

# Behave Yourself - Identity Power of Consumption, A Contemporary View

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Jukka Peltonen  
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**Author** Jukka Peltonen

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**Abstract**

The heart of the study lies in the concept of identity and its central role in understanding consumer behavior. The study follows the premises of postmodern consumption theories and underlines consumers' drive to buy products not only for the functional benefits but also for the symbolic meanings that these withhold. A product's capability to signal symbolic cues of the consumer oneself and the aspirations of an individual and his or her identity are strongly affecting the consumer behaviour.

According to findings based on academic literature, consumption of brands and goods are used for: Creating consumer's identity and expressing it to outside counterparts as well as for locating oneself socially. Also consumers seem to choose products, brands or suppliers matching their self-image, discussed as the congruence hypothesis, a theory based on the post positivistic school.

In the study it is highlighted how in the contemporary context the importance of the consumption of physical branded goods for the creation of the identity and for consumers' self-expression can be questioned. Consumers' need for self-expression is limited and brands are constantly challenged not only by other brands but also by any other non-brand means of self-expression and self-expressive behavioral acts, not forgetting constant public self-expressive behavior made possible by social media.

Nonetheless, consumerism and purchase rituals of physical goods and their brands have not disappeared, but still play a major role in our society and represent large amount of people's monthly investments in time and money. This leads to the indented aim of this study, to investigate the role of consumption in identity creation and as a self-expressive behavior in the changed environment, in the contemporary context of today's western welfare society. The final goal is formulated under the following research question: How does symbolic consumption and consumers' self-concept become negotiated in how the role of possessions is understood in a contemporary context?

The question is approached through the methods of ethnography and qualitative interviews. To grasp the context of contemporary society to its fullest, the choice of participants guided the research to a sample of four generation Y representatives living their independent lives of young adults in the urban neighborhoods of the capital of Finland.

The empirical findings show how consumption has a supportive role in the creation of consumers' identity. Consumption is also seen as a powerful tool in identity expression. Participants of this study behave very similarly as consumers compared to how they describe themselves as individuals and what the ethnographic findings concerning participants' identities suggest.

The study supports the stated importance of other self-expressive behavioral acts for identity creation – especially one's profession is seen particularly important. Yet, the study witnesses how participants use consumption more for that purpose: Participants didn't have so much control over their work situation but they were able to follow their free will in the field of consumption.

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**Keywords** symbolic consumption, consumer behaviour, identity, ethnography

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background and motivation

The heart of the following study lies in the concept of identity and its central role in understanding consumer behavior. Studying consumer behavior has gained much of importance during the last decades compared to early academic research relating to economics and business, in which consumption was mostly seen as a natural and rational continuation for production. When the “irrational” behavior of consumer became more prevailing and price and functional benefits seemed to lose their position as the primary triggers for purchase, researchers and industries became more interested in the various possibilities and motivations guiding consumption habits and purchase decisions.

In his Harvard Business Review article *“Symbols for Sale”* (1959), Sidney Levy introduced the idea of consumers buying products not only for their functional benefits but also for symbolic meanings that these products withheld. According to him academics and marketers should take into account, that next to more traditional factors such as social environment or motivation, the product’s capability to signal symbolic cues of the consumer oneself and the aspirations of an individual, are strongly affecting the consumer behavior. Consumers could be perceived to be keener in consuming products that communicate signals that are most in-line with consumers’ real or desired identities and characteristics (also Belk 1988; Holt 1995 & 1998; Solomon 1983).

Along with the rising buying power also consumers’ overall wealth, free time and drive for pleasure have increased (Campbell 1987 see Uusitalo 1995; Levy 1959). The less concern there is with the concrete satisfactions of a survival level of existence, the more abstract the human responses become (Levy 1959). When the development is heading constantly towards a market offering with more and more options for satisfying various consumer needs, the pattern of thought has become also more complex. Bhat and Reddy (1998) agree with Levy by noting that the

symbolism within the product or brand plays a great role, not just its functional benefits. Also Baudrillard (1981) states that products are no longer consumed for their material utilities but for symbolic meaning of those products as portrayed in their images. Debord (1997 see Elliot 1999, 122) goes as far as stating that real consumers of goods have become consumers of illusions.

Consumer behavior, symbolism and self-concept are not brand new as topics, as Grubb and Grathwohl have discussed these already in their early research in 1967. They underlined the fact that in order to work, consumed and shared symbols need a common understanding and interpretation. As well known, the meaning of physically same symbols varies over time and the meaning of symbols is constantly discussed in the human interaction (Dittmar 1992 see Wattanasuwan 2005). Also at the time when goods and life-styles are more accessible for all in developed societies (Belk 1976), the innovations in manufacturing have enabled the production of high quality items at any price making quality less potent to provide distinction and signal status (Berger & Ward 2010) and more generally, consumption patterns no longer structure social classes (Holt 1998) – consumption and its symbolism needs to be carefully studied not leaving out the social context nor the significant others with whom a consumer under investigation is aiming to interact or identify.

In my bachelor thesis, *Symbolic Consumption – Explanatory Phenomena for the Behavior of the Postmodern Consumer* (2007), I focused in finding a dominant logic for consumer behavior. According to findings based on academic literature, consumption of brands and goods are used for:

**Creating** consumer's identity and **expressing** it to outside counterparts (Schultz Kleine 1995; Uusitalo 1995; Ericksen 1996; Elliot 1999; Berger & Heath 2007), as well as for **locating** oneself socially (Holt 1995; Uusitalo 1995; Elliot & Wattanasuwan 1998; Banister & Hogg 2004; Wattanasuwan 2005). Also consumers seemed to choose products, brands or suppliers matching their self-image, discussed as the congruence hypothesis (Grubb & Hupp 1968; Ross 1971; Quester, Kuranaratna & Goh 2000, 527).

During the six past years the identity and its creation have become even more central in the world around us. A lot of identity creation and self-expression has moved from grocery and deluxe store shelves to everyday virtual interaction providing even further possibilities to shape our selves towards the desired identity and possible selves (Chernev, Hamilton & Gal 2011). In 2010's consumers do not have to signal themselves only through expensive purchasing rituals, but by linking symbols to one-self, adding pins, tagging photos and pushing Like-buttons. The late development has made the topics regarding extending self in a virtual world very interesting and also common to people create and express their personas notably online (Belk 2013). Through the remarkably rise of online communication and because of its social nature, many more people are now interested in their public image, formerly living their life enjoying a larger degree of privacy. More than ever, the people have tools to be their own "brand managers" looking after their public and virtual image more rigorously than any of the appointed media agencies.

## 1.2 Research question and method

As mentioned above, the importance of the consumption of physical *branded goods* for the creation of the identity and to self-expression can and should be questioned. As Chernev, Hamilton & Gal (2011) state, consumers' need for self-expression is limited and brands are constantly challenged not only by other brands but also by any other non-brand means of self-expression and self-expressive behavioral acts, not forgetting constant public self-expressive behavior made possible by social media (Belk 2013). To elaborate on Chernev, Hamilton and Gal's (2011) view of self-expressive behavioral acts, I state that many of these "acts" could be called as *branded doings*. These doings compete with consumption and possession of branded goods, as the satisfier of consumer's self-expressive needs, containing and communicating exactly same kind of shared symbolic cues as branded goods do. Therefore these acts can rightly be called "branded" and examined under the academic umbrella of symbolic consumption.

Consumption of brands is also challenged by the wide range of anti-consumption movements (Kozinets 2002; Kozinets & Handelman 2004; Varman & Belk 2009) and by general notion of contemporary moralism claiming that consumption can be negatively viewed per se, certain forms of consumption being “abusive, unproductive and irrational” contravening the control of the liberal self (Hilton 2004, 118 see Luedicke, Thompson & Giesler 2010).

The existing critical view on consumption and its questioned reputation leads to situation where individuals rarely want to display or think themselves as mainstream consumers, who are easily stereotyped as self-centered materialists or “mesmerized dupes of the corporate system” (Carducci 2006; Holt 2002; Kozinets & Handelman 2004; Sandlin & Callahan 2009). General approach towards consumption seems negative when avoiding out-groups plays greater role than belonging to in-groups in consumption choices (White & Dahl 2007). Choi and Winterich (2013) continue by underlining that in fact there are by far more out-groups than in-groups to begin with. Consumption seems more linked to avoidance than acceptance or desire. Even more largely, only very few people want to see themselves and their behavior as we marketers do – as consumers.

After viewing this, it would seem that only few citizens of 2010’s developed society would like to neither create nor express their identity through their consumption habits and choices. Even more it would easily guide research from grocery stores to Facebook-profiles and Twitter accounts as the key areas for self-expression. Nonetheless, consumerism and purchase rituals of physical goods and their brands have not disappeared, but still play a major role in our society and represent large amount of people’s monthly investments in time and money. Here we start landing to the indented aim of this study, to investigate the role of consumption in identity creation and as a self-expressive behavior in the changed environment, in the contemporary context of today’s contemporary welfare society.



The primary research question is:

⇒ How does symbolic consumption and consumers' self-concept become negotiated in how the role of possessions is understood in a contemporary context?

The theme will be approached through the following sub-questions:

SQ1: How does a postmodern consumer create and express his identity through consumption?

SQ2: What is the role of consumption compared to other self-expressive behavioral acts in identity creation and expression?

I will approach the research questions through the methods of ethnography and qualitative interviews. In ethnographic parts of the research the methods of participant observation are followed (Arnould & Wallendorf 1994) and when conducting interviews, the aim is to remain as unobtrusive and nondirective as possible following the guidelines of *the Long Interview* (McCracken 1986). The methodological choices of the study will be discussed more thoroughly in part 5 – *Methodology*. To grasp the context of contemporary society to its fullest, the choice of participants led the research to a sample of four generation Y representatives living their independent lives of young adults in the urban neighborhoods of the capital of Finland. The decisions made regarding the sampling will be explained more in detail in the part 6.1 – *Choice of participants*.

### 1.3 Definition of key concepts

*Symbolic consumption* refers to consumers' tendency to focus on product's immaterial qualities instead of physical or visible attributes in their purchase decisions (Levy 1959). Goods can be regarded as social tools and symbols "serving as a means of communication between the individual and his significant references" (Grubb & Grathwohl 1967, 24). In order for products and brands to serve as communicational symbols, their meanings have to be socially shared and constantly negotiated in the human interaction (Dittmar 1992).

The concept of *extended self* refers to the phenomenon in which an individual counts objects outside the physical self to be an integral part of his or her identity. Psychologist and philosopher William James presented in his 1890 published work, *Principles of Psychology* the following definition: "In its widest possible sense, however, a man's Self is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and his children, ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account" (James 1890, 291). The commonly shared idea among researchers that "we are what we have" is perhaps the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behavior (Belk 1988).

In the common language terms, *identity* and *self* are most often used as synonyms without any attempt to distinguish the meaning of these two words. In this research these words are attached to several discussions and therefore merit a short explanation. Stryker, Owens & White (2000) state that there definitely is a considerable confusion concerning the meaning and implications of diverse concepts of self and identity.

Reed and al. (2012) propose *identity* to be defined as a group of self-associations that reflect how a person in different situation thinks, feels and does. The psychologist view refers to identity as self-perceived combination of self-image (referring to person's mental model of herself), self-esteem and individuality, simpler described as person's holistic

impression of oneself (e.g. Vilkkö-Riihelä 1999, 733). When talking about the concept of *self*, more social aspects step into play. The self is socially constructed and it describes individual as an object of her own reflective consciousness, deriving from the interaction with others. Self is predominantly a process and a central component of the subjective world in which human beings operate and reflects individual's self-concept (Sanders 1990).

To summarize, we see that concept of self is described to be more socially constructed and perceived, and by concept of identity researchers refer to individual's own perceptions of herself. From above definitions we can also notice that self-concept and identity are both described as person's own view of herself. Therefore identity and self-concept can be often be used as synonyms, unlike identity and self. The key difference between self-concept and identity is the continuity: identity bearing the connotation of sameness or continuity of individual's self-concepts through time (Stryker, Owens & White 2000; Vilkkö-Riihelä 1999).

The genesis of *postmodernism* is often time-wise located in complex conjuncture of cultural conditions and transformation of the post World War II period, in the time of reconstruction of the capitalism and the birth of the multinational global economy (Firat 1991). Postmodernism recognizes the illusions and myths in the modernist project: that of improving human life and existence by controlling nature through scientific technologies (Angus 1989), but central to postmodernism is the constant search of different states of being that can be fragmented, even paradoxical and do not require a center or a central purpose (Firat 1991). "Possibly the main defining difference between modernism and postmodernism is the rejection of modernist idea that human social experience has fundamental 'real' bases" (Firat, Dholakia & Venkatesh 1995). This means that a social experience can be defined as interplay of myths that produce different truths. Another major aspect of postmodern culture is claimed to be the transformed role of consumption in relation to premodern and modern society (Firat 1991).

Even though the following concept will remain largely outside my theoretical discussion, I want to highlight the existence and importance of *cultural capital* in current consumer research. An often-cited definition of cultural capital is presented in Pierre Bourdieu's 1986 classic, *The Forms of Capital*. He names cultural capital to be one of capital's guises, among social and economic capital, which is on certain conditions convertible to economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications. He used forms of capital as a framework for his thoughts – the distribution of these, cultural, social and economic capital, explained well the current state and power structure of the society. In his definition cultural capital has three states: the embodied state referring to a person's abilities to do cultural distinctions, the objectified state relating to the possession of cultural goods such as books and pictures, and the institutionalized state which refers to diplomas and degrees showing formal cultural qualification of a person.

Many recent and merited academics (e.g. Arsel & Thompson 2011; Berger & Heath 2007) take Bourdieu's concepts of *cultural capital* (1986) and *taste* (1984) to observe and explain consumer behavior in the contemporary world. For example Arsel and Thompson (2011) made great findings relating to cultural capital and based on their findings refer to it as field dependent knowledge that can be accumulated by investing time and effort to a particular field of consumption/interest. They also state that the field dependent cultural capital can also take different e.g. institutionalized forms. Due to this late activity on the field of cultural capital, I will maintain the focus of my study mainly outside this topic.

A *brand* is a distinguishing name and/or symbol such as logo, trademark or package design intended to identify the goods and services of either one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors (Aaker 1991, 7). Brand can be also defined as a group of concrete, functional aspects and abstract attributes (such as personality and relationships) that consumers associate with, and that add value to consumers exceeding the value of, the underlying product or service (Biel 1997).

*Brand image* is the sum of the brand's current associations. It is the current state of the brand identity that can be seen as longer-term associations and characteristics that brand owners and strategists seek to create or maintain (Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2000). These associations are partly build through the benefit claims made about the brand, usually through marketing communications (Elliot & Percy 2007, 117).

*Generation Y* are the people belonging to the generation born between years 1980 and 1994 (Vesterinen & Suutarinen 2011) in USA and Europe and known for being the first generation with a very early exposure to technology and mastering the means of instant communication and social networking (Bolton & al. 2013).

## 2. CONSUMER IDENTITY

“Material possessions as an expression and extension of selfhood have been a consumer research staple for over 25 years (Arnould & Thompson 2005; Belk 1988)” (Bardhi, Eckhardt & Arnould 2012, 510). This recent comment by Bardhi, Eckhardt & Arnould (2012) and the more dated, but often-referred statement “we are what we have” by Belk (1998, 139) motivated me in the quest of where to direct my consumer behavior research. If we really are what we own – it definitely seems that our identity and our possessions, and more generally our identity and our behavior as consumers seem to be closely linked.

There are various and also contradicting views regarding the concepts of identity and self. In the earlier section 1.3 – *Definition of key concepts*, a psychological view on identity was presented, highlighting *continuity* as one of the main attributes of identity. In the following chapter the contradictions will be faced when different views of identity, self and extended-self that are present in the academic literature of consumer research are discussed. Despite the existing miss-alignment on the definitions, these concepts should not be neglected, these being key elements for understanding and assessing symbolic consumption.

