and say that it's authentic instead.

Elaine (guard of order):

But then you are just in it for the brand. So I think that you should buy the real thing, and if you can't afford: Don't bother getting it all. It's as simple as that.

Zenith (assistant):

Counterfeits are good. I bought a fake Rolex watch last week for 380 "kronor." If I would have gotten an authentic Rolex I would have spent more than I ever could spend on a watch.

Elaine (guard of order):

Now I'm really getting sick of this. I you buy a fake Rolex you are just out to get a watch with a particular brand. Why not just buy a watch

from a cheaper brand, then you would at least get a worthy and authentic watch?

Again consumers' idea or conception of authenticity seems to be of great importance, this time not concerning which brand symbols and which people that are considered to be authentic symbols of a style or authentic members of that style, but instead when it comes to the rights and wrongs with counterfeit consumption. From the perspective of the counterfeit opponents, in the previous quote represented by Elaine, it is thus not just the legal or illegal aspects of counterfeits that make counterfeit consumption inappropriate. Perhaps more importantly it is that by using counterfeit brands you convey or communicate an image of yourself that is unauthentic, or even false and deceptive, being untruthful both to yourself, and to others about who you are. According to counterfeit opponents you are only considered authentic as long as you are thought to be what Grayson & Martinec (2004) refer to as indexically authentic. This implies that an individual's behavior or expressions are only authentic if it clearly reflects who that individual really is and that there is a factual and spatio-temporal link with something else, which can be both physical and psychological. Using counterfeits of expensive name brands thus implies that you bear symbols that do not correspond to who you are.

The link between consumer objects, such as brands, and who you are or want to be has been acknowledged in consumer research for some time where possessions are found to serve as important parts of the extended self (Belk, 1988), that brands may be used as resources for one's identity construction (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998), and what one consumes and how one consumes it even communicate something about one's social class belonging (Holt, 1998). The view of counterfeit opponents is, therefore, that you should not try to be someone you really are not, and that you should be true to yourself, and that this should be mirrored in the brands you consume. Echoing Belk (1988), the brands you consume should be an extension of yourself. If you cannot afford to buy certain premium or even luxury brands it is better to buy authentic brands with less upscale meanings, than buying counterfeits of upscale name brands thereby pretending to be something that you really are not.

However counterfeit proponents, in the previous quote represented by the users Deerhunter and Zenith, seem to have a diverging view on the authenticity of brands. Instead, they seem to connect authenticity of brands with what Grayson & Martinec (2004) refer to as iconic authenticity, which is a physical or psychological mimic or representation of what is indexically authentic and real. If a counterfeit brand is an identical and iconic representation of the real brand, thus that one cannot tell the difference between fake and real, or indexically and iconically authentic. There is no reason to pay a full and premium price for an indexically authentic brand. At least as long as the counterfeit brand symbol is a credible representation enough to fulfil the same symbolic task as an indexically authentic brand. While an iconically authentic brand has no credence among the counterfeit opponents, it appears as a smart and attractive tool for counterfeit proponents when engaging in symbolic consumption. Authenticity, or rather consumers' conception of what is authentic, seems again to be a very important issue to handle, especially when dealing with, discussing, fleshing out, and understanding brand consumption. In addition, the dynamic features of the authenticity construct appear as a helpful tool for researchers when trying to find and make sense of the underlying reasons for the views and attitudes consumers display towards counterfeit brand consumption.

9.3 Summary and a additional reflections

It was important for the young consumers to discuss and to make sense of why people really consume brands. A common conception connects to the discourse where brands are thought to be consumed to attain recognition and status. On the other hand, name brand consumption is not bad or unnecessary at all times, when they are consumed with temperance and taste without degrading others who cannot afford to participate in that type of consumption. However, the young consumers assume two different interpretive positions, brand proponents and brand opponents, when discussing if name brands are mainly for good and bad and if it is right or wrong to use name brands. The brand proponents often need to defend their brand consumption in the eyes of the brand opponents since that type of consumption runs

against the ideology or ethos that one should not stand out from the middle. When defending their position they draw on the discourse of self autonomy and the discourse of functionality and supply various micro level accounts or justifications that connect to those discourses. These, in turn, reveal that these young consumers' conceptions of brand consumption involve elements of paradoxes and hypocrisy, a hypocrisy that appears as fairly honest. One of the explanations for this hypocrisy lies in their felt need to handle the balance between a hedonistic youth culture style signified by conspicuous consumption and pleasures, and the dominating parent culture signified by asceticism. In addition, when discussing the moral aspects of counterfeit brands the young consumers again assume two different interpretive positions, counterfeit proponents who support and like counterfeit brand consumption, and counterfeit opponents who regard it as morally, legally and ethically despicable. The counterfeit proponents, instead, mean that it is the firms' marketing premium and luxury brands that are immoral and unethical because they produce a stratified society. Interestingly, the consumers displayed a somewhat paradoxical relationship to brand consumption when they first agreed that it had to do with a rather ridiculous status pursuit but that they still bought into that type of consumption, because it felt good.

10 Brand understanding in micro interactions

In this chapter, I will summarize and discuss the findings from the analysis in relation to previous literature in order to clarify the theoretical contributions of this study. The first part deals with how consumers construct an understanding on a horizontal level, i.e. in micro interactions. The second part deals particularly with a conceptualization of the content of the young consumers' brand understanding. In the third section I discuss the theoretical contributions of a micro interaction approach to prior research on consumer understanding construction. In the fourth section I discuss the nature of the consumers' brand understanding in relation to previous constructs, and introduce the concept of consumer cynicism to theoretically represent the underlying paradoxes and contradictions identified in their understanding. In section five I summarize the contributions of the study, and finally, in section six I discuss the limitations of the study and potentially interesting avenues for further research.

10.1 Constructing brand understanding

This study shows that a substantial part of consumers' brand understanding construction occurs in a micro interaction structure that consists of three main but different micro interactions. I have termed these *consultative*, *disputative* and *normative* interactions. In each of them different types of roles are assumed by different individuals or consumers participating in those interactions. One individual may assume different roles in any of the various types of interaction. In the consultative interaction individuals may assume the roles of the advisee and the advisor. The advisee searches for new and additional opinions, conceptions and knowledge concerning products and brands supplied by the advisors, all in a positive atmosphere characterized by a sense of

consensus. The second interaction, the disputative interaction, involving the roles of debaters and mediators, is more fervent and is characterized by an intense atmosphere, and by disagreement concerning brand related issues rather than consensus. The debaters discuss topics with great energy and tension, while the mediators try to defuse the tension by posting diplomatic comments. The third type of identified interaction is the one I conceptualize as normative. It involves the roles of provoker and punisher where the punisher sanctions the provoker for improper brand conceptions and views. The provoker is thus reminded that his or her acts, thoughts or conceptions are faulty, a "thou-shalt-not" in a certain cultural context and are by means of the punishment, here manifested in a "flaming" (a verbal attack or abuse in an online setting) educated in what is the proper understanding, conception or opinion concerning brands.

