

UNIVERSITY OF TAMPERE
School of Management

**NEGOTIATED MEANINGS OF FASHION-FORWARD
TELEVISION PROGRAMMES**
**A case study on Sex and the City and
Gossip Girl**

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ABSTRACT

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The number of fashion-forward television programmes has grown drastically during the last few decades. The relationship between television and the fashion industry has become more and more synergistic and television is an effective media for spreading fashion trends globally. The symbolic meanings communicated by the media within the contemporary culture of consumption have a central role in the negotiations of cultural meanings made by consumers. The purpose of the study is to identify what kind of meanings consumers negotiate from fashion-forward television programmes Sex and the City and Gossip Girl. Fashion-forward television refers to television programmes that are seen as able to influence future fashion trends.

The theoretical framework of this study is based on Consumer Culture Theory. However, as the theory actually refers to multiple theoretical perspectives on the relations between consumers, marketplace and cultural meanings, this study concentrates in the cultural meanings in the mass media culture of consumption and the interpretation of self, others, television media and fashion in this context. Consumers are seen as unpredictable and interactive individuals, who are cleverly negotiating meanings in the contemporary culture of consumption.

The empirical data in this study was collected by focus group interviews. Focus group interview means that a group of selected people are gathered together to discuss a certain topic in order to gain in-depth information on the feelings and thoughts of the group. There were two focus group interviews in this study with 3 and 6 participants. All of the participants were Finnish females aged between 22 and 28 years. They all belong to the target audience of the television programmes studied and have been following one or both of the series regularly. Secondary online data was used to complete the empirical data.

The specific cultural meanings negotiated from fashion-forward television can be divided into four categories on the basis of the object of the meaning. The first category consists of the meanings attached to self. The second category contains the meanings attached to others. The third category includes the meanings attached to the fashion-forward television programmes and the fourth category consists of the meanings attached to fashion. However, this is not an omniscient categorization, as cultural meanings may consistently be transferred between categorizations.

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Muotiorientoituneiden televisio-ohjelmien määrä on kasvanut huomasti viime vuosikymmenten aikana. Myös television ja muotialan suhteesta on tullut yhä tiiviimpi, sillä television avulla muotitrendejä voidaan levittää globaalisti. Median välittämällä symbolisilla merkityksillä on suuri rooli kuluttajien ajatusmalleissa. Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoitus on tunnistaa minkälaisia merkityksiä kuluttajat omaksuvat muotiorientoituneista televisio-ohjelmista Sinkkuelämää ja Gossip Girl. Muotiorientoitunut televisio tarkoittaa ohjelmia, joilla on mahdollisuus vaikuttaa tulevaisuuden muotitrendeihin.

Tutkimuksen teoreettinen viitekehys pohjautuu kulutuskulttuuriteoriaan. Kyseinen teoria viittaa kuitenkin useisiin eri näkökulmiin kuluttajien, median ja kulttuuristen merkitysten välisissä suhteissa. Tässä tutkimuksessa on keskitytty massamedian välittämässä kulutuskulttuurissa esiintyviin kulttuurisiin merkityksiin sekä itsen, muiden, televisiomedian ja muodin tulkitsemiseen tässä kontekstissa. Kuluttajat nähdään interaktiivisina ja arvaamattomina yksilöinä, jotka tulkitsevat taitavasti nykyajan kulutuskulttuurissa esiintyviä merkityksiä.

Tutkimuksen empiirinen aineisto kerättiin fokusryhmähaastatteluilla. Fokusryhmähaastattelu tarkoittaa haastattelutilannetta, jossa tietyt henkilöt on tuotu yhteen keskustelemaan valitusta aiheesta. Tarkoituksena on saavuttaa syvälinen ymmärrys ryhmän jäsenten ajatuksista ja tuntemuksista. Tutkimuksen kahdessa haastattelussa oli mukana 3 ja 6 osallistujaa. Kaikki osallistajat ovat suomalaisia 22-28 vuotiaita naisia. Haastatteluihin osallistujat kuuluvat tutkimuksessa käsiteltävien televisio-ohjelmien kohderyhmään ja ovat seuranneet joko toista tai molempia ohjelmia säännöllisesti. Tutkimuksessa hyödynnettiin haastatteluiden lisäksi sekundaarista online-aineistoa.

Tutkimuksessa tunnistetut, muotiorientoituneesta televisiosta omaksutut merkitykset voidaan jakaa neljään kategoriaan. Ensimmäiseen kategoriaan kuuluvat itsen liitetyt merkitykset. Toinen kategoria on muihin liitetyt merkitykset. Kolmanteen kategoriaan kuuluvat muotiorientoituneisiin televisio-ohjelmiin liitetyt merkitykset ja neljäs kategoria koostuu muotiin liitetyistä merkityksistä. Merkityksiä ei voida kuitenkaan kategorisoida pysyvästi, sillä kulttuuriset merkitykset voivat jatkuvasti liikkua kategorioiden välillä.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Television and the fashion industry

Since the emergence of *Sex and the City* (1994), the number of television programmes with a narrative focus on fashion trends has grown drastically making the actresses contemporary fashion icons also in real life. Sarah Jessica Parker playing Carrie Bradshaw in *Sex and the City* and Blake Lively playing Serena Vanderwoodsden in *Gossip Girl*, have become real fashion icons thanks to the series. Magazines like *Harpers and Queen* as well as *People Magazine* have devoted covers to Sarah Jessica Parker and her clothes, shoes and accessories (Richards 2003, 147; Warner 2010). The relationship between television and fashion industry has become increasingly synergistic. Also the symbolic role of female celebrities as fashion promoters has changed within the relationship between fashion industry and celebrities (Warner 2010).

Star images have long been exploited to endorse fashion and beauty products (Warner 2010). According to Dawn (2000, 3), many Americans strongly associate fashion with celebrities. As Jackie Stacey's study of female film fans and consumer practices in the 1940s elaborates, female fans tend to engage in complex participatory practices and appropriate styles of the stars in order to construct their own cultural identities. However, it is important to take into account the economic and cultural context in which these relationships take place. They are always shaped by a certain set of economic and cultural circumstances (Warner 2010). There are many studies of the fashion and film industry which detail the relationship between Hollywood film stars and the fashion industry, showing for example that the glamorized star image presented in the classic films encouraged female fans to consume star styles. Whereas fashion and film stars is a widely researched area, there is a lack of studies considering fashion and television (Warner 2010).

Kozinets (2001, 86) calls for research in the intertwined roles that entertainment, stigma, fantasy, legitimation and utopia play in consumer behaviour and contemporary culture. According to Englis, Solomon & Ashmore (1994, 51 & 60) in the fashion and

beauty industry so called gatekeepers, for example fashion and beauty editors and film directors, play a crucial role in shaping the audience's perceptions about beauty ideals. This is why they are calling for additional research to better understand how the looks that these cultural gatekeepers choose to portray to the audience affect consumption patterns.

Besides entertainment, television is a great source of information. There are some reality shows such as Project Runway and America's Next Top Model fundamentally dedicated to fashion and modeling. In addition to reality television there are drama series such as Sex and the City and Gossip Girl which offer their audience a glimpse of what is hot and what is not aside of the actual plot twists. Fashion is an essential part of these programmes and it is a great way for the fans watching them to stay on track of the latest trends. Television may have an effect on how we perceive the world around us, as it affects how consumers see themselves as they are influenced by perceptions of what other consumers have and how they behave. Television is a significant source of social perceptions related to consumption as it portrays indirect experiences about other people's lives and consumption habits. This way it maneuvers the expectations, satisfaction, motivation and desire of consumers (Halkoaho 2012, 80). Television programmes also depict and model countless consumption-related phenomena, like social roles, the family life structure, lifestyles and subcultures as well as gender, race and class issues. That is what makes the programmes themselves influential (Russell, Norman & Heckler 2004, 151). Television has also been said to use theatricality as a way to establish its ongoing appeal in the era of Internet (De Kosnik 2010, 370).

Different kinds of media texts and cultural products, such as films, television shows, novels and popular magazines have been studied thoroughly in the field of cultural studies for the forms of cultural discourse that they draw from and produce. This kind of material can equally be used as a source of naturally occurring data for consumer research and cultural marketing. This material recently completed with Internet-forums and online communities may be analyzed especially to learn about contemporary consumer culture (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 70). There have been two areas of research in cultural studies that have dealt with the issues of consumer culture and media. Firstly, there is a body of research that has been studying consumer culture in everyday life, which includes the expressivity of consumption and analyses of the

cultural experience. Secondly, media consumption has been studied from various aspects. However, there is still missing empirical work that combines these two areas together, meaning analysis of consumption that pays attention to the importance of media (Jansson 2002, 6). As a managerial implication, one of the most important issues in the studies of consumer behaviour is how people often acquire products mainly because of their symbolic meanings. The symbolic meanings attached to fashion are an important part of the consumption choices of an individual and the choices of fashion consumption may vary under different circumstances (Piamphongsant & Mandhachitara 2007, 450).

