I Am What I Consume:

The Postmodern Self and Consumption Symbolism

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To my mother, Angsana Wattanasuwan

And in loving memories of my father, Pachern Wattanasuwan

Abstract

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This thesis employs interpretive research via ethnographic fieldwork to explore the complex relationship between the postmodern self and consumption symbolism. In postmodernity, where society becomes more global but simultaneously decentred, pastiche-like and hyperreal, the self is encountering a number of dilemmas propelled by the looming threat of personal meaninglessness. In order to attain a sense of existence, the self appears to seek the meaningfulness of life from and through symbolic consumption. Indeed, postmodernity is primarily a consumer culture where consumption is central to the meaningful practice of our everyday life. The postmodern self makes consumption choices not only from the products' utilities but also from their symbolic meanings, the function of which operates in two directions: outward in constructing the social world, *social-symbolism*; and inward in constructing our self-identity, *self-symbolism*.

To understand these phenomena, ethnographic fieldwork of four distinctive groups – a group of male femaling transgenders, a group of young nouveaux riches, a group of young extremist Buddhists and a group of young provincial women – are conducted in Bangkok, Thailand. Principally, the research explores how the informants employ everyday consumption symbolically in their self-creation processes. It also examines how the informants appropriate symbolic meanings through and from their lived and mediated experiences, and incorporate these meanings into their symbolic self-projects by means of everyday consumption. Moreover, it observes how the informants negotiate their self-social symbolism through the process of self-others identification within their friendship groups. The interpretations unfold a number of surprising outcomes which provide insight into the informants' self-projects and their consumption experiences. To conceptualise the interpretations, a model – *Consumption Symbolism and the Harmonising Self* – is proposed.

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Introduction

Come, sir, arise, away! I'll teach you differences.
William Shakespeare, *King Lear*

This thesis, *I Am What I Consume: The Postmodern Self and Consumption Symbolism*, is a study of the complex relationship between the self in postmodernity and symbolic consumption from an interpretive point of view. It is my endeavour to add another piece of the jigsaw to the multidimensional and ever-shifting consumer puzzle. Indeed, understanding consumer behaviour is one of the fundamental tenets that marketers always strive to achieve. To do this, marketers enthusiastically employ consumer research as a means to obtain consumer knowledge for their managerial practices. Therefore, consumer research becomes a vital field that marketing academics vigorously establish to meet the need of 'the real world', i.e., the business world. Various research methodologies have been developed in an attempt to gain knowledge of consumer behaviour. However, the majority of these methodologies are clustered around the dominant doctrine of positivism[1], the aptness of which has recently been questioned by a considerable amount of literature in consumer research (e.g., Anderson 1986; Elliott 1999; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Hirschman and Holbrook 1992; Holbrook 1995; Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy 1988; Peter and Olsen 1989; Sherry 1991).

[1] In this thesis, I use the term 'positivism' in a broad sense, that is, the term embraces positivistic, neo-positivistic, and quasi-positivistic modes of inquiry.

Fundamentally, the above literature poses critical questions concerning the positivism's ontological and epistemological assumptions that regard the nature of consumer behaviour as single, objective, universal, deterministic, fragmentable and consistent. The main criticism emphasises the positivist attitude that consumer behaviour can be studied scientifically in a controlled environment and thus it can be explained and generalised for prediction. The critiques commonly deem that the scientific practice of the positivist research may be too reductionistic to cope with such a complex construct of consumer reality and is likely to produce superficial knowledge (Elliott 1999; Holbrook 1995). In the course of criticising positivism, many consumer scholars trace back to its problematic philosophical foundation, modernism, and propose a movement which runs counter to modernism, postmodernism[2], as an alternative philosophical framework for consumer studies (e.g., Brown 1993; Elliott 1997; Featherstone 1988; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Hirschman and Holbrook 1992; Joy and Venkatesh 1994; Sherry 1991; Stern 1993).

Basically, modernism is criticised as narrow, dogmatic and unidimensional in its working philosophy (Foucault 1984; Jameson 1991; Lyotard 1984; Nietzsche 1967). That is, the modernist effort to create a scientific and rational foundation to obtain absolute knowledge of consumer behaviour limits our opportunity to understand the richness of malleable, manifold and incoherent consumer experience (Elliott 1999; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Holbrook 1995). Firat and Venkatesh (1995) remark that postmodernism exposes the limitations of modernism for the

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[2] In this thesis the terms 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' are referred to as a body of theoretical approaches whereas the terms 'modernity' and 'postmodernity' are referred to as an era or a paradigm of cultural consciousness (which is discussed later in Chapter One).

study of consumer behaviour, and offers alternative perspectives that have a liberatory potential. Philosophically, postmodernism views consumption experience as socially constructed; it denies the existence of universal facts and affirms that there are only interpretations of reality (Nietzsche 1967, p. 326). Hence, interpretivism is suggested as an alternative approach to positivism for the study of consumption (e.g., Belk *et al* 1988; Elliott 1999; Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Hirschman and Holbrook 1992; Holbrook 1995; Sherry 1991). Unlike positivism, interpretivism does not seek nomothetic knowledge to explain or predict consumer behaviour; rather it modestly seeks idiographic knowledge to understand the complex nature of the phenomenon.

Employing an interpretive research approach, this thesis presents insightful idiographic knowledge, exploring the complex relationship between the postmodern self and consumption symbolism. In postmodernity[3], where society becomes more global but simultaneously decentred, pastiche-like and hyperreal, the self is encountering a number of dilemmas propelled by "the looming threat of personal meaninglessness" (Giddens 1991, p. 187-201). In order to attain a sense of existence, the self appears to seek the meaningfulness of life from and through symbolic consumption. Indeed, postmodernity is primarily a consumer culture where consumption is central to the meaningful practice of our everyday life (Slater 1997, p. 131). Much literature suggests that we make our consumption choices not only from the products' utilities but also from their symbolic meanings (Belk 1988; Bourdieu 1984; Dittmar 1992; Douglas 1982; Elliott 1997; McCracken 1988a).

[3] I maintain that the term 'postmodernity' to which I refer throughout this thesis embraces any term (e.g., high modernity, post-industrialisation or late capitalism) that signifies a new paradigm of cultural consciousness as I discuss in Chapter One.

Elliott (1997) remarks that the function of consumption symbolism operates in two directions: outward in constructing the social world, *social-symbolism*; and inward in constructing our self-identity, *self-symbolism*. Simply put, in postmodernity we employ everyday consumption symbolically to create, continue and communicate our selves.

Striving to understand this complex phenomenon, I undertake a research journey to explore four distinctive ethnographic fieldwork groups in Thailand: young male-to-female transgenders; young nouveaux riche; young extremist (Dhammakaya) Buddhists; and young provincial women studying in Bangkok. Principally, I scrutinise how these informants employ everyday consumption symbolically in their self-creation (or self-recreation) process. For this, I examine how the informants appropriate symbolic meanings through and from their lived and mediated experiences, and incorporate these meanings into their symbolic self-projects by means of everyday consumption. I also observe how the informants negotiate their self-social symbolism through the process of self-others identification within their friendship groups. Rewardingly, as the interpretations unfold, a number of surprising outcomes emerge, which provide insight into the informants' self-projects and their consumption experiences.

To convey my experience of this research journey, I organise the thesis into three parts: Part One, *The Map*; Part Two, *The Journey*; and Part Three, *The Locals*. In Part One, which contains three conceptual chapters, I introduce the theoretical platform which I employ as a point of departure for the journey. To commence, in Chapter One – *Postmodernism, Consumer Culture and Consumer Research* – I lay down the ideas of postmodernism and consumer culture as an ontological and

epistemological map to set out the theoretical paths in Chapter Two and Chapter Three as well as the methodological direction in Chapter Four. In this first chapter, I argue how postmodernism becomes a promising mode of knowledge to understand consumer behaviour in postmodernity. At the outset, I review the ideas of modernism and its limitations in consumer studies. Then I examine how the project of modernity via globalisation and mediaisation generates radical changes that lead to an emergence of a new kind of cultural sensibility – the postmodern culture. Later I discuss postmodern thoughts and how we can apply them in consumer research.

In Chapter Two, *The Postmodern Self and Symbolic Consumption*, I discuss the central temperaments of the postmodern self and how everyday consumption becomes vital in the creation of the self in postmodernity. First, I scrutinise how the postmodern self encounters the dilemmas of meaninglessness and becomes the saturated self (Gergen 1991). Then I discuss the postmodern concept of the self as the contextual and embodied self. Endeavouring to follow the postmodern 'against metanarratives' approach, I investigate a range of microtheories of the self from interdisciplinary viewpoints. For this, I ironically include a few interesting ideas about the self, which may be regarded modernistic by some scholars, in my discussion about the postmodern self, as I decline the absolute boundaries between the two philosophical paradigms. Furthermore, to complement the Western views of the self, I also discuss concepts of the self from Eastern perspectives, especially from Buddhism. Apparently, the postmodern observation that the self is saturated, contingent and in constant flux is the mature notion that Buddhism has advocated for more than two thousand years. Later I explore the interplay between the symbolic self-project in postmodernity and symbolic consumption. Mainly, I look

at how the postmodern self exploits everyday consumption symbolically to accommodate her/his multifaceted, malleable and inconsistent temperament.

In the following theoretical chapter, Chapter Three: *Symbolic Resources and the Appropriation of Consumption Symbolism*, I inspect how the postmodern self appropriates consumption symbolism for her/his self-creation project. I explore symbolic resources available for the self in both lived and mediated experience. Indeed, living in postmodernity involves a continuous interweaving of both forms of experience in order to appropriate and re-appropriate meanings for the symbolic project of the self (Thompson 1995, p. 230). Then, I examine further how the postmodern self chooses and stylises resources to make sense of herself/himself, self-symbolism, and to make sense to others, social-symbolism. Lastly, I explore the process of the self-social negotiation of consumption symbolism.

Part Two, *The Journey*, consists of two methodological-related chapters: Chapter Four, *The Research*, and Chapter Five, *The Cultural Location: Bangkok, Thailand.* In Chapter Four, I discuss my research objectives as well as the approach and methodology I employ to accomplish them. Primarily, this research journey aims to examine the in-depth accounts of symbolic consumption and the self-creation project in the cultural context of everyday life, and to grasp and interpret emergent themes, which may arise in the research fieldwork, in order to enhance our understanding of the relationship between the postmodern self and consumption symbolism. To achieve these objectives, I adopt interpretivism as my research approach and ethnography as my methodology, which I discuss subsequently. Then I present my choice of fieldwork and the profiles of my informants. Later I describe how the ethnography is conducted. In order to achieve meaningful understanding of

the fieldwork, in Chapter Five I provide the cultural-historical background of its location – Bangkok, Thailand.

Part Three: *The Locals*, is the final but central constituent of the thesis where I present my interpretations of each ethnographic group individually in four successive chapters – Chapter Six: *The Gendered Self*, Chapter Seven: *The Nouveau Riche Self*, Chapter Eight: *The Religious Self*, and Chapter Nine: *The Urbanised Self*. Prior to the interpretations in each of these chapters, I also review corresponding microtheories which are relevant to the context of each fieldwork group. The interpretations illuminate the complexity and paradox of the postmodern self and reveal the polysemic and contextualised nature of consumption symbolism. To conclude this thesis, in the last chapter, Chapter Ten: *Reflections upon the Research Journey*, I reflect upon the knowledge I have gained from this long journey. On reflection, I believe that the interpretations of each piece of fieldwork provide insightful ideographic knowledge of the relationship between the informants' self-projects and symbolic consumption, which I hope contributes meaningful understanding to the discipline of consumer behaviour at large. To conceptualise this knowledge, I propose a model – *Consumption Symbolism and the Harmonising Self*. Finally, I discuss the limitations of the research and suggest possible directions for embarking on future research journeys.

Although this thesis is organised in a fairly linear fashion, it does not develop straightforwardly. In fact, it is a narrative evolving from and through the dialectical interplay between the theories and the ethnographic interpretations. Postmodern in its character, the thesis embraces several microtheories, some of which are ironically from modern discourses; it also allows multiple and paradoxical

interpretations. The thesis is also written in a relatively playful, collage-like style that creates a pastiche text consisting of an assortment of quotations and recycled ideas as well as a mixture of my idiosyncratic interpretations and the informants' interview excerpts. However, I believe that holistically this thesis offers a scholarly meaningful account which I hope my readers will enjoy reading as much as I enjoyed writing.

Part One: The Map

Chapter One

Postmodernism, Consumer Culture and Consumer Research

> The realities are too complex and paradoxical to be understood by logical thinking; and possibly, they can be best understood only through experience[4]
>
> A Thai Buddhist monk

> Consumer experiences are too complex to be boxed into a single experimental moment, and the joys of doing research must be found not in the pursuit of a holy grail of singular knowledge but in capturing many exploratory moments.
>
> Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p. 261

These two statements, although different in context, share a similar view that to acquire understanding of human experience, we need to recognise its multiplicity, complexity and ambiguity. Reductionism of realities into a single logic and the application of rational thoughts in knowledge acquisition may have limitations in

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[4] This statement was an answer given by a Thai Buddhist monk to my metaphysical quest for 'the reality' during our casual conversation several years ago. Buddhism advocates that there are no absolute realities in this world since realities are in continuous flux and relative, conditioned and impermanent (Morris, Brian (1994), *Anthropology of the Self: The Individual in Cultural Perspective*, London:Pluto Press.Morris 1994). What we believe is reality is an illusory construction as it depends on dialectical relationships between our Five Groups of Existence (i.e., corporeality, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness) and the external environment. Thus, our realities vary temporally and spatially; and various realities may coexist. Venerable Sumedho Sumedho, Venerable (1996), *Now is the Knowing*, Hemel Hempstead:Amaravati Publications.(1996, p.27) explains, "...what people call the 'real world' is the world they believe in, the world that they are committed to or the world that they know and are familiar with." This notion that reality is a construction has later (more than two thousands years) been argued by many Western thinkers (e.g., Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckmann (1966), *The Social Construction of Reality*, New York:Doubleday.Berger and Luckmann 1966; Deleuze, Gilles (1994), *Difference and Repetition*, New York:Columbia University Press.Deleuze 1994; Derrida, Jacques (1970), "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences," in *The Structurist Controversy: The Languages of Critism and the Sciences of Man*, ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, Baltimore:Johns Hopkins University Press, 246-272.Derrida 1970; Foucault, Michel (1979), *Discipline and Punish: the birth of the prison*, Harmondsworth:Peregrine Books.Foucault 1979).

grasping the dynamic and multifaceted nature of human existence. This ontological stance, in many respects, provides me with an epistemological platform as well as a philosophical map of theoretical and methodological directions for my research journey in an endeavour to comprehend consumer experience in this thesis.

There are several alternative ways of gaining and vindicating knowledge in consumer research (Anderson 1986; Hirschman and Holbrook 1992; Hudson and Ozanne 1988), ranging from watching a film[5] to conducting a laboratory experiment. Each research mode, I believe, to some extent contributes knowledge to the field. Nevertheless, the majority of modes of consumer research are conventionally clustered around the dominant doctrine of positivism. That is, positivist researchers view the nature of consumer behaviour as single, objective, universal, deterministic, fragmentable and consistent, whereby they can divide the phenomenon and remove it from the natural setting in order to study it scientifically in a controlled environment (Holbrook 1995; Ozanne and Hudson 1989). Consumer behaviour can be explained and predicted. Indeed, the positivist notions of consumer reality as well as the faith in scientific research lie within the philosophical framework known as 'modernism' (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Hirschman and Holbrook 1992; Lash 1990).

Over recent decades, much literature in consumer research has questioned the aptness of the positivist stance, both ontological and epistemological assumptions as well as methodological choices, in the study of consumer behaviour (e.g., Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Hirschman and Holbrook 1992; Holbrook 1995;

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[5] For example, Renton, McLoughlin and Ryan (1999), "The Apparent Paradox of Self - a Semiological Analysis of the Role of Consumption in the life of Trainspottings," a paper presented at the 1999 European ACR, Jouy-en-Josas, France.

Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy 1988; Peter and Olson 1989; Sherry 1991). The main criticism is that the positivist idea of studying consumers like the physical world limits our opportunity to understand the richness of manifold, socially constructed consumer realities. In the course of criticising positivism, many scholars trace back to its problematic philosophical foundation, modernism, and propose a movement which runs counter to modernism, postmodernism, as an alternative philosophical framework for consumer studies (e.g., Brown 1993; Elliott 1997; Featherstone 1988; Firat and Venkatesh 1995, Hirschman and Holbrook 1992, Joy and Venkatesh 1994; Sherry 1991; Stern 1993). Firat and Venkatesh (1995, p. 239) advocate, "postmodernism exposes the limitations of modernism for the study of consumption and offers alternative perspectives that have a liberatory potential."

Following Firat and Venkatesh (1995), I employ ideas from postmodernism as this thesis's philosophical foundation on which my epistemological position as well as theoretical and methodological choices are established to pursue understanding of relationship between the self and consumption symbolism in everyday life. Thus, this first chapter is a base for the following theoretical chapters in Part One and methodological chapters in Part Two. In this chapter I do not attempt to investigate all aspects of postmodernism, rather I focus on its dialectical impacts on consumer culture, specifically on our everyday consumption. Ironically, no matter how much I would like to discuss the tangled nature of postmodernism in a postmodernist fashion, it is inevitable that I employ a modernist approach of linearity to explicate it. I acknowledge this limitation and attempt to maintain the sense of postmodernism throughout the chapter. To outline, I first examine a brief history of postmodernism and its definitions. Then I discuss modernism and how it brings about a new cultural sensibility – a postmodern culture. Later I elaborate

central features of postmodern culture and how they influence our everyday life. Finally I argue how postmodern perspectives give us a better insightful understanding of consumer behaviour, and how I employ postmodernism in my research journey.

1.1 Postmodernism: Definition?

> Anything which has a history cannot be defined.
> Nietszche[6] in Turner 1990, p. 5

What is postmodernism? Is it only a myth? During the past two decades the emerging ideas of postmodernism have become a central debate within and across various cultural scenes and scholastic disciplines (Best and Kellner 1991; Connor 1997; Featherstone 1991, Harvey 1990), ranging from the arts, architecture and literature to anthropology, sociology, philosophy and even science (e.g., chaos theory, etc.). The debates emphasise on the controversial existence of postmodernism and its sufficient representation of the objects and practices of contemporary culture (Connor 1997). Defenders of the modern tradition criticise postmodernism as a passing fad, a myth (Britton 1988) or an "inflation of discourse" (Newman 1985). Britton (1988) views postmodernism as a specious invention of intellectuals in search of a new discourse and source of cultural capital. Giddens (1990) insists that postmodernism, if it exists, is just self-clarification of modern thought.

However, much literature suggests that postmodernism has outlived the duration of a passing fad and has evidently illustrated its powerful perspective to

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[6] Nietzsche, Friedrich (1967), *The Will to Power,* New York: Random House.

understand and conduct in our culturally constituted world (Best and Kellner 1991; Connor 1997; Featherstone 1991; Jameson 1991). Connor (1997) observes that as each discipline is developing the concept of postmodernism more manifestly within its own area of cultural practice, it draws progressively upon the discoveries and tautologous explications in other disciplines. Hence, similar themes from various kinds of postmodernism have gradually emerged across disciplinary boundaries. Accordingly, postmodernism has become a new philosophical and cultural theory in its own right (Bauman 1988; Best and Kellner 1991; Featherstone 1991; Firat and Venkatesh 1997; Harvey 1990; Vattimo 1992). Bauman (1988, p. 187) proposes that "the concept of 'postmodernity' has a value entirely of its own in so far as it purports to capture and articulate the novel experience of just one, but [*sic*] crucial social category of contemporary society: the intellectuals."

As we are now living through a phase of radicalisation of a society in which ways of life and forms of social organisation have diverged from those fostered by modern institutions (Giddens 1990), it is suggested that we need alternative modes of knowledge and methodology to deal with those new cultural and socio-economic conditions (Foucault 1973, 1980; Heidegger 1977; Jameson 1991; Lyotard 1984; Vattimo 1988). Thus, allied with other critiques of modernism such as feminism, poststructuralism or multiculturalism, assorted discourses of postmodernism have been developed to challenge the modernist paradigm of social knowledge.

Postmodern in its nature, theories of postmodernism yet hold no consensus to adopt any unified definition for its term. Lyotard (1984) defines postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives." Jameson (1984) regards it as "the cultural logic of late capitalism." Vattimo (1988) calls it a movement toward reconfiguring

"the philosophy of difference" (i.e., modernism). Baudrillard (1984) views it as "a response to emptiness." Indeed, postmodernism means different things to different people. Turner (1990, p. 5) comments that "the playfulness of postmodernism(s) precludes any premature foreclosure of its own meaning." Furthermore, Connor (1997, p. 9) postulates the apparent consensus of postmodern discourse that "there is no longer any possibility of consensus, the authoritative announcements of the disappearance of final authority and promotion and recirculation of a total and comprehensive narrative of a cultural condition in which totality is no longer thinkable." Any endeavour to ascertain the definition of 'postmodernism' will probably demolish the multifaceted aspects of it as a phenomenon. Instead, we should explore its pluralistic and paradoxically complex temperament, how and why it occurs, and how it influences us both epistemologically and methodologically.

To speak of postmodernism and postmodernity, it is inevitable to speak of modernism and modernity since the former appears to be some kind of counteraction to, or transition from the latter. Indeed the prefix 'post' in the term 'postmodern' reflects its association with the modern, either as a 'not' or 'after' the 'modern.' First, to avoid linguistic confusion, I would like to explicate my references to the usage of these problematic terms: 'modernity', 'modernism', 'postmodernity' and 'postmodernism'. In this thesis, 'modernity' refers to the time and space or the cultural sensibility that is moulded by the philosophical and socio-cultural ideas and conditions of 'modernism.' Historically the philosophy of 'modernism' arises in the Renaissance as the philosophical break away from classical Antiquity or scholasticism of the Middle Ages (Featherstone 1991), but becomes dynamic from the age of Enlightenment until the present day. Its discourses which are comprehensively called 'the project of modernity' by

Habermas (1983, p. 9) aim "to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic." In this thesis, the term 'modernity' may be used interchangeably with the term 'modern culture'.

The term 'postmodernity' refers to the time and space or the cultural sensibility where conditions mark discontinuities or distinctions from those of modernity. Ironically, these conditions are regarded as the consequences of 'the project of modernity.' Nevertheless, this thesis maintains a non-linear postmodern concept of time and space so that the existence of postmodernity may not signify the end of modernity. There is no temporally clear-cut boundary between postmodernity and modernity. Some literature holds the position that modernity has not come to its end yet and postmodernity is only its radical phase or extension (Giddens 1990; Jameson 1984; Jencks 1987; Lyotard 1984). Giddens (1990) prefers to call this phase of radicalisation in the modern culture 'radicalised modernity or high modernity' to 'postmodernity.' Whatever it is called or whether it is possibly a mature stage or a sub-culture of modernity, still it is distinctive and significant enough to be considered as a new paradigm of culture in its own right. This thesis labels this new paradigm of culture as 'postmodernity' which may be used interchangeably with the term 'postmodern culture.'

The term 'postmodernism' refers to the philosophical and sociocultural ideas that presumably offer a better understanding or knowledge of the culturally constituted world than modernism. It can be viewed as a critique of modernism (Best and Kellner 1991), a new philosophical and cultural movement (Vattimo 1988), or an alternative mode of knowledge to deal with postmodernity (Lyotard

1984). Turner (1990, p. 11) endorses Berman's[7] view of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism that "it is modernism which thus paradoxically lays the foundations of postmodernism by pure destruction." Apparently, postmodernism is believed to be a positive development that opposes the oppressive aspects of modernism and modernity (Best and Kellner 1991). In other words, postmodernism can potentially liberate human beings from what Weber calls 'the iron cage of bureaucracy' of modernism.

These four terms (modernism, modernity, postmodernism, postmodernity) should not be considered separately; they are dialectical and closely intertwined with each other. It is modernism that shapes modernity and conversely it is modernity where the discourses of modernism develop. Faith in modernism pushes the modern world towards postmodernity in which emerges the concept of postmodernism. Simultaneously postmodernism propels postmodernity. While postmodernism aspires to emancipate the world from modernism, some of its discourses are still based on those of modernism (Best and Kellner 1991).

1.2 Modernism and the Project of Modernity

> A good law must be good for everyone in exactly
> the same way that a true proposition is true for all.
>
> Condorcet[8]

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[7] Berman, M (1982) "All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity" London: Verso.
[8] Quoted in Harvey 1990, p. 13.

1.2.1 The Ideas of Modernism

Modernism is a philosophical framework which advocates universalism. Localism, or what Foucault (1973, p. xii) calls "respect... differences," seems to be disregarded. This totalising mode of modern thought reduces the differential and plural nature of the social world into one universal reality in order to keep it in favour of conformity and homogeneity (Best and Kellner 1991). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, modernism, which is mainly dominated by Enlightenment thought, is philosophical and socio-cultural ideas that aim "to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic" (Habermas 1983). The ideas strive to liberate human beings from the traditional medieval societies which are believed to have been shadowed by irrationalities of myth, religion and superstition as well as the dark side of human nature (Harvey 1990). Thus, in modernity, reason becomes the source of progress in knowledge and society. Cahoone (1996, p. 27) describes the modern champion of reason:

> ... above all that humans more or less universally possess a faculty called "reason," less a body of truths than a capacity and a method for grasping them, perhaps endowed us by God as the essence of humanity; that reason, independent of the dictates of tradition and authority, is the ultimate and legitimate earthly judge of truth, beauty, moral goodness and political order; that this reason is at war with ignorance and superstition; that its exercise by the individual is to be encouraged; and that the meaning of human existence is in some measure to be fulfilled by using reason to grasp a larger share of truth and to reconstruct human society, materially and politically ...

The discourses of modernism centre on reason, human emancipation and progress. Rational forms of social organisations and rational modes of thought have

been developed according to universal reason. Rationalisation is the key constituent to keep the social world orderly and reliable. Being inspired by science, modernism aims at the infinite progress of knowledge as well as the infinite advance towards social and moral betterment (Habermas 1983). Habermas (1983) comments that the project of modernity promotes not only the control of natural forces but also understanding of the world and of the self, moral progress, the justice of institutions and even human happiness.

Weber characterises modernity into three main differential spheres: science, morality and art. Each sphere possesses the autonomy indicated by its experts that separates itself from the hermeneutics of everyday communication (Habermas 1983). For instance, in the sphere of art, there is an established boundary between the so-called 'high art' or 'cultural art', such as museum paintings, ballet or classical music, and 'everyday life art', such as advertisements, folk dance or popular music. Aesthetic judgement is construed in the logical frame of moral judgement and understanding from scientific knowledge. Certainly, this constrained aesthetic judgement is usually postulated by acclaimed art specialists. Artistic aspects of our mundane everyday lives have hardly been acknowledged by modernism.

1.2.1a Science as the Locus of Knowledge

In modernity, scientific knowledge holds the privileged locus of truth to explain and govern the world. Firat and Venkatesh (1995, p. 248) note that "the sphere of science was assigned the norms of reason and truth, and the purity of science became a condition for maintaining social progress." Modernism affirms that truth is single, universal and immutable. There is only one certain and knowable reality in any phenomenon; thus, once it has been discovered by the

systematic basis of science, that phenomenon can be controlled, generalised and predicted. The world as well as the self is seen as a transcendental, unified and fixed entity that proceeds linearly. Within this framework of modernism, there exists the science of humanity known as 'positivism.' The positivist movement or idea, introduced by Comte in the mid-nineteenth century, advocates that human beings are suitable objects for scientific study. Human beings are perceived as cognitive subjects who hold consistently rationalised attitudes and beliefs. Consequently, with proper systematic observation and rigorous reasoning, we can elucidate and forecast human behaviour. Apparently, scientific knowledge can produce "mathematics of human behaviour as precise as the mathematics of machines" (Russell[9] in Gergen 1991, p. 30).

With such faith in rational and systematic knowledge, the project of modernity acquires "the establishment of expert systems" which bears differential power in the society (Giddens 1990). An individual or group who claims to possess specialised knowledge would have power to control or legitimise discourses of such knowledge. In our field of consumer research, this idea reflects on how researchers hold a privileged point of observation over the subjects being studied, and how they assert their explanation of the subjects' behaviour without considering the subjects' own perspectives. Observations of consumer culture in novels or films are neglected due to their unscientific nature. The consumer's everyday experience is hardly taken into account as a source of scientific knowledge.

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[9] Russell, Bertrand (1956), *Our Knowledge of the External World,* New York: Menton.

1.2.1b Dualism and Difference

Attempting to classify and regulate the world through a systematic construction of knowledge and discourse, modernism simply presents any domain of reality in dichotomous fashion (Derrida 1976) such as science/art, economy/culture, objectivity/subjectivity, rational/emotional, functional/symbolic, mind/body, production/consumption, signified/signifier, subject/object, male/female, West/East. The boundary between each pair is clear-cut. Each duality represents two different independent principles and the first one generally holds a superior status over the other. Presumably, the superiority of the first term to the second in each dichotomy is equated to that of the first one in other dichotomies. For example, male is perceived to equate to science, rational or subject; while female is to art, emotion and object. Vattimo (1988) regards this idea in modernism as 'the philosophy of difference.'

In the sphere of modern industrial capitalism, economy has a privileged realm of discourse over culture and the distinction of this economy/culture duality is mirrored in the domain of the production/consumption dichotomy (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Regarded as an engine and essence of economic progress, production has primary status over consumption. Firat and Venkatesh (1995) reckon that, in the modern point of view, while production creates economic value for society, consumption does not create anything of significant value, but is only an activity of value-destruction. Additionally, it is considered that production requires special skills and knowledge (e.g., allocation of resources, technologies), but consumption does not demand any speciality. Consequently, a producer also holds a primary status over a consumer. From a modern perspective, consumers do not

create or add any value to a product, but just deplete the product's value created by a producer. This value refers to economic value that is usually based on the product's utility.

Since economy is recognised as the engine of modern society, it has a primary status over culture. Consequently, studies of consumption are considered mainly from an economic perspective, not from a cultural viewpoint. Central to the modern economic project is the improvement of the consumer's standard of living through the provision of more and better products by means of scientific technologies (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Modern consumption is definitely conceptualised as only a need-driven activity. The focus here is on the functional aspects of products that can best satisfy the consumer's need. Modernism views consumption entirely in the term of market logic which assumes that consumers privately know what they want before they arrive on the market, and they will pursue the best means rationally to maximise their satisfaction (Slater 1997).

Eclipsed by economic supremacy, the cultural aspect is minimalised. Consumer behaviour is viewed as a universal, culturally independent phenomenon. An English person buying a Rover is similar to a Thai person buying one. The symbolic code of such consumption is disregarded. Modernism fails to acknowledge that consumers live in a culturally constituted world, and that consumption is embedded within social, cultural and symbolic realms (Barthes 1972; Bourdieu 1984). Additionally, as modernism focuses on consumption rationality, it deserts the emotional aspects of consumption such as consumers' aesthetic pleasures, dreams and desires (Featherstone 1991).

1.2.1c I Think Therefore I Am

Descartes' cogito is the most powerful statement that defines the rational capacity of the consumer in modernity. Individualism looms large in the modern culture. A modern man[10] is encouraged to liberate himself from traditional social influence through his internal resource of reason (Slater 1997). He is encouraged to pursue his self-interest independently and rationally. To realise his existence, he needs to define himself without any guidance from others. He must use his reason to decide who he is, what he wants and how to best pursue his interests. Thus, a modern man is perceived to be an autonomously and rationally self-defining being. Modern central values and goals are the individual's liberty from social interference. Cova (1997, p. 298-299) points out that "In the modern view, the individual was primary, he or she existed first as a pre-social being, relations were secondary and essentially instrumental. Differentiation, more than communion, guided the action of individuals." At societal level, the main concern is only to ensure that the social conditions allow individuals to define and pursue their self-interests as long as it does not violate other individuals' freedom.

In modern consumer research, the consumer is then assumed to be a cognitive, unified, centred and totalised subject who can be measured by scientific methods. (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Slater 1997) The consumer realm is single and immutable, and it consists of formal means-ends rationality. Thus, studies of consumer behaviour can be conducted individually in an enclosed system that is controlled and isolated from the social context. The behaviour is perceived to be

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[10]I intend to use a masculine term for a modern individual to illustrate the modern notion of male superiority that a man is rational and autonomous while a woman is irrational and manipulatable (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Slater 1997). This notion is a key critique of feminism.

linear and consistent, thus it can be mathematically modelled. In consumption studies, often the focus is on how the consumer processes information to make her/his buying decisions. The consumer is viewed as an information-centred person who is systematically seeking out and manipulating a product's functional information in order to make the best satisfying choice. From a modern angle, the symbolic aspect of consumption has usually been ignored.

Obsessed with rationality, modern consumer research pays attention exclusively to the 'mind' of the consumer and entirely neglects the 'body' (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Foucault 1980; Joy and Venkatesh 1994; Thompson and Hirschman 1995). The body is seen as a physical object to be controlled by the reason of the mind. Our sense of identity is not constrained by the body. It is only the mind that represents the essential self. Joy and Venkatesh (1994, p. 336) comment that the conventional study of consumer behaviour examines consumers in terms of various non-corporeal categories (e.g., attitudes, perceptions), and there is hardly any reference to the body itself in the depiction of the consumer. They explicate further that this is according to the modern belief that the mind makes the body consume; therefore, the researcher does not need to deal directly with the body.

1.2.2 Globalisation and Mediaisation of Modernity

The market economy of capitalism is one of various social means that promote the individual's autonomy in modernity (Cova 1997; Slater 1997). Slater (1997) remarks that modern consumption is originally based on the ideal of a liberal and commercial society comprising free individuals pursuing their interests through

free association in the public sphere. Consumers are free from traditional consumption that was tied strictly to social status. Consumer sovereignty is central to modern consumption since it "brings together the three defining obsessions of modernity: freedom, reason and progress" (Slater 1997, p. 35). Science thus not only promises the infinite progress of knowledge but also the domination of nature that emancipates consumers from scarcity and natural calamity (Harvey 1990). The pursuit of new material and labour resources, especially from colonial exploitation, and the development of multifarious technologies to fulfil this modern ambition leads to the Industrial Revolution, whereby production is the engine and essence of modernisation (Slater 1997).

Equipped with production, transportation and communication technologies, capitalist industrialisation dramatically propels the project of modernity across the global sphere (Wallerstein 1974). The production and commercialisation of Western brands, like Lux or Coca-Cola, is found in almost every corner of the world. Modernism, viewed as the prominent success factor of the affluent West, becomes the sacred ideology for the world to follow. Giddens (1990, p. 175) notes, "Modernity is universalising not only in term of its global impact, but in terms of reflexive knowledge fundamental to its dynamic character." Aspiring to become modernised, numerous countries march toward industrialisation, basically under 'the dominance of the West' (Giddens 1990, p.176).

The development of media and information technologies profoundly influences our way of living. Globalised media elevates the level of time-space distanciation tremendously (Giddens 1990). It influences "the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local

happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (Giddens 1990, p. 64). While globalised communities are apparently integrated via shared mediated experience, they are simultaneously contested by numerous exposures to different realities. Gergen (1991, p.6) remarks, "Emerging technologies saturate us with the voices of mankind – both harmonious and alien." What we 'think to be universally true' becomes doubtful; what we 'know to be fictional' becomes possible. The distinction between the image and reality becomes blurred (Baudrillard 1983). The grand narrative of modernism is challenged by pluralism and localism (Lyotard 1984). Inevitably, globalisation and mediaisation brings about a new cultural sensibility – a postmodern consciousness (Featherstone 1991; Gergen 1991; Harvey 1990).

1.3 The Emergence of Postmodernity:

Consumer Culture

All that is solid melts into air;

all that is holy is profaned.

Marx and Engels 1952, p. 25

It does not seem uncommon anymore for a Thai woman studying in England to have American-branded cereals for breakfast, a chicken Tikka sandwich for lunch and Chinese take-away for dinner; or for her to read a Thai newspaper on the Internet in the morning, watch the Sydney 2000 Olympic games from Australia in the afternoon and go to a Russian opera performed by an English company in the evening. People who live in one part of the world may be able to share the same experience with people who live far apart. The influence of distant happenings on

proximate events and on intimacies of the self becomes more common (Giddens 1991). We are experiencing an intense phase of 'time-space compression' (Harvey 1990). 'The project of modernity' has generated radical changes in contemporary culture via globalisation and mediaisation (Giddens 1990; Thompson 1990). From this, there emerges an entirely new kind of culture – the postmodern culture, the conditions of which shape a new world of consumption.

In postmodern society, we encounter cultural sensibility that embraces several entangled, and dialectical (and perhaps paradoxical) correlated features. Ideally, these features should be observed holistically. However, in order to grasp the epitome of postmodernity, I ironically classify and discuss its conditions separately under six critical themes: consumers as ultimate producers, hyperreality, fragmentation, paradoxical juxtaposition, de-differentiation, and the aestheticisation of everyday life. Although in this chapter I base my literature reviews on Western societies, I reserve that what we regard as postmodern conditions are not exclusively known to have existed only in a post-industrialised (postmodern) society. In fact, they are recognised to exist in non-western societies like Thailand, where modernity has not yet come to its radicalised stage. This I shall discuss further in Chapter Five.

1.3.1 Consumers as Ultimate Producers

While modernity represents a culture of production, postmodernity is primarily a culture of consumption where consumers paradoxically become ultimate producers of the products consumed (Featherstone 1991; Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Although production and consumption are recognised as two sides of the same coin,

in the modernist thought production has primary status over consumption since production is cherished as a value-creation activity while consumption is simply viewed as a value-destruction activity. However, from the postmodern perspective production and consumption are both acknowledged as an activity of value-creation for a product. On balance, production and consumption should not be treated as two separate entities as their boundaries are apparently fused on a horizontal continuum of value-creation process where consumption plays an ultimate role in ascribing the product's symbolic value.

Being shaped by capitalism and mediaisation, the project of modernity brings about consumer culture, of which consumption is not regarded as derived purely from production. Rather consumption becomes the central activity where consumers appropriate various signs and images in the market, especially in the media, and reproduce products' value symbolically (Baudrillard 1998; Brown 1995; Elliott 1994b). As a result, fixed economic value created by production is replaced by variable symbolic value re-created by consumption (Slater 1997). Consumers become active producers of product meanings; boundaries between production and consumption become blurred (Firat and Venkatesh 1995).

In fact symbolic consumption is not a unique phenomenon manifesting only in postmodernity; consumption is always a meaningful activity, whereby "the products are acting on the individual to produce a certain type of human being" (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p. 254). Throughout history and across societies we commonly exploit consumption activities to define ourselves in society (Douglas and Isherwood 1996, p. 36-81; McCracken 1988a). However, I maintain that making sense of consumption in postmodernity is more complex than other cultural

epochs/societies. While a product in those historical periods or traditional societies holds a relatively fixed meaning thus representing a particular social category or identity, consumption symbolism in postmodernity is evidently polysemic and dynamic (Brown 1995; Elliott 1994b). Apparently, postmodern consumption entails active manipulation of commodity-signs (Baudrillard 1998). Thus, in postmodernity product symbolism becomes unstable, flexible and negotiable; it is not only manifest in the design and imagery of the production and marketing processes. Rather symbolism emerges in the course of consumption (Leiss 1978) as consumers renegotiate it to create their self-identities and to position themselves in their social worlds (Elliott 1997). Hence, postmodern consumption becomes cultural as social life becomes deregulated and social relationships become more variable and less structured by modern capitalism organised around production (Featherstone 1991; Jameson 1984). Inevitably, postmodern consumers who now become the ultimate producers must acquire cultural capital in order to appropriate their consumption symbolism (Bourdieu 1984) – the cultural capital which enables them to deal with the hyperreal ambience of postmodernity (Slater 1997).

1.3.2 Hyperreality

As mediaisation bombards consumer society with countless signs, messages and images, the distinction between the image and reality is effaced (Baudrillard 1983; Jameson 1984). Postmodern social life is dominated by the dramatic proliferation of simulations, whereby media, information technology and cybernetic control systems replace production as the organising principle of society. In this way, a reality is simulated and re-simulated, and its simulation becomes a chain of endless significations, the intensification of which dissolves the original experience

and ground of 'the real' (Baudrillard 1983, Derrida 1970). The boundary between simulation or the unreal and the real becomes blurred as one simulated signifier is replaced by another simulated signifier in a continuous play (Derrida 1970). Baudrillard (1983, p. 2) elucidates, "Simulation is no longer that of territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origins or reality: a hyperreal." Baudrillard (p.23) argues that hyperreality is not unreal or surreal, but more real than real; it is a real reproduced in 'a hallucinatory resemblance' with itself. Simply put, in postmodernity, as hyperreality becomes the determinant of reality, simulations, signs and images seemingly constitute our world.

In consumer society, hyperreality is evident across the entire marketing spectrum (Brown 1995). Consumers are exposed to endless signs and simulations, especially from advertising and retailing milieus (e.g., theme parks or restaurants). Firat and Venkatesh (1995) observe that when marketing signs and simulations capture our imagination, we tend to accept the authentication of those simulations. For example, some tourists who visit Oxford on a day excursion would rather queue up to enter the Oxford Story[11] than just roam around the Oxford colleges in order to 'really experience Oxford.' Brown (1995) notes that the more marketers manipulate consumer desires and fantasies in their marketing campaigns, the further meanings are detached from their referents (i.e., products). Firat and Venkatesh (1995) explain that as we consume signs that do not exhaust in the way things do, the meanings of signs are subject to an endless reappropriation and recontextualisation of previous signs. Consequently, signs are able to float free from objects and are

[11] The Oxford Story advertisement describes its service, "Experiencing the history of the University of Oxford through life-like scenes and authentic sounds and smells."

available for use in a multiplicity of associative relations (Baudrillard 1998). One example is that a group of lesbians in the UK employ signs associated with Ikea, the Scandinavian furnishing store, to create a theme for their 'Dikea' group identity in the London Gay Pride Festival (Ritson, Elliott, Eccles 1996).

1.3.3 Fragmentation

The transformation of reality into images, especially through the electronic media, makes us feel as if we live in a world of perpetual present, where we seem to lose a sense of historical past (Featherstone 1991; Jameson 1984; Vattimo 1988). There is no unified and linear historical continuity; it is only what we are experiencing now that exists (Vattimo 1988). Baudrillard (1988) claims that in postmodernity there are no longer permanent organisations, nexus of causality, or patterns of determination through which we can delineate or connect paths of historical development – the world is deconstructed into pieces of disjointed experiences (Baudrillard 1984). Within this schizophrenic fragmentation of time, there emerges a schizoid culture where multiple realities coexist (Featherstone 1991). Postmodern (hyper)realities are simulated as collages of recontextualised, multilayered, multi-meaning images (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Thus, no individual needs to commit to any one moment, any specific project, any particular lifestyle, or any unified sense of being.

As subjects of postmodernity, consumers are de-centred into fragmented entities who inhibit a present moment in an ocean of endless flow of paradoxical juxtapositions that take us beyond stable sense (Featherstone 1991; Jameson 1983). The modern ambition for each individual to discover the unified and unique self

seems impossible. This de-centring of the subject leads consumers beyond individualism into a new 'aesthetic paradigm' in which they gather temporarily in fluid 'postmodern tribes' (Maffesoli 1988). This new form of tribalism is transient, ephemeral and imagined (Gabriel and Lang 1995). It is where consumers come together to experience moments of ecstasy, empathy and affectual immediacy (Maffesoli 1988). Each individual identifies her/himself with other 'tribe fellows' through shared life-styles or shared fantasies; the de-centred self is situationally shaped by membership to those 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983). In this way, a consumer who belongs to an academic tribe in the morning may become a member of a rock-and-roll tribe in the evening. Juxtapositions of the self possibly coexist.

1.3.4 Paradoxical Juxtaposition (Pastiche)

Living in a hyperreal and schizophrenic world, a postmodern life encounters profuse juxtapositions of experience. Things that seem oppositional can be mutually characterised; for instance, a compilation of ancient folklores in a CD-ROM or a laser-light presentation in a religious ceremony. Firat and Venkatesh (1995, p.255) comment, "Liberation from commitment and necessity of centered connections, and a tolerance for juxtaposition of anything with anything else, allow for abutting opposites." Hence, in postmodernity, there is no need to reconcile the differences and paradoxes into a unified reality. We can mix-and-match the endless flow of signs playfully. Featherstone (1991, p. 83) recounts Ewen and Ewen[12]: "Today there is no fashion: there are only fashions. No rules, only choices.

[12] Ewen, Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen (1982), *Channel of Desire,* New York: McGraw-Hill, p. 249-251.

Everyone can be anyone." Extremely put, postmodernity is where 'anything goes' – it is (from a modern perspective) chaos and disorder. The social (dis)order is paradoxical and ambiguous; it becomes pastiche. Jameson (1983, p. 114) describes:

> Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of the stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something *normal* compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic.

By this pastiche social condition, postmodern culture becomes a 'depthless culture' where there is nothing credible beneath or beyond the flat landscape of endless signification (Jameson 1991). The opposition of modern reality is dissolved.

1.3.5 De-differentiation

Changes of social life and social order in postmodernity, particularly in the cultural sphere which involves modes of production and consumption, lead to the erosion and effacement of established hierarchies (Lash 1988). Domains of reality, which are dichotomously classified in modernity such as production/consumption, subject/object, mind/body or art/life, are increasingly dissolved. Boundaries of the previously incontestable dualism become blurred, and the formerly vertical hierarchies erode towards a horizon plane of equivalence (Lash 1990). Inevitably, the systematically firm construction of modern knowledge and discourse turns unstable, malleable and mixable. Slater (1997, p. 196) observes this postmodern phenomenon:

> In watching the flow of television, for example, we may be watching soap opera one minute, opera the next; flick from melodrama to politics, to a drama-documentary that merges the two; attend more pleasurably to an advert than to a programme; observe a real war in progress or a politic event staged for a camera. Things which inhabited different world and value systems, and were consumed by different audiences, now occupy a single cultural space.

Indeed, through mediaisation the 'liquefaction of signs and images' entails the effacement of various boundaries or separations, most notably the erosion of the distinction between high culture and mass or popular culture (Jameson 1983, p. 112). In the postmodern era, it is not uncommon to find a poster of Monet's painting in a teenager's room, or an image of a product (e.g., Campbells Soup in Warhol's works) exhibited in an art museum. While museum arts are reproduced as commodities, product design and advertising are celebrated and museumified as art (Featherstone 1991). Hence, through the saturation of signs and reproduction of images and simulations, everything in postmodern social life becomes cultural (Jameson 1983).

1.3.6 The Aestheticisation of Everyday Life

As boundaries between high culture and popular culture become effaced, everyday life (i.e., having, living and being) is aestheticised (Featherstone 1991). That is, life may be viewed as an art project that we enthusiastically create through everyday consumption. In postmodernity, consumption is not so much an activity to solve problems as it is a desire to engage in experiences for pleasure, excitement, comfort or emotional nourishment (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). This way, a

mundane consumer becomes an artist as s/he artistically weaves her/his various disjointed experiences to fabricate a pastiche of her/his life. Slater (1997, p. 197) comments:

> Consumer culture is a fancy-dress party in which we dress up our everyday lives in ever-changing costumes, drawn from an inexhaustible wardrobe and driven by impulses which are themselves prompted by the life of the party rather than the life outside it.

Styles, references and images are central here. While these signifiers can circulate independently from their original contexts, we need substantial cultural capital to make sense of them (Slater 1997). Playfully, we assemble and deconstruct various styles and images in order to obtain the gratification of such experience. Furthermore, to celebrate the aestheticisation of everyday life, we engage in various signs and consumption activities that generate direct bodily excitement and aesthetic pleasure (Featherstone 1991). Simultaneously, there emerges a body culture where we enact, negotiate or subvert our identities through bodily practices (Joy and Venkatesh 1994; Woodward 1997). The body becomes a significant site of cultural knowledge that cannot be neglected.

1.4 Postmodernism:

An Alternative Mode of Knowledge

> Modernism is dominant but dead.
> Habermas 1983

1.4.1 The Ideas of Postmodernism

Now that we encounter an altered social world regarded as postmodernity, it is suggested that we need an alternative mode of knowledge to modernism the philosophy of which is believed to be deeply problematic (e.g., Foucault 1984; Jameson 1991; Lyotard 1984). Modernism is much criticised as narrow, dogmatic and unidimensional in its working philosophy (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). The modern advocacy of certainty, universality and rationality seems unequal to acquiring meaningful knowledge of a hyperreal, fragmented and juxtaposed world that is embedded with irrationality. Moreover, the modern construction of dualism is regarded as 'unsuccessful historical attempts to legitimate partial truths' (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p. 240) since it excludes or undervalues supposedly inferior status (Derrida 1976). It also appears inadequate in grasping the breaking-down phenomenon of established hierarchies in postmodernity. Furthermore, the modern champion of science as the locus of knowledge for explaining the world poses a limitation to comprehend the complexity and diversity of human experience. Additionally, the modern belief in the immutable unified and deterministic reality (and the self) seems unfit as an explanation of the self-evident uncertainty and pastiche of postmodern phenomena.

To challenge the long-established ideas of modernism, many critics (e.g., Baudrillard, Foucault, Jameson, Lyotard, etc.) put forward their viewpoints, which concurrently contribute to form a new philosophy labelled 'postmodernism' (Best and Kellner 1991). Eagleton[13] (in Harvey 1990, p.9) explains:

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[13] Eagleton, Terry (1987), "Awakening from Modernity," *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 February 1987.

> Post-modernism signals the death of such 'metanarratives' whose secretly terroristic function was to ground and legitimate the illusion of a 'universal' human history. We are now in the process of wakening from the nightmare of modernity, with its manipulative reason and the fetish of the totality, into the laid-back pluralism of the post-modern, that the heterogeneous ranges of life-styles and language games which has renounced the nostalgic urge to totalise and legitimate itself. ... Science and philosophy must jettison their grandiose metaphysical claims and view themselves more modestly as just another set of narratives.

The discourses of postmodernity emphasise negation of the metanarratives of modern theory. Postmodernism aims to deconstruct modernism not in order to seal it in its own image, but in order to open its closed system, to rewrite its coherent timeless reality and to contest its universal reason (Foster 1983). As I have previously discussed modernism, including some of its critiques, and the postmodern conditions and consciousness, I shall not reiterate those details again. Rather I shall examine the main notions of postmodernism that make it distinct from modernism.

1.4.1a Incredulity toward Metanarratives

Lyotard (1984) defines postmodernism as 'incredulity toward metanarratives.' Postmodernism rejects the modern totalising macroperspectives on reality in favour of localising microtheory and micropolitics, especially in the study of human phenomena. It criticises the modernist effort to create a scientific and rational foundation to obtain absolute knowledge of human experience as oppressive and reductive (Best and Kellner 1991). Foucault (1980) comments that the modern metanarratives need to be superseded by a plurality of forms of

knowledge and microanalyses. Nietzsche (1967) suggests that a multiplicity of perspectives provide an enhanced approach to human knowledge rather than a solitary perspective. He denies the existence of facts, and insists there are only interpretations of reality. Accordingly, we should seek multiple interpretations of phenomena, as there is "no limit to the ways in which the world can be interpreted" (Nietzsche 1967, p.326).

This 'against metanarratives' idea promises a better understanding of a world, especially the one under postmodern conditions (Lyotard 1984). The metanarratives, which advocate the transcendentally universal structure of human beings thus resolve all human contradictions into the unified and immutable entity, appear short-sighted in seeing the entire picture of hyperreal, fragmented and juxtaposed phenomena. In order to acquire knowledge, it is crucial that we recognise the arbitrary, differential and non-representative nature of human experience. Being recognised as a socially constructed entity, our experience is only a moment in a continuous process of interpretation where meaning is produced not in a stable, referential relation between signified and signifier, but rather within the endless, context-dependent dialectic of such experience. Hence, we need to consider locally contextual aspects of human experience such as society, culture, language or practice. Furthermore, Cahoone (1996, p. 15) notes, "Everything is constituted by relations to other things, hence nothing is simple, immediate or total present, and no analysis of anything can be complete or final." Thus, to champion the metanarratives of rational universality, total objectivity, scientific causality and innate certainty is to accept a very restrictive view of human reality. Nevertheless, we need to be aware that the postmodernist incredulity toward the modernist metanarratives may ironically make postmodernism become another paradigm of

metanarratives itself. Thus, to avoid this pitfall we should strive for "conscious pluralism" (Morgan 1983) and allow flexibility in pursuing knowledge.

1.4.1b Welcoming Pluralism

Under postmodernism, we welcome pluralism. Postmodernism refuses to privilege any one domain of reality or one perspective of analysis. That is, we acknowledge the coexistence of multifarious realities as well as promote the multiplicity of methods and interpretations to understand them. It is unnecessary to achieve commensurable, coherent and total knowledge. Postmodernism valorises incommensurability, fragmentation and difference as the "antidote to repressive modern modes of theory and rationality" (Best and Kellner 1991, p.39). Pluralism liberates the neglected domains of realities oppressed by modernism, and puts an end to the dominance of any one regime of truth. Thus, realities become free from the dichotomously hierarchical system. The suppressed domains such as consumption, female, body, culture, symbolic, myth and everyday life are acknowledged as a significant locus of knowledge and discourse.

1.4.1c Sensitivity to the Other

Foucault (1973) suggests that we not only need to acknowledge differences of phenomena but also respect those differences. That is, we should not treat the domain of different realities as superior or inferior. We must be open, tolerant and sensitive to 'the other' in order to gain wider perspectives on human experience.

The more perspectives we can gain on the phenomena, the richer and deeper our interpretations and knowledge (Nietzsche 1967). Since postmodernism recognises the dynamic, non-referential relation between signifier and signified, we should situate ourselves in the phenomenological realm of local experience in order to obtain perspectives of the other's thoughts and feelings (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). It is important that we do not employ universal representations to interpret the human experience; rather we should consider cultural and sub-cultural background in order to acquire understanding of the symbolic phenomena.

1.4.1d De-centring Human Subject

Contrary to modernism that hypothesises a pre-given, unified and permanent human quintessence that precedes all social operations, postmodernism posits that the human subject is socially constructed, multifaceted and malleable (Lyotard 1984). Postmodernism conceives the human subject as engaging in non-linearity of thoughts and practices as well as in fragmented, juxtaposed and spontaneous behaviours (Gergen 1991). The human subject should therefore be regarded as a constituted rather than a constituting consciousness (Foucault 1980), a symbolic rather than a cognitive subject (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). In order to grasp human experience, we must de-centre the subject and analyse it as a complex and inconsistent composition of symbolism.

Postmodernism negates the modern idea of individualism that advocates the human subject as an autonomously and rationally self-defining entity (Foucault 1988). Since the human subject exists in a fabric of social relations, it inevitably

engages in dialectical relationship between the self and its social world (Jenkins 1996; Lyotard 1984). Hence, to take the subject out of its social context is to ignore a crucial aspect that constitutes the subject. Additionally, postmodernism also embraces the intermingling between the subject and the object (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). That is, the subject may incorporate the object as a part of its extended self (Belk 1988).

1.4.2 Postmodernism and Consumer Research

Firat and Venkatesh (1995) propose that applying postmodernism in consumer research allows us a liberatory potential to grasp broader perspectives on consumer experience than by employing modernism. In other words, they believe that the interpretive approach advocated by postmodernism offers a better opportunity to understand the complex nature of consumer behaviour than the positivist approach championed by modernism[14]. Ontologically, postmodernism negates the existence of the single, coherent and immutable reality in favour of multiple, de-centred and flexible realities. It criticises positivism that treats consumers as deterministic and divisible entities which can be controlled and

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[14] For more insightful investigations into both positivism and interpretivism, please consult Hirschman, Elizabeth C. (1986), "Humanistic Inquiry in Marketing Research: Philosophy, Method, and Criteria," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 23 (August), 237-249.Hirschman (1986), Hirschman, Elizabeth C. and Morris B. Holbrook (1992), *Postmodern Consumer Research*, Newbury Park:SAGE Publications.Hirschman and Holbrook (1992), Holbrook, Morris B. (1995), *Consumer Research: Introspective Essays on the Study of Consumption*, Thousand Oaks:SAGE Publications.Holbrook (1995), Hudson, Laurel A. and Julie L. Ozanne (1988), "Alternative Way of seeking Knowledge in Consumer Research," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 14, (March), 508-521.Hudson and Ozanne (1988), Lincoln, Yvonna S. and Egon G. Guba (1985), *Naturalistic Inquiry*, Beverly Hills, CA:SAGE Publications.Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Ozanne, Julie L. and Laurel A. Hudson (1989), "Exploring Diversity in Consumer Research," in *Interpretive Consumer Research*, ed. Elizabeth C. Hirschman, Provo, UT:Association for Consumer Research, 1-9.Ozanne and Hudson (1989).

studied scientifically in isolation from cultural contexts. Postmodernism views consumers as socially constructed; thus, we need to deal with their local consumption practices instead of trying to examine them universally. For this, we have to recognise that consumption is cultural and consumption processes may not be universal across cultural and sub-cultural groups (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Accordingly, cultural context of location as well as of individuals and social groups should be incorporated epistemologically into the interpretations.

As postmodernism regards consumers as the ultimate producers of consumption symbolism, we should explore the symbolic aspect of consumers' everyday practices and how they negotiate consumption symbolism in their social spheres (Bourdieu 1984). Since the body becomes a significant site of symbolism where consumers act out their desires and fantasies, postmodern consumer research should not ignore it in favour of the mind (Joy and Venkatesh 1994). Essentially, we should delve into how consumers appropriate symbolism from the hyperreal world and integrate it in their everyday consumption. Indeed, in order to achieve this, we must not separate consumers from their social settings (Holbrook 1995). Epistemologically, we should employ triangulation across theories, methods and data sources (i.e., informants) in order to strive to grasp the complexity and ambiguity of consumer experience (Ozanne and Hudson 1989; Wallendorf and Belk 1989). More importantly, we must be sensitive to consumers studied by endeavouring to comprehend them from their perspectives. We should also allow any emergent epistemology to transpire in the course of the study and accept the achievement of multiple and possibly paradoxical interpretations (Holbrook 1995;

Ozanne and Hudson 1989). Indeed, we should acknowledge that consumer experience can be dynamic, multifaceted and juxtaposed.

1.5 Chapter Summary

In this chapter I lay down an epistemological platform and a philosophical map of theoretical and methodological paths for my thesis journey. I examine how postmodernism becomes a promising alternative mode of knowledge to understand consumer behaviour in postmodernity. To do this, I discuss ideas of both modernism and postmodernism as well as the features of postmodernity. To begin with, I illustrate how the project of modernity leads to an emergence of a new kind of cultural consciousness – the postmodern culture. Then I discuss key features of postmodernity, which are consumers as ultimate producers, hyperreality, fragmentation, pastiche, de-differentiation and the aestheticisation of everyday life. Later, I propose the ideas of postmodernism as an alternative mode to gain knowledge, particularly in the field of consumer research. That is, first and foremost we need to recognise that consumers are situated in a culturally constituted world. Thus the consumer self is socially constructed, complex and malleable. Furthermore, we should acknowledge the coexistence of multifarious realities and respect those differences. Therefore to study consumers we should employ localising microtheories instead of metanarratives of science. Importantly, we should try to understand their behaviours from their perspectives. For this, interpretive research approach is recommended.

Chapter Two

The Postmodern Self

and Symbolic Consumption

> [In the postmodern world] Our Identity is moulded as consumers.
>
> Sarup 1996, p.120

> Consumption moved from a means towards an end – living – to being an end in its own right. Living life to the full became increasingly synonymous with consumption.
>
> Gabriel and Lang 1995, p. 7

In postmodernity[15], where society becomes more global but simultaneously fragmented, pastiche and hyperreal, we are threatened by a number of "dilemmas of the self": fragmentation, powerlessness, uncertainty and a struggle against commodification (Giddens 1991, p. 187-201). Largely, these dilemmas are propelled by "the looming threat of personal meaninglessness" (Giddens 1991, p. 201) since the postmodern self becomes increasingly saturated by "the onset of a multiphrenic condition, in which one begins to experience the vertigo of unlimited multiplicity" (Gergen 1991, p. 49). Endeavouring to achieve a sense of our existence in this pluralised world, we are forced to choose, create, sustain, negotiate and display lifestyle choices among a perplexing diversity of options (Giddens 1991). Indeed, we need to design 'the self' that is not only profound enough to anchor us in the unruly postmodern world but simultaneously flexible enough to

[15] I maintain that the term "postmodernity" to which I refer throughout this thesis embraces any term (e.g., high modernity, post-industrialisation or late capitalism) that signifies a new paradigm of cultural consciousness as I discussed earlier in Chapter One.

allow us to accommodate the fluidity, multi-facets and paradox of the bewilderingly postmodern realities. Inevitably, the postmodern self becomes de-centred as it fluctuates temporally and situationally (Gergen 1991). Nevertheless, to resolve these dilemmas of the self, we struggle to assemble disjointed elements of our experiences into a coherently meaningful narrative of our existence – the narrative self (Giddens 1991; McAdams 1988; Ricoeur 1984; Thompson 1995).

As I argue in Chapter One that postmodernity is primarily a consumer culture, the postmodern self is thus possibly best grasped through the image of consumption (Baudrillard 1998; Slater 1997). Indeed, we deliberately employ everyday consumption to quench our cravings to create the self (Gabriel and Lang 1995). "We choose a self-identity from the shop – window of the pluralized social world; actions, experiences and objects are all reflexively encountered as part of the need to construct and maintain self-identity" (Slater 1997, p. 85). In this way, we make our consumption choices not only from the products' utilities but also from their symbolic meanings (Belk 1988; Bourdieu 1984; Dittmar 1992; Douglas 1982; Gabriel and Lang 1995; McCracken 1988a). Elliott (1997) elaborates that the functions of the symbolic meanings of products operate in two directions: outward in constructing the social world, *social-symbolism*; and inward in constructing our self-identity, *self-symbolism.*

In this chapter, I aim to lay theoretical foundations regarding the relationship between the postmodern self and symbolic consumption. To commence, I review central ideas regarding the postmodern self. Then I scrutinise how the self is created and sustained in everyday life. Finally, I discuss how vital a role consumption symbolism plays in the self-creation processes.