These micro level interactions in which consumers micro discursively debate and discuss brands also display and involve macro discursive references. In the three identified types of micro interactions, the young consumers access and make use of several social and consumer discourses to form an understanding of brand related phenomena such as status, social class, and the need to fit in. By conveying their conceptions or understanding of brands to others, consumers assume different interpretive positions. These are based on how they position themselves in relation to what Thompson & Haytko (1997) refer to as the morality of consumption. Two major moralities of consumption issues served as a reference point around which the consumers' positions were assumed; the good or bad, right or wrong with brand consumption, and the good or bad, right or wrong with counterfeit consumption. Around each reference point, the consumers have been found to assume two major and polemic positions.

When discussing if brand consumption is to be considered good or bad, wrong or right, the young consumers assume either a *brand proponent* or a *brand opponent* position. Brand proponents consider brands to be a favorable phenomenon in society, where their consumption makes them feel good about themselves, thereby adding value to their lives, while brand opponents are critical about name brands and regard them an unnecessary phenomenon that only causes anxiety and contributes to a stratified society. When arguing for their position, the brand

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opponents often draw on and refer to the equality/egalitarian discourse, being both a common and important feature of the ideology of Scandinavian countries. As a response, the brand proponents draw on a modern functionalist discourse telling people that a high price actually reflects a high quality product, and that name brand consumption is, therefore, sensible from a price-quality perspective. The brand proponents thus rationalize their acts and conceptions by supplying motives that name brands actually have superior quality and durability. When dealing with the issue of counterfeit consumption, the consumers assume the two main and polemic positions *counterfeit proponents* and *counterfeit opponents*. The counterfeit opponents are against counterfeits and take up a legal and moral discourse to argue that counterfeits and counterfeit consumption is something immoral and illegal since it supports unfair and illegal business practices. In contrast, the counterfeit proponents refer to an anti-branding discourse, which informs people that companies market brands in an ethically despicable way by taking advantage of low-wage countries and unfavorable labor practices to produce their brands at a low cost while charging western consumers premium prices. Since counterfeits and counterfeit consumption hurts those mean firms, they serve a good, even noble cause.

However, the young consumers did not only assume different and opposing interpretive positions when discussing and debating brands in the micro level interactions. They were also found to struggle for, maintain and reproduce the power and status positions constituting the social structure of the cultural field. This means that the three main types of micro level interactions do not only have an explicit knowledge or understanding constructing function, but they also serve as important bricks in the construction and perpetuation of the social structure of the cultural field – in this case the "Hamsterpaj" forum. The social structure is therefore also understood to be established, reconstructed and maintained in the three types of interaction and the subsequent roles identified before. Hence, at the same time as the micro level interactions form, reform and maintain the social structure of the cultural field, this very same social structure, shapes the micro interactions and the brand understanding that is formed in those three types of interactions. Consequently, the social structure indirectly

impacts the brand understanding being formed in the interactions of the cultural field.

The young consumers' struggle to attain recognition and formal status positions thus awards them with a power to not only affect other individuals navigating within the cultural field, but also to affect what kind of brand understanding that is formed, and what kind that is given prominence. Individuals with status positions affect or structure the brand understanding by taking advantage of their power to decide the kind of topics that may be discussed. Some have the authority to lock down threads, to moderate postings, and to kick people out, which has an impact on which brand issues are discussed and consequently on what understanding that is formed in the interactions. In addition, individuals with status positions exert a symbolic power where their conceptions and understandings are given prominence by others because of their position in the cultural field. Thus, they have greater power (than other individuals) to judge, influence, even decide what kind of brand understanding that is the sensible or "right" one.

In order to attain and defend such status positions, the consumers employ different strategic resources. The most important resource in the struggle for status positions on the "Hamsterpaj" forum is what Bourdieu (1984) refers to as cultural capital. Here, this represents not only individuals' brand knowledge and understanding, but also encompasses a competence of how to eloquently and convincingly present and express your brand understanding and argument to others so that you appear as a knowledgeable, and trustworthy cultural member of the field. In addition it involves the ability or cultural competence of the forum users to textually move around and navigate within the forum with ease, thus to naturally and strategically handle the norms and rules of the cultural field when struggling for or maintaining certain positions. This constant and strategic struggle for recognition and status in the cultural field of the "Hamsterpaj" forum may then, by extension, be understood as a power game where the knowledge and understanding of brands are put into use as a very important strategic resource for individuals playing this game. Interestingly, this indicates that, although consumers' brand understanding construction here has been argued to occur horizontally and in consumers micro level, peer-to-peer interaction, it still involves

vertical elements in the form of a hierarchical social structure where people with status positions have a greater power (than ordinary users) to influence the kind of brand understanding that is formed.

10.2 The content of consumers' brand understanding

The brand understanding that was formed and displayed in the micro level interactions on the "Hamsterpaj" forum may be divided into two main categories, *brand consumption understanding* and *brand creation understanding*. The former of these two categories pertains to the consumers' understanding of the usage of brands and their function in their daily lives. This category of brand understanding may then be subdivided into three types of brand consumption understanding, *what to consume*, *how to consume* and *why consume*. This pertains to consumers' understanding of how brands are created, the logic behind branding, and how brands' meanings may change or become diluted.

10.2.1 Brand consumption understanding

The *what to consume* type includes the understanding the young consumers possess and display of the symbolic landscape, the existing brand symbols, their meanings, how these symbols relate to each other, to other entities, and which brands that go with various styles. It thus involves the immediate understanding of brands that is needed to competently navigate within the contemporary consumer culture or within the young consumers' social sphere to successfully resolve the life project of creating a self or an identity of their own, both in relation to other contemporaries but also in relation to the dominant parent culture. This more concrete form of brand consumption understanding is mostly constructed in the consultative interactions. The understanding of existing brand symbols and youth styles is sought, shared, and negotiated in a positive atmosphere, much because such meanings are often experienced as being not definite or clear-cut, but rather polysemous by the individual consumers. They therefore need to be collectively made sense of, where the individual consumer's

interpretations of the meanings of brands and styles need and be given social ballast by other peers or contemporaries.