1.2 Fashion-forward television

This study focuses on two fashion related television programmes *Sex and the City* and *Gossip Girl*. Solomon & Rabolt (2004, 6) refer to fashion as “a style that has been accepted by a large group of people at a given time”. Fashion-forward television refers to television programmes where fashion is recognized as an essential part of the programme concept. According to Warner (2009, 181), fashion-forward television is television series that are seen as being able to influence fashion trends. There included are television series *Sex and the City*, *Gossip Girl*.

Sex and the City

The comedy series *Sex and the City* premiered already in 1998 in the American channel HBO. It was one of the first series on television to credit fashion on a large scale. It has been said that if one aspect of the show epitomizes how outrageous and courageous the show is, it is the fashion (Kuruc 2008, 201). The show has been nominated for over 50 Emmy Awards and 24 Golden Globe Awards and has regularly attracted large audiences throughout its seven seasons. The series is based on the novel by Candace Bushnell. It was created by Darren Star and produced by Michael Patrick King, John Melfi, Cindy Chupack, Jenny Bicks and Sarah Jessica Parker. Besides Parker the lead actresses were Kim Cattrall, Cynthia Nixon and Kristin Davis. The last episode of the series aired in the US in 2004 (Tv.Com 02.01.2013).

Gossip Girl

The highly popular teen drama is based on the series of young-adult novels by Cecily von Ziegesar. It debuted in September 2007 and ended in the US in December 2012. It has been created by Josh Schwartz and Stephanie Savage. Co-producers are Leslie Morgenstein, Bob Levy and Sara Goodman. The show has gotten numerous award nominations and won 18 Teen Choice Awards (Gossip Girl 02.01.2013).

1.3 The purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to identify what kind of meanings consumers negotiate from fashion-forward television programmes *Sex and the City* and *Gossip Girl*. The interviewees in the study were recruited from the related party of the researcher by social media, which enabled the researcher to identify if the possible interviewees are interested in fashion-forward programmes already in advance. In a qualitative study the most important criteria for choosing the interviewees are accessibility and suitability considering the research problem (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 51). Usually the social network of the researcher and other convenient ways for finding the interviewees are exploited as opposed to more systematic methods that are used in quantitative research (Lincoln & Guba 1985, 201).

The purpose of the study is completed by answering to the research question: How consumers negotiate meanings from fashion-forward television programmes?

This research question was divided into to the following sub questions:

- 1) What meanings are attached to self?
- 2) What meanings are attached to others?
- 3) What meanings are attached to fashion-forward television programmes?
- 4) What meanings are attached to fashion?

2 CULTURAL MEANINGS IN THE MASS MEDIA

CULTURE OF CONSUMPTION

2.1 Consumer Culture Theory

Culture as a concept is crucial to the understanding of consumer behaviour. It can be thought of as the collective memory of a society. It is the accumulation of norms and traditions, shared meanings and rituals within the members of a society or an organization. Culture includes abstract ideas like ethics and values as well as material objects and services like clothing and sports that are produced or valued by a group of people. It defines a human community including its individuals, social organizations, and its political as well as economic systems (Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard & Hogg 2010, 506). Culture is also a process in which meanings are produced (Lehtonen 1996, 153). According to Jansson (2002, 9) culture is about the interplay between signification and interpretation, meanings and values.

Social structures are the way in which social life is preserved, including culture-dominated domestic and political groups. Ideology, on the other hand, means the mental characteristics of people and the way they relate to their social groups and environment. This area circulates around the idea or belief that society members possess a common worldview. This means sharing certain ideas about principles of fairness and order and also sharing a set of moral and aesthetic principles (Solomon et al. 2010, 508). Consumer Culture Theory, also referred to as CCT, sees culture as the essence of experience, meaning and action and frames consumer`s horizons of potential action feelings and thoughts. This makes certain patterns of behaviour and sense-making interpretations more likely than others (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 869).

Consumer culture as a term conceptualizes a system of commercially produced texts, images and objects. These are all interconnected and used through the construction of overlapping and perhaps even conflicting meanings, identities and practices to make collective sense of the environment groups live in and their member`s lives and experiences (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 869). Consumer culture is a culture where

consumption is the central vehicle for the organization of social meanings (Solomon et al. 2010, 506). The definition of consumer culture is informed by the intertextual linkages of ideologies, images and texts in the cultural meaning systems of consumers. The definition is also attached to the industrial influences on contemporary cultures and subcultures and the contextual embeddedness of meanings. Those meanings are epitomized and negotiated by members of a culture on certain roles, relationships and social situations (Kozinets 2001, 68).

For decades consumer research has produced all kinds of research addressing the ideological, sociocultural, experiential as well as symbolic aspects of consumption. Consumer Culture Theory is not a unified, grand theory. It fundamentally refers to multiple theoretical perspectives addressing the dynamic relationship between consumer actions, the marketplace and cultural meanings. Consumer Culture Theory demonstrates the social arrangement in which the relations between lived culture and social resources, meaningful ways of life and both symbolic and material resources on which they depend are mediated through markets. Consumer Culture Theory studies the meanings that are heterogeneously distributed and the multiplicity of overall cultural groupings that exist within the broad frame of market capitalism and globalization (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 869). According to Moisander & Valtonen (2006, 188) more attention should be given to the multiple theoretical, paradigmatic and analytical perspectives that the body of Consumer Culture Theory research entails.

Consumer Culture Theory forms a distinctive body of theoretical knowledge of consumption and marketplace behaviours. It links individual meanings to cultural processes in different levels and tries to situate these relationships within the contexts of history and marketplace (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 875). Cultural, meaning, what is meaningful to people, can be found wherever there is social interaction and communication (Jansson 2002, 9). According to Consumer Culture Theory research the proverbial real world is never unified, coherent or completely rational to any given consumer. Consumer Culture Theory research indicates that the lives of consumers` consist of multiple realities. They tend to use consumption as a way of experiencing realities linked to fantasies, aesthetics, desires and identity play that are dramatically different compared to their everyday life (Arnould & Thomspson 2005, 875).

According to Arnould & Thompson (2005, 870– 874) Consumer Culture Theory processes issues like product symbolism, consumer stories in product and brand meanings, ritual practices and the symbolic boundaries that structure personal and communal consumer identities. Consumer Culture Theory is formulated around a set of theoretical questions, that are related to the relationships between consumer`s personal and collective identities. There included are issues such as the cultures created and epitomized in consumer`s lived worlds as well as the underlying experiences, structures and processes. Consumer Culture Theory has promoted consumer behaviour knowledge by illustrating sociocultural structures and processes, which are related to consumer identity projects, marketplace structures, mass-mediated marketplace ideologies as well as consumer`s interpretive strategies and the sociohistoric patterning of consumption. Institutional and social structures such as gender, class, community and ethnicity have a systematic influence on consumption. The connections among these underlying structures and the belief systems, experiences and practices of a consumer are central in Consumer Culture Theory research.

One stream of Consumer Culture Theory explores the ways in which consumers adapt feelings of social solidarity and create self-selected, fragmentary, distinctive and sometimes even transient cultural worlds in pursuit of common consumption interests. This family of Consumer Culture Theory research is devoted to marketplace cultures. It has been seeking to unravel the processes by which consumer culture is instantiated in certain cultural setting and the implications of that process for the ones experiencing it. Consumer Culture Theory research has highlighted the issue of experiential consumption activities fostering collective identifications that are based on mutual meanings and beliefs as well as mythologies, rituals, social practices and status systems (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 871–873).

Consumer Culture Theory is an interdisciplinary research tradition that has promoted consumer culture knowledge and all of its heterogeneous manifestations. It has also created findings and theoretical innovations that are empirically grounded and relevant to a broad consistency in social science disciplines, managerial sectors and public policy arenas. Consumer Culture Theory researchers do not study consumption contexts but rather in consumption contexts to form new constructs and theoretical insights. They also want to extend existing theoretical formulations. Consumer Culture Theory

originates from calls for consumer researchers to extend and broaden their focus to study the neglected social, experiential, and cultural dimensions of consumption in context. This means that the field is preferred to the laboratory as the natural context for Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 869).

