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Consumer's Sense-Making in the Current Economic Crisis

*The exploration of the dialectical relationship between
the consumer and marketer*

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ABSTRACT

Title:	How consumers make sense of the current economic crisis through their consumption: A dialectical approach of the dynamic relationship between the consumer and marketer
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Keywords:	consumption, consumer sense-making, dialectical framework, economic crisis
Thesis purpose:	The purpose of this thesis is to examine how consumers make sense of the current economic crisis. The dialectical understanding between consumer and marketers will be drawn upon to better understand the consumer's sense-making process.
Methodology:	The thesis uses an inductive and qualitative design. The authors propose and apply two data collection approaches- phenomenological interviews and semi-structured interviews. Heuristics and the interpretive case method are utilised as main tools of analysis.
Theoretical perspective:	The thesis builds upon prior crisis literature and consumer culture theory literature that examines the subject of consumer emancipation, identity projects and the emergence of a new consumer. The primary theoretical foundation however is Holt's (2002) dialectical framework and inspires our understanding of the consumer and marketer in the current economic crisis.
Empirical data:	Data was collected over a month-long period via phenomenological interviews with Swedish consumers and semi-structured interviews with marketers from around the globe via telephone or in person.
Conclusion:	This thesis finds three consumer cases that represent the consumer in crisis 1) the detached crisis commentator 2) the disguised crisis visitor and 3) the metamorphic crisis explorer. By interpreting their consumption in crisis, consumer's coping strategies have been identified 1) Coping through the search for simplicity and unfabricated ways of life, 2) Coping through the search for security and belongingness, 3) Coping through the search for new meaning of needs, 4) Coping through the search for personal sovereignty and 5) Coping through the filtering of medial messages. The authors suggest that there are crucial considerations that marketers must take into account in order to utilise the identified coping strategies and maintain their relationship with the consumer. The authors conclude that the dialectical relationship could potentially be in a state of transition in the current economic crisis context.

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CHAPTER ONE

1.1 Introduction

This thesis aims to gain an understanding of the dialectical relationship between the consumer and marketer in the current economic crisis. The existence of a dialectical relationship between these two key players comprises of a back and forth communication flow which is marked by constant shifts in power and consequent changes in the relationship composition. Although the focal point of our investigation is the exploration of the dialectical relationship between today's consumer and marketer, it is critical to note that this will be conducted within the context of the current economic crisis. This unique phenomenon and its dramatic affects on countries, governments, groups, professionals and individuals that are situated within the dialectical framework we find highly timely and fascinating to investigate. As the dialectical perspective contends that relationships cannot exist without the dynamic interplay between its contradictory parts (Baxter, 1988) we shall critically examine Swedish consumers and international marketers and their continuous transposition in order to better understand the consumer's sense-making process in the current financial recession.

It has been identified that consumers employ different '*interpretive strategies*', which are typified by changes in their consumption patterns and attachments with consumption objects, in order to make sense of their external environment (Thompson, Pollio & Locander, 1994). It is this sense-making process and the critical interpretive strategies that consumers employ in the context of today's economic crisis which is at the forefront of our thesis. Marketers, as a response to these identified changes in consumer's consumption, have been found to adapt their marketing mix strategies accordingly in crisis situations (Ang, 2000 & 2001; Gajewski, 1992, Webster 1994, Pettigrew, 2001). Here we see the dialectical relationship ever present in the current crisis context as consumers are not only interpreting messages communicated by marketers through consumer culture about the economic crisis, but simultaneously marketers are drawing upon consumer's interpretive strategies to understand their target audience more clearly.

It is this continual movement and interrelation between both players in the marketplace that is reflective in Holt's dialectical framework (2002) and as such we shall draw specifically upon his work as the main theoretical foundation of our thesis.

Notably, how consumers interpret events around them and construct meaning through consumption is a critical component of the subject area that consumer culture theory grapples with and therefore we find our thesis to fall within the consumer culture research domain. We find that by situating our investigation within the consumer culture theory paradigm and adopting Holt's dialectical framework it will enable us to better understand the consumer's sense-making process in the current economic crisis.

This above treatment- *how* consumers make sense of the current economic crisis through consumption and marketer's role within this sense-making process- has not been given specific academic attention and we find deserves critical interest. Thus this thesis will not only contribute to consumer culture theory in which a dialectical cultural understanding of consumers and marketers in a crisis situation will be examined, but we shall also contribute to the overall economic and marketing research realm. By establishing key principles which become evident when investigating the consumer and marketer dynamic relationship and how both perspectives meet in the current economic context, we will aim to develop and describe techniques that are relevant for marketers from a practical standpoint. With an understanding of the transition within the consumer's sense-making process in a crisis situation, the marketing community will be able to draw upon these identified key principles and apply them to other cases of transitional change and future economic crisis situations. Due to the fact that relational dialectics have no ultimate resolution as the relationship is in a constant state of flux, if our thesis is able to present an image that indicates transition and its consequent impact on CCT then this concept can be transferred to other cases when change occurs and thus become highly relevant.

1.2 Structure of Thesis

The following outline of the thesis is as follows. Chapter One will provide a definitional outline of how we understand the main terms that we draw upon throughout our thesis. This is followed by a brief overview of the economic crisis from a global account as well as from a Swedish perspective.

Moreover, we will progress to review the media's portrayal of the economic crisis, bringing forward some eminent discussions that are currently taking place between economists, journalists and opinion leaders.

Then we will continue to review academic literature on past economic crises that will assist us to establish relevant gaps in current research. Based on this literature review we shall establish the purpose of our thesis, academic contribution and position our research in the realm of consumer culture theory. In Chapter Two we shall draw upon the key theoretical foundations in consumer culture theory that are appropriate for our thesis discussion such as Holt's (2002) dialectical framework. The methodological decisions we have adopted in this thesis are presented and discussed in Chapter Three. Chapter Four provides the reader with our empirical data of the consumer in the current economic crisis and key themes that we have identified through this micro analysis. Chapter Five consists of the analysis of the marketer's perspective in which key themes are also constructed and examined. Chapter Six shall present our main findings of the thesis, which will be displayed, interpreted and discussed on the basis of the dialectical relationship between consumers and marketers in the current economic crisis, which will ultimately move the discussion from a meso to macro level perspective. As a conclusion key principles will be identified as well as recommendations.

1.3 Key Words

Throughout our thesis we will use various terminologies frequently, therefore it is imperative to establish our definitional understanding of the terms. A terminology that is used throughout the thesis is the *consumer* in which we understand to be a person living and interacting with the current marketplace. The idea that "*consumers and their objects communicate positions in the social world and that this is more fundamental than any idea of simply fulfilling a particular concrete need*" (Corrigan, 1997: 15) is a common theme that is intrinsic to consumer culture theory and their understanding of the consumer. It is this understanding of how consumer's use of goods to construct meanings and make sense of their external world that shall be employed throughout our thesis. Unlike in marketing where *consumers* are often talked about as an aggregated commodity item with little individuality (Ghauri & Cateora, 2006), our view honours the personality of the consumer and their representativeness of everyday individuals experiencing the current economic crisis.

The use of *marketers* in our thesis is the profession of people who are employed to execute this activity. Various specialisations are reflected in the ‘marketing community’ such as advertisers, direct marketers, market researchers, public relations consultants and strategic and brand managers. Therefore when we make reference to *marketers* we are including all the aforementioned professions.

Finally, our understanding of *media* or *mass media* is the term that is universally acknowledged to encompass newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and broadcasting and internet media. We recognize that the media plays a critical role in modern society as they are the carriers of information about how people behave. The evidence from social science is clear that information about others’ behaviour can have a contagious effect—leading observers to behave similarly and more and more observers to conform (Cialdini, 2001). We also acknowledge that within the media institution is ‘media agencies’ or ‘media conglomerates’ which are companies that help other brands, businesses or companies to communicate with current and potential consumers and the general public (Zanville et al, 2002).

Lastly, it must be noted that similar to the media’s interchangeable use of terms to describe the economic crisis such as *financial storm*, *recession*, *economic downturn*, *financial/economic crisis* and *meltdown* our research shall adopt a similar understanding in that all previously mentioned expressions to a great degree refer to the same economic event we are discussing in our thesis.

1.4 The Phenomenon of the Economic Crisis

1.4.1 The World in the Economic Crisis

An overall understanding of the global financial crisis, its main causes and its endemic nature, has to be gained in order for the phenomenon to be placed in the context of our thesis’ investigation.

If one examines various news publications and online media materials it has been widely accepted that the crisis emerged in September 2008 mainly due to the US sub-prime mortgage crisis which led to severely contracted liquidity in the global credit markets and insolvency threats to investment banks and other institutions (Brinkmann & Velz, 2009).

This failure of several large United States-based financial firms such as Lehman Brothers had wide ramifications for the rest of the global economy. Companies and governments throughout Europe were unable to pay debts, global stock market prices sharply fell and a recession hit as a final result.

The severity of the crisis is also being measured in terms of its projected longevity. With depreciation of currency, a dramatic rise in unemployment rates and a major loss in banking investments worldwide, the IMF forecasts for a “...*prolonged, deep global recession*” where recovery is predicted to be slow and difficult (AFP, 2009). Stephan Danninger, an IMF economist revealed that “...*there is some glimmer of hope that the stress is receding*”, however any improvement will merely reduce “*extreme levels of stress*” to still “*very high levels*” of economic stress (ibid, 2009). The IMF managing director, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, echoed the grim prognostications as he said in a speech at the National Press Club of Washington in late April that “...*2009 will almost certainly be an awful year- we expect global growth to enter deeply negative territory. This is a truly global crisis, and nobody is escaping*” (ibid, 2009).

Alongside bleak projections from financial bodies and official economic reports, the severity of the crisis is also being communicated and sensationalized by the mass media. The media’s current portrayal of the economic crisis is instilling fear into the public’s mind, however simultaneously it is presenting its role in the crisis as the ‘gate-keeper’ of all available information and disclosing rather controversial discourse from the governments, large financial institutions and mortgage lenders in an attempt to reveal the truth about the crisis. The majority of global newspapers and major publications are constantly in debate over who is to blame for the crisis, as well as future projections of when and how the world is going to get out of this financial mess.

By reviewing media discourse we can establish various viewpoints of the crisis in terms of blame assignment. The majority of media suggests that political institutions such as governments should be taking primary responsibility for causing the economic crisis. The main argument here is that governmental institutions have had severe debts which have built up for many years and have inevitably caused the downfall of the economy (Taylor, 2009, Cook, 2007, Roger, 2009).

The other extreme viewpoint is bearing responsibility on the consumer (Rowe, 2000, Lee, 2009). Wolf (2009:7) however argues that “...one of the most significant — but least remarked upon contributing factors in the current financial crisis was the pervasive belief that the United States could be both consumer of the world’s goods and borrower of the world’s money”. This view reflects a merged blame assignment in which both the consumer, businesses, government and general marketplace is to be accountable. Sir Martin Sorrell (The Financial Times, 2009) also confirms this attitude as he reveals that “We – business, governments, consumers – submitted to excess; we got too greedy. Life was easy in the late 1990s and early 21st century. With a seemingly benign interest rate regime and cheap goods from China keeping inflation at bay, all you had to do was go into the office – moderation was out”. Interestingly, another viewpoint on the economic crisis is explained by Robert (2009:39) who argues that it is very easy to blame bankers, tax regulators and political institutions however it is the incompetence of the current economic model that has contributed to the crisis.

An alarming consideration however is that the media’s constant focus on who is to blame has not only caused society to become accustomed to “...tales of tears and deeds of downfall” and scapegoat discourse but also the attitude that the “...world is split into two pantomimic parts, the evil (the bankers) and the good (everyone else)” (Marsh: 2009). Marsh (2009) highlights the fact that “...the prophets of doom have had a field day” expressing their views in the media landscape, as well as anti-corporate proponents.

Alongside the discussion of who to blame for the current economic crisis, the unprepared consumer and consequential change in consumption behavior is frequently discussed in the media. Santoli (2009:89) argues that both the economy and consumers were “unprepared for the financial storm”. This oversight majorly impacted consumer’s consumption which resulted in a sharp decrease in consumer spending and consumer confidence (Schmidt, 2009, Rowe, 2000). Sorrell (2009) argues that “conspicuous consumption” has become frowned upon as “...women no longer buy handbags as a mere badge of affluence” and men have become more self-conscious about owning extremely expensive cars. Changes in lifestyle habits as well as the psyche of the consumer is still being widely researched and debated in order to fully understand the event’s affect on today’s consumer.

It is Keynes' (1936:161) "*animal spirit*" notion that describes the economic fluctuations being explained by spontaneous (or exogenous) shifts in moods (optimism or pessimism) that is being widely discussed today in terms of trying to understand and predict consumer's consequent responses to the economic crisis. Esteemed Global economists George Akerlof and Robert Shiller (2009:5) challenge the economic wisdom that has led us to the current economic situation and "...reassert the necessity of an active government role in economic policymaking by recovering the idea of animal spirits". Like Keynes, Akerlof & Shiller (2009) confirm that managing these animal spirits requires the steady hand of government as they argue that "...*simply allowing markets to work won't do it*". George Soros (Woods, 2008) is another thought provoking commentator who argues that the long standing credit expansion was inevitably going to end with a period of contraction and likely to effect the whole global. His comment that it is the "*end of an era*" is not only illustrative of the many academics and journalist's cynical view of the global crisis but also the power of this constant discourse to facilitate and spur the sense of panic, anxiety and distrust amongst the public and individual consumers (ibid, 2008).

1.4.2 Sweden in the Economic Crisis

As our consumer investigation is limited to Sweden it is important to gain a snap shot of the current economic situation in this country. As the Swedish economy is heavily reliant on the export of cars, technological products and steel and electronics, the national economy has been hit as an overall cut in demand of all Swedish exports has occurred due to the economic crisis (Europa, 2009). In the fourth quarter of 2008, the Swedish GDP (total sum of goods and services sold within the country) fell by 4.9 percent (The Local, 2009a). Not only are economists predicting that Sweden's GDP shall fall by 2% on an annual basis in the future, but they are also showing general anxiety as the Swedish economy has never experienced in history such as dramatic fall in GDP (ibid, 2009a).

As a consequence of the economic crisis, household consumption has fallen by 3.3 percent which has had ramifications on the economy with a decrease in overall industry sales (The Local, 2009a). The currency depreciation of the Swedish kronor has further facilitated the decline in household consumption as daily items and services are more expensive which limits Swedish consumer's daily buying habits such as postponing their more expensive purchases on discretionary items.

Major Swedish companies (e.g. Volvo and Saab) as well as local business owners are facing challenging times due to the ongoing cut in demand. Companies have been forced to lay off dramatic numbers of employees which has led to a sharp rise in unemployment rates. Swedish Employment Service registered at the end of April 2009, 224,494 persons as unemployed (Dagens Nyheter, 2009a). Economic analysts also forecast the situation to get worst as they predict that “...half a million people in Sweden will be jobless in 2010” (The Local, 2009b).

Although Swedish consumers may not be currently experiencing the full affects of the economic crisis, the bleak projections of sharp rises in unemployment, decline in household consumption and the postponement of luxurious items highlights that there will be intrinsic changes or adaptive measures in the future taken by Swedish consumers in light of the economic crisis.

1.5 Literature Review

1.5.1 Crisis Literature from a Traditional Marketing Perspective

Previous economic and marketing literature has examined the changes in consumption behaviour during hard economic times (Ang, 2000 & 2001; Kelley, 1975; Gajewski, 1992; McKenzie, 2003). In particular the analysis of consumers in a crisis context has identified not only a decline in confidence in consumption but also a consequent ‘tightening of belt’ mindset. As the impact on the consumer is dramatic in an economic crisis, marketers have to adapt their strategies accordingly. However, as comparative research conducted by Zurawacki & Braidor (2004:1001) reveals, it is essential to consider the general economic position of a country that has been hit by a crisis. They therefore argue that the degree of economic strength and position in the global market needs to be considered as aspects that affects the level of impact on the consumer (ibid, 2004). In alignment with this Ang (2001:264) suggests that one needs to take into consideration the level of sophistication of marketing systems as well as socio-economic structures (McKenzie, 2003) as relevant aspects when consumption changes in a crisis are examined.

1.5.1.1 Consumption in Previous Crises

According to Ang (2000:98) consumers develop specific consumption strategies to make sense of a crisis situation. His research focuses on consumers in the 1997 Asian financial crisis in which the collapse was not limited to one country but spread throughout the Asia Pacific area which in nature is representative of today's global economic crisis however to a lesser degree (Zurawacki & Braidor, 2004). The relevance of analysing consumption changes is highlighted as consumers behave differently under economic crisis conditions. Zurawacki & Braidor (2004:1100) critically argue that these distinctions must be understood in order to form appropriate responsive strategies. One example that pinpoints these differences in behaviour is the influences of societal pressures that are caused by changes in consumption in times of financial crisis. Ang (2000:209) argues that the Asian financial crisis serves as a valid example of how consumers give more thought to their purchases and appear to discuss their consumption with greater depth within their social circles.

1.5.1.2 Marketing in Previous Crises

From a marketing perspective, strategies are reformed as a response to the crisis as they have the danger of being less effective due to the changes observed in consumer behaviour. Particularly, it has been found that conspicuous consumption and impulse purchases experience a decrease in economically tough times. Therefore, research has highlighted that marketers need to emphasize strategies that capitalise on changes in consumer needs, values and consumption patterns (Ang, 2000 & 2001. Zurawacki & Braidor, (2004:1101) however argue that these changes need to be understood as temporary. This observation is exemplary in the time period between the two oil crises in the US in which Schiphandler found that consumers returned to less frugal consumption patterns (Zurawacki & Braidor, 2004).

By examining previous academic literature on consumption affected by crisis, (Ang 2000 & 2001; Zurawacki & Braidor, 2004) it becomes apparent that marketers must understand *how* consumers are affected. The Asian financial crisis as an event highlights consumer's replacing their carefree consumption styles with a 'tightening of belt' approach. However, according to Ang (2000:100) consumers are not only affected from a financial but also from a psychological perspective.

An example of this is the change in faith that consumers have about the future and the enhanced feeling of being “...*left alone in these tough times*” (ibid, 2000). This psychological perspective has a direct implication on marketing strategies that firms implement. It has also been revealed that firms that use imagery-based advertising to promote their products during a crisis are judged as being socially inconsiderate and experience a loss in trust from the consumer. Even though the cultural differences affecting these feelings need to be considered, the loss of trust of the consumer towards a brand or company creates a major obstacle in reaching the consumer in hard economic times. The psychological aspect can also be identified in the way consumers view the deepening of the gap between their needs and their possible satisfactions (Gajewski, 1992). Ang (2000:101) also highlights the magnitude of impact the Asia crisis had on the consumer as a large segment of the population had just moved up to the middle class however immediately lost this position once the crisis hit. This further highlights psychological feelings of hardship and disappointed that consumers may feel during a crisis.

In summary, the changes in consumption from a consumer’s perspective in previous economic crisis situations are most noticeable in areas including product, price and shopping adjustments (Zurawacki & Braidor, 2004:1102). Noteworthy developments are described as “*voluntary simplicity*” and the “*small is beautiful attitude*” which were observed in the Asia crisis as well as the recession in the US late 1990’s (Ang, 2000). These concepts are determined by consumers aiming to be less wasteful and to reduce their overall spending by emphasising quality rather than quantity. These examples also serve as a valuable aspect of analysis as they examine how the consumer aims to make sense of the crisis through their own consumption.

In addition to the detailed economic and marketing research focusing on the consumer in crisis, there is also evidence of a lot of research conducted on consumer’s brand perceptions in a crisis situation. When reviewing previous crisis literature (Zurawacki & Braidor, 2004; Ang 2000 & 2001; Gajewski, 1992) it can be identified that consumers are inclined to switch from a premium brand to a challenging brand and then finally to a generic or local brand. Brand switching can be rationalised by the consumer to a) save money and b) support local brands in order to sympathise and communicate a backing attitude. However, Ang (2000:211) critically argues, that brands with strong brand equity are less likely to be affected by economical conditions and continue to experience a high level of loyalty from consumers.

It is essential for a consumer to know how long a product will actually last in relation to its price as this will directly influence the planned purchase decision. When an economic crisis hits, it has been discovered that the consumer starts approaching consumption in a far more rational and analytical way as they critically evaluate the benefits and weaknesses in a less emotional manner as done in prosperous economic times (Ang, 2000 & 2001).

Furthermore, marketers perceive consumers as being more risk adverse and less likely to be persuaded, as well greater attraction to rational information as opposed to emotions and imagery in a crisis situation (Ang, 2000 & 2001; Gajewski, 1992; Webster 1994; Pettigrew, 2001). Previous studies have revealed that marketers adjust their strategies in order to meet these significant changes in the general consumer profile (Ang, 2000 & 2001; Gajewski, 1992; Webster 1994; Pettigrew, 2001), however according to Zurawacki and Braidor (2004:1103) this is generally executed in a slow manner. In particular, advertising concepts are restructured as consumer's emphasis on benefits and information is identified and consequently aimed to be accommodated.

The economic crisis affects all aspects of marketing including product, pricing, promotion and distribution strategies. An interesting aspect highlighted in the Asia crisis is the shift of focus in target markets (Ang, 2001). The youth demographic has been identified as a new prosperous market, as young adults in Asia still live at home and are less likely to have financial debt. Hence, the availability of disposable income leads marketers to see significant target market potential in this emerging demographic. Therefore, young adults are perceived as less likely to be affected by crisis factors and offer incredible purchasing power.

Another perceived opportunity the crisis offers is the chance of repositioning a brand by emphasising different benefits to the consumer. This adaptive positioning can lead to an increase in market share as it has been found that consumers look at a brand from a different perspective. In summary, Ang (2000:112) suggests that the marketer perceives the consumer in an economic crisis as more functional, frugal and more oriented towards durability.

1.6 Research Gaps and Problem Formulation

With a detailed examination of past academic crisis literature and current crisis media reports it can be acknowledged that there is a great deal of research and valuable information available from the traditional marketing (Ang, 2000 & 2001; Kelley, 1975; Gajewski, 1992; McKenzie, 2003) and economic academic arena (Lee, 2009; Wolf, 2009; Taylor, 2009; Cook, 2007; Roger, 2009). Examining the crisis in terms of adaptive marketing and branding strategies, changes in consumption behaviour and brand perceptions has been a valuable contribution from this academic domain.

Although past academic literature has examined both the consumer and marketer perspective (Zurawacki & Braidor, 2004; Ang, 2000 & 2001; Gajewski, 1992) in difficult economic times it has treated both viewpoints as separate entities and not examined their relationship from a dialectical standpoint. Interestingly, cultural theorist Holt (2002) investigated consumer's "meanings", and argues that it is constantly vulnerable to redefinition and manipulation (Holt, 1997). Even though his research was based on a dialectical framework, it was completed in the context of the changing consumer era and not in a specific financial crisis situation which makes our investigation unique. Similarly, other consumer culture theorists such as Thompson (1990 & 1994) and Cherrier (2006 & 2009) investigate in detail consumer's meaning construction through everyday consumption practices which often leads them to discuss consumer's strained financial situation. An economic crisis however has never been isolated as a main context in which to examine consumption and "*consumer's interpretive strategies*" (Thompson, Pollio & Locander, 1990 & 1994).