### 2.1 Postmodern concept of identity

When one speaks or writes about the postmodern consumer, one refers to a consumer who does not do his or her purchase decisions solely based on the functional benefits of the product, but based on the symbolic meanings included in the product (Elliott & Wattanasuvan 1998). Interpretations of the postmodern consumer differ remarkably of its modern predecessor. A modern consumer was a clear subject whose needs had a central role and gave meaning to consumption. A modern consumer acted according to Maslow’s hierarchy and the key motivation was to progressively satisfy individual’s needs towards a better and more fulfilling human life (Firat 1991). In the case of postmodern consumer, the subject-object distinction is confused and it seems that the object (the product consumed) sets the

rules of the consumption process. According to Firat (1991) subject is not in control but controlled, and we could state that consumer as an individual subject has disappeared and been replaced by a machine-like object, built to follow the consumption rituals constructed to sell products. Firat, Dholakia and Venkatesh (1993, 40) deepen this analyze by noting that many of the “fundamental modernist” ideals regarding agency, freedom and structure no longer apply in the postmodern context.

Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) see that the identity of the postmodern consumer is in constant state of development. According to them, individual actually has possibility to control and shape his identity, not least through the consumption practices and choices one makes. According to Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) freedom of choice makes questions like, who I am and who I want to be, well available for consumer and actually give the sense of freedom and “return” the power back to consumers. Firat hits backs in his later work, now with Dholokia (2006) stating that centrality of the human subject no longer prevails (as opposite to modern thought), making the objects and constructed structures come to exert over individual. As an example he mentions the objects that create strong feelings of desire – making the modern idea of the superior subject versus inferior object relationship to turn upside down.

Markus and Nurius (1986) as well as Hogg, Cox and Keeling (2000) show that consumers’ relationship to their self-concept and self-knowledge is complex and diverse. Individual’s goals, aspirations, motives, fears and threats have potential to lead to different representations of the self. These representations are *possible selves*. A wanted identity can be radically different even unrealistic, *ideal self* that a consumer consciously aims for. To identity creation, as well as to consumption habits, applies that models of these processes are produced by social environment. By this I mean individual’s tendency to automatically adopt to her opinions and thinking, values and appreciations learned from the significant others, important reference groups and the society in general. Significant others and reference groups can be described as people or as a group of people whose

opinions matter to an individual and with whom he or she wants to identify (Bearden, Netemeyer & Teel 1989).

According to Markus and Nurius (1986) these different selves can prevail simultaneously, appearing as different selves in moment-to-moment social situations. As an example “work-self”, “fat” or “thin-self”, “business-leader-self”, “researcher-self”, “housewife-self” and “with-friends-on-free-time-self”, to mention a few. The importance of symbols and people’s common understanding of the interpretation have importantly enhanced the possibility to build different selves and enabled their coexistence. Through the use of commonly shared and understood symbols, an individual can create, maintain and express a variety of possible selves (Markus & Nurius 1986).

Kellner (1992, 141) describes a traditional view of identity in his writing published in the book *Modernity and Identity* as following: “... one's identity was fixed, solid and stable. Identity was as a function of predefined social roles and a traditional system of myths, which provided orientation and religious sanction to one's place in the world... One was born and died a member of one's clan, a member of a fixed kinship system, and a member of one's tribe or group with one's life trajectory fixed in advance...” According to Kellner (1992) individual’s identity was unproblematic and it wasn’t a subject to reflection or discussion. Also Shankar and Fitchett (2002) describe the earlier traditions reminding that human identity was seen as something that individuals were born with or something that resided somewhere inside the mind. It was a feature that was given to and possessed by an individual.

More traditional is also the view presented by Frable (1997), who states that human identity is built of his or her psychological relationships to different social categories. She sees identity as a construct of various “sub-identities” or categories. A result of how an individual creates and negotiates his or her gender, racial, ethnic, sexual, and class identities forms the actual identity of the person. Cerulo (1997, 386) is on a similar path with Frable reminding that identity studies have been dominated by



the collective movements: gender/sexuality, race/ethnicity and class forming the “holy trinity” of the field.

According to Schultz and Hatch (2002) the diverse and discontinuous identity of the contemporary world may be a key reason for the high number of disorders relating to the instability of the human mind that we are currently witnessing. Whereas the modern identity was formed through continuous everyday interactions, the postmodern identity can change its buildings and direction more easily. The thoughts like “my whole life changed after I went into therapy” or “the new management team reworked all the principles upon which the company previously operated” (Schultz & Hatch 2002, 277), describe well the postmodern way of thinking.

British sociologist Stuart Hall (see Peltokoski 2006) structures the development of the identity concept as three differing views: Identity as the inner truth of the individual (*enlightenment's view*), identity as a result of the interaction of the subjective self and social environment (*modern view*) and identity as disjointed stories and different identities (*postmodern view*). From the modern viewpoint, remarkable formers of the identity are the significant others. According to this view, identity bridges the gap between the inner and the outer, private and public self.

The unchanging and private identity seems to be entirely faded away by the postmodern view. The postmodern identity has been described even as the *empty self* (Cushman 1990, see Elliot 1999). According to Hall (Peltokoski 2006) postmodern consumer can change his or her identity completely and it can be seen as belonging to a single phase of life or a social situation. This matches well with the ideas of Markus and Nurius (1986) about the multiple simultaneous identities, possible selves meaning individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming.

## 2.2 Extended-self

When discussing consumer identity in the postmodern context, one should not leave out the concept of *extended self*. The concept helps us to understand individual's attachment to a possessed object and also, how an individual defines him or herself. These things matter when we later take a closer look on symbolic consumption.

### 2.2.1 Role of possessions in identity creation

The famous line "we are what we own" (Belk 1988, 139) describing the relationship of identity and consumption, shows how our identity is partly formed of objects outside of our physical self. Objects owned by an individual are significant for identity creation for two clear reasons (Mittal 2006): Firstly we are continuously surrounded by the things we own, we live in a house that we own (or at least pay rent for it), in the décor we have chosen and we wear clothes that we have bought etc. and these things are located on the borderline between the others and us. Secondly, we use our possessions to signal what we are, so these objects become an essential part of the self the others perceive in us.

Ernst Prelinger published the results of his research concerning person's possessions as part of the extended self in *Journal of Psychology* 1959. The results showed that of the studied objects/things, most important and closest to extended self were a person's body parts, psychological and other processes taking place in a human body, the attributes of personal identification (such as age and profession), physical possessions and individual's own creations. To the most distant were named abstract thoughts, objects in near surroundings and physically distant places. Belk (1988) agrees and elaborates by noting that the most important groups in formation the extended self are person's own body, internal processes, ideas, experiences and people, places and objects that a person is attached to.

Anthropologists in their studies of human behavior in societal and cultural contexts, commonly agree that the maker of an object, the user of land, and the cultivator of a plant are regarded as being entitled to the product of their labor (Belk 1998, 144). This offers a rather interesting point of view to the extended self. Summarizing John Locke's idea on this that he presented in his 1690 published work *Two Treatises of Government* we could state the following: We human beings own ourselves and therefore we own our labor i.e. what we direct our bodies to do. Therefore we own what we produce with our labor out of the materials of nature. Even though the products of our work today is rarely same types of physical objects as before, people tend to relate to the money they've earned and objects acquired, the same way as before. Money and acquired objects become a part of extended self and the formed property becomes a significant building block of identity: the symbolic connections between possessions and personal history, values and cultures (Belk 1988; Schouten 1991).

Following further Belk's (1988) thoughts, he clearly states that the outside factors extending our selves are not limited to physical objects, but also other persons and places can become a part of our identity, as for example our body parts. In Belk's view (1988) the prior research relating to consumption and identity focused too much on finding similarities between the perceived characteristics of an object and perceived characteristics of the self. By doing that, the research ruled out many other things that could be part of the extended self. "But, one can hold an object like the Statue of Liberty to be a part of one's identity without having to hold a self-concept composed of characteristics attributed to this statue" (Belk 1988, 140). Yet, Schulz Kleine, Kleine and Allen (1995, 341) remind that most often the self-relevant objects are those perceived as close to the core self and also remind that changing one-self artificially simply through acquisition of new possessions is not unproblematic.

Schultz Klein and al. (1995) continue that objects become important to identity when they have the ability to tell about who the owner is. Current workplace or car helps an individual to define his or her current self.

Important photographs, childhood home or a jersey from the high school years have all ability to describe who the person was or used to be. Ahuvia (2005) agree with Schultz Klein and adds, that objects that are closely related to important life stages become fairly easy a part of individual's identity and extended self. Ahuvia also stresses that most important are the objects that have had a strong emotional bond with the person in question.

Belk returns to the question of the nature of extended self in his late article *Extended Self in a Digital World* (2013). Although the process how identity is created and expressed might be largely affected – the identity has become more co-constructed/created, the presentation of the self has become more public, the self is jointly possessed with others, and even if the life is now documented and shared digitally – people's relationship to possession hasn't changed that much. The digital objects possessed and linked to an individual are found somewhat similar to their "physical counterparts" and have similar ability to become embodied part of individual's self (Belk 2013, 490).

In other recent research the object-nature of possessions has been questioned and viewpoint of another "temporary and situational" type of relationship between subjects and possessions is presented (Bardhi, Eckhardt & Arnould 2012). In the contemporary world where many people live lives that require high level of mobility, possessions are appreciated for their instrumental use and immateriality. The people with mobile lives can be referred as contemporary nomads and these people tend to have a rather detached relationship to their "liquid" possessions (Bardhi, Eckhardt & Arnould 2012).

As a general rule to possessions and extended-self research we can agree with Belk's (1988) thought that others shouldn't interpret individual's identity based on one single a factor such as brand choice – one may expect coherent identity-related results only through an intensive long-lasting behavioral research.

### 2.2.2 How a person defines himself, extended self version

The possessed objects can literally extend our self. These kinds of objects like vehicles, guns and tools allow us to do things that would otherwise be impossible. The extension can also happen symbolically: uniform or a won award can convince others or ourselves, that we are a different person than we would be without those (Belk 1988). When studying the defining of the self, Mittal (2006) started from the idea of an individual with none of his possessions, so called *sans possession self* on the one hand and an individual with his possessions on the other.

Mittal's (2006) thoughts are in line with the postmodern idea the multileveled, layered and modifying identity. In the centre of the identity are individual's personality and values, self-image and accomplishments. Visible outer-layer is formed from social roles, subjective personality traits and finally, possessions. Belk (1988), Mittal (2006) and Shankar and Fitchett (2002) are all basically unanimous what comes to the formation of the extended self. Having and being seem to be tightly knit together: "In other words, having and being are distinct but inseparable. When an object becomes a possession, what were once self and not-self are synthesized and having and being merge" (Belk 1988, 146). Belk refers to the idea presented by French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre in his book *Being and Nothingness*, by reminding that possessions are all-important to knowing who we are: through possessions individuals search, express and confirm the answers.

Shankar and Fitchett (2002) underwrite the idea of the close relationship between the individual's identity and her possession, but criticize the excessive importance of the "having" in defining one self. They refer to Fromm (1976) who states that "we are increasingly driven by our having mode of existence at the expense of our being mode of existence. Central to his argument is that for the past few hundred years idiomatic changes have occurred in the way that we express ourselves linguistically. An increasing use of nouns to replace verbs has resulted in the mistaken

replacement of being by having” (Shankar and Fitchett 2002, 506). Although Fromm is not very known in the studies concerning postmodernity or marketing, his work gives us nice everyday examples of the change. Shankar and Fitchett refer to Fromm by saying: “to *have* a good life style rather than *living* a good life implies that ways of living can in some way be had or owned” (2002, 507).

In the critical statements against the rising importance of *having* joins also Marx (1867) in his work *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, which with great skill managed to plot the future development of the society and people’s rising tendency to commodity fetishism. Marx tried to highlight the *doing* as a central value for a person’s identity definition. He was strongly against defining human value or identity based on possessions or material wealth. Despite the early and justifiable critics, we are in the situation where extended self plays a key role in identity definition. Referring to Fromm: “modern consumers may identify themselves with the formula: I am = what I have and consume” (Shankar & Fitchett 2002, 509). The commodity fetishism is a bit outdated as a concept for symbolic consumption, because so many other than pure physical commodities are consumed and desired, such as free-time activities and social life in general (Wilska 2002, 199), but nevertheless, his core idea of the accentuated role of possessing still seems valid.

### **2.2.3 How something external becomes a part of one’s identity?**

In previous part I explained how a person defines one’s identity from the viewpoint of *extended self*. In the following, I discuss processes through which things and objects become a part of consumer’s identity.

One can find various reasons why a product or object in general becomes part of oneself. David McClelland presented in his book *Personality* (1951) that a person feels objects to be part of him when he has control and power over these things. Also Belk (1988) see the control as a key requirement for the process. Another one is the already presented view by Locke (1690) of the ownership to one’s production and the close relation of

one's makings and the extended self. Third view implies that simply knowing something can make it a part of the extended self of an individual. According to Sartre (see Belk 1988), relationship in knowing the object is inspired by a carnal and sexual desire to have the object, and thus there is no clear distinction in *knowing* and *having* in terms of becoming a part of the extended self.

In its most typical form, extending self is about buying things and these things becoming part of one's identity. During the acquisition, interaction between the purchaser and the object kicks off the process how the object becomes a part of the identity. Firstly, a decision to buy a product is made by the individual himself. So, he or she is the gatekeeper of the process and ends up with the solution that seems to best fit his or her self-concept is the best fit between the product and the buyer's self-image (Banwari 2006, 556).

During and even before the actual purchase, a consumer has invested a lot of resources finding and selecting the product. These investments are both monetary as well as psychological. The psychological investment used in the acquisition increases furthermore the importance of the purchased product. Using the product means also investing more resources, whether it's time, money or effort. According to Banwar (2006) the use of the product and the closer relationship created through usage increases the product's meaning in person's extended self. Later, when the product has been used, also memories are related to the product. When this happens, a product becomes an object that reflects consumer's lived life and has even bigger role in one's extended self (Schultz Kleine, Kleine & Allen 1995). A product that is part of a collector's collection has very unique and special meaning. Because investing a great deal of effort, time and energy to acquire a collection, the bond is particularly strong (Banwari 2006).

### 3. SYMBOLIC CONSUMPTION

#### 3.1 Postmodern phenomena

“A symbol is appropriate (and the product will be used and enjoyed) when it joins with, meshes with, adds to, or reinforces the way the consumer thinks about himself. We are dealing here with a very plain fact of human nature. In the broadest sense, each person aims to enhance his sense of self, and behaves in ways that are consistent with his image of the person he is or wants to be”, states Sidney L. Levy in his ground breaking article “*Symbols for Sale*” (1959, 119) that has ever since been regarded as a corner stone of symbolic consumption research.

My goal is to discuss and structure the field of symbolic consumption research and to test, how these half a century old profound ideas apply in the contemporary context. When going deeper into the academic literature concerning the topic one can easily agree with Richard Elliott’s (1999) view of “operation of the symbolic” being non-rational, emotional, improvised and unconscious. This same irrationality is present also in other key elements of symbolic consumption, in desire for imaginary and pleasure. Referring to Levy (1959), when we examine the phenomenon of symbolic consumption, we simultaneously examine the profound element of humanity – the building blocks of identity and one’s place in the society. These two elements have been central themes also in other disciplines not only in marketing research – identity and one’s place in society inspiring a large number of existentialist philosophers and writers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, Dostoyevsky and Kafka to focus in these topics in their 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century master pieces.

Postmodern consumption theories are based on the view of the post-Fordist society (Haanpää 2007). Compared to Fordism as a modern economic and social system dominated by an industrialized and standardized mass production and in society where the basic everyday needs of consumers were the main consumption driver, the concept of



post-Fordism withholds short life-cycle of products, large freedom of choice, more fragmented market segments and an unstable consumer identity based on consumption habits. According to Haanpää (2007) in post-Fordist society individual's aspiration to define and express one's identity is emphasized. Haanpää agrees with Uusitalo's (1995) view of the active role of consumer and the importance of consumption for the creation of identity and social structures. This differs radically from very traditional and deterministic thinking where consumption choices could be anticipated by multi-attribute models (Fishbein 1976) or simply based on social class, significant others, cultural or other social background factors. Brown (1993, 24) takes similar approach stating that despite "the time invested in, careers made by and (apparent) achievements of modern marketing", postmodernist skepticism has challenged pretty much all of its the key principles and theories: e.g. the mentioned Fishbein's behavioral intentions model, Maslow's hierarchy needs, the Howard-Seth model and Porter's generic strategies.