2.1 The Postmodern Self

> Identities are highly complex, tension filled, contradictory, and inconsistent entities. Only the one who claims to have a simple, definite, and clear-cut identity has an identity problem.
>
> Ma'ari in Gergen 1991, p. 155

Following the ontological stance and the epistemological position proposed in Chapter One, in this chapter I examine concepts of the postmodern self from various perspectives. Firstly, I explore how the self in postmodernity encounters the dilemmas of meaninglessness (or overloading hyperreality) and becomes the saturated self. Secondly, I discuss the concepts of the postmodern self as the contextual self. Endeavouring to employ the 'against metanarratives' approach, I investigate an assortment of micro theories of the self from interdisciplinary viewpoints (e.g., anthropology, philosophy, sociology and social psychology). However, since conceptions of the self are too diverse[16] to be explored comprehensively in this thesis, I maintain to focus my perspectives on the theoretical grounds that the self is a cultural phenomenon that is multifaceted, malleable and contextual. Ironically, I include a few pertinent ideas about the self, which may be regarded modernistic by some scholars, in my discussion about the postmodern self, as I decline the absolute boundaries between the two philosophical paradigms. Furthermore, to complement the Western[17] understanding of the self, I

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[16] Different disciplines may view the concepts of the self from different angles or at different levels. For instance, in a system of legal practice, the self is referred to as an aspect of forensic identity; in psychology, the self may be discussed from a facet of ego identity; and in sociology, the self is conferred as a part of social identity (Gabriel and Lang 1995).

[17] Although I seem to refer to Western and Eastern concepts of the self separately, I uphold that the boundaries between those concepts are blurred. There have been influences of Western ideas on Eastern thinkers and vice versa (Morrison, Robert (1997), *Nietzsche and Buddhism: A Study in Nihilism and Ironic Affinites*, Oxford:Oxford University Press.Morrison 1997; Odin, Steve (1996), *The Social Life in Zen and American Pragmatism*, Albany:State University of New York Press.Odin 1996). For example, Morrison (1997) notes that Nietzsche's The Will to Power was influenced by Buddhist philosophy.

also incorporate notions of the self from Eastern perspectives, especially from the Buddhist angle, into my theoretical point of departure. Basically, I consider that since the empirical study of this thesis is conducted in a Buddhist culture (i.e., Thailand), it is practical to embrace such cultural perspectives in the discussion. Thirdly, as I suggest in Chapter One that the self is intimately intertwined with the body, I also explore how the body becomes a significant site for the creation, continuation and expression of the postmodern self.

2.1.1 The Saturated Self

> Social saturation furnishes us with multiplicity of incoherent and unrelated languages of the self. For everything we "know to be true" about ourselves, other voices within respond with doubt and even derision.
>
> Gergen 1991, p. 6

As postmodernity is emerging, the quintessence of self as a predetermined, stable and unified entity who possesses genuine and certain attributes like reason or emotion becomes doubtful. Ostensibly, we are living in the world where we experience uncertainty and absurdity, which menaces a secure sense of self (Giddens 1991). Through globalisation and mediaisation, the self is exposed to a multiplicity of confused and disconnected (hyper)realities. Giddens (1991, p. 187) comments:

> The transformations of place, and the intrusion of distance into local activities, combined with the centrality of mediated experience, radically change what 'the world' actually is.

Reality is always in question – what was once believed to be universally absolute may now be negotiated or dismantled. "Each reality of self gives way to

reflexive questioning, irony, and ultimately the playful probing of yet another reality. The center fails to hold" (Gergen 1991, p. 7). Evidently, a baby boy can grow into a woman; a woman can marry a woman; cannabis can be useful; development can bring catastrophe; and Mercedes-Benz can be used as a taxi. Practices that are commonly conducted in one culture may be considered eccentric in another culture. For example, the Thais commonly remark of a newborn baby, "what an ugly baby," in order to deceive the spirits who want to take 'a cute baby' away. This may sound ridiculous and irrational to people in other cultures; but for the Thais, such practice is sound: if the spirits exist and if they like a cute baby, it is logical to trick them with such a disguised statement[18].

Even emotion, which is regarded as a universal cognition of the self in modernist perspectives, is also questionable since it is suggested as perceptual, socially-constructed and context-dependent (Denzin 1984). Luxury brands like Versace or Gucci, which were once a source of pride for many nouveaux riche Thais during Thailand's booming economy, may become a source of embarrassment for the owners later, when the kingdom is encountering economic crisis. Indeed, realities are culturally constructed (Berger and Luckman 1966; Geertz 1973). So are reasons and emotions. Accordingly, in postmodernity, we can no longer hold the consistent and confident sense of the knowable self. Gergen (1991, p. 7) argues:

[18] This reminds me of one of my experiences of 'different realities'. When I was studying in America, I once asked an American friend why she studied her subject. Her answer was "it's God's will." I remembered that I (still ignorant/insensitive to the others at that time) had to hold my laughter as I thought, "this woman is weird; what God has to do with her study!" However, now I realise that if God exists and s/he has power to guide our lives, it is rational for my friend to believe that her study was according to God's will.

> In the postmodern world we become increasingly aware that the objects about which we speak are not so much "in the world" as they are products of perspective. Thus, processes such as emotion and reason cease to be real and significant essences of persons; rather, in the light of pluralism we perceive them to be imposters, the outcome of our ways of conceptualizing them.

As a multiplicity of voices is contesting for "the right to reality – to be accepted as legitimate expressions of the true and the good" (Gergen 1991, p. 7), postmodern realities become de-centred and paradoxical. Inevitably, the society as well as the self seems to be infused with a variety of puzzled and disjointed realities. The modern notion of an authentic self with a knowable set of essences is threatened by such dilemmas – dilemmas of social saturation, dilemmas of the saturated self (Gergen 1991). In Gergen's view, the saturated self is an outcome of drastic changes in relationships triggered by globalisation and mediaisation. Overwhelmingly, the postmodern self is beset with ever-increasing intensity of both lived and mediated experience. While we are bombarded with endless signs by the media, we also progressively engage in a variety of social relationships. The more we are saturated with the images and actions of others, the further we are pulled in myriad directions. Thus, the self is torn into pieces as it plays pluralistic roles. This dislocates the self into dilemmas of meaninglessness (Giddens 1991).

Embracing a diversity of social relationships and roles, the saturated self is apparently discouraged from searching for the "truly meaningful" (Gergen 1991, p. 219). Undeniably, not all of our social roles accommodate each other; in fact they are often contradictory. Thus, no matter how much we wish to find a profound commitment that can deeply secure our sense of self in a particular relationship, we may eventually contravene our commitment in another relationship. Consequently,

commitment is increasingly being eroded. Often the postmodern self feels unsettled since it can no longer hold a basic trust that is an essential component in maintaining a modernist sense of meaningfulness (Giddens 1991). Besides the disintegration of genuine commitment, the boundless simulations and images in postmodernity also generate distrust in sincerity. Gergen elaborates this argument by referring to Eco's notion (Eco 1983, p.67, quoted in Gergen 1991, p. 225):

> The postmodern attitude is that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, 'I love you madly,' because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland.

Certainly, the postmodern life becomes increasingly cynical since it seems impossible to distinguish the genuineness from the simulation. The meaningfulness appears to dissolve in the ocean of signs and simulations. Furthermore, living in the saturated world, the self also "experiences feelings of powerlessness in relation to a diverse and large-scale social universe" (Giddens 1991, p. 191). The self becomes marginalised and intimidated by powerful commodification processes of globalised capitalism (Giddens 1991). As a result of these dilemmas of meaninglessness generated by social saturation, the very concept of individual essences seems to evaporate into the postmodern atmosphere. Gergen (1991, p. 7) envisages that eventually, "the fully saturated self becomes no self at all." That is, the fully saturated self holds no quintessence, coherence and continuity; it is fluctuating contextually and finally enters "the stage of the relational self" (Gergen 1991, p. 147).

In fact, this 'no self' notion is not original. Buddhism also considers the self as an empty entity that holds no absolute substance or eternal soul (Morris 1994). What we perceive as 'being' is a momentary outcome of our empty self being saturated with illusions that arise in dialectical processes between the Five Groups of Existence (i.e., corporeality, feeling or sensation, perception, mental formations and consciousness) and external environment. Our existence is contextually dependent. Thus, the existential self is relational, impermanent, interdependent and in constant flux. Apparently, the self is just a stream of discontinuous moments. Berger (1963, p. 125) observes that in Buddhist psychology, the self is equated to "a long row of candles, each of which lights the wick of its neighbour and is extinguished in that moment. ... There is no entity passes from one candle to another." This Buddhist perspective of the self as emptiness and continuous discontinuity may have affinities with Sartre's existentialism (Sangharakshita 1967). Indeed, we are nothing else but a reflexivity – a contingent existence with no fixed center (Sartre 1998). To summarise, White and Hellerich (1998, p.7) recapitulate, "The postmodern self is a mode of being/awareness not bifurcated into subject and object but participating in/interactive with emerging spiral of differences that make up phenomenal experience."

Although the idea that the self is de-centred, incoherent and in constant flux may be perceived as a threat from a modern standpoint, it can ironically be viewed as positive from a postmodern perspective (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Gergen 1991). Gergen (1991, p. 17) observes, "In casting 'the true' and 'the identifiable' to the wind, one opens an enormous world of potential." That is, the postmodern self, with no absolute commitment to any essence, can explore an indefinite assortment of possibilities and choose as many 'who we are' as the self wants to become. The

self is exposed to the "openness of the world" (Giddens 1991, p. 189), so we are opened to endless possibilities that may both enrich and sustain our existence. Apparently, this openness to multiplicity allows us to acquire "the protean life-style[19]," which is embodied by "a continuous flow of being, without obvious coherence through time" (Gergen 1991, p. 249). Miller (1981) also perceives this phenomenon as the possibility for the self to "move meaningfully through a pluralistic universe." Ironically, plurality may not promote the collapse of the self; rather it can offer an opportunity for the self to create an alternative meaningful identity. As Giddens (1991, p. 190) argues, "A person may make use of diversity in order to create a distinctive self identity which positively incorporates elements from different settings into an integrated narrative." Like making a pastiche, by putting a mixture of different styles together, we craft the self into a distinctive artwork.

2.1.2 The Contextual Self

> Oh Brahmana, it is just like a mountain river, flowing far and swift, taking everything along with it; there is no instant, no second when it stops flowing, but it goes on flowing and continuing. So Brahmana, is human life, like a mountain river.
>
> Buddha in Rahula 1959, p. 25-26

Akin to postmodernism, Buddhism advocates that the self is not pre-given, unified and immutable; rather it is perpetually transient and always in the process of becoming (Dissanayake 1993; Morris 1994). This concept of the self as a temporal stream of discontinuous moments is also advocated by James (1892) and Mead

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[19] The idea of "the protean self" is conceptualised by Lifton (Lifton, Robert J. (1987), *The Future of Immortality*, New York:Basic Books. 1987) who compares contemporary life-styles with the characteristic of Proteus, the sea god of Greek mythology, who can alter his shape into a great variety of images incoherently.

(1962). James (1892) views the self as an ever-shifting flow of consciousness with no underlying substantial essence, while Mead (1962) regards the self as a kaleidoscope of discontinuous social moments with no fixed centre. Similarly, both James and Mead see the self as an entity arising momentarily in a nexus of social relations – the social self. The self is a temporal process, which is created and re-created, in each social context – it is a dialectic of self-other relations (Mead 1962). In this way, the self is contextually dependent or, in other words, the contextual self. Unsurprising, the self is considered as socially constructed (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Harre 1979). As Gergen (1991, p. 178) asserts, "without others there is no self."

James (1892) conceptualises the self as two components of "I" and "Me." While the "I" is the subjective self (the knower), the "Me" is the objectified self (the known). The "Me" is the empirical self that exists socially; thus, it is malleable and manifold. James (1892, p. 179) notes, "a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him." These multiple "Me's" are acknowledged by the "I." Unlike a Cartesian subject, James's "I" is not an eternal entity; rather it is "a thought, at each moment different from that of the last moment, but appropriative of the latter [the "Me"], together with all that the latter called its own" (p. 215). Hence, with each moment the previous self is substituted by a partly new self. Seemingly, a multiplicity of the socialised "Me's" is held together only by a fine thread of memory of the "I."

Inspired by James's notion of the social self, Mead (1962) views the social self not as just a passive entity bounded by others in the society, but as a dialectic of "I" and "Me," which both represent the two interactive poles of subjectivity and

objectivity. Although Mead's conception seems to rest within a modernist bipolar framework, I consider it to be a useful foundation to explore the postmodern self. Obviously, Mead's theory of the self as an I-Me dialectic secedes from the modernist notion that the self is a fixed, unified and transcendental entity. Furthermore, Mead's (1962) recognition of the self as an embodied and social being appears to be in concordance with the postmodern perspective I discuss in Chapter One. To Mead, the self is de-centred, fluid, open and shifting according to a social context. It is the social self that is constructed through communicative interaction with others in the social circle to which it belongs (Mead 1962). Accordingly, the self who is engaged in a multiplicity of social contexts (e.g. as a mother, as a working woman and as an environmentalist) embraces a variety of identities. Indeed, some identities are complimentary whereas others are contradictory. Some identities are more central to the self than others, while some identities may be active or dominant in particular social situations (Solomon 1996). Accordingly, the contextual self becomes complex, fragmented, protean and paradoxical.

Influenced by the Buddhist notion of the self, prominent Japanese philosophers like Nishida and Watsuji view the self as an outcome of the dependent co-arising of self and society (Odin 1996). Nishida (1911, in Odin 1996) advocates the self as a twofold social self that is intersubjectively constituted by a dialectic of "I" and "Thou" in the spatial locus of nothingness. He argues that the self is fundamentally a social self as the "I" becomes an "I" only by facing a "Thou" and a "Thou" is only a "Thou" by facing an "I" (in Odin 1996). Simultaneously, the self and the other come into existence together. Watsuji (1937, in Odin 1996) also articulates a social, relational, contextual notion of the self through the concept of an individual-society interaction. He proposes that the social self exists in the

"betweenness" (i.e., emptiness) of an individual and her/his society, as well as of an individual and her/his total surroundings. Thus, the self and the others co-arise interdependently from emptiness. In my imaginative comprehension, Watsuji seems to suggest that this emptiness is filled contextually by the dependent co-arising of self and others through rituals. Indeed, the self, who is mere flashes of consciousness, has no other existence than the conceptualising activities producing it (Brockington 1988). From this perspective, I conceptualise that in postmodernity where consumer culture looms large, it is not uncommon for the self to fulfil the "betweenness" with consumption symbolism.

Although, like Mead, both Nishida and Watsuji advocate concepts of the social self as a dialectic of self-other relations, it is important to observe that their theories are developed from the Zen Buddhist philosophy where there are no precise boundaries between the self and the others. Moreover, it is suggested that the boundaries of the self and the others are fluid and constantly shifting depending on social context (Kondo 1990). Accordingly, those boundaries may ambiguously overlap, intersect or fuse with each other. This is particularly so in postmodernity where the self is saturated by increasingly diverse social relations. From this perspective, the social self therefore is more complex than Mead's social self that exists within a continuum between the bipolar of individuality and sociality. Postmodernly, I presume that the self exists relationally in a multidimensional milieu of social affairs, where it can shift multidirectionally according to each momentary context.

2.1.3 The Embodied Self

> The body I am is not only an object of experience;
> it is also the medium of experience.
>
> Kasulis 1993, p. xi

Both Buddhism and Mead (1962) also view the self as an embodied self. That is, the intersubjective paradigm of the social self as a self-society relation also embraces a dialectical paradigm of a body-mind interaction. From the Buddhist perspective, the body and mind are ultimately regarded as one gestalt – there is no body-mind dualism (Gould 1994). The self is therefore the amalgamation of both self and its body (Dissanayake 1993; Gould 1994; Morris 1994). Indeed, the physical body is another essence that can give a sense of who we are. While modernism minimises the body to just a passive entity controlled by the mind, postmodernism acknowledges the active capacity of the body in its own right (Joy and Venkatesh 1994). It is suggested that the self-concept and the body are intimately intertwined (Harré 1991); hence, the body is central to the symbolic project of the self (Bourdieu 1984; Douglas 1966; Thompson and Hirschman 1995; Woodward 1997). Certainly, "the postmodern self is relocalized, decentred, merged with various aspects of the body" (White and Hellerich 1998, p. 7). Shilling (1993) remarks that the body offers potential boundaries to the self as it is a site where we can present our uniqueness as well as a site for marking difference. Yet, the body can also be a site for conveying our shared identities with the others or a site for expressing a sense of belonging to a group. For instance, some teenagers may acquire a particular design of tattoo to signify their membership of the group.

While the body is still viewed as a natural and biological base that shapes the self, much literature suggests that the body is socially constructed (e.g. Foucault 1979; Goffman 1959; Harré 1991). Kasulis (1993, p. xi) asserts:

> ...the human body is a cultural artifact, the result of social modification. We fashion that basic anatomy through hair styling, the alteration of genitalia, the sizing of feet, lips and earlobes, the shaping of muscles through exercise. We adorn it with tattoos, jewelry, perfume and dress. We even learn to move it in culturally influenced ways to form the languages of tongue and gesture, as well as the aesthetic of dance.

Basically, the body is a bearer of symbolic and cultural values (Bourdieu 1984; Douglas 1966) and it also mediates the relationship between the self and others. Goffman (1959) maintains that we always manage the body to facilitate and direct social interaction in our everyday life; yet, our body management is determined by shared meanings of the *body idiom* categorised by society. Foucault (1979) also shares Goffman's social constructionist view of the body as controlled by social discourses. Additionally, Foucault (1988) views that the body is a fundamental element of power relations in society since the body is situated in a political domain. Therefore, the body becomes the cultural site on and from which power is exercised. To Foucault, the body is fundamentally involved in the social construction of discourse.

However, Shilling (1997) argues that in order to understand the relationship between the body and the self, we should bridge the nature/culture divide and acknowledge the body as both a material and physical entity, and a socially constructed phenomenon. The body is not only a medium through which we express our identities, but also plays an integral part in moulding them (Shilling

1993). For example, some Thai parents choose names according to their children's physical appearance that later become the basis for the children's construction of identities in society. Principally, the body is a physical foundation of our social construction of reality (Giddens 1991). It is a socio-physical entity – which can be modified, within certain limits, as an outcome of its entry into and participation in society (Burkitt 1999; Shilling 1997).

2.2 The Creation of the Self in Everyday Life

> In the social jungle of human existence,
> there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity.
> Erikson 1968

Indeed, the self is central to how we make sense of our world; it gives us an idea of who we are and how we relate to others. It is essential that we create the self to realise our existence. However, to create a sense of self in postmodernity may be different from Erikson's modernist attitude that the foremost achievement of normal personal development is a firm and fixed sense of self. Viewed from the postmodern perspective, it is not abnormal for us anymore to relinquish an aim to accomplish a firm and fixed sense of self. In fact, such an aspiration can possibly alienate us from the de-centred, ever-changing and inconsistent (hyper)realities of postmodernity. To survive, the postmodern self may need to become "a social chameleon, constantly borrowing bits and pieces of identity from whatever sources are available and constructing them as useful or desirable in a given situation" (Gergen 1991, p. 150). To put in a more liberatory sense, we are now allowed to conceive the pastiche self which can obtain pleasure from the multiple forms of

self-expression in different contexts. Nevertheless, the postmodern self, striving to sense the unity of itself, ironically makes an attempt to put those pastiche experiences together into a narrative frame (McAdams 1997).

Although the self is conceptualised as socially constructed (Harré 1998), it is not just an assigned entity of a cultural system, which we simply adopt, but something we actively create (Foucault 1988a; Glover 1988; Markus and Nurius 1986; Thompson 1995). Foucault (1988a) proposes that we have the power to define our identities, to master our bodies and desires, and to forge a practice of freedom through "techniques of the self." However, although we can exercise free will to form the self, our 'free will' may paradoxically be oriented by values that are themselves a social product. Foucault (1988a, p. 11) notes:

> ...in the way in which the subject constitutes himself in an active fashion, by the practices of the self, these practices are nevertheless not something that the individual invents by himself. They are patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group."

Indeed, the creation of the self is the dialectic between the self and others. However, our self-creation endeavour is not a straightforward process. It involves a lot of negotiations – both inwardly with our own selves (e.g., possible selves, life history or the body) and outwardly with the various others. Essentially, negotiating the self entails artful skills to harmonise all of those self-creation enterprises.

2.2.1 The Symbolic Project of the Self

> I am what I am
>
> And what I am is my own special creation.
>
> From the film 'La Cage Aux Folles'

Thompson (1995) describes the self as a *symbolic project* which we create out of the available symbolic resources. Although the term 'project' appears to represent a unilateral scheme in a modernist notion, I maintain that the treatment of the self as a 'project' in this thesis is viewed from a postmodern perspective. As Glover (1988, p. 135) remarks:

> To have a project of self-creation need not involve a 'life plan': a unitary blueprint of how your life is supposed to turn out. A few people have such plans. But probably, for most of us, self-creation is a matter of a fairly disorganized cluster of small aims: more like building a medieval town than a planned garden city.

Based on a postmodern stance, this self-creation project playfully embraces a multiplicity of momentarily contextual missions. It is an open-ended project where there is no master plan or totalising goal to follow strictly, but various micro-plans with provisional goals. Furthermore, it is a reflexive project on which we work in everyday life. Accordingly, it is a flexible project where we are allowed to explore a range of possible itineraries that we can navigate from one transitory state of existence to another one. The self is perpetually in a process of becoming. Continually, the self-creation project involves envisaging possible selves, interpreting life history, crafting the body and negotiating with the others. Simply put, the symbolic project of the self is an ongoing and exploratory project where we work and re-work throughout our lives.

2.2.1a Possible Selves

The symbolic project of the self always involves anticipation of a scope of possibilities that we may want to approach or avoid. Markus and Nurius (1986) term these potentialities "possible selves." Possible selves comprise our ideas of what we may become, what we aspire to become and what we are afraid of becoming. They are considered as systematic components of the dynamic self-concept evolving from the here-and-now experiences that reflect the potential of the self to *become* in the future. This can be viewed as part of the process of symbolic self-completion where we attempt to fill in the gap between the now self and the imagined self (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982). Again, by this I maintain that self-completion is momentary; the self can at best only temporally fill its emptiness. Certainly, possible selves as well as both the now and imagined self are always in continuous flux.

Possible selves are not only a set of our imagined states of being in the future, but also accounts of our past experience. Since there is no predetermined blueprint in our self-creation, we recurrently acquire possible selves in order to advance the project. Pooling resources from socio-cultural and historical experiences – both lived and mediated ones, we assess our here-and-now self and then calculate and envisage what possible selves we may turn into in the future (Markus and Nurius 1986). The more we are opened to resources, the more possible selves we are likely to acquire. Unsurprisingly, under social saturation, we may harbour endless possible selves (Gergen 1991). These possible selves may include both positive and negative potentials. Accordingly, it is not uncommon that

in the self-creation project, while we attempt to pursue desired selves, we simultaneously strive to stay away from the unwanted ones.

Although possible selves are products of our personal imagination, they are definitely social. Markus and Nurius (1986, p.954) assert:

> Many of these possible selves are the direct result of previous social comparisons in which the individual's own thoughts, feeling, characteristics, and behaviors have been contrasted to those of salient others. What others are now, I could become.

Markus and Nurius (1986) also view that as possible selves derive from social experiences, they are socially constructed. Nevertheless, possible selves, being just images of the potential self, usually have not been verified or confirmed by social experience. Consequently, they are not anchored, and thus are vulnerable and responsive to changes in the environment. Particularly, possible selves are "sensitive to those situations that communicate new or inconsistent information about the self" (Markus and Nurius 1986, p. 956).

2.2.1b The Internal Voices: Echo from the Past

In our self-creation processes, we usually have dialogues with our "internal voices" (Gergen 1991, p. 71). Generally, these voices are the echo from our past experiences, both lived and mediated ones. They are elements of our life history that we consult and negotiate in order to develop a repertoire of possible selves. This echo inside us may not always represent what has really happened in our lives; it embraces our "vestiges of relationships both real and imagined" (Gergen 1991, p.

71). Indeed, our life history is what we believe we have been and done, or what we have not been at all. As we are reminiscing our past memories, we interpret those recollections of our bygone selves from our present point of views. Hence, our life history may not always be unified and unchanging. Whilst we proceed our self-creation project, we re-interpret and re-tell our life history. Harré (1998) explains that because there are a multitude of stories that we can tell about our lives, we may choose a particular fragment of our life history to tell to a particular other at a particular spatio-temporal location. As we narrate and re-narrate autobiographies, we interpret and re-interpret who we are and who we want to become, and vice versa. This thus locates our life history in a realm of perpetual present. Nonetheless, this dialectical relationship between the self and life history allows the self to carry a sense of continuity across time even though there is in fact no longer linear historical continuity.

2.2.1c The Body as the Postmodern Self

Postmodernity is deemed to be a body culture where the body plays a vital role in the self-creation processes. Shilling (1997) notes that the body can also be viewed as a project that we work and re-work on – its appearance, size, shape or even its contents. The body project becomes its owner's means of expression and a way of feeling good and increasing control over her/his own life. Apparently, the body is a site where we exercise freedom in our self-creation endeavour. As Kasulis (1993, p. xi) claims, "Within physical and cultural limits, I have the freedom to express myself somantically in a variety ways. I make my body the statement of my personal style." Shilling (1997) elaborates that if we feel unable to exert influence

over a complex society, at least we can have some impact on our bodies. However, no matter how vigorously we try to assert our freedom in our body project (i.e., the self project), we still manage it within social domains. It is unlikely that we pursue the body project independently from others' viewpoints (Douglas 1986; Jefferson 1989). Gergen (1991, p.149) remarks, "Each movement of the body, seemingly private and spontaneous, is orchestrated for social effect." Further, Douglas (1986, p. 65) explains:

> The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a peculiar view of society. There is a continual exchange of meaning between the two kinds of bodily experience so that each reinforces the categories of the other.

In the symbolic project of the self, the body is not only a medium through which we realise our existence but also a means of expression and identification in society. It is a site where we negotiate our identities internally with our own selves and externally with others in the society. Here again, there is a dialectical relationship between the social self and the physical body in the creation process of identities. Endeavouring to create a new self may require modification of the body (e.g. plastic surgery, body-building, or mannerism); on the contrary, transformation of the body (e.g. reaching puberty, aging or illness) may also lead to re-constructing a new identity. Simply put, the body cannot be divisible from the self-creation project.

2.2.1d The Internal-External Dialectic of Identification

The symbolic project of the self is always pursued within socio-cultural realms. As the self is viewed as a dependent co-arising of individual and society, the development of our self-identities is inseparable from the parallel development of collective social identities. Jenkins (1996) describes this relationship as the *internal-external dialectic of identification* where he maintains that the self has to be validated through social interaction since it is embedded in social practices. Kuwayama (1992, in Odin 1996, p. 26) suggests that there are three main levels of relationship between the self and the others – the self and "people around" (e.g., family, friends or close colleagues); the self and "people at large" (e.g., other people in our community); the self and "society" (e.g., general public) with which we generally identify ourselves. Therefore, simultaneously, we would engage in manifold processes of the *internal-external dialectic of identification* with a variety of others. This is particularly so, in postmodernity where social relations are even more fragmented and disorganised than Kuwayama's model. The processes of self-social identification become predominantly complicated and ironic. Indeed, it is not only a variety of social groups that we are dealing with, but also a multiplicity of contexts within each group. In essence, we need to negotiate and re-negotiate with each social group in each particular context in order to balance all facets of the self-social identification in our symbolic project of the self.

Nevertheless, although it seems that we are inescapably involved in the *internal-external dialectic of identification* with the others in order to establish our sense of self, we do not always comply with the others' expectations passively in the identification processes. Indeed, generally we would not like to alienate

ourselves from society, still we also crave for authenticity as well as "an ego-ideal which commands the respect of others and inspires self-love" (Gabriel and Lang 1995, p.98). Naturally, we need to feel able to overcome socially imposed confines and attain self-mastery (Foucault 1988a). To some extent, we struggle to exert our autonomy in the processes of *internal-external dialectic of identification* in order to achieve aspired identities.

2.2.2 The Narrative Self

> The self is constructed in discourses and re-experienced within all the texts of everyday life.
>
> Parker 1989, p. 56

As social saturation in postmodernity has decentred our experience into pieces, we are striving to bring together diverse elements into an integrated whole in order to live meaningfully (or normally?). In other words, we try to re-organise and unify our saturated self into the narrative self (Giddens 1991; McAdams 1997); we make an effort to coordinate "the multiple and conflicting facets of our lives within a narrative framework which connects past, present, and an anticipated future and confers upon our lives a sense of sameness and continuity" (McAdams 1988, p. ix). Ricoeur (1984;1992) also maintains that in order to make time human and socially shared, we require a narrative identity for our self, that is, we make sense of ourselves and our lives by the stories we can (or cannot) tell. Presumably, we come to know ourselves by the narratives we construct to situate ourselves temporally and spatially. Coyle (1992, p. 187) elaborates:

> The person is regarded as creating a life story, a biography or a personal narrative in an attempt to impart meaning and coherence to his/her disparate life experiences by forging connections, imposing causality, and making it appear as if his/her life has unfolded or is unfolding in a purposeful way.

The life stories we create are not only a way of telling the others (or ourselves) about our lives but also the means by which our identities are fashioned (Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992). So we may not only tell the chronicle of who we are (or have been) but also an imagination of what we wish to become (or to have become). Gabriel and Lang (1995, p.94) observe, "Identity is not only an embellished account of our adventures, accomplishments and tribulations, but also that vital web of truths, half-truths and wish-fulfilling fictions which sustain us." Of course, in order to carry on our sense of existence, we need to uphold our "capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*" (Giddens 1991, p. 54). For this, Giddens (1991) maintains that we cannot just tell a wholly fictive story – we must persistently incorporate events that occur in the 'real' world and arrange them into the ongoing narrative of the self.

Although we attempt to construct a coherent and continuous narrative of our lives, we frequently tell different stories about ourselves in different contexts (Harre 1998; McAdams 1997). Obviously, the narrative self is not just one story told to some generic and anonymous audience. In fact, it comprises several episodes of our lives, and "how the quality, value, detail and arrangement of the episodes recounted depends on the person to whom the tale is told, the context of the telling and the aim of the story-teller at that moment in the telling of it" (Harre 1998, p. 143). Nevertheless, the life episodes are not worlds apart from each other – they all share the main character (i.e., the person whose life story it is), even though the main

character possibly appears in a variety of guises, each of which embody particular facets of her/his narrative self (McAdams 1997). Indeed, some narrative selves can integrate all of their life episodes into a better unified and continuing theme than others, and some narrative selves can even achieve "a kind of symbolic immortality" – the narratives that can outlive the embodied self (McAdams 1997).

2.3 The Self and Symbolic Consumption

> One thing is needful.
> To 'give style' to one's character – a great and rare art!
> Nietzsche[20] in Glover 1988, p. 131

Endeavouring to create the self in postmodernity is presumably inseparable from consumption (Elliott 1997; Gabriel and Lang 1995; Gergen 1991; White and Hellerich 1998). Indeed, postmodernity is first and foremost a consumer culture – where our social life operates in the sphere of consumption (Firat and Venkatesh 1994; Giddens 1991; Slater 1997). That is, our "social arrangement in which the relation between lived culture and social resources, between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, is mediated through markets" Slater (1997, p.8). Consumption is thus central to the meaningful practice of our everyday life. Basically, we employ consumption not only to create and sustain the self but also to locate us in society (Elliott 1994b, 1997; Kleine and et al 1995). Products (e.g., low-calorie corn flake, natural-based cosmetic, leather jacket or Victorian house) that we buy, activities (e.g., Oxfam's Big Fast, fly-fishing or travelling) that we do and philosophies or beliefs (e.g., astrology, religion or political ideology) that we pursue tell stories about who we are and with whom we

[20] Gay Science

identify. Certainly, we do not consume products, activities or beliefs only to satisfy our needs but also to carry out our self-creation project.

In order to feel 'alive' in this saturated world, we crave for a sense of meaningfulness in our pursuit of 'being' (i.e., the self-creation project). And it seems that we can symbolically acquire it from our everyday consumption. Slater (1997, p. 131) asserts, "Consumption is a meaningful activity." Indeed, all voluntary consumption seems to carry, either consciously or unconsciously, symbolic meanings. By this, I mean if we have a choice, we will consume things that hold particular symbolic meanings. These meanings may be idiosyncratic or commonly shared with others. For example, using recycled envelopes may symbolise 'I care for the environment', going to classical concerts may represent 'I am cultured', supporting gay rights may signify 'I am open-minded', or even buying unbranded detergent may mean 'I am a clever consumer'.

Much literature suggests that we are what we have, since our material possessions are viewed as major parts of our extended selves (Belk 1988a; Dittmar 1992; James 1892; Sartre 1998). Material objects embody a system of meanings, through which we express ourselves and communicate with others (Dittmar 1992; Douglas and Isherwood 1996; Gabriel and Lang 1995; McCracken 1988a). Since all consumption holds some kind of expressive meaning, we endeavour to incorporate into our self-creation project those meanings we aspire to, while struggling to resist those we find undesirable. Observably, we sometimes avoid particular consumption in order to create, maintain and advance the self (Gould *et al* 1997; Hogg and Michell 1996).

2.3.1 In Pursuit of Meaningfulness in the World of Goods

> There is no self outside a system of meaning.
> Gergen 1991, p.157

As the postmodern self is perceived as encountering "the looming threat of personal meaninglessness" (Giddens 1991) or the possibility of dissolving into the 'no self' (when fully saturated) (Gergen 1991), it struggles to resume a sense of 'being' by actively looking for meaningfulness in life. In fact, the quest for meaningfulness does not loom exclusively in the postmodern epoch; rather such a quest seems to be a fundamental of human existence. Considered from the perspective that the self emerges momentarily from emptiness or nothingness (Watsuji in Odin 1996; Sartre 1998), in order to achieve a sense of the existential self, it is essential that we continually fill up this emptiness with the meanings which we believe can symbolically constitute a sense of who we are. We also use these symbolic meanings to bridge the "betweenness" (Watsuji in Odin 1996) between our selves and others in society. Indeed, the pursuit of meaningfulness is vital to the creation, continuation and communication of the self. Nevertheless, I maintain that the meaningfulness we pursue in postmodernity may not necessary be the 'grand meaning' of being; rather we look for 'micro meanings' that can accommodate us in our everyday life.

A considerable body of literature suggests that we vigorously appropriate symbolic meanings for our self-creation project from consumer products (Dittmar 1992; Douglas and Isherwood 1996; Elliott 1994b; McCracken 1988a). Gabriel and Lang (1995, p. 17) remark, " Whether one is looking for happiness, identity, beauty, love, masculinity, youth, marital bliss or anything else, there is a commodity

somewhere which guarantees to provide it." McCracken (1988a) explains that products hold an important quality that goes beyond their utilitarian attributes or commercial value, that is, they have the ability to carry and communicate cultural meanings. Symbolically, we exploit these meanings to create cultural notions of the self, to acquire and sustain lifestyles, to demonstrate social connections and to promote or accommodate changes in both the self and society (Douglas and Isherwood 1996; McCracken 1988a). Simply put, we consume these cultural meanings to 'live' in this culturally constituted world. McCracken (1988a, p. xi) asserts this point, "Without consumer goods, certain acts of self-definition and collective definition in this culture would be impossible."

Consumption is certainly a significant source of symbolic meanings with which we implement and sustain our project of the self. In our everyday life, we employ consumption symbolism to construct and express our self-concepts as well as to identify our associations with others (Dittmar 1992; Elliott 1997; Wallendorf and Arnold 1988). However, consumption symbolism is not a constant or intrinsic element; rather it is "socially constructed and there is no essential external reference point" (Elliott 1997, p. 286). McCracken (1988, p. 71) points out that consumption symbolism is always in transit since it is "constantly flowing to and from its several locations in the social world, aided by the collective and individual efforts of designers, producers, advertisers and consumers." Particularly in postmodernity, the more society is saturated with signs and images, which marketers create in their marketing campaigns to seduce consumers, the more those signs and images are detached from their referents (i.e., products), and the more malleable and manifold consumption symbolism becomes (Brown 1995; Baudrillard 1998; Firat and Venkatesh 1994). Ultimately, consumption symbolism becomes negotiable and is

subject to endless interpretations (Baudrillard 1998; Elliott 1997). Hence, we actively look for symbolic resources in order to help us negotiate, interpret and appropriate meaningfulness in our everyday consumption. Indeed, how consumption symbolism is created and employed in the self-creation project is complex, as I shall discuss later in Chapter Three.

Since product symbolism is not absolute, static and unique, we can playfully mix-and-match consumption choices in order to aestheticise our self-creation project. That is, we re-appropriate and re-contexualise consumption meanings to create lifestyles that allow us to experience comfort, excitement, emotional nourishment and ultimately pleasure (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Indeed, postmodernity is where consumption unfolds in the realm of seduction – where products become objects of desire and fantasy (Baudrillard 1998; Bauman 1992; Bourdieu 1984; Elliott 1997). The body project looms large here. Situated in the heart of the self-creation project, the body becomes a consumption site on which we work to pursue salvation in postmodernity (Baudrillard 1998). We consume numerous products and services to construct our body images to match our self-concepts. However, beyond its image, the body is ultimately a symbolic site for socialisation (Thompson and Hirschman 1995).

Central to the self-creation in postmodernity is the making of consumption choices that can facilitate the self in socialisation, more specifically to situate itself in a diversity of social contexts. Gergen (1991, p. 155) argues, "It is not the world of fashion that drives the customer into a costly parade of continuous renewal, but the postmodern customer who seeks means of 'being' in an ever-shifting multiplicity of social contexts." Basically, we make consumption choices to

accommodate our protean lifestyle. "By buying goods, we magically acquire a different persona" (Dittmar 1992, p. 2). A businessman can magically be another person by wearing a leather outfit instead of his business suit and riding a Harley-Davidson instead of driving his BMW. Indeed, consumption is a symbolic ground where we choose an assortment of the self. Consumption choice is also regarded as the means through which we exercise freedom (Bauman 1988). As we try to forge a practice of freedom through techniques of the self (Foucault 1988a), we pursue an endless making of consumption choices (Giddens 1991). Continually, we engage in the pursuit of consumption symbolism in order to make sense of our lives and advance our self-creation project.

2.3.2 To Have is to Be – Possessions and The Extended Self

> Shopping in not merely the acquisition of things:
> it is the buying of identity.
>
> Clammer 1992, p. 223

Sartre (1998) maintains that 'being' and 'having' are intimately intertwined. Ontologically, without 'having', 'being' cannot be realised. He asserts, "The bond of possession is an internal bond of being" (p. 588). Basically, Sartre states that we come to know who we are through what we possess. We acquire, create, sustain and present a sense of existential self by observing our possessions. The ability 'to see' is crucial here. Sartre (1998, p. 581) even expands this point to the extent that "to see it is already to possess it. In itself it is already apprehended by sight as a symbol of being." Thus, by seeing a beautiful beach, we are able to obtain a sense of possessing that beach, and then accordingly incorporating it into our sense of

'being'. This conception illuminates how we obtain a feeling of being 'alive' just through 'window shopping'.

The notion of 'to have is to be' is also affirmed by Belk (1988) and Dittmar (1992). Exploring the formula, "I am = what I have and what I consume" (Fromm 1976, p. 36), Dittmar (1992, p. 204-206) elaborates:

> material possessions have socially constituted meanings ...this symbolic dimension of material objects plays an important role for the owner's identity. ...This suggests that material social reality in an integral, pervasive aspect of everyday social life, of constructing ourselves and others.

Belk (1988) further examines the intimate relationship between 'having and 'being' by approaching possessions as the extended self. This perspective is also acknowledged by James (1892, p. 177):

> a man's Me is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank account.

Conceivably, we incorporate whatever we perceive as 'ours' into our selves. Sartre (1998) explicates that things or people become a part of our extended self as long as we hold a sense that we have created, controlled or known them. Indeed, to be able to create, control or know anything, we need to invest 'psychic energy' such as effort, time, and attention in it; and this energy has not grown or emerged from anywhere else but the self (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). As a result, the self symbolically extends into possessions.

As extension of the self, our possessions not only enable us to realise who we are but also to accommodate our self-transitions and to achieve or to dispose our

sense of continuity from the past (Belk 1988; McCracken 1988a). They symbolise "personal archive or museum that allows us to reflect on our histories and how we have changed" (Belk 1988, p. 159). Moreover, they also help us to envisage our possible selves. Certainly, our material possessions hold a capacity to keep our life narratives going. They sustain consumption symbolism that we embrace in our self-creation project. This includes symbolic meanings that we have acquired from consumption experience of intangible products. For example, photographs and souvenirs from the place we visited hold meanings of our travelling experience to that place. Douglas and Isherwood (1996) remark that without material objects, meanings are inclined to drift or eventually disappear.

Nevertheless, it does not mean that a particular object holds a particular intrinsic meaning. An object may carry a varied range of meanings since the creation of meaning is not deterministic and unidirectional, and each individual may ascribe different and inconsistent cultural meanings to an object depending on the extent to which they share the collective imagination (Ritson *et al* 1996). Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981, p. 173) further elaborate that since objects are "signs, objectified forms of psychic energy," they become "meaningful only as part of a communicative sign process and are active ingredients of that process." That is, the symbolic meanings of possessions emerge in the dialectical transaction processes between possessors and objects. Perceptibly, symbolism attached to an object signifies an owner's image, and vice versa. "Once Rolex watches, real or fake, are seen worn on the wrist of any taxi driver, the meaning carried by them becomes plastic[21]" (Gabriel and Lang 1995, p. 62).

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[21] The statement may sound 'politically incorrect', but I believe that it illustrates a relevant example.

Although there are relative symbolic meanings embedding in all material objects, each object alone may not be able to tell a meaningful life story, rather it communicates together with other objects in order to express an integral narrative of the self (Douglas and Isherwood 1996; McCracken 1988a; Solomon and Assael 1987). A Sony stereo playing a classical compact disk tells a different story about its owner from a Sony stereo playing a pop album does. Presumably, by acquiring a new object into or discarding an old one from our possessions, we are able to ascertain, continue or alter the narratives of our selves (Kleine *et al* 1995). By the same token, adding or abandoning one object may lead to adding and/or abandoning more objects in an attempt to complete a new episode of the narrative self. This includes an alteration of the body[22]. Acquiring a new haircut may lead to altering our wardrobe and vice versa.

2.3.3 Not To Have is to Be – Consumption Resistance

> There's no way that I buy pink shoes.
> Maybe next life in the afternoon[23]!
> My sister [24], Bangkok.

Besides 'what we endeavour to have', 'what we try not to have' is also significant for our sense of being (Hogg and Michell 1996; Gould *et al* 1997). Creating a particular lifestyle for the self may involve disassociating from some other lifestyles. Therefore, our self-creation project may engage in consumption resistance – that is abandonment, avoidance or aversion of particular consumption

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[22] Although whether the body should be viewed as a part of our possessions is controversial, we cannot deny that it is the material component of the self that we can act upon to obtain a sense of 'having' and 'being'.

[23] An informal Thai expression that signifies a strong rejection of a particular behaviour. It means we will not do it during this lifetime. Even in the next life, we will not do it first thing in the morning.

[24] My sister said this several years ago. Nevertheless, she now owns a pair of pink shoes.

(Hogg and Michell 1996). In order to achieve a new identity, we often need to forsake the old ones. In doing so, we commonly abandon some possessions that are associated with the old self. For instance, an actor sheds his cowboy boots to wash away his provincial image; a woman throws away a necklace given by her old boyfriend to break off her extended self to him (or his extended self to her); a teenage girl rejects her 'once favourite' Barbie rucksack to symbolise her grown-up self.

Avoidance and aversion entail relative resistance to particular consumption choices. This includes several forms of negations: asceticism, altruism, boycott or deferred gratification (Gould *et al* 1997). A committed Muslim refuses to consume alcohol to maintain her/his religious self; a man avoids using his favourite after-shave in favour of his wife's favourite brand; a Greenpeace member refuses to buy genetically modified food to maintain her/his environmentally friendly stance; and a doctoral student abstains from going to a cinema during her/his write-up in order to finish the degree. Consumption resistance also involves opposing consumption choices that symbolise associations with particular social groups. This can be related to the concept of the refusal of taste (Bourdieu 1984) or the idea of 'guilt by association'. Evidently, a businessman declines a particular brand of cigarette which is widely consumed by workers, or a woman refuses to wear a pair of Doc Marten's boots which represent a lesbian's dress code. Indeed, all these forms of consumption resistance can be regarded as vital parts of our symbolic project of the self. Again, it is essential to bear in mind that, like the role of consumption in the self-creation processes, consumption resistance may also be temporal and contextual.

2.3.4 To Have is to Belong – Consumption and the Self-Social Identification

> To be a member of a culture or 'way of life', as opposed to just 'staying alive', involves knowing the local codes of needs and things.
>
> Slater 1997, p. 132

Being a social self, we usually aspire to bridge the "betweenness" in the dialectic of self-others relations (Watsuji 1937 in Odin 1996). We again employ symbolic consumption to obtain desirable connections with others (Kleine *et al* 1995). Like the self, possessions are also socialised objects that may signify different symbolism in different social contexts (Appadurai 1986). Richins (1994, p. 523) notes, "Possessions are part of the social communication system and are sometimes actively used to communicate aspects of the self." Certainly, acquiring personal possessions expresses not only our individual sense of identity but also our sense of belonging to a group and group identity. Similarly, common possessions such as a family's house or a public monument also define both the group identity and self-identity of its members. Indeed, possessions embody a repertoire of symbolic meanings through which we bridge the self with others in the society. Dittmar (1992, p. 11) comments:

> the notion that we express our identity through our material possessions, and make inferences about the identity of others, on the basis of what they possess, means that there must be socially shared beliefs about material objects as symbolic manifestations of identity.

That is, buying a Mercedes Benz will not signify the owner's social status unless others in the relevant social groups share the owner's belief that it does. Outwardly, material possessions serve as symbolic mediators between the self and others. Here again, the shared symbolism attached to possessions is not total; rather

it can be varied and fluid as it emerges in the manifold processes of the *internal-external dialectic of identification* (Jenkins 1996) with a variety social groups. Significantly, we need to develop artful skills in order to present the self appropriately in various social contexts (Goffman 1959).

In postmodernity, creating a group self is not limited to social circles that we literally contact. Apparently, we can employ consumption symbolically to obtain a sense of belonging to a variety of "imagined communities" (Anderson 1983) or "neo-tribes" (Maffesoli 1988). In this way, we consume clothes, hairstyles, shoes, cars, computers, and other products that contribute to the symbolic means of self-identification, through which we align ourselves emotionally with those sharing our lifestyles (Gabriel and Lang 1995). By owning a Harley-Davidson motorcycle or a Macintosh computer, we imagine a sense of belonging to a Harley-Davidson or a Macintosh tribe. Through common consumption choice, lifestyle and imaginary, we symbolically create a group self.

2.3.5 To Have is to Be Enslaved

> If I am what I have and if what I have is lost, who then am I?
>
> Fromm 1976, p.76

To Fromm[25] (1976), endeavour to acquire a sense of 'being' through 'having' inevitably comes with the threat of losing it since 'having' may not be permanent. Instead, he proposes we should realise the self by sharing, giving and sacrificing. Evidently, 'to have' ironically leads us to be enslaved – we become a slave of our own possessions (Fromm 1976). Once a man has acquired a sports car,

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[25] I assume that Fromm's idea may be influenced by Zen Buddhism. Fromm has written a few books on Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis; for example, Fromm, Erich and Daizets Teitaro Suzuki (1960), *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, New York: Harper.

he may spend a lot of time cleaning and grooming it. Apparently, we become imprisoned (i.e., commodified) in the world of goods (Giddens 1991). Faurschou (1987, p. 82) comments:

> [Postmodernity is] ...no longer an age in which bodies produce commodities, but where commodities produce bodies: bodies for aerobics, bodies for sport cars, bodies for vacations, bodies for Pepsi, for Coke, and of course, bodies for fashion – total bodies – a total look. The colonization of the body as its own production/consumption machine in late capitalism is a fundamental theme of contemporary socialization.

Indeed, the belief that we can exercise our freedom through consumption choices seems to be an illusion. In fact, "we all not only follow lifestyles, but in an important sense are forced to do so – we have no choice but to choose" (Giddens 1991, p. 81). Additionally, Elliott (1994a) argues that immediate pleasure derived from consumption experience may enslave us in the realm of addictive consumption. Gergen (1991, p. 74-75) also has reservation about consumption freedom:

> Yet this same freedom ironically leads to a form of enslavement. ...Each new desire places its demands and reduces one's liberties. ...Liberation becomes a swirling vertigo of demands. ...Daily life has become a sea of drowning demands, and there is no shore in sight. ...Yet as Buddhists have long been aware, to desire is simultaneously to become a slave of the desirable.

According to Buddhism, this form of enslavement is not only due to the desire 'to have' but ultimately the desire 'to be' – the desire to create the self. Viewing the self as emptiness in an ever-changing world, Buddhism asserts that we can at best fill the emptiness momentarily. Thus, endeavouring to create the self is to enchain oneself to the vicious circle of an illusive sense of being. "The desire, the will to be, to exist, to re-exist, to become more, and more, to grow more and

more, to accumulate more and more" only leads to suffering (Rahula in Morris 1994, p. 55). To free ourselves from this vicious circle is to realise that 'to be' is an illusion. Therefore, we should not attach to 'the desire to be', let alone 'the desire to have'. However, since most of us still crave 'to be', in this thesis I therefore wish to understand how we achieve a sense of 'being' through 'having'.

2.4 Chapter Summary

Following the ontological stance and epistemological platform proposed in Chapter One, in this chapter I discuss the concept of the postmodern self and symbolic consumption. Firstly, I examine central features of the postmodern self which are saturated, contextual and embodied. In postmodernity where society is endlessly bombarded with a diversity of images and a multiplicity of social relations, the self becomes saturated, thus de-centred. It is not a total entity. The postmodern self is always in a process of becoming as it arises momentarily in a nexus of social contexts. The postmodern self is also viewed as embodied since it is re-localised and fused with various aspects of the body. Secondly, I explore key elements that involve the creation of the self in everyday life. That is, the self is a symbolic project which involves anticipations of possible selves, dialogues with the internal voices and the body, and identifications with others. Simultaneously, in an effort to attain a sense of unity and continuity, the manifold and contradictory facets of the self-project are integrated into the narrative self. Lastly, I argue how the self-project is created through symbolic consumption. Striving to accomplish meaningfulness in the saturated world, the postmodern self pursues and/or resists consumption choices symbolically to achieve a sense of being and belonging.

Nevertheless, the pursuit of being ironically leads to a vicious circle of enslavement. As a theoretical point of departure, this chapter suggests that in order to understand consumer behaviour, we must embark on the exploration of the consumer's multifaceted self.

Chapter Three

Symbolic Resources and the Appropriation of Consumption Symbolism

Following the theoretical point of departure discussed in Chapter Two, in this chapter I investigate further how we appropriate consumption symbolism in order to create, sustain and advance our sense of being. First, I explore vital symbolic resources that we exploit in order to acquire meanings for our self-creation project. Then, I review how symbolic meanings are constructed in our everyday life. Here again, it is essential to bear in mind that, like the self-creation process, the meaning appropriation process is correspondingly very complex, obscure and always in progress. The process does not advance straightforwardly; rather it evolves and re-evolves viscously and incoherently into myriad directions. Moreover, all elements involved (e.g., symbolic resources or agents) in the process are entangled and have an effect on each other, which makes exploring them independently problematical. However, for analytical and heuristic purposes, I ironically review this process in a relatively straightforward style. Each component is also examined separately. Yet, as I attempt to maintain the complexity of the phenomenon, the discussion on each element is inevitably overlapped and entwined

Being in a saturated world, we are exposed to abundant symbolic resources that we can exploit for the construction and re-construction of our postmodern self.

These symbolic resources are commonly classified into two experiential spheres: lived experience and mediated experience (Thompson 1990, 1995). However, I maintain that, under postmodern consciousness, the boundaries between these two forms of experience become increasingly blurred and inseparable. Therefore, in order to understand how symbolic resources are appropriated and incorporated into the self-creation project, we need to consider the interplay of both experiences in our everyday lives. As Thompson (1995, p. 230) observes, whilst we move through the temporal-spatial paths of our everyday lives, we grasp both lived experience and mediated experience, incorporating them into a continuously evolving life-project. While mediated experience provides us with symbolic resources to explore possibilities for our lives, our lived experience influences how we select and interpret those resources, and vice versa. Simply put, our lived and mediated experiences are dialectically intertwined.

Living in postmodernity involves a continuous interweaving of lived and mediated experience in order to appropriate and re-appropriate meanings for our symbolic project of the self. Differential appropriation of both experiences depends on our position in the continuum of relevant experience, varying between one end of the continuum (those who value only lived experience and have little contact with mediated forms), and the other (those who take mediated experience as central to the project of the self). However, I maintain that our position in the continuum is contextually variable – that our valorisation of both forms of experience depends on a particular context into which we apply symbolic meanings. Indeed, akin to the project of the self, the appropriation of meanings is also undoubtedly contextual.

Although some literature suggests that lived experience holds a more dominant role over mediated experience in contributing symbolic meanings for the everyday practices of the self (e.g., Fazio and Zanna 1978; Smith and Swinyard 1988), I hold that this proposition does not do justice to the inconspicuous power of mediated experience. Indeed, we appear to carry out, express and exchange symbolic forms meaningfully through our lived actions and interactions, but this does not signify that symbolic resources from our mediated experience have trivial roles in the creation of meanings. Apparently, mediated experience can provide rich symbolic resources that we re-work and re-contextualise in the course of our lived experience. As considerable studies suggest, mediated experience from advertising plays a vital role in the realm of symbolic work that young people act out in their lived social interactions (O'Donohue 1994; Ritson and Elliott 1999; Willis 1990). The power of mediated experience for the self-creation project in postmodernity is evidently manifest in the increasing popularity of self-help books in the marketplace (Simonds 1996). Even Tony Blair's government has to call for a special summit to campaign for the cutting down the number of images of skinny models in women's magazines in order to prevent and lessen anorexic behaviour among young British women. Nonetheless, whereas it seems that mediated experience can supply influential symbolic resources for the self-project, I maintain that those resources need to be valorised in the domain of lived experience (Thompson 1990, p.154). Indeed, these two forms of experience though different in nature cannot be treated separately. Moreover, Thompson (1995, p.39) observes that at present mediated experience appears to supplant or become confused with lived experience in such a way that we may find it difficult to distinguish between them. Hence, in this thesis I do not aim to attest which form of experience is more powerful or more relevant to

the creation of symbolic meanings. Rather, I aspire to understand the interplay of both lived and mediated experience in the creation of consumption symbolism and the self-creation process.

Since everything we live through or encounter in our day-to-day lives can be viewed as symbolic resources, it is too idealistic for me to discuss all of them in this thesis. Thus, in this chapter I intend to discuss only some vital resources that are germane to the further review of the relationship between the self and consumption symbolism examined in the previous chapter. That is, for the exploration of lived experience, I emphasise social interactions, everyday consumption, and the body; whereas in the case of mediated experience, I simply focus on advertising. Other symbolic resources such as other forms of popular culture are examined briefly[26]. Correspondingly, for the discussion of the appropriation of consumption symbolism, I scrutinise mainly the interplay between the self and those symbolic resources mentioned.

3.1 Lived Experience

Lived experience is the hands-on activities and face-to-face encounters in our everyday lives (Dilthey 1976). To elaborate, Thompson (1995, p. 227) explains, "It is the practical activities of our daily lives and our encounters with others in the context of face-to-face interaction which provide the content of our lived experience." It is continuous as we obtain it in the temporal flow of our day-to-day

[26] However, this does not mean that other forms of popular culture are not as significant as advertising. Constrained by time (and money) to explore all forms of popular culture in this thesis research, I have chosen to concentrate on advertising since it is a central capitalist means by which marketers attempt to create some sort of consumption symbolism.

lives; it is direct, situated, and is largely non-reflexive, in that we take it for granted as 'reality'. That is, since we acquire lived experience in the immediate and practical contexts of our everyday lives, we hardly question or hold any explicit act of reflection on it (Thompson 1995, p. 227). Clearly, lived experience establishes a milieu for the self because it occurs in the same parallel spatial-temporal locale as the self. Continually through time and space, we are unavoidably engrossed in lived experience. Nevertheless, we presumably have potential to influence it through our instantaneous actions or interactions with others in that lived moment. Undoubtedly, lived experience becomes a pertinent symbolic resource that we primarily incorporate into the project of the self (Thompson 1995, p.229).

Basically, everyday lived experience is the realm in which we act out "symbolic creativity" in order "to ensure the daily production and reproduction of human existence" (Willis 1990, p. 9); lived experience is not only a symbolic resource but also a means to keep our self-narrative going. As we travel along spatio-temporal passages in our everyday lives, we unceasingly acquire, interpret, exchange, negotiate and reproduce vast symbolic resources from and through a diversity of social interactions and a variety of consumption activities in order to make sense of ourselves. Simultaneously, we also obtain, reproduce and cultivate symbolic resources from and through our somatic selves – the body.

3.1.1 Lived Social Interaction as Symbolic Resource

As the self is viewed as an outcome of the dependent co-arising of self and others[27], all social interactions in which the self engages in society are meaningful

[27] See section 2.1.2 in Chapter Two.

and central to the creation of its identity (Giddens 1993, p. 21). Indeed, those interactions accommodate us to attain a sense of who we are in the society – how we are different from and similar to others; how we are separated and connected to them. Through a plurality of social interactions, the self and others co-create, communicate and negotiate a variety of symbolic forms that constitute our social world. As Thompson (1990, p. 1) states, "In all societies the production and exchange of symbolic forms – of linguistic expressions, gestures, actions, works of art and so on – is, and has always been a pervasive feature of social life." Certainly, those symbolic forms are expressions experienced as "a form address to the self when it is addressed to another" (Duncan 1968, p. 44). Therefore, everyday lived encounters in society are basic symbolic resources for our social self. Ever since we were born, we have never-endingly acquired, interpreted and communicated numerous symbolic forms through various social interactions, which enable us to comprehend a sense of self-aware, social orders and cultural values and norms, so that we are able to negotiate everyday activities meaningfully in order to narrate our life stories and to locate ourselves in the culturally constituted worlds (Giddens 1993).

3.1.1a At Home

At first, as a powerless infant, we gradually attain an awareness of being an individual from observing how our family, particularly our parents, behave towards us in regular ways (Mead 1962). As we are growing up, we talk, learn and observe others. In this way, we begin to understand relationships, languages, beliefs, values, practices, rules and conventions in the family. Indeed, it is suggested that socialisation within the family is the most powerful primary symbolic resource

(Furnham and Stacey 1991; Giddens 1993), especially in a society like Thailand where the centre of goodness and trust is idealised as being situated in the home, more specifically in the mother (Mulder 1996). Generally, those symbolic forms we learn at home are, to some extent, aligned with those shared by society, depending on to what degree our family abides by the social values and norms. For example, children of English natives may learn symbolic forms that are relatively more analogous to English values and norms from their families than children of Pakistani immigrants do from their families. Basically, in the course of interactions within the family, we develop our sense of both individual and family selves (Jenkins 1996). Early in life, we begin to realise where our individual selves and family selves locate in fundamental social categories such as gender, class, religion or ethnicity. Yet this is not conclusive; it is just the launch of our symbolic self-project into this postmodern world.

Since our parents often view us as parts of their extended selves (Belk 1988), they commonly attempt to pass on the symbolic resources they have accumulated to us. Additionally, they may believe that those resources are valuable capital (e.g., cultural capital or educational capital) which they fondly (or authoritatively?) endow us with so that we can invest them properly in our social circles. For instance, Thai parents who were educated in England may try to teach their children English culture, particularly the language; cultural-oriented parents may take their children to art galleries; religious parents may read Bible stories to their children at bedtime. In some cases, we even inherit a sense of loyalty to particular brands from our parents (Olsen 1995). Certainly, this is not always an unproblematic process. While some of us may respect our parents' experience and wisdom and adopt their views without question, many of us, especially during our adolescence when we

keenly explore our possibilities (Willis 1990), may strive to establish our autonomy through reinterpreting and renegotiating meanings with our parents (Noller and Callan 1991). In some cases, we may even rebel against them. As the pop star Madonna (quoted in Lewis 1993, p. 142) remarks about her adolescent rebellion through her kinky fashion, "Only because we knew that our parents didn't like it. We thought it was fun."

Furthermore, how we value our parents' resources greatly depends on the context of a particular interaction. For example, I who usually respect my mother's viewpoints hardly ever take her advice when we go shopping for clothes together: whatever choice she suggests is always an object of my scepticism. Of course, our social interactions at home are not lethargic but dynamic, especially in a family where various conflicts of interests coexist. Certainly, symbolic resources available at home may not always be coherent since it is not uncommon that family members embrace different symbolic resources. This is particularly so in postmodernity where the family self is increasingly decentred as its members engage in a multiplicity of disparate experiences. Accordingly, even trivia aspects of everyday interactions in the family become complex and significant (Giddens 1993). They are vital symbolic resources which we re-appropriate, re-interpret and re-contextualise in order to integrate into our self-creation project.

