Fashion brands and consumption in postmodern consumer culture
The construction of self and social identities

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ABSTRACT

Today’s postmodern consumer culture is embedded with consumption and products are now used for their symbolic properties. Possessions have become so important for us that they have become a part of our extended selves and forms of differentiation between individuals and groups of people.

The purpose of this research was to gain a better understanding of the role of fashion brands in the identity construction of adults. The objectives of the research focused on how an individual’s identity of self is constructed with the help of fashion brands, especially in social environments, and how an individual’s social identity is formed through fashion brands and in- and out-groups. The topic is discussed while uncovering brand symbolism and relationships.

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) was used as a theoretical framework in this research. Focus group studies were chosen as a research method and total of three focus group discussions with participants aged between 19 to 32 years were held in Helsinki, Finland.

The consumption of fashion brands was found to have a relevant role in the construction of an adult’s identity. Consumption of particular fashion brands was used to communicate personalities and identities, and relationships with fashion brands were found to become especially important in social situations. Fashion brands also stand central in the formation of in- and out-groups and friends were found to have the biggest influence over consumption choices. In-groups were found to form between people with interests towards the same fashion brands and unfavourable fashion brands were associated with members of out-groups. Adults were found to categorise people into groups based on the brands they wear and prevailing stereotypical mental images. Individual self-expression through fashion brands was found high, although given the concept of a salient identity, individuals were often found to conform to the expectations of the in-group. Most importantly, individuals and in-groups stated differentiation from out-groups to be a priority.

Keywords: Identity construction, social identity, fashion brands, postmodern consumer culture, consumption
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CCT = Consumer Culture Theory

H&M = Hennes and Mauritz

R’n’B = Rhythm and blues
1. INTRODUCTION

This section introduces the symbolic power of fashion brands in today's postmodern consumer culture, where consumption has become important for the sense of self and extended selves. Fashion brands and their consumption are important tools in identity construction, especially in terms of communicating distance or belongingness to a particular social group. The chapter begins with a brief background into the topic and introduces the main relevant work in the area. After defining the key terms, a problem discussion is formed followed by the research questions and purpose and limitations of the study.

1.1. Background

Brands are present everywhere in our postmodern consumer culture, which has become a culture of symbols (Väistö, 2009). Since the apparition of the postmodern consumer culture in the 1960s, people purchase products for their symbolic qualities, and not merely for their utility functions (Wattanasuwan, 2005; Veloutsou, 2008; Elliott & Clare, 2004), and thus consumption is suspected to constantly hold a symbolic power (Wattanasuwan, 2005). Thus, the needs and wants of the consumers are not only satisfied via simple product consumption, but also by the consumption of the brand itself (First, 2009; Schroeder, 2005).

Consumers purchase brands in part to construct their self-concepts and personal identity (Fang et al., 2012; Power & Hauge, 2008; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Belk, 1988; Richins, 1994a; Ger & Belk, 1996; Perez et al., 2010). Consumers use brands to create, develop and maintain their identities (Phillips, 2003). From this perspective, possessions become important for the consumer’s sense of self, and ultimately, they become part of consumers’ extended selves (Belk, 1988; Väistö, 2009). The symbolic meanings of material possessions communicate aspects of the owner’s identity to herself and to others (Dittmar, 1992; Perez et al., 2010). Therefore, the relationship between identity and consumption has drawn the interest of social scientists (Wattanasuwan, 2005; Phillips, 2003; Dittmar, 1992).

Brands have become so interwoven with consumption that today’s postmodern consumers have often deeply personal relationships to brands (Power & Hauge, 2008; Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Brands have multiple meanings to consumers as meanings are constructed in consumers’ minds in different settings, situations and psychological states (First, 2009). The consumer is a co-producer of brand meaning (Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Brown et al., 2003) which is a result of an interpretation process (Richins, 1994a) residing in the mind of the consumer (Keller, 2003). Meaning originates in the culturally constituted world, and moves...
into products through the fashion system, reference groups, word-of-mouth, sub-cultural groups, the media and celebrities (McCracken, 1988). Nairn et al. (2008) further state that consumers’ understanding of a brand is individualistic even though meaning is negotiated in a group of peers. Notably, postmodern consumers value brands as cultural resources that let them reproduce themselves as one chooses (Holt, 2002).

The role of brands in our contemporary society has received a variety of claims. Elliot and Wattanasuwan (1998) state brands to be particularly powerful symbolic resources in the construction of social identity. Social constructionists argue that individuals have their own identities as individuals, as part of a family group, as part of formal organisations they engage in and as part of a region, nation and world community (Hines & Quinn, 2007; Jenkins, 1996). Thus, identities are interpreted in these different contexts (Hines & Quinn, 2007). Consumers make choices between brands through identity processes and these interactions between subject and object are important shapers of the socio-economic process of consumption (Hines & Quinn, 2007; Langner et al., 2013).

Consumption of brands therefore helps in the formation of in- and out-groups (Väistö, 2009). Roedder (1999) adds that little is known about how consumption symbolism and materialism arises from peer interaction, which Elliott and Clare (2004) identifies to have an important role in the process. Escalas and Bettman (2005) found out in their study about reference groups as a source of brand meaning that brands with consistent images with an in-group enhance the brand relationship in terms of the consumer’s self-concept and self-differentiation goals in striving to differentiate from the out-group. As a result, a brand-connection is formed. Moreover, the symbolic meanings of possessions are thus not only used to communicate the identity of self and membership of social groups, social status and social position, but also to perceive others’ identity (Dittmar, 1992; Belk, 1988; Mc Cracken 1988; Wattanasuwan, 2005). Through brands and possessions, consumers seek to define and differentiate themselves from other groups (Douglas, 1997; Hogg et al., 1998; Moynagh & Worsley, 2002; Elliott & Clare, 2004; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; O’Shaughnessy & O’Shaughnessy, 2002). Therefore, consumption is now driven by consumers who wish to make statements about themselves in relation to others (Dittmar, 1992; Moynagh & Worsley, 2002).

1.1.1. Previous research on brands and identities

Extensive research has been carried out on brand symbolism. The most relevant studies on brand symbolism and identity construction that are applicable for this research come from Belk (1988), Elliott (1994, 1997), and Wattanasuwan (2005). Belk (1988) constructs that our possessions are a major contributor to and
reflection of the identities of people. Possessions thus contribute to the sense of self which becomes an extended self operating on a collective level. Elliott (1994) found in his study that the psychological meaning of fashion brands differs between genders and age groups. The study also suggests that social representations to meaning need to be applied to the study of brand symbolism to better understand what brands mean to consumers. In his later work he thus suggests that in our postmodern society “the consumption of symbolic meaning provides the individual with the opportunity to construct, maintain, and communicate identity and social meanings” (Elliott, 1997:285). Wattanasuwan (2005) further adds that consumers symbolically employ consumption in their everyday lives, and through that consumption they create and sustain the self and locate themselves in the society.

In the field of brand relationships, the work of Fournier (1998) is the most influential. Fournier (1998:368) points out the inextricable character of brand meanings and suggests that “once a significant relationship is established, the meaning of the brand becomes inseparable from the value of the product class”. The study further suggests that relationships affect and influence the contexts in which they are embedded and add significant meanings to the lives of people who engage in the relationships. Therefore, relationships provide meanings in the psycho-socio-cultural context.

Regarding the construction of social identity, the social identity theory by Tajfel (1982) is of most relevance. The theory focuses on explaining group membership and intergroup behaviour through differences and similarities inside groups and in relation to other groups. The theory suggests that group affiliation contributes to “the self-concepts of its individual members and to their subjective location in the social networks of which they are a part” (Tajfel 1982:31).

The theory and concepts derived from these studies will be further elaborated in the following chapters.

1.1.2. Fashion consumption and symbolism

A brand plays an undoubtedly significant role in the fashion industry (Power & Hauge, 2008). Svendsen (2006) argues that fashion has become almost a ‘second nature’ for today’s consumers. The consumption of fashion holds a significant role in today’s society (O’Cass, 2004), where consumers now consume fashion for its symbolic meaning (Fang et al., 2012; Perez et al., 2010).

On the other hand, fashion is a tremendously difficult object to define and analyse (Berry, 2001; Svendsen, 2006). Cultural studies have brought new light to understanding the complexity of the topic (Berry, 2001). Appadurai (1996)
proposes fashion to be specific to modern consumer culture in a variety of culturally and historically distinct ways. Recent cultural studies in fashion indicate that although the traditional use of clothing to indicate gender, age, group identity, and status, are still relevant, the social constraints associated with them have changed significantly. Thus, the challenge for cultural studies of fashion lays in addressing fashion not only as a normative set of rules but as a tool of individuation and selective group-identification. Cultural studies have thus created a significant shift toward recognising fashion as a powerful medium of collective identity and cultural expression. (Berry, 2001.)

In our Western culture, fashion clothing is of economic and social significance (O’Cass, 2004). In the dynamic fashion market, customer attitudes, tastes and behaviours are under constant change (Hines & Quinn, 2007; Hines & Quinn, 2005; Blythe, 2009). The consumer markets are becoming increasingly fragmented due to global changes in lifestyle, income, ethnic group and age (Sheth et al., 2000) and thus consumer needs and behaviour are becoming less predictable (Hines & Quinn, 2005). Due to fashion fragmentation, clothing becomes a means of individual differentiation and social equalisation or differentiation (Fang et al., 2012). In the context of fashion consumption, the identification and importance of recognising multiple self and social identities becomes a key point of reference for marketers (Hines & Quinn, 2007) as fashion brands should not only fulfil the functional needs of consumers, but also the symbolic ones (Auty & Elliott, 1998).

The image of the fashion product is determined by its physical characteristics as well as other associations, namely the predetermined mental images of the typical brand user. Branded fashion goods also denote membership to a particular group, and the associations with reference groups and generalised images yield in transferring the symbolic meaning consumers attach to products. (Hogg et al., 1998.) Through fashion, individuals can confirm or subvert of these facet about their identities. In other words, through a visual statement with the use of fashionable items, individuals can demonstrate their membership or distance to a particular social group or groups (Bennett, 2005).

Clothing is primarily a means of communicating social identity instead of personal identity. Clothing is thus a symbol of social identity and the values espoused by the group and serve as a premise for judging the clothing worn by others and the social identity symbolised by it. (Noesjirwan & Crawford, 1982.) Wearing unbranded products is a threat to social identity. Therefore, understanding how people interpret clothing and how different groups of people make different judgements about the same brand of clothing is critical to fashion companies. (Auty & Elliott, 1998.) According to Bearden and Etzel (1982), the influence of reference groups in fashion brand choices is strong. Social surroundings have an influence on the consumption of fashion as group affiliation
and the consequent attention to a particular code are important to individuals. Thus by knowing how different groups respond to a particular set of symbols can help the marketer to have greater control over the decoding of the brand image. (Auty & Elliott, 1998.)

1.2. Problematisation

The influence of the social environment and social identities in brand choices and decisions has been a neglected area in consumer research (Grier & Desphande, 2001; Maldonado et al., 2003; Hackley, 2005; Langner et al., 2013). The identity of self and the self-concept have been appointed research attention (Maldonado et al., 2003; Grier & Deshpande, 2001; Forehand & Deshpande, 2001; Jaffe, 1991), but consumption as a social identity reflection calls for further research, although marketing research has acknowledged the effect of social identities on consumer behaviour (Reed & Forehand, 2003). Thus, there is a new interest in research to identify how group membership defines the identity of self (Jenkins, 2008; Langner et al., 2013). Marketers can properly target consumers only after anticipating that the consumer is self-categorising himself into a certain social group (Langner et al., 2013).

Social interaction has a dynamic nature in the fashion context (Hackley, 2005). Consumers make social statements through their clothing; especially in terms who they are and who they are not (Moynagh & Worsley, 2002; Banister & Hogg, 2007). Consumers use clothing as a means of communicating membership or separation from social groups (Auty & Elliott, 1998). Moreover, little is known about how consumption symbolism arises from peer interaction (Roedder, 1999). Therefore, it is of great relevance to study the symbolic meaning of general fashion brands in the identity construction of consumers from the perspective of the social identity theory.

Although consumers express their identity through clothing, little research attention has been given to general fashion brands as most research is focused on the role of luxury fashion brands (e.g. Venkatesh et al., 2010; Perez et al., 2010). The study of fashion consumption can be seen as a tool for understanding the needs, desires, and practises of consumers (Perez et al., 2010). Understanding consumer behaviour is essential for the successful execution of any marketing plan (Solomon, & Rabolt, 2009; Azevedo et al., 2009). As customer needs and tastes are subject to change in the complex and dynamic fashion market, a deeper understanding of customers is required. The social study of identity construction sheds light on understanding consumer behaviour (Azevedo et al., 2009). By beginning to form an understanding of this area, a greater insight into fashion and its consumption can be portrayed (Banister & Hogg, 2007).
Previous researches have demonstrated the relationship between brands and consumer identity as important (e.g. Auty & Elliott, 2001; Chaplin & John, 2005; Grant & Stephen, 2006; Lanhance & Beaudoin, 2006). However, studies in this field are still relatively scarce (Souiden & M’saad, 2011). Despite the rich body of literature of brand management, it still remains unclear what brands actually mean to consumers (First, 2009). It is important to understand what consumers do with brands to add meaning to their lives as the brand relationship is not simply constructed by the message conveyed by managers (First, 2009; Fournier, 1998; Cova & Pace, 2006). As fashion clothing has different meanings to different people (O’Cass, 2004), it is of importance for consumer researchers and managers to understand how fashion brand meanings are formed, maintained and influenced in the minds’ of consumers. Auty and Elliott (1998) state that by knowing how different groups respond to a particular set of symbols can help the marketer to have greater control over the decoding of the brand image, which is important for the survival of any company. Therefore, studying the symbolic meaning of fashion consumption from a social identity perspective helps in understanding how consumers form and maintain brand relationships and perceive the brand images of general fashion brands.

The fashion industry systematically predisposes consumers toward certain kinds if identity projects (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), which is an area of interest for consumer culture theorists. Fashion brands act as visible cues that not only reflect the consumer’s identity, lifestyle, and interests, but reinforce the consumer’s symbolic and social values, and generate emotional responses (Hameide, 2011). Brands are shaped by a local culture as collective ideas about the brand differ according to the cultural context (Jung & Sung, 2008; First, 2009). However, few studies have explored how fashion brands influence the consumer’s identity construction within a given cultural context. Cultural studies of fashion are still needed to address the identity expressions of fashion (Berry, 2001).

Consumer culture research calls for more ethnographical perspectives to research, and the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) serves as a new theoretical method of understanding the complicated social factors involved with fashion brand symbolism in the postmodern consumer society. Previous researchers propose CCT as an alternative way of framing research into consumers’ relationships with brands. Although the CCT framework has been previously used on studies of teenage consumers and children, more research using CCT should be carried out in order to better understand the complicated social factors involved. (Nairn et al., 2008.)

Elliott (1999:113) suggests that in today’s postmodern society, fashion marketing has become “a social practise located at the centre of the construction of symbolic capital and thus involved in the development of the meaning of consumer culture”. Although of the symbolic nature of fashion, scholars (e.g. Elliott &
Elliott, 2003; Hackley, 2005) state that the use of ethnography, methodology of social investigation, to fashion has to date been very limited. As social interaction is of dynamic nature in the fashion context, a socially-constructed perspective of ethnography should be applied to examine how consumers socially and symbolically use brands to produce a sense of social identity (Hackley, 2005).

Given the rise of cultural studies and the need for ethnography in studying fashion phenomena, this study will take a qualitative approach to discover the role of fashion brands in the construction of self and social identities in the postmodern consumer culture. No previous studies have been made about the role of fashion brands in the construction of self and social identities in Finland, although brand symbolism and identity construction have gained research interest (see Väistö, 2009). Not only was the Finnish sample available for the researcher, but Finnish people have a strong sense of national identity and place great importance on spoken words (Alho, 2010). Therefore, it is of interest to study how Finnish people symbolically communicate their identities given the important nature of spoken words and national identity.

1.3. Purpose

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the role of fashion brands in the construction of self and social identities of today’s consumers in the postmodern consumer culture. In more detail, the aim of this research is to acquire knowledge of how consumers use fashion brands in their social lives in terms of acquainting with and distancing from other groups, which is also called the forming of in- and out-groups. In addition, it is researched what role fashion brands have on the construction of the identity of self and especially on private consumption, including the acquiring, consumption, and possession of fashion brands. To understand what fashion brands mean to consumers, this study discusses the construction of identities from the view point of brand symbolism and relationships. The paper first concentrates on the identity of self and then on the construction of social identity and the importance of peer interaction. The aim of this research is therefore to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon and not to draw generalisations.

1.4. Research questions

The research focuses on brand symbolism, brand relationships, and consumption and their meaning in the lives of today’s postmodern consumer. The area of interest is the construction of self and social identities.
The main research question for this study will be:

*What role do fashion brands play in the construction of self and social identities?*

For the purpose of the study, the main question is opened through the following research questions:

- *What role do fashion brands play in the construction of a consumer’s identity of the self?*
- *How do consumers construct their identities through fashion brands and in-groups?*
- *How do consumers construct their identities through fashion brands and out-groups?*

### 1.5. Limitations to the study

The purpose, research questions, and method used in this research were limited by the thesis time frame. Data was collected during weeks 18 and 19 in May 2014 in Helsinki, Finland. Therefore, due to the scope of the study and the method used, the study cannot be generalised. Although generalisability is not the aim of qualitative research (Bryman, 2012) or cultural studies (Väistö, 2009), the trustworthiness of the study (see section 6.4.) demonstrates that the findings of the study can be applicable to other similar cases through thick description of the social discourses during data collection.

The purpose of this thesis was to understand the phenomenon of the influence of fashion brands on the identity construction processes, and this is limited to the social context of Finland. The sample was chosen as the researcher was a Finnish citizen residing in Finland at the time of the thesis writing process, and thus the sample was easily available for the researcher. Moreover, the study was conducted only on female participants.
2. THEORETICAL FRAME OF REFERENCE – CONSUMER CULTURE THEORY (CCT)

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) studies consumption and the behavioural choices and practises of consumers as social and cultural phenomena, and not purely as psychological or economic phenomena (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). CCT can be summarised to refer to a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationship between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Askegaard & Linnet, 2011).

Thus, in a broader sense, CCT research explores “how consumers actively rework and transform symbolic meanings encoded in advertisements, brands, retail settings, or material goods to manifest their particular personal and social circumstances and further their identity and lifestyle goals” (Arnould & Thompson, 2005:871). Thus, the marketplace serves as the setting from which consumers construct their individual and collective identities.