Firat & Venkatesh (1995) continue the assessment regarding modern and postmodern views stating that earlier modernist thinking saw constitutions of individual and society being based on "particular historical forces" such as science, rationalism and technology. Another key building block was the common quest towards a promised material progress. Postmodern school has here again questioned these both: the former due to neglecting the cultural presence (that include aesthetics, language, discourses and practices) and the latter due to its turning out to be illusory (Firat & Venkatesh 1995, 240).

Imagination and feelings have always played a part in consumption (Campbell 1987, see Uusitalo 1995). According to Campbell the hedonistic relationship towards acquisition of goods has always existed, but it is emphasized in the behavior of the post-modern consumer. Instead of product benefits, consumer focuses on the different stimuli that provoke feelings in her. Consumer buys "images not things" as Marc Taylor and Esa Saarinen express it in their work *Imagologies* (1994, see Elliot 1999, 122). Campbell (1987) states that today's consumer can experience strong

feelings even by fantasizing about owning a certain product. Browsing home décor magazines or buying virtual goods in virtual game environments are good examples of this.

To explain the irrational behavior of consumer, beside imagination and feelings mentioned by Campbell (1987), desire is seen to play a big role (Shankar & Fitchett 2002). Jyrinki, Leipämaa-Leskinen and Seppälä (2006, 26), researchers focusing on the dynamic consumer and the meaningfulness of consumption, are convinced that consumers are driven by their irrational desires and wishes. According to the researchers, predictable needs are more and more often replaced by the desires created in interactions between the consumer and the surrounding world. Shankar and Fitchett (2002) express their concern about this development by criticizing marketers for constant creation of new desires causing continuous grave, also dissatisfaction: "Many social theorists have discussed the idea that 'desire to have' rather than the desire for particular things or objects defines, creates and extenuates consumer dissatisfaction" (Shankar Fitchett 2002, 502). The desire itself becomes more important than what is desired.

Firat (1991; also Firat & Venkatesh 1995) presents the context of symbolic consumption by writing about hyperreality, a new kind of world, where the postmodern consumer lives. The reproduction of human roles, relationships and characteristics administered by media, creates the surroundings of where the consumer lives. Advertising is considered especially potent in forming the world around us, by attaching new meanings (what Firat calls signified) to things (signifiers).

For example in toothpaste advertising a marketer might give up on telling the story of the original referent, a paste that cleans teeth, but focuses on attaching the paste with new symbolic meanings, such as sexiness, beauty, happiness or attractiveness. When these meaning are heavily communicated and the insights are considered true, consumers start to evaluate the category based on these new attributes. The new meaning of toothpaste might change largely from its original meaning and also the

consumers using the product can be viewed differently (sexy, beautiful etc.). When marketer's original aim was simply to increase the attractiveness of the marketed product, as a result he has also changed the reality surrounding the postmodern consumer.

The same applies to physical places. When marketers create Disney Worlds or Linnanmäki type of amusements parks these places – although fundamentally built on images and fantasy – become as real as “the suburban communities or the metropolitan cities where we are impelled to conduct our everyday lives” (Firat & Venkatesh 1995, 250). The same type of logic applies to many consumed goods around us: a McDonald's Big Mac cannot be seen as any more simulation of a homemade hamburger served in fast-food manner than a homemade hamburger is a simulation of a Big Mac (Firat & Venkatesh 1995).

### **3.2 Symbolic consumption as identity signaling**

Consumption is a multi-faced phenomenon with countless implications in the lives of individuals. But, when examining the marketing literature around the theme, the role of consumption in consumer's identity creation and signaling in everyday life seems to remain undisputed (Schultz Kleine 1995; Ericksen 1996; Uusitalo 1995; Elliot 1999; Arnould & Price 2000; Berger & Heath 2007). Through the act of consumption, a consumer can portray her identity (Uusitalo 1995) and in the contemporary society identity creation can be even viewed inseparable from consumption (Wattanasuwan 2005, 179). According to Elliot and Wattanasuwan (1998, 134), if the consumer has choice to consume, “he or she will consume things that hold particular symbolic meanings” and will portray the wished image of his or her identity. This is well described by Helga Dittmar in her comment: “By buying goods, we magically acquire a different persona” (Wattanasuwan 2005, 180). Wattanasuwan elaborates on that: “A businessman can magically be another person by wearing a leather outfit instead of his business suit and riding a Harley-Davidson instead of driving his BMW” (Wattanasuwan 2005, 180). Consumption's impact to identity can even be viewed as an *authenticating act*,

consumption objects giving the consumer a strong feeling of self-conception and uniqueness (Arnould & Price 2000).

The previous example presents the self-expressive power of consumption. By consuming selected symbolic goods, a consumer signals the symbolic meanings attached to the product as a part of her perceived self, the identity visible to the others. Preferably consumer aims to consume goods that fit and preferably enhance consumer's self-concept and lead to desired reaction from other individuals (Grubb & Grathwohl 1967). According to later research (Firat 1991, 73) this good sounding consumer dominated relationship can turn upside down and consumer's self-image can become "dependent on the symbolic meanings culturally attached to products consumed". When this happens, one cannot talk about consumer's freedom of self-expression but about the identity defined by consumed goods.

Consumption may also play a role in symbolic self-completion (Uusitalo 1995, Elliott & Wattanasuwan 1998). This may refer to a situation where "individuals who perceive themselves lacking a personal quality aim to fill this gap with symbolic resources" (Elliot & Wattanasuwan 1998, 134). Symbolic consumption can be used as a building block between the current and the desired identity. This means basically that a consumer can express his or her desired identity through the symbols conveyed by the products he or she is using. If the desired identity is for example "wilder" than her current identity, the consumer can change people's perception of herself by using products that signal "wildness". Buying a motorcycle could eventually be a part of a solution.

On top of self-expression, self-completion and other positive aspirations related to the creation of consumers' desired identity, one should not oversee the impact of negative possible identities. Consumers have tendency to protect their identity by avoiding consumption habits and purchase decisions that might signal unfavorable image of the individual (Banister & Hogg 2004). These undesired signals that consumers avoid signaling depend on the social context and their importance varies depending on the product domain (Berger & Heath 2007), but it's worth

noting that for example in clothing choices people's tendency to avoid wearing "wrong" item (negative drive) is stronger than aim to wear the latest or the "best" items (positive drive) (Banister & Hogg 2004, 863).

### **3.3 Symbolic consumption as social locator**

Symbolic consumption is not solely used for identity creation or expression, but consumption allows consumers also to locate themselves socially (Uusitalo 1995; Wattanasuwan 2005). "Possessions can also serve a social purpose by reflecting social ties to one's family, community, and/or cultural groups, including brand communities" (Escalas & Bettman 2005, 378). Through the consumption of products consumers can simultaneously seek to differentiate from one group of consumers and identify with another group that they wish to be associated with (Elliott & Wattanasuwan 1998). Note that when we discuss about postmodern consumer locating him or herself socially, we need to take account the environment where we are examining the phenomena: As postmodern consumption theory holds consumption as a central building block of our society, is the environment itself often created by consumption and its processes (Uusitalo 1995). This refers to the earlier presented concept of hyper-reality (Firat 1991), world built on changing meanings and simulated past, present and future.

Prior research shows clearly that consumers have a strong drive to differentiate themselves from others (Berger & Heath 2007, 121). In order to differentiate people use objects that have great capacity for self-expression and differentiation (Uusitalo 1995), often publicly consumed and visibly utilized products (vs. privately consumed) (Belk, Mayer & Bahn 1982; Escalas & Bettman 2005) and products that require higher investments (luxury vs. necessity) (Mason 1985; Escalas & Bettman 2005) or are less functional (wearing sunglasses inside vs. outside) (Berger & Heath 2007). The most important is that "wrong" people do not own or use the product (Berger & Ward 2010). For people who have higher needs in terms individuality, differentiation is especially important in the field in consumption (Berger & Heath 2007).

Symbolic meaning of products and brands is often linked to stereotypes associated with product-user imaginary (Banister & Hogg 2004). If many similar people use the same brand “it imbues that cultural item with symbolic value” (Berger & Ward 2010, 558). This is very prevalent in Banister and Hogg’s (2004) study of clothing brands – the typical user becomes a part of brands identity. Marketers are well aware of this in their marketing and advertising campaign planning: brands tend to highlight their existing or wished “typical” user groups, that consumers can potentially identify with. Other research has proven this process to hold true, consumers clearly employing symbolic consumption to obtain desirable connections with the wished others (Wattanasuwan 2005). Even though we need to take into account that the symbols might be largely differently interpreted depending on the social context (Berger & Heath 2007), possession and habits of consumption provide an individual with a large repertoire to symbolic tools to connect with other people. Broost (1974, see Belk 1988) and Wattanasuwan (2005) both agree that one of the strongest ways to express belongingness to a certain social group is through a shared symbolic object.

When talking about stereotypes, most often understood as characteristics linked to a typical user group of a brand or product, one should not forget individual’s ability to self-stereotyping (Biernat & al. 1996, see Banister & Hogg 2004). This refers to a situation where one perceives oneself to be a member of a group and “consequently” starting to behave in-line with this social identity (Banister & Hogg 2004, 855). Consumer aims consciously to signal an image of oneself as a member of the group or emphasize the belongingness to that particular group – a group that is in line with her current or desired identity.

To express belongingness to a particular group or community through symbolic consumption practices require that symbols have socially shared meanings (Muniz & O’Guinn 2001; Wattanasuwan 2005). Through the interpretation of symbols and provoked desired reactions, one can demonstrate belongingness to variety of groups outside the traditional demographic segmentation (her family, age-group and e.g. group of

colleagues based on her profession). The clothes we wear, hairstyles, shoes, the car we own or the computer we use signal symbolic meanings and connect us with the groups who share the same values or life-style (Wattanasuwan 2005). Owning a Ferrari or using a MacBook instead of PC, gives us an opportunity to belong to a Ferrari-club or Apple-people (although we see diminishing power of Apple as group marker when “too many wrong users” have adopted it following the logic of Berger & Ward 2010). In order to these groups to be constructed, the common interpretation and shared meanings need to exist, no matter if we talk about a small elite Ferrari-club or about one whole nation (Grubb & Grathwohl 1967).

As well as in self-expressive use of symbolic consumption described earlier, also in social locating, both negative and positive factors have an impact on the consumer behavior (White & Dahl 2007; Choi & Winterich 2013). According to research, through typical user stereotypes consumers form positive or negative reference groups for oneself (Banister & Hogg 2004; Berger & Heath 2007). These groups can be named also in- and out-groups (White & Dahl 2007; Choi & Winterich) based on the desire to belong to a certain consumer group or its avoidance. In the perceived group identity negative stereotypes and therefore negative reference groups (out-groups) have stronger impact on consumers’ decisions and therefore avoidance of associations with negative group identities play bigger role in consumer behavior than desire for belongingness (White & Dahl 2007).

## **4. SYMBOLIC CONSUMPTION OF BRANDS**

In this chapter I discuss the academic research on symbolic consumption taking brands in closer consideration. The role of advertising is examined as well as the relationship between the consumer's identity and brands, and how the symbolism that brands withhold affects the consumer behavior.

### **4.1 Symbolic consumption, advertising and brands**

Symbolic consumption is not limited to branded products or certain product categories. Almost all human actions can be considered as symbolic consumption. Leisure and even doing nothing are results of certain decision processes. All things that extend consumer's identity can be examined as part of symbolic consumption, like ideologies. But when talking of symbolic consumption discussion about brands is well justified. Brands often go through structured and intensive "meaning work" done by marketers – companies trying actively to attach new and favourable meanings to the brand in question. "If a product is to serve as a symbolic communicative device it must achieve social recognition, and the meaning associated with the product must be clearly established and understood by related segments of society" (Grubb & Grathwohl 1967, 24; Elliott 1994). This (at least aimed) establishment, shared meanings and interpretations make brands especially significant in the field of symbolic consumption.

One of the key elements of symbolic consumption is the signaling and expressing the individual's identity, either the current or the desired. Building a brand identity happens very similarly. It is an interactive process in which a brand communicates wanted signals of itself and based on these signals the significant groups, like customers, trade partners, owners etc. form their perception of brand's identity (Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2000, 66). Sum of the associations that consumers form of the brand's identity are cited as concept of brand image (Aaker & Joachimsthaler 2000; Elliott & Percy 2007).



The signals that brands communicate of themselves are often created and conveyed through advertising, the part of the communication process over which the marketers exert great control. Anderson and Meyer (1988 see Elliott & Percy 2007) note that what the marketers cannot control – is the interpretation of the signals. Meanings are not conveyed in the messages but are built-in (Anderson & Meyer 1988 see Elliott & Percy 2007, 50). This positions the interpretator in a very important role when reflecting the communicated signals in the light of her own personal perceptions and learnt social meanings.

Brand's identity signals can be transmitted also in other interaction between the consumer and the product. Generally it can be stated that there is no single source of signals that form the brand's perceived identity. Biel (1997) underlines the importance of positive interpretations of the brand in a lot broader scale. When he talks about successful brands, he points out factors like perceived quality, perceived uniqueness, rich imaginary to be very important along with longevity and strong and consistent advertising strategy. The advertisement is not enough as such but also the product or service needs to fulfill the expectations. Actually, when Smith and Swinyard (1988) studied the relative importance of product/service experience vs. advertising to the formation of brand image, not surprisingly personal experience played greater role in the opinion development.

Nonetheless, advertising has an undisputed ability to create and transform symbolic meanings (Holt 2002; Elliot & Percy 2007). This ability is related to the dialogue between advertising and the world surrounding consumers. On the other hand advertising is said to change or shape the reality where we live, but at the same time advertising tends to take most its cultural aspiration from the real human life (Holt 2004). This means that besides the cultural changes advertising might provoke or cause, it also encompasses and attaches a wide range of all ready existing values and meanings to marketed products. As an example I could raise the food company Saarioinen's campaign based on the idea of "Food made by mothers". The campaign merged the promotion of the traditional role of the mother as a cook of tasty dishes and feeder of her children to the

endeavor of making the perception of processed convenience food more positive. The aim was that use of Saarioinen's convenience food products would not directly symbolize busy single life or indifferent attitude towards food, but the products could also signal positive and traditional, family-centered values.

To summarize, the formation of brand symbolism can be seen as a three-step process (Escalas & Bettman 2005, 378). First, advertising uses the real life cultural meanings when communicating brand's identity (also Elliot & Percy 2007). In the second phase, brand users (i.e. reference groups) provide meanings to the brand and make their own associations of the brand (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). In the third phase meaning moves from brand to consumers as consumers construct themselves and support their identity through their brand choices. This comes back to the proven hypothesis of symbolic consumption: important is not only the expressive capabilities of a brand but also its ability to be part of consumer's identity creation or maintaining the self-concept (McCracken 1989).

## **4.2 Brand symbols as tools for consumer self-expression**

Townsend and Sood (2012) reconfirm one of the key assumptions in consumer behavior stating that consumers choose products and brands reflecting who they are (Gao & al. 2009) and who they are not (Berger & Heath 2007). Symbolic consumption of brands helps consumers to signal significant things of themselves to others, like social status, gender or age (McCracken 1987). The fields that McCracken mentions here are very traditional but still valid. One can state that before 20<sup>th</sup> century's radical changes in the society, the roles of individuals were very fixed. The class differences between working and upper class were straightforward (Haanpää 2007) and not as much dependent on individuals own life choices, consumption habits and other self-expressive behavioral acts, like later during the postmodern era. Currently when fixed roles define less and less consumer's identity, one can more freely express one's desired identity. Here the choice of suitable brands will help in conveying the wanted impression – what comes to social status, belonging to groups, displaying age or even sex (McCracken 1987).

This self-expressive function of consuming brands relates to *conspicuous consumption* presented by Veblen already in 1899, a term that refers to consumption of products mainly for the “purpose of attaining or maintaining social status”. It can as well be linked to displaying knowledge in culture, taste or membership in particular social group (Chernev, Hamilton & Gal 2010, 67). But referring to Belk (1988) consumption of brands does not need to aim to social benefits or acceptance but can straightforwardly serve in establishing and confirming a consumer’s self-concept. Through appropriate brand choices a woman can highlight her masculine or feminine characteristics and a man can naturally do the same. By the consumption of expensive brands a consumer can give more upper-class image of herself or dress unlike her age-peers to influence the age-interpretations of other people.

