Luxury Brands in Consumer Lives: Conceptualising and Exploring the Consumption of Luxury Brand Meanings

Yuri Seo

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Marketing,
The University of Auckland, 2012

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have contributed to this thesis in innumerable ways, and I am grateful to all of them. First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Margo Buchanan-Oliver, for all your everlasting support, encouragement, and guidance in not just completing this PhD journey, but also in terms of my own personal development and helping me to find my own way of doing things. It is no exaggeration to say that, without Margo's mentorship, all of this would not have been possible. One cannot wish for a greater Mentor! And this is despite what Elmer Fudd may say! =)

Thank you everyone in the Marketing Department. It was a pleasure knowing you all. If I am to write about how much I respect each individual person, it would probably take another thesis! Let me just say that you are all really awesome in so many different ways and you will always remain to be an important part of my extended-self. Special thanks to Rod for your support and "engagement"; (by the way, that Secret Santa coffee mug in your office is from me). Special thanks to Denise for being an outstanding PhD director, and to Mary for always being caring and helpful. Thank you Mike for having a really good time with 306 and Bodo for always being 'cheerful'! Also, special thanks to Sang-Uk for dramatically improving my Korean in the last couple of months.

I would also like to thank all my fellow PhD students. May *the force* be with you all! Special thanks to 'people in the fishbowl' for all your support. Special thanks to Angela for being a great buddy during Honours, Masters, and PhD =). The triad *still* Rocks!

Also, big thank you to Vicki Little, Brad Weekly, and Amanda Stanes for helping to find

contacts for my study. Thank you to the University of Auckland Business School for all the scholarships. They eased my work by a mile!

Special thanks to Ruby Huang for proofing my thesis. You did a great job!

Last but not least, thank you to all those people who are so passionate about luxury brands and my participants who made this project possible!

ABSTRACT

In recent years, the growing importance of the luxury market has stimulated research into the marketing and consumption of luxury brands (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Vicker and Reynalds, 2003; Berthon *et al.*, 2009). Despite this interest, there are gaps in the existing literature, particularly around the conceptualisation of how consumers experience and consume luxury brands in relation to different aspects of their lives (Kapferer, 2006; Berthon *et al.*, 2009; Atwal and Williams, 2009). In order to address these limitations, my thesis conceptualises and explores the meanings that consumers ascribe to luxury brands, and how these meanings are formed within the context of consumer culture. More specifically, the thesis develops a hermeneutic model of brand meaning, and applies this model to gain an emic understanding of the consumption of luxury brands. A qualitative study, grounded within the social constructionist epistemology, is conducted to explore the developed conceptualisation of brand meaning within the context of luxury brand consumption in New Zealand. The findings are used to advance a new theory that extends our understanding of the consumption of luxury brands by addressing the roles of socio-cultural beliefs, the uses and gratifications, the luxury brand experiences, and the perceived brand characteristics within the consumer-perceived meanings of luxury brands. The thesis concludes with a summary of key contributions to the academic knowledge about luxury brands and practical implications for marketing practitioners, following an overview of potential limitations and directions for future research.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

Luxury brands are perhaps one of the purest illustrations of branding power, since their greatest value often comes from the intangible attributes of the brand, such as consumers' perception of brand image and reputation (Nia and Zaichkowsky, 2000; Stegemann, 2006; Kapferer and Bastien, 2009; Keller, 2009). Over the past two decades, the market for luxury products and services has experienced unprecedented growth: the global market for luxury brands was estimated at US$80 billion in 2008, with sales forecast to grow about eight per cent per annum for the next three years (Christodoulides *et al.*, 2009).

Such a high rate of growth was brought about by two major factors. First, by the late 1990's, the luxury market had been transformed from a constellation of small family-owned artisan businesses, which were valued for high quality and the craftsmanship of their products (Jackson, 2002), into a consolidated economic sector led by the vision of brand-driven luxury corporations such as *Louis Vuitton-Moet-Hennessey* (LVMH), the *Gucci Group,* and *Richemont* (Jackson, 2002; Okonkwo, 2009). In order to stimulate their growth, some conglomerates combined a high perceived prestige with prices reasonable to attract middle-class consumers (Truong *et al.*, 2009), while others diversified into new international markets (Okonkwo, 2009). However, despite the differences in business strategies, these companies agreed on strong brand image and identity as the key determinants of success in the marketplace (Okonkwo, 2009). As a result, the luxury sector has since rapidly increased in its size and product range, marking an era of global luxury brands (e.g., *Louis Vuitton, Gucci*, etc.).

Secondly, the demand for luxury offerings was stimulated by a number of favourable macro-environmental trends, such as globalisation and cultural convergence (Chadha and Husband, 2006), a constant rise in the number of wealthy consumers (Capgemini, 2007), the growing popularity of internet shopping (Kapferer, 2000) and increased international travel (Nueno and Quelch, 1998). In particular, one of the consequences of globalisation and cultural convergence in the context of luxury brands has been an increasing demand for western luxury brands (such as *Louis Vuitton* and *Gucci*) in Asia and other emerging markets (Chadha and Husband, 2006). As a result of this trend, the size of the luxury market has significantly increased and, within the next decade, the revenues generated from these emerging markets are expected to surpass those of more established luxury markets in Europe and North America (Okonowo, 2009).

The growth of the luxury sector has also been a result of a growing number of wealthy consumers. According to Capgemini (2007), over the past decade the world witnessed a constant rise in the number of HNWIs (High Net Worth Individuals) – those with a net worth of over US$1million in all assets, excluding primary residence – who are traditionally considered to be the main target market for luxury brands (Capgemini, 2007). On the other hand, the consumption of luxury brands is becoming more affordable (Silverstein and Fiske, 2003; Truong *et al.*, 2009), expanding the customer base for luxury offerings to include not only members of the wealthiest social classes, but also those with less substantial income. Finally, the vast amount of attention that luxury brands receive from the media, the growing popularity of internet shopping, and increasing international travel encourage information sharing between individual consumers and consumer segments, together make luxury products more accessible and encourage the purchase of luxury items (Nueno and Quelch, 1998; Kapferer, 2000; Mandel *et al.*, 2006).

Therefore, the emergence of luxury conglomerates, which have been aggressively expanding the influence of their brands worldwide, combined with favourable global socio-economic changes, have contributed to an increased customer base for luxury offerings and an expanded range of available luxury goods and services worldwide:

> Whether it is fashion and accessories, leather goods, fragrance, skincare cosmetics, wines, spirits, timepieces, jewellery, automobiles, private jets, hotels, home decoration or concierge services, the supply of luxury is currently incessant. Brands such as *Louis Vuitton*, with 360 boutiques in 54 countries worldwide, are stretching the boundaries of access to luxury, whereas others such as Rolex and Cartier are leading penetration of luxury in new regions and markets such as China and Russia. (Okonkwo, 2009, p.287)

1.2.   Problem Orientation

The growing importance of the luxury sector has stimulated research into the marketing and consumption of luxury brands. There is, however, little agreement on what constitutes such brands (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Kapferer, 2006; Christodoulides *et al.*, 2009; Fionda and Moore, 2009). Given the multidimensionality of the brand concept and ambiguity about what constitutes luxury (Kapferer, 2006), researchers have struggled to develop a comprehensive conceptualisation of 'luxury brand'. Kapferer (2006) notes the following regarding the existing literature on luxury brands:

> Typically, everyone can readily identify which brands deserve to be called luxury brands and which cannot. However, most people find it hard to formulate a precise definition of luxury. As a rule, most scholars start by proposing their own definition. Instead of adding another definition … to the mass of already existing definitions of what is a luxury item, it is more fruitful to start from a premise: luxury is a concept with fuzzy frontiers. (Kapferer, 2006, p.67)

In the early studies on status goods, luxury products were often described as exclusive items that are more conspicuous than necessary (Bourne, 1957), and the purpose of such items was perceived to be the public display of a certain social status. Two decades later, Nueno and Quelch (1998, p. 61) defined luxury brands as "those whose ratio of functionality to price is low, while the ratio of intangible and situational utility to price is high" with the mere use or display of luxury items bringing prestige to their owners. By 2000 it was suggested that in making purchase decisions involving luxury products, consumers are driven primarily by their social and psychological needs, such as the enhancement of self- or social esteem (Nia and Zaichkowsky, 2000).

More recently, studies have noted that consumers demonstrate a range of motivations for purchasing luxury products and, therefore, vary in their perceptions of what constitutes a luxury brand (Dubois *et al.*, 2005; Chadha and Husband, 2006). Consequently, multidimensional constructs of brand luxuriousness have been developed with Vigneron and Johnson (2004) proposing five dimensions of consumer-perceived brand luxuriousness: perceived conspicuousness, uniqueness, quality, hedonism, and perceived extended-self. 'Perceived conspicuousness' considers that consumers purchase luxury items as a means of asserting prestige and status; 'uniqueness' suggests that a limited supply of a luxury brand enhances consumer preference for that brand; 'quality' is the expectation that luxury brands offer superior quality and performance over non-luxury brands; 'hedonism' refers to the ability of luxury items to evoke positive emotional feelings, such as pleasure; and 'perceived extended-self' suggests that consumers often integrate the symbolic meaning of a luxury brand into their own identity (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). Many of these dimensions of brand luxuriousness have been reported by others (Dubois *et al.*, 2005; Keller, 2009) while Vickers and Renand (2003) suggest that luxury and non-luxury brands can be differentiated

according to the functional (product-related), experiential (individual-related) and symbolic interactional (status-related) dimensions of a product. Similar dimensions of luxury branding have been suggested by Berthon *et al.* (2009) in their study on different market segments within the luxury brand industry.

Most recently, researchers have emphasised the importance of experiences in luxury branding (Atwal and Williams, 2009; Fionda and Moore, 2009; Gistri *et al.*, 2009; Tynan *et al.*, 2010). Tynan *et al.* (2010) note that luxury brand experiences offer an important way of enhancing the value derived from luxury brands. Gistri *et al.* (2009) argue that the hedonic nature of luxury brands provides consumers with an experience of sensory gratification that is unobtainable from non-luxury brands while Fionda and Moore (2009, p. 351) note that consumer experiences are crucial to a luxury brand's marketing communication process, because "the consumption experience provides an insight into a brand lifestyle by making it reality". Atwal and Williams (2009), using the dimensions of involvement and intensity, classify luxury brand experiences into entertainment, educational, aesthetic and escapist zones. They also argue that these experiential zones reinforce luxury brand image and will become important components of luxury marketing.

While these studies are insightful, they provide only a limited understanding of consumption involving luxury brands. Various characteristics and promises that luxury brands offer to their consumers have been noted (e.g., Vickers and Renand, 2003; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004) but why these perceptions connote luxury and how they are emergent remains largely unexplored. Moreover, the marketing of luxury brands is often described as crafting invigorating stories (Beverland, 2004; Kapferer, 2006) and, sometimes, even as selling dreams (Dubois and Paternault, 1995). However, with the majority of studies being driven by

quantitative analysis (Gistri *et al.*, 2009), the literature does not provide insight into how consumers respond to these dream promises. To discover what meanings consumers, themselves ascribe to luxury brands would perhaps require a qualitative enquiry (Thompson, 1997). Finally, although researchers note that the consumption of luxury brands is characterised by luxury-specific experiences (e.g., Atwal and Williams, 2009), these experiences have neither been empirically explored nor adequately theorised.

1.3. Research Objective

In the subsequent chapters, this thesis attempts to fill some of those gaps in the literature on luxury brands by adopting a meaning-based approach to the study of consumer behaviour (Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982; Stern, 1995; Thompson, 1997) and exploring emically (Spiggle, 1994) the consumption of luxury brands in New Zealand. Consequently, the aim of this thesis is *to inform our understanding of the consumption of luxury brands by exploring emically the meanings that New Zealand consumers ascribe to luxury brands in the context of the fashion and apparel industry, and providing insight into how these meanings are formed through brand experiences within consumer culture.* Such a study promises to uncover insights about the meanings that New Zealand consumers ascribe to luxury brands, explore how these meanings are emergent, and provide a more comprehensive insight into the roles that luxury brands play in consumer lives. Accordingly, the two specific linked objectives of this study are:

1. To explore the meanings that consumers ascribe to luxury brands.

2. To develop a theory that expands our understanding of how the perceived meanings of luxury brands are formed within consumer culture.

1.3.1. Conceptual Background

According to Merz *et al.* (2009), the marketing discipline inherited its foundation from neo-classic economic theory at its conception at the beginning of the twentieth century. Accordingly, within the discipline it was assumed traditionally that firms autonomously produced the value of their products and services that customers purchased and consumed (Prahalald and Ramaswamy, 2004). Therefore, "the firm and the consumer [were perceived to have] distinct roles of production and consumption, respectively" (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004, p.6). Over the past three decades, this company-centric view has been gradually replaced by the consumer-centric view that perceives consumers as the co-creators of value in marketing interactions (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Lusch and Vargo 2006; Payne *et al.*, 2008). In branding theory, this change in the dominant logic of marketing (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) has resulted in the "reconsideration of how branding 'works' and shifted attention from brand producers and products toward consumer response and services to understand brand value creation" (Schroeder, 2009, p.123). The consumer-centric view perceives brands as relationship partners (Fournier, 1998), as clusters of functional and emotional values that enhance consumer experiences (de Chernatony, 2006), and as relational experiences that emerge from consumer-brand interactions (Prahalad, 2004; Payne *et al.*, 2009). A common theme in this body of work is that consumers do not passively follow the company's idea of what a brand constitutes; instead, consumers experience brands and, as a result of these experiences, co-create brand meanings with companies (Berry, 2000; Payne *et al.*, 2009).

This conceptualisation of brands as meaningful experiences is also evident within the consumer research literature. Muñiz and O'Guinn (2001) argued that brands are co-created in the process of consumer-brand-consumer interactions; they found that consumers tend to

form brand communities – defined as "specialised, non-geographically bound communit[ies] based on a structural set of social relations among admirers of a brand" (p. 412) – which can directly influence the elements of brand equity, such as perceived quality, brand loyalty, brand awareness, and brand associations (Keller, 1993). Thompson *et al.* (2006) also found that brand image can be influenced by stories and images about the brand that are circulated in popular culture by consumers, and Pine and Gilmore (1999) noted that brands can increase their value by staging meaningful experiences for their consumers. These studies illustrate the importance of brand meanings, emerging in the process of the consumer's experience of the brand, for the understanding of consumer-brand interactions.

Within the consumer-centric view of brands, studies from a consumer culture perspective (Stern, 1995; Ritson and Elliott, 1999; Holbrook, 2000; Holt, 2002; Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling, 2006; Bengtsson and Ostberg, 2006; Schroeder, 2009) assert that brands are socio-cultural objects that convey cultural meanings. Accordingly, brand meaning depends not only on consumer-firm interactions, but is also mediated by socio-cultural processes – such as historical context, ethical concerns, and cultural conventions – that influence both consumers and firms in the process of meaning co-creation (Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling, 2006). For instance, Holt (2004) found that iconic brands tap into cultural mythologies to connect meaningfully with their consumers. Thompson (2004) illustrated how cultural myths are used by both advertisers and consumers in the construction of new marketplace mythologies that articulate ideological beliefs circulating in a particular social group, and Heilbrunn (1995) discussed how cultural meanings can be used to explore consumer-brand relationships. Moreover, not only are brands influenced by cultural meanings, but they themselves can play the role of "referents that shape cultural rituals, economic activities and social norms" (Schroeder, 2009, p.124). For example, Holt *et al.* (2004) discussed how the production of

global brands contributed to the emergence of global consumers connected through their consumption. Thus, within the consumer culture perspective, brands function as both a storehouse and a powerhouse of cultural meanings (Sherry, 1987). On the one hand, brand meanings, co-created by firms and consumers, reflect a broad range of social, cultural and ideological codes (e.g., Thompson, 2004; Holt. 2004), and on the other hand, brands actively forge new meanings that shape consumer culture (e.g., Holt *et al.*, 2004; Cayla and Eckhardt, 2008).

1.3.2. Research Questions

The consumer-centric view of the brand (Payne *et al.*, 2009) and studies from a consumer culture perspective (Holt, 2002; Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Schroeder, 2009) open up a range of research agendas that promise to provide new insights into the consumption of luxury brands. First, the consumer-centric view demonstrates the importance of consumer experiences and brand meanings, and advocates that researchers take a meaning-based approach in determining brand value. Previous research showed that the value proposition of luxury brands is different from that offered by non-luxury brands (e.g., Vickers and Renand, 2003). However, no research to date has theorised and explored emically the meanings that luxury brands convey for consumers.

Furthermore, luxury has always been an important concept in human society, infused with many ideological agendas that shaped the meaning of the concept (e.g., luxury as a privilege of the ruling class, luxury as immoral consumption) (Berry, 1994). This suggests that luxury brands share a certain sense of commonality in meaning that differentiate them from non-luxury brands. Researchers have noted the importance of the historical functions that luxury played in society, for the understanding of luxury brand consumption (e.g., Bourne, 1957;

Kapferer and Bastian, 2009). For instance, Bourne (1957) related the conspicuousness of luxury brands to the historical role of luxury to serve as a social marker of high status and distinction. However, meanings tend to change over time and across cultures (McCracken, 1986; Stern 2006). Therefore, the historical context of luxury (Berry, 1994) can only be seen as a starting point in the exploration of cultural meanings conveyed by luxury brands. In order to understand fully the nature of brand luxuriousness, it is necessary to emically explore the meanings (Spiggle, 1994) that consumers ascribe to luxury brands today, and to investigate how these meanings are emergent in the context of their culture. A thorough understanding of these meanings can serve as a means for elucidating a confusion that exists in the academic literature as to what constitutes a luxury brand (Berthon *et al.*, 2009).

In order to investigate what comprises a luxury brand in contemporary culture, this thesis develops a hermeneutic model of brand meaning, and applies this model to gain an emic understanding of the meanings ascribed to luxury brands by consumers. More specifically, I elicit four dimensions of brand meaning that reflect the consumer dominant perceptions of a brand, and account for the multiple frames of reference used by consumers in constructing their personalised brand meanings. These dimensions include the socio-cultural beliefs about a brand, consumer uses and gratifications, consumer experiences, and perceived brand characteristics. Using the data from in-depth interviews, I then explore these elements in the context of luxury brand consumption in New Zealand.

The research questions of this thesis in relation to the four elements of a meaning-based view of consumer-brand interactions are outlined below. The first four questions are related to the dimensions of the luxury brand meaning (i.e., the socio-cultural beliefs about luxury brands, the uses and gratifications of luxury brands, the luxury brand experiences and the perceived

characteristics of luxury brands), and the fifth question addresses the relationships among these dimensions within the context of the luxury brand consumption.

Research Question 1:   What are the socio-cultural beliefs associated with luxury brands in New Zealand?

Research Question 2:   What are the uses and gratifications that luxury brands possess for consumers?

Research Question 3:   What brand experiences do consumers derive from luxury brands?

Research Question 4:   What are the perceived characteristics associated with luxury brands?

Research Question 5:   What are the structural relationships among the principal dimensions of brand meaning, and how do these relationships influence consumers in deriving the meaning of brands within the context of luxury brand consumption?

1.4.   Research Approach

An interpretivist approach to the study of consumer behaviour (Spiggle, 1994; Crotty, 1998) was adopted to explore the research questions of the thesis. This approach was grounded within the social constructionist epistemology, which assumes that all knowledge and reality emerge in and out of interaction between human beings and the world within a social context (Crotty, 1998), and the theoretical perspective of hermeneutic interpretivism, which assumes that by analysing (or interpreting) meanings found in consumption texts, a researcher can understand consumers' interpretations of their experiences, values, and beliefs

(Thompson, 1997). The hermeneutic framework for interpreting consumer stories was chosen as a methodology. This framework advocates the use of interpretative readings of interview transcripts and other consumer-generated texts with the purpose of understanding the consumption meanings conveyed by the text. Thus, it guides the researcher to develop an emic insight into the meanings of the consumption experiences and how these meanings are emergent.

1.4.1. Data Gathering

The data for this study was gathered using semi-structured (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984) and modified Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) interviews (Coulter, 2006). Given the exploratory nature of this research aimed at investigating meanings that consumers construct during their experience of luxury brands, it was necessary to choose research methods that could provide an in-depth insight into respondents' perspectives and interpretations. Semi-structured in-depth interviews allowed the researcher to get beyond the surface meaning of phenomena and to discover more hidden, symbolic meanings that these phenomena possess for respondents (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). A modified ZMET method employed consumer-driven visual stimuli for participants (i.e., images representing the participants' thoughts and feelings about luxury brands). These stimuli enhanced the respondents' enthusiasm for participating in the research process and elicited enriched insight (Heisley and Levy, 1991) into the meanings and experiences associated with luxury brands as informants perceived them.

1.4.2. Data Analysis

The data gathered from the interviews was analysed with thematic and narrative analyses (Aronson, 1994; Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). Thematic analysis allowed the researcher to categorise qualitative data into the broader themes that emerged from consumer responses (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984), identify the relationships among the themes that emerged, and relate the empirical data to the existing classification patterns that exist in the literature (Aronson, 1994). Narrative analysis was employed to explore the structural relationships amongst the elements of luxury brand meaning and how these elements were emergent in relation to the narratives of consumer life stories. In conducting both the thematic and narrative analyses, the research followed the qualitative data analytic procedures advocated by Spiggle (1994).

1.4.3. Trustworthiness

While quantitative studies rely on measures of reliability and validity to assess rigour in the research process, in qualitative research these measures are replaced by trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). According to Cavana *et al.* (2001), the main verification of trustworthiness in qualitative studies is triangulation. Several methods of triangulation (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Cavana *et al.*, 2001) were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the results of this research, including researcher-researcher corroboration and the multi-method analysis of data (Cavana, *et al.*, 2001).

1.5.   Potential Research Contributions

This research promises to offer a significant contribution to both academic knowledge about luxury brands, and practical insights for marketing practitioners. The contributions to

consumer research theory are outlined first, followed by the marketing and managerial implications of this research.

1.5.1. Academic Contributions

This thesis will provide an important contribution into the academic field of consumer research and brand management. Firstly, it has been illustrated that over the last two decades, luxury brands have become an important consumption site (Jackson, 2002; Okonkwo, 2009). The consumer research field will benefit from an increased understanding of the consumption of luxury brands. Informed by the consumer-centric view of the brand (Payne *et al.*, 2009) and the studies of a consumer culture perspective of brands (Holt, 2002; Schroeder, 2009), this research will contribute further to this area of inquiry by exploring emically the meanings that consumers ascribe to luxury brands, and showing how these meanings are emergent. Furthermore, previous studies of luxury brands have been driven predominantly by quantitative analysis (Gistri *et al.*, 2009), and criticised for their over-reliance on student samples (Beverland, 2004; Christodoulides *et al.*, 2009; Fionda and Moore, 2009). This thesis will contribute to the existing knowledge about luxury brands by exploring their consumption qualitatively, and by detailing the consumption of luxury brands from the consumers' point of view.

This research also promises to make a theoretical contribution by developing and refining a conceptual framework for understanding the dimensions of brand meaning. This framework asserts that the consumer's dominant perceptions about the brand are constituted in personalised brand meanings, that form in the process of consumer experiences and influenced by highly individual cultural processes permeating brand consumption. Furthermore, the model illustrates that brand meanings are multidimensional in nature, and

there are multiple ways in which consumers can perceive brands. The thesis will aim to provide empirical support for the conceptual model developed in this thesis by exploring the consumption of luxury brand meanings in New Zealand. The implications for branding theory will be discussed in the end.

1.5.2. Practical Contributions

This study also promises to provide a number of insights for marketing practitioners. Firstly, knowledge about the contemporary meanings that consumers ascribe to luxury brands is important for advertising and marketing practitioners in the design of marketing communications for luxury products. Moreover, the luxury industry is suffering from an increasing volume of counterfeit products (Nia and Zaichkowsky, 2000; Okonkwo, 2009). The thesis will make a practical contribution by providing insight into the role of consumer experiences in the evaluation of brand luxuriousness. Since relevant experiences derived from brands are much harder to imitate than tangible items, providing consumers with such experiences can assist brand managers in protecting their brands from the influence of counterfeit products. Finally, researchers have noted the importance of customer relationships in the management of luxury brands (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009; Cailleux *et al.*, 2009). The thesis will make a practical contribution by detailing the multiple roles that luxury brands play in consumer lives. These findings can be useful in exploring new avenues for forging strong and committed customer relationships.

1.6. Conclusion

In recent years, the growing importance of the luxury sector has stimulated research into the marketing and consumption of luxury brands (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Vicker

and Reynalds, 2003; Berthon *et al.*, 2009). Despite this interest, there are gaps in the existing literature, particularly in the area of conceptualisation of how consumers experience and derive meanings from luxury brands (Kapferer, 2006; Berthon *et al.*, 2009 Atwal and Williams, 2009). In order to address these limitations, this thesis adopts a consumer-centric approach and explores the meanings that consumers ascribe to luxury brands and how these meanings are developed. More specifically, the thesis develops a hermeneutic model of brand meaning, and applies this model to gain an emic understanding of the consumption of luxury brands. I elicit four dimensions of brand meaning that reflect the dominant consumer perceptions of a brand, and account for the multiple frames of reference used by consumers in constructing their personalised brand meanings. These dimensions include the socio-cultural beliefs about a brand, consumer uses and gratifications, consumer experiences, and perceived brand characteristics. A qualitative hermeneutic study, grounded within the social constructionist epistemology, is conducted to emically explore the identified dimensions of brand meaning within the context of luxury brand consumption in New Zealand. The findings of the study offer important contributions to the academic field of consumer research and the marketing of luxury brands, as well as practical implications for brand management.

Following this introductory chapter, the thesis is organised into five further chapters: The Consumption of Luxury Brands, Conceptual Background, Methodology, Analysis and Findings, and Discussion and Conclusion. The second chapter discusses the evolutionary growth of the luxury brand market, and important cultural, social, and external trends that have influenced the modern consumption of luxury brands. This chapter also explores previous conceptualisations of luxury brands and identifies gaps in the existing literature.

The third chapter examines recent advances in branding theory and develops a conceptual model of brand meaning that assisted in qualitative data analysis of interview texts and their emerging themes during the empirical part of this study. The chapter first explores the conceptualisations of brands in the marketing and consumer research literature. It then examines the theoretical concept of brand meaning, and continues to develop the conceptual dimensions of brand meaning: (1) the socio-cultural beliefs about brands, (2) brand uses and gratifications, (3) consumer experiences of brands, and (4) the perceived characteristics of brands.

The fourth chapter details the research process that was employed to address the gaps in the existing theory regarding luxury brands that was identified during the literature review. It follows the principles of a social research process developed by Crotty (1998), progressing from outlining broader philosophical issues underpinning the research process towards detailing more specific methods that were employed in addressing the research questions. Accordingly, it discusses the appropriateness of the chosen epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods in the context of the research purpose and questions (Crotty, 1998). The chapter also details the specific procedures undertaken to gather and analyse the data, and the techniques that were used to corroborate the trustworthiness of data analysis and findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Cavana *et al.*, 2001).

The fifth chapter presents the empirical findings from the qualitative study that was conducted. Firstly, the chapter suggests the range of perceptions of the socio-cultural beliefs, the uses and gratifications, the brand experiences, and the perceived characteristics associated with luxury brands. It then explores how the identified themes of the luxury brand meaning dimensions influenced each other within the consumer perceptions of luxury brands. The

chapter shows that consumer perceptions of luxury brand characteristics are associated with their interpretations of the brand experiences under the influence of the relevant uses and gratifications which, themselves, are contextualised within their broader socio-cultural beliefs about luxury brands. Therefore, these findings support the hermeneutic mode of interpretation (Thompson, 1997; Klein and Myers, 1999) by showing that the luxury brand meaning dimensions cannot be understood fully, independently from one other. Finally, by developing a concept map of the luxury brand meaning derived from the interviews, the chapter offers an exploratory insight into the consumer-perceived luxury brand meanings and how these meanings are formed within the context of luxury brand consumption in New Zealand.

The final chapter discusses the relevance and importance of the findings of this thesis in light of the identified gaps in extant marketing and consumer research literature. In addition, this chapter advances new theory that promises to extend our understanding of the consumption of luxury brands by addressing the roles of socio-cultural beliefs, the uses and gratifications, the luxury brand experiences, and the perceived brand characteristics within the consumer-perceived meanings of luxury brands. It concludes with a summary of the key contributions to the academic knowledge about luxury brands, and practical implications for marketing practitioners, following an overview of potential limitations of the study and directions for future research.

CHAPTER II: LUXURY BRANDS

2.1. Introduction

Luxury is as old as humanity. Early essays on the meaning and social functions of luxury had already been written in ancient Greece (Berry, 1994). However, the idea of 'luxury brands', as a special form of branding and a cultural force behind fashion and an affluent consumption lifestyle, is a relatively new concept (Michman and Mazze, 2006; Chevalier and Mazzalovo, 2008). It was not until the late 1990s that the market for luxury offerings was transformed from a constellation of small artisan family-owned businesses − that emphasised premium quality and aesthetic value of their goods − into a consolidated economic sector led by powerful brand-driven luxury corporations (Jackson, 2002). These corporations (e.g., LVMH, the *Gucci* Group, etc.) made substantial investments in strategic management, product design, production, marketing, and retail capabilities in order to build and maintain the luxurious appeal of their brands (Okonkwo, 2009). According to Kapferer (1997), these appeals to luxury "implicitly convey their own culture and way of life: hence *Saint Laurent* is not *Chanel*. They offer more than mere objects: they provide reference of good taste" (p. 253). As a result, today, when consumers talk about the affluent lifestyle, they often talk about particular brands that connote luxury in their respective product categories. Some of the most prominent examples of this phenomenon would be *Rolex* watches, *Louis Vuitton* bags, and jewellery by *Tiffany* (Chadha and Husband, 2006). This chapter examines the emergence of the global luxury brand industry and discusses previous conceptualisations of luxury brands. It does so to illustrate the unique context of luxury brand consumption and to highlight several gaps in the existing literature. The chapter will start with the discussion of the evolutionary growth of the luxury brand industry and market. It will then examine

important cultural, social and external trends that have influenced the modern consumption of luxury brands. Finally, the chapter will explore previous conceptualisations of luxury brands and will conclude with a discussion of gaps in the existing literature.

2.2.   The Luxury Brand Industry

Under the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) system (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007) and according to the 'five forces industrial analysis framework' (Porter, 1980; 2008) luxury brands cannot be formally defined as an independent industry, as goods and services produced by such brands vary from automobiles to wristwatches. Indeed, it is very hard to imagine that *Rolls-Royce* cars compete with *Louis Vuitton* bags and *Tiffany* jewellery. However, although luxury products vary in terms of their functional uses, they provide consumers with comparable symbolic and experiential benefits – such as prestige and social status – (Vickers and Renand, 2003), that mostly come from the intangible attributes of their brand (Nia and Zaichkowsky, 2000; Stegemann, 2006; Kapferer and Bastien, 2009; Keller, 2009). It is this commonality in brand positioning (Okonkowo, 2007; 2009), combined with a shared customer base for luxury offerings (Capgemini, 2007), that has resulted in scholars and practitioners referring to luxury brands as a consolidated industry segment (Okonkwo, 2009; Christodoulides *et al.*, 2009). Thus, when we talk about the luxury brand industry, we refer to an exclusive group of brands across different product segments that are distinguished from the rest by their ability to convey certain elements of consumer-perceived characteristics of luxuriousness (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004) and, therefore, connote luxury in their respective product categories (Okonkwo, 2009).

In 2008, Interbrand provided a generic definition of a luxury brand. In order to qualify for this definition, a brand must: a) sit within a tier of a product category that seemingly

demonstrates price insensitivity; b) show that being expensive is of neutral or even positive impact to its image; c) demonstrate that a perceived price plays a minor role amongst drivers of purchase (Interbrand, 2008). Due to a rapid growth of the luxury brand industry in the last two decades, luxury brands have generated much interest from both academic scholars and business practitioners (e.g., Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Chadha and Husband, 2006; Okonkwo, 2007). Debate has, in the main, been about the challenges and paradoxes that have emerged as a result of the evolution of the luxury market as a consolidated industry sector (Okonkwo, 2009). Below I detail the major trends that shaped the luxury brand industry, and provide insight into the specificities and the scope of the luxury market.

2.2.1. Luxury Conglomerates and Branding

The market for luxury offerings was formerly comprised of small artisan family-owned businesses that were valued for the high quality and craftsmanship of their products (Jackson, 2002). With the emergence of large multinational conglomerates, such as LVMH and Richemont in the late 1990's and the *Gucci* Group in the early 2000's, the luxury market underwent some major changes (Okonkwo, 2009). In particular, while some conglomerates continued to emphasise their heritage and superiority of products to please the most affluent circles of consumers (Kapferer, 2006), others combined a perceived high prestige with reasonable prices to attract middle-class consumers (Truong *et al.*, 2009). Still others diversified into new international markets to increase their customer base (Chadha and Husband, 2006). As a result, the luxury sector has significantly increased in its market size, product range, and, most importantly, customer diversity (Jackson, 2002; Okonkwo, 2009).

Although luxury conglomerates varied in terms of their approaches for expanding market share and generating more revenue, a common theme that characterised all luxury companies

was their commitment to brand building. The managers of luxury brands noted that "firms that invested substantially in brand building were shown to have a stronger competitive positioning than those whose core values were linked more to products and services than to branding" (Okonkwo, 2009, p. 288). This is particularly important for the luxury industry, where in purchasing decisions consumers are driven by their social and psychological needs, such as the enhancement of self- or social esteem (Nia and Zaichkowsky, 2000). Thus, for a product to be called a luxury it is not enough for it to possess superior quality and distinctive design; it should also convey a particular symbolic meaning, a story behind the product that can be linked to the consumer's perception of luxury. Branding can add this value to the company's products (Holt, 2004; Brioschi, 2006). Substantial investment in brand image and identity was, therefore, an obvious choice for luxury corporations.

As shown, the luxury market went through a dramatic transformation in terms of its identity and focus. A market segment that was formerly linked purely to design and creativity in production evolved into a consolidated brand-driven economic sector led by the vision of powerful luxury conglomerates. In the late 1990s, this transformation caused business and academic circles to take note of the emergence of the luxury brand industry (Okonkwo, 2009; Christodoulides *et al.*, 2009). Strong brand image and identity have become the key determinants of success in this industry (Stegemann, 2006; Kapferer and Bastien, 2009; Keller, 2009). As a result, luxury brands have become some of the most remarkable and valued brands in the world (Okonkwo, 2007; 2009; Chevalier and Mazzalovo; 2008; Kapferer and Bastien, 2009):

> Luxury brands are characterised by a recognisable style, strong identity, high awareness, and enhanced emotional and symbolic associations. They evoke uniqueness and exclusivity, and are interpreted in products through high quality, controlled distribution and

premium pricing. These core factors have led to the development of a $180 billion global industry with an uninterrupted growth for over two decades. These elements have also led to the summarisation of luxury as a 'dream', leading to justifiable curiosity and interest. (Okonkwo, 2009, p.288)

2.2.2. The Scope of the Luxury Brand Industry

The emergence of luxury conglomerates, combined with favourable global socio-economic changes, has contributed to an increased customer base for luxury offerings and an expanded range of available luxury goods and services. Today, luxury brands exist in many product categories, including fashion and accessories (e.g., *Emporio Armani*), jewellery and watches (e.g., *Tiffany and Co*), leather goods (e.g., *Louis Vuitton*), cosmetics and fragrance (e.g., *Dior*), wines and spirits (e.g., *Moet et Chandon*), automobile and air transport (e.g., *Rolls-Royce*), hospitality and concierge services (e.g., *Preferred Hotels and Resorts*), and selective distribution (e.g., *DFS*), with many more to come in the future (Figure 1). While these companies may vary in terms of the functional uses of their products, by conveying a shared idea of 'luxuriousness' through their brand image, they actively contribute to the emergence of luxury lifestyles, and of affluent consumers who embrace these lifestyles by consuming luxury brands across a range of product categories (Chadha and Hubbard, 2006; Michman and Mazze, 2006).

Figure 1. The Luxury Brand Industry
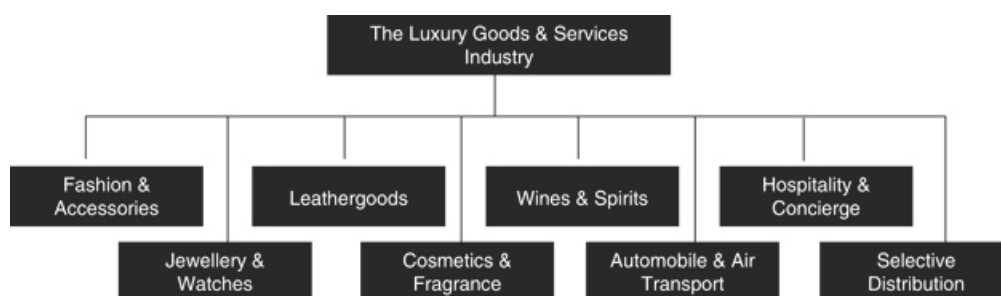
Okonkwo, 2009

2.3.   Trends Influencing Luxury Consumption

The consumption of luxury brands is influenced by a number of macro-environmental trends, such as globalisation and cultural convergence (Chadha and Husband, 2006); the emergence of new market segments (Okonkwo, 2009); a constant rise in the number of wealthy consumers (Capgemini, 2007); the increasing attention that luxury brands receive from the media (Mandel *et al.*, 2006); the growing popularity of internet shopping (Kapferer, 2000); and increased international travel (Nueno and Quelch, 1998). Not only do these trends contribute to a rapid growth of the luxury brand industry, but they also cause important changes in the composition of the industry and, in particular, within the customer base for luxury brands. These trends can be divided into three main categories – cultural, social and external trends – and they are explained in more detail below.

2.3.1. Cultural Trends

Globalisation, an elusive phenomenon that has been receiving a vast amount of attention in the last two decades, can be defined loosely as an ongoing process by which regional economies, societies and cultures are becoming more integrated through economic, social, technological, political, cultural and other exchanges (Robertson, 1992; Rodrik, 1997; Levitt, 2005). For the luxury brand industry, the major consequence of globalisation has been a growing appreciation of western luxury brands (e.g., *Louis Vuitton* and *Gucci*) by consumers in Asia, Russia, and other developing countries (Chadha and Husband, 2006). As a result of this trend, the customer base for luxury products is becoming more culturally diversified, bringing new opportunities and challenges for the managers of luxury brands.

The growing popularity of western luxury brands in emerging markets seems to make consumer tastes for them increasingly similar around the world (Catry, 2003). Some common characteristics that consumers seek in luxury brands today include high perceived prestige, aesthetic value, and their association with fashion and an affluent lifestyle (Okonkwo, 2007; Wiedmann *et al.*, 2007). Brands that successfully convey these characteristics of luxuriousness to their consumers (e.g., *Louis Vuitton* and *Gucci* in fashion, *Rolls Royce* in the automobile industry), tend to become leaders in the canon for luxury brands around the world (Chadha and Husband, 2006; Okonkwo, 2007). On the other hand, however, it has been noted that new emerging markets are displaying luxury consumption styles different from those of more established markets (Chadha and Husband, 2006; Okonkwo, 2009). For instance, Chadha and Husband (2006) found that in Asian countries, consumer motivation for purchasing luxury items is deeply rooted within the cultural traditions of these countries (e.g., Confucianism in South Korea) and, therefore, they are different from those in western countries. It follows that, while consumers may purchase the same brands globally, the meanings that they ascribe to these brands might be different.

Several researchers have previously attempted to explore luxury brand consumption in the context of different international markets (e.g., Dubois *et al.*, 2005; Chadha and Husband, 2006; Okonkwo, 2007). For instance, Okonkwo (2007) identifies six main regional markets for luxury brands – Europe, North America, Japan, China, India, and Russia. According to Okonkwo (2007), although luxury consumers across the world generally exhibit similar expectations for luxury brands and their products (e.g., high quality, prestige, and exclusivity), consumer attitudes and consumption styles may vary from one market segment to another, reflecting the economic, social and cultural forces that influence these regions. For instance, luxury consumers in Europe tend to be much older and have a higher disposable income than

their counterparts in other regions. As a result, Europeans tend to spend more time in shopping for luxury goods and to look for the most prestigious and established luxury brands. On the other hand, American luxury consumers are younger; they are willing to experiment with different luxury brands, and do not stay locked into loyalty for one luxury brand for the rest of their lives (Okonkwo, 2007). Consumers in Japan and other developed Asian countries (e.g., Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan) are very fashionable and label-cautious. Asian consumers in particular prefer brands that possess a high level of conspicuousness in the eyes of their peers (Chadha and Hubband, 2006; Okonkwo, 2007). According to Okonkwo (2007), about 94% of Tokyo women in their twenties own a *Louis Vuitton* product, and 92% own a *Gucci* product. Consumers in emerging markets, such as China, India and Russia, are also characterised by their unique luxury consumption styles. For instance, China poses challenges and contradictions for luxury brands that managers have not previously encountered in other countries (Okonkwo, 2007). Although, due to its rapid economic growth and large population, China has the potential to become the largest market for luxury brands in the world, it is also reputed to be the largest supplier of counterfeit luxury goods. Thus, "the potential problem that this contradiction creates for luxury brands is a clash of the genuine luxury consumers' population and the counterfeit consumers who might dilute the image of the luxury brands to an extent that could drive the genuine luxury consumers to seek alternatives" (Okonkwo, 2007, p. 74).

International markets may also vary in terms of consumer preferences for luxury brands by product category. For instance, it was noted that Indian consumers are particularly fond of jewellery – the luxury jewellery market in India is expected to grow by 40 per cent annually to reach US$2 billion by 2010 (Okonkwo, 2007, p. 75) – and Russian consumers tend to show a preference for products that are made with expensive materials such as pure gold and

diamonds (Pilyaev, 2000; Okonkwo, 2007). Moreover, there could also be differences in the luxury consumption styles within the market segments themselves. Chadha and Husband (2006) have investigated luxury consumption in Asia. They found that, while the countries of the region share some common elements of luxury brand consumption (e.g., status-orientated consumption, extreme label-consciousness), "each country has its own endearing eccentricities that make it unique" (Chadha and Husband, 2006, p. 56). In particular, the markets of Asia varied in terms of their levels of 'luxury addiction', and consumer attitudes for luxury brands tended to reflect socio-cultural beliefs that permeate these countries (Chadha and Husband, 2006).

Similarly, Dubois *et al.* (2005) conducted a cross-cultural study of luxury across twenty different countries, and concluded that consumer attitudes toward luxury brands are different. Dubois *et al.* (2005) identified three types of attitude towards luxury consumption − elitist, democratic, and distant. As its name indicates, the elitist attitude proposes a traditional belief of luxury as appropriate for only very few, the elite. "They regard luxury as reserved for 'refined' people because… some education is needed to fully appreciate these goods and services. Luxury implies 'good taste' and enables its users to differentiate themselves from others." (Dubois *et al.*, 2005, p. 122). In contrast, the democratic stance implies that luxury should not be reserved for "refined" people; it should be widely accessible and can be mass-produced. Thus, for democrats, a luxury item is a product that possesses features allowing it to satisfy some special hedonic and symbolic needs that non-luxury products lack. However, they also perceive that exclusivity is not essential, and that everybody deserves a share of luxury. Finally, the distant attitude towards luxury implies that consumers are not very attracted to it at all. Distant consumers think of luxury as something they neither understand nor need. "They feel that they are strangers, far away from the world of luxury. The

consequences of these negative feelings are that they find luxury somewhat old-fashioned and flashy, describe luxury users as snobbish and emulating the rich, and indicate that luxury should be taxed more." (Dubois *et al.*, 2005, p.122). According to Dubois *et al.* (2005), different countries and markets vary in terms of these three attitudes towards luxury. Some countries can display more of one attitude than another, whereas others can have a mix of two or three attitudes. Dubois al. (2005) found, for instance, that while France and Poland exhibited more of the elitist attitude, Denmark, New Zealand, and Netherlands favoured the democratic attitude, and Portugal, Italy, and Spain showed a tendency towards the distant.

These studies of the cultural aspects of luxury brand consumption suggest that cultural processes, such as cultural convergence, historical context and cultural conventions, play important roles in exploring consumer perceptions and attitudes towards luxury brands. While globalisation and the consequent global appreciation of western brands make consumer preferences for luxury brands similar, it is evident that their consumption is strongly influenced by regional and cultural differences. This also suggests that, if we accept that the world is moving towards a global culture where consumers are connected through the consumption of the same brands (Holt *et al.*, 2004), emergent markets will necessarily bring new connotations to luxury branding within those cultures.

2.3.2. Social Trends

Traditionally, luxury items were consumed by the wealthiest circles of society to display wealth and social status (Grossman and Shapiro, 1988). However, the luxury brand industry is experiencing a rapid expansion of its customer base to include more modest social classes. This is influenced both by an increasing disposable income among those less affluent consumers and by the appearance of new luxury brands which combine a perceived high

prestige with reasonable prices to make luxury products more affordable to a larger circle of consumers (Truong *et al.*, 2009). This trend is known as the 'democratisation of luxury' (Evrard and Roux, 2005; Vongova, 2008). According to Silverstein and Fiske (2003), new consumers of luxury buy such products for different reasons than those of the traditional elite consumers; these include "a desire to emulate the lifestyle of the richest or the social class immediately above them, the superior quality of the products, or on more hedonic grounds on the basis of self-rewards" (Truong *et al.*, 2009, p. 376). Therefore, the consumption of luxury brands is not only culturally diversified, but also ranges across different social segments.

Chadha and Husband (2006), consistently with other studies (e.g., Michman and Mazze, 2006; Chevalier and Mazzalovo, 2008), identify three distinct social segments of luxury consumers: the 'luxury gourmands', the 'luxury regulars', and the 'luxury nibblers':

(1) At the top end are the *luxury gourmands*, who devour luxury in great big bites, donning designer labels from head to toe, 24/7. Needless to say these are high net worth individuals (HNWI), with upwards of a million dollars in financial assets.

(2) Next you have the *luxury regulars*, who while not quite in the gourmand league are nevertheless on staple diet of luxury goods. These are affluent people with financial assets in excess of US$ 100,000.

(3) And finally, there are the *luxury nibblers*, who partake in a few small bites of luxe every season, a bag here, a watch there, whatever they can afford. They are typically young people with next to no savings in the bank, but with an increasing income-generating capacity thanks to a decent education and well-paying job.

<div align="right">(Chadha and Husband, 2006, p. 47)</div>

While all three segments are part of the customer base for luxury brands, their behaviour and lifestyles are significantly different, suggesting that consumer perceptions, experiences, and

motivations for purchasing luxury brands could also vary across these segments (Chadha and Husband, 2006; Okonkwo, 2009). For instance, some studies report that while the wealthiest consumers tend to perceive luxury more as a social "badge" (Grossman and Shapiro, 1988), middle and lower classes were found to think about luxury items more as a type of self-reward or a prize (Silverstein and Fiske, 2003). These differences suggest that consumers in different social segments look for different things when they purchase a luxury brand and, perhaps, ascribe different meanings to brand luxuriousness.

2.3.3. External Trends

Luxury brand consumption is also influenced by a number of external factors, such as the growing popularity of internet shopping (Kapferer, 2000; Okonkwo, 2007), the increasing attention that luxury brands receive from mass media (Mandel *et al.*, 2006), and increasing international travel (Nueno and Quelch, 1998). These trends make luxury products more accessible, and stimulate the purchasing of luxury items. In addition, contrary to cultural differences and the democratisation of luxury, these external trends also encourage communication and information sharing among the consumers of luxury brands, making consumer perceptions of luxury brands increasingly similar.

According to Lippmann (1922, cited in Mandel *et al.*, 2006) the media defines consumers' worlds by sketching images in their minds. Popular magazines, such as *InStyle* and *Vogue*, depict how successful people, such as celebrities, indulge in the consumption of luxury brands and inspire the mass of other consumers to emulate their affluent lifestyles via clothing and other consumer purchases (Mandel *et al.*, 2006). Luxury brand websites and internet shopping make it possible for consumers to interact with each other via website communities and virtual clubs dedicated to a specific luxury brand (Riley, 2003); and

increased international travel provides consumers with an opportunity to experience luxury brands in different cultural contexts and, thereby, understand how consumers from other cultures perceive luxury brands. These trends indicate that with such culturally and socially diversified customer bases for luxury brands, we are also witnessing movements towards a convergence of perceptions regarding luxury brands across segments and, perhaps, the emergence of a global luxury brand culture.

Therefore, contemporary luxury brand consumption is influenced by a number of micro-environmental trends, such as globalisation, cultural convergence, and the democratisation of luxury. These factors are often contradictory and have different impacts on consumers. On the one hand, consumers from different cultural and social segments appear to exhibit different perceptions regarding luxury brands. On the other hand, there are also trends that make consumer perceptions of luxury brands increasingly similar across these segments.

2.4.   Previous Conceptualisations of Luxury Brands

The growing importance of the luxury sector has stimulated research into the marketing and consumption of luxury brands. However, given the multidimensionality of the brand concept, and ambiguity about what constitutes luxury (Kapferer, 2006), researchers have struggled to develop a comprehensive conceptualisation of luxury brands. Below I discuss previous conceptualisations of luxury brands and highlight gaps in the existing literature.

2.4.1. Luxury Brands as Conspicuous Goods

In the early studies, consumer motivation for purchasing luxury brands was often attributed to 'conspicuous consumption' (Bourne, 1957), which Eastman *et al.* (1999, p. 310) specify as "the motivational process by which individuals strive to improve their social standing through conspicuous consumption of consumer products that confer or symbolise status for both the individual and surrounding others". In making purchase decisions involving luxury products, consumers were perceived to be driven primarily by their desire to gain status or social prestige from the acquisition and consumption of such goods (Bourne, 1957; Goldsmith *et al.*, 1996; Grossman and Shapiro, 1988; Nia and Zaichkowsky, 2000). It was assumed that consumers of luxury products would mostly be status seeking individuals, as "the more a consumer seeks status, the more he/she will engage in behaviours, such as the consumption of status symbols, that increases their status" (Eastman *et al.*, 1999, p.3). Conspicuous consumption sheds light on some important aspects of luxury branding, such as why leading luxury brands have a global presence and how luxury brands can maintain price premiums without compromising their target market demand.

Brands create value for a consumer through the potential benefits of attaining the recognition of others, achieving a sense of belonging to an affiliated group, and accomplishing self-expression via brand image consumption (Chitty *et al.*, 2008). Luxury brands in particular have a higher perceived quality and prestige ascribed to them (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). Therefore, status seeking consumers use luxury brands as a means to achieve a desired impression on others through brand symbolism (O'Cass and Frost, 2002). As a rule, the more conspicuous the brand, the greater is the respect that can be obtained through its consumption. Global brands are recognised by larger circles of consumers, than other more local brands, and facilitate interconnections between global consumers through the consumption of the

same brands (Holt *et al.*, 2004), which makes them more conspicuous than those without international presence. As a result, status seeking consumers are more drawn to global brands, and the leading luxury brands generally have a worldwide presence (Interbrand, 2008).

Thus, luxury brands communicate the prestige, status and role position of their users (Zinkhan and Prenshaw, 1994; O'Cass and Frost, 2002). Consequently, although luxury brands charge premium prices for their offerings, they do not compromise demand, because these premiums connote the exclusivity of the brand and, in fact, increase a product's 'upmarket' or 'snob' appeal (Grewal *et al.*, 1998; O'Cass and Frost, 2002). Thus, as consumers acquire status from specific attributes that give a brand a certain appeal (O'Cass and Frost, 2002), price premium becomes an essential component of luxury branding that emphasises the exclusivity of both the brand and the user (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004).

2.4.2. Multidimensional Constructs of Luxury

With the democratisation of luxury and the growing appreciation of western brands in emerging markets, luxury brands have acquired a range of new roles other than being simply social markers of prestige and status. As a result, consumer perceptions of luxury brands have become more complex and diverse (Dubois *et al.*, 2005; Chadha and Husband, 2006). Some researchers have developed multidimensional constructs of brand luxuriousness to address these trends. Nueno and Quelch (1998), for instance, took a firm-centric approach and identified common characteristics shared by luxury brands across different product segments. These characteristics included consistent delivery of premium quality across all products in the line, from the most to the least expensive; a heritage of craftsmanship; a recognisable style or design; a limited production to ensure exclusivity and possibly to generate a customer waiting list; a marketing position that combines emotional appeal with product excellence; a

global reputation; association with a country of origin that has a strong reputation in the relevant product category (e.g., French cosmetics; Swiss watches); an element of uniqueness to each product; an ability to time design shifts when the category is fashion-intensive; and the personality and values of the brand's creator. Many of these firm-centric characteristics of brand luxuriousness were confirmed by subsequent research (Phau and Prendergast, 2000; Dubois *et al.*, 2005; Keller, 2009). Most recently, Keller (2009) detailed ten characteristics identifying luxury branding from a firm-centric perspective:

(1) Maintaining a premium image for luxury brands is crucial; controlling that image is thus a priority

(2) Luxury branding typically involves the creation of many intangible brand associations and an aspirational image.

(3) All aspects of the marketing program for luxury brands must be aligned to ensure quality products and services and pleasurable purchase and consumption experiences.

(4) Brand elements besides brand names – logos, symbols, packaging, signage, and so on – can be important drivers of brand equity for luxury brands.

(5) Secondary associations from linked personalities, events, countries and other entities can be important drivers of brand equity for luxury brands.

(6) Luxury brands must carefully control distribution via a selective channel strategy.

(7) Luxury brands must employ a premium pricing strategy with strong quality cues and few discounts and mark downs.

(8) Brand architecture for luxury brands must be managed very carefully.

(9) Competition for luxury brands must be defined broadly as they often compete with other luxury brands from other categories for discretionary consumer dollars.

(10) Luxury brands must legally protect all trademarks and aggressively combat counterfeits.

(Keller, 2009, p.2)

In contrast to Nueno and Quelch (1998) and Keller (2009), Vigneron and Johnson (2004), made an attempt to detail the consumer-perceived value of luxury brands. They detail five dimensions that consumers may use to differentiate luxury and non-luxury brands: perceived conspicuousness, uniqueness, quality, hedonism, and perceived extended-self. The first three dimensions (conspicuousness, uniqueness and quality) reflect non-personal-orientated perceptions and the other two (hedonism and perceived extended-self) reflect personal-orientated perceptions. Perceived conspicuousness refers to the view that consumers purchase luxury items as a means of asserting prestige and status. This draws on early studies of luxury brands as conspicuous objects. Uniqueness incorporates the notion that a limited supply of a luxury brand enhances consumer preference for that brand because it is perceived to be more exclusive and valued. Quality is the expectation that luxury brands offer superior quality and performance over non-luxury brands, as it is unlikely that a luxury image can be sustained when product quality is inferior. Hedonism refers to an ability of luxury items to evoke emotions such as pleasure and a sense of achievement (Dubois *et al.*, 2001, cited in Christodoulides *et al.*, 2009). Finally, perceived extended-self refers to the view that consumers often integrate the symbolic meaning of luxury brands into their own identities. This dimension of consumer-perceived brand luxuriousness draws on Belk's concept of 'extended-self', where he suggests that our possessions are "a major contributor to and reflection of our identities" (Belk, 1988, p.139, cited in Christodoulides *et al.*, 2009). The dimensions of brand luxuriousness identified by Vigneron and Johnson (2004) were also noted by other researchers (e.g., Dubois *et al.*, 2005; Keller, 2009). Most recently, Christodoulides *et al.* (2009) have replicated the original study by Vigneron and Johnson

(2004) and found that previously identified dimensions of brand luxuriousness may need to be adjusted depending on the context of their application. In particular, they found that the original dimension of uniqueness identified by Vigneron and Johnson (2004) although an important characteristic of luxury brands for western consumers, is not as important for luxury seekers in Asia. Therefore, Christodoulides *et al.* (2009) concluded that additional research is needed in the area to explore these differences regarding consumer perceptions of brand luxuriousness.

An alternative approach to conceptualising luxury goods was developed by Vickers and Renald (2003). Their model appears to fulfil calls to apply an integrative perspective to brand definition (Tynan *et al.*, 2010) and reflects the brand perspectives discussed by Buchanan-Oliver *et al.* (2008) symbolic, functional, psychological and experiential. Vickers and Renald (2003) propose that luxury and non-luxury brands can be differentiated according to the functional, experiential and symbolic interactional dimensions of a product. They describe the functional dimension as a set of product features that solve extrinsic consumption needs through physical and service attributes (e.g., product quality); experientialism as product features that stimulate sensory pleasure; and the 'symbolic interactional' dimension as product components that are related to status and affiliation with a desired group. Vickers and Renald (2003) have found that there is a fundamental difference in the mix of these three components for luxury and for non-luxury brands. For instance, consumers expect luxury items to be of better quality than non-luxury products (functional dimension), to include design features that will provide consumers with a sense of pleasure (experiential dimension), and to possess a prestigious name that is affiliated with a high level of social status (symbolic interactional dimension); (Vickers and Renald, 2003). Christodoulides *et al.* (2009) also note that that the primary value of luxury brands is psychological, and that their consumption is

dependent upon a distinctive mix of experiential and symbolic cues, which are of lesser importance for non-luxury brands. In a similar vein, Berthon *et al.* (2009) discuss three constituent value dimensions of luxury brands: functional (What physical attributes does the brand possess? What does the brand do?); experiential (What does the brand mean to the individual?); and symbolic (What does the brand mean to others?). However, in contrast to Vickers and Renald (2003), Berthon *et al.* (2009) argue that there is no absolute differentiation between luxury and non-luxury brands, but rather that they exist on a continuum. Moreover, they also note that functional, symbolic, and experiential dimensions of luxury are contextual and may change over time depending on the individual and on socio-cultural beliefs:

> Symbolic and functional value change with the context. While coral was valuable in 5th century China, it's not very valuable today. Similarly, the fact that in the 1920's Rolex watch was accurate to one second a month is somewhat beside the point today when the cheapest digital watch easily surpasses this. Experiential value for an individual might also change over time – as their tastes evolve or change. For example, even gourmets might think paying $335 for an ounce of Beluga caviar excessive, but as their tastes become more sophisticated, they will seek these products out. (Berthon *et al.*, 2009, p.49)

2.4.3. Luxury Experiences

In some of the most recent approaches to conceptualising luxury brands, researchers have started to emphasise the importance of consumer experiences in luxury branding (e.g., Atwal and Williams, 2009; Fionda and Moore, 2009; Gistri *et al.*, 2009; Keller, 2009; Tynan *et al.*, 2010). Tynan *et al.* (2010) note that luxury brand experiences offer an important way of enhancing the value derived from luxury brands. Gistri *et al.* (2009) argue that the hedonic nature of luxury brands provides consumers with an experience of sensory gratification that is unobtainable from non-luxury brands. Fionda and Moore (2009) also note that consumer

experiences are crucial to a luxury brand's marketing communication process, because "the consumption experience provides an insight into a brand lifestyle by making it reality" (p.351). However, while researchers note that consumer experiences are important aspects of luxury branding, these experiences have not been clearly defined and their role in forming consumer perceptions of luxury brands has not been addressed. Furthermore, Atwal and Williams (2009), using theoretical dimensions of involvement and intensity, provide a typology of consumer experiences associated with luxury brands. They define involvement as "the level of inter-activity between the supplier and the customer" (p.5), and intensity as "the perception of the strength of feelings towards the interaction" (p.5). The authors identify four zones of luxury brand experiences that vary in terms of their levels of involvement and intensity: entertainment, educational, aesthetic and escapist. The entertainment zone includes experiences with low levels of intensity and involvement (e.g., fashion shows); educational experiences are characterised by a high level of involvement, but a low level of intensity (e.g., lectures on cruise ships); aesthetic experiences are those where consumers are less actively involved, but the level of intensity is high (e.g., admiring the interior of a designer boutique); finally, the escapist zone involves experiences where consumers are highly involved and the level of intensity is also high (e.g., luxury tourism). Atwal and Williams (2009) argue that these experiential zones reinforce luxury brand image and will become important components of luxury marketing. While this study is insightful, it was not based on empirical findings and leaves a range of questions for further research, such as what roles these experiential zones play in defining brand luxuriousness and what importance luxury experiences carry for consumers in their interactions with luxury brands.