CCT will be used as the theoretical framework for this research as it provides valuable information about consumption and marketplace behaviour from a social and cultural point of view. Recent CCT research has focused on exploring different contexts in which the consumer has been noted to act as an agent drawing upon market-based resources in constructing his or her own identity. A central notion of this view is that the consumer is a reflexive and empowered identity seeker who both consciously and critically reflects upon the market mediated messages embracing him or her as he or she navigates through the opportunities provided by the marketplace. (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011.)

Although the field of consumer culture lacks a one profound definition, the core aspect of CCT research has been on the consumption and possession practises. The hedonic, aesthetic and ritualistic dimensions of consumption and possession practises and marketing symbolism have especially been an integral part of CCT studies. (Arnould & Thompson, 2005.) CCT addresses the socio-cultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological aspects of consumption that have previously been neglected in the more traditional research of consumer decision-making and psychology. This provides a better understanding of the symbolic and socio-cultural meanings in the consumption of adults, adolescents and children. (Dittmar, 2008.) Moreover, Dittmar (2008) and Arnould and Thompson (2005) continue that these symbolic and socio-cultural meanings and functions of market goods span the whole consumption cycle including acquisition, consumption and possession, and not merely the purchase of products.

Four different types of research areas of socio-cultural processes and structures exist, namely consumer identity projects, marketplace cultures, socio-historic
pattern of consumption, and mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers’ interpretative strategies. In the light of CCT, the consumer identity project explains how consumers forge a sense of self through marketer-generated materials. Marketplace cultures view consumers as culture producers where consumers forge feelings of social solidarity and create self-selected cultural worlds through pursuing common consumption interests. The socio-historic patterning of consumption addresses the institutional and social structures, such as class, community, ethnicity, and gender, which systematically influence consumption. Finally, mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers’ interpretive strategies address how commercial media transmit consumption messages of consumer identity, and how consumers make sense of these messages and formulate critical responses. (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) This study addresses all of these four different types of research areas, but mainly focuses on the identity projects and marketplace structures. The theory chapters that follow fall under these different areas of research.

Recent research of consumer subcultures and brand communities (e.g. Cova et al., 2012; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001) has acknowledged the consumer also as a member of small-scale social unions and not just as an identity seeker (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011). Thus, Cova et al. (2012) suggest that consumer behaviour should be understood from a collective perspective. Therefore, the social identity theory will be later explained in the social identity chapter to provide a better understanding of the social meanings of brands to consumers.
3. CONSUMPTION AND SYMBOLISM IN TODAY’S POSTMODERN CULTURE

Consumption has become central to our postmodern society where goods are now consumed for their symbolic qualities. Consumption of fashion can be seen as an individual act, where individuals are provided constant possibilities to improve and express themselves through fashion, but also as a social act, where membership or distance to other cultural groups is confirmed. This chapter discusses the role of symbolism and possessions in our postmodern consumer culture.

3.1. Postmodern consumer culture

Today’s postmodern culture is embedded with consumption. Consumption has become the source of happiness (Firat & Dholakia, 1998) and a central focal point of human existence (Sumich, 2005). The term consumer culture builds to the understanding that goods are central to our contemporary society (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Featherstone, 1992). From the perspective of history, economy and culture have been considered separate from each other. However, cultures and their activities are influenced by material consumption and historical conditions. Thus, consumption can be seen as a social activity that brings economy and culture together. (Lee, 1993.)

The power of consumer culture is of significance. Since the 1950s, the economic, socio-cultural and psychological transformations have given consumption a central role in today’s society (Dittman, 2008). Consumers are now overwhelmed by choices of products and services. In our postmodern consumer culture, the process of consumption is both real and imaginary (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Consumers now consume symbols, images and objects, which are actually recognised to be the one and the same. The term consumer culture thus seeks to incorporate the system whereby groups use commercially produced images, texts and objects through the construction of identities and meanings to make collective sense of their environments and orient their member’s experiences and lives (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Consumption is thus a social act, where much is created and produced (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995).

Consumer culture has therefore an effect on how people in our modern society live their lives. Consumers seek to reach and attain a certain lifestyle and express their individuality and style through products, and especially through clothing and appearance. Consumers have therefore a constant possibility to improve and express themselves, and have different understandings of people’s lifestyles and social relationships where consumption stands central. (Featherstone, 1992.)
The marketing activities and actions taken by commercial companies have aided in the construction of today’s consumer culture. Therefore, the role of companies in producing consumption symbols has received criticism. Consumer culture gives access for consumers to create their identities through the consumption of brands. (Holt, 2002.)

3.2. Symbolism in our consumer culture

Goods are not only economic but symbolic objects which are thus not solely used for their utility purposes (Richins, 1994a; Cotte & Ligas, 1999; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). Goods have no function of value without their symbolic function (Holt, 2002) given the process of consumption is now both the consumption of real and the imaginary. The consumer thus becomes a consumer of illusions buying images and not things (Elliott, 1997).

Marketers have a key role in the creation of social meanings of goods (Lee, 1993) as it gives meaning to life through consumption (Elliott, 1997). If marketing was absent, consumers would not perceive products to be of cultural significance. Consumers attach meanings to products during consumption, although there is an inherent meaning already communicated by the marketer. (Lee, 1993.) However, consumers select only particular meanings communicated by the marketers and use them in idiosyncratic ways through their consumption (Holt, 2002; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). The product’s initial meaning embedded in its production does not disappear, but the product becomes symbolically transformative to hold the many different meanings created by its users in different contexts of culture (Lee, 1993; Elliott, 1997). Therefore, the symbolic meanings of products are in a constant state of transformation (McCracken, 1988; Elliott, 1997) and consumption choices manifest the current culture (Elliott, 1994). The meaning flows from the social world through marketers and consumers into products, wherefrom it further flows to the consumer through consumption processes. Given that the identity of self can be expressed through the meanings of products, consumers have limitless options in the meanings sought from products in today’s consumer culture. (McCracken, 1988.) Products become a means of communication and participation in social life. Therefore, the consumption of symbolic meanings gives the consumer an opportunity to construct, maintain and communicate identity and social meanings. (Elliott, 1997.)

There are two types of consumption experiences, namely lived and mediated experiences. Lived experiences are practical activities or face-to-face interactions consumers encounter in their daily lives, and mediated experiences stem from the culture of mass-media consumption where experiences are somewhat distant from the context of lived experiences. Consumers value these experiences differently. For some consumers, mediated experiences have become the means of
construction of the self. (Thompson, 1995.) However, given that consumers use the meanings provided by marketers in idiosyncratic ways, the lived experience, namely the purchase and usage of a brand, has a stronger influence than mediated experiences as both experiences need validity through social interaction. This is especially true for products and brands of social-symbolic nature such as fashion. (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998.)

3.3. Possessions and symbolic consumption of fashion

People seek meaningfulness in their lives (Väistö, 2009). Our modern society is characterised by the belief that “to have is to be” (Dittmar, 1992). Life’s meaning, achievement and satisfaction is evaluated from the premises of what possessions the individual has or has not acquired (Belk, 1985; Richins, 1994b; McCracken, 1988). Possessions are now key symbols of the qualities, attachments and interests of individuals (O’Cass, 2004). Therefore, people use consumption to support the self and locate themselves in the society (Wattanasuwan, 2005).

Given the definition of consumer culture, consumption aids in the construction of self-identity and confirms membership or distance from particular cultural groups or communities (Lee, 1993; Elliott, 1997; O’Cass, 2004; Dittmar, 2008). In order for products and brands to have a symbolic meaning, the symbol should be identified in the group and it should communicate similar meanings within the group (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1980; Ligas & Cotte, 1999). However, consumers have idiosyncratic meanings of fashion brands which are less widely shared than other symbolic representations (Elliott, 1994).

Product symbolism is especially important in the case of fashion clothing. Clothing is used as a means of social communication (Elliott, 1994) and therefore individuals make judgements about others based on the clothing they wear (Banister & Hogg, 2007). One does not purchase a Calvin Klein brand simply for its utility purposes, but to communicate wealth and appreciation for quality to others. In the case of fashion objects, women are more likely to share consumption-based stereotypes than men (Belk, 1978). In addition, females are significantly better in decoding the communicative language of fashion statements, clothing cues, and attributing positive characteristics to owners of fashion products (Elliott, 1994).
4. THE IDENTITY OF SELF AND CONSUMPTION

The self is constructed partially through consumption with the help of available symbolic materials. Possessions of brands are used to express one’s identity and they can be seen as a part of our extended selves. Consumers also form relationships with brands they find meaningful for their self-concepts. This chapter identifies the different terms of the self, and discusses the role of possessions and brand relationships in the identity construction of the self.

4.1. Self, self-concept and self-identity

The terms ‘self’, ‘self-concept’ and ‘self-identity’ have not spared from inconsistent definitions (Dittmar, 2008; Banister & Hogg, 2007). There are three different components of the self (Banister & Hogg, 2007). The actual or current self is the way an individual perceives himself, the ideal self represents the qualities the individual would like to have but falls short of, and the social self is the individual’s perception of how others see him. Dittmar (2008) defines the self as something a person actively creates. The self is therefore not an outcome of a social system or an entity adopted by the individual, but something created partially through consumption. Moreover, Aledin (2009:17) defines the self as ‘who and what we are’. Thus, the personal self is a unitary and continuous awareness of who one is (Ellemers et al., 2002).

Thompson (1995) holds a similar view. He describes the self as a symbolic project actively constructed by the individual from available symbolic materials. The symbolic materials define who a person is, therefore communicating self-identity. Self-identity is the subjective representation an individual has of himself involving individual, relational and group levels (Vignoles et al., 2006; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). Identity is constructed through a set of knowledge about the world and active participation in the social world (Chryssochoou, 2003).

Rosenberg (1979:7) defines self-concept as the “totality of the individual’s thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object”. Given the different layers of the self, self-concept is dynamic and changes according to social surroundings and situations functioning as incentives for future behaviour (Banister & Hogg, 2007). The concept of social self is further explained in Chapter 5. The different selves are of importance to consumption decisions, while they represent something a person is trying to reach and what he currently is (Banister & Hogg, 2007). Therefore, the self is something an individual creates and the self-concept is the way an individual sees himself (Väistö, 2009).
4.2. Identity construction through consumption

Consumption is a means of searching self-identity. People make judgements of others based on their possessions, and use possessions to express their identity in terms of who they are or would like to be (Banister & Hogg, 2007). By consuming the product or brand and their social symbolic qualities, consumers can move closer to the ideal self (Banister & Hogg, 2007; Elliott, 1997). Consumption has a two-fold nature in identity expression. Products can be seen as the ‘outer skin’ of identity which consumers attain to express the ‘inner self’ (Dittmar, 2008). The self-concept is of great value to consumers and thus they will attempt to protect and enhance it (Sirgy, 1982). Consumers will therefore purchase fashion brands that have a positive image for the individuals based on the typical user stereotypes associated with the brand (Banister & Hogg, 2007).

Therefore, the symbolic meanings of fashion products and brands play a significant role in the process of identity construction and maintenance (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Banister & Hogg, 2007). Clothing is used as a flexible means of identity communication as different fashion brands are seen more appropriate in different situations (Kaiser et al., 1991). Thus, what we choose not to consume is an important aspect in identity construction. This negative symbolic consumption explains how individuals reject certain fashion items of symbolic reasons to avoid some unwanted states of being (Banister & Hogg, 2007).

Campbell (2004) opposes the view of Wattanasuwan (2005) that we are what we buy. Campbell (2004) states that the identity of an individual is found in his reaction to products he consumes, and not in the products themselves. This can be argued on the premises of tastes that by consuming, people learn what they like and dislike. During this process, an identity is discovered, although tastes and preferences change, the discovery of identity remains stable (Campbell, 2004). Consumption is, however, a key player in self-identity construction, although of these two opposing views. Self-identity is showcased to others and the individual himself through the symbolic consumption of products. Dittmar’s (2008) and Campbell’s (2004) perspectives of self-identity through possessions brings a new light on the existing literature of identity construction (e.g. Belk, 1988).

4.3. The role of possessions

Symbolic possessions can be divided into three categories: historical continuity (e.g. photographs), expressions of artistic or intellectual interests (e.g. record or painting collection), and signs of status or wealth (e.g. luxury car or house) (Dittmar, 2008). Possessions have the power, in their importance to consumers, to become part of our extended selves by creating or altering them to fit the core self. Possessions extend the self as people convince themselves and others that they
would not be the same person without the acquired possessions. The attachment to possessions may be intentional or unintentional, and some have a more central role to self than others varying through time and cultures where the shared symbolic meanings to products are created. (Belk, 1988.)

Exceptional situations can showcase the cultural meanings of possessions that are sometimes hidden from the individual and surrounding environment. When objects are lost or stolen, the importance of possessions to self becomes evident (Belk, 1988; Dittmar, 2008; McCracken, 1988). Belk (1988) brings out the case of burglary and found out that after feelings of anger and rage, the burglary victims were most likely to feel invaded and violated due to intrusion of private space and personal possessions. Therefore, the trauma is not normally there when losing possessions voluntarily. People gladly dispose or neglect possessions that are inconsistent with their self images (La Branche, 1973), but when the disposition is forced, feelings of sorrow arise due to loss of self (Belk, 1988).

Belk (1988) further argues that a brand or a product itself is not enough to represent an individual’s self-concept, but a full range of consumption objects is required for a total representation of the self. By acquiring possessions, consumers manage their sense of place, social position and identity (Lee, 1993). During the acquisition of objects, only a portion of the object’s symbolic meaning is present and only fully acquired during consumption (Belk, 1988).

Through possessions, people learn, define and remind themselves who they are. The identification with possessions begins early in life where the infant learns to differentiate himself from the environment and others envying his possessions. Although the emphasis placed on material possessions decreases with age, it still remains high throughout an individual’s life-course as people seek self-expression, happiness, reminder of past experiences and accomplishments through possessions. Possessions also create a sense of immortality after death. They tell us our identity, our history, and perhaps where we are going. (Belk, 1988.)

There is no dividing line between the extended identity and core identity. Thus, possessions play an important and sometimes a positive role in identity construction, especially in terms of aiding effectiveness, control, and maintenance of identity over the individual’s life span, also by providing a sense of interrelatedness with others. (Dittmar, 2011.)

4.4. Brand relationships

Brands give meaning to the lives of consumers (Fournier, 1998). Brand relationships are relationships of a very personal nature forming between an individual and a brand. Although brand relationships do not happen in isolation
from peer interaction, it is important to understand brands as characters or persons themselves forming interpersonal relationships with individuals. Brands are humanised and personalised through advertisements, and consumers legitimate those acts. (Heilbrunn, 1998.)

The brand relationship theory defines a brand as a partner whose behaviour and actions create characteristic differences that sum up the consumer’s perception of the personality of the brand. Marketing activities and brand management decisions can be seen as behaviour and actions of the brand. However, these are enacted from the brand’s part, but they also cause attitudinal, cognitive and/or behavioural responses in the consumers. (Aaker & Fournier, 1995.)

Consumers form relationships with brands they find important, and thus brands can have several different types of relationships with consumers (Fournier, 1998). As already introduced by Belk (1988), a full range of brand objects are needed for a total identity representation. Thus, relationships vary from consumer to consumer in the level and content of brand relationships and identity activities, and also in the durability of relationships, number of close relationships and emotional quality stemming from brand commitments. Previous research identifies fifteen meaningful brand-consumer relationships falling into the categories of friendship, marriage, dark side and temporarily-oriented relationships. All of them have separate meanings and benefits to the consumer. Most importantly, brand relationships influence the consumer’s personality development which in turn influences the brand relationships. (Fournier, 1998.)

Fournier’s (1998) definition of a brand relationship has also received criticism. Bengtsson (2003) states that there is a lack of reciprocity in the brand-consumer relationships and it still remains unclear whether consumers wish to form or believe to have relationships with corporate entities and brands. Thus, he argues it should not be named a relationship as it is not a relationship between people. However, the main idea here is that consumers bond with brands and it has an effect on the consumer’s personality development which influences the quality and durability of brand relationships.
5. SOCIAL IDENTITY AND CONSUMPTION

The social self is part of an individual’s self-concept. Individuals hold various social identities which are activated in different social situations. The strength of commitment to a group defines which social identity is relevant to the individual in question. Social identity can become more important than personal identity and thus refers to the interaction between the individual and the in-groups and out-groups. Consumers also stereotype themselves and dehumanise the members of out-groups. Through consumer socialisation, individuals learn the behaviour considered appropriate in our society. Parents and family, friends and peers, and mass media have been identified as the main consumer socialisation agents. This chapter discusses the role of consumption and the reflexive self in the formation of in- and out-groups, and briefly opens up the definition of consumer socialisation.

5.1. Social identity theory

It is important to understand how groups identify and distinguish themselves from others and how self-identity is perceived in group identities to better understand symbolism in social groups. Previous work in social identity theory is made by Tajfel (1982) and Tajfel and Turner (1979). Social identity theory is a theory of intergroup relations, group processes and the social self (Hogg et al., 1995).

Although self-concept is typically linked to an individual, people also define themselves and create meanings in social situations (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). Social identity is part of the self-concept. The focus in social identity theory is on the social self differentiating between the individual’s personal identity and knowledge of group membership, also called social identity (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Tajfel, 1978). Tajfel (1978:63) defines social identity as the individual’s knowledge of belonging to certain social groups coupled with emotional and value significance of this group membership.

As already described, different concepts of the self exist. The core concept is the individual’s enduring personal identity, and the surrounding peripheral concepts are fluid in nature allowing the individual’s adaptation to different social situations and identities in different groups (Korte, 2007). Thus, salience is a main concept in social identity (Langner et al., 2013; Ellemers et al., 2002). A salient identity is an identity that is likely to be frequently activated across different situations, depending on which identity is more salient (Ellemers et al., 2002).

Thus, individuals can own various category memberships that have a different importance to the individual’s self-concept at the same time - the social identities (Hogg et al., 1995; Langner et al., 2013; Stets & Burke, 2000). These social
identities are derived from highly meaningful groups and abstract social categories (Ellemers et al., 2002). In other words, each individual has a role in society with can be continuous (e.g. mother or daughter) or particular to a certain period of time (e.g. student) or transitory (e.g. environmentalist). However, the consumer is only likely to attend to those social categories that are especially self-relevant and these categories constitute a consumer’s social identity (Reed & Forehand, 2003). Social identities describe and prescribe the way a member of the group should think, feel and behave (Hogg et al., 1995; Turner, 1982), being one with the group, being similar to other group members, and looking at the world from the group’s perspective (Stets & Burke, 2000). A group is formed when at least two people share common socially meaningful characteristics (Aledin, 2009). Thus, the strength of commitment of belonging to a group indicates which social identity is relevant to the individual in question, and the resulting perceptual, affective, or behavioural responses depend on the social context and which aspects of the self are secure or threatened (Ellemers et al., 2002).