Which brands then serve best when speaking about the self-expressive nature of the brand consumption? Bearden & Etzel (1982) concluded in their research that purchase decisions on products and brands that are publicly consumed (vs. privately consumed) and considered as luxury (vs. necessity) are influenced the strongest by consumer’s reference group. There might be many types of groups of i.e. significant others, people whose opinion, expectations and acceptance are important to a consumer (Bearden, Netemeyer & Teel 1989), but in all these cases the interaction between an individual and a group is required (Bearden & Etzel 1982). Publicly used products and brands facilitate this interaction. This is very much in line with the view presented in earlier chapter *symbolic consumption as social locator* (Belk, Mayer & Bahn 1982; Berger & Heath 2007; Escalas & Bettman 2005; Mason 1985; Uusitalo 1995).

When moving forward to examine academic literature on the relationship between consumer’s identity and brand’s symbolic associations, one finds large amount of research that has focused on categories clearly matching the above criteria like cars, houses, beer and other alcohol beverages, cigarettes (Belk, Bahn & Mayer 1982; Hogg, Cox & Keeling 2000), leisure, leisure products, cultural activities (Veblen 1899; Shipman 2004), clothing and apparels (Berger & Heath 2007; Han & al. 2010).

### **4.3 Consumer's self-concept and brand-image congruence**

As a last section of the theory part, I will discuss the congruence hypothesis, an important viewpoint behind motivations and triggers of consumer behavior and brand choices. Congruence hypothesis has its origins in the post-positivistic school of thought. Because of its verificatory nature it does not land directly in the postmodern discussions, but regarding consumer's brand related behavior, I see congruence hypothesis as a valid explanatory concept.

The discussion of self-image and product image was first presented by Landon (1974 see Quester, Karunaratna & Goh 2000, 527). Landon studied the images that various products signaled. Consumers were considered to favor brands that signaled images that were in line with consumer's self-concept. "The consuming behavior of an individual will be directed towards the furthering and enhancing of his self-concept through the consumption of goods as symbols" (Grubb & Grathwohl 1967, 26). According to this view consumer behavior was at least partly explained by individual's objective to express one's self-image or the image of one's ideal-self through the symbolism attached to the consumed products. The ideas of Landon (1974) and Grubb and Grathwohl (1967) form the assumption of unity – the congruence hypothesis.

The congruence hypothesis describing the relationship between consumers self-concept is summarized as following:

1. Some forms of consumer behavior are primarily expressive in which the consumer seeks to convey to others the kind of person one thinks or wants oneself to be.
2. Brands, products or suppliers of certain services convey various images to the consumers. This happens presumably in the same cognitive space that contains the consumer's self-image.
3. Consumers then choose products, brand or suppliers matching their self-image (Quester, Kuranaratna & Goh 2000, 527).

There is a strong scientific evidence that congruence hypothesis applies (e.g. Grubb & Hupp 1968; Ross 1971; Quester, Kuranaratna & Goh 2000). Also Dolich (1969) focused in her research on the relationship between consumer's self images and brand images. She approached the topic through the question: would an individual accept brands with images similar to the self-concept and reject brands with images dissimilar to it (Dolich 1969, 80). The study concluded, "favored brands were consistent with the self concept and reinforced it" (Dolich 1969, 84). Her study included brands from both privately and publicly used product categories namely beer, tobacco, soap and toothpaste brands.

Almost thirty years later Ericksen (1996) examined the congruence hypothesis choosing car industry as the research field for her European study. Cars seem as an evident choice due to their acknowledged capacity to signal the owner's identity (Belk, Bahn & Meyer 1982). In both studies, Dolich (1969) and Ericksen (1996) the congruence hypothesis was proven to hold, "...it is evident that a product should match self- or ideal congruity of consumer to become a part of the cognitive process in purchase intention as symbolism is an important criteria" (Ericksen 1996, 54).

Escalas and Bettman (2005) also studied the congruence between the brand-image and consumer's self-concept. They agreed with Ericksen's (1996) and Dolich's (1969) findings, but also introduced a concept of self-brand connection, that displays the strength of the brand-image self-concept relationship. This self-brand connection was used as dependent variable in their study and it measured based on following seven items:

1. This brand reflects who I am.
2. I can identify with this brand.
3. I feel a personal connection to this brand.
4. I use this brand to communicate who I am to other people.
5. I think this brand helps me become the type of person I want to be.
6. I consider this brand to be "me" (it reflects who I consider myself to be or the way that I want to present myself to others).
7. This brand suits me well (Escalas & Bettman 2005, 382).

Taking brand-self connection into congruence theory research confirms that brands which are able to signal consumer self-concepts where experienced as symbolic brands. Especially symbolic are the brands that have a strong brand-image (Wright & al. 1992) and these symbolic brands also form the strongest brand-self connection (Escalas & Bettman 2005). When further elaborated by noting that consumers are most prone to consume products or brands that they “believe to possess symbolic images similar and/or complementary to the image they hold of themselves” (Sirgy 1982; 1986 see Heath & Scott 1998, 1110; Dolich 1969, 84), it is hard to question the importance of symbolic brands to consumer behavior.

## 5. METHODOLOGY

### 5.1 Deciding on qualitative vs. quantitative methods

Choosing the appropriate methodology is essential for the results the study delivers. The first and foremost question is whether to address the research questions through qualitative or quantitative research methods. Although my topic guides me forcefully towards qualitative research, there are also reasons why quantitative methods could be taken into practice. “[...] number-based quantitative research emanating from a positivist paradigm still dominates public understandings of what equates with scientific validity” (Cheek 2007 see Tracy 2010, 838). Cheek’s (2007) view points out the question of validity that often rises when comparing these two approaches for conducting a research. *Qualitative community* is seen as very multi-faced and lacking solid common criteria for research as opposite to the relative consensus in the *quantitative community* where reliability, generalizability and objectivity among the mentioned validity are hailed as common golden rules (Winter 2000).

A number of qualitative scholars (Denzin 2008; Ellingson 2008; Golafshani 2003; Guba & Lincoln 2005 see Tracy 2010, 839) have commented that the used criteria should reflect the multiplicity of different theories, paradigms or qualitative communities. This view suggests that no general standards should be sought but different set of criteria should be used for different qualitative areas – narrative, phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnographic research and case study research (Tracy 2010).

In *the long interview* McCracken (1988) describes the difference between qualitative and quantitative methods by stating that qualitative methods can take us to the mental world of the individual to see how the individual sees and feels the world. “Without a qualitative understanding of how culture mediates human action, we can know only what the numbers tell us” (McCracken 1988, 9). As my study moves in the social spheres of consumer behavior where consumption represents a site “where power,

ideology, gender, and social class circulate and shape one another” (Denzin 2001, 325) the qualitative research methods typical to social sciences show their importance.

The behavior of an individual is present in the particular moments and quantitative methods allow researcher to study effectively the negotiations and social surroundings linked to the life of a commodity (Denzin 2001). Opposing the key assumptions of quantitative research, qualitative methods acknowledge the fact that when people, their personalities and lives are closely involved in studies, parallel or opposing truths may very well occur (Winter 2000).

In the qualitative studies, researcher is not an “objective, politically neutral observer”, who would somehow be outside the influence and not influencing the surrounding culture, the study process, schools of thought, academic disciplines or philosophies (Denzin 2001, 325; Clifford & Marcus 1986). Denzin (2001) states clearly that in contemporary social sciences, the God’s eye view, guaranteeing the absolute methodological certainty no longer exists. The researcher stands always between the research subject and results the study delivers and as McCracken states (1986, 18): “investigator serves as a kind of ‘instrument’ in the collection and analysis of data”, his or her own personality, cultural background, experience, intellect, degree of conceptual understanding and imagination affecting the interpretative process (Arnould & Wallendorf 1994; McCracken 1986; Moisander & Valtonen 2006). Holt (1991) underlines this un-objectivity of empirical observations in his article *Rashomon visits consumer behavior* presenting an example how four very different perceptions and interpretations made by four different individuals of the very same event are all equally valid. Each interpretation is “correct” for the individual participant-observer (Holt 1991, 57).

Referring to this, we can acknowledge that the very much-appreciated character of generalizability of quantitative research methods cannot serve as the measure of goodness in qualitative studies. The isolation of context, objectivity of observations and random sampling present in the



quantitative research do not serve in the situation where research aims to build deeper understanding of historically or culturally situated human behavior and knowledge (Tracy 2010). The lack of generalizability does not make the results of qualitative research any less valid, but we need to understand validity differently: not as “a single, fixed or universal concept, but as rather a contingent construct, inescapably grounded in the processes and intentions of particular research methodologies and projects” (Winter 2000). The openness regarding researcher’s intentions actualized through self-reflection concerning subjective values, biases and inclinations and the transparency of the research objects and results through the clarifications of used methods and faced challenges, begin to define a good set of criteria, generally applicable for qualitative research. As a set of suitable criteria Tracy (2010) suggests the following eight themes to be used when examining the quality of all qualitative research: worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonances, significant contribution, ethics and meaningful coherence (Tracy 2010, 840).

## **5.2 Chosen qualitative method: ethnography**

In the field of qualitative research this study follows most closely the methods described as ethnography. “Ethnography decodes and recodes, telling the grounds of collective order and diversity, inclusion and exclusion” (Clifford & Markus 1986, 2) with its overall goal being the building of social theory (Penaloza 1998, 352). Ethnography describes the processes how the world is structured and as a matter of fact, is also itself a part of these processes (Clifford & Markus 1986). Elaborating from this: instead of being just a form of data collection, ethnography attempts to make explicit how culture constructs and is constructed by human behavior and experiences (Arnould & Wallendorf 1994). Through its methods of conceptualizing often unrecognized patterns of our behavior and life, ethnography has ability to make “familiar strange, the exotic quotidien” (Clifford & Markus 1986, 2).

An ethnography, such as this study, focusing on the behavior of the people creating a market for a product or service can be referred as *market-*

*oriented ethnography* (Arnould & Wallendorf 1994). Market oriented ethnography aims to find priorities in consumers' lives by examining socially meaningful practices and uncovering tacit knowledge that lies within consumers' daily routines, gestures and revealed beliefs and values (Arnould & Price 2006). Arnould & Price (2006) specify this type of ethnography to have special interest in consumers as intentional actors and focus on their actual actions and way they organize their lives, not so much on what they say about their doings. Although, as in all qualitative research where the generalizability is not the foremost aim of the study, ethnographic research seeks to find patterns that are social or cultural in nature that contain comparative or cultural significance of the examined population or phenomena (Arnould & Wallendorf 1994).

By data collection of human behavior and life through observing people in their "natural environment", an ethnographer is able to collect information that goes beyond the information captured through interviews and spoken words (Arnould & Price 2006). In qualitative research that would rely only on interviews, the creation of data relies largely on the self-expressive skills and input of the interviewee. Spending time around or surrounded by the research subject has clear benefits. Referring to Fernandez (1986 see Arnould & Wallendorf 1994, 485): "the immersion in context increases the likelihood of spontaneously encountering important moments in the ordinary events of consumers' daily lives and of experiencing revelatory incidents". Arnould & Wallendorf (1994) note that these revelatory incidents provide the data based on the most naturally occurred real-time events and provide stimulation for interpretive insights.

Participant observation, as a method for conducting the ethnographic research (vs. non-participant and mechanical observation), underlines the importance of a delicate balance between the subjectivity and objectivity by recognizing centrality of researcher's personal experiences and traits (Clifford & Markus 1986). The preference for participant observation as the method for this study is based on its straightforward usefulness when studying consumer behavior: It gives access to observe and examine many

behavioral details of consumption, e.g. decision-making heuristics, financial negotiations, active socialization and culturally patterned consumption norms and values (Arnould & Wallendorf 1994). By participating in the social interaction in the particular research context, a participant observer might be able to study consumption behaviors that would remain invisible to the “outsiders” observing and recording human behavior but not taking part in the interaction in the social context (i.e. in the case of non-participant observation) (Arnould & Wallendorf 1994).

All ethnographic studies are located in the field of human activity. The following research based on my subjective data collection and data analysis, has within itself both the strengths but also the limitations of human perception (Richardson 2000). I shall discuss these limitations in chapter 7. As Tracy (2010) drafted criteria for interpreting the goodness of qualitative research in general, I also take account Richardson’s (2000, 254) view on criteria for examining ethnographic works: A good ethnographic work has substantive contribution to the understanding of social life, aesthetic merit, reflexivity, impact to affect people emotionally and intellectually and it needs to express a reality.

As Moisander and Valtonen (2006) state, to get the most out of ethnographic observations, interviews are also included in the research. When meeting my research subjects, on top of observing and sharing everyday situations I will also conduct interviews. Moisander and Valtonen (2006) note that an interview can be everything between an informal chat and a lengthy deep and structured interview. In conducting the interviews, it will be helpful to follow closely the guidelines set by McCracken (1986) to work with as unobtrusive, nondirective manner as possible – not forcing the conversations to any certain direction and not to gather information simply based on the researcher’s own logic. It is important to conduct the interviews avoiding directive “active listening methods” and remaining open to the coming outputs. Capturing the categories and logics of the study subjects is the key.

## 6. ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

In the following chapter I take the step forward into conducting the ethnographic research. In this chapter I have documented the ethnographic study conducted by myself. Based on the literature review I had two central assumptions when entering to the research. A) Post-modern consumers create and express their identity through consumption and B) other self-expressive behavioral acts can potentially replace consumption as the field of identity creation and expression or at least lower the importance of consumption for consumer's self-concept work. I was now willing to see how the symbolic consumption and consumers' self-concept become negotiated in how the role of possessions is understood in a contemporary context – this time through my own eyes and in a real life contemporary context.

### 6.1 Choice of participants

I approached the research topic of symbolic consumption in the contemporary context through short-term participation in the lives of four young adults living in the urban neighborhoods of Helsinki, the capital of Finland. They are all my contemporaries leading a fully independent life, with their own set of life-styles and rules, planning and spending time on actively assessing the important decisions concerning their upcoming grown-up life.

Born between year 1983 and 1989 they are all part of the *Generation Y*, also called as Echo Boomers, Millennials, Internet generation or Nexters (Eisner 2005) and defined as generation of people born in USA and Europe between 1977 and 1995, or between 1981 and 1994. There is no “widespread agreement” on the starting or the ending points of that particular generation (Bolton & al. 2013) but I will follow the general definition of generation Y used in Finland: people born between 1980 and 1994 (Vesterinen & Suutarinen 2011). There are many opinions about the generation, their values and particularities, but few attributes tend to be more prevailing and commonly agreed as others.

Generation Y is known for being the first generation with a very early and frequent exposure to technology, which referring to Bolton & al. (2013), has its advantages and disadvantages in terms of cognitive, emotional and social outcomes. Generation Y members tend to have a high need of technology for their entertainment, human interaction and even for regulating their emotions (Bolton & al. 2013). Finnish generation Y experienced an economic down turn caused by the big Finnish recession 1990-1993 (Kiander 2001) but after that has enjoyed a period of economic growth until last years' stagnation on the European markets. Eisner (2005) went in his writing as far as describing the upcoming years, in 2005, being an era of remarkable economic uncertainty comparable to recession of 1929. Along with technologies of instant communication, social networking and globalization are familiar to most of generation Y members (Bolton & al. 2013). The generation can be described as savvy users of media as Alch (2000, 44) puts it: "They are not pushovers for slick ads. They use Internet to find information about products and to make better-informed decisions about consumption."

Along with the 1980's and 1990's children growing older, we start to witness the effects of generation Y entering into work life. The generation is more educated than its predecessors and also more agile with technology, which makes these young people more suitable for the modern ways of working. But there is also a clear challenge. The life-styles and values of generation Y do not always fit the traditional established practices (Ahonen & al. 2010). Generation Y clearly wants more from their life than money and achievements attained through the work and career. Vesterinen and Suutarinen (2011) and Bolton (2013) state that for these people work-life and career are the ways of self-actualization and work needs to be interesting. Work is seen as individual's means to make a contribution to society.