2.4.4. Gaps in the Existing Literature

Despite this growing interest in luxury branding, there are gaps in the existing literature, particularly in the area of the conceptualisation of luxury brands (Kapferer, 2006; Berthon *et al.*, 2009). Various characteristics and promises that luxury brands offer for their consumers have been noted (e.g., Vickers and Renand, 2003; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004) but why these perceptions exist and how they are formed remain largely unexplored. Similarly, although researchers note that the consumption of luxury brands is characterised by luxury-specific experiences (e.g., Atwal and Williams, 2009), these experiences and their roles in consumer-brand interactions remain largely unexplored.

Recent studies in branding theory note the importance of brand meanings in exploring and understanding consumer-brand relationships (e.g., Fournier, 1998; Berry, 2000; Holt, 2004; Bengtsson and Ostberg, 2006; Batey, 2008; Phillips and McQuarrie, 2010). Berry (2000) defines brand meanings as stories that reflect the consumer's dominant perceptions of the brand that have emerged as a result of her experiences with brands. These stories are often complex, multidimensional, and polysemic in nature (Arvidsson, 2006; Phillips and McQuarrie, 2010; Puntoni *et al.*, 2010). According to Batey (2008), all brands are ultimately clusters of meanings that need to be considered more from the consumer's perspective than from the marketer's. "How a company 'positions' a brand is not necessarily how the consumer perceives that brand. Brands allow marketers to add meaning to products and services, but it is consumers who ultimately determine what a brand means" (Batey, 2008, p. 258). Uncovering meanings that consumers ascribe to brand luxuriousness is particularly important as the marketing of luxury brands is linked to crafting invigorating brand narratives (Beverland, 2004; Kapferer, 2006) and sometimes described as 'selling dreams' (Dubois and Paternault, 1995). However, with the majority of studies being driven by quantitative analysis

(Gistri *et al.*, 2009), the literature on luxury brands provides neither conceptual nor empirical insight into how consumers construct meanings associated with luxury brands.

Finally, one of the major shortcomings of the emerging theory is its predominant focus on either corporate or consumer-based brand equity. Brands, however, do not exist simply as a firm's value-adding assets which reflect consumer judgments of the company's product and services. They are also socio-cultural, ideological and political objects that infuse consumption with meaning (Holt, 2004; Schroeder, 2009). Therefore, to understand luxury brands more fully, researchers require an understanding of the culture and ideologies that surround luxury brand consumption, in addition to branding concepts, such as strategy, equity and value. This is particularly important when exploring brands that have embraced within their meaning such a central socio-cultural symbol as luxury. According to Berry (1994), luxury provides an "illuminating entrée into a basic political issue, namely, the nature of social order" (p. 6). As a result, throughout history the meaning of luxury has been infused with many ideological agendas. In ancient civilisations, whether of Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Chinese, or Amerindians, luxury items were used as symbols of leading groups and power (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009). In the days of Plato, the Romans and early Christianity, luxury was perceived in a pejorative form that signified the corruption of a virtuous manly life; and with the works of Adam Smith, luxury has become a vindication of commercial society (Berry, 1994). Today, the notion of luxury embraces all of these previous meanings and has also acquired some new ones, such as being a symbol of fashion and an affluent lifestyle (Chadha and Hubbard, 2006; Michman and Mazze, 2006). In order to understand the consumption of luxury brands fully, we require an understanding of how consumer interpretation of luxury brands is influenced by socio-cultural functions of luxury. Moreover, current cultural, social, and external trends suggest that consumer perceptions of

luxury brands do not depend only on consumer-brand interactions, but are also influenced by a number of external factors, such as globalisation, cultural differences and social class. These factors are often contradictory and have different impacts on consumers and, therefore, must be taken into account when exploring luxury brand consumption.

2.5. Conclusion

Luxury brands are a special form of branding that use the socio-cultural meaning of modern luxury to create an exclusive brand image and appeal. Over the past two decades, the market for luxury brands has experienced rapid growth brought about by two major factors. Firstly, the luxury market had been transformed from a constellation of small, family-owned artisan businesses in Europe into a global consolidated brand-driven economic sector led by the vision of brand-driven luxury conglomerates. Secondly, the demand for luxury was stimulated by a number of favourable macro-environmental trends. The outcome of these trends is a complex, sometimes paradoxical consumer market for luxury brands. On the one hand, the market is culturally and socially diversified and consumers from different cultural and social segments appear to exhibit different perceptions and motivations for purchasing luxury brands. On the other hand, there are also forces that contribute to the emergence of a shared idea of what a contemporary luxury brand should be, making consumer perceptions increasingly similar (Catry, 2003; Chadha and Husband, 2006). This paradox calls for investigation of a consumer-perceived view of luxury brands that can take into account not only the interactions between consumers and brands but also the context of the socio-cultural forces that influence luxury brand consumption. Previous studies were focused on identifying characteristics that are held in common by luxury brands (e.g., Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Keller, 2009; Berthon *et al.*, 2009), and research has predominantly been conducted via quantitative methods (Gistri *et al.*, 2009). However, in order to understand the consumption

of luxury brands in light of the current socio-cultural trends, researchers need to explore the meanings that consumers ascribe to luxury brands and the process of how the meaning of brand luxuriousness emerges. In the following chapter I will turn to studies of the cultural perspective of branding to develop a set of research questions that take these meaning-making perspectives into account.

CHAPTER III: CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

3.1. Introduction

Companies are concerned with brand value and equity, whereas consumers deal with brand meanings. The meanings derived from brands help consumers to understand and give a shape to the world around them (Batey, 2008) by becoming part of consumer self-concept (Cova 1997; Escalas 2004) and by fostering brand communities (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Muñiz and O'Guinn 2005; Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver 2010). Brand meaning is, therefore, a central and fundamental construct in understanding how consumers perceive, evaluate, and experience brands, as brands are first and foremost bundles of meanings. As McCracken (2005) and others assert, were it not for these meanings "it would be impossible to talk about brand images, brand personalities, or brand positions" (McCracken, 2005 p.179). In the previous chapter, it was noted that the current literature on luxury brands provides limited insight into meanings that consumers themselves ascribe to luxury brands and the processes by which these meanings are formed. In this chapter, I examine recent advances in branding theory, and develop a conceptual model of brand meaning. The aim is to gain an insight into how consumers derive their personalised perceptions of brands that can aid qualitative data analyses of interview texts and their emerging themes undertaken during the empirical part of this study. The chapter will first discuss the conceptualisations of brands in the marketing literature, and explore the roles that brands play within consumer culture. Next it will examine the theoretical concept of brand meaning, and then continue to develop the conceptual dimensions of brand meaning: (1) the socio-cultural beliefs about brands, (2) brand uses and gratifications, (3) consumer experiences of brand meaning, and (4) the perceived characteristics of brands. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of how the

developed conceptual model will be used to explore the meanings consumers ascribe to luxury brands, with findings from the participant interviews in the subsequent chapters.

3.2.   The Concept of the Brand

Since we are dealing with approaches and perspectives to branding it is relevant to address what is meant by the term 'brand' and how this term has been used in the marketing literature. The American Marketing Association (AMA) formally defines brand as:

> A name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers. The legal term for brand is trademark. A brand may identify one item, a family of items, or all items of that seller. If used for the firm as a whole, the preferred term is trade name (American Marketing Association, 2011).

This definition of brand, adopted by many marketing textbooks, is underpinned by multiple theoretical perspectives that convey a broad and diverse range of principles and concepts that are used about brands (De Chernatony and Segal-Horn, 2003; Brodie, 2009). They include an information economic perspective which views brands as market signals (e.g., Erdem and Swait, 1998), a psychological perspective which underpins the theory of consumer brand knowledge (e.g., Keller 1993), and broader relational social, and cultural perspectives that go beyond "seeing the brand just functioning as an entity and also see it functioning as a process where it can take on other meanings" (Brodie, 2009, p. 108). These broader perspectives widen the scope of branding by drawing on social psychology, sociology, social anthropology and other relevant disciplines (Buchanan-Oliver *et al.*, 2008) to include research on brand relationships (e.g., Fournier, 1998), brand communities (e.g., Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001), co-created brand experiences (e.g., Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004), and consumer

consumption practices and brand culture (e.g., Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Schroeder, 2009).

The scope of branding is, therefore, extensive. There are many aspects to brands and multiple perspectives from which they can be studied. Over the past several decades, branding theory and practice have developed their own specialised language, producing so many definitions and brand concepts that the term "has become so overdefined that its meanings are variable" (Stern, 2006, p.216). For instance, Brodie (2009) identifies four general types of concepts that are used about brands – consumer-based brand concepts (e.g., identity, expressions, personality), organisational concepts (e.g., clusters of values; positioning), relationship concepts (e.g., promises, commitments, experiences), and financial concepts (i.e., brand equity– and calls for an integrative theory of branding within the 'service brand' perspective. Others approach the study of brands from different angles and propose alternative classification schemas addressing the components of brands and brand conceptualisations (e.g., Stern, 2006; Jevons, 2007; Merz *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, the concepts of branding have been applied not only to goods and services, but also to entire companies, places, regions, universities, museums, artists, and even individuals (Montoya and Vandehey, 2005). With this diffusion of brands into all aspects of consumer lives, brands appear in a wide variety of ways. Some brands are more likely to be associated with physical products and logos, whereas others are perceived to be less tangible and signify processes and spaces (Bengtsson and Ostberg, 2006). In addition, branding does not involve only relationships between companies and consumers, but includes many other stakeholders such as employees, communities, and even countries and regions (Hatch and Schultz, 2003; Jones, 2005; Cayla and Eckhardt, 2008). Consequently, brands are more than complex and require further attention both as devices that bring competitive advantages to their legal owners (Bengtsson

and Ostberg, 2006) and as consumption practices that shape and reflect consumer culture (Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Kates, 2006; Schroeder, 2009).

This section provides an overview of the brandling scholarship with particular emphasis on research into brands that has a consumer rather than a firm focus. It will first explore the conceptualisations of consumer brand perceptions that are evident in the branding literature, in order to uncover the dominant foundational concepts. This is followed by an analysis of the consumer culture perspective to provide further insights into the multiple roles that brands play in consumers' lives. Overall, this section highlights that while the research on branding is extensive, there are gaps in the literature in terms of understanding how consumers experience and construct brand meanings.

3.2.1. Brand Management Literature

Companies are increasingly recognizing that brands are amongst their most important assets (Madden *et al.* 2006; Merz *et al.*, 2009). As a result, much of the existing research into consumer perceptions of brands has been conducted from a managerial perspective. These studies focus on understanding the dimensions of brand value and the brand value creation process (Bengtsson and Ostberg, 2006; Schroeder, 2009). Consequently, the marketing literature explores the influences impacting the recognition of a brand's logo (Gardner and Levy, 1955; Reynolds and Gutman, 1984), the imaginary associated with the brand (Park *et al.*, 1986; Roth, 1995), and more recently the relationships between companies, consumers and other stakeholders (Iansiti and Levien, 2004; Jones, 2005). Merz *et al.* (2009) offer a chronological summary of branding research and discuss the evolution of the branding theory in marketing thought and practice (Figure 2). As this and other studies suggest, the focus of the theory has been gradually moving from companies towards consumers, in seeking to

understand brand value creation (Keller, 2003; Prahalad, 2004). There is broad agreement in the managerial literature that brands have functional, symbolic, experiential and relational dimensions (Jevons, 2007; Buchanan-Oliver *et al.*, 2008).

Figure 2. Chronological Summary of the Branding Literature

Timeline and Relevant Literature	Fundamental Ideas
1900s-1930s: Individual Good-Focus Brand Era Copeland (1923), Low and Fullerton (1994), Strasser (1989)	Brand as Identifiers
1930s-1990s: Value-Focus Brand Era *Functional Value-Focus Branding* (Brown 1950; Jacoby *et al.*, 1971; Jacoby *et al.*, 1977; Park *et al.*, 1986) *Symbolic Value-Focus Branding* (Gardner and Levy 1955; Goffman, 1959; Levy, 1959)	Brands as Functional Images Brands as Symbolic Images
1990's-2000: Relationship-Focus Brand Era *Customer-Firm Relationships Focus* (Aaker, 1991; Blattberg and Deighton; 1996; Kapferer, 1992; Keller, 1993) *Customer-Brand Relationship Focus* (Aaker, 1997; Fournier, 1998; Gobe, 2001) *Firm-Brand Relationship Focus* (Berry, 2000; de Chernatony, 1999; Gilly and Wolfinbarger, 1998; King, 1991)	Brands as Knowledge Brands as Relationship Partner Brands as Promise
2000 and Forward: Stakeholder-Focus Brand Era McAlexander *et al.* (2002), Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), Muniz and Schau (2005), Ballantyne and Aiken (2007), Ind and Bjerke (2007)	Brands as Dynamic and Social Processes

Merz *et al.*, 2009

3.2.1.1.   *Functional Brand Perspective*

Brands were first considered in the marketing literature in the early 1900s (Stern, 2006; Merz *et al.*, 2009). Early studies viewed brands as merely identifiers of companies' products that assisted consumers in differentiating between competing offerings (Copeland, 1923; DiMingo, 1988). "The central notion was that brands constituted a way for customers to identify and recognize goods (and their manufacturer). Manufacturer-branded products had clear and distinct identities. Their distinctive packaging made them clearly identifiable on sight. As identifiers, brands allowed replication of purchase decisions" (Low and Fullerton, 1994, cited in Merz *et al.*, 2009, p. 330). Increased attention to branding occurred when companies realised that brands offered more benefits than merely providing products with recognisable labels. A clearly positioned brand image could not only differentiate a brand from its competitors (DiMingo, 1988), but also add value to market offerings by enabling consumers to identify the needs satisfied by the brand (Park *et al.*, 1986; Roth, 1995).

The 'functional benefits' of the brand refers to consumer perceptions as to whether a brand satisfies their immediate and practical needs (Bhat and Reddy, 1998), and reduces perceived risk for consumers by preventing or solving their current and anticipated problems (Roth, 1995). With its reliance on economic theory and emphasis on rationality in buying behaviour, the functional perspective assumes that when consumers evaluate brands they are guided mainly by cognitive reasoning related to the brand's practical benefits and efficiency (Gardner and Levy, 1955). For instance, Brown (1950) argues that functional attributes such as the physical characteristics of the brand, packaging, price, and warranties affect consumers' brand choice. Similarly, Park *et al.* (1986) suggest that for brands with utilitarian concepts, the marketing mix elements should communicate the brand's effective performance in solving consumption-related problems (e.g., getting dirty clothes white and bright, removing stains,

tasting good etc.); and Erdem and Swait (1998) noted that the clarity and credibility of brands as signals of product positions decreases perceived risk to consumers, and hence increases consumer expected utility.

Therefore, the functional perspective perceives brands as identifiers of products and as differentiating devices that communicate and enhance the product's perceived utilitarian benefits in the marketplace (Merz *et al.*, 2009). Within this perspective, consumers make rational choices regarding their purchases of products based on information communicated by brands. As a result, brand value was perceived to be located in the characteristics of the brand that conveyed the utilitarian benefits of the product.

3.2.1.2.   *Symbolic Brand Perspective*

Under the influence of the behavioural sciences in the 1950s and 1960s (Meenagham, 1995), the marketing discipline came to realise that consumers purchase brands not only because of their functional attributes, but also for the symbolic meanings associated with them (Gardner and Levy, 1955; Levy, 1959; Padgett and Allen, 1997). This change in conception of brands was prompted by Gardner and Levy's (1955, p. 34) call for a "greater awareness of the social and psychological nature of products", and Levy (1959, p. 124) proposing that "products turn people's thoughts and feelings toward symbolic implications". Since then, a number of studies have addressed the symbolic benefits of branding (Belk, 1988; Meenaghan, 1995; Bhat and Reddy, 1998). This body of research perceives brands as signifiers of meanings that are shared and used by consumers in social interactions (Solomon, 1983; Elliott, 1994; Richins, 1994; Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). According to Park *et al.* (1986), the brand's symbolic meanings satisfy consumers' internally generated needs for self-concept and social identification.

People engage in consumption behaviour, in part at least, to construct and express their self-concept and personal identity (Belk, 1988; Richins, 1994; Escalas and Bettman, 2003). Brands offer symbolism that assists consumers in achieving these purposes. For instance, Escalas and Bettman (2003) found that consumers represent themselves through their brand choices based on the congruity between brand and user self-image associations, and Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) assert that brands are often used as symbolic resources for the construction and maintenance of personal identity. Chaplin and John (2005) demonstrate the power of brand's symbolic meaning by showing how children and adolescents grow to develop self-brand connections that reflect their desired personality, characteristics, and reference group affiliation. In addition, a considerable amount of attention in the marketing literature was given to the construct of brand personality, which refers to the set of human characteristics associated with a brand (Aaker, 1997). Researchers found that imbuing brands with personality traits enabled consumers to relate brands to their selves (Fournier, 1998), by evoking images that prompt "a comparison process to determine whether the [branded] product and self-image are congruent" (Chaplin and John, 2005, p. 120). In other words, consumers search for brands that they perceived to match their personalities. According to Aaker (1997), as goods were becoming increasingly similar, brand personality provided a key way to differentiate a brand in a product category, and was considered to be a central driver of consumer preference and choice of brands. For instance, the personality traits associated with the Coke brand are cool, all-American, and real; these traits are memorable and differentiate the brand from its competitors (e.g., Pepsi is young, exciting, and hip; Dr Pepper is nonconforming, unique, and fun) (Plummer, 1985; Pendergast, 1993 cited in Aaker, 1997).

Furthermore, brand symbolism provides consumers with resources for social identification and group membership affiliation (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; O'Cass and Frost, 2002).

Veblen (1899) was the first to report that people purchase and use products as social 'badges' that reflect their status within a community. Similarly, Byrne (1999) argued that the acquisition of material goods is one of the strongest signals of social success and status, and Zinkhan and Prenshaw (1994) found that brands with exclusive appeals communicate the prestige, status, and role-position of the brand user. Moreover, brands help consumers to obtain and express their affiliation with social groups (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Holt, 2004) through fostering a sense of relational connection with other brand users, which arises as the result of shared attachments to a brand (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Kates, 2006). According to Kates (2006), these connections are most organised and prominent in brand configurations such as brand communities (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001), subcultures of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995) and cultures of consumption (Kozinets, 2001). For instance, Schouten and McAlexander (1995) show that in the case of the Harley Davidson subculture of consumption, consumers formed intergroup connections through the development and sharing of a set of common values and activities that were derived from meanings conveyed by this brand. Brand-related communities will be explored in more detail in the discussion of experiential and relational dimensions of brand, and again within the consumer culture perspective later in this chapter.

Therefore, while the functional perspective viewed brands as differentiating devices that communicate utilitarian benefits about products, the symbolic perspective emphasised the importance of brand meanings in increasing the value of market offerings and influencing consumer brand choice (Park *et al.*, 1986; Aaker, 1997). It viewed brands as signifiers of social meanings, and assumed that when consumers purchase brands, they purchase them for the meanings associated with these brands. Consequently, brand value was perceived to be found in brand meanings.

3.2.1.3.   *Experiential and Relationship Brand Perspectives*

The conceptualisations of functional and symbolic brand perspectives were developed under the influence of traditional company-centric views of markets (Merz *et al.*, 2009), which assumed that firms acted autonomously in producing the value of their products and services (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Within this view, consumers were regarded as 'targets' for the firm's offerings and it was argued that "the firm and the consumer had distinct roles of production and consumption, respectively" (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004, p.6). Thus, the functional and symbolic perspectives formerly assumed that brand value was entirely created within the firm, and the consumer role in this process was limited to simply deciding on whether to accept or reject the value proposition. Consequently, the early studies of branding focused on exploring the aspects of brand value, such as functional and symbolic benefits (e.g., Park *et al.*, 1986), paying little attention to how consumers interact with brands (Merz *et al.*, 2009).

The company-centric view has gradually been replaced by the consumer-centric view that perceives consumers as the co-creators of value in marketing interactions. This now asserts that consumers are actively involved, and that they interact with their suppliers in every respect, from product design to product consumption (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004; Lusch and Vargo 2006; Payne *et al.*, 2008). Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004, p.7) argue that "high-quality interactions that enable an individual customer to co-create unique experiences with the company are the key to unlocking new sources of competitive advantage". In branding theory, this change in the dominant logic of marketing (Vargo and Lusch, 2004) has resulted in the "reconsideration of how branding 'works' and shifted attention from brand producers and products toward consumer response and services to understand brand value creation" (Schroeder, 2009, p.123). The consumer-centric view is evident in the

conceptualisations of brands as consumer-based equity (Keller, 1993; Aaker 1997), as clusters of experiences (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Berry, 2000; de Chernatony, 2006), and as relationships that emerge from consumer-brand interactions and from other stakeholders (Fournier, 1998; Prahalad, 2004; Thompson *et al.*, 2006; Payne *et al.*, 2009). A common theme in this body of research is that consumers do not passively follow the company's idea of what a brand constitutes; instead, consumers experience brands and, as a result of these experiences, take an active role in co-creating brand value and meanings (Berry, 2000; Payne *et al.*, 2009).

The early models of consumer-based brand equity highlighted that brand value creation takes place in the minds of consumers rather than being pre-determined by the company (Merz *et al.*, 2009). For instance, Keller (1993) developed a conceptual model of brand equity from the perspective of an individual consumer. This model theorised the effects of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand, and implied the joint efforts of consumers and firms in co-creating brand equity and value. Similarly, Aaker (1996) defined brand equity as a set of drivers (i.e., brand awareness, perceived quality, brand loyalty and brand associations) which exist in consumers' minds and which determine the relationship between consumers and the firm; while Brown and Dacin (1997) found that brand knowledge influences consumer beliefs about and attitudes toward new products produced by a company.

As consumers have increasingly been viewed less as rational decision makers whose brand choices lead to purchasing outcomes and more as individuals who have feelings, fantasies, and who respond emotionally to consumption situations (Holbrook, 2000), the idea of brands as experiences has become popular in the marketing literature. Marketing practitioners have come to realise that understanding how consumers experience brands is essential for

developing marketing strategies and co-creating brand value (Schmitt, 1999; Prahalad, 2004; Pane et al, 2009; Brakus *et al.*, 2009). Schmitt (1999) proposed that companies can gain competitive advantage by getting consumers to "sense, think, feel, act, and relate" to their brands, while Pine and Gilmore (1999) called experiences the next step in the progression of economic value. They argued that companies must stage memorable events for their consumers, and that the experience itself is gradually becoming the product and the brand that consumers are seeking in their purchasing decisions. This view found considerable support in the consumer studies of retail and entertainment sectors such as the tourist experiences of Las Vegas (Firat, 2001) and the flagship brand stores of the ESPN zone in Chicago (Kozinets *et al.*, 2004).

The concept of brand relationship experiences has gained a particular interest (Fournier, 1998; Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001; Thompson *et al.*, 2006; Payne *et al.*, 2009). The notion that consumers engage in relationships with brands has originated from the studies of the symbolic benefits of branding and the construct of brand personality. According to Fournier (1998), imbuing brands with human characteristics not only provides consumers with resources for personal identification, but it also allows consumers to become relational partners with brands by forming bonds that are similar to interpersonal relationships. Similarly, Aggarwal (2004, p.88) noted that "since relationships are a sequence of interactions between parties where the probable course of future interactions between them is significantly different from that of strangers, consumer interactions with brands could also be characterized as relational", and Thompson *et al.* (2006) argued that consumer-brand relationships can cultivate a high degree of consumer passion for the brand by demonstrating "an empathetic understanding of consumers' inspirations, aspirations, life circumstances, and generating a warm feeling of community among brand users" (p.50). Recent studies show

that successful consumer-brand relationships bring many potential advantages to companies, including reduced marketing costs, ease of access to consumers, improved acquisitions and retention of consumers, brand loyalty, and increased brand equity and profitability (Blackston, 2000; Dowling, 2002; Smit *et al.*, 2007). These studies thus assert that brand value is co-created through successful consumer-brand relationships and determined through direct (i.e., through brand usage or consumption) or indirect (i.e., through perception) consumer experiences with the brand (Merz *et al.*, 2009). Consequently, strengthening relationships with consumers is increasingly regarded as "a central pillar of market differentiation and sustainable competitive advantage" (Thompson *et al.*, 2006, p. 50), with the relationship perspective becoming the main theoretical lens for understanding consumer-brand interactions (Peelen, 2003; Smit *et al.*, 2007; Swaminathan *et al.*, 2007; Payne *et al.*, 2009).

Further insights into brand relationships have been gained through the studies of brand-related communities (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Holt, 2004; Muñiz and Schau, 2005; Kates, 2006). The symbolic perspective had previously suggested that brands convey social meanings that consumers acquire in order to affirm their affiliation with brand-related groups (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Holt, 2004). The recent relational studies show that these brand-related groups represent interpretive communities that co-create brand value through social negotiation and interpretation of brand meanings, practices and acceptable means of demonstrating affiliation to the brand culture (Kates, 2006; Merz et al, 2006). Consequently, these communities actively construct brand meanings rather than following the company's idea of the brand constitution (Payne *et al.*, 2009). For instance, McAlexander *et al.* (2002) argued that the members of brand-related communities share their consumption experiences and enhance each other's appreciation of the product and the brand, and Keller (2001) suggested that brand-related communities cultivate consumer engagement with the brand so

that these "consumers themselves become brand evangelists and ambassadors on behalf of the brand, and communicate about the brand, and strengthen the brand ties with others" (p.16). These studies highlight the importance of consumer-to-consumer interactions and assert the role of consumers as co-creators in the brand value creation process.

Most recently, brand researchers' attention has been drawn to the forces that influence brand value creation and are located outside consumer-brand interactions – such as cultural influences and relationships with various stakeholders (Holt, 2004; Jones, 2005; Gregory, 2007; Merz *et al.*, 2009; Schroeder, 2009). For instance, Holt (2004) used the term 'iconic brands' to describe exceptionally successful brands that have integrated cultural meanings into their identities to increase their value. According to Holt (2004, p. 85), the narratives conveyed by iconic brands are so influential that they could "change culture at a deeper level, influencing how people understand themselves in relation to the nation's ideals". Accordingly, the study highlights the importance of cultural influences in the process of brand value creation. Furthermore, Jones (2005, p. 16) suggested that "the value of a brand can lie in a range of relationships, many of which have a synergistic relation to each other", proposing a stakeholder framework of brand equity that invites us to consider the range of stakeholders who affect the creation of brand value, including consumers, managers and employees, governments, media and public opinion, suppliers and distribution partners, and competitors. Similarly, Gregory (2007) argued that brand meaning is negotiated within dynamic environments in which stakeholders are diverse and the entire network of a company is part of the stakeholder group. These findings suggest that brand value is not only co-created through isolated dyadic relationships between brands and consumers, but also through multiple intertwined relationships that involve a range of stakeholders (e.g., consumers and consumers, consumers and employees, consumers and culture).

Therefore, rather than solely highlighting that brands offer different types of benefits (i.e., functional and symbolic), the experiential and relational perspectives address the ways in which the brand value is created, recognising consumers as significant actors in the value creation process (Merz *et al.*, 2009). Within these brand perspectives, consumer experiences and brand relationships are viewed as critical components in understanding and facilitating brand meaning and value co-creation. However, with the exception of a few consumer studies of brand relationships (e.g., Fournier, 1998; Muñiz and Schau, 2005; Thompson *et al.*, 2006), the general concept of brand experience is still underdeveloped (Caru and Cova, 2003; Buchanan-Oliver *et al.*, 2008; Phillips and McQuarrie, 2010). Marketing researchers have only recently attempted to conceptualise and measure the construct of brand experience. These recent studies were centred around understanding consumer response to brand-related information (Schmitt, 1999; Brakus *et al.*, 2009) and offer limited insight into how experiences contribute to brand meaning and value co-creation, which perhaps requires a more holistic and interpretive approach. "The work on brand experience makes no allowance for brand-created narratives […] The account of how consumers experience brands, and the means by which this experience can be acquired, appears to be incomplete, in the same way that the elaboration likelihood model proved incomplete as an account of the possible routes to persuasion" (Phillips and McQuarrrie, 2010, p.370).

3.2.2. Consumer Culture Perspective of Brands

The branding literature has come to recognise the importance of meanings derived from brands, and from consumers as active co-creators of these meanings. However, one of the key shortcomings of the emerging theory is that researchers have focused predominantly on exploring how consumer interactions with brands influenced the value creation process and increased competitive advantages for companies (e.g., Berry, 2000; Prahalad, 2004;

Payne *et al.*, 2009; Brakus *et al.*, 2009). Consequently, their findings seem to be confined by the bounds of commercial activity and do not give full justice to a broad spectrum of meanings and experiences associated with brands, leaving these key brand concepts theoretically and empirically underdeveloped (Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling 2006; Phillips and McQuarrie, 2010).

Further insights into how consumers experience and co-create brand meanings can be gained from studies of a consumer culture perspective that acknowledge the importance of brands in society, and explore the socio-cultural and experiential aspects of brand consumption (e.g., Stern, 1995; Ritson and Elliott, 1999; Holbrook, 2000; Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling, 2006; Bengtsson and Ostberg, 2006; Schroeder, 2009). This body of research recognises that brands have a role to play in many spheres of consumer lives and, therefore, can be encountered in a wide variety of ways (Bengtsson and Ostberg, 2006). For instance, it has been shown that consumers use brands as expressions of their self-concept (Cova 1997; Escalas 2004), and seek immersion in experiences conveyed by brands (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Firat, 2001). Consumers also use brands to foster brand communities (Muñiz and Schau, 2005), subcultures of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), and use brands as resources in constructing regional and national identities (Cayla and Eckhardt, 2008; Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver 2010). The multiple ways in which brands are used, encourage consumers to co-author different meanings of brands (Ritson and Elliott, 1995; Ritson and Elliott, 1999; Thompson, *et al.* 2006), and influence their experiences and relationships with these brands (Fournier, 1998; Monga, 2002). Therefore, the consumer culture perspective suggests that brand meanings are not fixed and constant. Instead, they are diverse in terms of their uses and purposes, continuously reinterpreted, and located within society and culture (Ritson and Elliott, 1995; Fournier, 1998; Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling, 2006).

Broadly speaking, the studies of consumer culture suggest that there are three ways or levels at which brand meaning is seen to be internalised by consumers. First, the studies of consumer-identity projects note that brands become meaningful at the level of individual consumer experiences and their personal relationships with brands. The findings suggest that consumers use brand meanings to construct and reflect their self-identity and achieve personal goals (Fournier, 1998; Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). Consequently, the meanings of brands are interpreted in accordance with an individual's life and preferences (Ligas and Cotte, 1999). Next, the research on brand-related interpretive communities and marketplace cultures suggests that brands play important roles in fostering communities. These studies show that some brand meanings are jointly co-created and shared by the members of a community, influencing how individual consumers perceive brands (Muñiz and Schau, 2005; Thompson, 2004; Kates, 2006). Finally, the brand culture perspective (Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling, 2006) provides cultural, historical, and political groundings to understand brands, asserting that there is a reciprocal interaction between brand meanings and consumer culture.

In a cultural context, consumers are viewed as meaning-centred individuals who, consistent with the symbolic brand perspective, make their consumption choices based on the socio-cultural meanings conveyed by brands (Belk, 1988; McCracken, 1986; Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). From this perspective, consumer interpretations of brand meaning portray essences of their individuality and reflect existing and desirable connections with others (Kleine *et al.*, 1995; McAlexander and Schouten, 1995). Accordingly, the research on consumer identity projects and brands explores how consumers use brand meanings in constructing narratives of their identities and life stories (Belk, 1988; Thompson, 1997; Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Fournier, 1998; Baumgartner, 2002). These studies show

that consumers create multiple interpretations of brand meaning by enacting and personalising cultural scripts that align their various self-concepts (e.g., social self, ideal self, etc.) with brand symbolism, both during the consumption and in subsequent social interactions with others (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Bengtsson and Ostberg, 2006). For instance, Belk (1988) notes that products and brands can become part of the consumers' extended-self, and Schau and Gilly (2003) found that brands help consumers to create multiple cyber self-representations without necessarily compromising a sense of an integrated self. Moreover, it has also been suggested that individual consumer relationships with brands can serve multiple purposes and, depending on their purpose, can add different meanings to consumer lives (Fournier, 1998). For instance, brand relationships can resolve concerns that individuals address in daily life (Mick and Buhl, 1992), or they can help to accomplish important life projects and tasks (Cantor *et al.*, 1987). Consequently, Fournier (1998) notes that "relationship is, in essence, what the relationship means" (p.345), and that understanding consumer interactions with brands requires "a mastery of the meanings the relationship provides […] in the context that shapes the significance of [this] relationship for the person involved" (p.346). These findings suggest that consumers use creative ways to combine and adapt meanings to fit their own lives (Ligas and Cotte, 1999). Therefore, not only do different consumers derive different brand meanings, but each consumer can also co-create multiple meanings from the same brand depending on the purpose and context in which the relationship with the brand is embedded (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998; Fournier, 1998; Schau and Gilly, 2003).

Furthermore, consumers do not just construct brand meanings individually; they also co-create meanings jointly with others. We have discussed that brands are capable of fostering a sense of social connection with other brand users, which arises as the result of shared

attachments to a brand (Muñiz and O'Guinn, 2001). These connections are most prominent in brand-related interpretive communities and marketplace cultures (e.g., McAlexander *et al.*, 2002; Thompson, 2004). Although different definitions and types of brand-related social groupings exist (e.g., brand communities, subcultures of consumption), a common fundamental premise of these communities is that they are "characterised by structured polysemy that allows for a limited range of readings relevant to the cultural identifications and social positionings of consumers" (Kates, 2006, p. 95). In other words, the members of a brand-related community share interpretive strategies, resulting in similar readings of brand meaning (Hirschman, 1998; Scott, 1994). Kates (2006) provides insight into how brand-related social groups influence consumer interpretations of brands. First, the relational connections among the members of community create 'linking value' (Cova, 1997) that bonds consumers to each other through a set of common meanings and activities (McAlexander *et al.*, 2002), helping consumers to negotiate a sense of social affiliation. Therefore, consumers accept socially constructed brand meanings to convey their affiliation with other brand users and the group. For instance, fashion discourses about brands can help consumers to fit within their social circles (Thompson and Haytko, 1997). Secondly, the members of an interpretive community can purposely choose to create oppositional readings of brand meaning in order to establish their group as a separate entity and to differentiate themselves from other brand users. For instance, Thompson and Arsel (2004) discussed how culture jammers and anti-brand activists were involved in constructing negative readings of the Starbucks brand with a purpose of expressing their beliefs and values. Finally, the meanings created by brand-related social groupings play a role in the construction of consumer identity. In particular, the studies show that consumers often incorporate the shared meanings and values of interpretive communities into narratives of their own personal identities. Such interactions were evident amongst Harley Davidson bikers (Schouten and

McAlexander, 1995), Star Trek enthusiasts (Kozinets, 2001), and devoted Apple users (Muñiz and Schau, 2005). These findings suggest that the participation in brand-related communities and social groupings adds more complexity to understanding how consumers interact with brands. Not only are consumers guided by their personal goals and values in co-authoring brand meanings, but they also take into account the goals and values of social groups they affiliate with.

Finally, the Brand Culture perspective developed by Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling (2006) argues that neither managers nor consumers are the sole authors of brand meanings because cultural codes constrain how branding works to produce meanings. Consequently, this perspective recognises that "culture and history can provide a necessary contextualizing counterpoint to managerial and information processing views of branding's interaction with consumers and society" (Schroeder, 2009, p. 124), and explores how brands create meanings and value in the marketplace through the cultural codes– such as history, images, myths, art, and theatre. For instance, Holt (2004) discussed how the deployment of cultural myths can leverage the power of socio-cultural meanings to build successful brands. Likewise, Mark and Pearson (2001) link the meaning of the Nike brand to a long history of a warrior archetype, arguing that Nike's success derives from the consumers' inherent dispositions toward the meanings of strength, bravery, and achievement encoded in its heroic brand image. Moreover, within the Brand Culture perspective, brands are not only mediators of cultural meanings; they have also become "ideological referents that shape cultural rituals, economic activities, and social norms […] Strong brands constantly develop prescriptive models for the way we talk, the way we think, and the way we behave – our goals, thoughts, and desires" (Schroeder, 2009, p. 124). Therefore, the cultural brand studies assert that not only is it important to understand how socio-cultural forces influence consumer readings of brand

meanings, but it is also equally important to explore how brands influence consumer culture. For instance, Cayla and Eckhardt (2008) found that Asian brands forged new webs of interconnectedness through the establishment of an imagined transnational Asian community; and Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver (2010) discussed the roles of brands in constructing a national identity. These studies suggest that brands function as both a storehouse and a powerhouse of cultural meanings (Sherry, 1987). On the one hand, brand meanings reflect a broad range of social, cultural and ideological codes (e.g., Mark and Pearson, 2001; Holt, 2004), and on the other hand, brands actively forge new meanings that shape culture and society (e.g., Holt *et al.*, 2004; Cayla and Eckhardt, 2008).

Therefore, the consumer culture research on brands demonstrates that brands play different roles in every sphere of commercial and non-commercial life. Brands help consumers to construct and express their personalities and achieve personal goals. They also have a role to play in fostering communities, and are capable of infusing society and culture with meanings. However, it is important to note that not all brands perform all of these roles. Some brands are more suited to certain purposes than to others. Holt (2004) suggests that only iconic brands are capable of national resonance; of narrating the 'imagined nation' , and s/he argues that very few brands have enough 'power' to have impact on the cultural values of society. Similarly, Fournier (1998) notes that not every brand that is consumed becomes a relationship partner for its consumers. There are brands that are more attractive than others, and consumers can choose which brands they want to have relationships with. These findings suggest that consumer experience of brands and, therefore, the meanings that consumers derive from brands, are contextualised to the roles that the brand plays in consumer lives, and may vary from one brand to another in terms of their depth and significance.

3.2.3. Summary of the Branding Literature

Several important insights can be derived from the branding scholarship. Firstly, the research on functional dimensions of brand shows that brands are subjected to consumer judgements and evaluations, at the very least in terms of their practical benefits, and that a common denominator for these benefits is often seen to be a perceived quality of a brand (Aaker, 1996). This suggests that consumers have certain expectations of brands (and brand categories), which they use to evaluate the characteristics of a brand in order to determine whether it is of good quality and whether it will be viewed favourably (Gubta and Stewart, 1996). Secondly, the symbolic brand perspective asserts that consumers find value in meanings derived from brands (e.g., Park *et al.*, 1986). This conception is important because it broadens the view of consumer perceptions about brands from merely evaluations ('I like this brand' vs. 'I don't like this brand') to a broad range of readings that include social symbols (e.g., Veblen, 1899; O'Cass and Frost, 2002), personalities (e.g., Aaker, 1996; Fournier, 1998), liminal spaces and locations (e.g., Firat, 2001; Kozinets *et al.*, 2004), and stories and cultural myths (Stern, 1995; Holt, 2004; Phillips and McQuarrie, 2010). Thirdly, the recent studies of experiential and relational conceptualisations of brands have investigated the processes that constitute interactions involving consumers and brands (e.g., Payne *et al.*, 2009). These studies highlight that brand meanings are created in consumer minds, asserting that brand experiences and relationships provide important insights into understanding the brand meaning co-creation process (Keller, 1993; Aaker, 1996; Payne *et al.*, 2009). In addition, these perspectives draw attention to relationships involving different stakeholders outside the dyadic interactions between companies and consumers, and are starting to recognise that neither companies nor consumers have complete control over brand meanings (Schroeder, 2009). Finally, the consumer culture perspective recognises that consumer interactions with brands are not limited to evaluating market offerings and building

relationships in commercial settings. Brands and branding play a broad range of roles in all spheres of consumer lives and, thus can be encountered in various forms. Different consumers tend to derive dissimilar brand meanings to accommodate their life themes, and individual consumers can create multiple readings of the same brand. In addition, consumer experiences of brands are influenced by social and cultural influences that contextualise the process of meaning co-creation. These studies suggest that in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of how consumers interact with brands, we are required to develop tools that would allow us to explore how consumers derive brand meanings, taking into account the socio-cultural and experiential contexts of the brand consumption.

3.3. Conceptualising Brand Meaning

Extant theory regarding brand consumption reveals that brand meaning is a central construct that mediates the consumer dominant perceptions of and relationships with brands, thereby determining consumer behaviour (Park *et al.*, 1986; Berry, 2000; Schroeder and Morling, 2006; Batey, 2008). However, the study of meanings that consumers ascribe to brands is challenging, as brands are multifaceted and are constantly reinterpreted to accommodate personal and socio-cultural influences that permeate consumption (Batey, 2008; Schroeder, 2009). Therefore, how we conceptualise and explore brand meanings requires further attention. This section adopts a hermeneutic perspective of interpretation (Thompson, 1997), and conceptualises the consumption meanings of brands as co-created and culturally mediated narratives. It then develops the dimensions of brand meaning within the context of luxury brand consumption, which include socio-cultural beliefs about luxury brands, luxury brand uses and gratifications, consumer experiences of and the perceived characteristics of luxury brands. The purpose of these conceptions is twofold: first, to inform our theoretical understanding of how consumers construct brand meanings, and second, to produce a series

of guiding propositions that will aid the interpretation of emic insights from participant interviews in subsequent chapters.

3.3.1. Hermeneutic Perspective of Brand Meaning

A theoretical insight into how consumers ascribe meanings to brands can be derived from a hermeneutic framework of meaning, which underpins the research on narrative structuring of cognition (Bruner, 1986; Gergen and Gergen, 1986; Polkinghome, 1988) and the textual analysis of consumption stories (Thompson, 1997; Stern, 1998). Within this theoretical framework, all human understanding and, therefore, all meaning is organised and communicated in terms of culturally shared narrative structures, such as stories and myths (Thompson, 1997). Moreover, the narrative meanings of particular life events, including consumption experiences, are perceived to be contextualised within broader narratives of self-identity which, themselves, are contextualised within even broader narratives of historically established cultural meanings and belief systems (Figure 3). In other words, this framework suggests that consumers derive personalised meanings from their experiences in accordance with the consumers' life stories and goals (Crites 1986; Gergen 1991; Giddens 1991). However, the interpretive strategies that consumers use to construct these meanings and their conceptions of self-identity are derived from the social categories, common sense beliefs and other important interpretive frames of reference that denote the cultural background of historically established meanings (Thompson, 1997). Therefore, it is argued that personalised consumption meanings express a "co-constituting (or dialectical) relationship between the social conditions and identity issues salient to a given consumer and a broader legacy of historically available frames of reference" (Thompson, 1997, p. 441).

Figure 3. Hermeneutic/Narrative Model of Meaning

Cultural
Narratives

Narratives of Self-
Identity

Narratives of
Particular Life
Events
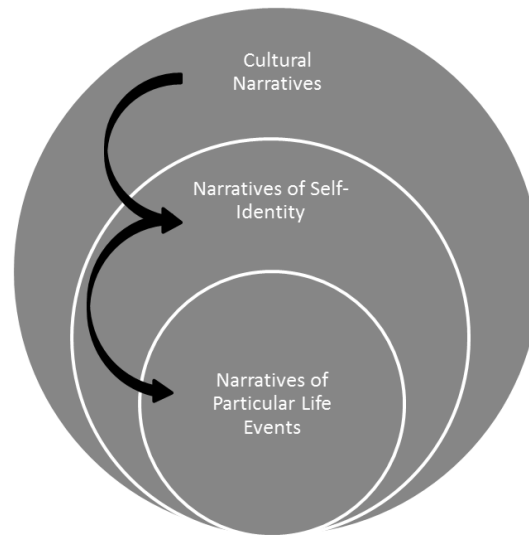
Adopted from Thompson, 1997

From the hermeneutic framework of meaning it follows that the consumption meanings ascribed to a brand by an individual consumer constitute a narrative, reflecting the consumer's dominant perception of the brand (Berry, 2000; Batey, 2008), and are co-authored through the consumer interpretation of brand-related experiences using personalised and socio-cultural frames of reference. In other words, the meanings ascribed to brands can be perceived as textual (Schroeder, 2005), and they are both idiosyncratic and socially constructed. This narrative conception of brand meaning is important for several reasons. First, it asserts that consumers take an active role in co-authoring brand meanings, highlighting the multidimensionality of brand interpretation. At the same time, this perspective recognises that brand meanings are not completely subjective or idiosyncratic, which provides a theoretical grounding for the assessment of the cultural brand perspective, that neither managers nor consumers are the sole authors of brand meaning, since cultural codes constrain the interpretation of consumption stories derived from brands (Schroeder and

Morling, 2006). Most importantly, the narrative perspective provides an agenda for exploring how brand meaning is emergent. In particular, it calls on researchers to account for the influence of the relevant cultural and personal interpretive frames of reference to better understand how consumers construct brand meanings, and to explore the consumption stories of brand experiences to gain insights into how these frames of reference are intertwined within the dominant consumer perceptions of brands.

The hermeneutic conceptualisation of brand meaning also suggests that the interpretive frames of reference used by consumers in co-authoring personalised brand meanings are embedded within the narratives of their self-concept and personalised interpretive strategies (Thompson, 1997) – which implies that consumers, themselves, may not be aware of using these frames of reference when they tell stories of their brand experiences. This perspective thus prompts us to concur with Holt's (2003) and Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling's (2006) proposition that:

> [Brand] knowledge does not come from focus groups or ethnography or trend reports – the marketer's usual means for 'getting close to the customer'. Rather it comes from a cultural historian's understanding of ideology as it waxes and wanes, a sociologist's charting of the topography of contradictions the ideology produces, and a literary critic's expedition into the culture that engages these contradictions. (Holt, 2003, cited in Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling, 2006, p.2).

To which we should also add 'a brand researcher's theoretical understanding of how consumers interact with brands'. Therefore, prior to an emical exploration of the main premises of this thesis, it is necessary to develop appropriate conceptual tools that can assist us in interpreting insights at the level of consumption stories of interview participants. Consequently, now that the broader theoretical perspective of how consumers interpret

brands has been established, we can explore dimensions of brand meaning that offer a more structured and detailed conception of how consumers construct their personalised meanings of brands.

3.3.2. Dimensions of Brand Meaning

Like meaning itself, the meanings of brands are multidimensional. It is, therefore, important to identify the key dimensions of brand meaning to establish the ways in which brands hold relevance for and connect with consumers – and how they can do so more potently (Batey, 2008). The hermeneutic perspective of interpretation suggests that the meanings ascribed to brands by consumers represent a dialectical relationship between the socio-cultural and consumers' personal frames of reference (Thompson, 1997). Therefore, in conceptualising the dimensions of consumer-perceived brand meaning it is also important to account for these influences. Based on the review of brand literature, I have identified four principal dimensions of brand meaning that reflect the consumer dominant perceptions of brand. These dimensions include the socio-cultural beliefs about brands, consumer uses and gratifications, consumer experiences, and perceived brand characteristics.

3.3.2.1.   *Socio-cultural Beliefs about Brands*

It has been noted that narratives, in the form of stories, have been a key concept in the social sciences for decades (Barthes, 1977; Stern, 1995), with human understanding being perceived to be organised in terms of "culturally shared narrative forms" (Thompson, 1997, p. 440). Particularly important are socio-cultural narratives that express the dominant beliefs of a society (Hirschman, 1987). For centuries, people have created such narratives to perform various functions relating to human concerns about the surrounding world, including

metaphysical – to help understand human existence; cosmological – to conceptualise the universe and its creation; sociological – to organise and validate social order; and psychological – to establish models for personal conduct (Campbell 1968; Hirschman, 1987). As beliefs tend to change over time, cultural narratives are also constantly reinterpreted to reflect and shape contemporary values and lifestyles, providing a foundation for popular stories, movies, television programmes and all other cultural texts (Hirschman, 1987; Stern, 1995; Thompson, 2004).

In the marketing literature, the term 'consumer mythology' (Levy, 1981; Hirschman, 1987; Thompson, 2004) has been coined to reflect the influence of socio-cultural beliefs on consumer behaviour. For instance, researchers have noted that advertising and mass media have been drawing generously from cultural 'mythic' themes to create more relevant and compelling stories within their promotional appeals (Holt, 2004; Thompson, 2004). Moreover, a number of theorists have suggested that cultural myths exert a significant influence on the consumption stories and, therefore, on the meanings that consumers ascribe to their experiences (Stern, 1995; Thompson, 2004). For instance, Levy's (1981) pioneering study into consumer mythology suggested that binary oppositions found in cultural myths, due to their 'universal meta-language' (Levy, 1981, p.52), are acted out by consumers in everyday culture. Thompson (2004) found that cultural myths can also be leveraged by both advertisers and consumers in the construction of new marketplace mythologies that articulate ideological beliefs circulating in a particular social group. Therefore, these studies suggest that the socio-cultural beliefs found in cultural stories serve as an important frame of reference used by consumers in co-authoring brand meanings, connecting the personalised meanings derived from brands with a wider discourse of socio-cultural meanings. Consequently, in order to understand the influence of culture on consumer perceptions of

brands, we need to identify and explore the relevant socio-cultural beliefs that influence the consumer interoperation of those brands within that culture in relation to other dimensions of brand meaning (i.e., brand uses, brand experiences, and perceived characteristics).

3.3.2.2.   Uses and Gratifications of Brands

Another important frame of reference used by consumers in co-authoring brand meanings is consumer motivations for purchasing and using brands in relation to the roles that these brands play in consumer lives. Recent studies suggest that consumers use brands to achieve their multiple goals, which include expressing different aspects of their self-concept (Escalas 2004), and fostering communities (Muñiz and Schau, 2005). The multiple ways in which brands are used, influence consumer perceptions of them (Ritson and Elliott 1999; Thompson *et al.,* 2006) and the nature of consumer-brand relationships (Fournier 1998). However, this area of study is conceptually underdeveloped and there are calls to develop a greater understanding of the roles that brands play in consumer lives (Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling 2006).

A theoretical insight into brand uses and their relevance for consumption meanings can be derived from the theory of uses and gratifications, that has been widely used in media studies and advertising (Katz 1959; O'Donohoe 1994; Ritson and Elliott 1995; Ritson and Elliott, 1999). This theory places more focus on the consumer, or audience, instead of on the message itself, by asking what people do with media rather than what media does to people (Katz, 1959). Consistent with the view that consumers are active co-authors of brand meanings, it is assumed that members of the audience are not passive but take an active role in interpreting and integrating meanings from media into their own lives (O'Donohoe, 1994; Ritson and Elliott, 1995). The uses and gratifications theory emphasises motives and the self-

perceived needs of audience members, and suggests that people use media to fulfil specific gratifications. In other words, when an audience actively seeks out media, they are typically seeking to gratify a particular need or purpose. For example, people may choose to watch television advertisements with a purpose of seeking out popular stories that they can add to their conversations in order to gain social approval (Ritson and Elliott, 1999). In addition, Blumler and Katz (1974) found that different people can use the same communication message for very different purposes. There is not only one reason or way that people use media. There are as many ways in which media is used, as there are reasons for using it (Blumler and Katz, 1974). Identifying these uses is important not only because they lead to a better understanding of how people consume media, but they also directly influence how consumers interact with media and derive meanings (O'Donohoe, 1994; Ritson and Elliott, 1995). For instance, in advertising research, the functions or uses to which an advertisement is put were found to influence the consumer's attitudes toward that advertising (O'Donohoe, 1994; Ritson and Elliott, 1995). "Functions of television advertising depend on specific consumer and specific situation. Simply put, the differing skills and 'processing techniques' used by an ad audience and the attitudes they hold towards those ads will vary dramatically according to the respective uses to which that reading will be put" (Ritson and Elliott, 1995, p. 1041).

When applied to branding, the uses and gratification theory suggests that consumer motives for purchasing, and their subsequent uses of brands in relation to the roles that these brands play in consumer lives will influence the consumer perceptions and experiences derived from these brands. This also implies that consumers can derive multiple perceptions from the same brand depending on how many different uses they have for the brand. Therefore, the uses and gratifications dimension of brand meaning conveys the relationship between personalised

meanings ascribed to brands and the roles that brands play in different aspects of consumer lives.

3.3.2.3.   Brand Experiences

Consumer perceptions of brands are mediated through their experiences of them (Berry, 2000; Payne *et al.*, 2009), which implies that brand experiences play an important role in construing consumers' personalised meanings of brands. In the marketing literature, brand experiences are generally viewed as consumer encounters with the company's total product, including both tangible goods and services (Berry, 2000). According to Pine and Gilmore (1999), these encounters represent a type of offering that needs to be memorable, if not extraordinary (LaSalle and Britton, 2003), in order to create value for consumers. Schmitt (1999) also proposed five dimensions of experience: thinking, feeling, sensing, acting, and relating. Building on this research, Brakus *et al.* (2009) defined brand experiences "as sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments" (p.52). They suggested that brand experience can vary in intensity, and that the higher levels of the brand experience intensity could lead to a more positive impact on brand satisfaction and loyalty (Brakus *et al.*, 2009).

While these studies are insightful, they are confined by the boundaries of commercial activity, often focusing only on the purchase-related experiences of brands (e.g., Berry, 2000; Brakus *et al.*, 2009) and, therefore, provide a rather limited insight into how consumption experiences help consumers to derive their personalised brand meanings. Therefore, we require a more holistic perspective of experience that can address the plurality of consumer interactions with brands. Consistent with the hermeneutic perspective of interoperation

(Thompson, 1997), I adopt a consumer culture view of experience defined as "a personal occurrence, often with important emotional significance, founded on the interaction with stimuli which are the products or services consumed. This occurrence may lead to a transformation of the individual in the experiences defined as extraordinary" (Caru and Cova, 2003, p.270). From this perspective, consumption experiences represent a central element of the life of today's consumer who is constantly searching for meaning and immersion:

> For the post-modern consumer, consumption is not a mere act of devouring, destroying, or using things. It is also not the end of the (central) economic cycle, but an act of production of experiences and selves or self-images . . . The way to enhance and enchant life is to allow multiple experiences, to be sensed emotionally as well as through reason, utilizing all the aspects of being human . . . Life is to be produced and created, in effect, constructed through the multiple experiences in which the consumer immerses. (Firat and Dholakia, 1998, cited in Caru and Cova, 2003, p. 271).

Accordingly, brand experiences can be viewed as personal occurrences founded on the interaction with multiple sources of brand meaning (e.g., advertising, purchase experience, social relationships, etc.), which mediate the consumer-perceived brand meanings and provide the relevance of these meanings for various consumers' life projects. Consequently, brand experiences are not limited to purchase activity (e.g., encounter with the service). Instead, they involve multiple brand-related encounters spread over a long period of time which, according to Arnould *et al.* (2002), can be divided into three main stages:

- The *pre-consumption experience*, which involves searching for, planning, daydreaming about, foreseeing or imagining the experience;

- The *purchase experience,* which derives from choice, payment, packaging, the encounter with the service and the environment;

- *The core and remembered (post-purchase) consumption experience,* including the sensation, the satiety, the satisfaction/dissatisfaction, the irritation/flow, the transformation, sharing, memories, etc.

Therefore, this more broad conception of brand experiences asserts that it is essential to go beyond a view of experience that is totally dependent on what the market offers, and include personal occurrences that happen outside the market, including experiences related to family ties, culture, social relationships, and self-concept, in order to understand the diverse range of roles and meanings that brands add to consumer lives (Caru and Cova, 2003). As a result, this supports the hermeneutic conception that the interpretation of consumption experiences does not happen in isolation. Instead, meanings that consumers ascribe to their experiences are contextualised within consumer life themes and other important socio-cultural influences (Thompson, 1997).

3.3.2.4. *Perceived Characteristics of Brands*

Through brand experiences, consumers develop their perception of the image associated with the brand (Aaker, 1990; Krishnan, 1996; Berry, 2000; Anisimova, 2007; Batey, 2008). Consistent with previous research (Aaker, 1990; Keller, 1993; Batey, 2008), in this thesis brand image is conceived as consisting of the consumer-perceived brand characteristics. Cultural studies suggest that these characteristics are constantly reinterpreted to accommodate contemporary cultural influences, changing consumer uses, and newer experiences of brands (Stern, 1995; Thompson, 2004; Schroeder, 2009). Therefore, the fourth and final dimension of brand meaning is consumer-perceived brand characteristics.

In studies examining a brand management perspective, the consumer-perceived brand characteristics are often explored in terms of consumer perceptions and various assessments (e.g., benefits attitudes, strength, favourability, uniqueness) of brand attributes (Aaker, 1990; Keller, 1993). Brand attributes are separated into product-related or non-product-related attributes (Keller, 1993; Berry, 2000; Keller, 2001; Batey, 2008). Product-related attributes refer to the physical attributes of a product, or the core components of a service, such as design and service quality, which affect the perceived product/service performance (Keller, 1993; Berry 2000; Batey, 2008). Non-product-related attributes are psychological attributes that do not affect product/service performance. These include brand personality, values, emotions, and user imagery associated with the brand (Batey, 2008). It is assumed that the product-related attributes tend to reflect the functional benefits of brands, satisfying consumers' immediate and practical needs (Bhat and Reddy, 1998), whereas the non-product-related attributes are related to the symbolic and experiential benefits, such as allowing consumers to express certain aspects of their self-concept (Belk, 1988; Richins, 1994; Escalas and Bettman, 2003), and having memorable brand experiences (Arnould and Price, 1993).