Moreover, the individual’s social identity can become more important than his personal identity in social situations, although individuals often act based on their goals and desires instead of members of a group (Jenkins, 2008; Hornsey et al., 2006). Social identity is therefore the process of interaction between the individual and the in-group and out-groups (Jenkins, 2008; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Ellemers et al., 2002). The in-group is formed through a process of social comparison, where individuals with similar characteristics as self are in the same group. Those who are not characterised similar are perceived as the out-group. (Stets & Burke, 2000; Escalas & Bettman, 2005.) According to social identity theory, individuals derive a feeling of positive social identity from belonging to desirable social groups and perceiving to be positively distinctive from other groups. Thus, individuals evaluate in-groups more favourably than out-groups when striving to achieve positive social identity in terms of products, services, and brands associated with the in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1981).

Social identity theory thus brings an understanding of group membership and behaviour, especially in terms of how people make sense of other people and themselves in social situations (Korte, 2007; Chryssochoou, 2003; Aledin, 2009). Individuals link themselves and others into social categories or groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Linking the self into a social category by using categorisation provides a definition of ‘who one is’ which is part of the self-concept (Hogg et al., 1995; Ellemers et al., 2002; Stets & Burke, 2000).

5.1.1. Self-categorisation theory

The process of self-categorisation forms the identity (Stets & Burke, 2000). The self-categorisation theory presents how individuals recognise their group
membership when defining social boundaries between groups and how they categorise themselves as either belonging or not belonging to them (Gundlach et al., 2006; Stets & Burke, 2000). Categorisation highlights both the perceived similarities between people and the self belonging to the same category, and the perceived differences between people belonging to different categories (Väistö, 2009). In the process of categorisation, individuals are perceived as representations of a particular in-group rather than as unique individuals (Hogg et al., 1995; Langner et al., 2012). Thus, individuals are depersonalised into group members and individuality reflects group behaviour (Hogg et al., 1995).

Given that individuals are born into an already structured society, the social categories or groups individuals wish to identify themselves with exist only in relation to other contrasting categories (Stets & Burke, 2000). For example, “the category of ‘young’ is meaningful only when it is compared to the category of ‘old’” (Väistö, 2009:28). However, each individual is a member of a unique combination of social categories, and thus the set of social identities forming the individual’s self-concept is unique (Stets & Burke, 2000). In addition, as social categories contain social elements stemming from culture, social networks and society as a whole (Langner et al., 2013) not all individuals are granted a direct access into groups (Kihlstrom, 1992). Consumers can thus search for meanings in products that do not exist, or adopt meanings they are not entitled to (Väistö, 2009). Personal history, personality, status and opportunity limit the accessibility of groups (Korte, 2007).

5.2. Symbolism and social identity construction through consumption

As personal possessions represent not only a person’s identity but also belongingness to a group and thus group identity, the social self can also be formed through consumption. Possessions hold various symbolic meanings individuals link with the self and others in the society. For example, universities or public monuments are common possessions defining both self and group identity. (Wattanasuwan, 2005.) Brand meaning is created in a social environment where individuals share the interpretation of the symbol. A Michael Kors bag does not communicate its owner’s social status if other social reference or comparison groups do not share the same belief of the brand’s symbolic meaning. Through the process of socialisation, people learn and agree on the shared meanings of symbols and develop individual symbolic representations. However, socially shared meanings change over time. A meaning becomes valid only after the mediated brand experience has been elaborated in a social context and given significance from lived brand experiences. The multiple identities are thus constructed, maintained and expressed through the shared meanings and individual symbolic representations. (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998.)
Through consumption of shared symbols, individuals express their group membership (Belk, 1988). Social identities thus guide judgement decisions of brands. The level of identification with a social identity has an effect on brand choices (Chattaraman et al., 2010; Stayman & Deshpande, 1989; Wooten, 1995) and brand loyalty (Deshpande et al., 1986). Consumers are attracted to products that are linked to their social identity in terms of symbolising the consumer’s own personality traits or the type of person the consumer aspires to become (Forehand et al., 2002). Possessions can thus help to distinguish an individual from others, but it can also be an indication of group identity or belongingness to a group (Belk, 1988; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; Langner et al., 2013; Kleine et al., 1993; Shavitt et al., 1992; Shavitt & Nelson, 2000). The process of identity construction is thus similar to individuals and groups (Belk, 1988).

Different brands have different symbolic meanings to different groups. Groups define how one acts and what meaning is given to acts, events and objects, and these meanings can be similar or different from the individual’s self-created meaning of a brand. Thus, the individual has to determine whether the meaning created by the group is true for the individual’s self, and alternatively use, alter or deny the meaning. (Ligas & Cotte, 1999.) Therefore, a brand is not only an identification of the individual’s status or wealth, but a means of communicating belongingness to a particular social group with whom the individual identifies (Ligas & Cotte, 1999; Kleine et al., 1993; Shavitt & Nelson, 2000). Therefore, consumers are attracted to brands that incorporate features of their social identity (Langner et al., 2013; Reed & Forehand, 2003).

5.3. Consumer socialisation and reference groups

To understand how people learn and agree on the shared meanings of symbols, it is necessary to review the concept of socialisation. Ward (1974:2) identifies consumer socialisation as “the process by which young people acquire skills, knowledge and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace”. However, socialisation is a life-long process also concerning adults. This includes the learning of the culture we are born and participation in social groups as well as the economic view by Roland-Lévy (2002) of being employed, unemployed and retiring. It includes the learning of social roles and their associated behaviour, and is dependent on the socio-demographic attributes of age, life cycle disposition, social class, knowledge, attitudes, motives, and skills (Kuhlmann, 1983).

Socialisation is thus a process of social interaction between the socialisation agent and the person, although a very complex one (Ekström, 2006). Previous studies (e.g. Ward, 1974; Moschis & Churchill, 1978; Moschis & Moore, 1979) have studied family, friends, or mass media as socialisation agents. Some have studied
department stores (e.g. Hollander & Omura, 1989) or retailers (e.g. Grossbart et al., 1991) having an impact on consumer socialisation. This creates the complexity of the relationship as several socialisation agents are involved in the process and their relative importance is difficult to determine (Ekström, 2006).

5.3.1. Reference groups

Reference groups have a significant role in communicating the symbolic values of products and brands (Banister & Hogg, 2007). By definition, reference groups are “a person or a group of people that significantly influence an individual’s behaviour” (Bearden & Etzel, 1982:184). A reference group is therefore an individual or a group the consumer refers to when forming judgements about his circumstances, evaluations, aspirations, attitudes and behaviour (Aledin, 2009; Grant & Stephen, 2006). Consumers’ behaviour is influenced by the associations they form with certain groups (Bearden & Etzel, 1982). Positive reference groups encourage consumers to consume in a certain way, whereas negative groups discourage the consumption of certain items (Banister & Hogg, 2007). Thus, comparison groups are groups the individual uses as a standard for self-evaluation, but does not belong to (Aledin, 2009). Therefore, consumers use brands utilising brand associations resulting from reference group brand usage to communicate their self-concepts (Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

5.3.1.1. Stereotyping and generalisations

Consumers form stereotypes of the product’s generalised user, which in return has an influence on consumer decision-making process (Erickson, 1996; Sirgy et al., 1997). For example, students with similar interest in music dress in similar ways and the personality of the outside groups is based on general assumptions and not on the cues of the outside group’s individual group members. Consumers thus stereotype themselves as members of a group and make consumption decisions and judgements of fashion objects and brands given the stereotypes and generalisations of the product’s typical user. (Banister & Hogg, 2007.) According to Tajfel (1982), stereotyping, prejudice and conflict are important consequences of social identity and self-categorisation which are easily triggered through in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination. Differences between groups are seen greater than they actually are as people stereotype and generalise the typical user and out-groups (Dittmar, 2011).

5.3.2. Consumer socialisation agents

As already discussed, the social interaction between the socialisation agent and the person is complex, and it is difficult to determine which socialisation agents
have a relative importance along the process of socialisation (Ekström, 2006; Muzzatti, 2007). However, unlike children, adults select their socialisation experiences (Goodwin & Sewall, 1992). As the social learning theory suggests (see Bandura, 1977), the main consumer socialisation agents are family, friends and peers, and mass media. Ghazali et al. (2011) suggest that the degree to which these socialisation agents have an influence in the fashion context depends on the individual’s attitudes toward fashion. The influence and importance of these socialisation agents will be discussed in the following sub-headings.

5.3.2.1. Parents and family

Adult consumption-related activities are shaped by what is learned early in life (Moschis, 1985; Ward, 1974). Therefore, family plays an important role in the socialisation process (Viswanathan et al., 2000). Children learn to understand how consumption functions in the society through the skills, knowledge, and values provided by the parents (Yan & Xu, 2010). Children thus imitate and observe the consumer behaviour of their parents (Kuhlmann, 1983). Children also consult their older siblings for clothing choices (Grant & Stephen, 2005). However, parents have the most important influence on children's purchase behaviour (Caruana & Vassallo, 2003). Especially mothers were found to have a great influence on the child's clothing choices (Grant & Stephen, 2005).

Parents are the first identification model of children (Rodhain, 2006), and children often associate their parents with certain brands which they later on seek to acquire (Martens et al., 2004). As children reach adolescence, peers become more important socialisation agents than parents, although the skills and attitudes learned in childhood influence consumption behaviour in adulthood (Ward, 1974; Kamaruddin & Mokhlis, 2003).

5.3.2.2. Friends and peers

Peers are seen to have a significant influence especially on the behaviour of youth and young adults (Drenten et al., 2008), but also adults (Plinto & Mansfield, 2011). Peers can be seen as social interaction with friends, classmates and members of organisations (Aledin, 2009). Peers become the most important socialisation agents later in life and have a significant effect on shaping decision-making styles (Kamaruddin & Mokhlis, 2003). They are important sources for product evaluations which are perceived to be accepted by other peers (Ghazali et al., 2011).

Consumers also learn the symbolic meaning of products through peers (Gunter & Furnham, 1998). Material possessions are valued, popularised, and accepted in the
culture of peer groups. Individuals seek to fit in with the group and thus make conscious decisions of their clothing choices when they are together with other peers. (Grant & Stephen, 2005)

Peers act as socialisation agents through direct peer-to-peer interaction and indirect observation of peers (Yan & Xu, 2010). Childers and Rao (1992) claim that peer pressure is most likely to be experienced for ‘public luxuries’, such as branded fashion items. Peer influence can have a normative or informational aspect. Normative influences are based on an individual’s need to identify with group norms, standards, and values, while informational influences represent an individual’s tendency to learn about product by observing others. (Bearden et al., 1989.)

5.3.2.3. Mass media

Exposure to media has also been demonstrated to have a great influence on the beliefs, attitudes and behaviour of consumers (Siegel et al., 2001). Advertising serves as a conversation medium between peers, and meanings to products are derived from advertising through the acquisition and consumption of products (Ghazali et al., 2011). Ward and Wackman (1971) also state that individuals use advertising for social utility purposes where individuals perceive that buying a certain product or brand manipulates the way how others see them. Thus, media serves as a benchmark for consumers to articulate and disseminate their social and personal identities (Muzzatti, 2007).

Mass media have expanded constantly in the past quarter century. The diverse forms of media range now from CDs and novels to magazines, TV and the Internet. The lines between news, advertising, and entertainment are now becoming diluted, and the messages sent by media serve as conduits through which society represents itself. Due to the divergent form of mass media, it strongly influences public opinion and consumers’ worldviews by shaping our perceptions of the surrounding world. (Muzzatti, 2007.) Nowadays, the Internet is increasingly being used for shopping and product browsing as opposed to conventional brick-and-mortar shopping (Dittmar, 2008). Thus, the Internet has become an important part of our lives (Väistö, 2009).
6. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study was to gain a better understanding of the role of fashion brands and their consumption in the construction of the identity of self and social identity. As already described in the introduction chapter, the ethnographical approach to social investigation of fashion has to date been very limited (Elliott & Elliott, 2003; Hackley, 2005). Thus, the method used for this research is qualitative in nature to understand the social world through the participants’ interpretation of that world. To understand the world from participants’ perspectives, a theoretical understanding of the contexts and meanings was first gathered from relevant theory, journals and preliminary studies. Social properties are outcomes of the interactions between individuals, and thus focus group interviews have been chosen as a data collection method.

6.1. Focus groups

There has been a growing interest in social research to use focus groups in cultural studies. The focus group method is a form of group interview where several participants are interviewed on a particular fairly tightly defined topic. Thus, the focus group method is a research technique where data is mainly collected through group interaction. The technique allows the researcher to understand why people feel the way they do. It also generates more interesting discussion and results as the approach offers participants the opportunity to probe each other’s reasons for holding a certain view. Thus, it is a helpful tool in bringing forward a wide variety of different views in relation to a particular issue. As the viewpoints of people are studied, the focus group method allows participants to bring fore issues they feel important and significant. Moreover, focus groups allow individuals to argue and challenge each other’s views which are lacking elements in one-to-one interviewing often producing inconsistent results. Thus, the focus group method produces more realistic results as individuals are forces to analyse and revise their views. This is an extremely important aspect when studying behaviour. (Bryman, 2012.)

The method is therefore more spontaneous while the moderator only observes and gently guides the discussion which allows the participants to freely discuss the topic at hand (Wibeck, 2010). This allows the participants to form group dynamic (Christensen, 1998), which also allows the researcher a chance to study how individuals collectively make sense of a phenomenon and construct meanings around it (Bryman, 2012; Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). It is therefore also a more naturalistic way than individual interviews to understand how individuals construct meaning in everyday life (Bryman, 2012; Christensen, 1998).
The aim of choosing focus group interviews as a research method for this study was to better understand the role of fashion brands in the identity construction processes as constructed by individuals engaged in a social process. The method allows the researcher to study the social meanings of fashion brands from the consumer’s perspective, and the group situation and interaction allows the study of social behaviour.

6.1.1. Important aspects before forming and conducting focus group studies

Some important aspects, such as the number and size of groups, participants, and atmosphere and environment, need to be taken into account before forming and conducting focus group studies.

Bryman (2012) points out that although of great variation in the number of groups used, there is a tendency for the range to be mainly between ten and fifteen groups. However, too many groups pose simply as a waste of resources and add complexity to data analysis. On the other hand, a large number of groups might be necessary if the researcher feels socio-demographic factors, such as age, gender, and class, affect the studied phenomenon. This also allows the researcher to capture a great deal of diversity in perspectives.

Smaller groups are preferred when participants are likely to have a lot to say about the research topic or the topic is complex (Morgan, 1998). Smaller groups allow greater opportunity for disagreement and diversity as opposed to larger groups while one person is not dominating the proceedings of the discussion (Bryman, 2012). Thus, smaller groups of three to five (Peek & Fotherfill, 2009) or four to six (Wibeck, 2010) participants are preferred in most contexts for smoother running of discussion as the participants can easily speak out and the influence of peers is minimised (Peek & Fotherhill, 2009; Wibeck, 2010). Smaller focus groups also make it easier for the researcher to analyse the data in depth.

The participants also need to feel or have the desire to belong to the group (Svedberg, 1992). This aspect of group cohesiveness is an important factor in group creation for the participants to feel connected to each other. Thus, interpersonal factors, such as personalities and other demographic variables, need to be taken into consideration when forming focus groups. Participants should share more or less the same socio-economical background, knowledge, and education, in order to facilitate interaction and eliminate problems caused by too large group diversity. Smaller groups were found to allow better room for group cohesiveness. The physical environments, size of location, acoustics and atmosphere have a strong influence on the group interaction. Thus, smaller locations are more preferable, and the environment should be natural or familiar to the participants for them to feel comfortable. (Wibeck, 2010.)
Given these important aspects in mind, the researcher decided to form small groups of four to five participants who shared similar background, knowledge, and education. In order for the participants to feel comfortable during discussions, the focus group studies were held at one of each focus group participants’ home where the rest of the participants had also visited. The number of focus groups was limited by the time frame of four months and resources of the research, and therefore the number of groups had to be kept to a minimum in order to analyse the transcripts in-depth. Given the time constraints, three focus group interviews were held.

6.1.2. Selection of participants

Purposive sampling approach was used to select participants. This is a strategic selection, where participants are selected in terms of criteria that allow the research questions to be answered (Bryman, 2012). The sampling approach does not allow for generalisations, but fits well with the aim of the study to gain a deeper understanding of the role of fashion brands in identity construction.

As previous studies of the role of brands in identity construction (e.g. Väistö, 2009; Auty & Elliott, 2001; Chaplin & John, 2005; Grant & Stephen, 2006; Lanhance & Beaudoin, 2006), the researcher also decided to form groups out of people who already knew each other. This is an appropriate strategy when construction of identity is studied (Holbrook & Jackson, 1996). This way, the participants are more comfortable about discussing a social phenomenon and bring forth their world-views. To establish whether there is any systematic variation in the ways in different groups discuss the research topic (Bryman, 2012), the participants were organised into groups in terms of stratifying criteria, such as age, education or occupation. The prerequisite to participate in the study was that the participant had an interest in fashion and clothing.

The selection of participants was carried out via the social media site, Facebook, where 19 people were first invited to attend a focus group session. These people were friends of the researcher, and most importantly friends with each other, whom the researcher knew to have an interest in fashion and clothing, and of which appropriate groups could be formed according to age, background, knowledge and education. The people invited to attend the discussion sessions were all female as they are significantly better in decoding the communicative language of fashion statements, clothing cues, and attributing positive characteristics to owners of fashion products (Elliott, 1994).

The initial invite was then followed by a snowball sampling technique – a technique in which the researcher initially samples a small group of people relevant to the research aims, and these sampled participants further propose
others with similar experience or characteristics to participate in the research. This allows the researcher to interview a wide diversity of people. (Bryman, 2012.) The participants were encouraged to invite prospective, eligible participants into the Facebook discussion chain. The initial 19 people invited nine people to participate in the discussions. The researcher then formed suitable focus groups by choosing relevant participants from the people interested in participating in the research. Of the 19 initial participants invited to attend the focus group study, eight people attended and six participants were collected via the snowball sampling technique. Participants were all Finnish citizens who were living in the Helsinki region.

6.2. Data collection method

Semi-structured interview method was used in the collection of data during the focus group discussions. The interviewing method stands between structured and unstructured interviews, where the interviewer has a series of questions that form the interview guide but is able to vary the sequence of questions. This way the moderator can guide the participants and ask further questions in response to what are seen as significant replies. A semi-structured interview method is thus a more flexible approach to interviewing as it allows for a relatively free conversation. (Bryman, 2012.)