Especially the communicative nature between both consumer and marketer, which is an intrinsic and underlying assumption of consumer culture theory, is highly interesting and reveals the void that this domain has yet to investigate a crisis situation as a setting. In the context of this thesis, it is critical to recognise that it is the interpretation of meanings that identifies how consumers consume in crisis that is of interest to us. Additionally, as this thesis is utilising the dialectical framework, the perspective that is presented by marketers also builds a critical component of our investigation.

Both established perspectives and their dialectical nature have not been investigated in a crisis situation and appear to be highly interesting as the results and findings could offer valuable information about potential transformations in consumers overall that marketers can draw upon from a practical standpoint.

1.7 Consumer Culture Theory – The Research Domain

With the established theoretical gap that we seek to close it is critical to identify what research domain within consumer culture theory we propose to contribute to. By reviewing Arnould & Thompson's (2005: 874) thematic framework that profiles four main interrelated consumer culture theory areas, our investigation shall fall within the domain of "*mass mediated marketplace ideologies and consumer's interpretive strategies*". The CCT paradigm assumes that the interrelationship between the dynamic components of consumer actions, marketplace and cultural meanings frame the context of consumption and is therefore concerned with the exploration of the heterogeneous distribution of meaning consumer's attach to ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend on (ibid: 2005). Ultimately consumption can be understood as symbols and market-made commodities communicated to the consumer by the mediated marketplace (ibid: 2005). As the main focus of this specific research area is to identify what the normative messages about consumption are and how do marketers communicate these messages, we find this applicable to our research area as it not only relies on the dialectical understanding between consumers and marketers but also considers how the consumer makes sense of these messages and how their critical response is shaped.

Arnould & Thompson (2005:870) further argue that consumers make sense of their environment by attaching meanings that are embodied in social situations, roles and relationships. By transferring meaning through encoding advertisements, brands, retail settings and material goods the consumer is inadvertently placing personal and social circumstances to this sense-making process to develop their personal identity and lifestyle goals (ibid: 2005). This viewpoint however considers the phenomena from two perspectives. Firstly, there is the *macro* level in which economic and cultural globalisation factors and its affects on consumer identity projects are at the fore front of research.

Secondly, there is the *meso* perspective in which analysis is concerned with the influence of cultural production systems on the consumer and their activities to organise the consumer in certain kinds of identity projects (ibid: 2005).

By connecting the current global crisis as an *economic factor* with its influence on *consumer identity projects* and *interpretative meanings* that are being mediated by marketers our basis of investigation shall form (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). As such we are adopting a *meso* level analysis in terms of identifying the ways in which consumer's interpret the current economic crisis through their consumption as well as the marketer's role in this mediating process. We will then however progress our investigation to a macro level by relating our findings to the dialectical framework which will enables us to discuss the current economic situation and consumer culture on a macro level.

In Chapter Two we shall explore the relevant elements of the consumer culture theory paradigm and Holt's (2002) dialectical framework which shall serve as the theoretical foundation of our investigation and critical to our understanding of consumer's meaning construction in the current economic crisis.

1.8 Purpose

This thesis aims to offer an understanding of the Swedish consumer's sense-making process about the current economic crisis displayed through their consumption and the image that globally active marketers communicate about the overall consumer in crisis. We argue that Swedish consumers act as a representative example of the western consumer and therefore the thesis' aim of transferability to a global level can be achieved.

Having gained both perspectives, we will then be able to examine the dialectic relationship between the marketer and consumer in the current crisis, with its potentially contradicting or common aspects. Consequently, we aim to conclude with key principles about consumers' sense-making that will assist marketers to develop strategies in which they can draw upon the established meanings of the Swedish consumers that have been identified.

Therefore, this thesis is aimed to offer marketers a perception of consumers that has not been researched before especially due to the timeliness of the economic crisis. As a result, we are aiming to offer valuable empirical data that marketers are able to incorporate in their strategy formulation in crisis times.

In summary, by presenting the meaning that Swedish consumer's display through consumption and therefore the interpreted sense-making process and the image about the global consumer communicated by the marketing world, we are aiming to offer two perspectives that we investigate in their dialectical nature. Our findings will offer conclusions on the potential transition consumers are undergoing in the current economic crisis in order to contribute with empirical data that can be used for future research that examines the potential shifts in the dialectical relationship.

CHAPTER TWO

2.1 Consumption in Consumer Culture Theory

This chapter will not only introduce the main concepts and assumptions of consumer culture theory that are relevant for our discussion but will also provide an account of the dialectical framework which is at the very heart of our thesis' theoretical foundation.

As we are positioning our thesis within the consumer culture theory paradigm it is imperative that we provide a brief account of the main principles that we find relevant to draw upon in order to better understand how consumers make sense of the economic crisis.

'Although consumption takes place in all human cultures, it is only in the present century that consumption on a truly mass scale has begun to appear as a foundational, rather than merely epiphenomenal characteristic of society'
(Corrigan, 1997:1)

Here, Corrigan encapsulates the basic ideas of consumer culture in that consumption as an activity is inherent in all cultures and that it has shifted from a mere characteristic of society to the very foundation of today's modern capitalism. Although this comment does not specifically define *consumption* it does however serve to represent its intrinsic relevance and the fact that religion, politics and education systems are no longer considered responsible for our life world, but it is rather the systems and structures inherent in consumer culture (ibid, 1997). The term *consumer culture* also conceptualizes an "...interrelated system of commercially produced images, texts, and objects that people utilize"—through the construction of overlapping and sometimes incompatible practices, identities, and meanings—to make collective sense of their environments and to familiarize their experiences and lives (Kozinets, 2001:67-89).

By adopting this conceptual understanding is to assume that consumers in the current economic crisis are drawing upon commercially branded images and medial messages communicated by marketers to facilitate their overall sense-making process. A critical element here is Kozinets' (2001) reference to that fact that the cultural system of images, texts and objects may in some cases be contradictory and it is therefore up to the consumer to interpret these messages through their own self reference and terms in order to make sense of a specific context. As we have identified that today's climate is met by uncertainty and angst portrayed by the mass commercial world such as the media, our thesis must acknowledge that there are a plethora of images being communicated to the consumer and consequently how consumers then utilize these *meanings* in order to make sense of the current economic situation.

In order to investigate how consumers draw upon interpretive strategies as a way in which to assist them in making sense of their external environment, we need to adopt a theoretical understanding of how consumer's *consume*. Holt's (1995:2) typology of consumption practices is a valuable way to achieve this understanding as he suggests that that there is a distinction between a) a "*structure of consumption*"- where the consumption object is engaged through action and/or interaction with other people to serve as a focal resource and b) a "*purpose of consumption*"- where consumer actions are viewed either as "*autotelic*" (ends in themselves) or "*instrumental*" (means to some further ends). These distinctive aspects of consuming are critical for our discussion as it acknowledges that consumers will not only utilise consumption as a tool in which to interact with other people in order to make sense of the crisis but there is also the consumer's more functional use of the consumption object as an end in itself which may also be a way in which to grapple with the economic situation.

Using these distinctions as a basis for the development of a typology, Holt (1995:3) creates four distinctive metaphors to describe consuming in which we shall use only two of his proposed typologies for our thesis. The first metaphor that we shall consider in our investigation of consumers is "*consuming as an experience*" (ibid: 3).

This focuses on the highly dependent, subjective and emotional reactions that consumers attach to consumption objects. In this context, consumption is viewed as psychological phenomenon that emphasises the importance of emotional states when determining consumption. Emotional states such as fear and anxiety, which are experiential discourses that have been previously connected to the construct of a crisis (Ang, 2000), will therefore be relevant to draw up when investigating “*consumption as an experience*” (Holt, 1995:3).

“*Consuming as integration*” is the second typology which we find highly applicable for our thesis discussion (ibid: 3) as it is concerned with the integration of self and consumption objects (ibid: 3). Here, the focus lies on the manipulation of consumption meaning and object’s symbolic properties in an attempt to either symbolically draw external object’s into one’s self concept which is noted as self-extension (Belk, 1988) or alternatively as described by Zerubavel and Solomon to “...*reorient one’s self concept so that is aligns with an institutional defined identity*” (Holt, 1995:6). This process of integration is critical to understand when comprehending consumer’s sense-making in the crisis as it is a cause for reflection on the institutional structures of the social world which provide consumers with resources to construct their experiences as meaningful (McCracken, 1986).

Thus, the use of consuming as an *experience* and *integration* shall serve as theoretical components when analysing the ways in which consumer make sense of the crisis by examining their consumption.

2.2 Consumer Emancipation

Consumer emancipation is another component of consumer culture theory that is of use to our thesis when examining consumers meaning construction in today’s economic crisis situation. Penaloza and Price (Cherrier, 2009) state that research on consumers’ practices of ideological resistance, highlights the overall aim to withstand the force of consumer culture.

Consequently consumers critically reinterpret media and advertising ideological inducements (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995) and challenge corporate power directly (Scot, 1994). According to Fournier's study (Cherrier, 2009) resistance takes place on the level of the marketplace as a whole (Kozinets, 2002) or towards marketing and branding activities (Pettigrew, 2001) and therefore dramatically fuels the development of the emancipated consumer.

Ang (2000:101) has identified that consumers in a crisis situation choose to detach themselves from specific marketplace messages. Therefore, by taking this identification into account and situating it within our research it gains high relevance in the process of understanding the consumer in a crisis. Furthermore, the perspective of the emancipated consumer creates a valuable aspect for our thesis as it is reflective of the consumer culture theorists' view that connects the consumer with ideological resistance responsive techniques (Kozinets, 2002 & 2004; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Cherrier, 2009).

Kozinets' (2002) examination of the *Burning Man* project is exemplary of mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumer's exercise of ideological resistance. Therefore, this anti-market event is of relevance to our thesis as it assists us to gain an overall understanding of the changes in consumption. Ultimately, it draws a link between self expression as art and the process of consumption observed in communities (Kozinets, 2002). The event is to be considered as an experiment that focuses on consumer emancipation by distancing oneself from consumer-driven global markets. Kozinets' (2002) critically highlights the purpose of *Burning Man* with the criticism of marketing, corporate greed and passivity of conventional consumers. This discourse is of interest to us, as it shapes our approach of understanding consumption under the specific consideration of the current economic crisis.

The *Burning Man* project is aimed to ideologically educate the participants about what is considered the "*ill effects*" of the market system (ibid: 26). This purpose is created and based upon the objectives that take the negative qualities of the market into account and stimulates neutralisation of their powers through continual cultural discourse.

In a crisis situation the marketplace moves from “*ill effects*” to “*disease contaminated effects*”. Therefore, Kozinets’ (2002) observations about the cause of changes in consumption are of high relevance to our thesis and acts as an axiomatic assumption.

2.3 Marketplace Ideology and the Emergence of a New Consumer

Although CCT strives to present a continual reminder that consumption is a sociocultural practice that is continually being reshaped by history that emerges within the structures and ideological imperatives of dynamic marketplaces, Arnould & Thompson (2005:876) criticize that there is little research on the broader analysis of the historical and institutional forces that have shaped the marketplace and the consumer as a social category.

Firat & Venkatesh’s focus on history and how a new consumer has emerged from the transformative shifts from modernity to post modernity is a key aspect that may be considered when viewing the consumer in the current time of crisis (Holt, 2002: 72). As the crisis is defined as a time space or categorical event, the transformative nature of the consumer may be present when investigating the economic crisis. Although the analysis of the institutional forces such as marketers and their influence on the consumer as a social category in the crisis is highly relevant, what is also interesting is to identify if there are any consumer shifts that have been facilitated by this global event.

In Firat and Venkatesh’s work they argue that as a means in which to resist marketer’s dominance and authority (the cultural structuring of consumption which maintains the political and economic support of the market system), consumers seek out “*social spaces*” in which to produce their own culture and identities that differ from what is being imposed on them by the market (Holt, 2002: 72). They further argue that people pursue “*non committal fragmented lifestyles*” in which the production of self and culture via consumption is important (Holt, 2002: 72).

This understanding is paramount when analyzing the consumer and the ways in which they interpret the economic crisis as it is another responsive technique. Holt (2002) however criticises Firat & Venkatesh's view that the proliferation of consumption styles of post modernity and the self-productive nature of consumption practices will eventually liberate people from the market's domination. He argues that their theory espouses "...a radical politics in which people are able to emancipate themselves from market domination to the extent that they are able to free themselves from cultural authority" (ibid: 72). Holt denounces (ibid: 72) that this "*cultural authority narrative*" only aptly describes modern branding circa 1950 and does not help to explain the anti-branding movement that is forcing the market to evolve today. The dialectical framework that he develops is based on various contradictions that he identifies between the branding and consumer paradigm. He concludes that based on his findings this will give rise to a new post-post modern branding paradigm premised upon brands as "*citizen-artists*" (ibid: 70).

2.4 The Dialectical Framework

Holt (2002:80) refers to the new dominant branding paradigm that has emerged as the dialectical institutional model which not only typifies the dynamic power relationship between consumers and brands but also the contradiction between consumer culture and the branding paradigm that propels institutional shifts in both. He reveals that whilst firms compete to add value to their brands through new techniques, consumers "...pursue the various statuses and desires that are valued within extant consumer culture" (ibid, 2002). With an increase in collective knowledge and skills in performing the culture, consumers are provoked to reflect upon the product's value and thus challenge the accepted status of marketer's action. In short, "*the conventional branding techniques developed within the culture gradually lose their efficacy*" as they are constantly being examined (ibid, 2002). Cultural experimentation and counter culture movements are by-products of consumers seeking to resolve these contradictions (ibid, 2002).

Drawing upon Holt's (2002) understanding of the dialectical framework, it is critical to note that our investigation is less concerned with the 'branding paradigm' as such but more so with the overall marketing paradigm. Therefore, we replace the branding paradigm in Holt's (2002) dialectical framework and consider marketing as the major player in the dialectical context. Due to the understanding we have gained about the influential aspects in the economic crisis, we feel that overall marketing communications that includes branding, public relations and advertising, is a whole construct that deserves to be looked at in its entirety in the context of the dialectical framework. We feel that to limit ourselves to branding (which is a component that makes up the marketing paradigm) would not only portray a skewed view of this perspective but also would not take critical elements into account. Even though we do acknowledge the importance of brands identified by Holt (2002) in our investigation, our conclusions will be drawn upon the perspective we have gained by exploring marketing as the interactive communicator with the consumer.

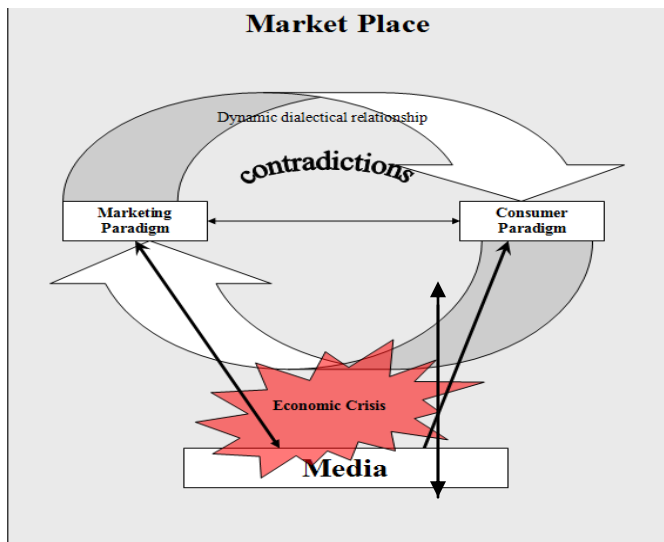
Furthermore, Holt's (2002) dialectical framework offers an appropriate theoretical construct for us to draw upon as it provides a better way of understanding consumer's meanings in a crisis situation. Although we shall draw upon Holt's (2002) dialectical understanding of marketers and consumers, we will not be focusing on time shifts. Our aim, as mentioned, is rather to explore the current crisis as it stands now and the exploration of the dialectical relationship between the identified key players during the current economic crisis.

Although we take Arnould and Thompson's (2005:876) view that timescapes "*...not only highlight the sociohistorical significance of consumption generally but also often have an impact on broader academic and social conversations concerned with marketing's effects on society*" into consideration because we have not conducted a critical historical account of previous time eras (in order to compare them with where we are situated now) there is an inability to focus on historical shifts. Furthermore, due to the fact that we are still in the midst of the economic crisis event, we are unable to compare the current context with other periods of time in crisis.

Since marketers are still in the process of evaluating the current consumer and reviewing and/or adjusting their marketing strategies accordingly, it is also difficult to find the correlation between the techniques marketers are implementing and how this has reached and affected the consumer. Therefore, our focal point rather lies in the discussion of the dialectical framework within the snapshot context of the current economic crisis as a way in which to better understand the consumer's sense-making process. By utilizing the dialectical understanding we will aim to establish key principles that we have identified from the consumer which can assist marketers to understand the transition within the sense-making process of consumers in the current crisis and can be drawn upon in other times of crisis and transition.

This illustration below demonstrates our understanding of the dialectical framework in the current economic crisis. This framework will function as our primary point of departure for our investigation between the consumer and marketer.

Visual 1- Illustration of our Dialectical Understanding



(Source: McCoy, Schmidt & Sledsens, 2009)

CHAPTER THREE

3.1 Methodological Overview

In order to arrive at a final point where we can understand the dialectical relationship of consumers and marketers in the current economic crisis the following section explores the methodological approach that shall be employed in the thesis. Before outlining our choice of data collection methods, analysis tool and the rationalisation of the selected consumer and marketer participants we will re-instate our thesis' objectives with a direct link to what we set out to achieve and why this is crucial to the effectiveness of the research project.

Consumption during a crisis is at the forefront of our investigation and unravelled by conducting phenomenological interviews with Swedish consumers. The stories of the consumers is analysed by thematising, structuring and interpreting the revealed information in order to ascertain how they make sense of the crisis. The marketer's understanding of the current consumer in the crisis is explored by conducting semi-structured interviews with industry professionals from around the globe. Whilst we are adopting a local view from the Swedish consumer, we are adopting a broader view from the marketing professionals. Due to the nature of our research objectives and thesis' overall purpose, the use of two different methodological approaches is needed. We identify that although both data collection methods fall under the qualitative research method, distinct methodological approaches for each perspective was suitable.

As we are in the midst of the economic crisis and therefore many brands are still in the process of either adapting their strategies or rolling out new advertising campaigns, it is very difficult to identify the correlation between what marketers are doing and how this has reached the consumer directly. As such this factor has been taken into account when reviewing the selection of marketers and the relevance we see by conducting interviews with them.

Thus, rather than focusing on specific campaigns that the marketer's are implementing due to the crisis (if any), we rather are seeking to gain an overall understanding of their role as a marketer and their contribution to the consumer's sense-making process in light of the economic crisis. This has led us to discuss the marketing perspective from a global stance thus dictating our choice of marketers worldwide, whilst limiting our consumers to the Swedish market who would have been privy to these global brands and marketing efforts. Once both perspectives from the consumer and marketer have been ascertained and comprehended, commonalities or critical misconceptions are identified in order to arrive at a point where we can discuss their relationship in the current economic crisis. For a visual illustration of our research design broken down step-by-step see appendix 1.

3.2 Research Objectives

In order to investigate the research problem the following research objectives have been developed and act as guidance throughout the research process.

The *overall* research objective is to identify the feelings and perceptions consumers display about the current financial crisis. The consumer's sense-making process- the way in which they create situational awareness and understand the complex and uncertain crisis situation through consumption in order to make decisions- is at the forefront of our thesis. The *primary* research objective is therefore to gain a critical understanding of potential changes in consumption through the consumer's view on objects in the current crisis. This identification will assist us in establishing whether or not consumers are adopting interpretive and coping strategies to make sense of the crisis.

The *second* objective is to examine the level of trust consumers have towards the marketing industry in the context of today's crisis situation. Questions surrounding the issue of how do Swedish consumer's view global brands and their marketing communication efforts in the current economic crisis situation will be examined as well as their feelings towards the media and their role in the crisis.

Our main critical objective from a consumer perspective is therefore to *investigate how consumers make sense of the current economic crisis*.

We will also aim to identify professional insights from the global marketers in order to gain an understanding of the opposing side of the dialectical relationship. We find three research objectives critical to achieve this understanding 1) marketer's view of today's consumer 2) how this view is reflected through cultural institutions and mass mediated images such as media and advertisers 3) marketer's perceptions and assumptions about the role of marketing now and their responsibility in the economic crisis.

In summary by obtaining a representation of *the consumer in the economic crisis* now and *the view that marketer's hold about the consumer in crisis*, we will be in a position to discuss the dialectic relationship between the marketer and consumer in the current crisis, with its potentially contradicting or common aspects.

3.3 The Phenomenological Interview with the Consumer

Our primary research method is the phenomenological interview which is anchored in our epistemological position that attests that research objectives are best explored through lived experience (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989:135). In essence, a phenomenological interview seeks to attain a first-person description of an experience and in our case assists us to identify the consumer's true *meanings* in relation to their consumption in the current economic crisis (ibid, 1989). Due to the nature of our research problem, we believe that this methodology is suitable as Kvale's study shows that the interview is the "*...most powerful means for attaining an in-depth understanding of another person's experience*" (ibid: 138). Furthermore, phenomenology is directly related to the hermeneutic intellectual tradition which is concerned with the question of how individuals make sense of the world around them and how, in particular, the researchers should bracket out preconceptions in their grasp of the world (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1990:347).

As one of our research objectives is to investigate how consumers make sense of the current economic crisis, this data collection method will enable us to achieve this aim.

We believe that the presentation of a number of cultural texts which demonstrate different views of the financial crisis is the best way to achieve a starting point of discussion. These cultural texts such as advertisements will be used as a *projective technique* (Bryman & Bell, 2003:131). The feelings expressed by the consumer about the stimulus object are a subject for interpretation and consequently reveal motivations about the overall consumption of the individual (Easterby & Smith, 2002). Crucially, this is of high importance as we are trying to identify consumer's sense-making process in the economic crisis. For a visual of the presented cultural texts that were used in the consumer interviews see appendix 2.

By utilising phenomenological interviews we acknowledge that the constructed interview situation is "*socially and linguistically complex*" and presents abnormally constructed circumstances (Alvesson, 2003: 14). It is therefore critical to avoid assumptions that considers each participant as a reliant "*truth teller*" (ibid: 14), whilst at the same time honouring the phenomenological viewpoint that Gier and Strasser argues to be the consideration of *subjectively* defined categories as the standard of reality for the way in which participants view his or her life world (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1990). This delicate balance between honouring the participant's expressions, whilst acknowledging the fact that they may not in reality actually do what they say in the interview needs to be sought and critically interpreted and examined in the consequent data analysis stage. Becker's study shows that by avoiding the 'socially constructed' feeling of an interview situation and instead creating a situation of comfort and approachability participants are willing to speak more freely (McCracken, 1988). In our case, the interviews were conducted in the comfort of the participant's home as a way in which to achieve a further climate of comfort. An inferior role was also adopted by the interviewer which allowed a rather informal interview context and facilitated a conversational and un-constructed process.