3.1.1b At School

Besides interactions within the family, another powerful lived experience is our interactions with significant others outside home, particularly at school. During our childhood and adolescent years, our everyday social interactions occur mainly at school, especially with our classmates. Although at school we are deliberately

delivered various symbolic resources through the formal curriculum, which we can cultivate into "educational capital" (Bourdieu 1984), we simultaneously acquire enormous symbolic resources from the "hidden curriculum" – our social interactions with teachers and friends (Giddens 1993). Akin to the parent-child relationship, the teacher-student relationship is commonly unequal yet possibly intimate and potentially long-term (Argyle and Henderson 1985). Manifestly, social interaction with teachers is a considerable symbolic resource. Particularly, when symbolic resources available at home appear to be deficient. In Thailand, it is common that children from uneducated families, especially in rural areas, respect their teachers' advice greatly. In Britain, the advertising headline, "could you inspire young minds?" under which the Teacher Training Agency campaigns evidently reflects the social representation (or expectation?) of teachers' roles in society. Since our teachers, like our parents, generally hold a superior status in the relationship, they often expect us (or we feel obliged) to customarily comply with the meanings they assert in the interactions. However, here again such meanings may be contested as we also involve in other significant symbolic resources such as interactions with friends, which potentially present us with competing meanings. This is particularly so when interactions with friends increasingly take place outside school, e.g., shopping centres, cinemas, amusement parks or nightclubs.

3.1.1c Friends

Socialising with friends is undoubtedly a vital source of symbolic meanings that we incorporate to a great extent into our self-project, and potentially it remains an important symbolic resource throughout our lives (Giddens 1993). Unlike the parent-child relationship, friendship is relatively democratic and founded on mutual

consent, which involves a large amount of give and take and negotiation (Furnham 1989; Giddens 1993). More importantly, friendship is usually by choice. We choose friends to whom we want to relate and share identities; thus, symbolic resources available in friendship are presumably desirable. Furthermore, friendship is generally developed within the realm of leisure such as talking, playing, clubbing or shopping. Even in the workplace, friendship commonly emerges based on "gossip, jokes and games in tea-breaks and lunch intervals" (Argyle and Henderson 1985, p. 316). Nevertheless, friends are not just people with whom we enjoy talking and doing things, but also people who provide fruitful symbolic resources that enable us to develop social skills as well as to attain a sense of individuality and group belonging (Furnham 1989). Furnham (1989) remarks that even for young children, interactions with friends provide valuable resources that adults simply cannot. Through talks and plays with friends, we learn from each other how to communicate our feelings and desires, how to negotiate and how to deal with conflict. Seemingly, we learn the art of 'living in a social world' in the playground. Unlike parents or siblings, friends will possibly stop talking/playing with us if we do something they do not accept. Indeed, every aspect of leisured interactions with friends becomes a serious and complex task in the self-project. Moreover, interactions with friends also provide an imperative means of social comparison – we spend "a great deal of time in friendship comparing tastes, skills, and abilities" (Furnham 1989, p. 94). Through this social comparison, the self and others dialectically co-emerge. Thus, symbolic resources derived from and through interactions with friends in the informal realm of leisure are vital to the construction of the self (Willis 1990). Endeavouring to understand the symbolic project of the

self, we must not discount the importance of friends, particularly those with whom the self establishes an apparent group.

Social interactions with friends frequently lead to group formation and the creation of group identity. Habitually, we are attracted to people whom we presume share our backgrounds, beliefs, values, tastes and styles – people whom we believe are agreeable to us, or reciprocate our preferences (Furnham 1989). Nevertheless, I maintain that we may also be attracted to people with whom we aspire to share similarities, more specifically identities – people whom we imagine we want to be like in the repertoire of our possible selves[28]. Unsurprisingly, people who are physically attractive or socially competent are likely to draw more friends (Furnham 1989). Of course, it is not uncommon for us to wish to have a 'cool' friend. Endeavouring to belong to a group, we actively look for symbolic meanings that can bridge the "betweenness[29]" in the dialectic of self-others relations. Through interactions, we co-create and negotiate symbolic boundaries that define inclusion and exclusion – the boundaries that identify 'us' against 'them'. Jenkins (1996. p.83) describes it thus:

> Group identity is the product of collective internal definition. In our relationships with significant others we mobilise identifications of similarity and difference, and, in the process, generate group identities. At the same time, our self-conscious group memberships signify others and create relationships with them. Thus categorisation is also a general social process, this time of collective external definition.

[28] See section 2.2.1a in Chapter Two.
[29] See section 2.1.2 in Chapter Two.

3.1.1d Social Communication, Rules and Conventions

Striving to locate the self within aspired shared boundaries is a complex mission. We need to acquire pertinent communication skills in order to negotiate our position in the group. Ability to encode and decode communication symbols is crucial here (Duck 1992). That is, we must be literate in not only shared languages (both verbal and non-verbal) but also shared rules and conventions (both explicit and implicit). Accordingly, we need symbolic resources to help us to "converse our way through life" (Berger and Kellner[30] quoted in Duck 1992, p. 1). Indeed, talking is fundamental to the self-social identification (Davies and Harre 1998). However, talking is not a trivially mundane element of everyday group relationship; rather it is a delicate and serious business (Argyle 1994). Since people tend to talk about topics that have some interest value to them (Argyle 1992), it is vital that we share topics of common interest with other people in the group. Yet we need to bear in mind that topics of common interest may be varied temporally and spatially and largely depend on the context of particular interactions. Talking also requires collective knowledge of "social representations" (Moscovici 1984, 1988). Moscovici (1984, 1988) conceptualises social representations as a system of interacting ideas and images which relate to everyday interpretations that evolve continuously over time and space; they provide coherence to our beliefs and concepts as well as enable us to experience shared senses in our social interactions. Again, I maintain that although social representations may appear to be inculcated, they are not permanent as they are continually reproduced in the social interactions of everyday life.

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[30] Berger, P. and H. Kellner (1975), "Marriage and the Construction of Reality," in *Life as Theatre,* eds., D. Brissett and C. Edgley, Chicago: Aldine.

Alongside the verbal language of talking, its non-verbal aspects are also vital and problematic (Argyle 1994; Duck 1992). The silent messages of gestures, facial expressions and eye movements are significant elements of social communication. Essentially, we need to have resources to grasp the shared meanings of these unspoken languages. Like the spoken language, the unspoken aspect is also socially constructed and context-dependent. The meanings may be varied culturally. For example, many tourists who visit Thailand admire the abundance of smiles on Thai faces and often view those smiles as a symbol of friendliness or Thai hospitality. However, that may be only one aspect of Thai smiles. Mulder (1996, p. 11) comments that a smile is "one of the most enigmatic expressions" in Thai society since "the Thai have a smile for every emotion, and with so many nuances of smiling, the smile often hides more than it reveals." Certainly, we need to acquire cultural resources in order to interpret Thai smiles in each specific context.

In order to locate ourselves properly in a particular social group, we also need to understand the group's rules and conventions. This is another complicated facet of social interactions because "to a large extent, the rules and conventions which guide much of the action and interaction in social life are implicit, unformulated, informal and imprecise" (Thompson 1990). Indeed, while some rules and conventions are announced explicitly (for example, in the film 'The Beach' there is an explicit rule that everyone must have a particular pattern tattooed on her/his bicep in order to become a member of 'the beach' community), most of the rules and conventions are unspoken or unwritten (e.g., use of words, dress codes, manners, etc.). Ostensibly, the best possible way to grasp those implicit rules and conventions is to harvest them in the "fields of interaction" (Bourdieu 1977, 1984; Thompson 1990). That is, we observe how the others act and interact in a particular

social context; and/or we talk to others in order to extract those hidden rules and conventions. At the same time, in appropriating various kinds of symbolic resources from everyday lived interactions, we also contribute, extend and reproduce symbolic resources in the practices of group socialisation (Thompson 1990).

To summarise, together with other group members, we co-establish common symbolic resources such as languages, tastes, styles, rules and conventions, sketching shared social boundaries that signify our group identities. However, these shared boundaries (i.e., group identities) are not absolute; rather they may be dynamic and continuously shifting through time and space. Moreover, they may ambiguously intersect with or disconnect from our other social boundaries as we concurrently engage in a variety of social relations[31]. This also includes lived interactions in unfocused social situations such as encountering other people in shopping centres or at airport lounges. In such encounters, although there is no exchange of utterance, there is always an exchange of symbolic forms. The clothes, shoes, watches, make-up or perfume we put on are the unspoken languages that we communicate to each other (Gabriel and Lang 1995; Goffman 1959; McCracken 1988). Hence, they are also symbolic resources that we can gather by observing others in the course of such social encounters. By this means, we may develop shared boundaries that establish our sense of belonging to a variety of imagined groups (Anderson 1983; Gabriel and Lang 1995; Maffesoli 1988).

[31] See section 2.1.2 and 2.2.1d in Chapter Two.

3.1.2 Lived Consumption as Symbolic Resource[32]

Lived consumption is a vital symbolic form that we communicate to each other in postmodern society (Elliott 1997). As consumer culture looms large in postmodernity, consumption becomes not only a fundamental symbolic means to cultivate the self, but also a major symbolic resource that we re-appropriate, re-interpret and re-contextualise to advance our self-project. Fundamentally, all consumption choices can be regarded as symbolic resources for the self, that is, all products carry symbolic meanings that we can employ to create and articulate who we are, and to position ourselves in the cultural world (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Douglas and Isherwood 1996; McCracken 1988). Having argued this, I do not mean to deny the utilitarian significance of products; rather I would like to emphasise that all products have symbolic properties. As Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981, p.20-21) explain:

> Even the use of things for utilitarian purposes operates within the symbolic province of culture. ...Thus it is extremely difficult to disentangle the use-related function from the symbolic meanings in even the most practical objects. Even purely functional things serve to socialize a person to a certain habit or way of life and are representative signs of that way of life.

Nevertheless, like other symbolic forms (e.g., language), things do not hold intrinsic meanings. Rather the symbolic meanings of things are socio-culturally constructed (Appadurai 1986; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Douglas and Isherwood 1996; Jhally 1990; McCracken 1988a; Sartre 1998). Jhally (1990) remarks that without us things have no meaning. Ironically, without the

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[32] The concept of consumption as symbolic resources for the self-project has been reviewed in section 2.3; thus in this section I reserve not to reiterate the points that have already been discussed in order to avoid unnecessary repetition.

meanings of things we may not hold any sense of meaningful existence either. Sartre (1998) argues that we are mediated by things to the same extent as things are mediated by us. Certainly, the self and society arise in and continue to exist through the communication of significant symbols (e.g., things) the meanings of which are co-created by the self and others in that society (Duncan 1968).

3.1.2a Products/Brands

> Each of us in this room is a walking compendium of brands. You choose each of those brands among many options – because they felt 'more like you'.
>
> Perry[33] in Gabriel and Lang 1995, p. 36

Like language, products as symbolic forms are consumed and interpreted in specific social-historical contexts (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). Thus to grasp the contextualised meaning of a particular product, we need resources or capital (that we have acquired from past experiences, both lived and mediated ones) which we can employ in the process of interpreting it (Thompson 1990). This involves "processes of valorization" in the "field of interaction" by which and through which we value, evaluate, acclaim and contest symbolic forms (i.e., products) in order to negotiate certain kinds of symbolic meanings for them (Thompson 1990). Hence the products, to which are ascribed with contextualised meanings, become symbolic resources that we incorporate into our symbolic project of the self. Presumably, we employ these resources in various ways: to mediate incoherence within the self; to express qualities of the self; to communicate status; to allow socialisation; or even to regard as role models (Csikszentmihalyi and

[33] Sir Michael Perry, the Chairman of Uniliver. In his presidential address to the 1994 UK Advertising Association, 7 July 1994.

Rochberg-Halton 1981). All these functions of products as symbolic resources for the self can be investigated further in the domain of brand consumption.

As global capitalism looms large in postmodernity, our selves are inevitably moulded as consumers (Sarup 1996), that is, we live in an extensive "brandscape" (Sherry 1987) from which we must choose a personal "brandspace" in which to live (Biel 1993). In doing this, we can obtain a sense of self or our positioning in the ubiquitous sphere of brands through lived consumption of a selected assortment of brands. Largely, the creation of individual brandspace can be achieved through the creation of deep meaning and the development of trust in particular brands (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998). Customarily, the symbolic consumption of brands can help establish and convey some of the fundamental cultural categories such as social status, gender, age, and such cultural values as family, tradition and authenticity (McCracken 1993). However, Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998) propose that brands can also be used to counter some of the threats to the self posed by postmodernity[34], such as fragmentation, loss of meaning and loss of individuality.

While the postmodern self is increasingly saturated with a multiplicity of confused and disconnected (hyper)realities, brands can offer a sense of consistency and continuity for the self. That is, brands can provide resources of reassurance through their ability to deliver reliable benefits across time and space (Feldwick 1991). Evidently, the consistency over time and space we obtain from our lived experience with a particular brand develops our trust in the brand (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998). For instance, after experiencing the reliable quality of Colgate toothpaste over time, we tend to trust that the Colgate we buy today is

[34] See section 2.1.1 in Chapter Two.

similar to the one we bought last month, and that the Colgate we buy in Thailand carries the same quality as the one we buy in England. In this way, symbolic resources from brands not only provide the self with a sense of stability but also offer comfort from uncertainty. Furthermore, brands can evoke nostalgic feelings that give us a sense of connection to the past (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998), especially a connection to sensual experience with brands during our "sensitive period" like childhood or adolescence (Holbrook and Schindler 1994). Indeed, at each moment that the self arises in this ever-changing world[35], to see the familiar brands apparently offers a sense of continuity and/or restores a sense of security for the self. Accordingly, lived experience with brands becomes symbolic resources for the development of coherent self-narratives.

Brands are significant symbolic resources that facilitate social interactions. We talk about brands. We exploit symbolic meanings of brands to present the self. We employ different brands to locate us in various social contexts. We even re-contextualise brands into symbols interpretable in full only to members of our group. As Elliott and Ritson (1995) find in their study of a group of female college students who ascribe the group's coded sexual meanings to Haagen-Dazs ice-cream. This may be extended to the use of certain brands as identity-symbols of imagined groups in postmodernity[36]. Interestingly, brands can also be used as role models. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981, p. 50-51) suggest, "To use a thing in a culturally appropriate way means to experience the culture directly – becoming part of the medium of signs that constitutes that culture." Presumably, a little girl who plays with 'Barbie and Ken' is learning the repertoire of gender roles in

[35] See section 2.1.2 in Chapter Two.
[36] See section 2.3.4 in Chapter Two.

society. Indeed, brands are vital symbolic resources for the creation, continuance and communication of the self (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998). Nevertheless, again, we have to bear in mind that, like other symbols, brands are subjected to a continuous process of reinterpretation and recontextualisation.

3.1.3 The Body as Symbolic Resource

Much literature views the body as a vital practice and symbolic resource for the creation of the self[37] (Shilling 1997; Willis 1990). Willis (1990, p.11) asserts, "The body is a site of somatic knowledge as well as a set of signs and symbols. It is the source of productive and communicative activity – signing, symbolizing, feeling." Indeed, the body talks! The body carries symbolic and cultural meanings that mediate social interactions in our everyday life (Bourdieu 1984; Douglas 1966; Foucault 1988; Goffman 1959; Shilling 1997). The body is also a physical resource upon which we work and re-work to advance our self-creation project (Giddens 1991). Bourdieu (1984) considers the body as a form of physical capital that constitutes the self-enterprise. We develop our natural body (i.e., initial physical capital) in ways recognised socially as possessing symbolic value (e.g., accent, body image, mannerism). Besides employing physical capital (the body) to create the self, we can also translate this capital into various resources for our self-creation project. Bourdieu (1984) suggests that physical capital can be converted into economic capital (e.g. Arnold Schwarzenegger's muscular body has helped him enormously in the film industry), cultural capital (e.g., an elite accent may be an

[37] See section 2.1.3 and 2.2.1c in Chapter Two.

advantage in an interview into elite educational institutes.) and social capital (e.g., an athletic body may help its owner become popular in school.). Undoubtedly, we can invest those capitals in our symbolic project of the self – we can exploit them to negotiate our identities in society.

3.2 Mediated Experience

> An individual who reads a novel or watches a soap opera is not simply consuming fantasy; he or she is exploring possibilities, imagining alternatives, experimenting with the project of the self.
> Thompson 1995, p. 233

Mediated experience is an outcome of a mass-communication culture and the consumption of media products (Thompson 1995). It involves the ability to experience not only events which are spatially and temporally distant from the practical context of our daily life, but also events which reflect everyday 'taken-for-granted' lived experiences. Via reception and appropriation of media products, people in Bangkok could experience Princess Diana's funeral which took place in London, while they also encountered the reflections of their everyday traffic jams in a snack advertisement. Mediated experience is recontextualised experience which is not a continuous flow but rather a discontinuous sequence of events which have varying degrees of relevance to the self (Thompson 1995). Realms of mediated experience are not demarcated by spatial-temporal contexts, but are superimposed upon them in such a way that we can rove between them without altering the practical context of our daily lives. Mediated experience can provide rich sources of symbolic materials which open up new possibilities for self-creation (Kellner

1995; Thompson 1995). Thompson (1995, p.212) explicates, "The profusion of mediated materials can provide individuals with the means of exploring alternative forms of life in a symbolic or imaginary mode; it can provide individuals with a glimpse of alternatives, thereby enabling them to reflect critically on themselves and on the actual circumstances of their lives." Paradoxically, mediated experience may also subject the self to an unsettling predicament since the ubiquitous expansion of media may expose us to countless narratives of self-formation, countless visions of the world in such a way that we are encountering "symbolic overload" (Thompson, 1995 p.216). The more we are exposed to mediated experience, the more the self becomes an endless site of signs that shift with every movement (Baudrillard 1988).

3.2.1 The Self in a Mediated World

As society is threatened on all sides by the expanding network of mediated communication, the self becomes inevitably saturated with prolific symbolic forms derived through mediated experience (Gergen 1991; Thompson 1995). Indeed, we are living in a mediated world permeated by a media culture. Kellner (1995, p.1) explains:

> A media culture has emerged in which images, sounds, and spectacles help produce the fabric of everyday life, dominating leisure time, shaping political views and social behavior, and providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities. Radio, television, film, and other products of the culture industries provide the models of what it means to be male or female, successful or a failure, powerful or powerless. Media culture also provides the materials out of which many people construct their sense of class, of ethnicity and race, of nationality, of sexuality, of "us" and "them." Media culture helps shape the prevalent view of the world and deepest values: it defines what is considered good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil. Media stories and images provide the symbols, myths, and resources which help constitute a common culture for the majority of individuals in many parts of the world today. Media culture provides the materials to create identities whereby individuals insert themselves into contemporary techno-capitalist societies and which is producing a new form of global culture.

Central to postmodernity is a growing range of opportunities for the use of mediated experiences in the project of the self. While some women obtain the possible modes of femininity and feminine fantasies by identifying themselves with melodramatic heroines in television soap operas (Ang 1990), some women read Greer's *The Female Eunuch* to realise their feminist potentials and to liberate themselves from conventional female roles (Simonds 1996), and some women explore their female sexualities and rebelling selves by watching Madonna on MTV (Kellner 1995). By opening up the self to countless mediated symbolic resources, the media culture "both enriches and accentuates the reflexive organization of the self" (Thompson 1995, p. 212). With the intensification of such symbolic resources, we are continually confronted with new possibilities, our worldviews are always shifting and our symbolic points of reference are endlessly changing. The self is fashioned and re-fashioned endlessly, corresponding to the profuse and transient images projected in a magazine, conjured up in TV advertising, and

glamorised in MTV videos (White and Hellerich 1998). Furthermore, mediated resources, especially self-help literature, can potentially assist us through life crisis, transition or identity-reconstruction (Simonds 1996).

Mediated symbolic resources not only enlarge the repertoire of our possible selves[38], but also facilitate our daily social interactions. We commonly discuss media messages like news, songs, television programmes or novels, and gradually weave them into the symbolic fabric of our everyday lives (Thompson 1995). Furthermore, we can exploit media messages to facilitate the symbolic creation of our narrative selves[39]; as Thompson (1995, p. 43) notes that media messages "may provide a narrative framework within which individuals recount their thoughts, feelings and experiences, interweaving aspects of their own lives with the retelling of media messages and with their responses to the messages retold." Ricoeur (1977) also articulates that mediated resources like literature can give structure and meaning to the complexity and confusion of life by providing a causal model for us, linking disparate life events into a coherent sequence.

The development of media technologies not only enhances and alters our self-creation process, but also produces a new kind of intimacy for the self – a mediated social relationship (Thompson 1995). Today our everyday social interactions are increasingly mediated by information technologies like email or the Internet. Hence our social network becomes more complex as it extends beyond the spatial-temporal context of everyday lived interaction. Essentially, we need to appropriate even more resources or capital to deal with this growing phenomenon. Thompson (1995) argues that mediated interaction can be more complicated than

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[38] See section 2.2.1a in Chapter Two.

lived interaction since it holds a more open-ended character which makes it more difficult to grasp its meaning. Unlike face-to-face interaction that includes a multiplicity of symbolic cues like intonation, gestures or facial expression, mediated interaction involves fewer cues so that we have to rely more and more on our own resources in order to interpret the messages conveyed (Thompson 1995). Certainly, resources needed may be appropriated in the field of that very mediated interaction. For example, in the course of interaction with friends on email, we learn or co-create symbolic forms that represent emotions or level of intimacy; e.g., the symbol ':)' for a 'smile' or 'r u :(?' for 'Are you depressed?'

Mediated experience can also lead to the intensification of non-reciprocal intimacy, for instance, the mediated quasi-interaction between fan and star (Thompson 1995). Generally, this kind of mediated intimacy offers the self a sense of exhilaration. However, it can be central to the symbolic self-project since "it can also become a form of dependence in which individuals come to rely on others whose very absence and inaccessibility turn them into an object of veneration" (Thompson 1995, p. 208). As one of Barry Manilow's fans[40] reveals, "I suppose it's the same kind of thing people get out of religion. I can't really explain it more than that. But they obviously get something from God to help them through their lives. And Barry is – maybe I shouldn't say it, but it's the way I feel – he's the same sort of thing. He helps me through my life" (quoted in Thompson 1995, p. 221). Apparently, Madonna's fans also view her as the ultimate icon, the supreme image of identity that they actively incorporate into their self-narratives (Kellner 1995). This phenomenon can later lead to the possibility of becoming part of an imagined

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[39] See section 2.2.2 in Chapter Two.
[40] In Vermorel and Vermorel (1985), *Starlust: The Secret Life of Fans,* London: W. H. Allen.

(or even literal) community of which members share a similar attachment (Thompson 1995).

Mediated experience via the Internet also offers abundant resources for the symbolic construction of the postmodern self. Whatever resources we are looking for to advance our self-project, the Internet seems to have it all. More importantly, the Internet experience offers us an unparalleled opportunity to become masters of self-presentation and self-creation (Turkle 1996). Indeed, in virtual space, we can be whoever we want to be. On the Net, I can be a sexy woman, a gay man, a playful teenager, an old millionaire or even an alien. It is an imagined site where we can explore and act out our countless possible selves and fantasies. Simply put, on the Internet we have a chance to experience multiple aspects of the self since we are who we pretend to be (Turkle 1996).

3.2.2 Advertising as Salient Mediated Symbolic Resources

Advertising is recognised as one of the most potent mediated symbolic resources for the self-creation project (Goffman 1976; Lannon and Cooper 1983; McCracken 1987; Mick and Buhl 1992; Sherry 1987). Much literature suggests that we should not conceive advertising as just an occasional conduit for marketing information, but rather as a ubiquitous manifestation in which human reality is mediated – advertising is a system of cultural meaning in society (Fowles 1996; Leiss *et al* 1986; McCracken 1987; Mick and Buhl 1992; Ritson and Elliott 1999; Sherry 1987). Watzlawick (in Kloepfer 1987, p. 126) comments that "even if advertising were completely without an 'objective' communicative basis, it would still be powerful because of our faith in it - as a 'self-fulfilling prophecy'." Like

other popular culture, advertising seems to dominate today's milieu of symbols, superseding more traditional forms of expression (Fowles 1996). With the alteration of traditional social meaning systems such as religion, politics and the family, advertising seems to fill the gap with its privileged discourse through and about objects, which ostensibly allows us to orientate ourselves to the social meaning of our everyday consumption (Leiss *et al* 1986; Slater 1997). Again, as salient symbols, advertising becomes a prolific resource, embodying cultural meanings that we internalise into our self-project (McCracken 1987). Additionally, advertising storylines and structure may be used as a framework for our narrative selves (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998). Finally, advertising can also be employed as a resource to facilitate our day-to-day socialisation (Ritson and Elliott 1999).

3.2.2a Advertising as a Resource for Symbolic Meanings

As a part of a cultural system, advertising is viewed as a guideline to map out all aspects of our social realities (Leiss *et al* 1986; Ritson and Elliott 1995a); on the other hand, all aspects of our realities are also guidelines to map out advertising creativity (McCracken 1988a). Evidently, our relationship with advertising is dialectical: advertising not only helps in creating, modifying and transforming cultural meaning in our society (Lannon and Cooper 1983), but also represents cultural meanings taken from our worldviews and invested into the advertised brand (McCracken 1988a). This dialectical relationship drives a cyclical flow of symbolic meanings derived from culture and transferred into the semiotic world of advertising, then interpreted and used by us to construct internally our self-concept and externally our social world. "Finally as part of the external construction of an individual's life world the meaning returns back to its original starting point, the

mass of flowing meanings that represents culture" (Ritson and Elliott 1995a, p. 116). Thus, advertising is not only a means to transfer or create meanings into culture but also a cultural product itself. Ritson and Elliott (1999, p. 274) elaborate, "advertising is itself a cultural product that can, through experience, interpretation, evaluation, ritual and metaphor, conspicuously confer and convey personal and group meanings." Accordingly, advertising becomes a rich symbolic resource that we can employ in our daily activities for the creation, maintenance and expression of both our self and group identities. As McCracken (1987, P. 122) argues:

> when the consumer looks at ads he or she is looking for symbolic resources, new ideas and better concrete versions of old ideas with which to advance their project – what they are looking for is small meanings, concepts of what it is to be a man or a woman, concepts of what it is to be middle aged, concepts of what it is to be a parent, concepts of what a child is and what a child is becoming, concepts of what it is to be a member of a community and a country.

In other words, we look for symbolic resources from advertising to make sense of our selves and our social worlds. That is, we appropriate advertising meanings by accommodating them into the symbolic practices of our everyday life (Anderson and Meyer 1988). Since symbolic images in advertising generally aim to create an association between the brands advertised and particular socially desirable and meaningful traits (Kellner 1995), advertising appears to be a potential means that transfers particular symbolic meanings from the social world into brands, which are then become symbolic resources for the self-project (McCracken 1988a). However, this meaning transfer process is not straightforward and total. Ostensibly, the symbolic meanings of brands that we appropriate from advertising are viscous in nature (Elliott *et al* 1993); thus, to achieve concretised meanings, at least

temporally, we need to discursively valorise them in the realm of our lived experience with brands and dialectically validate those meanings in the contextual field of social interactions (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998).

Nevertheless, many studies suggest that the symbolic resources that we obtain from advertising may not necessarily be connected to the consumption practices of the brands advertised (O'Donohoe 1994; Ritson and Elliott 1999; Willis 1990). Since advertising is "a buffet of symbolic imagery" (Fowles 1996), we can choose those images, then playfully mix-and-match them for various purposes in our symbolic self-creation processes. We may use informative and educational advertisements as sources of knowledge; for example, we may learn how whisky is made from a whisky advertisement. However, what we derive from this advertisement is not only the information of 'how whisky is made', but also the symbolic meaning of 'I know how whisky is made'. Habitually, we may observe different images portrayed in advertising and integrate them into lifestyles, which "give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity" (Giddens 1991, p. 81). Often, we consume advertising images for aesthetic pleasure (Willis 1990). Observably, advertising is a prominent source of entertainment – we enjoy jingles, humour, attractive presenters, beautiful scenery, interesting ideas or visuals and soap-type stories. Advertising can make us laugh, smile, sing along or even cry.

Furthermore, since advertising embraces fantasies, we may also exploit its images to obtain vicarious experiences (O'Donohoe 1994). Sometimes we may relate advertising images to our self-image and tend to assess those idealised images as role models and aspirations (O'Donohoe 1994). Controversially, this advertising gratification is criticised in Richins's study (1991, p.81) where she states that

"exposure to highly attractive images can negatively affect feelings about the self, such as satisfaction with appearance." However, another study (Myers and Biocca 1992) contradicts this findings and maintains that exposure to idealised images actually makes us feel more euphoric afterwards because it allows us to fantasise about the idealised possible selves. Presumably, it is not so surprising that these two studies reach opposite conclusions, since the appropriation of meanings is in fact a complex, and dynamic process that may produce a variety of outcomes according to the framework (e.g., social-historical context, personal perception, personal life theme) in which we bear them (Mick and Buhl 1992; Thompson 1995).

Moreover, we employ advertising as a resource for social comparison, that is, we usually compare ourselves with images portrayed in advertisements (Richins 1991). This is vital for the symbolic construction of the self as social comparison, whether the outcome is negative or positive, is central to the processes of self-social identification[41]. Additionally, advertising the mainstay of which is still based on the soap opera format can also be used as a narrative resource for the self-project (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998). Advertising not only provides a powerful representation of narrative sequence for the self, but also illustrates how to keep our narratives going with its different spatio-temporal episodes. Undoubtedly, mediated experience through advertising offers countless symbolic resources that enlarge the repertoire of our possible selves and enrich the pool of our capital, which we can employ to negotiate and advance our self-creation project in this postmodern world.

[41] See 2.2.1d in Chapter Two.

3.2.2b Advertising as a Resource for Socialisation

The ubiquity of advertising makes it "the most widely shared experience in our culture" (Wright and Snow 1980, p. 326). Thus, advertising evidently plays a vital role in holding the decentred society together, that is, it helps develop social bonding via shared experience. Interestingly, Barthes (1972) equates advertising with a repertoire of contemporary mythologies. "Like myths, ads frequently resolve social contradictions, provide models of identity, and celebrate the existing social order" (Kellner 1995, p. 247). Certainly, myths are important resources for learning the essential elements in our culture (Passikoff and Holman 1987). As postmodern myths, advertising then becomes a significant symbolic resource in the socialisation process (Grunert 1986; O'Donohoe 1994; Ritson and Elliott 1999; Willis 1990). Since all advertisements are socially contextualised texts (Kellner 1995; Scott 1994), advertising texts can facilitate social learning such as roles, rules and conventions in society (Grunert 1986). Certainly, many advertisements reflect familiar aspects of everyday life that we often use to reassure our social roles as well as to reinforce our attitudes and values (O'Donohoe 1994).

Much literature suggests that resources from advertising facilitate social interactions, particularly among young people (Buttle 1991; O'Donohoe 1994; Ritson and Elliott 1999; Willis 1990). Expected to be common experience, advertising is viewed as a familiar topic for conversation (Buttle 1991). This is not uncommon; Anderson and Meyer (1988) note that mass media is often a source of interpersonal debate. Frequently, advertising becomes fundamental to everyday phatic interactions among teenagers (Ritson and Elliott 1999). It is also a source of creative ideas for play. O'Donohoe (1994, p. 63) finds that teenagers habitually

play with advertising in the course of their phatic interactions: "frequently acting out scenes from ads, trying on, discarding and making fun of various roles, characters, lines and accents." Yet, these phatic interactions and playful acts revolving around advertising are not a trivial affair, but a serious business – they are vital to the formation and maintenance of group identity (Ritson and Elliott 1999). Ritson and Elliott (1999) remark, "Experiencing the ad becomes the ticket of entry into a particular part of the group's social exchange, and this experience in turn contributes to the ongoing structure of that group." Presumably, advertisements are "tokens in young people's system of social exchange" (Willis 1990, p.57).

Advertising is sometimes treated as discourse among group members in order to evaluate each other. O'Donohoe (1994, p. 70) argues, "Talking about advertising is a distinct social skill, and there are conventions and expectations regarding an individual's competence in its practice." Advertising literacy is crucial here. Ritson and Elliott (1995b) describe advertising literacy as not only the skill to be able to understand and transfer the meaning from an advertisement but also the ability to use that meaning within the social context of existence. In order to socialise appropriately in the group, we must be able to interpret the advertisement in a meaningful way, i.e., the interpretation must be satisfactory to be accepted by other group members (Ritson and Elliott 1999). Additionally, we must develop the skill to criticise and assess whether the advertisement is "cool" or "crap" in order to display "particular tastes" to other group members (Ritson and Elliott 1999). By discussing 'advertising taste' discursively, the group members can simultaneously affirm their 'collective taste', which presumably reinforces both their group identity and their membership within the group (Ritson and Elliott 1999; Willis 1990).

Shared advertising literacy may also be embodied as rituals or metaphors used in various social interactions. Ritson and Elliott (1999) note that symbolic resources derived from advertising may be ritualised to articulate particular meanings in particular social contexts. By enacting particular advertising scenes or rephrasing particular advertising scripts in everyday group interactions, we are able to create group distinction and isolate those who are illiterate in such advertising rituals (Ritson and Elliott 1999). Furthermore, as shared experience, advertising resources may be used as metaphors to spontaneously transfer particular meanings into particular social situations (Ritson and Elliott 1999). Again, to earn acceptance from other group members, we must be able to grasp the meanings from those advertising metaphors. Indeed, literacy in advertising rituals or metaphors becomes a form of cultural capital that we can invest in everyday socialisation to gain dividends in term of social status and self-esteem (Ritson and Elliott 1999).

3.3 The Appropriation of Consumption Symbolism

Making sense of our lives is fundamental to our symbolic project of the self. Following my argument in section 2.3.1, I maintain that in order to achieve a sense of being, we are endlessly appropriating meanings to fill in our empty selves. Gendlin (1962, p.5) suggests, "Meaning is formed in the interaction of experiencing and something that functions symbolically." And as our lives in postmodernity are conducted in the sphere of consumption (Firat and Venkatesh 1994; Giddens 1991; Slater 1997), we basically make sense of ourselves through consumption experiences. That is, we gain a sense of who we are through symbolism that is

attached to our consumption choices and activities (Douglas and Isherwood 1996; Elliott 1994b; McCracken 1988a). This embraces symbolism derived from both lived (e.g., brand usage) and mediated (e.g., advertising) experiences. Again, we must bear in mind that consumption symbolism is not pre-given and static[42]; but it is culturally constructed and in constant flux (McCracken 1988). It is what we recurrently interpret and re-interpret as the self momentarily arises in each social context[43]. Hence, consumption symbolism may shift multidirectionally depending on the very experiential moment that the self arises. Presumably, so long as the self encounters comparatively familiar experience, consumption symbolism appears to shift so unnoticeably that we assume its continuity and consistency. However, in postmodernity where the self is increasingly exposed to a diversity of everlasting experiences, renewed consumption symbolism seems to emerge unlimitedly.

3.3.1 Making Sense of Lived and Mediated Experience

> If we do not have the felt meaning of the concept, we haven't got the concept at all.
>
> Gendlin 1962, p. 5

Appropriating consumption symbolism involves a continuous interweaving of lived and mediated experience. While we proceed through time-space paths in our everyday lives, we acquire symbolic resources from both forms of experience, incorporating them into our ongoing self-project (Thompson 1995). For this, we require skills to draw selectively on mediated experience and interlace it with lived experience in order to appropriate symbolism for the construction of the self (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998; Thompson 1995). As we are situated within a specific

[42] See section 2.3 in Chapter Two.
[43] See section 2.1.2 in Chapter Two.

social-historical context, the key here is how to choose suitable resources for the interpretation process in order to achieve the proper meaning for each social context. Fundamentally, endeavouring to appropriate the contextualised meanings involves complex "processes of valorization" through which we valuate, evaluate and resolve the conflict of those symbolic forms in particular "fields of interaction," so that certain kinds of symbolic values are ascribed to them (Thompson 1990, p. 146-147). For this, I uphold that the processes of valorization are not carried out only by logical thinking, but also through felt experiencing (Gendlin 1962). Especially in valorising symbolic creativity, Willis (1990, p. 11) observes that meanings are "intrinsically attached to feeling, to energy, to excitement and psychic movement." Indeed, sensual experience is vital to the creation of meanings. Gendlin (1962) affirms that we cannot understand what a symbol "means" or use it meaningfully without the "feel" of its meaning. Seemingly, Descartes' cogito "I think therefore I am[44]" is inadequate.

In order to appropriate meanings contextually, we customarily incorporate the rules and conventions[45] of particular socio-historical contexts into the processes of valorization. Nonetheless, we are not a passive entity which obediently accepts the constituted significance; rather we are an active interpreter who is involved in an ongoing process of constituting and reconstituting meanings, which simultaneously reproduces such social contexts (Thompson 1990). Indeed, "sense making is an ongoing process in which meanings emerge in layers of time and circumstance and the development of one meaning does not preclude the development of others. We are prolific in our sense making, developing a depth and complexity of meaning"

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[44] See section 1.2.1c in Chapter One.
[45] See section 3.1.1d in Chapter Three.

(Anderson and Meyer 1988, p.34). In the course of our everyday lives, as we move through a multiplicity of social contexts, we actively interpret and reinterpret countless symbolic meanings which we undertake inwardly as self-symbolism and outwardly as social-symbolism.

3.3.1a Making Sense to Oneself: Self-symbolism

In order to make sense of our experience and incorporate its meanings into our self-creation project, we need to craft those meanings into our idiosyncratic meanings: self-symbolism. That is, we valorise and mould symbolic meanings to match our life circumstances. Thompson (1995, p. 211) notes, "the ways in which individuals draw on symbolic resources to construct their sense of self will depend to some extent on the material conditions of their lives, as individuals typically adjust their expectations and evaluations to their continuously revisable assessment of what, given the circumstances of their lives, they could realistically hope to achieve." Certainly, our physical capital (i.e., bodies[46]) and other capitals (e.g., economic, educational or cultural) that we have established and/or accumulated from past experiences in our life histories[47] are primary resources that bear on the material conditions of our lives. Nevertheless, those life conditions are not settled; rather they are negotiable. Inwardly, we always assess, interpret and negotiate our self-symbolism through the dialectical processes between newly acquired resources and our life conditions. For this, we continually explore our possible selves[48] and talk to our internal voices[49]. Simultaneously, "we are constantly shaping and reshaping our skills and stocks of knowledge, testing our feelings and tastes and

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[46] See section 2.1.3, 2.2.1c in Chapter Two and 3.1.3 in this chapter.
[47] See section 2.2.1b in Chapter Two.
[48] See section 2.2.1a in Chapter Two.

expanding the horizons of our experience" (Thompson 1995, p. 43). In such processes, we acquire/disregard some resources and/or modify our life conditions (e.g., undergo plastic surgery, rework our possible selves or reinterpret our life histories) in order to appropriate the negotiated self-symbolism to advance our self-project. However, self-symbolism alone is not meaningful enough to position the self in its social world.

3.3.1b Making Sense to Others: Social-symbolism

Being a social self, we need to make sense of our lives in the collective world. For the self and the others to co-arise[50] into the world meaningfully, there must be socially shared meanings that bridge the "betweenness": social-symbolism. In essence, to appropriate a sense of self is basically to understand where we are situated in our social world. Collectively, social-symbolism is achieved through the self-others dialectical processes. In the course of social interactions, we embrace, negotiate or co-create social representations, rules and conventions of various kinds of symbolic forms[51], which we integrate into our interpretation framework. Habitually, we validate self-symbolism in our social realms. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we always submit to social-symbolism. Vigorously, we negotiate and re-negotiate self-social symbolism through the process of *discursive elaboration* (Thompson 1990) – "an ongoing process of telling and retelling, interpretation and reinterpretation, commentary, laughter and criticism" (Thompson 1995, p. 42). Only through this process of *discursive elaboration* can symbolic meanings be appropriated socially and become what Eco (1979) calls "realised text." Again, this

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[49] See section 2.2.1b in Chapter Two.
[50] See section 2.1.2 in Chapter Two.
[51] See section 3.1.1d in this Chapter.

process of discursive elaboration is never straightforward. While it may sometimes take place effortlessly, it sometimes entails complex application. As each of us probably holds different experiences, different self-symbolism, we may ascribe different extents of values to particular symbols, "in such a way that an object which is praised by some may be denounced or despised by others" (Thompson 1990, p. 155). Essentially, to make sense to each other, we engage in the self-social negotiation of symbolism.

3.3.1c The Self-Social Negotiation of Symbolism

Generally, how and in which direction the self-social symbolism emerges in the process of *discursive elaboration* depends on our negotiating positions in particular social contexts (Thompson 1990). The more resources or capitals we bring to bear on interpreting it, the more interpreting power we potentially hold. Nonetheless, some of us, even with apparently inferior resources, may assert our willpower to maintain self-symbolism through grounded aesthetics (Willis 1990). Certainly, the processes of self-social negotiation of symbolism are never uncomplicated. This is particularly so in postmodernity – as we concurrently engage in a multiplicity of social groups, we are potentially subjected to conflicting social pressures and processes (Thompson 1990). The appropriation of symbolic meanings becomes even more problematical. Thompson (1990) remarks that accepting one set of social values and norms may coincide with rejecting another. However, I argue that under postmodern conditions[52], as we hold no absolute commitment to any essence, we may not necessarily resolve these conflicting meanings. Presumably, we can still live meaningfully in the pluralistic social

[52] See section 1.3 in Chapter One.

universe (Gergen 1991; Miller 1981) so long as we can coordinate and harmonise the manifold and conflicting facets of our lives within a meaningful narrative framework[53] (McAdams 1988).

The appropriation of symbolic meanings is an ongoing process that can extend well beyond the initial context of the experience (Thompson 1995). We talk about what our parents have told us to friends, what we have discussed with friends to siblings, or what we have seen on television to colleagues. Thus, meanings proliferate endlessly and sometimes incoherently, contesting with one another and surviving or slipping away by virtue of the power they possess. As the process of sense making continues, self-symbolism and social-symbolism increasingly fuse with each other – their boundaries become blurred in such a way that it seems impossible to distinguish them. Dialectically, these two realms of symbolism are woven into the symbolic fabric of the self, which is presumably reflected in our everyday consumption.

3.3.2 The Self, Lived Brand Consumption and Advertising

Following the above discussion on how we make sense of mediated and lived experiences, in this section I explore a particular case of how consumption symbolism is appropriated by examining the interplay between mediated experience from advertising, lived experience of brand consumption and the self. That is, I look at how we employ symbolic resources from an advertisement[54] to make sense

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[53] See section 2.2.2 in Chapter Two.

[54] Nevertheless, as I have discussed in section 3.2.2, I maintain that symbolic resources from advertising can be appropriated independently from the brand advertised (Ritson and Elliott 1999; Willis 1990). In this section, I only want to make a case of how advertising plays a potential role in generating symbolic meanings for the advertised brand. For discussion on advertising as resources of symbolic meanings for the self-project, please see section 3.2.2a.

of the brand advertised and subsequently incorporate its meanings into our symbolic project of the self. Being a vital promotional tool, advertising generally aims to create some sort of lifestyle imagery that bonds together images of consumers, the brand and social aspirations (Kellner 1995; Leiss *et al* 1986). Advertising messages appear to provide "guideposts for personal and social identity – telling one 'who one is' or 'what one might become' in life" (Leiss *et al* 1986, p. 11). As Kellner (1995, p.248) observes:

> Such symbolic images in advertising attempt to create an association between the products offered and socially desirable and meaningful traits in order to produce the impression that if one wants to be a certain type of person, - for instance, to be a "real man" – then one should buy Marlboro cigarettes.

McCracken (1988a) views advertising as a potential means that advertisers employ to transfer certain meanings, which they grasp from the cultural world, to the brands so that the consumers can derive those meanings from the brands through consumption rituals and incorporate them into their self-projects. However, the process of transferring meanings from advertising to brands and brands to consumers does not flow effortlessly or straightforwardly; rather it flows viscously as it involves complex processes of valorization, discursive elaboration and ongoing negotiations[55]. Since many studies suggest that we embody an active and participating audience/consumer, our appropriations of brand symbolism may be varied and different from what they are intended to be (Anderson and Meyer 1988; Fiske 1999; Livingstone 1995; Mick and Buhl 1992; O'Donohoe 1994; Ritson and Elliott 1999). Indeed, we are active interpreters of the advertising and brand

[55] See section 3.3.1 in this Chapter.

meanings – we are ultimate producers[56] of the brands consumed (Firat and Venkatesh 1995).

3.3.2a Appropriating Advertising Meanings

Although advertisers aspire to create particular meanings for brands through their advertising campaigns, the meanings interpreted and ascribed to the brands may be decentred into myriad directions. As we are exposed to advertising texts, we may attend only to certain messages and interpret them according to our resources such as personal perceptions, life goals and themes or social knowledge (Lannon 1992; Livingstone 1995; Mick and Buhl 1992). Certainly, the meaning of a particular advertisement is not given within the advertisement itself; as Anderson and Meyer (1988, p.7) point out, "meaning is not delivered in the communication process, rather it is constructed within it." Following Ritson and Elliott (1995b), I argue that at the self-symbolism level, advertising meanings are co-created through the dialectical process between the self and advertising texts. This is not a simple task, as this process is considered as a struggle of negotiation between two powerful sources - the texts and its audiences/readers (Livingstone 1995). While it is acknowledged that advertising generally employs strategy and tactics to invest the brand with persuasive symbolic meanings and to establish powerful, pervasive and long lasting moods and motivations in its target audiences (Geertz 1973), the audiences/readers are also recognised as resourceful and active (Fiske 1999; Livingstone 1995; Ritson and Elliott 1995b). Presumably, as the co-creation process is tugged between two powerful sources, it potentially shifts multidirectionally. Moreover, as advertising texts are viewed as polysemic, it

[56] See section 1.3.1 in Chapter One.

encourages its audiences/readers to perform strong readings in order to appropriate meanings (Fiske 1999; Morley 1993; Ritson and Elliott 1995b). Accordingly, through such process of co-creation, a multiplicity of meanings is likely to emerge (Ritson and Elliott 1995b).

However, the creation of meanings is not conclusive in the co-creation process between the self and advertising texts during the period of exposure to the advertisement. Since advertising is a form of mass communication, its meanings continue to arise in the course of our social interactions with others and may later become socially shared meanings: social-symbolism (Anderson and Meyer 1988; Thompson 1995; Ritson and Elliott 1995b). The social consumption of advertising again involves the process of *discursive elaboration* (Thompson 1990) in which we describe, discuss, argue about or laugh at a certain advertisement. It is in such processes that symbolic meanings of the brand advertised evolve. Yet these meanings are not solid, but remain viscous and tentative.

3.2.2b Appropriating Brand Symbolism

Although we may associate some aspects of symbolic meanings appropriated from advertising with the brand advertised, these meanings may remain viscous, liable to be rejected or just forgotten. In order for these meanings to become relatively concretised, we need to valorise them through lived experience of brand consumption. McCracken (1988a) suggests that brand symbolism may be affirmed, evoked, ascribed or reinterpreted through various consumption rituals: possession, exchange, grooming and divestment. Through such rituals, we interact with brands by using the body to perform symbolic actions that allows us to experience and articulate the meanings, which words cannot handle adequately, to ourselves

(Bocock 1974). For instance, by applying Nivea night cream to our faces or polishing our vintage MG car, we can grasp sensual experiences, and if those experiences give us euphoric feelings, we tend to appropriate the deeper meanings for the brands at that very moment. Presumably, if every time we perform such rituals and still sense a relatively similar experience, the meanings will become realised.

Nevertheless, the appropriation of one realised meaning for brands does not preclude the appropriation of other meanings. Evidently, brands may embrace multiple meanings. As brands are always consumed in particular contexts, their meanings may vary contextually. Lee (1993, p.25) notes:

> Although, in its guise as an object of lived culture, the commodity is by no means symbolically fluid, it is certainly symbolically malleable and thus able to assume a variety of meanings and significations according to the contexts of its use and the cultural competences of its users.

For (a Thai) example, the Bear Brand milk – with the slogan "with love and care" – which in its advertising campaign portrays how a husband shows his love and care to his pregnant wife (of course, one of his practices is serving her Bear Brand milk), appears to embrace various contextualised symbolic meanings. For instance, it symbolises "I care for your health" and is often used as a gift for hospitalised friends; it also symbolises "I love and care for you deeply" and is popularly used as a Valentine's Day gift. Indeed, for the Bear Brand to become different "social representations" in different social contexts, its meanings must have been valorised in the course of everyday social interactions. That is, while we retrieve symbolic meanings from advertising and interlace them with the lived experience of brand consumption, we valorise those meanings through the process

of discursive elaboration between the two realms of self-symbolism and social-symbolism (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998). Frequently, we talk about our lived experience of brand consumption with other people; we recommend others to use or not use them. Even though we may not talk about the brands verbally, the fact that we perform rituals of consuming them socially is another way of articulating them. Presumably, only after being subjected to the process of discursive elaboration in social contexts and interwoven with behavioral significations derived from consumption rituals, does the brand symbolism become a promising symbolic resource for the self-creation project.

3.4 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I first discuss potential symbolic resources from which we may appropriate consumption symbolism in order to create, maintain and express the self. Then, I examine how consumption symbolism is appropriated. Generally, while we move through the spatial-temporal paths of our everyday lives, we acquire symbolic resources from both lived and mediated experience, integrating them into our ongoing self-creation project. For this, we interact with others in order to draw upon symbolic resources such as languages, styles, rules and conventions in society. Additionally, we obtain symbolic resources from and through everyday lived consumption and the body. At the same time, we grasp countless resources from various media products, particularly from advertising. Continually, we interlace those symbolic resources from both experiences in order to make sense of ourselves. That is, we valorise, elaborate and negotiate their meanings in the two realms of self-symbolism and social-symbolism, then interweave those meanings into the

symbolic fabric of our lives. The complexity of the concepts I discuss in this chapter implies that if we aspire to understand the phenomenon, it is essential to explore it in a natural group setting as well as to delve into each individual member phenomenologically.

Part Two: The Journey

Chapter Four

The Research

> Without science, we lose our credibility. Without humanity, we lose our ability to understand others.
>
> Agar 1980, p.13

> Anything that bears the stamp of human experience can be endlessly *interpreted* and differentiated through more human experience.
>
> Gendlin 1962, p. 22

Human experience is indeed too complex to be explained by scientific and rational means, i.e., positivism (Best and Kellner 1991; Lyotard 1984; Nietzsche 1967). Being a socially constructed entity, our experience is only a moment in a continuous process of interpretations where the meanings are appropriated not in a stable, referential relation between signified and signifier, rather within the endless, context-dependent dialectic of such experience. Therefore, in order to understand human experience, we need to consider its locally contextual aspects such as society, culture, language, practices, rules and conventions; it is essential to study the human subject in the natural setting of cultural contexts. Importantly, we must acknowledge the multifaceted and paradoxical nature of human experience and thus employ various perspectives, particularly perspectives of the human subject studied, to interpret it (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Nietzsche 1967).

Acknowledging the complex nature of human experience, a considerable amount of literature in consumer research advocate interpretivism in seeking knowledge (e.g., Arnould and Price 1993; Arnold and Fischer 1994; Belk *et al*

1988; Elliott 1996; Hirschman and Holbrook 1992; Holbrook 1995; Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy 1988; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Sherry 1990; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991; Thompson *et al* 1994). According to the ontological stance and the epistemological position I have discussed in Part One, I too employ the interpretive approach to conduct this thesis research. Following the theoretical points of departure in Part One, in this chapter I describe how I conduct my research journey in order to understand the relationship between the postmodern self and consumption symbolism. First, I introduce the objectives of the research and the initial research questions. Then, I discuss the research approach I employ – interpretivism – against the approach I decline – positivism. For this, I review both positivist and interpretivist basic assumptions (i.e., axiology, ontology and epistemology). I also discuss my choice of interpretive research – ethnography. Next, I present the choices and profiles of my informants as well as my own profile. Later, I describe my data collection and interpretation methods. Finally, I argue how this research's trustworthiness can be assessed.

4.1 Research Objectives and Questions

Although I propose the following research objectives and questions as tentative destinations at which I aim to arrive, I maintain to keep them open so that I allow myself to pursue any surprising destination that may emerge during the course of this research journey. This reservation is significant: since the phenomena concerning both the postmodern self and consumption symbolism are dynamic, complex and paradoxical, it is probable that I may overlook some vital aspects.

Moreover, as I aim to grasp the phenomena from my informants' perspectives[57], to set a fixed inquiry framework can potentially weaken or bar my informants' voices.

Primarily, this research is undertaken with two objectives:

1. To examine the in-depth accounts of symbolic consumption and the self-creation project in the cultural context of everyday life and answer the initial research questions.

2. To grasp and interpret emergent themes, which may arise in the field, in order to enrich and enlarge our understanding of the relationship between the postmodern self and consumption symbolism.

For this, I initially explore the following questions as tentative guidelines for my inquiries in this research:

1. How do my informants employ everyday consumption symbolically to construct, maintain and express their selves as well as to position themselves in their social worlds?

2. To what extent do my informants appropriate symbolic meanings from mediated and lived experiences and recontextualise them into their everyday consumption practices?

3. How do my informants negotiate their self-social symbolism and incorporate it into their symbolic self-projects?

[57] See section 4.3 in this chapter.

4.2 Research Approach: Interpretivism

> The positivist practice of "scientific" marketing research cannot cope with such a constructed reality and is likely to produce superficial knowledge rather than meaningful understanding.
>
> Elliott 1999, p. 118

4.2.1 Interpretivism VS Positivism[58]

There are two primary competing research approaches to seeking knowledge in social science: positivism and interpretivism[59] (Ozanne and Hudson 1989). Both research paradigms have different axiology, ontology and epistemology, which we should consider when choosing our research methodology. In order to achieve my research objectives and answer the above questions meaningfully, I adopt interpretivism as the research approach for this thesis. Although positivism has dominated the field of consumer research, I believe that the positivist attitude of studying consumers like the physical world is likely to limit our opportunity to understand the richness of malleable, multifaceted, contextually dependent self and consumption phenomena. By saying this, I do not mean that the positivist approach widely employed cannot produce any useful consumer knowledge. Several positivist studies certainly provide invaluable perspectives to the field of consumer

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[58] For more insightful investigations into both positivism and interpretivism, please consult Hirschman, Elizabeth C. (1986), "Humanistic Inquiry in Marketing Research: Philosophy, Method, and Criteria," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 23 (August), 237-249.Hirschman (1986), Hirschman, Elizabeth C. and Morris B. Holbrook (1992), *Postmodern Consumer Research*, Newbury Park:SAGE Publications.Hirschman and Holbrook (1992), Holbrook, Morris B. (1995), *Consumer Research: Introspective Essays on the Study of Consumption*, Thousand Oaks:SAGE Publications.Holbrook (1995), Hudson, Laurel A. and Julie L. Ozanne (1988), "Alternative Way of seeking Knowledge in Consumer Research," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 14, (March), 508-521.Hudson and Ozanne (1988), Lincoln, Yvonna S. and Egon G. Guba (1985), *Naturalistic Inquiry*, Beverly Hills, CA:SAGE Publications.Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Ozanne, Julie L. and Laurel A. Hudson (1989), "Exploring Diversity in Consumer Research," in *Interpretive Consumer Research*, ed. Elizabeth C. Hirschman, Provo, UT:Association for Consumer Research, 1-9.Ozanne and Hudson (1989).

[59] The review on axiology, ontology and epistemology of positivism and interpretivism in this section is mainly based on Ozanne and Hudson (1989).

behaviour (e.g., Bourdieu 1984; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Elliott, Eccles and Hodgson 1993). However, for this thesis I deem that the reductionistic nature of positivism may encounter more difficulties in obtaining holistic insight into the symbolic aspect of consumption experience which I aim to explore than the open-ended nature of interpretivism. In other words, I consider that the axiological, ontological and epistemological assumptions of the interpretive approach correspond more fittingly with the symbolic phenomena being studied in this thesis.

Axiologically, positivism assumes that it can explain and predict consumer behaviour scientifically under universal law. However, much literature criticises this positivist axiology maintaining it is unlikely to be achieved due to the problem of induction (e.g., Anderson 1983; Deshpande 1983; Elliott 1999; Hirschman 1986; Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy 1988; Ozanne and Hudson 1989). As Gendlin (1962) asserts, "explanation always reduces what it explains to a few units." It is also argued that positivism holds the ontological and epistemological assumptions that apparently disregard the ambiguity, complexity and fluidity of consumer realities (e.g., the postmodern self and consumption symbolism). Ontologically, positivism assumes that a single, immutable and consistent consumer reality exists and this reality can be divided and removed from its natural setting to be studied in a controlled environment. Its ontology also suggests that consumer behaviour is deterministic and reactive; it is time-free and context-independent. Thus, epistemologically, we can employ the positivist approach to explain real causes of consumer behaviour. That is, the approach can identify and generalise relationships among variables for predictions in other time periods or contexts. Endeavouring to obtain scientific credibility, the positivist researchers apply the formal scientific

protocol (e.g., formulating hypotheses or controlling variables) that allows them or other researchers to produce repeatable outcomes, as well as assume their objectivity by separating themselves from the consumers studied. Ironically, this hardly proves its credibility in human studies; for example, Gendlin (1962, p. 22-23) contends:

> Scientific statements themselves change culture and society so that *science changes what it studies* ...[In studying human experience] there are no defined *observable variables* and since one can isolate and define infinite numbers of variables in any observation, one cannot hit upon those which would be useful in formulating significant predictive hypotheses. ...it is so difficult to *generalize usefully.*

Unlike positivism, axiologically interpretivism does not seek nomothetic knowledge in order to explain and predict consumer behaviour; rather it modestly seeks idiographic knowledge in an attempt to understand the malleable, multifaceted and inconsistent nature of the consumers studied. Interpretivism accepts that reality is dynamic and complex, therefore real causes cannot be defined. Ontologically, interpretivism acknowledges that consumers are socially constructed, thus their behaviour is symbolic and involves interactions with others. Their consumption experiences are also temporal and contextual. Accordingly, consumers should not be studied in isolation from their socio-cultural contexts, rather they should be analysed holistically in a natural setting. Importantly, in order to achieve a meaningful comprehension of consumer phenomena, interpretivism advocates the interactive and cooperative relationship between the researchers and their informants. That is, the researchers' interpretations should consider the perspectives of the consumers involved.

4.2.2 Interpretivism: Translation of the Texts

Considering my axiological aspiration as well as my ontological and epistemological standpoints on the phenomena studied for this thesis, I believe that interpretivism is the appropriate approach for my research methodology. From this approach, the methodological assumption is that the phenomena studied (i.e., the self-project and consumption symbolism) can be viewed as 'texts' from which we must extract meanings in order to understand them (Geertz 1973; Hirschman and Holbrook 1992; Ricoeur 1971). Presumably, the interpretive aim of this thesis is to read the informants' narrative selves literately so that I can retell the phenomena in a meaningful academic narrative. There are two primary tasks for me here – one, as a reader, is to understand the texts from the writers' (informants') social milieux, and another, as an author, is to rewrite the texts in a form pertinent to the research audience (Geertz 1973; Hirschman and Holbrook 1992). Simply put, I must "act as a *translator,* translating concepts encountered in one context into those appropriate to another context" (Hirschman and Holbrook 1992, p. 83).

In order to interpret the texts meaningfully, we must have dialogue, not monologue, with our informants (Tyler 1986). Basically, the interpretive process should involve democratic interaction between the informants and the researcher in order to attain some sort of mutual dialectical creation of meanings (Hirschman and Holbrook 1992; Tyler 1986). Nevertheless, as we deem the texts to be socially constructed, we should allow multiple and contradictory interpretations to emerge (Atkinson 1990; Marcus and Cushman 1982; Ricoeur 1976; Tyler 1986). In fact, in order to grasp the complexity and inconsistency of the postmodern texts, we are encouraged to strive for "conscious pluralism" in pursuing our research (Morgan

1983). That is, we should undertake the interpretive process that "does not assume any one answer to explaining consumer behaviour, on one single solution, but approaches consumer culture expecting to find multiple meanings and a rich construction of reality and illusion beyond the merely rational" (Elliott 1999, p. 121).

Like any sense making process, the interpretive process is problematical, particularly when the informants and the researcher hold different cultural or sub-cultural backgrounds. Since Hirschman and Holbrook (1992) suggest that we acquire texts through socialisation processes, we need to socialise into our informants' socio-cultural realms first. Essentially, we need to possess or appropriate cultural resources or capital like language and cultural knowledge (e.g., practices, rules and conventions) in order to get initial access to the common texts. Indeed, cultural literacy is a basic requirement in conducting an interpretive research. Still, this qualification may not be sufficient to grasp the complex texts of the postmodern self and its consumption experience. As the consumption phenomenon in the postmodern culture is presumably fragmented and inconsistent, we need to delve further into the local experience of microcultures. That is, we need to acquire the texts (or subtexts) from particular subcultures (e.g., social groups) in order to achieve a meaningful comprehension of such subcultures. Hence, it is suggested that we socialise with our informants' groups or subcultures via ethnographic fieldwork (e.g., Penaloza 1994b; Ritson and Elliott 1999; Schouten and McAlexander; Willis 1990).

4.2.3 Ethnography

I believe that conducting my research via ethnographic fieldwork is the most promising means to grasp the in-depth accounts of the complex phenomena of the self and symbolic consumption (Belk *et al* 1988; Sherry 1990; Willis 1990). The term 'ethnography' can literally be translated as a "description of the folk" (Werner and Schoepfle in Boyle 1994, p. 161). Basically, it is an endeavour to understand particular human groups in their cultural contexts, and then write about them. Indeed, ethnography embraces both a research process/style and the written product of that research activity (Agar 1980; Atkinson 1990; Clifford and Marcus 1986). Since ethnography entails a concept of culture, it is suggested that the ethnographer "go beyond what people say and do to understand that shared system of meanings we call culture" (Boyle 1994, p. 160). Thus, the ethnographer's central mission is, as Malinowski (1922, quoted in Marcus and Fischer 1986, p. 25) puts it, "to grasp the native's point of view[60], his relation to life, to realise *his* vision of *his* world." Marcus and Fischer (1986, p. 24-25) elaborate further:

> a "good" ethnography, whatever its particular arguments, is one that gives a sense of the conditions of fieldwork, of everyday life, of microscale processes (an implicit validation of the fieldwork method that itself indicates the anthropologist [the researcher] "was there"); of translation across cultural and linguistic boundaries (the conceptual and linguistic exegesis of indigenous ideas, thus demonstrating both the ethnographer's language competence and the fact that he [*sic*] has successfully captured native meanings and subjectivity); and of holism.