Consistent with the focus of this study of the consumption meanings of brands, and recognising that the meanings conveyed by brand characteristics can relate to both the product-related and non-product related attributes of brands, I adopt a holistic perspective. Brand characteristics are viewed as the dominant consumer perceptions that comprise the consumer-perceived imaginary associated with a brand, in relation to the roles that this brand plays in consumer lives. Such conceptualisation is supported by the other three conceptual dimensions of brand meaning, that account for the socio-cultural beliefs influencing consumer perceptions of brands, consumer motivations for purchasing and using brands, and

consumer experiences of brands. By providing insight into how consumers may derive and evaluate brand meaning in relation to different aspects of their lives and experiences, these dimensions suggest a more holistic and consumer-centred perspective of brand characteristics.

3.3.3. The Conceptual Model of Brand Meaning

The studies examining a brand management perspective have predominately explored brand meaning in terms of perceived brand characteristics that reflect the imaginary associated with the brand (e.g., Keller, 1993; Berry, 2000; Batey, 2008). While such an approach may provide insight into some consumer perceptions of brands (Berry, 2000), it does not acknowledge the influence of important cultural and personal frames of reference and consumption experiences that consumers use in interpreting brand meaning. I address these issues by offering an integrative conceptual model of the principal dimensions of brand meaning – namely, the socio-cultural beliefs about brands, the uses and gratifications offered by brands, brand experiences, and perceived brand characteristics (Figure 4).

This model achieves two purposes. First, by detailing the dimensions of brand meaning, it provides a more comprehensive conceptualisation of how consumers perceive brands. Secondly, consistent with Thompson's (1997) hermeneutic/narrative model of meaning, which suggests that "the meanings of particular life events are contextualized within a broader narrative of self-identity…[which] themselves are contextualized within a complex background of historically established cultural meanings and belief systems" (Thompson, 1997, p.440), the model illustrates that consumer perceptions of brands are derived through their interpretation of brand experiences using their personalised frames of reference (i.e., the uses and gratifications of brands) which, themselves, are contextualised within the socio-cultural frames of reference (i.e., the socio-cultural beliefs about brands). In this way it

reflects the hermeneutic theoretical perspective by suggesting that the dimensions of brand meaning are interrelated and cannot be fully understood independently from each other, because "all human understanding is achieved by iterating between considering the interdependent meanings of parts and the whole that they form" (Klein and Myers, 1999, p. 72). Consequently, the developed framework calls for researchers to explore emically, the dimensions of brand meaning and the relationships among these dimensions within the relevant context of brand consumption, in order to understand how consumers perceive and interact with brands.

Figure 4. Conceptual Model of the Consumer-perceived Brand Meaning
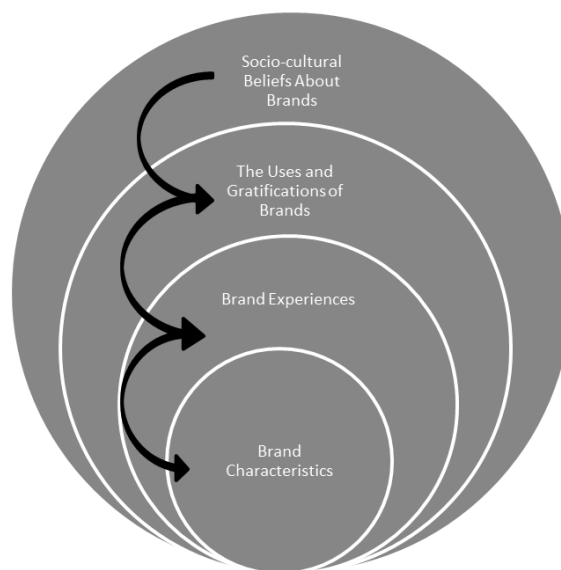
The literature review showed that the extant theory regarding the consumption of luxury brands provides limited insight as to how consumers identify and interact with the brands of this category. Although scholars seem to agree that luxury brands evoke unique associations in relation to perceived brand characteristics (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004) and brand experiences (Atwal and Williams, 2009), these associations are under-analysed and the way

that they are emergent remains largely unexplored. Furthermore, as the consumption of luxury brands becomes more complex, incorporating multiple socio-cultural beliefs and personalised motives for purchasing and using them, it is also important that the theory is capable to account for these influences. To inform our understanding of these important issues, this thesis will be using the developed theoretical model of brand meaning (Figure 4) to explore the consumption of luxury brands. More specifically, in the subsequent chapters, *this thesis will aim to inform our understanding of the consumption of luxury brands by exploring emically, the meanings that New Zealand consumers ascribe to luxury brands in the context of the fashion and apparel industry, and providing insight into how these meanings are formed through brand experiences within consumer culture*. Therefore, the two specific linked objectives of this study are:

1. To explore the meanings that consumers ascribe to luxury brands.

2. To develop a theory that expands our understanding of how the perceived meanings of luxury brands are formed within consumer culture.

The research objectives of the study will be addressed with the following research questions:

Research Question 1:   What are the socio-cultural beliefs associated with luxury brands in New Zealand?

Research Question 2:   What are the uses and gratifications that luxury brands possess for consumers?

Research Question 3:   What brand experiences do consumers derive from luxury brands?

Research Question 4:   What are the perceived characteristics associated with luxury brands?

Research Question 5:   What are the structural relationships among the principal dimensions of brand meaning, and how do these relationships influence consumers in deriving the meaning of brands within the context of luxury brand consumption?

3.4. Conclusion

Brands have emerged both as devices that add competitive advantage to their legal owners and as culturally important symbols (Bengtsson and Ostberg, 2006). Therefore, marketing scholarship requires theoretical tools to explore the multiple roles that brands play in different aspects of consumer lives. Although the current research on branding is extensive, there are gaps in the literature with regards to understanding how consumers experience and construct brand meanings. The studies have come to recognise the importance of meanings derived from brands; however, one of the key gaps within this emerging theory is that researchers have predominantly focused on exploring how consumer interactions with brands influenced the value creation process (e.g., Berry, 2000; Prahalad, 2004; Brakus *et al.*, 2009).

Studies from a consumer culture perspective recognise that brands play a broad range of roles in all spheres of consumer lives and, therefore, can be encountered in various forms. Different consumers may derive dissimilar brand meanings to accommodate their life themes, and individual consumers can also create multiple readings of the same brand. By proposing a cultural study of brands, I have developed a hermeneutic model of brand meaning that accounts for the multiple cultural and personal frames of references that consumers use in interpreting their experiences of brands. This model consists of four interrelated dimensions

of brand meaning – the socio-cultural beliefs about brands, brand uses and gratifications, brand experiences and the perceived characteristics of brands. The purpose of this model is to provide a more comprehensive conceptualisation of how consumers perceive brands and to inform our understanding of how these perceptions are emergent. In subsequent chapters, the theoretical insights derived from this conceptual model will be used to emically explore the personalised brand meanings ascribed by New Zealand consumers of luxury brands.

CHAPTER IV: METHODOLOGY

4.1. Introduction

This chapter details the research process that was employed to address the gaps in the existing theory regarding luxury brands that was identified in the literature review. First, in order to derive the research objectives and questions of the study, the chapter will discuss the dimensions of brand meaning, conceptualised in the previous chapter (Figure 4, see p.78), within the context of luxury brand consumption. Next, following the principles of a social research process developed by Crotty (1998), the chapter will progress from outlining broader philosophical issues underpinning the research process towards detailing more specific methods that were employed in addressing the research questions. Accordingly, the appropriateness of the chosen epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods will be discussed in the context of the research purpose and questions (Crotty, 1998). Finally, the chapter will detail the specific procedures undertaken to gather and analyse the data, and the techniques that were used to corroborate the trustworthiness of data analysis and findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Cavana *et al.*, 2001).

4.2. Research Objectives and Questions

The research purpose of this study corresponded with the gaps identified during the literature review. At the broadest level, this study *aims to inform our understanding of the consumption of luxury brands by exploring emically, the meanings that New Zealand consumers ascribe to luxury brands in the context of the fashion and apparel industry, and*

providing insight into how these meanings are formed through brand experiences within consumer culture. Therefore, the two specific linked objectives of this study were:

1. To explore the meanings that consumers ascribe to luxury brands.

2. To develop a theory that expands our understanding of how the perceived meanings of luxury brands are formed within consumer culture.

In the previous chapter, I discussed that the meanings ascribed to brands can be explored in terms of the four principal dimensions of brand meaning – namely, the socio-cultural beliefs about brands, the uses and gratifications of brands, brand experiences, and perceived brand characteristics (Figure 4, see p.78). Following this conceptualisation of brand meaning, the research objectives of the study were addressed with five research questions. The first four questions were related to the principal dimensions of the model (i.e., the socio-cultural beliefs about luxury brands, the uses and gratifications of luxury brands, the luxury brand experiences, and the perceived characteristics of luxury brands), and the fifth question addressed the relationships among these dimensions within the context of luxury brand consumption. Recognising that the study of meanings that consumers ascribe to luxury brands has not been the subject of previous research and that, consequently, the concepts and relationships explored in this study are still in their infancy, the research questions were deliberately left as open as possible (Crotty, 1998).

4.2.1. Socio-cultural Beliefs about Luxury Brands

The literature review suggested that there are a number of important, at times paradoxical, cultural trends that influence the consumer perceptions of luxury brands. In particular, while globalisation and the consequent global appreciation of western brands make

consumer preferences for luxury brands similar, it is also evident that the consumption of luxury brands is strongly influenced by regional and cultural differences, suggesting that emergent markets could bring new connotations to the meaning of a luxury brand (Dubois *et al.*, 2005). In order to inform our understanding of how these cultural processes influence the meanings ascribed to luxury brands, there is a need for an on-going investigation of the prominent socio-cultural beliefs related to the consumption of luxury brands. Previous findings suggest that some of these beliefs could be cross-cultural, influencing most consumers of luxury brands, whereas others are more culture specific, influencing consumers only within a particular cultural group (Dubois *et al.*, 2005). The context of this study is the New Zealand market of luxury brands. Consequently, the first research question aimed to understand the relevant socio-cultural beliefs that influence New Zealand consumers in deriving their personalised meanings of luxury brands, and it was formalised as follows:

Research Question 1:   What are the socio-cultural beliefs associated with luxury brands in New Zealand?

4.2.2. Uses and Gratifications of Luxury Brands

Brand researchers had previously looked into motives for purchasing luxury products (Vigneron and Johnson 1999; Tsai 2005), with Tsai (2005) making a general distinction between private motives, which are satisfied independently from others (e.g., hedonic pleasure and the creation of the extended-self) and social motives, which can only be satisfied in interaction with other people (e.g., prestige-seeking and demonstrative consumption). Although these studies acknowledged that there could be multiple motives for purchase and use of luxury brands, the influence of these uses on consumer perceptions and experiences of luxury brands has not been explored in detail. Therefore, there is a need to increase our

understanding of the consumer motivations for purchasing and using luxury brands. This objective was reflected in the second research question of the study, formalised as follows:

Research Question 2:   What are the uses and gratifications that luxury brands possess for consumers?

4.2.3. Luxury Brand Experiences

Most recently researchers began to recognise the importance of brand experiences in luxury branding (e.g., Atwal and Williams, 2009; Fionda and Moore, 2009; Gistri *et al.*, 2009; Keller, 2009; Tynan *et al.*, 2010; Bauer *et al.*, 2011), claiming that the consumption of luxury brands is characterised by luxury-specific experiences unobtainable from other brands (e.g., Atwal and Williams, 2009). However, the nature of these experiences and their roles in shaping consumer perceptions of this brand category remains largely unexplored, suggesting that there is a need to explore the luxury brand experiences emically, using a consumer-centred perspective. This objective was reflected in the third research question of the study, formalised as follows:

Research Question 3:   What brand experiences do consumers derive from luxury brands?

4.2.4. Perceived Characteristics of Luxury Brands

In previous studies, researchers identified various characteristics associated with luxury brands (e.g., Vickers and Renand, 2003; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). Most notably, Vigneron and Johnson (2004) identified five descriptive perceptions that consumers use to differentiate between luxury and non-luxury brands: perceived conspicuousness, uniqueness, quality, hedonism and perceived extended-self. Similar brand characteristics were also

reported by other researchers of luxury brands (e.g., Dubois *et al.*, 2005; Keller, 2009). However, studies from a consumer culture perspective suggest that brand characteristics perceived by consumers may change over time and can vary from one culture to another (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Therefore, it is important to have an on-going re-investigation of how consumers perceive brands within different socio-cultural contexts of consumption. For the purposes of this study, it was necessary to explore the characteristics that New Zealand consumers associated with luxury brands. This objective was formalised in the fourth research question of the study:

Research Question 4:   What are the perceived characteristics associated with luxury brands?

4.2.5. The Construction of Luxury Brand Meaning

Finally, extant theory regarding luxury brand consumption leaves many questions to be answered in relation to how the meanings that consumers ascribe to luxury brands are emergent. For instance, which brand characteristics are most important for consumers in deciding whether the brand is a luxury brand or not? What influences consumers in deriving their personalised meanings of luxury brands? Do all consumers have similar perceptions about luxury brands? Are these perceptions likely to change in the future, and are they transferrable across cultures? If we follow the conceptual model of brand meaning (Figure 4, see p.78), in order to provide answers to these important questions, we need to investigate not only the dimensions of luxury brand meaning but, most importantly, how the relationships among these principal dimensions influence the process by which consumers derive the meanings they ascribe to luxury brands. Therefore, the fifth and final research question of this study was formalised as follows:

Research Question 5:   What are the structural relationships among the principal dimensions of brand meaning, and how do these relationships influence consumers in deriving the meaning of brands within the context of luxury brand consumption?

4.3.   Research Approach

As noted earlier, this thesis, in order to address the subject of inquiry, followed the guiding principles of the social research process outlined by Crotty (1998). Crotty states that in laying out the justification of a research approach, the researcher can proceed in any direction as long as the reader is provided with a coherent structure, and the research approach addresses the four basic elements that underpin the process of investigation – namely, the epistemological assumptions, theoretical perspective, methodology and methods of the enquiry. Within this framework, epistemology represents a way of understanding and explaining "how we know what we know" (Crotty, 1998, p. 3), and it refers to the theory of knowledge that informs the adapted theoretical perspective. The theoretical perspective is a philosophical stance informing the methodology, which provides the context for the research process and grounds its logic and criteria. Methodology is the strategy or plan that underpins the research design and provides a rationale behind the choice and use of particular methods for achieving the desired outcomes. Finally, methods are concrete techniques that are employed in order to appropriately gather and analyse the data of inquiry. On the basis of Crotty's (1998) research framework, the following sections will address the appropriateness of the adopted research approach, progressing from outlining broader epistemological assumptions underpinning the research process towards detailing more specific methods employed in addressing the research questions (Figure 5).

Figure 5. The Research Approach Framework
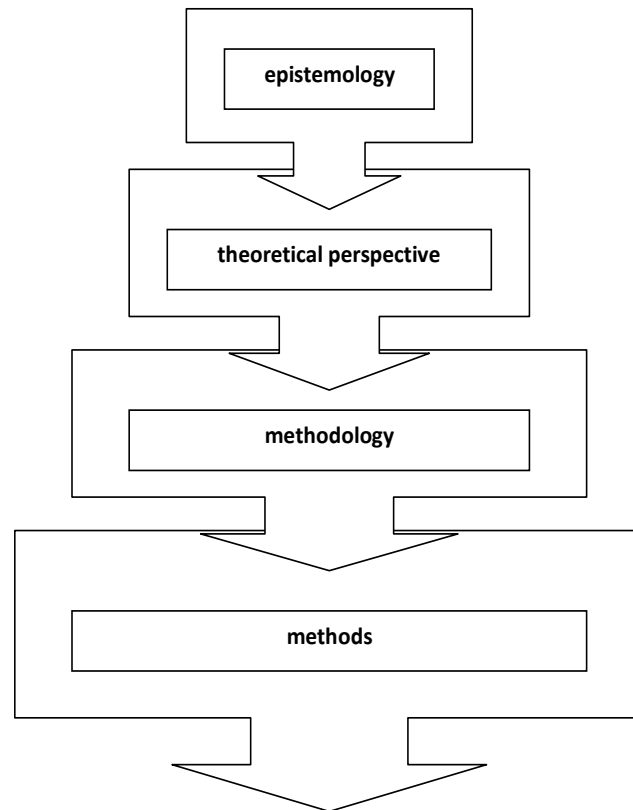
Crotty, 1998

4.3.1. Epistemology

The purpose of this research is to explore the meanings ascribed to luxury brands by New Zealand consumers and to understand how these meanings are emergent through brand experiences within the given context of consumer culture. The theoretical assumptions underpinning this research purpose were that consumers actively construct brand meanings within the context of the culture that surrounds the consumption of brands, rather than these meanings being inherent in brands. This position is supported by the social constructionist epistemology, which views all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality, as being

socially constructed by people as they engage with others in the world they are interpreting and perceiving through the lens of their own culture (Crotty, 2003).

Social constructionist epistemology dictates that rather than searching for meaning in objects, consumers actively engage in the meaning co-creation process, denying the existence of objective reality found within the positivist epistemology (Gioia and Pitre, 1990). Consequently, a social constructionist approach acknowledges the importance of investigating both the aspects of the researched object (e.g., luxury brand characteristics,) and the characteristics of people who engage in the meaning co-creation process with this object (e.g., consumer motivations, personal life themes, etc.). On the other hand, social constructionism also advocates that all meanings are socially mediated, as opposed to being formed purely through private cognitive processes, as it is perceived within the constructivism and subjectivist epistemologies (Hackley, 1998). Therefore, a social constructionist approach acknowledges the importance of investigating the socio-cultural influences mediating the meanings derived by consumers.

As the purpose of this research was founded on the premise that consumers derive personalised meanings of brands under the influence of the socio-cultural context that surrounds the consumption of these brands, a social constructionist approach provides a meaningful justification for the way that consumer interactions with brands were conceptualised in this thesis, and the basis for exploring the meanings ascribed to luxury brands by consumers in New Zealand.

4.3.2. Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical perspective is the philosophical stance informing the methodology, which outlines the assumptions made with regards to "the nature of the human world and social life within that world" (p.7) in the research process. It provides the context for the investigation and grounds its logic and criteria. This thesis employed the hermeneutic mode of interpretation as its theoretical perspective. This perspective is found within the larger spectrum of the interpretivist paradigm, and it is discussed in more detail below.

The 'interpretive turn' in social sciences refers to a group of approaches that analyse the ways people make sense of their activities and surroundings. In consumer research, interpretivist approaches have been used to investigate the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, consumer experiences and cultural meanings (e.g. Belk *et al.*, 1988; Stern, 1995; Thompson, 2004). Interpretivism assumes that people and reality are inseparable as, in fact, reality exists only in human perception (Hunt, 1991). Therefore, it perceives that the meaning within reality can only be understood by exploring the "culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world" (Crotty, 1998, p.67). Consequently, researchers use the interpretive approach to discover and understand consumer-based constructs and theories (Hirschman and Thompson, 1997).

Unlike the "traditional positivist philosophies of science which assume that the social sciences adhere to a single scientific method for the justification of their knowledge claim" (Anderson, 1986, p. 156), interpretive research generally involves the use of qualitative methodologies – such as ethnographic research, semiotic analysis and discourse analysis – where researchers themselves act as an instrument in the process of inferring meanings from the subject of inquiry rather than attempting to be a detached objective observer (Spiggle,

1994). Therefore, this type of research principally relies on researchers' abilities to observe, select, coordinate and interpret qualitative data (Sanday, 1979 as cited in Spiggle, 1994) and, as a result, it allows for multiple interoperations of the subject of inquiry. According to Crotty (1998), what such approach drives home unambiguously is that "there is no true or valid interpretation. There are useful interpretations, to be sure, and these stand over against interoperations that appear to serve no useful purpose" (Crotty, 1998, p.47).

The interpretive approach provided a useful context for my research into how New Zealand consumers derive meanings of luxury brands by advocating the exploration of the emic understandings of consumption experiences, with reference to the cultural context. It also dictated the employment of qualitative methodology and methods in exploring these meanings and experiences, and recognised an active role for the researcher in interpreting insights and in building the theory of how consumers derive the meanings of luxury brands. Crotty (1998) notes that there are three main streams within the interpretivist approach to human enquiry – phenomenology, symbolic interactionism and hermeneutics. Although detailed discussion of the different interpretivist theories is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is important to point out the key elements of each of these approaches in order to justify the theoretical stance adopted for this study.

Phenomenology is a theoretical perspective that suggests that when people revisit their conscious experience they can facilitate the emergence of new meaning or the authentication and renewal of present meanings (Barkway, 2001). Thus, "phenomenology suggests that, if we lay aside, as best as we can, the prevailing understandings of... [the researched] phenomena and revisit our immediate experience of them, possibilities for new meaning emerge for us or we witness at least an authentication and enhancement of former meaning"

(Crotty, 1998, p. 78). Symbolic interactionism emphasises that human communications and, therefore, social interactions are mediated by the use of common symbols (or codes), such as cultural meanings, that are shared by the members of a social community and are used to interpret the objects located within the social world (Blumer, 1969). As a result, symbolic interactionism strives to investigate how people create meanings during social interaction by a means of common symbols or codes (Crotty, 1998). Thus, symbolic interactionism encourages the researcher "to take, to the best of his [sic] ability, the standpoint of those who [were] studied" (Denzin, 1978, p.99).

The third theoretical perspective found within the interpretivist paradigm is hermeneutic interpretation. This theoretical perspective "suggests that the texts to be studied will represent the contextualised personal expressions of individual consumers" (Arnold and Fischer, 1994, p. 61). Essentially, a hermeneutic approach is concerned with finding the meaning of a text, where the text can take the form of written texts, conversations, body language, or anything else that may be treated as a text-based system. It assumes that by analysing (or interpreting) meanings found in consumption texts, a researcher can understand the consumers' interpretations of their experiences, values and beliefs (Thompson, 1997). Furthermore, texts do not reflect only the consumer's personalised meanings. They also provide a link between individuals and/or communities. "Through hermeneutics, interpretation has become part of our cultural self-understanding that only as historically and culturally located beings can we articulate ourselves in relation to others in the world in general" (Crotty, 1998, p. 10). Therefore, all texts are culturally constituted, reflecting a dialectical relationship between the socio-cultural influences and identity issues salient to a given consumer (Thompson, 1997). Finally, the hermeneutic approach suggests that once texts are authored, the researcher can derive meanings from these texts independently from the consumer's intentions when they

authored them (Crotty, 1998). Therefore, the researcher can develop insights into aspects of consumer behaviour that consumers themselves were not consciously aware. This is possible because the full meaning of any text is not found in the text itself. Instead, the meaning is interpreted in an iterative process, where the parts of the text are compared and reinterpreted to increase the meaning of the whole that they form. Consequently, the meaning of a text may increase, with the researcher bringing new readings to the preconceived or originally interpreted components of the text. This concept is referred to as the fundamental principle of the hermeneutic circle (Klein and Myers, 1999).

The study aimed to understand how consumers construct meanings through their experiences of luxury brands. It recognises that brand meanings are personalised, and can be revisited and reinterpreted by consumers as newer experiences associated with luxury brands emerge. This may suggest using the phenomenological theoretical perspective. On the other hand, brand meanings are also mediated by a means of culturally constituted symbols (e.g., socio-cultural beliefs about luxury brands), which need to be understood with reference to socio-cultural codes (Chandler, 2006). This might suggest using the symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective. However, while these two interpretivist approaches could have provided a useful context for this study, the hermeneutic enquiry was deemed to be the most appropriate theoretical perspective. First, this study aimed to explore how brand meanings are emergent. Consequently, the consumption texts required interpretation beyond the meanings originally intended by consumers in their answers, since consumers themselves are not always consciously aware of how their comments may express their beliefs about brand or brand meaning. Furthermore, in order to understand the roles of the principal dimensions of brand meaning fully (i.e., the socio-cultural beliefs about brands, brand uses, experiences and perceived characteristics) in deriving consumer perceptions of luxury brands, the analysis of

data needs to develop a sense of the 'whole' (Thompson *et al.*, 1994). That is, the research process needed to be an iterative one, where the initial understanding of a text was modified as later reading provided a more developed sense of its meaning as a whole (Crotty, 1998). Finally, a hermeneutic enquiry was chosen because it provided a useful context for the study by recognising that the process of interpretation of particular life events should acknowledge the role of both personalised meanings and of socio-cultural influences (Thompson, 1997), the interaction of which was one of the main assumptions underpinning the conceptualisation of brand meaning adopted in this thesis.

4.3.3. Research Methodology

Methodology provides a rationale behind the choice and use of particular methods for achieving the desired outcomes (Crotty, 1998). This study used a qualitative methodology to gain rich emic descriptions (Spiggle, 1994) that could provide a comprehensive understanding of the meanings ascribed to luxury brands and how these meanings are emergent. Furthermore, the concepts researched in this thesis are still in their infancy, making this an exploratory study. Qualitative research implies a richness of descriptions and is particularly appropriate for exploratory research (Robson and Foster, 1989). However, within the chosen approach there are different ways in which research can be conducted (e.g., semiotic analysis, narrative analysis, discourse analysis). In this study, a hermeneutic framework for interpreting consumer stories, developed by Thompson (1997), was adopted as a research methodology.

As a methodology, a hermeneutic framework of analysis is the application of an interpretative reading to interview transcripts and other consumer-generated texts, the purpose of which is to understand consumption meanings conveyed by the text. This framework perceives texts

of consumption stories first and forest as narratives that reflect the meanings ascribed by the original author of these stories (i.e., the consumer) to particular consumption objects (e.g., brands) and/or events (e.g., brand encounters). These narratives are perceived to be constructed in the context of a dialectical relationship between the author's self-identify and the socio-cultural influences salient to the author (i.e., the consumer), through their experiences of the researched objects and/or events (Thompson, 1997). Consequently, it guides the researchers to explore emerging themes (Aronson, 1994) and the narrative composition of consumption stories (Stern *et al.*, 1998) with the purpose of gaining an emic insight into the meanings of the consumption experiences and how these meanings were formed. In consumer research, this methodology has been adopted widely in empirical research that studied consumer experiences through data gathered from in-depth interviews and focus groups (e.g. Martin, 2004; Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver, 2010). According to Spiggle (1994), the purpose of such studies is, generally, to understand meanings that consumers ascribe to their consumption experiences (e.g., Martin, 2004), and also to portray broader cultural meanings by understanding individual consumers' points of view (e.g., Stern, 1995).

As this study aimed to investigate how consumers derive their own belief systems about luxury brands by means of analysing the consumption texts authored in interviews; hermeneutic analysis was deemed to be an appropriate choice of methodology. The choice of hermeneutic analysis was further justified by its ability to generate an iterative process of interpretation (Thompson, 1997), where the overall meaning of a text was informed and modified as new texts (data) were interpreted. This was, therefore, consistent with a hermeneutic theoretical perspective, which suggests that "all human understanding is

achieved by iterating between considering the interdependent meanings of parts and the whole that they form" (Klein and Myers, 1999, p. 72).

4.3.4. Research Methods

According to Crotty (1998), the choice of methods depends upon the nature of the research questions and also on the methodology that justifies the use of these methods (Crotty, 1998). Due to the exploratory nature of the research questions and an interpretivist methodology, grounded within the hermeneutic theoretical perspective, this thesis employed qualitative methods of inquiry. Adopting qualitative methods was important because the study deals with concepts that were still in their infancy, suggesting that the research methods needed to be capable of obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the emerging themes. Using qualitative methods allowed me to obtain rich descriptions and in-depth insight necessary for the exploratory research (Robson and Foster, 1989). Furthermore, this thesis recognises that the meaning co-creation process is personal for every consumer, as it is influenced by the multiple individual and socio-cultural frames of reference that consumers use to make sense of their surrounding reality (Ritson and Elliott, 1995). Consequently, the research methods employed, needed to account for the heterogeneity of individual interpretations and experiences. This further justified the use of qualitative methods that account for the complexity of individuality and commonality in the interpretation of meaning constructions (Hirschman and Thompson, 1997; Scott, 1994).

The qualitative methods employed in this study included semi-structured in-depth interviews (Kvale, 1996) and a modified Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) interviewing method (Zaltman. 1997; Coulter, 2006) for data gathering, and thematic (Aronson, 1994; Taylor and Bogdan, 1984) and narrative (Stern, 1995; Stern *et al.*, 1998) analyses for

interpreting the gathered data. Several methods of triangulation were also employed to corroborate the trustworthiness of analysis and results (Cavana *et al.*, 2001). These methods are discussed in more detail below.

4.3.4.1.   *Semi-structured In-depth Interviews*

The first data gathering method employed semi-structured, in-depth interviews. According to Kvale (1996), semi-structured interviews are most valuable when the researcher's aims are "to understand the world from the subjects' points of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences, [and] to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations" (p.1). They allow researchers to get beyond the surface meaning of phenomena and to discover more hidden, symbolic meanings that these phenomena possess for respondents (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984), providing not only insight into meanings that phenomena possess for consumers, but also how they formed these meanings (Kvale, 1996). Moreover, semi-structured in-depth interviews, guided by loosely structured questions, allow the researcher to uncover new ideas that he or she may not previously have thought of (Smith, 1996). This makes the approach especially useful for exploratory studies, where the researcher aims to gain a preliminary insight into the problem, and requires rich descriptions rather than generalised results (Aaker *et al.*, 1995). Since this research was exploratory in nature and aimed to understand the meanings that consumption experiences of luxury brands conveyed for consumers, the semi-structured in-depth interview was chosen as a research method that could generate both an in-depth insight into the meaning construction process and provide rich emic descriptions (Robson and Foster, 1989).

Moreover, semi-structured in-depth interviews were chosen because this method provided me with insightful consumption narratives (Thompson, 1997; Stern, 1995) of the participants'

experiences of luxury brands. According to Thompson (1997), from a hermeneutic perspective, interviews can represent stories that reflect meanings ascribed to consumption experiences by consumers. The rationale behind this is that all "human understanding is organised in terms of culturally shared narrative forms" (Thompson, 1997 p.440), suggesting that consumers make sense of their consumption experiences through narrative forms, that can be derived during the interviews (Escalas 1997; Thompson and Troester 2002; Stern, 1995). Therefore, for the purpose of this research, the semi-structured interviews allowed me to derive the consumption narratives, which reflected the meanings that consumers ascribed to luxury brands and, consequently, how these meanings emerged through brand experiences. Once gathered, and interpreted in relation to the developed conceptual model of brand meaning (Figure 4, see p.78) and earlier studies of luxury brands, these narratives were used not only to explore the perceptions of luxury brands of the interviewed participants (emic perspective), but also to gain insight into what these meanings signified in terms of a broader cultural perspective (Spiggle, 1994; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993) and to enable consideration of the consumption narratives in relation to emerging theory underpinning the consumption of luxury brands within consumer culture (etic perspective). This approach to the study of consumer behaviour is consistent with the social constructionist epistemology, the hermeneutic theoretical perspective, and the hermeneutic framework of interpretation (Thompson, 1997), all of which recognise that 'human texts' reflect the individuality of consumers' interpretations as well as the influence of culture on these interpretations (Crotty, 1998; Thompson, 1997; Ritson and Elliott, 1995).

4.3.4.2. *Modified ZMET Interviewing Method*

The second data gathering method employed a modified Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET) interviewing process (Zaltman and Coulter, 1995; Coulter,

2006; Venkatesh *et al.*, 2010). This method is grounded in various domains of linguistics, including verbal and nonverbal communication, visual sociology, visual anthropology, literary criticism, semiotics, mental imaginary, cognitive neuroscience and phototherapy (Zaltman, 1997; Zaltman and Coulter, 1995; Coulter, 2006). According to Venkatesh *et al.* (2010) "ZMET has been widely used by consumer researchers for it combines cultural models of narrative understanding with cognitive principles… [and it is] useful in delving into and providing in-depth understanding of key perceptual concepts" (p.46). While several variations of ZMET exist (e.g., Zaltman, 1995; Coulter, 2006; Venkatesh *et al.*, 2010), this interview process generally consists of a series of procedures that combine different projective techniques with the aim of exploring how individuals understand the consumption phenomenon. According to Coulter (2006), a ZMET interview includes the following steps:

(1) *Preparing Images.* [Prior to the interview], the informant is asked to prepare pictures that represent her thoughts and feelings about [the researched experience and or object] and the roles that [this experience/object] plays in their life. The images can be pictures from magazines, newspapers, pieces of artwork and/or photographs taken specifically for this assignment or retrieved from photo albums.

(2) *Storytelling.* [During the interview] the informant describes how each image represents [their] thoughts and feelings about the [researched experience/object]

(3) *Missed Images.* The informant is asked if there were important ideas [they] wanted to express but for which they could not find relevant images.

(4) *Metaphor probe/expand the frame.* The informant is asked to widen the frame of a selected picture and describe what else might enter the picture to better understand [their] thoughts and feelings.

(5) *Sensory metaphors.* The informant is asked to express [their] ideas using various sensory images.

(6) **Vignette.** The informant is asked to create a story about [the researched experience/object].

(7) **Digital Image.** The informant, with the skilled assistance of a computer graphics imager, creates a summary collage using [their images] and supplemental images from a database as needed.

Coulter, 2006, p.401-402

A modified ZMET interviewing method employed in this study involved the first six procedures of the interview process (i.e., preparing images, storytelling, missed images, metaphor probe, sensory metaphors, and vignette). The seventh procedure, digital imaging technique, was not employed in this study for several reasons. First, according to Coulter and Zaltman (1994), the main goal of the digital imaging technique is to produce summary images of consumers' thinking. However, recognising that luxury brands may simultaneously play multiple roles in consumer lives, and being particularly interested in how consumers interpret their experiences and perceptions of luxury brands in relation to different aspects of their lives – rather than in the participants' ability to combine different images with the purpose of 'summarising' their overall perspective – a digital imaging technique seemed to provide little benefit for the purposes of this study. In addition, the consumers' dominant perceptions about luxury brands were already addressed in-depth with the semi-structured interviews. Also, in order to make the participants feel more comfortable, some interviews were conducted at their homes, which would make it difficult to prepare the necessary equipment if I wanted to proceed with the digital imaging. Finally, the combined iterative semi-structured and ZMET interview could take up to three and a half hours. Using the digital image technique would have prolonged the interview even further, causing

inconvenience for the participants and also making them likely to drop out from the study. Consequently, the digital imaging step was excluded from the interviewing process.

A modified ZMET interview method was useful in generating consumer texts for the purposes of this study in several ways. First, during the interviews, this method employed consumer-driven visual stimuli for participants (i.e., images representing the participants' thoughts and feelings about luxury brands). These stimuli enhanced the respondents' enthusiasm for participating in the research process and elicited enriched insight (Heisley and Levy, 1991) into meanings and experiences associated with luxury brands as informants perceived them. This was possible because the images were provided by the participants themselves, rather than imposed by the researcher. Consequently, the participants could better relate to the stimuli, and provided richer descriptions of their perceptions and experiences of luxury brands. Given that this study required capturing the emic perspective of consumer perceptions and experiences, this was particularly important. Secondly, using photo elicitation and metaphor-based techniques allowed consumers to better articulate complex multifaceted perceptions about luxury brands in relation to different aspects of their lives. This, in turn, provided an opportunity to probe the emerging perceptions further, uncovering deeper meanings and experiences that the participants would have had difficulty communicating otherwise. Finally, by allowing the participants to express themselves through images and by shifting the focus from the person to images, the participants could connect to their submerged feelings, symbols, and metaphors (Zaltman and Zaltman, 2008), allowing them to overcome some of the hesitation they might otherwise have had about discussing topics that were central to their private belief systems (Venkatesh et al., 2010). Therefore, the ZMET interview method was useful in probing some potentially sensitive

topics related to the consumption of luxury brands (such as conspicuous consumption, attitudes towards status, ambitions).

It is important to note that from Crotty's (1998) framework perspective, ZMET can be perceived both as a method and as a separate methodology. As a methodology, it is a consumer-driven research approach that aims to explore the etic and/or emic meanings of consumption experiences through interpreting the meanings of metaphors that are derived in the research process (Zaltman, 1995; Venkatesh *et al.*, 2010). Consequently, the unit of analysis is metaphors, while the interview procedures outlined above (Coulter, 2006), as well as the analysis of derived metaphors, represent the methods of ZMET methodology. However, in this study, a modified ZMET interviewing process was employed as a data gathering method under the hermeneutic framework of interpretation, rather than as a separate methodology per se. From this perspective, similarly to the semi-structured interviews, a ZMET interviewing process represented a data gathering method, employed to generate consumption texts reflecting the participants' emic perceptions. These texts upon gathering could be interpreted with the intention of understanding meanings within the context surrounding the consumption phenomenon. Therefore, the units of analysis of my research were consumption texts, iteratively interpreted by considering both the interdependent meaning of parts and the whole that they formed (Klein and Myers, 1999).

4.3.4.3.   *Thematic Analysis*

The consumption texts gathered from the semi-structured and modified ZMET interviews were analysed by means of thematic (Aronson, 1994; Taylor and Bogdan, 1984; Spiggle, 1994) and narrative analyses (Polkinghorne, 1997; Stern *et al.*, 1998). The thematic analysis involved a close reading of the transcripts, which included identifying central themes

as they emerged, and systematically segmenting the text into meaningful categories or themes. These themes were refined until I was satisfied that they were captured in the quotes (Spiggle, 1994; Venkatesh *et al.*, 2010). Such analysis was necessary to categorise qualitative data into broader themes that emerged from consumers' responses and, also, to relate the empirical data to the existing classification patterns that existed in the literature (Aronson, 1994). According to Spiggle (1994), these procedures are important in order to conduct a comprehensive and iterative process of textual interpretation. Furthermore, the use of thematic analysis was justified by its compliance with a hermeneutic theoretical perspective, as the analysis implied that the meaning needed to be understood in terms of interdependent meaning of parts of the text (i.e., themes) and the 'whole' that they form (i.e., the purpose of the study) (Klein and Myers, 1999). In the context of this study, thematic analysis was employed to explore emically the developed dimensions of luxury brand meaning (i.e., the socio-cultural beliefs about luxury brands, luxury brand uses and gratifications, consumer experiences of brands, and the perceived characteristics of luxury brands), and the perceived meaning of a luxury brand that these dimensions formed.

4.3.4.4. *Narrative Analysis*

Narrative theory suggests that people produce accounts of themselves and their experiences as remembered narratives (Polkinghorne, 1988; Stern, 1995; Thompson, 1997; Moore, 2012). According to Thompson (1997), these narratives of particular life events, including consumption experiences, are contextualised within broader narratives of self-identity which, themselves, are contextualised within even broader narratives of historically established cultural meanings and belief systems. Consequently, by exploring the stories of consumption narratives in relation to broader narratives of self-identity and historically established cultural meanings, the researcher can gain insight into how consumers derive

meanings ascribed to their consumption experiences. "Through stories, we translate and interpret our experiences, both to understand them and to communicate them to others (Schank and Abelson, 1995 as cited in Moore, 2012).

Rather than being a single method, narrative analysis is a family of analytical tools that are used to explore texts in terms of common narrative elements and structures (Shankar *et al.*, 2001). Therefore, the study of narratives can be approached in a number of ways, depending on the purpose of analysis (Mick, 1986; Stern, 1995; Heilbrunn, 1995; Stern *et al.*, 1998; Shankar *et al.*, 2001). Based on the study by Mishler (1995), Shankar *et al.* (2001) offer a comprehensive typology of narrative approaches used by researchers within the marketing and consumer research literature. Firstly, this typology identifies a stream of researchers who focus on the ways in which narratives are constructed and communicated, specifically the sequence of events told in the story (reference and temporal order) (e.g., Stern *et al.*, 1998). For instance, Stern *et al.* (1998) explored the plots of consumption narratives "to gain insight into the consumer's view of a marketing relationship" (p. 208). Secondly, Shankar *et al.* (2001) identify studies that focus on how narratives gain their structure and coherence through the use of different grammatical devices (textual coherence and structure) (e.g., Stern, 1995). For example, Stern (1995) drew on Frye's taxonomy to interpret consumer stories surrounding Thanksgiving, finding that the stories generated by her participants matched Frye's taxonomy. Finally, the third form of a narrative analysis concentrates on the functions of narratives within a psychological, social, and cultural context (narrative functions). Thompson (1997) highlights, in particular, the relationship between an individual's story and the issues pertaining to the identity and socio-cultural beliefs salient to that individual. According to Shankar *et al.* (2001), these three forms of narrative approach are not mutually

exclusive and can assist researchers in developing richer understanding of different aspects of consumption (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Narrative Typology

Approach	Focuses on	Examples
Reference and temporal order	The relationship between the succession of happenings and its textual representation. Assumes a correspondence between language and reality.	Stern *et al.* (1998) Brown and Reid (1997)
Textual coherence and structure	How language is used to create meaning through the use of grammatical devices (e.g., metaphors)	Stern (1995)
Narrative functions	How narratives 'work' to create: a sense of one's self or social processes or institutions or representations of cultures	Stern (1995) Thompson (1997)

Shankar *et al.*, 2001

The analysis of interviews employed in my study has followed the third stream of narrative research approaches identified by Shankar *et al.* (2001) − namely, narrative functions. In particular, informed by the hermeneutic framework of interpretation (Figure 3, see p. 67), narrative analysis was used to explore how the consumer perceptions of the principal dimensions of luxury brand meaning were intertwined within the stories that participants discoursed about their personal consumption experiences of luxury brands. Furthermore, by uncovering these narrative interrelationships emically within the context of each respondent's consumption story, and then comparing these relationships across the entire sample of respondents, I aimed to gain insight into how participants derived their perceptions about

luxury brands in relation to their personal and socio-cultural frames of reference. Such an analysis is consistent with the narrative functions approach employed in previous studies (e.g. Thompson, 1997; Shanker *et al.*, 2001).

4.3.4.5.   Trustworthiness

While quantitative studies rely on measures of reliability and validity to assess the rigour of the research process; in interpretive research, these methods are replaced by trustworthiness as a measure (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This distinction is important as the concepts of validity and reliability are based on the belief that there is one 'truth' that can be found. Since this study is underpinned by the theoretical assumption that there are multiple realties that can be constructed and explored, it would be inappropriate for it to use these measures. This thesis followed the guiding principles outlined by Cavana *et al.* (2001) to ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis and findings. Several methods of triangulation (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Cavana *et al.*, 2001) were used, including researcher-researcher corroboration and the multi-method analysis of data (Cavana, *et al.*, 2001). The detailed description of these methods and the process of triangulation are outlined later in this chapter.

4.4.   Procedure

This section details the research activities undertaken during the research process. It will start by outlining the selection of a research site and will discuss the purpose of an expert panel phase. It will then detail the data gathering procedures, including the process of participant recruitment and the description of the specific interview techniques used to obtain the consumption texts. Finally, the section will address the process of data analysis, and conclude with the discussion of procedures undertaken to ensure the trustworthiness of

derived results. It is important to note that, although this section is presented in a chronological order; due to the hermeneutic nature of the research, several activities and procedures were carried out simultaneously. In particular, in order to achieve an iterative research process, the analysis of data was conducted at the same time as data gathering, where the analysis of older interviews would help to inform the reading of newer ones, until the point when I reached theoretical saturation (Spiggle, 1994).

4.4.1. Selection of Research Site

This study explores the aspects of meaning that consumers ascribe to luxury brands. However, according to Okonkwo (2009), luxury brands can be encountered in many product and service categories, in each of which the meaning of a luxury brand can be interpreted differently. Furthermore, the literature suggests that even within one particular product category, there could be different types of luxury brands (Tsai, 2005; Berthon *et al.*, 2009), with some brands being or, at least, being perceived as more 'luxurious' than others (Truong *et al.*, 2009; Berthon *et al.*, 2009). Consequently, prior to exploring the meanings that consumers ascribe to luxury brands, it was important to carefully choose an appropriate research site, which provided a meaningful context for investigating the researched phenomenon. Multiple product categories were considered as potential research contexts (e.g., luxury cars, airlines, wines and spirits, fashion accessories, etc.). However, the fashion apparel and accessories industry, which includes the purchasing of clothing, jewellery and handbags, was chosen as a single most appropriate context for this study. There were several reasons for this decision. First, because of the qualitative and exploratory nature of this research, it was deemed to be more important to explore the emerging concepts in detail, within the context of one particular product category, rather than widening the research scope to incorporate multiple product categories. Such an approach is consistent with my aim to

uncover, explore, and interpret the emerging themes, rather than to generalise the findings. The literature showed that consumers are most aware of luxury brands in the fashion products category (Berry, 1994; Chadha and Husband, 2006; Okonkwo, 2009), with the majority of researchers focusing on only the luxury brands from this category in exploring the consumption of luxury brands (e.g., Kapferer, 2006; Berthon *et al.*, 2009). Consequently, in order to maintain consistency with the existing literature and provide a more valuable insight to contribute to the emerging theory of luxury brand consumption, this study too, explored luxury brands within the context of the fashion and apparel industry. Therefore, the subsequent discussions of luxury brands in this thesis refer to the luxury brands of this category.

Previous studies have suggested that there are many different types and categories of luxury brands. For instance, Kapferer (2006) distinguishes between the classic European-modelled luxury brands – the brands that attract consumers with a long history behind them – and the new US-modelled luxury brands – the brands that have invented captivating stories for themselves. Similarly, Truong *et al.* (2009) suggest that there are traditional luxury brands, which are very rare and exclusive, and there are also 'masstige' luxury brands, which combine a high perceived prestige with reasonable prices in order to attract middle-class consumers. Finally, Berthon *et al.* (2009) argue that "all luxury brands are not the same – they can mean different things to different people or even different things to the same people, which makes target marketing of luxury brands both difficult and important" (p.45); proposing a typology of luxury brands that includes classic, modern, postmodern, and Wabi Sabi luxury brands (for details, see Berthon *et al.* 2009, p. 51). However, while these studies recognise the differences among the brands, they also note that all of these forms of branding are undoubtedly related to the consumption of luxury brands. Consequently, recognising that

consumer perceptions of brands are both idiosyncratic and socially-constructed, and that different luxury brands may appeal to different consumers, depending on the socio-cultural beliefs salient to a consumer, the consumer uses and gratifications of luxury brands, the luxury brands experiences and/or perceived characteristics associated with luxury brands, this study explored the brands in the fashion industry that met the following two criteria:

1. The brands were recognised in either academic or popular literature as luxury brands (including traditional, 'masstige', classic European, and the US-modelled brands).

2. The participants considered these brands to be luxury brands.

Accordingly, a comprehensive list of international and New Zealand luxury brands was compiled, based on academic and popular fashion literature (such as fashion magazines) (Appendix 2) prior to commencing the participant selection and recruitment process. During the participant selection, I checked that the brands that participants considered to be luxury brands also appeared on the compiled list. Such an approach was necessary to ensure that the brands studied and emerging themes were not only conveying the participants' individualised perceptions, but were also the representations of luxury brands in the context of the wider culture (popular culture, national culture).

4.4.2. Expert Panel Phase

To my best knowledge there have been no previous studies that have investigated the consumption of luxury brands in New Zealand. Consequently, it was deemed to be important to gain a preliminary insight into the context surrounding the consumption of luxury brands in New Zealand prior to commencing the data gathering process. In particular, it was of

interest to identify what brands New Zealand consumers consider to be luxury brands; what types of customers predominate in the New Zealand market for luxury brands, and whether there are any other dominant specificities of luxury brand consumption in New Zealand of which I needed to be aware, prior to commencing the research. Since there is such a limited amount of information to be found in the literature, I conducted an expert panel phase, consisting of four open-ended, unstructured interviews with managers and commercial experts from the luxury brand industry in New Zealand. The brief profiles of the expert participants are presented in Table 1 below, and the full transcripts of the interviews are provided in Appendix 6.

Table 1. Expert Participant Profiles

Name	Profession	Expertise
Mark	General Brand Manager for a global luxury brand conglomerate in New Zealand	10 years +
James	Managing Director of international brand consultancy firm in New Zealand	10 years +
Julian	Owner of one of the largest luxury multi-brand stores in New Zealand	10 years +
Roxy	Retail Manager of a luxury multi-brand store in New Zealand	2 years

Several important insights were derived through these expert interviews. First, in relation to the preferred luxury brands in New Zealand, the experts confirmed that New Zealand consumers purchased both international and national brands, and that these were the brands included in the list of luxury brands compiled during the selection of a research site process (Appendix 2). Thus, the expert interviews corroborated the appropriateness of the luxury brands explored in this study.

Secondly, the experts asserted the importance of Auckland, in particular, being as the base market for luxury products and services in New Zealand. The experts clarified that there were

differences in preferences, shopping styles, and motives for purchasing luxury brands between European New Zealand and Asian New Zealand luxury brand consumers. According to the experts, European New Zealand consumers tended to be more knowledgeable about luxury brands and purchased the brands for personal enjoyment, whereas Asian New Zealand consumers preferred international and more conspicuous luxury brands, that were predominately used to satisfy the consumers' social needs (such as status display). Furthermore, the experts noted that consumer preferences for luxury brands may vary across different age groups. In particular, they suggested that younger consumers (e.g., high school and university students) tended to purchase 'entry level' luxury products, such as fragrance and cosmetics; young professionals (e.g., recent graduates) purchased more substantial products, such as suits and shoes; and older consumers (e.g., successful company owners; wealthy, retired HNWI's) purchased luxury brands more frequently and preferred the most expensive products within the category. This segmentation of the customer base for luxury products corresponds with the customer groups identified during the literature review:

(1) At the top end are the *luxury gourmands*, who devour luxury in great big bites, donning designer labels from head to toe, 24/7. Needless to say these are high net worth individuals (HNWI), with upwards of a million dollars in financial assets.

(2) Next you have the *luxury regulars*, who while not quite in the gourmand league are nevertheless on staple diet of luxury goods. These are affluent people with financial assets in excess of US$ 100,000.

(3) And finally, there are the *luxury nibblers*, who partake in a few small bites of luxe every season, a bag here, a watch there, whatever they can afford. They are typically young people with next to no savings in the bank, but with an increasing income-generating capacity thanks to a decent education and well-paying job.

(Chadha and Husband, 2006, p. 47)

The insight provided by the experts regarding the existence of different customers of luxury brands in New Zealand was helpful in designing a meaningful research sample. In particular, by inferring that there could be differences in the consumption styles of luxury brand consumers, the experts' observations suggested that it was important to recruit the participants from different cultural backgrounds, age groups, and the degrees of purchases.

Finally, the experts noted that one of the specificities of New Zealand consumption of luxury brands, presumably rooted within New Zealand culture, was the existence of a significant number of consumers who displayed resistance towards conspicuous consumption – the public display of luxury products. According to these experts, the minimal appreciation of luxury brands amongst the wider New Zealand public sometimes had the effect of discouraging other customers who might otherwise have enjoyed the conspicuousness brought by luxury brands. In other instances, it could result in the unwillingness of luxury brand consumers to acknowledge their preference for luxury brands – and sometimes their hiding their consumption from others. The experts also noted that this could be one of the reasons why the luxury brand industry remains rather small in New Zealand, and why a lot of New Zealand consumers prefer to purchase luxury brands overseas. For the purposes of this study this was an important insight, because it asserted that some respondents could be unwilling, or might find it uncomfortable, to discuss their perceptions and experiences of luxury brands.

In summary, the expert panel phase was an important step in the research process for three main reasons. First, the findings allowed me to corroborate the luxury brands explored in the study. Secondly, the findings from the expert interviews provided a set of guidelines for

designing the research sample; and, finally, the experts' views made me aware of difficulties that could potentially arise with the gathering of data.

4.4.3. Data Gathering

This section outlines the procedures that were undertaken to gather the data. First, the section will discuss how the participants were selected and recruited for this study, followed by a description of the process of the interview guide development. Finally, the section will address the process of interviewing, and discuss how I achieved theoretical saturation (Spiggle, 1994; Bowen, 2008).

4.4.3.1.   *Participant Selection*

I used a purposive sampling technique because of the research questions and the qualitative nature of this research. This was based on the assumption that richer insights could be uncovered into important aspects of the meanings and experiences ascribed to luxury brands if the sample met certain criteria imposed, rather than if the sample was random (Patton, 2001; Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). The criteria for selecting the research participants and generating the research sample are discussed in detail below.

Firstly, given that this study was conducted in New Zealand and it aimed to uncover the meanings that New Zealand consumers ascribe to luxury brands, it was important that the participants had lived in New Zealand. Consequently, the first criterion for the selection was that the participants had lived in New Zealand for at least five years. Secondly, the exploratory nature of the research demanded that respondents were able to engage in reasonably cognitively challenging tasks, such as discussing their perceptions and

experiences of luxury brands. Thus, it was crucial to recruit participants who were good at articulating their perceptions and experiences.

Furthermore, there were several criteria with regards to the research sample composition. During the expert panel phase it was indicated that the customer base for luxury brands in New Zealand is multicultural in composition, and that consumers with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds could have different perceptions about luxury brands. Consequently, I aimed to recruit participants with different cultural backgrounds (provided that they had lived in New Zealand for at least five years). In addition, acknowledging that the meanings and experiences ascribed to luxury brands might be different according to frequency of purchases (Chadha and Husband, 2006), it was important to interview participants with a range of purchasing habits. Accordingly, the final sample consisted of twenty-four informants from the Auckland area in New Zealand, eight who purchased a luxury brand product at least four times a year, eight who purchased two to four times year, and eight who had purchased at least one luxury product within the last year. The sample included twenty-one women and two men; ages ranged from nineteen to sixty five, with an income of at least NZD$40 000 per year. The brief profiles of the research participants are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Brief Profiles of Participants

Participant	Age	Cultural Background/ Ethnicity	Occupation	Semi-Structured Interview	ZMET Interview
Jean	48	NZ Indian	Director	Yes	Yes
Emma	45	NZ European	Senior Manager	Yes	Yes
Katherine-Anne	23	NZ Indian	Librarian	Yes	Yes
Heather	27	NZ Asian	Office Worker	Yes	Yes
Suzanne	38	NZ Indian	Senior Manager	Yes	Yes
Charles	30	NZ Asian	Consultant/ PhD Student	Yes	No
Scott	28	NZ Asian	Student	Yes	Yes
Rachel	28	NZ Asian	Office Worker	Yes	No
Elizabeth	30	NZ Asian	Graduate Student	Yes	Yes
Danielle	49	NZ European	Manager	Yes	No
Ruth	40	NZ European	Senior Manager	Yes	No
Alison	32	NZ European	Nurse	Yes	No
Sarah	31	NZ Asian	Lawyer	Yes	No
Cecilia	25	NZ European	Fashion Buyer	Yes	No
Tessa	45	NZ European	Business Owner	Yes	No
Jubilation	29	NZ European	PR Manager	Yes	No
Miranda	28	NZ Asian	Bank Consultant	Yes	Yes
Lilandra	45	NZ European	Writer	Yes	No
Page	28	NZ Asian	Make-up Artist	Yes	No
Lillian	65	NZ European	Housewife	Yes	No
Megan	26	NZ Asian	Housewife	Yes	Yes
Lorna	27	NZ Asian	Museum Worker	Yes	No
Logan	32	NZ Indian	Manager	Yes	Yes
Hope	50	NZ European	Senior Researcher	Yes	No

Due to the product category that was chosen as the research context, the sample consisted of predominately female respondents. While this may seem to be a source of potential bias, the themes that emerged from the three male respondent interviews corresponded to the themes that emerged from interviews with the female subjects. The primary purpose of this study was to explore how consumers derive meanings of luxury brands in relation to the developed conceptual model of brand meaning (Figure 4, see p.78), and so having a predominantly female research sample did not affect the ways in which constructs and relationships were conceptualised and derived. Several studies have also reported that women tend to express

personally relevant information, particularly related to interpersonal issues and feelings, better than men, which makes them more informative research participants (Burns *et al.*, 2000; Fern, 2001). The participants' abilities to express their thoughts and feelings, and clearly articulate their perceptions and experiences, were very important criteria for this study.

4.4.3.2.   *Participant Recruitment*

Several techniques were used to find suitable participants who met the research criteria. First, I put an advertisement in The University of Auckland Business School Newsletter. Secondly, with the help of The University of Auckland Business School public relationships office, I managed to get in contact with some high net-worth individuals who purchased luxury brands. In addition, contacts were obtained from the expert panel participants and with the help of the thesis supervisor.

However, the majority of contacts were obtained from the research participants, themselves, using a snowballing technique (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). Snowballing was particularly useful because the technique helped to generate a sample based on referrals made by people who presented the characteristics that were of research interest (frequent purchasers of luxury brands). Consequently, I gained access to the recruitment of willing and suitable participants to take part in this study and to generate rich information. Moreover, snowballing helped to identify participants with diverse views and socio-cultural backgrounds, who were outside of my immediate social networks. Finally, the personal referee technique added to my credibility as the researcher, as potential participants knew and trusted the referees who vouched for my credibility (Ger and Sandikci, 2006).

Once the contacts were obtained through one of these methods, I would contact them by email. The first email would contain a personal information sheet (Appendix 3.1.), that

explained the nature of the research, and a small questionnaire that was used to confirm whether the potential respondents met the research criteria. The questionnaire contained questions related to the potential respondents' personal background (such as age, occupation, and ethnicity), the luxury brands they preferred, and their frequency of purchases. If the respondents met the research criteria, then I would send these participants a second email, which would contain a participant consent form (Appendix 3.2.), and asking to arrange a suitable time and place for an interview. If the potential participants did not qualify for the research, I would thank them for their interest and let them know that they were not suitable participants for this research.

4.4.3.3.   *Development of Interview Guide*

In conducting modified ZMET interviews, I was guided by the interview procedures outlined by Coulter (2006). A detailed guide for these interviews is presented in the Appendix 5.2. An interview guide for the semi-structured interviews was prepared using a series of pre-test interviews. These interviews were conducted with friends and colleagues, and provided an insight into the ways in which consumers could respond to my questions, assisting in the refinement of the wording of questions that were asked during the actual research sessions. In addition, pre-test interviews helped me to practice interview skills, helping to determine the level of guidance that I needed to provide in order to obtain a sufficient amount of information about the constructs of interest. As I interpreted the earlier transcripts, changes were made to the interview guide in order to uncover and reiterate the emerging themes in the later interviews. Such an approach is consistent with the hermeneutic theoretical perspective, which suggests the meaning of a text may increase with the researcher bringing new readings to the preconceived or originally interpreted components of

the text (Klein and Myers, 1999). The final interview guide for the semi-structured interviews is presented in Appendix 5.1.