3.4 The Consumer Data Collection and Analysis Process

Proceeding the phenomenological interviews, hermeneutics was employed as the analysis tool of the empirical data collected. Specifically the analysis process involved reading texts (the interview transcripts) in full in order to first gain a sense of the whole picture. After several readings of the text, the next stage was the hermeneutic endeavor (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1990), or intertextuality (Thompson & Haytko, 1997), whereby patterns and differences were sought across the interview transcripts. Thompson, Pollio and Locander (1994:433) reveal that the methodological process that hermeneutics employs for interpreting texts is “*iterative*” in which a “*part*” of the qualitative data is interpreted and reinterpreted in relation to the developing sense of the “*whole*”. This act of repeating is necessary in order to achieve a holistic understanding. In accordance with this hermeneutic principle, our interpretation of consumer texts (i.e. transcripts of in-depth consumer interviews) were developed and modified over time to critically understand and unveil the *true meanings* that consumers construct through consumption.

There must also be the recognition that the final explanation represents a fusion of horizons between the participant’s frame of reference and the texts being interpreted (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Colaizzi’s (1978) data collection and analysis process was drawn upon as a way in which to provide us with a step-by-step process, see appendix 3 for a visual map of the individual steps that were followed.

Furthermore, the process of “*bracketing*” through an “*interpretive group*” was employed to ensure further validity of interpretations of the text and the treatment of the transcript as an autonomous body of data (Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989: 134). In Merleau-Ponty’s work he described that bracketing does not imply a neutral view as researchers must always see and describe the world from some sort of perspective however it does impose a process of cross-examination of interpretations that have been made (ibid: 140). In our case one of the thesis members was not present at the consumer interviews and was therefore utilised as the outsider and impartial view in the interpretive group session.

After each individual group member made their own interpretations of the consumer interviews based on the transcripts, a session was held in which bracketing of preconceptions were questioned as well as themes and interpretations that had been made by each group member. The fact that our group comprised of multiple perspectives not only maintained a *fresh* vision but also offered a means for overcoming difficulties arising from the sheer volume of data involved in the dialogical research. If a member of the group did not seek to acknowledge a certain preconception the other members of the group were in a position to see then this was highlighted and further discussed. Furthermore, for any interpretation put forth by a member of the group, follow-up questions were asked to ensure that a theme emerged from a particular respondent's description rather than from abstract or theoretical conjectures. This interpretive method highlights the continual "*...back and forth process of relating parts to the whole*" (ibid: 141) and was completed over the course of a two-week period. Additionally, the dynamic of the group mentality had an energizing effect on the interpretive process and in a sense brought the transcripts to *life* by being read and discussed amongst the group.

3.5 Selection of the Swedish Consumer Participants

The following section of our thesis will reason the choice of Swedish consumer participants from both a broad level as well as a rationalisation of their specific demographic relevance.

Although the choice of Swedish consumers was largely pre-determined due to a number of geographical and time restrictions, we argue that the Swedish consumer's viewpoint is both highly relevant and enables us to fulfil our research objectives. The selection of Swedish participants as representative of the consumer in crisis is reasoned by the main fact that this consumer group is a recipient of global marketing messages that we intend to explore. The connection that we draw between the consumer and marketer participant is crucial.

The marketer participants who are representative of global brands such as *IKEA*, *SCA* and *Polo Ralph Lauren* are brands that the Swedish consumers are both aware of and also would have come into contact with, especially their advertising messages or branding communication. Alden (2008) supports the notion that the symbolic meaning of advertising is globally understood as a significant percentage of advertisements in Asia, North America, and Europe employ GCC (Global Consumer Cultures) positioning, that is using globally understood signs (e.g. language, aesthetic systems, story themes) to associate the advertised brands with GCC through what McCracken (1998) identifies as the process of meaning transfer. Thus, by looking specifically at the Swedish consumer we argue that we are in a position where we can connect our empirical findings from this perspective with the international marketing viewpoint of the consumer in crisis.

Furthermore, we argue that the Swedish consumer is also representative of the global consumer as the Swedish economy is in fact impacted by the global economic crisis. Given this, we believe that the Swedish consumer is representative of the global consumer in the current economic crisis. Although in research, where the aim is to give some sort of general description about a phenomenon on a global level, we acknowledge that there is a degree of complexity and danger in making generalisations about one consumer group given that our research sample is limited to one country. Although it would have been ideal to have considered other consumers from around the globe, due to the nature of the phenomenological interview method, it was impossible to fly to different countries seeking in-depth interviews with consumers due to economic and time restrictions. Despite this limitation, we believe that by ensuring the correct implementation of trustworthiness techniques our empirical findings will have generalisability.

If we look more specifically at the Swedish consumers and their demographic makeup each of the chosen participants is representative of a different age generation. By choosing participants from three different age groups, we were able to achieve an understanding of consumption that allows a diverse and rich picture of consumers in crisis.

Additionally, our participants were chosen based on their differences in lifestyle, financial position and family situation to further gain an overall perspective of the current consumer today in crisis.

However given these differences between the participants we understood that there also needed to be commonalities and constant variables shared between them such as same cultural background, gender and social class. This decision was an attempt to increase the validity of our findings as the participants' *meanings* could be investigated as an entity in themselves absent of gender, societal class system or nationality influences. In order however to limit our research to one particular consumer group we decided to focus on women. Literature has stated that women are a powerful economic consumer group and responsible for more than 80% of the shopping for household goods (Eisler, 2007) and are considered as the main influencer and decision makers in the consumption context. This factor therefore spurred our choice of participants and led us to solely concentrate on the female consumer for our investigation. For a visual table outlining in detail each of the participant's profile see appendix 4.

In summary, our consumer participants were identified as appropriate for our study based on their differences in demographics and lifestyles as well as their shared cultural and gender characteristics. This choice of distinct differences and commonalities in our participants was determined by the aim of gaining a contentious and rich portrait of consumers in crisis. Ultimately, we see a connection between the Swedish consumers and marketers due to the fact that the consumers are subjected to the global marketing communication campaigns of the marketers selected.

3.6 The Semi-Structured Interview with the Marketers

Within the realm of qualitative research it has been argued that conducting interviews is often the best method of gathering data (Easterby & Smith, 2002; Seidman et al, 2004; Plakhotnik & Rocco, 2006). Unlike in quantitative research where the interview content directly reflects the researcher's desire and concern to gain pure answers to their proposed research area, in qualitative research much attention is placed on the participant's point of view and elaborative perspective (Bryman & Bell, 2007:474). A qualitative interview guide can be used as point of departure before conducting interviews however as questions arise throughout they can be poised and can also vary in order. This flexible mindset of qualitative interviews cannot be implemented within the quantitative research type. This critical factor has led us to select the qualitative interview approach in order to gather data from the marketers. Another aspect of the qualitative interview that is pertinent for our research objectives is the significance given to gaining "*rich and detailed answers*" instead of "*easily processed answers*" which is indicative of the qualitative method (ibid, 2007:474). Based on the benefits and qualities that are inherent in semi-structured interviews, this interview method was consequently chosen in order to gain the marketer's viewpoint and achieve our research objectives.

The interviews with marketing professionals were scheduled for up to one hour per candidate. During the interviews each marketer explained their professional understanding of the consumer in the current economic crisis. Once the marketing professionals had accepted participation in the interview process they were sent an email relaying in broad terms what topics the interview would cover. We felt that by sending each participant five main topic areas was a way in which to facilitate the marketer's pre-preparation for the interview. As we were attempting to elicit answers from the marketers that were rather thought-provoking, elaborative and reflective we felt that they needed some time to prepare. This preparation time also meant that the answers we received from the marketer's were much more rich and analytical.

Due to geographical and time restrictions the majority of the semi-structured interviews were conducted over the phone as opposed to in person.

Although face-to-face interviews would have been preferable, given the previously mentioned circumstances, telephone interviews provided us with the only efficient communicative way of gathering information from different geographical countries within a short period of time. The fact that many researchers attest that telephone interviews are more, or at least as, representative as face-to-face interviews also comforted our choice of the telephone interview method (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The interview with Laura Petrucci, Noel Turnbull and Jane Emery were conducted via the phone, whilst the interview with Henrik Palsson and Joachim Kähler were conducted in person. All of the participants were asked to discuss the same set of questions and there was no time limit given so the participants were able to elaborate on their perspectives without any restrictions.

As the semi-structured interviews demands a certain list of specific topics that need to be covered in the interview, a question template or interview guide was prepared in which comprised of five main topic areas (ibid, 2007). Alongside these areas was the overarching topic that was revealed to the participants before the interview- *consumers and their consumption in the current economic crisis* – from their professional perspective. The five main topic areas were 1) what is the marketer's professional perception of the consumer in the current crisis situation 2) where are they getting these assumptions from 3) what is the role of marketers in the current economic crisis 4) what marketing strategies have been changed or are being communicated in the current situation 5) what are their experiences in previous hard economic times or crisis situations.

3.7 The Marketer Data Collection and Analysis Process

The analysis of the data conducted with the marketers was guided by specific evaluative objectives. The analysis had to be understood in an inductive context as the raw interview data was primarily read repeatedly in order to derive concepts. The purpose of the analysis was to present a condensed summary of the extensive data.

We then used our empirical findings and complimented this with our pre-understanding of already established and existing consumer culture theory. Thomas (2006) argues that data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing are the three main goals that are the determinants of qualitative data analysis with which we followed closely.

In the data analysis of the marketing professional interviews we followed four main steps. *Firstly*, the analysed data was labelled with specific categories. These categories were identified and established by reading the raw data repeatedly. *Secondly*, we continued with describing the identified categories in more depth and explained in detail their contributing elements. In alignment with this was the *third* step to select the interview text used to present examples that were associated with the chosen categories. *Lastly*, we drew relationships between the categories and explained how they differ from each other. For a visual overview of the individual steps that composed the data analysis of the marketer interviews see appendix 5.

3.8 Selection of the Global Marketer Participants

The following section will illustrate and justify the selection of marketing professionals used in our semi-structured interviews which had the primary objective of being representative of leading marketing professionals in the industry. For a detailed table of the five marketing professionals see appendix 6.

The choice of marketers was influenced by three critical factors- the level of their expertise in the marketing field, the field and/ or brand that they represented and what country they represented. Ultimately, however the objective of gaining an international marketing perspective as opposed to a national marketing perspective such as Sweden lay in the fact that we wanted to ascertain a global perspective of the marketing world which meant not limiting ourselves to one market. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, we see the connection between the selected Swedish consumers and international marketing participants as correlating and appropriate due to the fact that the Swedish consumer are subjected to the global marketing companies' efforts that we have selected.

With the established link between Swedish consumers and international marketers we will now rationalise our choice for the specific international marketers that we chose as participants. Firstly, the marketers were selected based on their level of expertise within the field of marketing. This expertise was primarily reflective in the number of years they had served in the particular industry and the role and responsibilities they hold or held in their professional field. All five marketers have worked in the marketing industry for over a decade with the majority of them possessing top management roles and considered esteem professionals in their related fields.

Secondly, the field that they represented was also a critical aspect that determined the selection process. As we are trying to obtain an overall view of the marketing industry which encompasses traditional marketing managers and brand strategists, we also wanted to gain insights and views from public relations consultants as well as advertising managers. As such, each of the five participants represented one of the mentioned specialised fields within the overall realm of marketing.

Furthermore, when choosing product-related marketing managers we had to consider the level of impact the current economic crisis is having on that particular brand and industry in general as a selection criteria. In consideration of previous research on consumption in crisis, it has been identified that low involvement products were less affected by economic changes (Ang, 2000 & 2001, Zurawacki & Braidor, 2004). Simply put, consumers continue to buy these products regardless of the economic conditions they are affected by. On the other hand, high involvement products including furniture, cars and luxury items were affected more strongly in past crisis situations (Zurawacki & Braidor, 2004). Therefore, by selecting professionals that are responsible for marketing activities of both low and high level involvement products we were able to attain an overall portrait of the consumer through the marketer's eyes. Whilst Joachim Kähler represents personal care and hygiene products (low involvement category), Laura Petrucci has been working for *Coach*, *Ralph Lauren* and other luxury good brands for over a decade and is therefore a valuable representation of the high involvement product industry.

Furthermore, as previously mentioned in order to successfully draw a valid connection between the consumers and marketers we felt that the brands that the marketers represented had to be relatable to the consumer. Both *IKEA* and *SCA* are companies that have global operations but their origins are in Sweden. As the consumers are Swedish a degree of relatedness could be achieved and concurrently the ability to discuss with the marketers their global perspective and not limit their perspective to the Swedish market was also a goal that could be achieved.

Although the participants were asked to state their professional viewpoints of consumers in crisis irrespective of their brand's motives or strategy and the country that they were working within, we acknowledged that the brand or company that they were currently representing in its market context was still drawn upon by the participants to support their opinions. We understood that by discussing consumer perceptions it was difficult for marketers not to employ practical examples from their workplace. To discuss the crisis and consumers generally, in isolation of their brands or clients meant that the discussion would be rather shallow and general. Due to this acknowledged issue, we strategically elected professional perspectives that represented different market contexts such as Europe, the United States of America and Australia. By selecting professionals from different continents we were not only able to make stronger assumptions about the marketing community on a global scale, as we had participants from all over the globe, but also that they are representative of countries that are being particularly affected by the crisis. All marketing professionals however were selected based on their knowledge and experience of the global market and the consumer to ensure that their views were not limited to their local markets and skewed.

3.9 The Interpretative Case Methodology- Meso to Macro

Once the data collection and analysis of both the consumer and marketer were completed, the Interpretive Case Methodology (ICM) was drawn upon to facilitate the shift from a 'meso' to 'macro' level. According to Thompson & Haytko (1997), ICM involves the analysis of a particular micro-level case, which is understood as exemplary of the processes and structures in the wider macro environment. In accordance with this concept, Burawoy (1991) states that in order to gain insights of larger societal processes the analysis of one particular case can provide valuable assistance. It is this circular interplay that shapes the methodology of our interpretation and therefore forms the process of our main analysis. Importantly, it is the *meaning* that consumers reveal by telling stories about their current consumption which will be interpreted and compared to the information gained from the marketers which will form the dialectical setting of this study. Thus, ultimately the ICM will be used as a way in which to guide this transfer of the consumer's consumption *meanings* from an individual *meso* level to a *macro* level which will then put us in a position to analyse the dialectic relationship between the consumer and marketer in the current economic crisis.

3.10 Credibility, Transferability, Dependability and Confirmability

By reviewing methodological literature, it becomes apparent that the dimensions of *reliability*, *validity*, *generalisability* and *objectivity* are described with a vast array and different terminology in the context of qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2003; Ellis et al, 2008; Sinkovics, Penz, & Ghauri, 2008). Therefore, in qualitative research we create an overall trustworthiness through: *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability* and *confirmability*. According to Sinkovics (2008) in order to satisfy these criteria it is critical to formalise procedures of gathering, analysing and interpreting data. Therefore, we aimed to meet the criteria by introducing a step by step approach in the analysis (refer to appendix 5). Furthermore, the interview process itself was guided by a phase structure, an overall framework of themes and prompt questions.

By establishing a clear and formalised procedure that guides the reader through all the aspects of the research methodology including the data collection and the data analysis, we argue for this thesis to be transferable. Furthermore, as we are presenting the Swedish consumer's perspective we argue that they act as representatives of consumers of the western world. Therefore, the transferability of the overall findings is increased and offers valuable empirical information that can be utilised when studying consumers from other countries.

An aspect that could potentially affect the transferability of this thesis is our different nationalities (Sinkovics, Penz & Ghauri, 2008). We are acknowledging the aspect of *construct bias* that could be caused due to the composition of our research team (Dutch, German & Australian). The bias affects are mainly caused due to our different cultural backgrounds and therefore different interpretation that is expressed through language. In order to minimise this aspect and to increase the transferability of our thesis we aimed for consistency during the data collection process. This consistency was determined by the fact that we had one person conducting the interview, one person as a background observer and one outsider (Thomas, 2006). The outsider was not present during the interview in order to gain an objective perspective and increase trustworthiness of the thesis.

Credibility is another critical aspect for qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2003). Sinkovics (2008) argues that credibility is achieved when the study is built upon established theories and strengthened by the use of pre-established dimensions. As our thesis is built and developed through the framework of Consumer Culture Theory (which we have devoted a chapter to according to its relevance), we aimed to achieve a high level of credibility.

Confirmability is also an aspect that supports trustworthiness of a research study. Sinkovics (2008) explains that it is achieved if the researcher is alert to assumptions that are made (based on individual background or cultural factors).

Therefore, we aimed to minimise this aspect by articulating assumptions we made in the thesis on specific behaviour. Furthermore, we elaborate on specific key words that are used in order to gain consistency throughout the thesis.

We aimed for our thesis to be as informative about the methodological investigations as possible. For a visual summary of the different aspects we have considered in order to achieve trustworthiness see appendix 7.

3.11 Ethical Concerns

Bryman & Bell (2007:132) highlight four main principles a researcher needs to consider in order to create a highly ethical approach. These principles include harm to the participants, a lack of informed consent, an invasion of privacy and involvement of deception (ibid, 2007:132). In order to achieve privacy protection the consumer interviewees were given the opportunity to remain anonymous. This, we felt was particularly of importance, as consumers were talking about their personal experiences and stories. As their identity was of no relevance to the thesis purpose, the protection of their personal identity therefore presented no obstacle. However, the marketer participants were asked to share their identity as their professional opinion was required and a disclosure of their identity offered the thesis a higher degree of validity. Furthermore, the participants were given an ethical protocol (see appendix 8) to sign before commencing the interview.

The aspect of harm and deception appeared to be most critical in the consumer interview context. The current economic crisis and its dramatic affects on the consumer have potential to be harmful in consideration of their psyche. Therefore, talking about consumption during this crisis could have lead to feelings that include depression, frustration, anxiety and hopelessness. Consequently, when we sensed high sensitivity towards a specific topic that could have affected the psychological condition of the consumer, we then intentionally steered away from it, in order to not cause any harm to the participants.

3.12 Gender Aspects

The following section will discuss the potential gender related concerns our thesis is affected by. From an overall perspective, because we are all female researchers, one could argue that our thesis is based on a female perspective and is therefore pushing an underlying agenda (Bristor & Fisher, 1993). Whilst it might be true that a female perspective is presented, we argue that there is distinct inter-connection between us as female researchers and the subjects (consumers) of our thesis who are also of the same gender. Therefore, we feel that our shared sex rather creates an advantage than hindrance to our thesis. Bryman & Bell (2003:501) critically argue that in-depth interviewing is an aspect within the feminine research framework and therefore a typical method used by feminine researchers as the method is rather emotional which is an underlying aspect of the female nature. Whilst we acknowledge Bryman & Bell's (2003) view, we however feel that in order to investigate our research question, in-depth interviews embedded in a qualitative research methodology is an appropriate fit for our thesis irrespective of the gender related appeal. Another gender related aspect becomes apparent in the interview process especially due to the research objective of identifying personal experiences and sense-making. By being of the same gender as our female participants we created a situation of greater comfort and relatedness which encouraged them to converse and share stories with us that entailed feelings, perceptions and attitudes more freely and readily.

As part of the opening sequence of the interview we used the projective technique in the form of cultural texts. According to Stern (1993:561) the credibility and evaluation of cultural texts is an aspect that is strongly influenced by gender. When evaluating any commercial text or image the consumer always places a specific attitude on it whether it is conscious or subconscious. This attitude is directed towards the advertiser as well as the advertisement. By acknowledging this gender related concern, we have chosen advertisements and cultural texts that do not have an overt brand symbol or name. Furthermore, Stern (1993:559) argues that female consumers tend to "... *see a story from the inside*". Therefore, they approach specific phenomena by emphasising feelings and experiencing it by entering in order to achieve a rather internal perspective.

This gender aspect is highly relevant to our thesis as it is this exact internal perspective we are aiming to further investigate. The perspective of marketers was researched by interviewing both female and male professionals however this aspect of our thesis has to be understood as gender neutral. This, we emphasised by avoiding three main factors that introduce gender concerns- reproduction, challenging and stereotyping (ibid: 559).

In conclusion, we feel that by a) being female researchers and b) interviewing female consumers, the authenticity of our research is enhanced, as it derives and benefits from the gender influences that are proven to affect human behaviour, the subject of this thesis

CHAPTER FOUR

4.1 Consumers in the Crisis

In the following section we shall examine how the three consumer's experiential situations and issues in the current economic crisis are meaningfully organised or interpreted within their life-worlds. This idiographic level of analysis shall provide us with a valuable base to cluster meaningful themes on a nomothetic level whereby similar patterns or differences shall be drawn from all three consumers generally.

4.2 Case One: The Detached Crisis Commentator

Dressed in a plain, dark green woollen jumper and beige pants, Lisbeth is a 61 year old woman who has been divorced twice. She use to be an SAS air hostess however retired after 32 years and is now living on her farm in Dalby, just outside of Lund. Here she looks after a stable of eight horses and teaches riding. As she leads us into her lounge room where the interview will take place, we notice the immaculate nature of the house and the well executed interior design. With the wooden chairs complimenting the dark wooden beams that frame the roof and the strategically placed floral pillows on the clean beige coach, one can notice that a lot of effort and thought has been put into the country-style décor. Although there are a few personal touches such as the numerous beds for her eight cats and some horse shoes hung on the wall, the lounge room looks as if it is rarely used. There are no signs of personal touches such as photos, paintings or magazines lying around. With a large book shelf lining the back wall, the books are organised by height order, whilst the TV is hidden away in a large cabinet in the far corner. As she sits on her wooden armchair and adds sugar to her coffee we begin the interview.

Lisbeth has a relatively critical view of modern consumer society and its contribution to the world. She does not see the marketplace as alleviating day-to-day pressures and making things easier and more efficient but rather that it shapes the superficiality and materialism that is inherent in the world. She adopts a Marxist (1978) perspective in that *“doing and particularly working is central to existence and self worth”* and that false happiness is achieved through commodity fetishism (Corrigan, 1997).

In her view, consumption is an oppressive force and this is evident in her hopelessness and dark language used when discussing the economic crisis and her consuming behaviour. She makes a concerted effort, when discussing her views whether they are political, social or cultural, to search for the *“truth”* and the most *“natural”* way of life. As an internal search for what is *“real”*, consumers like Lisbeth are seeking *“existential authenticity”* in an attempt to connect with their *“true”* selves (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006:300). Consequently, her meaning construction is sought through identifying simplicity and un-fabricated ways of life. As a result, her life and consumption behaviour is a constant battle against the market in which she communicates both an attitude and deliberate activities that shape her anti-consumption mindset (Cherrier, 2009). She associates modern times with superficiality and fashion and to what she believes as *“stiff and cold”* and *“too flashy”*.

L: “I am not influenced by fashion at all. Even when I was young. But then I had high heel shoes.”

Here, although she is voicing her distaste against the fashion industry and its perceived lack of influence on her, there is an obvious contradiction that she is not aware of, that she is in fact influenced by fashion (her involvement in the 80s high heel craze). Interestingly, Bourdieu (1984) argued in his influential work, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, that taste is reflective of the individual’s level of economic and cultural capital (Lui, 2008). Therefore, Lisbeth’s taste and distaste are highly influenced and characterised by her socioeconomic circumstances and subsequently reflect her class identity. The fact that she is naïve to this reflects Lisbeth’s confusion about her relationship with fashion and the marketplace generally.