How to consume involves the understanding of how to properly practice brand consumption. This may involve an understanding of how to autonomously perform brand bricolage (Thompson & Haytko, 1997), perhaps with the aim of being an authentic style member (Hebdige, 1979; Fox, 1987), or again, to solve the life project of forming an identity. The consumers here have enough brand understanding to enable them to not just follow the cultural meanings but perhaps also to reformulate and play with them. The understanding of how to consume brands also encompasses how to behave or act towards other people when wearing, using or consuming brands. As the study shows, there are certain cultural prescriptions that ought to be followed, and which you need to have an understanding of, when consuming brands. You should not be pretentious, look down on others, and deem them as lesser individuals when using or displaying certain (often more expensive) brands that others, for various reasons (often because they cannot afford it), do not. Moreover, it is important to understand how to consume brands tastefully, which means not using name brands excessively but with ease or temperance. Excessive brand consumption is considered vulgar and is often deemed as ugly or disgusting, where practicing excessive and overt brand consumption would convey an image of oneself as an un-reflecting and gullible brand freak.

Why consume refers to an understanding of the underlying ideas behind brand consumption. This more abstract brand consumption understanding relates to the underlying conceptions, even reflexivity, concerning the main reasons for why people engage in brand consumption in the first place, if brand consumption should be something to strive for, and what effects it has on society as we know it. The "why consume" understanding dealing with consumer ideological issues also encompasses certain cultural prescriptions, even norms of both how one ought to think of brand consumption as a phenomenon. Hence, it particularly deals with and mirrors important consumption norms and values of the Swedish consumer culture.

The "how to consume", and "why to consume" brand understanding is most often constructed in the disputative and normative interactions. It is not that strange since these types of understanding often include

cultural rules or norms connected to consumption, but also of more, if not philosophical, then at least reflective conceptions of the underlying function of brands as a social phenomenon. The norms or rules, most probably being a product of the consumer culture's ideological infrastructure, of how to understand and reason concerning brand consumption need to be upheld and defended against deviating conceptions and thoughts. This is done by punishing individuals for breaking those norms or rules, which is what occurs in the normative micro interaction where provokers are quickly flamed or punished for deviating conceptions. Navigating within a consumer cultural field would then partly involve strategically handling those rules and norms competently, for example, by supplying honourable accounts to justify one's deviating brand conceptions. The disputative interaction is more common when the underlying functions and motives behind brand consumption are discussed. Individuals tend to disagree about these matters which become evident in those types of interactions. The debaters energetically argue for their positions and conceptions regarding these important matters, often by drawing on various forms of social and consumer discourses, where the mediator tries to defuse the somewhat hostile atmosphere.

10.2.2 Brand creation understanding

The second major category of brand understanding, the brand creation understanding, refers not only to the conceptions and understanding consumers possess about the very techniques employed by firms to create brands, but also to the logic behind branding, and how the brand fashion process works. Thus how brands go from being in to being out and how their meanings become diluted. The young consumers display an understanding that there exists a negative relationship between a brand's level of commercial popularity or "mainstreamness", and its distinctive, authentic and therefore attractive meanings. Their understanding of brand creation contains a fairly elaborate knowledge of a wide range of branding techniques employed by brand management, such as celebrity endorsement and the usage of magnified brand logos to be used by consumers as identity markers. They also display an understanding of the logic behind branding, often communicated by the anti-branding movement, which encompasses

the criticism that firms promoting well-known brands take advantage of low wage countries and unfair labour practices to produce their brands at low cost while still charging consumers premium prices. The young consumers seem to be sceptical about the relationship between the price of the brand and the quality of the product where some believe that the high prices of certain brands are not mirrored in their quality. A common understanding seems to be that all products and brands are made in the same Asian factory anyway.

The brand creation understanding is mostly formed in the consultative interactions in which understanding is constructed in a positive and supportive atmosphere. One possible reason why this brand understanding is largely is formed in the consultative interaction is, precisely as with the concrete form of brand consumption understanding, that those doing the interacting are unsure of the actual or underlying meanings of the various branding techniques or of which brands that are in the process of meaning dilution. There are no (clear-cut), what Garfinkel (1967) and Holstein & Gubrium (1994) refer to as "social facts" concerning the meanings of various branding techniques and the way brands lose in distinction and become out of fashion. There is thus no one, or very few, who have a firm answer to these queries and may therefore not assume an authoritative role, educating others in a more normative way where deviating conceptions are punished for being wrongful, improper or ridiculous. Instead, the young consumers together try to analyze and interpret the meanings behind these branding techniques in a way similar to how young consumers together, as suggested by Ritson & Elliot (1999), interpret the meanings of various advertisements.

10.3 Contributions of a micro interaction approach

As was argued in Chapter 1, previous theory has conceptualized consumers' understanding construction as a vertical or top-down process, where they are thought to form an understanding when individually dealing with macro level consumer and social discourses. However, here it has been argued that a substantial degree of consumers' understanding of brands is formed horizontally, in the micro level discursive and peer-to-peer interactions between consumers

themselves, but that this micro level understanding construction has been under-theorized in previous consumer research. The conceptualization of the three types of micro interactions and the subsequent interactional roles identified in this study reduce this under-theorization by adding and contributing to our prior theoretical knowledge of how consumers horizontally and on a micro level form an understanding of brands and how they work.

10.3.1 Contributions to consumer socialization

In consumer socialization literature, consumers' understanding of brands is mainly theorized as being handed down to the consumers through authoritative socialization agents such as parents and school. This is instead of learning about consumer phenomena, such as brands from traditional socialization agents - parents, school and the media (Moschis, 1978; Moschis, 1987), as proposed by previous socialization literature. The construction process of young consumers' brand understanding is here conceptualized to occur in the three main micro level interactions where the understanding formed is substantially influenced by the consumers' own appointed enculturation agents, instead of traditional ones such as parents and school. In addition, consumers, as Friestad & Wright (1994) propose, develop knowledge of marketers' persuasion attempts by first forming individual and cognitive insight about persuasion through the continuous handling of these attempts issued by the persuasion agents, and then interacting and talking to peers, family, friends and colleagues about how feelings, thoughts and behavior are affected by these persuasion attempts. These peer interactions or talk with friends or family are not only random chitchat. Rather, this study shows that consumers' understanding of consumption-related phenomena is discussed with great seriousness and interest. It reveals that these discussions and talk follow a certain micro interaction structure and order, involving certain discrepant interactional roles. Moreover, consumers' knowledge or understanding of persuasion attempts or other marketing techniques is here increasingly understood to be a communal understanding created and residing in social interaction, rather than in individual consumers' cognitive memory.