4.4.3.4.   Interviewing Process

The interviews were conducted at the most convenient places for the participants. These included the participants' homes, workplaces, and some interviews were also conducted at The University of Auckland Business School. Two forms of interview were conducted –semi-structured in-depth interviews and modified ZMET interviews. All twenty-four participants were interviewed using the semi-structured interview method. Twelve of these participants were also interviewed using a modified ZMET interview method. There are several reasons why not all of the respondents were interviewed with a ZMET method. First, the practical reason for this was that a ZMET alone could take up to two hours of interviewing. When combined with a semi-structured component, the entire interview could take up to three and a half hours. Given that most respondents in this study were employed full-time, the combined interviews required a lot of commitment from the participants. Secondly, one of the key objectives of this study was to explore how the meanings ascribed to luxury brands are formed. In order to address this objective, it was necessary to uncover the relationships among the dimensions of the luxury brand meaning (Figure 4, see p.78) within the consumer perceptions of luxury brands. The semi-structured interviews, which allow the researcher to probe the relationships among constructs in deriving the consumption texts (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984), seemed to be a more appropriate technique for addressing this purpose rather than a single ZMET interviewing method. Finally, although ZMET interviews provided me with a valuable insight into complex concepts that the participants might have had difficulty in articulating, the analysis of ZMET interviews showed that the themes that emerged from these interviews corresponded to those from the semi-structured

interviews. In fact, the most valuable aspect of the ZMET interview method was in deriving richer descriptions of the themes that had already been identified during the semi-structured interviews. Theoretical saturation was thus achieved after conducting twenty-four semi-structured and twelve ZMET interviews.

The interview process took approximately two hours for a semi-structured interview and up to three and a half hours to complete a combined research session. All sessions were audiotaped and transcribed with permission obtained from each respondent. The semi-structured in-depth interview technique was guided by the developed interview guide. These interviews were conducted in a comfortable and conversational style to allow respondents to communicate their thoughts freely in a narrative form (Britten *et al.*, 1995; Thompson, 1997). Open-ended probing questions were used to obtain rich descriptions (Robson and Foster, 1989) of the themes that emerged during the interviews, and to gain an increased understanding of the meanings ascribed to luxury bands, and how these meanings were had been formed by the participants.

The modified ZMET interviews followed the procedures outlined by Coulter (2006). Prior to the interview, the participants who agreed to be interviewed using the method, were sent an email stating:

> "I am interested in your thoughts and feelings about luxury brands in the fashion and apparel industry, and the roles that luxury brands play in your life...Please bring 6 to 8 pictures that represent these thoughts and feelings about luxury brands and the roles they play in your life. The images can be pictures from magazines, newspapers, pieces of artwork and/or photographs taken specifically for this assignment or retrieved from photo albums. The images can also be sent to me via email prior to the interview"

At the interviews, the respondents were first interviewed using the semi-structured interview method. After completing this component of the interview, the respondents were asked questions about the images that they had provided using a modified ZMET interview guide (Appendix 5.2.). In particular, the participants were first probed to discuss how each image represented their thoughts and feelings about luxury brands. Then the participants were asked to use their imagination and try to widen the frame of the images and describe what else might enter the image, to better understand their thoughts and feelings about luxury brands. Next, the participants were asked if there were any important ideas they wanted to express but for which they couldn't find images. Finally, the participants were asked to express their ideas using various sensory images, and to create an imaginary story about their experience with a luxury brand. Unlike the traditional ZMET method, which puts emphasis on generating metaphors associated with the researched consumption experiences (Zaltman and Coulter , 1995), the modified ZMET interviewing method used in this study aimed not only to derive the metaphors but, most importantly, to understand the participants' interpretation of these metaphors. Consequently, throughout the modified ZMET interview, I would ask the participants to discuss the meaning of emerging metaphors in relation to the themes that these participants had previously talked about during the semi-structured component of the interview. The transcripts of all participant interviews are presented in Appendix 7.

4.4.3.5.   *Achieving Theoretical Saturation and Sample Size*

In hermeneutics, "the understanding is achieved by iterating between considering the interdependent meaning of parts and the whole that they form" (Klein and Myers, 1999). Thus, the understanding of earlier readings of text (interview transcripts) informed the reading of the later ones. For this reason, I constantly revised interpretations of interviews as they were gathered, and in the later interviews explored themes that had emerged in previous

ones (Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). Such an iterative process was necessary to obtain a holistic understanding of the research problem while also noting the differences that existed amongst the respondents. In order to assist this process, I kept a research journal that detailed repeating and newly emerging themes (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). The journal was especially useful in exploring the uses and gratifications of luxury brands, and their perceived characteristics. I would keep notes about the ways that respondents described luxury brands in one interview, so that in the next one, these descriptions could be explored in more detail. Information regarding relevant literature on the emerging themes was also kept in this journal. This allowed me to compare emic data with the theoretical concepts guiding the research (Klein and Myers, 1999). Most importantly, however, the research journal was a useful tool to enhance the reflexivity of the research process), where I was able to revisit my own thinking and thus, better understand how the research process shaped its findings (Holland, 1999).

The iterative process was also useful in determining the sample size. Interviewing continued until the point when theoretical saturation (Spiggle, 1994; Bowen, 2008) was reached, and additional transcripts were not expected to add any new insights into the research problem (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984). The decision regarding saturation was made in agreement with the thesis supervisor. The researchers agreed that clear themes were established and the research questions answered after the generation of twenty-four interview transcripts – twelve semi-structured in-depth interviews and twelve interviews that combined the semi-structured interviews with a modified ZMET method of interviewing. Such an approach is consistent with the principle that the sample size should be determined by the research questions and the analytical requirements of the study (Kvale, 1996; McCracken, 1988; Taylor and Bogdan, 1984).

4.4.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis began with all interview recordings being transcribed into electronic text files. A commercial transcriber was first employed to do the initial data processing tasks (Appendix 4). I then reviewed the electronic transcripts in order to confirm that transcripts reflected the narrative sequences of interviews accurately. Any necessary adjustment to respondents' idiosyncrasies and grammar corrections were also made at this stage. Moreover, the process of transcript revision was useful in obtaining an in-depth understanding of each respondent's interpretation and meanings (Ezzy, 2002), as well as the holistic understanding of general themes across the data set (Hirschman, 1992). Such understanding is critical for the process of hermeneutic interpretation, where the researcher analyses data by the means of an "iterative back-and-forth process of relating a part of a text to the whole" (Thompson *et al.*, 1989, p. 347). The subsequent process of data analysis was highly iterative and followed the procedures of qualitative data manipulation operations described by Spiggle (1994) and Thompson (1997). The two formal methods employed to analyse the data were thematic and narrative analyses.

4.4.4.1.   Thematic Analysis

The first part of the analysis involved the use of thematic analysis (Aronson, 1994; Spiggle, 1994). In conducting the thematic analysis, I followed the operations of categorisation, abstraction, comparison, dimensionalisation and integration advocated by Spiggle (1994). Once interview transcripts were reviewed, the data was investigated using the qualitative analysis software package Nvivo 9. This software was useful in coding the data (Aronson, 1994) in the early stages of the analysis, and was also used to assist me in the facilitation of an iterative thematic analysis (Spiggle, 1994; Aronson, 1994; Thompson *et al.*,

1989). I first used Nvivo 9 software to segment inductively (Ezzy, 2002) each interview transcript into separate text blocks that reflected a meaningful theme within the transcript. Once the themes were identified from the interview texts, they were interpreted by myself, and triangulated by the thesis supervisor, to understand how these themes corresponded to the developed dimensions of the luxury brand meaning (i.e., the socio-cultural beliefs about luxury brands, the uses and gratifications of the luxury brands, the luxury brand experiences, and the perceived characteristics of luxury brands). During this process, the coded text units were repetitively inspected to confirm that the themes that emerged were adequately described before they were assigned to one of the four principal dimensions. The themes were first understood in light of the interview from which they were derived, in order to generate an overall understanding of that particular interview; and then these themes were compared across the entire set of interviews to elicit higher-order abstractions (Spiggle, 1994) that described the meanings that consumers ascribed to luxury brands.

4.4.4.2.   Narrative Analysis

From a narrative perspective, consumers use narrative structures to represent their understanding of their life events, including consumption experiences (Thompson, 1997; Stern *et al.*, 1998; Moore, 2012). These narrative structures are comprised of interrelated narrative elements that convey the meaning of the narrative, more commonly referred to as the story of a narrative structure (Polkinghorne, 1988). Consequently, by examining the relationships among the elements comprising the story, the researcher can gain insight into how the meanings conveyed by the narrative were constructed, or authored, by their participants (Stern *et al.*, 1998). The second part of the data analysis involved a narrative analysis (Thompson, 1997; Stern *et al.*, 1998; Moore, 2012) of the interview transcripts that explored structural relationships among the principal dimensions of the luxury brand meaning

(i.e., the socio-cultural beliefs about luxury brands, the uses and gratifications of luxury brands, the luxury brand experiences and the perceived characteristics of luxury brands) within the stories that participants suggested about their consumption experiences of luxury brands during the interviews.

In order to achieve this purpose, the themes reflecting the dimensions of luxury brand meaning, salient to each respondent, were perceived as the narrative elements of stories conveying the respondent-perceived meaning of luxury brands. Consequently, informed by the hermeneutic framework of interpretation (Figure 3), I explored how the themes of the socio-cultural beliefs about; luxury brands, the uses and gratifications of luxury brands, the luxury brand experiences, and the perceived characteristics of luxury brands were narratively intertwined within each story from the interview transcripts. Such an approach allowed me to gain insight into the participants' perceptions of luxury brands within the context of their self-identities, and the broader socio-cultural issues salient to their consumption of luxury brands. After the emerged themes were understood in light of the individual interview from which they were derived, similar to the thematic analysis process, these themes were then compared across the entire set of interviews to elicit higher-order abstractions (Spiggle, 1994), and to develop a theoretical model of how consumers derive the meanings of luxury brands.

4.4.5. Trustworthiness

In ensuring the trustworthiness of analysis and findings, this thesis followed the guidelines outlined by Cavana *et al.* (2001). According to Cavana *et al.* (2001), the main verification of trustworthiness in qualitative studies is triangulation. In this study, I used several methods of triangulation. First, as suggested by Cavana *et al.* (2001), I kept comprehensive records concerning the research process throughout the analysis. This was

done to keep track of coding, results, thought process and to address "referential adequacy" (Cavana *et al.*, 2001, p. 136) that offers confidence that the data was reported accurately. The second method of triangulation involved "confirmation from other sources about specific issues or events identified" (Cavana *et al.*, 136). I used this method of triangulation by comparing the emerging themes of this study with previous research in the academic literature and corroborating the findings with what the expert panel participants. The third method of triangulation was the use of a multi-modal approach. This approach requires the researcher to use two or more methods of data gathering and then to compare resultant interpretations (Cavana *et al.*, 2001). This study employed semi-structured in-depth interviews and modified ZMET interviews for data gathering. The findings from both methods were corroborated during the thematic and narrative analyses, showing that similar themes emerged from both. The fourth and final, method of triangulation employed was researcher-researcher triangulation (Cavana *et al.*, 2001). This method requires another researcher to analyse the data. In this study, the process of analysis and the final results were triangulated with the thesis supervisor on a weekly basis, and another experienced researcher also read the transcripts and corroborated the themes that had emerged. Furthermore during the course of the study, I published papers at the number of reputable national and international conferences, including The University of Auckland Business School PhD Conference, the Australia New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference, the Academy of Marketing Brand Conference, and the Academy of Marketing Science World Marketing Congress. These publications were based on the PhD project and were subjected to an independent review process (Seo, 2009a; Seo, 2009b; Buchanan-Oliver and Seo, 2010; Seo and Buchanan-Oliver, 2011a; Seo and Buchanan-Oliver, 2011b; Seo, 2012) (Appendix 1).

4.5. Conclusion

This chapter has explained the logic behind this research. The study aims to inform our understanding of the consumption of luxury brands by exploring emically the meanings that New Zealand consumers ascribe to luxury brands in the context of the fashion and apparel industry, and providing insight into how these meanings emerge through brand experiences within consumer culture. In order to address the research purpose, this study employed a qualitative approach, grounded within the social constructionist epistemology and the hermeneutic theoretical perspective, located within the larger spectrum of the interpretivist paradigm. A hermeneutic framework for interpreting consumer stories, developed by Thompson (1997), was adopted as a research methodology. The data was gathered using semi-structured in-depth interviews and a modified ZMET interviewing method. Data analysis was highly iterative and followed the procedures of qualitative data manipulation operations described by Spiggle (1994) and Thompson (1997). The two formal methods employed to analyse the data were thematic and narrative analyses. The thematic analysis was used to explore the principal dimensions of the luxury brand meaning, and the purpose of the narrative analysis was to explore the relationships among the principal dimensions with the aim to explore how the meanings ascribed to luxury brands by consumers emerge. Several methods of triangulation were employed to corroborate the trustworthiness of the analysis and findings.

CHAPTER V: ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

5.1. Introduction

This research grew out of a call to investigate gaps in the existing literature about the consumption of luxury brands. In particular, the purpose of the study was *to inform our understanding of the consumption of luxury brands by emically exploring the meanings that New Zealand consumers ascribe to luxury brands in the context of the fashion and apparel industry, and providing insight into how these meanings are formed through brand experiences within consumer culture*. The two specific linked objectives of this study were:

1. To explore the meanings that consumers ascribe to luxury brands.

2. To develop a theory that expands our understanding of how the perceived meanings of luxury brands are formed within consumer culture.

These research objectives were addressed by developing a conceptual model of brand meaning (Figure 4, see p. 78) and exploring the following research questions in the context of luxury brand consumption in New Zealand:

Research Question 1:   What are the socio-cultural beliefs associated with luxury brands in New Zealand?

Research Question 2:   What are the uses and gratifications that luxury brands possess for consumers?

Research Question 3:   What brand experiences do consumers derive from luxury brands?

Research Question 4:   What are the perceived characteristics associated with luxury brands?

Research Question 5:   What are the structural relationships among the principal dimensions of brand meaning, and how do these relationships influence consumers in deriving the meaning of brands within the context of luxury brand consumption?

The purpose of chapter five is to present the analysis of findings that address the research questions of this study. First, the chapter will detail themes related to the four principal dimensions of the luxury brand meaning (i.e., the socio-cultural beliefs about luxury brands, the uses and gratifications of the luxury brands, the luxury brand experiences, and the perceived characteristics of luxury brands) that emerged from participant interviews, addressing the first four research questions of the study. Secondly, the relationships among the principal dimensions of the luxury brand meaning will be discussed, addressing the fifth research question of the study. Thirdly, informed by the findings, the chapter will develop a theoretical model that illustrates and explains the process by which consumers derive the meanings that they ascribe to luxury brands or, in other words, how the consumer-perceived luxury brand meanings are formed. Finally, the chapter will present the concept map of the consumer-perceived luxury brand meaning derived from the interviews, offering an exploratory insight into the meanings ascribed to luxury brands, and the process by which these meanings emerge within the context of luxury brand consumption in New Zealand. Thus, this chapter forms the foundation for chapter six, which is a discussion of the findings in the context of extant literature and of the broader purpose of this study, which is to gain a more holistic understanding of the consumption of luxury brands within consumer culture.

5.2. Themes of the Luxury Brand Meaning Dimensions

The process of refining themes of the luxury brand meaning dimensions involved repeated readings, and the development of thematic codes within the conceptual framework of thepreviously established conception of brand meaning (Figure 3). Iterations of this process continued until the refinements of the themes were complete and every interview was coded. A summary of themes from the twenty-four research participants is presented in Table 3, with themes categorised into the dimensions of the luxury brand meaning that they represent, and ranked according to the number of individual participants who mentioned them,

Table 3. Themes of the Luxury Brand Meaning Dimensions

Theme	No of Participants	Theme	No of Participants
Socio-Cultural Beliefs about Luxury Brands in New Zealand		*Post-Purchase Experiences*	
Global Luxury Brand Culture	24	Special Occasions in Consumer Lives	14
Immigrant Cultures from the Asian Region	12	Appreciation from Luxury Brand Users	8
Circumspect Character of New Zealand Culture	12	Hedonic Experiences	8
The Uses and Gratifications of Luxury Brands		Social Appreciation of Luxury Brands	6
Escape Uses of Luxury Brands	12	Relational Experiences	5
Status Uses of Luxury Brands	10	***Perceived Luxury Brand Characteristics***	
Reward Uses of Luxury Brands	9	Brand Quality	24
Aspirational Status Uses of Luxury Brands	7	Brand Rarity	21
The Uses of Luxury Brands as Extended-Self	6	International Recognition	18
Luxury Brand Experiences		Brand Uniqueness	11
Pre-purchase Experiences		Brand Historicity	8
Introductory Experiences	24	Brand Discreetness	2
Purchase-related Experiences			
Elite Shopping Experiences	16		
Fantasy Shopping Experiences	7		

unsolicited, in their semi-structured interview and/or who talked about them during the ZMET interview. Explanations of these luxury brand themes with text unit illustrations are detailed in this section, and the key themes salient to individual participants can be found in Appendix 8.

5.2.1. Socio-cultural Beliefs about Luxury Brands in New Zealand

To speak of different cultures implies a certain measure of boundary and exclusivity (Reeves, 2004) that distinguishes one culture from another (e.g., Asian and Western cultures, British and American cultures, Auckland and Wellington cultures, etc.). However, the measures of such boundaries may not necessarily imply territorial or geographical borders. They can also refer to the differences in the socio-cultural belief systems prominent in the culture (Hirschman, 1987; Brockmeier and Carbaugh, 2001). From the marketing perspective, these cultural beliefs are important because they exert a significant influence on consumer behaviour by prompting the co-creation of culturally-constituted meanings (McCracken, 1986) that consumers ascribe to their life events and experiences (Stern, 1995; Thompson, 1997; Thompson, 2004). Consequently, researchers can explore the similarities and differences in consumption values, motivations, and behaviours within different socio-cultural contexts (e.g., a comparison of luxury brand consumption in Asia and in Europe).

However, in deriving meanings of consumption experiences, consumers are often influenced by the systems of values and beliefs that are derived from different cultures. For instance, Penaloza (1994) found that recent Mexican immigrants in the U.S. are influenced by both their own culture of origin and the culture of immigration in deriving the meanings of particular life events and experiences. Similarly, Sutton-Brady, Davis, and Jung (2010) discovered "the conflicted and negotiated construction of consumption around the subjects'

[consumers'] dual cultural identities" (p. 358) within the consumption practices of the Korean community in Australia. Furthermore, studies suggest that the prevalence of one culture over another in influencing consumption meanings may be different depending on the situational and environmental context. In other words, a consumer may identify strongly with one culture in deriving the meanings of some consumption experiences and more strongly with another culture when deriving the meanings of other experiences (Penaloza, 1994; Taylor and Stern, 1997; Oswald, 1999; Sutton *et al.*, 2010). For instance, Oswald (1999, as cited in Sutton-Brady *et al.* 2010) noted that "crossings between home and host culture, immigrants switch cultural codes constantly, adapting to the expectations of both home culture and host culture as the situation demands", and Sutton-Brady *et al.* (2010) found that consumers can use their consumption practices to move between symbolic cultural spaces, demonstrating the fluidity of their cultural identities. In light of increasing trends towards globalisation and cultural convergence (Robertson, 2003; Holt, 2004), these findings prompt the reconsideration of whether the often adopted traditional mono-cultural (ethnocentric) approaches – that impose a particular set of behaviours, motivations, and meanings on consumers based on their national and/or ethnic identities (e.g., Dubois *et al.*, 2005; Bian and Veloutsou, 2007) – are capable of providing a holistic insight into the roles of cultural influences in exploring consumption experiences and the meanings ascribed to those experiences.

The aim of this thesis is to explore how consumers derive the meanings of luxury brands. Accordingly, the thesis recognises the individuality of consumer interpretations, and that socio-cultural differences may exist even among consumers of the same nationality and/or ethnic group. Therefore, instead of imposing a particular set of meanings on participants based on their ethnic and/or national identities, or segmenting participants into mono-cultural

groups prior to exploring the themes emerging from interviews, I first identified the socio-cultural beliefs relevant to the consumption of luxury brands salient to each participant individually, and then compared the emerging themes across the entire sample of twenty-four respondents. Consequently, the themes related to the socio-cultural beliefs about luxury brands were first identified within the context of each interview, and then they were compared across the entire set of interviews to elicit higher-order abstractions (Spiggle, 1994). The analysis of interviews suggested that there are three broad themes related to the socio-cultural beliefs about luxury brands and their consumption in New Zealand. These themes are the circumspect character of New Zealand culture, the influence of immigrant cultures, and the influence of media and a global luxury brand culture. I will now discuss these themes in more detail.

5.2.1.1. *Circumspect Character of New Zealand Culture*

> "Blending-in… They [New Zealanders] wouldn't wear this [points at the luxury brand scarf], this is stand out. People look at me and go, "Oh you're bright today". And it's like if you were in India or Asia everyone's bright. We wear colours whereas here [New Zealand] there's a lot of navy blue, black and grey and I think *Zambesi* [local brand] does what the market expects. It is a dark brand and I think from that point of view they do okay, but they need to know that the world's a colourful place"
>
> Jean, aged 48, p.A91[1]

Jean is a New Zealander of Indian descent, born in Kenya. She came to New Zealand from Kenya when she was 8 years old. By visiting both India and Kenya frequently while living in New Zealand she kept in touch with her other two home cultures, allowing her to compare the cultures of New Zealand, India, and Africa as an insider of all three of these cultures. In

---

[1] Appendices: page 91

her comments about the consumption of luxury brands in New Zealand, Jean indicates that one thing peculiar for her about New Zealand is that it is characteristic for New Zealanders to want to 'blend in' with others. Although Jean mostly talks about the colours that are popular to wear in New Zealand, her comments suggest a more holistic perception that being conspicuous or as Jean calls it, to 'stand out', is a behaviour that is not very well appreciated within New Zealand culture. This view is corroborated by another participant, Emma:

> "I think people are much more discreet in New Zealand... I think they're much more discreet and I think that even if they've got the [luxury brand], even if they own the luxury brands they're much more discreet about how they use them and when they use them... Well actually.... I don't know whether this is relevant or not, if you are a female and you worry...you're talking about being discreet here...some of that's to do with people sitting above you in the organisation as well because you don't want to show up to other people. So you've got to watch what it is you do and what you're wearing and what you're conveying with people who are superior to you in the organisational structure... But if you worked in Singapore it'd be quite different, working in New York would too...So here [in New Zealand] there's quite a bit of thinking about who I work with and how I dress, I compromise a little. I would really love to have nice Prada handbags and everything else... but I wouldn't probably want to bring them to work..."
>
> Emma, aged 45, p.A129

In her comments, Emma indicates that people in New Zealand like to be circumspect about their consumption of luxury brands. Furthermore, she thinks that there is a socially and culturally-constituted awareness of "how and when you use luxury brands". In particular, Emma says that she would resist wearing luxury brands at workplaces in New Zealand, because such behaviour can convey a negative image to the management and other employees. Similarly, Katherine-Anne, who admits being a very passionate consumer of luxury brands and spends a lot of her free time on reading fashion magazines and shopping,

concurs with Emma's and Jean's views that there is prejudice within New Zealand culture towards wearing luxury brands conspicuously and what such behaviour may convey:

"We're such a conservative culture…. It's more widely accepted to be a little bit more lax in your appearance than it is to try too hard. I know that I'm probably the only person in this whole building that puts on this much make-up and wears clothes like this to work every day… I couldn't imagine wearing this [pointing at the photo in a fashion magazine] (Illustration 1) in Auckland, and not being judged just wearing something so completely outrageous. I mean it's not even that outrageous, it's like you know, it's fine, it's just a pencil skirt with a top. But, I mean because of the colours and stuff you would definitely stand out … You'd definitely stand out and it might not be in a good way because [of] culture and the perceptions here, because you kind of, it's the whole tall poppy thing, if you get. If you stand out, you're gonna get chopped down, you know. Like you have to conform to everyone else, and this [points at Picture 1] definitely making a very bold statement. Whereas the *Karen Walker* [local brand] skirt, I mean it's quite conservative…. Whereas this [points at Illustration 1] is more looking good, you know, part of the luxury side. Whereas in New Zealand I don't think people appreciate the looking good aspect as much as it is appreciated internationally, which is why this image would probably be awesome overseas and people would rush out to buy it, but [not here]…"

<div align="right">Katherine-Anne, aged 23, p.A133</div>

Illustration 1. Katherine-Anne's Fashion Magazine Photo

Katherine-Anne indicates that she considers New Zealand culture to be rather conservative, because it is more accepted in New Zealand "to be lax in your appearance than to try too hard". She also notes that not only it is common among New Zealanders to lack appreciation for luxury brands, but also wearing luxury brands in public can provoke negative judgements from others: "*It's the whole tall poppy thing... If you stand out, you're gonna get chopped down*". Another participant, Heather, thinks that the consumption of luxury brands in New Zealand is somewhat unique because within New Zealand culture it is rather uncommon to convey status and draw attention by conspicuously consuming luxury brands:

> "I guess it's [luxury brand consumption] definitely different because in New Zealand there's no, there's much less occasions you will actually need something to represent your status... if you're a well-known businessman, or you're a well-known someone, or politician, or anything like that, you don't need those [luxury brands] to make, to enhance it, I guess. But in other culture they need it because they have so many people trying to be famous, I guess, or trying to be someone, or trying to make it as a topic for others to talk about, and so that's part of the socialising style. In New Zealand it's just different. Even sometimes when you use it [luxury brands] you'll be like quite an odd one out and it's not a good thing actually."
>
> Heather, aged 27, p.A167

Therefore, the findings suggest that one of the key themes of the socio-cultural beliefs related to the consumption of luxury brands in New Zealand is the circumspect character of New Zealand culture. Participants noted that there is a sense of conformity within the socio-cultural norms and values of the culture that encourage New Zealanders to seek inconspicuous behaviours, allowing them to blend in with others. As Katherine-Anne suggests, it is more acceptable to be underdressed than overdressed in New Zealand. These socio-cultural beliefs are prominent for the consumers of luxury brands, because they

discourage New Zealand consumers from conspicuously wearing and using luxury brands, as the display of such consumption can be socially condemned.

5.2.1.2.   Immigrant Cultures from the Asian Region

New Zealand has always been a nation of migrants, built upon the tribal base of its indigenous Maori population. The 1840 Treaty of Waitangi permitted early British settlement, and European migration to New Zealand grew increasingly in the late nineteenth century due to widespread labour shortages in the country (Ward and Masgoret, 2008). In 1986 New Zealand opened its doors to nontraditional sources of migration, and in 1991 the active recruitment of skilled and entrepreneurial immigrants commenced (New Zealand Immigration Service, 1991). Since then, immigration from Asian countries has seen an unprecedented growth, increasing 240 per cent in the last ten years. China and India have been the largest contributors to New Zealand's growing population and at present almost 40 percent of overseas-born persons in New Zealand originate from Asia and the Pacific (Zodgekar, 2005; Ward and Masgoret, 2008). In 2006 about 4 million people were recorded as residing in New Zealand. On the basis of the 2006 census the ethnic origin of the population was recorded as: 67.6 percent European, 14.6 percent Maori, 6.9 percent Pacific, 9.2 percent Asian, and 12.1 percent other (Statistics New Zealand, 2006). Over 20 percent of these people are overseas-born. Moreover, "future projections forecast a growth in all ethnic minorities over the next 15 years, ranging from 28 percent (Pasifika) to 120 percent (Asians)." (Ward and Masgoret, 2008, p.228).

Participant interviews indicated that the circumspect character of New Zealand culture was not the only theme related to the consumption of luxury brands in New Zealand. Perceptions about luxury brands are also influenced by the socio-cultural beliefs of the cultures brought to

New Zealand with an increasing immigration (Ward and Masgoret, 2008), particularly from the countries of the Asian region (e.g., China, India, Japan, etc.). Participants recognised an increasing influence of Asian cultures on the consumption of luxury brands in New Zealand and, in some cases, it was noted that these cultures exerted a dominant influence on the ways in which consumers perceived luxury brands. For instance, in the interview with Suzanne, the participant noted her perceptions about the consumption of luxury brands in Wellington and Auckland, the two largest cities in New Zealand by population, which she sees as very different. Suzanne associates Wellington with the conservative and circumspect New Zealand culture, whereas Auckland, in her opinion, symbolises the influence of Asian cultures on the consumption of luxury brands in New Zealand:

Researcher: How would you describe the consumption of luxury in New Zealand?

Suzanne: "Okay, when I was in Wellington it's totally different society from Auckland. They are very conservative and they don't spend a lot of money on themselves on how they look – on luxury goods. So when I moved to Auckland our eyes sort of opened and [we] thought: "We were actually living in a different sort of generation".... Auckland is very multicultural, and people are not... they're quite broad minded here because they travel, they work, they earn, and they are a lot more exposed to the outside world than people in Wellington. Because a lot of the jobs in Wellington are government jobs, so a lot of people have stayed in those jobs for 15 years in the same role, and not moved on and not travelled much – quite conservative New Zealanders. Whereas Auckland's people... there's a drive here, there's an energy here...If you had seen us in Wellington to now it's a huge difference, because in Wellington you don't bother to make appearances, you don't bother to dress up or be presentable. It's just slack, and if you do [dress up] then people think, "Oh my God, where are you going?" So you have to actually dress down and play down if you wanted to fit into that society in Wellington, because that's how it was, and that's how people accept you, and if you were any different [from others], then people actually thought you were from a different planet... I think Wellington is more 'true New Zealand'"

Suzanne, aged 38, p.A181

Suzanne's comments suggest that her perceptions of Wellington's culture correspond to the view expressed by other participants in relation to the circumspect character of New Zealand culture. In particular, Suzanne notes that people in Wellington prefer to be underdressed than overdressed, and that conspicuous consumption can provoke negative judgements from others. However, when Suzanne talks about Auckland, she describes a very different sociocultural perception of the luxury brand consumption:

> "Auckland is a bit like if you've ever travelled to London, it's a bit like a bit of America, bit of Europe, bit of Asia…it's a mixture and I don't know what Auckland was like years ago, but I've found that in this city, the four years that I've lived in Auckland, we've seen more branded shops open… I mean, we never used to have *Louis Vuitton* in Auckland, we never used to have *Gucci*, and now I hear there are other brands opening as well! And I think that it's showing that the population of Auckland spending a lot more on luxury goods. I think even in terms of, if you were running a certain business, like a day spa,…[you] got to be presentable [in Auckland], whereas in Wellington we didn't have to be, it was very different. And just over the years I think – this is sort of my perception of why we're getting more of luxury shops and more of luxury items moving into this country – there is influence from a lot of people from Asian countries who've moved to Auckland, and that's why the demand is here. And you see at work, for example, let's say Bola [friend], who's from China, comes [to work] and she's got really good bag, nice *Louis Vuitton* designer bag. Everyone wants it and I want that as well, so they work hard for it, and they'll go out and buy it. So I think there are a lot of influences that have come in from Asian countries because you go to Singapore, you go to Japan…and everyone's just dressed beautifully in designer clothes, just looking immaculate!"
>
> Suzanne, aged 38, p.A182

Suzanne attributes the growing appreciation of luxury brands in Auckland to the cultural influences from Asian countries, which tend to show a greater appreciation for luxury brands, and brought to New Zealand with an increasing immigration from the Asian region over the last two decades (Ward and Masgoret, 2008). Therefore, contrary to Emma's and Katherine-

Anne's views that conspicuous consumption of luxury brands is socially disapproved of and even condemned, Suzanne notes that wearing luxury brands in Auckland may not only receives positive feedback, but it could also accumulate followers.

Further insights into how socio-cultural beliefs originating from the immigrant cultures influence consumer perceptions of luxury brands in New Zealand can be drawn from the interviews with Charles and Scott. Both participants were born in China, and came to New Zealand about ten years ago. They are regular consumers of luxury brands in New Zealand, spending over NZD$10,000 per year on luxury products. During their interviews, these participants suggested that in their perceptions of luxury brands they are more influenced by the values and beliefs of their culture of origin rather than New Zealand culture.

Researcher: What kind of things come to your mind when you think about luxury?

Charles: "It's something showing your social status…In China we have old saying which is, "If you want to tell whether this guy is good or bad from the first impression you look at how they dress." And if he's rich, whether it's good or not, you look at what is on his bag, you know, the logo. So it's kind of easier for other people to recognise you in the first place rather than spending time to tell them who you are and what have you achieved. If you drive a Maserati or Ferrari to a business meeting people often might think, okay you are successful person and it will be less time spending to explain who you are (laughter) and you can probably work on some other things"

Charles, aged 30, p.A211

Researcher: Why do you buy luxury brands?

Scott: "Because [for] the Chinese people… I think most Chinese people… it's the history – everyone want to show himself to the people that they are rich [and] wealthy. Historically, Chinese people mostly like that [appreciate wealth]. So, some people they can't afford the real luxury goods, they'll buy the fake one. The Valentino's logo is V [brand name]. So, this

brand came to the Chinese markets early, and people know that this is a luxury good, because just one T-shirt will be selling for hundreds. It would be available only in the developed cities in China like, you know, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, and Beijing. People will know that the Valentino is a luxury good. Because they cannot pay for the real ones they will buy the fake ones. Even in my home town, which is a small city, you can see somebody in the market just selling vegetables or something they will wear the Valentino fake one T-Shirt..."

Scott, aged 28, p.A232

The comments made by both Charles and Scott suggest that, within their perceptions of Chinese culture, luxury brands are conventionally associated with conspicuous consumption – the consumption of goods and services with the purpose of displaying wealth or status (Veblen, 1989). Furthermore, the participants suggest that within Chinese culture, the display of such consumption is not only accepted but expected. In particular, Charles thinks that luxury brands can serve an early introductory purpose within social and business settings, communicating the brand user's status and achievements to others. Scott also suggests that it is one of the characteristics of Chinese culture to have aspirations towards conspicuously portraying a higher level of status and wealth. According to Scott, it is this characteristic of Chinese culture that motivates some Chinese consumers to engage in the counterfeit consumption of luxury brands.

Another participant, Rachel, was originally from Thailand. However, she had lived in New Zealand for over fifteen years. In her interview, similarly to Suzanne, she noted that there are differences in the socio-cultural perceptions about the consumption of luxury brands within the contexts of Asian and New Zealand cultures. In particular, Rachel concurs with Charles and Scott that it is more commonly accepted and even expected within Asian cultures to wear

luxury brands when you go out in public, and she agrees with Emma and Katherine-Ann that in New Zealand conspicuous consumption of luxury brands is often condemned:

> **Rachel:** "In Thailand, I wouldn't go out the house without any makeup on, just because of the culture, and things like that. Over here [in New Zealand], the image that you portray is different, because if you're all dressed up just to go to Countdown people will be like, staring at you, "Are you normal?" They'll judge you and they'll go, "Hmm, oh, what a…" I don't know, whatever they think. So it's the image as well that you portray. So, like with my stuff, I hardly ever use one of my bags. I have this Dior bag that is all white and it's really nice, but I wouldn't want to carry it around here [in New Zealand] because it's just like… people would think, I don't know, people just look at you as if you're not normal…You don't fit in to the culture here. I can't just go…if I go out with my friends and they're just using normal stuff [not luxury brands], I don't want to be using like a fancy or brand name stuff because it might make me feel…you don't want to be like, "Oh look at me, I'm all drag and draped in luxurious stuff… But let's say in Thailand – it [the consumption of luxury brands] is different… If I go out with friends who use all these brand names then I feel well I probably should be using [one] just to fit in… And then when you go shopping you have more… you're more inclined to go: "Oh, have a look at this, have a look at this"

> **Researcher:** So, your consumption allows you to affiliate with people you are with?

> **Rachel:** Yeah, definitely, because that's… I wouldn't make friends then. If you're kind of, if you were different all the time you don't fit in…it makes it harder. So you want to fit in… You might be a little bit different but you still want to be able to fit in with others and not make others think kind of like, "Oh, you think you're special, you think you're better than us."

> <div align="right">Rachel, aged 28, p.A269</div>

Furthermore, Rachel indicates that her consumption behaviour associated with luxury brands changes depending on whether she is in Asia or in New Zealand. Rachel admits to wearing luxury brands in Thailand, but she avoids using luxury brands conspicuously in New Zealand. From the comments above, it can be seen that this duality of consumption behaviour is

caused by Rachel's need to socialise with others and to 'fit in' within the culture. Consequently, the consumption of luxury brands adopted by Rachel are consistent with the dominant socio-cultural beliefs salient to the culture that surrounds her during the consumption events. These findings suggest that the oppositional attitudes towards luxury brands found within the socio-cultural beliefs of Asian and New Zealand cultures may instigate cognitive and behavioural conflicts related to the consumption of luxury brands for some consumers of luxury brands (e.g., recent immigrant consumers). It also implies that the more the public consumption of luxury brands becomes culturally accepted in New Zealand, the more consumers of luxury brands, like Rachel, could be inclined to adopt such behaviour.

Cultural diversity in New Zealand is a reality now and will only increase in the future (Smeith and Dunstan, 2004). In light of this trend, the findings suggest that the socio-cultural beliefs which originated from the immigrant cultures, particularly from the countries of the Asian region, are exerting a significant influence on the ways in which New Zealand consumers perceive luxury brands and their consumption. More specifically, by encouraging consumers to adopt and appreciate the conspicuous aspects of luxury brands, these cultural beliefs convey a sociocultural attitude towards luxury brands that are in oppositional conflict with the more circumspect character of the established New Zealand culture. Consequently, these differences in the socio-cultural values of Asian and New Zealand cultures can become a source of cognitive and behavioural conflicts related to the consumption of luxury brands, particularly for consumers who are strongly affiliated with both of these cultures. These socio-culturally prompted conflicts are important because they may also have a role to play in the meanings that consumers ascribe to luxury brands. More specifically, like Rachel, by questioning which socio-cultural beliefs about luxury brands are more dominant for them, the consumers may also want to reconsider their personal uses, experiences, and the

characteristics that they ascribe to luxury brands. A more detailed discussion of how the socio-cultural beliefs about luxury brands influence the other dimensions of luxury brand meaning is presented later in this chapter.

5.2.1.3.   *Global Luxury Brand Culture*

Over the last two decades, one of the most prominent changes in the ways in which luxury brands acquire and retain their customers has been a gradual shift in focus from the craftsmanship of exceptional products towards the craftsmanship of exceptional brand images (Beverland, 2004; Kapferer, 2006; Okonkwo, 2009). Consequently, the modern marketing of luxury brands is often described as invigorating storytelling (Beverland, 2004; Kapferer, 2006) and even as selling dreams (Dubois and Paternault, 1995). The stories and dreams conveyed by luxury brands captivate consumers, providing references to the fashion world and an affluent lifestyle (Michman and Mazze, 2006; Chevalier and Mazzalovo, 2008; Kapferer, 1997):

> Luxury brands are the tangible references to the most sophisticated fashions of a given time. As such, these brands implicitly convey their own culture and way of life: hence Saint Laurent is not Chanel. They offer more than mere objects: they provide reference of good taste. Luxury items provide extra pleasure and flatter all senses at once … luxury is the appendage of the ruling classes. (Kapferer, 1997, p.253)

According to Kapferer (1997), luxury brands have, come to convey their own culture, encapsulated by the narratives of global luxury brands, such as *Louis Vuitton*, Saint Laurent, and Chanel. Apart from advertising and various other forms of marketing communications (Brioschi, 2006), popular media and fashion have also become important elements within this emerging culture of global luxury brands (Okonkwo, 2009). According to Lippmann (1922,

cited in Mandel *et al.*, 2006) the media defines consumers' worlds by sketching images in their minds. Popular international fashion magazines, such as *InStyle* and *Vogue*, depict how successful people, such as celebrities, indulge in the consumption of luxury brands and inspire the masses of other consumers to emulate their affluent lifestyles through clothing and other consumer purchases (Mandel *et al.*, 2006). The global luxury brand culture is further reinforced by entertainment media, which include motion pictures, TV shows and music videos. Through careful product placement these media raise the prestige status of luxury brands worldwide while removing the appearance of selling (Lamb, 2011).

Consistent with these trends, the findings from participant interviews suggested that the emerging culture of global luxury brands has come to convey its own socio-cultural beliefs that influence the meanings ascribed to luxury brands by consumers in New Zealand. In particular, participants have recognised that the consumption of luxury brands is often associated with celebrities and an affluent lifestyle (e.g., Mandel *et al.*, 2006). For instance, Elizabeth makes reference to famous personas, such as Princess Diana and Victoria Beckham, when she talks about the famous *Hermès* handbag:

> "The *Hermès Birkin* [Illustration 2]. I heard that they're all handmade and cost sometimes 100 thousands of US dollars to get one, and you have to book it, and then wait for months in advance because those people have to craft and they have to made it for you…They're very unique; it's almost like tailor made for you type of thing, and the exorbitant price… People who use them, you can see this is one with the princess Diana, and also people like Victoria Beckham [Illustration 2]. She's quite rich and she has like hundreds of those Birkins, and then if you look at other celebrities, only the really successful ones have those. So that to me is extremely, extremely, extremely expensive, and the ones that use these [bags] are super successful!"
>
> <div align="right">Elizabeth, aged 30, p.A303</div>

Illustration 2. Elizabeth's Photo of the Famous *Hermes Birkin* Bag

In this interchange, Elizabeth talks about the *Birkin* handbag made by the *Hermès* brand. She notes that only very few people in the world, who include Princess Diana and Victoria Beckham, own this type of handbag. Hence, for Elizabeth, being able to possess such a luxurious item signifies the highest level of success. Other participants also recognised that the global luxury brand culture plays an important role in linking the consumption of luxury brands with the affluent lifestyle:

> **Researcher:** Is there any particular reason why luxury brand watches are really important for you?

Danielle: "Watches, handbags and shoes. Actually I think that's something that appeals to females anyway. Like a man like to have a Murray Crane handmade suit or something like that, that's not important to me. I think women generally like to have those things. I think it's driven by things in the media, I think it's driven by things like '*Sex in the City'*… There are a couple of brands of shoes in there that would never have, I mean those brands, their high profiles were created and, therefore, that drove demand through people wanting to be like the girls in '*Sex in the City'*".

<div align="right">Danielle, aged 49, p.A316</div>

"A lot of people see, or they view what luxury is based on what they see famous people wearing or having. Like, I don't know, Paris Hilton off the top of my head, I don't have a TV so I don't really know the latest stuff and I don't read gossip magazines which is fine with me, I'm happy with that. But I think that a lot of younger people or even older people look at famous people to emulate that lifestyle, because that to them is very prestigious and very elite and luxurious. They want to live like Beyonce and Jay-Z and this and that."

<div align="right">Alison, aged 32, p.A351</div>

"I think it's the brand image that it has, a lot of money spent into advertisement using super models and cool pictures in magazines. And you see Hollywood stars wearing it all the time in magazines, and you're sort of instilled the idea that they are the good luxury items, and they look actually good on them. So, you get to have an image that even if you don't look like them, when you have that item you feel like you're going to, you know, yeah. It sounds a bit stupid when you put it in words, but I think it's the image."

<div align="right">Sarah, aged 31, p.A371</div>

"Marketing has impacted the way we think, the way we associate it [luxury brand consumption]. Because let's say my favourite, let's say, I don't have a favourite actress, but let it be someone like Scarlett Johansen or something. She's carrying that bag, so, and she looks so good and you want to be like, you want to look good like that, for example, so you're like, "Oh wow, if I buy that bag maybe I'll look a little bit like her," for example… you try to have that kind of celebrity, the coolness, the things rub off on to yourself. There's always a little bit of that!"

<div align="right">Rachel, aged 28, p.A258</div>

Danielle, Alison, Sarah, and Rachel agree that the consumption of luxury brands has become the symbol of an affluent lifestyle. Furthermore, the interviews suggest that this affluent consumption belief is different from the conspicuous consumption of luxury brands discussed in the context of immigrant Asian cultures. Whereas conspicuous consumption refers to the purchasing and using of items mainly for the purposes of attaining or maintaining social status (Veblen, 1899), affluent consumption is associated with the socio-cultural beliefs that luxury brands convey a wealthy, celebrity-style way of living. Consequently, not only do the motives for affluent consumption include aspirations and/or affirmations of social status, but they also include the senses of self-worth, success, and hedonic experiences that constitute the affluent lifestyle. Accordingly, Danielle and Alison note that people want to live like the characters from a popular TV show *Sex in the City* and famous celebrities like Beyonce and Jay-Z, whereas Sarah and Rachel indicates that they want to look like their favourite celebrities, echoing Kapferer's (1997) words that the affluent consumption of luxury brands should "pleasure and flatter all senses at once" (p.253).

Most importantly, the findings indicate that popular beliefs that the consumption of luxury brands conveys an affluent lifestyle are not derived from the cultures of identity, whether it is their culture of origin (e.g., China) or residence (New Zealand). Rather such perceptions are derived from the consumer encounters with various forms of brand communications, popular media, and fashion, which reinforce these perceptions about luxury brands conveyed by the emerging global culture of luxury brands. Consequently, the findings suggest that in addition to the socio-cultural beliefs of New Zealand and immigrant cultures, the third key theme of the socio-cultural beliefs that influence the meanings consumers ascribe to luxury brands is the emerging culture of global luxury brands.

5.2.1.4.   *Summary of the Themes Related to the Socio-cultural Beliefs*

The analysis of interview data suggested three key themes related to the socio-cultural beliefs about luxury brands and their consumption in New Zealand. The first theme was the circumspect character of New Zealand culture. Participants noted that there is a sense of conformity within the established socio-cultural norms and values of New Zealand culture that encourage New Zealanders to adopt discreet behaviours. Consequently, the consumers of luxury brands are often discouraged from using luxury brands in public, as the display of conspicuous consumption is socially condemned within New Zealand culture.

The second key theme of the findings was that the socio-cultural beliefs originating from immigrant cultures, particularly from the countries of the Asian region, are exerting a significant influence on the meanings ascribed to luxury brands by consumers in New Zealand. More specifically, by encouraging consumers to appreciate the conspicuous aspects of luxury brands, these Asian cultural beliefs and values convey a sociocultural attitude towards luxury brands that are in oppositional conflict with the more circumspect character of the established New Zealand culture. Consequently, the oppositional influences found within the socio-cultural values and beliefs of Asian and New Zealand cultures provide a source of cognitive and behavioural conflicts related to the consumption of luxury brands, particularly for the consumers who are strongly affiliated with both of these cultures, as recent immigrant consumers may be.

Finally, the third key theme of the socio-cultural beliefs about luxury brands was the influence of the global luxury brand culture. In particular, participants have recognised that the consumption of luxury brands is often associated with celebrities and the affluent lifestyle, derived from their encounters with various forms of brand communications, popular media

and fashion. It is important to note that affluent consumption is different from conspicuous consumption, as this consumption practice conveys not only aspirations and/or affirmations of social status, but also the senses of self-worth, success and hedonism that constitute the affluent celebrity-like lifestyle.

5.2.2. The Uses and Gratifications of Luxury Brands

Consumers do not follow a company's idea of brand meaning passively, nor do they merely accept this meaning from the socio-cultural beliefs prominent in their cultures of identity. Instead, consumers negotiate and derive their own personalised interpretations of brand meaning (Berry, 2000; Batey, 2008; Payne *et al.*, 2009), which are dependent on the brand uses salient to them as individuals (Thompson, 1997), and the roles that these brands play in their lives (Fournier, 1998). Therefore, the meanings that consumers derive from brands are purposive (Fournier, 1998; Batey, 2008), and consumer motivations for purchasing and using brands serve as an important frame of reference in understanding consumer-perceived brand meanings.

Following the principles of the uses and gratifications theory, which asserts that people interpret and integrate the meanings of different texts into their lives to fulfil specific gratification wishes (Katz 1959; Ritson and Elliott 1995; O'Donohoe 1994), I explored consumer motivations for purchasing, subsequent uses of what they bought, and the roles that luxury brands play in their lives as expressed in the stories of participant interviews. The findings have suggested five key themes of consumer uses and the gratifications of luxury brands. These themes are the status uses of luxury brands, the aspirational status uses of luxury brands, the escape uses of luxury brands, the reward uses of luxury brands, and the uses of luxury brands as extended-self. The analysis has also shown, however, that the

consumption of luxury brands can provide multiple gratifications, adding more complexity to the meanings that consumers ascribe to them. Therefore, the uses and the gratifications of luxury brands are not mutually exclusive and can jointly co-exist within the perceptions of an individual consumer. I will now discuss the themes related to the uses and gratifications of luxury brands that emerged from participant interviews, in more detail.

5.2.2.1. *Status Uses of Luxury Brands*

In the early marketing literature, consumer motivation for purchasing luxury brands was attributed to conspicuous consumption, and the terms luxury brands and status goods were often used interchangeably (Veblen 1899; Bourne 1957; Zinkhan and Prenshaw, 1994; Vigneron and Johnson 1999). This status-orientated perspective suggests that, due to their high price and rarity, luxury brands are used by affluent consumers to signal their wealth, power and, ultimately, the status and role position of the brand-user (Zinkhan and Prenshaw, 1994). This suggests that luxury brands are mostly purchased for getting recognition from others rather than for personal gratification (O'Cass and Frost, 2002; Tsai 2005). This type of luxury brand use and subsequent gratifications derived from it, were noted in this study as well.

Suzanne is a senior manager of an international multi-channel spa treatment and product company. During her interview, Suzanne noted that she uses luxury brands to enhance her social status:

> **Suzanne:** "Luxury gives you status…It's not putting people down but [luxury brands] differentiate people from their backgrounds and their financial earnings, their social backgrounds."

> **Researcher:** Why is status important for you?

> **Suzanne:** "Status is important because it… reaching a certain status is important, I think, because it actually gives you the drive to work for that. So you say, "Okay, I want to buy that bag but what am I going to do to get it?" So it gives you that drive to say, "Now I'm going to work hard, I'm going to save or whatever". And normally people with success are people who work hard and not lazy, and you find normally people who are quite lazy and say, "Oh you're just lucky"… I don't think success comes because you're lucky. I think success comes because you're actually really hard working so that's important for me. I think it sort of comes down to if you're hard working and you work hard, yeah you deserve what you want and that might be a good car or a quality car and people are going to, if you're driving a big car, people are going to say, "Wow, you've worked hard" …And also to show success is very important and, to be seen as a successful person, [because] If you want to be seen in certain social networks you have to show that you're worth it or that you can be accepted into it and it still sort of exists. "

> Suzanne, aged 38, p.A179

Furthermore, Suzanne's comments suggest that there are important gratifications associated with the status-orientated uses of luxury brands. First, they motivate Suzanne to keep up with her work, encouraged by the appraisals of her achievements by others. Secondly, Suzanne notes that by conveying her status and role position through the consumption of luxury brands she can get affiliation with and recognition from high-status social networks, which she finds important in light of her career aspirations. Similarly, Charles finds that the status-orientated consumption of luxury brands provides a number of important benefits:

> **Charles:** "Luxury for itself represents something of high value, and the social status is more about what kind of position you're taking in the society. The more luxury you are, probably, the higher your social status is, because social status can be measured with your income. Income is part of it, and if you have more income you probably have more residual money, income to spend on luxury goods."

> **Researcher:** What function do luxury brands serve?

Charles: "if its luxury it means only certain level among people can actually get close to it...It's the representation of your achievements for some people, but not for everyone...some people have inherited money from family so there's two, spend their money on those goods."

Researcher: Why would you buy luxury brands?

Charles: "Sometimes it can convey the trust, you know, here's my wealth, here's what I earn in the past and it kind of give assurance in terms of what I'm capable of. Well, people wearing something totally different from the rest is showing their capability right, if you can afford it at the same level but then they probably can't afford it, which means I'm better than you to a certain extent …. Also gaining respect, as well, because in places for people to meet in a short period of time… people are much easier to be attracted by what I'm wearing, what I'm driving, what I'm drinking because you can tell from what they're doing and how they dress themselves. If, you know, in a social event, such as a business dinner, someone is wearing an LV hat, you probably think, "Oh, this guy is probably a loose cannon he can do whatever he wants," so it's just some judgement is made on their appearance."

Charles, aged 30, p.A227

Charles indicates that he also uses luxury brands to convey his social status. In his opinion, luxury brands are capable of communicating wealth, achievements, and successfulness of the brand user, inducing a sense of respect from other people.

The comments made by Suzanne and Charles encapsulate the status uses and subsequent gratifications through use of luxury brands noted during the study. Consistent with previous research, the findings suggest that the status users perceive luxury brands as items with high value and rarity. They use luxury brands to signal their wealth, power and, ultimately, the status and role position of the brand-user (Zinkhan and Prenshaw, 1994). This type of luxury brand use provides a number of associated gratifications, including the acceptance of the

brand user to affiliation with high-status groups of consumers, as well as providing the brand user with a sense of achievement, which comes from the appraisals from others, increasing the brand user's self-esteem.

5.2.2.2.   *Aspirational Status Uses of Luxury Brands*

Whereas the status-orientated consumption of luxury brands is used to convey the brand user's achieved social status, the findings have also suggested another form of luxury brand uses, where consumers purchased and consumed luxury brands to convey their desired or aspirational social status. For instance, Elizabeth aspires to have a successful career and seeks to achieve high social status in the future. Being a student at the moment, Elizabeth cannot afford to purchase luxury brands regularly. However, she still purchases one or two items each year, showing high appreciation for and knowledge about luxury brands. During an interview, Elizabeth indicated that, for her, the consumption of luxury brands symbolises the social status she aspires to achieve in the future:

> **Elizabeth:** "Luxury is not essential for average income group of people, which is probably more [larger in size] than a group of customers who can afford those [luxury brands]. I mean, for the normal, average income group of customers those things are not essential, so they are buying those maybe for certain occasions or whatever. But for those people who can afford it [affluent consumers], to them buying those brands is not a big deal…If their income is one billion, and then they spend like say $20,000 and buy a bag, the proportion to them is still [small], at the end of the day, it is [just] a bag. So, people who can just afford it [affluent consumers], they can never comprehend buying other cheaper stuff. And then for the other ones, maybe it's inspiration for them in having to go to say "I work hard this year, then at the end of the year I will reward myself with one thing", because obviously when you use it, people perceive you can afford those kind of bag [you are an affluent consumer]"

Researcher: What about yourself, for you personally?

Elizabeth: "Well at this stage it's still a treat for me…because I'm still studying and I don't really work, so if I achieve certain things every year then I will like to get myself some of those. But for the future I'm inspired to have that as part of my collections or what I use every day. [**Researcher**: Why is that?] It comes down to your own satisfaction and it comes down to how others perceive you…because that represents success. Only when you achieve success at certain level then you can become [one of] the group of customers who can afford those as [these brands become] not too expensive as proportion to your income. So that is something, not only about the luxury brand or product per se, it's about the level of success I'd like to achieve. It's a reflection… it's a reflection of using those luxury brands as your everyday use. It reflects the level of success you have achieved so you can afford those… For example if you are a business person and use those kind of products, then obviously people link your success with it [luxury brands]. And to me to achieve that level of state you have to earn your money, and I do respect those people who are very career wise successful."

<div align="right">Elizabeth, aged 30, p.A282-283</div>

In Elizabeth's perception, people who have achieved high social status and wealth, consume luxury brands as necessities which convey their status and role positions. Aspiring to achieve such a high level of social status in the future, Elizabeth consumes luxury brands to convey her aspirations to herself and others. Accordingly, on the one hand, the aspirational status uses of luxury brands provide Elizabeth with personal gratifications, where Elizabeth can praise herself for the achievements she has made towards becoming an affluent consumer. On the other hand, these luxury brand uses also provide her with social gratifications (gratifications that come from interactions with other people), by conveying Elizabeth's aspirations towards high social status to others through the conspicuous consumption of luxury brands. In another interview, Cecilia also admits to using luxury brands to convey an aspirational status that she has not yet achieved:

Cecilia: "I think you have to be successful to be, in order to have the money to buy it [luxury brands]. I mean anything I've bought from a somewhat luxury brands, I've worked really hard for it, so that is, well to me, that's success."

Researcher: Why do you, personally, buy luxury brands?

Cecilia: "I think it's a bit of a status thing as well, it's important for me, because I know that one day I would like to be able to go and buy a thirty thousand dollar bag. (Laughter) I've got, I know the lifestyle that I'd like to have and in order to get that I need to, you know, get success, it's very important."

Researcher: And how is success connected to luxury brands?

Cecilia: "Being able to afford them...Because the consumer [of luxury brands] can, does have that money to go and buy it, those brands, you cannot lay-by, they won't do it, you have to buy it in full, right then [when you want them]."

Cecilia, aged 25, p.A393

Cecilia had been working for four months at the time of interview. Similarly to Elizabeth, she indicates that, in her perception, the consumption of luxury brands is associated with a high level of social status and also an affluent lifestyle. Being a career-focused and success driven businesswoman, she consumes luxury brands to convey her aspirations to achieve these higher level of social status and an affluent lifestyle herself.

Finally, in an interview with Scott, the participant noted that conveying high status associated with the consumption of luxury brands can help the brand user to gain confidence and increase their self-esteem:

Scott: "If I wear *Gucci* and you don't, we're different. I wear *Gucci*, it is better than what you wear. It's like if we both together want [to get attention of] the same girl, I wear *Gucci*, you wear *Nike*, I feel more confident."

Researcher: So do luxury brands give you self-esteem?

Scott: "Self-esteem, yeah. The luxury brands will give you self-esteem, because I'm not really rich, and I don't have a business, own business, I don't even have a job. So I need luxury goods to give me some confidence, you know… Say, you're meeting your partner. They will have a look at you, what you're wearing, what you're driving. If you're driving like a *Honda*, or *Toyota*, they will think, "Can you do business for me with projects like one-million, one-billion?", or they think, "Okay, your watch is expensive, your phone is expensive, oh your shirt is expensive, you know, *Gucci* or *Louis Vuitton* or whatever, and you are driving a Ferrari", they will think "Okay, I want to do business with these people." You know, I will be successful, [there is] more chance for [me being] successful."

Scott, aged 28, p.A239

Scott is a regular customer of some of the most famous luxury brands available in New Zealand. Scott indicates that the consumption of luxury brands provides him with a sense of self-esteem and confidence by conveying the social status associated with these brands to others. Therefore, similarly to Elizabeth and Cecilia, Scott uses luxury brands to convey the social status that he has not in fact achieved. However, unlike the other two participants, who aspire to achieve social status associated with the consumption of luxury brands in the future and, therefore, become the actual status consumers of luxury brands, Scott has not suggested such intentions. For Scott, the aspirational status uses of luxury brands gratify his immediate needs for self-esteem.

Therefore, the findings show that consumers can use luxury brands to convey their desired or their aspirational status. Unlike the consumers who use luxury brands to endorse their achieved status and role positions, the aspirational status users consume luxury brands either

to convey their aspirations towards achieving higher status, which could eventually lead them towards becoming the status users of luxury brands, or they consume luxury brands to increase their sense of self-esteem and confidence among their peers. Accordingly, the aspirational status uses of luxury brands can provide consumers with both personal gratifications, such as consumers praising themselves for their achievements on the path towards becoming an affluent consumer, and also with social gratifications, such as gaining self-esteem, derived from other people's appreciation of the social status associated with luxury brands.