[60] The term 'native' refers to the people the ethnographer studies; in this thesis I refer to them as 'informants'.

The first crucial element here is that we must be able to get access to the fieldwork, not just being there physically but also having an opportunity to interact and communicate with the people we study in their natural setting (Agar 1980; Atkinson and Hammersley 1994; Boyle 1994; Geertz 1988; Marcus and Fischer 1986). Another critical element is that we must have or develop sufficient language and other cultural knowledge so that we are able to grasp the meanings contextually and build our understanding of the fieldwork holistically (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Marcus and Fischer 1986). Boyle (1994, p. 162) asserts that "A central tenet of ethnography is that people's behavior can be understood only in context; that is, in the process of analysis and abstraction, the ethnographer cannot separate elements of human behavior from their relevant contexts of meaning and purpose."

It has been suggested that long-term immersion in the fieldwork can potentially increase our opportunity to acquire cultural knowledge to observe the informants as they go about the chores of everyday life, to encounter spontaneous moments or revelatory demeanours that emerge in the field, and to build rapport with the informants (e.g., Agar 1980; Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Wallendorf and Belk 1989; Willis 1980). It is hoped that after the rapport has been established, we will be allowed to explore further into backstage regions of the informants' lives where they unfold more facets of their multiple selves (Goffman 1959). This is crucial, particularly for studying Thai people who are "masters of presentation and take great pains with their appearance" (Mulder 1996, p. 11). Prolonged engagement with the informants also increases the

likelihood of attaining the "experience-near[61]" (Geertz 1973) – the insider's view or the informant's perspective of reality. However, in doing ethnography, it is also important to maintain the "experience-far" (Geertz 1973) – the outsider's view, so that we retain the ability to perceive the phenomena studied with fresh eyes (not objective eyes) that will not take things for granted (Wallendorf and Belk 1989; Wirth 1964). Dialectically, the juxtaposition of the "experience-near" and "experience-far" is observed to accommodate deeper insights into the ethnographic account (Geertz 1973; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Werner and Schoepfle 1987).

In term of data collection, the ethnographic methods depend on the nature of the fieldwork (e.g., the phenomenon studied, the degree of accessibility or the characteristics of the informants), the researcher's knowledge and experience and the unanticipated enquiries that arise in the course of fieldwork (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). Generally, the primary methods are observations and interviews. Nevertheless, conducted in the natural setting, ethnographic data collection may be driven by emergent design, corresponding to the phenomenon occurring *in situ* (Belk *et al* 1991). Triangulation across sources and methods is encouraged not only to enhance the research credibility (Wallendorf and Belk 1989) but also to generate a multiplicity of perspectives on the behaviours and contexts of the phenomena (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Elliott 1999). Potentially, the more perspectives the data has, the richer and deeper our interpretations and knowledge (Nietzsche 1967).

Ethnosemiotics is also proposed as a resourceful concept that can enrich the ethnographic interpretations (Fiske 1990; Elliott 1999). The concept draws

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[61] The concept is similar to the "emic perspective," but is viewed in more relative terms. Geertz develops these relative concepts of "experience-near" and "experience-far" to revise the dualism of "emic" and "etic" cultural categories (Marcus and Fischer 1986).

attention to the incoherent and paradoxical nature of consumer behaviour by adding a semiotic concern with what is absent from the text as being as important as what is present. That is, we should also observe what is missing in the fieldwork as we observe what is occurring. To do this, we may compare the data obtained from our fieldwork to the data obtained from other cognate consumer studies in order to examine whether there is anything present in other such studies ('what is present') missing in our fieldwork. This methodological concern appears to correspond aptly with the notion of consumption resistance that I have discussed earlier in section 2.3.3. Ethnosemiotics also advocates the important role of subjectivity in understanding consumer behaviour and symbolic meanings. Indeed, endeavouring to be objective may limit our ability to grasp the complexity of human experience. Willis (1980, p. 91) explains, "If we wish to represent the subjective meanings, feelings and cultures of others, it is not possible to extend to them less than we know of ourselves. The 'object' of our inquiry is in fact, of course, a subject and has to be understood and presented in the same mode as the researcher's own subjectivity - this is the true meaning of 'validity' in the 'qualitative' zone." Thus, we must constantly employ the moment of reflexivity (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Willis 1980). As ethnographers, we are a significant component of the fieldwork that we study and are affected by it. Thus, in writing ethnography, it is important to provide not only the personal and cultural backgrounds of the informants but also those of the researcher.

4.3 The Informants and the Researcher

4.3.1 Choice of Fieldwork and Informants

To achieve my research objectives, I conduct "microethnography" (Werner and Schoepfle 1987) of four different fieldwork groups. Choosing ethnographic fieldwork is a relatively practical issue. The primary criteria that I use to select my ethnographic fieldwork are: suitability for investigation of the phenomena studied, feasibility for conducting a meaningful research within a small budget and time constraint (the maximum of two years), and accessibility to the fieldwork and the informants. First, suitability; as I aim to grasp the complex phenomena regarding the postmodern self and consumption symbolism, I consider that my choice of fieldwork must be where postmodernity, i.e., consumer culture, looms large. For this, I choose Bangkok[62], Thailand as a cultural location. More importantly, this choice of cultural location also matches my second criterion feasibility; it is my home culture where the cultural context is already a part of my experiential portfolio (Wallendorf and Belk 1989). Thus, I need not spend time learning the language and other socio-cultural background. I reckon that according to the complexity of the phenomena studied, even if I wanted to conduct fieldwork in, for instance, Oxford, it would be difficult for me to obtain an in-depth understanding of the self and symbolic phenomena within the research timeframe because of my deficiency in language and cultural knowledge[63].

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[62] See Chapter Five for the socio-historical background of the cultural location and how Bangkok and Thai people are viewed as postmodern.

[63] Although I can speak English fairly, I still have a lot of problems understanding many accents, slang words and non-verbal cues. It is problematic enough to catch the words, let alone their symbolic meanings.

Although a classical anthropological study[64] is usually undertaken in a foreign culture, it is not uncommon for a researcher to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in her/his own culture (e.g., Belk *et al* 1991; Ekins 1997; Ritson and Elliott 1999; Schouten 1991; Thompson 1996; Willis 1990). Indeed, by studying another culture, virtually everything is exotically mysterious to the ethnographers, which offers them the advantage of being able to maintain a critical distance from what they study (McCracken 1988b). However, in postmodernity where culture becomes fragmented, I believe that studying another subculture or what Maffesoli (1988) calls a "postmodern tribe" within our own culture, can also to some extent offer us such analogous advantages. Since all four fieldwork groups I have chosen for this ethnographic study belong to postmodern tribes or social realms different from my own[65], I consider everything I encounter in my fieldwork to be enigmatic to some degree.

Furthermore on the suitability criterion, considering the conditions of postmodernity[66], I believe that it is more useful to examine the phenomena in a small group setting. In postmodernity, consumption symbolism[67] becomes increasingly 'free-floating' from its point of reference (i.e., product), and we may ascribe different and inconsistent cultural meanings to our consumption depending on the self-social symbolism we negotiate within our social groups. Thus, to understand the self-social symbolism phenomenon, we should explore it at a micro level in a small group context, particularly a friendship group. However, I reckon that as an inexperienced ethnographer, studying only one group may not provide me

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[64] Evidently, the practice of studying another culture in a classical ethnography is initially driven by colonialism. Later it becomes a common practice to acquire knowledge of 'the exotic others'.
[65] This issue will be discussed further in section 4.3.3.
[66] See section 1.3 in Chapter One.

with sufficient perspectives to understand the multifaceted phenomena. Although Wallendorf and Belk (1989) recommend triangulation across fieldwork sites in the hope of finding consistency and to test the transferability of the research[68], I do not employ triangulation for the same reason. Following the ontological and epistemological stance of my research, I do not strive to generalise from my interpretations. I only believe that triangulation across fieldwork sites gives me an opportunity to broaden my perspectives so I may achieve a "thick description" (Geertz 1973) of each particular fieldwork site; for example, triangulation may offer me a chance to notice 'what is absent' in a specific fieldwork site as I compare it to others.

Next I need to decide what types of small groups are suitable for my research and how many of them I can realistically study within my timeframe. Again, I come back to my criteria. Although I acknowledge that the self-creation project is an ongoing one, thus studying the phenomenon can be meaningful in any group, I have decided to study teenagers or young adults. Primarily, teenagers or young adults are in a radical transition period when identity crisis is apparent (Erikson 1968). They are also in a period when "virtually every choice becomes tainted by image-consciousness" (Gabriel and Lang 1995, p. 89). Hence, they appear to be active in looking for symbolic resources, particularly through mediated experience, for their self-projects (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998b; Gabriel and Lang 1995). Therefore they are a highly suitable group to use for exploring the symbolic meaning phenomenon. As Willis (1990, p. 7) argues:

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[67] See section 1.3 in Chapter One and 3.3 in Chapter Three
[68] I will discuss the matter further in section 4.6 in this chapter.

> The teenage and early adult years are important from a cultural perspective and in a special need of a close 'qualitative' attention because it is here, at least in the first-world western cultures, where people are formed most self-consciously through their own symbolic and other activities. It is where they form symbolic moulds through which they understand themselves and their possibilities for the rest of their lives. It is also the stage where people begin to construct themselves through nuance and complexity, through difference as well as similarity.

Moreover, I believe that young people tend to be relatively accessible and cooperative. Heuristically, the young then appear to be a suitable group for this research. Regarding the number of groups studied, I deem that under my feasibility criterion I can manage to study four groups simultaneously. Since I do not aim to obtain some sort of controllable setting for fieldwork comparisons, but rather to enlarge my perspectives, I decide to go for 'diversity' instead of 'similarity'. Nonetheless, due to Bangkok's notorious traffic, logistically these four diverse groups must be located in the same physical area where I can move from one fieldwork site to another one effortlessly and spontaneously. Crucially, it must be a location that comprises a variety of accessible fieldwork sites. For this reason, a university campus appears to be a promising location. In fact, using university students as informants for this research is not just for convenience; I also consider it from the cultural perspective that for many Thais, time at university is symbolically a rite of passage to adulthood – a transition from schooling years into the working world. It is also a period when young Thais negotiate for more independence from their parents.

Regarding types of groups studied, I choose four friendship groups where identities are pronounced. That is, I purposively select informants who either

involve themselves in relatively extreme forms of consumption or engage in an apparent self-transition. Additionally, I also stretch my fieldwork sites across significant cultural categories like gender, religion, class and place. For this, I choose informants whose group identities are pronounced in particular social categories. (Nevertheless, I am aware that each informant embraces all aspects of cultural identity.) In doing so, I hope to illuminate the postmodern notion that although these cultural categories still play an important role in society, the classifying boundaries within each category become blurred and negotiable. Therefore, I recruit a group of transgenders, a group of nouveaux riches, a group of extremist Buddhists and a group of migrating provincials. Since self-creation is a delicate project that many of us pursue gradually and subtly in our everyday lives, studying such groups presumably facilitates the discovery of the emergent themes that may be overlooked in the study of a mundane everyday self-creation (e.g., Schouten 1991).

For the purpose of accessibility, I conduct my fieldwork in the Bangkok campus of the state university where I used to teach. I recruit my informants through informal networks. First, I am informally introduced to potential informants who provide a way in to their friendship groups. Then I discuss with the members of each group the possibility of doing an ethnographic study with them. Endeavouring to establish trust, I inform them openly about the research project and myself. Wallendorf and Belk (1989, p. 69) note that "by being open with informants about purposes and researcher identities, we have often been allowed access to a wider range of behaviors than would otherwise have been the case." Indeed, by conducting my research overtly, I have opportunities to ask questions and probe issues which seem inappropriate for a supposed non-researcher participant. In

the recruitment process, it is essential that all members of the chosen groups feel comfortable with the ethnographic nature of my research. Importantly, they must allow me to make use of materials I obtain in the course of fieldwork (e.g., photographs, interview scripts).

4.3.2 Profiles of the Informants

Brief profiles of each group and its individual members are presented. Each group represents a microethnographic site of fieldwork, idiographic interpretations of which are discussed independently in each corresponding chapter. That is, the ethnography of the transgender group is discussed in Chapter Six, the nouveaux riche group in Chapter Seven, the Dhammakaya Buddhist group in Chapter Eight, and the provincial group in Chapter Nine. For reasons of confidentiality, all informants are referred to by pseudonyms throughout the thesis.

4.3.2a The Transgender Group

The transgender group is a group of male-femaling transgenders who express their gender identities (e.g., cross-dressing, putting on make-up) publicly. All informants except Bee have undergone hormonal treatment; however, none of them had sex-reassignment surgery[69] during the course of the fieldwork. I choose this particular group in order to understand how they use consumption symbolically to cross gender boundaries. As a woman, I consider that while exploring how a man creates his male identity is too remote for me to get a clear understanding of the

[69] Approximately a year after the study, Giles and Kate have had the surgery.

phenomena studied, studying a woman can ironically be too close for me to appreciate the taken-for granted reality. Their profiles are presented as follows:

Bee: Bee is a nineteen-year-old, public relations student. She is the only son among three children of a well-to-do Chinese background family. Her father runs his own business while her mother is a housewife. Both parents live in another province. She lives by herself in a rented flat near the university. Although she is open about her transgender identity publicly outside home, she has not come out to her family yet.

Giles: Giles is a twenty-one year old French language student. She is the eldest of the two sons in the family. Her father is a sergeant in the Royal Thai Army. Her mother is a housewife. Giles lives with her parents in a small one bedroom flat in an army encampment. Her family is always struggling with financial problems. Giles gives private tutoring in French as a part-time job to earn extra income for her hormonal in-take expenses. She has already come out to her family. Her mother appears to fairly accepting of her identity but her father is still upset about it.

Jane: Jane is a twenty-one year old broadcasting student. She is the eldest son of the family. She has one biological brother, two stepbrothers and a stepsister. Her mother is a schoolteacher and her stepfather is a policeman. Her parents live in another province near Bangkok. She lives by herself in her stepfather's police flat in Bangkok, but goes back to her parents' home every weekend. She has come out to the family and everyone accepts her well, especially her mother.

Kai: Kai is a twenty-year-old History student. She is the eldest son among three children of a Chinese background family. Her father has passed away. Kai lives with her family, including her grandparents. She has come out to the family and everyone accepts her fairly.

Kate: Kate is a twenty-one year old English language student. She is the middle one among three sons. Her father is a colonel in the Royal Thai Army. Her mother is a medical doctor and a lecturer in a Nursing college. Both parents live in another province. Kate lives in the university male dormitory. She has come out to the family. Her parents are still unsympathetic to her identity, but they seem to try to tolerate it. Her eldest brother accepts her well. Her youngest brother is apparently following in her footsteps.

Liz: Liz is a twenty-four year old Russian language student. She is the only son. Her mother has passed away, thus her grandmother raises her. Since her father has had a new family, she has become estranged from him. Liz shares a flat with two other transgender friends who study in another university. Having more experience than the other members, Liz appears to be quite influential in the group.

4.3.2b The Nouveaux Riche Group

The nouveaux riche group consists of nine informants from the nouveaux riche families who consume luxury brands intensively to express their social class. All informants but Ong and Oui are from Chinese background families. All of them live with their parents. Since the university is reputed to hold a relatively left-wing image, I am also interested to see how they negotiate the supposed conflicting images that they embrace in their self-projects. Apart from Oui and Pum, who are

journalist students, all other informants are business students. Their profiles are presented as follows:

Ong: Ong is a twenty-year-old male. He is the younger of the two sons in the family. His father is a retired army general and politician. His mother is a housewife. Ong's parents are quite authoritative. Both parents are into luxury brands. The family frequently goes shopping together in Hong Kong. Examples of Ong's possessions are a Rolex watch[70], Versace and Armani shirts and jeans, a Prada rucksack, an Ericsson mobile phone and a BMW coupe.

Sue: Sue is a twenty-year-old female. She is the only daughter among three children. Her father has passed away and her mother carries on the family businesses. The mother is into luxury brands. They commonly go shopping together in Hong Kong or Boston where her brothers are studying. Examples of Sue's possessions are a Rolex watch, a Gucci handbag, a Prada jacket, a Chanel dress, Tommy jeans, DKNY and D&G tops, a Motorolla mobile phone.

Tam: Tam is a twenty-year-old female. She is the eldest among three daughters. Her family owns several businesses. They used to live in Singapore. Her parents are into luxury brands. The family often goes shopping together in Hong Kong or Singapore. Examples of Tam's possessions are a Rolex watch, Gucci, Louis Vitton and Prada handbags, a Prada coat, and an Ericson mobile phone.

[70] Although Rolex used to have an image of a father's or a businessman's watch when I was a teenager, it is now very popular among young rich teenagers.

Al: Al is a twenty-year-old male. He is the only son. His mother has passed away, and he lives with his widower father. His father owns several businesses. He usually goes shopping with friends. Examples of Al's possessions are Armani jeans, Versace and Gucci neckties, Timberland and Next shoes[71], a Nokia mobile phone, and an Audi car.

Au: Au is a twenty-year-old female. She is the eldest among three daughters. Her parents own several businesses. They are not much into luxury brands. Au is just recently into luxury brands. She is interested in politics. Examples of her possessions are a Gucci handbag, DKNY and D&G tops, a Chistian Dior perfume and a Motorolla mobile phone.

Val: Val is a nineteen-year-old female. She is the eldest among four daughters. Her family owns several businesses in another province. Val lives with her sisters in the family's Bangkok condominium. Val's parents are very protective. They call the daughters at 6.00 p.m. everyday to ensure that all the girls are back home. Her parents also visit them every weekend. Both parents are into luxury brands. The family often goes shopping together in Bangkok. Examples of Val's possessions are Rolex watches, Louis Vitton, Celine and Gucci handbags, Prada backpacks, Joose and Next dresses, a Motorolla mobile phone, and a Mazda car (of which her parents hold a dealership).

Nook: Nook is a nineteen-year-old female. She is the only daughter of the two children. Her father is a police officer. Her mother runs her own auditing and

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[71] Timberland or Next may not be considered 'posh' in America or UK, but they are popular 'posh' teenage brands in Thailand. While Next shoes cost around 3,000-5,000 bahts, other local brands cost around 200-1,000 bahts. Regarding to the exchange rate on 15 September 2000, £1 can be converted to 59.57 bahts.

other businesses. Her parents are very protective; her mother still picks her up at the university everyday. Both parents are into luxury brands. Examples of Nook's possessions are Tag-Heuer and Baby-G watches, Louis Vitton and Chanel handbags, a Prada backpack, Ferragamo shoes, and an Ericson mobile phone.

Pum: Pum is a nineteen-year-old female. She is the second daughter among three daughters and one son. Her father holds a Mercedes-Benz auto-part dealership. Both parents are not much into luxury brands, but she has close cousins who are heavily into luxury brands. Examples of Pum's possessions are a Rolex watch, a Louis Vitton wallet, a Celine handbag, Sisley and Benetton clothes, Replay jeans, and an Ericson mobile phone.

Oui: Oui is a nineteen-year-old female with tomboyish personality. She is the middle one among three daughters. Both parents work for state enterprises. Oui is more into famous sport brands than luxury fashion brands. Examples of Oui's possessions are Nike, Reebok and K-Swiss shoes[72], Levi's jeans, and DKNY, Morgan and Polo T-shirts.

4.3.2c The Dhammakaya Buddhist Group

The Dhammakaya Buddhist group is a group of extremist Buddhists who belong to Wat Phra Dhammakaya[73]. They are also committee members of the university Buddhist society. All of them except Oz are business students. It is interesting to see how these informants negotiate their extreme Buddhist ideology in the consumer culture. Their profiles are presented as follows:

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[72] These brands may be relatively common brands in America or UK, but they are expensive sport shoes in Thailand.

[73] Background of this controversial sect is presented in Chapter Eight.

Doll: Doll is a nineteen-year-old female. She is the third daughter among four children. All of them live with their single father who works as a skilled labourer. Doll has participated in the Dhamma Tayat Summer Camp[74]. She visits the temple every weekend and meditates twice a day. Her father belongs to another Buddhist sect.

Kay: Kay is a twenty-one year old female. She has a twin sister with whom she shares a flat. Their parents live in another province. Her sister is also a committed member of the sect. Kay has participated in the Dhamma Tayat Summer Camp. She visits the temple every weekend and sometimes stays there over the weekend. Kay meditates whenever time allows. She wants to work for the temple after graduating from the university.

Lynn: Lynn is a twenty-year-old female. She is the youngest among three children. Her parents own a small business in another province. She lives in Bangkok with her aunt. Her family is concerned about her religiousness. Lynn has participated in the Dhamma Tayat Summer Camp. She visits the temple every weekend and meditates once a day.

Oz: Oz is a twenty-two year old male. He is the older of the two sons. His parents work for private companies. They do not support the sect, but are not against his commitment to it. Oz has taken one year off from university to be ordained as a monk. He visits the temple at least twice a month and meditates occasionally.

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[74] A Buddhist camp organised especially for university students from all over Thailand by the sect.

Paul: Paul is a twenty-year-old male. He is the middle one among three sons. He lives in an extended family. His father is a government official. His mother is a medical doctor. She is a committed member of another temple. His family disapproves of and is concerned about his commitment to such a sect. Paul was ordained as a monk during the two months summer break. He meditates once a day and visits the temple once a month only to avoid conflict with his mother.

Tom: Tom is a twenty-two year old male. He is the older of the two sons. His parents own a small business in a province near Bangkok. Although it is not inconvenient to commute from his parents' home to the university, Tom rents a flat in Bangkok and lives by himself. Tom has taken one year off from university to be ordained as a monk. He visits the temple every weekend and meditates whenever time allows. He plans to be ordained for life after finishing his degree, which concerns his parents greatly.

4.3.2d The Provincial Group

The provincial group is a group of provincial female students who are affiliated to 'The White Elephant Project[75],' which grants special placements or scholarships to outstanding provincial students, particularly those from the rural regions, to study in the university. All informants except Nud are from the same region, which is approximately two hundreds kilometres away from Bangkok, but

[75] Please note that in the Thai context, the term 'white elephant' holds a very positive meaning. Since a white elephant is a rare phenomenon, it is regarded as a privileged animal of the king. Whenever a white elephant is found, it will be brought out of the forest to be groomed in the palace. Generally, the term is used to equate with an outstanding person in the rural areas. Since it is more likely for students in Bangkok to be able to pass the entrance examination into the university, the project is then established to provide an opportunity for provincial students.

they had never known each other before. They live in the same flat building – Bird, Nat and Da share one flat; Auan and Win share another flat with another friend; and Nud shares a flat with other two friends from her home province. Since the social life in Bangkok and the provincial regions is very different, it is interesting to see how these informants adapt themselves to the capital. Their profiles are presented as follows:

Auan: Auan is twenty years old. She is the eldest among three children of a Chinese background extended family. Her parents own a small pig farm. Her father also works in a local water-bottling factory. She goes back home every weekend and school break. She dislikes Bangkok and wants to get a job in a city near her home so that she can live with her extended family.

Bird: Bird is twenty-one years old. She is the youngest of six children in an extended family. Her widowed mother owns a small sugarcane field and a vegetable farm. She is the only child who had a chance to study at university. Her brothers work on the family's farm. Although Bird rarely goes back home for the weekend, she goes back home every school break to help her mother work on their farm. She hopes to get a well-paid job in Bangkok so that she can support the family.

Da: Da is twenty-one years old. She is the third of four children. Her parents have a small dessert booth in a local school. Da goes back home every weekend and school break. She hopes to get a job in a city near home so that she can live with her parents.

Nat: Nat is twenty-one years old. She is an only child. Her father works for a local branch of a well-known bank. Her mother is a schoolteacher. She is one of the two group members whose parents are educated. Nat wants to get a job in the bank where her father works so that she can live with her parents.

Nud: Nud is twenty-one years old. She is the fifth of seven children. Her parents own a small motorcycle repair workshop. Although her parents are uneducated, they strongly support their children's education. Nud is the only group member who comes from a far-away province. She hopes to get a job in Bangkok.

Win: Win is twenty-one years old. She is the younger of two children. Both of her parents are schoolteachers. However, they also grow guavas and raise quails to earn extra income for the family. Win dislikes Bangkok and wants to get a job in a city near her home so that she can live with her parents.

4.3.3 The Researcher

I am a female Thai researcher[76] from Bangkok. I am the eldest of three children in a middle-class family. My father was a banker and my mother is a psychiatrist. My parents are democratic and open-minded. Since we were young, we have commonly been involved in the family's decisions. I am close to my family even though we have not been together much. I have spent a lot of time away from home: eight years in a boarding school in Bangkok and eight years abroad. Although I am relatively westernised and sometimes quite critical of my home country, I undoubtedly appreciate and value Thailand and Thai culture greatly.

[76] I am thirty something years old, but I feel twenty-eight years old.

I want to go home and live there with my family after I finish my DPhil. Personality wise, I am "a social chameleon, constantly borrowing bits and pieces of identity from whatever sources are available and constructing them as useful or desirable in a given situation" (Gergen 1991, p. 150). Leading "the protean life-style" (Lifton 1987), I embrace a variety of supposed paradoxical tastes: from operas to animations; from Bach to Meat Loaf; from Buddhism to Peter Rabbit; from Ankor Wat to Disneyland. Nevertheless, I rarely feel uneasy with these contradictions. I suppose this is the 'Thainess' in me: as Mulder (1996, p. 55) notes, "Thai thinking does not attempt to resolve the contradictory, opposed, or complementary experiences of daily existence, but leaves them side by side just as they are."

I believe that with my cultural background and personality, I have the potentials to adapt myself to achieve the "experience-near" in my fieldwork. However, I am also aware that when we are too familiar with any context, we can easily take it for granted (Wirth 1964), thus fail to acquire in-depth comprehension of the phenomena with "new eyes" and "new ears" (Wallendorf and Belk 1989). McCracken (1988b) also notes that people who work in their own culture may not have a critical distance from what they study since they carry with them a large number of assumptions. Indeed, in order to achieve meaningful ethnographic interpretations, I need to counterbalance the "experience-near" with the "experience-far" (Geertz 1973). In fact, since I have lived outside Thailand for more than two years before conducting the fieldwork, I have developed a sense of "experience-far."

Additionally, viewing myself from another angle, I am actually an outsider in my informants' social realms. Besides the macro cultural background, I hardly

share any experience with my informants. For example, although I appreciate my womanhood, I never want to look or behave as femininely as my transgender informants hope to. Moreover, although my family holds a relatively privileged status in society, we do not have the economic means to afford the luxury lifestyles of my nouveau riche informants. Furthermore, although I am very interested in Buddhist philosophy and I have incorporated it into my way of living, I do not practise the teaching the same way my Buddhist informants do. In fact, I do not really admire the institutionalisation of Buddhism in Thailand[77]. My family rarely go to a temple – my mother even told us that the temple was in our *jai*[78]. Lastly, although I was born in the provinces like my provincial informants, I have been living in Bangkok since I was eight years old. Unfamiliar with the informants' experiences, I believe that I have the potentials to see peculiar occurrences with my naïve eyes.

4.4 Doing Ethnography

Following the research approach discussed in section 4.2, in this section I present how I carry out my fieldwork, or in other words, how I collect and manage my data. Striving to understand what everyday consumption means in the informants' lives and how the meanings are appropriated, I explore the phenomena within the fundamental triadic component of the self, others and consumption practices in the natural setting. Central to the choice of methods is the problem of

[77] Apparently, Buddhism in Thailand has been institutionalised since the introduction of the project of modernity to the kingdom during the reign of King Rama IV (see section 5.2 in the next chapter).
[78] Heart as well as mind.

dealing not only with the incoherence and paradox of the cultural meanings and symbolic significance of everyday consumption from the perspective of the informants involved, but also the distinctive nature of each informant's experience and the socially shared meanings of the consumption (Ozanne and Hudson 1989). Thus I employ triangulation across methods to gather the ethnographic data, mainly observations and the long interviews. While observations reveal the informants' "perspectives in action", the interviews provide their "perspectives of action" (Belk and Wallendorf 1989, p. 71).

Both observation and interview methods are conducted flexibly, depending on the context of particular natural events. In the course of carrying out my fieldwork, I have to tune my methodology to each particular site of fieldwork as well as to each individual informant. Even with the same fieldwork or informant, I also need to tune to the ethnographic practices contextually. Often, things do not go as anticipated or planned; I need to spontaneously improvise what I am going to do according to the situation. For example, while I am talking to (informally interviewing) an individual informant on a particular issue and another informant walks into the scene, I have to decide spontaneously how to respond to the shifting situation. Frequently, I do not have a chance to choose what to do because they decide what they want to do, thus I have to go along with it. Indeed, doing fieldwork in ethnography requires a lot of creativity and spontaneous fine-tunings.

4.4.1 Naturalistic Inquiry

To maintain the richness of the phenomena studied, it is necessary to comprehend data in a raw, investigational and relatively grounded manner – the

naturalistic inquiry (Belk *et al* 1988; Sperber 1996; Willis 1980). Arnould and Wallendorf (1994, p. 486) assert, "Naturalistic fieldwork helps illuminate the complex of motivational forces that operate simultaneously in consumption contexts." Additionally, there is always the greatest possibility of 'surprise' in the natural setting (Willis 1980). For this research, I primarily conduct the ethnographic fieldwork at each group's natural location in the university campus where its members habitually hang out together between classes. Generally, each group has their 'supposed table' in the common room area; for example, see Picture 4.1-4.3. However, the groups also have other frequent meeting places where I may find them if they are not at their tables. For instance, the transgender group sometimes hangs around near the campus entrance area, watching people passing by while waiting for other missing members to go out for lunch together. This is the vital natural setting where I can gather a lot of interesting data by listening to their gossip about passing-by colleagues; e.g., "Look, that colour is beautiful. Do you think it will suit me?" In this way, I can observe the process of *discursive elaboration*[79] productively (Thompson 1990). Similarly, the provincial group sometimes hangs out in the common area in front of the library, or the nouveaux riche group sometimes hang out at the KFC near the campus. Essentially, I have to find out about their favourite 'hanging-out' places. Fortunately, the Buddhist group is always in one place – the Buddhist society, even at lunchtime (see Picture 4.4).

[79] See section 3.3.1b and 3.3.1c in Chapter Three.



Picture 4.1: The Transgender Group's Table



Picture 4.2: The Provincial Group's Table



Picture 4.3: Oui and Pum's (The Nouveaux Riche) Alternative Table



Picture 4.4: The Dhammakaya Buddhist Group After Lunch

To manage my fieldwork profitably, I ask all informants for their class schedules. From this, I can plan my ethnographic schedule to match the informants' leisure time between classes. Since lunchtime is usually when most group members congregate, I try to have lunch with each group every week. However, things never go as planned. Sometimes, the informants need to work with their classmates for a course project, or sometimes they want to go shopping or to see a film. Thus, I need to be flexible with my schedule – for example, I have to suddenly decide whether I should go out with one group at the cost of observation time of other groups. Generally, I find it is useful to observe the group's interactions in various naturalistic contexts (e.g., at lunchtime, at the shopping mall, at the cinema). Moreover, doing things with the informants outside the regular site (i.e., the university campus) greatly enhances my rapport with them. Therefore, at weekends I occasionally take a day out with my informants (see Picture 4.5 and 4.6). Of course, with the Buddhist group, it is always at the temple (see Picture 4.7). Unfortunately, I hardly have a chance to do this with the nouveaux riche group since they usually spend the weekend with their parents. Outside the university campus, the informants are less aware that I am a researcher, thus they allow our friendship to flourish more genuinely. Apparently, after the second month of the fieldwork, all informants regard me as a 'big sister' whom they begin to seek advice from or confide in. This allows me to access further into the backstage of the informants' lives (Goffman 1959). Thus, the informants later allow me to visit them at home and are willing to let me to explore their possessions (see Picture 4.8-4.11).



Picture 4.5: A Day Out with the Provincial Group and Their Boyfriends



Picture 4.6: A Day Out with the Transgender Group



Picture 4.7: The Buddhist Group at Wat Pra Dhammakaya



Picture 4.8: Kate (the Transgender Group) at Home



Picture 4.9: Au (the Nouveaux Riche) at Home



Picture 4.10: Doll (the Dhammakaya Buddhist Group) at Home



Picture 4.11: Nat (the Provincial Group) at Home

4.4.2 Ethnographic Observation

Naturalistic observation is the primary ethnographic data collection method I employ. Basically, I observe the informants' everyday consumption, interactions and conversations over time and across social contexts. This method reveals a perspective in action (Wallendorf and Belk 1989) that manifests the informants' self-project and their self-social symbolism. My main interest is to understand the processes of *internal-external dialectic of identification*[1] (Jenkins 1996) as well as the processes of *discursive elaboration*[2] (Thompson 1990) in the naturalistic group setting. I also pursue my observation on symbolic resources[3] that the informants contextually employ to negotiate the shared meanings within their groups. That is, I

[1] See section 2.2.1d in Chapter Two, 3.1.1c and 3.1.1d in Chapter Three.
[2] See section 3.3.1b and 3.3.1c in Chapter Three.
[3] See Chapter Three.

observe the contents as well as the process of discursive elaborations. Furthermore, I observe the interplay of the informants' behavioural significations (e.g., carrying a new handbag to the university) and their groups' responses (e.g., commenting on the new handbag) in the processes of self-social symbolism negotiation.

The course of observations ranges from full participant observations (e.g., where I initiate or actively lead the interactions/conversations) to non-participant observations (e.g., where I just observe the groups' interactions/conversations quietly). This depends greatly on the nature of fieldwork and the contexts (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). While I can obtain data through participant observation in one fieldwork effortlessly, I may be struggling in another fieldwork. For example, while the provincial group and the transgender group feel at ease to talking about various issues, the nouveaux riche group and the Dhammakaya Buddhist group appear to be very conscious of what they say, and thus the conversation seems superficial. Nevertheless, the fact that these informants do not respond to our interactions naturally is significant data – I view this course of action as part of the informants' self-presentation (Goffman 1959). I realise that how the informants do and/or say things is as important as what they do and/or say. Although participant observation is always useful for my research, it is sometimes better to collect data via non-participant observation, especially when the informants are not aware of my presence; for example, I often grasp much vital information when I am supposedly reading a magazine while the group is engaging in an intense conversation and apparently forget that I exist.

The first few weeks in the fieldwork are quite awkward. I find it is difficult to keep the conversations going. Striving to fit in, I try to recollect what it is like to

be twenty years old. I gather various resources of what is 'in' among the young Thais from both mediated and lived experiences – e.g., I watch television, listen to radio, read magazines, talk to my young cousins and stroll in shopping centres. Indeed, I need to socialise into the group first in order to grasp the meaningful 'ethnographic texts' (Hirschman and Holbrook 1992). Furthermore, although the informants agree to let me hang around in their groups, some of them may at first be sceptical about my participation in their groups. For example, Liz from the transgender group asks, "Are you sure that you can bear hanging around with us for long? We aren't like other people;" Auan from the provincial group asks, "If you want us to be natural, I'm afraid you won't be able to handle it. We are silly and we always crack dirty jokes;" Lynn from the Dhammakaya Buddhist group asks doubtfully, "What will you learn from us? We don't consume much." However, I am eventually able to confirm my research purposes as well as to convince them of my 'open-mindedness' and 'willingness-to-understand'.

Generally, I avoid taking fieldnotes in front of my informants so that they do not feel that they are constantly observed. Nonetheless, I habitually record my observational data (i.e., fieldnotes) everyday, either during the break between fieldwork sessions (while I am alone) or in the evening at home. From this, I have a chance to reflect on my data – to employ "the moment of reflexivity" (Willis 1980) when I ask myself a lot of questions (e.g., Why are these things occurring?). To ensure that I understand the observational data from the informants' point of views, during the course of participant observations, I always ask the question, "What do you mean?" For non-participant observational data, I commonly raise the issues later, in either the casual conversations or the long interviews. To supplement my observation, I also take photographs of everyday events during fieldwork. Initially,

I only expect to use photographs to remind me of the events or to capture the moments that cannot be fully explained by verbal descriptions (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). However, I discover that photographs can also help me see the 'taken-for granted' and/or 'what is absent' phenomena in the fields.

During the period of the ethnographic study, I occasionally withdraw myself from the fieldwork. I feel that after being in the field for a few months, I become too familiar with the fieldwork[83] and begin to take things for granted. Essentially, we need to create distance to maintain a critical awareness of matters with which we become familiar (Marcus and Fischer 1986; McCracken 1988b). Therefore, every three or four months in the field, I come back to Oxford for a few months, (usually during the university breaks when the informants are not in the regular field locations) in order to spend the moment of reflexivity on the data. Furthermore, I believe that this practice also helps maintain my "experience-far" (Geertz 1973) – that I can return to the fieldwork with "new eyes" and "new ears" (Belk and Wallendorf 1989). Altogether, I spent 56 weeks on fieldwork during the period between November 1996 and June 1998. On average, each group was observed 6 hours a week. Since this fieldwork period provided me with an opportunity to observe not only the pattern repetitions in the data but also its dynamics, I believed that my engagement in the field was sufficiently prolonged.

4.4.3 The Long Interview

After a rapport develops and my informants and I feel more comfortable with each other, I commence the long interviews – the method which provides

[83] I think this is because I am carrying out fieldwork in my own culture.

phenomenological explanations of each individual informant's thoughts, feelings and actions (McCracken 1988b). Interview questions are phrased in a loosely structured and non-directive manner (McCracken 1988b) in order to encourage emergent dialogue. In fact, most questions are spontaneously formulated during the course of each interview as each informant describes her/his experience, thoughts and fantasies. A phenomenological approach (Thompson *et al* 1989) is adopted to explore each informant's personal experiences and her/his constructed reality of symbolic meanings. It aims to capture the informants' sense of the self and self-social symbolism that are embedded in symbolic consumption as well as their relationship to the culturally constituted world.

I interview each informant at least twice. All interviews are audio-recorded. Each interviewing session ranges from one and a half to two hours. I usually begin the first session with the general question, "Could you please tell me about yourself?" Basically, I inform my informants the interview topic – I tell them that I want them to talk about their selves and their consumption experiences. Hoping to grasp the "experience-near" (Geertz 1973), I use open-ended probes that presumably allow the informants to fill in the contents from their perspectives. Nevertheless, I constantly validate my comprehension of the words or the accounts that the informants express by the use of "floating prompts" (McCracken 1988b). That is, I repeat the word from the informant's utterance with a curious tone so that s/he elucidates it; otherwise I simply ask the question, "What do you mean?"

Acknowledging that the self is a complex and paradoxical phenomenon, I consider that even the enthusiastic and articulate informants may have difficulty in narrating the multiplicity of their selves and experiences verbally during the course

of the interview. Accordingly, I follow McCracken's (1988b, p. 36-37) suggestion on the use of "auto-driving" – a strategy that helps to foreground and materialise aspects of the informants' experience that are "otherwise difficult to bring into the interview." Considering the pastiche nature of the postmodern self, I employ collage[1] as auto-driving for the interviews. That is, I ask my informants to create a collage that describes 'who they are' by using their own materials at home (e.g., advertisements from the magazines they read). Later, I ask them to talk about it as a part of the first interview (see Picture 4.12). I find that this method is very useful in unfolding the informants' multifaceted selves.



Picture 4.12: Auan (the Provincial Group) Talking about Her Collage

[1] For examples of the use of collages in consumer research, see Belk, Russell W., Guliz Ger and Soren Askegaard (1996), "Consumer Desire in Three Cultures: Results from Projective Research," in *Advances in Consumer Research Vol. 23*, ed. Kim P. Corfman and John G. Lynch, Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, 24-28.; Havlena, William J. and Susan L. Holak (1996), "Exploring Nostagia Imagery through the Use of Consumer Collages," in *Advances in Consumer Research Vol. 23*, ed. Kim P. Corfman and John G. Lynch, Provo, UT:Association for Consumer Research, 35-42.; Heisley, Deborah D. and Sidney J. Levy (1991), "Autodriving: A Photoelicitation Technique," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 18 (December), 257-272.

For several informants, the later interview sessions are conducted at their homes, where I am fortunately allowed to explore their bedrooms, closets and personal possessions. From this, I use materials available in the informants' homes (e.g., their favourite possessions or posters in their bedrooms) as auto-driving to induce them to unfold further their self-project and consumption symbolism. Photographs of their bedrooms and possessions are taken whenever appropriate. Additionally, I sometimes conduct the interviews in pairs of best friends[85] to broaden the perspectives of the data. I believe that the practice of multiple interviews both enlarges and enriches the phenomenological data. Basically, when I interview the informants for the second or the third times, I not only ask for new information but also return to some previous issues. Frequently, I discover that the life stories the informants tell in the following interview may differ from the first interview. Apparently, the stories in the later interview appear to be more genuine as my informants seem to develop more trust in me. At first, I was very concerned about this matter – whether I should discard the inconsistent data. However, after several moments of reflexivity, I realise that any life stories the informants recount, whether they are factual or imagined, are useful data. I believe that the informants have had to pull each episode of their life story from the repertoire of their possible selves[86]. Thus, these stories can be viewed as part of the informants' symbolic self-creation. Additionally, I also consider these different life stories as part of the informants' presenting their selves to me at different stages of our relationship.

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[85] It is common to find that there are informants who are especially close to another particular informant in their groups.

[86] See section 2.2.1a, 2.2.1b and 2.2.2 in Chapter Two.

4.4.4 Data Management

Since I aim to achieve idiographic knowledge of each fieldwork group, I manage the data being gathered from each group independently. To prepare the data for interpretation, I try to textualise all forms of data. I have all audio-recorded interviews transcribed verbatim, not only the exact words from the interviews but also some other conversational cues like laughing. In order to minimise 'distortion of the fieldwork texts', I intend to read all textualised data directly from the original language (i.e., Thai). Throughout the period of ethnographic research, I continually read and re-read the data in order to discern and develop provisionally thematic categories and meaning-based linkages from the data. Once each provisional category emerges, I explore its attributes or characteristics further to identify its properties and dimensions. As I continue collecting the data from the fieldwork, I read the newly acquired data as well as re-reading the previous data in order to enhance the categorisation. These iteration processes are not used only to establish a more robust category, but also to try to re-categorise the data until categories are saturated and reach a point of redundancy. Nevertheless, although some of the data is re-categorised, I also retain the previous categories. Hence, particular data may belong to more than one category. In this way, I can approach the same set of data from various perspectives, which helps enhance the ethnographic interpretations of the fieldwork.

4.5 Interpreting and Writing Ethnography

Following the above discussion on how I carry out my fieldwork, in this section I describe how I interpret my fieldwork texts and convey them to my potential readers. Although the interpretations and the writing seemingly follow on from the fieldwork, I do not execute the interpreting and the writing process only after the fieldwork period. In fact, both processes, particularly the interpretive process, are conducted concurrently with the data collecting process throughout the period. Iteratively, as I am collecting my ethnographic data, I continually interpret and re-interpret it, as well as write and re-write my interpretations for the research readers. After the fieldwork, I continue interpreting and writing the ethnographies until I feel that I have achieved meaningful ethnographic products that provide insightful understandings of the postmodern self and consumption symbolism phenomena. Although I acknowledge that the ethnographic products I present in this thesis are not the absolute products as the texts I acquire from the fieldwork can endlessly be re-interpreted and re-written, I believe that, for the time being, they elicit ample accounts of the fieldwork from the informants' viewpoints, and reflect scholarly the epistemological groundings of such accounts.

4.5.1 Interpreting Ethnography

Interpreting fieldwork texts is a problematic process. It requires a lot of resourcefulness and imagination in order to strive to understand others (Geertz 1988; Sperber 1996). Moreover, since any cultural phenomenon commonly embraces the submerged texts of contradictions, inconsistencies and divergencies, interpreting the cultural texts requires "an ability to watch for inconsistencies,

contradictions and misunderstandings and to make theoretical interpretations of them" (Willis 1980, p. 91). Furthermore, we should also watch for 'what is absent' in the texts. Importantly, the interpretive process needs to be approached from different perspectives. The interpretations I accomplish for this thesis are the outcomes emerging from the dialectical processes between the juxtaposed perspectives of the "experience-near" and the "experience-far" (Geertz 1973). Methodologically, I employ the hermeneutic circle[87] and social representations (Moscovici 1984) to tackle the consumption symbolism phenomenon. As I aim to establish the ideographic knowledge of each fieldwork group, I interpret each set of the fieldwork texts individually according to its idiosyncratic subcultural context. However, since I interpret all fieldwork texts simultaneously in parallel, the boundaries of the interpretive frameworks that I bear on interpreting each group become blurred and overlapped. That is, I utilise the perspectives that I obtain from one group to approach the interpretations of the others.

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[87] See Arnold, Stephen J. and Eileen Fischer (1994), "Hermeneutics and Consumer Research," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21 (June), 55-70.Arnold and Fischer 1994; Hirschman, Elizabeth C. (1990), "Secular Immortality and the American Ideology of Affluence," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 17 (June), 344-359.Hirschman 1990; Thompson, Craig J. (1996), "Caring Consumers: Gendered Consumption Meanings and Juggling Lifestyle," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22, (March), 388-407.Thompson 1996; and Thompson, Craig J., William B. Locander and Howard R. Pollio (1989), "Putting Consumer Experience Back into Consumer Research: The Philosophy and Method of Existential-Phenomenology," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16, (September), 133-147.Thompson *et al* 1989; Thompson, Craig J., Howard R. Pollio and William B. Locander (1994), "The Spoken and the Unspoken: A Hermeneutic Approach to Understanding the Cultural Viewpoints That Underline Consumers' Expressed Meanings," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21 (December), 432-452.Thompson *et al* 1994 for examples of the use of the hermeneutic circle as a methodological process for consumer research.

4.5.1a Interpreting from the "Experience-near"

Central to the interpretations of the fieldwork texts is to interpret them from the informants' perspectives. This ethnographic endeavour is problematic as it is impossible for the ethnographer (i.e., me) to get completely inside the *jitjai*[88] of the informants. However, Geertz (1973) argues that understanding the informants may not necessarily require intuitive empathy[89]. He suggests that we can obtain the "experience-near" (the experience that is relatively near to or shared with that of the informants) through vigorous communication with our informants. That is, the more we communicate with the informants, the more we potentially share the experience-near with them, and thus the more likely that we are able to develop shared perspectives with the informants. Because of my prolonged immersion and active socialisation in the fields, as well as my cultural background, I believe that I have gained considerable shared experience-near with my informants. Furthermore, I also believe that with my countless moments of reflexivity and constant elaborations on the data throughout the fieldwork period, I am able to see things from relatively analogous angles to my informants. Besides the lived experience with my informants, I sometimes can surprisingly obtain the experience-near through mediated experience. For example, I can develop a clearer sense of what my transgender informants are talking about in their childhood experiences when I see the film 'Ma Vie En Rose' – the film about a little boy who wants to be a girl.

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[88] A Thai word the meaning of which embraces both heart (feelings) and mind (thoughts).
[89] Indeed, if we can really have intuitive empathy of our informants, it will be ideal. But should we hang on to an illusive attempt to gain it?

Reading an interview of a teenager who intensively consumes luxury brands in a magazine also improves my experience-near.

To achieve the holistic comprehension of the phenomena being studied, I employ the hermeneutic circle to interpret my fieldwork texts. This interpretive process is conducted in an iterative fashion in which a part of the text is interpreted and re-interpreted in relation to the developing sense of the whole (Spiggle 1994; Thompson 1996; Thompson *et al* 1994). Through the hermeneutic circle of the continuous part-to-whole and whole-to-part interpretations, I am able to understand each informant's symbolic self-project and self-symbolism in relation to her/his group's shared meanings (social-symbolism) and identity. As this iterative process continues over time, I can develop my understanding of the texts holistically. Nevertheless, within the holistic narratives of my interpretations, there consist a multiplicity of interpretive episodes – of which some are coherent while others may be contradictory. Since the hermeneutic circle emphasises grasping meanings as expressed in language (Thompson *et al* 1994), I employ Moscovici's notion of social representations, as suggested by Elliott (1999, p. 119), to hold out "the prospect of eluding the limitations of linguistic meaning structure and engaging with the complexity of a constructed world of both reality and illusion." Accordingly, I can also grasp the image and iconic aspect of the socially shared meanings of consumer goods.

4.5.1b Interpreting from the "Experience-far"

Geertz (1973) uses the term "experience-far" to represent the experience of the outsiders (i.e., etic, but in a relative sense) – it is generally the experience that the ethnographer[90] shares with her/his readership, more specifically the readers in her/his academic domain. Although the primary aspiration of the ethnography is to comprehend the informants' visions of their cultural worlds, it is also critical to interpret the fieldwork texts from the experience-far perspectives. This approach aims to liberate our interpretations from the taken-for-granted state in which we are trapped, due to familiarity with the experience-near. Additionally, it also accommodates the act of cross-cultural interpretations that the ethnographer pursues in an attempt to convey the knowledge obtained from the fieldwork to her/his readers (Marcus and Fischer 1986). Therefore, besides interpreting my fieldwork from the experience-near perspectives, I also struggle to view them from the experience-far. I use the word 'struggle' because in this research I am in an ambiguous position, that is, as a Thai I am not really distant from my informants' cultural experience, and simultaneously I do not share a great deal of cultural experience with my potential readers[91].

Hence, I employ a few strategies in order to maintain the experience-far that I have already had[92], and to appropriate the experience-far from other outsiders (i.e., my potential readers). That is, to maintain the experience-far, I occasionally withdraw myself from the fieldwork[93]. Concurrently, I also acquire the outsiders'

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[90] Presumably, it refers to a western scholar who studies an exotic culture.
[91] I assume that the majority of my potential readers (at least my supervisor and the examiners of this thesis) are westerners.
[92] I discuss this issue earlier in section 4.3.3 in this chapter.
[93] I discuss this strategy in the last paragraph of section 4.4.2 in this chapter.

perspectives on my research through exchange of ideas with colleagues in the consumer research or related fields. From this, I obtain a lot of useful comments and often-peculiar questions, which provide me with an opportunity to view my fieldwork from afar. In fact, some literature suggests that a relatively similar strategy (i.e., debriefing by peers) helps increase the trustworthiness of the naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Wallendorf and Belk 1989). However, my primary aim of the strategy is to gain experience-far perspectives. Additionally, I find that writing a paper for a conference or a journal is also helpful – since I can gain more outsiders' viewpoints via a reviewing process. Furthermore, reading papers that engage in relatively similar research topics or methodology also helps the development of the experience-far. While I am acquiring the experience-far, I return to re-interpret my fieldwork texts hermeneutically.

4.5.1c The Near-Far Dialectic of Interpretations

As I proceed through my ethnographic journey, I vigorously grasp both experience-near and experience-far, incorporating them into the iterative process of interpretations. Continually, I not only move hermeneutically within the texts but also shift dialectically between the experience-near and the experience-far throughout the interpretive process. Along such process, I repetitively collect, re-collect, categorise, re-categorise, interpret and re-interpret my fieldwork texts. Simultaneously, I appropriate, re-appropriate, tune and re-tune my understanding of the texts through the near-far dialectic of interpretations until I achieve both an insightful account of the fieldwork and an abstract knowledge of such accounts.

4.5.2 Writing Ethnography

Writing is another significant component of the ethnographic process. It is a complicated task that involves cross-cultural transfer of the insightful knowledge of the fieldwork into the scholarly written account. Basically, it is the rewriting of the interpretations of the fieldwork texts for the outside readers. The central mission here is how to rework the fieldwork texts written by the informants into the scholarly ethnographic texts to be read by the outsiders without losing the complex meanings and the cultural sensibility of the original texts. This requires a lot of cross-cultural resources and imagination. Some ethnographic scholars compare writing an ethnographic text to writing fiction (e.g., Atkinson 1990; Clifford 1986; Geertz 1973, 1988). Nonetheless, it is a persuasive form of fiction (Geertz 1973) where writing style, as noted by Clifford (1986, p. 6), is determined in at least six ways: contextually, rhetorically, institutionally, generically, politically and historically.

In this thesis, I write my ethnographic text of each fieldwork group individually and present each of them in separate chapters – Chapter Six: The Gendered Self, Chapter Seven: The Nouveaux Riche Self, Chapter Eight: The Religious Self and Chapter Nine: The Urbanised Self. Prior to these ethnographies, in Chapter Five, I provide some cultural-historical background of the fieldwork location, Bangkok, Thailand, in order to establish a sense of the experience-near for my readers. Additionally, in each ethnographic chapter, I also discuss some micro-theory and subcultural background of the fieldwork. Striving to maintain a sense of the fieldwork texts, I employ the notion of "collaborative text" – that the ethnographic fictions in this thesis are co-written by my informants and myself.

Logistically, I integrate various excerpts from each informant's original texts (i.e., the interview scripts) with my interpretive texts in order to compose the ideographic narrative – the narrative that holds the holistic portrayal of each distinct fieldwork group. Yet, within each narrative corpus, there are a multiplicity of life stories, actions and events intermingling ironically.

Since these ethnographic narratives must be written in English but the informants' original texts are in Thai, I have to translate the excerpts being quoted into English. In order to retain the original sense of the texts, the translation needs to be done elaborately, as literal translation may distort the meaning of the original texts or simply be obscure. Thus, I first consider whether the literal English translation of every original Thai word in a particular sentence or phrase still conveys a similar meaning and context to that of the original text. If so, I translate it literally. However, if not, I take the comprehensive meaning of the text, then translate it figuratively yet try to maintain its holistic sense. Where the use of an English word cannot express a similar meaning and context, the original Thai word is maintained in the excerpt. Later, I ask my Thai friends who are reading for a doctoral degree at Oxford to verify the accuracy of my translations. The main objective is to ensure that the translations convey the same meaning and context of the original text.

4.6 Research Trustworthiness Assessment

Endeavouring to ascertain the rigour of ethnographic research, some scholars propose criteria to evaluate its trustworthiness as well as techniques to achieve it (e.g., Lincoln and Guba 1985; Wallendorf and Belk 1989). These evaluative criteria, suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), are creditability, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Wallendorf and Belk (1989) later add another criterion – integrity. To establish these criteria, they suggest several research techniques: prolonged engagement/persistent observation; triangulation of sources, methods and researchers; regular on-site team interaction; negative case analysis; debriefings by peers; member checks; seeking limiting exceptions; purposive sampling; reflexive journals; and independent audit (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Wallendorf and Belk 1989). However, can assessing trustworthiness of any interpretive research be possible? Are these evaluative criteria compatible with the epistemological standpoints of the research approach (i.e., interpretivism)? Can the suggested techniques truly justify the trustworthiness of the interpretive research?

Following Holt (1991), I believe that any endeavour to establish the evaluative criteria to objectively assess trustworthiness of ethnographic research is unattainable – it is fraught with epistemological problems. For example, the criterion credibility (Do the interpretations represent the informants' realities?); I find that although I employ techniques like prolonged engagement and triangulation as recommended, it is still idealistic to claim the achievement of such transparent representations. As the socially constructed realities can be endlessly interpreted, the representing interpretation is forever indefinable (Clifford 1988; Geertz 1973;

Marcus and Fischer 1986; Rabinow 1986). Indeed, an attempt to achieve 'credibility' via the true representation is basically positivistic.

Similarly, I find that other evaluative criteria are also relatively analogous to the positivist endeavour (i.e., to achieve generalisability and objectivity). Since I stand on the epistemological base that the self and consumption experience are contextual, consumer knowledge at the behavioural level thus cannot be transferred across contexts. Moreover, as consumer realities are moulded by a multiplicity of ever-changing socio-cultural and idiosyncratic forces, it is questionable whether one can establish dependability or pattern of behaviour. Furthermore, since the ethnographic text is polysemic (Hirschman and Holbrook 1992), it is unrealistic to establish confirmability of the interpretation. Holt (1991) argues that no matter how many suggested research techniques are used, it is still not guaranteed that we can unquestionably establish these evaluative criteria. For example, Holt (1991) explains that the auditing techniques recommended to check for interpretation accuracy (e.g., debriefing by peers or independent audit) are flawed because the interpretation a peer or an auditor brings to the data is just as idiosyncratic as the researcher's original interpretation. Accordingly, an enterprise to justify trustworthiness of the ethnographic research by referring to these techniques is illusory.

Nevertheless, I deem that the recommended research techniques such as prolonged engagement in the fieldwork, triangulation across methods and fieldwork and critiques from colleagues (debriefings by peers) are useful. Regardless of their doubtful abilities to establish trustworthiness, these research techniques provide me with opportunities to broaden my perspectives, which I believe can enhance the

insightfulness of my interpretations. Actually, Holt (1991) also acknowledges that these techniques can improve the quality of the interpretation and thus attain increased trustworthiness in the eye of the reader. Indeed, the concept of 'trustworthiness' is socially constructed and hence its justification depends on the interpretation shared within a particular interpretive community. For example, while some interpretive communities advocate techniques like prolonged engagement in the field and triangulation to justify trustworthiness (e.g., Lincoln and Guba 1985; Wallendorf and Belk 1989), others may promote reflexivity (Willis 1980) or the experience-near and experience-far juxtaposition (Geertz 1973; Marcus and Fischer 1986). Unquestionably, there is no intrinsic justifying criterion for trustworthiness. Presumably, the trustworthiness of our ethnographic research may only be achieved through its power to convince our research community (i.e., our readers and ourselves) of the insightfulness of the interpretations (Holt 1991).

4.7 Chapter Summary

Following the ontological and epistemological stance as well as the theoretical foundations discussed in Part One, in this chapter I argue that interpretivism is a promising research approach to pursue my research journey. That is, I view the phenomena being studied (i.e., the postmodern self and consumption symbolism) as texts we can understand through the interpretative process. Thus, I adopt ethnographic research in order to obtain consumer texts in a naturalistic setting. For this thesis, I conduct four different microethnographic fieldwork groups. In the fieldwork, I use triangulation across methods (i.e.,

participant observation, non-participant observation and the long interview) to collect the ethnographic data. Regarding the interpretation process, I approach the fieldwork texts from both experience-near and experience-far perspectives. Methodologically, I employ the hermeneutic circle and social representations to gain insightful understanding of the phenomena studied. The ideographic interpretations of each fieldwork group are presented separately in Chapter Six to Chapter Nine. The next chapter is the cultural-historical background of the fieldwork location: Bangkok, Thailand.

Chapter Five

The Cultural Location:

Bangkok, Thailand

In this city of angels
amulet sellers
cellular phones

Sherry 1997, p. 92

Urban silken
teenage Thais
surround HDTV
entranced by the
loud mouthings of
the wrestlers of the
World Federation
amidst the rant and wait
of shoppers sifting jeans
and compact discs
enroute to KFC

Sherry 1997, p. 95

The above poems capture Sherry's sensibility of consumer culture in Bangkok. The first one is an excerpt from the poem 'Krung Thep[94]' which portrays the paradoxical coexistence of an old commodity like an amulet and a new technological product like a cellular phone in the society. The second poem, Mah Boon Krong[95], reflects scenes of globalisation, fragmentation, hyperreality and disorder in the Bangkok shopping centre. Sherry (1997, p. 91) believes that these

[94] Thai people generally call their capital city (Bangkok) 'Krung Thep' which literally means 'the city of angels.' Actually, it is only a short version of the capital's formal name.
[95] A shopping centre in Bangkok which accommodates mixture of various retailing aspects, from contemporary retail design to traditional vendor's booth, from retailers of expensive famous brands to retailers of cheap counterfeit products. It is a popular meeting place for Bangkok teenagers.

poems address "an issue of moral geography beyond the imagination of conventional marketing research." Indeed, I agree with Sherry that Bangkok is an interesting example of cultural locations bound by postmodern conditions which cannot be fully grasped by the methods of positivist consumer research.

I choose Bangkok, Thailand, as a cultural location to conduct my study since I reckon it to be a very interesting research field to explore the self and consumption symbolism in postmodernity. Bangkok is not only a big city of the juxtaposition of opposites (e.g., the Westernised Thainess) and the hyperreality of global mediaisation (Tejapira 1996), but also a society embedded with playfulness and flexibility. Culturally, Thai consumers appear to hold several temperaments of the postmodern self, possibly long before their Western counterparts. I believe that studying Thai consumers in Bangkok will contribute valuable in-sight to an understanding of the postmodern self in a non-western context. I suspect it will provide additional perspectives of 'the otherness[96]' to the field of consumption studies.

In this chapter, I first present an overview of Thailand. Then, I discuss briefly how the project of modernity has permeated Thai society, especially Bangkok. Later, I investigate how Bangkok and Thai consumers are threatened by postmodern conditions.

[96] As most literature on postmodern consumption is dominated by studies in Western societies, studying postmodern consumption in Thai society can be regarded as studying 'the other.'

5.1 Thailand at a Glance[97]

The Kingdom of Thailand is located in the heart of Southeast Asia, sharing boundaries with Myanmar on the west and north, Laos on the north and north-east, Cambodia on the east and Malaysia on the south. The kingdom[98] covers an area of 513,115 square kilometres and holds a population of approximately 60 millions, with a literacy rate of 93.8%. As a historically migratory crossroad, Thailand has a population composed of diverse ethnic groups: ethnic Thais (the majority), Mon[99], Lao, Khmer, Malay, Indian and most vigorously Chinese. It is still debatable when and where Thai civilisation originated. The recent discovery of artefacts dated 1,000 years older than those of Mesopotamia in a small north-eastern village, Ban Chiang, generates a theory that Thai civilisation is an ancient one. Nevertheless, the most popular theory based on written records is that the kingdom known as Siam was founded in the 13th Century A.D. by King Ramkamhaeng of Sukhothai[100]. Approximately a century later, Sukhothai was superseded by the Sri Ayudhaya Kingdom[101]. Apparently, the Ayudhaya period was when the Thais had initial contacts with westerners, mainly the Portuguese, the French and the Dutch.