In Consumer Culture Theory consumers are seen as culture producers opposed to the traditional anthropological views of people as culture bearers. Previously mass audiences have been conceptualized as passive recipients of subcutaneously injected ideologies of false consciousness (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 871; Kozinets 2001, 83). Since the 1980`s, research and theory have emphasized how the meanings that audience scoops from media are dynamic and contested, built within the interaction between active media as well as an active audience. Consumers are also constantly drawn into an active interplay with producers, microcultures, subcultures and other wider cultural meanings and practices. Mass media reception is driven by a close relationship with the culture of consumption. (Kozinets 2001, 83–84). On the roots of cultural studies, it is important to remember the interaction between cultural communities, cultural products and cultural practices. From a theoretical viewpoint media culture and consumer culture are overlapping. Empirically they are inseparable. Mediated texts carry a great meaning for the way consumers experience the interplay between self and the surrounding world (Jansson 2002, 8 & 11).

2.2 Interpreting media contents

Consumers that receive media products are involved in a process of interpretation in order to make sense of them. Cultural forces like social relations and past experiences must be taken into account as important determinants on how the messages are read and there is a dialectical relation between the cultural forces. Our choices of media consumption and the meanings we take from the media are modified by our experiences. However, also the media we consume affects the way we make sense of these experiences. The background of a consumer may have an effect on the choice of media vehicle, for example television, as well as the choice of media content. Also, every consumer probably interprets a particular television programme differently and

media contents, like a television programme, may act as a resource for both individual and social-oriented identities (Halkoaho 2012, 87 & 89).

Entertainment has infiltrated basically all aspects of contemporary marketing and consumption especially in America. They live in a so called entertainment economy and entertainment is becoming an omnipresent part of the consumption reality, embedded in all types of products and services (Kozinets 2001, 85). Even though the characters of television programmes are fictional, they may actually appear as real people to the viewers and grant feelings of familiarity and intimacy (Russel et al. 2004, 150).

Life themes, experiences and projects shape the interpretations and meanings that consumers make of media contents. Those meanings may be instruments for the ongoing maintenance of identity or also a basis for a new one. (Halkoaho 2012, 89; Kozinets 2001, 83). People may also experience a certain sense of community by sharing certain cultural tastes and lifestyles. This is usually created in relation to popular culture (Jansson 2002, 15). When studying media consumption related to identity the meaning of a media product to identity creation should be evaluated from the viewpoint of the individual consumer instead of the viewpoint of the media content producer (Halkoaho 2012, 89). The interpretation of media messages is depicted in figure 1.

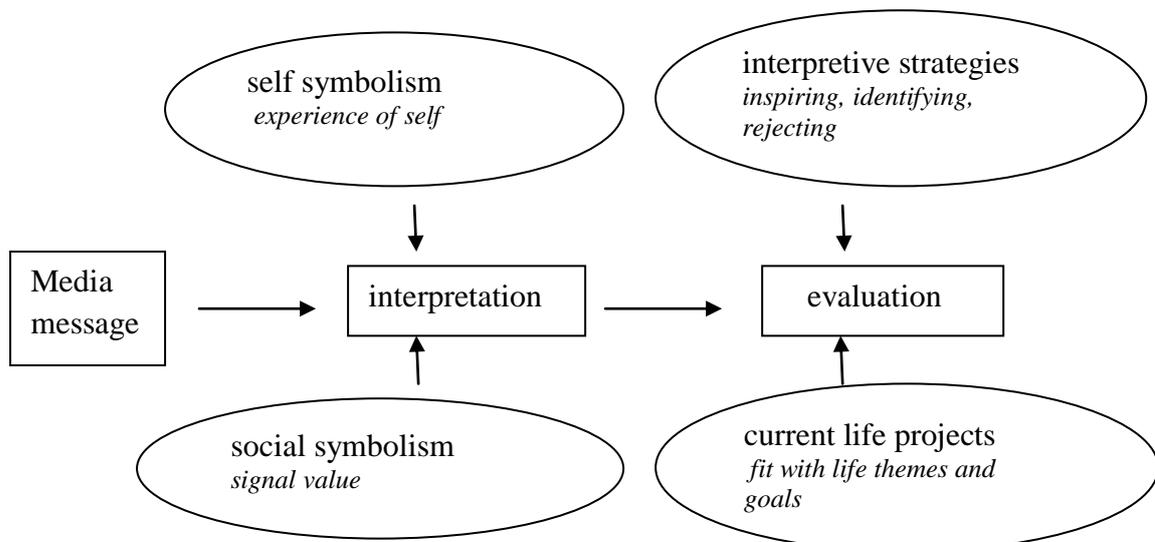


Figure 1 Interpretation of Media Messages (modified from Halkoaho 2012, 90)

The way an individual consumer sees a television programme is related to their predominant self-goals and needs, like self-enhancement and striving for self-

verification (Halkoaho 2012, 100). Media messages are interpreted and evaluated and these processes are affected by social symbolism and self symbolism as well as the interpretive strategies and current life projects of an individual consumer. Consumer culture theorists investigate popular culture texts like films and television programmes as lifestyle and identity instructions that communicate authentic marketplace ideologies and idealized consumer types. The ideologies are the likes of “look like this”, “act like this”, “want this kind of things” and “aspire to this lifestyle”. By interpreting these ideologies consumer culture theorists expose the ways how cultural production systems invite consumers to desire certain lifestyle and identity ideals (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 874).

2.3 Interpreting self and others in social contexts

When it comes to consumer identity projects, the premise is that the marketplace has become a preeminent source of symbolic and mythic resources, through which also the people, who are not able to participate in the market as full-fledged consumers due to the lack of resources, construct identity narratives (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 871–873). Recent sociological theories of consumption and lifestyles indicate that the role of consumption is essential in the personal identity creation and maintenance. Consumption experiences can play a significant role in providing meanings to consumers and contributing to the identity formation of the consumer. In the structuralist view, social identities are expressed by signs and symbols and the meanings are created within the consumption process (Wilska 2002, 195–197; Venkatesh & Meamber 2008, 48).

Consumer culture theorists have argued the market to produce some kind of positions for consumers that they can choose and inhabit. Consumers are personalizing and embodying cultural scripts that align their identities with the structural forces of a consumer-driven global economy, even though individuals can and do pursue personally uplifting goals through the consumer positions (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 871–873). Consumers are seen as unpredictable, individualistic and expressive and they find a high level of similarity uncomfortable (Bertrandias & Goldsmith 2006, 29; Wilska 2002, 195).

According to Harwood (1997, 204) consumers look for messages that support their social identities and avoid the ones that do not. It has been argued that consumers seek reinforcement of their social identities by consuming media, and the rewards from this media consumption may be described as social identity gratifications. The assumption behind this is that viewers select the kind of media contents that meet the needs of their social identity (Halkoaho 2012, 85). According to Vlachos, Theotokis, Pramataris & Vrechopoulos (2010, 1481) consumers are likely to create emotional attachments to the kind of offerings that provide means of self-enrichment, self-gratification and self-enablement.

If products can offer symbolic resources that enable brand-self connections by presenting one's current, past, future or ideal self, they may be linked to self. Also media products can be used for self-enablement, which means that the object of consumption creates a feeling of an effective and capable self. Enriching one's self is a matter of constructing one's identity and identifying the self-fulfilling lifestyle. Enriching the self actually refers to discovering one's true preferences and fulfilling emotional needs as well as self-actualization and expression. Gratifying one's self means the experiential and hedonic aspects of consumption and the role of media products in gratifying the self is evident. The self may be described as a symbolic project, which must be actively constructed out of the symbolic materials by the individual (Halkoaho 2012, 85–86).

Products may empower consumers to follow their goals and tasks. This functional performance of the product may cherish a sense of mastery (Park, MacInnis & Priester 2006, 12–15). Entertainment products are the key elements that consumers in contemporary society use in order to construct their identities and appreciation of what matters in life. Individuals have a way of engaging themselves in social comparisons with the images created by the media, for example the idealized images of attractiveness. People try to achieve the specific, currently prevalent ideal of beauty in their culture. This beauty ideal is an overall look which incorporates both physical features and different products, like clothing, cosmetics and hairstyling. Beauty ideals may also be summed up in specific women, who have come up to embody a certain ideal, such as Cher (Englis et al. 1994, 50; Kubic & Chory 2007, 285). Also for example

Carrie Bradshaw, Blair Waldorf and Serena Vanderwoodsens may be seen as this kind of beauty idols.