As from Vesterinen and Suutarinen's work (2011) can be concluded: Millennials appreciate good life, are entrepreneurial, networked, environmentally conscious and responsible, empathetic and caring but not

modest, they value free time and like to spend time with their friends. They are children raised by an abundant, urban and global market and media culture.

The reasons behind my decision to choose the four individuals representing the generation Y as my study subjects should come out clear from the description above. The research aims to find evidence and traits of symbolic consumption in the *contemporary context* by solving the question how do consumers create and express their identity through the act of consumption. Generation Y are at the verge of fully entering the adult life, are already both economically and mentally independent, have gained reasonable amount of life-experience and are soon in place to make decisions that will have impact on wider audiences: their future families, their workplaces and on the society as whole – having a large say on what “the contemporary” soon means and what type of values and behaviors will the generation in power have.

In the sampling of participants this study profits from the selection of individuals within the same social class of generation Y. Since the aim is not to define different consumption practices depending on demographic differences but to go deeper in the consumption and identity work of an individual – it is crucial that neither the level of cultural nor economic capital becomes too a decisive factor in the small sample group of four people. As can be stated, cultural capital has an uncontested effect on consumption practices (Arsel & Thompson 2011) and drives the preferences even more powerfully than the living standards and wealth of an individual (Berger & Ward 2010), which were for long time seen as the most decisive factor in individual’s behavior as consumer. The decision of having a group of individuals with higher level of wealth was made in order to avoid the participants being heavily limited in their economic resources to follow the consumption manner of their choice.

To attain a wished demographic homogeneity in the sample group which was seen favorable for the purposes of the study, the chosen participants have a number of attributes in common: They are all soon finishing their

degree of higher education, come from similar type of family backgrounds with highly educated parents and are all currently employed. Taken these attributes into account, the participants could be defined as a group of HCCs – individuals with high level of cultural capital, following a definition by Bourdieu and scale developed by Holt (Holt 1998, 7). Also their living neighborhoods are alike, three out of four living in the same district and fourth very close. Also all of them present one person households, are not married nor have children and their living standards, their economic capital, can be said to be very much equal.

The chosen homogeneity of the group of individuals that participated in this study does not aim for this study to be used for larger generalizations (as discussed in chapter 5): not of the Finnish generation Y nor the type of people these individuals might sociologically present. But, I hold great importance on the factor that in this research, the situation in life or traditional class markers, should not explain the findings and possible differences in participants' consumption behavior, but more refined factors of distinction will be needed.

<b>Background information</b>	Respondent 1	Respondent 2	Respondent 3	Respondent 4
Age	24	26	28	30
Year of birth	1989	1987	1985	1983
Sex	Female	Female	Male	Male
City	Helsinki	Helsinki	Helsinki	Helsinki
Neighbourhood	Urban hip	Urban hip	Urban established	Urban hip
Distance to city center	< 3 km	< 3 km	< 4 km	< 3 km
Apartment status	Rented	Rented	Own	Rented
Number of people in household	1	1	1	1
Study field	Economics	Economics	Technology & Economics	Economics
Years to graduation	2	1	1	2
Employed	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Current profession	<i>Banking</i>	<i>Marketing &amp; Communications</i>	<i>Procurement</i>	<i>Education</i>
Hobbies	Various sports, Yoga, Art, Travelling	Art, Theatre	Tennis, Golf, Travelling	Gym
Education of Parents	Higher education	Higher education	Higher education	Higher education
Level of cultural capital	High	High	High	High
Level of economic capital	Medium	Medium	Medium to high	Medium
Researcher's description	<i>Pleasure seeker</i>	<i>Wannabe</i>	<i>Connoisseur</i>	<i>Capitalist</i>

Table 1. Background information of participants

## 6.2 Conducting the research

The ethnographic interpretation of this study is based on the findings from two data sources, observations of behavior and verbal communication, following closely the idea of methodology suitable for a market-oriented ethnography presented by Arnould and Wallendorf (1994) and discussed more in detail in chapter 5. The research was entirely conducted by the writer of this thesis, also a representative of generation Y who would fit in the decided sample with no hardship. Most of the attributes presented above match entirely my current situation: living in a one-person household in the established urban neighborhood in an owned apartment, close to completing the master's degree in a school of economics and working in a marketing position in a multinational fast-moving-consumer-goods company. My hobbies are sports, football and golf to mention a few and music in its many senses, playing, producing and listening to it.

The participants in this study were familiar to me in advance, which served as a facilitating factor when starting the sampling and gathering the group of individuals for the research. Out of the several hundred people I know and few dozens considered, these four were finally selected - similarity in life-stage and demographic factors being the leading decisive factor. Participants were contacted through telephone and Facebook, where all of the participants are present. Separate days were scheduled for the ethnographic observations and interviews. In order to gather data most often a long afternoon with a participant was spent, on top of the former un-scientific meetings we had had together during the past 4 to 12 years.

When aiming to study the chosen individuals in a manner that would prevail most of their personality and their identity creation and expression, the physical observations and ethnographic interviews were conducted in-home. Since following the presented theories concerning differences in the public versus private consumption behavior it was very essential to have also access to participants' domiciles. The group of individuals chosen for this study was likely to have homes that contained



important signals for researcher's examination. I wasn't expecting quite as much as Holt (1998, 8) who described homes of high cultural capital individuals as "canvasses upon which they express their aesthetic sensibilities. Interiors need to be visually appealing, to provide the appropriate experimental properties".

When entering to an apartment and starting the inquiry, the clear aim was not force the interaction or the upcoming events to any particular direction. Quite often the situation resembled having guests at home: some participants being more prepared due to the awareness of the upcoming ethnographic visit, some less. Since the researcher in this case was already familiar to the study subject, the interaction went very naturally and the situation turned into free conversation and carrying out everyday activities, such as doing laundry, smoking cigarettes, drinking beer or preparing smoothies or food together. In order to capture the most of this interaction a recorder was used. This seemed not to bother the participants to any extend, although when sometimes going in to very personal discussions, the researcher was asked to either close the recorder for a minute or not to use the content of that particular outtake in the final report. Luckily, these requests did and will not affect the academic validity of the study or have negative impact on the richness of the source material since the most essential parts regarding the research objectives were captured during the moments that both the researcher and the participant considered admissible.

In the following chapter the central findings and ethnographic themes are presented. As highlighted earlier the aim was not to force discussions or events to any particular direction, but to understand the participants' spontaneous views and categories regarding identity and consumption.

## 6.3 Findings and ethnographic themes

*“Hedonist, woman... independent, but that’s so boring. I kind of understand those young women who aim becoming a muse of an older artist. [Asks to not refer to her experience] Maybe to a description of myself I would add honest. Or when as consumer I’m self-indulgent and I bet that most of the consumers are, but they claim to be something else. And otherwise as well. I cannot kind of be like things would not be said as they are”* woman, 24 years.

The afternoon at the home of the first participant met, also referred as *participant 1, woman 24-years* had just started. The preparations for a light late afternoon meal were on course.

### 6.3.1 Path to current identity and future projections

The participants of this study seemed to have gained a reasonable high amount of life-experience. They had all travelled and three out of four had spent longer times living abroad. They had all experienced longer term relationships, being in love and heart broken, had taken actively part in the social life during high school and university and lived by themselves for years. Despite the demographic homogeneity and early adult life-stage being an identity marker common to all four, these young individuals were no clones to one another, thus there are characters that justify researcher’s definitions or very well invites other interpreters into debate.

*Pleasure seeker* – The participant number 1 highlights the pleasures and indulging oneself among the priorities in her life. She loves to travel, good food and has tight network of close friends. She is willing to spend large amount of time for the preparations if the upcoming party or picnic will be spent in good company and she feels that it is worth it, which she often does. Her approach to life could be called romantic and aesthetics play an important part in her life.

*"I enjoy of having beauty at home, beautiful tableware and beautiful people. And like city-views. For example the view that one can see from my window that goes over the rooftops is amazingly beautiful. And I'm not like, that I would only look at the people looking like Barbie or Ken. Actually I've started to see for example in the old people... a lot of beauty!"*

*Wannabe* – The participant number 2 sees herself openly as a – wannabe. She lives a very active life with a lot of social interaction and friends that are currently studying or working in many different fields, many artists included. She hasn't decided whether she is fully in terms with her economics degree or is that too conflicting with her self-perception. She has a wide range of interests, is dedicated to whatever she puts herself into and rather offers a beer to a friend than misses the opportunity to spend good time with a person she likes.

*"I consider my self as quite a wannabe. I'm a bit like wannabe cross-creative, wannabe-hipster. But especially I don't want to identify, that I would be a School of econ chic. Rather, if it can remain untold, I keep it that way. Most what it does, its fights against my identity... [Break] I think that others, or well, I'm quite cool person, but maybe others more honestly live up to what they want. Maybe I'm underperforming in that sense. I don't fully use the potential that I might have for something else. But on the other hand, I don't know what that other thing might be."*

*Connoisseur* – Participant number 3 is a diplomatic, positive and hospitable person that has high interest in fashion, arts and interior design. He has also an active social live, but not everybody will get really close to him since a certain distance is often kept. He has been rather successful in his work-life, but still hesitates whether the chosen path will satisfy him in the long run. When he shops or makes purchases the ordinary will not satisfy him but he aims for higher value in terms of taste and distinction.

*"Positive and sociable. And if I for instance think the work stuff, maybe some type of tendency to think project-wise... or like, for certain things I am quite bad at, that if I would need to do the same thing for eight years. If you*

*know what I mean. [...] And what I know from work... the equals, diplomatic I would say. Maybe vainglorious, you don't have to put it there."*

*Capitalist* – Participant number 4 has a personality that is an interesting mix of a wealthy out-going young shareholder and an old loner socialist philosopher. He is very much into deep conversations and deliberations about the current society, but in other moments, the only feasible solution will be found in the hedonistic pleasures, free-markets and capitalist gains. Although he has been living a life full of social contacts, spending time alone is no issue for him and was only slightly surprised after being described as an introvert in a personality assessment.

*"Or like, maybe I thought so because in that life-stage I had a very large entourage and big social network and worked a lot with people. And I thought I was an extrovert. [...] But then, it was the introvert personality for real. [...] As teenager, I can anonymously admit [lowers his voice] that I was socialist. [Laughter] At thirteen-fourteen I got this philosophical and political awakening, started thinking that how this world should be organized. And it kind of interests me still a lot. Now that the answer has been found in economics."*

When describing the journey to the current identity, past experiences and family upbringings were among the key elements. In their verbal testimonials the family was often mentioned and its values, either being in-line or different from it, was discussed. The role of parents varied from the idol-status, as for participant number 1 to very loose ties and less shared understanding of participant number 4. Participant 1 hold her parents opinions in great value, not necessarily obeying those, but saw her mother as an example that could be followed even in terms of later career choices. Participant 4 again had quite opposite view and referring to earlier testimonials is often willing to criticize life-attitudes and career choices of his parents.

*"[When thinking a person that I admire] First that I can think of is my mother and my grand-mother. [...] I like to be with people and I could think*

*of being a teacher at a university of applied sciences one day. [How have you come up with that?] Well my mum is” Participant 1.*

Experiences of schooling formed an important part of the path in the identity creation, from junior to high school and to present education. In junior high and high school the differences between oneself and the others were noticed, giving a great ground for identity formation. Current university surroundings again played an important role, forming great part of the social networks that these people had and also, served as a test ground of the identity formed in teenage now in comparison to the rest of the world.

*”School has always been fairly easy, but I’ve kind of experienced that or let’s say that I went to SYK [one of the elite schools of Finland] during junior high, and I noticed that I wasn’t among the people like me. And that’s why I wanted into that [Art] high school. [...] But then when I went to that Art high school, maybe I kind of noticed that on the other hand I’m quite an average” participant 2, female, 26 years.*

Regarding schooling it was surprising, that even if they had all managed to enter the school they had aimed for, none of the participants had completed their degree although it should have been possible in terms of years spent in the university. This observation is somewhat similar to the following: The participants mentioned often, that work was an important identity marker when considering other people. Amazingly none of them was able to say any clear definition of their neither childhood dream nor future dream job. The work played a big role for the identity and actually they were semi to strongly attached and very dedicated to their work, no matter what they were doing at the moment. The need of having a job that they considered important was clearly there, so they wanted to take the best out of what they were doing. The drive to create something meaningful and lasting, which was in-line with their values, was significant. But, they also mentioned that only few or no existing company was in line with their self-concept.

*"I've never had a clear thing, like to become a fireman or singer or something like that. Maybe something a bit more visual compared to what I'm doing now, although I see solving problems as quite creative. So if I could say now what I should study, it would be like interior designing or something like that. [Break] But I would not start studying, but since I've had my own company I would actualize my visions through that, got good experiences of it"* participant 3, man 28-years.

*"For me, since I am an atheist and don't believe in the post mortal life, so the funny thought is, that when I die... I would have been part of building something lasting in some form. Whether it is my own enterprise in the future. Somehow all the work that is done, and all the fortune that I've managed to cumulate and kind of taken care as well as possible, that will remain"* participant 4, man 30-years.

*"It labels and defines you where you work, in the same way as what you wear or where you go to eat or what you have as your hobbies. Yes... Same as for me, it's still a work-in-progress thinking that where I would like to work. It's very hard to find a company with whom I would share the majority of my values and what they do"* participant 1, female, 24 years.

*"I like a lot to work. Or I've always worked a lot. And [break] among other things, my artist friends have criticized me a lot for it, not that I would be a money-person, since I've never had any well paying jobs. [...] But I've liked to be there at the cashier at that supermarket. I've been in McDonald's and I considered it enjoyable. In those jobs too, you have that self-actualization. [...] I identify myself a lot with the work I'm doing, like I'm already now defending the company that I'm now working for, even though I've been there only two months. I definitely go all the way for the thing I'm in. But I wouldn't join just anyone"* participant 2, female, 26 years.

Based on their verbal testimonials, work and workplace really had great power in defining one's identity. It could be stated that entrepreneurship was seen so compelling choice for participants' future careers partly

because of the lack of corporations meeting the personal values of these individuals.

### 6.3.2 Independent identities

When going forward in the descriptions that the participants were giving about their identities, one upfront observation came very clearly across. It was astonishing to notice that despite the importance of family upbringing and their schooling, all of the four participants were remarkably sure about the independency and uniqueness of their identity construction. Participants' drive for identity differed and came out in different forms, in comments and behavior, but the uniqueness and independency was still openly discussed:

*"But, I'm unique character, in pretty many ways. And as a matter a fact, with the most of the people I meet, maybe others think the same that I behave and act differently as the ordinary. [Break] And then, as many others are special as well, but I kind of never have tried to dress up it and be as everyone else"* female, 26 years.

*"In certain way, I get back to the individualism. [...] Thinking more from my perspective. As a rule, I don't seek for acceptance"* male, 28 years.

*"As a character... independent! Self-directive. [...] I feel it a bit troublesome, that I feel, that it is a bit unfair that some people get these outer stimuli, of some action, like from success they got the respect and other outer rewards and money and all like that and it motivates them somehow... For me, it's like that if I'm not interested in something, I cannot like motivate my self a bit based on that"* male, 30 years.

Not only as the leading character that came out in the discussions with the participants, the independent behavior seems to be very highly regarded character also among other people, clearly highlighted in the comments concerning the individuals who participants respect or admire.

*"I have never admired anyone, as a person. [...] But in certain way I want to identify with [very slowly, emphasizing every word] successful, independent, young people that in a certain way, are fully autonomous"*  
male, 30 years.

*"Maybe [I admire] most the people, that you can tell that no matter the decisions they've made – whether they've entered into careers which are imposed to us or done something completely different, but a good feeling radiates from them and they know that they're doing exactly what they want – and that they've figured out that oh boy, this feels good for real"*  
female, 24 years.

*"He's been to different music schools, but he has it, that he's doing completely his own thing. He lived four years in Paris, now half-a-year in Lisbon. [...] But that, that he has played his piano and [with voice full of admiration] honestly, done very cool projects, but his own way. And hasn't let people or what's been discussed around him have any impact on it"*  
female, 26 years.

*"People, that in certain way are living and realizing their dreams. Like doing it, what they like. Classical example is Steve Jobs I think like, that he had a vision that he carried forward although everybody said that it's not worth it. It's very extreme. Certain way, if I think of my family, then my grand-grandpa was like that, with entrepreneurial background, made it really well. Dropped out his school and maybe through that, naturally different time and that. But maybe bit like a [in English] self-made man"*  
male, 28 years.