10.3.2 Contributions to consumer culture theory

The findings of this study show that consumers' understanding of brands is not only handed down to consumers through what Holt (2002) calls an ideological infrastructure consisting of various macro level discourses telling consumers what and how to consume things. It also reveals that principles and assumptions behind a prevailing branding paradigm and the subsequent branding techniques are systematically discussed, made sense of and understood by consumers through a micro interaction structure. This includes consultative, disputative, and normative interactions and various types of interactive roles, which are enacted before the consumers develop what Holt refers to as a literacy of these branding techniques.

The outcome if this study also shows that consumers, not only individually, as Thompson & Haytko (1997) suggest, develop an understanding of consumption phenomena by drawing upon countervailing consumer and social discourses, but that these discourses are discussed and made sense of in consumers' micro level interactions. These authors propose that many of the consumers' consumption stories are formed in a conversational matrix within micro cultures by which several consumers negotiate a common understanding out of countervailing meanings and ideological positions. However, as they carried out phenomenological interviews with individual consumers, the authors were not able to give a credible theoretical account of how that kind of interactional conversation and negotiation process works. The conceptualization of the micro level interactions, their subsequent roles, and the linguistic accounts provided by the interactants supplies a credible theoretical conception of how these consumer-to-consumer conversations and negotiations works.

According to Thompson & Haytko (1997), consumers also make use of countervailing discourses to assume identity and interpretive positions in relation to fashion and the morality of consumption. This study reveals that consumers not only assume various interpretive positions in relation to a particular issue or phenomenon such as brands or fashion, but that these positions are also assumed in relation to, and even opposition to the positions held by other consumers. These positions have here been found to be criticized and defended strategically by employing various forms of accounts and vocabularies

of motives. The countervailing discourses that Thompson & Haytko (1997) mean that consumers use to assume interpretive positions are, thus, not just appropriated by the individual. They are in the micro interactions, in relation to contemporaries, systematically made sense of, argued for, and dodged by supplying legitimate accounts and rationalizations.

Moreover, the conceptualization of interactional structure, the subsequent roles and the linguistic accounts contribute more generally to how consumers in micro interactions make sense of, understand, handle and appropriate various consumption discourses in their daily life. These concepts may, for example, be used to analyze how café flâneurs and oppositional localists collectively and in interactions make sense of and appropriate what Thompson & Arsel (2004) call the anti-Starbucks discourse in order to obtain meanings of their coffee shop patronage in distinction and even in opposition to other coffee consumers. They may also contribute to understanding how natural health consumers together make sense of and use what Thompson (2004) refers to as market place mythologies to position themselves against, challenge and even resist discourses of workaholism and medical authority.

In addition, the findings of this study also show that roles, role taking, and role switching seem particularly relevant and important when trying to develop a better theoretical knowledge of how consumers construct an understanding of brands, branding and marketing. In Chapter 8 it was illustrated that young consumers, from a dramaturgical perspective put forward by Goffman (1959), possess enough role specific knowledge, as described by Berger & Luckmann (1966), to not only assume the performing role of the marketer, but even to pass a judgment on marketers and how competently they actually perform or act out their role as marketers. The young consumers, here being understood as the "audience" in the dramaturgical play have uncovered the underlying secrets of the "performing team" of marketers and brand managers, thus enabling them to assume a role in the performing team of marketers as well as to evaluate other performers within that same team.

If we then adapt the thought presented by Mead (1934) that people do not develop a selfconsciousness of their own until they can regard

themselves from the conscious perspective of the other, it is reasonable to argue that it is perhaps not until consumers can assume the conscious role of the marketer, that they fully understand and become fully conscious of their role as consumers. Being an important part of Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective, roles, role taking and role switching thus offers a fruitful theoretical addition to Holt's (2002) dialectical approach. Instead of conceptualizing the process of how consumers develop brand literacy and learn about branding as result of a dialectical relationship between the branding paradigm and the consumer culture, it may be understood as a continuous role taking or role switching activity. Here the consumers develop a knowledge of branding as they assume the role of the marketer and, from the perspective of a marketer are able to recognize how they ought to think and act, not only in the role as marketer but also in that of a consumer. Marketers and brand managers have long been trying to put themselves in the shoes of the consumer to be able to figure out how they think and act, thus getting close to the consumer and developing marketing and branding tactics from that position. Hence, in order to fully know and understand the consumer you need to become one. In the same way, the consumers may develop an understanding of the brand managers, their way of thinking and acting, by putting themselves in their shoes.

10.3.3 Contributions to brand community literature

The cultural field investigated in this dissertation has several similarities to previously studied communities within consumer research, since this cultural field, possesses features and pillars constituting a community. This means that the findings and conceptualizations derived from the investigation of the "Hamsterpaj" forum may be used to better understand both various types of what Cova (1997) refers to as consumption communities, but perhaps primarily brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). The informants of this investigation have gathered round and are united by a general interest in brands as a fashion and consumption phenomenon. They have thus developed a mutual engagement and shared repertoires that according to Elliot (2004) defines a community of practice. It is the common interest, mutual engagement and developed repertoires that hold the cultural

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field of the "Hamsterpaj" forum together. As has been illustrated in previous chapters the young consumers have discussed many different brands, their meanings, how they are related to certain youth styles, but also the underlying motives and morality of brand consumption. The cultural field under investigatation may therefore rather be regarded as a community of brands than a brand community in that it does not only, as traditional brand communities (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001) or subcultures of consumption (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) center around the common interest in and devotion to one specific brand, but involves the interest in many brands, or in brands as a phenomenon.