The effect of traditional social categories on individual's choices has diminished dramatically over the years and consumers are forced to choose between different lifestyles and identities by themselves. However, belonging to a social category is still important for the consumer. Both psychology and sociology have acknowledged the importance of social context and other individuals in the formation of the personality identity of an individual, especially a consumer. The choices consumers make about consumption are not only about how to act but also about who they want to be. Social networks are likely to affect the notions of appropriate consumption far more than the ones mediated by the media and mass marketing. Social regulation and conventions as well as routines and socialization with other consumers are also likely to affect and restrain the freedom of the individual consumer. There are social regulations, routines, conventions and socialization in peer groups that function as a restriction to free-floating identities (Bauman 1990, 205–207; Wilska 2002, 195–196).

According to Ritson & Elliot (1999, 265) advertisements often becomes a social resource of conversational interactions and bonding. This theory could also be applied to fashion-forward television, as consumers tend to share their opinions and discuss the programmes with their friends. However, as consumers tend to collectively critique and rework the meanings of advertisement campaigns, few of these interactions actually initiate compulsion to buy the brand or product advertised (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 875). Kozinets (2001, 84) states that fans negotiate the relevant boundaries of consumption cultures both individually and collectively, interweaving media properties like fan texts to coincide with their personal and subcultural affinities.

As a result of globalization and postindustrial socioeconomic transformation the traditional bases of sociality have significantly eroded and the dominant ethos of individualism has oriented around an incessant quest for personal distinctiveness in lifestyle choices (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 873). However, insecurity and anxiety are the reverse side of freedom for one's choices (Wilska 2002, 196). Every choice contains a risk of failure which creates insecurity in everyday life and an individual

consumer becomes more dependent upon secondary institutions like the market and mass media, economic cycles and social policy (Halkoaho 2012, 85; Wilska 2002, 196).

The consumption of goods and services plays an important role in lifestyle formation process, as lifestyles are easily understood as the material expression of consumer's identities. Consumer identity is sustained through a process that operates by playing with fragmented, flexible and fluid lifestyles. Visible consumption is the best way of expressing the meaning attached to a lifestyle. The need of expressing a particular lifestyle leads to desires for certain consumer goods. However, consumer may also adjust their desires to meet with their resources and be happy with the outcome (Wilska 2002, 195–198). Many consumption styles are characterized by modest and rational spending. Saving money is often important but consumers may often also underestimate their consumption. According to many empirical studies social status and the level of income as well as socio-economic and demographic factors like age, gender and class still have a powerful effect on consumer choices and everyday practices. Consumers are also highly competent in their spending patterns (Wilska 2002, 195–196 & 208).

2.4 Interpreting fashion

Fashion is an overpowering phenomenon of our culture, which affects the design and consumption of a variety of products, clothing being the classic example (Eckman & Wagner 1995, 646). Nowadays fashion has infiltrated in the very aspect of culture and as the world is dependent upon visual representations, fashion is an important tool for communicating and representing one's persona. People tend to select products and brands that differ from established norms, but are still viewed as acceptable (Goldsmith & Clark 2008, 310). Fashion is also one of the ways in which social order is experienced and communicated. It is a significant aspect of culture that is highly important as a human communication form. Fashion also discovers new meanings in a modest way (Kuruc 2008, 213; McCracken 1986, 76). Thompson & Haytko (1997, 38) express fashion as a distinctive domain of consumer culture.

The North American contemporary society is driven by visual images and conspicuous consumption. Fashion has become an important signifier in determining the status and

persona of an individual. Random objects and particularly items like handbags, jewelry, accessories and shoes act as important status and class symbols within the western world and are maintained through the media and especially in television shows like *Sex and the City*. For consumers fashion is a way to negotiate images, be individualistic and keep their sense of autonomy and affiliation in balance. (Kuruc 2008, 193–194 & 198; Piamphongsant & Mandhachitara 2008, 438). Specifically fashionable clothing signals other people information about the personality and status of the person wearing it (Goldsmith & Clark 2008, 309).

Fashion can signify the social position and class of an individual and be a means of identification within a group. Fashion, like other sign systems, is interconnected with other cultural elements and can be used as an analytic tool for studying different aspects of cultural significance. Fashion is able to define particular groups and individuals as well as entire outward appearances based on cultures. It is an effective tool for communicating versatile messages about cultures and individuals as representation and identification with particular groups happens on the visual level. It can be argued, that the way people dress themselves is an active and a technical process for the construction and presentation of bodily self (Kuruc 2008, 193–194).

The clothes we wear may say a lot more about us than anything we say or do. That is what makes the clothes we wear a highly powerful statement. It is a way of giving clear messages and transferring information about the wearer (Damhorst 1990, 1; Tucker & Kingswell 2000, 8). After all, clothing has a significant role in impression formation (Howlett, Pine, Orakçioğlu & Fletcher 2013, 39). A historical analysis of the origins of fashions aids in the understanding that fashion has as a signifier of both persona and cultural identity. It may also be seen as extension of one's persona. Basically fashion statement has become a personal statement (Kuruc 2008, 193–194).

Fashion opinion leaders have been highly important in spreading new clothing fashions. Consumers use them as sources of information about fashion and the opinion leaders have a powerful effect on the buying behaviour of consumers as fashion opinion leaders are a prime example of information sharing and influencing others (Bertrandias & Goldsmith 2006, 27; Goldsmith & Clark 2008, 309). Especially women who are concerned with their looks pay specific attention to social surroundings and make use of

a complex range of strategies for impression management (Piamphongsant & Mandhachitara 2008, 439–440). However, most research on consumer's practices of ideological resistance underlines the smart and creative ways in which consumers critically view and reinterpret media and ideological baits bending for example advertisements to fit their own lifestyles and circumstances rather than feel the pressure to adjust themselves to a specific ideological representation (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 874).

People construct their social identities by through certain styles of dress, like dark business clothes or colourful outfits. They communicate and achieve social order partially by the use of visual symbols and images in different forms and tend to perform their gender identity treating their appearance with make-up and accessories that are gender-appropriated (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 85). Also clothing is an important factor in symbolic consumption and identity construction. Consumers use fashion in order to identify themselves with some when on the other hand distinguishing themselves from others. Individuality and conformity are possibly reflected more visibly in fashion clothing compared to any other type of consumption (Piamphongsant & Mandhachitara 2008, 439–440).

2.5 The synthesis of the theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on Consumer Culture Theory. However, as it is not a unified theory, this study concentrates in cultural meanings in the mass media culture of consumption. In the theory of this study the interpretation of media messages, interpretation of self and others and interpretation of fashion were analyzed.

Consumers are constantly interpreting media products in order to make sense of them. Interpretation and evaluation of media messages is affected by self and social symbolism as well as interpretive strategies and current life projects of a consumer (Halkoaho 2012, 90). Popular culture texts also communicate marketplace ideologies and idealized consumer types that maneuver consumers to aspire certain identity and lifestyle ideas (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 874). The meanings consumers negotiate

from media and also the media contents consumers choose are often highly dependent on the individual.

The self of an individual consumer is a symbolic project which must actively be constructed of the symbolic materials by the individual and the self can only be constructed in a social context (Halkoaho 2012, 85; Wilska 2002, 195). Even though the importance of traditional social categories has diminished, social networks are still important for an individual consumer as they are likely to affect for example the ideas of appropriate consumption styles. Belonging to a social category is still important but socialization with other consumers often also acts as a restriction to free-floating identities (Baumann 1990, 205–207; Wilska 2002, 195–196). The role of social contexts is interactive and relatively multiform. The meanings attached to both self and others are usually negotiated in relation to social contexts.

Fashion is a sign system which is connected with other cultural elements and aids in studying different aspects of cultural significance. As representation and identification, happens on the visual level, fashion is an efficacious tool for communicating a variety of messages about cultures and individuals (Kuruc 2008, 193–194). The meanings attached to fashion may vary on a wide range as fashion is interconnected both with culture and an individual consumer.

The primary coordinates of meaning are cultural categories and cultural meanings may continually be transferred between categorizations (McCracken 1986, 71–72). The cultural meanings in this study were divided into four categories. Firstly, there are the meanings attached to self and the second category consists of the meanings attached to others. The third category includes the meanings attached to television media and in the fourth category there are the meanings attached to fashion. These four categories are depicted in a four-field in figure 2.