Despite dismissing the affect of display mannequins in shopping windows (Ad 1) and her dislike of advertising material she is infact an active participant of consumer society and is reliant on it. Although she believes she is not influenced by advertisers and the fashion industry, she selects times when it is convenient for her to be influenced by the market. For instance, she shows interest in interior design as she reads *House and Garden* and *Landleben* magazines in which she gets “*little tips*” and “*ideas*” for her own home. Evidently, consumers like Lisbeth are unaware that they are being manipulated and ultimately disregard an involvement with the marketplace (Kozinets, 2004). Lisbeth prefers life to be basic and defies against people wanting things that they don’t need. Similar to Baudrillard’s (1988:38) notion of “*the need to need*”, Lisbeth believes that companies are responsible for misleading people and spurring needs that are not justified.

L: “Just before Christmas. It was in the paper. Why don’t you afford a new kitchen before this Christmas time? Can we maybe buy a new sweater? I mean a kitchen costs a lot of money. I mean today it is a bathroom or kitchen we have to buy these fantastic nice things. I mean people don’t even cook today. I mean people don’t cook anymore we buy food to put in the microwave. We have to buy kitchens it is like in restaurants. So I think it is very good that people have stopped and people have to sit down and must reflect. What is important in life? And then we also have many people that want to change the world. We also are going to get a new world.”

I: “What is the new world?”

L: “A new world we have to think about basic things. And not be so influenced to buy in this consumption society. I think it has been terrible. And also this consumption looks for example at cars. I mean that is for guys they construct cars and these cars need to be nicer and nicer. Do you need all these fancy things? Mobile phones for example that is the same thing I mean you have thousands of different things. How many people can use it? I am so stubborn myself. And then you look to the TV and then you have the camera and I have to read when you see the instruction book. I mean I get tired only by looking at the book. I want to put the button on and off, and don’t have to read a whole book, I think that it is so complicated.”

Here, Lisbeth views the fact that people are slowing down their consumption activities as a positive outcome of the economic crisis.

Reflection and people's redefinition of what is really needed and valuable in life is something that she hopes will result from the scare of the crisis. Her view of the "*new world*" is exemplary of what she has always appreciated- the basic things in life and therefore reflects Kozinets's (2004: 701) observation of consumption that is determined by a person's basic needs. In this sense, she assumes a moral superiority over the marketplace and actively chooses to rise above it and in her mind does not actively participate. Lisbeth's optimism for a "*new world*" is illustrative of McCracken's (1988:106) notion of "*displaced meanings*" where "*...objects represent bridges to meanings that cannot be attained easily in the here and now*". For Lisbeth she looks to the future as the other cultural universe free from the perils of materialism. Cherrier (2009) classifies this understanding of consumption and consumer attitude as being a *political consumer* in which the individual re-shapes their concept of justice, equality and participation. Similarly, Lisbeth articulates a discursive choice in her consumption that expresses her attitude against the ideology of mass-consumption.

She admires her 82 year old mother who is "*clear like water*", whilst criticizes young people who have "*such a big need to be seen...*" and who are "*...influenced by looking in these papers and magazines*". The fact that people are now "*...use to communicating with machines*" and "*can't maintain themselves busy... (and) have to be put in front of something*" are points that she condemns and attributes to the current state of the world. Although, she constantly complains that she is time poor and restricted- "*...but the time there is no time all the time*"- she, to a certain extent, considers people who are not busy like her, fulfilling a life purpose and hold meaningful attitudes towards *needs* are direct supporters of the new world. Her attitude of one's mode of existence is underlined by the seriousness of one's purpose (Ewen & Ewen, 1982) and contribution to society by accomplishing something meaningful (Thompson & Haytko, 1997).

Functionality and ease is a constant driver for Lisbeth's consumption activities. As she is time poor, processes in her view need to be quick and efficient and objects must fill a utilitarian purpose.

Although, she has invested in a TV and camera she shows frustration towards having to read the manual, which she considers confusing and information overload. Her description of her eating habits is another example of her functional interpretation of objects.

L: "But many women like to cook, they love it. But I don't love it. I do it by force. It has to be quick, very quick. I mean if you sit there and have your food on the stove. I mean you make potatoes in the microwave for four minutes."

Here, dinner time is not a social event that she shares with the other male who lives in her house or friends rather it is purely fulfilling the basic need of hunger. Although, the act of eating is not considered as a social or cultural experience, she does however strive to purchase good quality food even though it is only for her individual pleasure. Her distaste for plastic Swedish bread and her choice of Swedish pork fillet instead of Danish pigs (which she believes holds a lot of penicillin) reflect her choice of good quality products even if it means paying more. Here, a hidden force that guides Lisbeth's consumption becomes apparent. This in academic literature (McCracken, 1988) has been described as the "*Diderot Effect*" and relates to the power that motivates consumers to sustain a cultural consistency in their choice of consumer goods (Lui, 2008). Therefore, by choosing commodities that Lisbeth considers as quality products, an evident expression of consistency is revealed.

Ultimately however due to her "*tight*" economic situation she strives to buy inexpensive things. A tactic that Lisbeth uses in light of the economic crisis is to wait until the last possible minute that a product is needed in hope that in the time that she has stalled the price has decreased.

L: "I should have contacted the shoemaker for the horses I have been waiting a little bit because that is 550 sek for the shoes for a horse and that is only for one horse."

L: "Now I need nutrition for the grass, I mean we buy it to spread it out. It is now double the price. It is now 560 sek! That is double price to get grass to grow. Normally I use 600kg and I have been waiting for that but now I must do it now."

The objects she is referring to (horse shoes and grass fertilizer) are also illustrative of what Lisbeth considers as important products that deserve her consumption attention. Both highly functional items, one can see that to her aesthetic pleasures are somewhat false and are not worthy of contemplation or purchase. Described by Carrol (2001) as the minimalist approach towards the aesthetic pleasure of objects, for Lisbeth, goods and objects are there to satisfy physiological needs and meanings (Venkatesh, Laurie & Meamber, 2009). Although she appreciates durability and good quality, such as buying more expensive riding pants that she knows she will get a lot of use out of, she does admit to buying second hand items and is surprised that people are giving away such high quality clothes. Although, her life has always been met with constant financial strain she does believe that the economic crisis has intensified the pressure that she is under.

L: "Every time you get this 'red envelope' they say, and then you have less money. We have to make decisions about so many things today and of course that is very stressful. I think many people say it is necessary to close up. You have to close your eyes today."

I: "What do you mean by closing up?"

L: "To close it is just to look a little bit like this (makes a protective body gesture). Everything is coming from everywhere. You can't stand how much. And then it is full. The 'hard disc', like they say. I am not only because sometimes you think you get a little bit old. More and more people start to think. And especially now people start to think with the crisis. So what I mean that it is not only here. I mean it is the whole world. If you were living in Pakistan also with the climate. I mean it is terrible today. And when you talk about food and then you talk about water which should be the problem of tomorrow. How is the world going to be in 100 years?"

Here, Lisbeth links the economic crisis with other major global problems such as environmental concerns. Drawing upon the crisis as a platform in which to voice her fears about the world, Lisbeth associates the meaning of hopelessness and severity of global problems with the financial crisis simultaneously. Her approach to dealing with the situation is "to close up" and attempt to ignore it as she feels that there is too much to process and handle.

The crisis is “*stressful*” for her and her fear which not only concerns the current state of the world but also the future which highlights her general negativity and angst about the world’s problems irrespective of the current financial crisis. As identified by Andreassen (1984), stress can cause dissatisfaction with life in a societal context and in that sense the economic crisis is another way or excuse for Lisbeth to further remove herself from the marketplace.

L: “I mean you read what you want to read. I mean you get depressed sometimes. I mean the world is so bad today... I mean there is so much shit in the world. I think it is better to just go here and do as much as possible with your own life. I mean I have enough with my own shit, yeah sometimes I say, without listening to the shit in the world.”

She feels that by closely following the newspapers and the media’s messages one cannot help but to get depressed. She therefore selectively chooses what messages she consumes in the media as a response strategy to deal with the economic crisis. According to Couldry (2008) media consumption often causes disruption in the individual’s relationship to the media world. An example of this is her choices of following politics closely or talking to her mother about chosen news items that interest her as opposed to letting the media dictate what messages she should interpret. Although, she follows the news on a regular basis she also prefers to have quiet time at night and silence from the information overload of the television. This active temporary withdrawal (Couldry, 2008) indicates that her rigorous patrol of marketing and media channels to selectively control her intake is not only a way in which she escapes the depression of the global crisis but also a further attempt to establish that she does not conform to marketplace demands. Although, she reveals that the economic recession has not directly affected her or her family in the form of job loss, she sympathises with “*Tom that lost his job*” and other people’s stories in the paper.

With reference to ad 4, Lisbeth argues that “*selective hearing*” is ever present today and that “*...you hear what you want to hear*”. Her cynicism in people is also reflective in her assumption that “*...you have bad people in all people*” and that journalists in many cases publish stories about the crisis to frighten people.

Her constant cynicism and reference to negative issues is also reflected in her pre-occupation with death and darkness. She portrays a sense of disorientation and confusion in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world that the economic crisis is positioned within. Whilst she exhibits distrust towards the government and the media, she highlights that animals are the only genuine specie.

L: "...because animals are very sincere and honest. There is no game. No superficial. The world is oh so fine. I think much in world it is so superficial. I am a sporty type myself. I like riding, I mean I like many kinds of sport- golf, tennis- without being a kind of star. You can do so many things with a horse. It is completed, that is communication with a mammal. You can do jumping, dressage. You can go out in nature. Today, to do sports they are sitting in the bicycle gym with all the bad smells. When you can take the bicycle and you can get out in the nature, all the fresh air. So that's why I like animals."

Lisbeth uses animals and her relationship with them as a way in which to reaffirm her anti-capitalist attitude and to define herself in opposition to extant consumption society (Cherrier, 2009). She views animals as more genuine than humans and therefore acts rather dramatically by limiting her contact with people and preference to be around animals. Although, she is not a total recluse and prefers to associate herself with animals, in the instances where she chooses to interact with people, she seeks to find those who have similar love for animals, especially horses. Lisbeth's utilisation of her horses as an extension of herself is highlighted by Secord (1968) who notes that "*pets are often seen as a part of the pet owner's self to the extent that the attitude is 'love me, love my dog'*" (Belk, 1988:155). Her juxtaposition of nature and the mechanics and harshness of society further highlights her favourable view of animals, appreciation for nature that they both share and her attempt to infer characteristics that her horses represent onto herself (ibid, 1988).

L: "I have horses. They are my kids. I prefer animals. The more people I learn the more I prefer animals. You know we have labels that you can put on the car, 'the more men I know the more I like my dog' ...or something like that!"

Here, she demonstrates a lack of trust and faith in people to cope with the 'new world'.

This disapproval towards people, and men specifically, could also be due to the fact that she has had some difficult past relationships, being divorced twice, and this has developed into a rather cynical and bitter view towards people generally. As such she is heavily reliant and dedicated to her horses as they give meaning to her life, job, love and friends. This dedication however compromises her life's happiness and ability to socially interact with the outside world. She knows no other way of meaning.

L: "I don't have any time. Yes, I mean I played golf before. But with this life I can't do anything. I like to go to concerts and music and things like that but maybe also to deal with friends but everything costs a lot of money. And when you have eight horses there is no time to do anything else and if you are alone to deal with the horses."

Here, she is using her horses as a shield against the perils and materialism of society, justifying her isolation as an inevitable by-product of her current occupation and lifestyle. In this context, Lisbeth's horses can also be understood as consumption commodities that has inscribed her individual self (Cherrier, 2004). Her comment about "*this life*" is direct reference to her unattained life goal of being an elite horse rider. This life, if obtained, means not having "...to deal with other people that don't know riding and that are riding bad". This comment also reflects her impatience and judgmental nature towards others who are unworthy of riding skills and sport. In the event that she can share the passion of riding with someone commendable and who can ride like herself she however shows great enthusiasm and happiness. Her recollection of the visit of an infamous Spanish horse trainer Miguel highlights the only moment throughout the interview where Lisbeth's moods transitions from being frustrated and rather negative to excitement and positivity.

Her aversion of the marketplace frames her consumption such as shopping attitudes and behaviours. As a way in which to respond to this dissatisfaction of the current marketplace she avoids going into the centre of town and limits her contact or interaction with the marketplace.

L: "I don't buy clothes for myself I buy clothes for horses. I buy for my kids. That was terrible. I did last month. They were selling winter blankets. And it was a third of the price and I bought some of them. I should not have done it but I did it."

She portrays guilt when buying things that are even on sale or when she consumes "*unnecessary things*". It is as if she is surrendering to the marketplace and becoming part of the consumption process that she dislikes so much. Although, she is purchasing a rather functional item for her horses which she considers the most important criteria, she illustrates angst about the purchase and views it as an over indulgence.

She views herself as person of necessity who "*...doesn't use or need so much*". Although, she asserts that she does not enjoy shopping, she does portray delight and a sense of satisfaction when she finds a great deal e.g. a two for one deal on shrimps in small glasses or a particular crème available at the Body Shop. This is once again reflective of her confusing and rather paradoxical relationship with the marketplace. She considers herself as a frugal shopper but is still disinterested. Bourdieu refers to the benefits that arise from transformation of obtaining "*self-interest*" into "*disinterested*" as "*symbolic capital*" which one can understand as a form of power (Wilson, 1988:49). Even though, Lisbeth does not perceive it as power she displays a demand for recognition and distinction from others through her consumption which evidently reflects the symbolic capital as power (ibid, 1988).

She expresses further hate towards commercial advertising and reveals that she does not like receiving brochures from ICA as part of her membership program. In a way to reinforce this attitude she attempts to portray herself as disinterested in shopping discounts, brands or the commercial world. She says, that she does not "*...read their advertising*" or take notice of it but then mentions a Coop Konsum cheese special she noticed the day before the interview. She associates loyalty cards with people buying "*so much*" which is in direct opposition of her life view but still has an ICA card. Once again, there is a clear paradox between her anti-consumption identity that she wants to project and the influence it has on her in actual reality.

L: "Now we have to accept that we have rich people and we have poor people."

I: "Where would you say you belong to?"

L: "The poor people but I know you don't believe that when you seen that I have eight horses...eight horses and this house. I don't have fun. My salary is one day in and the next day it is out...on heating, rent, the normal bills and then it's gone. That is my life. My life has been like this."

Here, Lisbeth displays the most frustration expressed throughout the interview. Similar to not asking for outside help to cope with the overbearing task of looking after a farm and eight horses, she does not rely on others to facilitate her consumption behaviour and meaning formation in life. Although, she shows extreme frustration towards the endless cycle of her monotonous existence, in alignment with Simmel's theory (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995:246) that individuals attach their own meanings to objects, she still allows her horses to shape her identity and therefore appreciates what they represent to her. She uses her house with its impressive exterior and well-presented interior as the only means in which to express her individuality away from her horses. This is the only way in which she makes use of commodities as a resource to create individual meanings (Stalp, 2009) and appreciates aesthetics as she does not express this through typical avenues such as clothes or choice of car. She is proud of the visual representation of her home in which her taste according to Bourdieu (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995) reflects her social class. However, Lisbeth desires to maintain the view that her life is disconnected from class society and furthermore that it is about basic and immaterial things rather than superficiality and a pathetic attempt to impress others.

Ultimately, for Lisbeth there is an apparent meaninglessness in society that the 'new world' and consumption encompasses. She feels that the economic crisis will however force people to re-negotiate and re-evaluate life's meanings into what she views as more natural and basic which is representative of the very basis of her existence.

4.3 Case Two: The Disguised Crisis Visitor

We met Maria in front of her husband Sergio's bookshop. Her little daughter Annika was holding on to her hand. Maria's son Emilio was sitting on the stairs in front of the bookshop with an impatient and bored facial expression. Maria was dressed casually. A long, green jumper was covering most of her body. She asked us to take a seat in the bookshop so that her husband could look after the kids in their home and we would not be disturbed. We sat down facing each other at a glass table. Maria was playing with her necklace throughout the entire conversation.

Throughout the conducted interview, it becomes apparent that Maria's consumption reflects the overall position she is taking in society. She has departed from her role as an individual which involves focusing on her personal goals, ambitions and developments. Needing something in Maria's eyes is purely functional and disconnected to the concept of satisfying a desire. Interestingly, her entire consumption today is purely influenced and determined by being a member of a group. Therefore, whatever that group might be, her consumption is symbolically shaped by the meaning of a community (Cherrier, 2006). For instance, Maria is influenced by her immediate family, work colleagues and friends and therefore displays the impact others have on her consumer behaviour (Cherrier, 2007). In direct association with this, it also appears that Maria is aiming to achieve belongingness and protection within these previously identified groups, which becomes transparent in her consumption.

Maria views togetherness and participating in a 'we' community as experience that fulfils her. However, this fulfilment is related more to her as being part of a group rather than her as an individual. Her individual identity is made tangible by non-consumption related items. She explains that she likes to keep things that represent memories in her life. These memories create therefore the foundation of her identity. Thus, Maria identifies herself with memorable items that include schoolbooks and leaflets.

Considered as a “*proof of life- achievements*” she holds on to them which highlights Belk’s (1988:148) assessment that “...*possessions are a convenient means of storing the memories and feelings that attach our sense of past. A souvenir may make tangible some otherwise intangible travel experience*”. Interestingly, she is holding on to an identity that is not present anymore in its original shape in her life today.

I: “*What things are important to you?*”

M: “*Even just little paper from when I was an exchange student, all the papers that I filled in like information about the exchange program, I kept. I don’t know where they are right now but if I don’t find them some day and I can go through them, I was there, I did this and this happened and it’s prove...But if I chuck everything out it’s like “Who am I?!” What did I actually do with my life...I have no tangible proof.*”

Maria is critical about the media and expresses a certain distance she feels towards the communication that is directed to consumers. Even though she is deliberately selecting certain media channels and therefore allows it to reach her, she is critical and aware of her lack of knowledge about certain topics. Couldry (2008:17) describes this relationship with the media as “*satisfied distance*” which is determined by consumer’s displaying an intermittent public connection however that they do not perceive this as a problem. Maria reads the local newspaper headlines which exemplifies Couldry’s (2008) concept of media consumption that displays disengagement. Furthermore, she only reads newspapers that are available to her at no costs. It illustrates that even though she is attempting to make sense out of the life she is living in, in a macro context, she still chooses to just briefly examine these touch points. By isolating her life context within an overall societal and economic context, Maria creates a distance. She needs this distance in order to sustain a feeling of protection within her life context. Not only does she consider external economic developments as a distant phenomenon but also as not present and highly relevant to her own life context. Her constant aim to protect her life context from the impacts of the external environment is filled with contradicting feelings. She repeats that her consumption and overall life is not affected by the economic crisis but continuously identifies aspect in which she does feel a certain impact. Conversely, by not knowing the nature of these impacts and by not labelling them she sustains this distance, which is her ultimate goal.

I: *“When was it then the last time you bought something that you really wanted to buy? Do you remember that?”*

M: *“Well, oh I kinda need some new shoes, the ones I have are still functional. Shoes are really expensive. It’s not like you go out and buy a pair of shoes every month or every couple of months even every once a year or every season.”*

Maria’s consumption is determined by functionality and affordability and is detached from creating satisfaction. Maria considers her financial situation as restricted through the eyes of a mother. The economic crisis has affected her family. However, she chooses not to see direct affects and therefore understands the crisis as phenomenon that is taking place disconnected from her personal surroundings. Her consumption as an individual as well as member of a group is detached from political and economical conditions. This is particularly visible as her consumption is shaped by needs and not wants. Therefore, by buying things her and her family needs she expresses a position that isolates her from the developments within the marketplace. Even though she acknowledges her active choice of detaching herself from the current crisis, the interesting aspects is the occurrence of contradictions throughout the interview.

Maria displays scepticism about the medial messages that are communicated about the crisis. However, especially because of her personal stance of being distant from the phenomenon she feels detached, not involved and therefore not affected.

I: *“Do you have the feeling due to the economic crisis that you have to cut back on certain items. Watch what you spending on money?”*

M: *“No, not really our regular financial situation just in our family we’ve always been you know kept things short so because of the financial crisis we can’t really feel any difference that we thought we have to cut back then.”*

I: *“So it doesn’t really affect your family then? The economic crisis?”*

M: *“I hadn’t thought of it that way, but we are affected somehow.”*

I: *“Has the event affected your working environment?”*

M: *“I feel oh my goodness how is this going to effect me and my work and in that sense, yes, I mean, I know that I can’t just go out and look for a new job, even though I tried I applied to a couple of job there are not that many out there, that oh this would be perfect for me...From that point of view, I know from the economic crisis and this all situation means no work. So I kinda feel I have to hold on to what I have, and do the best I can, but it’s not fun at the same time.”*

Maria’s identity as a consumer is highly influenced by her family. This influence has caused her individual identity to slowly diminish. Hochschild (Stalp, 2009) argues that women are often expected to perform both the roles of the paid worker and unpaid care-worker which is reflective of Maria. The expectations and demands of people from her direct surroundings have taken precedence and replaced the elements in her life that complete her as individual and act as foundation for her own identity. Therefore, her consumption in a societal context has to be understood as part of something rather than an entity on its own. Maria appears to be torn between herself as an individual and her as part of a group. She worries about losing one or the other and expresses her commitment to both aspects of her personality.

I: *“How does it make you feel when you are playing the guitar and sing?”*

M: *“It feels good, I like it. Sergio (husband) has to be in a different room (laughing) though because he doesn’t like it. The kids have to be asleep otherwise they will be crawling on top of me and that it doesn’t work that way. So I haven’t done it that often, since Annika’s birthday either, the past 7 years. I used to do it more often, I sang in a choir and I was more active, I like that.”*

Even though her identity as individual is not transparent in her life as it is today, she aims to hold on to it. This becomes apparent when she tells her daughter about her life in the United States.

I: *“What was her reaction?”*

M: *“She was a bit sad that she didn’t know. But then she was happy... “Oh I didn’t know that you did that and that.”*

I: *“How does that make you feel that she reacted like that?”*

M: *“Good, she is like “my mom did that”. I am not just the mom now. I’ve done other things in the past especially for my self-esteem.”*

Maria's perspective of consumption in a buying context is an aspect of life in which she feels uninvolved. Everything that involves buying things is considered as a need filler. As soon as she is confronted with personal fulfilment of wants she deliberately pushes it away, purely in order not to be a part of it. She therefore does not involve herself with self-expressing commodities. This anti-consumption attitude could have been caused by a melancholy that evolved from her diminishing identity as an individual. With her constant aim to please the needs of her family and to withstand the pressures of her life context, she motions away from her own individuality. Belk's (1988:152) notion of "*maintaining multiple levels of self*" is clearly evident in Maria's battle between her individual versus collective conception of self. Although Belk (ibid: 48) argues that "*...because of accumulated possessions, well-developed skills, possession of both a past and a future, and parenthood, the middle years of life also are likely to involve the most extended concept of self*", we can clearly identify in Maria's case that she is still coming to terms with her self definition through consumption objects.

Maria's general understanding of the marketplace outside of her own identity is determined by non-choice commodities. A contradiction however becomes apparent when she explains how she needs a dress for a friend's wedding. By transforming the need into a want she considers an option that pushes her back from her group identity to focus on her own individual identity. Even though she is ultimately aiming to please a certain beauty benchmark set by society and according to Bourdieu reflective of her social class, she feels a specific control over her choice and ownership, a feeling that is otherwise not apparent in Maria's consumption (Wilson, 1988: 52).