The interview guide (see Appendix 1) consisted of questions and issues to be covered in order to help the moderator to facilitate the session (Bryman, 2012). The interview guide was first tested on two people who were not participants of the discussions to make sure questions were understandable. The interview guide was divided into six sections, namely, the introduction, first projective technique, identity of self and consumption, social identity and consumption, second projective technique, and conclusions. The moderator started the sessions by giving a brief description of the aims of the thesis and the research issue at hand, which introduced the participants with the research topic and provided a chance for the participants to create group cohesiveness (Wibeck, 2010). The guide started with an introduction question, where the participants were asked to present themselves and give a brief background of themselves to others. This made the participants more relaxed as they were all friends with each other and found the presentation of themselves a little amusing. Thus, the presentation of participants was more done for the moderator, who could then later hear from the tapes which participant had which voice and map where they were seated during the discussions.

The discussion then followed with the first projective technique. Previous studies have found them relevant in focus group discussions to generate cultural talk (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). This followed the introduction before the key
questions. In order to get the participants to reflect over their fashion possessions and favourite fashion brands, the participants were asked to write and/or draw their favourite clothing brands and fashion items onto a piece of paper. Each participant was given a sheet and a pen, and they had five minutes time to write and/or draw their favourite things. This exercise was considered as fun, and all the participants draw or wrote for at least five minutes. When the time was out, the participants were asked to show others what they had drawn or written on the paper and describe why they had chosen to draw those particular fashion items or brands. This sparked interesting conversation about the participants’ fashion possessions and preference towards certain fashion brands inside the focus groups. The moderator also made follow-up questions to attract valuable data (see Appendix 1 for questions).

A few key questions were then asked based on the theory and literature studied that would help in analysing the research questions of the study. The key theory questions consisted of questions concerning the identity of self and consumption, and social identity and consumption. The theory questions were then followed by the second projective technique. The participants were shown three pictures of stereotypical fashion brand users one at a time, namely, a R’n’B girl, groups of hipster girls, and a gothic girl. The participants were asked to name the fashion brands they thought the girls in the pictures would wear, and briefly describe the person based on her outer looks and what the participants thought the girl(s) in the pictures would be like in real life. The participants were then shown recognisable fashion brand logos. The participants were asked to describe what types of people wear those types of brands and what these types of people would be in real life. This projective technique also sparked interesting conversation between the participants and attracted data which was essential for the research. The interview guide finished with a closing question that confirmed that the participants had nothing further to add.

The data was collected in a home environment in the Helsinki region as the two prime considerations for participants are convenience and comfort (Millward, 2006). The participants of each focus group were asked to gather around at one of the participating participants’ home, which the moderator knew would be the most comfortable place to hold the discussion as all the participants participating in the groups had visited that environment before. The focus groups consisted of fourteen people ranging between the ages of 19 to 32. They were all female participants, who were either students, just graduated students starting out their working life or adults in working life. A total of three focus group sessions were held of four to five participants per group. Two people did not participate in the research although of their first agreement. After the second focus group, the researcher noticed that the groups discussed similar topics. The third focus group held confirmed the notion that no new relevant topics emerged.
The focus group sessions took place in May 2014 each lasting between 105 to 120 minutes. While most focus group researchers state a standard duration of a focus group study on adults to vary between 60 to 120 minutes (Millward, 2006), the time used for discussion in the focus group sessions was reasonable. The overall atmospheres in the focus group discussions were relaxed, open and educative. All participants stated to have enjoyed the session at the end of the discussion and told to have learned a lot about themselves and of others through their use of fashion brands.

6.3. Data analysis method

All focus group sessions were recorded with iPhone recording application. This made it easier for the moderator to later the transcript the data. Participants were informed about the recording and were assured confidentiality (Millward, 2006). The moderator also took notes of important themes and issues that arose from the discussions between participants. After data collection, the researcher soon listened to the recordings of the focus group discussions and read through the notes to capture the main themes and issues of each interview session and to detect patterns. The transliteration of data took fifteen days to complete.

During the transcription of data, the moderator placed special attention to the way the participants talked about the uprising topics, laughter, tone of voice, physical reactions, and how participants reacted to the comments of others. This is an important procedure in order to capture the entire character of the session. The data was not shortcut or selectively edited as this would have altered the way content was actually produced. (Millward, 2006.) Thus, the researcher was able to capture things normally missed in the data collected by searching for these discourses.

Data should be considered in the context in which it is produced and interpreted (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006; Bryman, 2012). According to Moisander and Valtonen (2006) exact systematic procedures and techniques can make the analysis of data into a too technical of a procedure. The data of interest in this research was not only the content but also the interaction process of how the participants as a group make sense of the topics and phenomena discussed. As the data of interest sets the form of analysis, the data was analysed by using content and discourse analysis which includes both the mechanical and interpretative components of content and interpretation (Millward, 2006). This approach has been previously used by other social constructionists (e.g. Wilkinson, 2003) to understand how participants collectively make sense of the social phenomena studied.
As only a small proportion of data can be analysed using discourse analysis (Millward, 2006), content analysis was used to form the main categories of the results. After reading through the notes made during the discussions and the transcripts, the data was first grouped into main categories concerning the identity of self, social identity, possessions and symbolism, and brand relationships, and then divided into sub-categories under each main category. The formation of the main themes was influenced by how the participants addressed the topics and how they brought forth certain topics or reacted to the comments or actions of others. The moderator then sought to analyse why participants brought up certain topics and why they reacted the way they did during the discussions. Interpretation was then used to determine which sub-categories were meaningful to answer the research questions (Millward, 2006). Therefore, data that was not considered relevant for the purposes of the research was deleted, and the final main and sub-categories were formed. The data was further analysed by looking at the group interaction and the context in which statements were made. By analysing the social interaction between participants, the moderator was able to not only analyse the content but also the social action, which was an important part of gaining a better understanding of the formation of in- and out-groups. Finally, the main themes and the findings with most relevance to the research questions, theory, and literature studied were formed, and they are presented in the analysis and discussion of the results.

6.4. Trustworthiness of the study

The terms validity and reliability are not viewed separately in qualitative research. To reflect these terms of validity and reliability in ethnographic research, credibility, transferability, and trustworthiness is used. (Golafshani, 2003.) Previous research in validity and reliability claims in qualitative research proposes even further that the quality of qualitative research should be established and assessed through the criterion of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Bryman, 2012). Therefore, claiming trustworthiness is crucial for claiming validity and reliability in qualitative research (Bryman, 2012).

Credibility parallels internal validity, a term used to ensure whether there is consistency between the researcher’s observations and the theoretical ideas they develop (Bryman, 2012). Thus, in qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument for credibility (Patton, 2001). To ensure the researched had correctly understood the social world studied, respondent validation technique was used. The researcher provided each participant the transcript from the discussion they participated in and the draft of the findings drawn from the analysis in order for the participants to validate that the researcher had understood the discussion and comments correctly.
Transferability parallels external validity, which refers to the degree to which findings can be generalised across social settings. As the research is qualitative in nature, the results do not produce statistical data, and thus results as such cannot be generalised to the wider public. However, thick description about the detailed accounts of the social setting is given for the reader to determine whether the situation studied in the research is applicable to the reader’s situation. (Bryman, 2012)

Dependability parallels reliability, which refers to the degree to which a study can be replicated (Bryman, 2012). Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose that dependability can be argued via an auditing approach, where the researcher keeps records of all the phases of the research process (Bryman, 2012). Fellow classmates and the researcher’s thesis supervisor acted as auditors during the course of the research assessing the problem formulation, theory used, methodology, interview guide (see Appendix 1), interview transcripts, and data analysis and conclusions. This contributes to the trustworthiness of the study.

Confirmability parallels objectivity, which ensures the researcher has not allowed personal values or theoretical inclinations sway the conduct of the research (Bryman, 2012). One of the criticisms of qualitative data analysis is the fact the interpretation of data is too subjective (Bryman, 2012; Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). As the main occupation of qualitative research is to understand the social world from the perspective of those people studied (Bryman, 2012), the researcher interpreted the data according to her pre-understanding of the research issue, and the meaning of the data was produced together with the participants of the focus group discussions. By using a semi-structured interview guide, the researcher was able to enhance the opportunity of revealing the perspectives of people studied (Bryman, 2012). Moreover, the researcher had culturally conditioned knowledge of the research issue. The researcher is a Finnish citizen who has lived in the culture for most of her life and has an understanding of people from different parts of Finland. In addition, the academic knowledge was based on the marketing and consumer behaviour courses studied at the Swedish School of Textiles and Metropolia Business School, and the articles and relevant books read during the thesis writing period about postmodern consumer culture, consumption, identity construction, and brand symbolism and relationships. These assumptions have influenced the interview guide, and the interpretation and analysis of data.
7. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Adults have strong recognitions of fashion brands and they use fashion brands as a means of communication in different personal and social situations. It was evident from the study that adults form relationships with fashion brands, which in return has a long-term effect on their fashion buying behaviour and consumption. However, the types of relationships were variable, and not all adults showcased a special relationship to a fashion brand. This chapter presents the findings of the focus group discussions. The interest in this research were the development of fashion brand symbolism and formation of fashion brand relationships in three settings, namely the personal, in-group and out-group environments.

The first sections concentrate on the findings of the personal environment and the role of fashion brand possessions to the self-concept through brand symbolism and relationships. Adults use fashion brands as a means of identity construction by using fashion brands as symbols to differentiate from other individuals. Participants were found to select certain fashion brands to stand out from others, highlight their personal values or showcase their body. Fashion products represent one of the most favourite possessions of adults which are important for the individual’s sense of self. On the other hand, altered clothing and clothing without labels were also found valuable.

Section 7.4. concentrates on the findings of the in-group environment. Friends and peers at work or school were the most influential in-groups. However, family was also found to have an important influence over brand choices for the younger adults.

Section 7.5. concentrates on the findings of the out-group environment. It was found extremely important for adults to distinguish themselves from unfavourable fashion cliques and younger people. Participants were found to often result in classifying people according to their stereotypical mental images and to have prejudice against people they considered to be representing out-groups.

7.1. The different selves, fashion brands and consumption

Most of the participants had a clear idea of their personal style and the fashion brands used to portray the different styles. For example, Tanja stated that she loves street fashion and likes to combine masculine objects with feminine pieces by wearing hats or army boots with dresses. She was also very clear about the colours that she would wear. Colours besides black, white, grey or red were out of the question as she did not find colours to either suit her or go together with the style she wanted to portray. Tanja was also a big fan of Jeffrey Campbell and Dr.
Martens shoes and admitted that she owns several pairs from the fashion brands. Thus, Tanja chooses fashion brands that would fit her street style and colour requirements.

Tanja: I am a street style person. So close to my heart are brands such as Obey, Vans, Unif, Crooks & Castles etc.

Tanja understands that by choosing certain fashion brands she can communicate her personality and showcase her identity to distinguish herself from others who do not wear the same brands. By choosing to wear the above mentioned fashion brands, Tanja is constructing her sense of self and what she would like to be. Through the symbolic properties these fashion brands represent and Tanja’s strict colour requirements, she can differentiate herself from others who might use different fashion brands and colours to portray their street style aspirations.

7.1.1. Self in different occasions

Participants could easily categorise fashion brands according to different occasions. Different occasions and activities clearly influenced how participants would dress and what fashion brands they would choose to wear. These fashion brands were not only tied to the person’s self image, but also to other people present at the occasion. For example, Linda said that she would wear her Nike trainers to work as she knew that her colleagues would dress similarly. In this case, it was important for Linda to fit in with her colleagues. However, her workplace environment was not restricting her choice of fashion brands which allows her to freely express her individuality. This was not true in Leena’s case where she was required to change her fashion brand or item choices if she was called to work.

Leena: I can’t go to work in my Nike slippers. There you have to wear a collar shirt and fix your hair.

As with Linda, it was important for Leena to fit in with her colleagues at work. Leena also described another situation where she would find herself dressing differently. She said to have difficulties in dressing for a night out without looking over-dressed as she did not want to stand out too much from the crowd. Thus, in-groups were found to have an influence over the brand choices participants would wear in different situations. Participants showcased a need to fit in with the groups they felt to be a part of, for example, peers at school or work, or groups of friends.

Emma, on the other hand, stated that if she had to dress more professionally, she would wear something from the H&M business side. Emma said to be a huge fan of the comfortable and sporty clothes, and thus favoured brands such as Peak
Performance and Franklin & Marshall. Later in the discussions, Emma admitted to buy a lot of clothes from H&M and said that they have an abundance of style choices for everyone. She said to find a lot of sporty and comfortable clothes from their collections. This can also explain her brand preference for H&M, if she was required to dress more professionally. Emma’s story also indicates the reluctance of moving out of the comfort zone of fashion brands. Tanja also explains:

Tanja: If I wear high heels to school, those will be my Jeffrey Campbell’s.

Earlier during the discussions Tanja expressed her love affair for Dr. Martens and Jeffrey Campbell shoes. Although she would normally wear her favourite Dr. Martens, she would choose her other favourite fashion brand in case she needed to wear high heels. Moreover, Tiia stated that she would dress more laid-back during her free time. However, she stated to wear exactly the same fashion brands, which indicate that she chooses her free time, school and work outfits from the fashion brands she feels connected to. Participants were thus more likely to choose among the array of their favourite fashion brands if they were required to change the style that they thought to represent their identities. This can be seen as an act of control over the self as wearing brands that would not fit the participants’ views of the self would deteriorate core identity and how others would perceive them.

7.1.2. Actual and ideal self

Material possessions are also used to showcase who you would want to be. Participants thus described a lot fashion brands and items they would like to own or acquire. The conversation between Jenni and Aada explains:

Jenni: One big dream is a Chanel bag and Louboutin shoes. But these are only dreams.
I: Why is it that you dream of these?
Aada: The brand of course.
I: Why?
Jenni: Because it has been praised in media. And also because it's not easily achievable to wear these brands. Therefore I dream of these.
I: Is there a certain message the media is sending about these brands?
Jenni: Of course. It’s like what type of woman would wear and use those brands.
I: Well what type of woman would wear or use them?
Jenni: That type who walks... or comes from work and flips her hair and wears a Burberry trench coat and walks into the store, puts her Louis Vuitton bag on the counter, takes her American Express. (Jenni and other participants laugh.) These are all brands I just named. They all have a certain mental image but I don’t know if I’d ever be one of those people.
Aada: I wouldn’t even have to use those brands. I’d just like them to hang in my closet. For me it’s the Chanel bag that looks like the best bag in the world. It gets better with use and you can give it to your grandchildren.

Participants dreamed of fashion brands that were of more expensive nature and thus out of reach for them at the moment. The above conversation between the two participants was encouraged by other participant nodding, smiling and laughing. They could all relate to these brands and had a similar view of what they meant. The conversation indicates that owning a more expensive and famous fashion brand symbolises wealth, success and continuity. Not only do the Chanel bag or Louboutin shoes symbolise self-expression, happiness and life accomplishments, they create a sense of immortality. By wanting to give her possible future Chanel bag to her grandchildren, Aada can preserve her history and story after death on Earth.

Another interesting observation rising from the above discussion is Jenni’s insecurity of ever becoming ‘one of those people’ who wear expensive fashion brands. It was clear from the discussions that Jenni is very fashion brand oriented and has a high appreciation for expensive fashion brands. However, given that people are born into different social categories, not all individuals are granted a direct access into groups. Although she might have the opportunity to once become ‘one of those people’, her personal history might limit her from obtaining her ideal status. Jenni was born in a working-class family and thus doubts if she has the right to manifest her ideal self. By laughing off during her description of a typical Chanel brand user, she is showcasing her uncertainty of ever having an opportunity to be entitled to wear the brand.

When participants were asked to describe their style, they were very specific with the adjectives and fashion brands they wanted themselves to be linked with. Most of the participants were also rather dissatisfied with the style they had at the moment. For example, Sanna wanted to be more fashionable and wear more expensive brands whereas Leena was happy with her ‘worn-out’ style but would buy more expensive items. Again, participants wished to be able to buy more expensive fashion brands to signal higher status or wealth.

The ideal self was also found to be restricted by social pressures.

Emma: The society sets certain pressures. I would love to look sportier but I can’t wear that look for a PTA meeting.
I: So you don’t want to stand too much from the crowd?
Emma: Yeah. You have to dress according to the occasion.

Emma is afraid that by dressing her ideal way will affect the way how others perceive her. She is willing to modify her actual and ideal self to fit in with her
peers and their expectations of how she should dress. Emma’s comment also indicates how dressing the self according to different occasions is largely influenced by the opinions of reference groups. This reflects how individuals are more likely to conform to the in-group, and thus willing to experience a loss of self, although this action limits the individual’s possibility to showcase her true personality through the brands she wears.

In addition, most of the times the image the participant wanted others to see differed to some extent from the view the participant wanted to communicate. In these occasions, the moderator could clearly sense feelings of embarrassment. For example, a conversation between Linnea and Annika turned into a mild argument when Linnea was trying to describe her style but Annika interrupted her and described her style totally differently from the style she wanted to portray.

Linnea: But I don’t think that’s what I feel like I want to communicate to people. For me it’s more like what I don’t want to be I wish to communicate!

Clearly, Annika was categorising Linnea into groups she did not want to be associated with, which was jeopardising both her actual and ideal view of the self. This created an awkward mood in the session, and the participants started to quickly laugh off the argument and ask Linnea what she really wanted to communicate. This can be seen as a type of in-group solidarity, where a group of friends dressing similarly and wearing the same brands would defend a member of the group as they saw her similar to them. This would strengthen the group’s identity as members were seen to share common characteristics and interests towards the same fashion brands. Moreover, the above comment made by Linnea also captures how important the participants found it to differentiate from the out-groups. Although she was unsure about which groups she belonged to, she was clear about the groups she did not wish to be associated with. This type of behaviour was found usual and extremely important, and the participants made several comments similar to this during the discussions.

7.1.3. My body

Some participants also expressed that the use of certain fashion brands was also influenced by their body types. For example, Linda expressed her love for dresses and the concern of her body type in finding clothing that would flatter her curves. She had just lost a lot of weight and stated that she could only find dresses that would fit her from her favourite fashion brands Oasis, Closet or Object.

I: Why are these brands important?
Linda: For me, because they fit my boobs. That’s simply the reason why I normally stick to those brands.
I: So for you it’s the fit of the clothes?
Linda: Yeah, I can try H&M or Vila or Vero Moda, but usually if I don’t wear XL it just looks weird. Just looks funny. So that’s why I stick to those brands.