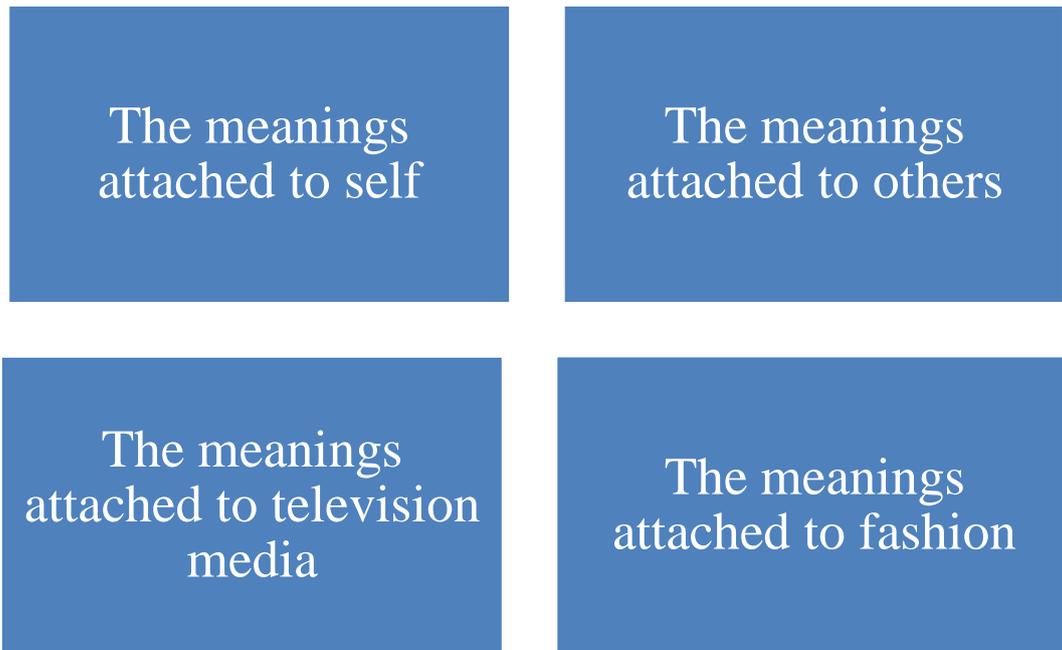


Figure 2 Cultural Meanings in the Theoretical Framework of the Study

The categories in figure 2 were divided on the basis of the focus of the cultural meanings in the theoretical framework of this study. However, this is not an omnipresent categorization, as cultural meanings may continually be transferred between categorizations. As McCracken (1986, 71) states, cultural meaning has several locations in the social world and flows continually between those locations by the help of individual efforts.

3 CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH

3.1 Research method

Qualitative data and a set of related data collection as well as analysis techniques are central to Consumer Culture Theory, which follows from the aims that drive the theory. Consumer Culture Theory focuses on socio-cultural and experiential dimensions of consumption which are not accessible through surveys, experiments and database modeling only (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 870). The main idea of a qualitative study is to describe and clarify experiences in the way that a person has them experienced and built consciously (Polkinghorne 2005, 138). In consumer marketing and cultural research empirical analysis is based on visual materials and texts, like texts that are generated through interviews and focus groups. Cultural texts and cultural talk refers to social texts that are produced, shared and used in socially organized and culturally specific ways. They are not taken as accurate portrayals or perfect representations of a phenomenon but they enable us to have access to particular accounts of those phenomena (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 44–69).

This is a qualitative and descriptive case study. There are two cases, the fashion-forward television programmes *Gossip Girl* and *Sex and the City*. This study focuses on identifying the meanings consumers negotiate in the context of these programmes. In a qualitative study reality is created by producing and interpreting social, cultural, and time-related meanings (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 4–5; Denzin & Lincoln 2003, 13). Qualitative study is characterized by simultaneous data generation, analysis and interpretation (Gummesson 2005, 312). In qualitative research methods the researcher tries to understand the research object comprehensively in a specific context (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 5). The idea of a descriptive study is to produce a rich understanding of the phenomenon and the meanings attached to it (Gummesson 2005, 322). In a descriptive case study producing a good story is already creating theory (Eriksson & Koistinen 2005, 11).

When a case study is inductive, the case provides data for conceptualization and theory generation. In a qualitative case study one or several cases are used to gain either general or specific conclusions about a certain phenomena (Gummesson 2005, 322). This phenomenon might be simple or complex, like a project of an organization or a general phenomenon like consumption (Denzin & Lincoln 2000, 437). In a case study concepts can be formed and theory and propositions can be tried on the basis of real world data. It is aimed to give a full description of the interactions and relationships between a host of events and factors, hence becoming highly interpretive (Gummesson 2005, 322).

Methodology defines how the research phenomenon is studied and method is a specific research technique (Silverman 2000, 79) Instead of being a limitation, the research method should be of an advantage to the research. A rigid and strict method does not make the research better. As a matter of fact, it might take the focus off the phenomenon. Giving freedom to humanity, experience and knowledge of the researcher is vital for the data generation (Addis & Podestà 2005, 405). The objective in choosing the research method is to select methods and materials that enable the researcher to learn as much as possible from the phenomenon. Sometimes it is best to analyze a narrow set of data with a very specific technique when other times it might be better to take advantage of several different methodological tools and multiple empirical materials to study the marketplace (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 44).

Qualitative study is a continuous comparison of data and existing theory. It is a sense-making process, where patterns are formed and turned into concepts, categories and theories as a result (Gummesson 2005, 312). In figure 3 there is a depiction of the research edifice.

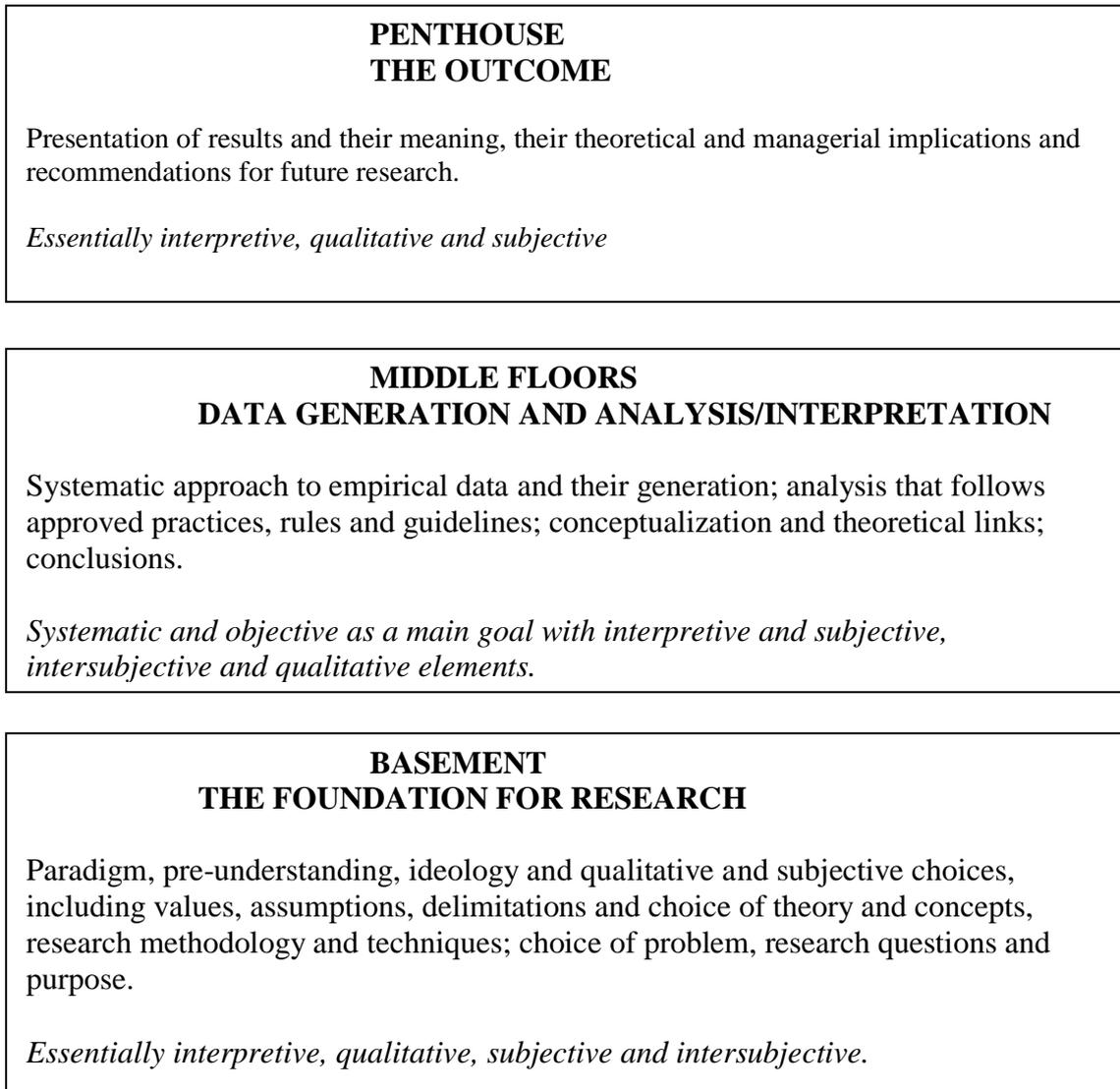


Figure 3 The Research Edifice (Gummesson 2005, 313)

All research starts with making a mix of subjective, intersubjective and objective choices and assumptions like what to research and which research questions to choose. There is also the foundation of the researcher's paradigm and pre-understanding. In the middle floor there is data generation and analysis/interpretation. A qualitative study requires a lot of personal and subjective interpretation of data in order to attract and accept the wealth of data that unpredictable, complex and chaotic markets offer to us. In the penthouse the research data, results and conclusions are presented (Gummesson 2005, 316–317).