Previous consumer research and literature have conceptualized the formation and perpetuation of brand communities from a classic sociological and anthropological perspective. Elements of religion have also been brought in to theoretically explain the construction and reproduction of these brand communities. These have been understood to be formed around cultural values, an ethos, shared beliefs, a felt we-ness (a consciousness of kind), and that are maintained through rituals and traditions, story telling and a felt obligation to the community where devotees of a brand help each other out if one of the members is in trouble (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). There are important brand artifacts such as banners, pins, stickers and other memorabilia that are used to perpetuate the community and maintain a sense of a religious brotherhood (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). Supernatural, religious, and magical stories of persecution, miraculous performance, survival of the brand and the return of the brand creator may also help perpetuate the brand community, its values and beliefs (Muniz & Schau, 2005), as well as brand cult sustaining myths of creation, the messiah, Satan, and resurrection (Belk & Tumbat, 2005).

However Fine (1979) argues that if we want to understand the dynamics of culture creation we ought to study the micro level interactions of small group cultures with the assumption that cultural content derives its shared social meaning via interaction instead of through an a priori assignment of meaning. Previous conceptualizations have, however, greatly neglected such a fruitful micro interactional approach to understand the creation and perpetuation of brand communities. This study, therefore, adds to our knowledge of how brand communities are constructed and perpetuated by bringing in

such a micro interactional approach. Instead of primarily regarding brand communities to be created by cultural beliefs and values, a felt we-ness, rituals, traditions, myths, brotherhood and a felt obligation to the community and its members, they may be regarded as creation of the consultative, disputative and normative micro interactions identified in the analysis. The micro interactional structure with its subsequent roles developed in this investigation could then serve as a more finely grained or sensitive theoretical lens when studying the smaller components and processes of the creation and perpetuation of consumption communities. Hence, by zooming in the microscope on the micro level we may see more clearly and understand the smaller components and processes which make up brand communities and other types of consumption communities.

In addition, rather than conveying an image of brand communities as a communal and noble phenomenon characterized by a felt we-ness, brotherhood and a felt obligation to the community and its members, this micro level interactional study also reveals that a central feature of such communities is the members' continuous and strategic struggle/fight for recognition, status positions, and the authoritative power that is inscribed in, and exerted from those positions to affect other individuals. Certainly, brand communities and subcultures of consumption have previously been understood to contain hierarchical social structures where certain individuals, those who are most devoted to the brand community's ethos, have higher status positions than other members of the community. It is also recognized that socialization processes are at work when new members are adopted in the community and are educated regarding the norms and thou-shalt-nots of the community. However, what is argued here is that brand communities may primarily be conceptualized as a power game where people fight for status positions. Rather than being the main reason for community creation and perpetuation, brands, the knowledge of brands, and the understanding of how brands work as a phenomenon then serve foremost as an important (consumer) cultural capital resource that consumers bring into play when struggling for status and power in different cultural and social spheres.

10.3.4 Negotiating and legitimizing the meaning of brands

Since a lot of the discussions taking place in the various types of interactions dealt with the sense making of the meanings of various brands, the conceptualizations and findings of this study also contribute to previous literature on how consumers negotiate brand meaning. They therefore extend the previous theoretical models of brand meaning negotiation supplied by Ligas & Cotte (1997) and Elliot & Wattanasuwan (1998) because they account for how these negotiation processes and the discursive elaboration of brand meanings are actually played out between consumers. The consultative, disputative, and normative types of interactions with their subsequent roles of advisees, advisors, debaters, mediators, provokers and punishers may, as micro theoretical constructs, serve as valuable micro theoretical representatives for what goes on in the social environment when consumers negotiate brand meaning.

The brand discussions and the brand meaning negotiation taking place in the online interactions at "Hamsterpaj" indicate is that it is hard, as Ligas & Cotte (1997) claim, to gain a unified ground in the marketplace, where an agreed upon meaning of a brand may be achieved. This study conveys that although brand meaning negotiation processes take place, where some individuals have a greater negotiating power due to their status position, they do not always, in the end, lead to a stable brand meaning consensus, or a common brand meaning denominator among the consumers. The meaning of brands seems rather, as Bengtsson & Firat (2006) acknowledge, to be constantly socially constructed and re- constructed, no matter how stable it appears to be. Meaning is thus continuously contested, contradictory and under negotiation (Elliot, 2004). Often, consumers seem to possess diverging conceptions of a brand's various meanings, and that these also may change swiftly as other groups of people or youth styles appropriate them for their own purposes. Therefore, there seems to exist a tension between the shared meanings of a brand and its diverse or perhaps unclear meanings. A brand's meanings could, in this respect, be more or less shared or diverse not only between people in a certain cultural field or context, but also as put forward by Holt (2004), in a specific period in time.

The brand meaning negotiations being played out in the micro level interactions may be understood as a form of brand legitimization processes where certain brands are discussed whether or not they are legitimate symbols for a certain style and for the authentic enactment of such a style. These young consumers seem to be occupied with legitimate processes similar to what Kates (2004) refers to as the moral legitimacy of brands, which refers to the ways consumers actively evaluate whether brands truly benefit a particular community in society. The difference here is that these consumers are not members of a politically oriented gay community but rather a community of brands where various individuals discuss the meaning and membership of various youth styles in relation to brands. It is therefore not the morality of the brand in relation to the community and its political norms, values and ethos, but instead the legitimate authenticity of a brand as a symbolic marker of the ethos of a style and its individual members that is of importance. Consumers may react very strongly when brands, that before were considered to be both what Kates (2004) refers to as cognitive legitimate and moral legitimate, for various reasons such as "selling out" or being kidnapped by another style, turn authentically illegitimate in the eyes of the consumers. The findings of this study thus support Kates' conclusion that brand legitimacy occurs when consumers become convinced that their brands and they themselves have matching baggage. However if this match is disturbed by some actions of the brand, the reaction could come swiftly and be emotionally harsh.

10.4 Consumer cynicism - the paradoxical nature of consumers' brand understanding

The nature of the young consumers' brand understanding was found to contain extensive elements of cynical reasoning, both concerning the various branding practices of marketers, what brands really do to people and what kind of society they create, in addition to consumers' underlying motives for using brands in the first place. Their brand understanding contained high levels of what Bengtsson & Firat (2006) refer to as brand literacy. They seemed competent enough to both read and understand the cultural meanings and strategies underlying brands

and to reformulate and play with those meanings, thereby fully partaking in a culture of brands. Moreover, they relayed critical stories and evaluations about various forms of branding practices performed by marketers, similar to the peer-to-peer critical advertising evaluations that Ritson & Elliot (1999) found young consumers engaging in when trying to decode and make sense of the underlying meanings of advertisements. The brand understanding uncovered here thus illustrates that the multidimensionality of consumers' brand knowledge (Keller, 2003) involves not just dimensions of brands' meanings and associations and how these are linked to other entities such as persons, places, things or other brands. Rather, consumers' brand knowledge has here been found to entail a more wide reaching understanding of how brands are created by firms, how consumers use them, and an understanding of why consumers themselves use them in the first place. Apart from, or perhaps in addition to, Keller's cognitive perspective where this multidimensional brand knowledge is thought to be stored in consumers' memories, consumers' brand knowledge is mainly understood to be formed and located in the text or talk generated by consumers' micro level interactions.