5.2.2.3. *Reward Uses of Luxury Brands*

The findings have also suggested that consumers may use their consumption of luxury brands as a means of self-reward. Unlike the status and aspirational status users of luxury brands, these users consume luxury brands to celebrate their personal achievements, rather than to convey their achieved or desired status to others. For instance, Suzanne indicates that she first purchased a luxury brand item to mark a beginning of her professional career:

Researcher: When was the first time you bought something from the luxury brand?

Suzanne: "I think when I was living in the UK. I purchased a pair of *Jimmy Choo* shoes so that was when I was working, that would be the first time when I was earning money for myself after I had finished my university. That was the first time and it felt amazing. [**Researcher:** Why is that?] Because I was able to buy something out of money that I had worked hard for and not sort of money that my parents had given me. Yeah, so for me that was really important and was also to show that to my parents that look "I worked so hard and I aspired to getting these good quality shoes, and I managed to do that!" So for me it was achievement."

Suzanne, aged 38, p.A193

For Suzanne, getting her first job was an important achievement in her life. She began getting income and no longer relied on the support of her parents. Therefore, in this episode, the purchase of a luxury brand represents a symbolic act, which conveys the brand user's achievements to herself and her parents. This consumption practice is significantly different from the status uses of luxury brands, because it was intended to gratify the brand user's own needs, rather than to conspicuously display her achieved social status. Similarly, Rachel also tells of buying luxury brands to celebrate major achievements in her life:

> **Rachel:** "It's like a sense of accomplishment, I guess. Like when you get your first pay cheque, for example, it's different buying it with your parents' money, but when I get my first pay cheque, I'm like, "Oh, wow, I'm going to reward myself with," let's say Dior glasses, or a pen, or whatever. And it's your satisfaction that you've worked yourself, this is your money, and you can afford this with your own money."
>
> Rachel, aged 28, p.A257

Therefore, apart from the status and aspirational status uses of luxury brands, the consumption of luxury brands can also be used to gratify consumer needs for self-reward. These findings are consistent with recent studies that note the emergence of new luxury brands (e.g., Truong *et al.*, 2009) and luxury brand consumption styles (e.g., Amatulli and Guido, 2011), which appeal to the luxury brand consumers' internal motivations for self-reward rather than conspicuous consumption. The interviews show however that, similarly to the status and aspirational status users, the reward users of luxury brands appreciate the perceived rarity and high value of luxury brand offerings. However, unlike the other two user groups, who appreciate these characteristics because they can convey the brand user's achieved or desired social status, the reward users find these characteristics important for their personal assessment of whether luxury brand offerings will make a worthwhile reward. Therefore, the gratifications derived from the reward uses of luxury brands are more personal

in nature. However, the findings have also suggested that the status and reward uses of luxury brands are not mutually exclusive. Consumers can have multiple uses of luxury brands that aim to gratify their different needs. For instance, Suzanne is both a status and self-reward user of luxury brands. Suzanne has suggested that she uses luxury brands both to convey her social status to others (see p. 148) and to gratify her personal needs for self-reward (see p. 155). Similarly, other participants also indicate multiple uses for their consumption of luxury brands.

5.2.2.4.   *Escape Uses of Luxury Brands*

Another important theme of the luxury brand uses and gratifications that emerged from the findings was that consumers use luxury brands to escape from their ordinary life and immerse themselves into the experiences and stories conveyed by luxury brands. For instance, Cecilia describes the consumption of luxury brands as an escape into another 'princess-like' world:

> "I don't have the disposable income to really be a connoisseur, but luxury is an idea, definitely another world, it is another world, and it allows you to escape into that sort of, I don't want to use the word, princess, but that kind of land. Yeah!"
>
> Cecilia, aged 25, p.A392

Similarly, Katherine-Anne also perceives the consumption of luxury brands as a form of escape:

> "I think with luxury brands the escape is pretty much the whole experience from where, for some people, it might be from a magazine. For me, it starts in the magazine, you know, it's a different kind of escape obviously. It's like packing your bags, like I said, to go on a trip. So from that to deciding to go to the store, to shopping, to trying on the clothes, and then deciding if you want to buy it, and that's when the journey ends, you know, when you walk

out of the shop with a bag in your hand, or if you chose to leave without buying anything, it's okay, you can always go back."

<div align="right">Katherine-Anne, aged 23, p.A151</div>

Katherine-Anne describes her consumption of luxury brands as an escape journey, which starts with the reading of fashion magazines, goes on throughout the purchase, and may continue afterwards. Other participants have also indicated that the escapism associated with luxury brands does not end with the purchase and may include post-purchase experiences as well. This suggests that the escape uses of luxury brands are often gratified during the different stages of consumption experiences – pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase experiences) (Arnould *et al.*, 2002). For instance, when Jean was asked to describe her feelings and thoughts about luxury brands, she also talked about escapism. However, in Jean's perception, the escape is strongly associated with the notions of transporting to another place and going on adventurous experiences (e.g., safari), whereas the consumption of luxury brands is seen to be an integral part of these escape experiences:

Researcher: Why does going on safari symbolise luxury brands for you?

Jean: "Safari's really expensive…. safari to me is the pinnacle of luxury because it offers you excitement within a luxurious surrounding, like I went on a safari last year and you get back to your tent and all the lights are like really old, so it's like *Out of Africa* and you've got the hot water bottle and then at 5.30 in the morning, the butler comes and he gives you hot chocolate in the morning before you go on your game drive. And it's just that, it's that transportation to a different place. There's like why would I want to escape to do that and holidays to me are escapism and that's what luxury brands offer, escapism from your normal life…"

Researcher: Where do brands come into play within this escapism experience?

Jean: "Luxury is an experience and the bags and things are … yeah they're add-on to that luxury or, necessities, because you can't go and stay at Aman [luxury resort] with a Mimco bag [not a luxury brand], can you? I mean, you'd have to have enough money for bag [and experience]!"

<div align="right">Jean, aged 48, p.A101</div>

According to Jean, going on safari signifies the pinnacle of luxury, because for Jean, luxury is an experience of transporting to a different and exciting place, offering an escape from her normal life. Luxury items, such as bags and clothes, are perceived to be an integral part of this escape, conveyed by Jean's comments that "you can't go and stay at Aman with a Mimco bag". In other words, in Jean's perception, the escape would be incomplete if she did not use luxury brands. This is further reinforced by the story that Jean narrated during her modified ZMET interviewing process, which shows that luxury brands are important elements of Jean's perception of escape:

"I'll tell you what comes to my mind [about luxury brands] straight away is Chanel or *Louis Vuitton* luggage, and I would be flying preferably a private jet, but if I couldn't do a private jet, so let's get real on that one, it would be first class on any of the first class airlines. Where would I like to go? I would like to go, I'd like to do the Blue Train from South Africa, that goes from South African for four days. I think that would be stunning. Yeah I'd really like to do that because that to me represents what I love, the adventure of the environment but also the luxury…"

<div align="right">Jean, aged 48, p.A107</div>

Similarly, another participant, Tessa, compares the consumption of luxury brands with going on a holiday or eating out in a restaurant. Tessa indicates that, by consuming luxury brands, she can leave all her "usual chores" behind, and feel more "special and being looked after", also emphasising the linkage between the consumption of luxury brands and her wants for a temporary escape:

Researcher: Why do you associate the consumption of luxury brands with going on a holiday?

Tessa: "I mean everybody, no matter who they are, I'm sure, even if they can't afford it, would love to be able to every now and again go to a top restaurant and just have somebody wait on them and sit there, not have to get up and do the dishes, not have to spend hours making the meal. There's a wonderful feeling of just being looked after and not having to do it for yourself, because I think too for me and for a lot of people who enjoy luxurious things they're actually working very hard themselves. I mean I could be one of these women who sit back and say, "Oh well my husband he earns plenty of money, so he can go out and do it and I'm going to just stay home." But I'm a person who works all day myself and as well as doing your usual things, looking after a home and that type of thing, are doing all the usual chores and so on, so when you go on holiday, or you're travelling, or you're going out for a meal, I want to be looked after and feel special"

Researcher: Can you relate this in the context of your favourite luxury brand, Roberto Cavalli?

Tessa: "When you go into *Graciella [a multi-brand shop]* particularly, now that they know me, the good thing is the staff, funnily enough, has been the same every year, in this shop. [Researcher: Is that important?] Yeah, it is, because they remember me, they know me, they, go "Oh madam, so good." They're just so happy to see you back into the shop again and they know what I like, so they're immediately running around. The good thing is, "Oh madam, would you like a glass of water, glass of Champagne, Cappuccino, what would you like?" My husband sits down; he's offered this, that and the other. So you're looked after properly. They help you go through, they pull things off the racks for you, you go through yourself, and you pull things off. They are devoted to looking after you whilst you're there, which is very nice to be treated like that."

<div align="right">Tessa, aged 45, p.A415</div>

Therefore, the findings suggest that consumers can use the consumption of luxury brands to gratify their needs for escape from daily drudgery and responsibilities. This form of luxury

brand uses echoes the notion of periodic escapes described in the tourism literature (Dann, 1977; Quan and Wang, 2004), which suggests that consumers seek tourist experiences to escape from their daily routine: "The greatest reason for travel can be summed up in one word, "Escape": escape from the dull, daily routine; escape from the familiar, the commonplace, the ordinary; escape from the job, the boss, the customer, the commuting, the house, the lawn, the leaky faucets (Dann, 1977, p.145). A similar notion of escape was also described by Coulter (2006) in her study of Broadway experiences. She found that the theatrical performances of Broadway shows facilitate "escapism from the 'day-to-day grind' of work and home, from political and economic aspects of life, from societal problems" (p.410), linking escape to a metaphor of the theatre as 'sanctuary'. According to Coulter (2006), the dominant visual images describing such escape included the pictures of recreational activities, coupled with quotations such as "When I walk in there and they turn the lights down... I forget about work. I forget about home life… I forget about money problems… it's an escape route" (p. 410). The findings show that similar to consumers of tourism and theatrical experiences, the consumers of luxury brands use their consumption experiences to escape from their everyday lives and immerse themselves into the journeys, experiences and worlds conveyed by luxury brands. These themes of escape conveyed by luxury brands can be both direct, where the consumption of luxury brands, by itself, is perceived to be a form of escape (e.g., shopping experiences), and indirect, where consumers perceive their consumption of luxury brands as an integral part of some other imaginary escape (e.g., going on a safari).

5.2.2.5.   *The Uses of Luxury Brands as Extended-Self*

Belk's concept of 'extended-self' suggests that our possessions are "a major contributor to and reflection of our identities (Belk, 1988, p.139), and that people often regard

their possessions as part of their identity. Building on this concept, Vigneron and Johnson (2004) theorised that consumers integrate the symbolic meaning of a luxury brand into their own identity (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004), proposing that "people's desire to conform to affluent lifestyles and/or to be distinguished from non-affluent lifestyles affects their luxury-seeking behaviour…Thus, 'luxury imitators' may use the perceived extended-self dimension transferred from luxury brands to enhance their self-concept and replicate stereotypes of affluence by consuming similar luxury items" (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004, p. 490), leading Vigneron and Johnson (2004) to the conclusion that "the possession of luxury brands may be more appreciated by consumers who are highly materialistic and susceptible to interpersonal influence" (p.490). In this chapter, the consumption of luxury brands that convey the brand user's desired status and affluent lifestyle has been discussed as part of the aspirational status uses of luxury brands. As for the uses of luxury brands as extended-self, the findings show that consumers use the symbolic meanings of luxury brands beyond merely replicating social status and affluent lifestyle. Participants were found to forge meaningful bonds with their favourite luxury brands and even to consider these brands to be the expressions of their personality. The two prominent examples of luxury brands becoming the extended-self of the brand user can be derived from the interviews with Jubilation and Katherine-Anne. First, Jubilation is showed to have a strong and long-lasting relationship with one particular luxury brand:

> **Jubilation:** "I've been shopping there [*Zambesi*] since I was...I bought my first ever piece when I was fourteen, and that I still have it because I will never throw anything from *Zambesi* away or sell it, I've kept every single piece that I've ever bought. [**Researcher:** Why's that?] Because I treasure it, I just love it so much. So I still have the very first piece that I bought which was a very, very frail piece of fabric that just wraps around you and it was a hundred and twenty dollars back then, so that was sort of fifteen years ago, so that was a lot of money, especially for a fourteen year old. I think I managed to ask Mum for it

for my birthday and I just have always loved everything about it, so I follow them... I've been going to their fashion shows for the last six or seven years. I now work closely with the designers, so I do, I can call them up on the phone, or, you know, like so I do know them. I love them so much that I've asked them to design my wedding dress."

Researcher: How did this happen?

Jubilation: "Well, I got engaged on my birthday...so I'd gone to visit *Zambesi* ... and saw this dress that I just loved, and it was quite expensive, and at the time I knew I couldn't afford it...and then Ororo who's the daughter of the designer she was like: "Oh my God let's take a photo of you in it ...and say this is my birthday present"... That was an awesome experience because to go out of their way to make it...I don't know, it was personal to us... like they really wanted me to have this outfit...because they knew I really loved it, so they were going out of their way, above and beyond, to see how they could help me!"

Researcher: What does make *Zambesi* so special for you?

Jubilation: "Well...for me is, I personally, I think if you're going to be an individual, I prefer individual style and perhaps the fact that *Zambesi* is maybe it's polarising as well, maybe not everyone likes *Zambesi*, maybe people think it's not for them or something. So I like a brand that people either really love or don't really like at all, because I'm just not very, I'm not, personally I don't aspire to mass brands. So I think if you maintain a level of, they don't have flashy gold lined advertisements, or everything's quite grey and black and monotone and, I'm not really explaining myself very well. But for me cool is not flashy...I want someone to realise that I am me, that I'm not sort of taking, I don't know, that I'm uniquely me, that I'm different to everyone else, a little bit individual, so *Zambesi* I guess for me talks that. So, people that wear *Zambesi* often wear them quite differently, so they're all quite unique in their style."

<div align="right">Jubilation, aged 29, p.A434-435</div>

Jubilation's comments about the *Zambesi* brand express a deep and meaningful relationship that has been formed with the brand. Jubilation indicates that *Zambesi* has been playing an

integral role in the most significant events of her life, such as her birthday, work, engagement, and even her wedding. Therefore, *Zambesi* is not just a luxury brand. It is the brand that Jubilation *"loves enough to ask them to design her wedding dress"*, showing an exceptionally strong commitment to the brand on the consumer side. Interestingly, Jubilation noted that the brand has also shown commitment towards their relationship by rewarding Jubilation with reciprocal gestures (giving her a birthday present). This means that the interactions between the brand and the brand user are mutually beneficial, making the consumer-brand relationship even stronger (Fournier, 1998). Finally, Jubilation's comments suggest that not only has the *Zambesi* brand played important roles in her personal life experiences, but the brand image of *Zambesi*, itself is aligned with her personal perception of being unique and *"cool in her own style"*. This suggests that not only does *Zambesi* play an important role in her life, but Jubilation also considers that by consuming this brand she can also convey her own personality. These findings, therefore, suggest that the *Zambesi* brand is an important part of Jubilation's extended-self.

Whereas Jubilation has a strong connection with one particular luxury brand, another participant, Katherine-Anne, uses a range of luxury brands as her extended-self. These brands conform to a particular style that the participant perceives as making her unique and individualistic:

> "For me, luxurious brand means something that I'd put on and it makes me feel amazing because it looks amazing on me…I like being unique, this is very important for me, I like having my own individual style…I like standing out, I like being different, which is probably why I do make an effort in the morning and dress up and wear nice clothes, and I'll wear high heels all the time, even though I'm behind a counter and no one can see my feet. I wouldn't wear flats unless I had something wrong with my foot."
>
> Katherine-Anne, aged 23, p.A135

In this episode, Katherine-Anne indicates that she uses luxury brands to express her individuality and to satisfy her need for uniqueness (Tian *et al.*, 2001). She also asserts that being unique and maintaining her own individualistic style is an important part of her life. Furthermore, Katherine-Anne's comment "*I'll wear high heels all the time, even though I'm behind a counter and no one can see my feet*" suggest that her need for uniqueness is not only driven by how she is perceived by others, but rather it is driven by her own perception of herself. This is further reinforced by how Katherine-Anne responded to the question as to whether she wants other people to recognise her style:

> **Katherine-Anne:** "People don't necessarily have to know… [but] I like being unique. I like having my own individual style. I say this to my sister a lot. When I find that a lot of people are dressing like me, like my friends and stuff, 'cos they start off saying "Hmm, that's a bit strange and odd", and then they all start wearing the same thing, I will change completely. I will stop wearing black if they all start wearing black, I will wear white… [**Researcher**: Why is that?] Well, there's a little bit of, I guess, conspicuous for other people as well…but I kind of do it for myself…like I said, I just like being unique. I think I've found one style which I really like and people have gotten used to that."
>
> Katherine-Anne, aged 23, p.A135

Katherine-Anne notes that, although it is not necessary for other people to recognise her style, she dislikes it if someone imitates the way she dresses, as such behaviour makes her feel less unique. Consequently, this recurring theme of wanting to be unique and individualistic has been shown to define the way Katherine-Anne perceives herself and her relationship with luxury brands. In particular, Katherine-Anne has indicated that by consuming luxury brands she has managed to derive her own unique style, which she loosely describes as being "*weird, loose, comfortable, and black*" (p. A145). These luxury brands include *Juliette Hogan, Alannah Hill, Donna Karen,* and *Arthur Gallan* (Illustration 3). Katherine-Anne displays a high level of affection towards these brands as they help her to assert her own individuality:

Illustration 3. Katherine-Anne's Luxury Brands

"My favourite, I love Juliette Hogan right now. I think she's so awesome, absolutely great. I have three from her good stuff. Very feminine at the moment, she does lots of pleats, in chiffon, flowy stuff, and I really like that. I'm not really into print fabrics, which is probably why I like Arthur Galan, he's Australian. Juliette Hogan's a New Zealand designer. Arthur Galan is Australian, I love him because he does lots of dark colours and I wear a lot of black I like Donna Karen…Who else do I like? I like Alannah Hill, some people might not say that's a luxury brand, but I like the way it makes me look so girly and pretty, I like the aesthetic of her shop [too]…"

Katherine-Anne, aged 23, p.A140

Consumers often use brands as a part of their extended-self and as expressions of self-concept (Belk 1988; Holt 1995; Escalas 2004), forging strong relationships with brands that add meaning to their identity and personal lives (Fournier 1998). Luxury brands are particularly attractive in this sense as they convey compelling stories and distinct fashion styles (Kapferer 2006), which inspire consumers to become the followers of these brands. Furthermore, luxury brands can create a sense of exclusivity by providing individualised services and managing customer relationships, encouraging consumers to engage with their brands on a more

personal and meaningful level. The analysis has indicated that the way these consumers use luxury brands as their extended-self goes beyond acquiring or replicating social status and affluent lifestyle to the purpose of enhancing self-esteem, as has been suggested by previous studies (e.g., Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). In particular, some participants were found to forge strong bonds with specific luxury brands, making these brands important relational partners (Fournier, 1998), adding meanings to these consumers' personal lives, while others used the consumption of luxury brands to derive their own unique style, expressing the aspects of their perceived self and personality.

5.2.2.6.   Summary of the Themes Related to Uses and Gratifications

The findings presented in this section suggest that there are multiple uses and subsequent gratifications of luxury brands. The consumers uses of luxury brands include status uses, aspirational status uses, escape and reward uses, and the uses of luxury brands as extended-self.

The status uses of luxury brands are used to signal the brand user's wealth, power and, ultimately, the status and role position of the brand-user (Zinkhan and Prenshaw, 1994). This type of luxury brand uses provides a number of associated gratifications, including the acceptance of the brand user to and affiliation with high-status groups of consumers, as well as providing the brand user with a sense of achievement, which comes from appraisals from others, increasing the brand user's self-confidence and self-esteem.

Unlike the status uses of luxury brands that convey consumers' achieved status and role positions, aspirational status uses convey consumer aspirations towards achieving high status. These uses could lead consumers towards eventually becoming the status users of luxury

brands, and/or the brand users can consume luxury brands to increase their sense of self-esteem and confidence among their peers. Accordingly, the aspirational status uses of luxury brands can provide consumers with both personal gratifications, such as consumers praising themselves for their progress toward becoming an affluent consumer, and also with social gratifications, such as gaining self-esteem, coming from other people appreciating the social status associated with luxury brands.

Apart from the status and aspirational status uses of luxury brands, the consumption of luxury brands can also be used to gratify consumer needs for self-reward. Similar to the status and aspirational status users, the reward users of luxury brands appreciate the perceived uniqueness and high value of luxury brand offerings. However, unlike the other two user groups, who appreciate these characteristics because they can convey the brand user's achieved or desired social status, the reward users find these characteristics important for their personal assessment of whether luxury brand offerings make a good reward. Therefore, the gratifications derived from the reward uses of luxury brands are more personal in nature.

The escape uses of luxury brands are employed by consumers to escape from their everyday realities and immerse themselves in the journeys, experiences and worlds conveyed by luxury brands. The escape consumption of luxury brands can be both direct, where the consumption of luxury brands, by itself, is perceived to be a form of escape (e.g., shopping experiences), and indirect, where consumers perceive their consumption of luxury brands to be an integral part of some other imaginary escape (e.g., going on a safari).

Lastly consumers can use luxury brands as their extended-self (Belk, 1988), which goes beyond acquiring or replicating social status and affluent lifestyle. In particular, some consumers forge strong bonds with some particular luxury brands, making these brands

important relational partners (Fournier, 1998) which add meanings to these consumers' personal lives. Others may use the consumption of luxury brands to derive their own unique styles that expresses aspects of their perceived self and personality.

Finally, the analysis has also shown that the consumption of luxury brands can gratify multiple uses, adding more complexity to the meanings that consumers ascribed to luxury brands. Therefore, the uses and gratifications of luxury brands are not mutually exclusive and can jointly co-exist within the perceptions of an individual consumer. Most participants have displayed multiple uses for their consumption of luxury brands, which were used to gratify their different needs.

5.2.3. Luxury Brand Experiences

Consumers experience brands and, as a result of their brand experiences, derive personalised perceptions about brands (Thompson, 1997; Berry, 2000; Payne *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, this thesis regards brand experiences to be an important dimension of consumer-perceived brand meaning. Furthermore, while different conceptualisations of brand experience exist (e.g., Berry, 2000; Brakus *et al.*, 2009), given the focus of this study on the consumption meanings of brands, I adopt the notion of brand experiences grounded within the consumer culture perspective (Hirschman, 1982; Caru and Cova, 2003). Accordingly, brand experiences are viewed as personal occurrences founded on interaction with multiple sources of brand meaning – such as advertising, purchase experience, social relationships –-which mediate consumer perceptions about brands, and help in understanding the relevance of brand perceptions for various consumers' life projects. Hence, brand experiences are not limited to purchase activity, such as encounter with the service. Instead, they involve multiple brand-related encounters spread over a long period of time.

The analysis of interviews has identified multiple themes of the luxury brand experiences that, consistent with previous research, can be loosely divided into three broad categories – pre-purchase (introductory), purchase-related, and post-purchase (the core consumption) experiences (Arnould *et al.*, 2002; Caru and Cova, 2003). Pre-purchase experiences increase the initial consumer knowledge and skills in obtaining information about the consumption of luxury brands. These experiences can be derived from such brand encounters as reading fashion magazines, watching popular TV shows, and visiting luxury brand websites. Purchase-related experiences include consumer perceptions and feelings during the purchase and service encounter. These include the fantasy and elite shopping experiences derived from luxury brands. Post-purchase experiences are a wide range of core consumption experiences (Arnould *et al.*, 2002), which include the experiences associated with a social appreciation of luxury brands, the experiences associated with the appreciation of luxury brands from other luxury brand consumers, the experiences derived from special occasions, the hedonic experiences of luxury brands, and the relational experiences of luxury brands. I will now discuss these themes in more detail.

5.2.3.1.   *Pre-purchase Experiences*

Participants noted that their early pre-purchase experiences of luxury brands generally served an introductory purpose, increasing their knowledge and information literacy about the consumption of luxury brands. Some of the most common sources of these introductory experiences were derived from reading books and magazines, watching TV shows, brand advertising, and visiting luxury brand websites. For instance, Tessa suggests that she first got to know about luxury brands from reading books:

Researcher: How did you first know about luxury brands?

Tessa: "Well I suppose from books and things, because if you look around, over here for example, you see there are some of these books. And I think I probably bought some of these books and then sort of got my head turned by them. Here's one here, it's a prime example of a book that I brought. And so I, you look through something like this [pointing at luxury brand dress] and to be in luxury hotels, dreams in France"

<div align="right">Tessa, aged 45, p.A426</div>

In other interviews, Katharine-Anne compares reading magazines to the beginning of a journey that sets expectations for future luxury brand experiences, whereas Elizabeth notes that watching popular TV shows and visiting luxury brand websites helped her to determine her preferences of luxury brands:

"Reading magazines is like putting ideas in your head about what you want. It's getting you prepared, I think. It's like packing your bags, you know. With a magazine like this [Vogue], I guess it just tells you what's out there and what to expect when you walk into a shop. For example, this article here is all just talking about the different kinds of knits and things that all the local designers are bringing out for winter"

<div align="right">Katherine-Anne, aged 23, p.A144</div>

"I first have a random look and see the new [fashion] seasons online, what they have and things like that, and yeah, and then if something really… or sometimes even, for example, I see news where I see those entertainment news and you see the celebrity have this thing, and it's really good and you start to trace back where they get that and things like that. So a lot of the magazines, and basically anything about fashion, about style could trigger my preference about luxury brands."

<div align="right">Elizabeth, aged 30, p.A297</div>

These interview excerpts show that consumers can be introduced to luxury brands by the means of pre-purchase experiences derived from reading magazines, visiting websites, and

watching popular media. The findings suggest that the role of introductory experiences within consumer perceptions of luxury brands is to increase consumer knowledge and literacy about the brands, welcoming consumers on their endeavour to consume luxury brands.

5.2.3.2.   Purchase-related Experiences

The purchase-related experiences are derived from choice, payment, packaging, the encounter with the service and the environment (Caru and Cova, 2003). In the marketing literature, purchase-related experiences are also referred to as shopping experiences (Swinyard, 1983), and as service encounters in service research (Bitner, 1990; Caru, 1996). Analysis of the interviews has identified two main themes of purchase-related experiences that are derived from the consumption of luxury brands – fantasy shopping experiences and elite shopping experiences. These two types of consumer-perceived purchase-related shopping experiences are detailed below.

5.2.3.2.1.   Fantasy Shopping Experiences

Some participants described their shopping experiences of luxury brands as "transportations to fairy tale worlds" (Jean, aged 48) and "visiting princess-like lands" (Cecilia, aged 25). The following excerpt from an interview with Katherine-Anne provides insight into these perceptions:

> "With Alannah Hill [luxury brand], she's kind of get carried away [with her shop] in this whole girly wonderland type thing, which is why she does the pretty ruffles thing, and lots pink corals. She does blacks and stuff as well, but it's always very, very feminine, kind of *Alice in Wonderland* type things. It is escapism; it's definitely an experience to shop in there. The shop assistants are obviously quite characteristic of what the brand is trying to put out there, 'cos they're always bubbly and chirpy. Whereas, compared to Alannah Hill,

> Arthur Galan, when I went in there the girls are very classy, you know, in terms of your shopping experience they leave you be. They are helpful, but it's more so, if you like it, then you like it, if you don't then you don't. I like that as well as being around really bubbly, chirpy girls who are going to tell you "Oh my god, you look so pretty", because that's what I went into that shop for, you know, that experience as opposed to another experience"
>
> Katherine-Anne, aged 23, p.A140

Katharine-Anne associates the *Alannah Hill* brand with the story of *Alice in Wonderland*. According to Katherine-Anne, this perception is not just influenced by the very feminine style of the brand's products. It is also reinforced through the environment of the brand's flagship store and the participant's interactions with the staff. Consequently, it appears that Katherine-Anne's shopping experiences reinforce her perception of *Alannah Hill*'s fashion style as well as the participant's uses of the luxury brand consumption as a form of escape. Similarly, another participant, Miranda suggests that the shopping experiences of luxury brands prompt consumer fantasies:

> "I just went to my friend's shop and she is working in Prada, herself, so I went to the shop to see her last week, and then she was busy. So she, I think she went out to do something so I had to stay in the shop to look after it, and then I feel like I am swimming in this pool of luxury bags …But it's not really… It just make me so happy… like chocolate and you imagine… like it's full of chocolate around you and then you are swimming in the chocolate house!"
>
> Miranda, aged 28, p.A463

The interviews suggest that shopping experiences for luxury brands can allow consumers to transport themselves into make-believe worlds making these experiences more memorable and meaningful for these consumers. These findings echo the studies of spectacular consumption (e.g., Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Gottdiener, 2000; Kozinets *et al.*, 2004), where the spectacular environments of retail spaces (e.g., flagship brand stores) were found to

have an effect of "overwhelming, and coercing consumers" (Kozinets *et al.*, 2004, p. 658).

5.2.3.2.2.   *Elite Shopping Experiences*

Whereas fantasy shopping experiences transport consumers to imaginary worlds, elite shopping experiences make consumers feel more special and important in terms of their status and role positions. For instance, Lilandra notes that they perceive a higher level of shopping experience associated with luxury brands. More specifically, the participants indicate that they would expect to get a more personalised attention from luxury brands:

> "I think you expect a very different experience if you walk into, say, *Louis Vuitton*'s store to if you walk into a Warehouse to buy a suitcase. I think you would expect at the Warehouse you'd have to rummage through yourself and find what you want. Whereas in a *Louis Vuitton* store you would expect that somebody would be there to help you select, help you choose, give you that experience and I suppose feeling that you're important to them"
>
> Lilandra, aged 45, p.A470

Similarly, Scott notes that one of the most important things he expects from his shopping experiences of luxury brands is a feeling of being important and special which, according to Scott, comes from receiving exclusive benefits from these brands:

> **Researcher:** What is important for you when you shop?
>
> **Scott:** "100% make me the VIP. Sometimes I buy things, I will go upstairs [elite room]. I don't want to have a look at the bag, or try the shoes around many people here [main area of the store] because store is open for everybody. Some people may… I don't want them to have a look at the shoes, I wear. If everybody is looking at you, would you feel comfortable?"
>
> Scott, aged 28, p.A236

Therefore, the findings show that consumers perceive a higher level of service encounters associated with the shopping experiences of luxury brands. In particular, consumers expect to

receive more benefits and exclusive attention from these brands. Consequently, the shopping experiences of luxury brands are perceived to be elite and personalised, making consumers feel more special and important in terms of their role positions and status.

5.2.3.3.   *Post-purchase Experiences*

Post-purchase, or the core consumption experiences, refer to the consumer encounters with luxury brands that allow them to derive their personalised perceptions about these brands outside commercial activity. Therefore, these experiences generally occur after the brands have been acquired by consumers. The core consumption experiences are more idiosyncratic than pre-purchase and purchase experiences, as these experiences tend to reflect a range of roles that luxury brands can play in different aspects of consumer lives. The analysis of interviews has identified the following five types of the post-purchase experiences associated with luxury brands: the experiences associated with a social appreciation of luxury brands; the experiences associated with the appreciation of luxury brands from other luxury brand consumers; the experiences derived from special occasions; the hedonic experiences of luxury brands; and the relational experiences of luxury brands. Each type of the core consumption experiences was found to play a distinct role in the consumer perceptions of luxury brands. The themes related to these experiences are described below.

5.2.3.3.1.   *Social Appreciation of Luxury Brands*

Some participants suggested that they tend to wear luxury brands when they go out in public places. The luxury brand experiences derived from such brand encounters allow consumers to receive social appreciation of the status associated with the brands. For instance, Rachel notes that she wears luxury brands when she goes out with her friends in Asia:

"In Thailand … If I go out with friends who use all these brand names then I feel well I probably should be using [one] just to fit in… And then when you go shopping you have more… you're more inclined to go: "Oh, have a look at this, have a look at this"

Rachel, aged 28, p.A269

From what Rachel and other participants have indicated about the role of luxury brands within the context of Asian cultures, it can be inferred that her behaviour conveys the conspicuous consumption of luxury brands. In another interview, Scott has also suggested that he likes to openly display his consumption of luxury brands. The excerpt below suggests that Scott wears luxury brands in public to gratify aspirational status uses by conveying the status derived from the brands to other people:

Researcher: When do you wear your luxury brands?

Scott: "Every day. When I am with other people…it's like when I saw this girl maybe five times, six times, she brings the same bag. If five times my girlfriend changes different bags, I think it is better, yeah?... also when people on the street see someone with a limited edition LV bag, they would think: oh, he must be rich, or…oh, he must be successful…it gives you self-confidence!"

Scott, aged 28, p.A238

These findings suggest that consumers wear luxury brands in public places to draw attention to the brands that they have acquired. By conspicuously conveying the social status associated with luxury brands, the experiences derived from such consumption occurrences help consumers to receive positive social reinforcement from people who may or may not be the consumers of luxury brands themselves.

5.2.3.3.2.   *Appreciation from Luxury Brand Users*

"It is flattering if people recognise what the brand of my bag is if I am at some event or business meeting because people do judge you based on how you look…it allows you to fit in, but I don't really care if some girl on the street will recognise my bag or not…it is not really important"

<div align="right">Jean, aged 48, p.A127</div>

Jean's comments indicate that she is not so much concerned with wearing luxury brands in public places, as she is conscious about displaying her consumption of luxury brands at social gatherings, where she can meet other brand users, possessing similar status and role positions as herself. Another participant, Page, also says that she would like to share her consumption of luxury brands with other knowledgeable luxury brand consumers, but she would avoid conspicuously showing her consumption of luxury brands to other people:

"I don't like it to, I don't know… I like it to be whoever that knows about it [luxury brands] they would know, whether it's the pattern, whether it's how the leather is sewed or whatever, or the shape of the bag, or shoes. Whoever that knows fashion they would know, but I don't like it to be out there going, I've got the *Louis Vuitton* monogram, everyone has, yeah… I mean it makes it the same to people that knows a little about luxury brand, they just think, yes, it's luxury brand, but it makes a difference when someone in the fashion industry look at you and they go, "Oh my God you've got the latest season of whatever.""

<div align="right">Page, aged 28, p.A487</div>

The interviews have shown that the experiences derived from wearing luxury brands in public places can help consumers to find positive social reinforcement for their luxury brand consumption from people who, themselves, are not the consumers of luxury brands. The experiences derived from wearing luxury brands at social gatherings, on the other hand, are

purposively used by consumers to provide them with positive reinforcement from luxury brand users similar to themselves. Interestingly, the interviews also show that the participants, who noted the importance of social gatherings for their display of luxury brands and sought appreciation from other brand users, generally did not aspire to, and even disliked, the idea of wearing luxury brands in public with the intention of getting social appreciation from people who, unlike them, are not the consumers of luxury brands.

5.2.3.3.3.   *Special Occasions in Consumer Lives*

The analysis of interviews has also shown that consumers derive important meanings about luxury brands from their experiences of the brands in association with special occasions, such as birthdays, important achievements, and anniversaries. For instance, Alison notes that one of the most memorable occasions associated with her consumption of a luxury brand was when she received this brand as a gift from her husband:

> "Well one very good memory was that, I told my boyfriend at the time, who's now my husband, that I wanted a ring from Tiffany's and I was like, "Here's the size, this is what it looks like, this is the ring, dah, di, dah, go get it for Christmas", and he was like, so he went there, well he said, "Okay, well I'm going there today," or I don't know what he said but then he came back and I was expecting him to give me the box and he didn't. He said, "They didn't have it." And I said, "Well did you order one or did you tell them, did you pay for it and it's coming like this week?" And he was like, "No." And I was thinking, "You dope why are you, what is the story, thanks for nothing, like this is ridiculous." And then he's like, "Well, come over to the room so that I can show you something on the computer, whatever." And I was in the middle of making dinner, so I was like, "Okay, well, let me finish doing this and then I'll come in there." And then I went to put the things away and I opened the refrigerator and the box was sitting inside the refrigerator. So that was very

cute and he was very proud of himself and that was probably the cutest thing because I
think that's the only time he's been that thoughtful ever (laughter) in that way, so yeah"

<div align="right">Alison, aged 32, p.A361-362</div>

This episode demonstrates how the meanings of luxury brands can intertwine with the meanings of important aspects of consumer lives. Alison indicates that the Tiffany brand is important to her, because this brand reminds her of a memorable gift occasion with her husband. Similarly, Suzanne notes that one of her most memorable experiences of the *Gucci* brand is associated with her birthday. Furthermore, she also notes that the elite shopping experience derived from the consumption of this luxury brand made her special occasion even more memorable and unique:

"It was my birthday voucher for last year. My husband gave it to me from my daughter and it had been a year but I hadn't used it so I had to go and use it and, yeah, when I received it I was like very excited, "Wow, I can actually go to *Gucci* and get something that I like". So I went to the shop, yeah it was a great shopping experience because you get really, really good customer service because you're going to be in there and you're going for a purpose, you're going to be spending money and they were happy to show me around."

<div align="right">Suzanne, aged 45, p.A187</div>

Therefore, the findings indicate that luxury brands can be perceived by consumers to be suitable items for celebrating memorable and important occasions of their lives. Consequently, the meanings of these events can intertwine with the meanings that consumers ascribe to their consumption of luxury brands, making consumers consider the perceptions about luxury brands, derived from these experiences, as important aspects of their lives.

5.2.3.3.4.   Hedonic Experiences

Tessa notes that she enjoys purchasing and wearing luxury brands because she gets satisfaction just by possessing these items:

> "Having things that are exotic and expensive and top quality, refined. I want things …served in beautiful crystal boxes and with, I want it served with finesse just like I want nice China and silver cutlery, because I like those things. So it just gives me a lot of pleasure to have them"
>
> Tessa, aged 45, p.A412

Similarly, Katherine-Anne notes that she can escape from the drudgeries of her everyday life by wearing luxury brands, because these brands provide her with hedonic pleasure and gratification:

> "I think a lot your attitude has to do with how you're feeling and how clothes make you feel, how shoes make you feel. I know that I've just had a crappy week, really busy week at work I go out and get a haircut or I go and buy a new dress and then I wear it to work, and I feel amazing. [**Researcher**: Why is that?] (laughter). I don't know. It's just a pick me up. I don't know, I'm one of those girls that like retail therapy I suppose. I think the feeling of wearing something new, as well, and knowing that you look really good in it, and just splurge."
>
> Katherine-Anne, aged 23, p.A136

Extant literature on luxury brands recognises hedonic value as one of the key components of luxury branding (Dubois and Laurent 1994; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). The studies have identified the emotional responses associated with luxury consumption, such as sensory pleasure and gratification, aesthetic beauty, and excitement (Benarrosh-Dahan, 1991; Fauchois and Krieg, 1991; Roux and Floch, 1996; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). Consequently, the hedonism associated with luxury brands is defined as "the perceived subjective utility and intrinsically attractive properties acquired from the purchase and

consumption of a luxury brand to arouse feelings and affective states, received from personal rewards and fulfilment" (Wiedmann *et al.*, 2007, p.7). Consistent with these studies, the findings from interviews show that the consumption of luxury brands can provide consumers with hedonic experiences.

5.2.3.3.5.   *Relational Experiences*

Finally, the findings show that, over time, some consumers tend to forge deep and meaningful relationships with luxury brands. Consequently, there are certain experiences of luxury brands that convey consumer perceptions about these relationships. One of the key features of these relational experiences is that they develop over a certain period of time and they are perceived by consumers to be reciprocal in nature (Fournier, 1998). This means that not only does the consumer show commitment towards the brand, but the brand is also perceived to show commitment towards the consumer. The following excerpt describes the relationship between Lilandra and the *Christian Lacroix* brand:

> I used to regularly shop at *Christian Lacroix*...when I would go in there, they'd got to know me, which in one sense was important for me because when I might, unlike a lot of people would often just go in dressed like this in jeans, and I'd just want to go and get some clothes, 'cause I don't tend to go shopping as a social activity because I don't really enjoy it, so it's very functional for me, right the next place I want to go in and buy what I need. So I recall when I first walked in they sort of looked at me like, what are you doing in here? But then once I became a regular shopper they got to know me, I'd come in and they'd say, "Oh, hey, we've just had a lovely such and such in that we think that you'd like." So you got, there would be a lot more help that they would give you, they would, the changing rooms were comfortable, large, the racks weren't crammed full of things, you could easily sort through and find stuff, the shops are well laid out.
>
> Lilandra, aged 45, p.A476

Lilandra notes that her relationship with the *Christian Lacroix* brand has developed over some period of time. She notes that when she first visited the brand's store, she did not feel any commitment on the brand's side. However, as she started to shop more regularly, she perceived the brand showed more commitment towards her as an important consumer. Although the attention given to Lilandra by the luxury brand could be interpreted as an elite shopping experience; given the history of the participant's relationship with the brand, Lilandra perceives these experiences to convey the commitment that the brand has shown towards the consumer-brand relationship. This is particularly evident when Lilandra asserts that the relationship has developed over a period of time. She notes that the brand did not know her at first, and it was only later that the brand came to accept her as an important consumer, despite the fact that she did not look like an affluent consumer. Consequently, this story also suggests that similar encounters of luxury brands can convey different meanings to consumers depending on the idiosyncrasies of their previous experiences and the roles that these brands play in consumer lives. This is also evident by what Scott has indicated about his experiences with the *Louis Vuitton* brand:

> **Scott:** "Once *Louis Vuitton* invited us to go to the Australian *Louis Vuitton* shop. I think in 2006, *Louis Vuitton* paid for the first class tickets for me and my girlfriend, and accommodation at the Sheraton Hotel for one night. Before we go to Australia, they tell us that they invite us to go to Sydney for shopping. We know *Louis Vuitton* invited us, because they don't have the clothing in [New Zealand] store. Some global stores have clothing, watches, jewellery and shoes but New Zealand is not a global store, so they invited us to go to Australia.

> **Researcher:** So why this kind of service is important? How does it make you feel when you get that kind of service?

> **Scott:** They make us feel like VIP... Because we pay a lot of money, we need different service....it's status...Things like this, the reason I buy the *Gucci* jacket... I can buy many

> brand jackets, local brand jackets, even no famous brands I can buy ten or thirty of
> those…Instead I will keep the money to buy the *Gucci* jacket. Why? …Because it's *Gucci*.
>
> Scott, aged 28, p.A235

Scott suggests that the *Louis Vuitton* brand has shown a high degree of commitment towards the relationship with the participant by inviting him to visit one of the brand's overseas shops. However, these exclusive brand experiences are important for Scott not because they convey the commitment from the brand, but because these experiences also suggest a high level of social status. Consequently, the meanings derived from these experiences reinforce Scott's status-orientated uses of luxury brands. Therefore, these findings show that the reciprocal experiences of luxury brands can make consumers perceive their consumption of luxury brands as relationships. However, the consumer reading of these relational brand experiences is dependent on the idiosyncrasies of their previous experiences and should be interpreted in light of the roles that luxury brands play in their lives.

5.2.3.4.   *Summary of the Themes related to the Luxury Brand Experiences*

The findings show multiple themes of luxury brand experiences that add different meanings to the consumer perceptions about these brands. Consistent with previous research, they can be loosely divided into three broad categories – pre-purchase, purchase-related, and (post-purchase) the core consumption experiences (Arnould *et al.*, 2002; Caru and Cova, 2003). Pre-purchase (literacy) experiences generally serve an introductory purpose, increasing consumer knowledge about the consumption of luxury brands. Some of the most common examples of these introductory experiences are derived from reading magazines, watching TV shows, and visiting luxury brand websites.

Purchase-related experiences include the shopping and service encounter experiences of luxury brands. They include fantasy and elite shopping experiences. The fantasy shopping experiences are the purchase-related experiences of luxury brands that allow consumers to transport themselves into make-believe worlds, making the consumption of luxury brands more memorable and meaningful for these consumers. Elite shopping experiences are the purchase-related experiences that make consumers feel more special and important in terms of their role positions and status.

Post-purchase, or core consumption experiences, are referred to as the consumer encounters with luxury brands that allow consumers to derive their personalised perceptions about these brands outside commercial activity. Therefore, these experiences generally occur after the brands have been acquired by consumers. They include the experiences associated with social appreciation of luxury brands, the experiences associated with the appreciation of luxury brands from other luxury brand consumers, the experiences derived from special occasions, the hedonic experiences of luxury brands, and the relational experiences of luxury brands.

Further, the findings suggest that consumer experiences of luxury brands are idiosyncratic. Therefore, consumers may vary in terms of the types of experiences that they encounter, when they encounter these experiences, and the importance and the meanings that these experiences convey for their perceptions of luxury brands. Thus the consumer interoperation of their brand experiences is dependent upon the idiosyncrasies of previous experiences, and these experiences should be interpreted in light of the roles that luxury brands play in the consumer's life.

5.2.4. Perceived Characteristics of Luxury Brands

In studies examining a brand management perspective, consumer-perceived brand characteristics are often explored in terms of consumer perceptions and various assessments – benefits attitudes, strength, favourability, uniqueness – of brand attributes (Aaker, 1990; Keller, 1993). Brand attributes are separated into product-related or non-product-related attributes (Keller, 1993; Berry, 2000; Keller, 2001; Batey, 2008). Product-related attributes refer to the physical attributes of a product, or the core components of a service, such as design and service quality, which affect the perceived product/service performance (Keller, 1993; Berry 2000; Batey, 2008). Non-product-related attributes are psychological attributes that do not affect product/service performance. These include brand personality, values, emotions and user imagery associated with the brand (Batey, 2008). However, consistent with the focus of this study on the consumption meanings of brands, I adopt a more holistic perspective and recognise that perceptions about brand characteristics can concurrently relate to both the product-related and non-product related attributes of brands, Therefore, brand characteristics are viewed as the dominant consumer perceptions that comprise the consumer-perceived imaginary associated with the brand, in relation to the roles that this brand plays in consumer lives.

Previous studies identified various characteristics associated with luxury brands (e.g., Vickers and Renand, 2003; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004), such as perceived conspicuousness, uniqueness, and quality (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). However, studies from a consumer culture perspective suggest that brand characteristics perceived by consumers may change over time and can vary from one culture to another. Therefore, it is important to have an on-going re-investigation of how consumers perceive brands within different socio-cultural contexts of consumption. The findings from interviews have identified key themes related to

the perceived characteristics of luxury brands: brand quality, brand historicity, international recognition, brand rarity, brand uniqueness and brand discreetness. These themes are discussed in more detail below.

5.2.4.1.   Brand Quality

All twenty-four participants in the study noted that one of the key brand characteristics they associated with luxury brands is an expectation that these brands are superior in terms of their product quality and performance compared to non-luxury brands. The following excerpts from interviews with Suzanne and Elizabeth convey this perception:

> "Well, say you buy 10 bags, which on average break down within three months…and if you spend of course more, but on those pieces of things [luxury brands] that will last for few years, to me, that's pretty good, I mean, mathematically that's pretty good."
>
> Elizabeth, aged 30, p.A282

> "[With luxury brands] you're getting a good quality item for what you're paying. There's no point paying less, or buying something cheaper that is an imitation, or something that is not going to last very long because you are going to have to replace it sooner than if you buy something that's good quality"
>
> Suzanne, aged 38, p.A179

Suzanne and Elizabeth note that they expect luxury brands to have better quality products than non-luxury brands. Furthermore, their comments suggest that this perception about the superior quality of luxury brands justifies paying premium prices for these products, and allows them to avoid the cognitive dissonance that could come as a result of purchasing more expensive products. In particular, Suzanne and Elizabeth suggest that, although luxury brands are more expensive, these brands are also more durable and can last longer than non-luxury brand products, which, in their perceptions, makes these brands worth their price. In another

interview, Lilandra also notes that the superior quality of luxury brands justifies paying higher prices for luxury brand offerings. Lilandra's comments also suggest that the quality of luxury brands does not only refer to the quality of physical products. It also refers to consumer expectations of a higher level of service that the brand provides for their customers:

> "I think a luxury brand has a lot to lose by delivering a poor quality product. And generally the reason you pay the additional money for luxury brands is because they do invest in the quality and they invest a lot in the goodwill of their brand, I suppose you could say. So I would expect if, let's say I was to buy a *Gucci* handbag and it fell apart, well I wouldn't expect that it would fall apart, but if it did fall apart I would expect that a brand of that quality and level would fix the problem very quickly and deal with it properly. If I was to buy a handbag at the local Warehouse store then you would expect that it would fall apart and you would expect if it did and you took it back they wouldn't probably do anything"
>
> Lilandra, aged 45, p.A468

Therefore, consistent with previous research, the analysis of interviews shows that consumers expect luxury brands to demonstrate a superior level of quality (e.g., Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). The perception that luxury brands possess superior quality may help consumers to avoid the cognitive dissonance that may come as a result of paying premium prices for these brands. Furthermore, the findings show that the consumer perceptions of quality associated with luxury brands do not merely come from their perceptions of the physical attributes of the products. Instead, they refer to the consumer perceptions of the entire brand, including the products, service encounters and consumer imaginary associated with luxury brands.

5.2.4.2.   Brand Historicity

Several participants noted that they perceive luxury brands to have a long and/or rich history behind them. For instance, this excerpt from an interview with Paige suggests that she considers the long historicity of a luxury brand to convey the success associated with it:

> "History means a lot, think it shows how the luxury brand evolves, what people liked ten years ago, or whatever, to what it sort of evolved to now. To me it's more sort of like, a sense that because it is successful, that's why it's been around for this long"
>
> Page, aged 28, p.A482

Timelessness is an important quality in the fashion world, and luxury fashion is often portrayed as 'timeless' (Venkatesh *et al.*, 2010). Lillian and Ruth indicate that the long history of a luxury brand also conveys its timelessness. In particular, these participants note that luxury brands require a long time and history to prove that their signature looks and identity can withstand the ever-changing fashion trends:

> "Brands like *Chanel*, had its look that's been around for a very long time and it's a signature look, it's never really veered away from that look. You can pick *Chanel* straightaway and I think you could wear a *Chanel* piece that was fifty years old or, well I'm exaggerating here, but that is maybe thirty years old and feels as good in it today as when it was brought out. Even though the hem lines might have changed, or the shoulder line might have changed, it's not radical….and that's true luxury to me."
>
> Lillian, aged 65, p.A511

> "Fashion's probably not the best example, but if you look at, just go to Oxford Street in London, you know, the brands that sit there. *Cartier*, they've been around for a long time, and its timelessness, also is probably another qualifier for me… I mean that same dress is still as relevant today as it was ten years ago, twelve years ago, fifteen years ago, whenever it was, because it's not, you know, you get that sort of short term high fashion [of non-luxury brands], and then you get those timeless pieces!"
>
> Ruth, aged 40, p.A344

Finally, Elizabeth and Heather note that, in the past, luxury items were consumed only by royalty and the nobility. Therefore, the participants consider that a long historicity of a luxury brand conveys the prestige and an affluent lifestyle associated with their perception of the

past owners of luxury brands:

> "[Luxury brand] is quite expensive and it has a long history, because it has been used by so many [people], like royalties, and so many celebrities, and also it seems like all those are really rich people, somehow, use [the brand] and you don't see every day normal people using it, then it fits perfectly with the definition of luxury."
>
> Elizabeth, aged 30, p.A288-289

> "[Luxury brands have] the heritage, the history, that was once used by the royal families and they still, kept their way of making things. It's not just a leather bag...It's either handcrafted, or its custom made. So it's those really... I think only the top brands or, not the top brands, but only the ones that have history will be considered as luxury brands for me... [they remind me] of how French society was back in eighteenth or seventeenth century, how they have the luxury living and, I guess, that's how most current brands started, or at least the craftsmanship started, and I guess, some of the brands were used by the royal families before... It's like they are still carrying the same message."
>
> Heather, aged 27, p.A157

Therefore, the findings show that one of the key brand characteristics associated with luxury brands is the perception that luxury brands have a long and/or rich history behind them. Participants note that long historicity of a brand can signify its success as a luxury brand and its timelessness. In addition, some participants link their perception of the history behind luxury brands with their perception of the prestige and affluent lifestyle of royalty and nobility, whom they consider to be the past owners of these brands.

5.2.4.3. *International Recognition*

By the late 1990's, the luxury market had been transformed from a constellation of small family-owned artisan businesses into a consolidated economic sector led by the vision of luxury corporations such as *Louis Vuitton-Moet-Hennessey* (LVMH), the *Gucci Group*,

and *Richemont* (Jackson, 2002; Okonkwo, 2009). One of the key outcomes of this transformation was the expansion of luxury brands into new international markets (Okonkwo, 2009). Consistent with these trends, the analysis of interviews shows that some consumers have come to consider the perceived international recognition of a brand as one of the key characteristics that defines luxury brands:

"Luxury brands, I would consider it to be more sort of international brands. So something that is well known around the world, usually something that would be around for years, and it's successful"

Page, aged 28, p.A482

"You could show me a pair of designer sunglasses, *Prada* or *Gucci*, or whatever and therefore the label or the branding of it matters to me, in a sense that they matter to me, because I want to have a luxury pair...but if I just buy something from the local optician or sunglasses from Smith and Caughey's [local shop] and it's a brand I've never heard of I'll think twice about it."

Emma, aged 45, p. A121

"I think especially international presence has a really big influence on this kind of thing, like when you see it's out there and, when you see like people with power using it, I think you kind of trust them more."

Megan, aged 26, p.A523

"You know the magazine can take the photo with some movie star, yeah there was this wedding, so there was this one [brand] is called the IT bag. My girlfriend wanted to buy this one, I tried to stop because it's not luxury, not top tier of luxury goods. The top, the first level, of luxury goods are international brands like here: The top of the first luxury goods is *Louis Vuitton*, *Hermès* and Chanel."

Scott, aged 28, p.A233

The excerpts from interviews above show that, for some consumers, only the brands that are perceived to gain international recognition are considered to be luxury brands. The brands noted by these participants were typically European brands that are owned and managed by the luxury brand conglomerates (e.g., *Prada, Gucci, Louis Vuitton*, etc.). Similar to brand historicity, participants noted that the international recognition of a brand conveys the brand's success as a luxury brand. Furthermore, in light of the numerous brands that claim to be luxury brands, this brand characteristic provides consumers with an affirmation that the brands consumed by these participants are conventionally regarded to be luxury brands in the context of the emerging global culture of luxury brands.

5.2.4.4. Brand Rarity

Another important consumer-perceived characteristic of luxury brands that has emerged from the interviews is that luxury brands are perceived to be rare. The following two excerpts from interviews with Tessa and Lilandra illustrate this point:

> "So for me, if something is a luxury brand, well it should stand out from other things in terms of quality and rarity, that's two important things. So as I say, I don't want them to have made five hundred of them all being sold down at Parnell. I want there to be one of them down there and so I know that when I go out to a fashion evening or a ball or a black tie dinner, I don't want to find other people see me with the woman next to me wearing the same dress. So, I think, so luxury brands, for me, it's important that it's unique. It's also, I don't necessarily want it to be expensive but they will be expensive if they're going to be luxurious items"
>
> Tessa, aged 45, p.A413

> "I think if you're paying a higher price for something you wouldn't expect to see, you'd be the second person on the street with that, for the simple fact that, apart from anything, most people couldn't probably afford it. So that automatically cuts out a large portion of the

population. But I think too, in order to be able to charge those prices; you've got to have limited quantities of what you're providing."

<div align="right">Lilandra, aged 45, p.A469</div>

Both Tessa and Lilandra suggest that a premium price paid for luxury brands is not only justified by a superior quality of the products. It is also justified by the perception that luxury brands are less common and harder to obtain than non-luxury brands. Therefore, by purchasing and using these brands, consumers can perceive themselves to be one of the few who can afford to consume luxury brands, rather than one of the many who cannot afford them. Other participants have expressed similar perceptions by acknowledging that their appraisals of luxury brands can be influenced by the perceived rarity of the brands:

"The *Hermès* Birkin. I heard that they're all handmade and cost sometimes 100 thousands of US dollars to get on, and you have to book it, and then wait for months in advance because those people have to craft and they have to made it for you…They're very unique; it's almost like tailor made for you type of thing, and the exorbitant price… People who use them, you can see this is one with the Princess Diana, and also people like Victoria Beckham. She's quite rich and she has like hundreds of those Birkins, and then if you look at other celebrities, only the really successful ones have those."

<div align="right">Elizabeth, aged 30, p.A302</div>

"[For luxury brands,] most of the things are limited… So they are not trying to mass produce, and their brand itself, it's well known because they kept their quality as how it is, but *Louis Vuitton* they are trying, they over-market themselves I guess. They've just become too big …to meet all their demands internationally. So I guess that's why it becomes too casual for me in terms of the *Louis Vuitton* brand."

<div align="right">Heather, aged 27, p.A163</div>

The excerpt from an interview with Elizabeth describing her perception of the affluent global culture of luxury brands suggests that Elizabeth admires the *Hermès* brand, because she

perceives this brand to be so rare that only very few successful people can afford it. On the other hand, Heather talks about a luxury brand that, in her perception, has lost its luxurious appeal because she thinks this brand has become too common.

Therefore, the findings show that perceived rarity is an important characteristic associated with luxury brands. Further, some participants, such as Heather, suggested that by vastly expanding their customer base internationally, luxury brands can lose their luxurious appeal by becoming more common. These comments imply that the perception about the rarity of luxury brands can be in conflict with the perception that it is important for these brands to have international recognition. In particular, the reason why Heather perceives *Louis Vuitton* to be less luxurious is because this brand has diversified into international markets by rapidly increasing its overseas customer base (Chadha and Husband, 2006). This strategy allowed the brand to gain international recognition but, at the same time, it also made it look less rare for some consumers. Hence, the themes of the rarity and international recognition associated with luxury brands seem to underpin the recent debate about how far a luxury brand can diversify before it starts to lose its luxurious appeal (Okonkwo, 2009; Berthon *et al.*, 2009).

5.2.4.5.   *Brand Uniqueness*

Participants also noted that one of the distinct characteristics of luxury brands is that these brands are perceived to have unique appeal and images. These findings echo Kapferer's (1997) notion that luxury brands "implicitly convey their own culture and way of life: hence *Saint Laurent* is not *Chanel*" (p. 253), which is particularly evident from the excerpts describing participants' perceptions about their favourite luxury brands:

"If you're buying *Chanel,* you've got a lot more detail in every item that you're purchasing, you've got a lot more design work that's gone into it, you've got…you're buying, I suppose, in a lot of ways, you're buying a piece of art to many extents. You might buy a vintage Dior coat [luxury brand] but you're unlikely to go and buy a vintage *Karen Walker* coat [New Zealand brand], you know, whereas I think that those brands are, they are probably more like purchasing a piece of art in a lot of ways. Because there are the designers behind them, the talent that's behind those top luxury brands is quite extraordinary, it is a real value, I think in those, in that talent that goes behind these brands."