Generally the sizes at H&M, Vila and Vero Moda are rather petite, and although Linda had lost the weight to actually fit into the clothing provided by these fashion brands, she still feels insecure of buying from these brands. She clearly did not want to link her actual self with the XL size, and thus continued purchasing from her favourite brands that have a more generous fit. According to Linda’s description of the typical brand users of H&M, Vila and Vero Moda, she did not find herself to be part of the groups of people wearing those brands, which might also be an indication why she continued to purchase from the brands she felt more related with. Moreover, the consumption of her favourite brands was a long-time experience and therefore changing her preference of fashion brands could result in a loss of self. Linda therefore continues to favour the brands that she has a long-term relationship with.

The clothing choices and use of fashion brands also changed greatly when the female body forms started to emerge. Sanna described how she started to wear dresses from H&M and Gina Tricot after she started to grow breasts. Moreover, Emma said that she started to move from sportive brands, such as Fila, towards more feminine brands, such as H&M, when she started to look more womanly. Sanna and Emma therefore felt they were entitled to wear the ‘big girl’ brands and move away from the childhood brands. H&M and Gina Tricot can be seen as rather girly fashion brands which can explain why participants switched to these brands when they started to see themselves more as women. Being a woman can be linked to the core sense of self and thus can guide in the selection of fashion brands.

7.1.4. Quality, comfort and values

The participants were also interested in sustainability and quality issues, which also sparked interesting conversations in all focus groups. The discussions came forth spontaneously when one person would start to manifest their own personal values of sustainability and the others would follow. Quality was often linked with more expensive fashion brands and sustainability with personal values of being more environmentally-friendly.

Emma: I like comfortable, relaxed, sporty clothes. And comfortability is a must and I have brands like Peak Performance, Björn Borg, Franklin & Marshall, and Roxy.
I: Do these brands have those type of comfortable clothes you are looking for?
Emma: Yeah they do but also slightly nicer. Like basic hoodies I don’t buy from H&M, but I buy like... a hoodie from a certain brand. For me it feels like they are better quality.

I: *So the brand does matter when buying a basic hoodie?*
Emma: Yeah it doesn’t matter if it costs more. It needs to feel superior quality. And so that it will last longer.

By buying more expensive fashion brands Emma feels like she is buying into quality, which can be seen as a personal value. It was evident from the discussions that Emma was keen on environmental issues and thus favoured fashion brands that were more transparent with sustainability information. Thus, Emma is constructing her identity with the help of fashion brands she finds more sustainable to the environment. Moreover, Laura also stated to put more money into quality shoes as her personal experience has taught her that less expensive brands break easily. This experience has made her faithful to Björn Borg shoes. Quality fashion brands were thus seen as more expensive and better for the environment. Therefore, participants were found to favour fashion brands that they thought to represent their ideal values.

However, for some participants, the latest trends in fashion would overrule the need to be sustainable. Jenni favoured fast fashion brands as she wanted to stay on trend. She admitted that she buys clothing if it looks cool and does not care about quality or environmental issues. The main thing is the trendy look of the item.

Jenni: It would be wonderful, also considering my profession, to buy something more sustainable. Save money and only buy one thing. But. It just doesn’t go like that.

Therefore, the values of quality and sustainability would vaporise if the need to stay on trend was more prominent. It was clear that Jenni did not find sustainability to be a value close to her identity. It was more important for her to stand out and be unique, and thus differentiate herself from others. Staying on trend could also be influenced by social pressures.

Sanna: I shop at Gina Tricot and H&M because I get many dresses for the price of a more expensive one. Because I don’t like to wear the same clothes every day. Or if you see the same people every day, then I can’t wear the same clothes with the same people.

Although Sanna stated earlier to buy more expensive fashion brands as they are of better quality and of more sustainable nature, her statement was overruled by social pressures of having to wear different clothes every day if the same people were met. Wearing the same clothes with the same people can symbolise lack of money or style, and thus Sanna would purchase clothing from fast fashion
retailers to showcase her peers that she is fashionable and not short on cash. Sanna’s statements of sustainability might have appeared as others in the group started to express their concerns for the environment, and thus she felt the need to participate in the discussion.

In addition, many participants told to regularly shop at flea markets. While doing second-hand shopping, participants admitted to look for brand names on items. Clothes from fast fashion retailers were not worth of purchasing second-hand, but if the brand name was mentioned next to the price tag, the participants were more likely to purchase the item. For example, Jenni explains how she prices her items at flea markets:

Jenni: If it was a certain brand, then I mentioned for example a sweater from Object. Because for me it brings added value.

Second-hand shopping can be seen as an act of sustainable consumption and a value close to one’s self-concept. In general the participants were extremely brand oriented and aware of fashion brands. This can also be seen in their way of doing ‘sustainable shopping’, where fashion brands that were linked with quality were worth of purchasing. Thus, even though while shopping at flea markets, the name of the fashion brands purchased was important. The brand name was therefore an indicator of quality.

Leena also explained that she buys almost everything from flea markets, although admits that she just bought two pairs of Nike slippers online. The way her comment came out in the discussions was spontaneous and uncontrolled, and she was admittedly embarrassed of telling her peers of buying something new after making repeated comments about her values of sustainable consumption. Although many participants liked the idea of giving clothing a second life, it was clear that personal values of sustainability were overruled by the need to stay on trend or social pressures. Thus, the topic of sustainability snowballed from one participant to the other as participants were afraid of presenting point of views that would differ from the main views presented by others.

7.1.5. Standing out from the crowd

Participants described numerous stories during the discussions where they stated the need to stand out from the crowd. It was interesting to see how the need to stand out was high in groups of friends, but also it was more important for the in-groups to differentiate from the out-groups. These topics will be better addressed in the following sections.
Participants were aware that wearing certain fashion brands would give them visibility and make them stand out more from the crowd. For example, Tiia said to normally dress in American Apparel and wear Dr. Martens shoes. Those seemed to be the key fashion brands she identified with and she described the brands in a way that would differentiate her from the crowd. Therefore, participants were found to strategically choose certain fashion brands to differentiate themselves from their peers and unfavourable out-groups. For example, Jenni explains that she could better stand out from the crowd by choosing to wear a known fashion brand:

Jenni: Of course if I had a very recognisable piece of clothing, if I went out, I’d like to wear that.

Therefore, standing out from the crowd gave participants the feeling of uniqueness. Standing out was a well-calculated action done on purpose. For example, some stated to wear clothes that would contradict each other to stand out from the crowd and others would wear tailor-made clothes or clothes purchased abroad to differentiate themselves from others. Even though the acceptance of in-groups was found extremely important, participants described to aim towards individuality.

Saimi: All of my friends have a very personal style. It’s like really difficult, somehow…. to look like someone else. I would feel weird if I would dress like them because that’s not my thing at all. Like I try to look nice in my own slice of a style.

### 7.2. Favourite clothing possessions

The participants also shared many stories of their most cherished clothing or fashion items that had significant importance to them. The most valuable possessions were shoes, clothes and accessories due to their physical qualities and symbolism the possessions portrayed. The stories that the participants brought up in the discussions were rather similar and often concerned with items that were altered, lost, stolen or broken. Although these are rather negative features, they represented how certain fashion objects had become more valuable than others.

The participants described a maximum of two cherished fashion items which would evoke strong feelings if lost, stolen or broken. It was evident from the discussions that these fashion items were irreplaceable by any number of new or more expensive items. For example, Tanja told a story of her favourite pairs of earrings, which reflects how an object becomes even more valuable if something is lost. She had bought one pair from Spain and another pair from Gina Tricot and
lost one earring from both sets. Now she has a mix of both brands and said she would not know what to do if she lost the last pair of earrings.

Tanja: I don’t know what I’d do if I lost the last uneven pair! They are my favourite pair. I have other earrings but I don’t wear them.

Losing fashion items were situations that the participants could clearly memorise. Feelings and memories still arose, although items could have been lost over a decade ago. The moment of losing a precious fashion item was linked to feelings of sadness, panic, nostalgia or embarrassment. Clothing was often lost when hanging out with friends. For example, Jenni told the story of her beloved furry childhood sweater from H&M. She had received it as a gift from her mom and once she was playing with her friend outside, she forgot the sweater at the playground. When she went searching for it, it was no longer there. They searched for the sweater for a long time but they never found it.

I: How long were you sad because you lost the sweater?
Jenni: I still am! It was a really nice sweater!

Some of the most cherished items were also received as gifts from parents or relatives. Tiia brought up the story of her Marc O’Polo sweater which she had received as a gift from her mother. The sweater would not have been as important to Tiia if she had not received it from her mother who seemed to be an important person in her life as she repeatedly referred to her during the discussion. She probably would not feel as embarrassed about losing the sweater if it was given by someone else than her parents as she showcased very close connection to her mother. Therefore, memories and feelings were linked to the sweater as a reminder of Tiia’s relationship with her mother.

Tiia: I had one, really of good quality, sweater from Marc O’Polo which I lost last autumn. I have no idea where it went. I really thought that it was still in my closet or somewhere else, at my friend’s place. It just vanished. It was a gift from my mom. I was really pissed off about that.
I: Do you still think about the sweater?
Tiia: Well actually yes! (She laughs awkwardly.) I haven’t told my mom yet that I lost it. She might take it as a personal insult that I don’t care about the stuff she has given me.

Stolen fashion possessions evoke feelings of embarrassment, violation and sadness. Stolen items were clearly memorised and described with the item’s brand name, and times and occasions of usage. Stolen items were found to evoke the strongest feelings of not being in control of one’s life by losing a part of one’s sense of self. For example, Emma described an occasion from few years back when someone had broken into her storage and stolen her favourite yellow
Timberland shoes. It had been a big purchase for her and she was still upset that she cannot wear the shoes anymore.

Participants also mourned after clothing or fashion items that were broken. Broken items were not given any brand names or other value indicators as they were simply possessions that were precious to their holders and contained significant emotional value. For example, Aada told the case of her favourite pair of stilettos she had bought while living abroad. One day one of the heels broke and now she cannot find a shoemaker in Finland of reasonable price to fix them.

Aada: I feel upset about the shoes every day... Or. Like every time I want to go out.

The shoes had become to represent her ventures abroad and therefore part of her extended self. The detachment from the fashion items had thus often happened involuntarily, which can help to explain why the items had such strong emotional ties to the person in question. The items had become parts of the participants’ selves and their loss represented a loss of self and control over one’s possessions and identity. Possessions were seen as objects that tell something about its owner. Losing an item was seen as something that would take away a piece of one’s self and achievements.

Aada: I want my fashion brands hanging from my closet. It’s not the use, it’s more about the fact that I own them. It pretentiously says that you have achieved something in your life. Although that might not be the case. I think fashion to be my possessions.

Moreover, alteration was also a theme that came up in the participants’ stories. For some, the favourite clothing possessions came to be through their own usage or clothing alteration. These items were also linked to feelings and memories that the piece of clothing represented today. The fashion brands of the altered clothing were of significance, while these items were described specifically with brand names. Participants would only alter clothing from brands that they thought could be linked to their style, values or image of themselves. Clothing alterations was a way of standing out from the crowd, and also attracting attention from peers and outsiders. By altering recognisable fashion brands, participants could make a brand as their own, and thus these altered items were extremely cherished and worn almost daily as they brought up feelings of uniqueness.

Therefore, fashion possessions represented a big part of the participants’ identities, and through controlling their possessions, participants could cope with life changes and other periods or feelings of uncertainty. Favourite clothing possessions represented stability in the materialistic world by serving the basic need for safety.
Emma: Considering the changes in my life and working life, I have sought comfort and safety from clothing.

Participants stated to wear their favourite clothing possessions on a continuous basis. This might be because the items represent comfort and safety, and control over one’s life and identity.

**7.3. Favourite fashion brands**

Certain fashion brands were found to be very fond. Participants told similar stories of their relationships with fashion brands, although two participants did not describe any special relationship with a brand. However, participants, who had found something they really loved, would stick with it and not try other brands if they had the choice. Thus, the participants described ‘marriages’ with specific fashion brands and indicated reluctance to buy from a different brand. For example, Tiia openly admitted her tendency to shop from the same fashion brands.

Tiia: For me it’s like you stick with the brands that are good until you might find something that possibly is better. You might buy Dr. Martens shoes but then you might find a better pair from some other brand and then you buy those because they look better.

This indicates the stories of some participants. Although they were faithful to their favourite fashion brands, they were constantly on the look for the better alternative. These participants were most likely to test new fashion brands, but always returned back to their original choice after bad consumption experiences. These participants interestingly also described similar stories of how their style and use of fashion brands had changed numerous times over the years. This might help to explain their tendency to switch brands as an identity-seeking exercise. However, some participants indicated total commitment towards their favourite fashion brands.

Tanja: If I buy jeans, I go for Crocker jeans. Those are like so good for me.
I: What would make you buy a pair of jeans from another brand?
Tanja: You should get the same feeling when you put them on! The feeling like... I don’t even bother to try others on because I already have this good pair. So you don’t even bother to look for alternatives. Although there might be better ones out there.

These type of fashion brands evoked strong feelings in participants. Participants commonly used words, such as best, comfortable, convenience, safety, and cool, to describe the fashion brands they were never willing to let go of. It was
interesting to notice, that these fashion brands were brands that they had been fond of or using since their adolescence or early adulthood. Shopping at and wearing the same fashion brands thus evoke feelings of comfort and safety.

Linda: For me Oasis resembles feelings of comfort and it makes me look nice.

Some participants described love-hate relationships towards fast fashion brands. In general, fast fashion brands sparked interesting conversations between participants in all focus group discussions. For example, Aada said that if she had a choice, she would not shop there and would buy more quality clothes from more expensive brands. She uses the store as more of an inspiration place to go and see what is in trend at the moment, but also results in buying the clothes from there as they are of cheap price.

However, participants had also trust relationships with some fast fashion retailers, such as H&M, Gina Tricot, Vila and Vero Moda. These brands were described as kind of ‘grocery stores’ where you will always find something nice to wear for a cheap price. Thus, for some participants, fast fashion retailers represented a last resort whereas for others they were brands to always count on. Contrary to the trust relationships, some participants described continuous disappointments with certain fashion brands.

Jenni: However, Cubus is a brand when I go shopping and look at the store window, I think, well nice! But when I go inside, I never find something.

Some participants had also selective relationships with their favourite fashion brands. These participants had a really unique style and, based on their comments during the discussions, had a higher need to stand out from the crowd than their fellow participants. The participants had selective relationships with fashion brands that were hip and cool at the moment, but simultaneously they understood that not all items from the infamous brands were worth wearing.

Tiia: My favourite brands are like selections. If you think about Acne or Dr. Martens for example, then most of their items are clothes I could wear, not all but they have a lot of nice stuff.

These participants had a compelling need to create a style that would differentiate themselves from the participants having love-hate relationships towards fast fashion retailers. Moreover, some participants with unique style had ‘I’m not wearing a brand’ relationships with fashion brands. These relationships were long-lasting marriage-like relationships with no thought of brand-switching behaviour. For example, Leena turned out to be a big fan of old clothes from Adidas and Nike. The colours and clothes these brands had made in the 80s was something she now thought to represent her style and taste. Leena said that it was
Leena: I’m a Nike girl. I could never even think about buying sneakers from some other brand.

Uniqueness was also sought from foreign affairs. Quite a few participants admitted to shop online or while abroad, mainly at fashion brands that could not be found in Finland. These fashion brands seemed to be of significant value and almost all of the foreign affair shoppers stated to shop at the same fashion brands while abroad. Participants who said to shop abroad were less likely to purchase fast fashion brands as they strove towards uniqueness and differentiating themselves from others. Participants who shopped abroad made comments such as ‘because they don’t have that in Finland’ and ‘no one else has it’, which made their choice of fashion brands more unique and valuable.

Katri: I shop at Cos. Or Acne outlet, then there, although they don’t have that in Finland. Urban Outfitters, TopShop, if I go to a bigger city where they have these. It depends, normally I try to look for vintage shops. Also American Apparel is nice.

7.4. Fashion brand symbolism and relationships in the in-group environment

As Bandura (1977) suggests, the main consumer socialisation agents influencing the formation of in-groups are family, friends and peers, and mass media. The socialisation agents are important shapers of symbolism and consumption in childhood, whereas adults select their socialisation experiences. Family and friends were clearly identifiable from the discussions. However, the influence of mass media was not as evident from the discussions as expected, while participants mainly talked about brick-and-mortar store environments.

7.4.1. Family

According to consumer socialisation theory, parents and family members are of biggest influence in brand choices in the childhood years. It was evident from the discussions that the brand behaviour taught at home was carried all the way from adolescence to adulthood. For some, the opinions of parents and siblings were still influencing fashion brand preferences even though all of the participants had moved away from home years ago and family members were not met regularly due to long distances between cities.
Family units can be seen as in-groups through their use of clothing and fashion brands. Clothing and brand choices inside the family also resemble the need to belong to a certain group. References to family in brand preferences came forth spontaneously during the discussions. The stories were similar in a way that the participants described brand relationships they had learned at home. These relationships were still found to be influential today, and it was noticeable that these fashion brands were respected and admired. Therefore, the participants’ brand preferences in relation to the family could be divided into two categories: the brand preferences learned at home and family opinions influencing current consumption habits.

During childhood, the fashion brand consumption was a family activity which happened together with siblings and parents. The participants stated the mother to have been the one choosing brands and clothing when they were children. Linnea told how clothes in her family were ordered from mail order catalogues from H&M, Ellos or Josefssons. The mother decided what to order, and then when the clothes came, it was a hassle between the siblings to choose the clothing that looked the nicest. Linnea explained that after she moved from home, she ordered clothing online for years, and told that she and her mother are still loyal to the brands of her childhood years.

Children do not have their own money to spend on clothing, and thus family plays a significant role in learned brand experiences, which also reinforces the idea that fashion brand consumption is a family activity. Tiia told how she never received the fashion brands she wanted to wear when she was a child. It was evident from the discussions that Tiia’s parents were more affluent than her peers’ parents, and thus her parents would only buy fashion brands that would separate them from the ‘working-class’. Tiia was not given any spending money on clothing and thus resulted in wearing her parents’ choices, although her peers at school would dress differently. Tiia said that she never got bullied for not wearing the same clothing as her peers, but she often felt jealous of others as her parents would not allow her to wear the latest trends.

Tiia: I didn’t have any phases in my style when I was younger. Maybe that was because my parents were very conservative. I remember others wearing Moomin scarves and stuff, I never had those. Because you wear what your parents buy you.