After Ayudhaya was annihilated by the invading Burmese in the late 18th century, the capital was relocated briefly to Thonburi, and later to Bangkok. Bangkok was established as the capital of Siam in 1782 by King Rama I, the

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[97] I compile background information on Thailand from several sources such as *Thai history* by a famous Thai historian, Phya Anumanrajadhon, in www.mahidol.ac.th, and *Thailand: A Short History* by David K. Wyatt (1984), New Haven: Yale University Press, statistics on Thailand from *Pocket Thailand Figures* (1994) by Alpha Research Co., Ltd., and www.geographic.org, or Thai economy from Bangkok Post's Annual Economic Reviews.

[98] I intend to use the term 'the kingdom' rather than 'the country' to suggest that although Thailand is presently governed under a democratic system, the present king (Rama IX) is still acknowledged as the centre of the nation.

[99] An ethnic group in Burma (Myanmar).

founder of the present Chakri Dynasty. Then, trade and contacts with the West were re-established, especially with the English and the French. During the 19th century, the kingdom of Siam was seriously threatened by Western colonial pursuits. However, with shrewdness in diplomatic manoeuvring, the kingdom managed to preserve her sovereignty throughout the colonial epoch, both in the Ayudhaya and Bangkok eras. Indeed, the kingdom proudly claims the distinction of being the only country in Southeast Asia that has never been colonised. This national pride is reflected clearly in the kingdom's new name – Thailand which literally means 'the land of independence.' Apparently, the change of the kingdom's name from Siam to Thailand in 1939 was a part of the controversial modernisation scheme (Reynolds 1991), which I shall examine later in this chapter.

Culturally, Thailand is enormously influenced by Indian culture (via Khmer influence), especially by Buddhism. Since the Sukhothai period, Thai culture has been shaped by Buddhism, and everything in Thai social life (e.g., art, education, law, literature etc.) is developed and clustered around the religion. As 95% of the Thai population are Buddhists opposed to 4% Muslims and less than 1% Christians, being Thai is commonly equated to being Buddhist (Mulder 1996). Jackson (1991, p.191) observes, "The intimate theoretical and ritualistic relationship between Buddhism and all aspects of secular life in Thailand has placed the religion at the centre of recent attempts to isolate, define and promote the features of a distinctive Thai identity." Hence, it is essential to embrace Buddhism in the interpretations of Thai culture and consciousness. When I say Buddhism, I mean 'Thai Buddhism.' It is not only the religion that moulds Thai culture, but also Thai ways of life that

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[100] The Kingdom situated in the central north of Thailand.
[101] The Kingdom situated in the central Thailand.

shape 'Thai Buddhism' dialectically. For the Thais, whatever beliefs they adopt, they seem to readily modify them to suit their temperaments and surroundings. When they first adopted Theravada Buddhism, they significantly incorporated some facets of their previously animistic beliefs into the fold of Buddhism. Similarly, they assimilated some vestiges of Hinduism into their Buddhist practices, especially in rituals and ceremonies. Over several centuries, Thai Buddhism, which embraces some other beliefs and practices into its realm, has eventually developed into being the mainspring of Thai social life. Besides Indian influence, Thai culture is also permeated by Chinese Confucian values, such as repaying gratitude or respecting seniority. However, during the past century, Thailand has been immensely affected by Western culture, through both the kingdom's modernisation endeavour and the globalisation of Western capitalism.

Having been ruled by absolute monarch for several hundred years, Thailand presently has a constitutional monarchy. Since the introduction of a democratic system in 1932, the kingdom has struggled to achieve the Western ideal of democracy. During the 70 years of democratisation, the elected civilian governments have been interrupted by several coups d'etat. Despite her political flaws, Thailand has nevertheless enjoyed substantial economic growth. Blessed with considerable expanses of fertile land and supremely horticultural conditions, Thailand is a major food supplier (e.g., rice, tapiocas, etc.) to the global market. However, endeavouring to follow the Western capitalist economy, Thailand has marched towards industrialisation. Since the 1980s, Thailand has emerged as one of the most promising developing nations in the world with rapid economic growth. This growth was initially due to external factors such as foreign investment, export and tourism; but later it was also due to escalating domestic demand (i.e., expansion

of consumer culture). Despite the economic crisis in the mid 90s that has slowed down economic growth, Thailand can still claim to have a complex, multifaceted economy, embracing various industries that employ highly sophisticated technologies. Since the Thai economy has been largely driven by global capitalism, Bangkok has inevitably become an international city bound up with globalisation and mediaisation.

5.2 Thailand and the Project of Modernity

Thailand has adopted the project of modernity since the mid 19th century. Initially, the motive was mainly to preserve sovereignty from the threat of colonial pursuits by the West. The turning point of modernisation (i.e., Westernisation) commenced during the reign of King Rama IV[102]. However, the growth of Western influence was obviously witnessed during the reign of King Rama V who not only sent his sons and other elites to study in Europe but also twice paid royal visits to Europe himself. Then, the kingdom was radically introduced to Western (mainly British) ways of life such as clothes, food, educational system, communication and transportation. Ironically, the royal attempt to modernise the kingdom brought about the revolution against the absolute monarchy later in 1932. Nevertheless, the revolution for democracy unfortunately ended up with a military dictatorship that introduced a controversial modernisation scheme under its regime (Sivaraksa 1991).

In 1939, having adopted the modernist concept of the nation-state from the West, the dictatorial government introduced a scheme to build national identity.

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[102] Widely known as King Mongkut (1851- 1865) in "The King and I." Like most Thais, I decline to accept the claim suggested in the film that the preservation of the kingdom's sovereignty was owed to Anna Leonowen's influence.

Regardless of the pluralistic nature of the kingdom's population, the scheme aimed to codify and promote a unified national culture (Sivaraksa 1991). According to the governmental decree, the term 'culture' was defined as "qualities which indicated and promoted social prosperity, orderliness, national unity and development, and morality of the people" (Chaloemtiarana[103] in Reynolds 1991, p. 6). In order to do this, the government prescribed several ambiguous cultural mandates which, on the one hand, claimed to preserve a genuine and unique Thai culture, yet on the other hand, strived to align some cultural practices with imagined Western norms (Reynolds 1991). Consequently, in order to promote Thainess, other ethnic cultures, especially the Chinese identity, were repressed (e.g., Chinese were pressurised to change their original names to Thai names); and in order to become modernised (i.e., Westernised), some traditional practices (e.g., betel-chewing) that might be considered as uncivilised in the eyes of Westerners were forbidden. Additionally, some (illusory) Western practices were legalised (e.g., men must kiss their wives before going to work or women must wear hats when leaving home).

Striving to establish modern nationhood for international circulation, the regime not only invented new national symbols such as the national anthem, but also changed the old ones such as the kingdom's flag and name. Regardless of regional dialects, central Thai (i.e., Bangkok) dialect was appointed the national language (Diller 1991). Furthermore, a series of new national 'high culture' such as dances, plays or songs were designed. Simultaneously, the regime also encouraged its citizens to appreciate Western arts (Michaelsen 1991). Any art forms or tastes adopted from the West were admired as *sakol* (universal). Samudavanija (1991)

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[103] Chaloemtiarana, Thak (1978), *Thai Politics: Extracts and Documents, 1932-1957,* ed., Bangkok: Social Science Association of Thailand, p. 256.

notes that under this regime, an official version of national culture was superimposed over popular culture. Indeed, folk cultures which had embraced more freedom of expression under the pluralistic name of Siam were marginalised (Reynolds 1991). Another apparent example of the regime's adoption of modernist dualism was its promotion of clear-cut boundaries between maleness and femaleness; e.g., an individual with a gender-ambiguous name must change her/his name accordingly to her/his gender.

Besides coercive measures, the regime extensively utilised mass media to promote its nationalistic ideology (Samudavanija 1991). However, despite its strict control over the media, the regime was hardly able to control the readings of its citizens. Because of this, the regime's metanarratives seemed to become fragmented and disperse. Hamilton (1991, p. 345) explains:

> And, where the populace is well-aware that the mass media and its messages are censored and controlled, this only provides an even more fertile ground for the proliferation of rumours, gossips, and the circulation of information, criticism and sometimes wild imaginings. In Thailand what is *not* said, the resounding silences, can open up fissures through which an unofficial discourse is constructed and rapidly circulated.

In late 1960s, as the kingdom was threatened by communism, state power elites were forced to embrace and promulgate capitalism to counter the communist challenge (Samudavanija 1991). They had to loosen their bureaucratic control over the media in order to seek an alliance with the capitalist and middle classes. This resulted in a unprecedented rise in power of the bourgeoisie, especially the Chinese bourgeoisie whom had formerly been suppressed. Since then, the capitalist aspect of the economy has become a dominant factor that has shaped the new social order

in the kingdom (Samudavanija 1991). With the dramatic growth of capitalism and democratisation processes since the late 1980s, Thai society has evidently become more civil. In the age of globalised capitalism in the 1990s, Thailand seemed to be progressing towards becoming a Newly Industrialised Country. Today, the kingdom claims to have a modern transportation and communication system. However, for the most part, those infrastructures are overcrowded in Bangkok, which makes the capital a first-world city in a developing country (i.e., Thailand).

5.3 The Postmodern Bangkok, the Postmodern Thais

> Newly dimensional Thai community,
> the borderless Thai society.
> Slogan of SiamWEB[104]

Although the project of modernity in Thailand has not yet developed to the radicalised stage as it has in the post-industrialised West, Thailand, especially Bangkok, seems to abound with postmodern conditions. Like other cosmopolitan cities, Bangkok appears to have an image which Raban (in Harvey 1990, p.5) regards as "labyrinth, honey-combed with such diverse networks of social interaction oriented to such diverse goals." Walking along a Bangkok street, one can easily sense continual encounters with signs and simulations, countless pieces of disjointed experiences, the existence of a myriad of juxtaposed realities, and endless evidence of hedonistic extravagance. Influences of globalisation and mediaisation are everywhere. Consumer culture looms large. Sivaraksa (1991, p. 46) comments:

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[104] A Thai Internet WebPages (www.siamweb.org).

> A consumer culture bringing Coca-Cola, fast food and blue jeans has replaced our local Siamese way of life. The great department stores and shopping complexes have now replaced our *wat* [temple] which used to be our schools, museums, art galleries, recreation centres and cultural centres as well as our hospitals and spiritual theatres.

Through the commercialised mass media, Thai society is bombarded with endless signs and images from advertising. In Bangkok, simulations are ubiquitous, in the restaurants, in the shopping malls or even in the temples. Hyperreality seems to constitute Bangkok social life. For example, during the period of the Tamagochi[105] craze in Bangkok, 'computer game' and 'reality' seemed to run into each other – many Tamagochi young owners even sent their virtual pets to a day nursery when the game was banned in schools. The Bangkok experience is also a pastiche. Ironically, a luxury hotel is situated next to a slum; a spirit house is located in front of the Stock Exchange building. While famous brands like Gucci, Versace or Prada are available in department stores, counterfeit ones are also displayed along the pavements in front of those stores.

In fact, the postmodern ambience in Bangkok is not only propelled by the project of modernity, but also derived from the cultural and psychological nature of the Thais. This may be explained by Buddhist values that are embedded in Thai culture. As some literature suggests that there are similarities between Buddhism and postmodernism (Glass 1995; Gould 1994), it is not uncommon to find postmodern consciousness among the Thais. Morrison (1997) comments that there is a historical parallel resting on an emerging nihilism between the development of postmodernism in the West today and Buddhism in the East over two thousands

[105] A popular virtual pet in mid 1990s. Both Thai children and adults alike raised their Tamagochi seriously as if it had been their real pets.

years ago. Not surprisingly, the postmodern conception of fragmented and mutable reality is not a new notion in Buddhist philosophy. Like postmodernism, Buddhism advocates that reality is in continuous flux, and is relative and impermanent (Morris 1994). Hence, Thai people are flexible and situation-oriented (Komin 1990). Their social world is multifaceted and malleable.

Unlike other Asian societies (e.g., Chinese or Japanese), Thai society is categorised as a loosely structured social system (Embree 1950; Hanks 1972; Piker 1969). That is, it tolerates considerable variations in individual behavior. Bunnag (1973) comments that in Thai culture, the social roles are relatively unspecified, thus it allows the 'ease of role-shift' in the society. Girling (1981) supports this point that most Thai people hold the psychological repertoire which equips them for diverse social postures. Simply put, the Thai selves are socially fragmented. This theory may also be supported linguistically. In the Thai language, there are a variety of pronouns for "I" as opposed to the singular pronoun 'I' representing the self in Western languages (e.g., English or German). The usage of each "I" depends on the context of the situation and the relationship with the interacted person. Some "I's" are more multidimensional (e.g., gender, social status, degree of formality) than others. As it is suggested that a language reflects a society's *life-world* (Wittgenstein 1953), the various forms of pronoun "I" in the Thai language illustrate the multiplicity and malleability of the self in Thai society.

In contrast to the 'loose structure' social paradigm, Thailand is also viewed as a well-patterned society (Suvannajata 1976). Mulder (1996) suggests that Thai society is a complex hierarchically structured system where most social relationships are characterised by relative superiority versus inferiority. This

hierarchical social power embraces several elements such as social status, age, education or gender. My personal view is that both contradictory theories may explain the paradoxical characteristics of Thai society to some extent. I hold that Thai society is like a spider's web, that is, it is well-patterned but fragmented and elastic. An individual's social status and role is not absolute; it depends on social context at a particular time and situation. An individual may be able to move around the social web. To obtain social acceptance, s/he is expected to perform appropriately in a particular social context. Nevertheless, the concept of appropriateness can be flexible, depending on her/his relative degree of superiority/inferiority in that social context.

Thailand is a society of paradox where collectivism and individualism coexists. While many Thai values are other-directed (Komin 1990), the Thais are also ironically viewed as individualistic people (Wichiencharoen 1976) who usually retain the "profound sense of self-concern and freedom of choice" (Phillips 1965, p. 206). Thai people try to smooth interpersonal relationships, yet they maintain and indulge their own aspirations. Endeavoring to balance this ironic composition, the Thais tend to uphold their flexibility, thus seem not to attach to any commitment. Furthermore, the Thais are fun-loving people who relish extravagance (Smuckarn 1976). The Thais savor the aesthetics of everyday life as Ayal (1963, p. 47) notes, "The Thai view life as something to enjoy here and now." Since S*anuk*[106] appears to be a necessary means that facilitates social interactions, it is vital in Thai everyday life (Mulder 1996).

[106] Having fun, enjoying oneself or having a good time.

5.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter explores the historical and cultural background of Bangkok and the Thai people. It describes how the project of modernity has percolated through Thai society. Moreover, it investigates postmodern conditions that loom large in Bangkok social life. Finally, it discusses the cultural and psychological nature of the Thai people, which constitutes the postmodern temperament in Thailand. It is hoped that the background of the research location discussed in this chapter provides basic knowledge of the socio-cultural context in which the informants lead their everyday lives.

Part Three: The Locals

Chapter Six

The Gendered Self

> Given that gender has played a most important role in the significations of the consumer and consumption, to fully understand consumption, gender must be made a central subject of study.
>
> Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p. 261

In this chapter, I discuss my interpretations of an ethnographic fieldwork of the male femaling transgenders whose personal profiles are presented in section 4.3.2a in Chapter Four. I explore how these transgender informants derive symbolic meanings from both mediated experience and lived experience, and how they incorporate those meanings into their everyday consumption in order to re-construct and express their aspiring gendered selves. Following Penaloza (1994), I aim to tackle the complex and paradoxical phenomenon of gender identity and consumption in this postmodern era where gender boundaries become blurred (Firat 1994). I believe that studying the extreme form of gender re-construction will enhance a better understanding of gendered consumption and facilitate the discovery of emergent themes that might be overlooked in conventional studies of consumption and the construction of the gendered self (O'Guinn and Faber 1989; Schouten 1991). As a priori setting for my interpretations in this chapter, I review the literature on the relationship between consumption and the gendered self. Additionally, I also present a brief background on male femaling transgenderism in general and specifically within the Thai cultural context. Later, I discuss my interpretations of the study and the emergent themes.

6.1 Gender Identity and Consumption Symbolism

Gender is a fundamental social category that we use in marking distinctions between people. Costa (1994, p.7) notes "gender is a pervasive aspect of culture, penetrating deeply and spreading broadly throughout the fabric of society." Inevitably, creating and enhancing gender identity is an essential component of the self-completion project that manifests itself in almost all aspects of our lives. From the moment we are born, our parents commonly put great effort into highlighting our gender by the things they use for us such as clothes, accessories and toys (Connell 1983; Pennell 1994). Even on special occasions, for instance Halloween (Levinson *et al* 1992), parents often use costumes to reinforce the traditional gender roles of their children (e.g., a Batman costume for a boy or a Mulan costume for a girl). Indeed, our everyday consumption is central to the social creation of our gender identities.

It has long been recognised that numerous consumption materials and rituals are intertwined closely with one gender or the other (Costa 1994). Being a significant social category, gender becomes a vital consideration in marketing activities (e.g., market segmentation, product development, advertising campaign). While many products and services are gender-associated, various studies show that our consumption behaviour is also gendered (e.g., Dittmar 1992; Fischer and Gainer 1991; Pennell 1994). However, most studies on gendered consumption are still attached to the modernistic notion of dichotomous gender – the consumer is either male or female.

Although gender is closely intertwined with the physical body, it is socially constructed (Harre 1991). At birth, we are assigned a gender category of either male or female according to the physical appearance of our genital organs. These categories of sex differences between 'male' and 'female' are socially determined to be absolute opposites. In fact, biologically, sex differences cannot be categorised into the affirmative dichotomy (Bushong 1995; Kaplan and Rogers 1990; Harre 1991). Bushong (1995) reports that there are more genetic varieties (e.g., XXY, XYY or XO) than the traditionally known XX (female) and XY (male). Levels of both female hormones (oestrogen and progesterone) and male hormone (testosterone) controlling our primary and secondary sexual characteristics also vary. The variety of sexual genotypes and hormonal conditions generate a bimodal array of primary and secondary sexual characteristics (e.g., hirsute, adiposity, bone structure, etc.). These characteristics are distributed along a continuum, varying between one end defined socially as 'female characteristics' and the other as 'male ones' (Bushong 1995; Harre 1991). While many people are congregated at one or the other end of the continuum, some may be located indeterminately and ambiguously in the middle. The fixed assignment of gender duality does not truly reflect a biological reality, but only a convenient social construction based on a male notion of whether a penis is present at birth or not (Kaplan and Rogers 1990).

At puberty, when secondary sexual characteristics begin to develop, the physical differences between 'male' and 'female' bodies become noticeable. However, these differences are not sharply defined since the distribution of these sexual characteristics overlaps between the sexes. Ironically, it is society that exaggerates the differences (Connell 1987) and draws absolute boundaries between them. Various discourses have been fabricated to polarise bodies between the

normative paradigms of femininity and masculinity, as well as to regulate them (Foucault 1979) to remain within their own boundaries. Although there is a suggestion that in postmodernity, some of this gender dichotomisation is breaking down (Firat 1994), much of it yet remains resilient to change and still influences our self-concepts and our interpretations of everyday consumption (Costa 1994; Fischer and Gainer 1994; Elliott, Eccles and Hodgson 1993; Stern and Holbrook 1994).

Inevitably, we are socially bound to engage in consumption and bodily practices in order to conform to those discourses of femininity and masculinity. Central to gender construction is the consumption of products or services that are not only believed to remedy, enhance or transform our bodies physically (Connell 1987; Harre 1991), but also to symbolise gendered ways of being. A body lotion is not just to soften a woman's skin, but also to signify her caring nature; or weight training is not just to build-up muscles for a man, but also to denote his vigorous character. It is not only a product's utility but also its gender symbolism that we consume (Belk 1988; Bourdieu 1984; Dittmar 1992; Douglas 1982; Elliott 1994; Gabriel and Lang 1995; Giddens 1991; Goffman 1959; McCracken 1988a).

Since gender is the cultural category most used in advertising (Jhally 1990), advertising thus becomes a vital resource for the symbolic project of the gendered self. Advertisements play a significant role in projecting not only gender attractiveness (Fowles 1996), but also gendered ways of being (Goffman 1976). McCracken (1987) suggests that when we look at advertisements, we are searching for symbolic resources – for instance, what it is to be a man or a woman, in order to advance our identity project. However, it has also been suggested that mediated gender images have only a secondary role in our gender construction – they are not

slavishly accepted but are involved in very complex and purposeful negotiations with other people (Fejes 1992; Fowles 1996; McCracken 1993; Peterson and Peters 1983).

Gender images in advertising and social gender roles are in a dialectical relationship. While changes in gender roles in society are reflected in advertising, gender representations in advertising influence changes in gender roles in society (Elliott, Eccles and Hodgson 1993). Much literature suggests that we, especially in our adolescence, are captivated by gender imagery and seek advertising depictions of gender that best symbolise cultural concepts of femaleness and maleness (Durkin 1985; Fowles 1996; Jhally 1990). Fowles (1996, p.217) notes that "As gender constructions become more flexible, they become more worthy of careful scrutiny by young people. The young then turn to media depictions of gender for help with a doubly difficult transition – first, into adult genders, and second, into adult genders whose definitions may turn out to be mutable." In fact, some literature suggests that we take appearance features from mediated representations of males and females in advertising and use them in the construction of our ideal gendered selves (Fowles 1996; Richins 1991).

However, Martin and Kennedy in their study of female college students (1994) argue that though their respondents appear to compare themselves with models in advertisements, these respondents do not incorporate the information from physical appearance comparison into their notions of the self. Martin and Kennedy reason that their respondents seem to realise that advertising images are unrealistic, thus they are able to distance themselves from those models.

Furthermore, by college age, these respondents may already hold a relatively stable self-concept.

6.2 Negotiating the Gendered Self - Transgenderism

In postmodernity, gender can be viewed as much too complex to be treated in a dichotomous fashion (Butler 1990; Ekins and King 1997; Penaloza 1994). Postmodern consumers may place themselves at any position on the gender continuum, and possibly move back and forth along it. It seems to be the natural 'taken for granted' course of things when consumers are assigned a particular gender at birth, and come to have a sense of themselves as that gender, in developing that gender identity and presenting it accordingly (Ekins 1997). However, what if consumers come to have a sense of themselves opposite to the gender being assigned? While most consumers keep reinforcing their polarised biological genders throughout their lives, some consumers resist doing so and thus negotiate a migration across boundaries from the assigned gender to the aspired one. What if biologically male consumers want to become women? How do they negotiate to cross gender boundaries? To what extent does their everyday consumption figure in this process of crossing the gender boundaries?

The process of crossing gender boundaries from male to female has been called "male femaling" by Ekins (1997) and takes place in three major modes: 'gender femaling', 'body femaling' and 'erotic femaling.' Gender femaling refers to the adoption of behaviours, emotions and cognitions socio-culturally associated with being female. Body femaling involves the desire and practices of males to 'female' their bodies and may involve the use of hormonal treatment and surgery.

As the body is the primary site for differentiating genders socially, it is important for the transgenders to put a great deal of effort into altering their bodies in their gender re-construction project (Griggs 1998; Penaloza 1994). Griggs (1998, p. 4) talks about her male body before beginning her sex reassignment, "The predicament of body is in looking though self-identity into the reflection. And when a well-formed feminine gender confronts a well-formed masculine physiology, ornamentation is wrong from the ground up." Erotic femaling refers to femaling that is deliberately sexual and aimed at arousal and gratification of desires. In this sense, a male femaling transgender strives to become an object of desire for the opposite gender, that is a man (Penaloza 1994). These three male femaling modes may interrelate over time and may be coexistent in one individual or may exist separately. Ekins (1997) refers to individuals who engage in this process as the "Transgender community."

In Thailand, we call the male femaling transgenders '*katoey*.' Alternatively, they may be referred to as '*sao prapate song*' or '*the second kind of woman*.' It is not uncommon to encounter *katoeys* in Thai society; they are on the streets, in the markets, at schools and in the media. Harris (1968, p. 75) observes, "The Katoeys who lived across from my house [in Bangkok] were not laughed at and ridiculed by the community. They seemed to be accepted and they seemed to be at home." Harris also notes that their neighbours would drop by to chat with them and they were apparently children's favourites. Jackson (1989) comments that *katoeys* in Thai society suffer relatively fewer and less severe social sanctions and psychological barriers than in the traditional Western societies because Thai society lacks any religiously-based ethical condemnation or any legal sanctions against them. However, this does not mean that Thai *katoeys* do not have any difficulties in

crossing the gender boundaries. Indeed, they contest to negotiate the self and the social symbolism in order to re-construct their gender identities, which I shall discuss in my interpretations.

6.3 Interpretations of the Fieldwork

The ethnography strongly suggests that the most important aspect of the informants' project of the self is to abandon their assigned male identity, and accordingly to re-create the aspired female one. It provides some insights into the complex nature of the informants' thoughts, feelings and behaviour, and highlights the use of symbolic meanings derived from advertising and products as valuable symbolic resources in the re-construction and maintenance of their gender identities. In this continuous process of *symbolic self-completion* (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982), the study shows how the informants interlace their mediated experience of advertising with lived experience of consumption in the process of the *internal-external dialectic of identification* (Jenkins 1996) between self-symbolism and social-symbolism. Meanwhile emergent interpretations reveal the paradoxical temperament of the informants' project of the gendered self.

6.3.1 A Passage to Become a Woman

Although it seems obvious that the informants' ultimate goal is to re-create the female self, their gender re-construction project is not straightforward. The interpretations substantiate the view that the informants' gendered selves are fragmented and paradoxical, which I shall discuss later in this chapter. In order to

get this complex issue across first, I inevitably employ a modernist approach[107] to discuss the interpretations. That is, the informants' symbolic project of the gendered self is unquestionably to become a woman. Then, I elaborate on how these informants use consumption symbolically to reveal and express what they think is a female soul that is housed in their material male body, as well as to re-integrate and re-locate themselves in this culturally constituted world.

6.3.1a Recounting Life Histories

The informants' symbolic project of the gendered self is a continuous process in which their life history plays a significant role in making sense of who they are today. Seemingly, all informants share more or less similar histories in their lives. They loved to play 'girlish stuff' when they were young, then started using cosmetics when they were in high school, and later dressed like women when they entered university. One life event leads to another event and these events are interlaced into a coherent sequence of their narrative identity (Ricoeur 1984). The symbolic meanings they draw throughout their life contributed to the development of today's meanings of their gendered self.

All informants claim that they were aware of their 'inner' female self at a very young age. Since then they have always felt that there was something missing in their beings – something, they must pursue to complete their lives.

> ***Giles:*** I want to tell you... I don't know whether you will believe me or not. As far back as I can remember... since I was in kindergarten, I have wanted to be a girl. I remember that even my mom used to complain about my sissy behaviour. For example, I loved to try on my mom's bra. My dad has also complained about it. However, it has never changed; since then, the feeling [of being a woman] has remained inside me.

[107] The approach assumes that there is one unified reality which can be explained in a linear fashion.

Jane also mentions that she has never felt herself a man, thus internally she has never transformed from a man to a woman.

> ***Jane:*** Since I was young, I have never felt that I was a male. I have never passed a stage of being a man, and then transformed to be a woman. I was born with it... There was not a stage when a caterpillar turned to be a butterfly, but I was born a butterfly. I just didn't look like a butterfly. Do you understand this?

This sense of incompleteness becomes stronger when they reach the age of puberty. Unlike other biological men, the informants refuse to follow parental encouragement of boyish/male activities. They form their own interpretation of their gendered selves. They struggle forcefully to negotiate their gender identities with their parents. Besides verbal contest, behavioural signification of gendered consumption is central to this negotiation process. While the parents try to make the informants behave like boys, the informants assert their desire to consume like girls.

> ***Giles:*** When my effeminate behaviour became more obvious... when I was in grade 6 or 7, my father thought it was too much and he wanted to fix it. Therefore, he forced me to jog and workout [the military way] every day. I didn't like it at all. I was trying to protest against him. Once I fought with him [verbally] and cried until I fainted. He then loosened up and gave up later. Still he cannot accept it completely. When he gave me money to buy things, let's say clothes, he would check what kind of clothes I bought. It must be a loose T-shirt or a shirt. He would not let me buy female outfits. ... My dad liked to buy us wristwatches. When he took us to the watch shop, I would like to choose a female model. However, my dad tried to persuade me to buy a male model. He asked why I didn't want the model and convinced me that most people [men] were wearing it. ... It is like tug of war. ... Anyway, since I keep insisting on dressing like a woman, my father seems not to pay attention anymore. ... Presently, my mom seems to accept what I am quite well. She once said it is good to have a daughter. We now can talk more about everything.

> ***Kate:*** When I was in secondary school, I got more involved in girlie stuff. So, my parents became antipathetic to my behaviour. Especially my father who is a military man, he even beat me when I had my ears pierced. I was really upset and thought of running away from home. I thought they were hostile to me because I was not their real child. Regardless of my parents' antipathy, I kept using girlie things, though in secret. Later I did it more openly. ... However, I have shown them that I could still be a good person regardless of my problematic gender. I studied so hard that I could

> get in a famous university. ... Now, my parents seem to reconcile themselves to my gender identity, not completely but they are trying. ... Well, recently my mom introduced me to her colleagues as a daughter. ... My dad once asked whether I could shift back to be a man, and I told him it was impossible. He just nodded and said he is only afraid that nobody would love me sincerely and I'll live alone. ... My elder brother was also against me at first, but now he really understands. He treats me as a younger sister. He always takes care of me, carrying things for me when we go shopping together.

Although being a *katoey* is not criticised in Thai society as breaching some given or absolute moral order of the cosmos (i.e., God's creation), it is criticised in social terms, in terms of negative social consequences (Jackson 1989). While Kate's father is worried that Kate will be lonely in later life, Giles' mother is also concerned that Giles will not have a promising future. In a casual conversation with Giles' mother, she mentions her worry regarding Giles' gender identity.

> ***Giles' Mother:*** Although I can accept what she is now, I cannot help thinking of what she has lost. If she stayed a man, she would have a bright future. She is smart and handsome. She would get a good job easily. I don't know what she can do now. It won't be easy to get a good job. Now I can only hope that she will get a job to support herself. I only ask her not to become a prostitute.

Obviously Giles' mother is not only worried about the negative social consequences to Giles of leaving a privileged male status, but also afraid of her limited career opportunity that might impel her to adopt a socially unacceptable career, i.e. prostitution. In the case of Bee who is the only son in a Chinese family, the major effect of being a transgender is her inability to produce an heir, which will lower her mother's status. Thus, she is still reluctant to come out to her parents.

> ***Bee:*** I still cannot come out to my parents because it will upset them tremendously, especially my mom. My father has two wives, and each has one son. The fact that I'm a katoey will put my mom's status under another wife. ... So every time I visit home, I try to dress neutrally. ... Actually, my parents are somewhat suspicious. My father was trying to find out once. He drank a glass of beer to encourage himself to ask whether I was a katoey. However, when he saw my re-action, he changed the topic. I knew he didn't want to upset me as much as I didn't want to upset him.

For Kai and Jane, their gender negotiation histories seem to be less dramatic. Kai remarks that although her mother does not support her male femaling project, she appears to accept it. Unlike her friends, Jane recounts that she gets support from the family, especially her mom.

> ***Jane:*** My mom let me use her cosmetics, and she even taught me how to do make-up.

Still, no matter how much the informant endeavoured to re-construct their gender identities, they try to keep a harmonious balance between their aspiration and their parents' level of acceptance. They lessen their feminine behaviour when they are with their parents.

> ***Kate:*** Although my parents know that I dress as a woman, I try to dress neutrally in front of them. For example, I would wear a loose T-shirt instead of the tight one. I don't want to hurt them.

At school, the informants had fewer difficulties in negotiating their gender identities. They appeared to divulge their feminine behaviour more openly. They played girlish games, or impersonated girls in the games. They wore make-up in classes. They related that teachers and classmates did not reject their behaviour.

> ***Kate:*** At school I hardly played with boys. They are too vigorous. I played girlie stuff like paper dolls with girls.

> ***Bee:*** I loved to play a daughter in the game 'Bandit abducting a daughter.' A boy who rescued me from a bandit could kiss me as a reward.

> ***Jane:*** Although girls were forbidden to wear make-up to school, the teachers never punished us. They just let us be.

> ***Giles:*** I had no problem with my male classmates; still I hang around with female friends. ... Teachers never condemned my sissy behaviour. ... Once, a teacher told me lovingly to tone down my lipstick colour.

Kai: Boys sometimes teased me, but they never bullied me.

Liz: I went to an all-boys school. Though I have changed, we are still friends.

At a young age, the informants acquired their female sense of self mainly by socialising with girls. However, when they entered adolescence, they began to identify other transgenders in their classes. Then, the teenage transgenders magnetised towards each other to pursue their common mission of the male-femaling project.

6.3.1b Femaling the Body

Central to the male-femaling project is consumption to femininise the body. Since the gap between the female spirit and the material male body is very large, the informants feel a tremendous sense of incompleteness of the self. To re-construct their gender identities, the informants need to modify their bodies to match their self-concepts. Here there is a struggle between the self and the physical body. This appears to substantiate the dialectical relationship between the self and the body discussed earlier in Chapter Two. The informants believe that their 'inner' self urges them to femininise their bodies. The more the body becomes feminine, the more the self feels it. Simultaneously, the more the self savours femininity, the more it craves to femininise the body.

Most informants started to femininise their bodies when they were in secondary school. Having observed bodily changes in their female friends, they began to pay attention to their bodies. At first, the informants still dared not alter their bodies physically. They only used cosmetics so that they could alternate their gendered selves flexibly from girls at school to boys at home. Evidently, wearing

make-up not only beautified the informants, but also made them feel symbolically like a woman.

> ***Giles:*** When I first put on make-up, I thought it made me look beautiful. I felt very good and was hooked on it. Therefore, I did it every day. I felt beautiful. I felt good. I loved it. It's me.

One fulfilling consumption experience leads to another one to advance the male-femaling project. The informants consume a wide range of products to groom their body from hair, face, and skin, down to toes.

> ***Giles:*** I like to use Pias Honei Meal. I have been attached to it since the first year *[in the university]*. I first used it when I was a fresher. A katoey friend suggested that I use it and I have found it very good. I feel so good about it. It is very good. I dare not switch to other brands because I'm afraid that the other brands are probably not as good. I have used it for quite a long time. Then, after cleansing my face, I'll use toning lotion. It helps balancing the skin. I feel that it moisturises the skin. Later I follow with night cream... that is in the evening. In the morning, I use sunscreen cream. I try to use them daily. Formerly, I didn't pay much attention, just washed my face with soap. But now that I 'pen sao' *[reaching puberty for a girl]*, I should use them. I can feel that my face is getting better. I feel good to use them.

The informants take female contraceptive pills in order to obtain oestrogen to femininise their bodies physically. They claim that these pills help to develop their breasts and cheeks as well as to soften their muscles and skin. Even though they are aware that this oestrogen in-take may have side effects on them, they are willing to take a chance, just to become who they want to be. Kai, Kate and Jane recount that at first they did not want to take the pill since they were afraid that it might affect their memory, thus their studies. However, they later could not resist the temptation to femininise their bodies, especially when they saw a change in their friends' bodies after taking the pill.

> ***Kai:*** I would rather take a chance *[to take the pills]*. I want to look more feminine like them *[Liz and Giles]*. Umm...yes, some people told me that these pills ruined our brains. I don't know. When I first took the pills, I felt dizzy and felt the heat under my skin. However, it is quite okay now. ... I was so pleased to see such a

> change in my body. I really have breasts now. I can even wear a bra *[brassiere]*... I felt so thrilled, but also a bit embarrassed to put it on. I don't know...hmm...maybe it is like the girl in that "first bra" advertisement. I'm now happy to wear it. It makes me feel like a grown-up woman.

The informants desire to attain not only a female body, but also a beautiful one. Since the body mediates the relationship between the self and others (Goffman 1959), it becomes physical capital that can be converted into other forms of capital such as social capital or economic capital (Bourdieu 1984). The informants believe that a beautiful body can bring more social acceptance and a wider network, as well as providing them with good career opportunities, especially in the entertainment industry. Moreover, they realise that beauty is a source of social power. For example, Liz whose body looks more feminine than the others boasts that she is the group's beauty expert, thus appearing to dominate the group.

The male-femaling project is an ongoing process. Like the famous transsexual super-model in Thailand, Ornapa Krisadee, most informants reckon that just looking like a woman is not enough to complete their identity project; they want to have sex re-assignment surgery.

> ***Liz:*** I dream of becoming a 'complete' woman. I'll save up money for the sex-change surgery. ... No, I'm not afraid of it. Many people had it. With modern medical technology, it should be okay. I want to become a 'complete' woman. I don't want to be an unfinished woman.

Symbolic self-completion theory (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982) suggests that if individuals feel insecure in social roles then they will attempt to 'complete' their ideal self-concept by the use of symbols they believe will demonstrate role competence. Sex re-assignment surgery not only transforms the male body into the closest possible female one, but also signifies the complete abandonment of manhood. Jane comments that, for a transgender, to become a woman is to be as

much opposite to a man as possible. Featherstone (1991, p. 82) notes, "In effect to construct an identity, to know who you are, you need to know who you are not."

> ***Jane:*** I really want to have sex-change surgery. I don't do it for a man, but for myself. It will terminate my manhood. The male hormone will never do me any harm anymore. I regard the male hormone as poison. I want to get rid of this poison inside me. I'm disgusted with it. ... Let's say suppose we are lost in the jungle. We don't bring any pills *[contraceptive pills]* or any hair removing cream along with us. Many people, especially the media, are waiting for us to be rescued from the jungle. Then we came out from the jungle with beards. Yuck, I cannot stand that. If I had sex-change surgery, I would not have to worry about this.

The sex re-assignment surgery seemingly enhances the informants' sense of security since it will immunise them against their previous male selves. However, Bee and Kai do not want to have the surgery, at least when the fieldwork was being carried out. Bee does not want to upset her parents, while Kai still wants to keep some part of her natural-born self. For Kai, just having a female appearance is enough to complete the definition of her female self. As Ekins (1997, p. 58) describes it, "many male femalers prefer to develop a middle-of-the-road femme personality they feel is suitable to their age, class, looks and background." Indeed, this compromise is an attempt to keep a harmonious balance between self-symbolism and social-symbolism.

6.3.1c Exercising Female Consumption

To keep a balance between self-symbolism and social-symbolism, the informants may need to shift their gender identities back and forth, depending on time, social group and situation. Primarily, the informants use consumption of gendered products symbolically to facilitate their malleably gendered selves. Regardless of the physical body, the informants can experience a sense of womanhood through consumption of female products. They not only use female

clothes, accessories and cosmetics, but also symbolically consume various other socially representative female products such as facial cleansing foam, body lotion or even food and drink, to help the aspired self to materialise.

> ***Kate:*** Once I stole my mom's old handbag and took it to school. I hid it in my school bag and used it for pencils and some accessories. I thought that it represented femaleness. It was a woman's handbag, so I wanted to use it, didn't I? I used it to keep my pencils and accessories. I was very happy to use it.

Whenever the informants have to perform their male roles, they just exercise male consumption. For example, Bee who does not practice hormonal treatment to alter her physical self can lead a double life by using consumption to switch between her male and female self. She dresses simply in a baggy T-shirt and jeans when she visits her parents who live outside Bangkok. Simultaneously, she feels that she can easily transform herself into a woman by putting on make-up, changing her clothes, carrying a handbag and wearing high-heel shoes. Obviously, Bee's consumption of these female objects becomes an extension of her female self (Belk 1988). More importantly, Bee is using consumption to negotiate a very complex, situated self.

> ***Bee:*** I love using a handbag. It makes me a lady. I love it. I love these shoes, these tops. They are expensive though. But they make me feel like other teenage girls.
>
> ***Interviewer:*** Did you spend a lot of money on these famous brands?
>
> ***Bee:*** Yes, but I love them... I take good care of them. See, I wash this top by hand. I regularly polish this bag and always put it in a cloth bag when I don't use it. They are parts of me. I need them. Unlike you, you don't need these things... you've got everything.
>
> ***Interviewer:*** What have I got?
>
> ***Bee:*** You are a woman.

Besides consuming female products, the informants also practise various everyday rituals to fill in their incomplete sense of female selves. Eating is one example. The informants always eat lightly. This is because they are very

conscious of their weight, and light eating symbolises femininity. Grunert (1994) suggests that a woman who eats lightly is perceived to be more feminine, and vice versa. When the informants go to lunch together, they sometimes buy fresh or pickled fruits to eat together afterward. To them, it is a 'girlie' ritual to enhance their femininity. Going shopping together is another common ritual that they think symbolises womanhood.

> ***Giles:*** It is a girlie thing, isn't it? Eating pickled mangoes after lunch. Men don't usually do it, do they?

> ***Bee:*** I enjoy going shopping with friends *[mostly katoeys].* We love to try things on and make comments on each other. It is fun. It is really girlie.

6.3.1d Abandoning the Unwanted Male Self

Despite the endeavour to counterbalance self-symbolism and social-symbolism, the informants' gendered selves are dynamic. Their male-femaling project continues. The further the informants progress across gender boundaries into the new world, the less they want to return to the former one.

> ***Kate:*** Now I usually buy female stuff. My wardrobe is full of female clothes. I would feel very embarrassed to go back to dressing like a man. Once I had an interview for a scholarship, for which I had to put on slacks and a shirt. I was so embarrassed that I didn't want to leave my room *[in the dormitory].* I didn't want people *[who know me]* to see me in male clothes. I had never thought that I would have such strong feelings against it. I thought it was no big deal. I had worn them before. Why couldn't I wear them again? However, oh once I put them on, I felt such repulsion. I felt strange...*krun nua krun tua [an uncomfortably feverish feeling].* I ran out the dormitory and got in a taxi immediately so that nobody could see me.

Once the informants establish their female identities in society, they gradually avoid or abandon male consumption. The informants eliminate any male-associated possessions. Although the informants acquire female nicknames, they think of changing their manly official first names to dispose of their male identity.

They decline to perform consumption rituals that symbolise masculinity. For example, the informants hardly ever drank strong liquor because of its masculine image. Apparently, they also believe that alcohol will nullify their hormonal intake. To discharge the unwanted male appearance, the informants would rather not eat and be hungry than look like a man.

> ***Liz:*** We will look ugly if we are fat. See, we aren't like those women who have small body structure. We need to keep ourselves thin; otherwise, we will look ugly. We will look like 'chong' *[transgender slang for man].*

Certainly, consumption resistance or refusal of taste (Bourdieu 1994) are actively exercised by the informants not only as instrumental to the re-construction and expression of their gendered selves, but also as mechanisms to allow a reciprocal balance in their male-femaling process.

6.3.2 Symbolic Resources: Mediated vs. Lived Experiences

In order to re-construct their gender identities, the informants actively look for symbolic meanings of 'what an ideal woman is like' from both mediated and lived experience. The interpretations suggest that advertising can be a significant symbolic resource for the informants' concept of gender. However, gender imagery from advertisement becomes concretised only after it is brokered in lived experience. The informants occasionally discuss advertising with each other in order to make sense of what an ideal woman is. Fowles (1996) comments that the symbolic material in advertising can only supply distant and tentative navigational aids – it plays a less important role than interactions with significant others such as family and peers. Elliott, Eccles and Hodgson (1993) also note that the gendered meaning that we construct from advertising is viscous in nature, and signification

through the media is likely to be much less potent than signification through actual behavioural experience.

6.3.2a Looking for the 'Great Look'

The informants look for symbolic representations of what feminine beauty is like in order to nourish their identity re-construction project. Female body images portrayed in advertising seem to be central to their interests. The informants pay considerable attention to advertisements for personal care and beauty products. Here, Liz talks about her concept of the 'great look,' deriving from a shampoo advertisement.

> ***Liz:*** Gorgeous face, shining long hair, beautiful skin, slim body... just likes Natasha *[Natasha Plianvithi, Thailand's top model]* in the Lux Shampoo advertisement.

Although the informants may not intentionally seek the 'great look' from advertisements, they often describe, discuss or comment on the models' appearances in the advertisements. They consciously compare themselves with models in advertisements. Unlike Martin and Kennedy's respondents (1994), the informants seem to incorporate the 'gap of female attractiveness' from this comparison into their male-femaling project. This may be because, for the informants, the physical capital of the 'great look' can bring better opportunities as discussed earlier.

> ***Giles:*** I don't pay attention to an advertisement. However, if it is well made, I may pay attention to it so that I'll 'mouth' *[talk/gossip]* about it with my friends. We like to 'mouth' about advertisements, but it does not mean that I intend to watch every advertisement.
>
> ***Interviewer:*** What do you like to 'mouth' about in an advertisement?
>
> ***Giles:*** Those models who have wonderful bodies. At present, there are many advertisements with those gorgeous super models. I'm obsessed with their bodies.

> ... Have you seen the model in the Yo-most advertisement? She has such a great body. One day I'll have a body like that.

> ***Bee:*** I look at how they *[advertising models]* wear their make-up, their hairstyles, and so on. We can see a fashion trend. Once I spent all day looking for a lipstick colour worn by a model in ...I could not remember which advertisement.

6.3.2b Making Other Senses of Advertising

As the informants' conversations are centred on how to beautify their bodies, the 'great look' in advertising is occasionally used to initiate the 'mouthing.' This illuminates some of the social roles of advertising proposed in the literature which I review in Chapter Three (e.g., Anderson and Meyer 1988; Buttle 1991; O'Donohoe 1994). The informants appear to appropriate various symbolic meanings from advertising. Besides the 'symbolic pleasure' (Willis 1990) of female attractiveness, the informants also derive romantic fantasies from advertisements. Jane remarks that she loves to look at those handsome men in advertisements. Interestingly, she seems to believe that advertising imagery is a socially endorsed ideal of gender attractiveness. This reflects the power of mediated experience as a symbolic resource for the self-project.

> ***Jane:*** My ideally handsome men are like those models in advertising. Everybody around the world would reckon that people in advertisements are good-looking, wouldn't we? They *[advertising models]* must be universally thought handsome, not just by katoeys.

Apart from notions of gender attractiveness, the informants also obtain various concepts from advertisements as resources for their symbolic project of the self. Kate talks about some advertisements she put in her 'collage of the self' (Picture 6.1).



PICTURE 6.1: Kate's 'Collage of the Self'

Kate: The overall impression of this collage is to reflect various aspects of me. Various moods, various personalities. I like these advertisements; some because of the pictures and others because of the wordings. Like this one 'Mysterious,' it hits my heart/mind[1]. I want to be mysterious. I think when we are mysterious, we somehow hold power. I mean the power to attract attention from friends. Nevertheless I want to look sexy sometimes, or sweetly innocent other times. ... I don't really like this woman in the swimming suit, but I like the words 'subdued elegance in black and white tone.' I always buy black and white clothes. I prefer to look simple but graceful. ... I like this picture of a naked woman, not because of her body though. She looks so liberated, not being imprisoned by clothes. She looks happy. I want to be liberated like her. ... I like this wording too, 'Many thrills in a woman's life never depend on a man.' I think, yes! Most katoeys do things to please men. They depend very much on how men think of them. It is too much.

[1] In Thai language, we use the same word for heart and mind since it is inevitable to feel without thinking or think with out feeling. Nevertheless, we have separate vocabularies for anatomical heart and brain.

6.3.2c Validating Mediated Symbolism in Lived Experience

The informants always validate their advertising interpretations in their fields of lived experience. Superficially, the interpretations suggest that the informants' lived experience, through face-to-face encounters, tends to dominate the mediated one. For instance, Giles notes on her diet motivation that her encounters with natural women have a stronger impact on her attempts to diet than do the models in advertisements she talks about earlier.

> ***Giles:*** Not only those models *[in advertising]*, some girls in our university also have great bodies. I'm very envious. I would like to be like them. At present, I'm on diet. Believe it or not, I eat only one meal a day. I have done this for almost three weeks. I don't touch dinner at all.

However, after re-reading the data, I propose that in the informants' symbolic project of the gendered self the mediated experience of advertising is possibly as significant as lived experience. The interpretations illustrate that advertising provides symbolic meanings that the informants later rework and realise in the realm of their lived experience. The mediated feminine ideals in advertising become the interpretive tools through which the informants negotiate their gendered selves. Giles' encounter with those slim female students may not have motivated her to be on diet if she had not been primarily instilled with the idealised image of those slim bodies in advertising. Witnessing the lived attractive bodies reinforces the belief of Giles, who has a feminine body endowment, that those mediated bodies in advertisements can be actualised.

However, if the informants conclude that mediated symbolism will rarely be achieved in real life, they will re-negotiate the meaning or just let it go. This highlights the dialectical relationship between mediated and lived experience discussed in section 3.3.1 in Chapter Three.

> ***Kai:*** It would be great to be gorgeous like those models. However, it is too ambitious for me. I have to overhaul my whole body. I don't have money to work on it. I rather look at those beautiful women for pleasure than trying to be like them.

> ***Kate:*** When I see the advertisement that portrays a happy family. I dream of having a family. I want to have kids. But it's impossible, isn't it? It is hard enough to find a husband.

6.3.3 Maintaining the Balance: Self-Social Symbolism

From both participative and non-participative observations, the interpretations indicate that the informants subtly negotiate symbolic meanings which they obtain from both mediated and lived experience in their everyday social settings. It is important for the informants to maintain a harmonious balance between self-symbolism and social-symbolism in their male-femaling project. Earlier, I presented my interpretations of how the informants keep a balance in the negotiating process with their parents. In this section, I focus on the process of the *internal-external dialectic of identification* (Jenkins 1996) within their *katoey* group, and the process of *discursive elaboration* between the informants and the significant others.

6.3.3a Identifying the Common Symbolism

Since the informants are aware of their differences from other conventional genders in society, they rely on other *katoeys* in their group emotionally and intellectually. They gain support and learn how to materialise their gender identity from each other. They are immensely influenced by other members in the group. To feel secure in their unconventional gender identity, the informants tend to lose a sense of individuality and acquire a collective sense of being a *katoey.* They constantly and actively validate the symbolic meanings from both lived and mediated experiences through the process of *discursive elaboration* in their group interactions. From observation, in their conversations the informants always argue about the latest 'in' fashion, discuss their personal problems, gossip about their female classmates, crack a joke on a teacher's dress, or show sympathy for a friend's failing relationship. In this way, they appear to develop the group's common symbolism.

They habitually ask each other's opinions and advice on how to dress, how to beautify and take care of their bodies, how to femininise themselves and how to attract men. The informants always show what they buy to each other in order to check out their approval. Certainly, these group interactions seem to reinforce their aspirations to pursue their male-femaling project.

> ***Kate:*** Nobody can understand a katoey better than another katoey. I can talk about everything with my katoey friends. We are interested in similar things. We learn a lot from each other. I don't feel alone.

After discursive elaborations in social settings, the symbolic meanings emerge from the *internal-external dialectic of identification* process between self-

symbolism and social-symbolism, then become temporally concretised, and are consequently applied to the informants' everyday consumption.

> ***Giles:*** Kate encouraged me to take the pills. She teaches me a lot about it. She is also a good friend who helps me find a summer job or a tutorial job. ... Jane is a make-up expert, while Liz knows all about fashion. We exchange knowledge of how to beautify ourselves. We always go shopping together. ... Of course, we go cruising together.

> ***Jane:*** *[Talking about her usage of UV facial cream]* I'm addicted to it. Once I use it and other people compliment that I look whiter, I cannot stop using it. I feel like using it every day so that people will praise me every day. ... Yes, I usually listen to them. If they say the dress is dreadful, I won't buy it then.

Nevertheless, if the informants consider that their friends' opinions do not match their realities, they will re-negotiate in order to sustain the balance within the self and with other group members. They may either settle the issue verbally, or assert their views through actions.

> ***Kai:*** Sometimes they recommend I buy a more feminine dress. However, I'm afraid that I'll look hideous in it. It may be too bold. I dare not wear it. I think we should wear what suits us. Otherwise, people will chitchat about it. So I keep wearing what I think is suitable for me. I think they get the message, and then stop pushing me to buy the dress.

Besides their katoey friends, the informants also seek approval from outsiders, especially men. Consumption symbolism becomes more meaningful when it is approved by the significant others.

> ***Liz:*** *[Talking about her favourite dress]* When I first put on this dress, I thought it was beautiful. I loved it. I wore it and went clubbing. I had such great fun. I was pretty much born because of this dress... many orders by men *[she was pursued by many men.]*.

> **Bee:** I have just started taking hormones. I look more like a woman. Actually, I looked like one even before any hormonal in-take. Amazingly, until now some people still don't recognise whether I'm a woman or a man. They think I'm a woman. This encourages me that I'm passable.

> ***Giles:*** There is an exciting story this morning. This uniform *[female university uniform]* made me born. The policeman at the box in front of the university, who teased our group yesterday, saw me in this uniform and came to apologise to me about yesterday's incidence. He said he had thought that I was a katoey. I passed.

It is not just men's approval that can thrill the informants. Interestingly, a lesbian may deliver a comparable excitement according to Giles' journal keeping.

> ***Giles:*** Today while I was working at the CK one counter, a cute *tom [a lesbian butch]* came to flirt with me. It is funny, but I felt good.

Having been attracted to the *tom* confirms not only Giles' qualification as a woman, but also her feminine beauty. This is because the Thai *toms* are reputed to usually pursue attractive feminine women.

6.3.4 The Dynamic and Paradox of the Gendered Self

Although the informants' objective to become a woman seems obvious, the informants' gendered selves are complex and sometimes contradictory. The self is dynamic and so is symbolism. In this section, I discuss the paradoxical nature of the informants' male-femaling project that emerges from the interpretations.

6.3.4a Liberated or Trapped

Having been assigned the male identity by nature and accordingly expected to behave as a man by society makes the informants feel imprisoned in the wrong bodies. They want to liberate themselves, to let free what they believe are their female souls that are trapped in material male bodies. Exercising consumption to

femininise themselves, especially their bodies, symbolises their power over their destinies – the power to re-assign and to materialise their 'real' selves. Like the people who had cosmetic surgery in Schouten' s study (1991), the informants feel that they are taking control of their bodies. Femaling themselves not only signifies improvement of their physical appearance, but also celebration of their freedom.

> ***Giles:*** My father seems to have given up. He does not force me to dress as a man or to build up body muscles anymore. I'm free to be a woman. It is my life. It is my body. I should be able to choose what I want to be.

However, while the informants are celebrating their liberation from the assigned male selves, they evidently fall into another social trap. That is, they are trapped in the socially shared symbolism of femaleness. Despite the fact that the looks of women in Thai society have changed tremendously, the informants still cling to a conventional concept of femaleness. They refuse the radical concept of the androgynous-looking woman, as Giles writes in her journal about Kate Moss in a CK One advertisement. The informants are also entrapped in their endeavours to please men.

> ***Giles:*** I want to have longer hair. This length is not enough to become a woman. Many men wear their hair this length. I feel that long hair symbolise femininity.

> ***Kai:*** I don't like muscular women. They look too tough, too masculine.

> ***Giles' journal:*** I don't understand why people like Kate Moss. I don't think she is beautiful. Why is she so famous? She is okay, but not the kind of woman I want to be.

> ***Liz:*** It's very exhausting. Whenever we go out with a man, we have to look beautiful. We have to put on make-up, blow-dry our hair, and so on.

To femininise their bodies, the informants exercise particular consumption such as hormonal in-take or facial care very strictly. It is a regular ritual that they never miss. They follow their hormonal in-take schedule and daily facial nourishment with discipline. It is as if they are observing the precepts of the male-femaling cult.

> ***Kate:*** We are strict with our hormonal treatment. It is like we're strict in some sort of religion. We will feel guilty if we break the rules.

Ironically, the informants are trapped in the conventional world of women in order to be liberated from the world of men.

6.3.4b Romantic Fantasies or Sexual Pleasure

In their male-femaling project, the informants not only want to become women, but also fantasise a romantic relationship with men. Otherwise, the symbolic project of the gendered self is not yet achieved. Like many women, they actively beautify their appearances to attract men. Willis (1990, p. 90) notes "appearance is a key means by which women not only express their individual identities and independence, but are simultaneously constituted as objects of, and for, male desire." The informants even romanticise their symbolic consumption.

> ***Giles:*** When I saw displays in the shop window, I could not help bringing myself into the shop to have this photograph taken. I have never worn a traditional Thai costume. Especially this Northern costume looked very beautiful. I felt like a Northern princess. It sounds so romantic. If I have a chance to go to Chiang Mai again, I'll have another photograph taken. Next time I'll let my hair down. (See Picture 6.2)



PICTURE 6.2: Giles in a Northern Costume

Perceiving themselves as women, the informants dream of meeting 'Mr. Right' who is a heterosexual man. They long for romantic love and hope to have a partner. However, they recognise the limited possibility to actually materialise this fantasy. They do not expect to marry Mr. Right; they only need to be accepted by

him. Symbolically, being engaged in a romantic and sexual relationship with a heterosexual man enhances their sense of female selves.

> ***Giles:*** I'm falling for an engineer who is supervising the construction of our new library. I'm knitting a jumper for him. I do it between classes. My friends tease me that I'm over-the- top; they josh that I don't have to knit to prove my femininity. They have never been in love. ... I hope that one day he will accept me. I realise that he must have a family. I'll let him go if he finds a woman he loves.

However, Kate who once had a similar idea could not handle the fact when her former partner left her for a woman.

Though each individual informant reveals her desire for a romantic relationship, as a group they agree that it is senseless to fantasise the impossible dream or to wait for 'Mr. Right.' Accordingly, the informants tend to seek sexual pleasure instead.

> ***Jane:*** Life is short, and we don't have much time to enjoy it. No man wants to live with a katoey forever. Old katoeys are unpleasant. We should seek *[sexual]* pleasure when our body allow us to do so.

> ***Bee:*** I love clubbing. I go there to court men. With them, I can sense my womanhood.

Certainly, striving for sexual pleasure from men is central to the erotic male-femaling project (Ekins 1997).

6.3.4c Assimilating to or Alienating from Thai Culture

Despite abandoning their assigned male identity, the informants do not discard all of their realities. They still hold deeply embedded Thai beliefs and values. For example, they hope to be able to take care of their parents when the parents get old. They observe Buddhism and practice Buddhist rituals. Interestingly, the informants divulge some superstitious beliefs that play significant

roles in their male-femaling process. They express their concerns as to whether having sex re-assignment surgery or a rhinoplasty, or changing their names[109] will alter their fates.

> ***Bee:*** I'm looking for a red blouse. It's lucky a colour for me. So said Dr. Yong *[a famous psychic]*. Black is not good for me this year. ... I'm a Buddhist. I always practise merit making such as giving food to monks, freeing birds, donating money to charities. ... I want to re-incarnate as a complete human. I mean...to be either a genuine man or woman. Nobody wants to be unnatural.

> ***Kate:*** Some katoeys are afraid that their fates will worsen when they have their things *[penis]* cut off. Therefore, in order to sustain or raise our fates, we need to make a lot merit, especially before the surgery. It is said our merit-makings will bring a successful surgery. I mean it will work *[being able to conduct a sexual intercourse]*.

Firmly identifying themselves as Thais, they want to re-integrate themselves back into Thai society as Thai women. They note that the more like women the are, the more demure they become. Apparently, they adopt the social concept of how to be a decent Thai woman. Paradoxically, when they want to do something 'naughty,' they use the excuse that they are not women.

> ***Giles:*** Thai women would not do that *[courting men]*. However, it is okay. I'm not a woman.

> ***Liz:*** Emotionally I want to be a conservative Thai woman who is demure. Reserving her virginity for the husband. But as we are like this *[*katoey*]*, we shouldn't be uptight. We should let it be and enjoy our life whenever we can.

Since the informants acknowledge that this attitude is a source of social criticism against *katoeys* in Thai society, they find excuses to justify their behaviour.

> ***Jane:*** A man does not lose anything. Katoeys were once men. Thus, we don't lose anything either. It should be okay for two people who have nothing to lose to get together just for sex. Why bother to care? It may sound too much for a Thai

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[109] There is a belief influenced by Chinese Ngo-Heng that facial characteristics direct our fates. Also, according to Thai astrology, the letters in our name can affect our destiny.

woman. Sometimes we joke among ourselves that we follow American culture[110]. Therefore, it is not immoral. We won't use Thai culture to judge our sexuality.

Consequently, they alienate themselves from their culturally constituted world.

6.3.4d Female Acting, Male Thinking

It is unquestionable that the informants adopt female impersonation in their everyday lives. Their consumption, their bodies and their mannerisms are obviously femininised. Yet, they seem to carry on some social perimeter of conventional male thinking. While they act to please a man, they consider him as a sexual object or a fragile gender. Regarding a female friend, the informants also think that she is vulnerable, and it is their responsibility to protect her.

> ***Liz:*** *[Showing a photograph]* I 'ate' this man once. I like men, but I don't care for them. I just enjoy their company. I'm bored of being in a relationship. It is like I own a very precious thing that I need to treasure... to nourish. It is exhausting to guard my man from the others *[either women or* katoeys*]*.
>
> ***Jane:*** We are a privileged gender. There are less social constraints for katoeys. We can do so many things that most women dare not do, such as courting a man. When people see a woman with a man, they gossip about the woman. However, when they see a katoey with a man, they gossip about the man, not us.
>
> ***Jane:*** I always advise my female friends how to protect themselves from men. They are so innocent. I reveal male nature to them. I tell them how men think. I don't want the girls to get hurt later.

Indeed, in the course of female acting, the informants' gendered selves may yet paradoxically adhere to male thinking.

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[110] Americans are perceived to be loose in their sexual conducts. Largely, this image is derived from the mediated experience of American soap operas and Hollywood films.

6.3.4e To Be or Not To Be: A Woman

While the informants energetically migrate across gender boundaries to the female world, they still have doubts whether it is the world where they want to settle down. Though generally they appear to be confident in their male-femaling project and negotiate forcefully to become a woman, they are sometimes doubtful whether they can become one literally. They realise that no matter how hard they strive to acquire their womanhood, the best they can accomplish is still not sufficient.