<div align="right">Lilandra, aged 45, p.A472</div>

"I mean some of the brands are very similar, like the current line that they're doing with in *Christian Dior* is very similar to the traditional *Chanel'*s squares. But, I think, that you can still see the differences, that there are some [distinct] elements, so I think, currently, the *Christian Dior* have got a little bit more colour in them and a bit more accessories and other decorations. Whereas *Chanel* is darker look, it's still more mature."

<div align="right">Lorna, aged 27, p.A558</div>

"I guess they [favourite luxury brand] don't follow trend for me, they would never follow trend and, sort of, use a trend that was something you could already get in a top shop, for example, or Glasson's [non-luxury brand] or something. They maintain their integrity to their identity so a lot of pieces are often distinctly *Zambesi* style. So yeah, they understand their brand so well that they don't need to follow trend, they create trend….[also] in terms of their personality, the people who work there know who they are and that's it, and so that's what makes them unique and luxurious to me is because they are uniquely them. They're not trying to be somebody else, or trying to attract people by being trendy."

<div align="right">Jubilation, aged 29, p.A435</div>

The comments made by these participants show that luxury brands are perceived to be more unique than non-luxury brands. Moreover, the findings show that the perceived uniqueness of these brands is derived by consumers in many different ways. For instance, Lilandra notes that, in her perception, the uniqueness of such established brands as *Chanel* and *Christian Dior* is expressed by the very distinctive design of the items created by these brands. In

particular, Lilandra describes the clothes produced by these luxury brands as artworks. Similarly, Lorna notes that luxury brands have their own distinct styles. For instance, she perceives *Christian Dior* to be more colourful, whereas she perceives the *Chanel* brand to be more mature and darker. On the other hand, for Jubilation, the uniqueness of the *Zambesi* brand is conveyed through the distinct brand identity, which she sees not only in the products produced by the brand, but also in the staff who work for the brand. Jubilation perceives *Zambesi* to be a luxury brand because this brand is congruent with its unique identity, which does not follow fashion trends and stays true to itself. Finally, it is important to note that perceived uniqueness is not the same as the perceived rarity of the brand. Although some consumers may use similar words to describe their perceptions about the uniqueness and rarity of a luxury brand (e.g., Tessa), the two constructs are different. Brand uniqueness refers to consumer perceptions of the distinct features of a brand that differentiates this brand from others, whereas brand rarity is referred to as the perceived scarcity of the brand offerings and the perception that not all consumers can obtain these brands.

5.2.4.6.   *Brand Discreetness*

"For me luxury is understated. So perhaps I only know how much my... my top was a thousand dollars, and the person next to me probably couldn't tell, they probably think it looks nice, or not, they might hate it. But I personally know that it's a luxurious piece as opposed to me having to go, "Look I've got a *Louis Vuitton* bag."…I'd rather have something that I know is super luxurious to me, but is not easily identified"

Jubilation, aged 29, p.A445

"I consider lack of advertising probably a bit more luxurious than in your face advertising. You know, because it's quietly popular, and quietly luxurious. For example, if you go through Fashion Quarterly, you will hardly find any full page spread of say, *Gucci*. I mean it's unlikely. There's one here of *Louis Vuitton*, I'm talking in terms of fashion. You'll find

heaps of perfumes and make-up, like full pay spreads of things like that, but not for clothes, not for shoes. In terms of that the lack of [advertising] makes it a little bit more desirable. In terms of people don't really know about it and stuff. You have to do your research to find out what's available, what the collection is"

Katherine-Anne, aged 23, p.A138

Katherine-Anne and Jubilation indicate that, unlike the participants who consider the international recognition of the brand to be one of the key characteristics of luxury branding (e.g., Page, aged 28; Emma, aged 45), they perceive the most luxurious brands to be inconspicuous and even discreet. Katherine-Anne notes that the lack of advertising makes the brand look "quietly" luxurious, exclusive, and more desirable. Jubilation agrees that luxury brands should be discreet and asserts that luxury should not be easily identified. Interestingly, while both participants recognise that discreetness is an important perceived characteristic of luxury brands, their perceptions about the specific luxury brands are very different. In particular, Katherine-Anne considers the *Gucci* brand to be discreet, whereas Jubilation perceives this brand to be conspicuous. This case illustrates that different consumers may have different perceptions about the same luxury brands salient to their individual experiences of these brands.

Over the past two decades, luxury brand conglomerates have expanded rapidly into various social and regional segments of the global market by promoting their brand appeals through intensive advertising and product placement (Oknokwo, 2009; Lamb, 2011). Consistent with this trend, the analysis of interviews shows that the most famous international luxury brands (e.g., *Chanel, Louis Vuitton*, etc.) are considered to be the canon of luxury branding by some participants. On the other hand, the findings also show that there are other consumers who reject these international brands because they perceive them to have lost their rarity factor. The excerpts from the participant interviews presented in this section also show that some of

these consumers have come to perceive the 'true' luxury brands as not only being rare, but also as being inconspicuous and discreet.

5.2.4.7.   *Summary of Perceived Luxury Brand Characteristics*

Consistent with previous studies, the analysis of interviews shows that consumer perceptions of the imaginary associated with luxury brands is multifaceted. There are multiple brand characteristics that consumers ascribe to luxury brands. Some of these characteristics appear to be common among most consumers of luxury brands (e.g., brand quality), while others are more idiosyncratic (e.g., international recognition and brand discreetness). Six key themes of perceived luxury brand characteristics have been identified – brand quality, brand historicity, international recognition, brand rarity, brand uniqueness and brand discreetness.

Brand quality refers to the perception that luxury brands possess superior quality. This brand characteristic can help consumers to avoid cognitive dissonance that may come as a result of paying a premium price for luxury brands. Furthermore, the findings suggest that the consumer perceptions of quality associated with luxury brands does not come merely from their perceptions of the physical attributes of the products. They refer to the consumer perceptions of the entire brand, including the products, service encounters, and the imaginary associated with luxury brands.

Brand historicity refers to the perception that luxury brands have a long and/or rich history behind them. Participants note that a long historicity of the brand can signify its success as a luxury brand and its timelessness. Some participants also link their perception of the history

behind luxury brands with their perception of the prestige and affluent lifestyle of the past users of luxury items.

International recognition is the perception that only the brands that have gained international recognition and popularity can be included in the cannon of luxury branding. These brands are typically European brands that are owned and managed by the luxury brand conglomerates (e.g., *Prada, Gucci, and Louis Vuitton*). Similar to their responses related to brand historicity, participants noted that the international recognition of a brand conveys the brand's success as a luxury brand. In light of the numerous brands that claim to be luxury brands, this brand characteristic provides consumers with an affirmation that the brands they consumed are conventionally regarded to be luxury brands in the context of the emerging global culture of luxury brands.

Brand rarity refers the perception that luxury brands are scarce in quantity, and cannot be easily obtained by just anyone. This is an important characteristic of luxury brands because it sustains the perception that by purchasing and using luxury brands, consumers can regard themselves to be among the few who can afford them, rather than one of the many who cannot.

Brand uniqueness refers to the perception that luxury brands possess unique and memorable appeal, differentiating them from other luxury and/or non-luxury brands. The findings show that the perceived uniqueness of luxury brands can be derived by consumers from many different sources of brand meaning, including the distinct design of items created by these brands, unique brand styles, and/or brand identity.

Finally, brand discreetness refers to the perception that the 'true' luxury brands are inconspicuous and discreet. This perception seems to be derived from the belief that some famous international luxury brands have lost their rarity and have become perceived as too common. Consequently, some consumers seek luxury brands that are less conspicuous, distancing themselves from the consumption of these international luxury brands.

The findings also show that consumers may have contradictory perceptions of some of the identified characteristics of luxury brands. In particular, while some consumers perceive the international recognition of a brand to be an essential element of luxury branding, others consider the most luxurious brands to be discreet and inconspicuous. The interviews also show that different consumers may ascribe different perceptions to the same luxury brands. Therefore, the consumer perceptions of both individual luxury brands and of luxury brands as a category, are salient to the individual consumer's experiences of these brands.

5.3.   Relationships of the Luxury Brand Meaning Dimensions

The thematic analysis of interview transcripts explored the dominant themes of the luxury brand meaning dimensions. The findings have showed different perceptions of the socio-cultural beliefs, the uses and gratifications, the brand experiences, and the perceived characteristics associated with luxury brands (Table 2). Some of these themes were common among most participants (e.g., brand quality, the global luxury brand culture), whereas others were more idiosyncratic, and even contradictory (e.g., discreetness of New Zealand culture and immigrant Asian culture; brand discreetness and international recognition).

The purpose of the narrative analysis was to explore how different themes of the luxury brand meaning dimensions influenced each other within consumer perceptions of luxury brands.

There were two linked assumptions underpinning this analysis. First, consistent with the hermeneutic theoretical perspective (Klein and Myers, 1999), which suggests that "all human understanding is achieved by iterating between considering the interdependent meanings of parts and the whole that they form" (Klein and Myers, 1999, p. 72), the dimensions of brand meaning were assumed to be interrelated, and not able to be understood fully, independently from each other. Secondly, consistent with Thompson's (1997) hermeneutic model of interpreted consumption meaning, which suggests that "the meaning of particular life events are contextualized within broader narratives of self-identity…[which] themselves are contextualized within a complex background of historically established cultural meanings and belief systems" (Thompson, 1997, p.440), it was assumed that consumer perceptions of brands are derived through their interpretation of brand experiences using personalised frames of reference (i.e., the uses and gratifications of brands) which, themselves, are contextualised within socio-cultural frames of reference (i.e., socio-cultural beliefs about brands).

The findings have discussed three higher-order sets of structural relationships among the dimensions of luxury brand meaning, that provide insight into how consumers derive their personalised meanings of the brands. These include the socio-cultural beliefs associated with the uses and gratifications of luxury brands; the luxury brand experiences associated with the uses and gratifications of luxury brands; and the perceived characteristics associated with the uses and gratifications of luxury brands. Explanations of these sets of relationships with text unit illustrations are detailed in this section. The reader will find that the text units used to illustrate the relationships are often derived from the expanded text units used to describe the themes of the luxury brand meaning dimensions. Such an approach was chosen deliberately

to assert that the relationships between the dimensions of luxury brand meaning provide further insights into the meanings conveyed by the individual themes of these dimensions.

5.3.1. Socio-Cultural Beliefs Associated with the Uses and Gratifications

The socio-cultural beliefs about brands represent cultural narratives about the systems of values and beliefs that are salient to the consumption of these brands within the context of a particular culture. The findings of the thematic analysis have discussed multiple sets of the socio-cultural beliefs salient to the consumption of luxury brands in New Zealand (e.g., circumspectness of New Zealand culture; the global luxury brand culture). Consistent with the hermeneutic model of meaning (Thompson, 1997), the narrative analysis has discussed that these socio-cultural beliefs exert influence on the consumer uses and the gratifications of luxury brands. In particular, the findings of my exploratory study suggest that some personalised uses of luxury brands are more influenced by the sets of beliefs derived from one cultural identity, whereas other uses are influenced by the beliefs derived from multiple cultures. The structural relationships between these specific themes of the socio-cultural beliefs and the uses and gratifications of luxury brands are detailed below.

5.3.1.1.   *Socio-Cultural Beliefs Associated with (Aspirational) Status Uses*

The findings show that both the status and aspirational status participants were encouraged by the socio-cultural beliefs of the immigrant Asian cultures and/or the emerging culture of global luxury brands. For instance, in the following excerpt derived from an interview with Scott, it is evident that he is an aspirational user of luxury brands, and that Scott's aspiration for higher status is associated with his identity with Chinese culture:

Researcher: Why do you buy luxury brands?

Scott: "Because [for] the Chinese people… I think most Chinese people… it's the history – everyone want to show himself to the people that they are rich [and] wealthy. Historically, Chinese people mostly like that [appreciate wealth]. So, some people they can't afford the real luxury goods, they'll buy the fake one. The Valentino's logo is V [brand name]. So, this *brand* came to the Chinese markets early, and people know that this is a luxury good, because just one T-shirt will be selling for hundreds. It would be available only in the developed cities in China like, you know, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, and Beijing. People will know that the Valentino is a luxury good. Because they cannot pay for the real ones they will buy the fake ones. Even in my home town, which is a small city, you can see somebody in the market just selling vegetables or something they will wear the Valentino fake one T-Shirt…"

Scott: "If I wear *Gucci* and you don't, we're different. I wear *Gucci*, it is better than what you wear. It's like if we both together want [to get attention of] the same girl, I wear *Gucci*, you wear Nike, I feel more confident."

Researcher: So do luxury brands give you self-esteem?

Scott: "Self-esteem, yeah. The luxury brands will give you self-esteem, because I'm not really rich, and I don't have a business, own business, I don't even have a job. So I need luxury goods to give me some confidence, you know… Say, you're meeting your partner. They will have a look at you, what you're wearing, what you're driving. If you're driving like a *Honda*, or *Toyota*, they will think, "Can you do business for me with projects like one-million, one-billion?", or they think, "Okay, your watch is expensive, your phone is expensive, oh your shirt is expensive, you know, *Gucci* or *Louis Vuitton* or whatever, and you are driving a Ferrari", they will think "Okay, I want to do business with these people." You know, I will be successful, [there is] more chance for [me to be] successful."

<div style="text-align: right;">Scott, aged 28, p.A231 & A239</div>

Similarly, Charles indicates that he uses luxury brands to convey social status, and that his perception of luxury brands functioning as status symbols is rooted within the socio-cultural beliefs of his home culture:

Researcher: What kind of things come to your mind when you think about luxury brands?

Charles: "It's something showing your social status…In China we have old saying which is, "If you want to tell whether this guy is good or bad from the first impression you look at how they dress." And if he's rich, whether it's good or not, you look at what is on his bag, you know, the logo. So it's kind of easier for other people to recognise you in the first place rather than spending time to tell them who you are and what have you achieved. If you drive a Maserati or Ferrari to a business meeting people often might think, okay you are successful person and it will be less time spending to explain who you are (laughter) and you can probably work on some other things"

Researcher: Why would you buy luxury brands?

Charles: "Sometimes it can convey the trust, you know, here's my wealth, here's what I earn in the past and it kind of give assurance in terms of what I'm capable of. Well, people wearing something totally different from the rest is showing their capability right, if you can afford it at the same level but then they probably can't afford it, which means I'm better than you to a certain extent …. Also gaining respect, as well, because in places for people to meet in a short period of time… people are much easier to be attracted by what I'm wearing, what I'm driving, what I'm drinking because you can tell from what they're doing and how they dress themselves. If, you know, in a social event, such as a business dinner, someone is wearing an LV hat, you probably think, "Oh, this guy is probably a loose cannon he can do whatever he wants," so it's just some judgement is made on their appearance."

Charles, aged 30, p.A211 & A227

On the other hand, Danielle notes that her aspiration for social status is influenced by the socio-cultural beliefs of the global luxury brand culture. Danielle's story shows that her

perception of the prestige and status associated with luxury brands is derived from popular international TV shows and luxury brand advertising, which draw linkages between the consumption of luxury brands and an affluent lifestyle. Consequently, by consuming luxury brands, she replicates the status and lifestyle reflected within the socio-cultural beliefs of this emerging culture of global luxury brands:

Researcher: Is there any particular reason why luxury brand watches are really important for you?

Danielle: "Watches, hand bags and shoes. Actually I think that's something that appeals to females anyway. Like a man like to have a Murray Crane handmade suit or something like that, that's not important to me. I think women generally like to have those things. I think it's driven by things in the media, I think it's driven by things like 'Sex in the City'… There are a couple of brands of shoes in there that [I] would never have, I mean those brands, their high profiles were created and, therefore, that drove demand through people wanting to be like the girls in 'Sex in the City'".

Researcher: Why do you purchase luxury brands?

Danielle: "I think it's exquisite, I think it's something that people aspire to be able to have that not everybody can. I think it is something that most people wish or desire to have but not everybody can achieve. .. The prestige and the marketing… I've got a Dior lipstick in my bag right now, I'll say, "Can you see the diamond gloss on my lips?" It is called Diamond Gloss… Prestige is the answer for me. I think luxury brands make people feel good, because it makes them think that they're able to have what other people have, what people who are, the people who are considered elite in the world, it makes you feel good if you are able to have something that you think is like what they've got.."

<div align="right">Danielle, aged 49, p.A316 & A322</div>

Therefore, these findings suggest that some status and aspirational status users of luxury brands in New Zealand are influenced by the socio-cultural beliefs of the immigrant Asian cultures, which approve and even encourage the conspicuous consumption of luxury brands.

Furthermore, the status-orientated uses can also be associated with the socio-cultural beliefs of the global luxury brand culture, which promotes the status and an affluent lifestyle appeals conveyed by luxury brands.

5.3.1.2.   *Socio-Cultural Beliefs Associated with Escape Uses*

Recent studies suggest that not only do global luxury brands appeal to their customers by conveying a high perceived status, these brands also attract consumers by promising to deliver enjoyable and memorable experiences (Fionda and Moore, 2009; Atwall and Williams, 2009), immersing consumers into the affluent culture conveyed by these brands (Chadha and Husband, 2006; Michman and Mazze, 2006; Chevalier and Mazzalovo, 2008). Consistent with these findings, the analysis of interviews has suggested that the escape uses of luxury brands can be associated with the socio-cultural beliefs of the global luxury brand culture. For instance, Jean's story shows that she perceives her consumption of luxury brands to be an integral part of her escape experiences:

> **Researcher**: Why does going on safari symbolise luxury brands for you?

> **Jean:** "Safari's really expensive…. Safari to me is the pinnacle of luxury because it offers you excitement within a luxurious surrounding, like I went on a safari last year and you get back to your tent and all the lights are like really old, so it's like *Out of Africa* and you've got the hot water bottle and then at 5.30 in the morning, the butler comes and he gives you hot chocolate in the morning before you go on your game drive. And it's just that, it's that transportation to a different place. There's like why would I want to escape to do that and holidays to me are escapism and that's what luxury brands offer, escapism from your normal life…"

> **Researcher:** Where do brands come into play within this escapism experience?

Jean: "Luxury is an experience and the bags and things are … yeah they're add-on to that luxury or, necessities, because you can't go and stay at Aman [luxury resort] with a Mimco bag [not a luxury brand], can you? I mean, you'd have to have enough money for bag [and experience]!"

Jean, aged 48, p.A101-102

During the ZMET session, Jean showed me a photograph that depicts her perception of the escape (Illustration 4). This photograph supports Jean's comments that luxury brands play important roles in her escape. Most notably, however, the image was taken directly from the 2010 *Louis Vuitton* travel advertising campaign, which specifically aimed to associate the brand with extraordinary journeys in Africa (*Louis Vuitton* website, 2012). Therefore, Jean's story, together with the photo from the *Louis Vuitton* campaign, suggest that her perception of luxury brands being associated with temporal escapes are directly influenced by the promotional stories communicated by famous luxury brands, which constitute an integral part of the global luxury brand culture (Kapferer, 1997; Kapferer 2006).

Illustration 4. Jean's Photo of Safari Escape

Similarly, Cecilia described the consumption of luxury brands as an escape into another 'princess-like' world, suggesting that she also consumes luxury brands to escape from her everyday life:

> "I don't have the disposable income to really be a connoisseur, but luxury is an idea, definitely another world, it is another world, and it allows you to escape into that sort of, I don't want to use the word, princess, but that kind of land. Yeah!"
>
> **Researcher:** What comes to your mind when you think about wearing luxury brands?
>
> "Probably being with the people from the show in the couture fashion week in Paris... [**Researcher**: Why is that important?]…Because that's where the Haute couture is…that's where they're born and you're only a true brand that goes haute couture if you're from Paris basically. People say that they are in New Zealand but it's not. (laughter) [**Researcher**: So, what is it that makes it luxurious?] I think it's the romance of the city and all of that kind of magic coming together and creating that whole feeling and mood around the whole industry I guess."
>
> <div align="right">Cecilia, aged 25, p.A392-393</div>

Further, Cecilia's story suggests that her perception of the escape associated with the consumption of luxury brands is largely influenced by the socio-cultural beliefs of the global luxury brand culture. This is evident from her comparison of the luxury brand consumption to the experiences of "being in Paris during the fashion week" and the feelings of "the romance of the city and magic coming together". The city of Paris is often portrayed by popular media and brand advertising as the birthplace and epicentre of the global luxury brand culture (Dubois and Paternault, 1995; Kapferer, 2006). In addition, during the interview, Cecilia noted that her favourite luxury brands are such famous international brands as *Hermès* and *Givenchy*, and that she considers only these global brands to be the "true" luxury brands.

These findings confirm that the escape uses of luxury brands are associated with the socio-cultural beliefs of the global luxury brand culture. In particular, the famous luxury brand appeals and popular media tend to depict the consumption of luxury brands as partial or complete escapes, and emphasise the hedonic experiences associated with these brands. Consequently, these messages encourage consumers to purchase and use luxury brands as a form of temporary escapes from their ordinary lives.

5.3.1.3.   Socio-Cultural Beliefs Associated with Reward Uses

The analysis of interviews suggests that the consumer uses of luxury brands as a form of self-reward can also be associated with the global luxury brand culture. In particular, the findings show that the consumer perceptions of luxury brands being a desirable form of self-reward can be derived from the socio-cultural beliefs permeating the consumption of global luxury brands. The following excerpts from an interview with Heather illustrate this point:

> "The *Cartier* [luxury brand] bag, I bought it because I had been working for five years and that was okay, that.... That was a gift for myself for being in, being in work five years I guess..."

> "I guess for most of people, [they] would like to have it, to stay in the place that's comfortable, that's luxury, and it's just how, I guess, it's one of the motivations why we work hard, or we try to achieve something. So I guess that's why there's a need for luxury brand, because that is for, your idea to feel "yes, I achieved something", it is a reward for me, or something as a goal to work towards... So it's reflects the luxury living that we, most people would like to have... Also, luxury brands could be a piece of art [**Researcher:** Can you elaborate on that?] Yeah, because the brands itself, the image, it's basically just built on marketing, the commercials, the advertisement … the goodwill was behind it…I guess they are still doing what they're doing because, to them, it's art and it's just the same as a piece of painting, for example, that you hang on the wall. So people treat it as investment,

or see it as to make the living environment better, and for most of luxury brands I guess you could also see it as a painting, yeah."

<div align="right">Heather, aged 27, p.A159 & A172-173</div>

During the interview, Heather inidcated that she prefers only famous international luxury brands (such as *Cartier, Hermès*), and that she purchases these brands to reward herself for important achievements in her life. For instance, the episode above describes an occasion where Heather purchased a *Cartier* bag to celebrate five years of her working career. Furthermore, Heather's story shows that she chooses to reward herself with the consumption of these particular luxury brands, because these brands express a sense of comfort and enjoyment associated with an affluent lifestyle. Heather also compares luxury brands to artwork, which suggests that this perception is derived from the imaginary associated with famous luxury brands. Significantly, throughout the interview, Heather asserts that she likes purchasing luxury brands as a form of self-reward, but she does not aspire to achieve the status associated with these brands:

> "I know, well I have some other Taiwanese friends, who would actually just talking about luxury brands all day through, but for me it's like this is just what...it's just something I enjoy to use and it's, yeah, it's, I like it, and I'm not using it to reflect my status or anything."

> "I would think it's [luxury brands] worth it [the price] but I [also] do use just those crappy bags for whatever reason....for me I don't really need a luxury brand to reflect my background or a status so it's not my idea or the reason why I'm purchasing luxury brands."

<div align="right">Heather, aged 27, p.A169</div>

These comments suggest that, although Heather's perception of luxury brands is associated with the socio-cultural beliefs of the global luxury brand culture – that promotes the status appeals of luxury brands – Heather does not appear to be an aspirational status user of these brands. Instead, the images of affluence derived from these socio-cultural beliefs appeal to

Heather's needs for self-reward. This story illustrates the hermeneutic conception that people can derive different meanings from the same sets of socio-cultural beliefs, depending on the idiosyncrasies of their identity and personal goals (Thompson, 1997).

Heather's aversion to status consumption suggests, furthermore, that the luxury brand uses of self-reward can also be associated with the circumspect character of New Zealand culture. In particular, the findings of the thematic analysis suggest that that there is a sense of conformity within the socio-cultural norms and values of New Zealand culture that encourages consumers to seek inconspicuous behaviours and disapproving the conspicuous consumption of luxury brands. These socio-cultural beliefs may influence consumers to adopt different attitudes to uses and gratifications of luxury brands, which are different from the attitude of status-orientated consumption. Since the reward uses of luxury brands are focused on the individual as opposed to the social gratification offered by luxury brands, this form of luxury brand consumption could be perceived as more socially acceptable within New Zealand culture. During the interviews, several reward users of luxury brands, including Heather, unsolicitedly noted the importance of the circumspect character of New Zealand culture for their perceptions and behaviours associated with luxury brands:

> "I guess it's [luxury brand consumption] definitely different because in New Zealand there's no, there's much less occasions you will actually need something to represent your status…In New Zealand it's just different. Even sometimes when you use it [luxury brands] you'll be like quite an odd one out and it's not a good thing actually."
>
> Heather, aged 27, p.A167

Heather's comments suggest that the circumspect character of New Zealand culture could be one of the reasons for why her consumption of luxury brands is associated with reward uses. In another interview, Emma also noted that, within New Zealand culture, it is appropriate to

be circumspect and even hide the consumption of luxury brands from others, suggesting that some New Zealand consumers would be more likely to adopt self-reward uses than status-orientated uses of luxury brands:

> "I think people are much more discreet in New Zealand... I think they're much more discreet and I think that even if they've got the [luxury brand], even if they own the luxury brands they're much more discreet about how they use them and when they use them... Well actually…. I don't know whether this is relevant or not, if you are a female and you worry…you're talking about being discreet here…some of that's to do with people sitting above you in the organisation as well because you don't want to show up to other people. So you've got to watch what it is you do and what you're wearing and what you're conveying with people who are superior to you in the organisational structure... But if you worked in Singapore it'd be quite different, working in New York would too…So here [in New Zealand] there's quite a bit of thinking about who I work with and how I dress, I compromise a little. I would really love to have nice Prada handbags and everything else… but I wouldn't probably want to bring them to work…"
>
> Emma, aged 45, p.A129

Therefore, the findings from these participant stories suggest that the reward uses of luxury brands are associated with the socio-cultural beliefs of the global luxury brand culture and the circumspect character of New Zealand culture. The images of affluent lifestyle derived from the socio-cultural beliefs of the global luxury brand culture may prompt consumers to consider these brands as a suitable self-reward for their achievements and significant events in their lives. On the other hand, by discouraging the status and aspirational status uses of luxury brands, the circumspect character of New Zealand culture can make consumers perceive the reward uses of luxury brands as being more socially acceptable than the status uses.

5.3.1.4.   *Socio-Cultural Beliefs Associated with Extended-Self Uses*

The stories told by participants suggest that the uses and gratifications of luxury brands as part of the extended-self are distant from both the socio-cultural beliefs of the immigrant Asian cultures and the beliefs conveyed by the global luxury brand culture. First, the participants who used luxury brands as part of their extended-self showed resistance towards conspicuous consumption them. For instance, Jubilation noted that, for her, the consumption of luxury brands is a very personal aspect of her life. Therefore, she would avoid conspicuously displaying such consumption to other people:

> 'So maybe true luxury to me is not only uniqueness but it's also, it's also possibly something that only I know…it's personal, it's kind of like maybe if you had a tattoo, and you had it in a really prominent place that everyone could see… for me, if I was going to have a tattoo I would choose a place on my body that perhaps only I could see, or people who are very close to me could see, or that I could hide…yeah so I'd rather spend money on things that are different, that nobody would go "Oh my God that's a pair of *Gucci* heels," because they've been emblazoned all over the advertising campaigns. I'd rather have something that I know is super luxurious to me, but is not easily identified"
>
> <div align="right">Jubilation, aged 29, p.A445</div>

Furthermore, unlike most other consumers, the extended-self users showed little appreciation for, and even disapproval of some of the most affluent global luxury brands. In particular, these participants' comments show that they consider a lot of global luxury brands to lose their luxurious appeals because these brands have become too well-known, standardised, and freely available for the masses:

> "I think, you know how I was saying for *Prada* or *Gucci*, even though they're luxury, they've gone a bit too mass for me…[as opposed to] *Chanel* [that] has remained, it's maintained the integrity to that brand, like it's unwavering, it understands who it is, who the woman is that it's talking to and it hasn't changed"
>
> <div align="right">Jubilation, aged 29, A439</div>

"Recently I read this fact that 40% of the population in Japan owns a real *Louis Vuitton* piece. So, it just seems like it's just almost mass market, like mass produced which isn't to me, isn't really that great. I mean I really admire what Marc Jacobs does and I also look at the collections that he does for them and there's lots of things, clothing that I really like, but to me it's just not as special I anymore I guess"

Cecilia, aged 25, A407

Consequently, these participants noted that they preferred less known and more unique international brands (e.g., *Hermès, Givenchy, Chanel*), and/or less conspicuous New Zealand and Australian brands (e.g., *Zambesi, Juliette Hogan, Alannah Hill*).

These findings suggest that the extended-self uses of luxury brands may stand apart from the socio-cultural beliefs of the immigrant Asian cultures and even the global luxury brand culture. Therefore, in New Zealand, this form of luxury brand consumption seems to be more aligned with the circumspect character of New Zealand culture, in a sense that the consumers who choose to use luxury brands as part of their extended-self prefer more discreet brands, and oppose the conspicuous consumption of luxury brands.

5.3.1.5.   *Summary of Socio-cultural Beliefs Associated with the Uses and Gratifications*

The analysis of participant stories suggests the structural relationships between their socio-cultural beliefs and the uses and gratifications of luxury brands. More specifically, the findings of my exploratory study suggest that particular themes of the socio-cultural beliefs may be underpinning each form of the uses and gratifications of luxury brands. The findings from interviews suggest that the socio-cultural beliefs of the immigrant Asian cultures are associated with the status and aspirational status uses of luxury brands. The global luxury

brand culture has been found to influence the status-orientated users, the escape, and reward users of luxury brands. Finally, the circumspect character of New Zealand culture seems to be prominent for the reward uses and for the consumers who use luxury brands as part of their extended-self. These associations between the socio-cultural beliefs and the uses and gratifications of luxury brands are depicted in Figure 7.

Figure 7. Socio-cultural Beliefs and the Uses and Gratifications
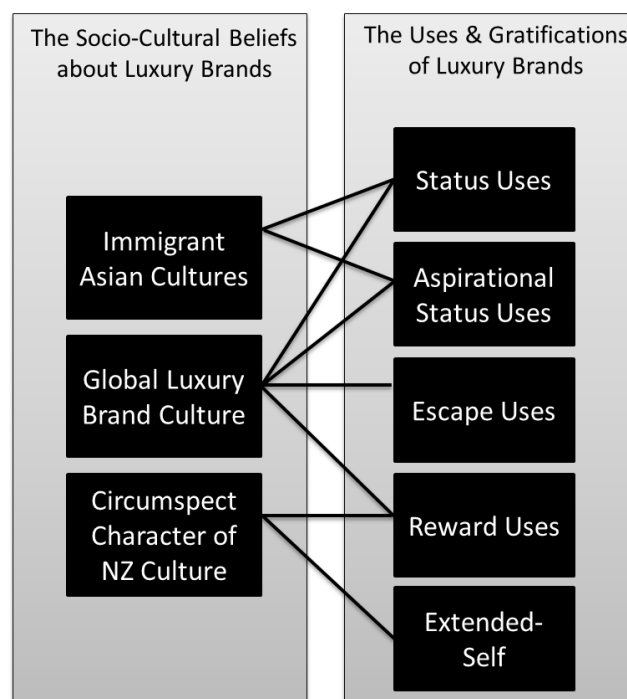
5.3.2. Brand Experiences Associated with the Uses and Gratifications

The findings of the thematic analysis have indicated different themes of luxury brand experiences, which were broadly categorised into pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase experiences. The narrative analysis suggests that, while these experiences can be encountered by all luxury brand consumers, their importance and significance may vary for individual consumers, depending upon the personal uses and gratifications salient to each consumer. In other words, the uses and gratifications of luxury brands are characterised by prominent types

of experiences, which provide further insight into the roles that they play in consumer lives. The experiences associated with each form of the uses and gratifications of luxury brands are detailed below.

5.3.2.1.   *Introductory Experiences and the Uses and Gratifications*

The thematic analysis has indicated that the early pre-purchase experiences of luxury brands are idiosyncratic, and generally serve an introductory purpose, increasing consumer knowledge and information literacy about the consumption of luxury brands. The narrative analysis has shown that during these experiences, consumers can start to develop their early perceptions about luxury brands in relation to the roles that these brands can play in consumer lives. Consequently, rather than being related to the specific uses and gratifications, these experiences provide consumers with an awareness of the different uses and gratifications, which they can choose to explore further with the purchase and post-purchase experiences. For instance, Katherine-Anne suggests that her consumption of luxury brands as a form of escape begins with her introductory experiences of reading magazines:

> "I think with luxury brands the escape is pretty much the whole experience from where, for some people, it might be from a magazine. For me, it starts in the magazine, you know, it's a different kind of escape obviously. It's like packing your bags, like I said, to go on a trip…"
>
> Katherine-Anne, aged 23, p.A151

Whereas for Tessa, the introductory experiences allowed her form a perception about the status and affluent lifestyle associated with luxury brands:

> **Researcher:** How did you first know about luxury brands?

Tessa: "Well I suppose from books and things, because if you look around, over here for example, you see there are some of these books. And I think I probably bought some of these books and then sort of got my head turned by them. Here's one here, it's a prime example of a book that I brought. And so I, you look through something like this [pointing at a luxury brand dress] and to be in luxury hotels, dreams in France…"

<div align="right">Tessa, aged 45, p.A426</div>

These excerpts suggest that with their introductory experiences consumers start to develop their first perceptions about luxury brands in relation to what these brands convey within the consumer culture that surrounds them, and what meanings luxury brands can potentially add to their lives. For instance, Tessa noted that, in her perception, luxury brands convey an affluent lifestyle. Her comments above suggest that this perception was initially conceived by reading fashion books and magazines, long before she made her first purchase of a luxury brand item. Other participants have also noted that their initial perceptions of luxury brands, which may or may not have changed by their later experiences of them, were derived from reading magazines and watching TV shows.

The analysis also shows that during their introductory experiences, consumers are open to the influences of their significant others, and/or to follow the dominant socio-cultural beliefs about luxury brands that they are aware of. This is because, prior to these experiences, consumers are still unfamiliar with luxury brands, limiting their ability to ascribe personalised meanings to these brands. Some participants indicated that, when they first started to get interested in luxury brands, they would follow the advice of their friends and relatives (e.g., Charles, aged 30; Emma, aged 45; Tessa, aged 45), while others admitted to following popular trends because they lacked their own knowledge about luxury brands (e.g., Scott, aged 28; Katherine-Anne, aged 23). Consequently, these findings suggest that the consumption of luxury brands experienced by individual consumers can be described as

metaphorical journeys, where the introductory experiences lay out different ways in which the journeys can proceed.

5.3.2.2.   Brand Experiences Associated with Status Uses of Luxury Brands

The status users consume luxury brands to display their achieved status. The findings derived from the participants' stories have indicated several luxury brand experiences that were particularly prominent for the status users. These included elite shopping experiences, experiences of getting appreciation of luxury brand consumption from other brand users, and the relational experiences of luxury brands.

Participants suggested that elite shopping experiences are associated with the status consumption of luxury brands because, by providing personalised attention to consumer needs, such shopping encounters can make consumers feel more important in terms of their achieved status and role positions:

> "I think it is important, because as I say, I mean I might go in there and spend forty thousand dollars on these dresses. I want to be looked after, I don't want to be a few dresses chucked in the changing room and say, "Oh well, where's your money," at the end of it. I want somebody to look after me and run around and get this and that, whip it upstairs to alter it to see whether it's going to make it a bit different to fit me better or, you, I think when you're paying for a lot, a lot of money you do want to be looked after."
>
> Tessa, aged 45, p.A421

> "I regard myself as fortunate to be able to do it. I mean if it were a question of finance and I couldn't go [first class], if I didn't go economy, then of course I would go economy. But I've been lucky enough that we could afford to do that and therefore it makes the whole experience less, as I said, certainly much less stress and much easier in every respect. And people go over and above, I mean I remember when we flew back from Paris to Hong Kong and we were flying Cathay Pacific business class and when we checked in they'd

upgraded us to first. So we get on and we're given the best champagne and the best of this and the best of that, and then we arrived in Hong Kong and my husband's case didn't come off. Now, immediately the ground staff of Cathay were there, "Mr X, we realise that your case hasn't come off, now we will deal with this." And they took over and did it all. Now, if we had flown that leg economy that would not have happened, we would have been waiting, waiting, waiting for that case and when it didn't come off and the horrible feeling in your stomach, then we'd be seeking where do we go to report it, filling in this form, following up [by] ourselves. Similar, with luxury shopping... If I go, for example, into *Gucci* here, I get the treatment, they find out my name and they call me by name and, "Can I interest you in this, this and this." And they'll follow up if they haven't been able to find it, they'll, you get that personal attention."

Lillian, aged 65, p.A510

Furthermore, the status luxury brand users have suggested that, while they tend to seek approval of their brand consumption from other brand users, they generally do not aspire to, or even dislike, the idea of sharing their consumption with non-luxury brand consumers. This is explained by the perception that the owners of luxury brands often possess a similar level of social status. Consequently, the status brand consumers want to seek approval from the social circles that they affiliate with:

"There's no point showing it [luxury brands] to someone, a child in Africa, who's got no food, what's the point? It doesn't make any sense...It's for people who understand that and know the value of those goods... I think in the past, I wasn't sort of involved with people who sort of judged you or looked at you in a certain way depending how you were dressed or what you were wearing...and now, I guess, it's different, because yeah I want certain people to recognise what you've achieved. There's also that element, there is a little bit of element that well what's the point in buying it if you're not going to show it."

Suzanne, aged 38, p.A185

"It is flattering if people recognise what the brand of my bag is if I am at some event or business meeting because people do judge you based on how you look...it allows you to

fit in, but I don't really care if some girl on the street will recognise my bag or not…it is not really important"

<div align="right">Jean, aged 48, p.A127-128</div>

Finally, the relational experiences of luxury brands have also been found to be associated with status brand consumption. The stories told by participants suggest that the relational experiences are, sometimes, perceived to convey status by making consumers feel elite even among other luxury brand users. This is particularly evident from the earlier story told by Scott about his experiences with the *Louis Vuitton* brand:

Scott: "Once *Louis Vuitton* invited us to go to the Australian *Louis Vuitton* shop. I think in 2006, *Louis Vuitton* paid for the first class tickets for me and my girlfriend, and accommodation at the Sheraton Hotel for one night. Before we go to Australia, they tell us that they invite us to go to Sydney for shopping. We know *Louis Vuitton* invited us, because they don't have the clothing in [New Zealand] store. Some global stores have clothing, watches, jewellery and shoes but New Zealand is not a global store, so they invited us to go to Australia."

Researcher: So why this kind of service is important? How does it make you feel when you get that kind of service?

Scott: "They make us feel like VIP… Because we pay a lot of money, we need different service….it's status…Things like this, the reason I buy the *Gucci* jacket… I can buy many brand jackets, local brand jackets, even no famous brands I can buy ten or thirty of those…Instead I will keep the money to buy the *Gucci* jacket. Why? …Because it's *Gucci*."

<div align="right">Scott, aged 28, p.A235-236</div>

This episode shows the reciprocal relationship between the consumer and the brand. Furthermore, Scott indicates that the relational experiences derived from these brand encounters are important for him because they convey a high level of social status, which the

participant has achieved among other consumers of this luxury brand. Consequently, the meanings derived from these experiences reinforce Scott's status-orientated uses of luxury brands.

5.3.2.3.   Brand Experiences Associated with Aspirational Status Uses

Similar to status uses, elite shopping experiences can be associated with the aspirational status uses of luxury brands. In the context of these uses, elite shopping experiences allow consumers to glimpse the privileges of the status that they aspire to achieve in the future. For instance, Cecilia uses luxury brands to seek her aspirational status:

Researcher: Why do you, personally, buy luxury brands?

Cecilia: "I think it's a bit of a status thing as well, it's important for me, because I know that one day I would like to be able to go and buy a thirty thousand dollar bag. (Laughter) I've got, I know the lifestyle that I'd like to have and in order to get that I need to, you know, get success, it's very important."

<div align="right">Cecilia, aged 25, p.A393</div>

Cecilia notes that she can get a more personalised service from her shopping experiences of luxury brands, which she associates with a higher level of status:

Cecilia: "You're shopping in New Zealand, and you go to a New Zealand fashion designer label, you always get, well I find that I always get really good service and the products generally quite expensive for the country. And then, say ,you go into *Gucci* or *Louis Vuitton* down in Queen Street, it's just that much better (laughter)"

Researcher: What kind of experience would that be?

Cecilia: "Well generally when shopping at places like that you get a really personalised service, which I love good customer service. So I, the whole experience for me when I get

it home and I unwrap it, or whether it's walking in a door and having the security man open the door for you, or whatever it is, it's definitely higher kind of status experience, I think…"

<div align="right">Cecilia, aged 25, p.A394</div>

Furthermore, the findings suggest that the aspirational status consumers can seek experiences that allow them to receive a social recognition of their luxury brand consumption. Therefore, these consumers may wear luxury brands conspicuously to draw attention to the brands that they have acquired:

Researcher: When do you wear your luxury brands?

Scott: "Every day. When I am with other people…it's like when I saw this girl maybe five times, six times, she brings the same bag. If five times my girlfriend changes different bags, I think it is better, yeah?... also when people on the street see someone with a limited edition LV bag, they would think: oh, he must be rich, or…oh, he must be successful…it gives you self-confidence!"

<div align="right">Scott, aged 28, p.A238</div>

However, whereas the status luxury brand consumers seek and enjoy the attention of other luxury brand users, some aspirational status consumers have indicated that they may feel uncomfortable sharing their consumption with the highly successful status users of luxury brands:

"I actually feel I'm not worthy to be there [at private fashion show]...because I'm not famous or a celebrity… I'm just getting there through the people I know more than anything; I get to attend through the people that take my phone calls really… (Laughter)"

<div align="right">Danielle, aged 49, p.A327</div>

In this episode, Danielle indicates that she feels insecure among the affluent consumers of luxury brands, because she has not achieved their level of social status. This suggests that,

although the aspirational consumers seek social appreciation of their luxury brand consumption, they may not aspire to display their consumption of luxury brands in front of other users of luxury brands.

The findings suggest, therefore, that, similar to the status users of luxury brands, the aspirational status consumers may appreciate the elite shopping experiences associated with the consumption of luxury brands, because such experiences can allow them to appreciate the social status that they are aspiring to achieve. The aspirational status users may also seek social recognition of the luxury brands that they have acquired but the findings suggest that they may also feel reluctant to display their consumption to higher status users of luxury brands.

5.3.2.4. *Brand Experiences Associated with Escape Uses*

The experiences that were prominent to the escape users of luxury brands included fantasy shopping experiences and hedonic experiences associated with their consumption. First, fantasy shopping experiences can immerse consumers into an escape by transporting them into the imaginary worlds staged by the brands during purchase encounters:

> "With *Alannah Hill* [luxury brand], she's kind of get carried away [with her shop] in this whole girly wonderland type thing, which is why she does the pretty ruffles thing, and lots pink corals. She does blacks and stuff as well, but it's always very, very feminine, kind of *Alice in Wonderland* type things. It is escapism; it's definitely an experience to shop in there."
>
> Katherine-Anne, aged 23, p.A140

> "I went into the *Armani* shop and I was blown away by the dresses that were on this floor and I, it was a combination of the styling, the fabrics and the colours which were utterly beautiful. It may well have just been that particular season that they had that appeal to me,

having said that I do go back to that shop any time I'm in Vegas, but I've only bought smaller items, maybe a top or a skirt of something like that, or trousers, but not such a big purchase, just to remember that lovely experience of being in [the] *Armani* shop"

Lillian, aged 65, p.A515

The hedonic experiences characterised with a sensory pleasure and gratification, aesthetic beauty, and excitement associated with the consumption of luxury brands (Benarrosh-Dahan, 1991; Fauchois and Krieg, 1991; Roux and Floch, 1996; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004), have also been found to be capable of facilitating a sense of temporary escape. For instance, Katherine-Anne describes her consumption of luxury brands as "retail therapy". Her story indicates that she can escape from her work and routine drudgery by purchasing and feeling good about wearing luxury brands:

"I think a lot your attitude has to do with how you're feeling and how clothes make you feel, how shoes make you feel. I know that I've just had a crappy week, really busy week at work I go out and get a haircut or I go and buy a new dress and then I wear it to work, and I feel amazing. [**Researcher**: Why is that?] (laughter). I don't know. It's just a pick me up. I don't know, I'm one of those girls that like retail therapy I suppose. I think the feeling of wearing something new, as well, and knowing that you look really good in it and just splurge…"

"When you're stressed out…I know that after the first two, three weeks of work I usually tend to go shopping because it's so much money that I've got, which I haven't had time to spend and it's just sitting in there going "Spend me"…."

Katherine-Anne, aged 23, p.A136

Therefore, the findings from the participant stories suggest that the two prominent types of experiences associated with the escape uses of luxury brands are fantasy shopping experiences and the hedonic experiences of luxury brands. The fantasy experiences can allow consumers to escape from their ordinary lives, by transporting them into imaginary worlds

during their purchase encounters. By providing consumers with sensory pleasure and gratification, aesthetic beauty, and excitement derived from wearing and using luxury brands, the hedonic experiences can also facilitate a sense of escape after the purchase encounters.

5.3.2.5.   Brand Experiences Associated with Reward Uses

The stories told by participants show that the experiences associated with the reward uses of luxury brands include elite shopping encounters and special occasions, which mark important achievements in their lives. First, elite shopping experiences reinforce the perception that luxury brands are a suitable form of self-reward:

> "It [luxury shopping experience] makes you feel wanted or it just makes you feel this is somewhere where I want to spend my money because I'm worth it… These people who acknowledge, they respect me, and they genuinely care about what I'm there for. Yeah, they're not just there to make money."
>
> Suzanne, aged 38, p.A187

Furthermore, the reward users indicated that the consumption of luxury brands is not something that they would consider doing regularly:

> "I think a definition of luxury is that it's something that you don't have every day. That's not to say that the way I live my life might not look like luxury to a sort of two dollar a day sort of person in the developing world, so it's all relative. But for me luxury is something that I would say I don't consume on a daily basis, it is something special…"
>
> Hope, aged 50, p.A595

Instead, this form of luxury brand consumption is associated with the special occasions in consumer lives. Moreover, these occasions are not only infrequent, but also accompanied by feelings of success and pride in what these consumers have achieved on those occasions. For

instance, in the earlier story told by Suzanne, she described purchasing a pair of *Jimmy Choo* shoes to celebrate the beginning of her professional career.

> **Suzanne:** "I think when I was living in the UK. I purchased a pair of *Jimmy Choo* shoes so that was when I was working, that would be the first time when I was earning money for myself after I had finished my university. That was the first time and it felt amazing. [**Researcher:** Why is that?] Because I was able to buy something out of money that I had worked hard for and not sort of money that my parents had given me. Yeah, so for me that was really important and was also to show that to my parents that look "I worked so hard and I aspired to getting these good quality shoes, and I managed to do that!" So for me it was achievement."
>
> <div align="right">Suzanne, aged 38, p.A193</div>

Later on, Suzanne has also indicated that she felt very proud to be able to purchase these shoes:

> **Suzanne:** "I think for me personally, I was proud, it was that I achieved buying them…It was my hard working, I saved up and I worked hard and yeah, yeah, because I wanted those!"
>
> <div align="right">Suzanne, aged 38, p.A193</div>

Therefore, these findings suggest that the reward uses of luxury brands can be characterised with the elite shopping experiences and the experiences associated with the special occasions in consumer lives. Elite shopping experiences assert the appropriateness of luxury brands as a form of self-reward. The experiences associated with special occasions can be important for the reward users, because they mark important achievements in these consumers' lives, evoking feelings of pride and self-esteem.

5.3.2.6.   *Brand Experiences Associated with Extended-Self Uses*

For the reward users, the experiences associated with special occasions marked important achievements accomplished by the consumers. For extended-self users, the special occasions associated with the consumption of luxury brands often symbolise more personal aspects of these consumers' lives (e.g., birthdays or a wedding). Furthermore, the experiences derived from these occasions can allow luxury brands to become an integral part of the consumers' life themes. For instance, the earlier story told by Alison illustrated how the brand has become a symbolic expression of her bond with her husband:

> "Well one very good memory was that, I told my boyfriend at the time, who's now my husband, that I wanted a ring from *Tiffany*'s and I was like, "Here's the size, this is what it looks like, this is the ring, dah, di, dah, go get it for Christmas", and he was like, so he went there, well he said, "Okay, well I'm going there today," or I don't know what he said but then he came back and I was expecting him to give me the box and he didn't. He said, "They didn't have it." And I said, "Well did you order one or did you tell them, did you pay for it and it's coming like this week?" And he was like, "No." And I was thinking, "You dope why are you, what is the story, thanks for nothing, like this is ridiculous." And then he's like, "Well, come over to the room so that I can show you something on the computer, whatever." And I was in the middle of making dinner, so I was like, "Okay, well, let me finish doing this and then I'll come in there." And then I went to put the things away and I opened the refrigerator and the box was sitting inside the refrigerator. So that was very cute and he was very proud of himself and that was probably the cutest thing because I think that's the only time he's been that thoughtful ever (laughter) in that way, so yeah."
>
> Alison, aged 32, p.A361-362

Similarly, the reciprocal relational experiences of luxury brands are an important element of luxury brand consumption as part of the extended-self. Whereas for the status users, these experiences may convey a superior level of social status (e.g., Scott's story); for the extended-self users, the relational experiences signify a meaningful bond between the brand and consumer. This is illustrated in the earlier story told by Jubilation where the *Zambesi*

brand has managed to become not only a relational partner, but also the expression of Jubilation's self-image:

Jubilation: "I've been shopping there [*Zambesi*] since I was...I bought my first ever piece when I was fourteen, and that I still have it because I will never throw anything from *Zambesi* away or sell it, I've kept every single piece that I've ever bought. [**Researcher:** Why's that?] Because I treasure it, I just love it so much. So I still have the very first piece that I bought which was a very, very frail piece of fabric that just wraps around you and it was a hundred and twenty dollars back then, so that was sort of fifteen years ago, so that was a lot of money, especially for a fourteen year old. I think I managed to ask Mum for it for my birthday and I just have always loved everything about it, so I follow them... I've been going to their fashion shows for the last six or seven years. I now work closely with the designers, so I do, I can call them up on the phone, or, you know, like so I do know them. I love them so much that I've asked them to design my wedding dress."

Researcher: How did this happen?

Jubilation: "Well, I got engaged on my birthday...so I'd gone to visit *Zambesi* … and saw this dress that I just loved, and it was quite expensive, and at the time I knew I couldn't afford it...and then Ororo who's the daughter of the designer she was like: "Oh my God let's take a photo of you in it …and say this is my birthday present"… That was an awesome experience because to go out of their way to make it...I don't know, it was personal to us… like they really wanted me to have this outfit...because they knew I really loved it, so they were going out of their way, above and beyond, to see how they could help me!"

Researcher: What does make *Zambesi* so special for you?

Jubilation: "Well…for me is, I personally, I think if you're going to be an individual, I prefer individual style and perhaps the fact that *Zambesi* is – maybe it's polarising as well, maybe not everyone likes *Zambesi*, maybe people think it's not for them or something. So I like a brand that people either really love or don't really like at all, because I'm just not very, I'm not, personally I don't aspire to mass brands. So I think if you maintain a level of, they

don't have flashy gold lined advertisements, or everything's quite grey and black and monotone and, I'm not really explaining myself very well. But for me cool is not flashy...I want someone to realise that I am me, that I'm not sort of taking, I don't know, that I'm uniquely me, that I'm different to everyone else, a little bit individual, so *Zambesi* I guess for me talks that. So, people that wear *Zambesi* often wear them quite differently, so they're all quite unique in their style."

Jubilation, aged 29, p.A434-435

These stories suggest that the relational experiences and the experiences of luxury brands derived from special occasions are associated with the consumption of luxury brands as part of the extended-self. The reciprocal relational experiences of luxury brands can forge meaningful bonds between the brand and consumer, allowing the brands to become a relational partner and/or the expression of self-image. Similarly, the experiences of luxury brands derived from special occasions can signify personal aspects of consumer lives, where luxury brands play an important role within the consumer life themes.

5.3.2.7.   *Summary of Luxury Brand Experiences Associated with the Uses and Gratifications*

The narrative analysis shows that some brand experiences are particularly prominent for certain forms of the uses and gratifications of luxury brands, increasing our understanding of the consumer-perceived meanings of luxury brands. The findings of my exploratory study suggest that the appreciation from luxury brand users can be important for the status uses and gratifications of luxury brands. Elite shopping experiences could be associated with the status, aspirational status, and the reward uses and gratifications of luxury brands. The social appreciation of luxury brands has been found to be prominent for the aspirational status uses and gratifications. The fantasy shopping experiences and the hedonic experiences of luxury brands have been found to be associated with the escape uses and gratifications of luxury

brands. Relational experiences can be important for the status and the extended-self uses of luxury brands. Finally, the experiences derived from the special occasions associated with luxury brands are associated with the reward uses and the extended-self uses of luxury brands. The purpose of the introductory experiences is to increase consumer knowledge and literacy about luxury brands. Therefore, they are not particularly prominent to the specific uses and gratifications but, rather, these experiences are common to all forms of luxury brand consumption.

Furthermore, the findings have indicated that within the context of their respective uses and gratifications, the luxury brand experiences provide further insight into the roles that these uses play in consumer lives. For instance, it was found that while a social appreciation of luxury brand consumption is important for the aspirational status users, the status users seek appreciation only from other brand users similar to themselves. Likewise, the uses and gratifications of luxury brands can increase our understanding of the roles and the meanings conveyed by luxury brand experiences. For instance, both the status and the extended self-users of luxury brands appreciate the relational experiences associated with these brands. However, within the context of the status uses, the relational experiences convey a higher level of social status whereas, within the context of the extended-self uses of luxury brands, these experiences are important because they forge meaningful bonds between luxury brands and consumers. These findings, therefore, illustrate the hermeneutic principle that the understanding of meaning "is achieved by iterating between considering the interdependent meanings of parts and the whole that they form" Klein and Myers, 1999, p. 72). The dyadic relationships between each form of the uses and gratifications and their respective luxury brand experiences are depicted in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Luxury Brand Experiences and the Uses and Gratifications
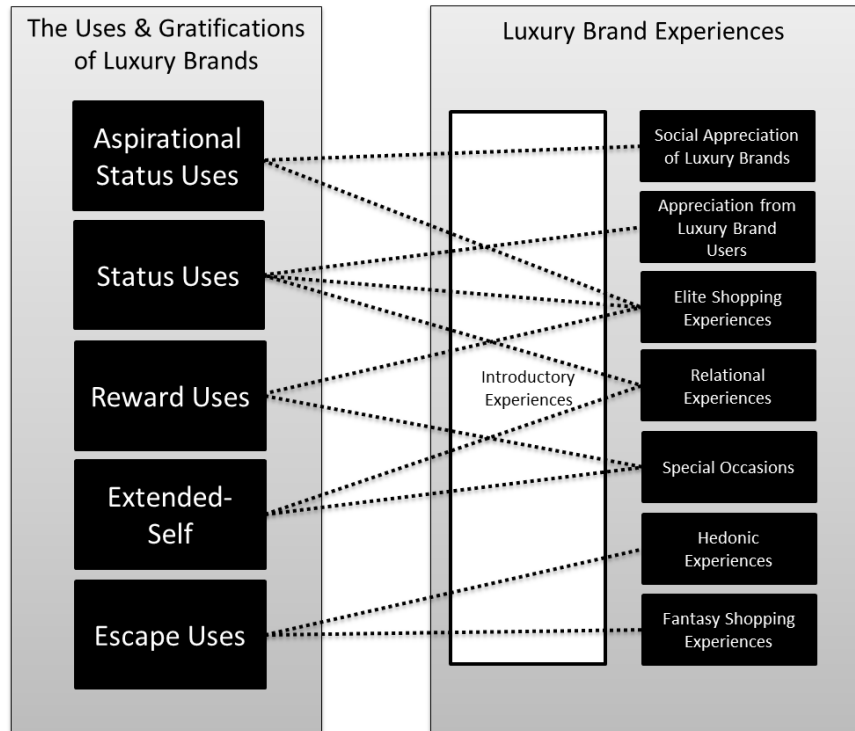
5.3.3. Perceived Characteristics Associated with the Uses and Gratifications

Brand characteristics comprise the consumer-perceived imaginary associated with the brand in relation to the roles that this brand plays in their lives. Thematic analysis has identified six common perceived characteristics associated with the consumption of luxury brands – brand quality, brand historicity, international recognition, brand rarity, brand uniqueness and brand discreetness. The narrative analysis has indicated that the importance of these characteristics for consumer perceptions of luxury brands is associated with the uses and gratifications salient to individual consumers. The luxury brand characteristics are also reinforced by the luxury brand experiences, which are prominent for their respective uses and

gratifications. Consistent with the hermeneutic conceptualisation of brand meaning (Figure 4, see p.78), this suggests that the structural relationship between the perceived characteristics and brand experiences of luxury brands are contextualised within the consumer uses and gratifications salient to consumers. The perceived characteristics associated with each form of the luxury brand uses, and the relationships between the perceived characteristics and the brand experiences within the context of these uses and gratifications, are discussed below.

5.3.3.1.   *Brand Quality and Uses and Gratifications*

The thematic analysis has shown that all twenty-four participants perceive luxury brands to be of superior quality compared to non-luxury brands. Furthermore, this perception about the quality of luxury brands refers not only to the assessments of the physical attributes of products; it also includes the quality of services associated with the luxury brand purchases. The narrative analysis has indicated that the perceived superior quality of luxury brands is an important perception for all forms of the uses and gratifications associated with the consumption of these brands. For instance, both Ruth and Charles note that the perceived quality is important for their social uses of luxury brands:

> "It's the quality – quality means, I think, having a sense that no they're [luxury brands] not just going to sell it to each, every man and his dog, 'cause it's that's exclusivity. Exclusivity to me is definitely one of the foundations of luxury...[**Researcher:** Why is exclusivity important?] Because you, by buying a piece of jewellery that was designed by so and so and the quality of so and so you're not just every man and his dog, you know, it is that, it puts you in...puts you a little club doesn't it? ... a little club of diamond wearers of that degree. It puts you in a little club of people who drive whatever car, the latest and greatest, I don't know. And it puts you in those little clubs and I think people have got to, for the most part people have strong herding instinct, although they want it to be exclusive they're interested in attracting others in that same thing"

Ruth, aged 40, p.A348

"I'd say the quality of it [the brand], the quality of it is really good and people recognise it, it's just it help me to gain respect in social functions. People see you dress up properly and they more tend to talk to you."