Therefore, the clothes and brands chosen by family members might have differed from the fashion brands the participants wanted to wear when they were children. Participants were found to react differently in these situations. Some wore the brand without rebellion, whereas others would refuse to wear brands that were chosen without their acceptance. This behaviour happened normally in situations where friends and peers at school were wearing brands that were linked to some current social phenomena. For example, Emma described a situation where her
parents would not buy her Levi’s jeans. She received a pair of jeans from HayDay instead. It was a cheaper brand and of bad quality, and one day at school her jeans popped and everyone started laughing at her. Emma said that her peers noticed that she did not have Levi’s jeans which sparked feelings of embarrassment and also anger towards her parents for not being able to wear the same brands as her peers.

In general, the participants stated to be very aware of different fashion brands in their adolescent years. Thus, the acceptance of fashion brands chosen by parents might have been because the child was not that aware of other fashion brands. This was especially clear with participants who came from small villages and cities where the abundance of stores was limited. Participants from smaller places were more humble with their fashion brand choices and they were grateful when they received a fashion brand of their liking. Katri told how her family, and to her understanding, everyone else, mainly shopped at the two local boutiques available in her small village, when she was a child. She stated to never resist wearing the clothes or brands her parents chose her as everyone else was wearing the same. Katri said that it was not until her teenage years, when a big shopping mall opened close to her village that she and her siblings and peers started to become more fashion brand aware. This sparked arguments with parents over clothing choices and mostly embarrassment if she was still caught wearing clothing from the village boutiques.

The influence of parents and family on later brand preferences could be seen more strongly on more expensive fashion brands. The fashion brands resembled the status and wealth of the family. Consumption of these fashion brands still continued as a sign of in-group favouritism and respect to the brand choices of their parents. For example, Tiia explained to still wear a lot of clothing from her mother, which she described to be of better quality and style, such as Chloé and Marc O’Polo. By choosing to consume the same more expensive brands than her family members, Tiia could showcase others her family’s affluence and distinguish herself from others wearing less expensive brands.

Tiia: I have a lot of old clothes from my mom. The idea is that they are sown nicely and cut nicely and they fit nicely. That makes the piece of clothing look really different than that you buy a really cheap one from a fast fashion retailer. Those old items stay kind of iconic. It’s kind of a statement.

As Tiia’s and Linnea’s stories reveal, the learned fashion brand behaviour could also be seen in the participants’ current shopping behaviour. It was evident from the discussions that all of the participants still bought the fashion brands they had consumed as a child, which marks great brand loyalty taught at home. Thus, the fashion brand preferences of family members were found to transfer onto children and influence their future consumption habits. Tiia made an interesting comment
during the discussions that she somewhat feels restricted to wearing the fashion brands she wants and the ones favoured by her parents.

Tiia: I think it’s mainly about restriction. I notice that I dress differently if I hang out with my parents or go to family reunions.

This indicated how the fashion brand loyalty is extremely learned behaviour from home and adults continue to wear their childhood brands, to some extent, even though they would have an abundance of brands to choose from. This might be as children will remember their childhood home brands easily and continue to purchase these brands when starting to make their own consumption choices. As Tiia’s story indicates, childhood fashion brands are still favoured, although they might spark negative feelings of restriction of not being able to truly bring forth one’s own identity through the consumption of fashion brands. Therefore, family dynamics was still found to have an important influence over fashion brand choices of adults.

7.4.2. Friends and peers

According to consumer socialisation theory, friends and peers start to gain influence over brand choices during teenage years. It was noticeable from the discussions that friends and peers had influenced brand behaviour in teenage years and also continued to have an impact on fashion brand preferences. Friends and peers can be seen as in-groups through their use of clothing and fashion brands as it resembles their need of belonging to a certain group. The stories of how friends and peers had influenced participants’ fashion brand choices were similar and concerned with topics such as fitting in with others and owning an individual style. The bond between fashion brands and groups of friends was found valuable and friends were often found talking about the same fashion brands.

7.4.2.1. Different phases in clothing choices

Participants had had several different phases with clothing choices. Personal style was generally found after high school when the clothing choices were not bound to the choices of friends or what the participants described as what the society expects from them. In the childhood or teenage years, dressing similarly to a friend or a sibling was important. Jenni explained that she had to have the same clothes that her brother had, and was very jealous if her brother received or bought new clothing pieces. Emma on the other hand said that she would wear a lot of clothes from her older sister who would ship them to her from Germany. The clothes were something no one else had in Finland, and she was happy to
wear them and shock people with her choices as her sister had received some of them through her modelling gigs.

During childhood years, it was extremely important to wear whatever everyone else was wearing. Participants described several stories from their childhood where they were caught wearing the same fashion brands. Some participants admitted to be exact copies of their friends at that time. For example, Sanna mentioned a phase from her childhood where she would dress exactly the same way as her friend.

Sanna: If my friend had something, then I also had to have it.

Participants in all focus group studies described some memorable social phenomena that had jointly influenced everyone’s choice of fashion brands. From the discussions it was evident that this was especially true in the teenage years, where it was common to have similar phases in clothing styles as their friends. For example, all participants of one focus group discussion clearly remembered when the fashion brand MicMac hit Finland and everyone had to have the same brand. Thus in the teenage years fashion brand choices were influenced by current phenomenon which would be greater fuelled by the need of friends to talk about and wear the same fashion brands.

Moreover, in the teenage years, fitting with the in-groups was important but choosing the right way to go was challenging for some. For example, Emma described how she had a lot of friends from different fashion groups and she was trying to balance between them and find her own place. Some of her friends tried to make her a hippie and others a rocker. She felt pressure from her friends to follow the same choice of clothing and the need to shop at the same brands. In addition, Aada often described pressure to look like her friends so they would not be ashamed of her choice of clothing. This reflects the power of friends over fashion brand choices during teenage years.

Sanna: Of course your set of friends influence the clothes and brands you wear, but not so to the extreme. It’s more like when you grow up with someone. That the influence is greater.

Thus according to the participants, the influence of friends was found greater in the childhood and teenage years. However, during adolescence the need to copycat your friends was expressed directly, which is not the case of adults, although some participants openly admitted to copycat their friends’ style or to actually shop at their wardrobes. Participants made references to their friends and fashion brand choices in their adult years during the discussions through spontaneous comments. For example, Saimi described the case of her favourite fashion item where she had bought a maxi dress from H&M’s.
Saimi: I guess one of my friends had one of those and then I put one on and realised how wonderful it is on. That’s how I bought mine.

Therefore, conforming to the in-group was made less directly in the adult years than in childhood. Friends were still found to adjust their style and use of fashion brands according to each other, although the topic was not openly discussed.

7.4.2.2. Same brand, different meaning

Friends were found to talk about the same fashion brands. Given that the participants in each focus group discussion were familiar with each other, the discussions were characterised with a certain unique set of fashion brand names that spontaneously emerged during the discussions. The same fashion brands were also found to spark different meanings in individuals. They represented both the stereotypical ideologies of the typical brand user, but also individual translations of the brand personality. Although participants would talk about the same brands, it was evident that they were discussing about different brand qualities, which were important to the specific individual in question. For example, Laura found Zara to have clothes that give her a sense of success, Jaana said it was the best fashion brand to keep her on trend for any occasion, whereas Annika reported Zara clothes to flatter her body and the clothes being comfortable.

Thus, although friends would talk about and shop at the same fashion brands, the brand had an individual appeal for each participant.

Aada: We can go to the same stores but we look at totally different things at them. Like totally different.

Given the individual meanings of the brands, participants did not consider their friends to dress exactly like them. Most of the participants described their friends to wear similar clothing but to have a totally different style. Tanja said that she has a lot of friends who wear the same fashion brands, but also some friends who are totally opposite to her brands of liking. She described an incident a few days back where she met a very close friend on the street and they looked like exact copies of each other with the same brands and clothing on them, although they had not told each other what they would wear that day. Therefore, fashion brands can be used as a code between friends.

Tiia: I have a friend who is a total punk girl and we both like Dr. Martens and some other brands. But style-wise we are totally different. Although you might have totally different views of brands you might talk about them. But mainly like, I wanna buy a pair of shoes from this and this brand then they like immediately know what you’re talking about.
Therefore, the fashion brand talk is used as a kind of a code language inside the in-groups. Friends were found to adapt their brand talk according to the in-group in question. For example, Leena said that she has a lot of friends who have really original styles and some friends who know nothing about brands. The ‘fashion talk’ was only shared with people who could familiarise themselves with the brands that she liked.

However, when asked if they had friends that were from different fashion cliques, most of the participants responded negatively. In that sense, the fashion style and brands used inside the in-group were extremely similar as it was a way to mark territory from other groups of people with different styles and interests. For example, Jenni described the case with her childhood friend. She said that her friend dresses really differently from her and doubted if she met her now, they would have nothing in common. Jenni said that they are basically friends now only because they met in childhood and have been friends for such a long time. However, if they met now, the way her friend dresses would not make Jenni want to get to know her. This is an interesting observation that will be further elaborated in the following sections.

7.5. Fashion brand symbolism and relationships in the out-group environment

The formation of brand symbolism and relationships is not only influenced by the in-groups, but also the out-groups which are groups that the participants did not want to belong to or felt that they were attached from, for example people from different age groups and unfavourable fashion cliques. This chapter concentrates on the discussion of stereotypical mental images of fashion brands and their users and the need to distinguish from the out-groups.

7.5.1. Different age groups

One of the questions presented at the focus group discussions was to let the participants describe the fashion brands they thought younger and older people to wear. The participants in one focus group labelled younger girls as ‘cotton candy and fairy’ ladies. According to the participants, the ‘cotton candy and fairy’ ladies are younger girls who shop at fast fashion retailers, wear counterfeited clothes, a lot makeup and a push-up bra, have hair and nail extensions, and always take pictures of themselves in different places, but mainly in bars and at the gym. These younger girls were said to be between the ages of 18 to 20. Interestingly, the participants making this stereotypical comment of ‘an average Finnish girl in their teens’ were not that much older from the type they wanted to distinguish themselves from.
In general, younger people were seen to use fashion brands such as H&M, Asos and Gina Tricot due to their lack of money and the need to stay in style. However, participants noticed that younger people tend to wear even more and more luxurious fashion brands to climb up the social ladder. This can be because branded clothing and accessories are associated with successful youngsters and adults, and thus younger people wear branded clothing to signal status and mature age.

Aada: Like today at Gina Tricot, I saw like seven teenage girls with real Louis Vuitton brands.

Participants thought that younger people have a certain need of fitting in with the crowd by being and wearing exactly the same brands like everyone else. When asked about what was a popular fashion trend at the moment, the participants could easily identify with current fashion phenomenon and also distinguish themselves from unwanted phenomenon. Some participants described their resentment towards the out-of-control fitness craze and Freddy’s jeans, which are currently phenomenon favoured by the younger girls.

Tiia: I think in Helsinki young people define themselves much through certain brands a lot. On a certain level it pisses me off a lot... Sometimes it goes like ‘I can’t buy these pair of sneakers because they are not of a certain brand’. And I’m like buy them because they look nice.

Therefore, most of the participants stated to favour more expensive fashion brands or shop at flea markets or vintage stores in order to move away from the younger girls seeking to imitate them. Participants who stated to shop at fast fashion retailers are still in a transitional phase of early adulthood and adulthood which might indicate their preference of shopping at the same fashion brands as the so called ‘younger girls’. It can be expected that when these participants get older, they will move more away from fast fashion brands that are favoured by the younger girls.

Interestingly, participants were more cautious in their words when they were asked to describe the fashion brands older people wear. Older women were described as significantly older and more fashion-oriented than the participants. These older women were women in their middle-age with highly successful careers, one or two children, and owner-occupied apartments. They were seen as rich people with picture-perfect lifestyles with Sunday brunches, have time to read magazines and change their wardrobe according to each season. Participants described older people to wear fashion brands such as Marimekko, Zara, MaxMara, Gant, Nanso and Esprit, but also higher price brands such as Chanel, Gucci and Louis Vuitton. They were also seen as people who place more emphasis on quality in clothing.
Tanja: When you’re older you aim at timeless style by thinking I now buy this sweater or something and I can wear it for many years to come. I myself might buy a lime green thing just because I know that it’s in trend now.

The participants recognised themselves and the older people they described as different in terms of the fashion brands they used. The brands used by older women were clearly associated with lifestyle, success in career, and fortune. The cautiousness and sense of respect in the way the participants described the older women might have stemmed from the dream of one day being successful in one’s career and having the privilege of wearing the same fashion brands as them. The moderator was also able to sense feelings of jealousy and frustrations that older women have the opportunity to have a better lifestyle than them and wear more expensive fashion brands that are currently out of reach from the participants.

7.5.2. Dressing as a code

Branded clothes and personal styles were used as a code to differentiate from the out-groups. Participants described similar stories where they would wear certain brands as a means of peer identification. Therefore, the participants recognised that the fashion brands they wore with recognisable prints, colours and logos would have an effect on their peers.

Tiia: Like if you go to a certain place where they listen to certain type of music you like then of course the people there dress in a certain way. And like when you go there, people can say just by looking at you that you are like, okay, a cool person. That you are from the same category or something. That’s cool because you can bond with people easier.

I: So dressing in a certain way is kind of a code?

Tiia: Of course, definitely. I think it’s cool to meet people that you can’t tell from the outside of the person who that person is or like what they do for living. Then you’re like, wow!

Tiia’s story summarises the topic of in-group favouritism from the discussions. Participants would approach people who they thought to be similar to them and indicated to have high prejudice against people who wore fashion brands they did not want to be associated with. Tiia’s last comment strengthens the claim that the participants have prejudice against people from out-groups, but if contact is made, the stereotypical mental image can be broken. However, approaching people from out-groups was thought to be rather unlikely.

Participants described how they would purposely go to places and bars where they knew people would dress similarly to them. Clothing and fashion brands were seen as an important visual communicator telling others what type of person one
is without verbally saying anything to others about oneself. Participants were unanimous that they use clothing and fashion brands to spot people they think belong to their ‘category’, as Tiia described, to leave out unwanted associations with out-groups. People dressing the same way were thus seen as similar.

Tanja: Of course there’s people who have the same spirit than you like you can see from some... from the way they look when you meet new people if you are similar people or not like by the way you dress. Like basically if you are similar or not.

Clothing and fashion brands were especially used as a code when going to new places. For example, Leena stated to select her new friends at a new school or event by the fashion brands and style they are wearing. In addition, participants said to avoid places where they were likely to meet people who would not look like them. Katri made a powerful statement of her identity when she said not to go to fancy clubs full of H&M copies and glitter girls:

Katri: Like I think of myself of a better person that I don’t dress like that.

Therefore, the need for the in-groups to differentiate from the out-groups was found extremely important among the participants. The fashion brands of others were found to be of extremely important influence in adulthood. Participants held onto their stereotypical references of typical brand users and fashion cliques, and stated that they would not approach people outside their cliques. That had a clear effect on their relationships and the difficulty of meeting new people.

7.5.3. Stereotypical brand users

One of the projective techniques of the focus group discussions was to let the participants describe general users of fashion brands and to identify the fashion brands worn by people in pictures. Participants were first shown logos of different fashion brands and pictures of girls from different fashion cliques, namely R’n’B, hipster and gothic. In the case of the pictures of typical users, participants in all focus groups were unanimous of the fashion cliques the girls in the pictures belonged to and the brands they thought the girls wore.

Participants described the girl in the R’n’B picture to be a girl with an attitude and listen to R’n’B and rap music. These types of girls were stated to wear fashion brands such as Diesel or H&M. Next, the participants were shown a picture of three hipster girls. General comments made about this picture in the discussions included comments such as ‘so obvious hipsters’ and ‘they look like exact copies of the Californian girls’. These comments were made with a negative tone of voice and none of the focus groups wanted to be linked with this fashion clique.
The hipster girls were described to be bohemian personalities who are most likely to wear clothes from BikBok or Urban Outfitters. Lastly, the participants were shown a picture of a gothic girl. When participants saw the picture, they started laughing which can be translated as a sign of feeling more superior. Participants looked down on the girl in the picture and commented on her appearance relentlessly. Participants stated the gothic girl to have a personal style straight out of the CyberShop catalogue and she likes reading sci-fi, although the moderator was able to depict irony between the words and the looks exchanged between the participants. When participants in one focus group discussions were shown the picture of the gothic girl, Aada quickly stated the following:

Aada: That is so far away from me! I could never talk to her. I have nothing to talk to her about.

Participants were then shown logos of recognisable fashion brands. They were quick to describe the stereotypical user of the fashion brands by using their predetermined mental images. A woman wearing Donna Karan was described as a young adult, a business woman or a super put-together mother from a higher class. Participants in all focus groups wished to distinguish from the brand.

Aada: Donna Karan is not an overly expensive brand. I like their bags but would never buy them as I don’t want to get the Donna Karan stamp.

Aada recognises that by wearing the Donna Karan brand, others would categorise her as a member of group she did not want to be associated with. Moreover, a typical Louis Vuitton user was a rich person from a nice neighbourhood or a teenage girl trying to climb up the social ladder. Louis Vuitton was not seen as a luxury brand, but rather a brand for the masses or people in favour of counterfeited clothes. The participants did not want to be connected to this fashion brand either, and participants especially in one focus group made strong comments of the inferiority of the brand. This might be because it links them with counterfeited clothes or younger girls which might indicate other people that their style is not unique. Similar comments were made of Gucci where the participants saw the label to be a brand of sloppy people wearing counterfeited clothing. Thus, these fashion brands were negatively linked to represent people with tacky style.

H&M divided opinions between the focus groups. Participants in two focus groups considered people using H&M clothing to be every single person on the planet, whereas participants in one focus group made the same comments but with a negative tone of voice. It was also noticeable that when one participant started to talk negatively about H&M, the others would follow. This can be seen as a sign of in-group favouritism where groups of friends want to distinguish from the unwanted fashion brands. However, participants were unanimous about the stereotypical user of Zara clothes. These people were described as someone with
classical, timeless taste and all participants thought they could shop at Zara’s. Given that Zara has a more luxurious feeling to the brand and the clothes are more expensive than at H&M’s, the participants were more likely to familiarise themselves with the brand. Moreover, people wearing GAP clothes were seen as clothes for a sportier, classy people or Finnish-Swedish or American people. Since the participants were not Finnish-Swedish, they felt attached from the fashion brand and stated not to wear it. However, given that this brand was described as a fashion brand of the typical richer class in Finland, the comments made about this brand were respectful and almost as admired.

The participants clearly saw themselves as separate groups from the fashion cliques and people in the pictures. They used fashion brands to describe and categorise people, and they portrayed several stereotypical mental images based on fashion brand names. They did not want to be associated with the stereotypical users of the fashion brands and thus brands of the masses were seen inferior as they would not allow participants to stand out from the crowd.