It was astonishing to notice the participants being very much aligned also in the discussion of the disliked and unwanted personalities and identity traits. Although I could not interpret the values of participants' being particularly hard in terms of their comments towards the current Finnish society, its social constructions and national state of mind, it was very much obvious that lack of the sense of responsibility, negativity and being



untruthful or fake were not well perceived characteristics by these young generation Y representatives.

*"In this current welfare society, I kind of despise people that very ungratefully take advantage on the prosperity created by others, even if as a matter of fact I'm clearly favourable for the large public sector and high level of taxation, and wide welfare society. [Break] The people that in this society of possibilities fail totally and end up being fully taken care of by others and show no gratitude, to certain extend towards the fact that we have a certain agreement of society"* male, 30 years.

*"The people who complain, I'm very bad in taking complaints. Or if someone complaints like, I cannot take it... I don't know, or if one cannot make things happen and is for example dependent on others"* Man 28-years.

*"I wouldn't want to say that I despise anybody... [But] Those whiners. And the kinds, that don't take responsibility on anything – and have a negative attitude to things. I cannot stand at all situations with negative premises. I think it's unnecessary"* female, 24 years.

*"Being fake, trying to be something that you're not. [...] If it's like that, that you have no merits what so ever, but then yourself you keep on polishing your un-existing shield. It is totally disgusting"* female, 26 years.

The similarity of the most prevailing identity traits are following the general notions of the generation Y. Independency is generally highly regarded and what also stands out is the ability and will of doing what an individual sees important – realizing his or her visions and dreams. Surprisingly the subjects did not mention any profession or non-criminal act doomed as totally wrong or certain career not worth pursuing. The key was not *what* actually was done, who did and in which field, but the notion of success and respect was more linked to the *liking*: did the person like what he or she was doing. If person did like, that career and work was worth doing and that person would earn the respect of these millennials.

When it came to distinction from others in terms of identity, the findings start to differ: Participant 1, *pleasure seeker*, seemed to adjust her behavior and even preferences to some extent to suit the surroundings and current company. Participant 2, *wannabe* was taking the opposite role to majority in various social interactions and number 4, *capitalist* was willing to portray a clear and constant image highlighting more the desires of belonging. In making distinction, participant 3, *connoisseur*, was willing to make the clearest distinction – even to this closest friends and colleagues:

*“Or you can tell, that I don’t like that if I have something, I don’t want to see my friends having it or other stuff. Not at home particularly, but maybe more in clothing a bit more or like. And it’s not that others shouldn’t have it, but it is just an identity that preferably distinguishes from others”* male, 28 years.

It seems that the physical possessions still seem to play a role in the creation and expression of the identity. Let’s follow the study subjects to their homes and see what type of findings were there to be found.

### **6.3.3 Possessions and extended-self**

Making the home visits provided this research an extensive amount of ethnographic material. All of the participants had lived in their current domiciles from one and a half to five years and all of them had been able to decorate the apartment following their wishes and needs. The observations will be discussed in the following.

#### **6.3.3.1 Visiting pleasure seeker**

I visited the participant 1 during early July 2013 in her apartment in Kallio, an urban neighborhood that has been recently under great transformation developing from a poor proletarian district where social exclusion and alcohol and drug related problems were an everyday issue, more towards a higher working class, urban hip area. After living there for 1,5 years, she had started to feel comfortable in the socially active, booming

neighborhood. We met during a late afternoon and had a light meal together. Many topics outside this study were covered but it gave a great opportunity and time to make observations about her apartment and mode-de-vie. For her, the home was very important and once we entered into discussion about it, she got into deep and thorough thoughts concerning her apartment and decoration:

*“My former apartment was more edgy, but it must have had many similar things... maybe it was more feminine. This started from purely white, since I had just been eight months in Latin America... and first I thought that [excitedly] yeah, I’ll bring a lot of colors with me. But when I arrived to Finland I understood that no, I cannot take any more of those colors, noise or that kind of stuff, but pure and clear.”*

She wanted to be surrounded by objects that make her feel good and at home. Her apartment was full of beautiful pillows, comfortable carpets and nice details such as chandelier in her toilet. Inspired by some lyrics, she had written a Spanish language poem on her walls, forming a lyrical circle of interior decoration. Her aesthetics went all the way up to her home care and household cleaning products: on her sink one could see a specialty hand dish wash detergent by *Maison belle* and beautifully sewed durable and washable wipe – an environment regularly occupied by a standard Fairy bottle and Chifonet rag had turned into something beautiful.

*“In home decor as well as in clothing it is the same. When I find something just right and nice, then I just get it. That curtain made of lace I’ve had that since I was eight years old. [...] But maybe pretty many of my things have a story, or that I can name where it’s been bought or gotten or how it has... come.”*

When talking about her favourite objects, stories stepped also into play. She hesitated long time whether she liked more the pillow covers or the storage boxes for hats. She had bought them both during the period she lived in NY, which according to her was one of the periods she really

loved and a period when she felt really good about herself. These objects both seemed to carry a deeper meaning and reminder of this experience not so long time ago.

*“Those [storage boxes] are nice, that you can hide stuff in it. Or then those [pillow covers] because they are soft... Maybe [little pause] I would choose those pillow covers because they’re simpler from their look and I remember well the couple from whom I bought these. It was funny, kind of Indian boutique. And on the side they shared some advises for life. And they had a funny custom, that when a customer bought something they had postcards where you could put your address, and then they sent it as a thank you card.”*

Her favourite piece of clothing also dated back to her stay in New York. A second hand fur coat was a treasure that makes its owner be less distressed about the harsh winters of Finland. Actually, the participant 1 mentioned her coat as primarily reason why the winter is welcome. She was very attached to that object and it has been present for example in the Facebook profile picture of this person.

*“It’s very feminine, beautiful and warm. And always when I wear it, I get the feeling like [proud and content sneer].”*



Picture 1: Participant 1 living room



Picture 2: Participant 1 closet

### 6.3.3.2 Visiting wannabe

The next stop of this ethnographic journey took me to meet participant 2. She lives in the same district as participant 1, in an apartment that is of similar size but very different what comes to its look and feel. We had a couple of beers and discussed the life in general before going into identity or possession talks. After I had arrived, I had soon noticed that a laundry and cleaning day was going on, meaning that the apartment was in a somewhat messy state – but according to the owner, that was pretty often the case.

*“I have all kinds of junk, but I like it what I have. For example, check that Russian plaque, I bought it for five euros to my first apartment from a flea market’s self-service side. I have all kinds of retro shit. And that pot is from my grandmother.”*

The apartment was full of different objects and one could have called the interior design as a mix of all sorts of styles and decades. But participant 2 was not at all bothered by the certain decadence around her but felt perfectly at home. One object in particular caught the observer’s attention.

*“Actually, I’m freaking proud, I love that poster. [Continuing all exited] This is so cool this story, and I love myself that I’m so cool person [laughing] that I managed to get it... But it again wannabe-wannabe.”*

The object was a gigantic poster of Dior’s fragrance Chérie, presenting a view over Paris and in the centre of the visual a young woman in a pink dress flying over the city with a large bundle of balloons in her hand. This object seemed to incorporate many aspects of the participant’s life.

*“Then I moved here [from Paris] and was all down, like why am I here. And even worse I had ended up in to some School of Economics – like kicking the one that’s already lying down on the ground. I walked always back home passing by a department store and that scent had just come on the market. And those big posters in the windows and I always looked at those [with a depressive and dreamy voice] ooh, I could be that girl flying over Paris with those balloons [tone changing to a lot colder and harder], but instead I’m here with some “money talks” folks in the School of Economics. I know one person working in a fashion magazine and through her I got the contact details of the PR-woman of Dior. [...] In my eyes the value of this gets even higher, because she said to me in the mail, that [with a convincing voice] if you ever consider abandoning this, you must not give it to any of your friends or anyone else, like burn it... because they are very strict about those materials.”*

Another interesting object that caught observer’s attention was actually a pair of bags lying in the entry of the apartment. One next another there were a Fjällräven rucksack and a Mulberry designer handbag.

*“I think it’s so fascinating that I have that handbag, that Mulberry which is very expensive. But I presume that if I walk with that on the street folks probably think that it is fake [ironically] because otherwise I look like a beggar.”*

It's absolutely is fascinating how that bag fits together with the rest of the objects found in the apartment. The same is true for the top of the range vacuum cleaner that fits perfectly together with the ancient pots and pans. After having spent a while in this home and having discussed with the personality to whom it belongs, what first seemed as a mess started to form a dedicate harmony.



Picture 3: Participant 2 entry



Picture 4: Participant 2 living room

### 6.3.3.3 Visiting connoisseur

The participant number 3 lives approximately 2,5 kilometers from the preceding participants. The apartment is not a lot further from the city centre but is situated more to West in a similarly urban but more established district. The visit took place on a regular late August Wednesday evening. Participant had just returned from a long day at work and after finishing some personal affairs he needed to take care of, we gathered around the open kitchen table, me sitting on the living room side and him preparing a delicious raw chocolate and ginger smoothie. I had considered bringing a couple of beers along, but noticed soon that this healthier choice was very delicious and more to participant's liking. As in the earlier visits, we discussed some other current topics first before putting on the recorder and continuing the discussion. As a general notion

the apartment was tidy, filled with many details that seemed to be carefully chosen and interesting pieces of furniture. A designer class table held a large fashion book concerning Tom Ford in its integrated rack, making the living room look rather sophisticated.

*"[The inspiration for the decoration has born] little by little, like quite... those ideas, I would like to say they're my own, but I'm sure you absorb a lot from the things you see. But right, I have the vision first pretty clear what I want and straightaway. But started to build little by little."*

The decoration was somewhat remarkable, a mix of new design, mostly present in the kitchen and what came to audio-visual devices, and then many of his the objects found in the apartment seemed very old. Modern Bang & Olufsen amplifier-speaker combo matched with no hardship to the classical overall look and feel.

*"There are naturally some very old objects and paintings. [...] There is [points at the top of the bookshelf] whether those were beer or wine barrels, from the attic, old quite funny things... I think that when you have a home, you must have kind of, not a catalogue, but your own things"*.

This apartment clearly was no catalogue but quite personally crafted entity. We started discussing his favourite objects among the things we saw around us. I was maybe expecting him to comment something on relating to the statue presenting an old family member or something more obvious and visible, when he referred to an antique *Rolex* found in an Italian e-store specialized in second hand watches. He valued highly its character as longer terms investment and due its manual charging the watch was suppose to last long, as it had already done. After that participant 3 returned to design objects when discussing his favourite belongings:

*"That lamp, that's something I've always liked. It's so nice. It is in a good way a mix of something old and new. It must be a Finnish lamp from the*



*50's, but that material is kind of new and its forms too, but it still has its classicism. It's kind of a good mix."*

This comment was no surprise and actually summarized pretty much the observations that were made of the whole apartment. I actually looked a bit more in detail to find contradicting elements to this new-classic entity, but it surely seemed that the inhabitant of this apartment knew and live-up to his style to a very detailed level.



**Picture 5:** Participant 3 study



**Picture 6:** Participant 3 living room

#### **6.3.3.4 Visiting capitalist**

The final visit to the home number 4 took me back to Kallio, to the urban neighborhood of participants' 1 and 2. The afternoon in August was still warm, giving us the opportunity to spend a part of the common time we had on the balcony belonging to the high-rise of participant 4. The apartment was relatively small but very well organized. The lack of space didn't prevent the owner to clearly distinguish separate spaces of the apartment. He had carefully planned his living room to resemble a living space of a lot larger condo. We started by discussing whether I had visited the apartment earlier, but ended in the conclusion that most likely I had

only seen the pictures in his Facebook-page, where according to him was an ongoing “apartment exhibition”.

The apartment was decorated with few sharp colors red and deeper gray splitting the main wall, white accompanying in the kitchen and on closet doors. Red drawers and storage boxes were placed carefully to make the impression of red and grey to travel harmoniously through the apartment. The overall style could have been described as a bit cold and un-personal, with one exception. Participant 4 had occupied one part of his living room by objects he had collected during his student union times. Many pictures of different people with whom he had spent time in the union were there as well as a union songbook, old shot glasses and a student cap. Together these objects formed a composition that could be described to resemble an altar.

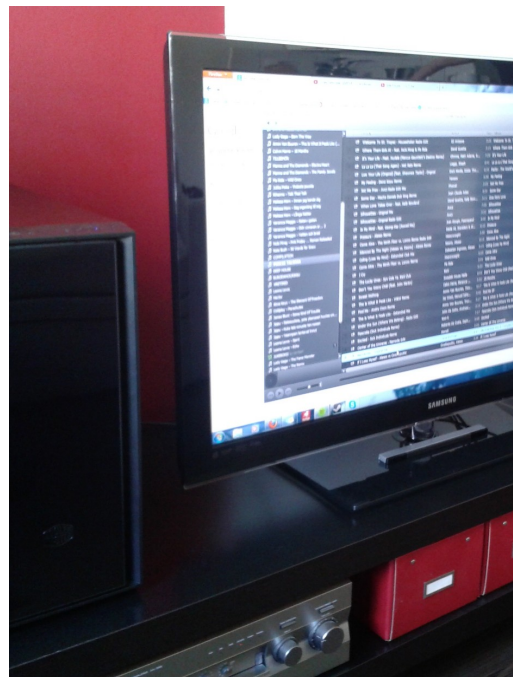
When having smoked a couple of cigarettes and having set the mood for an open discussion we entered finally in talks regarding his home. It was remarkably to notice, whereas maybe other participants were more willing to talk more about generally their homes or decoration, participant 4 focused more on few objects and their net worth.

*“For example that computer, only the hardware came, not even the operating system. It cost like 1200 or 1300, was a bit more expensive a pack... than I first imagined. 1200 euros typically, kind of very considered pick. I’m not interested in technical devices as such, although I had a period when I considered becoming an engineer. [...] I chose this not because it was the cheapest, or that this would have been technically the best case, since it has a tendency to overheat every now and then. But for a computer’s outer case it’s pretty nice. They often look terrible. And in some way that form and function unite very strongly. Every component of is very carefully chosen, kind of the most powerful possible computer with that price, but when it comes to appearances, then you start to eliminate things and take decision that it looks... [good]”.*

As we continued the discussion about his decoration next thing he mentioned was his audio-system that according to him he *“couldn’t afford this anymore. Should work more. [...] I read a couple of books concerning hi-fi and got excited, I read quite many things and did kind of very considered decisions. These must be quite father to son gear.”* His view on his home and decoration was to amusing extend in line with his view of world, the rationale was found in economics theories and the objects were investments that needed to hold their value for a long time and if possible, increase it. The altar remained unmentioned.



**Picture 7:** Participant 4 closet



**Picture 8:** Participant 4 living room

As a general observation of participants’ possessions that were covered during the research, those seemed to be very much in line with their lifestyles and values they communicated – possessions they had at their homes were clearly reflecting who these people were. They seemed to have a great power and control over the things they owned and wanted to own. The objects they had at their homes in terms of decoration or utilitarian tools were seldom some random picks, but seemed more like very conscious choices and to be there for a good reason.