M: "*A friend sent an email, who is someone who makes dresses, 'Oh that would be nice, to be able to look nice and that it's made for me and so it will fit me and I can choose myself'. So I contacted her, so she is making a dress for me for the wedding.*"

Here, Maria's overall consumption can be ascertained by considering three main influencing elements. Firstly, the *needs* that she acknowledges initiate her contact with the marketplace.

Secondly, her *knowledge* about products is shaping her consumption, whilst finally she attempts to build *stability* via a protected construct made of group identities.

I: *“Are these brands also important? Like with diapers is there a particular brand you always buy?”*

M: *“Yes, Libero. I don’t know why but my mum always buys Pampers. So every time when he comes home from my mom, he has a pamper diaper on, but I like the way they fit him. I know what I buy, if I buy something else they are different, I just know what Emilio (son) needs, size etc.”*

A glimpse of a rebellion, moreover a resistance against marketplace developments becomes visible through Maria’s deliberate choice of supporting a specific milk brand. This exemplifies Fournier’s notion (Cherrier, 2009) of classifying resistance strategies into 1) avoidance behaviour and 2) active rebellion. In this instance, Maria is feeling a responsibility towards her local market and expresses an attitude towards the threat of removing this product from the market. Quite suddenly she feels a sense of liberation and power, a power that in her life is normally only gained by a co-dependency with her influential groups. In this case, she can steer and affect changes. This powerful strength is directly connecting her with her hidden identity as an individual. However, this reflection needs to be viewed as an entirely separate phenomenon that takes place in Maria’s life. Her identity as a group member is not rebellious it is rather the opposite. In this case, her group-identity that is reflected through her consumption illustrates a linear and rigid approach as well as a constant desire to achieve community meaning (Cherrier, 2006) through shared consumption symbols (Belk, 1988).

M: *“They all talk about ecological milk, and produced as close as possible. So all stores wanted to take out that milk, while all the people are like: “No, don’t do that!” Including me. So because of that I decided to not buy milk from Skanemeijer.”*

I: *“How come?”*

M: *“People would lose their work if we don’t buy milk from them and now maybe with the financial crisis, we need to help the people from here, so it’s about protecting their own.”*

Throughout the entire conversation with Maria it appears that she is involved in a battle that reflects the division between her individual consumption identity and her identity as part of a group. In literature on identity construction it is discussed that consumption practices have to be considered as expression of individual identities as well as the expression of connectedness with others (Cherrier & Murray, 2007; Cherrier, 2009). As previously established, these identities contradict each other significantly. On the one hand, she expresses scepticism about marketplace movements such as ecological products however, by taking a critical stance she positions herself as the consumer that is open but careful and not easy to convince. She explains that for real commitment to products she needs to read about it. Therefore, Maria feels by gaining knowledge she moves from a passive- need driven to an active- want driven consumer. However, receiving messages from both her influential groups as well as communicated marketplace messages she ends up feeling confused and indecisive. In order to decrease this confusion and reposition herself as a consumer, Maria aims to accelerate the sense-making process by gaining knowledge.

M: *"I am split, I haven't made a huge decision if we are always being ecological food or not. That is what I am confused about when I am going to the stores sometimes."*

I: *"So you are not sure?"*

M: *"The price is also a criterion."*

I: *"But that is also the ecological thing that is also again a strategy of a company. That is something new. Would you believe them then, I mean what your dad is saying"*

M: *"I am confused; I am not completely going over to ecological side. But I have read a lot some people say it should be ecological best. Even eggs - ecological eggs how's that? But then, so the hens are fed real food, not strange food and so the eggs of course become better food for us. Ok, I am getting the point but I haven't made up my mind yet. Even though an article in the newspaper the other day said that if you buy ecological food you can still save money in a year even though some of the things expensive, because if you try to eat more healthy and ecological then you can cut down in all these other things such as sweets, cakes, candies that your body doesn't need because it is just extra. And in that way you can save money. And I am like 'oh true yes' so then you could afford those ecological choices..."*

This disparity in consumption causes Maria to rationalize her decisions and without explicitly acknowledging it she is displaying a sense-making process. As a consumer Maria wants to uphold her responsibilities for the groups she belongs to. Her individual consumer identity is constantly interfering with this. Therefore she makes choices that demonstrate her stance without revealing the true Maria. This disparity is made visible through her explanation about her feelings towards the recent purchase of one eighth of a bull.

I: "But because these people are telling you that, they are close to you, you trust these people so therefore is it a driver for you to buy this meat?"

M: "For me, yes I probably wouldn't have done it if my parents or cousins would not have told me about this. If my parents would tell me, to share meat with their friends then I would do it but mainly to support the local economy. At the same time, it is better and cheap food. This time, it is a priority so this will work in the long term."

M: "I found this one bread, and Sergio likes it. I usually go shopping they have bread of the day and then I buy a whole bunch of them and then I put them in the freezer, but they are fresh from the day. And then the bread was hard and old, when I just bought it so I have learned as a consumer. And I try to look more at the content of the products packaging."

Maria's overall identification of being detached and not involved with the crisis is drifting through significant contradictions. Despite her most transparent sense-making of the crisis that is determined through affects on her workplace environment, she constantly identifies aspects in which her behaviour is reflective of the current economic conditions. However, because her entire financial situation is characterized by satisfying needs rather than wants, she already feels a certain distance to the overall marketplace. She is therefore choosing not to consider impacts of the crisis in her life context. This detachment also satisfies Maria's need of protection and sense of belonging. By separating herself from the "victims of the crisis" she builds a construct that is determined by her already existing life situation. This construct offers her shelter and does not require her to reflect on impacting external conditions. Maria's way of 'we' thinking as part of her sense-making process, in which her family, her children, her friends and her church are major influential factors, demonstrates that she excludes herself and these factors from the economic crisis.

I: “What do you feel when you read the newspaper? How do you feel then when they talking about the economic crisis. How do you feel about that? Does it frighten you, in a way?”

M: “No it doesn’t frighten me. There was one page in the Metro where they asked several people about the economic crisis, such as are you afraid of losing your job? Most people said, No, I have a good job and firm position. No I just got a good job, or I am out of work so I am not worried about loosing my job (laughing). I was kind of surprised, so most seemed to be not afraid and I kinda fit into that category.”

I: “And back home, with Sergio do you discuss the economic crisis? Is that a topic you would talk about?”

M: “More like, did you hear they are closing down, this or but like it’s from a distance it’s not hit us, from a safe distance. It’s kinda like someone is sick or dies, you hear about it but and you feel for them.”

I: “Yeah, it doesn’t really affect you?”

M: “I can feel for them but I don’t know anyone on that airplane that crashed. But it doesn’t affect me personally.”

By comparing the crisis situation with a plane crash Maria acknowledges the dramatic affects it has on people. She however identifies herself as an observer from a distance rather than an affected victim. Even though she acknowledges the affects and expresses awareness of other people being affected, she still separates and detaches herself from the phenomenon which evidently displays a “*satisfied distance*” (Couldry, 2008: 19). Again, the sustaining of a protected life context (from an individual as well as a group standpoint) becomes apparent in this disconnecting scenario to the external environment.

4.4 Case Three: The Metamorphic Crisis Explorer

Dressed in a white summer dress, Johanna meets us in the hallway of her student dorm. The 24 years old business student has been living in Lund for four years. Her room was nicely furnished with warm colours that emanated a chic and modern atmosphere. The decor was reflected in the dark brown painted walls and the patterned pillows she placed on her bed and couch. Although, the room was small, the furniture was efficiently arranged to make maximum use of the space. The room was full of accessories, clothes, fashion magazines and many pictures of Johanna with her friends and travels.

Johanna is living the typical student lifestyle which is marked by a lack of financial responsibility and most consumption activities are pleasure seeking in nature. Although, she moved away from home four years ago, she is still very much dependent on her parents financially and admits that she has “...*not grown up yet*”. The money that she receives from her parents and part-time job at a clothing store allows her to have a high disposable income which reinforces her identity as a student- a free and fun lifestyle. Johanna’s reliance on the marketplace and her consumption activities is a way in which to affirm her identity as “...*young at heart*”, a term that she uses to describe herself.

In alignment with Allen’s (2008: 40) concept of “*I consume therefore I am*” one could argue that pursuing ‘fun’ is of utmost importance for Johanna as she frames all of her consumption practices such as shopping, eating out with friends and going to parties around entertainment and social value. The main way in which she seeks enjoyment is through fashion and purchasing clothes.

J: “Yeah I would say clothes, it’s a big part. My parents help me with all the necessities so all the money I have I can put on basically whatever I want, just fun. I put mostly on travel, I put on yeah fun; like going out, eating, and having fun like partying going to Copenhagen for a weekend. I would rather put my money on stuff like that than going to Willey’s and buy food because I have that already taken care of. I just spend it on living, but 50 % on clothes for sure.”

The fact, that her parents already have all her functional needs taken care of such as rent and food shopping, Johanna is free to consume as she pleases. Her admittance that she is “...*a little bit spoilt*” and has “...*not grown up yet but will*” highlights her attempt to rationalize her way of life. To what many would consider as meaningless and exuberant spending, Johanna sees her material lifestyle as appropriate not only because other students are consuming the same but also that she will not be able to consume like this when she “*grows up*” and is therefore enjoying this autonomy whilst she can. Interestingly, Lacan’s study (Thompson & Haytko, 1997) shows that personal autonomy for young adults is often met with over excessive consumption as an attempt to fill the symbolic void abandoned by the formation of a self-governing adult ego.

Elliot stated that “*individuals are motivated to seek out various forms of social affiliation and often turn to symbolic forms of social relatedness, such as participation in a common consumption*” (ibid: 26).

Furthermore, despite appreciating the benefits that you receive from getting an ICA or Coopsum grocery card, she feels that at this point in her life she doesn't need one.

J: “Like if I would have a family and an apartment and living the real life not living the student life then I would have a card and I will get one in a couple of years but at this point in my life I feel that I don't need it, because sometimes I do my purchases at ICA, Coopsum and I don't go to the same store and it doesn't affect me even though it says you will get 10% off. Because what I needed.”

It is interesting to note that she feels that she *needs* a JC Penney and Brothers and Sisters loyalty card because she is always receiving something in return from being a member. Thus, one can see here that even the loyalty program that she chooses to be apart of and that she considers to be of practical necessity epitomizes her identity formation as a student and her life period.

When she reflects upon her recent shopping habits, she feels that in the light of the economic crisis she is actually purchasing more rather than cutting back and cost saving.

J: “No, no. I would say that I am not affected at this certain time but maybe in a year when I don't have a job I would have to buy a suit and I can't afford it. But basically by being a student everything that I want I can buy. I don't have that kind of lifestyle that means I need a huge salary.”

J: “I am not very grown up in that particular way. I am not having a house and children and all of that. I am on my own and I am having fun. And I am a student and I am still in that kind of mindset that I am young.”

Here, there are two interesting points. Firstly, her association of “*being grown up*” with material objects such as an apartment or high salary is reflective of the way in which she interprets overall meanings and values in life. As opposed to talking about personality and self growth as part of maturing into a young adult, she connects material goods with growing up.

This process of interpretation is indicative of her current preoccupation with material consumption objects and seeking identity through acquiring and accumulating selected consumption objects (Belk, 1988).

Secondly, she compartmentalizes the economic crisis in her sense-making process and therefore perceives that it will only truly affect her in the next phase of her life. Her expression of angst about graduate programs cutting back positions available next year such as Shipstead illustrates that Johanna only sees the crisis as having an adverse impact on her life in the event that she cannot find employment after university. Her association of not having a job with the inability to continue her consumption behaviour and “*buying a suit*” further confirms her preoccupation with material goods and fulfilling the need of purchasing.

Johanna is fully aware of the severity of the global financial crisis as she feels that it is “*impacting everyone*”, “*the whole world*” and “*we are all talking about it*”. However, she exhibits clear confusion when she attempts to measure its impact on her life. Although, as previously mentioned, she does not feel that it is affecting her right now “*money wise*”, she demonstrates a constant contradiction between saying that it does and does not influence her. In essence, the economic crisis may stop Johanna from progressing from a student to young adult in means of finding a job, however she has subliminally illustrated that she is not willing to alter her consumption behaviour that she is enjoying now.

In regards to her use of consumption objects she views them as fulfilling an aesthetic and pleasurable purpose rather than a utilitarian function.

J: “Yeah, I need them because I want them. If I see something I like then I just want to have it. And it is fun with trends because then you... mmm... it is like a way of revitalising yourself. When spring is coming up or new clothes or more colourful clothes that you would be able to feel. Like in the spring mood.”

Here, Johanna is transferring the meaning of fun to seeking out new trends through clothing objects.

She not only utilises consumption objects such as fashion to revitalise herself, but in doing this simultaneously imbues a lot of trust on the fashion industry to dictate her mood. Johanna's narrative of differentiation offers a personalized expression of Simmel's suggestion (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995:246) that an underlying motivation for fashion consciousness is a desire to sustain a sense of personal uniqueness in the "*relatively depersonalizing environment of modern social life*". Ultimately the fashion industry has a highly influential role on Johanna and her self-identity projects. Women's dress especially has been an indicator of one's socio-economic class and is therefore highly affecting the construction of the individual identity (Stalp, 2009).

Johanna does however attempt to distance herself from consumption society as she reveals that she is a "*spontaneous shopper*" and is not driven by brands and materialism.

J: "Because I work in a store, I get enough of that shopping mall environment. So when I buy stuff I just do it randomly, spontaneously. If I pass a store and I see something in the window then I go and buy it."

I: "So it doesn't matter then which brand it is?"

J: "Not really. Of course it matters to a certain extent but not that much. And I never do like what other people do like they go every Saturday to a shopping mall to buy certain stuff. I just buy when I like something I see. I never reflect upon why I do it."

Here, Johanna is attempting to demonstrate that she appreciates clothes for their visual design and quality as opposed to what brand they belong to or if they are supported by a persuasive communication campaign. As identified by Allen (2008) consumers tend to seek more emotional, rather than material forms of consumption which results in a demand to re-define and re-invent the environments they shop in. Consequently, Johanna's avoidance of the "*shopping mall environment*" is a further effort to demonstrate her distaste against materialist institutions. This however is called into question when she reveals that is influenced by window shopping.

In an attempt to further justify the market's lack of influence on her consumption behaviour, she reveals that she has a lot of clothes that are not branded at all.

J: "I think no one can really categorize me. I would say I am not a typical consumer, I am very particular in my tastes so it doesn't matter that there is a big campaign about something. If I think it is ugly I will never buy it. If I don't like a trend, I mean there are many trends going on right now and I don't like everything, I just pick things I like."

Clearly, Johanna is devoted to fashion trends however believes that by consuming these objects on her own terms it absolves her from any superficiality and meaninglessness that is connected to the material world. By not associating herself with a specific consumer category and arguing that brands do not understand her, she separates herself from the marketplace and its influence upon her. This desire to be unique is formulated in terms of an anti-conformist narrative that expresses a theme of autonomy and independence for Johanna. Emberley argues that this mythic idea of identity construction through the distinctiveness of one's consumption choices has long served as an encouraging and positive theme for mass-produced fashion goods (Thompson & Haytko, 1997:22). Ultimately however, this narrative demonstrates the tension between autonomy and conformity that fashion discourses moderates (ibid: 22). This disillusioned view of the market's influence on Johanna is then confirmed by her admittance that she is a fickle shopper and not brand loyal, which is a typical characteristic of the young and materialistic consumer of today, which she attempts to steer away from.

J: "I get sick of things quite easily. Yeah like when I go out I don't like to wear a dress more than two times then I am sick of."

I: "Yeah, and what do you do then with the dress when you are not wearing it anymore?"

J: "Well, it just hangs there. And maybe in two years time I find it fun again and then I would wear it sometime."

Here, Johanna illustrates that her appreciation for consumer goods is short lived and only temporarily fulfils her pleasure seeking needs. By being constantly up to date with fashion trends and advertising through internet blogs and working at a clothing store, Johanna is idealistic and naive about the material world's direct influence on her consumption behaviour.

She is heavily reliant on affordable brand's replication of luxury brand products that she aspires to purchase, which once again spurs her interaction with brands and their marketing efforts.

J: "Yeah if I see something that I like such as a Gucci dress that costs 10,000 sek then I can always go to H&M and Zara. They will do an exact copy of that for less so then I will get that one. And some stuff that I find really interesting, I can put a lot of money into it like a bag or to have the real thing I can do that as well. But then when I purchase something like that then of course I have to reflect upon it for while."

The fact that she admits that if she were to buy a more expensive luxury brand such as a Gucci handbag she would be able to satisfy this need with a little more thought and care, indicates that she can consume without boundaries as long as the need in her view is meaningful. The financial issue or pressure is not a deciding factor, it is the quality, design and cultural reflection of the high end product that she needs to examine. She aspires to purchase high end luxury brands however understands that for the lifestyle that she is living today, as a student, there is no expectation by society and her friends that requires her to be wearing designer fashion clothes. Thus, for her specific lifestyle as it stands, she has enough money to fulfil her desires and reiterate her profile as a student irrespective of the current economic situation.

I: "When you are spending time with them do you then discuss the economic crisis?"

J: "Yes, we talk about the work environment because that is such a big part out of my life right now. So of course we cover that topic a lot and also we will talk about it with my father as he is a journalist so obviously he is very into the news. Everyday the newspaper or on TV you hear about the economic crisis. You hear about how in the next year 12% of the people in Sweden will not have a job and stuff like that."

Johanna's perception of communicated messages by media is imbued with contradicting statements and is reflective of her overall search for an identity. Johanna is a young woman, who is in the midst of understanding of who she is and where she wants to be in life. Therefore, she is constantly seeking to construct an identity that would reflect where she ultimately aims to position herself in society. Interestingly, by doing so Johanna drifts in and out of contradicting feelings. These feelings are clearly determined by her practical understanding of the marketplace and its influential elements.

The economic crisis is a reoccurring topic in conversations with her immediate social surroundings. Johanna involves herself in the evaluation of media messages in an attempt to develop opinions about them. However, these opinions are ultimately subject to change and heavily determined by her process of establishing an identity. Importantly, due to the instability caused by the development process she is involved in, these messages are encoded and result in a contradictory and muddled perspective. She acknowledges a constant presence of the crisis in media communication and this exact presence leads her to inform herself about the topic and actively seek involvement. Therefore, her media consumption is illustrative of what Couldry (2008: 17) describes as “*troubled closeness*” in which the consumer engages with the media through the internet and national press.

Furthermore, this concept exemplifies the emergence of problems through the individual’s involvement with communicated messages (ibid: 17). However, the approach she displays in this involvement process is not interpretive. She aims to gain factual knowledge as she claims to understand how macroeconomics works. Johanna chooses not to analyse or critique medial messages as that would require her to form an in-depth and rather critical perception, a requirement that at this stage of her life she is not ready to fulfil. She constantly reminds us about the fact that she is not “*grown up*” yet and therefore allows to liberate herself from a set of opinion concepts, responsibility and judgement.

J: *“It doesn’t frighten me because I know in a couple of years it will be ok. But it is difficult to see, where it is heading. If it will be worse or it will be better or I mean, the public people of Sweden and another public person such as Obama of the US, they say that everything is shit and of course you as a consumer/person in real life you feel, you feel kinda hopeless basically.”*

I: *“Does it frighten you in some kind of a way?”*

J: *“It frightens me a little bit, but personally I know I will be fine and it’s not a big deal. I am frightened for the welfare of Sweden a little bit because they make it to such a huge thing and of course it is a huge thing.”*

Johanna is constantly involved in forming opinions about her external environment. This is demonstrated by her rather pragmatic attitude that she represents when asked about the economic crisis.

She considers media and the sender of medial messages as authoritative and therefore does not question their authenticity. Moreover, she takes the messages as a source for her development as an individual. In this respect, her sense-making and evolved meanings are vulnerable to redefinition and manipulation (Ringberga & Reihlenb, 2008).

By not being critical Johanna displays her open, but also restricted judgement of understanding the external environment. She views politicians as main decision makers and opinion leaders in the current society and therefore closely follows their overall outlook that affects society. However, Johanna contradicts herself as on the one hand she views the external environment as something remote that does not have any real influence on her life, but then at the same time uses the marketplace as a setting her individual life context is situated in. This becomes apparent as she refers to the media as “*they*”, however simultaneously achieves context through implementing these messages into “*real life*” in which a rather distant approach becomes visible. Her curious, open self however forces her to weaken these boundaries and let information manipulate her (ibid, 2008) which consequently affects her individual life context. This push and pull strategy is just another aspect of Johanna trying to create identity and make sense of her life in an overall societal context.

I: *“So would you say you are well informed about the economic crisis?”*

J: *“Yeah, I feel like I cannot be better informed because it is everywhere, even on the posters in the city or in the shops.”*

I: *“What is the difference between this crisis and other economic crisis?”*

J: *“The difference is that everyone is saying this is the worst crisis since war, one is saying it is the mortgage crisis and that the credit crisis will emerge out of this. I don’t know if it’s getting blown out of proportion.”*

Here, Johanna reveals how her perspective is highly influenced by others. By referring to “*everyone*” she demonstrates her understanding of society in the context of the crisis. She merges her individual identity into a societal context by adopting the overall perspective that is presented through media.

Interestingly, she exposes a careful and slightly critical stance by recognizing a potential “*blown out of proportion*” perception that is communicated. Therefore, Johanna considers this societal perspective and takes it on to form her identity. However, her forming phase leads her into a rather unstable mindset and therefore is constantly represented as *identity under construction*. Cherrier (2006:520) explains this with the understanding that identity is “*processual*” and therefore involved in a process of construction rather than a finished concept.

I: “*Do you believe the news is sent out by the media landscape?*”

J: “*I go with the flow. I don’t have a straight forward opinion, such as NO or Yes. When I see the news I go with it but don’t know what to believe.*”

Johanna’s overall approach can therefore be interpreted as rather floating in its nature. As previously identified, due to her unstable and not yet developed identity, she prefers to not form a solid opinion. Her knowledge about the economy that has evolved during her studies however has led her to be critical. It is due to her understanding of society and influential opinion leaders who shape societal thinking that she displays a constant battle of merging pragmatic perspectives and interpretive thinking processes. Johanna considers media as an aspect of society that purposively aims to inform people but “*... makes people scared...*”. She acknowledges the power of influence but contradicts herself by reconstructing and reproducing the messages (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Consequently, she refers to media as an institution of “*prophecy*”, which paradoxically is where she obtains most of her information about the crisis from.

I: “*But what about the consumer, do we then spend more money?*”

J: “*No, but just keep spending like you are used to... because if we don’t then it will become worse. That’s the thing because I am a business student so I know how macro economics works and how micro works so of course we should not care about what the news says about the crisis and everything. Because everything is like a prophecy, if you say something then people will believe it then it will be like that... but if you try to not think about too much.*”

Evidently, this contradiction further typifies Johanna’s overall search for identity.