7.5.4. Differentiation, prejudice and uniqueness

Participants clearly described the fashion groups they did not want to belong to. The participants brought up these stories voluntarily and made several references to out-groups even though discussing about other topics. Thus, by identifying the out-groups, the participants were better able to describe their in-groups. Out-groups were mostly described by using fashion brand names. Participants in one focus group discussion even openly admitted their tendency to categorise people according to the fashion brands they use.

Annika: For example, I always tell my friends how a person I saw on the street looked by using fashion brands. Like, that person had so Nike trainers on and a Gap sweater. That’s how they know exactly what I mean!

This indicates that although the general stereotypical mental images are created by the mass population, the in-groups also modify their stereotypical thinking with the help of fashion brand identification. Therefore the in-groups develop their own stereotypes of the out-groups. This can be also seen through the way in-groups used fashion brands as kind of a code language.

Aada: Yeah it’s extremely important if they were Nike or Adidas trainers. Those are totally different things.
I: How are they different things?
Aada: Because Nike trainers, they have been in fashion now for a while, not as sporting trainers but more as lifestyle trainers. So I link them with a certain style.
Thus, the Nike brand was seen as favourable, surprisingly in two focus group discussions, as the participants linked the brand with their lifestyle and felt connected to the brand. Participants in these focus group studies were from the same age bracket and shared similar interests. Thus, Nike was considered as a brand favoured by the in-groups of peers. However, some fashion brands were generally regarded as unfavourable according to the participants’ opinions. It was clear from the discussions that participants linked certain fashion brands with members of the out-groups. For example, Desigual was off-limits and the brand was mentioned in all focus group discussions in a negative light. The brand was not linked to one special fashion clique, but participants repeatedly used and named certain fashion brands as unfavourable by using their stereotypical mindsets of a crazy artist or an old lady wishing to look younger.

Aada: I would never go and shop at Monki.  
Jenni: Yeah, that's a hipster place.

Comments like these were made on a continual basis in all of the focus group discussions. It was noticeable that when one participant voiced her opinion about one brand, others would follow. Therefore, the stereotyping of fashion brands and their users was seen as a social activity. This could also be seen from the way the participants reacted to stereotypical comments made by other participants.

Linda: Then there’s the style that you don’t want to look like. Mm, like in Punavuori, there’s a lot of hipsters with Nike-like trainers and Gina Tricot crop tops and the funny hair and oversized jacket. When I see that coming towards me on the street, I’m like yeah, I don’t want to look like that! (Others nod as a sign of agreement.)

None of the focus groups wanted to be categorised into the hipster fashion clique. Hipsters were also commented on negatively and participants were quick to describe the fashion brands associated with this clique. Participants also felt attached and distanced from other groups, such as heavy metal listeners. The stereotypical mental image of this fashion clique was so strong that it affected participants’ ability to tie new relationships and meet new people.

Sanna: Because your personality shines through your looks, so that’s why I’m not friends with heavy metal people. You haven’t got to know those types of people because you just think that you won’t have anything in common.

This brings up an important point of the discussions. Even though participants favoured people to have a personal, unique style, they would still have prejudice against people who they thought were different from them. For example, Aada made a favourable comment towards heavy metal listeners even though she made it clear in the discussions that it is a fashion clique she wants to distinguish from.
Aada: It doesn’t matter, like some heavy metal people actually look nice. It’s like you see the person, and she/he is actually exactly that. So that’s a good look! When it’s not a wannabe.

Even though participants respected members of out-groups to have a unique style, they were afraid of others categorising them as members of unfavourable out-groups. This can explain why participants were so quick to name the fashion brands they wore and how they wish others would perceive them.

Annika: I’m fashionable and like to wear dark, rock clothes. But I wouldn’t want others to categorise me as a hipster or a heavy metal girl.

Annika’s comment sparked sympathy in the other participants of the focus group where they quickly started to comfort and assure her that she could definitely not be categorised into these groups. This also signals in-group favouritism where members of a group are seen as similar to each other and distinct from other groups. Jenni was also very afraid that others see her as a dark person as she wears a lot of black. She did not want people to connect her with heavy metal listeners and wanted people to see that she is actually a happy person. She loves wearing items that shock people with their trendiness, but she does not want people to find her pretentious. She recognised that people sometimes have prejudice against her for wearing clothing that looks very trendy or weird. She was afraid that people would label her as something she was not by the fashion brands she wears.

Jenni: Yeah of course you want to stand out like... Hey! That girl has a cool thing, but I don’t want people to find me too proud. I am a positive person and would like others to see me like that as well.

Although not all participants showcased willingness to stand out inside the in-groups, the need to differentiate from the out-groups was clearly recognisable. Jenni clearly has the need to stand out but her constant changes in style make it difficult for her peers to categorise her the way she wants to be perceived. She is afraid of the categorisation her peers give her and thus she is uncertain whether she is standing out enough from the out-groups she wants to distance herself from.

Aada herself encouraged prejudice based on her own personal style. She thought to have a confident style and expected others around her to look and carry them similarly to her. She also described that when shopping for clothes with her friend, she always asks for a second opinion as she is too afraid to be perceived differently by her peers. Aada described a situation where she was shopping at Gina Tricot, but was not sure if the Gina Tricot “pink” colour would fit her style. Her friend said that it looked nice, but the other friend had earlier said that it would not fit her. Thus, Aada was feeling confused and said that it was so difficult to wear brands, clothes and colours that slightly differ from your personal style as
it might totally alter the perspective how outside people would see her. Other participants besides Jenni and Aada also stated similar difficulties in balancing between personal style and fitting in with the others. For example Emma made several statements during the focus group discussions where she has sought to reduce peer prejudice by choosing to wear clothing she thought others would find acceptable.

Emma: I have also previously used clothing to fit with the rest. To fit better with the society.

Emma said that she would never want to show off her wealth and had clear prejudice and judgement against people wearing expensive fashion brands.

Emma: I don’t know if I could wear an expensive fashion brand, because it sends an image... It makes me wonder if others think I’m a Chanel lady.

It was interesting that after Emma’s comment, other participants started to defend their choice of wanting to wear an expensive fashion brand and describe the occasions where they would wear it. Participants in this focus group study thus identified that wearing expensive brands is acceptable if it is only a few items at once and the rest of the style stays down-to-earth. Participants stated that this type of cautious use of expensive brands would not make them associated with unwanted groups such as younger girls, counterfeit-lovers or old ladies.

It also came forth in the discussions that participants felt the Finnish society to be rather restricted. Given the above comment made by Emma that she has worn certain clothing to better fit with the society indicates that people are categorised into clear fashion cliques in Finland, and people who do not meet those predetermined categories are seen as outsiders. Tiia also described how she felt restricted with her style and use of fashion brands when she moved back home after a period abroad. She felt that in Finland there was not enough room to experiment with different styles and brands, and she had to find herself again to fit with the Finnish society.

Tiia: If you do something different in Finland, you instantly pop out from the crowd.

Although standing out from the crowd was generally seen as a positive thing, Tiia’s and Emma’s statements have a negative cling to them. Their stories describe how societal and peer pressures can influence the choice of clothing and brands in order for the society to look similar.
8. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The area of interest of this research was to gain a better understanding of the role of fashion brands in the construction of an adult’s identity of the self and social identity. The main research question was opened with three sub-questions which are discussed in the following sections.

It was clear from the research that adults use fashion brands as a code language. This means that each fashion brand is a symbol shared commonly with others and used in the construction of one’s identity. Thus, the meanings of fashion brands were found to be really important in social situations, which help in the formation of in-groups and distancing from the out-groups. The participants in this research were fully aware of the meanings of the fashion brands they wore and stated to use fashion brands as a means of communicating their identity and belongingness to certain in-groups.

In general, the participants were very fashion brand aware and also indicated interest towards other brands in their descriptions. Based on their stories and shopping tendencies, the participants were active fashion consumers with a clear interest in the fashion brands that they thought to represent their identity, aspirations and lifestyle. Given that some participants came from different backgrounds, some adults were found to have greater interest in materialism than others. The interest in fashion brands stemmed from the values of the adults, the brand behaviour taught at home, and peer influence. The use of fashion brands was also found to be an important factor in the adults’ relationships which aided and complicated the formation of relationships.

8.1. The construction of the identity of the self

The first sub-question focused on the role of fashion brands in the construction of one’s identity of the self. It was clear from this research that adults construct their identities of the self through fashion brands. According to Sirgy (1982), the self-concept is of great value to consumers and thus they will attempt to protect and enhance it. Consumers will therefore purchase fashion brands that have a positive image for the individuals based on the typical user stereotypes associated with the brand (Banister & Hogg, 2007). Participants were very quick to name the fashion brands they thought to represent their image of the self and therefore understood that they can communicate their personalities and showcase their identities by choosing particular fashion brands. Take the case of Tanja, for example, where she used her favourite brands as symbolic properties to construct her sense of self and what she would like to be.
Participants were also found to distinguish themselves from others who were not wearing the same brands. For example, Tanja uses particular fashion brands to differentiate herself from her peers and members of out-groups. According to Banister and Hogg (2007), the social self is the individual’s perception of how others see him. Thus, Tanja hopes that others will see her as a street style person through the brands and colours she chooses. Moreover, the different layers of the selves are of importance to consumption decisions, while they represent something a person is trying to reach and what he currently is (Banister & Hogg, 2007). Take the case of Tiia, for example, where she deliberately stated to wear Americal Apparel and Dr. Martens to stand out from her peers. Fashion brands were thus central elements in the construction of the actual and social self, but also the ideal self.

Put in other words, fashion brands were used as a way of defining who one is and who one would like to be. According to Banister and Hogg (2007), the actual or current self is the way an individual perceives himself, whereas the ideal self represents the qualities the individual would like to have but falls short of. Most of the participants dreamt of fashion brands or items they would later like to own or acquire but due to their expensive nature were out of reach from the participants at the moment. The stories and descriptions, which were linked to the dreams of owning more expensive fashion brands, pictured hopes of wealth, success, status and uniqueness. According to Belk (1988), people seek self-expression, happiness, and reminder of past accomplishments through possessions. Most of the participants came from working class families and thus, interestingly, participants dreamt of fashion brands linked to groups they were not given a direct access to. Personal history, personality, status and opportunity limit the accessibility of groups (Korte, 2007), and thus not all individuals are granted a direct access into groups (Kihlstrom, 1992). Take the case of Jenni, a child from a working class family, where her dream was to one day own a pair of Louboutin shoes or a Chanel bag. These were fashion brands that she thought to represent her ideal self. Owning these brands would signal others who she would like to be.

In addition to showcasing actual and ideal self, possessions were also used as a way of preserving one’s legacy and history on Earth after death. According to Belk (1988), possessions also create a sense of immortality after death by providing a sense of past telling us who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going. Aada’s story of wanting to pass on her possible future Chanel bag to her future grandchildren is an excellent example of how adults wish to create a sense of immortality by acquiring possessions to be passed onto future generations. During an individual’s life-course, possessions reflect our sense of self by reminding us and others after us of our history and accomplishments.

Some fashion possessions were found to have significant importance to the participants. According to Thompson (1995), the self is constructed from
available symbolic materials. The favourite fashion items were valued for their physical qualities and symbolic meaning, and were possessions such as shoes, clothes and accessories. Although some of those favourite items were received in childhood, the participants were still fully aware of the brand of their favourite piece of clothing. The stories of the participants’ favourite clothing possessions were told by using fashion brands, and contained words such as altered, lost, stolen or broken. Belk (1988) argues that possessions have the power, in their importance to consumers, to become part of our extended selves by creating or altering them to fit the core self. When objects are lost or stolen, the importance of possessions to self becomes evident (Belk, 1988; Dittmar, 2008). The favourite clothing possessions of participants received an icon-like status when they were altered, lost, stolen or broken. In these cases, all participants described similar stories and feelings of disappointment, panic, guilt or sadness, or contrarily uniqueness, if alteration was concerned. For example, Tiia described feelings of embarrassment and guilt after losing a Marc O’Polo sweater which was a gift from her dear mother, and Aada feelings of sadness after a broken pair of her favourite German stilettos. The fashion possessions were thus tangible memories of close relationships, fond memories, or past experiences, and were embedded with feelings of safety and comfort. As Thompson (1995) states, self-identity is communicated through symbolic materials, which define who a person is. Favourite possessions were seen as part of the participants’ selves and thus they mourned after the loss of their favourite things. According to Belk (1988), feelings of sorrow arise due to loss of self if possessions are lost involuntarily. In all cases, the loss of a favourite item was done involuntarily, which represented a loss of self and control over one’s possessions and identity.

The stories participants told were vivid as if it was yesterday, and the general indication given by participants was that these lost, stolen, broken or altered fashion items could never be fully replaced by new ones. They had become integral parts of the participants’ selves reminding them about their past experiences and accomplishments (Belk, 1988), and thus no new items could replace their emotional value. Take Tanja’s case, for example, where she dreaded the day when she would lose the last uneven pair of her favourite Gina Tricot earrings. Although eventually favourite items were replaced by new clothing possessions, the participants were found to stay brand loyal. However, the memories of lost possessions remained nostalgic. According to Banister and Hogg (2007), the self is dynamic and changes according to social surrounding and situations functioning as incentives for future behaviour. The memories of the participants’ lost, stolen or broken favourite possessions received in childhood were also found to be emotionally guiding them towards the same fashion brands in their adult years. This brings us to the topic of brand relationships.

Consumers form relationships with brands they find important, and thus brands can have several different types of relationships with consumers (Fournier, 1998).
Participants considered fashion objects to be their possessions and some of the descriptions of their brand relationships indicated ownership of a brand. These relationships vary from consumer to consumer in the level and content of brand relationships and identity activities, and also in the durability of relationships, number of close relationships and emotional quality stemming from brand commitments (Fournier, 1998). Although two of the participants showcased no special relationship to a fashion brand, other participants described special relationships with particular fashion brands. Participants who had had numerous changes in style over the years were most likely to switch fashion brands. These participants had a unique style and a great need to stand out from the crowd. Therefore, the participants’ previous brand loyalty could be linked to which fashion brands were seen as central to the self. In other words, lack of brand loyalty in the past was affecting their present brand behaviour where some participants were still seeking their identity by switching between fashion brands. However, some participants showcased strong commitment towards certain fashion brands. These were fashion brands the participants had been using since childhood or adolescence to early adulthood and evoked feelings of nostalgia, safety and comfort in the participants. Moreover, some participants described love-hate relationships with fast fashion brands, where buying a cheap brand contradicted with personal values of sustainability and quality, although these participants stated fast fashion retailers to be brands to always count on. Therefore, participants’ values were also guiding fashion brand behaviour. For example, Laura said to purchase Björn Borg shoes due to their superior quality. Participants sought to showcase their inner values and identities through their choices of fashion brands or flea market shopping. By choosing to wear Björn Borg, Laura is differentiating from her peers by putting more money on expensive shoes and letting others know her interest in sustainable consumption. Sustainable consumption is also a way of realising one’s identity in the society, for example, as an environmentalist.

In addition, participants also saw their values and physical view of the self through fashion brands. Fashion brands that accentuated physical forms were important for some participants. According to McCracken (1988), consumption is a way of realising one’s identity in the society e.g. as a man or a woman. Being a woman can be considered as a part of the core sense of self, and participants told similar stories of how their feminine forms had influenced their brand choices. Take the case of Sanna and Emma, for example, where they stated to have started wearing girly brands such as H&M and Gina Tricot when the female figure started to emerge. This also indicates how individuals are given an access to certain groups to communicate the ideal self. Sanna’s and Emma’s stories reflect how the development of the female body allowed them to wear the fashion brands that were linked with older, feminine girls.
Participants also used fashion brands as a means of controlling their identities. Differentiating the self from others was found extremely important, but at the same time, fitting in with others was a priority. The self is reflexive in nature (Banister & Hogg, 2007), and to fit in with others, participants stated to modify their styles according to different occasions. Therefore, participants were found to experience a loss of self by conforming to the expectations of the in-groups. According to Kaiser et al. (1991), different fashion brands are seen more appropriate in different situations. Interestingly, participants chose to wear their favourite fashion brands but different clothing items in these situations. Thus, participants showcased unwillingness to change fashion brands. Changing to wear fashion brands that were not central to the self was seen as a lack of control over the self. This portrays how central some fashion brands had become for the participants’ identity of the self.

Dittmar (2008) said the self to be something a person actively creates, partially through consumption. According to Belk (1988), a brand or a product itself is not enough to represent an individual’s self-concept, but a full range of consumption objects is required for a total representation of the self. Although participants valued some possessions and aspects to the identity that were not tied to fashion brands, generally their most important factors to the selves were branded entities. This can be seen from the way they described their style and others with the help of fashion brands and how their favourite possessions all had a specific brand.

### 8.2. Identity construction through fashion brands and in-groups

The second sub-question focused on identifying how in-groups are formed through fashion brands. Social identity is the individual’s knowledge of belonging to certain social groups coupled with emotional and value significance of this group membership (Tajfel, 1978) which is a part of an individual’s self-concept (Ellemers et al., 2002; Stets & Burke, 2000). Participants were found to construct their identities through the fashion brand preferences of their friends who had an important role in deciding which fashion brands were or were not popular or acceptable. Thus, participants were found to trust on the feedback of their peers, and perhaps family members, over fashion brand choices. However, mass media did not come up in the discussions on a regular basis and thus no claims about its influence on in-group formation can be said.

Fashion brand relationships and preferences were found to form already in the childhood years through the influence of parents and family. According to Belk (1988), the identification with possessions begins early in life where the infant learns to differentiate himself from the environment and others envying his possessions. Take the case of Jenni, for example, where she was jealous of her brother receiving a new piece of clothing. This is a perfect example of how
participants were found to identify themselves through their possessions already in their childhood years, and explains, to some extent, the participants’ brand awareness in fashion brands at a young age. Moreover, children imitate and observe the consumer behaviour of their parents (Kuhlmann, 1983). Parents are also the first identification model of children (Rodhain, 2006), and children often associate their parents with certain brands which they later on seek to acquire (Martens et al., 2004). Participants showcased great brand loyalty towards the fashion brands they had consumed in their families as it fulfilled the need to belong to a certain group. Linnea, for example, continued to order from H&M and Ellos mail order catalogues as they did in her family even after she had moved away from home. As Belk (1988) stated, people learn, define and remind themselves who they are through possessions. During the process of socialisation, individuals can attach deep meanings into brands, such as profound feelings of nostalgia and comfort (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). As already described, childhood fashion brands were referred to as giving feelings of comfort and safety. Therefore, the childhood and adolescence fashion brands were considered central to the participants’ identities as they had started to define the participants’ sense of self at an early stage. These brand relationships learned at home were still found to be influencing the fashion brand preferences of the participants, and it is expected that the participants will pass their preferences onto their offspring as the skills and attitudes learned in childhood influence consumption behaviour in adulthood (Ward, 1974; Kamaruddin & Mokhlis, 2003).