#### 6.3.4 Reflecting identity in consumption behavior

When the discussion concerning identity was initiated, consumption and brands were not mentioned among the first decisive factors for the identities of these young people. But actually when the testimonials went onwards and the picture started to clarify, similarities between the identity traits and consumption behavior started to materialize. Participant 1 – pleasure seeker, having just described her personality a while ago, referred to herself as a consumer as following:

*“Very seasonable, volatile and also to this comes the self-indulgence and hedonism. I would very much like to be conscious and be vegetarian and so but [break] I like meat and I would not like to bother to get all the information about the nutrition like that. I like to be as I am, until the law says otherwise. This NY thing comes up all the time, but somehow I felt good being there. I spent [accentuating] incredible much, crazy much, I tripled the amount of my physical possessions... I stopped counting the pairs of shoes I bought after the number exceeded twenty [laughing]. I didn't stop buying, but counting yes. [...] I see my consumption mostly in my clothes. Maybe I like to put more money, not particularly in clothes but maybe in travelling. I've always been ready to spend money in travelling. And in growing amount to food, I've noticed that I get so much pleasure out of it. So, gladly I put money into that...”*

Hedonism and small pleasures that make the life worth living are clearly present in her consumption habits. Her tendency of changing interest and moods rapidly and to live strongly based on her feelings are as well a great part forming the full image of her as consumer:

*“Maybe that I had very turbulent spring, many challenges on many fields. I didn't make it too well in school, could get a job and et cetera. So maybe I wanted to have some kind of Zen out of my clothing choices, a bit similar than when I wished for lighter shades in home decoration [after returning from South-America]. But yes, quite lively, like if I think back half a year from now, I had a totally different style. And already now I've put away*

*many clothes, which I used then. Let alone one year ago, when I was on holiday the whole summer and now that I've been checking the clothes I used back then! [Laughter] That maybe one could go out jogging with those but not anywhere else [more laughter]."*

Although participant 1 was clearly changing her style and consuming spontaneously and the drivers for her consumption were quite clear: Seeking pleasures and comforting her moods guided her consumption.

When moving to participant 2 – wannabe, I witnessed a different approach. More than suiting changing moods, the identity seeking seemed to play a greater part. Whom she felt or wished to be one day explained her spontaneous purchase decisions. Also in this case, I was surprised how her consumption habits seemed to sync with her general description of herself as an individual. Let us hear how the lady in harmony with Kånken and Mulberry bags discussed her consumption:

*"[When I buy clothes] it's basic H&M and others, but [brake, thinks for a while] and then quite much flea-market and second hand stuff, maybe this goes into that wannabe-hipster section. Maybe that has also developed a bit. In high-school people used some shocking flea-market gear, myself included. Hipsters were merely an idea back then. But then, nowadays – or for example these shorts are ugly. These are outrageous, but in away so cool! For example these I bought from a second hand shop in Japan. Maybe when buying clothes it's emphasized, that you always buy that kind of clothes that you wish to be...the person that would be wearing that piece of clothing. And then again here I have a closet full of clothes, and a big part of them, I'll never use... And I've analyzed this, that why is it like that and... there are so many different. Maybe one day I see a thing that is kind of sophisticated and like, a person that takes care of her looks and is cool, that she would wear this. And then I buy it and unconsciously wish that I would become like that too. That maybe I will start to file my nails and go to hairdresser often enough. Or then I think I'm cooler than I actually am and buy a strange hipster cloth. But then I will not wear that either."*

As can be witnessed from above, her spontaneous wannabe personality is very much present in her consumption practices. Based on the physical observations and vocal testimonials, in her case the amount of so-called error-purchases is very high. She suffers from the lack of suitability of market offering to her current self-concept. Many things are either too hipster or too sophisticated “School of Economics”. This is similar to what she expressed of her self-positioning in social situations: she is now similarly placing herself in the middle of different personalities and styles in her consumption behavior. Her spontaneous and careless attitude towards life work for her advantage: these events that could cause stress and disappointment to someone do not cause it to her. She does not consider consumption as investing and the waste of money or stress related to recently purchased but unused items does not cause her unhappiness. She seems to be well aware of her comportment and to be in terms with it:

*“Maybe in both cases, that when I put it on at home and I’m going out, I get the feeling that I’m leaving out in some kind of disguise. That one can see it from a kilometre’s distance. And I say to myself, not me, what come on, and I leave it behind. This to underline that sometimes money is spent to all sorts of stupidity... maybe finding the own style is quite tricky for everybody.”*

Based on the interaction with following two participants I cannot say that the mentioned hardship of finding the *own style* would apply to everybody. Both male participants seemed to have very established view concerning what they wanted to portray and how their consumption was organized. It was time to broaden the view towards other personalities and other ways of consumption.

When the role as consumer was discussed, both of male participants were very much inclined to mention single purchases that they had done and the rationales behind it. They seemed to do purchases very planned not falling into impulse decisions. As participant 4 – capitalist describes:

*"I am, mainly... I consider myself as a very good consumer. Not like ethically or ecologically, but I think that I'm good in consuming in away that when I do some more longer term purchases [break] those are very considered, maybe even too considered and sometimes too much time is spent for purchase decisions. A couple of days, maybe thirty hours was spent choosing that computer. Because I knew that it's a investment for many years."*

Both participants, 3 – Connoisseur, and 4 – Capitalist seemed to be ready to invest a lot of time and make only considered choices, but then again, their interest was limited to the product categories they cared and knew about. This difference between product categories didn't come out in the discussion with participants 1 and 2, but it is still a factor to be considered.

*"But then on the other hand, when I go to grocery-store, I don't know what is the price for milk. I don't know what goods cost. I don't need to watch my daily consumption, I check it monthly where I am. I kind of have built-in, that I all the time know how much money I have and how much I can consume" male, 30 years.*

*"But then what comes to like washing products and detergents, there I buy very much based on prices if I'm not convinced about some products superiority. But I'm very hardly convinced... that why a detergent would be better than another, where as in clothes I'm fully convinced that the other one is" male, 28 years.*

For participants 3 and 4 clothing was a category that seemed to matter a lot and was among their key interests, together with different technical devices. Following participant 3's drive for uniqueness in terms of *"that if I have something, I don't want to see my friends having it or other stuff. Not at home particularly, but maybe more in clothing a bit more or like"*, he avoided making purchases in his hometown or country. He was willing to buy socks or T-shirts in Helsinki, but the main sources for his clothing were different e-stores and also shopping during travelling was favored.

Participant 4 was also very much into clothing and was willing to spend considerable amounts in order to make the wished impression.

*“That I’m using branded clothing, it’s my way to identify... with the admired [exactly with these words] holders of the capital. Myself, I’m that to very small extend. In a way, I could not afford this or that people think that what the hell, five hundred euros for a jacket [break], it was a bit more. Something like five, five fifty it was in 50% discount [laughter]. It was like, why!? But... in some way I prefer that kind of youthful, but pretty classic style, in a way very suitable for many situations” male, 30 years.*

Also participant 3 focused in more expensive brand clothing. Not only in the moment of the purchase but also later, these both seemed to give a high value to their acquisitions. The clothes were well presented, neatly in place shelves and also both of them used open racks and many of the pieces of clothing were visible, not hidden in the closets.

The high interest and connoisseurship of brands shown by the participants and the way these naturally landed in the discussions when presenting the clothing choices, justifies the following part. What is the role of brands in the symbolic consumption for these four generation Y-representatives? It will be discussed in the following.

### **6.3.5 Relationship towards branding**

*“The more you are interested about the thing, the more the brand counts”*  
male, 28 years.

The relevance of brands to the identity of the participant differed quite much between participants. For participants 1 and 2 it was rather hard to define a favorite brand or even a couple of brands that would suit them, where as participants 3 and 4 were certain about their preferences and the brands that they could be associated with. Being part of the generation Y, Finnish youth that have grown up with branded toys and had a teenage full of multimedia and product placement, they were all very well aware



what the brands stand for and despite the differences in their relationship to brands and identity, all participants raised the brands on table when talking about consumption and identity. Participant 1 raised her relationship to brands as the following, addressing brands as value and cool markers and also as a stamp that has power on defining an individual.

*“Rather I say that these are Calvin Klein vintage, than that these are from H&M. I would lie if I would claim that it wouldn’t matter, but it is not the first criterion. I have a couple of Kors bags but I don’t like the things where the brand is visibly there. That’s why I used to like Diesel, because you couldn’t necessarily say that it’s Diesel. It was written always differently, on the back or somewhere. But I notice that it is not the thing. It’s like a stamp. Not a stamp on the forehead but a stamp on the clothes. Oh, she is a Guess user [laughter]. I once had a pair of Guess shoes but I sold them” female, 24 years.*

The defining power of brands was also raised by other participants. As woman 24-years describes above, brands serve as common factor through which the people unknown to another can label others. And in these cases getting a wrong label on oneself had to be avoided. On top of the outer labeling and communication between people, it also seemed that brands served as a tool for participants’ self-concept – brands were used to lift individual’s sense of expertise and sense of self making a distinction from others, either knowing something particular not common to everybody or then acquiring something rare or exclusive.

*“I buy a lot of some H&M shit and quite happily use it, and it is ok for me. But this spring I bought a jewel – which as such is quite cool, I wear it quite much. But right, this kind of jewel [showing the white necklace looking like a bobble], but this! This piece of shit cost over fifty euros, which to me seems like pretty big money for this kind of hanger, which would cost maybe five euros at H&M. But, this was from that just bankrupted Finnish design brand, that Minni F. Ronja jewel. Well then, I don’t know I bought it [laughter]” female, 26 years.*

This comment was surprising from the participant 2, who to me seemed to care the least about brands. She had analyzed her behavior and reasoning quite deeply continuing:

*"I don't think that I bought it for the reason, that I would like people to know I've bought something like this. But maybe that I could tap myself on the shoulder, like yes! [taps herself on her shoulder]. I bought something cool, a little. [Break and a moment of consideration...] I don't think no one from the outside gets this my fine investment of fifty euros to the Fininsh fashion. Maybe I just try to be something cooler than what I am. That am I now, or could I be a little like hipster" female, 26 years, who first seemed uninterested in brands, but mentions later her favourite brands being Dior, Chanel and Chloé.*

The ability of brands to enhance individual's self-worth through the expertise or acquisition mentioned in the statement above, is well present also in the following comment by the participant 3, male, 28 years:

*"[The favourite brand] changes, but I cannot say I would have one. Clothing brands are pretty strong... Quite like luxury, traditional, like Gucci or some Lanvin or Prada, those are good. Maybe in furniture that Minotti is very good. In audio gear maybe Bang&Olofson, they have the nice design aspect and good devices, maybe a bit similar as Apple products. But Apple, it's so big nowadays, so that the brand isn't... But somehow Bang&Olofson, maybe because it is not too common. I don't like that it's too big and everybody has it" male, 28 years.*

Owning products of a certain brand was not seen necessity in order to talk about it. Even a favorite brand could have been something that was purely an object of desire. Knowing what is good in which category and portraying one's expertise on brands was seemingly not limited to what people actually owned. But, in most cases it seemed that individuals that were interested in certain brands (e.g. participants 3 and 4) also aimed to ownership of the objects of that particular brand. These brands supported

participants' needs for enhancing the sense self or distinguishing from others:

*"[About Gucci] There in a good way unites the old, something that I consider fun, those times, like traditional but in a modern way. Tremendous quality, and it kind of matters a much that it is in a way exclusive and there isn't much of it and it stands out"* male, 28 years.

Brands seemed to be particularly highly valued by participant 4. He considers cloth purchases more like investments (versus participants 1 and 2) and is able to tell very much about the differences and particularities of the brands he wears. When browsing through his closet I was able to notice that there were only few clothes, very well organized and every piece and brand had that a story that did not remain untold. For him, brands did not serve so much in distinguishing from others or underlining his connoisseurship, but served as clear symbols of the class and value.

*"[Telling about Tiger of Sweden when showing the jacket he owns.] It is a kind of higher middle class brand. Not quite Dolce & Gabbana. Dolce & Gabbana in that sense, that it is quite brave, youthful and in some way this is a slightly undistinguished [shows on D&G jacket he has] for my taste. I kind of like that a piece of clothing radiates more, how much it is worth"* male, 30 years.

Regarding brand user congruence the findings differed. The participants 3 and 4 conveyed the message their identity being in line with their favourite brands, but for the female participants the link was weaker. This came through in their verbal testimonials, clearly explained in the comment of participant 1.

*"There's not one that would be above others and sufficiently the same. That the brand would be sufficiently similar to my identity... I want to be myself, others label you easily based on what the people look like and what they wear. [...] But if I think of similarities, then some small [brands]. Some authentic"* female, 24 years.

## 7. DISCUSSION

Following the theoretical framework based on the academic literature presented in the beginning of this study, consumption plays an important role both in creation and expression of the human identity. In the changed environment the importance of consumption for the self-concept work of an individual has been questioned and its role has been stated to diminish. Through the ethnographic research, gathering information through participant observation and discussions, this study approached the phenomena of symbolic consumption and traced its forms of existence. The aim was to assess earlier theoretical assumptions and see whether the role of consumption would have changed as radically as some might have anticipated. The aim was also to map how young generation Y representatives would see their identity and behavior as consumers. When proceeding from theory to field research I noticed traces of the symbolic consumption coming into practice. The findings presented in the preceding chapter 6 are now discussed in the light of the theories from chapters 2, 3 and 4.

### 7.1 Symbolic consumption in creating and expressing identities

This research submits clear evidence of *identity creation* through consumption (Schultz Kleine 1995; Uusitalo 1995; Ericksen 1996; Elliot 1999; Berger & Heath 2007). The individuals that participated in this research did not express this phenomenon very clearly in their verbal testimonials, stating in most cases the opposite by saying their self-concept to be very independently constructed. But based on the physical observations more evidence was found following Belk's (1988) and Schulz Kleine, Kleine and Allen's (1995) theoretical findings on extended-self.

Participants seemed to exert power over objects unlike Firat (1991; Firat & Dholokia 2006) suggests and seemed to have large freedom to choose their wished identities, which is in line with Elliott and Wattanasuwan's (1998) earlier findings. Based on ethnographical observations participants had

surrounded themselves with objects that enhanced their self-concept. This was prevalent in perceived alignment between their own view of their identity and the image that their possessions conveyed. Many of these objects contained special meanings and were able to tell a lot about its owner (Schultz Klein and al. 1995) like the family objects in participant 3's home. They also contained stories and memories (Ahuvia 2005) like the numerous objects participant 1 had acquired during her time living in New York and Dior's fragrance advertisement on participant 2's wall presenting a girl in the middle a view over Paris taking her back to her time in France. These objects seemed to incorporate various aspects of the participants' lives. The special and personal meanings, memories and stories were all strongly immersed in the objects found in the altar type of construction in the apartment of participant 4, this altar being dedicated to the period in the student union and presenting clearly "the prime of his life".

Based on the findings I would not fully agree with Belk's famous line "we are what we own" (Belk 1988, 139), but rather I would turn it around saying "we own what we are". Gathered observations and the analysis suggest that possessions do not serve as the starting point for the identity creation, but can have a supportive role. In this study one of the participants (4) had very tight connection between his identity and his possessions, but even for him his identity was based by far more on sociological experiences and his past with various schools of thought he had once believed in, now identifying himself as capitalist and acting accordingly. It can be stated that the findings support theories of extended-self on identity being partly constructed of objects outside the physical self, but at the same time it needs to be highlighted that the role was perceived only secondary in identity creation – self-concept driving for possessions and not vice versa.

What comes to *identity expression* through consumption (e.g. Uusitalo 1995; Wattanasuwan 2005) the findings were remarkable in their appearance both in the physical observations and in the verbal testimonials that very naturally came across in the cases of all four individuals that participated

in the research. How they described themselves as individuals and image of these individuals gained through ethnographic observations seemed to be well reflected in their consumption habits. The participants clearly used the self-expressive power of consumption (Arnould & Price 2000, Wattanasuwan 2005) to replicate and reassure their identity and to convey the image of it to others.

Participant 1 highlighting the enjoyment and *pleasure seeking* as one of the main characteristics along with independency and femininity, showed the exact same characteristics in her consumption habits. Participant 2 being very flexible in her so called unfixed *wannabe* identity, portrayed a picture of a volatile consumer, not thinking too much about the money and making a large amount of miss-purchases. She did not necessarily regret the money spent or wasted, but found herself with a high number of possession she had absolutely no or very little use for.

Participant number 3 had very established family values and high cultural education, showing clear *connoisseurship* in product categories in which he had great interest. At the same time the study witnessed, how his drive for individualism was being the highest among the participants and that he also suffered the most if his choices would become mainstream or common among his close friends or colleagues. This follows very closely the findings of Berger and Heath (2007) stating that for individuals that have higher needs in terms of individuality, the differentiation is especially important in the field of consumption.

The participant number 4, the *capitalist*, paid a great attention to the value of his property. He had similar approach to all his purchases, viewing those as investments. Purchasing new computer or audio-system meant for him hours or even days of careful examination. The objects that for many would mean an everyday commodity meant for him an investment that needed to keep the initial value for a very long time.