This research proceeded like a hermeneutic helix. The hermeneutic helix represents the dialogue between theory and empirical data, where pre-understanding evolves into a

higher level of understanding (Arnold & Fischer 1994, 63; Gummesson 2003, 485). By following the format of the hermeneutic helix, generating and testing theory happens partly simultaneously, so there is not a clear distinction. By comparing the theory to the empirical data, the process is a continuous test of the truthfulness of the theory. This improves the quality of the research (Gummesson 2005, 321). According to the hermeneutic point of view, the objective of a qualitative study is for the horizons of the researcher and the research topic to merge (Arnold & Fischer 1994, 63–64). Hermeneutics in general is referred to as the necessity of understanding and interpretation in qualitative research (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 20–21).

3.2 The cases in the study

3.2.1 Case Sex and the City

Sex and the City circulates around the lives of four young professional women who are searching for the perfect relationship (Tv.Com 02.01.2013). However, fashion is an essential part of the appeal of the show and there are still online conversations on the fashion of the show in 2012, for example in the homepage of the show, eight years after the end of the show. The series incarnated fashion trends as much as it introduced them, both on micro (like the name place necklace of Carrie`s) and macro [haute couture] level (Carrie`s Return 06.03.2013). The main character, Carrie Bradshaw has been said to be legendary (Iltalehti 22.03.2013).

*“I think I wanted the Carrie-necklace at some point. I was looking for it.”
(Interviewee D)*

Costume designer Patricia Field has turned the Sex and the City characters into true small-screen fashion icons. They sparked trends from high-end designer brands to fabric flowers and gave a lot of attention to various designers, for example the world-famous shoe designer Manolo Blahnik (Sex and the City 02.01.2013):

“I personally loved the Manolo Blahniks that carry buys when she is getting ready for the charity event where Natasha will be. They are open at the back and have a rainbow print...absolutely stunning. Anyone remember those?” (A14)

The characters of the show wear the latest fashion trends from Cosmo or Glamour, shop in designer boutiques, attend ballet and gala openings and engage in glamorous consumption of clothes. They are the ideal of the independent woman with a new twist, the big city girls (Richards 2003, 147–148). Sex and the City is like an urban fashion show. The creator of the show has stated that he wanted fashion to be very important in the programme (Kuruc 2008, 200).

The city of New York plays an important role in their lifestyle and the series is deeply rooted in the city (Richards 2003, 147–148). The show has been credited as innovative, as it allows women a distinctive voice within the society dominated by men. It is a powerful discourse which reproduces the massive consumerism of the western society and confirms different gender and cultural stereotypes through the use of fashion (Kuruc 2008, 194).

“Id give my life to New York if it meant living like the girls.” (A1)

Sex and the City is like a trendsetting style bible (Sohn 2002, 67). Viewers of the show become acquainted with the four female characters and their personas mainly through their costuming. Fashion acts as an important factor in signifying the personas and the roles of the characters in each episode so that the viewer is able to identify and relate to them. Metaphorically fashion may be viewed as a fifth character that dictates the roles and development of the women in the show (Kuruc 2008, 201).

Patricia Field has stated that “everybody wants to watch the show and see what the girls are wearing”. People tend to watch the show together and have dinner. According to Fields working on the show has made her realize how powerful a communication device television actually is (Sohn 2002, 68). Field actually dictated full-scale style waves that still resonate today (Carrie`s Return 06.03.2013). Patricia Fields is much appreciated by the fans of the show:

“Patricia Field is great! She has made all of us dreaming of the clothes and the shoes and everything...personally, I want them all!”(A2)

“It was those outfit choices, the crazy, the brave, and the mind-boggling choices that Carrie paraded season after season, that I am happy to say, made my personal clothing choices a little braver too. And for that, Pat Field, I thank you!”
(C 05.03.2013)

Fans of the show can visit HBO and Bravo websites to attend and interactive personality quizzes to see which of the show’s female characters they are likely to be (Richards 2003, 147–148). There are also several quizzes online to determine which character’s style one’s own style reminds the most.

3.2.2 Case Gossip Girl

Gossip Girl is mainly about the lives of privileged young adults living in Manhattan. While the series has a lot of resemblance to other teen dramas before it, the distinctive production element which makes it stand out is the costuming. The styling of the show is the creation of Eric Damam, who also has been a part of the styling team for *Sex and the City*. There are designer names like Christian Louboutin, Tory Burch and Chanel popping out in every episode, and in addition to top designer names the costuming presents an incredible level of glamour and innovation. The importance of fashion and trends in the show can be seen in the number of costume changes per character, which varies from three to six per a 47 minute episode (Romeo 2009, 15–18). Considering Blair’s preppy headbands, Chuck’s dandy suits, and Serena’s deep cleavage, the influence these characters have had on street style and fashion spreads alike is unquestionable (Fashionista 17.03.2013).

“Well when you think about Finland for example when you think about those series I am sure that those have brought for example Louis Vuitton to our street view as well.” (Interviewee D)

Following the shopping habits of the characters is an important aspect of the show, and according to Patte (2006, 155) it has had a lot of comparing to *Sex and the City*. All of the characters have their unique styles and their signature pieces, like the boots of Blake Lively’s character or the headbands of Leighton Meester’s character Blair Waldorf (Romeo 2009, 17). According to Irving (2008, 10) many of the fans of *Gossip Girl* believe that if they imitate the characters of the show they too will have a life full of

glamour. In a blog dedicated to Gossip Girl's fashion there are comments and questions about the clothes and accessories in the episodes:

"do you know who made Serena's dress in the thanksgiving episode of season 6? it's beautiful!" (B)

As some of the actors of the show have become fashion icons also in real life, their style choices are being followed constantly as well. For example Red Carpet Fashion Awards presents outfits of Blake Lively, Leighton Meester and the rest of the acting crew both on red carpet occasions and everyday life online (RedCarpet 2013).

3.3 Data generation

3.3.1 Focus group interviews

Focus group interview means a selected group of people, who are gathered together to discuss a certain topic in order to study it thoroughly (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 173; Bryman & Bell 2003, 368). The participants should be purposive, although not necessarily representative, sample of a certain specific population. The name focus group interview is based on the selection of the groups being "focused" on a given topic. The focus group method is applicable for a variety of theoretical and methodological frameworks, like a culturally oriented research on marketing and consumption. In the beginning this technique was used by communication researchers who were interested in mass media message responses (Lederman Costigan 1990, 117).

In cultural marketing the conceptualization of focus groups is not merely a research instrument but rather a research site where processes of culture and social interaction are made use of and played out. Group members create an audience for each other providing a kind of a theatre where they tell stories about themselves for themselves. By doing this they reflect upon the taken-for-granted practice of life and become aware of it. Group members draw social strength from each other and the situation permits candor by mutual understanding and a feeling of comfort between the participants (Lederman Costigan 1990, 118). Groups offer an opportunity to reflect and comment on

culture and the participants of a group in some way write culture together (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 73–74). Focus groups may be used in business research either as a method in its own right, or side by side with other methods (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 175; Silverman 2004, 178). In this research focus group interview was the main research method.

Focus group is a useful method for studying consumer marketing related issues like attitudes, needs, observations and preferences (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 177). It aims at obtaining in-depth information on ideas of the group (Malhotra & Birks 2007, 187). It was adopted to explore the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of people. The idea of using a group interview is in their ability to create data about “why” behind the certain behaviour and the ability to seek the kind of questions that individual interviews miss and surveys can't ask. In focus group interviews openness is extremely important to create an atmosphere in which the participants feel free to express their sincere feelings, attitudes and thoughts instead of giving socially desirable responses. Also flexibility is needed as the information may occur in a different sequence than what was anticipated (Lederman Costigan 1990, 117–124).