However, although containing cynical reasoning with regard to the actions of marketers and the morality of brand consumption, the nature of consumers' brand understanding does not lend itself to being put into neat categorizations such as the three main levels of brand literacy proposed by (Bengtsson & Firat, 2006). Rather it involves more nuances and particularities. In some instances it is fairly complex and sophisticated, especially when it comes to how brands' meanings are formed and change, and the function and purposes of certain branding practices. At the same time, and in other instances, however, it is fairly simple/primitive and contains a lot of uncertainties, especially when it comes to reaching a common definition of brands as a phenomenon. Hence, the consumers' brand understanding does not seem to contain an integrated and shared set of cognitive beliefs that, according to Friestad & Wright (1995), would represent a folk knowledge of advertising.

What is even more interesting is that the cynical nature of the young consumers' brand understanding contains a couple of underlying but central inconsistencies and paradoxes. One of these underlying

paradoxes relates to the consumers' cynicism about marketers branding practices. While the young consumers display a cynicism towards firms' branding activities and the underlying purpose of creating attractive brands, they still become disappointed and angry when brands, in the ambition to increase sales and profit, go mainstream and "sell out" by starting to target larger consumer segments. A second paradox represents the contradiction where the young consumers understand brands as favorable and distinguishing symbols for the creation of styles, and for consumers' individual and autonomous life project to form an identity of their own. At the same time they are conceived of as unfavorable consumption symbols that are used for peoples' ridiculous status pursuit, for distinction, for the classification of people, and that they produce and reproduce a stratified society where some people are considered better than others. The third, and perhaps most interesting paradox in the consumers' brand understanding, involves an exiting contradiction. This is expressed in that many understand and conceive of brands and brand consumption as something unnecessary; that they produce what Holt (2002) refers to as a harmful consumer culture signified by a ridiculous status pursuit, the feeling of not being good enough, thereby producing more anxiety than happiness for people in their age; even so, they confess to buying into, and participating in this brand consumption game. Often in the discussions they even ironically claim that brands are not that important to them – a paradox again. They would hardly be on a youth forum to energetically discuss these brand matters if they did not think that brands were important. The previous discussion thus illustrates that there seems to be an interesting but strange connection between consumers' cynicism and paradoxical reasoning. However, this connection is not really that strange if we further investigate the construct of cynicism.

10.4.1 Consuming brands at a cynical distance

Cynicism, Fleming (2002) suggests, is thought to involve an inherent critical and de-masking dimension, a hyper-pessimism, and a disbelief that enables individuals to see through the surface motives of others, thereby uncovering hidden and dishonorable motives or intentions (cf. the accounts and vocabularies of motives that the young consumers supply to justify their brand consumption to others). It corresponds to

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a sort of embittered knowingness, mixed with irony, sarcasm, mistrust and suspicion, which is often based either on past experience or apparent contradictions in reality. It is often expressed with the motive of to avoid being taken for a "sucker" (the brand discussions taking place in the various types of micro interactions between the young consumers were often characterized by such irony, mistrust, and the ambition of not being taken for a sucker). Another wide-spread conception is that cynicism, referring to peoples' insight that there is an alternative agenda, often involving an insightful, skeptical and critical understanding, may enable individuals to not only see through cultural and social phenomena, but also to prevent cultural colonization of identities, and to resist strategies of cultural control (Fleming & Spicer, 2003).

A first read and interpretation of the construct of cynicism may give the impression that (consumer) cynicism enables the consumers to become what Ozanne & Murray (1995) define as critical defiant consumers, who are able to resist strategies of cultural control, and to emancipate themselves from the structures of the market and corporate branding. In the marketing management literature such consumer cynicism involving consumers' scepticism and disbelief about marketing and advertising has also been understood as a problematic obstacle that marketers somehow need to handle (Koslow, 2000; Mendleson & Polonsky, 1995). However, a closer reading of the cynicism construct indicates that this does not need to be the case. Rather, cynical reasoning has been argued to reproduce cultural control and power relations instead of emancipating people from such things.

An explanation for this, perhaps, slightly false impression of the emancipatory power of the cynicism construct, is that cynicism according, to Fleming & Spicer (2003) works as an ideological force unobtrusively reproducing relations of power instead of actually freeing people from them. This is not in a vulgar sense where an all-knowing puppet master intentionally dupes the unthinking masses, but rather through the way everyday discourses, signs and symbols frame our subjectivity in relation to cultural authority and power. These authors mean that cynicism is an ideological force that only gives us the impression that we are not victims of ideological obfuscation, misleading and cultural control. Žižek (1989) claims that ideological

indoctrination and cultural control is not only in our heads and our fantasy but also in reality itself and what we do. In this light, expressions coming from consumers like, "I am not a sucker, I have not bought in to this type of ridiculous brand consumption and harmful consumer culture, seem to go comfortably hand in hand with obedient brand consumption practices. Cynicism is, therefore, in Sloterdijk's (1987) words, enlightened false consciousness. It gives us an enlightened but false conscious impression of escaping cultural control and power. Therefore, by being cynical we are enlightened about how the world works, but can still act out the most ignorant, vulgar, and common discourses, much because we cannot understand that ideas and fantasy are embedded in our ways of acting. Thus, although the cynicism allows us to dis-identify and distance ourselves from our prescribed roles, we still often perform them - ironically even occasionally better than we would if we were to fully identify with those prescribed roles (Fleming & Spicer, 2003).