## **7.2 Established identity, investments and brands in symbolic consumption**

Participants 3 and 4 were more sure and stable in their current or wished identities and were also willing to make financially larger investments as a part of their consumption. These young men consumed in slightly differed forms: participant 3 investing in his apartment and its decoration and participant 4 investing into much more liquid assets, mostly shares on the stock market. But what can be seen important is that the proportion of money spent was high in both cases and the both forms of investments were very much in-line with the type of signals these two young men were willing to convey: former holding a great interest in classical value-holders, like real-estate and design, and the latter investing into something very typical seen from the capitalist tradition.

Participants 1 and 2 were both less fixed in their view of their identity compared to participants 3 and 4. Participant 1 had bought her apartment when moving into city and starting her studies in the university, but for instance she did not live in it, but instead lived currently in a rented apartment. Decoration was important for her, but location and the real estate itself less. Rest of the money was put into consumption of pleasurable goods: delicious food and trendy clothes of varying styles. For participant 2 it was hard to say what her style of decoration was, since the outcome was rather mixed. The similar pattern followed her other forms consumption supporting clearly her volatile game of identity. Participants 1 and 2 having many open points regarding their future and identity followed closely their changing moods and preferences also in their consumer behavior.

Brands were more important to the participants that were surer of their current identity (participants 3 and 4) or the desired identity they wanted to convey through their consumption. They were more able to say what their favorite brand was and which brands suited them, which resulted in a visible difference in behavior between the participants, especially regarding clothing purchases. Compared to the female participants, it was

remarkable how both of these men invested on branded and higher priced clothing. Yet again, among the participants with more uncertainty concerning identity, clear or loud brand choices were avoided.

Regardless of the importance of brands or more precisely regardless of the level to which brands were prevalent in their consumption, all participants were more than willing to discuss brands. As anticipated in chapter 6, brands seem to have the ability to enhance individual's self-concept also through other means than straight consumption or acquisition. Expressing one's expertise on brands served as a channel to portray his or her cultural education and affect the perceived image of that individual, being for example more interesting or up-to-date. Even in cases where it was not important to be directly associated with a brand (for example when describing brand with an unwanted user stereotype) showing the knowledge of brands had an effect on the assessment on participant's level of cultural capital (Arsel and Thompson 2011). According to ethnographic findings brands were treated as a natural part of general culture, comparable to arts or history – just as another field of discussion where one needs to be educated in order to fully participate.

Symbolic consumption as social locating practice came prevalent in the context of consumption of brands. As an example participant number 4 was able to clearly express that the individuals he idolized and with whom he wanted to be associated with i.e. his wished significant others (Wattanasuwan 2005) were users of a certain brand. Desire to belong to the group of “young and independent owners of the capital” was expressed through his consumption practices and brand choices for example preferring Dolce & Gabbana clothing with visible branding. In this case some obvious traces of self-completion (Elliot & Wattanasuwan 1998) and self-stereotyping (Banister & Hogg 2004) were also found.

In the choice of brands, on top of self-expression, self-completion and other positive aspirations related to consumers' desired identity, the presence of avoidance of the negative possible identities was clearly visible. Following studies of Banister and Hogg (2004; also White & Dahl



2007; Choi & Winterich 2013) consumers' tendency to protect their identity by avoiding the consumption habits or purchases that might signal negative or unfavorable image of the individual was clearly present in the comments by the female participants of this study. Guess shoes were sold and Louis Vuitton bags were avoided in order not to become identified as "wrong" type of person (Berger & Ward 2010) following the idea of typical user stereotyping (Banister & Hogg 2004).

On top of the wished significant others (Wattanasuwan 2005) presented above and the effects of belonging to a desired in-group, also the drive for avoiding out-groups (White & Dahl 2007) came strongly across in the study. The findings suggest participant 4 being very much driven by his desired reference group but for example participant 2 was clearly guided by the negative drive of avoiding her out-groups. A testimony of this kind of behavior was gained as she clearly stated making conscious choices that distinguished her from typical "School of econ chicks", a group she did not wish to be identified with.

The findings of this study suggest that the congruence theory (e.g. Quester, Kuranaratna & Goh 2000) holds. Participants assessed many of their brand choices based on the fit between the brand-image and their own self-concept. It was remarkable to notice this type of assessment appearing very naturally when discussing the choice of brands. The contributions of congruence thinking were two fold. On the other hand it led to deeper relationship between an individual and a brand (e.g. participant 3), but on the other hand it led to acknowledge that the experienced need of congruence could also work as a barrier for purchase (e.g. participant 1). This was prevalent in cases where the individual found it difficult or was unwilling to identify with any brand. Then the avoidance was more of a driving factor instead of finding a best fit between the brand-image and consumer identity.

### **7.3 Role of consumption and other self-expressive behavior for identity creation and expression**

This question I approached in the theory section describing many parts of consumers' behavior as *branded doings*. The reasoning was that many of human actions follow the principles of symbolic consumption. Individual's leisure activities, ideologies one believes in and even doing nothing, are all concrete results of conscious or unconscious decision processes that contain symbols that signal shared meanings of an individual. When comparing the relationship between branded possessions and branded doings for consumer's identity creation and self-expression, the result was following: Both played an important role in a person's self-expression, but other behavioral acts i.e. branded doings, were seen more important for individual's identity creation. The participants stated clearly that what people have as their full time activity defines and communicates a lot more the identity of a person than which brands or products the individual might consume. Of all activities, including leisure activities, travelling, hobbies and other self-expressive acts, it was individual's occupation that was seen paramount for individual's identity creation and expression.

Surprisingly, although participants acknowledged the importance of work or profession as a central building block for one's identity, none of the participant said to be professionally doing what they really wanted or that their work would describe their identity to a high degree, as it might in general describe the others. No one of them was in their childhood dream job (if they had thought of something) or even fully sure if the career path was right. Maybe in this perspective, it was no surprise that none of the participants had graduated, although it would have been possible in terms of years spent in the university. Graduating was seen as "final-step" to certain career and life path, and when work was seen as a strong identity marker – participants were not willing to lock and express their final decision on themselves.

Not finishing the studies and not entering fully committed work life or career meant for these young people a possibility to remain outside classification and kept freedom for themselves to define them more vaguely. This partly explained their preference for entrepreneurial career somewhere in the future. The many possibilities that it might contain, kept the doors wide open regarding the largest identity marker they had mentioned. Also the unfound congruence between existing companies and participants, explained the unwillingness to identify strongly with a certain enterprise and to be classified accordingly.

It was remarkable, that although profession was seen as key element for identity creation and expression, they seemed to rely more on consumption behavior as a central field of expressing their free will and self-concept. As noted above, the four participants differed largely in terms of how they consumed, but for each one of them, consumption was a clear channel through which the identity was expressed. They described and portrayed themselves very similarly as individuals and as consumers. It seemed that consumption served as semi-serious theatre for the identity game. Consumption was something that these four young people were able to control and alter following their wishes, but their work-situation was less in their hands. They were all employed so they had funds to consume, but were too junior in their career to have a large say on their work or were not even sure if they were on a right career.

It can be stated that although participants were very capable to play the game of signals and acknowledged many of the postmodern conditions – in the matter of big defining attributes, they followed more closely traditional modern school: their life-stories were more continuous than discontinuous and also their belief regarding work or study degree being a defining factor reflects that they experienced some symbols still being fixed and un-negotiable. “True” postmodern individual wouldn’t let life-story or profession to define oneself, but rather believe in individual’s ability to affect the interpretation of these symbols and define oneself more freely.

## 7.4 Disregarded social media and the role of advertising

Facebook and other social media were very openly discussed, but on the contrary to my expectations it did not become spontaneously a central theme in the verbal testimonials regarding the self-concept practices. It seemed like participants were down-prioritizing the importance of social media and claimed it not to have a particular role for their identity creation or expression, contradicting partly the findings of Belk (2013). But in another way the findings returned to be aligned with Belk who stated that possessed and linked digital objects are found somewhat similar to their “physical counterparts” in their relation to an individual. Maybe social media is something so familiar to the participants that they see the communication in these channels very similar to any other forms communication. Since the findings through the methods used in this study provided no or little findings on the identity work in the social media, another study dedicated entirely to the use of social media and self-concept would be required.

Another theme that surprised me by its absence in the discussions was the lack of comments regarding advertising. Although it is seen as an integral part of symbolic consumption (Smith and Swinyard 1988; Holt 2002; Escalas & Bettman 2005; Elliot & Percy 2007) the participants did not consider advertising among the decisive factors in their consumption or brand choices. According to the literature view, the role of advertising is undisputed in creation of brand-images (Holt 2002; Elliot & Percy 2007) and serve as a tool for consumer-brand interaction. The stated independency of participants’ self-concepts could be seen as one explanation. The individuals might experience that their choices are not dependent from advertising or simply that advertising does not have a remarkable impact on them.

To certain extend it could be stated that we are actually witnessing here exactly what Alch (2000) suggested. The role of advertising for these generation Y members is less important – they have and prefer other

sources of information to make their decisions about consumption and to build their brand preferences. It is probable that advertising would have a more central role if the study had focused more on brand-identities, but in the study focusing on consumer identity, the advertising had less say. Nonetheless, Dior had managed to occupy one third of the living room wall of participant 2 with a huge outdoor poster and Tom Ford fashion catalogue had managed to take over a central space in participant 3's lounge. Seems that these two brands had managed to establish themselves as strong identity markers that the relationship between an individual and produced brand material has gone far beyond the case of traditional advertising. Where as advertising and other brand communication is often avoided, in this case these were warmly welcomed and the objects had managed to become a part of consumers' extended-selves.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

### 8.1 Answering research questions

The heart of this study was in the concept of identity and its central role in understanding consumer behavior. My interest in the various motivations guiding consumption habits and purchase decisions served as the starting point for this study and the ethnographic research as the tool for the inquiry. I will now proceed to final conclusions through answering to the research questions set in the beginning of this work.

The first sub-question of the study was the following:

⇒ How does a postmodern consumer create and express his identity through consumption?

My empirical findings showed traces of the postmodern consumer creating and expressing his or her identity through consumption. The assumption of identity-creative and expressive nature of consumption was based on former academic research and my empirical findings showed clear traces of both.

Regarding identity creation, my findings suggest consumers to be in power in the subject-object relationship and the identity that was formed independently from consumption practices or brands was seen to serve as a starting point. This identity was then enhanced and supported by the objects that had become a part of consumer's extended-self, often containing special meanings and stories for the individual.

Consumption was seen as a powerful tool regarding identity expression. Participants of this study expressed their identities to a very high extend conducting very similarly as consumers compared to how they described themselves as individuals and what the ethnographic findings concerning participants' identities suggested.

The role of brands differed. Individuals that were surer about their current or wished identities were also surer about their brand preferences and also used more branded items (e.g. as part of their clothing), where as the participants with less certainty regarding their identity tent to avoid loud choices.

The second sub-question was:

⇒ What is the role of consumption compared to other self-expressive behavioral acts in identity creation and expression?

The study shows that there is a potential correlation between consumption and other self-expressive acts in the field of identity creation and expression. There was discussion about the nature of other self-expressive acts and it was stated that work or other comparable fulltime activity was seen to have potential to serve as a tool for identity creation and expression (where as hobbies etc. leisure activities did not have the similar identity power).

The study suggests that even though work was seen paramount for defining one's identity, these young generation Y representatives used consumption more for that purpose: they didn't have so much control over their work situation but they were able to follow their free will in the field of consumption.

By answering the sub-questions I consider also the main research question to be covered. The main research question of this study was:

⇒ How does symbolic consumption and consumers' self-concept become negotiated in how the role of possessions is understood in a contemporary context?

It all started with Levy (1959) and his article "*Symbols for Sale*" (1959). In the course of this research it also became obvious that products have

developed far from being uniquely combinations utilitarian functions and functional benefits. The participants of this study belonging to generation Y seem to be fully immersed in the world of marketing and symbolic meanings. Brands are discussed as everyday topics and when discussing their possessions, we didn't land on any of the lower steps of Maslow's hierarchy: the product decisions were not made based on needs but some other, symbolic aspects:

*"Maybe when buying clothes it's emphasized, that you always buy that kind of clothes that you wish to be..."* female, 26 years.

As a final conclusion can be stated that yes, consumer's self-concept has definitely a role to play and have a large impact on his or her consumer behavior. It was remarkable to notice how participants behaved as consumers similarly as they perceived them selves as individuals. Consumers also eagerly use consumption to enhance their identity and to express it. A continuous interactive circle between identity and consumption exists, also based on this study conducted in the contemporary context. This study confirms that the identity power of consumption has not disappeared.

## **8.2. Limitations of the study**

This study partly succeeded in giving clarity on the presented themes and partly gave only little or no support. This study managed to reveal how identity plays an important role in the lives of the generation Y individuals that participated in this study, and how brands are key building blocks in the field of symbolic consumption. Also the study suggests that branded doing is important, but when work or occupations cannot full fill self-expressive needs, self-expression through consumption remains or becomes very central. But on the other hand this study underperformed in delivering information on the role of advertising and social media for consumer's identity creation.



The acquired findings or the lack of those are, to large extend, explained by the choice of method. If the interaction had been more formal and guiding, maybe also the themes that now remained unanswered would have received more light. But, then again must be admitted that sample size and this method enabled to grasp the categories and thinking of the participants, not only to verify existing theories. In this case, the priority was to see whether the premises of symbolic consumption still held in the contemporary contexts and only secondary to cover all themes suggested by the literature overview.

### **8.3 Future research**

As mentioned earlier a lot of research focuses on the identity power of publicly consumed products (Belk, Bahn & Mayer 1982; Hogg, Cox & Keeling 2000; Veblen 1899; Shipman 2004; Berger & Heath 2007; Han & al. 2010), but a lot less study is devoted to privately consumed brands from categories such as domestic appliances, healthcare, home care, personal cleansing or grooming products. Coupland (2005) refers to many of the brands in these daily used categories that surround us, as “invisible brands”. People develop often long term relationships and loyalty to these brands, but it might happen inadvertently and stay unrecognized.

In many of the publicly consumed categories, such as cigarettes, cars, luxury clothing and apparels and alcohol beverages we find many strong brands such as Marlboro, BMW, Louis Vuitton and Budweiser that all have very clear built-in identity signaling symbolism and that perform also remarkably well in terms of business profit (Millward Brown Branz top 100 ranking 2013), not forgetting the strong IT-companies such as Apple and Google dominating the brand rankings.

When taking only the brand contribution, portion of brand value driven by brand itself, rather than financial or other factors, into account we can witness a strong dominance of beer and luxury brands, but among them one sees brands from “private consumption” categories entering the TOP 10: Crest toothpaste, a diaper brand Pampers and an un-luxury personal care brand Natura. Especially in the case of diapers and toothpaste brands,

considered to be very low-involvement and privately consumed categories a question arises: what is the role and value of these brands in the symbolic consumption and identity creation and signaling discussion? This study shed only little light on this matter, stating mostly that brand and purchase decisions were more considered in the product categories consumer knew and cared about. Despite that or exactly for that reason it would be interesting to study consumer hermeneutics in these categories, what type of relationship would people have with these “low-involvement” brands and could these brands hold different value for customers. Could we be able to find unpredicted value for private personal identity creation that many publicly consumed, loud and expressive brands might lack? From my point of view that would deserve a separate study and the results of these would benefit and be in interest of many companies.

Another topic that this study inspired to research further is the relationship of work-life and consumption. In this study travelling, hobbies (even artistic ones) or other leisure related self-expressive behavioral acts were not considered to have enough identity power to define one’s identity, but work or comparable full time activity were in the core of both identity creation and expression. We also witnessed that when participants were limited in their self-expression in terms of their current work, they were very keen on expressing themselves through consumption. This raises a question: does a negative correlation between interesting and self-expressive work and interest in consumption exist? So, could we state that the more you manage to express your identity at work the less you are interested in expressing yourself through consumption? Or other way around, does consumption become very central to an individual when the work does not bring out an individual’s personality or enable self-expression, as the results of this study might imply. If taken into closer investigation would we witness how an uninteresting but well-paid work e.g. at banking or IT leads to excessive self-expressive acts in consumption behavior? Following Chernev, Hamilton and Gal’s (2011) study on self-expressive behavioral acts, this might be the case.

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