> ***Liz:*** Sometimes I feel confused. I have certainly never seen myself as a man. However, I'm confused of how much I am a woman. Sometimes I want to be a woman, whilst some other times I don't want to be.

> ***Kate:*** We're artificial. How can we lead a normal life as a woman? It is difficult, isn't it? ... A very beautiful katoey cannot be compared to a plain-looking woman. A woman holds her natural femaleness. She may act tomboyish, yet sparkle her female radiance. Katoeys don't have that property.

Indeed, this gender re-creation project is socially constructed. The informants seem certain that they do not want to be men, thus they try to get away as much as possible from their male identities. Socially bounded within the realm of gender duality, the informants take the path toward the opposite end. Nevertheless, their gender re-construction project is not absolute. Interestingly, I notice that the more passable the informants are as women, the more they wonder at their male-femaling project. For those informants who are working to be passable, they can enjoy the novelty of the new world and rarely have doubts about the project. They are still excited to see their breasts develop, to feel their softer skin, to buy a bra, and so on. On the other hand, for those who successfully cross the boundaries, their adventures apparently diminish. Furthermore, it appears to be more difficult to maintain the new gender identity.

Kate shares her feelings and thoughts towards her identity project.

> ***Kate:*** It is exhausting being a katoey. We have to live up to other people's expectations. We must look good all the time. Once we decided to become women, we must be beautiful. We cannot dress sloppily. We aren't allowed to be an ugly katoey. I think I spend too much energy and time in grooming myself. I feel tired. It is very stressful. Sometimes I consider converting back to be a man.
>
> ***Interviewer:*** Is that possible?
>
> ***Kate:*** Maybe. Well, for the time being, I still want to be like this *[e.g., wearing long hair, putting on female clothes]*. When I think about giving up all this and converting to dress like other ordinary men... wearing short hair, putting on shirt and slacks ... I just cannot stand it. It is unacceptable. I have invested a lot to be like this... fighting with my parents, taking pills, etc., etc. I love what I am now. But who knows? You see, sometimes I just want to be relaxed... not to be too concerned about my looks. I once mentioned to my friends that we were concerned too much about our appearance. However, it didn't seem to bother them. I think we are quite competitive. Sometime I feel exhausted. I want to be happy with myself. I'll probably get out of this competitive arena.

Kate's statements indicate not only her confused feelings towards her gendered self, but also her imagined possibilities of the self (Markus and Nurius 1986). Although she wants to maintain her male-femaling project, she does not preclude other possibilities of what she can be. The informants' gendered selves are fragmented. Their gender identities are malleable depending on whom they are with.

> ***Jane:*** When I'm with a man, I feel that I'm a woman. When I'm with katoey friends, of course I'm a katoey. When I'm with female friends, it depends on the situation. If I can mix well with them, I feel that I'm a woman. Otherwise, I'm a katoey.

This illustrates that the self is dynamic. Whenever it encounters a new experience or a new social situation, it will re-interpret and re-negotiate to keep a harmonious balance within itself and between the two realms of self-symbolism and social-symbolism. The informants' symbolic project of the self is always under construction. To be or not to be a woman (or a *katoey*) remains uncertain.

6.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter illustrates that consumption is central to the symbolic project of the gendered self. The interpretations show how gendered consumption fosters a harmonious balance within the fragmented, paradoxical self and between the two realms of self-symbolism and social-symbolism. The ethnography portrays how the informants draw female imagery from mediated experiences, particularly from advertising, and interlace them with lived experiences of female product consumption in the process of the internal-external dialectic of identification in order to re-create their gender identities.

Chapter Seven

The Nouveau Riche Self

Taste classifies and classifies the classifiers.
Bourdieu 1984

In this Chapter, I discuss my interpretations of the fieldwork of the nouveaux riche informants whose personal profiles are presented in section 4.3.2b in Chapter Four. Since, these informants consume luxury brands intensively in their everyday lives, the primary aim of this fieldwork is to explore the interplay between their self-creation projects and the symbolic meanings of luxury brands in their everyday consumption. The interpretations unfold the complex relationship between the nouveaux riche self and the dynamic and multifaceted symbolism of luxury-brand consumption. Evidently the informants not only consume luxury brands to express the sumptuous image of the nouveaux riches, but also to create and sustain their sense of being (e.g., a sense of self-mastery and a sense of security) in the unruly world. To set the background for my interpretations, I first briefly review the interplay between social class, identity and consumption. Then, I discuss the phenomenon of the nouveaux riches in general and later I introduce the social setting of the nouveaux riches in Thailand. Finally, I present my interpretations of the fieldwork.

7.1 Social Class, Identity and Consumption

No matter how much we want to believe that social hierarchy relatively disappears, we cannot deny that there are still some kinds of social boundaries which classify people in society. Evidently, most societies are viewed as composed of a number of layers of people in a hierarchy. Family background, education, occupation, economic status, appearance, taste, manners and lifestyle – all are known as part of this complex hierarchy (Coleman and Rainwater 1979). Although the factors that indicate boundaries between layers may be ambiguous and vary across societies, a number of distinct social classes such as 'upper class', 'middle class' or 'working class' are commonly recognised. In some societies, the notions of these social classes may be more apparent than others, and people appear to associate themselves with a particular class as their principal identity. As social identity, social class then becomes one of the vital sites of distinction in behaviour and lifestyle in society (Argyle 1992; Bourdieu 1984). Nevertheless, the boundaries of social distinction are always contested and shifting (Featherstone 1991).

Throughout history and across societies, it has been recognised that consumption archetypes have functioned as a significant domain for the articulation, reaffirmation and reproduction of social class boundaries (e.g., Bourdieu 1984; Coleman and Rainwater 1979; Douglas and Isherwood 1996; Featherstone 1991; Holt 1997; McCracken 1988a; Simmel 1978; Veblen 1912). Previously, these social class boundaries, such as royalty, nobility or peasantry, were relatively stable and socially determined at birth. By tradition, these boundaries between classes in some societies were maintained through identifiable ways of life that rarely traversed. That is, these social class boundaries were protected and reproduced by

restricting practices. This is particularly so in the sphere of consumption, where there were sumptuary laws which regulated which class could consume which commodities and wear which types of clothing (Appadurai 1986), or there was some way of controlling possibilities for exchange (Douglas 1967). Hence, a particular consumption good or activity would hold a fairly stable symbolic meaning representing a particular class status.

However, as the project of modernity has instigated various revolutions (e.g., industrial, economic, political and social) in the society, the traditionally established relationship between social class, identity and consumption has gradually dissolved. The predetermined meanings of commodities that signify social status, especially aristocracy, are contested and recontextualised through consumption of such commodities by new emerging classes like the nouveaux riche or the leisure class (Simmel 1978; Veblen 1912). Social boundaries and class identities become increasingly obscure, variable and amalgamated as consumption symbolism of status commodities becomes unstable and manifold. Hence, social classes become fragmented, yet some may intersect with each other at times as they are renegotiated by social relations of power and exclusion. Accordingly, social standing becomes relational. Nevertheless, this does not mean that there are no more links between class, identity and consumption patterns. Social classes still continue to constitute consumption patterns and vice versa, but in increasingly subtle and elaborate ways (Featherstone 1991; Holt 1997).

Much literature suggests that in contemporary culture, social classes are differentiated, articulated and reproduced by consumption tastes (Bourdieu 1984; Douglas and Isherwood 1996; Featherstone 1991; Holt 1997). That is, our social

standing is demarcated not only by what we consume but also how and when we consume it. Thus, we must have legitimate 'tastes' which enable us to appreciate and classify products aptly, and thus to use them appropriately and "with natural ease in every situation" (Featherstone 1991, p.17). Essentially, we must be able to integrate our 'tastes' being employed in and/or acquired through the consumption of high cultural goods (e.g., art, literature, philosophy) with the consumption practices of other more mundane cultural goods (e.g., clothing, food, drink). Bourdieu (1984, p. 40) notes:

> Thus, nothing more rigorously distinguishes the different classes than the disposition objectively demanded by the legitimate consumption of legitimate works, the aptitude for taking a specifically aesthetic point of view on objects already constituted aesthetically – and therefore put forward for the admiration of those who have learned to recognize the signs of the admirable – and the even rarer capacity to constitute aesthetically objects that are ordinary or even 'common' (because they are appropriated, aesthetically or otherwise, by the 'common people') or to apply the principles of a 'pure' aesthetic in the most everyday choices of everyday life, in cooking, dress or decoration, for example.

In this sense, it is vital that we acquire symbolic resources and cultural capitals in order to cultivate particular tastes and lifestyles which help position ourselves within a particular "habitus" (Bourdieu 1984). This is particularly so for groups such as the new middle class, the new working class or the new rich who need an admission ticket to access and settle down comfortably in their new class boundaries. For this, they actively look for resources and capitals through lived and mediated experience[111]. Besides observing the lifestyles of other people in the aspired class or attending educational or training programmes, they can also acquire cultural capitals from "the new cultural intermediaries" – e.g., those in lifestyle and

fashion magazines, self-improvement books and advertising (Bourdieu 1984). As the newly arrived struggle to position themselves in particular habitus boundaries through newly acquired tastes and lifestyles, they may simultaneously strive to impose their own particular tastes as the legitimate tastes. Through these dynamic social processes, social class boundaries as well as consumption tastes, practices and meanings are always contested and shifting – that they are continually subjected to be produced, reproduced, negotiated, renegotiated, classified and reclassified (Featherstone 1991).

7.2 The Nouveau Riche

7.2.1 The Nouveau Riche and Conspicuous Consumption

The term 'nouveaux riches' generally refers to those who become wealthy through self-earned accomplishment (Costa and Belk 1990). Unlike the aristocracy or the old rich who are associated with the royal court or whose wealth is inherited in land preserved under a feudal system, the nouveaux riches' major source of wealth is commonly generated from their profession in trade. Although the nouveaux riches are not a modern occurrence[112], the phenomenon has become more apparent and socially contesting since the advent of industrialisation and modern capitalism. With their abundant economic capital, the nouveaux riches are often known by their attempts to buy social space in the aristocratic boundaries. That is, they usually engage in conspicuous consumption in an endeavour to imitate or even outshine the aristocratic lifestyles (Simmel 1978; Veblen 1912). Thus, their

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[111] See section 3.1 and 3.2 in Chapter Three.
[112] The new wealth from trade can be traced back to the ancient Roman era (Costa and Belk 1990).

conspicuous consumption practices are often dismissed as vulgar and tasteless by the established aristocracy and those who are rich in cultural capital like intellectuals (Featherstone 1991).

Indeed, economic capital alone is not enough for the nouveaux riches to position themselves in the aristocratic world. They also need to acquire cultural capital and the legitimate tastes held by the aristocracy (Bourdieu 1984). In other words, "the nouveaux riches must learn to be wealthy" (Costa and Belk 1990, p.85). Costa and Belk (1990, p.100) propose that the social category of the nouveaux riches may be viewed as a symbolic continuum between working class and wealthy, and the status of the nouveaux riches is a dynamic one, a funnel through which individuals learn to advance their way towards the achieved position of 'wealthy'. Nevertheless, some may choose to position themselves relatively in the middle of the continuum. In their studies of nouveau riche Americans, Costa and Belk (1990) find that their informants learn their new consumption culture mostly from mediated resources in the magazines like Town and Country or Travel and Leisure. Costa and Belk (1990, p. 131) argue, "It is apparent that such magazines provide lessons in how to decorate, dress, drink, eat, travel, relax, and in general, live the life that wealth and taste make possible."

7.2.2 The Nouveaux Riches in Thailand

Akin to their counterparts elsewhere, the nouveaux riches in Thailand amass their wealth through trades and businesses. Most of them are Chinese ethnics who were formerly suppressed by the controversial modernisation scheme[113] under the

[113] See section 5.2 in Chapter Five.

military dictatorship regime in the mid twentieth century (Sivaraksa 1991). In concert with the dramatic growth of capitalism in late 1960's, these nouveau riche Chinese emerge as a new economic power in Thai society (Samudavanija 1991). As the capitalist economy becomes the dominant factor in the kingdom, the old power elites and the aristocratic Thais are inevitably forced to yield power to the new wealth. However, this is not an unproblematic social process. Not only ascending the social hierarchy from the working class, but also being ethnic Chinese, the nouveaux riches in Thailand have to struggle tremendously to be accepted in aristocratic society. They are commonly looked down upon by the old aristocratic Thais as being unrefined in their mannerisms and utterances as well as unreserved and tasteless in their displays of wealth.

Like their American counterparts in Costa and Belk's (1990) studies, the nouveaux riches in Thailand must learn to achieve a socially acknowledged status of 'wealthy'. This entails a lifelong investment in appropriating cultural capital through socialisation with the aristocracy. Indeed, they learn about the legitimate tastes and lifestyles of the old wealth. Nevertheless, they also employ sumptuous consumption and practices to assert the superiority of their economic capital. Importantly, they ensure that their children are properly educated, ideally in the aristocratic schools. Additionally, many of the nouveaux riches' children engage in intermarrying with the children of the old aristocratic families, which has been a popular theme in several Thai novels and television melodramas. At the present time, the nouveaux riches in Thailand appear to be establishing idiosyncratic social boundaries in their own right—the habitus in which luxury-brand consumption looms large.

7.3 Interpretations of the Fieldwork

The interpretations illustrate the importance of the informants' everyday consumption of luxury brands in their symbolic project of the self. It provides some insights into the complex nature of their thoughts, feelings and behaviour, and highlights the use of symbolic meanings derived from luxury brands as valuable resources in the creation, maintenance and expression of the self. Superficially, we often assume that these young people exploit luxury-brand consumption to reaffirm and reproduce their nouveaux riche selves. In other words, they use luxury brands to reflect their glamorous self-images and sumptuous lifestyles. Undoubtedly, this conspicuous aspect of the informants' luxury-brand consumption is a legacy that their parents wish them to carry on.

However, after iteratively interpreting and reinterpreting the fieldwork texts, I argue that the symbolic meanings of luxury-brand consumption, which these informants incorporate into their self-creation projects, operate far beyond generating and/or illustrating nouveaux riche images. Evidently, the informants also employ their luxury-brand consumption symbolically as the rite of passage into adulthood, as emblems of liberation from authoritative or over-protective parents, as talismans to provide a sense of security in the postmodern world, as cultural capital in the age of globalisation and as sources of excitement and fantasy.

7.3.1 Luxury-brand Consumption: An Inheritance

Luxury-brand consumption is nothing unfamiliar to the informants since it is a significant part of their parents' lifestyles. These parents are evidently the first or semi-second nouveau riche generation in their families. Presumably, for the parents, luxury-brand consumption may serve as both a bulletin board to illustrate their economic achievement and an admission ticket to get access to the aristocratic realm. However, for the informants (i.e., their children), luxury-brand consumption appears to be a common way of life – a habitus in which they have grown up. They maintain that they do not consume luxury brands to boast their socio-economic superiority or to impress others with their lavish tastes.

> ***Ong:*** I don't understand why people think that we use these expensive brands to show off our wealth. We buy them because we like them. We feel good using them. They are a part of our lifestyles. We don't buy them to intimidate those who can't afford them. Honestly, I've never looked down on anyone who does not use these brands. I think it's unfair to blame us for what we buy or use.

Certainly, the informants' symbolic self-creation is a continuous process, in which their life history plays a significant role in making sense of who they are today and who they want to be in the future. These informants are nouveau riche offspring whose parents consume luxury brands intensively. Since offspring can be perceived as the parents' extended selves (Belk 1988), it is not uncommon that these parents endeavour to ensure that their children (i.e., the informants) sustain their nouveau riche images. Additionally, Feibleman (1975) suggests that parents by late middle age tend to live vicariously through their children. Hence, the parents continually encourage the informants to consume luxury brands. Unsurprisingly, the informants and their parents often go shopping for luxury brands together. It

seems that luxury-brand consumption is a form of cultural capital that the parents hand over to the informants so that they can reinforce their nouveau riche selves.

> ***Val:*** My parents want me to look good. They don't like me to put on sloppy clothes. Especially my dad; he once said his daughters must look beautiful. He always buys dresses for us. My mum also told us that if we didn't dress properly, it humiliates her. She always dresses well. I think I like to dress well too. ... When my parents visit us during the weekend, we always go shopping together. My mum likes to keep up with new things. My mum's just bought this Louis [Vitton] wallet for me last weekend.

Furthermore, it can also be interpreted that these parents want their children to follow their lavish lifestyles in order to keep the narratives of their nouveau riche selves going. Since the informants are expected to inherit their parents' legacies (i.e., businesses and family names), the parents may try to prepare a "generativity script" – a narrative that the parents generate, nurture, or develop as a positive legacy of the self for subsequent generations, so that they can attain a kind of symbolic immortality (McAdams 1988, 1997). Presumably, luxury-brand consumption and sumptuous lifestyles are a vital part of the parents' generativity scripts. Moreover, the parents also prepare the informants for the aristocratic world by sending them to a well-known aristocratic school. For example, although Val's parents run their businesses in the provinces, they send all their children to be educated at a celebrated all-girls school in Bangkok where the girls are trained to be 'aristocratic'. However, for some informants like Tam and Sue, their parents have chosen to send them to an international school instead, which is also fashionable among the wealthy.

Socialising in schools with other wealthy peers, the informants inevitably become a 'branded' kid. In their early years, they are into children's brands like

Hello Kitty, Kero or Forever Friends. Unquestionably, whatever their peers have, they must have too; otherwise they may feel left out at school and unloved by their parents (Isaacs 1935). Indeed, the informants' parents seem to understand this issue so well that they always provide things that can maintain their children's status among peers. Furthermore, since some of the informants' parents are so busy with their businesses that they do not have time for their children, they seem to compensate by indulging the children with money to spend on expensive things.

> ***Nook:*** When I was young. I was a big fan of Hello Kitty. I had the whole set of Hello Kitty stationery: a pencil box, pencils, notepads and so on. I had a Hello Kitty backpack too. In fact, almost everyone in my class had Hello Kitty. Later, we changed to Kero.

> ***Ong:*** When I was young, there was a time when my parents were very busy with their work. They didn't even have time to take care of our spending. They let somebody else take care of the matter and we could ask for as much money as we liked. Come to think of it, I have to admit that I was stupid in throwing money away. I'm getting better now; however, I still can't help buying those expensive brands. But I think I'm more rational in spending money now.

Although the informants seem to position themselves comfortably in the relatively 'wealthy' end of the nouveau riche continuum, they are often reminded by their parents that their superlative social space is in the business domain. The informants are commonly discouraged from pursuing other professions, especially the ones dominated by the old aristocrats.

> ***Au:*** Personally, I want to study foreign relations in the Faculty of Political Science. I want to work for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Actually, I've got a place in the department already. But my father wants me to study business. He always reminds us that our family background is in business. He tells me that it will be difficult for me to become a diplomat since we do not have a noble background. We are also Chinese ethnic. He asserts that I will have a much better opportunity in the business world. I think he's right.

7.3.2 The Self-project and Symbolic Resources

One life event has led to another event and those events are interlaced into a coherent sequence of the informants' narrative identities (Ricoeur 1984). The symbolic meanings they have drawn and created throughout their childhood lives contribute to the development of today's nouveau riche selves. Once they have entered transition to adulthood, they have begun to consume fashionable teenage brands like Sisley or Benetton and more sophisticated adult brands like Chanel Louis Vitton, Prada or Versace.

> ***Tam:*** I know I have this bad habit. I've been hooked on expensive brands. This is because I went to school in Singapore. Singapore, like Hong Kong, is really a consumer society. Having studied there for a few years, I've become like other Singaporean kids. Up until now I haven't been able to break this habit. The more grown up I am, the more expensive the stuff I buy.

> ***Pum:*** I first bought a Louis [Vitton] handbag when I was in the last year of high school. My friends bought them, so I asked my mum to buy one for me too. Now I have several bags – Louis [Vitton], Celine, Benetton, Moschino, Gucci, Versace and Prada. I like them all. They are suitable for different occasions. But my favourite one now is Prada. It's suitable for everyday use. The material is easy to take care of. I don't have to be concerned much about where to put it. ... I don't know why I like these brands. But I feel good using them.

Indeed, luxury-brand consumption is central to the informants' symbolic project of the self. The evident examples can be observed from their collage of the self, where luxury brands dominate the self-defining space (see Picture 7.1 and 7.2). Particularly in Pum's collage (Picture 7.1), the centred image with the statement 'I want to possess' appears to reflect a sense of control that she wants to have over those luxury brands so that they become a part of her extended self[114] (Belk 1988; Sartre 1998).

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[114] See section 2.3.2 in Chapter Two.



Picture 7.1: Pum's Collage of the Self



Picture 7.2: Sue's Collage of the Self

From the interviews, all informants also share the same 'I feel good using them' feeling towards luxury brands. Presumably, those brands must have provided the informants with symbolic resources to achieve some sort of "an ego-ideal which commands the respect of others and inspires self-love" (Gabriel and Lang 1995, p. 98).

7.3.2a Mediated Experience

The fieldwork supports the theory that mediated experiences through advertising and fashion magazines are considerable resources for the informants' symbolic self-creation. They actively look for new 'in' models and brands from advertisements in foreign fashion magazines in order to obtain the latest information about those brands. Knowing such information symbolises their leadership in the world of fashion. This knowledge can also enable them to assert their tastes as legitimate tastes among their nouveau riche peers. Obviously, knowledge of luxury brands and fashion becomes a symbolic resource to advance their self-project.

> ***Sue:*** I love to read Elle. I like to keep up with what's new in the market. Fashion magazines are always a good source to learn about trends in the market. There will be advertisements of new models or new brands in every issue. So, we will know what's in or what's out. I feel stupid and *cheoy*[115] if I don't know it.

> ***Tam:*** I regularly read foreign magazines. I feel so thrilled to see an advertisement of this new model *[Prada bag]* coming out. I'd like to have it before it becomes popular in Thailand.

[115] Out of date.

In fact, the informants do not derive only brand knowledge from advertising. Advertisements also give them ideas about their self-concepts. Nook, who is majoring in marketing and advertising, describes the advertisements she puts in her collage of the self as if they are a script she is writing for her self-project (see Picture 7.3). Apparently, Nook employs a copy-writing format she is learning in her advertising class to compose her narrative self.



Picture 7.3: Nook's Collage of the Self

***Nook*:** I like this Kenneth Cole advertisement. When I saw it, I thought, "Yes". This light blue, cloth shoe is unconventional. It frees itself from those conventional colours of black, brown or white shoes. I feel that this shoe portrays my liberation from formality. ... This is a Cooler Club advertisement. I don't drink but I like the advertising concept. It's so simple but cool. Like this CK Be advertisement, it's very simple but again it looks really cool and classy. I think if we can stand out on the basis of simplicity, it shows that we're really cool. ... When I dress up, I want to wear something simple but chic.

Although some literature (e.g., Fazio and Zanna 1978; Smith and Swinyard 1988) suggests that attitudes formed through lived experience are stronger, more accessible, held more confidently, and are more predictive of behaviour than those derived from mediated experience through advertising, this fieldwork shows that in postmodernity mediated experience like advertising is possibly as significant as lived experience in the symbolic project of the self. Evidently advertising provides symbolic meanings that the informants later rework and realise in the field of their lived experiences. The mediated ideals in advertising become the interpretive tools through which the informants negotiate their nouveau riche selves.

> ***Pum:*** I like that U-Billy Jewellery advertisement on TV. I'd like to be like that woman in the advertisement ...working in a beautiful office where she can look outside. I want to work in a glass building where we can see outside. It doesn't look stuffy. I like the way she dresses too...that's how I want to dress when I work. I also like her personality ...a respectable workingwoman with a playful fringe.

> ***Tam:*** Yes, advertising gives us ideas of what is 'in' or what will be 'in'...hairstyles, outfits, colours, etc. I usually look at how those models in advertising or magazines dress and combine it with how other people on the streets dress in order to create my own style.

> ***Sue:*** I saw the advertisement of this Gucci handbag in Elle. I figured that it was for me, but I didn't buy it right away. Well, it was not available in Thailand at that time. Later I saw it again in Hong Kong and it reminded me of how I felt when I first saw it in the advertisement. I bought it without a second thought. I really love it. I'm so proud to own it.

Indeed, the relationship between mediated experience and lived experience is dialectical. The symbolic meanings appropriated through mediated experience become more powerful when the informants apply them in their realms of lived experience, and vice versa.

7.3.2b Lived Experience

Although the interpretations illustrate the importance of mediated ideals obtained from advertising in the informants' self-creation projects, it is noticeable that the more the informants are exposed to the direct experience of the world of luxury brands, the less enthusiastic they appear to look for mediated resources. Since some informants have more opportunities to travel abroad and visit retailers of various luxury brands, as well as to observe how young people in those countries dress, they tend to be less active in searching for new resources in advertising or fashion magazines.

> ***Ong:*** Yes, I enjoy looking at advertisements in the magazines. However, I learn about new popular models or brands from travelling abroad. Our family often go abroad ...Europe, America, Hong Kong, especially America and Hong Kong. We have a house in America, but it's a bit too far. So, we only go there once or twice a year. We often go shopping in Hong Kong though. It's near. We can go there just for the weekend. Most importantly, it's a place to find the latest fashion.

> ***Tam:*** We are usually behind Japan and Hong Kong a few years. When I go to Japan or Hong Kong, I always observe what is chic there. Like this Chanel handbag, it's just started to become popular here. It's been popular much earlier among teenagers in Japan.

Indeed, going shopping is an important domain of lived experience from which the informants obtain symbolic resources to continue their nouveau riche selves. It is also a vital opportunity for the whole family to reinforce their family identities through the collective ritual of luxury-brand shopping. Seemingly, "relationships are formed and maintained more and more in and by consumption" (Ger and Belk 1996, p. 275). Besides obtaining resources through the lived shopping experience, the informants also exchange their resources in the fields of interactions with their nouveau riche peers.

7.3.3 Luxury Brands: the Self-Social Symbolism

Throughout the continuous process of self-creation, the informants always explore their feelings, thoughts and experiences towards luxury-brand consumption in order to create, negotiate and express their nouveau riche selves. To create a sense of self is not only to distinguish the individual from the masses but perhaps also to lose a sense of difference and become like the others. Thus, being a part of the group, the informants often negotiate and co-create the self-social symbolism of their common nouveau riche self-projects. However, as the informants are studying in a relatively left-wing university where their luxury-brand consumption practices may offend other fellow students (and lecturers), they simultaneously need to balance their self-social symbolism with others outside their nouveau riche group as well.

7.3.3a Among the Nouveau Riche Peers

Apart from their parents, the informants are immensely influenced by their nouveau riche peers. Coming from the nouveau riche families, the informants appear to embrace common self-projects. Undoubtedly, their luxury-brand consumption is the common bond which reinforces their individual and group identities. The fieldwork clearly shows that the informants' consumption of luxury brands becomes more symbolically meaningful when it is approved of by each other. The interpretations illuminate the process of the *internal-external dialectic of identification* (Jenkins 1996) between self-symbolism and social-symbolism in the informants' symbolic project of the self.

Pum: I have to admit that I bought my Louis *[Vitton]* handbag because other people in our group have got one. Whenever we buy anything new, we always show it to the group. We talk about it. And of course, within a month or so, almost everyone has one.

Al: I'm not good at choosing things. I just follow my friends' opinions. Sometimes I even ask my friends to buy stuff for me. I've just asked Sue to buy a neck-tie from Hong Kong for me. She has good taste. I trust her choice.

Tam: We *[the group]* have similar tastes. We love dressing up. We regularly talk about what's 'in' and what's 'out'. We may have different styles though, but we all are quite glamorous in our own way. That's why we are friends. Anyway, even though I don't think my friends would judge my style, I'm still quite sensitive about how I dress. I sometimes ask my friends for their advice. Well, I don't want to be out of place.

***Au*:** I've improved a lot. When I was a fresher, I dressed plainly... quite out of date. My friends called me "A-ma."[116] They still do. Well, they didn't mean to look down on me. They just teased me lovingly. Most of my friends are heavily into brands. You may reckon that they're chic. I've learned how to dress from friends. I've observed how they dress and see what would fit me. I go shopping with them quite often. I don't really shop myself, but it's fun to watch them shop...see how they choose things. I like to listen to their discussions about fashion as well. They always suggest, "This is good...this is gorgeous." Now I read fashion magazines more, so I can participate in the discussion.

Val: With my high school friends, I can wear whatever I feel like. We dress quite unconventionally...sometimes crazily. For instance, the other day we dressed like old aunties...carrying a basket, wearing a hat and a knitted blouse. But with my friends here, I'm a bit cautious. I feel that there're eyes judging how I dress. If I don't feel confident *[in a particular dress]*, I won't wear it.

Nook: Of course, my friends have some influence on my buying decisions. Sometimes I want to buy something because I think it's beautiful. I like it. But if my friends think it doesn't look good, I may not feel confident enough to buy it. If we want to look good, we should listen to our friends' opinions, shouldn't we? If my friends say "okay...pass", I believe them. But if they think it's unacceptable, I reckon that " hey, may be I didn't look at the thing carefully." So I tend not to buy it. ... However, if my friends didn't like a thing that I've already bought, I would hesitate to use it at first, and then I would try to use it again. Well, I didn't want to throw it away. I've spent money on it already. If my friends don't say anything, I would use it. If they still made comments, I wouldn't use it again.

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[116] A Chinese word for "grandma".

> ***Oui:*** Yes, I've just bought these Underground shoes because of friends. We went shopping at Ma Boonkrong the other day. My friends encouraged me to buy them. They suggested that this brand is cool. It's an alternative to Dr. Marten. I like blue, so I took the blue ones. At first my friends kind of disagreed on the colour. But I went for it anyway. Now my friends reckon that it's cool. They say it's me.

Indeed, the informants constantly validate the symbolic meanings from both mediated and lived experiences through the process of *discursive elaboration* (Thompson 1990) and behavioural significations in their group interactions. In this way, they are able to balance the self-social symbolism within the group. Interestingly, in this information technology age, some informants not only discuss their views and experiences towards luxury brands with their friends in the group, but also with 'cyber-friends' via the Internet chat room.

> ***Val:*** I'm now hooked on the Internet. I discuss things with other teenagers around the world, mostly Thai though. Sometimes we talk about new products or new 'in' brands. It's good to know what's going on in Europe or America. We share our views such as "why does ...*[a particular brand]* really suck these days?" or "Try this, it's cool."

7.3.3b Balancing the Nouveaux Riche Self with Other Fellow Students

As mentioned earlier in section 7.3.1, the informants wish to avoid intimidating their university colleagues with their nouveau riche lifestyles, and so they appear to dress down in the university (see Picture 7.4 and 7.5). From this, they can lessen the tension between the group's luxury-brand consumption practices and their colleagues' attitudes towards their nouveau riche lifestyles. This dressing down strategy seems to allow them to balance their self-projects in the social environment where they hold a relatively superior socio-economic status. Nevertheless, we can also view this strategy from another perspective; it is a subtle way of creating their social boundaries. Indeed, it is only people in the same social

space who can recognise that the sandals Ong wears in Picture 7.4 are Versace, or the handbag Sue carries in Picture 7.5 is Gucci. Through this strategy, they can apparently generate high admission barriers and effective techniques of exclusion. That is, they are not only able to exclude those who do not consume luxury brands but also those who are a novice in the sphere of luxury-brand consumption.



Picture 7.4: Ong



Picture 7.5: Sue

7.3.4 The Dynamic of Luxury Brands

The symbolic meanings of luxury-brand consumption are dynamic. The interpretations suggest that the informants do not consume those brands just to create and express the glamorous image of their nouveau riche selves, but also use them for various meanings. Symbolically, the informants employ luxury brands as the rite of passage into adulthood, as emblems of liberation from authoritative or over-protective parents, as talismans to provide security for them in the unruly world of grown-ups, as cultural capital in the age of globalisation, and as sources of excitement and fantasy.

7.3.4a Luxury Brands as the Rite of Passage into Adulthood

The interpretations suggest that the informants consume luxury brands symbolically to facilitate the process of self-transition to adulthood. To them, luxury-brand consumption not only symbolises a continuing family legacy but also the lifestyle of a nouveau riche adult. Indeed, such consumption is used as an agent of transformation yet also represents continuity in their self-project (Belk 1988; McCracken 1988a). Endeavouring to achieve a sense of adulthood, they actively search for a social idea of what it means to be an adult and what kind of adult they would like to become. For now, their primary symbolic project of the self is to create the grown-up self. From a sociological perspective, adulthood is not only biologically but also socially constructed. There is a common conception concerning the ingredients that constitute adult status, formed by the members of a culture. Evidently, the interpretations suggest that the informants view luxury brands as an essential element that symbolises adulthood. Thus, acquiring a certain set of luxury brands makes the informants feel that they have transited into the grown-up world. This symbolic consumption becomes the informants' instrument to manipulate their possibilities (Belk 1988) and the core element in the rite of passage to adulthood (Gabriel and Lang 1995).

> ***Val:*** We're university students now. It's ridiculous to keep on using a kiddy rucksack. I want to be recognised as an adult, not a kid. Using these brands makes me feel like a real adult. They look more sophisticated.

> ***Nook:*** We're not kids any more. We can take care of expensive things. My mum bought me this handbag *[Louis Vitton]* because she knew that I was grown up enough to take care of it.

For these informants, being allowed by parents to purchase and use luxury brands makes them feel that their parents acknowledge their grown-up selves. It symbolises the trust that their parents have in them as responsible adults. From the interpretations, luxury brands not only symbolise adulthood but also the image of an adult the informants want to become. They are highly self-conscious in making brand choices. Gabriel and Lang (1995, p.89) remark, "By early adolescence, virtually every choice becomes tainted by image-consciousness."

> ***Pum:*** I bought this handbag *[Celine]* when I was about to go to university. I just thought, would I be able to make new friends, if I didn't have anything *[luxury brands]*? At that time, I perceived that there were two main kinds of students in the university – the nerds and the chic. I knew that I couldn't mingle with those nerds. I was not one of them. So, another option was to join the chic bunch. But, how could I mingle with them if I didn't have what they had. I thought that my family could afford it... so I asked my mum to buy this handbag for me. However, once I got in to this university, I didn't really use this Celine handbag. It looked too formal and posh. It didn't fit well with people here. So, I bought this Versace rucksack...it looked more casual.

Indeed, in such a transition the informants visualise their ideal self according to the imagined possibilities of the self. Consequently, they consume different sorts of brands to try out these possibilities. Markus and Nurius (1986, p. 954) note, "an individual is free to create any variety of possible selves, yet the pool of possible selves derives from the categories made salient by the individual's particular sociocultural and historical context and from the models, images, and symbols provided by the media and by the individual's immediate social experiences." The concept of possible selves as components of the self-concept suggests that the self can be multifaceted. Also, the concept allows us to account for both spatial (situational) and temporal malleability of the self and its continuity and stability (Markus and Nurius 1986). Clearly, the interpretations support the theory that the

informants use consumption, especially on clothes and accessories, to portray the multifacets of the self.

> ***Ong:*** Yes, if I want to look respectable, for example, if I'm giving a presentation in class, I'll put on trousers and a white shirt. When I go clubbing, I'll wear something else... jeans maybe. If I want to look cool, second-hand Levi's and an Armani shirt will do.

> ***Sue:*** No, I don't stick to one particular style. It depends on how I feel on the day. Sometimes I get up and feel like being a sexy woman. I'll put on make-up and a black Chanel dress. Sometimes I feel like being a Rave teenager; I'll put on DKNY T-shirt and Tommy jeans. I don't know. It depends on where and with whom I'll be too. It's fun that we can be anything we want to.

> ***Tam:*** Of course, we feel different when we wear different clothes, don't we?

Willis (1990, p. 89) comments, "Clothes can make people feel differently in different contexts. For some young people, and especially young women, the clothes they wear on any particular day will influence the way they talk, behave and present themselves." Creating and expressing gender identity is a vital part in the process of constructing the informants' grown-up selves. Consumption of luxury brands becomes a crucial medium for the symbolic creativity that the female informants pursue to express their femininity. They feel that these sumptuous designer brands help to enhance their feminine appearance.

> ***Val:*** I tend to go for dresses these days. No more unisex outfits. I want to look more feminine. I like Joose dresses. They look simple, but neatly cut. I bought designer clothes not because of their brands, but because of the designs, the materials and the cuts. You can see the difference. It's worth buying.

> ***Tam:*** When I buy my clothes, shoes or handbags, I choose them carefully. I'm pretty concerned about how I look. We women don't want to look sloppy, do we?

Similarly, the male informants also reckon that designer brands can enhance their masculine charisma. They believe that these famous brands help improve their personality and give them confidence.

> ***Al:*** I'm a man. I want to look credible. These things *[e. g., clothes, shoes, watch]* help create a good personality...a leadership look maybe. Dressing up is not only for women. It's not that we want to look sexy. We just want to look good.

As some informants are finishing their university education, they also use luxury brands to prepare themselves for the transition to the business world. They believe that luxury brands help construct the 'professional-look' self.

> ***Nook:*** We should prepare ourselves. We can't transform from sloppy students into working women in one day. How can we walk with confidence if we never wear them *[high heel shoes]*? A workingwoman should look self-confident, eh?

> ***Al:*** I want to be an investment banker. I have to look neat and mature. Neckties are very important. I like Gucci. It looks more subdued... more professional. A Versace tie is too much for me – its design is a bit over the top.

> ***Au:*** I have a job interview next week. I think this suit will make me look professional. My mum helped me choose this one. She's also a workingwoman.

Solomon and Anand (1985, p. 315) affirm that, "the female business suit is approached as a modern manifestation of a timeless occurrence: A ritual artefact integral to a contemporary rite de passage."

7.3.4b Luxury Brands as Emblems of Liberation

All informants claim that they come from loving and warm families. Even though the interpretations suggest that most of their parents are either authoritative or over-protective, the informants affirm that they are close to their parents. The

informants feel that their parents have given them the best any parents can. Like many Thai, to re-pay and express gratitude to their parents, they have tried to follow the Thai values of being good children. Simply put, they feel obliged to fulfil their parents' needs and to avoid upsetting them. In such efforts, they seem to be trapped in their parents' realms – they have not yet been adults in their own right. Although all informants are adults in the eyes of law[117], they are still 'babies' in the eyes of their parents. They still need to ask their parents for permissions to do things. The informants always listen to their parents' opinions and are inevitably obedient to them. They try their best to live up to their parents' expectations.

> ***Val:*** I'm the first child in the family. I know that I'm my parents' favourite. I don't like the idea though. Especially my father, I feel that he loves me more than my sisters. Maybe because I always live up to his expectations. He's so proud of me. He loves to talk about me with relatives and friends. He hopes that I will inherit our family businesses after I graduate. I want to do a master's degree and possibly work in an advertising agency though. ... Sometimes I still act like their little daughter. I love to cuddle my mum. But I want my parents to see me as a person who can be responsible for myself, a trustworthy person. My parents are quite concerned about us *[Val and her sisters]*; they would like us to be home before dusk. Every evening once I get back home, I have to call them to let them know that I've got home safely *[Val's parents live in another province where their main businesses are based.]*. If I haven't called them yet, they will be very worried and frustrated. They won't have dinner until I call them. So, usually I try to be home by half past six. ... My parents are very strict – they don't want me to stay the night anywhere else. I can't stay the night at my friends' houses. I can't go anywhere alone with my male friends. But if I want to go with only female friends, they won't allow me either because they think it's too dangerous for us.

> ***Nook:*** My parents are very protective of me. My mum still drives me to university and picks me up in the evening everyday. My mum bought me this mobile phone so that she could reach me. They hardly let me go anywhere by myself. For example, I wanted to go to a *[English]* summer course abroad. My dad didn't let me go. I wanted to go to the 'rub nong.'[118] Again, my dad didn't let me go.

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[117] All informants are over twenty years old. Legally, Thai citizens are eligible to vote if they are over eighteen years old.

[118] The party organised to welcome the fresher, usually being held in a resort/camping place outside Bangkok.

Ong: We have a warm family. I'm close to my parents. We always do things together. ... No, no, I'm still their son, not their friend. I still need to be obedient to them. ... I don't like studying business, but my parents want me to so. I can do it, but I don't enjoy it much. I'm thinking of taking a course in interior design after I finish this degree. I haven't told my parents yet. I don't want to upset them. I think I'll wait until I graduate, then I'll tell them. Well, at least I will get the degree that they want me to have.

Tam: Our family is very warm. We are intimate, deeply loving and caring for each other. We always do things together. ... Yes, there have been a few incidences when my parents do something that upset me. Once my mum read my letters. ... No, I wasn't angry with her because I thought it wasn't appropriate *[to be angry at parents]*. I've never had any secrets from my mum any way. We have to understand that our parents are concerned about us and just curious about what's in the letters. They didn't mean to read them. I asked my mum not to read my letters and told her that I'd tell her about the contents in the letters if she wanted to know.

Nevertheless, although the informants' parents are strict with the informants in many aspects, they are relaxed with how their children spend money. The informants are allowed to buy what they like. Thus, it seems that choosing the brands or the models is one of the few decisions that the informants can exercise more freely. It is also suggested that luxury brands can be used to form an autonomous adult ego, since their meanings can be used to forge a sense of affiliation with other social groups outside their own families; thus, they mark a sense of distance from the parents' realms (Thompson and Haytko 1997). Symbolically, the informants' luxury-brand consumption symbolises an emblem of liberation from their parents.

However, for the informants' parents, to allow their children to buy luxury brands of their own choice can be perceived as a strategy to control them. Ironically, instead of liberating themselves from their parents' realms, these informants seem to become more and more financially dependent on the parents. Hence, this will make the informants feel more obliged to comply with the parents'

demands and expectations. In other words, the informants' habitual luxury-brand consumption offers their parents a potential means to control their behaviour.

7.3.4c Luxury Brands as Talismans

In their transition to adulthood, the informants symbolically use luxury brands as talismans to provide security for themselves in the unruly world of grown-ups. Gergen (1991, p. 15) describes the unruly world under postmodernity as "a world in which we no longer experience a secure sense of self, and in which doubt is increasingly placed on the very assumption of a bounded identity with palpable attributes." Challenged by the fragmented and uncertain nature of postmodernity, the informants try to pursue a sense of security in their lives, especially when they are in the world outside their homes. Mulder (1996) comments that, to the Thai, the reliable and trustworthy world is centred on their mothers; thus, the further away they are from the mothers, the less secure they feel. Undoubtedly, the Thais often acquire different kinds of talismans – amulets such as images of Buddha, to protect them in the untrustworthy world. Symbolically, luxury brands are the present day talismans to safeguard the informants in the social interactions outside homes. They believe that these celebrated brands can help them avoid unwise buying decisions, hence social embarrassment. Presumably, luxury brands offer consistency in an ever-changing world and this reassurance is a vital element in their additional meanings (Feldwick 1991).

Pum: These are famous brands. They are widely recognised for their qualities and designs. They give us peace of mind. I feel confident in using them. It's a sure thing.

Al: We usually drink Black *[Johnny Walker Black Label].* Possibly, because everybody drinks it. ...No, I've never drunk Red *[Johnny Walker Red Label].* I don't know why. I started *[my drinking]* with Black and stick to it. Red is something I never think of drinking. ... When we're broke, we go for Spay *[Spay Royal]*, not Red. If we can't afford Black, we wouldn't want to remind ourselves *[by going for Red]*, eh? Spay is said to be a good alternative. It seems to be an 'in' cool brand.

Sue: I don't want to look *cheoy*[119]. I want to be chic. I'll never go wrong with these brands.

To obtain a sense of security in the unruly world of the grown-ups, the informants need to feel a firm sense of social acceptance. "The Thai person is socially defined by, and subject to, the acceptance of others. As a consequence, he must find and cultivate his resources in the social world, the commonly accepted validation of the person being defined in terms of his capacity to present himself (Mulder 1996, p. 111). Obviously, the informants believe that these luxury brands are talismans that can magically bring them a sense of affiliation with other sophisticated adults with minimal effort and time. Indeed, participation in such mutual consumption and lifestyle symbolises a form of relatedness in the society (Elliott 1997; Thompson and Haytko 1997).

[119] Out of date

7.3.4d Luxury Brands as Cultural Capital

Evidently, the informants consume luxury brands to illustrate not only their economic wealth but also their sophisticated tastes. The informants' knowledge of luxury brands becomes symbolic resource (Elliott 1994) to be accumulated into the cultural capital employed to create distinction in society (Bourdieu 1994). As a hierarchical society, Thailand is a place where most social relationships are characterised by relative superiority versus inferiority (Mulder 1996). Such cultural capital promises to locate the informants in a desirably superior social status. To maintain their status quo, it is essential for the informants to keep up to date with the world of luxury brands. Apart from basic information such as the latest models or brands in the market, the informants also acquire sophisticated knowledge such as a brand history, its designers and customers or the brand's special materials. They even claim that they are able to detect counterfeits.

> ***Val:*** Of course, I can spot the fake ones. People may think that there's no difference between the bogus and the real. Yes, they may look similar, but if you know the product well enough, you'll be able to tell. There're some people in my class who use fake Versace *[rucksacks]*. I can spot them right away.

> ***Nook:*** Do you know that this Prada rucksack is expensive because of its special material? It's the same material they use to make an astronaut's outfit. It isn't flammable.

Additionally, the informants' luxury-brand consumption also characterises their cultural capital in the age of globalisation. To become globally refined citizens, the informants judge that they need to acquire certain knowledge of global culture. To them, global culture means Western culture, more specifically the consumer culture of the West. Without a doubt, they only know the material aspects of Western culture via media and shopping centres. In this capitalist world,

it is essential for the informants to learn about world-class brands; never mind Socrates, Shakespeare or Mozart. Knowledge and use of those renowned brands helps them achieve a sense of global belonging. Interestingly, the informants also hold that their luxury-brand consumption can elevate the image of Thai people as a whole.

> ***Sue:*** I think it is essential that we dress well, especially when we travel abroad. If we wear sloppy clothes, those foreigners will not only look down on us, but on all Thai people. I wear these brands because I want them to realise that we, the Thai, also have good taste. We are not savages; we are as civilised as they are.

The above statements clearly reflect Sivaraksa's criticism (1991, p. 46) regarding 'the crisis of Siamese identity':

> We just grope and strive to be like a developed country. We try to be one of the Newly Industrialised Countries (NIC), to look East [Japan] as we used to look West, as if these countries were so perfect or ideal, a hallucination of the elites who are mostly half-educated or only educated in the material aspects of the West without understanding our own spiritual and cultural identity.

Obviously, in the age of globalisation, the nouveau riche Thais appear to strive harder to become like their western counterparts. Paradoxically, as they believe that their luxury-brand consumption helps enhance the image of Thai people in the global village, they are criticised by many Thais, largely among intellectuals, as a source of national embarrassment, since such behaviour is often looked down upon by foreigners.

7.3.4e Luxury Brands as Sources of Excitement and Fantasy

Since most informants feel bound to behave in accordance with their parents' expectations, they try to avoid doing anything inappropriate or 'naughty'. The extravagance of luxury-brand consumption seems to become their primary source of excitement and fantasy. It is like playing a challenging game: who is the first one to know of the latest popular model or brand? When and where is it available? Who is the first one to get it?

> ***Val:*** I feel thrilled to find a rare model or colour. I don't like to shop in the same places as my friends. I prefer to shop in a little-known store. I don't like to tell my friends where I buy things either. ... I'm always among the first few people to use something *[a particular brand or model]*. When everyone in the group uses it, I switch to something else.

> ***Ong:*** I love shopping; it makes me feel good. Recently we *[Ong's family]* went to Hong Kong. It was a fun shopping trip. We shopped...shopped...shopped from one store to another.

> ***Tam:*** I love Prada. It's 'my' brand at the moment. I knew about the brand before it became popular in Thailand. I'm always excited when a new Prada model comes out. I'm looking forward to its new gimmick. Unlike Louis *[Vitton]*, Prada doesn't stick to the same material; it's more dynamic and exciting.

> ***Nook:*** I like this pair of shoes. I like the design. It doesn't cover the entire foot. I feel sexy when I put them on.

Indeed, with their design, luxury brands are also sources of romantic fantasy. Although the informants consume common luxury brands to relate themselves to their nouveau riche friends, they also endeavour to create their own sense of differentiation. It is exciting for them to mix various brands or styles in order to create new meanings to achieve their personalised style. Indeed, a mixture of brands is a decommodification strategy that allows the informants to experience a

sense of uniqueness and self-guidance in their personalised style (Thompson and Haytko 1997).

> ***Sue:*** I don't like to wear a particular brand from head to toes. Okay, we all are brand crazy, but I always try to differentiate myself. For example, I may use this 'Khun Nai'[120] Gucci handbag with second-hand Levi's to create my own style.

Interestingly, towards the end of the fieldwork, some informants begin to experiment with their dressing styles by combining luxury brands with other low-priced clothing bought from the flea market. This symbolic creativity seems to make them achieve a sense of 'ultimate fashion' at play.

7.4 Chapter Summary

The interpretation illustrates that the lived symbolism of luxury-brand consumption among these informants is more dynamic than just being a symbolic resource for the creation of the glamorous selves. Indeed, luxury-brand consumption is a legacy of the nouveau riche narratives that their parents wish them to carry on. However, perhaps more importantly, the symbolic meanings of luxury-brand consumption, which the informants incorporate into their self-projects, are recontextualised as the rite of passage into adulthood, as emblems of liberation from authoritative or over-protective parents, as talismans to provide security for them in the unruly world of grown-ups, as cultural capital in the age of globalisation and as sources of excitement and fantasy.

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[120] A female boss or a boss's wife. When referred to as style, it is usually associated with 'formal', 'sophisticated', and 'prestigious'.

Chapter Eight

The Religious Self

> Religion is pervasive; it permeates life, whether one is a believer or a nonbeliever. Because religion is an economic force, a political force and social force, it directly or indirectly affects every consumer.
>
> Hirschman 1982, p. 228

In this chapter, I explore how a group of the Dhammakaya Buddhist informants, whose personal profiles are presented in section 4.3.2c in Chapter Four, negotiate their Buddhist beliefs and their endeavours to create a sense of identity in their everyday lives. The interpretations unfold the paradoxical relationship between the informants' Dhammakaya Buddhist selves and their consumption practices. Regardless of Buddhism's advocacy of the *anatta*[121] (not-self) doctrine, these informants still aspire to create the self. That is, instead of trying to detach themselves from the notion of selfhood, these informants paradoxically adhere to a desire to become what they believe a good Buddhist is. To do this, they strive to abstain from some common consumption practices like going to a cinema or eating dinner; and simultaneously they seek to consume particular products as well as to exercise particular rituals that symbolise their Dhammakaya Buddhist selves.

Following Hirschman (1982), I believe that as one of the fundamental social elements, religion certainly links us through a variety of connections to a way of life

[121] Buddhism advocates that the individual existence, as well as the whole world, is in reality nothing but a process of ever-changing physical and psychical phenomena. There is no real existence in the self. All existence is transient and conditional. Thus, endeavouring to create the self will propel us into a vicious circle of never-ending desire.

that influences not only what we consume but why and how we consume. This also includes the idea of consumption resistance[122] (e.g., abstaining from alcoholic drinks). To set out a background for my interpretations in this chapter, I first review the relationship between religious identity and consumption. Then I present a brief background of the Dhammakaya Buddhist sect to which the informants belong. Although at present there is much criticism of the Dhammakaya in Thailand, I do not discuss my viewpoint of the controversial criticism here in this thesis; rather I focus only on how the Dhammakaya informants view themselves as Buddhists and to what extent they exercise their everyday consumption to create their Buddhist selves, which I later discuss in my interpretations section.

8.1 Religious Identity and Consumption

Religion is a vital social identity; it has been universally acknowledged as a central component of a common system of beliefs and values which binds people together into a community (Turner 1991). To achieve this, it usually involves several collective ritualistic practices. Geertz (1968, quoted in Rook 1984, p. 280) elucidates:

> ...it is in ritual – i.e., behavior – that somehow this conviction is generated that religious conceptions are veridical and that religious directives are sound. It is in some sort of ceremonial form – even if that form be hardly more than the recitation of a myth, the consultation of an oracle or the decoration of a grave – that the moods and motivations which sacred symbols induce in melt ...meet and reinforce one another.

[122] See section 2.3.3 in Chapter Two.

Accordingly, through these common ritualistic practices, "religion creates powerful symbols of social life and human existence which generate a powerful experience of social membership" (Turner 1991, p. xi). Indeed, particular ritualistic practices are necessary to sustain the religious meanings in society. However, in order to concretise the meanings, rituals require material objects, as Douglas and Isherwood (1978, p. 65) argue:

> More effective rituals use material things, and the more costly the ritual trappings, the stronger we can assume the intention to fix the meanings to be. Goods, in this perspective, are ritual adjuncts.

Thus, to perform a religious ritual, we always engage in consumption of the ritual-adjunct products. For example, in Thailand Buddhist rituals, even when being conducted at home, usually entail a Buddha image and the use of lotuses, candles and incense. Since 95% of the Thai population are Buddhists, it is unsurprising that such Buddhist ritual-adjunct products are available in supermarkets and department stores. In fact, in Bangkok there is one particular area where most retailers are in the Buddhist ritual-adjunct product business, selling products from Buddha images and altar kind of furniture to ceremonial candles and ordaining materials.

Besides the spiritual aspect, religion also permeates the secular practices in our everyday life. Boundaries between religion and secular life become fused as they intersect. In this way, "religious affiliation may substantially affect a variety of consumption processes (Hirschman 1982, p. 228). It may influence the way we dress (e.g., a yarmulke, a yashmak), the food we eat (e.g., kosher food, halal food or vegetarian food) or the drink we consume (e.g., wine, tea or soy milk). Furthermore, striving to obtain salvation through religious beliefs and values, some

of us may adopt asceticism as a part of our self-creation projects, which certainly affects our consumption practices and choices.

Although in postmodernity religious asceticism may be challenged by the hedonistic lifestyles of consumerism (Turner 1991), I believe that the interplay between religion, identity and consumption practices is still a fascinating subject to explore. However, for this we may need to approach the phenomenon from a postmodern perspective, that is, we should not regard religions such as Christianity, Islam or Buddhism as the grand narratives in society. Like other social fundamentals in postmodernity, the notion of the 'grand narrative' religion is contested and thus becomes increasingly decentred into several fragmented sects. Moreover, in postmodernity, as we are threatened by a number of "dilemmas of the self" (Giddens 1991, p. 201), a variety of emerging 'alternative religions' or cults come into play, offering us some kind of comfort refuge.

Religious identity can be created and reinforced by appropriating symbolic resources from both mediated and lived experience. A multiplicity of lived experiences – socialising with religious groups, engaging in religious activities, carrying out ritualistic practices, observing religious precepts and possessing religious objects – all contribute to the creation, maintenance and expression of the religious self. In the age of mediaisation, mediated experience through religious programmes on television or radio, religious books and religious websites on the Internet can also be symbolic resources for the self-project.

8.2 Negotiating the Buddhist Self – the Dhammakaya

> How can you find delight and mirth
> where there is burning without end? In
> deepest darkness you are wrapped!
> Why do you not seek for the light?
>
> Buddha, *The Pali Canon*

Throughout our history, Thailand has always been recognised as a prominent Buddhist society. In Thai thinking, Buddhism is our way of life, our national identity and the key to primordial 'Thainess' (Jackson 1991; Mulder 1996). However, some studies suggest that although most Thais think that we are good Buddhists, we must really be considered as having only a superficial adherence to the tenets of Buddhism (Komin 1990; Mulder 1996). Apparently, although the institutional and ritual expressions of the Thai religion appear to be very Buddhistic indeed, its characteristic mentality does not really reflect the key philosophy of Buddhism, like the *anatta* doctrine. Evidently the common understanding and practice of Thai Buddhism embraces some vestiges of Hinduism and animism. Apparently, Thai Buddhism, Hinduism and animism seem to share the recognition of impermanence and instability of reality. Since encountering postmodernity, animistic expressions of Thai Buddhism seem to be increasingly flourishing with more and more sacred material objects such as Buddha images, holy water, amulets, and the like being produced (Mulder 1996). Practices of Buddhist rituals (e.g., merit-making) as well as consumption of these sacred objects become a means for many Thais to ensure security and success in the uncontrollable world.

In order to cleanse a Thai's image of being a superficial Buddhist, various Buddhist sects in Thailand (e.g., Santi Asoke, Suan Moke, etc.) try to propagate their moral way of life, which claims to lead Thai people to become a 'real' Buddhist. Among these sects is the Dhammakaya who have successfully attracted a large number of the emerging urban middle-class families. However, although the temple attracts a considerable number of followers, it also draws much criticism from other Thai Buddhists. Central to the criticised issues are their teaching and activities that appear to focus on materialism, which contradicts the Buddhist teaching that our desires for material possessions only enchain us to the vicious circle of the desirable, thus leading to suffering (Morris 1994).

Another main criticism is of the Dhammakaya's business-like approach. Unlike other passive traditional temples, the Dhammakaya actively employs marketing practices such as target marketing, advertising and missionary salespeople (which the Dhammakaya calls *Kalyanamitra*[123]) to promote its sect. Basically, the temple's target group is the emerging urban middle-class, especially the young. Each year, the temple organises several Dhamma camps for university students, many of who later become committed followers who dedicate themselves to working as a *Kalyanamitra* for the temple after their graduation. The Dhammakaya's teaching focuses on the combination of discipline and esoteric Dhammakaya meditation as well as strong group solidarity. The temple even adopts military training as a part of its Dhamma Tayat training.

Regularly, the Dhammakaya organises religious activities such as mass ordainings or communal meditation gatherings. On an important Buddhist day or

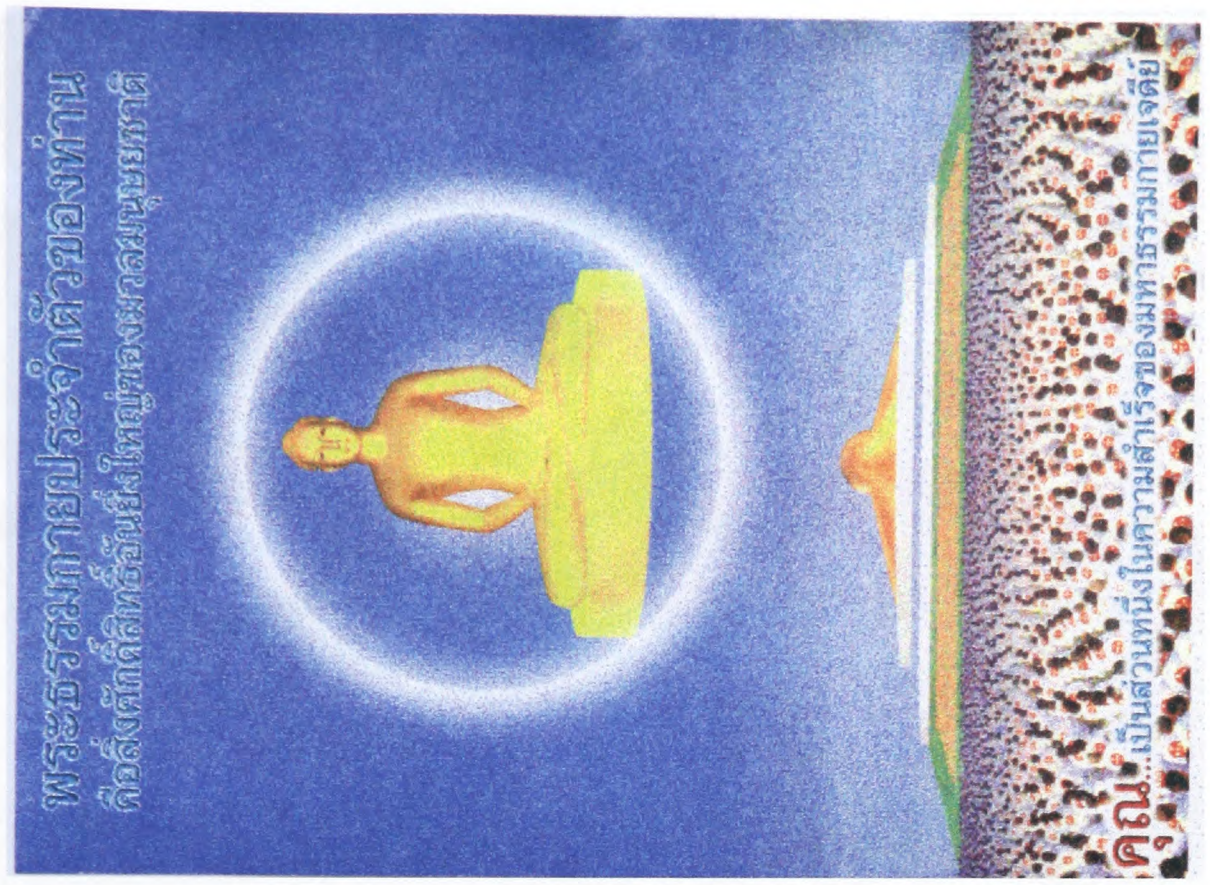
---

[123] Good friends.