Interestingly, the previous discussion would indicate that consumer activists who, according to Kozinets & Handelmann (2004), are the ones who display high levels of cynicism and put most energy into changing the ideology of consumption, even looking down on ordinary consumers and deeming them as culturally duped couch potatoes, are, from this cynical perspective the consumers who are most entrenched in the ideology of consumption they are trying to fight and change. Members of the anti-branding movement (Klein, 1999) or consumers who have accepted and now enact the anti-branding discourse so that it, according to Thompson *et al* (2006), may create unfavorable doppelgänger brand images for global brands, are then perhaps the consumers who are most embedded and entrenched in the branded society that they try to counter. This may provide some explanation to Helm's (2004) surprising finding containing the paradox where consumers who display a high degree of consumer cynicism are the ones who simultaneously show great trust in, and loyalty to, the very brands they actually like. It may also supply some clues to Wattanasuwan's & Elliot (1999) finding that although young Buddhists advocates the concept of 'no-self'' and refraining from the self-creating desires of a consumer culture, they paradoxically create, maintain and express their religious selves through symbolic consumption in their attempt to become a good Buddhist.

Echoing the previous discussion, the cynicism displayed by the young consumers interacting on the "Hamsterpaj" forum then offers them a dis-identification or a cynical distance that enables them to fully participate in the brand consumption game. At the same time they understand this consumption to be ridiculous, sometimes even immoral, and that it produces a harmful consumer culture that generates a lot of worries and anxiety among young individuals. Herein lies the explanation for the paradoxical nature of the consumers' brand understanding. Since paradoxical reasoning and action is an inherent and integral part of cynicism, it is possible for consumers to both possess an insightful, skeptical, and critical knowingness of firms' branding practices and the possible outcomes of a brand permeated society while still confessing to fully performing their role as brand consumers. In line with Fleming & Spicer's (2003) thoughts, such cynical distance may, ironically, enable people, in this case young consumers, to perform their role as brand consumers even better than those who fully and with approbation identify with such a brand permeated consumer culture. Sloterdijk (1987) claims that this is central in modern cynicism: the ability of its bearer to work (or here to consume) – in spite of everything that may happen, and particularly, after everything that might happen. Cynics Sloterdijk argues:

> …know what they are doing, but they do it because, in the short run, the force of circumstances and the instinct for self-preservation are speaking the same language, and they are telling them that it has to be so. Others would do it any way, perhaps worse" (Sloterdijk, 1987, p. 5).

He also means that cynicism bears with it a particular undertone of chic bitterness, because cynics are not stupid, and occasionally they most certainly see the nothingness to which all leads. This is neatly illustrated and given support in one of the empirical quotes from the very beginning of my analysis supplied by the administrator and system operator "Number 1":

> Surely you can have your own style and you do not need to be a slave under fashion, but right now I am so eternally tired of that bullshit. Just face it! We are constantly affected by newspapers, advertising, other people, fashion etc.

For Sloterdijk (1987) psychologically, present day cynics may be regarded as borderline melancholics who can keep their symptoms of unhappiness, even depression, under control, and thereby remain able to work. He means that being dumb and having a job is happiness, while being intelligent and still carrying out your work (or your consumption) is unhappy consciousness in its modernized form. Interestingly though, the consumers on the "Hamsterpaj" forum do not really seem to possess the same melancholic and depressive traits as those Sloterdijk talks about. How might this be?

A possible explanation lies in the cynical reasoning's enlightened false consciousness which gives consumers the illusion that when they are able to see through and understand how brands, brand consumption, and brand creation really work, they are actually able to emancipate themselves from what Kozinets (2002) refers to as the structure of the market and corporate branding. This cynical distance or dis-identification, often expressed through individuals' irony, mockery, jokes, criticism, even cultural jamming towards cultural authority and a prevailing ideology, forms, according to (Fleming & Spicer, 2003), a hole or gap where the subject feels relieved from the burden of being committed to or actively enacting a certain role. Transferring the thought from the previous authors, a consumer then might state: "Although I am a slave under fashionable brand consumption, I am nonetheless free." However, precisely as with Kozinets' (2002) study of the Burning Man festival shows, it is, despite all their efforts, not likely that consumer cynicism in a true and factual sense leads to consumer emancipation. Perhaps it is the consumers' mere *feeling* of being free that matters to the consumers themselves, and not so much our theoretical definition of what constitutes the term. By consuming at a cynical distance and expressing dis-identification, consumers in their daily lives may obtain a metaphoric sense of freedom from a harmful and brand permeated consumer culture, without having to join and take part in the type of remote, peculiar and specific tribal anti-market festival investigated by Kozinets (2002).

Another possible explanation might be that this dis-identification also awards consumers with a sense of distinctiveness from their peers, status, even power, since they have cracked the code of the market system. Consumers who reason cynically are thus not deemed cultural

dupes, being completely swayed by the marketing system and brand managers. A display of cynical reasoning and understanding of brands and branding is then important if one is to avoid being reduced to an un-reflecting member of the consuming masses. A cynically distant gaze on the existence, creation, and consumption of brands would, from a Bourdieu (1984) perspective, award the individual consumer with social recognition and distinction. Such a gaze or understanding would at least confer some happiness on an, according to Sloterdijk (1987), unhappy, melancholic and even depressive cynic of contemporary society. It is then possible to conclude that cynical reasoning concerning brands serves consumers (at least the ones interacting at the "Hamsterpaj" forum) with a relevant resource, a cultural capital, which may be used to gain recognition from other peer consumers when navigating for status positions in different social contexts or cultural fields. It is, however, more unclear what such cynical reasoning can do for consumers when it comes to emancipation from the structure of the market, corporate branding, and a consumer culture largely governed by brands. More research is needed to gain a better understanding of the relationship between consumer cynicism and consumer emancipation.

10.5 Summary of findings and contributions

One of the main contributions of this study is the development of the micro interactional structure containing three types of interactions (consultative, disputative and normative). These interactions may serve as theoretical tools that can be used to analyze and understand how consumers on a micro level construct an understanding of how consumption phenomena, such as brands, work. The micro level, peer-to-peer interaction perspective of consumers' construction of understanding put forward in this study thus contributes to other previous consumer research perspectives, such as consumer socialization and consumer culture theory, on how consumers form an understanding of consumer related phenomena. In addition, since micro interactions are the prerequisite for the creation and continuance of social gatherings and communities, the social structure of such communities and the power game occurring there may be analyzed and

theorized by using the micro interactional structure introduced here. A comparison with other consumer research perspectives on the formation of consumers' understanding is illustrated in the following figure.