She views media as an informative source of knowledge and almost without any evaluation she chooses to take on a vast variety of messages as her leading guide in the opinion making process. Even though she attempts to filter these messages she steers herself into a conflict that involves beliefs, construction and positioning of self- identity (Cherrier, 2007) and influential opinions that she is exposed to in her life context. Rebelliously, she then compares media to an institution that creates predictions based on visions and that are rather interpretive in its nature, and therefore not pragmatic at all. She even offers solutions that reflect this conflict. By advocating that people “...*shouldn't think about it too much*”, she ultimately aims to build a distance from this movement, in which if successfully implemented, she is able to form perspectives based on her individual foundation rather than the media.

4.5 Consumer's Meaning Construction

With a sufficient variety of consumption stories from each three respondents and the consequent formulation of their specific meanings attached to consumption in the current crisis, we will now progress to cluster recurrent meaningful themes on a nomethetic level. By identifying patterns and differences sought across all transcripts and are rendered in emic terms, we have recognised five main themes. Although each of the three women hold rather distinct views, it is this identification of their true meaning constructs that we are striving to identify. These themes have enabled us to arrive with a rich description of consumer's meanings attached to objects in a time of crisis.

4.5.1 The Meaning of a Position in the Crisis- *Where am I now?*

By examining each consumer closely it becomes apparent that all three women hold a differing view of the crisis and their position within it.

Lisbeth, in the face of hopelessness and a society met by materialism and meaninglessness, detaches herself via the avenue of consumption which is indicative of a strategy of resistance (Cherrier, 2009). By isolating herself from the destructiveness of society, she not only frees herself from the marketer's control but also allows her to critique society from an outsider's perspective. The economic crisis for Lisbeth is another example of the archaic nature of the world and further prompts her to remove herself from the marketplace. An isolation process (Ang, 2000) becomes therefore visible. She views herself as a sort of social and political commentator of the crisis which is somewhat unfeasible due to her lack of true involvement in the market system. Furthermore, it exemplifies the concept of the "*political consumer*" described by Cherrier (2009:186) in which the consumer considers media as "*poison spreading*" institution in order to express their anti-consumption attitude. By isolating herself from the market's communicated messages, Lisbeth aims to strongly resist social control. Cherrier (2009) argues that consumers who isolate themselves in the way that Lisbeth does are enabled to construct personalised meanings in their consumption by negating commercial invasions.

Although, Maria shows a detachment response as well when attempting to position herself within the crisis contexts, it is not as dramatic as Lisbeth. For Maria, she chooses to remove herself from the economic crisis phenomenon in general as opposed to removing herself from consumption society as a whole like Lisbeth. The ways in which she does this is to view consumption as a purely "*functional*" act and consequently seeks experiences that are "*affordable*". She acknowledges the crisis and sympathises with people's stories of hardships however prefers to observe from a safe distance and focus on her own family's financial situation.

Alternatively, Johanna feels no direct affect or responsibility to society as whole in light of the economic crisis. She does however feel strong emotional ties to being part of the young generation but in no way links this to the economic crisis or how this sense of belonging could be used to aid the current situation. Her consumption reflects this confusion and displays an attempt of integration (Holt, 1995) in which a constant search for her position within the marketplace and its influence upon her becomes evident.

Comparatively, Lisbeth and Maria are confident with their view of the marketplace and their identified position within it. Johanna has not established a position from which she wants to view the world from. It is because of her lack of responsibilities, lifestyle and age that she has the ability to move rather lackadaisically through different perspectives. She has the freedom and fun loving spirit to do so and has the capacity to choose when she wants the marketplace to influence her and when she does not. As Johanna predicts that the economic crisis is going to improve in a year and will not affect Sweden as much as other countries, she does not feel that this then warrants her to change her consumption behaviour or position in society. Unlike Maria and Lisbeth who talk about other people who are affected by the crisis, Johanna does not mention other people who are being directly affected. One could say that Johanna is living inside a rather ‘sheltered bubble’ which evidently displays a rather detached approach (Ang, 2000) where the only association of the economic crisis she has is with her job goals.

4.5.2 The Meaning of Needs and Wants in the Crisis- *What do I want and need now?*

The re-evaluation of consumer’s needs and wants in a crisis situation is found to be typical especially when the crisis is of a financial nature (Gajewski, 1992). For all three consumers however, it has been found that their needs and wants are being shaped by their construction of identity, their search for “*existential authenticity*” (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006:300) and the relationship with the marketplace more generally as opposed to the current economic situation.

Whilst Maria and Lisbeth acknowledge that the economic crisis has made life more financially strained in terms of job opportunities and pressures, there is no overt suggestion that their consumption behaviour has altered dramatically in the past year.

Maria's consumption behaviour is shaped by needs and not desires. Desires and pleasure-seeking through consumption objects has developed an unobtainable nature for her. She closely associates concepts of needs and wants with her individual identity as a middle aged woman, however due to her role of being the focal point of her family means that she now sees wants and desires purely through a group mentality. In this respect, commodities are used as cultural resources to express her sub-cultural identity and relationship to social order (Stalp, 2009). When discussing consumption activities, Maria's constant use of "*security*", "*what is best for my family*" and "*protection*" are underlying characteristics that dictate her needs and wants and are therefore reflecting the symbolic resources her consumption is shaped by (Holt, 1995).

For Lisbeth, wants and desires are connected with a world outside of the current societal setting that she is living in. For her, the current world's needs and wants are warped as she strongly believes that physiological needs are the predominant needs that have to be met. A demand of the reformation of societal values in which members of society are required to emancipate themselves from the extant consumption society therefore becomes apparent (Kozinets, 2002 & 2004; Cherrier, 2009). She criticises that the priorities of Maslow's hierarchy of five needs are out of sync with what society should be projecting as important. She sees the economic crisis however as an event that can spur a re-examination of needs overall.

Alternatively, Johanna identifies her sense of self through the exploration of wants. Her classification of what is a want and what is a need is intertwined as she actively transforms wants into needs because she desires it at that particular moment.

This is reflective of her idealistic view of what she 'needs' as she displays more interest in pleasure seeking and aesthetically pleasing objects which moreover highlights the attachment of her emotions to consumption objects (Holt, 1995; (Venkatesh, Laurie & Meamber, 2009) as opposed to functional meanings. There is, however a constant battle of positioning her self-identity between needs and wants. Her life without responsibility is shaped by a pure focus on desires. Unlike Maria and Lisbeth, who comprehend the true meaning of needs and associate it with functional objectives, Johanna either due to lack of responsibility or care does not appreciate this meaning.

4.5.3 The Meaning of Identity in the Crisis- *Who am I now?*

Consumer's identity construction is continually present no matter if there is a crisis situation occurring or not, however it is interesting to examine whether or not the event is having any bearing on consumer's identity formation.

Maria is in a constant battle between her individual identity, which she associates to her past and her group identity as a mother or wife in the nuclear family form. Due to practical responsibilities such as finances and day-to-day necessities, her group identity is taking precedence over herself as an individual and critically highlights her social identity and social categorisation (Cherrier, 2006).

Different from Lisbeth, Maria is insecure about her formed identity as she is in constant search for affirmation and compliments from surrounding people. Although, there is this insecurity and dissatisfaction with what her identity has become, she does not change her consumption behaviour in order to test new ways of meaning. It is if she is inside a cocoon, although claustrophobic and uneventful at times, it also provides functional warmth and is secure. On the other hand, Lisbeth is convinced and feels strongly about her formed identity. She does not feel at all as a part of society and rather has the goal of sticking to herself. She therefore expresses her identity not through consumption but through her love of animals and feels best understood by them and nature.

This highlights that Lisbeth's concept of self is isolated from society and extended through anti-consumption objects that deserve her emotional attention e.g. her horses (Belk, 1998). She considers the crisis as tightening her financial situation, which ultimately affects her relationship with her animals and her ability to sustain her farm and horses, which is at the very essence of her consumption identity.

Johanna, unlike Lisbeth, is still searching for her identity and is therefore on a constant journey. Her consumption somewhat illustrates an emotional state (Holt, 1995) which is made visible through her spontaneous and theatrical consumption behaviour. Unlike Lisbeth, who is very cynical of the marketplace dictating people's emotions and personalities and which is as such reflective of an overall consumer trend (Pettigrew, 2001), Johanna shows a naivety towards this and is therefore easily influenced and more opportunistic to seek objects.

4.5.4 The Meaning of Medial Messages in the Crisis- *What and who do I listen to now?*

The interviewed consumers recognised a strong presence of mass mediated messages presenting the current economic crisis. All of them are therefore somewhat exposed to messages and have established their own filtering techniques that enable them to associate these messages within their individual life context (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). However, the deliberately selected distance or closeness to the media (Couldry, 2008) reflects the level of involvement they have with the current economic situation.

Lisbeth perceives the entire media landscape with its messages, which are interpreted mostly in a negative manner, rather overwhelming and described by Cherrier (2009:186) as "*poison spreading*". As a consequence, she excludes herself from the world as much as possible. By closing and isolating her own life, she is able to create a reality that is outside and rather protected from these messages. The reality she creates, can be understood by using the metaphor of a 'house' and is aimed to create a social space that is ultimately detached from market influences (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995).

She feels protected and completely in control of external influences however, from time to time she opens the door and lets messages in. These messages are then interpreted from her protected context she has situated herself in. Immediately by evaluating these messages, she feels that the world, with its negativity and senselessness, is entering her sanity-based created reality which is clean and meaningful.

Johanna also chooses to allow media messages to reach her but for her the “truth” is revealed by choosing a variety of media. Johanna claims to have a daily routine in which she actively gets in touch with the media world. TV, Internet, newspapers and magazines are on her daily menu in order to satisfy her hunger for facts and knowledge so that she can finally arrive at an opinion only just to reform it again tomorrow. Maria also wants to involve herself and allows messages to be received however the encoding and filtering of these messages are not her focal point. Constant life pressures dictate her routines and schedules and force her to prioritise. Therefore, Maria is only able to achieve a limited intake of these messages. Due to this restriction and her awareness of the in-depth approach that is necessary to achieve what she identifies as acceptable and thorough knowledge, she chooses the “*satisfied distance*” approach (Couldry, 2008:19) and isolates herself from the media communicated phenomenon. She acknowledges its presence and receives messages but only to release these immediately after and not dwell on them. By doing that, she ensures that her life is positioned from a safe distance to the crisis. Almost like viewing it as a contagious disease, she tries to avoid more touch-points with then media so that she is not affected.

Therefore, the media channels are differentiating the consumers from each other and the interpretation of messages is highly determined by their individual life context.

4.5.5 The Meaning of a Response to the Crisis- *How do I cope now?*

In the individual case analysis it becomes apparent that all consumers are acknowledging an impact of the current economic crisis on society. However, the magnitude of this impact and consequently the sense-making strategies appear to differ significantly. Lisbeth's view demonstrates a demand to reform the existing society in which ultimately societal values are newly established (Kozinets, 2002). Her mindset reflects a need for a separation approach so that "we" can restructure the beliefs and values that society is currently based upon. This *separation approach* needs to be understood as a strategy in which society disconnects its individual aspects and establishes new meanings.

Different from Lisbeth, Maria promotes a *melting approach* in which we support and help each other. By doing this, a stronger unity is formed that can battle the influencing conditions. Both views are based on the different identities and life contexts these consumers are situated in. Lisbeth purely develops perceptions by looking from her point of view as an individual and how this differs to society as a whole. This view demonstrates her stubbornness in which she is convinced that the only strategy that can be successful is to create what she refers to as a "new world". It is the refocusing and emancipation (Kozinets, 2002) of the individual self that then needs to be re-implemented into society so that an overall society structure can be revolutionized and a new equilibrium can be reached.

Maria however, strongly determined by her group member identity makes sense of the crisis through a "we" thinking/ collaborative approach. Therefore, she implements her solutions into this exact context. Maria's approach reflects further her constant aim to re-categorise herself in a societal context (Cherrier, 2006) in order to achieve belonging with a group. Johanna on the other hand, appears to aim for individualism in society. Different to Lisbeth however, Johanna acknowledges the concept of society as whole in her own life context. She offers solutions that show characteristics of the *melting approach* but the result of this strategy is ultimately to produce separation.

This separation is defined through the generational context Johanna is situating herself in, the generation that “*wants it all*”. This metaphor however, in Johanna’s view reveals that not everyone can have everything. As a result, we have to fight and compete and consequently ‘separate’ or distinguish ourselves from each other. Interestingly, the generational context is not as visible in the case of Maria or Lisbeth. Both of them have a much stronger position that is embedded in their individual context and based more on experiences. It is however critical to identify that all of the consumers show an appeal to either the *melting* or the *separation* approach. In order to make sense of the crisis they advocate one or the other as a solution development tool. Therefore, by considering these response strategies and the attempt to foresee the outcome of the implemented strategy, they demonstrate the identification of a need to deal with the crisis and a confirmation that the crisis is influencing them in some form or another.

4.6 Reflections on the Meaning Construction

Our general analysis demonstrates how consumers in the current economic crisis appropriate messages of consumption to fit the circumstances of their immediate social setting and their sense of personal history, interests and life goals. Whilst all of them do this in different ways, which consequently forms different interpretive meanings of the crisis, they all have a thread of commonality in the way they interpret these messages and the techniques used. Whether it is through constructing meaning of the crisis through their classification of wants and needs or what messages and institutions they choose to decode meanings of the crisis through, they all in some sense or another, advertently or inadvertently, draw upon similar frames of reference.

The fact that all three of the consumers illustrate differing views of their position in society in relation to the crisis or employ distinctive coping strategies, is indicative of the danger to generalise the impacts of the global crisis and its influence on consumer’s meaning construction and appropriation via consumption.

Ultimately, the participants use the economic crisis and its discourse as a way in which to communicate their dominant meanings and values they perceive to exist in their specific social spheres or society at large. In all three cases, crisis discourse becomes a means by which the consumer aligns themselves with certain cultural viewpoints whilst resisting or subverting others.

CHAPTER FIVE

5.1 Marketers in the Crisis

Throughout the marketer interviews we discovered a common thread in perceptions of the consumer in today's crisis and the external resources marketers are relying on to obtain information concerning the crisis and consumers. In relation to the marketers perceived role in the economic crisis and their consequent response strategies, a wide range of tactics were revealed throughout the interviews which were highly dependent on the specific profession that the marketer represented. Despite representing different fields within the marketing community and therefore different orientations and objectives, ultimately we found that the marketers share common goals in the current economic crisis. All marketer participants ultimately returned to the notion that they are there to aid the consumer by encouraging constant dialogue and relationship building and hope to simultaneously capitalise on the crisis event to get closer to the consumer. As such we have identified six areas which illustrate the commonalities and differences that the marketing community holds.

5.1.1 Who is the Consumer Today?

The overall perspective of the consumer, according to the marketing professionals, can be summarised by two main aspects. Firstly, the consumer in the current crisis can be portrayed as cautious as they not only tailor their consumption according to their financial circumstances but also develop response strategies that take a longer term perspective (Emery, 2009; Palsson, 2009; Kähler, 2009; Turnbull, 2009; Petrucci, 2009). Overall, the marketers believe that the consumer feels uncertain, is risk averse and appears to be fearful about the future, characteristics that have also been identified in previous crises (Ang, 2000 & 2001; Gajewski, 1992).

Secondly, all marketers share the view that the consumer is more educated, sceptical and curious, which supports the understanding of the emergence of a new consumer (Holt, 2002; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). This trend, although evident in the current crisis situation, is rather enhanced by the information that is readily available to the consumer especially through online channels. It is not only the fact that information is available but also that there is an increase in demand for information by the consumer. Therefore, the need of the consumer to be highly informed by the service or product they are planning to purchase has increased. Interestingly, *IKEA*'s Global Online Content Manager, Henrik Palsson (2009) argues that this trend has been observed for a long period of time, however has been enhanced by this crisis as he argues that the "*crisis is accelerating this change in the consumer...*". Similarly, Noel Turnbull (2009), representative of the public relations perspective, argues that "*...consumers are taking more control over their economic lives*". This development supports Palsson's (2009) view that consumers are becoming more educated and taking charge of their situation. As the crisis hit rather unexpectedly, Turnbull (2009) further reveals that consumers now aim to be better prepared so that they "*...don't get caught ever again.*"

All marketing participants argue that the rise of unemployment has had a major impact on consumption during the economic crisis and has affected all age groups and social classes (Emery, 2009; Palsson, 2009; Kähler, 2009; Turnbull, 2009; Petrucci, 2009). By losing their jobs or at least the perceived job instability, household expenditure has experienced major adjustments and consequently affects consumption during a crisis (Zurawacki & Braidor, 2004; Ang, 2000). As there is less money available consumers are now aiming to spend smart and strategically in order to survive these hard economic times. The consumption strategies reveal a more open consumer with a higher willingness to switch to generic brands, a development that has also been observed in previous crises (Zurawacki & Braidor, 2004; Ang, 2000 & 2001; Gajewski, 1992). Advertising manager Jane Emery (2009) argues that if the consumer has an established emotional connection to a brand, the usage rate however will remain the same. This re-evaluative process met by consumer's uncertainty has a significant impact towards the loyalty to brands as price increases in its importance.

This development has also been identified by Emery (2009) in that “...consumers will take the lowest priced one, unless a brand has connected with them in some way”.

The marketing professionals also highlight that consumers are sharing more information during the current crisis (Palsson, 2009; Kähler, 2009; Turnbull, 2009). Consumers talk about their experiences with products and brands and consequently influence each other based on these information exchanges. Petrucci (2009) identifies the middle age consumer as especially becoming more proactive in the crisis. As the impact felt in this age group is quite significant in terms of job loss, loss of savings and investments and the affects on their immediate social environment, Petrucci (2009) observes an overall “*cutting mode*” with this consumer. Extravagant or overindulgent consumption are also being frowned upon by consumers. Turnbull (2009) views that society overall is moving away from conspicuous consumption “...as this appears to be frivolous and insensitive given that there are so many people who have lost their jobs”. Interestingly, the decrease of “*conspicuous consumption*” and impulse purchasing is a phenomenon that reoccurs in economic crises (Ang, 2000 & 2001).

Marketers have also voiced that consumers are recreating their situation by re-establishing their lifestyles. According to Turnbull (2009) there is noticeable change in the consumption of Generation Y as they are questioning their expenses and adjusting their lifestyles. Petrucci (2009) however reveals that the younger generation will only continue to reevaluate their spending if the crisis has a lasting impact such as continuing for more than a couple of years. She argues (2009) that because the younger generation have the majority of their life and earning potential ahead of them, if the crisis lasts only a few years, their lifestyle and changed consumption behaviour will be short-lived. Furthermore, Turnbull (2009) argues that there is an overall trend that demonstrates a shift in the consumer’s attitude as “... it has almost become cool not to be a spender”. This development is supported by consumer’s aim to re-evaluate their needs and wants in a crisis (Gajewski, 1992). The overall question that consumers pose now is if they really need certain consumption items.

Therefore, activities including eating out, travelling or purchasing luxurious products are re-considered and according to Petrucci (2009) adjusted to a new priority understanding as “...consumers when they hit this economic wall they stop and they say there are not that many things I really need”.

More generally Petrucci (2009) argues that there is a “*turning point in consumption*” developing spurred by the economic crisis, as consumers are re-evaluating their needs and wants in order to re-establish their lifestyles and stabilise their financial situation. Petrucci (2009) states that “*hard realities can permanently alter the way someone thinks*”. In her opinion, consumers are going to change to more conservative and less materialistic consumption behaviour. Furthermore, Palsson (2009) argues that consumers in the current economic crisis are involved in an “*evolutionary process of sorts*” which results in a more inward looking attitude.

5.1.2 What Information Resources are Marketers Relying on?

The marketing community illustrates that they are reliant on a wide array of information resources in order to frame their view of the economic crisis and more importantly inform and learn how consumers are reacting and feeling about the situation. In general the marketing community has expressed that they rely on a mixture of sponsored market research reports, general industry publications and professional trade magazines as their main sources of information (Emery, 2009; Palsson, 2009; Kähler, 2009; Turnbull, 2009; Petrucci, 2009). In terms of keeping up-to-date with current economic developments concerning the crisis, all marketers utilise online news publications.

The level of awareness and engagement with external resources to gain more information about the consumer in crisis is disparate and dependent on profession. Petrucci (2009) for instance illustrates high engagement with external resources such as her daily tracking of online consumer behaviour surveys as well as reading opinionative pieces.

This detailed knowledge of the crisis is reflective however of her professional role as a branding consultant and the responsibility to her clients to be aware of all areas of their target audience. Similar to Petrucci, Turnbull (2009) also uses direct information from his clients to form a professional opinion concerning the crisis. One of his clients, a major Australian Bank, recently identified through market research that consumers want more control over their financial situation through convenience and stability and therefore re-launched their online financial planning and budgeting tool.

From a client perspective, Palsson (2009) reveals that he relies upon external consultants for information concerning consumers and the current economic climate. He argues that media agencies are more “*proactive*” and alert in delivering information to brands and therefore there is a “*shift of listening*” more to them. He attests that he has experienced a shift from relying solely on advertising consultants to media agencies who conduct studies on consumer behaviour and target audience clustering. Alternatively, advertising agencies rely heavily on independent consumer research to provide information about consumer behaviour in the economic crisis. Emery (2009) reveals that her agency is currently in the midst of completing the *Eye on Australia* study which provides insights of the mindset of Australians. Instead of focusing on external sources such as advertising consumer research, Kähler (2009) admits that SCA focuses on internal sources such sale figures and quantitative reports to educate themselves about their consumer in the current economic crisis.

5.1.3 What is the Marketer’s Role in the Crisis?

The shared perception of the marketer’s role in the current crisis is a position that stems from honesty and genuine concern for consumers (Emery, 2009; Palsson, 2009; Kähler, 2009; Turnbull, 2009; Petrucci, 2009). The marketing community, whether it is from the client or agency perspective, view that they as a brand or company, have an inherent responsibility to their consumer in this time of crisis. This responsibility however differs in scope and orientation as it is dependent on what area within the marketing field the perspective represents.

Both *IKEA* and *SCA*, who represent the client side of the marketers, illustrate that although both emphasize a strong and honest commitment to their consumers, the way in which they communicate this is dissimilar. Kähler (2009) understands that all brands need to be “*prudent*” in the current economic crisis, however argues that because the sales volume of *SCA* has not been directly affected by the economic crisis, their role to the consumer has not changed. He reveals that the brand’s responsibility ‘...*will and has always been working on relationship building and long term investment in current and new consumers*’ and to provide products to the consumer in an “*affordable way*”. This aspect appears to be critical as consumers in an economic crisis have been identified as more price wary (Ang, 2000). In this sense, Kähler (2009) is inadvertently revealing that the brand is being an aid for the consumer however it is clear that *SCA* is not using the economic crisis in any way to reassert their position in the market or acknowledging that their consumers may be changing their behaviours in light of the crisis event.

IKEA, on the other hand is clearly using the crisis as a way in which to accelerate the already identified weakness in their brand positioning strategy. Palsson (2009) discloses that *IKEA*, in the last few years, has swayed away from its roots and original soul of the company, and has become “...*more corporate, more authoritative, and trying to sell and push solutions on to the consumer*”. He advises that the brand now needs to revert back to their original positioning strategies and the way they talk to their target. Thus, the crisis in essence is being used as a prong to refocus *IKEA*’s positioning towards being more “*educational*” and the change of tonal shift from “*we know what you should do..*” to “*we can help you in finding your way, if you are interested in some tips we have the products for you*” (Palsson, 2009). Maintaining and increasing quality perception is another critical role and responsibility undertaken by the brand in the current economic crisis. Palsson (2009) views that alongside the economic crisis the online boom has played a redefining role in marketing as there is a copious amount of information readily available for consumers to look up about *IKEA* products. Palsson (2009) posits that open dialogue with the consumer is critical as well relationship marketing in a time of crisis and moving forward. Brands need to be more assertive in listening to their audiences and he sees that the crisis has accelerated this pressure to progress marketing strategies.