Charles, aged 30, p.A223

Ruth suggests that the purchasing of brands with a superior quality conveys the exclusivity and social status of a brand user. Similarly, Charles believes that the perceived quality of luxury brands is likely to be recognised by others, allowing him to receive social appreciation associated with the consumption of these brands. On the other hand, for Lillian, the perceived quality is an important element of her hedonic experiences, which are salient to her escape uses of luxury brands:

"I love to surround myself with beautiful things, and so if I'm given a choice I would always opt for the luxury side of things. I'd rather buy fewer things and buy good quality than I would cheaper things and throw them out…Beautiful things, because almost everything I look at, every design I look at they use the best of the best. They use the best quality diamonds, they use, and their designs are timeless and you go and you can just appreciate how beautiful everything is and it gives you great pleasure to wear it. And because I wear my rings all the time, I'm getting constantly, every day, when I put them on I think, "that's beautiful."…[it makes you] feel like a princess and, I know that feeling, you feel as though you are looking absolutely your best, which gives you confidence as well."

Lillian, aged 65, p.A505

For Suzanne, the perceived quality of luxury brands conveys the perception that these brands represent a worthwhile form of self-reward due to their perceived high value:

Suzanne: "I think when I was living in the UK. I purchased a pair of *Jimmy Choo* shoes so that was when I was working, that would be the first time when I was earning money for myself after I had finished my university. That was the first time and it felt amazing. [**Researcher:** Why is that?] Because I was able to buy something out of money that I had

worked hard for and not sort of money that my parents had given me. Yeah, so for me that was really important and was also to show that to my parents that look "I worked so hard and I aspired to getting these *good quality* shoes, and I managed to do that!" So for me it was achievement."

<div align="right">Suzanne, aged 38, p.A193</div>

Finally, Logan uses luxury brands as part of his extended-self. In particular, his story suggests that he consumes luxury brands to express his self-image:

Logan: "It's all about the style… Coco Chanel said, "You can buy fashion, you can never buy style." It tells who you are, it reflects who you are."

Researcher: So really for you, when you purchase luxury it reflects who you are?

Logan: "Yeah absolutely, but and that's why probably I said that to me the status doesn't matter. It doesn't matter to me at all and trust me I don't even think from that point of view that I'm wearing a very expensive pair of shoes so I belong to a different class. It doesn't even bother my mind. What goes to my mind is that the shoes I'm wearing are so beautiful and actually goes with my clothes and it shows the kind of man I am"

<div align="right">Logan, aged 32, p.A591</div>

Logan suggests that the perceived quality of luxury brands is important for his extended-self uses, because he would not want to associate his self-image with ordinary brands:

"[Luxury goods are] very fine goods, very high quality. For me, quality is a top priority and then obviously with quality comes design. For me I will not wear or any time, I mean, I would not consider something luxurious unless the design is so unique."

<div align="right">Logan, aged 32, p.A567</div>

Therefore, the stories told by participants suggest that perceived quality is one of the most important and fundamental characteristics associated with all forms of the luxury brand uses and gratifications. Moreover, the findings suggest that perceptions about brand quality can

play different roles within the consumer imaginary associated with luxury brands, depending on the consumers' personal uses and gratifications. For instance, within the context of social uses, the perceived quality conveys social status, whereas within the context of escape uses, the brand quality is associated with the hedonic experiences derived from the escape consumption of luxury brands. These findings also illustrate that perceptions about brand quality are reinforced by luxury brand experiences, which are salient to the specific uses and gratifications of luxury brands.

5.3.3.2.   *Brand Characteristics Associated with Aspirational (Status) Uses*

The stories told by the status and aspirational status brand users suggest that these consumers may share a common perceived imaginary associated with luxury brands. In particular, apart from the superior quality of luxury brands, these consumers appreciate the brand rarity and international recognition associated with luxury brands. For instance, Lilandra and Elizabeth note that the rarity of luxury brands signifies the higher level of social status:

> "I think if you're paying a higher price for something you wouldn't expect to see, you'd be the second person on the street with that, for the simple fact that, apart from anything, most people couldn't probably afford it. So that automatically cuts out a large portion of the population. But I think too, in order to be able to charge those prices, you've got to have limited quantities of what you're providing."
>
> Lilandra, aged 45, p.A469

> "The *Hermès Birkin*. I heard that they're all handmade and cost sometimes 100 thousands of US dollars to get on, and you have to book it, and then wait for months in advance because those people have to craft and they have to made it for you… People who use them, you can see this is one with the Princess Diana, and also people like Victoria

Beckham. She's quite rich and she has like hundreds of those Birkins, and then if you look at other celebrities, only the really successful ones have those."

<div align="right">Elizabeth, aged 30, p.A303</div>

Similarly, Scott's comments suggest that the global luxury brands have a stronger association with the culture underpinning an affluent consumption of luxury brands. Therefore, consumers tend to perceive the international recognition associated with these brands as an appraisal of their conspicuousness, associating a higher level of status and prestige with the consumption of the international brands:

"You know the magazine can take the photo with some movie star, yeah there was this wedding, so there was this one [brand] is called the IT bag. My girlfriend wanted to buy this one, I tried to stop because it's not luxury, not top tier of luxury goods. The top, the first level, of luxury goods are international brands like here: The top of the first luxury goods is *Louis Vuitton*, *Hermès* and Chanel."

<div align="right">Scott, aged 28, p.A234</div>

Furthermore, the findings suggest that the association of brand rarity and international recognition with the conspicuous imaginary of luxury brands can be reinforced by their brand experiences salient to the status-orientated uses and gratifications. For instance, the excerpt from the interview with Lilandra suggests that, by offering elite shopping experiences unattainable from other stores, luxury brands confirm her perceptions of rarity and status:

"I think you expect a very different experience if you walk into, say, *Louis Vuitton*'s store to if you walk into a Warehouse to buy a suitcase. I think you would expect at the Warehouse you'd have to rummage through yourself and find what you want. Whereas in a *Louis Vuitton* store you would expect that somebody would be there to help you select, help you choose, give you that experience and I suppose feeling that you're important to them"

<div align="right">Lilandra, aged 45, p.A470</div>

On the other hand, Suzanne and Tessa suggest that the perceived rarity of luxury brands is important for receiving social appreciation associated with the status consumption of luxury brands:

> "It's worth it, yeah absolutely. It's a rarity. and I think also a lot from our sort of culture is you want to show other people, our families or other sort of people in your social sort of network that by dressing well and driving branded cars or wearing branded boots that you've actually succeeded in something, especially in our culture, it's quite a big thing to show off your assets."
>
> Suzanne, aged 38, p.A180

> "So for me, if something is a luxury brand, well it should stand out from other things in terms of quality and rarity, that's two important things. So as I say, I don't want them to have made five hundred of them all being sold down at Parnell. I want there to be one of them down there and so I know that when I go out to a fashion evening or a ball or a black tie dinner, I don't want to find other people see me with the woman next to me wearing the same dress…"
>
> Tessa, aged 45, p.A413-414

Similarly, Megan indicates that the internationally recognised luxury brands are more likely to receive appraisal from others:

> "I think especially international presence has a really big influence on this kind of thing, like when you see it's out there and, when you see like people with power using it, I think you kind of trust them more."
>
> Megan, aged 26, p.A523

Therefore, the participants' stories suggest that, since the status and aspirational status uses of luxury brands are employed by consumers to display their achieved or desired social status, these consumers prefer highly conspicuous luxury brands, which can be associated with the

perceived rarity and international recognition of these brands. Consistent with these perceptions, the analysis has also indicated that the consumer experiences salient to the status-oriented uses of luxury brands can reinforce the connection between the brand rarity and international recognition with a higher level of social status. Furthermore, the earlier stories told by Ruth and Charles (see p.233) also suggest that the social status can be conveyed by the perceived superior quality of luxury brands. Accordingly, the interviews show that the prominent perceived characteristics associated with the status uses of luxury brands include brand rarity, international recognition, and the superior quality of luxury brands.

5.3.3.3.   *Brand Characteristics Associated with Escape Uses*

The thematic analysis has also indicated that consumers can use the consumption of luxury brands to gratify their needs for escape from daily drudgery and responsibilities. The findings from the narrative analysis suggest that the escape consumers may appreciate the richness of history behind luxury brands. For instance, Heather indicates that, by consuming luxury brand products, she can also experience their stories, which transport her into the imaginary worlds of the past symbolised by these brands. Heather's comments suggest that the richer the history that luxury brands have, the more likely consumers are to use these brands as part of their escape consumption:

Researcher: What is a luxury brand for you?

"[Luxury brands have] the heritage, the history, that was once used by the royal families and they still, kept their way of making things. It's not just a leather bag...It's either handcrafted, or it's custom made. So it's those really... I think only the top brands or, not the top brands, but only the ones that have history will be considered as luxury brands for

me… [they remind me] of how French society was back in eighteenth or seventeenth century, how they have the luxury living and, I guess, that's how most current brands started, or at least the craftsmanship started, and I guess, some of the brands were used by the royal families before… It's like they are still carrying the same message [in those brands]"

Researcher: Can you give me an example?

"Well brands like *Chanel,* itself, has a history and so, we're using their things, and it's like being surrounded by the fashion, like history, I guess, so that's the brand itself for me – the story it has"

Heather, aged 27, p.A157

Furthermore, some escape users have also noted the importance of perceived brand uniqueness. For instance, Katherine-Anne notes that her perception of escape is derived from the unique styles and stories that she associates with her favourite luxury brands:

"With *Alannah Hill* [luxury brand], she kind of gets carried away [with her shop] in this whole girly wonderland type thing, which is why she does the pretty ruffles thing, and lots pink corals. She does blacks and stuff as well, but it's always very, very feminine, kind of *Alice in Wonderland* type things. It is escapism; it's definitely an experience to shop in there. The shop assistants are obviously quite characteristic of what the brand is trying to put out there, 'cos they're always bubbly and chirpy. Whereas, compared to Alannah Hill, Arthur Galan, when I went in there the girls are very classy, you know, in terms of your shopping experience they leave you be. They are helpful, but it's more so, if you like it, then you like it, if you don't then you don't. I like that as well as being around really bubbly, chirpy girls who are going to tell you "Oh my god, you look so pretty", because that's what I went into that shop for, you know, that experience as opposed to another experience"

Katherine-Anne, aged 23, p.A140

Katherine-Anne's story suggests that each of her favourite luxury brands, in her perception, conveys its own unique style. Therefore, when she consumes a particular luxury brand, she

feels immersed within the style of that brand. In addition, the Katherine-Anne's comments suggest that her perceptions about the uniqueness of these luxury brands are reinforced by fantasy shopping encounters, which are also the prominent experiences of the escape uses of luxury brands.

Therefore, the stories told by participants suggest that brand historicity and uniqueness could be important brand perceptions for the escape consumption of luxury brands. In particular, escape users are attracted by the stories and/or historicity of luxury brands, which allow these consumers to immerse themselves in the imaginary worlds conveyed by the brand imaginary. Similarly, the unique styles of luxury brands can provide consumers with memorable experiences, arousing a sense of escapism associated with the consumption of such brands. Furthermore, participants have revealed that the fantasy shopping experiences associated with escape uses can reinforce their perceptions of the historicity and uniqueness associated with luxury brands. Finally, the findings have shown that the hedonic experiences which are associated with the escape uses of luxury brands, can be related to perceptions of the superior quality of luxury brands (e.g., Lillian's story, see p. 233). Consequently, the prominent brand characteristics of the escape uses of luxury brands identified during the interviews include the brand historicity, uniqueness and the perceived quality of luxury brands.

5.3.3.4. *Brand Characteristics Associated with Reward Uses*

The analysis of participant stories suggests two prominent brand characteristics associated with the reward uses of luxury brands. These characteristics include the perceived brand quality and the rarity of luxury brands. The earlier story told by Suzanne shows that the perceived quality of luxury brands can convey the perception that these brands represent a worthwhile form of self-reward due to their high perceived value (see p. 234). Similarly, the

perceived rarity of luxury brands can also prompt consumers to think about these brands as high-value items and to consider rewarding themselves with the consumption of luxury brands:

> **Rachel:** "It's like a sense of accomplishment, I guess. Like when you get your first pay cheque, for example, it's different buying it with your parents' money, but when I get my first pay cheque, I'm like, "Oh, wow, I'm going to reward myself with," let's say Dior glasses, or a pen, or whatever. And it's your satisfaction that you've worked yourself, this is your money, and you can afford this with your own money."

> **Researcher:** Why luxury brands? Why do you use luxury brands to reward yourself with?

> **Rachel:** "They are unique…If everybody has it then it's like, well then it's not so unique, it's not so different. Then it doesn't give me that sense of, "Oh, wow, I can buy it with my own money, from my pay cheque." And, it's like, "Oh well, my one was three thousand, look at that lady she she's got it too." Then it's like why did I spend time working to spend three thousand dollars then I see it, it's not worth three thousand dollars now because I can see a lot of people walking around with it!"

> Rachel, aged 28, p.A257

Rachel notes that the reason why she uses luxury brands to reward herself for her achievements is because she perceives these items to be rare[2] and expensive, the brand characteristics linked to her perception of the high value of the brands. This view is consistent with the comments made by other reward users of luxury brands, such as "*a reward should be of a high value enough for me to want to get it*" (Lilandra, aged 45, p.A474), and "*I am not buying something for myself that everybody else has got*" (Lillian, aged 65, p.A403), which

---

[2] Although Rachel used the word "unique" to describe luxury brands, she refers to the construct of rarity rather than uniqueness. Brand uniqueness refers to the consumer perceptions about the distinct features of brands that differentiate this brand from others, whereas brand rarity refers to the perceived scarcity of the brand offerings (p.196). Consequently, Rachel's comments relate more closely to brand rarity rather than to uniqueness.

suggest that the rarity and perceived high value of luxury brands are important characteristics influencing the consumers' personal assessments of whether these items can become a worthwhile reward.

Furthermore, similar to the status users, the reward users have also noted that their perception about the rarity of luxury brands is reinforced during their elite shopping encounters:

> "I think normal brand shopping you go in and you're not going to expect people come up to you and talk to you, or help you find what you're looking for. You basically go and buy what you want, try it out if you want and then you pay for it. Whereas luxury brand someone can actually come in, actually help you and identify maybe just, "Hey I can show you something that you might like," or kind of a more personal experience."
>
> Lorna, aged 27, p.A565

The reward consumers can perceive luxury brands to be rare and possess high value if they consume these brands only during a special occasion:

> **Hope:** "I think a definition of luxury is that it's something that you don't have every day. That's not to say that the way I live my life might not look like luxury to a sort of two dollar a day sort of person in the developing world, so it's all relative. But for me luxury is something that I would say I don't consume on a daily basis, it is something special…"
>
> **Researcher:** Why do you think luxury is not something you consume every day?
>
> **Hope:** "Because then it's not a luxury then, it becomes a commodity…it's not special"
>
> Hope, aged 50, p.A595-596

Therefore, the findings suggest that the reward users may perceive luxury brands to possess high value because of their high perceived quality and rarity. These perceptions are important for the reward consumption of luxury brands because they prompt consumers to consider

these brands as a worthwhile form of self-reward. Consistent with the other luxury brand uses, the brand characteristics associated with the reward uses are reinforced by the consumer experiences salient to this form of luxury brand consumption.

5.3.3.5. Brand Characteristics Associated with Extended-Self Uses

The thematic analysis has shown that luxury brands are perceived to have unique appeals and memorable personalities. The stories told by the extended-self users suggest that this perception about the uniqueness of luxury brands can be associated with the uses of luxury brands as an expression of self-image:

> "That [luxury brand] design has to be unique, that sets you apart. That design has to be something different that I cannot get from other brands"
>
> Logan, aged 32, p.A570

> "For me, luxurious brand means something that I'd put on and it makes me feel amazing because it looks amazing on me…I like being unique, this is very important for me, I like having my own individual style…I like standing out, I like being different, which is probably why I do make an effort in the morning and dress up and wear nice clothes, and I'll wear high heels all the time, even though I'm behind a counter and no one can see my feet. I wouldn't wear flats unless I had something wrong with my foot."
>
> Katherine-Anne, aged 23, p.A135

These excerpts show that the extended-self consumers may prefer unique luxury brands to portray their self-images. Furthermore, their perceptions about the uniqueness of luxury brands can be reinforced by the experiences salient to the extended-self consumption of luxury brands. In particular, relational experiences and the experiences derived from the special occasions representing important events in consumer lives forge meaningful bonds between the consumers and their brands. These bonds can make these consumers perceive

luxury brands as being even more unique due to the personal attachments they have forged with these brands. For instance, the earlier story told by Alison has shown that there were special occasions in her life, where a brand had played a prominent role:

> "Well one very good memory was that, I told my boyfriend at the time, who's now my husband, that I wanted a ring from Tiffany's and I was like, "Here's the size, this is what it looks like, this is the ring, dah, di, dah, go get it for Christmas", and he was like, so he went there, well he said, "Okay, well I'm going there today," or I don't know what he said but then he came back and I was expecting him to give me the box and he didn't. He said, "They didn't have it." And I said, "Well did you order one or did you tell them, did you pay for it and it's coming like this week?" And he was like, "No." And I was thinking, "You dope why are you, what is the story, thanks for nothing, like this is ridiculous." And then he's like, "Well, come over to the room so that I can show you something on the computer, whatever." And I was in the middle of making dinner, so I was like, "Okay, well, let me finish doing this and then I'll come in there." And then I went to put the things away and I opened the refrigerator and the box was sitting inside the refrigerator. So that was very cute and he was very proud of himself and that was probably the cutest thing because I think that's the only time he's been that thoughtful ever (laughter) in that way, so yeah"
>
> Alison, aged 32, p.A361-362

Alison has thus indicated that, in her view, the *Tiffany's* brand is perceived to be very unique and special:

> "I actually when I think about Tiffany's it makes me feel better." [**Researcher**: Really, (laughter) like how?] "It sounds crazy, I think that it just makes you feel like, "Oh that's something that I want and if I had that then that would make me feel better." …I think because I find that to be like the one most unique and luxurious item probably and it's attainable…So I don't know, diamonds are my birth stone and I just like Tiffany …I think it's the chemistry that we have together."
>
> Alison, aged 32, p.A359

Furthermore, since the extended-self users forge deep personal relationships with their luxury brands, these consumers may want to be discreet about their consumption of luxury brands, preferring brands that are less conspicuous and more understated. Consequently, these consumers may consider brand discreetness to be a vital characteristic of their perceived imaginary associated with luxury brands:

> "For me luxury is understated. So perhaps I only know how much my... my top was a thousand dollars, and the person next to me probably couldn't tell, they probably think it looks nice, or not, they might hate it. But I personally know that it's a luxurious piece as opposed to me having to go, "Look I've got a *Louis Vuitton* bag."...I'd rather have something that I know is super luxurious to me, but is not easily identified"

> "It's personal, it's kind of like maybe if you had a tattoo and you had it in a really prominent place that everyone could see, for me, if I was going to have a tattoo I would choose a place on my body that perhaps only I could see, or people who are very close to me could see, or that I could hide. Because I think everything I do, I like it to be, I like to keep close and maybe be a bit private, yeah so I'd rather spend money on things that are different that nobody would go, "Oh my God that's a pair of *Gucci* heals," because they've been emblazoned all over the advertising campaigns. I'd rather have something that I know is super luxurious to me, but is not easily identified."
>
> <div align="right">Jubilation, aged 29, p.A445</div>

Therefore, the findings suggest that, apart from the perceived brand quality, the two prominent brand characteristics associated with the extended-self uses include the uniqueness and discreetness of luxury brands. The extended-self consumers can be attracted by the uniqueness of luxury brands. Further, the perception about uniqueness is reinforced by the luxury brand experiences salient to the extended-self uses. Finally, since consumers can forge personal relationships with the luxury brands they consume, they may choose to hide these relationships from others, prompting them to associate brand discreetness with luxury brands.

5.3.3.6.   *Summary of Luxury Brand Characteristics Associated with the Uses and Gratifications*

The narrative analysis of the participants' stories shows that, similarly to the luxury brand experiences, some perceived characteristics of luxury brands are particularly prominent for certain forms of the uses and gratifications. The findings of my exploratory study show that the status and aspirational status participants appreciated the perceived rarity and international recognition of luxury brands, and that perceptions relating to the historicity and uniqueness of luxury brands were prominent for the escape users. The reward users appreciated the perceived rarity of luxury brands. The extended-self users were attracted by the perceived uniqueness and the discreet nature of some of the luxury brands. Finally, the perception about brand quality has been found to be a common perception for all forms of the uses and gratifications of luxury brands.

Moreover, the findings have indicated that within the context of their respective uses and gratifications, the perceived brand characteristics are associated with the luxury brand experiences salient to these uses. For instance, the perception about the rarity of luxury brands was reinforced by the elite shopping experiences associated with the status and reward uses of luxury brands, whereas the perceptions about historicity were reinforced by the fantasy shopping encounters associated with the escape uses. These relationships suggest that understanding the perceived characteristics of luxury brands and their structural relationships with brand experiences provides further insight into the uses and gratifications within consumer perceptions of luxury brands.

On the other hand, the findings also suggest that, while consumers may have similar perceptions about luxury brands, these perceptions can convey different meanings, depending on the brand experiences and the brand uses salient to those consumers. The most prominent example would be the perception of the superior quality of luxury brands. The interviews have shown that, while all participants noted the importance of perceived brand quality for their imaginary associated with luxury brands, this perception played different roles within the context of individual consumer uses and experiences of luxury brands. In particular, for the status and aspirational status users, brand quality conveyed the achieved or desired status; for the escape users the perception about brand quality was associated with hedonic experiences; for the reward users, brand quality signified a worthwhile form of self-reward; and for the extended-self users, the perception about brand quality was important because these consumers did not want to associate themselves with ordinary products. Therefore, the structural relationships between the perceived brand characteristics, brand experiences, and the uses and gratifications of luxury brands reiterate the hermeneutic principle that the understanding of meaning "is achieved by iterating between considering the interdependent meanings of parts and the whole that they form" Klein and Myers, 1999, p. 72). The relational connections between each theme of the uses and gratifications, their respective luxury brand experiences, and the perceived brand characteristics are depicted in Figure 9 below.

Figure 9. Brand Characteristics, Experiences, and the Uses and Gratifications

The Uses & Gratifications of Luxury Brands
- Aspirational Status Uses
- Status Uses
- Reward Uses
- Extended-Self
- Escape Uses

Luxury Brand Experiences
- Introductory Experiences
- Social Appreciation of Luxury Brands
- Appreciation from Luxury Brand Users
- Elite Shopping Experiences
- Relational Experiences
- Special Occasions
- Fantasy Shopping Experiences
- Hedonic Experiences

Perceived Luxury Brand Characteristics
- International Recognition
- Brand Rarity
- Brand Quality
- Brand Discreetness
- Brand Uniqueness
- Brand Historicity

5.4.   Consumer-perceived Luxury Brand Meaning

The analysis of interview transcripts aimed to explore the themes and structural relationships among the four principal dimensions of luxury brand meaning: the socio-cultural beliefs associated with luxury brands; the uses and gratifications of luxury brands; the luxury brand experiences; and the perceived characteristics of luxury brands. At the broadest level, the findings support the hermeneutic mode of interpretation (Thompson, 1997; Klein and Myers, 1999) by showing that the luxury brand meaning dimensions are interrelated and, therefore, cannot be fully understood independently from each other. In particular, the structural relationships among the themes of the luxury brand meaning dimensions suggest that the consumer perceptions of the luxury brand characteristics are related to their experiences of these brands within the context of their personalised uses and

gratifications which, themselves, are contextualised within their broader socio-cultural beliefs about luxury brands. This conceptual process by which consumers derive the meanings that they ascribe to luxury brands is illustrated in Figure 10.

Figure 10. Conceptual Model of Consumer-perceived Luxury Brand Meaning
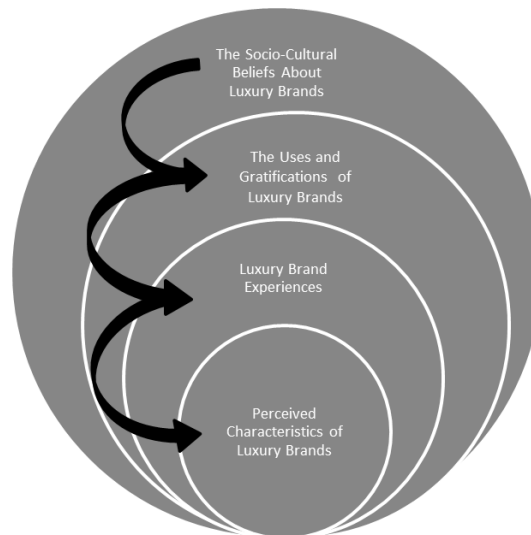
Furthermore, the findings offer an exploratory insight into the consumer-perceived luxury brand meanings and the process by which these meanings are formed within the context of luxury brand consumption in New Zealand. More specifically, the thematic analysis has explored emically, different perceptions of the luxury brand meaning dimensions among the consumers in New Zealand. By exploring the structural relationships among the identified themes, the narrative analysis has also provided an insight into the processes by which these consumers derive the meanings of luxury brands. The concept map of the luxury brand meanings derived from the interviews with New Zealand consumers is presented in Figure 11. This map illustrates the polysemy of meanings associated with luxury brands, by showing that consumers can have multiple perceptions related to each dimension of luxury brand meaning. In addition, the map details a complex web of structural interrelationships, asserting

that the meanings derived from each luxury brand dimension should be understood in relation to the meanings of other dimensions salient to the consumers.

Figure 11. Concept Map of Consumer-perceived Luxury Brand Meaning of New Zealand Consumers
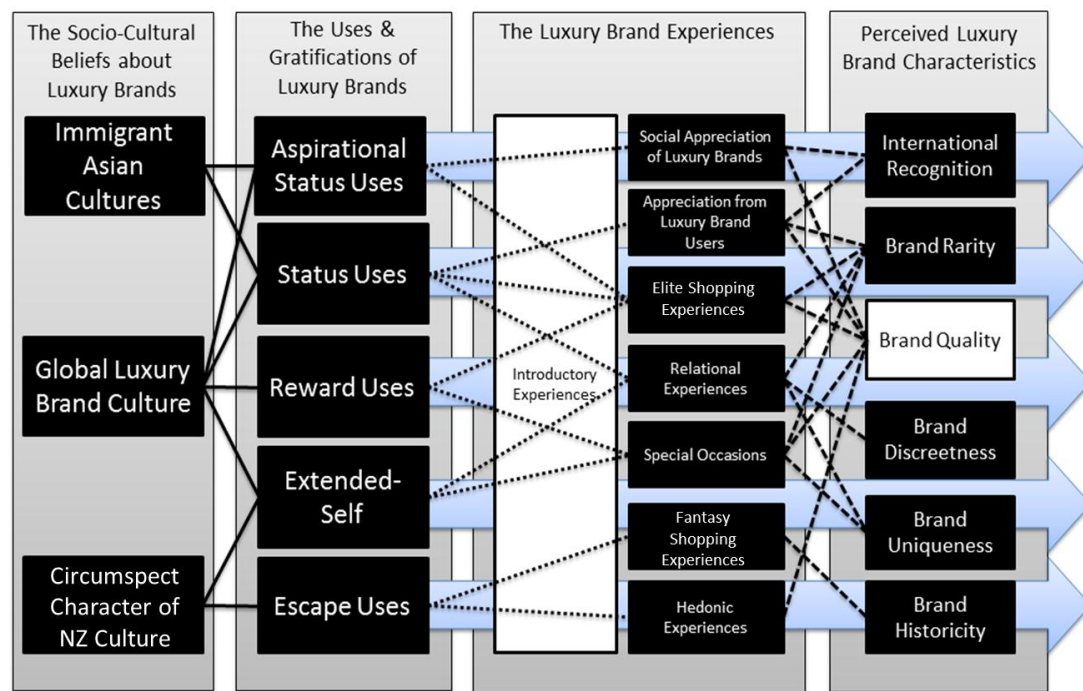
5.5. Conclusion

This chapter has presented the empirical findings from the qualitative study that was conducted with consumers of luxury brands in New Zealand. Thus, it forms the foundation for chapter six, a discussion of the findings in the context of the extant literature, and of the broader purpose of this study which is to gain a more holistic understanding of the consumption of luxury brands within consumer culture.

First, the findings suggest different perceptions of the socio-cultural beliefs, the uses and gratifications, the brand experiences, and the perceived characteristics associated with luxury

brands (Table 2). Some of these themes were common among most participants (e.g., brand quality, the global luxury brand culture), whereas others were more idiosyncratic, and even in opposition to each other (e.g., circumspectness of New Zealand culture; brand discreetness). Next, I have explored how the identified themes of the luxury brand meaning dimensions influenced each other within the consumer perceptions of luxury brands. The findings have suggested three higher-order sets of structural relationships among the dimensions of the luxury brand meaning, which include the socio-cultural beliefs associated with the uses and gratifications of luxury brands; the luxury brand experiences associated with the uses and gratifications of luxury brands; and the perceived characteristics associated with the uses and gratifications of luxury brands. These relationships suggest that the consumer perceptions of the luxury brand characteristics are related to their experiences of these brands within the context of their personalised uses and gratifications which, themselves, are contextualised within the broader socio-cultural beliefs about luxury brands. Therefore, the findings support the hermeneutic mode of interpretation (Thompson, 1997; Klein and Myers, 1999) by showing that the luxury brand meaning dimensions cannot be fully understood independently from each other. Finally, the findings provide an exploratory insight into the consumer-perceived luxury brand meanings and the process by which these meanings are formed within the context of luxury brand consumption in New Zealand (Figure 11). The developed concept map illustrates the polysemy of meanings associated with luxury brands, and details a complex web of structural interrelationships among the dimensions of luxury brand meaning derived from the interviews with New Zealand consumers of luxury brands.

CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

6.1. Introduction

This final chapter discusses the relevance and importance of the findings from this exploratory study in light of the identified gaps in extant marketing and consumer research literature. In addition, this chapter advances new theory that extends our understanding of the consumption of luxury brands by addressing the roles of socio-cultural beliefs, the uses and gratifications, the luxury brand experiences, and the perceived brand characteristics within the consumer-perceived meanings of luxury brands. The chapter is organised so that the key areas of enquiry, delineated by the research questions, are addressed first, followed by a more overarching discussion of the broader theoretical issues and concepts. It will conclude with a summary of the key contributions to academic knowledge about luxury brands, and practical implications for marketing practitioners, following an overview of potential limitations of the study and directions for future research.

6.2. The Consumption of the Luxury Brand Meanings

The concept of luxury is as old as humanity. Early essays on the meaning and social functions of luxury had already been written in ancient Greece (Berry, 1994). However, the idea of 'luxury brands', as a special form of branding and a cultural force behind fashion and an affluent consumption lifestyle, is a relatively new concept (Michman and Mazze, 2006; Chevalier and Mazzalovo, 2008). It was only by the late 1990s, that the market for luxury offerings had been transformed from a constellation of small family-owned artisan businesses – that emphasised premium quality and aesthetic value of their goods – into a consolidated

economic sector led by powerful brand-driven luxury corporations (Jackson, 2002). These corporations, such as LVMH, the *Gucci* Group and others, made substantial investments in strategic management, product design, production, marketing and retail capabilities in order to build and maintain the luxurious appeals of their brands (Okonkwo, 2009). According to Kapferer (1997), these luxurious appeals "implicitly convey their own culture and way of life: hence Saint Laurent is not Chanel. They offer more than mere objects: they provide reference of good taste" (p. 253). As a result, today, when consumers talk about the affluent lifestyle, they often talk about particular brands that connote luxury in their respective product categories. Some of the most prominent examples of this phenomenon would be *Rolex* watches, *Louis Vuitton* bags, and jewellery by *Tiffany* (Chadha and Husband, 2006).

Over the past two decades, the global market for luxury products has experienced unprecedented growth: it was estimated at US$80 billion in 2008, with sales forecast to grow about eight per cent for the next three years (Christodoulides *et al.*, 2009). The increasing importance of the luxury brand sector has stimulated research into the marketing of luxury brands producing research on: the dimensionality of a luxury brand (Vigneron and Johnson, 2004; Vicker and Reynalds, 2003; Berthon *et al.*, 2009), luxury brand extensions (Reddy *et al.*, 2009), cross-cultural studies of luxury brands (Dubois *et al.*, 2005; Chadha and Husband, 2006), and the effect of counterfeit products on luxury brands (Nia and Zaichkowsky, 2000). Despite this interest, there are gaps in the existing literature, particularly in the area of the conceptualisation of luxury brands (Kapferer, 2006; Berthon *et al.*, 2009). Given the multidimensionality of the brand concept and ambiguity about what connotes luxury (Kapferer, 2006), researchers have struggled to understand fully the consumption of luxury brands. This thesis considers that one of the major limitations of the emerging theory is its predominant focus on either corporate or consumer-based brand equity. The findings of my

exploratory study illustrate that brands do not exist simply as a firm's value-adding assets which are used by consumers to judge the company's product and services. They, themselves, are also the sources of cultural and personal meanings that permeate consumption (Sherry, 1987; Thompson, 1997; Holt, 2004; Schroeder, 2009). Therefore, to more fully understand luxury brands, researchers require an understanding of the cultural and personal frames of reference that surround luxury brand consumption, in addition to branding concepts, such as strategy, equity and value. This section discusses the relevance, significance and importance of the findings of this thesis in light of the four key areas of enquiry, delineated by the research questions – the socio-cultural beliefs about luxury brands, the uses and gratifications of luxury brands, the luxury brand experiences and the perceived characteristics of luxury brands. Lastly, the section draws these threads together and advances a new conceptualisation of consumer-perceived luxury brand meaning.

6.2.1. Socio-cultural Beliefs about Luxury Brands

For the luxury brand industry, one of the major consequences of globalisation and cultural convergence has been a growing appreciation of luxury brands by consumers in Asia, Brazil, Russia, and other countries outside Europe and North America (Okonkwo, 2009). As a result, the customer base for luxury products is becoming more culturally diversified, bringing new connotations to what luxury means. Several researchers have previously compared the consumption of luxury brands in the context of different international markets (e.g., Dubois *et al.*, 2005; Chadha and Husband, 2006; Okonkwo, 2007), predominantly focusing on the differences in behaviours, motivations, and perceptions amongst consumers with different national and/or ethnic identities (e.g., Dubois *et al.*, 2005; Bian and Veloutsou, 2007). For instance, Okonkwo (2007) identifies six main regional markets for luxury brands – Europe, North America, Japan, China, India and Russia. According to Okonkwo (2007),

consumer attitudes and consumption styles may vary from one market segment to another, reflecting the economic, social and cultural forces that are salient to those regions. Similarly, Dubois *et al.* (2005)'s cross cultural study of luxury across twenty different countries concluded that these countries exhibit different types of attitudes towards luxury consumption (elitist, democratic, and distant).

These emerging cross-cultural studies assert the importance of socio-cultural processes (e.g., cultural convergence, historical context, cultural conventions) in exploring the consumption of luxury brands. They suggest that, while the world is moving towards a global culture where consumers are connected through the consumption of the same brands (Holt *et al.*, 2004), emergent markets will necessarily bring new connotations to luxury branding within those cultures. However, one of the key limitations of this cultural perspective is that most studies tend to adopt ethnocentric approaches – that impose a particular set of behaviours, motivations and attitudes on consumers based on their national and/or ethnic identity (e.g., Dubois *et al.*, 2005; Bian and Veloutsou, 2007) –thereby suggesting that the consumers of luxury brands are influenced only by the socio-cultural beliefs derived from one particular culture related to their national identity (Lim, 2009). On the contrary, modern consumers are often influenced by the systems of values and beliefs that come from multiple cultures (Penaloza, 1994; Taylor and Stern, 1997; Sutton-Brady, *et al.*, 2010). This is particularly relevant in light of the increasing trends towards globalisation and cultural convergence (Robertson, 2003; Holt, 2004), where consumers are constantly exposed to multicultural environments.

The findings of my exploratory study in New Zealand advocate a multicultural perspective by providing further insight into the structural relationships between multiple cultural influences

and personalised meanings ascribed to the consumption of luxury brands. In particular, the analysis of interviews has shown that the consumers of luxury brands in New Zealand are not influenced only by the socio-cultural beliefs of New Zealand culture. Participants suggested that their experiences are also mediated by the socio-cultural beliefs of their immigrant Asian cultures and the emerging culture of global luxury brands. Each of these distinct cultural identities – New Zealand culture, immigrant Asian cultures, and global luxury brand culture – was found to be characterised by its own set of socio-cultural beliefs about the consumption of luxury brands. For instance, the display of conspicuous consumption is socially condemned within the context of New Zealand culture. However, this form of consumption is encouraged by the influences coming from Asian cultures as well as from the global luxury brand culture. The findings show that consumers are aware of these cultural influences, and that they can use some or even all of these socio-culturally established beliefs in deriving their personalised meanings about luxury brands. More specifically, the analysis suggested that each form of the participants' personal uses and gratifications of luxury brands was influenced by values and beliefs derived from multiple cultural identities (Figure 7, see p. 216), illustrating the multicultural nature of socio-cultural influences associated with the consumption of luxury brands in New Zealand.

Furthermore, the findings also suggest that socio-cultural beliefs related to the consumer's national and/or ethnic identity are not always the dominant influences on their perceptions of luxury brands. For instance, some participants suggested that they adopted the status uses of luxury brands under the influence of a global luxury brand culture, even though this type of consumption is socially condemned within the circumspect New Zealand culture. Lastly, the findings suggest that luxury brand consumers, who are influenced by more than one cultural identity, can adopt multiple behavioural patterns related to the consumption of luxury brands

depending on the issues salient to their identity and the socio-cultural context of consumption events. For instance, one of the participants, Rachel, suggested that her consumption behaviour associated with luxury brands changes depending on whether she is in Asia or New Zealand. In particular, Rachel relates that she wears luxury brands in Asia, but she said that she would avoid using luxury brands conspicuously in New Zealand. During the interview, it was indicated that this duality of consumption behaviour was caused by Rachel's wish to socialise with others and to 'fit in' within the cultures of either Asia or New Zealand. Consequently, the consumption of luxury brands adopted by Rachel were dependent upon the dominant socio-cultural beliefs salient to the culture that surrounded her during the consumption events. These findings suggest that the importance of socio-cultural influences on the consumer perceptions of luxury brands is multifaceted, and it is dependent on the context of consumption and individual life themes.

The cultural influences on how consumers value and perceive luxury brands have intrigued marketers for over a decade (Dubois *et al.*, 2005; Bian and Veloutsou, 2007; Okonkwo, 2007). The conclusion most commonly arrived at is that consumers' national and/or ethnic identities determine the ways in which they experience and derive meanings from luxury brands. For instance, it is frequently argued that Asian culture shapes the luxury brand consumption experience in a different way from Western practices because Asians share interdependent constructs of self-concept rooted in Confucian traditions (Chadha and Husband, 2006; Lim, 2009). My study illustrates that, contrary to this view, there is a need for reconsideration of how culture 'works' in influencing the consumption of luxury brands. The findings show that consumers can recognise cultural influences salient to their national and/or ethnic identities related to the consumption of luxury brands (e.g., Asian culture, New Zealand culture). However, in deriving their personalised meanings about luxury brands, consumers are also

influenced by the socio-cultural beliefs that come from other cultures, which are salient to their identity and the consumption experiences of luxury brands.

Therefore, social-cultural influences on the consumption of luxury brands can be viewed against a background of historically established and shared socio-cultural beliefs, which provide "the social categories, common sense beliefs, folk knowledge, and interpretive frames of reference" (Thompson, 1997, p. 440) used by consumers in deriving their own personalised meanings about luxury brands. Consequently, the socio-cultural influences on consumer perceptions of luxury brands are always salient to consumer identities, the roles that luxury brands play in consumers' lives, and individual experiences of luxury brands. In light of the globalising forces of taste and technology and the highly dynamic environments in emerging economies (Lim, 2009), the cultural background of the shared meanings related to the consumption of luxury brands is becoming increasingly larger and more multifaceted. In order to more fully understand the consumption of luxury brands, my exploratory study calls for further consumer-centric and context-specific investigations of the relationships between culture and personalised meanings that consumers ascribe to their consumption experiences of luxury brands.

6.2.2. The Uses and Gratifications of Luxury Brands

Consumers do not follow a company's idea of brand meaning passively, nor do they merely receive this meaning from the socio-cultural beliefs permeating consumption. Instead, consumers experience brands and, as a result of those experiences, actively negotiate and derive their own personalised interpretations of brand meaning (Berry, 2000; Batey, 2008; Payne *et al.*, 2009). The hermeneutic perspective (Thompson, 1997) suggests that these personalised brand meanings are constructed in accordance with the aspects salient to

consumer identity (Thompson 1997) and the roles that brands play within that identity (Thompson, 1997; Fournier, 1998). Therefore, the meanings ascribed to brands are purposive (Fournier, 1998; Batey, 2008), and exploring consumer motivations for purchasing and using brands in relation to the prominent aspects of consumer identity can increase our understanding of consumer-perceived brand meanings. Consistent with this view, the studies of consumer culture perspectives recognise that brands have a role to play in many spheres of consumer lives and, therefore, can be encountered in a wide variety of ways (Bengtsson and Ostberg, 2006). It has been discussed that consumers use brands as expressions of their self-concept (Cova 1997; Escalas 2004), and seek immersion in experiences conveyed by brands (Pine and Gilmore, 1999; Firat, 2001). The multiple ways in which brands are used were found to encourage consumers to co-author different meanings of brands (Ritson and Elliott, 1999; Thompson, *et al.* 2006), influencing consumer experiences and relationships with these brands (Fournier, 1998; Monga 2002). Within the luxury brand literature, researchers have previously looked into motives for purchasing luxury products (Vigneron and Johnson 1999; Tsai 2005). However, the influence of these luxury brand uses on consumer perceptions and experiences of the brands has not been explored in detail.

Following the principles of the uses and gratifications theory, which asserts that people interpret and integrate meanings into their lives to fulfil specific gratifications (Katz 1959; Ritson and Elliott 1995; O'Donohoe 1994), my exploratory study has investigated consumer uses and gratifications derived from the consumption of luxury brands in New Zealand. The findings provide several important insights into the roles that luxury brands play in consumer lives. First, the analysis has shown that the consumption of luxury brands can satisfy different types of consumer motives. In particular, my exploratory study has suggested five distinct forms of the uses and gratifications associated with luxury brands in New Zealand. These

include the status uses of luxury brands, the aspirational status uses of luxury brands, the escape uses of luxury brands, the reward uses of luxury brands, and the uses of luxury brands as extended-self. As was suggested by previous research (e.g., Tsai, 2005), some of the luxury brand uses appeared to have a more private orientation (e.g., the extended-self uses), while others were more socially orientated (e.g., the status uses). However, the findings have also shown that consumers could often derive both private and social gratifications from the same uses of luxury brand consumption. For instance, the aspirational status users consumed luxury brands because they wanted other people to appreciate the social status associated with luxury brands (i.e., social gratification), as well as to gain a sense of personal achievement (i.e., private gratification). Therefore, my findings suggest that, rather than being two separate entities, private and social luxury brand uses reside on the opposite ends of the same continuum.

Further, one of the key insights of the study was that the identified uses and gratifications of luxury brands were characterised with prominent types of the experiences and perceived characteristics associated with luxury brands. For instance, the findings show that the status consumers find elite shopping experiences very important for their consumption of luxury brands, because such experiences make them feel more important in terms of their achieved social status and role positions. Accordingly, these consumers prefer luxury brands that are internationally recognised as being leaders in their product category. On the other hand, the extended-self users consume luxury brands because these brands represent important aspects of their personal life themes. The findings show that these consumers can forge strong relationships with luxury brands and perceive these brands as being more unique than other brands. From the hermeneutic perspective of interpretation (Thompson, 1997), these findings suggest that the uses and gratifications of luxury brands help consumers to construct coherent

stories about their luxury brand experiences and the perceived characteristics associated with luxury brands in relation to the important aspects of their identity. In particular, the status users associate elite shopping experiences with their consumption of luxury brands, and require that these brands must have an international recognition, because these consumers use luxury brands to convey their achieved social status. Likewise, the extended-self users forge strong bonds with luxury brands, and perceive these brands to be more unique than other brands, because these consumers treat luxury brands as important elements of their live themes. In other words, consumers ascribe meanings to luxury brands in accordance with the uses and gratifications of luxury brands salient to their identities, which reflect the roles that the consumption of luxury brands plays within that identity.

Finally, postmodernist researchers suggest that contemporary consumers can possess a fragmented and multiple sense of self with no need to reconcile identity contradictions to produce a unified experience (Firat and Venkatesh, 1993; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Ahuvia, 2005). According to Firat and Venkatesh (1993), consumers gained a "freedom from the necessity to remain loyal to original or received meanings, and from having to seek centred connections or an authentic self, afford[ing] an enormous potential for creativity in manufactured representations" (p.233). Moreover, "the necessity to commit oneself to a single way of being during one's life is considered too modernistic" (Firat and Vebkatesh, 1993, p.233). The findings of my exploratory study indicate that the disparate uses and gratifications of luxury brands are not mutually exclusive and can jointly co-exist within the perceptions of an individual consumer. Therefore, the consumption of luxury brands can gratify multiple uses, adding more complexity to the meanings that consumers ascribe to luxury brands. Consequently, my study also opens up a range of postmodern inquires and

ideological research agendas to explore how the consumer uses and gratifications of luxury brands are related to the different composites of consumer identity.

6.2.3. Luxury Brand Experiences

As consumers have been increasingly viewed less as rational decision makers whose brand choices lead to purchasing outcomes and more as individuals who have feelings, fantasies, and who respond emotionally to consumption situations (Holbrook, 2000), the idea of brands as experiences has become popular in the marketing literature. Brand experiences are generally viewed as consumer encounters with the company's total product, including both tangible goods and services (Berry, 2000). According to Pine and Gilmore (1999), these encounters represent a type of offering that needs to be memorable, if not extraordinary (LaSalle and Britton, 2003), in order to create value for consumers. Schmitt (1999) also proposed five dimensions of experience: thinking, feeling, sensing, acting and relating. Building on this research, Brakus *et al.* (2009) defined brand experiences "as sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of a brand's design and identity, packaging, communications, and environments" (p.52). They suggested that brand experience can vary in intensity, and that higher levels of the brand experience intensity could lead to a more positive impact on brand satisfaction and loyalty (Brakus *et al.*, 2009). While these studies are insightful, they are confined by the boundaries of commercial activity, often focusing only on the purchase-related experiences of brands (e.g., Berry, 2000; Brakus *et al.*, 2009) and, therefore, provide an incomplete picture into how consumption experiences help consumers to derive their personalised brand meanings. In parallel with these developments in the marketing literature, researchers have also begun to emphasise the importance of consumer experiences for luxury branding (e.g., Atwal and Williams, 2009; Fionda and Moore, 2009; Gistri *et al.*, 2009; Keller, 2009; Tynan

et al., 2010), suggesting that the consumption of luxury brands is characterised by luxury-specific experiences unobtainable from other brands (e.g., Atwal and Williams, 2009). However, this area of research is underdeveloped and there are calls to increase our understanding of how luxury brand experiences shape the consumer perceptions of this brand category (Tynan *et al.*, 2010; Bauer *et al.*, 2011).

To address this gap in the literature, my thesis has developed a more holistic and consumer-centric view of brand experience – conceptualised as personal occurrences founded on the interaction with multiple sources of brand meaning that mediate the consumer-perceived brand meanings and provide the relevance of these meanings for various consumers' life projects – and emically explored the luxury brand experiences of New Zealand consumers. Accordingly, the luxury brand experiences investigated in my study were not limited to purchase activity (e.g., encounter with the service). Instead, they involved multiple brand-related encounters spread over a long period of time, which were broadly divided into pre-purchase, purchase and post-purchase activities (Arnould *et al.*, 2002). Such an approach was essential to go beyond a view of experience that is totally dependent on what the market offers, and to include personal occurrences that happen outside the market in order to understand the diverse range of roles and meanings that luxury brands add to consumer lives (Caru and Cova, 2003). The findings that emerged offer several important insights into consumer experiences of luxury brands.

First, the study provides an exploratory insight into a broad range of pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase experiences associated with the consumption of luxury brands in New Zealand. These experiences were found to add different meanings to consumer perceptions about luxury brands. For instance, participants suggested that pre-purchase experiences

helped them to increase their knowledge about the consumption of luxury brands (e.g., reading magazines, watching TV shows). Purchase-related experiences included the fantasy and elite shopping experiences. Fantasy shopping experiences allowed consumers to transport themselves into make-believe worlds, whereas the elite shopping experiences made consumers feel more special and important in terms of their role positions and status. The study has also indicated a number of post-purchase or core consumption experiences of luxury brands. They included experiences associated with a social appreciation of luxury brands, experiences associated with the appreciation of luxury brands from other luxury brand consumers, experiences derived from special occasions, hedonic experiences of luxury brands, and relational experiences of luxury brands. Therefore, these findings suggest that consumption experiences of luxury brands are not limited to purchase-related activity and include multiple personal encounters with various sources of luxury brand meaning in different spheres of consumer life.

Further, the study has also suggested that consumers interpret their luxury brand experiences in accordance with the roles that these brands play in their lives. In particular, it has been discovered that some forms of luxury brand experiences were practically prominent for certain types of luxury brand uses and gratifications. The findings have also indicated that these uses and gratifications can assist us in interpreting the meanings conveyed by the luxury brand experiences. For instance, the study has shown that both the status and the extended self-users of luxury brands appreciate the relational experiences associated with these brands. However, within the context of the status uses, the relational experiences convey a higher level of social status whereas, within the context of the extended-self uses of luxury brands, these experiences are important because they forge meaningful bonds between luxury brands and consumers. These findings illustrate that, not only do the luxury brand experiences

provide insight into the roles that the uses and gratifications of luxury brands play in consumer lives, but that these uses and gratifications, themselves, can increase our understanding of the meanings derived by consumers from their experiences of luxury brands. Accordingly, my study illustrates a dyadic relationship between the important aspects salient to consumer self-identity (i.e., uses and gratifications) and the meanings ascribed to the experiences of particular life events (i.e., luxury brand experiences) (Thompson, 1997), offering a consumer-centric perspective in investigating the consumption experiences associated with luxury brands.

6.2.4. Perceived Characteristics of Luxury Brands

Through brand experiences, consumers develop their perception of the image associated with the brand (Aaker, 1990; Krishnan, 1996; Berry, 2000; Anisimova, 2007; Batey, 2008). Consistent with previous research (Aaker, 1990; Keller, 1993; Batey, 2008), this thesis conceives of brand image as consisting of the consumer-perceived brand characteristics. Cultural studies suggest that these characteristics are constantly reinterpreted to accommodate contemporary cultural influences, changing consumer uses and newer experiences of brands (Holt. 2004; Schroeder, 2009). In previous studies, researchers identified various characteristics associated with luxury brands (e.g., Vickers and Renand, 2003; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). Most notably, Vigneron and Johnson (2004) identified five descriptive perceptions that consumers use to differentiate between luxury and non-luxury brands: perceived conspicuousness, uniqueness, quality, hedonism, and perceived extended-self. Similar brand characteristics were also reported by other researchers of luxury brands (e.g., Dubois *et al.*, 2005; Keller, 2009). However, as consumer perceptions of brands are idiosyncratic, can change over time, and vary from one culture to another, it was necessary to explore the contemporary characteristics that New Zealand consumers associate

with luxury brands. It was also of interest to explore how these characteristics were formed within consumer culture. The exploratory findings of my research provide several key insights into these inquiries.

Consistent with previous studies, the analysis of interviews has indicated that the consumer perceptions of luxury brands are multifaceted, as there are multiple brand characteristics that consumers associate with these brands. Some of these characteristics appeared to be common among most consumers of luxury brands (e.g., brand quality), while others were more idiosyncratic (e.g., international recognition and brand discreetness). Six key themes of the perceived luxury brand characteristics that were identified from my exploratory study in New Zealand included brand quality, brand historicity, international recognition, brand rarity, brand uniqueness, and brand discreetness associated with luxury brand.

Further, my findings provide insight into how the perceptions about luxury brand characteristics are formed. Similar to the luxury brand experiences, some perceived characteristics were particularly prominent for certain forms of the uses and gratifications. For instance, the status and aspirational status participants appreciated the perceived rarity and international recognition of luxury brands, whereas perceptions about the historicity and uniqueness were prominent for the escape users. The findings have also suggested that within the context of their respective uses and gratifications, the perceived brand characteristics were associated with the luxury brand experiences salient to these uses. For instance, the perception about the rarity of luxury brands was reinforced by elite shopping experiences associated with the status and reward uses of luxury brands, whereas the perception about historicity was reinforced by fantasy shopping encounters associated with the escape uses. These findings illustrate that the perceived characteristics ascribed to luxury brands are

dependent on the individual brand experiences salient to the consumer uses and gratifications of luxury brands.

Further, the analysis has indicated that, although it may appear that consumers share similar perceptions about luxury brands, these perceptions can convey different meanings for individual consumers, depending on the personal brand experiences and the brand uses salient to the consumer. For instance, while all participants noted the importance of brand quality for their perceived imaginary associated with luxury brands, this brand characteristic played different roles within the context of individual consumer uses and experiences of luxury brands. In particular, for the status and aspirational status users, brand quality conveyed the achieved or desired status; for the escape users the perception about brand quality was associated with the hedonic experiences; for the reward users, brand quality signified a worthwhile form of self-reward; and for the extended-self users, the perception about brand quality was important because these consumers did not want to associate themselves with ordinary products. Accordingly, my study suggests that the perceived characteristics associated with luxury brands should be interpreted in relation to the roles that these brands play in consumer lives. Therefore, it calls for researchers to adopt an integrative approach, where the perceived brand image can be explored in accordance with other dimensions of the brand meaning (i.e., the socio-cultural beliefs, the uses and gratifications, and the brand experiences). This view is also consistent with the hermeneutic perspective, as it suggests that consumer perceptions are derived under the influence of the issues salient to their narratives of self-identity (i.e., the uses and gratifications) which, themselves, are contextualised within even broader narratives of the socio-cultural beliefs salient to the consumer (Thompson, 1997).

6.2.5. Conceptualising the Consumer-perceived Luxury Brand Meaning

The purpose of this section was to draw the reader's attention to the key insights derived from this thesis in light of the identified gaps in extant literature about the consumption of luxury brands within consumer culture. Delineated by the four key areas of inquiry, each subsection has addressed the issues salient to a particular dimension of the luxury brand meaning (i.e., the socio-cultural beliefs about luxury brands, the uses and gratifications of luxury brands, the luxury brand experiences and the perceived characteristics of luxury brands). At the broadest level, there are two key tenets that underpin these findings. First, the meanings that consumers derive from brands are not limited to evaluating market offerings and building relationships in commercial settings. Brands and branding play a broad range of roles in all spheres of consumer lives and, therefore, can be encountered in various forms. Different consumers tend to derive dissimilar brand meanings to accommodate their life themes, and individual consumers can also create multiple readings of the same brand. In addition, consumer experiences of brands are influenced by social and cultural influences that contextualise the process of meaning co-creation. Accordingly, my thesis goes beyond the boundaries of commercial activity and provides a more holistic perspective of the consumer-perceived luxury brand meaning. This perspective accounts for the influence of multiple socio-cultural beliefs salient to the consumption of luxury brands, different roles that luxury brands play in consumer lives, a broad range of luxury brand experiences, and a multifaceted imaginary associated with luxury brands.

Secondly, consumer perceptions regarding different dimensions of brand meaning are structurally interrelated and, therefore, cannot be fully understood independently from each other. It is impossible, for example, to gain insight into a consumer-perceived brand imaginary without exploring the experiences underpinning this imaginary, the roles that the

brand plays in consumer lives, or how socio-cultural beliefs influence the brand consumption. Accordingly, marketers require tools that would allow us to explore how consumers derive brand meanings within the broader perspective, which can take into account the webs of interrelationships between the socio-cultural influences, personal frames of references, the consumption experiences of brands, and the perceived brand imaginary. Informed by the hermeneutic mode of interpretation (Thompson, 1997; Klein and Myers, 1999), my thesis advances this perspective by developing a new conceptual model of consumer-perceived brand meaning (Figure 4, see p.78). The thesis has emically explored this conceptual model with an exploratory qualitative study of luxury brand consumers in New Zealand. The findings of this study provide emic evidence thatconsumer perceptions of luxury brand characteristics are related to luxury brand experiences, which are contextualised within the personalised uses and gratifications and the broader socio-cultural beliefs about luxury brands (Figure 11, see p.251). Accordingly, these exploratory findings corroborate the developed conceptualisation of the consumer-perceived brand meaning within the context of the luxury brand consumption (Figure 10, see p. 250).

6.3.   Research Contributions

The thesis offers several important contributions to the academic knowledge about luxury brands, and practical implications for marketing practitioners. The contributions to the theory are first outlined, followed by the managerial implications of this research.

6.3.1. Academic Contributions

This thesis offers an important contribution to the luxury brand literature. It has been illustrated that over the last two decades, luxury brands have become an important

consumption site (Jackson, 2002; Okonkwo, 2009). However, there are gaps in the existing literature, particularly around the conceptualisation of luxury brands (Kapferer, 2006; Berthon *et al.*, 2009). Given the multidimensionality of the brand concept and ambiguity as to what connotes luxury (Kapferer, 2006), researchers have struggled to understand fully the consumption of luxury brands. Moreover, previous studies of luxury brands have seldom explored consumer emic perceptions qualitatively (Gistri *et al.*, 2009), and have been criticised for their over-reliance on student samples (Beverland, 2004; Christodoulides *et al.*, 2009; Fionda and Moore, 2009). In light of these gaps in the literature, my thesis contributes to the existing knowledge about luxury brands by exploring their consumption qualitatively, and detailing the consumption of luxury brands from the consumers' point of view. More specifically, this thesis has conceptualised how the meanings that consumers ascribe to luxury brands are formed, and explored these meanings emically within the context of the New Zealand market. The findings provide several key insights into the consumption of luxury brands.