Perspective	Direction	Focus	Main idea
Consumer socialization	Vertical	Institutional agents ↓ Individual	Consumers learn about brands by being educated by traditional socialization agents
CCT Ideological infrastructure	Vertical	Social discourse ↕ Individual	Consumers form brand understanding when being subjected to and handling social/consumer discourses
CCT Micro level	Horizontal	Peer-to-Peer ↔ Interactions	Consumers form brand understanding through consultative, disputative & normative interactions

Figure 10:1: Relationship between different perspectives on brand understanding construction

The young consumers were found to have a rich understanding of brands and how they work. Two main types of brand understanding were identified and labeled as brand creation understanding and brand consumption understanding. The first type relates to consumers' understanding of brands as commercial and marketing objects/symbols, why firms create brands and the type of activities they engage in to build them. The second type of brand understanding refers to their understanding of brands as a consumption phenomenon. It contains three subcategories of understanding, what to consume, how to consume, and why consume brands.

The young consumers' brand understanding was found to be fairly elaborate. However, at the same time as, in some instances, it appeared sophisticated and insightful it is also occasionally came across as a bit primitive, containing uncertainties. What is perhaps more interesting is that it contained underlying paradoxes that pointed to a theme of consumer cynicism. Here we have the paradox of seeing and criticizing brands as an unnecessary, even sometimes ridiculous/pathetic

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phenomenon that contributes to a harmful consumer society and bigger social clashes, while simultaneously acknowledging and confessing to fully participating in the brand consumption game. This is an example of a cynical reasoning that allows consumers to de-identify with such a society and such brand consumption acts while still performing them. Although the consumer cynicism may provide the brand consumers with a good sense of being initiated in the workings of brands, awarding them with some dignity, distinctiveness and recognition from other consumers, it most likely only gives them a false impression of being freed from the ideological infrastructure of the consumer culture, telling them that life needs to be channeled through brands to have value. Since contradictions are an integral and inherent part of cynical reason, cynicism may well be used to explain and represent consumers' somewhat paradoxical understanding of how brands work. Consumer cynicism, and its capacity to give account for more nuanced and even paradoxical brand conceptions therefore adds to other previous constructs that have been developed to explain and represent the nature of consumers' brand understanding. In the following figure the consumer cynicism construct is compared to previous constructs, such as brand literacy and brand knowledge to further illustrate its contribution.

Theoretical concepts	Nature of content	Type of understanding	Theoretical perspective
Consumer folk knowledge/theory	Integrated (common sense)	Persuasion/adverting knowledge	Cognitive
Brand knowledge	Multidimensional	Awareness Attributes Images Experiences Feelings Thoughts	Cognitive
Brand literacy	Multilevel	High level of literacy Medium level Low level	Cultural/literacy
Consumer cynicism	Paradoxical	Brand creation und. Brand consumption	Cultural/interaction

Figure 10:2: Relationships between different theoretical constructs representing brand understanding content

10.6 Delimitations and further research

Although the findings from this study are generated by studying an online forum and the interactions unfolding in that type of setting, they may be extended to an offline scenario. This means that although the online setting is an interactional one, it puts both constraints on and opens up for various forms of interaction compared to an offline setting. The various types of interaction and interactional roles assumed by individuals may very well serve as fruitful concepts when studying micro level interactions offline. The concepts developed in this study may also be transferred to spheres than consumer research, for example, the social sciences and in society, when aiming to understand how social and cultural contexts are formed, maintained and re-furbished in peoples' micro level interactions. They may be used to understand group dynamic within, for example, management teams at companies, the formation, maintenance and reformation of political parties, and

how leadership and hierarchies are formed and perpetuated in any form of social or cultural setting where several individuals are involved.

For marketers, the content of the brand knowledge may reveal that consumers, to a larger extent, are indeed active producers of meanings and have an elaborate knowledge of the various branding activities performed by the firms, which probably would cause some trouble for contemporary brand managers. However, despite being cynical about brands and branding the young consumers still ascribe brands with a lot of importance, even confessing to full participation in the consumption of brands.

The consumers investigated here, however, belong to what Brown (2003) refers to as generation®, a marketing savvy and skeptical generation that has grown up and therefore been familiarized with marketing and branding since they were born. More research about other brand knowledge of other groups of consumers such as those belonging to generation X, Y and perhaps earlier generations that experienced the social revolution of the 60s or the time during the second world war and its consequences, is therefore needed to obtain a more exhaustive knowledge of consumers' understanding of brands and how they work. See for example Elliot & Davies' (2006) study of the evolution of the empowered consumer. Other types of methods such as interviews, focus groups, or real life ethnographies would then serve as very useful tools to advance previous theory of consumers' knowledge of consumption phenomena. In addition, the brands that are elaborated on and discussed in the interactions by the young consumers are brands that are consumed in public and may serve as symbolic markers of their lifestyle. The brand knowledge constructed in the interactions pertaining to that kind of brands may then have had impact on the actual brand understanding formed and obtained in the study. It is largely an understanding of how high involvement and lifestyle brands work rather than an understanding based on the interactions concerning more generic and basic low involvement brands that are less usable as social and communicative resources. Such brands may be a less attractive strategic resource for consumers when struggling for recognition and status in a wider social structure.

Although the brand understanding of consumers found in this study has its limitations, and pertains specifically to young people belonging

to generation® it reveals something of how entrenched, embedded or enculturated people are in today's culture of brands and the consumer society. Their elaborate and encompassing brand understanding tells us something of what is valued and important for many people today, and that the expressive, symbolic and communicative characteristics of consumption seem to be something that many young people care a lot about and prioritize. This would be most relevant from a public policy perspective. It is then important for researchers to investigate with more depth and scope how far this prioritization goes. What happens when consuming brands achieves a higher priority than other important life upholding aspects such as roof over one's head or food for the day? Why do people end up in tough life situations because of how they prioritize their consumption? Why, or maybe how can a person buy an expensive name brand flat screen TV or a luxury suit on hire-purchase, at the same time as he or she is running the risk of getting evicted from their apartment or house because they cannot afford to pay their bills or mortgage loans? How do they reason? What role does the marketing and consumption discourse play in that kind of scenario? Such issues offer interesting avenues for future consumer research, where more investigations are needed of the impact of consumption on the really important and profound aspects of life such as people's life sustaining actions and activities. This study has given some important initial insights concerning these issues, especially when it comes to how important brands and consumption seem to be for some people, but much more research remains to be done about regarding these issues.

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