Public relations agencies demonstrate a clear and defined role in the crisis as an aid for companies' to manage their reputation and assess risk in these uncertain times. Turnbull (2009) argues that public relation firms' main objective is to help clients sell their products and services "*...in a responsible way*" and "*act as an environmental monitor bringing consumer's views and opinions to the inside of company*". Furthermore, he reveals that they have the responsibility to "*...act as a corporate conscience, ensuring that companies behave responsibly and ethically as well as communicate in a transparent, honest and open manner*". Ultimately, he expresses that the more relevant companies appear to the consumer, the more loyal they will be to them. Similarly, advertising agencies consider the economic crisis as presenting huge opportunities to increase their understanding of the consumer and the ability to tap into insights as the consumer is changing. Emery (2009) claims that "*...in particular women are thinking differently – it's about value, not just saving money*". She also shares the view of public relation firms that "*...you also have to be transparent and authentic in communications*".

From a strategic branding perspective, Petrucci (2009) provides a more analytical account of the marketing community's role generally and her role specifically as a strategic consultant. From the position as an observer, Petrucci (2009) criticises that components of the marketing community are "*self interested*". Whilst advertising agencies "*...are trying to stay alive*" and public relations agencies "*...are trying to get brands to put their best foot forward*", she argues that many marketing institutions are in "*a very conflicted position*". She reveals that specifically in the US there is a tenuous and delicate balance between serving the client and simultaneously keeping the company afloat in the economic crisis. When considering her professional role in the economic crisis, Petrucci (2009) holds numerous viewpoints. Firstly, she perceives her relationship with companies as a "*counsellor*" and "*strategic advisor*". She discloses that many of her clients do not know how to handle this time of economic uncertainty and because a lot of them are male CEOs of major brands they do not feel comfortable or are too proud to admit that they need external help. Besides examining the internal make-up of a company, Petrucci (2009) also adopts a role as seeking to find out what is happening to their clients particular target group in the current economic crisis.

Thus, all perspectives of the marketing community share a common interest in that their role in the crisis is centred upon continuing dialogue and relationships with their consumers or clients, as well as establishing a role of being *the friend* or *advisor*. Although external consultancies to brands and companies adopt a stronger communicative position, brands comprehend the necessity of constant dialogue and are therefore refocusing their strategies from product-driven to consumer-driven strategies (Pettigrew, 2001:3).

5.1.4 What are Marketer's Response Strategies in the Crisis?

If we review the current response strategies that marketers are implementing in the economic crisis, we can see that their tactical and strategic decisions reflect their role undertaken in the crisis, perception of the consumer and their classification of the crisis as an opportunity or threat.

Petrucci (2009) reveals that response strategies, such as repositioning messages that emphasize value, need to be directly communicated to the consumer in the current economic crisis. Kähler (2009) also emphasises a strong value message, as he conveys that the main response strategy for *SCA* is “...to work even harder” to align the perception of the products' value and price with the consumer. In order to heavily promote and drive price in the marketplace, *SCA* are not only using tactical promotions such as rebates, coupons and discounts, but Kähler (2009) also reveals that a stronger focus is on maintaining a dialogue between existing consumers and future consumers. On the other hand, Palsson (2009) reveals that *IKEA* are “...trying to steer away from recession focused messages” as the company would feel “...a bit dishonest to play on the financial crises like other brands are currently doing”. Instead, *IKEA* is trying to reinforce through all communication material that the “home is important, it has always been important, it will always be important”. Palsson (2009) discloses that in an “...upturn consumers want status and in a downturn it is more about being true to yourself”. *IKEA* therefore wants to reinforce this individuality and the brand value that “...it is about you, your situation and what your individual lifestyle is like”.

A strong price point is also associated with this response strategy of repositioning in the current economic crisis.

Advertisers have a similar view on response strategies as Emery (2009) highlights that *“...every claim has to be consistent and real, all the way through the consumer experience”*. Emery (2009) makes reference to one of the agencies’ major clients, *Procter and Gamble*, as exemplary of this integrated strategy as the brand uses the philosophy of *“the first moment of truth begins when the consumer picks up their product from the shelf and the second when they use it at home”*. Ultimately, she expresses that it is the role of the advertising agency, as the message sender, to *“...not just push product information out there but to engage people in dialogue”*.

Public relations agencies provide tactical and more concrete ways in which to increase loyalty and trust amongst consumers and businesses in the current economic climate. Turnbull (2009) reveals that the main response strategy for practitioners is to *“...advise clients to develop relationships with their target markets so that they develop a sense of attachment and remain loyal to them and spend money when better times return”*. The second response strategy is to assist companies in achieving a strong and reputable message of trust and value that is seen throughout all communication materials. Turnbull (2009) emphasizes that *“the more value or educational information you give out, the more you come across as genuine. People also want to know your perspective on issues, rather than just information about a product”*. This latter point is critical, especially in times of crisis, as companies need to not only push their product or service offering but also illustrate that they are *“understanding, honest and responsible”* about external issues (Turnbull, 2009). He also recommends various tactical response strategies that represent new opportunities to connect with the customer and build loyalty such as social networks, advising companies to make better use of their employees as ambassadors and scanning message boards and responding to consumer’s questions. Ultimately, Turnbull (2009) argues that in the current financial crisis *“...it is a bad time to be sending messages, instead the emphasis should be on dialogue and handling the customer with more care, with personalised and sensitive communications”*.

5.1.5 Is the Crisis an Opportunity or Threat?

The marketing community in general considers the current economic crisis as an opportunity for brands and businesses not only in terms of improving relationships with consumers, but also more broadly forcing them to refocus and realign their marketing objectives and goals (Emery, 2009; Palsson, 2009; Turnbull, 2009; Petrucci, 2009).

Petrucci (2009) argues that the economic crisis has forced many companies to re-evaluate their business models and objectives. She reveals that “...*companies have a chance to shake out their inefficiencies*” which she predicts to contribute to stronger industries in general. Kähler (2009) shares this opinion as he argues that if *SCA* can position itself positively in the market in these tough economic times then the brand “...*has a good platform for the future*”. From a consumer perspective, Petrucci (2009) also considers the crisis as an opportunity as she argues that people need to be more responsible with their expenses such as saving money for retirement and avoiding bankruptcy. The crisis, in her opinion, has compelled society to critically evaluate consumerism and “...*spending beyond one’s needs*”. This reflects the overall trend that consumers tend to be more emotional than materialistic in their consumption (Allen, 2008). Petrucci (2009) explains that this change in consumer behavior and cut back on spending should not be considered as a negative, rather as a positive development where a new, more educated consumer shall emerge, where they “...*take responsibility for what happens to them*”.

Turnbull (2009) also views the crisis as an opportunity especially for small businesses. In these financially strained times, Turnbull (2009) argues that lower priced or discount value brands are now getting the chance to capture the consumer’s attention. For instance, he reveals that “...*stores like K-mart in Australia are more appealing to today’s everyday customer as their mindset has adopted a ‘saving money’ strategy*”. Furthermore, small businesses have the ability to increase brand loyalty and market share because consumers demand more personalised service and trustworthiness. Turnbull (2009) explains that this development provides an opportunity for PR as they can assist smaller companies to boost their media coverage and gain consumer attention.

Another opportunity he perceives is for financial institutions to better explain economic information and educate today's consumer.

The changes in consumer behaviour, due to the economic crisis such as 'cocooning' (Rowe, 2000) where people are preferring to stay at home and watch television instead of eating out or going out to see a movie, has proved a great opportunity for *IKEA*. Not only has Palsson (2009) revealed that the lifestyle shift has stimulated and supported *IKEA*'s products and services, but it also provides an opportunity for the brand to re-emphasize that they can help consumers make their 'home' more comfortable and a place of haven in these insecure times. Thus, the marketing community adopts both a business and consumer orientation in terms of assessing whether the crisis is an opportunity or threat.

5.1.6 Why is this Crisis so Different?

All marketing participants have identified that the current economic crisis is global in its impact and therefore has had a significant affect on the consumer worldwide (Emery, 2009; Palsson, 2009; Kähler, 2009; Turnbull, 2009; Petrucci, 2009). Interestingly, all marketing professionals have identified a change in the media that has been exposed in the crisis which makes this event distinctive of past crisis situations (Emery, 2009; Palsson, 2009; Kähler, 2009; Turnbull, 2009; Petrucci, 2009). Overall, media has become more pervasive and sensationalistic when treating the current economic crisis. The altered way that messages are now presented to the consumer critically highlights the influential nature the media has on the consumer. Ultimately, the marketing community argues that the crisis is reported to have had a global impact and is therefore affecting the world economy in a dimension that has never been experienced before (Emery, 2009; Palsson, 2009; Kähler, 2009; Turnbull, 2009; Petrucci, 2009). As there is an overwhelming amount of messages targeted towards the consumer, marketers have acknowledged that they need to find new ways that are designed to reach the consumer. Not only has the vast amount of messages but also the consumer's interpretive strategies led to an increase of discussion amongst the marketing community (Ringberga & Reihlenb, 2008).

Palsson (2009) argues that people have become more selective and critical about the messages they are receiving and therefore the marketing industry needs to adjust their strategies accordingly. This consumer development, of a rather selective and critical perspective on medial messages, reflects the overall trend of consumers becoming more educated and knowledgeable (Holt, 2002).

An interesting aspect highlighted by Turnbull (2009) is human behaviour in the crisis as he makes reference to the "*animal spirit*" which identifies human irrational actions that become apparent in crisis times. He argues that "*...the major difference of this crisis is the shift in what Keynes calls 'animal spirit'*". Turnbull (2009) argues that media is not only causing fear but is also creating tinges of panic in the consumer that have never been demonstrated in previous economic downturns. He attests that the media's negative portrayal of the crisis has not only exaggerated the effects of the crisis in order to "*make news headlines*" but also has "*lessened the confidence amongst consumers to go out and spend money*". Turnbull (2009) reveals that "*much of the reporting has been irresponsible and has contributed to the downturn itself*". Therefore, the severity of the crisis is amplified due to the relentless media coverage.

Petrucci (2009) argues that the trend of time poverty is becoming escalated in the crisis and is another reason why the crisis is unique. This trend, in her opinion, is demanding media to become terse and consequently has led communication strategies to be "*dumbed down*". A direct result of this strategy is often fear, as information is not presented in a factual way but sensationalistic and in an attention-seeking manner. Furthermore, Petrucci (2009) reveals that there is infact a consumer "*that is interested in being more serious*" and demanding greater factual messages. However, due to the changing nature of media there are people that have simply stopped watching television "*...as there is nothing worth watching anymore*", which Petrucci (2009) considers highly hazardous.

From a retailer perspective, Palsson (2009) perceives the crisis as an acceleration device that makes people work harder and re-evaluate their status quo in which the media takes a large role in this acceleration process.

He claims that if a company is able to build a stronger relationship with the consumer, the rewards are far greater. This, in his view, is a positive outcome of the strong media presence in the crisis. Thus, if a company takes advantage of the media as message transmitter then they can express honesty to the consumer in order to achieve a high level of transparency. Palsson (2009) identifies this as a strategy to reach the consumer in the crisis as “...you can really be honest and that they believe you and find that transparency, if you do good things they will come back to you, it is a huge opportunity”.

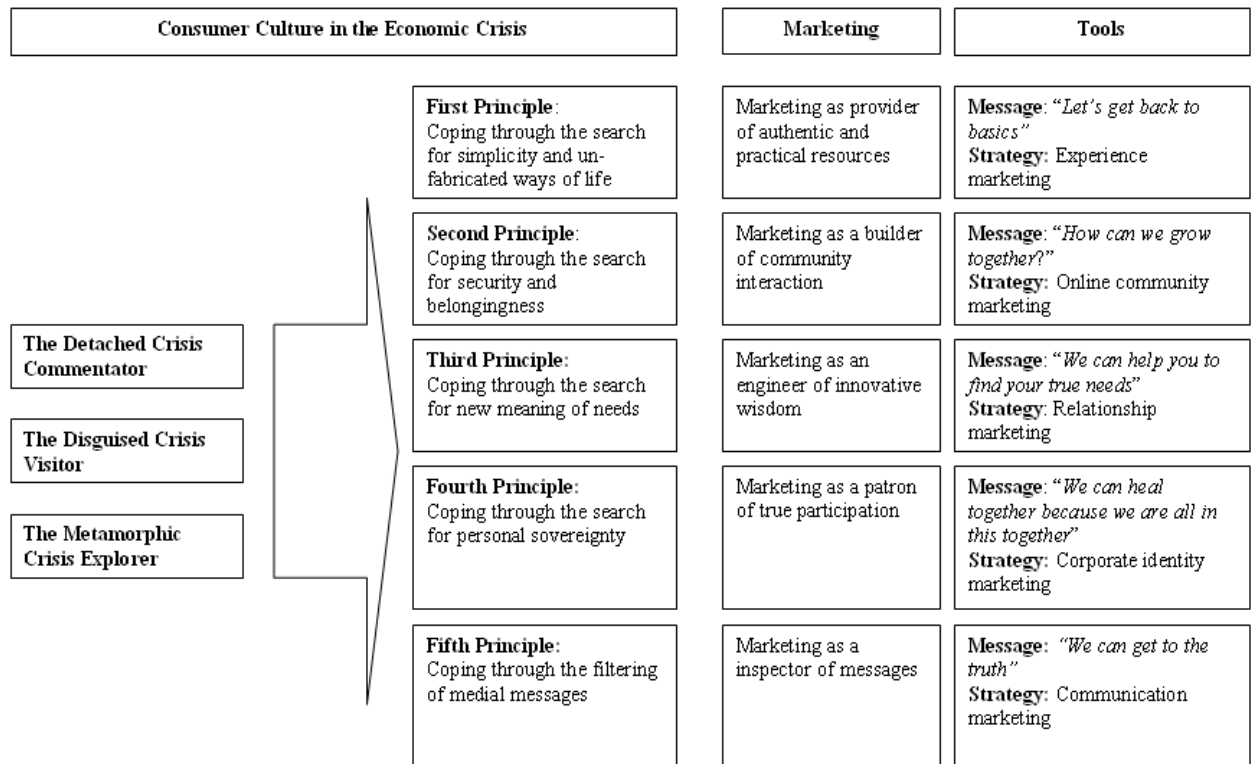
In summary, all marketing professionals argue that media plays a significant role in the way the consumer perceives the economic crisis. However, this responsibility has not been taken with the necessary carefulness and sensitivity and as such has caused a magnitude of the crisis that could have been avoided.

CHAPTER SIX

6.1 Key Principles in the Current Economic Crisis

By examining consumers in the dialectical relationship we can elicit a set of key principles that are indicative of consumers in the current economic crisis that can consequently shape how marketers conceptualise their strategies and approaches. According to Holt (2002:80) these set of principles act as leading guidelines that compose consumer culture. Importantly, these principles have evolved through the sense-making process that consumer's displayed in their consumption during the economic crisis and can be summarised as followed.

Visual 2- Illustration of Empirical Findings and Recommendations



(Source: McCoy, Schmidt & Sledsens, 2009)

6.1.1 Coping through the Search for Simplicity and Un-Fabricated Ways of Life

Consumers in the current economic crisis are adopting a rather critical and sceptical view of modern day consumer society. With the crisis exacerbating feelings of uncertainty and aversion towards the marketplace and more specifically large corporations and the financial market, we have found that consumers are reacting by *searching for simplicity* and *un-fabricated ways of life* through their consumption. This oppositional strategy is a direct reaction against consumer's feeling suffocated by meaninglessness and materialism that marks today's society and as such ultimately leads to a revised meaning construction in consumption.

This coping strategy- searching for objects that imbue simplicity and authenticity through consumption- is a critical means in which the consumer makes sense of the crisis. Both the *detached crisis commentator* and the *disguised crisis visitor* illustrate the employment of the coping strategy in different ways. Whilst we notice that consumers draw themselves closer to objects that reflect simplicity and thus simultaneously acting as an extension of self (Belk, 1988), other techniques include the emphasis on functionality as the rationalisation for all consumption activities which demonstrates a direct opposition against materialism. For consumers, it has been found that the search for simplicity as a coping strategy in the current economic crisis has also been intensified by the '*time-poor nature*' of their life experience (Petrucci, 2009). As such consumers are illustrating a demand for processes that are quick and efficient and objects that fill a utilitarian purpose.

Marketers demonstrate a general awareness of this *back to basics* consumer trend that is being intensified by the current economic climate (Turnbull, 2009; Petrucci, 2009; Emery, 2009; Palsson, 2009). They not only recognise that consumers, now more than ever, perceive extravagant or overindulgent consumption as "*politically incorrect*" in this time of crisis (Turnbull, 2009), but also that conspicuous consumption is in direct opposition with consumer's re-evaluation of their lifestyle and values.

Palsson's (2009) insight that consumers are currently involved in an "*evolutionary process of sorts*" is critical as it highlights that marketers are aware of the wider implications that this trend encompasses.

As the previous discussion outlines, marketers are illustrating a sound awareness of this principle as a main coping strategy used by consumers in the economic crisis, there are techniques however that need to be employed in order to ensure that this awareness is used effectively. Rather than simply considering consumer's demand for simplicity and abhorrence towards materialism in pure 'product' and 'business' terms, such retrofitting the product's offering so that it now appears relevant to the consumer, marketers need to constantly remind themselves that this trend has wider ramifications for consumption society. As such, an implementation of this new philosophy throughout marketer's business model and culture is critical. Holt (2002:88) encapsulates this idea as he argues that '*post-modern branding is perceived as deceitful because the ideals woven into brands seem so disconnected from, and often contrary to, the material actions of the companies that own them*'. Thus, an emphasis on their representative brand's or business' authenticity, honesty and simple-mindedness is a strategy that also needs to be a focal point for marketers. This also needs to be integrated seamlessly throughout their advertising material, brand values, internal communication and organisational structure. Companies today need to forge all-encompassing branded identities so that consumer's experience the very essence of the brand at every corporate touch point. Although marketers express that they are adopting a value proposition and consumer-centric approach as a way in which to accommodate consumer's inward looking attitude to seek simpler and basic pleasures through consumption (Palsson, 2009), this needs to be continually reinforced.

Furthermore, marketers need to acknowledge that the persistent bombardment of one-way communication campaigns to reach the consumer in the crisis will not be effective. Although integrated marketing campaigns are being acknowledged as the only effective strategy for reaching today's consumer (Emery 2009), the brand's value proposition cannot simply be filtered through all communication channels in a one-way manner.

Critical to note here is it is not the channel in which the message is communicated via but the message itself and its nature of delivery. The message needs to be used in a way in which engages the consumer in an active dialogue. By identifying this coping strategy and the consumer's innate desire to reach un-fabricated ways of life and authenticity, we argue that consumers no longer just consume, but demand to create, participate and contribute. As such, a two-way relationship is critical in the current economic situation as Turnbull (2009) supports that "*...it is a bad time to be sending messages instead the emphasis should be on dialogue and handling the customer with more care, with personalise and sensitive communications*".

Marketers also need to illustrate through their brands or on behalf of their clients an ability to escape from commoditization to showing empathy in turbulent times. In order to achieve this it is not only about becoming a caring brand that is generous to customers, employees, and the environment and social causes, but also by conducting this in a way that resonates with consumers such as building real and authentic experiences. Thus, consumption that revolves around practicality, efficiency and responsibility, and less concerned with traditional luxury, splurging and upgrading, implies that marketers need to tap into this nostalgic *back to basic* desire from the consumer and re-evaluate what makes their product or service unique. Ultimately, we have identified that marketers are demonstrating awareness; some however to a larger degree than others, that they *need* to be wary of this coping strategy if they want to maintain their relevancy in this time of crisis.

6.1.2 Coping through the Search for Security and Belongingness

The second principle that we have identified is the consumer's *search for security and a sense of belongingness* as a way in which to cope with the current economic crisis. The pursuit and implementation of this coping strategy invites the consumer to seek one's individual identity projects and as such they are under construction in the economic crisis.

Whether it is searching for one's individual identity, being caught in between individual and group identities or using identity as hideaway construct to escape consumption culture, the fact that all three consumers display either one of these techniques is illustrative of the extensive impact the crisis is having on consumption overall.

Highlighted in *the disguised crisis visitor*, this identity seeking interaction can dramatically impact consumer's sense-making process in the crisis such as people's reliance on others to facilitate them in making decisions. Especially in these turbulent economic times, we have found that consumers attach depressive emotions to their consumption objects which results in a demand for a counteractive healing environment and in this respect reaffirms the concept of identity construction. Thus, we argue that the crisis intensifies the consumer's psychological and emotional state that is critical when determining consumption. Although consumers appear to have evolved to a more educated, knowledgeable and reflexive consumer and as such are more confident in the marketplace in terms of drawing upon cultural resources, they paradoxically are searching for security within their immediate context and outer community as a way in which to make sense of the crisis. Directly linked to the first identified principle, Holt (2002:87) argues that "*the question of authenticity will shift to focus on the brand's contribution as a cultural resource, as consumers will look for brands to contribute directly to their identity projects by providing original and relevant cultural materials with which to work*".

When assessing marketer's response strategies in the current economic crisis it becomes apparent that they have identified the increase in consumer's desire for security and belongingness, especially in this time of crisis, and are using this principle as an opportunity to draw their target audience closer to them (Palsson, 2009; Turnbull, 2009; Petrucci, 2009). The main way in which to comfort the consumer is by providing a stage where dialogue can occur between the consumer and brand, but also more importantly amongst consumers. Turnbull (2009) highlights the value of social networks as a means to increase affinity and loyalty with customers.

Although for some marketers the sense of security and belongingness does not provide a direct link with their product or service, others such as *IKEA* have found that this coping strategy is a direct reflection of their brand proposition. Palsson (2009) reveals that the identified trend of ‘cocooning’ in the current economic crisis not only provides a great opportunity for *IKEA* in terms of further emphasizing the home as a safe haven, but it also allows the brand to tap into consumer’s sense of identity whether that is obtained via their individual self or group mentality as a further means in which to comfort their target. Thus, marketers are infact suggesting an awareness that in order to reach out to consumers they need not only to contribute directly to their identity projects, but also provide resources in the form of cultural artefacts which consumers can draw upon to make greater sense of their external environment and feel comforted and secure. Online is one platform that can provide marketers with a space where a sense of belonging can be fostered with the consumer. Furthermore, we suggest that marketers need to take advantage of the fact that online can serve as a setting where cultural resources, that provide security and convenience about a product or service, can further be illustrated and experienced in an innovative and engaging way.

In addition to these more tactical techniques that build upon the consumer’s copying strategy, marketers also need to acknowledge that a sense of security and belongingness can be achieved through activities that are external to the brand or company. Marketers need to be critically aware that the potential of their goodwill activities such as corporate social responsibility and environmental activities has the ability to bring consumers closer together or alternatively enables a sense of escape that at the same time contributes to the consumers’ view of the marketer as relevant and worthy of esteem. Turnbull (2009) emphasizes that “*people also want to know your perspective on issues, rather than just information about a product*”. Thus, if companies are seen to be aware and actively sharing concerns for the external environment, then a sense of belongingness and sense of attachment with the consumer can be created. This active sharing of external concerns coupled with the increase in dialogue between the consumer and marketer could invariably cause a shift in the way brands speak to their audience.