First, the cultural influences on how consumers value and perceive luxury brands have intrigued marketers for over a decade (Dubois *et al.*, 2005; Bian and Veloutsou, 2007; Okonkwo, 2007). The conclusion most commonly arrived at has been that consumers' national and/or ethnic identities determine the ways in which they experience and derive meanings from luxury brands. The findings from my exploratory study in New Zealand advocate a multicultural perspective by providing further insight into the structural relationships between multiple cultural influences and personalised meanings ascribed to the consumption of luxury brands. In particular, the analysis of interviews has shown that the consumers of luxury brands in New Zealand are not influenced only by the socio-cultural beliefs of New Zealand culture. Participants have suggested that their experiences are also

mediated by the socio-cultural beliefs of the immigrant Asian cultures and the emerging culture of global luxury brands. Therefore, my study advocates that researchers recognise the influence of multiple cultural identities in exploring the consumption of luxury brands.

Secondly, researchers have previously considered motives for purchasing luxury products (Vigneron and Johnson 1999; Tsai 2005). However, the influence of these motives on consumer perceptions and experiences has not been explored in detail. My findings provide further insight into this area of inquiry by exploring the uses and gratifications that consumers derive from the consumption of luxury brands. The study indicates that consumers can often derive both private and social gratifications from the same uses of luxury brand consumption. Therefore, rather than being two separate entities, private and social luxury brand uses are the opposite ends of the same continuum. Furthermore, the findings show that the uses and gratifications of luxury brands help consumers to construct coherent stories about their luxury brand experiences and the perceived characteristics associated with luxury brands in relation to the important aspects of their identity. In other words, consumers ascribe meanings to their consumption of luxury brands in accordance with the uses and gratifications of luxury brands, which reflect the roles that the consumption of luxury brands plays within the consumer identity. Finally, the findings of my exploratory study show that the uses and gratifications of luxury brands are not mutually exclusive and can jointly co-exist within the perceptions of an individual consumer. Therefore, the consumption of luxury brands can gratify multiple uses, adding more complexity to the meanings that consumers ascribe to luxury brands.

Thirdly, researchers have emphasised the importance of consumer experiences for luxury branding (e.g., Atwal and Williams, 2009; Fionda and Moore, 2009; Gistri *et al.*, 2009; Keller, 2009; Tynan *et al.*, 2010). However, this area of research is underdeveloped and there

are calls to increase our understanding of how luxury brand experiences shape the consumer perceptions of this brand category (Tynan *et al.*, 2010; Bauer *et al.*, 2011). To address this gap in the literature, my thesis has developed a more holistic and consumer-centric view of brand experience and emically explored the luxury brand experiences of New Zealand consumers. The findings provide an exploratory insight into a broad range of pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase experiences associated with the consumption of luxury brands. The study has also indicated that consumers interpret their luxury brand experiences in accordance with the roles that these brands play in their lives. Accordingly, my study illustrates a dyadic relationship between the important aspects salient to consumer self-identity (i.e., uses and gratifications) and the meanings ascribed to the experiences of brands (i.e., luxury brand experiences) (Thompson, 1997), offering a consumer-centric perspective in investigating the consumption experiences associated with luxury brands.

Fourthly, researchers have previously identified various perceived characteristics associated with luxury brands (e.g., Vickers and Renand, 2003; Vigneron and Johnson, 2004). However, as consumer perceptions of brands are idiosyncratic, can change over time, and vary from one culture to another, it is important to re-investigate the contemporary characteristics that consumers associate with luxury brands in different contexts of consumption. The exploratory findings of my research provide several key insights into this area of inquiry. First, the analysis of interviews has described six key themes of perceived luxury brand characteristics in New Zealand. Further, my study has provided insight into how the perceptions about luxury brand characteristics are formed. More specifically, the findings illustrate that similar to the luxury brand experiences, the perceived characteristics ascribed to luxury brands are dependent on individual brand experiences salient to the consumer uses and gratifications of luxury brands. Accordingly, these findings suggest that the perceived

characteristics associated with luxury brands should be interpreted in relation to the roles that these brands play in consumer lives.

Finally, the thesis offers a more holistic insight not only for the luxury brand literature, but also for branding theory in general. In particular, the branding literature has come to recognise the importance of meanings derived from brands and consumers as active co-creators of these meanings. However, this area of study is underdeveloped and there are continual calls to develop a greater understanding of the roles that brands play in consumer lives (Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling 2006; Batey, 2008; Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver, 2010). Informed by the hermeneutic perspective of interpretation (Thompson, 1997), this research makes a theoretical contribution by developing and refining a conceptual framework for understanding the dimensions of consumer-perceived brand meaning. This framework asserts that the meanings ascribed to brands encourage consumers to develop a personalised brand imaginary, which emerges in the process of consumer experiences, reflecting the roles that brands play in consumer lives, and which is influenced by the cultural processes salient to the particular consumers and the brands they consume. There are two key tenets that underpin this model. First, the meanings that consumers derive from brands are not limited to evaluating market offerings and building relationships in commercial settings. Secondly, consumer perceptions regarding different aspects of brand meaning are structurally interrelated and, therefore, cannot be understood fully, independently of each other. The thesis advances this perspective by developing a new conceptual model of consumer-perceived brand meaning, which theorises the structural relationships between the dimensions of brand meaning within the consumer perceptions of brands. The empirical findings from this study of luxury brands in New Zealand are used to corroborate the developed conceptualisation of brand meaning.

6.3.2. Practical Contributions

The thesis also has a number of implications for marketing practitioners. Firstly, knowledge about the contemporary meanings that consumers ascribe to luxury brands is important for advertising and marketing practitioners in the design of marketing communications for luxury products. In particular, the thesis calls for marketers to increase the relevance of these communications by gaining a more holistic understanding of how consumers perceive and experience luxury brands. I have outlined the process by which consumers derive meanings about luxury brands and described the four key dimensions of the consumer-perceived luxury brand meaning – the socio-cultural beliefs about luxury brands, the uses and gratifications of luxury brands, the luxury brand experiences and the perceived characteristics of luxury brands.

Further, the thesis extends the real world relevance of this study by drawing attention to the influence of multiple socio-cultural beliefs on consumer perceptions of luxury brands. In particular, these empirical findings from New Zealand caution managers that it is too simplistic to assume that consumers are influenced only by the value systems of their national and/or ethnic identities in making decisions regarding their purchases of luxury brands. There is a need for continuous reinvestigations of popular beliefs permeating the consumption of luxury brands, as these beliefs may change over time and across different markets. This is particularly relevant in light of the globalising forces of taste and technology and the highly dynamic environments in emerging economies (Lim, 2009), which make the cultural background of meanings related to the consumption of luxury brands increasingly larger and more multifaceted.

The importance of customer relationships has been discussed widely in the context of management of luxury brands (Kapferer and Bastien, 2009; Cailleux *et al.*, 2009). One of the key aspects of successful relationships is their personal significance for consumers (Fournier, 1998). The thesis makes a practical contribution by detailing the multiple uses that luxury brands have for consumers (i.e., the status uses, the aspirational status uses, the reward uses, the escape uses, and the extended-self uses). These findings can be useful in exploring new avenues for forging strong and committed customer-brand relationships by making these relationships even more relevant to the roles that luxury brands may play in consumer lives.

The luxury industry is suffering from an increasing volume of counterfeit products (Nia and Zaichkowsky, 2000; Okonkwo, 2009). This thesis makes a practical contribution by providing insight into the role of consumer experiences in the evaluation of luxury brands, which are much harder to duplicate than tangible items. In particular, the thesis provides an exploratory insight into the luxury brand experiences prominent for different users of luxury brands. This knowledge can assist brand managers in staging relevant luxury brand experiences for their consumers, thus protecting their brands from the influence of counterfeit products.

Finally, New Zealand is one of the emerging markets for luxury brands. However, to my best knowledge, there have been no previous studies that have investigated the consumption of luxury brands in this market. The findings of my thesis provide an exploratory insight into consumer-perceived luxury brand meanings and the process by which these meanings are formed within the context of luxury brand consumption in New Zealand. Consequently, the concept map derived from this study (Figure 11) may be useful in the development of

marketing communications and brand positioning strategies for luxury brands in the New Zealand market.

6.4. Limitations

The limitations of this thesis stem from several factors. First, potential limitations arise from the fact that the concepts explored in this research are underdeveloped. Given the exploratory nature of the research, this thesis is more theoretically driven than empirically tested. Accordingly, I make no claim that the findings are generalisable to the wider population. The findings have been linked to theory and used to generate theory. Therefore, generalisations are also made from the theory. This approach is appropriate in light of the discovery oriented purpose of the thesis, which was to uncover and explore different aspects of consumer-perceived luxury brand meanings.

Secondly, the sample recruited for this research gives rise to some limitations that should be noted. In particular, the scope of this study is limited by the fact that findings are drawn from interviews with twenty-four participants from the greater Auckland region in New Zealand. Therefore, the consumer-perceived meanings were studied within a single market, the New Zealand context. Furthermore, the snowballing method (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984) employed in this research could have limited the variety of respondents. That is, by the nature of this technique, where respondents are recruited by previous respondents, it is recognised that respondents could be members of affinity groups. Thus, while attempts were made to interview a variety of respondents – I tried to find responders with different cultural backgrounds, from various age groups, and different levels of frequencies and loyalties – the recruitment of individuals by snowballing may not be representative of other populations. However, the research was not intended to be sample to population generalisable. Rather, it

was intended to contribute to the building of theory about how consumers derive their personalised meanings about luxury brands.

Additionally, since admitting to consumption of luxury brands may be seen as being socially undesirable by some consumers, there are inherent problems in persuading consumers to indicate their personal uses of and honest perceptions about luxury brands. Several procedures were undertaken in this study to reduce participants' sensitivity to the issue. First, respondents were briefed about the confidentiality and anonymity of the interviews. During the in-depth interviews, a funnel approach was employed (Cavana *et al.*, 2001), starting with questions about broader issues of luxury brand themes before venturing into more specific questions about personal uses of luxury brands. The idea was to make consumers feel comfortable, letting the discussion about luxury brands arise naturally and unsolicited. Finally, I employed several projective techniques during the ZMET interviews to mitigate the problems of the sensitivity of the topic.

The last consideration relates to the limitations that arise from the research site. This study has explored the consumer-perceived meanings of luxury brands by interviewing the participants of one particular product category, which is the consumption of fashion and apparel products. I acknowledge that the meanings ascribed to luxury brands may vary across different product categories (e.g., hotels, cars), which would limit the generalisability of findings to the luxury brands of other product categories. However, my research did not intend to understand the differences among the luxury product categories. Instead, the intention was to understand the process by which consumers derive personalised meanings. Accordingly, using one product category as a single research site was consistent with my aim to uncover, explore, and interpret the emerging themes, rather than to generalise the findings.

The literature showed that consumers are most aware of luxury brands in the fashion products category (Berry, 1994; Chadha and Husband, 2006; Okonkwo, 2009), with the majority of researchers focusing only the luxury brands from this category in exploring the consumption of luxury brands (e.g., Kapferer, 2006; Berthon *et al.*, 2009). Consequently, in order to maintain consistency with the existing literature and provide a more valuable insight for the emerging theory of luxury brand consumption, this study explored luxury brands within the context of the fashion and apparel industry.

6.5.   Future Research

This study offers many potential avenues for future research. First, the thesis is limited to consumers in the context of the fashion industry and New Zealand culture. Future studies can also explore the consumption of luxury brands in other product categories and cultural contexts as the socio-cultural beliefs, the uses and gratifications of luxury brands, the luxury brand experiences, and the perceived luxury brand characteristics can vary from one country to another, and/or from one category to another. Studies conducted in other countries and product categories could also demonstrate that the findings represent more than a single country or product category effect.

Secondly, the thesis has discussed the emergence of the global luxury brand culture. Over the last several decades, this culture has come to convey its own socio-cultural beliefs that influence the meanings ascribed to luxury brands by consumers. Within the context of my exploratory study in New Zealand, the global luxury brand culture was found to permeate the status, reward and escape uses of luxury brands. It would be interesting to explore whether this emerging culture is perceived differently across different markets, and whether and how

it drives the emergence of global consumers who feel connected through the consumption of the same brands (Holt, 2004).

Thirdly, the thesis has explored individual meanings that consumers ascribe to luxury brands. However, the consumption of brands can also be shared and socially constructed. Further research might investigate not just the individual uses and gratifications of luxury brands, as discussed in this study, but also the uses and gratifications in the context of the social consumption of luxury brands, such as brand communities and subcultures of consumption (Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Muñiz and O'Guinn 2001; Kates 2006).

Fourthly, postmodernist researchers suggest that contemporary consumers can possess a fragmented and multiple sense of self with no need to reconcile identity contradictions to produce a unified experience (Firat and Venkatesh, 1993; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Ahuvia, 2005). The findings of my exploratory study indicate that the uses and gratifications of luxury brands are not mutually exclusive and can co-exist jointly within the perceptions of an individual consumer. Accordingly, my study opens up a range of research agendas to explore how the consumer uses and gratifications of luxury brands are related to the different composites of consumer identity. For instance, further research may endeavour to explore whether multiple uses and gratifications of luxury brands can help consumers to create coherent narratives about their identity, or whether they produce contradictions within that identity and/or encourage consumers to adopt a multiple sense of self.

Finally, luxury has always been an important concept in human society, infused with many ideological agendas that shaped the meaning of the concept (e.g., luxury as a privilege of the ruling class, luxury as immoral consumption) (Berry, 1994). Luxury brands are the

contemporary cultural artefacts of this concept. Future studies of luxury brands can employ a critical analysis approach to investigate how the consumption of luxury brands is influenced by or resists the social and ideological beliefs about morality, the nature of social order, power, or domination.

6.6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the key purpose of this thesis was *to inform our understanding of the consumption of luxury brands by emically exploring the meanings that New Zealand consumers ascribe to luxury brands in the context of the fashion and apparel industry, and providing insight into how these meanings are formed through brand experiences within consumer culture*. The two specific linked objectives of this study were:

1. To explore the meanings that consumers ascribe to luxury brands.

2. To develop a theory that expands our understanding of how the perceived meanings of luxury brands are formed within consumer culture.

This thesis has addressed this purpose in a logical manner. First, it has thoroughly reviewed the extant literature, and identified gaps in our knowledge about luxury brand consumption. A comprehensive review of the branding theories from marketing and consumer research literature followed, to provide a conceptual foundation for the study. The outcome of this theoretical process was the development of a new conceptualisation of consumer-perceived brand meaning, which underpinned the research questions of the thesis. The research questions were then explored with an emic study of luxury brand consumers in New Zealand. The findings provided support for the developed conceptual model within the context of luxury brand consumption and offered new insights as to how consumers derive their

personalised meanings about luxury brands. The claims made in this thesis are based on strong evidence from consumer interviews, with relevant excerpts being provided for the reader. The thesis has discussed both the contribution to academic knowledge about luxury brands and practical implications for marketing practitioners. Limitations of the study have been recognised and directions for future research have also been outlined.

Accordingly, this thesis offers an original contribution to the meta-theory of luxury branding by conceptualising and emically exploring the socially constructed consumption of luxury brands in the unique New Zealand context. This market is permeated by multiple, at times paradoxical, socio-cultural beliefs; empowering consumers to actively forge new meanings about luxury brands. My findings show that these meanings range from the perceptions about luxury brands as the extended-self – prompting some consumers to 'hide' their favourite luxury brands from others – to conspicuously displaying these brands as a means of convening their social status. In doing so, my study offers a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of luxury brand consumption informed by the emic stories of twenty-four luxury brand participants using a much needed 'interpretive' approach. It expands the view of luxury brands from being merely status symbols by describing three newer uses and gratifications associated with these brands (escape, reward, and the extended-self). It also provides a rich thematic description of pre-purchase, purchase, and post-purchase luxury brand experiences informed by the emic stories of luxury brand consumers. It asserts the emergence of the global luxury brand culture *per se,* and explores how this culture may interact with other cultural identities to influence the consumption of luxury brands. Finally, my study provides fruitful avenues for future research on luxury brands as an interpreted socially constructed narrative. Thus, the thesis has advanced an alternative theoretical perspective of luxury brands that extends our understanding of consumer-perceived brand

meaning, and emically explored the consumption of luxury brands in a unique context by addressing the roles of socio-cultural beliefs, the uses and gratifications, luxury brand experiences, and perceived brand characteristics within consumer-perceived meanings of luxury brands.

REFERENCES

Aaker, D. A. (1991). *Managing brand equity: Capitalizing on the value of a brand name*. New York: Free Press.

Aaker, D. A. (1996). Measuring brand equity across products and markets. *California Management Review, 38*(3), 102-120.

Aaker, D. A., and Keller, K. L. (1990). Consumer evaluations of brand extensions. *The Journal of Marketing, 54*(1), 27-41.

Aaker, D. A., Kumar, V., and Day, G. S. (1995). *Marketing research* (5th ed.). New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Aaker, J. L. (1997). Dimensions of brand personality. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 347-356.

Aggarwal, P. (2004). The effects of brand relationship norms on consumer attitudes and behavior. *Journal of Consumer Research, 31*(1), 87-101.

Ahuvia, A. C. (2005). Beyond the extended self: Loved objects and consumers' identity narratives. *Journal of Consumer Research, 32*(1), 171-184.

Amatulli, C., and Guido, G. (2011). Determinants of purchasing intention for fashion luxury goods in the Italian market: A laddering approach. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management, 15*(1), 123-136.

American Marketing Association. (2011). *Dictionary.* Retrieved April 10th, 2011, from http://www.marketingpower.com/_layouts/Dictionary.aspx?dLetter=B

Anderson, P. F. (1986). On method in consumer research: a critical relativist perspective. *Journal of Consumer Research, 13*(3), 155-173.

Anisimova, T. A. (2007). The effects of corporate brand attributes on attitudinal and behavioural consumer loyalty. *Journal of consumer marketing, 24*(7), 395-405.

Arnold, S. J., and Fischer, E. (1994). Hermeneutics and Consumer Research. *The Journal of Consumer Research, 21*(1), 55-70.

Arnould, E. J., Price, L., and Zinkhan, G. M. (2002). *Consumers*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Arnould, E. J., and Price, L. L. (1993). River magic: Extraordinary experience and the extended service encounter. *Journal of Consumer Research, 20*(1), 24-45.

Arnould, E. J., and Thompson, C. J. (2005). Consumer Culture Theory(CCT): Twenty Years of Research. *Journal of Consumer Research, 31*(4), 868-882.

Aronson, J. (1994). A pragmatic view of thematic analysis. *The Qualitative Report, 2*(1), 1-3.

Arvidsson, A. (2006). *Brands: Meaning and value in media culture*. London: Routledge.

Atwal, G., and Williams, A. (2009). Luxury brand marketing - the experience is everything! *Journal of Brand Management, 16*(5), 338-346.

Ballantyne, D., and Aitken, R. (2007). Branding in B2B markets: insights from the service-dominant logic of marketing. *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing, 22*(6), 363-371.

Barkway, P. (2001). Michael Crotty and nursing phenomenology: criticism or critique? *Nursing Inquiry, 8*(3), 191-195.

Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, music, text* (S. Heath, Trans.). New York: : Hill and Wang.

Batey, M. (2008). *Brand meaning*. London: Routledge.

Bauer, M., von Wallpach, S., and Hemetsberger, A. (2011). "My Little Luxury": A Consumer-Centred Experiential View. *Marketing Journal of Research and Management, 33*(1), 57-68.

Baumgartner, H. (2002). Toward a personology of the consumer. *Journal of Consumer Research, 29*(2), 286-292.

Belk, R. W. (1988). Possessions and the extended self. *Journal of Consumer Research, 15*(2), 139-168.

Benarrosh-Dahan, E. (1991). Le Contexte Lexicologique du Luxe. *Revue Française du Marketing, 132/133*(2-3), 45-54.

Bengtsson, A., and Ostberg, J. (2006). Researching the cultures of brands. In R. Belk (Ed.), *Handbook of qualitative research methods in marketing* (pp. 83-93). Northhampton: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Berry, C. J. (1994). *The idea of luxury: a conceptual and historical investigation*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press.

Berry, L. L. (2000). Cultivating service brand equity. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 28*(1), 128-137.

Berthon, P., Pitt, L., Parent, M., and Berthon, J. P. (2009). Aesthetics and ephemerality: observing and preserving the luxury brand. *California Management Review, 52*(1), 45-66.

Beverland, M. (2004). Uncovering" theories-in-use": building luxury wine brands. *European Journal of Marketing, 38*(3/4), 446-466.

Bhat, S., and Reddy, S. K. (1998). Symbolic and functional positioning of brands. *Journal of Consumer Marketing, 15*(1), 32-43.

Bian, X., and Veloutsou, C. (2007). Consumers' attitudes regarding non-deceptive counterfeit brands in the UK and China. *Journal of Brand Management, 14*(3), 211-222.

Blackston, M. (2000). Observations: Building Brand Equity By Managing The Brand's Relationships. *Journal of Advertising Research, 40*(06), 101-105.

Blattberg, R. C., and Deighton, J. (1996). Manage marketing by the customer equity test. *Harvard Business Review, 74*(4), 136-145.

Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic Interaction: Perspective and Method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Preatice-Hall.

Blumer, J. G., and Katz, E. (1974). *The uses of mass communication*. Beverly Hills: Sage.

Bourne, F. S. (1957). Group influence in marketing and public relations. In L. Rensis and H. Samuel (Eds.), *Some applications of behavioural research* (pp. 206-215). Paris, France: Unesco.

Bowen, G. A. (2008). Naturalistic inquiry and the saturation concept: a research note. *Qualitative Research, 8*(1), 137-152.

Brakus, J. J., Schmitt, B. H., and Zarantonello, L. (2009). Brand Experience: What Is It? How Is It Measured? Does It Affect Loyalty? *Journal of Marketing, 73*(3), 52-68.

Brioschi, A. (2006). Selling dreams: The role of advertising in shaping luxury brand meaning. In J. E. Schroeder and M. Salzer-Mörling (Eds.), *Brand Culture* (pp. 198-210). New York: Routledge.

Britten, N., Jones, R., Murphy, E., and Stacy, R. (1995). Qualitative research methods in general practice and primary care. *Family Practice, 12*(1), 104-114.

Brockmeier, J., and Carbaugh, D. A. (2001). *Narrative and identity: Studies in autobiography, self and culture*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Brodie, R. J. (2009). From goods to service branding. *Marketing Theory, 9*(1), 107-111.

Brown, G. H. (1950). Measuring consumer attitudes toward products. *The Journal of Marketing, 14*(5), 691-698.

Brown, S., Kozinets, R. V., and Sherry Jr, J. F. (2003). Teaching old brands new tricks: Retro branding and the revival of brand meaning. *Journal of Marketing, 67*(3), 19-33.

Brown, S., and Reid, R. (1997). Shoppers on the verge of a nervous breakdown: chronicle, composition and confabulation in consumer research. In S. Brown and D. Turley (Eds.), *Consumer Research: Postcards from the Edge*. London: Routledge.

Brown, T. J., and Dacin, P. A. (1997). The company and the product: corporate associations and consumer product responses. *The Journal of Marketing, 61*(1), 68-84.

Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Buchanan-Oliver, M., Brodie, R. J., and Huang, D. (2008). *Refining the dimensions of the brand in the service economy*. Paper presented at the Thought Leaders International Conference on Brand Management.

Buchanan-Oliver, M., and Seo, Y. (2010). *Luxury Brand Culture: Exploring Consumer Experiences of Luxury Brands* Paper presented at the 6th International Conference of the AMA's Brand, Identity and Corporate Reputation SIG.

Bulmer, S., and Buchanan-Oliver, M. (2010). Experiences of brands and national identity. *Australasian Marketing Journal, 18*(4), 199-205.

Burns, A. C., and Williams, L. A. (2000). Narrative text biases attending the critical incidents technique. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal, 3*(4), 178-186.

Byrne, J. (1999). Health, wealth and honesty: perceptions of self-esteem in primary- aged children. *Health Education, 99*(3), 95 - 102.

Cailleux, H., Mignot, C., and Kapferer, J. N. (2009). Is CRM for luxury brandsandquest. *Journal of Brand Management, 16*(5), 406-412.

Campbell, J. (1968). *The hero with a thousand faces* (2nd ed.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Cantor, N., Norem, J. K., Niedenthal, P. M., Langston, C. A., and Brower, A. M. (1987). Life tasks, self-concept ideals, and cognitive strategies in a life transition. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 53*(6), 1178-1191.

Caru, A., and Cova, B. (2003). Revisiting consumption experience: a more humble but complete view of the concept. *Marketing Theory, 3*(2), 267-286.

Catry, B. (2003). The great pretenders: the magic of luxury goods. *Business Strategy Review, 14*(3), 10-17.

Capgemini. (2007). *World Wealth Report.* Retrieved April 10th, 2009, from http://www.capgemini.com/insights-and-resources/by-publication/world_wealth_report_2007/

Cavana, R., Delahaye, B. L., and Sekeran, U. (2001). *Applied Business research: Qualitative and Quantitative Methods*. Sydney: John Wiley and Sons.

Cayla, J., and Eckhardt, G. M. (2008). Asian brands and the shaping of a transnational imagined community. *Journal of Consumer Research, 35*(2), 216-230.

Chadha, R., and Husband, P. (2006). *The cult of the luxury brand: Inside Asia's love affair with luxury*. Boston, MA: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

Chandler, D. (2006). Semiotics for Beginners. Retrieved July 7, 2010, from http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/semiotic.html

Chaplin, L. N., and John, D. R. (2005). The development of self-brand connections in children and adolescents. *Journal of Consumer Research, 32*(1), 119-129.

Chevalier, M., and Mazzalovo, G. (2008). *Luxury brand management: a world of privilege*. Singapore: John Wiley and Sons.

Chitty, W., Barker, N., Valos, M., and Shimp, T. (2008). *Integrated Marketing Communications Asia Pacific Edition*. Melbourne: Cengage Learning Australia.

Christodoulides, G., Michaelidou, N., and Li, C. H. (2009). Measuring perceived brand luxury: An evaluation of the BLI scale. *Journal of Brand Management, 16*(5), 395-405.

Copeland, M. T. (1923). Relation of consumers' buying habits to marekting methods. *Harvard Business Review, 1*(3), 282-289.

Coulter, R. A. (2006). Consumption experiences as escape: an application of the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique. In R. Belk (Ed.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods in Marketing* (pp. 400-418). Northhampton: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Coulter, R. H., and Zaltman, G. (1994). Using the Zaltman metaphor elicitation technique to understand brand images. *Advances in Consumer Research, 21*, 501-501.

Cova, B. (1997). Community and Consumption: Towards a Definition of the Linking Value of Product or Services. *European Journal of Marketing, 31*(3/4), 297-316.

Crites, S. (1986). Storytime: Recollecting the Past and Projecting the Future. In T. R. Sarbin (Ed.), *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct* (pp. 152-173). New York: Praeger.

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. London: Sage.

Crotty, M. (2003). *The foundations of social research* (2 ed.). London: Sage.

Dann, G. (1977). Anomie, ego-enhancement and tourism. *Annals of tourism research, 4*(4), 184-194.

De Chernatony, L. (1999). Brand management through narrowing the gap between brand identity and brand reputation. *Journal of Marketing Management, 15*(1-3), 157-179.

De Chernatony, L. (2006). *From brand vision to brand evaluation: the strategic process of growing and strengthening brands*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.

De Chernatony, L., and Segal-Horn, S. (2003). The criteria for successful services brands. *European Journal of Marketing, 37*(7/8), 1095-1118.

Denzin, N. K. (1978). *The Research ACT: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

DiMingo, E. (1988). The fine art of positioning. *Journal of Business Strategy, 9*(2), 34-38.

Dowling, G. (2002). Customer relationship management: in B2C markets, often less is more. *California Management Review, 44*(3), 87-104.

Dubois, B., Czellar, S., and Laurent, G. (2005). Consumer segments based on attitudes toward luxury: Empirical evidence from twenty countries. *Marketing Letters, 16*(2), 115-128.

Dubois, B., Laurent, G., and Czellar, S. (2001). *Consumer Rapport to Luxury: Analyzing Complex and Ambivalent Attitudes*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dubois, B., and Paternault, C. (1995). Observations: Understanding the world of international luxury brands: The" dream formula.". *Journal of Advertising Research, 35*(4), 69-76.

Eastman, J. K., Goldsmith, R. E., and Flynn, L. R. (1999). Status consumption in consumer behavior: Scale development and validation. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 41-52.

Elliott, R. (1994). Exploring the symbolic meaning of brands. *British Journal of Management, 5*(1), 13-19.

Elliott, R., and Wattanasuwan, K. (1998). Brands as symbolic resources for the construction of identity. *International journal of Advertising, 17*(2), 131-144.

Erdem, T., and Swait, J. (1998). Brand equity as a signaling phenomenon. *Journal of Consumer Psychology, 7*(2), 131-157.

Escalas, J. E. (1997). Meaningful self-brand connections and consumer product experience stories. *Advances in Consumer Research, 24*, 309.

Escalas, J. E. (2004). Imagine yourself in the product: Mental simulation, narrative transportation, and persuasion. *Journal of Advertising, 33*(2), 37-48.

Escalas, J. E., and Bettman, J. R. (2003). Using narratives to discern self-identity related consumer goals and motivations. In S. Ratneshwar, D. G. Mick and C. Huffman (Eds.), *The why of consumption: contemporary perspectives on consumer motives, goals, and desires* (pp. 237-258). London: Routledge.

Evrard, Y., and Roux, E. (2005). *Culture vs. Luxury: The Paradoxes of Democratisation*. Puyricard, France: CEROG.

Ezzy, D. (2002). *Qualitative Analysis: Practice and Innovation*. London: Routledge.

Fauchois, A., and Krieg, A. (1991). Le Discours du Luxe. *Revue Française du Marketing, 132/133*(2-3), 23-39.

Fern, E. F. (2001). *Advanced focus group research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Fionda, A. M., and Moore, C. M. (2009). The anatomy of the luxury fashion brand. *Journal of Brand Management, 16*(5), 347-363.

Firat, A. F. (2001). The Meanings and Messages of Las Vegas: The Present of our Future. *M@ n@ gement, 4*(3), 101-120.

Firat, A. F., and Venkatesh, A. (1993). Postmodernity: the age of marketing. *International Journal of Research in Marketing, 10*(3), 227-249.

Firat, A. F., and Venkatesh, A. (1995). Liberatory postmodernism and the reenchantment of consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research, 22*(3), 239-267.

Fournier, S. (1998). Consumers and their brands: developing relationship theory in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research, 24*(4), 343-353.

Gardner, B. B., and Levy, S. J. (1955). *The product and the brand*. London: Sage.

Ger, G., and Sandikci, Ö. (2006). Doing research on sensitive topics: studying covered Turkish women. In R. W. Belk (Ed.), *Handbook of qualitative research methods in marketing* (pp. 509-520). Northhampton: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Gergen, K. J. (1991). *The Saturated Self*. New York: Basic Books.

Gergen, K. J., and Gergen, M. M. (1986). Narrative Form and the Construction of Psychological Science. In T. R. Sarbin (Ed.), *Narrative Psychology:The Storied Nature of Human Conduct* (pp. 22-44). New York: Praeger.

Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Gilly, M. C., and Wolfinbarger, M. (1998). Advertising's Internal Audience. *Journal of Marketing, 98*(1), 69-88.

Gioia, D. A., and Pitre, E. (1990). Multiparadigm perspectives on theory building. *Academy of management review, 15*(4), 584-602.

Gistri, G., Romani, S., Pace, S., Gabrielli, V., and Grappi, S. (2009). Consumption practices of counterfeit luxury goods in the Italian context. *Journal of Brand Management, 16*(5), 364-374.

Gobe, M. (2001). *Emotional Branding: The new Paradigm for Connecting Brands to People*. New York: Allworth Press.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Anchor Books.

Goldsmith, R. E., Flynn, L. R., and Eastman, J. K. (1996). *Status consumption and fashion behaviour: an exploratory study.* Paper presented at the Association of Marketing Theory and Practice Proceedings.

Gregory, A. (2007). Involving stakeholders in developing corporate brands: The communication dimension. *Journal of Marketing Management, 23*(1-2), 59-73.

Grewal, D., Krinshan, R., Baker, J., and Borin, B. (1998). The effect of store name, brand name and price discounts on consumers' evaluations and purchase intentions. *Journal of Retailing, 74*(3), 331-352.

Grossman, G. M., and Shapiro, C. (1988). Foreign counterfeiting of status goods. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 79-100.

Gupta, K., and Stewart, D. W. (1996). Customer satisfaction and customer behavior: the differential role of brand and category expectations. *Marketing Letters, 7*(3), 249-263.

Hackley, C. E. (1998). Social constructionism and research in marketing and advertising. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal, 1*(3), 125-131.

Hatch, M. J., and Schultz, M. (2003). Bringing the corporation into corporate branding. *European Journal of Marketing, 37*(7/8), 1041-1064.

Heilbrunn, B. (1995). *My brand the hero? A semiotic analysis of the customer-brand relationship.* Paper presented at the EMAC Proceedings Annual Conference, Paris, France.

Heisley, D. D., and Levy, S. J. (1991). Autodriving: A Photoelicitation Technique. *The Journal of Consumer Research, 18*(3), 257-272.

Hirschman, E. C. (1987). Movies as Myths: An Interpretation of Motion Picture Mythology. In D. J. Umiker-Sebeok (Ed.), *Marketing and Semiotics: New Directions in the Study of Signs for Sale* (pp. 335-373). New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Hirschman, E. C. (1992). The Consciousness of Addiction: Toward a General Theory of Compulsive Consumption. *The Journal of Consumer Research, 19*(2), 155-179.

Hirschman, E. C. (1998). When Expert Consumers Interpret Textual Products: Applying Reader-response Theory to Television Programs. *Consumption, Markets, and Culture, 2*(3), 259-310.

Hirschman, E. C., and Thompson, C. J. (1997). Why Media Matter: Toward a Richer Understanding on Consumers' Relationships with Advertising and Mass Media. *Journal of Advertising, 26*(1), 38 - 43.

Holbrook, M. B. (2000). The millennial consumer in the texts of our times: Experience and entertainment. *Journal of Macromarketing, 20*(2), 178-192.

Holbrook, M. B., and Hirschman, E. C. (1982). The experiential aspects of consumption: Consumer fantasies, feelings, and fun. *Journal of Consumer Research, 9*(2), 132-140.

Holt, D. B. (2002). Why do brands cause trouble? A dialectical theory of consumer culture and branding. *Journal of Consumer Research, 29*(1), 70-90.

Holt, D. B. (2003). What becomes an icon most? *Harvard Business Review, 81*(3), 43-49.

Holt, D. B. (2004). *How brands become icons*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

Holt, D. B., Quelch, J. A., and Taylor, E. L. (2004). How global brands compete. *Harvard Business Review, 82*(9), 68-75.

Hunt, S. D. (1991). Positivism and Paradigm Dominance in Consumer Research: Toward Critical Pluralism and Rapprochement. *The Journal of Consumer Research, 18*(1), 32-44.

Iansiti, M., and Levien, R. (2004). Strategy as ecology. *Harvard Business Review, 82*(3), 68-81.

Ind, N., and Bjerke, R. (2007). The concept of participatory market orientation: An organisation-wide approach to enhancing brand equity. *Journal of Brand Management, 15*(2), 135-145.

Interbrand. (2008). *The Leading Luxury Brands.* Retrieved April 10th, 2009, from http://www.interbrand.com/Libraries/Branding_Studies/The_Leading_Luxury_Brands_2008.sflb.ashx

Jackson, T. (2002). International Herald Tribune Fashion 2001 conference review. *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management 6*(4). Retrieved from http://www.emeraldinsight.com/Insight/ViewContentServlet?contentType=NonArticleandFilename=Published/NonArticle/Articles/28406dac.001.html

Jacoby, J., Chestnut, R. W., and Silberman, W. (1977). Consumer use and comprehension of nutrition information. *Journal of Consumer Research, 4*(2), 119-128.

Jacoby, J., Olson, J. C., and Haddock, R. A. (1971). Price, brand name, and product composition characteristics as determinants of perceived quality. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 55*(6), 570-579.

Jevons, C. (2011). *Towards an integrated definition of brand*. Paper presented at the Thought Leaders International Conference on Brand Management.

Jones, R. I. (2005). Finding Sources of Brand Value. Developing a stakeholder model of brand equity. *Journal of Brand Management, 13*(1), 10-32.

Kapferer, J. N. (1992). *Strategic Brand Management*. London: Kogan Page.

Kapferer, J. N. (1997). Managing luxury brands. *Journal of Brand Management, 4*(4), 251–260.

Kapferer, J. N. (2000). How the Internet impacts on brand management. *Journal of Brand Management, 7*(6), 389-391.

Kapferer, J. N. (2006). The Two Business Cultures of Luxury Brands. In J. Schroeder and M. Salzer-Mörling (Eds.), *Brand Culture* (pp. 67 - 76). London: Taylor and Francis.

Kapferer, J. N., and Bastien, V. (2009). The Luxury Strategy: Break the Rules of Marketing to Build Luxury Brands: London: Kogan-Page.

Kates, S. M. (2006). The Extended Case Method in Consumer Research. In R. Belk (Ed.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods in Marketing* (pp. 175-185). Northhampton: Edward Elgar Publishing.

Katz, E. (1959). Mass communication research and the study of culture. *Studies in Public Communication, 2*, 1-6.

Keller, K. L. (1993). Conceptualizing, measuring, and managing customer-based brand equity. *The Journal of Marketing, 57*(1), 1-22.

Keller, K. L. (2001). Building customer-based brand equity: a blueprint for creating strong brands. *Marketing Management, 10*(3), 15-19.

Keller, K. L. (2003). Brand synthesis: The multidimensionality of brand knowledge. *Journal of Consumer Research, 29*(4), 595-600.

Keller, K. L. (2009). Managing the growth tradeoff: Challenges and opportunities in luxury branding. *Journal of Brand Management, 16*(5), 290-301.

King, S. (1991). Brand-Building in the 1990s. *Journal of Marketing Management, 7*(1), 3-13.

Klein, H. K., and Myers, M. D. (1999). A Set of Principles for Conducting and Evaluating Interpretive Field Studies in Information Systems. *Management Information Systems Quarterly, 23*, 67-94.

Kleine, S. S., Kleine III, R. E., and Allen, C. T. (1995). How is a possession" me" or" not me"? Characterizing types and an antecedent of material possession attachment. *Journal of Consumer Research, 22*(3), 327-343.

Kozinets, R. V. (2001). Utopian enterprise: Articulating the meanings of Star Trek's culture of consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research, 28*(1), 67-88.

Kozinets, R. V., Sherry, J. J. F., Storm, D., Duhachek, A., Nuttavuthisit, K., and DeBerry-Spence, B. (2004). Ludic Agency and Retail Spectacle. *Journal of Consumer Research, 31*(3), 658-672.

Krishnan, H. S. (1996). Characteristics of memory associations: A consumer-based brand equity perspective. *International Journal of Research in Marketing, 13*(4), 389-405.

Kvale, S. (1996). *Interviews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. London: Sage.

Lamb, R. (2011). Are luxury brands in the tank for product placement? *Luxury Daily*. Retrieved from http://www.luxurydaily.com/strategic-product-placement-in-media-can-influence-brand-perception

LaSalle, D., and Britton, T. (2003). *Priceless: Turning ordinary products into extraordinary experiences*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Press.

Levitt, K. P. (2005). Globalization, Development, and Economics: Reflections on the History of Development Thought. *Canadian Journal of Development Studies, 26*(3), 517-526.

Levy, S. (1959). Symbols for Sales. *Harvard Business Review, 37*(4), 117-124.

Levy, S. J. (1981). Interpreting Consumer Mythology: A Structural Approach to Consumer Behavior. *Journal of Marketing, 45*(3), 49-61.

Ligas, M., and Cotte, J. (1999). The process of negotiating brand meaning: a symbolic interactionist perspective. *Advances in Consumer Research, 26*, 609-614.

Lim, M. (2009). *Is the East still Different from the West?: Critical Perspectives on 'Culturalist' Models of Luxury Brand Consumption*. Paper presented at the 6th International Conference of the AMA's Brand, Identity and Corporate Reputation SIG.

Lincoln, Y. S., and Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. London: Sage Publications Inc.

Lippman, W. (1922). *Public opinion*. New York: Macmillan.

Louis Vuitton. (2012). *The Heart of Africa* Retrieved April 1st, 2012, from
http://www.louisvuittonjourneys.com/africa/

Low, G. S., and Fullerton, R. A. (1994). Brands, brand management, and the brand manager system: A critical-historical evaluation. *Journal of Marketing Research, 31*(2), 173-190.

Lusch, R. F., and Vargo, S. L. (2006). *The service-dominant logic of marketing: Dialog, debate, and directions*. Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe Inc.

Madden, T. J., Fehle, F., and Fournier, S. (2006). Brands matter: an empirical demonstration of the creation of shareholder value through branding. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 34*(2), 224-235.

Mandel, N., Petrova, P. K., and Cialdini, R. B. (2006). Images of success and the preference for luxury brands. *Journal of Consumer Psychology, 16*(1), 57-69.

Mark, M., and Pearson, C. (2001). *The Hero and the Outlaw: Harnessing the Power of Archetypes to Create a Winning Brand*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Martin, B. A. S. (2004). Using the imagination: Consumer evoking and thematizing of the fantastic imaginary. *Journal of Consumer Research, 31*(1), 136-149.

McAlexander, J. H., Schouten, J. W., and Koenig, H. F. (2002). Building brand community. *The Journal of Marketing, 66*(1), 38-54.

McCracken, G. (1986). Culture and Consumption: A Theoretical Account of the Structure and Movement of the Cultural Meaning of Consumer Goods. *The Journal of Consumer Research, 13*(1), 71-84.

McCracken, G. D. (1988). *The Long Interview*. London: Sage Publications.

McCracken, G. D. (2005). *Culture and consumption II: Markets, meaning, and brand management*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Meenaghan, T. (1995). The role of advertising in brand image development. *Journal of Product and Brand Management, 4*(4), 23-34.

Merz, M. A., He, Y., and Vargo, S. L. (2009). The evolving brand logic: a service-dominant logic perspective. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 37*(3), 328-344.

Michman, R. D., and Mazze, E. M. (2006). *The affluent consumer: Marketing and selling the luxury lifestyle*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing Group.

Mick, D. G. (1986). Consumer Research and Semiotics: Exploring the Morphology of Signs, Symbols, and Significance. *The Journal of Consumer Research, 13*(2), 196-213.

Mick, D. G., and Buhl, C. (1992). A Meaning-Based Model of Advertising Experiences. *The Journal of Consumer Research, 19*(3), 317-338.

Miles, M. B., and Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis*. London: Sage.

Mishler, E. G. (1995). Models of narrative analysis: A typology. *Journal of Narrative and Life History, 5*(2), 87-123.

Monga, A. B. (2002). Brand as a relationship partner: gender differences in perspectives. *Advances in Consumer Research, 29*(1), 36-41.

Montoya, P., and Vandehey, T. (2005). *The Brand Called You: The Ultimate Brand-Building and Business Development Handbook to Transform Anyone into an Indispensable Personal Brand*. Tustin, CA: Personal Branding Press.

Moore, S. (2012). Some Things Are Better Left Unsaid: How Word of Mouth Influences the Storyteller. *Journal of Consumer Research, 38*(6). Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.1086/661891?uid=3739864anduid=2anduid=4anduid=3739256

Muñiz, A. M., and Schau, H. J. (2005). Religiosity in the abandoned Apple Newton brand community. *Journal of Consumer Research, 31*(4), 737-747.

Muñiz, J. A. M., and O'Guinn, T. C. (2001). Brand community. *Journal of Consumer Research, 27*(4), 412-432.

Nia, A., and Zaichkowsky, J. L. (2000). Do counterfeits devalue the ownership of luxury brands? *Journal of Product and Brand Management, 9*(7), 485-497.

Nueno, J. L., and Quelch, J. A. (1998). The mass marketing of luxury. *Business Horizons, 41*(6), 61-68.

O'Cass, A., and Frost, H. (2002). Status brands: examining the effects of non-product-related brand associations on status and conspicuous consumption. *Journal of Product and Brand Management, 11*(2), 67-88.

O'Donohoe, S. (1994). Advertising uses and gratifications. *European Journal of Marketing, 28*(8-9), 52-75.

Okonkwo, U. (2007). *Luxury fashion branding: trends, tactics, techniques*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Okonkwo, U. (2009). Luxury fashion branding- trends, tactics, techniques. *Journal of Brand Management, 16*(5), 413-415.

Oswald, L. (1999). Culture-Swapping: consumption and the ethnogenesis of middle-class Haitian immigrants. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 25(4), 303-318.

Padgett, D., and Allen, D. (1997). Communicating experiences: a narrative approach to creating service brand image. *Journal of Advertising, 26*(4), 49-62.

Park, C. W., Jaworski, B. J., and Maclnnis, D. J. (1986). Strategic brand concept-image management. *The Journal of Marketing, 50*(4), 135-145.

Patton, M. (2001). *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*. Newborn Park, CA: Sage.

Payne, A., Storbacka, K., Frow, P., and Knox, S. (2009). Co-creating brands: Diagnosing and designing the relationship experience. *Journal of Business Research, 62*(3), 379-389.

Payne, A. F., Storbacka, K., and Frow, P. (2008). Managing the co-creation of value. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 36*(1), 83-96.

Peelen, E. (2003). *Customer relationship management*. Amsterdam: Prentice Hall.

Peñaloza, L. (1994). Atravesando fronteras/border crossings: A critical ethnographic exploration of the consumer acculturation of Mexican immigrants. *Journal of Consumer Research, 21*(1), 32-54.

Pendergrast, M. (1993). *For God, Country and Coca-Cola*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

Phau, I., and Prendergast, G. (2000). Consuming luxury brands: the relevance of the rarity principle. *The Journal of Brand Management, 8*(2), 122-138.

Phillips, B. J., and McQuarrie, E. F. (2010). Narrative and persuasion in fashion advertising. *Journal of Consumer Research, 37*(3), 368-392.

Pilyaev, F. P. (2000). *Luxury in Russia through centuries*. Moscow: EXMO Press.

Pine, B. J., and Gilmore, J. H. (1999). *The experience economy*. Boston, MA: Harvard
      Business School Press

Plummer, J. T. (1985). *Brand Personality: A Strategic Concept For Multinational
      Advertising*. Paper presented at the Marketing Educators' Conference.

Polkinghorne, D. (1988). *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*. Albany: State
      University of New York Press.

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1997). Reporting qualitative research as practice. In W. G. Tierney and
      Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Representation and the text: Re-framing the narrative voice* (pp. 3-
      21).

Porter, M. E. (1980). *Competitive strategy*. New York: Free Press.

Porter, M. E. (2008). The Five Competitive Forces That Shape Strategy. *Harvard Business
      Review, 86*(1), 78–93.

Prahalad, C. K. (2004). The Co-creation of Value-Invited Commentary. *Journal of Marketing
      Research, 68*(1), 23-23.

Prahalad, C. K., and Ramaswamy, V. (2004). Co-creation experiences: The next practice in
      value creation. *Journal of Interactive Marketing, 18*(3), 5-14.

Puntoni, S., Schroeder, J., and Ritson, M. (2010). Meaning matters: Polysemy in advertising.
      Journal of Advertising, 39(2), 51-64.

Quan, S., and Wang, N. (2004). Towards a structural model of the tourist experience: an
      illustration from food experiences in tourism. *Tourism management, 25*(3), 297-305.

Reeves, J. (2004). *Culture and International Relations*. New York: Routledge.

Reynolds, T. J., and Gutman, J. (1984). Advertising is image management. *Journal of
      Advertising research, 24*(1), 27-37.

Richins, M. L. (1994). Special possessions and the expression of material values. *Journal of Consumer Research, 21*(3), 522-533.

Riley, F. D. O., and Lacroix, C. (2003). Luxury branding on the Internet: lost opportunity or impossibility? *Marketing Intelligence and Planning, 21*(2), 96-104.

Ritchie, J., and Lewis, J. (2003). *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Ritson, M., and Elliott, R. (1995). *A model of advertising literacy: the praxiology and co-creation of advertising meaning*. Paper presented at the 24th Annual Conference of the European Marketing Academy.

Ritson, M., and Elliott, R. (1999). The social uses of advertising: an ethnographic study of adolescent advertising audiences. *Journal of Consumer Research, 26*(3), 260-277.

Robertson, R. (1992). *Globalization: Social theory and global culture* (Vol. 16). London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Robertson, R. T., and Robertson, R. (2003). *The three waves of globalization: A history of a developing global consciousness*. London: Zed Books.

Robson, S., and Foster, A. (1989). *Qualitative Research in Action*. London: Edward Arnold.

Rodrik, D. (1997). *Has globalization gone too far?* Washington: Peterson Institute.

Roth, M. S. (1995). The effects of culture and socioeconomics on the performance of global brand image strategies. *Journal of Marketing Research, 32*(2), 163-175.

Roux, E., and Floch, J. (1996). Gérer L'Ingérable: La Contradiction Interne de toute Maison de Luxe. *Décisions Marketing, 9*(September-December), 15-23.

Sanday, P. R. (1979). The Ethnographic Paradigm (s). *Administrative Science Quarterly, 24*(4), 527-538.

Schau, H. J., and Gilly, M. C. (2003). We are what we post? Self-presentation in personal web space. *Journal of Consumer Research, 30*(3), 385-404.

Schmitt, B. (1999). Experiential marketing. *Journal of Marketing Management, 15*(1-3), 53-67.

Schouten, J. W., and McAlexander, J. H. (1995). Subcultures of Consumption: An Ethnography of the New Bikers. *The Journal of Consumer Research, 22*(1), 43-61.

Schroeder, J. E. (2005). The artist and the brand. *European Journal of Marketing, 39*(11/12), 1291-1305.

Schroeder, J. E. (2009). The cultural codes of branding. *Marketing Theory, 9*(1), 123-126.

Schroeder, J. E., and Salzer-Mörling, M. (2006). *Brand culture*. New York: Routledge.

Scott, L. M. (1994). The bridge from text to mind: Adapting reader-response theory to consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research, 21*(3), 461-480.

Seo, Y. (2009). *The Consumption Practices of Luxury Brands: Brand Meanings, Experiences, and Engagement*. Paper presented at the Australia New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference 2009 Doctorial Colloquium

Seo, Y. (2009). *Exploring Consumption of Luxury Brands*. Paper presented at the 4th University of Auckland Business School PhD Conference.

Seo, Y. (2012). *Deriving Marketing Insights from the Consumer Uses and Gratifications Theory in the context of Luxury Branding*. Paper presented at the U21 PhD Conference in Business.

Seo, Y., and Buchanan-Oliver, M. (2011). *Understanding Luxury Brands: In Pursuit of the Meaning of Brand Luxuriousness*. Paper presented at the 15th AMS World Marketing Congress.

Seo, Y., and Buchanan-Oliver, M. (2011). *The Uses and Gratifications of Luxury Brands*. Paper presented at the Australia New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference.

Shankar, A., Elliott, R., and Goulding, C. (2001). Understanding consumption: contributions from a narrative perspective. *Journal of Marketing Management, 17*(3-4), 429-453.

Sherry, J. F. (1987). Advertising as a Cultural System. In D. J. Umiker-Sebeok (Ed.), *Marketing and semiotics : new directions in the study of signs for sale* (pp. 441–461). New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Silverstein, M. J., and Fiske, N. (2003). Luxury for the masses. *Harvard Business Review, 81*(4), 48-57.

Smeith, G., and Dunstan, K. (2004). Ethnic Population Projections: Issues and Trends. . Retrieved April 20th, 2009, from http://www.stats.govt.nz/products-and-services/Articles/pop-proj-Jun04.htm

Smit, E., Bronner, F., and Tolboom, M. (2007). Brand relationship quality and its value for personal contact. *Journal of Business Research, 60*(6), 627-633.

Smith, J. A. (1996). Beyond the divide between cognition and discourse: Using interpretative phenomenological analysis in health psychology. *Psychology and Health, 11*(2), 261-271.

Solomon, M. R. (1983). The role of products as social stimuli: A symbolic interactionism perspective. *Journal of Consumer Research, 10*(3), 319-329.

Spiggle, S. (1994). Analysis and interpretation of qualitative data in consumer research. *Journal of Consumer Research, 21*(3), 491-503.

Statistics New Zealand. (2006). *Census*. Retrieved April 20th, 2011, from http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2006CensusHomePage.aspx

Stegemann, N. (2006). Unique Brand Extension Challenges For Luxury Brands. *Journal of*

Business and Economics Research, 4(10), 57-68.

Stern, B. B. (1995). Consumer myths: Frye's taxonomy and the structural analysis of consumption text. *Journal of Consumer Research, 22*(2), 165-185.

Stern, B. B. (2006). What doesbrand mean? historical-analysis method and construct definition. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science, 34*(2), 216-223.

Stern, B. B., Thompson, C. J., and Arnould, E. J. (1998). Narrative Analysis of a Marketing Relationship: The Consumer뭘 Perspective. *Psychology and Marketing, 15*(3), 195-214.

Strasser, S. (1989). *Satisfaction guaranteed: The making of the American mass market*. New York: Pantheon.

Swaminathan, V., Page, K. L., and Gürhan-Canli, Z. (2007). "My" Brand or "Our" Brand: The Effects of Brand Relationship Dimensions and Self-Construal on Brand Evaluations. *Journal of Consumer Research, 34*(2), 248-259.

Sutton-Brady, C., Davis, T., and Jung, M. (2010). Perceived cultural spaces and cultural in-betweens: Consumption among Korean Australians. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, 9(5), 349-363.

Taylor, C. R., and Stern, B. B. (1997). Asian-Americans: Television advertising and the" model minority" stereotype. *Journal of Advertising, 26*(2), 47-61.

Taylor, S. J., and Bogdan, R. (1984). *Introduction to qualitative research methods: The search for meanings*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Thompson, C. J. (1997). Interpreting consumers: a hermeneutical framework for deriving marketing insights from the texts of consumers' consumption stories. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 438-455.

Thompson, C. J. (2004). Marketplace mythology and discourses of power. *Journal of Consumer Research, 31*(1), 162-180.

Thompson, C. J., and Arsel, Z. (2004). The Starbucks brandscape and consumers'(anticorporate) experiences of glocalization. *Journal of Consumer Research, 31*(3), 631-642.

Thompson, C. J., and Haytko, D. L. (1997). Speaking of fashion: consumers' uses of fashion discourses and the appropriation of countervailing cultural meanings. *Journal of Consumer Research, 24*(1), 15-42.

Thompson, C. J., Locander, W. B., and Pollio, H. R. (1989). Putting Consumer Experience Back into Consumer Research: The Philosophy and Method of Existential-Phenomenology. *The Journal of Consumer Research, 16*(2), 133-146.

Thompson, C. J., Pollio, H. R., and Locander, W. B. (1994). The Spoken and the Unspoken: A Hermeneutic Approach to Understanding the Cultural Viewpoints That Underlie Consumers' Expressed Meanings. *The Journal of Consumer Research, 21*(3), 432-452.

Thompson, C. J., Rindfleisch, A., and Arsel, Z. (2006). Emotional branding and the strategic value of the doppelgager brand image. *Journal of Marketing, 70*(1), 50-64.

Thompson, C. J., and Troester, M. (2002). Consumer Value Systems in the Age of Postmodern Fragmentation: The Case of the Natural Health Microculture. *Journal of Consumer Research, 28*(4), 550-571.

Tian, K. T., Bearden, W. O., and Hunter, G. L. (2001). Consumers' need for uniqueness: Scale development and validation. *Journal of Consumer Research, 28*(1), 50-66.

Truong, Y., McColl, R., and Kitchen, P. J. (2009). New luxury brand positioning and the emergence of Masstige brands. *Journal of Brand Management, 16*(5), 375-382.

Tsai, S. (2005). Impact of personal orientation on luxury-brand purchase value An international investigation. *International Journal of Market Research, 47*(4), 429-455.

Tynan, C., McKechnie, S., and Chhuon, C. (2010). Co-creating value for luxury brands. *Journal of Business Research, 63*(11), 1156-1163.

United States Census Bureau. (2007). *North American Industry Classification System.* Retrieved April 4th, 2009, from http://www.census.gov/cgi-bin/sssd/naics/naicsrch?chart=2007

Vargo, S. L., and Lusch, R. F. (2004). Evolving to a new dominant logic for marketing. *Journal of Marketing, 68*(1), 1-17.

Veblen, T. (1899). *The theory of the leisure class*. New York, NY: Macmillan.

Venkatesh, A., Joy, A., Sherry Jr, J. F., and Deschenes, J. (2010). The aesthetics of luxury fashion, body and identify formation. *Journal of Consumer Psychology, 20*(4), 459-470.

Vickers, J. S., and Renand, F. (2003). The Marketing of Luxury Goods: An exploratory study-three conceptual dimensions. *The Marketing Review, 3*(4), 459-478.

Vigneron, F., and Johnson, L. W. (1999). A review and a conceptual framework of prestige-seeking consumer behavior. *Academy of Marketing Science Review, 1*(1), 1-15.

Vigneron, F., and Johnson, L. W. (2004). Measuring perceptions of brand luxury. *Journal of Brand Management, 11*(6), 484-506.

Vongova, B. (2008). Democratization of Retail and Luxury Goods. *The Harbus*. Retrieved from http://www.harbus.org/2008/Democratization-of-Retail-and-4276/

Wallendorf, M., and Brucks, M. (1993). Introspection in Consumer Research: Implementation and Implications. *The Journal of Consumer Research, 20*(3), 339-359.

Ward, C., and Masgoret, A. M. (2008). Attitudes toward Immigrants, Immigration, and Multiculturalism in New Zealand: A Social Psychological Analysis1. *International Migration Review, 42*(1), 227-248.

Wiedmann, K. P., Hennigs, N., and Siebels, A. (2007). Measuring consumers Luxury Value Perception: a cross-cultural framework. *Academy of Marketing Science Review, 7*(7), 333-361.

Zaltman, G. (1997). Rethinking market research: Putting people back in. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 424-437.

Zaltman, G., and Coulter, R. H. (1995). Seeing the voice of the customer: Metaphor-based advertising research. *Journal of Advertising research, 35*(4), 35-51.

Zaltman, G., and Zaltman, L. H. (2008). *Marketing metaphoria: what seven deep metaphors reveal about the minds of consumers*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Press.

Zinkhan, G. M., and Prenshaw, P. J. (1994). Good life images and brand name associations: evidence from Asia, America and Europe. *Advances in Consumer Research, 21*, 496-500.

Zodgekar, A. (2005). The Changing Face of New Zealand's Population and National Identity. In J. Liu, T. T. McIntosh, T. T. McCreanor and T. Teaiwa (Eds.), *New Zealand Identities: Departures and Destinations* (pp. 140-154). Wellington: Victoria University Press.