The object of a focus group interview is for the participants to discuss and interact with each others as well as answer the questions of each other's more than the researcher's. The role of the researcher is to encourage the participants in this interaction. The participants are seen both as individuals and as a part of a group, and they have the key responsibility for the discussion. The difference between a focus group and a group interview lies in the explicit emphasis on group interaction to generate data compared to collecting individual-level data in a group setting (Bryman & Bell 2003, 368; Cox, Higginbotham & Burton 1976, 77; Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 173; Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 72).

There are five assumptions upon which the focus group method rests. Firstly people themselves are considered as valuable sources of information, also information about themselves. Secondly, they are expected to be able to report themselves and articulate well enough to put their thoughts, feelings and behaviours into words. Third assumption is about people needing help in “mining” the information. This role is served by the researcher who is supposed to focus the interview. In the fourth assumption the group

dynamics may be exploited to surface genuine information instead of creating a “group think” phenomenon. Last, the group interview is expected to be superior to the interview of an individual. However, most of these assumptions are not unique to focus group interview (Lederman Costigan 1990, 118).

The data of this study was generated by focus group interviews. Two focus group interviews were conducted, one in Helsinki and one in Tampere. All of the participants were between 22 and 28 year old young adult females who have been following either *Sex and the City* or *Gossip Girl* or both actively. The candidates were chosen on the basis of their interest in fashion-forward television and fashion and because they belong to the target audience of these programmes. The target audience for *Gossip Girl* is from 18- to 34-year-old women (Foxnews 20.03.2013). The participants of the focus group interviews of this study were recruited by social media. They were identified via facebook fan pages of the series and sent an inquiry about their willingness to participate in the study and also if they felt like they were suitable for the purpose of the study. The inquiry was sent in Finnish. Also the interviews were conducted in Finnish and translated into English by the researcher in order for the participants to be able to express themselves as well as possible. In total the inquiry was sent to 11 candidates, in the end 9 of the candidates participated in the study.

The people were divided into two groups on the basis of location. All of them live in the city where they took part in the interview. The participants knew each others already in advance and they were selected because they belong to the target audience of the fashion-forward television programmes. There were 3 participants in the interview conducted in Tampere and 6 participants in the interview in Helsinki. There were supposed to be 4 participants in the study conducted in Tampere, but one of the candidates canceled her participation. One of the candidates declined immediately. The first focus group interview was held on 7th of March 2013 and the second one on 15th of March 2013. The first interview was organized in a coffee house in Tampere and the second one at the apartment of one of the participants in Helsinki. The focus group interviews were audiotaped. The interviews were also transcribed afterwards.

The group composition and the possible group tasks have an obvious effect on the scope and nature of the interaction in the group. The discussion usually proceeds in a focused

but also open and free-flowing manner for a limited time, usually for approximately two hours (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 72). The recommended number of people in a focus group interview varies between 2 and 10 (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 180–181). There may be a variety of group compositions, like pre-existing social groups or groups of strangers (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 72). When people know each other, the groups may occur more naturally. This allows the study glimpses of interactions that come close to empirical data that could be collected by observing participants in an ethnographic study. An additional advantage is that participants who know each other in advance can relate to familiar comments and to incidents in their daily lives (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 180–181).

The focus group interview allows the researcher to observe the participants in interaction, generating interactive data that could not be gathered in an individual setting. In a group setting often what one participant says about a certain point actually voices the feelings and thoughts of many. This may be expressed by nonverbal signs of assent or agreement or other cues (Lederman Costigan 1990, 120). A focus group researcher is interested in how people talk about a topic, not just what they say about it. This means that the researcher analyses not only the content of the conversation, but also what the conversation situation is like in terms of body language, emotions, interruptions, conflicts and tensions. Sometimes it is just as important to explore what is not said as of what is said (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 175). Data generation means that data are constructed by the researcher as opposed to data collection. Data are often created in interaction, like in an interview, meaning that already at the early stage of the research, the researcher is engaged in interpretation (Gummesson 2005, 312).

As a limitation to focus group interview may be considered the possibility of people not being willing or able to report their own thoughts, feelings and behaviours with accuracy or the possible discrepancy between the actual behaviours and what people believe they do. Focus groups may also fail if the participants are not carefully selected (Lederman Costigan 1990, 118–127). It is fully acknowledged that people make different statements in different contexts, so the social influence of the group is taken into account but not considered as a problem. The social dynamics of group behaviour is considered an important part of the phenomenon under study, not as something that has to be overcome by preparation and moderation (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 73).

3.3.2 Secondary online data

This study uses cultural texts collected from online communities as secondary data in addition to focus group interviews. However, as the researcher of this study did not take active part in the online communities, it can be said that the study used applied netnography. As a marketing research technique, netnography on the internet uses the information that is available in online forums to identify and understand the needs and decision influences of online consumer groups (Kozinets 2002, 62). It can also allow almost up-to-the minute assessments of the collective pulse of consumers (Kozinets 2006, 281).

There are, admittedly, a few differences between content analysis of conventional mass media such as newspaper articles or TV-programmes on the one hand and online media communication on the other. Firstly, mass media are by definition public media. On the internet, however, it has to be decided from case to case whether we are dealing with private communication or public communication. The key to this decision is the access criteria for observation and/or participation in such communication community. If there is restricted access, for example by the use of passwords, and it is thus reserved for members only, we may talk about a private communication within the community. If access is not restricted, meaning that anybody can participate, this can be defined as public communication (Langer & Beckman 2005, 194). In this study data was collected only from public online communities. Data was collected from January 2013 to March 2013 [Gossip Girl Fashion; Style Blog; The Fashion of Sex and the City].

3.4 Data analysis

3.4.1 Interpreting the data

Although data collection method is extremely important, the importance of how the data is interpreted after it has been collected cannot be underestimated. The term analysis is mainly associated with rigorous and explicit techniques that can be replicated by others, meaning primarily quantitative research. Qualitative research, where replication is more

difficult, is better linked with interpretation (Gummesson 2005, 311). The focus in interpreting interview materials is to collect information about the interviewees' views and facts of the phenomena to practices and cultural meanings through which members of a culture build social reality. This means that the analytic focus lies in the discursive representation or production of marketplace phenomena in talk, images, text and signifying practices (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 72).

The research should be both systematic and rigorous but also equally intuitive and experiential. Human qualities like intuition, common sense, sound judgment, experience, insights, wisdom, tacit knowledge and empathy as well as ethics are highly important and need to be combined with the rigorous research techniques. If the human aspect is ignored, the research may become irrelevant, erroneous and thus harmful. In qualitative research the researcher is after all the most important instrument and the analysis/interpretation is very much dependent on the intuition of the individual, whether we acknowledge it or not. Good intuition enables us to quickly process and synthesize data and make conclusions based on the huge masses of the data and linkages stored in our brains, even though it is often despised as anti-science (Gummesson 2005, 314). However, in qualitative research the researcher may sometimes become confused because of the quantity of the material. It is extremely important to be able to choose a narrow and strictly limited research phenomenon (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2003, 94). Obviously intuition can also harbour bias, but that is the matter with other interpretation/analysis techniques as well (Gummesson 2005, 314).

According to Moisander & Valtonen (2006, 103–104) the selected theoretical framework has a major effect on the process of data analysis and interpretation. Theory without data is empty and data without theory does not say anything. The analytical perspective of this study is atheoretical, meaning that it is based on a rather abstract theory on culture, subjectivity and markets. The primary focus is on questions of how things happen in the marketplace instead of asking why. This kind of perspective offers a general idea of what is analyzed in the data, like meanings and systems of representations instead of the real state of affairs. However, more specific constructs of theory may be necessary in order to gain insightful interpretations of the market phenomena.

The primary role of theory in cultural research is to provide perspectives to the data, in other words to open it up, instead of testing it (Alasuutari 1996 372–373). Data interpretation and re-interpretation is a continuous trial-and-error process where theory is both generated and tested. Through this process there is theory testing also in the sense of constantly improving its validity (Gummesson 2005, 315). There are several analytical approaches that can be used with the data generated from focus group interviews. In all of the approaches the data are used to determine a preliminary depiction, interpretation or an insight into the research phenomena (Lederman Costigan 1990, 124).