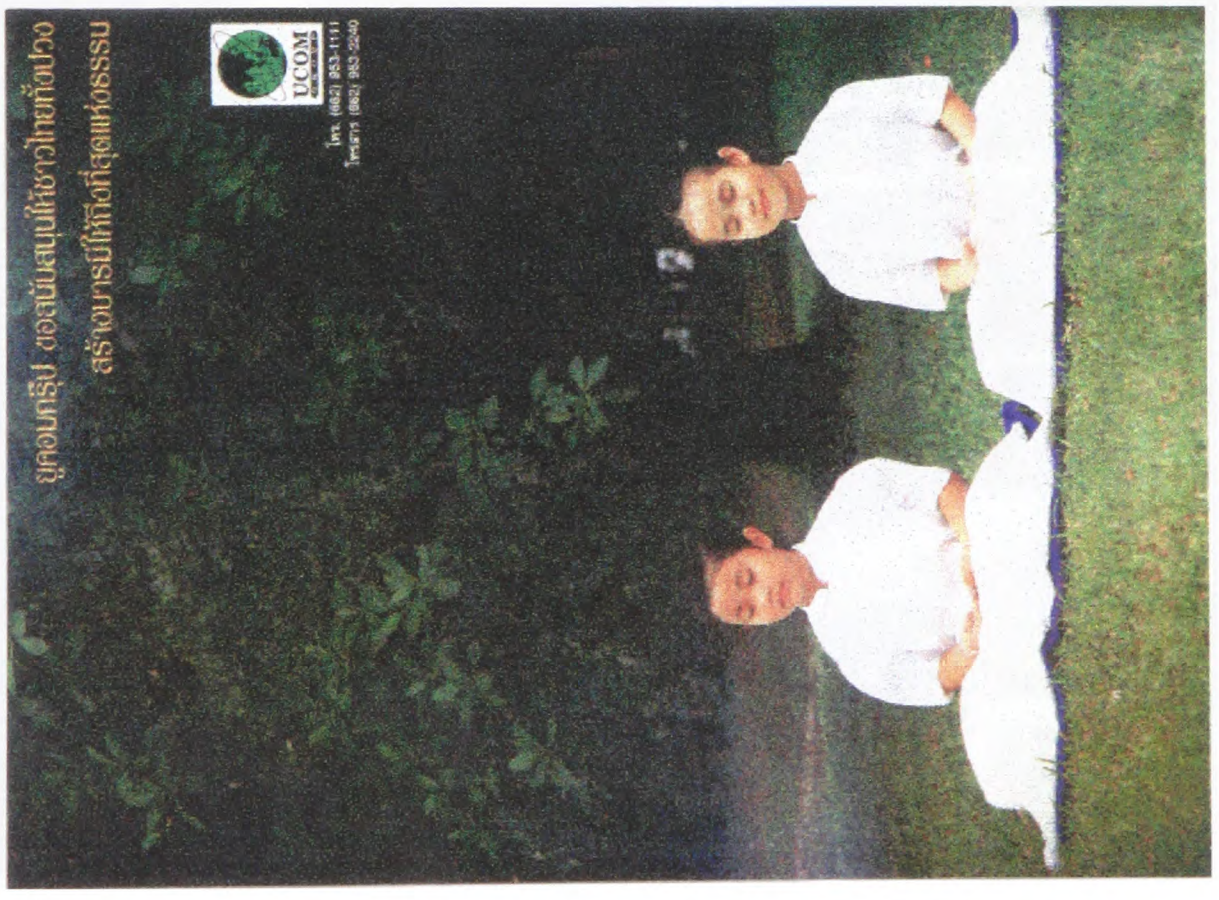
occasion, the temple always organises an extravagant ceremony supplemented by a light-and-sound or multi-media presentation. To promote their activities, the Dhammakaya produces a variety of media materials, e.g., television advertising, the *Kalyanamitra* monthly magazine, videotapes and brochures (see Picture 8.1 and 8.2). Even advertising in the *Kalyanamitra* magazine commonly portrays the sect's esoteric meditation to reinforce the meaning of the Dhammakaya Buddhist self (see Picture 8.3). The Dhammakaya also operates its own cooperative store that sells various ritual-adjunct products for the followers (see Picture 8.4 and 8.5).



Picture 8.1: Kalyanamitra Magazine



Picture 8.2: An Example of The Dhammakaya's Advertising



Picture 8.3: An Example of Advertising in the Kalyanamitra Magazine



Picture 8.4: Ceremonial Candles



Picture 8.5: The Image of the Founder of the Dhammakaya Meditation Being Sold in the Dhammakaya Co-operative Store

8.3 Interpretations of the Fieldwork

The interpretations strongly suggest that encountering the dilemmas of the self in postmodernity, the informants seek refuge in the Dhammakaya realm. Thus, their primary project of the self is to become a virtuous Dhammakaya Buddhist. They try to appropriate what it means to be a virtuous Buddhist, and employ symbolic consumption and consumption resistance (i.e., asceticism) in an attempt to complete their Dhammakaya Buddhist selves. As a result, the informants acquire a civilised body, disengage from materialism and the common order of popular culture life, and practise the Dhammakaya rituals. They constantly appropriate symbolic resources to create and advance their Buddhist selves from various materials and activities developed by the Dhammakaya. As the Dhammakaya emphasises group solidarity, these informants always validate their understanding of how to be a virtuous Buddhist through the process of discursive elaboration in their social interactions within the group and with other Dhammakaya followers. However, the interpretations also suggest that while the informants are striving to become virtuous Buddhists, they paradoxically fall into a vicious circle of '*kilesa*[124] to become'.

8.3.1 Encountering the Dilemmas of the Self

Like most Thais, the informants are Buddhist by birth. They have obviously grown up in a Buddhist environment; they are familiar with common Buddhist

[124] Desires.

ritualistic practices such as *tak batr*[125] and *wai pra*[126]. When the informants recount their childhood Buddhist practices they recall that although they tried to observe the principal five *sila* or precepts[127], they were not really interested in the Buddhist philosophy itself. Certainly, they spent their childhood and their early teens like other kids in a consumer culture – their lives were surrounded by popular music, television, shopping malls and so on. The informants had only become interested in Buddhism when they were entering adolescence. This is not uncommon; as Argyle (1992) notes, religion can produce solidarity and healing that helps some people cope with major transitions. Like many teenagers, the informants are facing an identity crisis (Erikson 1968). Additionally, such a transition into adulthood seems to expose them to different realities in life. Thus they have begun to feel anxious with themselves and started to question their existence in the unruly world. Indeed, the informants have been threatened by a number of "dilemmas of the self" (Giddens 1991, p. 201): fragmentation, powerlessness, uncertainty and a struggle against commodification. Oz who is the eldest son and the centre of attention in the family, feels that he is nobody in the outside world, particularly when he is entering an adult world in the university. Tom is distressed about the problems in his family. Lynn and Kay, who are timid girls from the provinces, feel powerless in cosmopolitan Bangkok. Doll, whose beloved stepmother has recently left her family, realises the uncertainty of life. Paul becomes bored with hangovers after his frequently involuntary nights out with friends. Importantly, the informants feel

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[125] Offering food to monks, usually in the morning. Many Thais, particularly in the provinces, *tak batr* every morning.

[126] Paying homage to a Buddha image.

[127] Five precepts are the basic Buddhist teaching for mundane people to follow in their everyday lives. They are 1) to abstain from hurting other people bodily, verbally and mentally, 2) to abstain from stealing, 3) to abstain from unlawful sexual conducts, 4) to abstain from lying, and 5) to abstain from intoxicating substance.

restless and aware that there is something missing in their lives. They are also experiencing an overwhelming sense of insecurity.

> ***Oz:*** I'm the first child in the family... the first grandchild as well. When I was young, I was a star among my aunts and uncles. I've got all the attention in the family. Sometimes I feel that it's too much. But now... I don't know... I want to be recognised by others. I want others to pay attention to me. At least I want to be accepted sincerely. ... Sometimes I wish I could be a child forever. A child is always happy. The children's world is innocent; we don't judge each other. It's difficult to find sincerity in the adult world. Particularly in the material world, we are judged by what we wear, not who we are. People are always wearing masks.

> ***Tom:*** When I was young, my parents were very protective of me. I'm their first child. They never let me go anywhere by myself. My dad drove me to school and picked me up every day. ... At present my parents don't have much time for me. They are very concerned about my brother. He has a lot of problems. He does alcohol and drugs. He is one of those hard rock teenagers, wearing long hair.

> ***Lynn:*** At the university, I'm not really myself. I don't know why I'm not so bubbling as I am at home in the province. At home, I always crack jokes with my sibling. I'm quite talkative too. Here I don't really talk much. People think that I'm coy. Sometimes I feel that I don't exist since I just listen while others do the talking.

> ***Kay:*** This is the first time I've lived in Bangkok. It's so different from home. Life here is tough. It seems that everybody is competing with everybody. People aren't really friendly.

> ***Doll:*** My father and my real mother divorced when I was young. Then, my father married my stepmother. She was like our real mother. She took good care of us. I love her. But last year she left us. I don't know why she left us. I thought she loved us. I was really confused.

> ***Paul:*** Formerly, I behaved mischievously – clubbing, drinking, etc. I was too much attached to friends. When they went clubbing, I went as well, even though I didn't really want to go. I didn't want to say no to them. I think I didn't want to offend them because I was afraid that they would shun me. But I didn't really enjoy the night out. I didn't like the hangover. I always felt sick the whole day after the night out. So I wondered why I had to do it. It wasn't a real pleasure.

Interested in the poster of the Dhammakaya's Dhamma Tayat Camp, which offers to show how to actualise true happiness in life, the informants consulted their senior in the Buddhist Society and then joined the training. Impressed by the training and the Dhammakaya teaching, the informants have decided to follow the

Dhammakaya path to fulfil the incompleteness of their human selves. The informants believe that human beings should cultivate wisdom in order to differentiate themselves from other beings, and that certainly the Buddhist path via the Dhammakaya teaching is the way to achieve it.

> ***Paul:*** During the Dhamma Tayat Programme, I was ordained as a monk for two months. It was such a great experience. We mainly learned Dhamma and meditated. I felt peaceful and contented. I realised that we can achieve happiness through Dhamma, not material things. Clubbing or drinking is just an illusive happiness that brings suffering as a consequence.

> ***Oz:*** In my teenage years, I was very crazy about pop music. I bought so many tape cassettes. I had to have the latest hit album. Even though they played a lot of those hit albums on the radio, I still wanted to have my very own cassettes. I was so thrilled to add a new one to my collection. Now, whenever I look at them, I think, "what a waste of money!" When I was ordained as a monk for a year, I didn't listen to any music at all. I was surprised that in fact I could feel happy without it.

> ***Tom:*** We are born and grow up, then get married and later raise our children and so on. This life cycle is not different from animals at all. Being a human should be more special than that. ... I'm convinced that the through the Dhammakaya practice, we can achieve our human quest.

> ***Doll:*** Because I have a broken family, I see that life is suffering. I feel that there must be something better for a human being than just to live, to work, to get married and then to die. ... The Dhammakaya gives me the answer of how we should lead our lives.

8.3.2 To Become a Virtuous Buddhist: The Primary Self-project

Endeavouring to seek true happiness for the self, the informants set their principal life goal to become a virtuous Buddhist who possesses a refined mind. Evidently, they become a committed follower of the Dhammakaya sect. All male informants plan to be ordained as monks at the Dhammakaya temple again after they finish their degree; while all the female informants will consider working for the temple, either on a part-time basis or full-time as *Kalyanamitra.* This can be

seen clearly from Tom's collage of the self[1] (see Picture 8.6). Situated at the centre of the collage, a picture of a Buddha image from one of the Dhammakaya's advertisements (see Picture 8.2) symbolises the central theme of Tom's self-project. The other pictures are all associated with the Dhammakaya's activities – the mass meditation, the individual meditation, the mass ordaining ceremony and the temple.



Picture 8.6: Tom and His Collage of the Self

Tom: I've decided to dedicate my life to Buddhism. I will be re-ordained after I graduate, and this time it will be for life. I aim to achieve the Dhammakaya... to refine my mind through the Dhammakaya meditation. ... No, since I joined the Dhammakaya, I've never gone to any other temples. I'm not interested in them. I find everything for my life in the Dhammakaya.

[1] Due to my carelessness, the original collage was accidentally ruined before I could reproduce it in a photographic form. Fortunately, I took this photograph before the collage was ruined.

> ***Kay:*** After graduation, I will devote my whole life to the Dhammakaya. I'll work for the temple as a *Kalyanamitra*. Life in the outside world is illusive. I want to spend my life at the temple where I can meditate to achieve the Dhammakaya.
>
> ***Lynn:*** I want to be a virtuous Buddhist. I want to dedicate my life to the Dhammakaya. I want to be a *Kalyanamitra*.

Undoubtedly, this commitment orientates every aspect of the informants' way of living, which is inevitably reflected in their everyday consumption. Their behaviour is strictly directed towards their interpretation of what a virtuous Buddhist is, and more specifically how to obtain a refined mind. Indeed, their ultimate aspiration is to achieve the Dhammakaya. In order to achieve this goal, they believe that they must acquire a civilised body, disengage from materialism and the common order of life in popular culture, and practise the Dhammakaya rituals.

8.3.2a A Virtuous Buddhist Must Acquire a Civilised Body

As Buddhism regards the (illusive) self as embodied, the informants believe that it is essential for a virtuous Buddhist to civilise her/his body. That is, a good Dhammakaya Buddhist must possess a clean body and a refined manner in order to be able to develop a refined mind that is suitable for meditation. Gould (1994, p. 308) elaborates:

> Although Buddhists distinguish the body and mind for certain everyday purposes, they ultimately see them as one gestalt. There is no question in Buddhism that our bodies can be shaped by our minds and that the body's actions in turn can shape our mind (e.g., sitting in a certain way can calm our mind).

From the informants' perspectives, this civilised body should not only be able to have control over its emotions but also be able to conduct the 'appropriate behaviour.'

> ***Tom:*** It is essential to have a refined mind in order to practise meditation successfully. We can see whether people have refined minds or not by looking at their appearance and manner. That's why Lord Buddha emphasises the '*sumruam*' manner. For instance, when we want to put a thing on a table, a person with a coarse mind would throw it on the table, but a person with a refined mind would lay it down gently. So...it's obvious that those construction workers who have a bad manner will not be able to meditate as successfully as those who work in the office.

> ***Lynn:*** Here we don't swear. It isn't necessary to swear at all. Many young people misperceive that using rude words to each other represents intimacy. Rude words only represent a coarse mind. The Dhammakaya teaches us to refine our minds by refining our manners. We always speak softly and politely. We don't shout. We walk slowly.

Paradoxically, Tom's example of a 'refined-mind' person is not accurately what Buddha refers to[129]; rather his example reflects the Dhammakaya's regime that focuses on the educated middle-class and excludes the underprivileged class[130]. In this way, the body, particularly a person's manner, becomes a vital site to create and communicate the Dhammakaya Buddhist self. Bourdieu (1984, p. 66) explains:

> Knowing that 'manner' is a symbolic manifestation whose meaning and value depend as much on the perceivers as on the producer, one can see how it is that the manner of using symbolic goods, especially those regarded as the attributes of excellence, constitutes one of the key markers of 'class' and also the ideal weapon in strategies of distinction, that is, as Proust put it, 'the infinitely varied art of marking distances'.

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[129] Historically, Buddha advocates his teaching to counterbalance the deep-rooted caste system in Hinduism. While Hinduism believes that the lower castes like the untouchables cannot achieve nirvana as the upper castes like the Brahmans can, Buddhism asserts that anyone from any caste is able to achieve nirvana.

[130] This is another criticism of the Dhammakaya sect.

Manner is certainly not only a means to exemplify the informants' group identity but also an effective strategy to distance themselves from others who possess a 'coarse mind'.

> ***Kay:*** You can tell very easily that we belong to the Buddhist society [i.e., The Dhammakaya] by our looks and manner. We have to maintain the image of the society.

In conjunction with manner, the informants re-work on their appearance. They aim to differentiate their appearance from other young people in the popular culture. That is, they must disassociate themselves from fashion and the lavish body-project. As a result, the male informants have a military-like haircut, while the female informants wear short hair (a schoolgirl-like hairstyle). The informants also dress plainly – the female informants generally wear the university uniform at the university and the male informants commonly wear a white shirt and slacks. Indeed, while many female students wear short skirts, the female informants always wear long skirts. Presumably, these informants try to desexualise their appearance. Overtly, the way they dress, the way they have their hair cut, the way they conduct themselves – basically the way they make up their whole bodies – becomes vital not only for acquiring a civilised body but also for signifying the simplicity of their lifestyle. Certainly, this is how they incorporate the civilised body into their symbolic project of the Buddhist self. Importantly, their physical appearance also symbolises their sense of orderliness and solidarity – their Dhammakaya group selves.

> ***Lynn:*** We don't wear short skirts or any outfits that show our figures. Unlike those girls, we are not interested in attracting anyone. Personally, I don't want to have a boyfriend. I don't want to get married.

> ***Paul:*** We always dress politely. The military haircut looks polite and plain. This is the Dhammakaya way. If you go to the temple, you'll see that we all are like this. Unlike other teenagers, we have good discipline.

8.3.2b A Virtuous Buddhist Must Disengage from Materialism and the Common Order of Popular Culture Life.

In order to become a virtuous Buddhist, the informants think they must refrain from materialism and the common order of life, which are the origin of *kilesa*. They observe eight *sila*. They claim that they do not want to be like other Thai Buddhists who are wrapped up in the materialistic world. They avoid consuming anything beyond necessities. The informants abstain from consuming any entertainment in the popular culture (e.g., films, music, television, etc.). They do not wear cosmetics and fashionable clothes. For example, Paul has abandoned wearing his luxury-branded clothes. As a part of their observation of the eight *sila*, the informants abstain from eating after mid-day, let alone consuming an alcoholic drink. Most informants also give up sleeping on mattresses. All informants also refrain from romantic and sexual activities. In this way, consumption resistance is employed by the informants as instrumental to the creation, maintenance and expression of their Buddhist selves.

> ***Tom:*** I've given up all luxuries in my life. I don't listen to popular music or watch TV anymore. I only use this stereo to listen to news and to play a Dhamma cassette or a meditation cassette. You can see that my room is very empty. I don't even sleep on a mattress (see Picture 8.7, 8.8 and 8.9).



Picture 8.7: Tom's Bed



Picture 8.8: Tom's Dressing Table



Picture 8.9: Tom's Luxuries – A Stereo and An electrical Fan

Paul: Do I have a girlfriend? I don't need a girlfriend. Romantic love brings suffering. I used to have one though. That's before I joined the Dhammakaya. I have decided to observe celibacy. … I also quit all my nightlife. No more alcohol. I don't care whether my jeans are Armani or not anymore. All these *[e.g., sex, luxury brands, nightlife and alcohol]* are evil powers that enchain us to the state of a coarse mind.

Oz: Those things *[popular media]* stimulate our desire, which will make our mind become coarse. It's not good for our meditation at all.

Doll: I don't use any cosmetics. I use only basic stuff like baby powder. Cosmetics may enhance our physical looks, but they also coarsen our minds. I mean cosmetics make us attached to an illusive look that isn't permanent.

Kay: At the temple nobody wears accessories such as a ring or a bracelet. We want to make sure that everybody is equal here. There's no differentiation by economic status.

8.3.2c A Virtuous Buddhist must Practise the Dhammakaya Rituals

Furthermore, in order to become a virtuous Buddhist, the informants actively practise particular Dhammakaya rituals that, they believe, help them cultivate *boon*[131]. In their thinking, the more *boon* they cultivate, the more refined their minds become. More importantly, *boon* is the only 'possession' they believe that can be taken with them to the following lives.

> ***Kay:*** We cannot take any possessions with us when we die. The only thing we can carry along to our next life is our 'boon'. We, human beings, were born to accumulate 'boon' for our following lives.

Unsurprisingly, the informants spend a considerably large amount of their budgets on a variety of the merit-makings, mainly through various types of donation to the Dhammakaya. They believe that this is the best way to accumulate *boon.* Besides the Dhammakaya temple, they hardly donate money to any other temples or charities. Interestingly, in order to save up money for the donations, the informants buy a *krapookboon*, a special crystal-shaped piggybank sold in the Dhammakaya cooperative store. All informants have at least one *krapookboon.* Indeed, the *krapookboon* holds a symbolic meaning for the informants, that is, its crystal-shaped design constantly reminds them of the crystal ball that they aspire to see in their Dhammakaya when they are meditating. Presumably, it empowers the informants to abstain from spending money on other unnecessary materials so that they can save money to cultivate *boon.* To enhance their Buddhist selves, the informants regularly visit the Dhammakaya temple to listen to the abbot's preaching and to practise the

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[131] Merit or good deed.

Dhammakaya meditation led by him. Whenever the informants visit the temple, they always put on a white outfit to symbolise the purified self. Alternatively, they put on a 'STOP' T-shirt, which they buy from the cooperative store, to characterise their ability to control their minds via the Dhammakaya meditation. All informants, except Paul, have at least two of these T-shirts. In fact, the 'STOP' T-shirt is a part of the fund raising campaign for the construction of the Dhammakaya Ceteya. This T-shirt also symbolises the informants' sense of solidarity and commitment to the Dhammakaya. Like football fans, wearing such a T-shirt closely identifies the informants with the sect, and thus it becomes important symbolism of their identity (Argyle 1992). (See Picture 8.10 and 8.11)

Lynn: We usually wear a white outfit to the temple. Hardly anybody wears coloured clothes. White represents purity. ... These days, we wear the 'STOP' T-shirt instead to help promote the Dhammakaya Ceteya project. The T-shirt also reminds us to stop craving for material things in order to achieve the Dhammakaya.

Doll: I feel I belong when I put on this 'STOP' T-shirt. It shows our shared aims to stop *kilesa*... our commitment to build a better society. I wear it to the temple almost every week now.

Tom: Wearing the 'STOP' T-shirt shows our shared commitment to build the Dhammakaya Ceteya. It's really impressive to see everybody put on the T-shirt for the foundation-stone laying ceremony. It shows our strong team spirit.



Picture 8.10: Dressing for the Temple



Picture 8.11: An Advert with the Followers in the 'STOP' T-shirt

Endeavouring to refine their minds, the informants practise the Dhammakaya meditation every day. For practising the meditation ritual outside the temple, the informants require a meditation cassette, which contains the abbot's voice leading the meditation process. Of course, the informants can choose a variety of these meditation cassettes from the cooperative store. Picture 8.12 is a collection of Doll's meditation cassettes.

> ***Doll:*** The more we practise the meditation; the more refined our minds become. I meditate every day. I use these meditation cassettes to guide my meditation.

> ***Kay:*** Now, I practise the meditation at least twice a day, once in the morning and again before I go to bed. I try to meditate whenever time allows. These cassettes help calm my mind so that I can concentrate on the practice.



Picture 8.12: A Collection of Doll's Meditation Cassettes

All informants also possess the Dhammakaya crystal balls that symbolise the crystal ball they aspire to visualise when they practise the meditation. Obviously, the crystal ball helps to create and sustain the symbolic meanings of their everyday meditation rituals (Douglas and Isherwood 1978). Although the informants can buy these crystal balls from the cooperative store, most of their crystal balls are given by the Dhammakaya monks or their seniors. Certainly, these crystal balls can remind the informants not only of the serene feeling they obtain from the meditation but also their sense of belonging to the Dhammakaya. But more importantly, as an object being used in the gift-giving ritual among the Dhammakaya members, usually from the superior/senior to the inferior/junior, the crystal ball appears to symbolise the recipient's status in the sect. The status of the giver (e.g., the abbot or the novice), the occasion and the size of the ball being given, signify the informant's position in the sect's social hierarchy. Accordingly, each individual ball embodies idiosyncratic symbolism for its owner. Furthermore, through the gift-giving ritual, the crystal ball is symbolically de-commodified and thus becomes sacred (Belk *et al* 1991).

Collectively, these crystal balls are believed to hold the spiritual power to protect the owners from any misfortune as well as to empower them in their meditation practices. Indeed, these crystal balls are sacred objects that "fulfil a need to believe in something significantly more powerful and extra ordinary than the self – a need to transcend existence as a mere biological being coping with the everyday world" (Belk *et al* 1991, p. 60). Seemingly, for the informants and other Dhammakaya followers, the sacredness of the crystal ball is more powerful than that of the Buddha image. While other Thai Buddhists wear a necklace with the Buddha

image, the informants wear a necklace with the crystal ball. Even on the altar, the informants put the crystal ball instead of the Buddha image at the centre (see Picture 8.13).



Picture 8.14: Tom's Personal Altar

Tom: This is my most precious crystal ball. I put it in the centre of my altar. It's a gift from *Khun-Yai* (grandmother) who is the founder of the Dhammakaya temple. Without her, there wouldn't be the temple... there wouldn't be hundreds of thousands of people congregating to do good deeds. I was so thrilled to receive this crystal ball from her because she hasn't often given the crystal ball to anyone.

Lynn: I have this crystal ball with me all the time. It is said that a person survived a car accident because he carried the ball with him. Apparently the police saw bright light above the car after the accident.

Kay: These crystal balls empower me to practise my meditation. Whenever I see them I feel like meditating.

Besides the crystal balls, the informants also have a collection of souvenirs such as photographs of *Luang-Por Sod,* who discovered the Dhammakaya meditation, *Luang-Por Dhammachayo,* who is the abbot of the Dhammakaya temple, and *Khun-Yai,* who is the founder of the temple. This collection becomes their "personal archive or museum" (Belk 1988, p.159), which the informants incorporate into their self-narratives. For some informants, these collections become the most valuable possessions, even more important than family photographs.

> ***Doll:*** If there is fire, I will try to take them [e.g., the photographs of *Luang-Por*, the crystal balls) out first. They are the most important things.
>
> ***Interviewer:*** What about other stuff like family photographs or your childhood photographs?
>
> ***Doll:*** Well, those photographs are not so important as these collections.
>
> ***Interviewer:*** But you can always buy the photographs of *Luang-Por* or a new crystal ball at the coop. On the other hand, you may not be able to get hold of your childhood photographs again.
>
> ***Doll:*** That's okay. These crystal balls and photographs of *Luang-Por* are more important than my childhood photographs. They are given... they are irreplaceable. Getting a new one from the coop won't do. It won't be the same.

Abstaining from popular culture, in their leisure time, if the informants do not meditate, they may read the Dhammakaya's Dhamma books or the *Kalyanamitra* magazine. If they need music, they only listen to the Dhamma song cassettes produced by the temple. Of course, these Dhamma books, magazine and cassettes are exclusively sold in the Dhammakaya cooperative store. Basically, the Dhammakaya has secularised its teaching (i.e., its interpretations of Buddhism) into commodities which can be readily consumed in the everyday consumption sphere. In this way, the sect can permeate the informants' secular lives. Nevertheless, as the informants associate their consumption of these commodities with their religious

beliefs, these commodities eventually become sacred. Inevitably, the informants' religious and secular practices are fused in their realms of everyday consumption.

> ***Lynn:*** These Dhamma songs will purify our minds, unlike those love songs that are not constructive at all. I listen to them regularly. It keeps my mind away from the material world.

> ***Oz:*** I feel relaxed when I am reading the Dhamma books. I feel peaceful and contented. I love to read stories about Lord Buddha. They are fascinating.

8.3.3 Symbolic Resources and the Appropriation of Meanings

8.3.3a The Dialectic of Mediated and Lived Experience

The meanings of the virtuous Buddhist that the informants incorporate into their symbolic project of the self are endlessly appropriated and re-appropriated from both mediated and lived experience as they move through the temporal-spatial paths of their everyday lives. Since the informants withhold themselves from the popular media, most of their mediated experience is through the Dhammakaya's media materials (e.g., advertising, the *Kalyanamitra* magazine, or Dhamma cassettes and video). However, the fact that the informants abstain from the popular media does not mean that the informants do not derive any symbolic meaning from them. For the informants, the popular media symbolises the materialistic world – the world from which they want to liberate themselves. They regard the lifestyles portrayed in the popular media like advertising, fashion magazines or films as an illusory way of living that cannot provide true happiness in life.

> ***Doll:*** You don't get anything from [popular] advertising. Most people just want to follow the fashion... especially those teenagers who need to show off that they have expensive things. I feel that it's unnecessary to show anyone. We'd better consume only essential things and save money to cultivate *boon*.
>
> ***Tom:*** Popular media are like *maras*[132] that lure us to follow the materialistic path. They tempt us with images of illusive happiness.

Living in the media-saturated culture, no matter how hard the informants try to shun the popular media, they cannot avoid being exposed to some of them. Outdoor advertising, film posters and billboards and popular music are ubiquitous. Furthermore, their university colleagues often talk about those mediated resources. As a result, the informants sometimes exploit resources from the popular media in their activities. That is, they recontextualise popular meanings and employ them in their religious projects. For example, the informants use the names of the heroic couple in the film 'Titanic' to promote a special talk that they organise for the Buddhist Society. In the leaflet to advertise the talk, the popular Titanic couple are discussing how the talk will help them attain eternal happiness. Apparently, none of the informants have seen the film, but they have heard about it from their colleagues' conversations and thought that the popularity of the film would attract an audience for the special talk.

Generally, the Dhammakaya media materials are the main mediated resources from which the informants obtain the symbolic meanings for their self-projects. In the Dhammakaya's media materials, the words and pictures are mostly related to the meditation and the cultivation of *boon*. Seemingly these words and pictures not only remind them of contented moments during meditation but also reinforce their aspirations to achieve their Dhammakaya Buddhist selves. From my

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[132] Demons.

observations, the informants draw on a lot of verbatim words, phrases and sentences from the Dhammakaya's media materials to explain their beliefs, thoughts and feelings in the interviews[133]. This illuminates the power of mediated resources in the informants' processes of meaning valorisation. Evidently, the symbolic meanings derived from this mediated experience become concretised when they are brokered in the realm of lived experience. This is particularly so in the case of the meditation experience.

> ***Lynn:*** I was interested in the Dhamma Tayat Ying[134] leaflet. I remembered the slogan, "Once in a life of a woman, leave everything... in search of the truth of life." That's why I joined the training. But I realised what those words meant when I was in the training itself. I was very moved by the training ...by my mentor, by the activities and by the serenity at the temple. It's really different from the outside world.

> ***Tom:*** They *[the others]* must come to the temple to understand what I have told them...to realise that the ideal society does exist. We are extremely impressed when we are there, but they can feel only ten percent of what they have been told.

> ***Oz:*** *[Talking about his meditation when he was very sick.]* It helped a lot. I felt so good... It was the only thing I wanted to do at that time. I didn't want to possess a million baht... I didn't want to have a house or a car. I didn't want to listen to music or to go to the cinema. I didn't want anything. The more I meditate, the more I realise that what we need in life are not those things. They give us only temporary satisfaction, unlike the happiness obtained from meditation.

> ***Kay:*** Nothing impresses me as much as listening to *Luang-Por Dhammachayo*'s preaching. He shows us how we can follow the Dhamma path successfully. Unfortunately, he's very busy, so he cannot preach every week. But I can listen to his preaching from the cassettes as often as I want to.

Listening to the abbot's preaching is definitely a powerful lived experience through which the informants grasp the meaning of 'what a virtuous Buddhist is'. And indeed, this meaning is reinforced through the mediated experience, i.e.,

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[133] Noticing a lot of similarities in the informants' use of words, phrases and sentences, I went through the sect's media materials and realise that several words are literally taken from these mediated resources.

[134] A Dhamma training programme for females.

listening to the abbot's cassettes. Simultaneously, this meaning is also ascertained through the course of lived socialisations within the group and with other Dhammakaya followers. To sum up, the symbolic meaning of the Dhammakaya Buddhist self are dialectically appropriated through the realms of both mediated and lived experience.

8.3.3b The Self-Social Identification

To create a sense of identity is not only to distinguish the individual from the masses but perhaps also to lose a sense of difference and become like the others. This is particularly so for these informants who appear to identify themselves with the Dhammakaya collectively. Since the Dhammakaya emphasises the principles of solidarity, the informants constantly validate the meanings of the Buddhist self through the process of *discursive elaboration* (Thompson 1990) in their everyday interactions. They are immensely influenced by other group members and by other people in the Dhammakaya sect, particularly the abbot and monks. The fieldwork clearly illustrates the process of the *internal-external dialectic of identification* (Jenkins 1996) among the group members. As discussed earlier in section 8.3.2, the informants strongly identify themselves with each other through their common beliefs and consumption behaviour. Basically, the informants' individual identities and their group identity are almost identical as they single-mindedly pursue the common project of the Dhammakaya Buddhist self. I presume it is not uncommon to find this phenomenon among the members of several religious cults.

In their everyday lives at the university, the informants spend most of their time together. They usually have lunch together in the Buddhist Society office. This is a vital time when they advise each other how to enhance their Buddhist

selves. Moreover, whenever they are free from classes or other academic activities, they congregate in the society and habitually discuss the Dhammakaya's beliefs and practices. They often talk about the abbot's preaching, the activities at the temple, the meditation experience or even words and pictures in the sect's media materials. The informants are always cautious of what they do and try not to break any code of conduct that may weaken their sense of solidarity. As a member of the group, they believe that it is essential for them to notify each other when they see her/him engaging in any inappropriate conduct. Certainly they keep reinforcing each other in their pursuit of their collective projects to become a virtuous Dhammakaya Buddhist.

> ***Lynn:*** I really enjoy talking about the history of the temple with my senior. I'm so proud to be a part of it. ... We always discuss Dhamma and how to improve our meditation.

> ***Kay:*** We will warn each other if we see that any of us has done something improper. We call it 'orientating the treasure trove.' This is how a good Buddhist should be. I mean we should be a *Kalyanamitra [a good friend]* who protect our friends from mischief and encourage them to practise good *karma*.

More importantly, the informants always conduct routine ritualistic practices together. That is, for examples, they chant and meditate together every evening; they *tak batr* together; and they prepare objects being used for the *tak batr* activities together. These collective rituals indeed reinforce what it means to be a virtuous Buddhist and thus strengthen their group solidarity and identity (Bocock 1974). Indeed, they are social cement that fortifies social cohesion (Turner 1991). Particularly for the Thai, we believe that if we practise merit-makings together with

someone, it is likely that we will re-incarnate together[135]. Undoubtedly, the collective merit-making rituals also symbolise the shared *karma* that the informants bear together into their following lives.

8.3.4 The Paradox of the Dhammakaya Buddhist Self

Endeavouring to become a virtuous Buddhist, the informants appear to cling more and more to the desire to create and express their Buddhist self, and thus paradoxically disregard one of the three primary characteristics of existence or *Tri-lakkhana*[136] advocated in Buddhist philosophy – the *anatta*. In their symbolic processes of constructing the Dhammakaya Buddhist self, the informants ironically enchain themselves to a *kilesa* to be loved and noticed, a *kilesa* to be superior and a *kilesa* to be immortal. Simply put, from a Buddhist perspective, so long as the informants still aspire to create the self, they are unlikely to be able to liberate themselves from suffering; instead they are endlessly enslaved in the vicious circle of their illusive sense of existence.

8.3.4a Kilesa to Be Loved and Noticed

Threatened by a number of dilemmas of the self[137], the informants struggle to seek refuge in a place where they can regain a sense of certainty and security. Joining the Dhammakaya seems to fulfil their quests. The informants appear to

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[135] The Thais commonly practise merit-makings together with people we love and hope to share the following lives with. For example, family members *takbatr* together so that they will be a family again in the following lives.

[136] The three characteristics of existence are: all formations are 'transient' (*anicca*); all formations are 'subject to suffering' (*dukkha*); and all things are 'without a self' (*anatta*).

[137] See section 8.3.1 in this chapter.

resume their sense of security, as they can feel sincerely loved and cared by their Dhammakaya peers. They also feel comfortable spending time with the group at the Buddhist society and the Dhammakaya temple because everything is in order. They know where they are located in the Dhammakaya community. It is like a utopian or *Pra Sri Ariya* community for them. Evidently, the informants believe that it is the ideal community where they find sisterly/brotherly love, sincerity and peace – the values that they find hard to obtain in the unruly materialistic world.

> ***Paul:*** I feel secure here. No deception. No jealousy. Everyone sincerely loves and cares for me. It's a perfect place to belong.

> ***Lynn:*** I feel at peace here. It's not as confusing as the outside world. We share the same beliefs. People treat me well. There's no rich or poor. We're all equal. We wear similar clothes. Nobody looks down on me. Nobody is judgemental.

> ***Oz:*** Everybody is important here since we all contribute to the betterment of the society. I feel that I can make a difference. And people here recognise it.

> ***Kay:*** At the temple, everything is in order. We are very disciplined. It's always like this. Every time we come to the temple, we'll experience the familiar scene. I feel at peace here. It makes me feel that at least life is in control as everybody here has a strong commitment to the temple and to each other. I can trust everybody.

> ***Tom:*** At the temple, we are family. Every time I visit the temple, it's like coming back home. It's a place where I find happiness. I feel warm and welcome. We all are siblings. ... No, I don't feel this in my own family.

Obviously, the Dhammakaya offers the informants a sense of trust and intimacy, or in other words a sense of certainty for the self. Hence, the informants' endeavour to create the Dhammakaya Buddhist self has apparently enchained them to the illusive belief that such certainty exists. Ironically, they disregard the *anicca* or the impermanence being advocated in Buddhism.

8.3.4b Kilesa to Be Superior

Moreover, it seems that the informants not only need to be loved and accepted, but also desire to be superior to the others. Feeling powerless in the postmodern secular world, the informants obsessively strive to create the religious self that symbolises "a kind of spiritual elite" (Argyle 1992). The informants believe that employing the Buddhist moral code strictly and practising the Dhammakaya meditation intensively elevate their spiritual status above other mundane people (i.e., the non-Dhammakaya beings). Such an attitude reflects their attachment to the *kilesa* to attain superiority in the Thai social hierarchy.

> ***Kay:*** We observe the eight precepts. Observing the five precepts is common. Everybody can do it. It doesn't show our enthusiasm to be a virtuous Buddhist. If we observed only five precepts, we would not be superior to other Thai Buddhists.

> ***Paul:*** In the Buddhist Society we do not talk non-sense like other teenagers. We discuss Dhamma to elevate our minds... to cultivate wisdom. ... With wisdom, we can free ourselves from materialism. Those who do not practise Dhamma are always slaves of their own desires.

8.3.4c Kilesa to Be Immortal

The informants' self-creation projects embrace not only the narratives to complete a sense of superior existence in this life, but also the scripts to achieve a sense of symbolic immortality. Since the Dhammakaya are raising funds to build the Dhammakaya Ceteya, which contains a million 'personal Buddha images', the informants donate a large amount of money to build (i.e., buy) at least one of their own 'personal Buddha images' (10,000 or 20,000 bahts[138] depending on the location of the image in the Ceteya). They believe that this Ceteya will become the

[138] Regarding to the exchange rate on 15 September 2000, 59.57 bahts can be converted to £1.

Eighth Wonder of the World, and importantly its greatness will remain for thousands of years. Therefore, they are happy and proud to be a part of this greatness. More importantly, the informants believe that the Ceteya will make the Dhammakaya become the centre of the world Buddhism. Thus, they visualise how the prospective visitors of this Ceteya will praise their commitment to Buddhism when the visitors see their names inscribed on those 'personal Buddha images'. In this way, the informants can symbolically extend themselves into the immortal Buddha images. Obviously, this is evidence of symbolic consumption that helps to create the immortal self which the informants hope will keep their self-narratives going eternally.

> ***Oz:*** We cannot live forever, but this Ceteya will exist for at least two thousand years. And our names will also be there so long as the Ceteya exists.

> ***Kay:*** This Ceteya will make Thailand [more specifically the Dhammakaya] the centre of world Buddhism...just like the Vatican being the centre of Christianity. It's a great *boon* to be a part of it. The next generations who visit the Ceteya will praise us for our merits.

> ***Tom:*** We were born to *sasom baramee*[139]. And this is a great opportunity to *sasom baramee.* The Ceteya will save the world from *kilesa.* Its greatness will attract people around the world, not just Thai people, to the virtue of Buddhism. To take part in building the Ceteya is the great *boon.* This *boon* is like *sabeang*[140] that we can take with us on our journey in the following lives.

Indeed, the merit-making is a mechanical contract that the informants hope will guarantee a better rebirth in their next lives.

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[139] Accumulate merits.

[140] Food and subsistence supplies that we bring along when we are travelling.

8.3.4d The Dhammakaya Buddhist Self: Liberated or Enslaved

Although the informants believe that they follow the Buddhist path strictly in their symbolic construction of the Dhammakaya Buddhist selves, they appear to engage more and more in the vicious circle from which they believe they want to liberate themselves. While the informants mention that they are dissatisfied with animistic practices conducted by many monks in the traditional temple, they are paradoxically more impressed by all the phenomenal stories about the Buddha's life than with the quintessence of his philosophy. Obviously, the informants hold on to the magical power of the Dhammakaya crystal balls and the photographs of both *Luang-Por Sod* and *Luang-Por Dhammachayo*. Since a number of miraculous occurrences due to the *baramee* of the merit-makings and the magical power of the crystal balls and the like have repeatedly been publicised in the Dhammakaya's media materials, the informants seem to be touched by those miracles and recount them repetitively in their everyday interactions.

Furthermore, while the informants claim that since they joined the Dhammakaya sect, they have become independent of peer-pressures (e.g., consuming luxury-branded products or drinking), they paradoxically have succumbed to the conformity of the Dhammakaya way of life. Because of the sect's advocacy of solidarity, they may be even more influenced by their Dhammakaya peers than they once were influenced by their 'materialistic' friends. Moreover, endeavouring to create the Dhammakaya Buddhist self, the informants seem to be endlessly enslaved by their *kilesa* to accumulate more and more merits.

> **Lynn:** I want to be rich like...[a Thai millionaire who is an important benefactor of the Dhammakaya] so that I can donate more. The more we cultivate *boon*, the more virtuous Buddhists we become, and the better life we will re-incarnate.

So long as the informants still cling to the notion that 'the more they donate, the more *boon* they receive', it seems that they will not be able to liberate themselves from the logic of capitalism operating in the materialistic world. In consequence, symbolic consumption to cultivate merits will still be a vital part of the informants' self-creation.

8.4 Chapter Summary

The interpretations strongly support the view that in postmodernity religion may still be a significant dimension in the construction project of the self. Although Buddhism advocates the concept of *anatta*, these informants still aspire to create, maintain and express their religious selves in order to sustain their existence in this fragmented and uncontrollable world. Instead of trying to detach themselves from selfhood, they paradoxically fall into attachment to particular forms of symbolic consumption in an attempt to become what they believe a virtuous Buddhist should be.

Chapter Nine

The Urbanised Self

> ...our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than categories of time, as in the proceeding period of high modernism.
>
> Jameson (1991, p.16)

In this chapter, I discuss the fieldwork of the provincial group whose profile is presented in section 4.3.2d in Chapter Four. I explore how these informants employ everyday consumption to re-negotiate and re-settle themselves in a new spatiality, i.e., cosmopolitan Bangkok. The ethnographic interpretations in this chapter aim to convey insightful understanding of the interplay between the postmodern self, geographical identity and consumption symbolism that emerges in the fieldwork. The interpretations reveal the complexly dynamic and paradoxical selves of these informants. Although they aspire to urbanise their selves in order to assimilate properly into postmodern Bangkok, they still wish to preserve their ties with their provincial roots. To do this, they engage in various forms of symbolic consumption to create, express, negotiate, and harmonise the multifacets of their identities.

To understand the entangled relationship between the self, geographical space and consumption, I employ concepts from geography and migration studies as points of departure for my interpretations in this chapter. I believe that moving from one geographical area to another one, even within the same national boundaries, can threaten our sense of self to some extent, in a same way that is

similar to the experience of immigrants. That is, it involves the acculturation process of the self, which engages in symbolic consumption in order to assimilate, maintain, resist and segregate the self in a new cultural location (Penaloza 1994b).

9.1 Place, Identity and Consumption Symbolism

It is not uncommon that we identify ourselves with a particular place, even in the postmodern world where it is assumed that there is no longer a sense of geographical attachment (Said 1983). McDowell (1999) argues that despite the globalising forces that enhance our movement (e.g., for pleasure, for career, for education, for safety, etc.), our everyday life still largely takes place within particular places. It is also contended that globalisation paradoxically recreates or reaffirms rather than destroys locality or the meaning of place (du Gay 1997; Marcus 1994; McDowell 1999). Indeed, the term 'place' which I discuss in this chapter does not refer to just a physical area, rather it embraces local ways of life such as customs, values and practices. Additionally, the notion of place also comprises symbolic meaning that we often incorporate into our identities (McDowell 1999). Challenging the traditional concept of place as a set of coordinates on a map that define and bound a piece of territory, much literature argues that places are contested, fluid and uncertain (Massey 1997; McDowell 1999; Okely 1996; Smith 1993). Contrary to the modernist concept of absolute geographical space, it is proposed that places may hold manifold and shifting boundaries, for they are defined by socio-spatial practices (Massey 1997; McDowell 1999). Accordingly, places may overlap and intersect with each other as they are established and sustained by social relations of power and exclusion (Smith 1993).

From this perspective, places are socially constructed – they are the results of the continually dialectical relationship between physical landscapes and the social processes within them. Thus, socio-spatial practices not only differentiate localities but also bound the socio-spatial identities of the locals. Indeed, places embrace social life instilled with politics and ideology (Soja 1989). Sack (1992, p.1) reckons that, "space and place are fundamental means through which we make sense of the world and through which we act." Unsurprisingly, places and identities are closely intertwined (Keith and Pile 1993; McDowell 1999; Zukin 1992). Reading Benjamin's work (1979), which illustrates the complex relationship between landscapes and the self, Sontag (1979, p.19) remarks, "reminiscences of self are reminiscences of a place, and how he positions himself in it, navigates around it." Significantly, Benjamin's work illuminates "the relationship between identity and the spaces through which identity is both produced and expressed (Keith and Pile 1993, p. 9).

Central to the socio-spatial practices that distinguish places are consumption practices. While people in a provincial area in Thailand buy fresh food from the fresh market to prepare their meals daily, people in metropolitan Bangkok commonly buy their fresh food from a supermarket weekly. Sack (1992, p.1) notes:

> Consumption and [post]modernity, on the one hand, and the relational geographical framework, on the other, are mutually reinforcing. Consumption is basic to living in the [post]modern world. Even though we differ from one another in many respects, it is a fact of modern life that most of us are consumers and that we share the experience of being in places of consumption.

Dialectically, consumption creates and transforms places whereas places are designed to facilitate and enhance consumption (Zack 1992). Inevitably, as landscapes of consumption, places are perpetually contested and reproduced. So are identities. Fundamentally, socio-spatial identity is derived simply from what we consume in a particular landscape (Zukin 1992). In Bell and Valentine's (1997) book about food, they discuss the fact that our identity is strongly tied to where we eat. In this way, 'where we eat' may not refer to only a physical space but also to a symbol of a certain location (i.e., local food). As a Thai living in England, I always feel close to home (i.e., Thailand) whenever I have Thai food. Indeed, by exercising socio-spatial consumption, we are able to hold on to the symbolic meanings attached to such localities. Sack (1992) comments that as we move, we carry with us the sense of place that we have created from the interweaving of our everyday thoughts and actions with those of others in that place. To sustain a sense of specific place, we usually bring along some objects or practices that symbolise the place for us wherever we move. For instance, Mehta and Belk (1991) observe that Indian immigrants in the United States possess many objects from India to symbolically affirm bonds with their original homeland. Metaphorically, Indian and American boundaries converge. Embracing cultural hybridity[141] (Hall 1990), the self emerges in the 'third space' (Bhabha 1990; Soja 1996), not India not America; rather it is the imagined spatiality produced by intersection between images of India and America.

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[141] Stuart Hall (1990, p. 235) does not use the term 'hybridity' to reflect inferiority or impurity as he notes, "The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of identity which lives with and through, not despite, difference, by hybridity." By this, Hall's term 'hybridity' means that identities and cultural practices are an outcome of intermingling and fusion, an out come of movement (McDowell 1999).

As migration fabricates hybridity of cultures and identities (Hall 1990), it produces manifold selves (Woodward 1997) Bhabha (1990, p. 211) comments, "The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation." Complexly, hybridity holds contested identities which are not located in one place and cannot be traced back simply to any one root (Gilroy 1997). The self seemingly is situated in space between two or more competing worlds. To understand this phenomenon, much literature suggests that we avoid dualistic thinking and conventional concepts of acculturation (where immigrants conform to host cultures) or syncretism (with an image of two unambiguous cultures overlaid) (Anzaldua 1987; Clifford 1997; Massey 1991; Soja 1996). Certainly, border crossing is not just a movement from one territory to another; and acculturation process is not an unproblematic adaptation to a new culture. Anzaldua (1987) asserts that in border crossing, one can metaphorically be in both sides at once. Penaloza (1994, p. 32) also affirms that acculturation is not a straightforward process, rather it is a complex dynamic process "that consists of movement, translation, and adaptation processes leading to outcomes of assimilation, maintenance, resistance, and segregation."

In her study of Mexican immigrants in the United States, Penaloza (1994) discusses her findings that consumer acculturation involves consumption practices tailored to the situational contexts in the particular spaces. She notes that whereas the immigrants' consumption behaviours entail cultural presentation within a socio-spatial setting supposedly characterised by interdependent and overlapping cultural domains, these immigrants translate cultural identities into consumption at play. They do not surrender to the cultural meanings ascribed to products and services.

Indeed, for these immigrants, cultural identities become the unstable points of identification the meaning of which can be removed from previous referential cultural domains and reattached to new ones (Hall 1990; Penaloza 1994). By this playful translation, hybrid identity emerges and is continually reproduced through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth (Hall 1990). Certainly, "all identities are a fluid amalgam of memories of places and origins, constructed by and through fragments and nuances, journeys and rests, of movement between" (McDowell 1999). Thus, cultural identities may merely be shared through what Anderson (1983) calls 'imagined communities' – communities where members share imagined styles, not physical areas, to mark distinction from the others. Of course, these shared styles are exercised symbolically through everyday consumption.

In postmodernity, where globalisation and mediaisation appear to seep into almost every locality, places and the selves are overwhelmed by cultural identities that are complex manifestations of "local and global processes in relational, non-teleological way" (Clifford 1997, p. 7). This "global sense of place" dissolves the genuineness of locality and deconstructs it into disjointed socio-spatial scales (Massey 1991). We may sense the 'authenticity' of places only through their images constructed from dialectical fusion between our lived experience (e.g., living in the place, interacting with others in the place or visiting the place) and mediated experience (e.g., advertising, novel, travel guide or film).

9.2 Negotiating the Provincial Self in Bangkok

Bangkok, the capital of Thailand, is not only the ultimate example of the nation's consumer culture as described in Sherry's poems (1997) in Chapter Five, but also the national centre of everything – business, communication, (crime), education, entertainment, finance, government and transportation. Consequently, each year there are copious numbers of people coming to Bangkok for jobs and education. Essentially, they need to acculturate Bangkok's ways of life in order to settle down comfortably. I use the term 'to acculturate', which generally refers to the act in the general process of movement and adaptation to the cultural environment in one nation by persons from another nation (Penaloza 1994), in order to portray that moving from other provinces to Bangkok may be relatively equated to migrating to another nation.

As Bangkok is viewed as a first-world city in a developing nation (i.e., Thailand), the social life in Bangkok is very different from that outside the capital. Influenced intensively by multi-national capitalism, Bangkok has become a cosmopolitan city bound up with globalisation and mediaisation. While the way of life in the provincial areas is still simple, the social life in Bangkok is complex since it is greatly influenced by postmodern conditions. To acculturate successfully into Bangkok culture, the provincial consumers need to acquire cultural capital and skills not only to urbanise themselves but also to cope with the threats posed by postmodernity.

Being the capital and the centre of almost all activities, Bangkok holds a tremendously privileged position compared to other places in the kingdom. While

Bangkok is regarded as 'Greater Bangkok,' any area outside Bangkok is referred to as 'other provinces'. Unsurprisingly, people in the provinces often experience a sense of 'otherness' and thus inferiority. Although, in the recent decades, the modernisation of mass media and the transportation system as well as the development of tourism has diffused Bangkok's urbanised and globalised experience all over the kingdom, the gap between Bangkok and other provinces is still enormous. Because of the very unequal distribution of development[142] (e.g., in communications, the economy, education and healthcare) between Bangkok and other provinces, consumers in Bangkok and the provinces inevitably have a different standard of living and lifestyle. Moreover, culturally and economically, Bangkok's scale of "global sense of place" (Massey 1991) is much more intense than that in the provinces. Consumers in Bangkok have many more opportunities to be exposed to global consciousness via globalised retail milieux (e.g., fast-food restaurants, retail chain stores, shopping centres) and media (e.g., cable/satellite television, the Internet, films).

With such inequality, the disparity between schools in Bangkok and the provinces is to be expected. Most renowned schools appear to cluster in the capital. Evidently, schools in Bangkok can attract more of both quality teachers and benefactors. Therefore, despite the national standard curriculum, students from prominent schools in Bangkok are potentially able to pass the entrance

[142] For example, Bangkok and its vicinity holds 10% of the kingdom's population, but earns almost 50% of the GNP and has almost 70% of bank deposits. The number of telephones and physicians in Bangkok is approximately 65% and 50% of the whole kingdom respectively. Source: Pocket Thailand in Figures (1994), Alpha Research Co., Ltd.

examination[143] into the state universities more than students in the provinces. To provide opportunities for talented provincial students, several state universities develop special programmes that offer admission quotas reserved exclusively for provincial students. One of these programmes is the White Elephant Programme to which the informants belong.

9.3 Interpretations of the Fieldwork

The interpretations strongly suggest that in order to assimilate into Bangkok social life, the informants consciously employ symbolic consumption to urbanise themselves. Vigorously, they look for symbolic resources from both lived and mediated experience to facilitate their acculturation processes. Simultaneously, they resist becoming a Bangkokian. Whenever the informants congregate, they remind each other of their provincial roots. Like those immigrants in Penaloza's study (1994), the informants' acculturation processes seem to paradoxically embrace both the endeavour to integrate into their new social environment and the determination to preserve their provincial roots.

9.3.1 White Elephants from the Provinces

The fact that the informants have been accepted into the White Elephant Programme suggests that they hold outstanding backgrounds in both their academic records and extra-curriculum activities. Since their early school age, the informants

[143] The annual examination managed by the Ministry of University Bureau for students who wish to get into state universities. Since the state universities are more academically famous than the private ones, the examination is highly competitive. It is also regarded as more prestigious to study in the state universities.

have always performed well academically. They were frequently appointed heads of their classrooms, which simultaneously provided them with opportunities to exercise their leadership in other extra-curriculum activities such as Girl Guides. Accordingly, the informants were regularly granted scholarships and awards. Even in informal settings, the informants' leadership was also well regarded by peers who sometimes depended on their 'academic support'.

> ***Bird:*** Academically, I was in the top 10% of my class. I also liked to participate in extra-curriculum activities. My proudest activity was when I worked for the Girl Guides. In my senior year, I was appointed the president of the school's Girl Guides, which allowed me to participate in decision-making processes with the teachers. I was in charge of planning all activities for a batch of more than a hundred Girl Guides.

> ***Win:*** Since I performed well at school, my parents hardly needed to pay for my school fees.

> ***Nud:*** Although I wasn't really studious, I did very well in class. I was mischievous but the teachers liked me. My friends liked me too since I often let them copy my exam answers, especially the mathematics exam. Hence, I became kind of a gang leader. We were quite a big gang; there were ten of us. I was always the one who suggested activities, like let's see a film this weekend or let's have ice cream after school.

With their excellent performance at school, the informants appear to be their parents' hope and pride. Despite the economic constraints, their parents have been willing to spend on almost anything they believe would help the informants' academic performance.

> ***Bird:*** I'm the only one in the family who has had the chance to study at a university... the only one who has lived in Bangkok. At home, we don't need to spend much. We can eat things from our farm. I'm the biggest spender in the family. I feel guilty sometimes for my mum always favours me.
>
> ***Interviewer:*** Because you are the youngest child?
>
> ***Bird:*** Not really. I think because I've done well at school. I'm her hope. She tries her best to support my studies. For example, when I was in junior high school, I wanted to have a typewriter, but I didn't have enough saving to buy it. It cost around 4,500 bahts, but I had only 1,500 bahts. First, my brother agreed to share it with me, but he also had only 1,500 bahts. So, we decided to ask mum to contribute the rest.

> Guess who asked mum? Me. Because we knew that mum would favour me for it. Since my academic records were better than those of my siblings, she tended to give me more educational-related stuff. Luckily, my siblings are very understanding. They are very supportive as well.

Indeed, even though Bird's mother wants to treat her children equally, with her financial constraints, it seems more sensible for her to invest in a more promising child. Like Bird, other informants appear to be their parents' hope for the betterment of their families in the future. That is, a well-educated child is likely have a better opportunity to establish a good career; thus, it is expected she will be able to support the rest of the family in the future. Unsurprisingly, the informants' major spending in their childhood revolved around their education. As well as the economic justification, to obtain educational capital is also a significant means to improve social status. As mentioned earlier in Chapter Five, Thai society, though flexible, operates in a hierarchical fashion. Thus, the more the informants are educated, the better chance for them to gain social superiority. Undoubtedly, as an extension of the informants' selves, their families then can vicariously enjoy such status too (Belk 1988).

The informants recount that due to their families' economic limitations, their everyday consumption in the province is simple and economical. They claim that they are not conscious much of what they consume. Primarily, most products they use daily at home such as soap or shampoo are communally shared among family members. Their main entertainment is watching television with their families. Watching television is obviously a daily ritual to strengthen bonds in the informants' families. It is also the time when family members negotiate their communal consumption choices.

> ***Win:*** I didn't pay much attention to what I used. I used whatever my mum bought. The whole family used the same stuff. For example, we shared a bar of soap... toothpaste... not a toothbrush though [laugh]. ... We used common brands like Colgate toothpaste, Lux soap or Sunsilk shampoo. However, if I wanted to try some other brands, I told my mum and she bought them for me. I mean, for the whole family to use. Let's say, when I saw an advert of a new shampoo, I would persuade my mum to buy it next time.

> ***Da:*** There wasn't anything much to do in the province. Occasionally, I saw a film with my friends. Otherwise, I watched TV at home with my family. We usually watched news, [Thai] soap operas and Chinese series. Sometime we mimic the acting. It was good fun. We cracked a lot of jokes together.

Evidently, for the informants, consumption in the province is a collective practice in the family. This socio-spatial consumption appears common in a less developed place where individuals display little sense of self apart from the group (Sack 1992). Moreover, culturally, the Thais, especially in the provinces, still value their families, especially parents highly (Komin 1990). As the informants claim that they have warm and happy families, they naturally identify themselves with the families. For example, in Auan's collage of the self, she put her parents as an important constituent of her identities. The significance of family also arises frequently in other informants' interviews.

> ***Auan:*** Family is everything to me. Whenever I feel troubled, sad, exhausted or disheartened, I think of home... of my family. Going back home will make me feel better. We have a warm family. We love each other dearly. If I have a problem, I can easily seek advice at home, especially from my mum. I'm so close to my mum that I can talk to her about everything.

> ***Nat:*** My parents are the most important people in my life. I don't want to live far away from them after I graduate. I don't want to work in Bangkok. I want to find a job in my hometown. ... Especially, because I'm the only child. I feel that I should take care of them when they get old. Without them, we wouldn't have today, wouldn't we? I mean they are gods who not only give us life but also take care of us, eh? They save up their incomes to give me the best they can. So, when I want to buy something unnecessary, I think of them, think of how hard they work to earn the money, I then can forget about it [the thing that Nat wants to buy].

Nat's notion that her parents can be compared to gods is not uncommon in Thai culture. This is particularly so for the mother, Mulder (1996, p. 91-92) notes, "She is not a person any longer, but the symbol of virtue and sacrifice, of goodness and forgiveness. ...Obviously, the mother image is inviolably sacred." Indeed, this cultural meaning has been incorporated into the informants' selves, and certainly influences their consumption practises. Interestingly, Nat's favourite T-shirt has an image of a rabbit, which apparently denotes her mother's nickname.

The informants' simple lifestyles in the provinces are also due to the bare minimum of peer pressure at school. The informants describe most students in their schools as coming from relatively similar socio-economic backgrounds; thus, all their classmates also consume minimally. There is no pressure to buy or use any sumptuous products. Nevertheless, the informants regularly talk about their mundane consumption with their friends, particularly when there are new brands advertised on television. For instance, they recommend each other to try a new brand of soap or a new scent of an established brand of shampoo. Later, the informants discuss their friends' recommended brands at home.

9.3.2 The First Encounter with Bangkok Social Life

After graduating from provincial high schools, the informants were admitted to the university under the White Elephant Programme. Just after the first term started, they instantly formed a group – a provincial group. Although the informants had been greatly exposed to the Bangkokian attitudes, lifestyles and values via the mass media before they came to Bangkok, they still felt uneasy

mingling with the Bangkokian students in their early years. Nat recounts her first experience in the university,

> ***Nat*:** In our first year, the segregation between Bangkokian students and provincial students was very obvious. We, the provincial students, dared not talk to the Bangkokian students. We dared not introduce ourselves to them. Apparently, the Bangkokian students didn't bother to mingle with us either. They hung around together. They went to lunch together. There was no single provincial student in Bangkokian groups. Concurrently, the provincial students also clustered together. It happened automatically. I don't know why.
>
> ***Interviewer*:** What made you hesitate to talk to the Bangkokian students?
>
> ***Nat*:** We did talk to them. They talked to us too. They were friendly. But we felt tense. We dared not talk much. I don't know how to explain. We even dared not initiate a conversation. So, they didn't bother to talk to us. Maybe they thought that we were unfriendly. In fact, we just dared not approach them.
>
> ***Interviewer*:** Were you afraid of saying something *cheoy*[144]?
>
> ***Nat*:** No, we weren't afraid of that. We just felt... I don't know how to describe the feeling.
>
> ***Interviewer*:** Shy?
>
> ***Nat*:** Not really. It seemed that they enjoyed each other's conversation a lot... they laughed, but we didn't. And we didn't understand why we didn't enjoy those conversations. It was something like that. We were like an extra. Then, we formed our own group, the provincial group. Well, it wasn't that we didn't like the Bangkokian students. We said 'hi' to them. We smiled at them. But we never had lunch or did things together. However, now that we are in our third year, we seem to know them better. We feel more comfortable talking to them. We can even crack jokes with them. I can say that we now have become friendly to each other. The separation between provincial students and Bangkokian students seems less. I think maybe it is because we can adjust ourselves to them better. They are what they are. It was our mentality that we felt we were different that distanced us from them.