Friends and peers were found to have the biggest influence on fashion brand choices in teenage years and adulthood. As children reach adolescence and adulthood, peers become more important socialisation agents than parents and start to shape the decision-making of peers (Kamaruddin & Mokhlis, 2003). Peers can be seen as social interaction with friends, classmates and members of organisations (Aledin, 2009) through which consumers learn the symbolic meaning of products (Gunter & Furnham, 1998). This can be seen in the way how groups of friends talked about, favoured, and wore the same brands, especially in the teenage years, often due to some social phenomenon which were found to fuel the popularity of some brands. For example, when MicMac came to Finland, participants in one focus group said to have worn the brand together with friends. Individuals seek to fit in with the group (Acuff, 1997), and thus participants stated similar stories of having periods in their lives of looking and owning exactly the same things as their friends which was found extremely important. Childers and Rao (1992) confirm that peer pressure is most likely to be experienced for ‘public luxuries’ such as branded fashion items.

In order for a consumer to bear a specific meaning of a certain brand, a common understanding, of some level, of its meaning must be present between the individuals using the brand (Ligas & Cotte, 1999). The participants in each one focus group discussed about and liked the same fashion brands. Not only did
fashion brands have individual meanings to participants, but they also had a social meaning inside the in-groups. Thus, in-groups were found to use the fashion brand talk as a code language to describe members of out-groups. Therefore, the fashion talk was saved for friends that shared similar interests towards the same brands. According to Ellemers et al. (2002), a salient identity is activated across different situations depending on which identity is more salient. The strength of commitment of belonging to a group indicates which social identity is more relevant (Ellemers et al., 2002). Therefore, participants were found to change their social identity according to the group in question. Leena, for example, stated to save the brand talk to friends with whom she knew to share interests towards the same brands. According to Stets and Burke (2000), the in-group is formed through a process of social comparison, where individuals with similar characteristics as self are in the same group. Participants were found to form relationships with people who favoured the same fashion brands or dressed similar to them. This thus had an influence on the way they talked about particular fashion brands inside different groups of friends, and how particular fashion brands were considered to represent the in-group in question. This entails how groups are formed between friends by sharing mutual interests towards particular fashion brands.

Participants talked somewhat differently about fashion brands. Although some participants denied the importance of fashion brands in their clothing choices, they contradicted themselves later in the discussions by saying they would never want to own some fashion brands or showcased unwillingness to switch from their favourite brands. Therefore, some participants were not aware of their own behaviour and how they categorised people and made friends judging by the brands they wore. Some fashion brands were seen very unfavourable inside the focus groups, and the participants clearly voiced which fashion brands they would purchase or would not purchase. Banister and Hogg (2007) pointed out that what we choose not to consume is an important aspect in identity construction. Thus, each focus group had their own set of fashion brands that were favoured by the participants of that focus group. These brands were considered to represent the in-group, whereas the unfavourable brands were linked to members of out-groups.

Through consumption of shared symbols, individuals express their group membership (Belk, 1988). As the participants in each focus group were familiar with each other, it was not a surprise that friends favoured the same fashion brands. Although group cohesion stems from interpersonal ties (Hogg, 1992; Prentice et al., 1994), it can also manifest from the tendency to either associate with or distance the self from particular groups (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1991; Reed & Forehand, 2003). Take the case of Tanja, for example, where she told the story of meeting a friend on the street wearing exactly the same clothing and brands as she did. Although participants did not consider themselves to dress like their friends, they were consuming the same fashion brands. Friends were seen as
having different styles than the self. Saimi, for example, told the case of her H&M maxi dress which she bought after first seeing it on her friend, although she considered them to have totally different styles. Conforming to the in-group was thus made less directly in the adult years than in childhood. Friends were still found to adjust their style and use of fashion brands according to each other, although the topic was not as openly discussed given they were striving towards individuality. The individual’s social identity can become more important than his personal identity in social situations, although individuals often act based on their goals and desires instead of members of a group (Jenkins, 2008; Hornsey et al., 2006). The need to stand out was found to arise in special social situations, such as going to a bar with friends or meeting very close friends whose style was seen too similar to oneself. Individuality and uniqueness were thus sought after inside in-groups, but this was normally done by modifying the style and not changing the brands used. It was clear from this research that participants were more concerned with standing out from the out-groups. Participants thus deliberately used fashion brands as a means of differentiation from the out-groups, but also for a less mild version of differentiation inside the in-groups.

Mass media was not found to have as big of an influence on in-group formation as expected. However, participants made several references in the discussions to fashion brands that have been very visible in media which thus directs them towards certain brands. According to Ward and Wackman (1971), individuals use advertising for social utility purposes where individuals perceive that buying a certain product or brand manipulated the way how others see them. Moreover, participants voiced the importance of store environments for the overall brand experience which has an impact on their tendency to purchase from a brand. If the participants found the store environment stimulating, they were more likely to form a tighter relationship with the fashion brand. This was an interesting observation as Dittmar (2008) states that the Internet is substituting the conventional brick-and-mortar stores in shopping and product browsing. This research found the traditional store environments to be more important consumer socialisation agents than the online environment or other forms of media.

It was rather unfortunate to find out how important role consumption had taken in the participants lives. Participants were found to take every opportunity they could to describe themselves, their dreams and values through fashion brands. In one focus group, before the actual recording had begun, the participants stormed in talking about their latest shopping trip and all the items and brands they had purchased. Thus, the participants were extremely open about their fashion brand preferences. However, the moderator was able to sense how peers influenced the way participants talked about fashion brands. When one would express her liking to a certain fashion brand the others were not fond of, she would receive a snappy comment or a judging look from her peers which would ultimately make her change her opinion about the fashion brand. Therefore, participants were afraid of
voicing their opinions of fashion brands that were not favoured by the rest of the group. Groups were thus found to defend the fashion brands they thought to represent themselves and made clear which fashion brands they did not want to be associated with. Moreover, participants did not consider themselves to have friends from different fashion cliques as it was evident from the study that friends use clothing and brands as a code language. Therefore, the symbolic meaning embedded in fashion brands was influencing and restricting the formation of relationships.

8.3. Identity construction through fashion brands and out-groups

The third sub-question focused on identifying the role of out-groups on social identity construction. The formation of brand symbolism and relationships is also influenced by the out-groups which are groups the participants did not want to belong to or felt that they were attached from, for example, people from different age groups and unfavourable fashion cliques. The brand communicates belongingness to a particular social group with whom the individual feels their social identity to be incorporated (Langner et al., 2013; Reed & Forehand, 2003). This research found groups to form around different, related fashion brands. People make sense of other people and themselves in social situations through in-group and out-group behaviour (Korte, 2007; Chryssochoou, 2003). The participants were found to use strong stereotypical mental images of others wearing particular fashion brands and had prejudice against people from different fashion cliques.

Brand symbolism is used to differentiate oneself from out-group associations (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Participants found certain fashion brands to be more suitable for younger or older girls than themselves. The participants were in their early adulthood or adulthood years. They were in the transition between adolescence and adulthood which can also be seen in their fashion brand choices. They described to use some of the same fashion brands they identified younger girls to use, but also distinguished themselves with the use of more expensive fashion brands they thought older women to use or unique items acquired from vintage shopping. Given the transitional age of the participants, they are expected to move away from the fashion brands preferred by the younger girls with age. Thus, participants wanted to distinguish themselves from these two age groups.

The symbolic meanings of possessions are not only used to communicate the identity of self and membership of social groups, social status and social position, but also to perceive others’ identity (Dittmar, 1992; Belk, 1988; McCracken 1988; Wattanasuwan, 2005). Fashion brands and styles were used as a code between in-groups to differentiate from the out-groups. In-groups had thus formed their own symbolic meanings of particular fashion brands which were used to describe
members of out-groups. This had an impact on how participants viewed and categorised other people. Fashion brands were found to be key identifiers of group membership, and participants used their mindset of categorisation especially when meeting new people or going to new places. Group cohesion is formed by assessing the expectation of individual in-group members about each other (Swann et al., 2000). For example, Leena stated to select her new friends at school judging by the clothes and brands they were wearing. According to Banister and Hogg (2007), students with similar interests dress similar and the personality of the outside group is based on general assumptions based on their possessions. It was clear from this research that participants had formed strong stereotypes of members of out-groups by making judgements only based on the brands they wore. Although participants stated some members of out-groups to be stylish, the general comments about outsiders were negative.

Consumers make consumption decisions and judgements of fashion objects and brands given the stereotypes and generalisations of the product’s typical user (Banister & Hogg, 2007). The participants stated not to buy fashion brands or visit stores that were associated with members of out-groups. For example, when participants in one focus group brought up the clothing brand Monki, Aada and Jenni were quick to label the brand as a hipster brand. Comments like these were made on a continual basis in all of the focus group discussions. It was noticeable that when one participant voiced her opinion about one brand, others would follow. Therefore, the stereotyping of fashion brands and their users was seen as a social activity. This could also be seen from the way the participants reacted to stereotypical comments made by other participants.

The out-group constitutes of those individuals who are not characterised similar (Stets & Burke, 2000; Escalas & Bettman, 2005). The main goal of the participants was to make the in-group stand out from the out-group. As Sanna put into words, participants did not find to have anything in common with people from unfavourable fashion cliques as it was an indication of personality. According to Dittmar (2011), differences between groups are seen greater than they actually are as people stereotype and generalise the typical user and out-groups. Sanna’s comment strengthens how dissimilar the participants perceived members of out-groups. Therefore, people who were wearing brands that were not favourable in the eyes of the in-group were seen as members of out-groups and participants were unlikely to take contact with people they thought were members of out-groups. Thus, prejudice and categorisation had a negative impact in establishing new relationships and approaching new people. The stereotypical mindsets of participants were present during the whole course of the discussions, which gives an indication of how strong influence the mental images associated with fashion brands have on the formation of in- and out-groups.
9. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research used the CCT theory as a theoretical frame of reference as encouraged by Nairn et al. (2008). The study gives a better understanding of brand symbolism and relationships in the lives of adults and how they discuss about fashion and brands in social situations. The methodological contribution of the research was the study of identity construction through a focus group study. No research of brand symbolism and identity construction had previously been made in Finland on adults, especially not about the role of fashion brands. Thus, this study has provided a better understanding about the role of fashion brands in identity construction for future research purposes.

Even though the research studied consumer behaviour and consumption, the focus of this study was not on marketing, although the results do have some managerial implications. According to Auty and Elliott (1998), it is crucial for fashion companies to understand how people interpret clothing and how different groups of people make different judgements about the same brand of clothing. This will help managers to have a greater control over the decoding of the brand image.

Participants understood that they can communicate their personalities and showcase their identities by choosing particular fashion brands. The symbolic properties of fashion brands were found to be a part of the construction of one’s sense of self and ideal self. Therefore, the symbolic meaning embedded in fashion brands was used to communicate who one would want to be. The material fashion possessions of participants had become part of the participants’ extended selves communicating their identities. Thus, the most important factors to their selves were found to be branded entities. Fashion brands were also an integral part of differentiation from others. However, the individual need to stand out was often diminished in favour of the in-group to preserve similarity inside the group. Participants were also found to form different types of relationships with fashion brands, where brand loyalty towards particular brands stemmed from childhood years. The relationships with fashion brands become especially important in social situations where friends have a great influence on fashion brand and clothing choices. Thus, marketers of fashion brands cannot count on forming long-lasting relationships with consumers, especially if the brand preference was not already created at home. These strong relationships also portrayed how central some fashion brands had become for the participants’ identity of the self.

Fashion brands were also found to stand central in the formation of in- and out-groups. During childhood, fashion brands consumed inside the family resembled the need to belong to a group. These brand relationships were found to be extremely influential even in adult years as they had started to define the
participants’ identities at an early stage. However, friends and peers were found to take a greater influence over participants since teenage years. Groups of friends started then to form based on similar interests towards the same fashion brands, and friends were found to talk about, favour, and wear the same clothing brands. In this age, the use of fashion brands was also influenced by peer pressure, which was found to be less direct in adulthood. However, fashion brands were used also in adulthood in the formation and identification of groups.

Fashion brands were used as a code language inside in-groups. This indicates how particular groups have given their own symbolic meanings to certain fashion brands, although adults were also found to use the general stereotypes of typical brand users. In-groups were found to also have a set of fashion brands they wished to be associated with, and users of other brands were seen as members of out-groups. In-groups considered to own certain fashion brands to their identities and thus were found to be protective of these fashion brands. Ownership was acquired by stereotyping members of out-groups with unfavourable brands and conveying members of in-groups towards favourable brands.

Differentiation from out-groups was thus found to be a priority. Participants identified members of out-groups based on the generalisations of a typical fashion brand user. Therefore, fashion brands worn by others were seen as an indication of others’ identity. Fashion brands were thus used as a means of categorising people into groups, and based on these prevailing assumptions of typical brand users, participants were found to have strong stereotypical mental images of outsiders which made it difficult to meet new people or form new relationships. Members of out-groups were thus seen as very dissimilar based on the brands they wore.

The study thus brings a greater understanding of how self identity is defined through group membership, and how consumers form and maintain brand relationships, and perceive the brand images of general fashion brands. The consumption symbolism of general fashion brands was found to stem from social interaction and symbolism was found to hold individualistic and social meanings. After anticipating that the consumer is self-categorising herself into a certain social group, marketers can properly target consumers (Langner et al., 2013). Thus, marketers should communicate aspect of the social identity to consumers that reinforce the individual’s belongingness to a group in order to have a control over the brand.

9.1. Future research

Many interesting topics for further research emerged during the course of this study. It would be interesting to carry out a longitudinal study about the fashion
brand preference of consumers forming already in the childhood years and how these relationships influence their brand choices in adulthood. This could also give a better understanding of how consumption choices of fashion are made at home and how relationships with fashion brands form in childhood. This research indicates that fashion brand preferences are passed on from parents to children, and thus it would be interesting to study how these relationships are passed onto generations.

Since mass media did not come up in the discussions as expected, it is recommended for further research to study whether mass media is still a relevant socialisation agent for adults. If the researcher had been aware of how little the topic would be discussed in the sessions, a separate section concentrating on the new forms of media would have been appointed. This would give a better understanding of the forms of media influencing fashion brand preferences and how individuals construct their sense of self and social identity through them. As the traditional brick-and-mortar stores came up in the participants’ descriptions on a regular basis, it would be interesting to research how the peer influence acted on behalf of the in-groups influences fashion consumption behaviour in shopping environments. In addition, it would be interesting to better understand which personal values linked with the self influence fashion consumption behaviour.

This research showcases how important consumption has become in our postmodern society. Symbolic consumption has become an integral part of our identities, which also enslaves us (Wattanasuwan, 2005). Therefore, it is necessary to research how our society can move away from material consumption and how people could start to define their identities through other means than material objects. Therefore, it would be an interesting study to research the total representation of brands, products or values used to construct the identity of the self.

Given that this research used the focus group study as a research method, it would be interesting to study if personal interviews with participants would give different results. Personal interviews would be an appropriate method of gaining a deeper understanding of the individual brand relationships with fashion brands. Moreover, a comparative study could be made with the same participants after a decade to see if and how their fashion brand behaviour has changed after the transition to what society sees as adulthood.
10. REFERENCES


Hello everyone and welcome to my session. First of all, thank you for participating in this focus group discussion where we will today be talking about the role of fashion brands in the construction of self and social identities. My name is Silja Hokkanen and I am carrying out this research for my master’s thesis at Textilhögskolan i Borås. I am interested in acquiring knowledge about how consumers use fashion brands in their social lives in terms of acquainting with or distancing from other groups, and what role fashion brands have on the construction of the identity of the self and private consumption of fashion brands. I am having similar discussions like this with several groups in the Helsinki region.

You were invited to attend this discussion group as you all know each other and share similar characteristics in terms of age, education or occupation.

There are no right or wrong answers to the questions I propose, but rather different points of view which I hope you to openly share even if they differ from the views of what others have said. I want this to be a discussion between you, and not an individual interview between me and one participant. Therefore, you are openly encouraged to express your views and comment on what others are saying. Please note that I am keen on hearing both positive and negative comments and experiences, and I am not conducting this research for any commercial company.

This discussion will be taped with the recording application of my iPhone to make sure I do not miss any comments or important quotes. I will later listen to the recording to make sure I haven’t missed anything essential. However, no names will be written on the report and I can assure you complete confidentiality. The report will later be submitted to the thesis supervisor and examiner for marking and published in an online master thesis library.

Okay, let’s begin our session by first introducing ourselves. Can you please tell me your name, profession, age, and family background.
PROJECTIVE TECHNIQUE:
Next, I would like you to draw/write your favourite fashion items and/or clothing brands on this piece of paper.
- Tell/elaborate on your drawings
- What are your favourite fashion brands?
- Why are these important?
- How/why did you acquire them?
- Why/how/where to consume them?
- Do you still own them or are some of them items you would later like to acquire and why?
- Have you ever lost a precious clothing item?
- What feelings do these items/brands evoke in you?

THE IDENTITY OF SELF AND CONSUMPTION:
How do you dress in different situations? What would make you dress differently?
- Self at work, school, home, public, private
- What influence do these have on your choice of clothing/brands?

How has your fashion choices and use of fashion brands change?
- Former and current self
- From childhood to present

What type of relationships do you have with brands?
- What brands would you like to own? Elaborate.

How do you see yourself through your clothing choices?
- Actual and ideal self
- What do you want to communicate through your clothing and choice of fashion brands?

SOCIAL IDENTITY AND CONSUMPTION:
What type of clothing/fashion brands do you normally use and why?
- How do your friends dress? Do you dress similarly? Do you wear the same brands or talk about the same brands? Which brands?
- What type of fashion cliques do you not want to belong to and why?
- Have you had to abandon some fashions and why?

What is a popular fashion brand at the moment and why?

Older and younger people:
- What kind of fashion brands do younger people like? What do they do for work and in their free time?
- What kind of fashion brands do older people like? What do they do for work and in their free time?

What influences your clothing/fashion brand choices?
- Parents/family (childhood)
- Friends and peers
- Mass media
PROJECTIVE TECHNIQUE:
Then, I would like you to do a one last exercise. Please describe what fashion brands you think the person(s) in the pictures are likely to wear and what type of person(s) you consider them to be.
- R’n’B girl
- Hipster girls
- Gothic girl

Then, I would like you to describe what type of person would wear the following fashion brands. What are these people like and what do they do in their free time?

Is there something you think we haven’t discussed yet that you think is important for my research on fashion brands and identity construction or do you have anything else to add?

I thank you for participating in this discussion!