Establishing a role of *friend* or *advisor*, as opposed to authoritative or paternal voice of reason, is a critical element that marketers must evaluate when examining their communication material. Thus, we argue that the need for generosity and responsibility is never greater than in challenging times as consumer's demand from their governments, organizations and brands, someone to take care of their jobs, their savings and their fellow citizens. Ultimately craving care, empathy, sympathy and generosity is ever present today and needs to be integrated throughout all marketing efforts.

6.1.3 Coping through the Search for the New Meaning of Needs

Consumption in the current economic crisis is shaped by the evolutionary development of the concept of needs and wants. Consumers are re-evaluating their understanding of things they need, want and desire which consequently affects the construction of their meaning in consumption. Marketers appear to identify aspects of this evolution by acknowledging consumer's changes in the activities they pursue in the economic crisis (Petrucci, 2009). However, the critical aspect marketers need to assess is that it is not only the adjustment in consumption activities but the fact that it is also an emerging coping strategy. Furthermore, the economic crisis provokes consumers to reflect upon their consumption from a monetary perspective which creates a re-constructing of principles that shapes the composition of consumer society. This re-constructing approach is determined by the *consumer's search for a new meaning of needs* and movement away from the true meaning of wants. Critically influenced by consumers becoming more reflexive and therefore more sceptical (Holt, 2002), this coping strategy reveals that consumers are actively searching for meanings in order to counteract society which they consider as meaningless.

Marketers identify value and trust as critical components that need to be emphasised in their strategy formulation in crisis times (Kähler, 2009; Turnbull, 2009; Palsson, 2009). As the economic crisis provokes consumer's concept of needs and wants and even further lead to an evolutionary development as such, it is critical to shape marketing efforts in this light of transition.

Trust has become a golden resource that company's aim to "re"-establish. In order to emphasize this, brands such as *IKEA* are claiming to be an *advice giver* or *friendly aid* for the consumer rather than the paternal voice they previously utilised (Holt, 2002). Furthermore, by attempting to create a corporate identity that is reflective of the proactive approach consumers are displaying, *IKEA* manipulates the concept of friendship in the light of their corporate interests. Even though the brand is moving away from "*we know what you need*" to "*we can help you with finding what you want*" approach (Palsson, 2009), one could critically argue that it is this very transition that will not reach consumers, especially as we have found that consumers are displaying a definitional approach about needs and not wants. Different to previous crises, where consumer's construction of meaning was reflected through the deepening gap between wants and desires (Gajewski, 1992), the consumer in this crisis is moving away from the true meaning of wants to a new meaning of needs.

Marketers are recognising that consumers are re-thinking the objects they really need as a consequence of being hit by the economic crisis (Petrucci, 2009). However, the critical aspect here is that marketers are interpreting the consumer's sense-making process in a rather shallow manner and not with the necessary depth that this coping strategy appears to require. It is not only the adjustment to a new priority understanding of their actual needs (Petrucci, 2009), it is moreover the aspect that consumers are actually searching for a new meaning behind their needs in the crisis that is important. As apparent in *the metamorphic crisis explorer* wants are transformed into needs which reveals the justification of consumption in crisis made easier by fulfilling needs instead of wants. Even further, wants appear to have a rather incoherent definitional meaning in the extant consumption society. Therefore, we argue that the economic crisis stimulates consumers to actively change the concept of wants and replace it to the concept of needs.

In order to utilise the identified coping strategy marketers need to provide innovative resources that assist consumers in the search for their new meaning of needs. By employing techniques that highlight the transformational wisdom that is linked with the re-birth of needs rather than desires and wants, consumers will potentially feel understood. As such marketers will be in a position to guide consumers in their search for this evolutionary need. Therefore, marketing can exploit this coping strategy as an opportunity by taking on the role as the friend and/or guidance counsellor. Furthermore, advertising should be reflective of the consumer's search for a new meaning of needs by approaching it rather in an anti-didactic manner. The overall message should be expressing a '*we can help you find your true needs*' attitude. Consequently, branding efforts must incorporate consumer's evolutionary sense-making by offering a brand experience that allows consumers to find their path to a new concept of needs.

6.1.4 Coping through the Search for Personal Sovereignty

The economic crisis stimulates an attempt by the consumer to capitalise on the changing macro environment as an opportunity to express their orientation and attitude towards consumption society. This *search for personal sovereignty* by expressing one's orientation and inclination about consumption epitomises the final identified coping strategy. Marketers are reflective of this affect of the crisis and reason it with the interpretation that it is a consumer's attitude that is determined through change and the willingness to change as a consequence of a changing environment. They argue that consumers are forced to change as they are situated in a transformative society and therefore need to adjust accordingly (Turnbull, 2009). However, it is critical to note that consumers are rather active than re-active change agents in this society and therefore not just followers of a development. As *the disguised crisis visitor* reveals, consumers are reflective of the changes in societal structures. Demanding a reformation of the current society and re-matching it according to the developments in the macro environment, exposes an affect on consumption that is significant in its dimension.

This articulated demand typifies emancipation techniques (Kozinets, 2001) and coping strategies (Cherrier, 2009) consumers are developing in order to enter a power battle against the marketplace. In this respect, marketers are identifying the need to involve consumer's views and perceptions in their strategy formulation. They argue that companies are now aiming to operate in a responsible way and therefore act as corporate conscience in which they claim to behave ethically, transparent and in an honest manner (Palsson, 2009).

Interestingly, Foucault's (1988) notion of resistance and domination suggests that if there is resistance then there must be a power that already exists. In alignment with this, the emancipation and resistance strategies displayed in the *detached crisis commentator* can be understood as reaction or production against domination (Cherrier, 2009). Companies including *IKEA*, acknowledge that consumers are not responding to an authoritative and pushed solutions concept anymore (Palsson, 2009). Consumers are displaying an increased interest in product knowledge and demand for transparency, which is a development that is certainly accelerated in this crisis. *IKEA* claims to position themselves from a hierarchical perspective next to the consumer by offering solutions that they are interested which consequently transfers more power to the consumer (Palsson, 2009).

However, whether the crisis fuels *melting* in which participants of society are supporting and helping each other or *separation* where society disconnects its individual aspects in order to establish new meanings and values, is not the only meaning here. Consumers are also attempting to establish coping strategies to an occurring phenomenon in the macro environment. This directly connects with the proactive approach of consumers that has been identified earlier and reveals a proactive search for personal sovereignty. In this respect, marketers are claiming to recognise a consumer that is more open to a community mindset (Petrucci, 2009). This becomes evident when consumers actively share their experience and knowledge about brands. The important aspect here is the increased influence that occurs and the identification of the influence source.

Therefore, it is not only the brands influencing the consumers it is more that the consumers are influencing each other which ultimately leads to an increased power imbalance between brands and consumers. The understanding consumers develop about society as whole and its function in a macro setting is critical for consumption and the relationship with the marketers. As apparent in the *metamorphic crisis explorer*, consumers are battling between the concept of “we” and “I” in consumer society and simultaneously exposing the emergence of a reflexive stance (Holt, 2002).

In order to utilise this coping strategy it is critical to understand that the economic crisis causes consumers to re-assess the position they take from a societal perspective. Consequently, marketers must avoid becoming the enemy in this relationship but rather the *best friend in difficult times*. Furthermore, marketing techniques need to articulate an attitude that clearly displays sympathy and participation. If marketers communicate messages in a ‘*we are all in this together*’ manner, consumers have the potential to be reached as they sense a mutual feeling of consternation. Branding efforts are therefore required to convey a certain vulnerability of companies that is caused by the crisis, and consequently will achieve a level of transparency that consumers are likely to appreciate and be able to relate to. Therefore, techniques are required to highlight the fact that everything and everyone is affected by this crisis. Furthermore, by re-establishing trust and belief in one another, we suggest that a ‘*we can all heal together*’ perception could be stimulated in the consumer by the marketer.

6.1.5 Coping through Filtering Medial Messages

Consumption in the economic crisis is critically affected by the way individuals make sense of the world around them. Media is therefore a crucial and highly influential institution that shapes this sense making by communicating messages to consumers. In alignment with that, the *detached crisis commentator*, the *disguised crisis visitor* and the *metamorphic crisis explorer* are all exposed to messages and have established their own *filtering techniques* that enable them to associate these messages within their individual life context in order to cope with the economic crisis.

The deliberately selected distance or closeness to the media (Couldry, 2008) as well as the distinctive channels reflect the level of involvement that consumers have with the current economic situation. Consequently, consumers are showing an oscillation of distance in their media consumption which is fundamentally shaped by two different approaches and therefore influences the constitution of the identified coping strategy. As apparent in the *detached crisis commentator*, media is interpreted as a “*poison spreading*” institution and is therefore chosen to be isolated almost entirely out of her life context (Cherrier, 2009:186). Conversely, as the *metamorphic crisis explorer* reveals, media consumption can also be experienced in a rather close manner. In this case, consumers are allowing media a relatively high level of invasion into their life context. It is however critical to understand that the media’s authenticity is not questioned by consumers and therefore causes them to follow all communicated medial messages without critical evaluation.

It is essential to note that a change in the way media is communicating messages has been identified by both the marketing community (Palsson, 2009; Turnbull, 2009; Petrucci, 2009) as well as the consumers. Media has evolved from a factual communicator to a sensationalising *story teller*. Especially, due to the artificially manipulated feelings media produces, consumers are displaying underlying filtering techniques in order to cope with the world around them. As research identified, the media has always been an influential cultural production system and therefore systematically predisposes consumer’s sense-making process (McCracken, 1986; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). However, we argue that the problematic character of the media, as it becomes apparent today, is increased through the occurrence of a macro economic phenomenon such as the current crisis.

Therefore, the danger lies in the aspect that the communication of messages has been designed with a potentially underlying politically-loaded agenda. Similarly, consumer culture theorist Baudrillard (1998) argues that a setting is created where consumers receive pre-conceptualised perceptions which are artificially created illusions outside of reality. As a result, by already pre-selecting the nature and appearance of these messages, they leave the consumer no way of escaping their potentially set agenda.

In this respect, the communication about the current economic crisis has turned the event into a *self-fulfilling prophecy* and evidently has affected both marketers and consumers. Especially, by drawing upon a catalyst such as an event that is marked by uncertainty as well as doom and gloom, the media has concurrently demonstrated the magnitude of their power and their position in society.

Interestingly, our findings have identified that marketers perceive the media as primarily responsible for contributing to the *self-fulfilling prophecy* that is manifesting in the current crisis (Kähler, 2009; Palsson, 2009; Turnbull, 2009). In opposition to consumers, such as the *metamorphic crisis explorer* who is ignorant to the discussed hazardous relationship with the media, marketers appear to essentially comprehend the power of the media (Petrucci, 2009; Palsson, 2009). However, the challenge appears to be with how to utilize this power in order to draw beneficial contributions to the relationship with consumers. Especially the marketer's intrinsic reliance on the media such as public relations agencies' connection with journalists or advertising manager's dependency on media buyers as providers of advertising space indicates that the marketers will have to take a strategic stance towards the media in order to transform their influence into a partnered powerhouse. This is a tenuous balance that needs to be achieved as on the one hand marketers may capitalise on the fact that they are consumer's surveyors of medial messages, whilst on the other hand, they do not want to rebuff the media and its critical role as an institution in the context of the economic crisis.

6.2 The Dialectical Relationship Explored and Implications

The identified coping strategies used by consumers not only have implications for marketers in terms of strategy formulation but also have wider affects on their relationship dynamic with the consumer. With consumers demanding greater transparency, authentic and practical resources, a greater dialogue and participation with brands in the economic crisis, we suggest that the relationship dynamic between marketers and consumers may be on the cusp of a state of transition.

Whilst marketers are attempting to draw themselves closer to the consumer by delivering on brand promises and increasing a two-way communication flow, consumers are conflicted, as they want to achieve personal sovereignty through brands but at the same time distance themselves from the marketplace which they perceive as materialistic and dysfunctional. As a result, marketers must calculate their strategies in order to maintain relevancy with the consumer and an effective and viable role in the dialectical relationship.

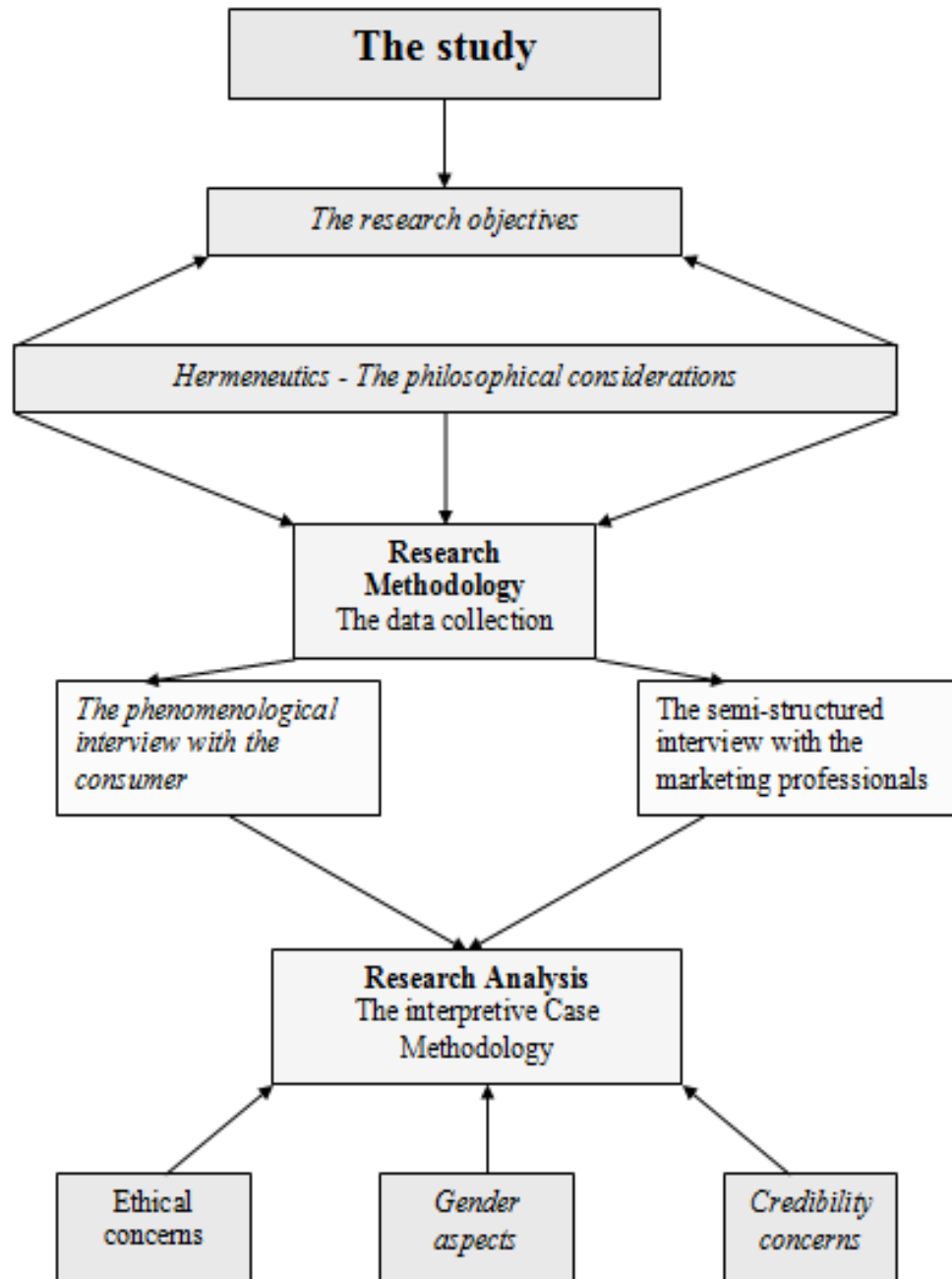
Firstly, we see that marketers can benefit from the economic crisis as they have the potential to become an active cog in the consumer's sense-making process. Due to the fact that all of the consumer's coping strategies are underlined with the theme of searching for *new* meanings via simplicity, needs, security and sovereignty and filtering techniques, marketers can consequently play an integral role by contributing to this meaning process. If marketers can provide guidance in the process of the consumer's implementation of their specific coping strategies, then they can influence the resolution that consumers arrive at from this activity. For instance, if marketers respond appropriately to the consumer's trend of *authenticity*, through value-driven messages that do not appear fabricated, then marketers have the possibility of changing the way consumer's view authenticity. By associating meanings behind authenticity with particular cultural artefacts which are reflective of their brand's understanding of authenticity, then consumers may draw upon this in their own interpretive strategies. In essence, marketers, if approached with tact and caution, can potentially direct the path that consumer's take to make sense of the crisis and affect constructions of meaning in the current economic crisis.

Secondly, we suggest that by not only adopting a *friend* role in the relationship, as well as expressing a '*we attitude*', marketers can potentially reach a position that is much closer to the consumer than they have ever experienced before. As we argue that the economic crisis is amplifying and spurring consumer's utilisation of these coping strategies, marketers can, as a consequence, then take advantage of this knowledge and draw the consumer closer.

Finally, all marketing efforts must be conducted in a humble yet assertive way in order for marketers to capitalise on the existence of such coping strategies that are symbolic of the current economic crisis. This paradoxical position may present a challenge for marketers, however is critical to the success of their relationship with consumers. Whilst consumers are craving care, empathy, sympathy and generosity from brands, we suggest that marketer's advice and solutions must be delivered in a *masked* humble manner. Although, marketers must demonstrate full transparency through their internal and external activities, their innate understanding of the consumer in the crisis can potentially lead them to gaining more power in the relationship than explicitly displayed from the visual stage. Despite consumer's having an open dialogue and participation with marketers and thus influencing their representative products or services, a deeper level of influence is present that the consumer may not be aware of. As marketers have the potential to become further involved with the consumer as *active agents* in their sense-making process, they will gain further influence in the relationship construct. The inability to disentangle consumer's coping strategies from marketer's influence, not only has potential ramifications on the dialectical relationship but also on consumer culture.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Our Research Design



(Source: McCoy, Schmidt & Sledsens, 2009)

Appendix 2: Advertisements/ Cultural Texts used in the Consumer Interviews

Ad 1



Retrieved from: <http://www.apartmenttherapy.com>, 2 April 2009

Ad 2



Retrieved from: <http://channel8000.wordpress.com/2008/12/15/controversial-ad-on-global-finan>, 2 April 2009

Ad 3



Retrieved from: <http://nicpic2608.files.wordpress.com/2008/11/kleenex.jpg>, 3 April 2009

Ad 4



Retrieved from: <http://www.frederiksamuel.com/blog/2009/02/bianco-footwear.html>, 3 April 2009

Appendix 3: Consumer Data Collection and Analysis Process

- (1) We shall read the participants narratives, to acquire a feeling for their ideas in order to understand them fully.
- (2) The next step '*extracting significant statements*' requires us to identify key words and sentences relating to the phenomenon under study.
- (3) We will then attempt to formulate meanings for each of these significant statements.
- (4) This process is repeated across participant's stories and recurrent meaningful themes are clustered. These may be validated by returning to the participants to check interpretation.
- (5) After this we should be able to integrate the resulting themes into a rich description of the phenomenon under study.
- (6) The next step is to reduce these themes to an essential structure that offers an explanation of the behaviour (in our case true meaning constructs)

(Source: Colaizzi, 1978)

Appendix 4: Consumer Participant Profiles

	<i>Elisabeth</i>	<i>Maria</i>	<i>Johanna</i>
Elements affecting consumption based on demographical & lifestyle factors	60 years old	35 years old	20 years old
	Divorced	Married	Single
	Pensioner	Part-time worker	Student
	No children	Two children	No children
Elements affecting consumption based on cultural/ geographical factors	Swede	Swede	Swede
	Middle class	Middle class	Middle class
	Female	Female	Female

(Source: McCoy, Schmidt & Sledsens, 2009)

Appendix 5: Step by Step Approach of Data Analysis

Analytical Strategies and Core Questions	→	Core meanings identified in the raw data
Outcome of Findings	→	Categories & themes evolved through these meanings
Presentation of Findings	→	Description of Categories

(Source: A general inductive approach for analysing qualitative data, Thomas, 2009)

Appendix 6: Marketing Participant Profiles

	<i>Industry</i>	<i>Company/ Brand</i>	<i>Managerial Position</i>	<i>Relevance for our thesis</i>
Joachim Kähler	Personal Care/ Hygiene Products	SCA (SCA, 2009)	Commercial Director	Low level involvement products Brand perspective (internal) Swedish perspective
Henrik Palsson	Furnishing Products	IKEA (IKEA, 2009)	Global Online Content Manager	High level involvement products Brand perspective (internal) Swedish and global perspective
Laura Petrucci	Brand and Marketing Consultant	The Winthrop Group (Winthrpgrp, 2009)	Company Founder and Director	Role of mediator between industry and consumer American perspective Specialisation in luxury products
Jane Emery	Advertising Services	GREY Group, Australia (Grey,2009)	Managing Director	Large portfolio of clients (consumer products and services) Role of communicating messages from brand to consumer Australian Perspective
Noel Turnbull	Public Relations and Media Specialist	Former founder of <i>Turnbull Fox Phillips</i> (now Turnbull Porter Novelli) <i>Growth Solutions Group</i> (GSG, 2009) Professor in Communications at RMIT University, Melbourne	Director	Strategic reputation management of companies and brands Close ties with media and communications industry Australian and global perspective

(Source: McCoy, Schmidt & Sledsens, 2009)

Appendix 7: Increasing Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

Credibility ↔ Validity	Transferability ↔ Generalisability	Confirmability ↔ Objectivity
<p>Study is based on established CCT literature</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <p>Developed on pre-established CCT domains</p>	<p>Research problem is conceptualised by employing structural measurements</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <p>Achievement of functionality by in-depth step by step explanation of data collection and analysis</p>	<p>General alertness of assumptions based individual backgrounds</p> <p style="text-align: center;">↓</p> <p>Minimisation of affects by employing leading definitions of behaviour and terminology</p>
Construct Bias		
↑	↑	↑
<p>Overall study is based on theoretical framework</p> <p>Extensive review of relevant literature</p> <p>Problem definition constructed on above identified framework and literature</p>		

(Source: Thomas, 2006)

Appendix 8: Ethics Protocol

Ethics Protocol

Thank you for your willingness to participate in our study where we are aiming to investigate consumption in the current economic crisis.

Your participation is very much appreciated. Before starting the interview, we would like to reassure you that as a participant in this research you have several very definitive rights:

- Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary.
- You are free to refuse to answer any questions at any time.
- You are free to withdraw from the interview at any time.

This interview will be kept strictly confidential and will be available only to members of the research team, i.e. to us and our supervisors from Lund University.

We would be grateful if you would sign this form to show that you are aware of the ethics content of this paper.

With kind regards,

Maija McCoy, Claudia Schmidt, Sheila Sledsens

Interviewer (signature)

Participant (signature)

(Source: Östberg, 2009)

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