Evidently, the fact that the informants were familiar with Bangkok social life through mediated experience did not ensure them instant understanding of such a culture. Even though some literature suggests that via the modern mass media, "the ability to participate in an urban way of life is largely independent of location and is open to all" (Clark 1996, p. 100), I argue that consumers in the provincial or rural regions may not comprehend the urban culture the same way as those who live in the cities do. As the urban and provincial consumers are engaging in different lived

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[144] Out of date or out of place.

experiences as well as holding different values, they may interpret their mediated experience of the urban images portrayed in the mass media differently. Indeed, they might attend to different certain messages and make sense of the meaning according to their different personal perceptions and social knowledge (Anderson and Meyer 1988). Hence, regardless of their exposure to similar mediated experiences, the provincial informants and their Bangkok colleagues do not seem to equally share the common worldviews.

Moreover, the fact that the informants had experienced the Bangkok social scene through the mass media did not mean that they could settle down effortlessly in their new social atmosphere. In fact, their mediated knowledge of the capital made them more aware of the vast difference between their provincial simple living and the Bangkokian lavish lifestyles. Accordingly, as the informants became highly conscious of the differences, they appeared to be less confident in interacting with their Bangkokian colleagues. Simultaneously, Bangkokian students also failed to notice their provincial colleagues' apprehension due to their ignorance of this matter. Thus, they did not make enough effort to welcome the new comers. Nevertheless, the informants seemed to approach the segregation problem only from their sides. They thought it was their responsibility to adapt themselves to the cosmopolitan life. The attitude 'when in Rome, do as the Romans do' loomed large in their acculturation process.

Furthermore, the informants' hesitation in mingling with their Bangkokian colleagues can be interpreted from the perspective of social literacy. The informants felt anxious about carrying out conversations with their Bangkokian colleagues because they could not enjoy the conversations, especially the jokes.

Indeed, these conversations seem like a 'foreign' language to them. Frequently, the Bangkokian students talked about some luxury foreign brands or their shopping experience and so the informants could hardly participate in the conversation. Despite literally speaking the similar language (i.e., Thai), the informants did not share the 'social literacy' (i.e., the literacy of consumer culture) with their Bangkokian counterparts. Additionally, the shift of social space from a simple life in the province to a much more complex life in the Bangkok also increased the informants' anxieties tremendously.

> ***Nud*:** I could hardly mix in with those Bangkokian students. I didn't know what to say to them. They loved to talk about clubbing, shopping, especially shopping. They talked about foreign brands or new fashion trends. I knew nothing about it. I didn't enjoy such topics at all. I felt lost.

> ***Win*:** I could easily sense my vulnerability when I first came to the university [i.e., Bangkok]. Previously, my life was like living in another world... a dream world where I had a warm family and good friends. Everything seemed perfect. I never felt distressed. But here... society is so vast and varied that I've met various kinds of people. At first, honestly speaking, I could hardly handle it. ... I could not adjust my *jitjai*[145]. Superficially [i.e., physically], I might be able to fool the others that I could adjust myself well. I acted normal. But inside, I felt very confused.

> ***Auan*:** At the beginning, I really missed home, especially my mum. I felt as if I had to fight in this big world alone. I wondered whether I would survive.

Indeed, the informants appeared to lose their sense of security. Mulder (1996) comments that, to the Thai, the reliable and trustworthy world is centred on their mothers; thus, the further away from the mothers (i.e., home), the less secure the world. In this case, the informants not only live away from home but more importantly, live in unruly Bangkok. Accordingly, the informants sought refuge from this social frustration by turning to each other to form a group of their own. Since they share accommodation in Bangkok, the group spend most of their leisure

[145] Heart. In Thai language, the term 'heart' embraces both the heart (feeling) and mind (thinking).

time together, both at the university and outside the university. Nonetheless, they did not seal themselves in their own social world. They still needed to socialise with other students, especially in the academic context (e.g., classrooms or group coursework). They realised that they needed to adapt themselves in order to socialise comfortably with their colleagues. Hence, they began to urbanise their self-projects.

9.3.3 In Search of Symbolic Resources

Endeavouring to integrate into the new social world, the informants actively look for symbolic resources in order to enlarge their cultural capital for urbanising themselves. This involves consumption of media and observation of Bangkok consumer culture in their everyday lives. Watching advertisements on television and strolling in department stores or shopping centres become the informants' significant missions to obtain symbolic resources for the self-urbanisation project.

9.3.3a Mediated Experience

The informants maintain that previously they only attended the media mainly for news and entertainment. They claim that they had never been conscious of 'looking for symbolic resources' from the media. (I note that they did acquire a lot of resources from soap operas or advertising from television as mentioned earlier in section 9.3.1 and 9.3.2, but they are not aware of it.) However, when the informants came to Bangkok, they realised that what they experienced in the media could be vital symbolic resources to facilitate them in socialising with their Bangkokian friends, especially resources from television advertising. Yet, they did not have a

television, thus, it was important to buy one first. Bird talks about her experience when she decided to buy a television.

> ***Bird*:** My favourite things? This TV. I really wanted to have a TV in our flat [in Bangkok]. I thought I must have it. I was on a bus home. When the bus stopped in front of Merry King[146], I spontaneously jumped off and went in the store to buy this TV. These guys *[pointing at other group members]* were still on the bus. I didn't even wait for them.
>
> ***Interviewer*:** What made you make such decision?
>
> ***Bird*:** We didn't have a TV in our flat. If we wanted to watch TV, we had to watch it at *[a friend's name]*'s flat. Actually, we weren't addicted to any programme. But we had to have it. We had to watch it; otherwise, when we chatted with friends, we could not follow the conversation. We went blanked. So, I thought it was high time we bought a TV.
>
> ***Interviewer*:** What kind of topic on TV did your friends talk about?
>
> ***Bird*:** Advertising, pop stars, programmes, everything, which I could not follow.
>
> ***Interviewer*:** Advertising? Tell me more about it.
>
> ***Bird*:** Like... Have you seen that advert? Like... They talked about the dinosaur in a new PTT[147] advert. It had a dental brace. How cute it was... I didn't see it... I didn't understand.
>
> ***Interviewer*:** How did you feel?
>
> ***Bird*:** I felt *cherm*[148]...I felt *ber*[149] I thought how could I join in the group *[her colleagues in marketing classes]* if I didn't understand what they were talking about. I just sat *bur*[150] alone while the others were laughing. So, this TV is an investment.
>
> ***Interviewer*:** Investment? Was it worth the investment?
>
> ***Bird*:** Certainly.
>
> ***Interviewer*:** How?
>
> ***Bird*:** Now I can participate in conversation better. I don't feel stressed anymore. I can discuss... I can laugh... I used to feel frustrated when I could not follow the discussion. I was afraid of not being able to catch on with colleagues. I was afraid of being a loser.

Similar to the sixth formers studied by Ritson and Elliott (1999), Bird's experience of being "*cherm, ber and bur*" is a particularly frustrating one that obstructed her capability of socialising with her marketing colleagues[151]. Indeed,

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[146] A department store.
[147] A local brand of petroleum station.
[148] Out of date.
[149] Stupid.
[150] Blanked. It is a Thai slang derived from the English word 'blur'.
[151] Bird majors in Marketing. Later she becomes the President of the Marketing Club.

"experiencing the ad becomes the ticket of entry into a particular part of the group's social exchange, and this experience in turn contributes to the ongoing structure of that group" (Ritson and Elliott 1999, p. 265). Evidently, advertising is employed for various gratifications and uses (O'Donohoe 1994). It is a considerable socialising agent as it provides resources of enjoyment and things to talk about. From my observations, the informants habitually crack jokes derived from particular advertisements. Yet, they also discuss the images portrayed in other advertisements seriously. Sometime they mimic the advertising models or play with words or slogans in the advertisements; while at some other time they argue critically about the storylines.

Interestingly, throughout the fieldwork period of this group, advertising appeared to be a significant ingredient of the group's interactions, especially in their everyday conversations[152]. Seemingly, their extensive use of adverting, particularly as metaphors for jokes and plays, is not only for socialising purposes (Ritson and Elliott 1999), but also for neutralising or lessening the frustrations of living in unruly Bangkok. For these informants, everyday life in Bangkok is stressful. Not only do they have to endure Bangkok's conditions like traffic jams, overcrowded buses or pollution, but they also struggle with the capital's high cost of living and deeply rooted consumerism. According to their socio-economic circumstances, they somehow feel powerless and marginalised in Bangkok's consumer society. Thus, symbolic creativity through the uses of 'free resources' like advertising helps restore their sense of vital capacity, and therefore empowers their sense of self (Willis 1990). Indeed, the capability to choose and reapply resources from advertising to

[152] I would say that it is more apparent than other fieldwork groups.

another contexts creatively reaffirms their self-esteem in that even under such circumstances they are still able to maintain and illustrate their aptitude.

Advertising also supplies symbolic resources for aspirations and fantasies. More importantly, it offers ideas for the self-creation project (McCracken 1987).

> ***Auan*:** Sometimes I prefer advertising to the programme itself. Many advertisements are very well made. Some are very funny. Some are so romantic that I would like to be in the advert myself. Beautiful scenery... light music... and a gorgeous man. I may look a bit rough, but I'm very sensitive and romantic.
>
> ***Da*:** Definitely, I want to be a workingwoman. Nobody wants to be just a housewife. It is boring. Even in detergent advertisements, every woman seems to be working now.
>
> ***Interviewer*:** If a woman works, who will take care of her baby then?
>
> ***Da*:** Well, I will demand that my husband takes care of the baby. *[Laugh]* Like in the Care[153] advert, where a father gives his baby a bath.
>
> ***Win:*** I dream of having a warm happy family of my own in the future. Have you seen the Dumex[154] ad? ... Or the Aletta NF ad... I can't remember the brand exactly. There are daddy, mummy and a little girl. I want to have a family like that.
>
> ***Bird:*** Of course, I often dream of owning a house like that one day. But for now I know it is impossible. But it is nice to dream of it anyway.

Ostensibly, the informants may not take these symbolic resources for present usage; rather they accumulate them in the repertoire of their possible selves. Although the informants sometimes aspire to materialise those images portrayed in advertising, at the same time they realise that they are unlikely achieve them. However, this does not depress them. In fact, the informants seem to enjoy vicarious experiences through these advertising fantasies.

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[153] A brand of baby toiletries.
[154] A brand of instant milk for toddlers.

9.3.3b Lived Experience

Besides the mediated experience, the informants also vigorously look for symbolic resources from their everyday lived experience. They love to stroll in shopping centres to find out what is 'in' as well as to observe how other people dress. The informants also observe what is fashionable among their fellow students, especially their Bangkokian counterparts.

> ***Auan*:** I mooch about Merry King or Central[155] regularly. They are just across the street from where I live. So, almost every time I get off the bus, I habitually walk into the stores.
>
> ***Interviewer*:** Shopping?
>
> ***Auan*:** Not really. Mostly, I just do window-shopping. Just for pleasure... for knowledge as well. I want to know what is new in the market so that I can *mouth*[156] with friends. Otherwise, I feel *cheoy*. Also, I love to watch how other people dress so that I can follow the trend. I want to know what is hip now.
>
> ***Interviewer*:** Don't you see it in the university?
>
> ***Auan*:** Of course, we love to watch those trendy folks in the university as well. There is one girl in particular whom we usually observe. She is *dern*[157] everyday. She always wears something *tuen ta tuen jai*[158]. She is a trendsetter.
>
> ***Interviewer*:** Do you follow her then?
>
> ***Auan*:** No. She is too modern. I dare not dress like her. Nobody in our group does. We just like to look at her style and *mouth* about it. Well, that is not true. Sometime we follow her. Like... the other day the whole group except Bird bought ankle bracelets after her. Usually, we will consider whether it will match us well or not.

The informants also acquire symbolic resources to acculturate themselves to Bangkok lifestyles through lived consumption experience. That is, they learn about the cosmopolitan life through consuming particular products or services. Win recounts her first consumption experience at McDonald and Pizza Hut. Indeed,

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[155] A big department store and shopping complex.
[156] Slang for chitchat.
[157] A slang for modern.
[158] Tuen – awake; ta – eyes; jai – heart. The phrase usually refers to response towards novelty or extravagance.

eating out in international fast-food restaurants is an important component of young people's lifestyles in Bangkok.

> ***Win:*** At home, we had a simple lifestyle. My parents didn't even shop in the local department store. If I were still at home, I wouldn't know anything. I learned a lot in the first year of the university. It was also the first time I've been to McDonald and Pizza Hut. ... The first time I went to these restaurants was bizarre. I didn't know what to do or order. So, I just followed what other people did. I felt coy but I didn't show it. I thought it was peculiar to eat a hamburger or a pizza. It wasn't a normal meal for us. But I'm used to it now. At first, we only went to those restaurants only on a special occasion. Now, we go there when it is hot. It is nice to eat in an air-conditioned place.

Additionally, the informants also obtain symbolic resources or capital in the field of interactions with other colleagues in the university. Commonly, they share these resources with each other in the group.

9.3.4 Negotiating Meaning: Self-Social Symbolism

Since the informants form the group in order to take sanctuary in each other, they appear to rely on each other tremendously. They not only support each other emotionally but also share the aspiration to urbanise the self. Whenever any informant has a problem, the others would lend a hand and comfort them. Whenever the informants learn anything new, they would update the others. For instance, when Win hears about the next year 'in' make-up colour tone from her colleague, she eagerly tells other members in the group; or when Nat learns about a new mobile phone from her boyfriend, she shares the knowledge with the group. Generally, when the informants learn about a new product or new fashion, they discuss the matter; and frequently they even go to the stores to check things out. The informants usually go shopping together and they naturally ask each other for advice. Even when they go shopping alone, when they want to buy something,

especially clothes, they do not buy it straight away. Instead, they go back to ask their friends to come to the store with them so that they can ask for advice whether they should buy it or not. If their friends consider they should buy it, then they will feel confident to buy it. If their friends think the product is not good, they will normally decline the idea of buying it. Trying to harmonise their individual and group identities, the informants constantly validate and negotiate the meaning of their consumption choices between the two realms of self-symbolism and social-symbolism (Elliott 1994b) through the process of "discursive elaboration" (Thompson 1990). This process not only affirms their sense of belonging to the group, but also provides them with a sense of self-confidence. Manifestly, the informants are conscious of trying to avoid making the 'wrong choice' or buying something in 'bad taste'; they always need their friends to endorse or verify their consumption choices.

***Nud*:** We love to go shopping together. It is more fun than doing it alone. More importantly, when we shop together, we can help each other choose stuff. Sometimes my friends encourage me to buy what I wouldn't have the confidence to buy if I came alone. Like these *kama*[159] jeans, I wouldn't have bought them, if they had not given me confidence that I looked good in them. I thought the *kama* jeans would make my thighs look fat. But my friends confirmed that they made my hip and thighs look smaller.

***Da*:** We always buy similar things. Whenever any of us buys something and likes it, we will recommend the others to buy it as well. Let's say when I buy a brand of facial foam and I think it is good; I will encourage my friends to try it. So, we end up using the same stuff.

***Win*:** If we don't go shopping together, we always show what we buy to the others. Then, everybody will try it on; and we make comments. It is fun. If we like it, we will go and buy it.

[159] A style of jeans that was popular in Thailand during the period of this study.

Nonetheless, when the informants really want to buy a particular product, they will re-negotiate the self-social symbolism through behavioural signification. That is, they buy and use that product regardless of the group's disapproval, and check how their friends respond to their behaviour. If the others do not make any further comments, it means that they may continue using the product. However, if the others keep nagging on about it, they may need to give up using it.

> ***Auan*:** I usually follow my friends. However, it is not always that I listen to their comments. If I really like it, I will buy it anyway. Like this T-shirt; I liked the colour and the design, but my friends thought it was too *kiku*[160]. I liked the cartoon on it, so I bought it. When I put it on, they didn't say anything. Actually, Win mentioned that it was cute on me. So, I guess it is okay to wear it then.

Interestingly, as bonds between group members become more robust, the informants seem to be more assertive of their self-symbolism. Presumably, they also develop more self-confidence in their tastes as they have acculturated Bangkok lifestyles.

> ***Win:*** Previously, I was really influenced by the group. When they commented that the product is *cheoy*, I didn't have the confidence to buy it at all. But, as we know each other better, we realise that our styles may be different. I tend to buy what I like, and they seem to accept my style. Thus, I'm now less influenced by the group. If I think this style suits me well or I feel 'it's me', I will go for it.

9.3.5 Urbanising the Self

Although the informants feel contented with their group, they still need to socialise comfortably with other university colleagues as well as to assimilate properly into Bangkok social life. The informants mention that they need to urbanise themselves in order to make their Bangkokian peers accept them socially. However, I deem that the informants' implicit urge to urbanise themselves is to

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[160] When an adult mimics a child, s/he may not look innocent or cute like a child. Rather s/he may look *kiku.*

restore their sense of security and self-esteem. It must be demoralising for these informants who used to have a superior status (e.g., being a classroom leader) in the provinces to feel so marginalised in Bangkok. Their interview excerpts in section 9.3.2 indicate their sense of insecurity and their loss of self-confidence clearly. So long as they do not urbanise themselves, they will still experience a sense of incompleteness. In the symbolic self-completion theory, Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) suggest that if individuals feel insecure in social roles then they will attempt to complete their discrepant self-concept by the use of symbols they believe will demonstrate role competence.

Endeavouring to pursue their self-urbanisation project, the informants employ much symbolic consumption in their everyday lives. First, they need to get rid of their provincial images. Primarily, the informants need to urbanise their looks. Clothes and physical appearance are crucial here. Thus, the informants consume various products to groom their looks, especially their faces and skins.

> ***Bird*:** When I visited home last school break, I helped my mum working in the field. Thus, I became darker because of the sun. When I came back to Bangkok, my friends recommended me to use this UV whitening cream. I've used it for a month. I look much fairer now.
>
> ***Interviewer*:** So, you prefer fair skin to dark skin.
>
> ***Bird*:** Dark skin is not bad, but I want to look fairer. Most people here [in Bangkok] look fair. It makes me feel so dark. I don't know how to explain. But having fair skin certainly looks better than dark skin. At home, I was never aware of my skin. In fact, compared to the others at home, I looked relatively fair.

What Bird does not mention explicitly is that dark skin symbolises a 'provincial look' (i.e., farmers or those people who work under the sun), while fair skin indicates an 'urban look'. To look urbanised, Bird also decides to have her teeth braced. The body grooming activities also coincide with the informants' self-transition from teenage girl into grown-up young woman. They begin to use

cosmetics and other accessories like earrings or ankle bracelets to adorn their bodies. More importantly, since some of them start going out, they become even more aware of their appearances.

To urbanise the self, the informants must also polish up the way they dress. To do this, they pay attention to how young women in Bangkok dress. More importantly, they take notice of how to dress properly in different social contexts. At home, if they want to go to the market, they may go out in their home clothes. However, they are aware that in Bangkok, there are some implicit dress codes that they should follow.

> ***Nat*:** Sometimes I feel like wearing *kangkeng Le*[161] to the supermarket, but my friends always remark, "This is Bangkok, not home. Dress properly, otherwise they will look down on us." It is such a hassle that we need to change our clothes when we go out.

Apart from urbanising the look, the informants also urbanise themselves by consuming products or services that not only help to enhance their cultural capital but also symbolise cultural capital itself. For example, the informants save up money to register for additional English and computer courses outside the university. To them, acquiring English and computer skills seemingly signifies the internationalised and IT aspects of the urbanised self. These skills can also be viewed as educational capital that the informants hope to convert into economic capital (i.e., getting a good job) in the future (Bourdieu 1984). As information technology looms large in Bangkok social life, possessing an IT product also symbolises the urbanised self.

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[161] A pair of trousers initially worn by fisherman. Usually, people wear them at home.

***Nud*:** I've just bought this pager. Now that I'm a committee member of the Marketing Club, I need to be easy to reach. It would be better if I had a mobile phone. Unfortunately, I cannot afford it.

Interestingly, from the above excerpt, Nud attempts to neutralise the 'guilt' of buying an expensive (and probably unnecessary) product by justifying that a pager is essential for her extra-curriculum activity. This behaviour is common among the group members. Since the informants' economic resources are limited, they tend to ascribe symbolic values to products that are practical in design and purpose. Thus, they always try to rationalise their consumption choices, even after the purchase.

Win: This is my favourite bag. It is very useful. I can put everything in it. I mean, a wallet, a comb, a calculation, etc.

Interviewer: Tell me more about your buying experience of this bag.

Win: Actually, I didn't plan to buy it. I just wanted to go window-shopping. But when I saw it, I felt yes! The design was just 'in'. It was really 'hit my heart[162]'. So I bought it without hesitation.

Interviewer: So, it was an impulsive buy, wasn't it?

Win: Yes *[Laugh]*. But...I've used it for almost two years now.

9.3.6 Sustaining a Sense of the Provincial Self

Although the informants attempt to assimilate into Bangkok life, paradoxically, they also strive to sustain their sense of their provincial selves. The informants visit their homes in the provinces whenever their schedules allow. They constantly remind each other of their provincial roots. They believe that they never want to become a Bangkokian. In their everyday consumption in Bangkok, the informants try to retain some practices which they usually do at home; for example,

[162] Translated from a Thai word which is used when we really like something.

sharing bathroom toiletries. Indeed, such collective consumption practice provides them with a sense of home – a sense of family.

> ***Da:*** We are like family. We not only live together, but also do a lot of things together. We eat together... shop together. We share things too. We even share personal products like soap, shampoo or toothpaste. ... It makes us feel at home.

In order to feel close to home, the informants even ascribe symbolic value to their regular department store – Merry King, as their 'home market'. Additionally, they try to resume some practices that they normally do with their families at home; for example, *tak batr*[163].

> ***Auan*:** We prefer shopping at Merry King to shopping at Central. Although Central is posher than Merry King. We feel more relaxed to walk about in Merry King. It is more like our home department store. Sometimes we go shopping there in shorts and T-shirts. We refer to it as 'our home market.'

> ***Bird:*** As a Buddhist, I try to *tak batr* once a week. It is what we usually do at home. My mum *tak batr* every morning.

Ironically, the longer they live in Bangkok, the more they seem to resist becoming a Bangkokian and want to reclaim their provincial selves.

> ***Nat*:** Sometime I feel it is ridiculous that we have to follow the Bangkokian. So, I do what I normally do at home. I do what I want to do. ... Thailand belongs to us too!

Presumably, these informants exercise resistance in their acculturation processes as a mechanism to maintain a balance between their provincial selves and the newly urbanised ones.

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[163] Offering food to Buddhist monks in the morning.

9.3.7 Balancing the Multifaceted Self

To pursue their symbolic self-project comfortably, the informants employ several approaches to balance their multifaceted selves under their life conditions. In order to reconcile the tension between their economic constraints and Bangkok lavish lifestyles, the informants valorise symbolic meanings to consumption which is affordable and practical in their everyday lives. This symbolic valorisation is analogous to Bourdieu's (1984, p. 374) "the taste for necessity" and Thompson's (1990, p. 158) "practicality" – the strategy that individuals in subordinate positions in society employ to ascribe meaning to accessible and inexpensive products.

> ***Bird*:** I'm not against those people who carry expensive handbags like Louise Vitton[164]. Likewise, I don't feel inferior to use this 199 baths[165] handbag. I like it. It looks beautiful and it is practical. I can carry it anywhere.

While Bird feels relatively indifferent towards a luxury brand being used as a lavish symbol by some colleagues[166] in the university, other group members reject its lavish meaning in order to counterbalance their sense of inferiority due to the unequal distribution of wealth in the society. That is, they re-valorise luxury brands with various censorious meanings such as vulgar, profligate, stupid or even responsible for Thailand's economic demolition[167]. Some informants go so far as to use the counterfeits to ridicule the authentic ones.

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[164] It is approximately costs 15,000-20,000 bahts in Thailand.
[165] Regarding to the exchange rate on 15 September 2000, £1 can be converted to 59. 57 bahts.
[166] For example, the nouveaux riche group.
[167] During economic crisis in Thailand, luxury brand consumption is blamed as a source of the kingdom's deficit trade balance.

> ***Da:*** This wallet is counterfeit. Everybody would know instantly that it is a counterfeit. How can I afford the genuine one? I have no intention of fooling anybody that it is authentic. I think it looks exactly like the authentic. It is *sa jai*[168] that I spent only 159 bahts to get a similar-looking wallet to that for which some people paid several thousands bahts.

Moreover, although the informants want to look urbanised, they employ 'the middle path' approach in their consumption practices so that their provincial self can presumably walk hand in hand with the urbanised one in harmony.

> ***Nud*:** We always hesitate to follow new fashion. Usually, we buy stuff when almost everybody has bought it. We try not to be *cheoy*. But at the same time, we also try not to adopt any new style too soon. If we are too fashionable, we may look outrageous at home.

Furthermore, besides shopping at their "home market" (i.e., Merry King) and other average shopping centres, the informants tend to avoid any extravagant consumption landscape that makes them feel uncomfortable or intimidated.

> ***Nat*:** I went to the Emporium[169] once. I didn't like it at all. Although there were a lot of nice shops there, I felt that it wasn't my kind of place. It is too posh. I cannot afford anything there. ... I even dared not stroll into any stores because I was afraid that the salespeople would look down on me. I won't go there again.

9.3.8 Counterbalancing the Frustrating Life in Bangkok

Striving to counterbalance their socio-economic constraints, the informants creatively transform their consumption activities into an exciting game. That is, they turn their usual shopping for low-priced products into a shopping game where the quest is to hunt for the best deal. This involves not only an active search for the cheapest price and 'on sales' occasion, but also a vigorous bargaining on negotiable

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[168] A scornfully satisfied feeling
[169] A very posh department store and shopping complex in Bangkok.

merchandise. From this, their economic frustration is neutralised, thus consumption becomes a more rewarding and enjoyable activity.

> ***Auan:*** Every time we go out, we always keep our eyes open, looking for the best deal. Even if we can find only 1 baht cheaper, it is an achievement already.

> ***Win:*** We are proud to be able to buy stuff at a discounted price, especially if it is the price we bargain for.

Besides the shopping game, the informants have also invented an advertising game where they literally translate a catchphrase in an advertisement into English, and then memorise it. The first person who can finish the whole phrase perfectly wins the game. This game gives them a good laugh because the literal translation is usually funny, and the act of rephrasing it in a race always yields even funnier outcomes. Commonly, the informants also pun and relate implicit dirty jokes[170]. Seemingly, this playful behaviour is also a vital element that counterbalances the informants' frustrated lives in Bangkok.

9.3.9 The Paradoxical Self

While the informants struggle to harmonise their dynamically multifaceted selves, their self-projects comprise various paradoxical realities and possibilities. For example, while Nat denounces luxury brands, she ironically buys them when they are in the sale. Indeed, the symbolic meaning Nat ascribes to luxury brand consumption is not stable, depending on the context. While such consumption generally symbolises profligacy, it becomes prudence under 'sales' conditions.

[170] In my opinion, the jokes are not disgusting. In fact, they are quite funny.

Similarly, Bird, who is always enthusiastic to engage in extra-curriculum activities, contradictorily maintains that she likes to lead a quiet life. While she exerts herself to become the President of the Marketing Club, she claims that she in fact does not want to bear leadership.

> ***Bird:*** I feel very exhausted being a leader. I want to be a follower.
>
> ***Interviewer:*** What makes you apply for the position then?
>
> ***Bird:*** Other people want me to; they believe that I can lead the club. I don't want to disappoint them. I don't understand why I have to live up to other people's expectations.

Ironically, Bird has already been a follower who allows the others to guide her self-project. Indeed, the self-creation project is unsurprisingly complex and paradoxical. Interestingly, Auan even declares that her life is full of contradictions – it often falls into a "grey area[171]" where she cannot conclude what she wants in her life. Accordingly, she employs the attitude 'let it be', that is, she let the situation resolve her contradictory self.

Throughout the fieldwork period, I come across several paradoxes in the informants' self-projects. One noteworthy paradox, which is evidently shared among the informants, is their desire to return home after they graduate. I believe that they sincerely want to resume their lives in the provinces. They evidently yearn to go back to their simple and happy lives at home. However, do they still have the 'same old life' to go back to? As the informants steer their self-projects across socio-spatial boundaries back and forth, they somehow emerge in the "third space" (Bhabha 1990; Soja 1996) where the self is located vaguely in the intersection between their hometown and Bangkok. It seems that the informants' images of their tranquil lives in the provinces are only their nostalgic visions of the utopian

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[171] Auan's own words from the interview script.

lives. In reality, as the informants travel along the spatio-temporal paths of their experience in Bangkok, they continually reinterpret, renegotiate and recreate their self-projects – which seem to become less identified with their homes, particularly in the sphere of consumption. Although the informants still love their families dearly, they acknowledge that their families hardly have any influence on their everyday consumption anymore. Now, even when they visit home during the university break, they hardly ever go shopping in the local department stores. Instead, they occasionally come back to Bangkok to do their shopping. Paradoxically, no matter how much the informants aspire to return 'home', I presume that there is no 'home' to go back to.

9.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter illuminates the dynamic and paradox of the postmodern self and consumption symbolism. The interpretations demonstrate how the provincial young women, who study in cosmopolitan Bangkok, employ symbolic consumption in their acculturation processes. Endeavouring to settle down in Bangkok, the informants take symbolic resources from both mediated and lived experience to urbanise themselves. Simultaneously, they recontextualise some consumption practices to sustain their ties with their provincial roots. The informants also use consumption symbolically to harmonise the multifaceted selves, and counterbalance their frustrating lives in Bangkok.

Chapter Ten

Reflections upon the Research Journey

Yesterday is a memory.

Tomorrow is the unknown.

Now is the knowing.

Ajahn Sumetho 1996, p. 7

Finally, it comes to the conclusion of my research journey for this thesis. In this chapter, I reflect on the knowledge I have gained from this long journey. First, I convey my reflections upon the epistemology. That is, I review the nature of the idiographic knowledge generated by all four ethnographic fieldwork groups, which I have discussed in the previous four chapters. Then, I discuss further my reflections upon the abstract knowledge that emerges from the fieldwork. For this, I propose a model – *Consumption Symbolism and the Harmonising Self* – to conceptualise my interpretations of the complex relationship between the postmodern self and consumption symbolism. Later I reassess the research methodology I employed. Importantly, I scrutinise the limitations I experienced in conducting and interpreting the fieldwork. Lastly, I suggest some directions for future research to be explored further in order to enhance our understanding of these complex phenomena.

10.1 Reflections upon Epistemology

Personally, I believe that through the vigilantly conducted ethnographic fieldwork, I am able to gain insightful understanding of the complex relationship between my informants' self-creation projects and their consumption symbolism. However, I also acknowledge that no matter how much I have strived to comprehend my informants' symbolic self-projects and their consumption experiences from their points of view, the ethnographic narratives I present in this thesis are ultimately my here-and-now idiosyncratic interpretations. Without a doubt, it is undeniable that I inevitably bring my own social-historical framework to bear on acquiring and interpreting the ethnographic texts. As a result, this may pose some limitations to the appropriation of knowledge. Still, I deem that with my deliberate applications in conducting the fieldwork as described in Chapter Four, I have attained a satisfactory level of scholarly interpretations that, I hope, contribute an additional perspective to our endeavour to understand consumer behaviour. Presumably, the more perspectives we can gain on the human experience, the more insightful knowledge of the human behaviour we obtain (Nietzsche 1967, p. 362).

10.1.1 Reflections upon the Fieldwork

Epistemologically, the interpretations of each fieldwork group yield the idiographic knowledge or "thick description" (Geertz 1973) of that particular fieldwork. Akin to much literature, the interpretations profoundly suggest that consumption is a central platform where the informants exercise their symbolic project of the self (e.g., Belk 1988; Bourdieu 1984; Dittmar 1992; Douglas and

Isherwood 1996; Elliott 1997; Gabriel and Lang 1995; McCracken 1988a). However, although the interpretations provide an insightful apprehension of the informants' consumption behaviour and the interplay between their self-projects and consumption symbolism, the interpretations also affirm that the nature of the self and the nature of symbolic meanings are too complex and dynamic to be scientifically generalised for prediction. The interpretations illuminate that the informants' consumption behaviour is bound by social-historical context; and consumption symbolism is polysemic and contingent in its nature. The same product can mean different things to different people. While a Gucci bag represents femininity for Bee (the transgender group), it symbolises adulthood for Val (the nouveau riche group), it denotes *kilesa* for Doll (the Dhammakaya Buddhist group), and it signifies stupidity for Da (the provincial group). Even with the same person, identical consumption behaviour may hold a different meaning depending on the context. As time goes by, consumption symbolism may also alter and proliferate.

> ***Auan*** (the provincial group)**:** My life is always in a grey area. I don't know how to explain my feelings and behaviour. In fact, it's unexplainable sometimes. For example, *[Auan talks about a pair of 'Versace' jeans she bought]* I thought it's shameful to buy a counterfeit brand. If we didn't have money to buy the real one, we shouldn't buy the fake one either. It's pathetic. But then I thought I didn't buy it because of the brand. I just liked the design and it fitted me well. So I bought it. When I wear it to the university, sometimes I feel unconfident to walk around because I know that other people know that it's fake. But sometime I feel, "See, my 199 bahts Versace are as good as your ridiculously expensive ones."

> ***Nud*** (the provincial group)**:** I like German cars like BMW. I don't like Japanese cars, especially Toyota. They are a taxi type of car. ... *[A week later]* I've changed my mind. Actually, Toyota is not bad at all. The other day in the royal news[172], the king was driving one. It must be a good car then.

[172] Royal news is a common part of every television channel's daily news.

Indeed, as the informants are moving along the temporal-spatial path of their everyday lives, they are endlessly exposed to new lived and mediated experience and thus continually reascribe the symbolic meanings to their consumption choices and activities. Unceasingly extracting symbolic resources from and through both forms of experience, the informants incessantly interpret then reinterpret, create then recreate, and negotiate then renegotiate their self-projects as well as consumption symbolism. As a result, it is problematical to anticipate their behaviour since their self-projects and symbolic meanings can evolve multidirectionally. Throughout the fieldwork period, I came across a number of emerging 'surprises' from the field, which illuminates the interpretivism's epistemological notion that an attempt to identify the causal relationships, which predict consumer behaviour, is simply unachievable.

Undoubtedly, the informants may share some aspirations, for example, an aspiration to take control over their lives or an aspiration to pursue a 'cool' lifestyle, yet the way they response to such aspirations can be diverse. The positivist researcher may try to explain this by linking values or demographic factors with behaviour. But again, I maintain that the phenomena are not straightforward; the behaviour of the informants appears to be simultaneously and dialectically moulded by various factors, many of whose boundaries are blurred, fused and inconsistent. Even the informants who avow their determination to follow a particular goal in their self-creation project can potentially change their pursuits. For instance, after the fieldwork period, I have learnt that Oz (the Dhammakaya Buddhist group) who affirmed that he wanted be ordained for life after his graduation is looking for a job in the media industry. Apparently, his parents asked him to work in the secular world for a few years first before making a decision as to whether to become a

Dhammakaya monk. Thus, after working in the secular world for a few years (if he does), I presume that Oz will have acquired new symbolic resources that will navigate his self-project towards any possible path corresponding to the evolving repertoire of his possible selves. Whether Oz will become a monk for life or not can hardly be predicted.

Furthermore, the interpretations strongly suggest that the informants are to some extent influenced by each other within their friendship groups. They constantly engage in the process of the *internal-external dialectic of identification* (Jenkins 1996) with each other. The self-creation indeed operates in the social fields where individual identity and group identity are intimately intertwined. In consequence, the symbolic meanings that each informant incorporates into her/his self-project are undeniably outcomes of her/his social interactions. Yet again, the interpretations indicate that the course and inclination of the social influence on each individual is not certain; it varies depending on the social context. While the informants negotiate their self-social symbolism forcefully in some contexts, they appear to be less vigorous in negotiating the meanings in some other contexts. Whereas sometimes the self-social negotiation of consumption symbolism takes place effortlessly through gossip, laughter and plays, sometimes the negotiation process involves deliberate application of *discursive elaborations* (Thompson 1990) and behavioural significations. Importantly, the interpretations reveal that the informants constantly strive to maintain the harmony between their exertion to uphold a sense of self-mastery and their endeavour to obtain a sense of social belonging.

Additionally, the interpretations illustrate that the body is a significant location from and though which the informants obtain, reproduce and cultivate symbolic resources for their self-projects. The body is also a fundamental site that the informants exploit to create, communicate and negotiate their identities and self-social symbolism. Thus, the informants dynamically engage in various consumption activities to craft their bodies. Again, the interpretations reveal that crafting the body either in order to portray the self-image or in order to socialise into a particular group can be conducted in various different ways. While the transgender informants aspire to sexualise their femininised bodies, the Dhammakaya informants conversely seek to desexualise their appearance. While Bird (the provincial group) and Jane (the transgender group) groom their complexions regularly with whitening lotion, Sue (the Nouveau riche group) on the other hand tans herself with a suntan lotion. For Bird and Jane, a fair complexion is unquestionably preferable. Nevertheless, although the motivation to whiten their complexions may be relatively comparable, i.e., to look good, the symbolic meaning of having a fair complexion is apparently dissimilar. To bird, a fair complexion signifies an 'urban look'; however, to Jane, it symbolises a 'feminine look'. As for Sue, she points out that in general she likes her fair complexion, but she tans it sometimes since "it's a part of a holiday, isn't it?" This is not surprising; I presume that her lived experience in the westernised environment (e.g., at the international school she went to and frequent holidays in America) and mediated experience through her favourite foreign magazines must have contributed symbolic resources to her appropriation of this meaning.

Moreover, the interpretations clearly suggest that the self is always in the process of becoming; they also indicate that the self-project embraces a multiplicity of possible selves. This symbolic self-creation project may hold various micro-plans with provisional goals. Consequently, the self-project is malleable, multifaceted and paradoxical. Evidently, some self-projects may be less flexible and embrace fewer possible selves than others. For example, the Dhammakaya informants appear to adhere to a relatively rigid and focused self-project compared to the others. This may be because the Dhammakaya informants engage in a relatively narrow range of both lived and mediated experience, that is, they mainly socialise with other Dhammakaya followers and are exposed only to the media materials produced by the sect. Since the self is regarded as a symbolic project constructed and sustained out of available symbolic resources, I presume that the richer and more diverse the resources or experiences (e.g., social relations or media exposure), the more saturated the self is, and thus the more complex the self-project potentially becomes.

In the ongoing process of self-becoming, as the self arises momentarily, it continually employs consumption symbolically to advance from one transitory state of being to another. This process sometimes seems to happen naturally, however sometimes it involves conscious effort. This is particularly so when the self endeavours to proceed across social boundaries. Evidently, the informants deliberately exploit particular symbolic consumption as rites of passage to another social boundaries (i.e., gender, adulthood, religion and socio-cultural space). Besides exploiting consumption to facilitate life transition, the informants also employ everyday consumption in order to feel 'alive' symbolically. Consumption symbolism apparently provides them with a sense of freedom, a sense of security, a

sense of control, a sense of continuity, excitement, fantasy and so on. Importantly, it assists the informants in sustaining the balance between their selves and others. That is, the informants use everyday consumption to communicate and negotiate their self-creation projects in their social domains. For this, they appropriate various symbolic meanings through a continuous interweaving of resources culled from and through both lived and mediated experience, and then negotiate these meanings in the process of the self-others identification in order to incorporate them into the consumption activities that they exercise to create and maintain their self-projects.

In order to employ consumption symbolism for their self-creation projects, the informants engage in not only the process of symbolic appropriation but also the process of 'symbolic stylisation'. That is, apart from ascribing symbolic meanings to consumption choices, the informants also mix and match those meanings through a particular consumption constellation in order to create a particular style for the self in a particular context. In this way, through symbolic stylisation the informants are able to conceive the pastiche self which allows them to possess and enjoy the multiple forms of self-expression in different contexts. Like the process of symbolic appropriation, I maintain that the symbolic stylisation is an ongoing process. As we constantly encounter new lived and mediated experiences, we continually take on endless new symbolic meanings into our self-project, modify numerous existing ones, and drop some of the old and 'not yet adopted' ones. Concurrently, we always renegotiate and restylise our symbolic self-project by adjusting our consumption constellations, i.e., adopting some new products and discarding some old ones as well as remixing and rematching the constellations.

Again, the propensity of the forthcoming symbolic stylisation can hardly be forecasted.

To conclude, the epistemology generated from this research journey is the idiographic knowledge that I believe provides an insightful understanding of the informants' self-projects and their consumption experiences. However, although the interpretations demonstrate some apparent patterns and symbolic meanings of the informants' consumption behaviour, they also bring to mind that this symbolic behaviour is complex, contextual and holistic. We cannot divide and measure the phenomena quantitatively. Thus, an endeavour to establish generalised causal relationships for predicting upcoming behaviour is unattainable. In fact, the idiographic knowledge achieved here is only an account of my interpretations of four unique social-historical consumption experiences. By this, I mean, the knowledge being presented in this thesis is not the conclusive knowledge of the informants' consumption behaviour. It is only the fractional knowledge of the informants' experience in the particular spatio-temporal social settings (i.e., the fieldwork). Additionally, it is my here-and-now idiosyncratic reading of the ethnographic texts which indeed can be endlessly reinterpreted. Nevertheless, on reflection I believe that the idiographic knowledge discussed in this thesis contributes unique[173] insights into the understanding of the complex relationship between the self-creation project and consumption symbolism, which accordingly contributes knowledge to the field of consumer behaviour at large.

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[173] By saying this, I do not mean that my interpretations are so insightful that they are incomparable. I only consider that as time goes by, the same spatio-temporal setting of the fieldwork groups cannot be resumed; and no researcher and interpreter can take the place of the here-and-now 'Me' even my very own self.

10.1.2 Reflections upon the Level of Abstraction

Although the idiographic knowledge obtained from this research journey cannot establish the causal relationship at the behavioural level, apparently at the level of abstraction it can describe some genres of relationships that emerge from the fieldwork. On reflection, the interpretations strongly suggest that the informants not only use symbolic consumption to create, maintain and express their identities, but importantly they also employ it to balance the multiplicity of their postmodern selves. The interpretations illuminate the complex interplay among various abstract elements – self-symbolism, social-symbolism, mediated experience and lived experience – which operate in the informants' processes of self-creation and symbolism appropriation. In this chapter, I do not intend to discuss each element in detail again; rather I aim to conceptualise the relationships among these abstract elements, which became apparent in the fieldwork, from a holistic point of view.

To do this, I would like to propose an abstract model – 'Consumption Symbolism and the Harmonising Self' (see Figure 10.1) – which I derive from dialectical scrutiny between the abstract foundations in Part One and the fieldwork interpretations in Part Three. This abstract model is an endeavour to illustrate my comprehension of the complex, dialectical process of consumption symbolism and the self-creation project that emerges from this research journey. Basically, the model recapitulates how the multifaceted, mutable postmodern self derives symbolic meanings from both lived and mediated experience (Thompson 1995), and then harmonises them in the process of the internal-external dialectic of identification (Jenkins 1996) between the two realms of self-symbolism and social-symbolism (Elliott 1994), and at the same time incorporates these symbolic

meanings into everyday consumption in order to create, maintain and express the self.

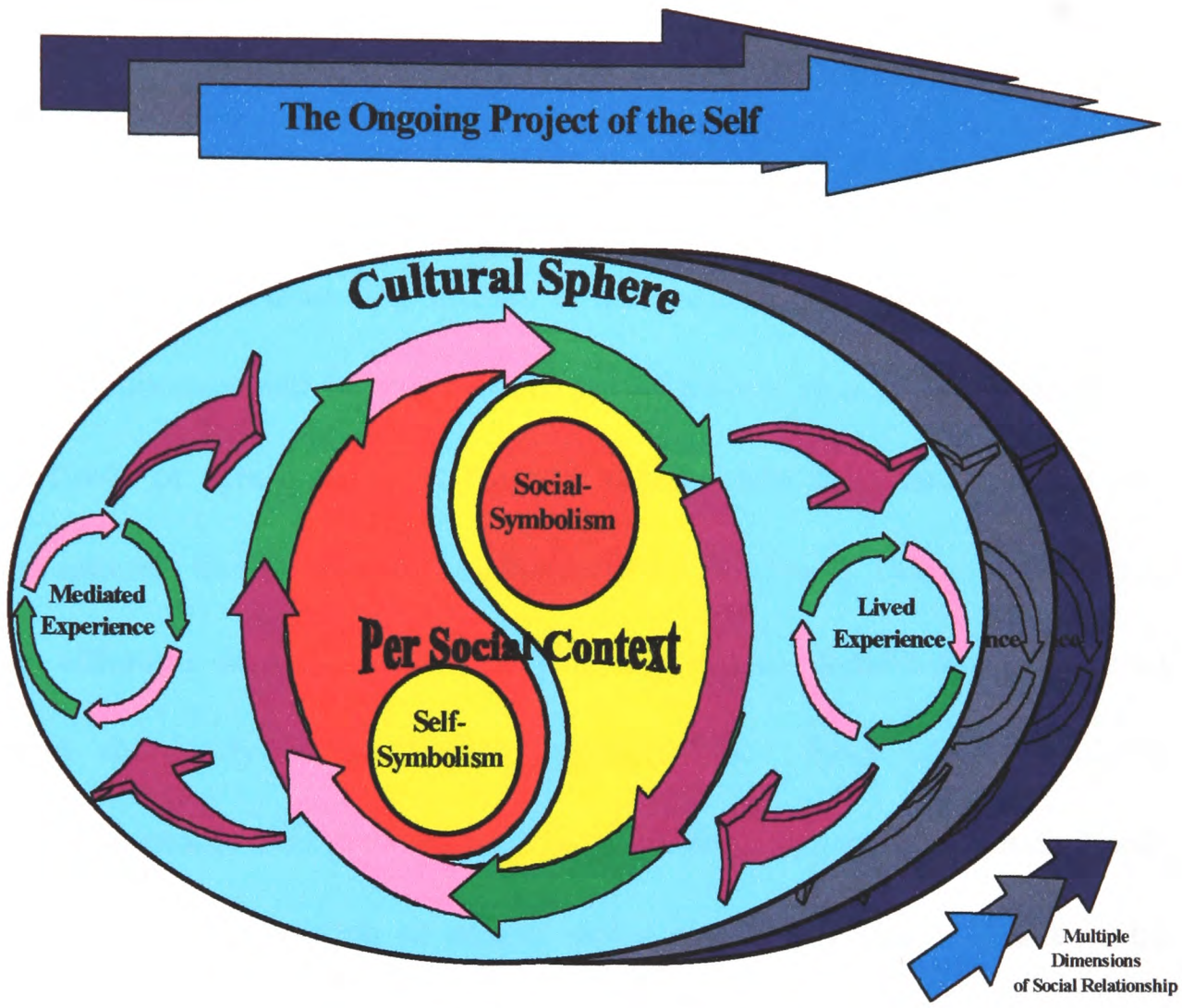


Figure 10.1: Consumption Symbolism and the Harmonising Self

To begin, let us look at the icons I employ to signify this abstract model. There are five principal elements in the relationship between consumption symbolism and the postmodern self which I emphasise in the model. Firstly, the model is placed within the oval-shaped icon representing a cultural sphere. This is to underline that the phenomena are culturally located. As we are living in a culturally constituted world, we experience things through our cultural senses (Douglas 1966). The way we appropriate symbolic meanings from lived and mediated experience, the way we negotiate these meanings with the previously extant meaning, and the way we apply the resultant meanings in our consumption is

culturally-oriented. Hence, in order to understand the phenomena, we need to take cultural elements into consideration. Nevertheless, we have to bear in mind that it is impossible to define the precise cultural boundaries of any cultural sphere (Bouchet 1996), especially in the age of globalisation and mediaisation where global sense permeates locality.

Secondly, I use circulating arrows to characterise the dynamic nature of consumption symbolism and the postmodern self. The model is a circuit portraying continuous flows of symbolism that the self appropriates from and through two experiential spheres: lived experience and mediated experience. These two forms of experience, although depicted individually in the model, should not be treated separately in the study of symbolism appropriation. Both are dialectically intertwined. The model also portrays that the phenomena are not sequential, linear processes. There is no starting or ending point in the processes. There is no affirmative causal relationship between lived-mediated experience and self-social symbolism. All abstract components are related to each other in dialectical fashion. The whole phenomena are not static and straightforward; rather they are complex and dynamic. In sum, the circulating arrows in the model signify on-going dialectical processes of sense making between both forms of experience and the two realms of self-social symbolism.

Thirdly, in the model I uphold that as the self and the others are co-arising in the social sphere, the self always negotiates symbolic meanings in the process of the *internal-external dialectic of identification* between the intertwined realms of self-social symbolism. I adopt the Yin-Yang icon to portray that the self-symbolism and social-symbolism are inseparable. In order to sustain ourselves in the social world,

we strive to balance our everyday symbolism between two realms of self-symbolism and social-symbolism. To do this, we constantly negotiate and renegotiate symbolic meanings with the others in our social milieux through the process of *discursive elaboration* (Thompson 1990) and behavioural significations. Otherwise, the self may be subject to the threat of social alienation. Simultaneously, we aspire to maintain the internal harmony, that is, we always negotiate and renegotiate self-symbolism internally with our own selves (e.g., exploring our possible selves, talking to our internal voices and considering our physical body). The model also shows that as a contextual self, it is important that we acquire skills to harmonise flows of self-social symbolism contextually. Significantly, although I depict the self and the other in the juxtaposed position in the Yin-Yang icon, I maintain that the boundaries of the self and other are fluid and constantly changing depending on context (Kondo 1990), and possibly become fused with each other.

Fourthly, I would like to accentuate that there may be several layers of the phenomena in this abstract model. That is, generally we engage in manifold social relations within each of which we attempt to keep a balance of self-social symbolism. Among these multiple dimensions of our social relations, while some of our social relationships/roles are complimentary, other relationships/roles may be contradictory. Again, the boundaries between social dimensions may also intersect with each other. So may the boundaries of self-social symbolism across social dimensions. As a result, the self and consumption symbolism may be socially fragmented, fused and paradoxical, varying according to social relations. Thus, it is essential that we strive to accommodate different arrays of the self-social symbolism that we appropriate from various social realms in order to sustain a harmonious balance in our symbolic self-creation project. Whenever the self-social symbolism

in any of our social realms is out of balance, we may need to either renegotiate the symbolism or leave that realm. For example, Kate (the transgender group) mentions that she once joined the university's Buddhist Society (which is dominated by the Dhammakaya group), but she later left the society because of the unsettled self-social symbolism.

> ***Kate:*** When I broke up with my ex-boyfriend, I was very confused. See, I thought I would be able to accept it if he wanted to be with a real woman. But actually, I couldn't. I was confused and hurt so I joined the *[Buddhist]* society. I wanted to learn how to meditate. They're nice people. I felt welcomed there, but I somehow still felt uncomfortable. I don't agree with their extreme practices. I prefer the notion of the middle path in Buddhism.

Lastly, I emphasise that our symbolic project of the self is an ongoing project. Indeed, 'living in the world' involves a continuous interweaving of symbolism derived from both mediated and lived experience in order to keep our self-narratives going. Accordingly, we always need to interpret, re-interpret, negotiate and renegotiate the self-social symbolism in order to harmonise our self-project. So long as we can maintain harmony among the multifarious circulations of symbolism in the project, we can presumably advance our self-creation relatively smoothly. However, whenever there is new symbolism either from lived or mediated experience seeping into the flow of self-social symbolism, the entire circulation may be disturbed and become unbalanced. Then again, we need to renegotiate the self-social symbolism to restore the harmony in the self-project. In this way, our symbolic self-creation is never-ending; it progresses continually until the end of our lives or even beyond.

In sum, this model is an abstract model with which I strive to illustrate the complex, dialectical processes in the symbolic self-project. Although the model

may look ideally in balance, we should bear in mind that in reality our self-project can hardly ever achieve such an ideal state, and perhaps at best it can only attain the balance temporarily.

10.2 Reflections upon the Methodology

10.2.1 Reflections upon the Ethnographic Fieldwork

On reflection, I believe that the interpretive approach and the methodology[174] employed for this research journey provided me with an opportunity to achieve an insightful understanding of the complex phenomena of the postmodern self and consumption symbolism. The naturalistic inquiry into everyday life via ethnographic fieldwork allowed me to discover a number of critical 'surprises' and subtleties in the informants' consumption behaviour, which I believe I would have been unable to perceive if I had employed other research methodologies. Long-term immersion in the fieldwork also enabled me to observe the complex processes of the self-social negotiation in the natural setting; it not only allowed me to observe pattern repetitions in the data but also its dynamics. Importantly, prolonged engagement and persistent observation also accommodated me to explore such processes in various temporal-spatial contexts. Additionally, the long interviews offered me an opportunity to phenomenologically delve into the informants' experience as well as their thoughts and feelings. This helped me to grasp the symbolic meanings that the informants incorporate into their self-creation projects.

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[174] See Chapter Four.

However, I maintain that 'being in the field' does not automatically guarantee insight into the informants' lives. In order to achieve profound understanding of the fieldwork from the informants' viewpoints, it requires deliberate applications which enable the attainability of the proximate "experience-near" (Geertz 1973). For this, I affirm that vigorous communication and frequent moments of reflexivity are central. Indeed, it is essential to have dialogue, not monologue, with the informants in order to acquire phenomenological insight into their consumption experiences. Moreover, communication facilitates the development of rapport which is a licence to get access into the "backstage regions" of the informants' lives (Goffman 1959). By the same token, I find that the moment of reflexivity enables me to utilise my subjectivity in order to delve into the complexity of the phenomena studied. Indeed, using one's own subjectivity is vital for enhancing the comprehension of the symbolic phenomena (Elliott 1999; Fiske 1990; Willis 1980); as Willis (1980, p. 91) notes, "If we wish to represent the subjective meanings, feelings and cultures of others, it is not possible to extend to them less than we know of ourselves." However, to achieve this, it is important to bear in mind that 'sensitivity to the others' and 'conscious pluralism' is indeed needed (Foucault 1973; Morgan 1983).

Ironically, in order to gain insight into the informants' experience, it is also crucial to create distance from them. The "experience-far" (Geertz 1973) is vital for maintaining a critical awareness of matters with which I have become familiar (Marcus and Fischer 1986; McCracken 1988b). Certainly, it is essential to be in the fields with "new eyes" and "new ears" in order to avoid taking things for granted (Belk and Wallendorf 1989). Interestingly, I find that the experience-far enables me to see several common 'peculiar' happenings in the field. By this I mean being a

Thai myself I would not be able to see the peculiarities of common Thai cultural practices if I did not obtain the experience-far. Indeed, occasionally withdrawing myself from the fieldwork, exchanging viewpoints with my western colleagues and having my research papers reviewed by western scholars greatly assists me in gaining the experience-far.

In addition, I deem that triangulation across methods and fieldwork is useful; it helps broaden my perspectives. Conducting this research, I realise that no single method can grasp the complexity and ambiguity of the self-creation and consumption symbolism phenomena. I believe that the triangulation across methods I employ generates a multiplicity of perspectives on the behaviours and contexts of the informants. The diverse perspectives I have gained from four different fieldwork groups also assist me in seeing the phenomena from various angles. In sum, with various deliberate applications in my methodology[175], I believe that I am able to stretch my perspectives to embrace both the proximate experience-near and the distant experience-far. And dialectically, the juxtaposition of the experience-near and experience-far enables me to achieve insightful interpretations of the fieldwork.

10.2.2 Reflections upon the Limitations

Since consumer behaviour is very complex and in constant flux, it is impossible for us to conduct a piece of flawless consumer research. There are always limitations; it is unattainable to gain complete understanding of the phenomena. We can possibly at best achieve insightful understanding by striving to

[175] See section 4.4 in Chapter Four.

minimise the limitations of the research being conducted. However, this does not imply that any research is worthless. Indeed, it is needful to obtain an assortment of partially meaningful understandings to develop a better comprehensible knowledge of the phenomena. Thus, it is essential that we acknowledge the limitations of our research in order to reveal the gap that needs to be filled by other research journeys. Proclaiming our limitations can also help our research readers to empathise with the limited perspectives that we bear in the interpretations.

On reflection, I deem that this thesis research could potentially contribute a richer and deeper knowledge of the informants' experience if triangulation across researchers was employed. Conducting the ethnographies single-handedly certainly limits the ability to obtain certain data and perspectives. Having said this, I do not mean that the more researchers the better the research; too many researchers can also spoil the research as they potentially disturb the natural setting of the fieldwork. Personally, I believe that this research would have achieved a better insight if there had also been a male researcher who could have alternately attended the fieldwork. Although I have strived to acquire as rich data and as many perspectives as possible by employing several deliberate applications, I realise that I still cannot overcome some limitations posed by gender.

This is not uncommon; as Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p.92) remark, "The researcher cannot escape the implications of gender: no position of genderless neutrality can be achieved." I find that while my femaleness certainly provides me with an advantage in some contexts, it also poses a disadvantage in some other contexts. I notice that it is difficult for me to gain access into the world of my male informants. I feel that the male informants are very conscious of what they say or

how they behave in front of me. For example, they avoid using rude words or swearing when I am around; or they do not want to talk about some sensitive issues[176] such as sexuality or their views about women in the long interviews. This can be explained from a cultural perspective that since I am a more senior woman, the male informants tend to show their respect to me by avoiding any behaviour or conversation that may intimidate me. By the same token, I also have some difficulties in relating to them. Thus, this gender aspect limits my ability to gain the proximate experience-near from my male informants in the same way as I can gain it from my female or transgender informants.

Another important limitation is the restricted extent of the informants' social relations that could be observed. As the postmodern self concurrently engages in manifold social relations, the self-creation project inevitably embraces a multiplicity of self-social symbolisms, all of which are entwined with each other. However, in this research I explore the informants' self-projects and their consumption symbolism by observing them in only one social realm setting. Although I can glimpse a vestige of the interplay between the informants' self-creation and the self-social symbolism in other social domains (e.g., family or other groups of friends) from the interviews, I unfortunately did not have an opportunity to observe them in lived interaction. Thus, this limits my ability to delve further into the multifaceted nature of the phenomena, particularly the negotiation process of self-social symbolism within and across the informants' social spheres. I believe that being able to observe the informants in different social relations would have helped to further unfold the complex temperament of their self-projects and consumption symbolism.

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[176] I do not have this problem with my female or transgender informants.

Furthermore, due to the limitations of my research timeframe and budget, I did not have an opportunity to have my informants read and comment on the final draft of my interpretations. This member-check technique suggested by Wallendorf and Belk (1989, p.75) could have possibly enhanced my interpretations, particularly from the 'native point of view'. Nonetheless, despite the lack of formal member checks on my final interpretations, I conducted this technique informally throughout the fieldwork period (e.g., discussing my understanding of my informants' behaviours with them). Lastly, in writing this piece of ethnographic research I also encountered a technical problem, that is, I failed to put the observation notes drawn directly from my fieldwork diaries as parts of my ethnographic text. The absence of the notes apparently hinders the richness of the data being presented in this thesis. Although I took notes of my field observation regularly, I did it in my own 'shorthand' for my own usage. This caused difficulties when I wanted to transform the notes into properly communicable texts. Having considered the time needed to rework my fieldnotes, I was compelled to give up my attempt to do so. Nevertheless, I assert that I have extensively utilised all the fieldnotes in my interpretation process.

10.3 Future Research Journeys

For future research journeys to enhance our insight into consumer experience, I passionately believe that the research approach and methodology employed in this thesis is a promising and rewarding path to follow. However, we must bear in mind that each research journey is unique in its nature, thus the methodology being used should be flexible so that it can accommodate any

spontaneous inquiry. Importantly, we must consider the local context of the journey destination (i.e., fieldwork) such as society, culture, language or practice. Moreover, it is worth noting that practicality is a critical factor; the researcher must consider practical aspects such as the suitability, feasibility and accessibility of the prospective journey.

Since the culturally constituted world as well as the self is changeable, compound and contradictory, we will never run out of interesting itineraries to explore the relationship between the symbolic self-creation project and consumption symbolism. There are countless possible research journeys to be undertaken. For example, I could study the female-to-male transgenders, the once-riches[177], the hedonists and the Bangkokians who move to the provinces[178]; or I might research the early adolescents who struggle to exercise their self-autonomy from their parents, the late twenties who have just started their own families, the elderly who try to detach themselves from possessions[179]. Whichever research journey we undertake, I believe, will contribute idiographic knowledge that will enhance insightful understanding of the phenomena. Indeed, there is no limit to the ways in which the postmodern self can be explored.

However, to extend the research journey conducted in this thesis, I would like to encourage the further exploration of how the postmodern self strives to balance her/his self-creation project across a multiplicity of her/his social relations. That is, we may observe how the self appropriates and negotiates her/his self-social

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[177] Apparently, this is a new phenomenon that has emerged as a result from the recent economic crisis in Thailand.
[178] This is another phenomenon that is gradually happening. Some middle-class Bangkokians have moved to the provinces to run away from the increasingly unpleasant environment in the capital.
[179] This is not uncommon in Thai society. Detaching from possessions or a material world apparently signifies spiritual maturity. Evidently, it is also a preparation for death.

symbolism in each social relation as well as how s/he harmonises these various arrays of symbolism in her/his self-project. Concurrently, we also scrutinise how the self employs these symbolic meanings to create, maintain and express her/his pastiche identity through the process of symbolic stylisation in everyday consumption. For this, the abstract model, *Consumption Symbolism and the Harmonising Self*, may be used as a point of departure.

10.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter is a reflection upon the research journey I have undertaken for this thesis. Basically, I discuss the knowledge that I believe this thesis contributes to the field of consumer research. First, I consider the idiographic knowledge that I have obtained from the ethnographic fieldwork. The interpretations drawn from this affirm that the phenomena regarding the self-creation project and consumption symbolism are too complex to establish any generalised causal relationship for predicting consumer behaviour. However, at the level of abstraction, the interpretations suggest some apparent relationships which are conceptualised and proposed in the model – *Consumption Symbolism and the Harmonising Self.* Later I reassess the methodology employed and the limitations of this research journey. From my reflections upon both epistemology and methodology, I believe that this thesis provides insightful understanding of the complex relationship between the self-creation project and consumption symbolism. To conclude, I suggest possible directions for future research journeys in order to enhance our insight into consumer behaviour.

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