3.4.2 Content analysis

Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2003, 93–94) state that a possible method for analysis in all qualitative research is content analysis, which is exploited also in this research. The analysis of a qualitative data proceeds as the following:

- 1) Decide what is interesting in the material and make a strong decision.
- 2) Go through the material and register those things involved in your topic of interest
- 3) Leave everything else out of this research!
- 4) Categorize the material by category, theme or type
- 5) Write the summary

Content analysis is used in order to gain a general and compressed depiction of the research phenomena. However it is only used to organize the material for making the conclusions (Grönfors 1982, 161).

3.5 Evaluating the quality of the research

In scholarly research it is desirable that the reader can follow the thoughts and actions of the researcher. However, it is not always possible to make all the steps transparent to the reader (Gummesson 2005, 312). The interpretations produced in contemporary cultural research present only one way of interpreting and managing the phenomenon, so in an attempt to evaluate such an interpretation one must accept the possibility of there being multiple readings there. Accordingly, it is highly important for the cultural researcher to make the specific interpretive perspective open and explicit to indicate from which perspective the interpretations are produced. The reader of any qualitative research should always be aware of the possible assumptions that may affect the study (Daymon & Holloway 2011, 128; Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 149–150). The main function of data collection and interpretation is to make the underlying premises of the research as visible as possible and to develop the initial framework (Alasuutari 1996, 373). The researcher should explain the theoretical and methodological starting points for the study. A good analysis presents a transparent depiction of the process of arriving at the conclusions. This improves the credibility and trustworthiness of the study (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 149–150).

The widely used quality criteria of reliability and validity have been created in quantitative studies and hence correspond mainly to the needs of quantitative studies (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2003, 133). Reliability, representativeness and other quality criteria for quantitative studies cannot simply be applied to case study research. The number of cases needed to conclusion drawing cannot be decided in advance. The sample is theoretical and the purpose is to look for cases that provide maximum information. It should also preferably be guided by saturation, meaning the point where no or only little further information can be found (Gummesson 2005, 322). The point of saturation is considered to have been accomplished well in this study. In this study there were two focus groups and in total nine participants. It must be taken into account that there were a limited number of participants, which acts as a restriction for the generalizability of the findings. Secondary online data was used to complete the data collected from the interviews.

Methodological consistency and generic coherence may be viewed as standard goals for a good cultural interpretation, meaning a well chosen methodological point of view which is respected throughout the study and interpretations produced from this specific perspective (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 151). As the research is evaluated as an ensemble, the inner coherence is extremely important (Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2003, 135). Cultural analysis should also be concerned with the interpretation ethics and politics, as interpretation is always political, ideological and infiltrated with values (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 151). In this study it must be taken into account that the interviews were conducted in Finnish and translated into English by the researcher. This was done in order for the participants of the interviews to be able to use their native language and this way express their thoughts and feelings as clearly as possible.

Hirschman (1986, 238) states that research inquiry is naturally value-laden because the values of the researcher have an inevitable influence on the choice of methods, choice of phenomenon, choice of data and choice of findings. Ethical considerations for focus groups are similar to other research methods in social sciences. When participants are involved, the researcher needs to make sure that they are given full information about the purpose of the study and the uses of their contributions. Participants must be told to keep the contents of the discussion private and the researcher need to secure everybody's anonymity in the research report (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 180). The privacy of the participants in this study is secured by referring to them anonymously.

4 THE MEANINGS IN FASHION-FORWARD TELEVISION

4.1 The meanings attached to self

4.1.1 Expressing personality

According to Kuruc (2008, 193–194) fashion can be seen as an extension of one's persona. Basically it means that fashion statement has become a personal statement. Fashion is a signifier of both personality and cultural identity and the clothes we wear may say a lot more about us than anything we say or do. That is why the clothes we wear are a highly powerful statement (Tucker & Kingswell 2000, 8). For consumers fashion is a meaningful and fun way to express personality and be individualistic. They enjoy the ability to create a personal style and are proud about it. Nowadays style is one of the most important ways to visually express and communicate personality.

*“It's like someone can come to me and tell me that I like your style. Then I can just be like well, this is my personality. My personality is in these clothes.”
(Interviewee D)*

People construct their social identities by through certain styles of dress, like dark business clothes or colourful outfits. They communicate social order partially by the use of visual symbols and images in different forms (Moisander & Valtonen 2006, 85). The choices consumers make about consumption are not only about how to act but also about who they want to be (Wilska 2002, 196). Expressing one's personality by style is seen as self-evident. It is natural and doesn't necessarily have to be done consciously. Style is a part of the person and it cannot be seen as a separate dimension.

“Usually I just get an idea in my head. Like that looks amazing. It's not...usually it's me because it looks amazing.” (Interviewee A)

However, as the series are often compared to real life, it brings pressure to be as versatile in everyday life as the characters are in the series. Every day is a chance to tell something about the personality of a consumer. This brings up a chance to be expressive

but it can also be seen as exhaustive if there are days when one does not feel like putting effort in their appearance. After all, not looking perfect can also be thought of as a statement of a kind.

“In every scene you`re like, well what are they wearing now? So every scene is like a new chance to dress up and be somehow interesting and communicate or whatever. So I think that people nowadays think that when you go somewhere here or there you should always look perfect.” (Interviewee D)

Consumption experiences can play a significant role in providing meanings to consumers and contributing to the identity of the consumer (Venkatesh & Meamber 2008, 48). Even though fashion consumption continues to be motivated by the desire to look good, a second motive is to be expressive and communicate meaning (Eckman & Wagner 1995, 646). However, wrong consumption decisions may cause negative feelings about the self, especially considering brands, as they communicate a very strong message about the person who is wearing the brand. According to McCracken (1986, 79) there are certain products that a consumer never successfully claims, as she does not claim the symbolic properties of the product.

“I bought this scarf from Louis Vuitton. I hate it so much I...I regretted it immediately. It was like...I don`t want... I don`t want that. I don`t know... I just bought it. It was a birthday present for me from myself and then I felt horrible afterwards. I felt like I was the most superficial person in the world. Because it is only a scarf. It might be that someone else has the same kind of scarf and I don`t look at it in any particular way but I just don`t...or I just don`t want to communicate it about myself. I like Louis Vuitton but the logo is featured so visibly there so I feel like it gives out the wrong message about me. And it makes me feel like I don`t represent what the brand represents.” (Interviewee I)

For a range of products, especially in fashion, people are constantly sticking the label of “it`s so me!”, which indicates how product ownership and use helps consumers in defining and communicating their identity (Mittal 2006, 550–552). Personal style may sometimes be so strong and evident that clothes seen in stores can be attached to certain people by others as well. However, this is usually done only with close friends. It is also an indicator of knowing the other person very well. Usually this also means that the person has managed to express their style and personality clearly.

“It’s exactly like you said that sometimes someone else may say that hey that looks good on you. And sometimes I might spot something for friends who have a totally different style than me. That this looks just like you. This is so you.” (Interviewee G)

4.1.2 Expressing fashion consciousness

Besides personality, fashionable consumers want to express their fashion consciousness as well. Enriching the self is a matter of identity construction and identifying the self-fulfilling lifestyle. Self-enrichment refers to discovering one’s true preferences and fulfilling emotional needs as well as self-actualization and expression (Halkoaho 2012, 86). For the viewers of fashion-forward television it is important to be taken seriously even though they care about fashion. They want to express their fashion consciousness but also be considered as smart and serious women. Fashion-forward television offers verification that it is possible for them to be both fashionable and smart.

“For me it maybe means that it’s okay to be crazy about for example shoes. It’s like Carrie is a smart woman and thinks about stuff and still she keeps going on about shoes and it’s basically her whole life. So it doesn’t mean that if you’re like..if you like to do that kind of stuff you can still be smart.” (Interviewee I)

4.1.3 Feeling pressure to look good

Individuals have a way of engaging themselves in social comparisons with the images created by the media, for example the idealized images of attractiveness (Kubic & Chory 2007, 285). Popular culture texts like films and television programmes have been studied as lifestyle and identity instructions that communicate authentic marketplace ideologies and idealized consumer types. These ideologies are the likes of “look like this” and “act like this” (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 874). The effect of media on the appearance pressures of especially young girls has been acknowledged already for a long time. Even though age usually brings confidence, female consumers are, however, exposed to the images of ideal types of women depicted by media throughout their lives.

“Maybe it [fashion-forward television] brings this pressure to be for example skinny...it brings this certain pressure...and for example the way they handle it if someone gains weight.” (Interviewee A)

The gatekeepers, meaning for example fashion and beauty editors, film directors and other creatives define and authorize and define beauty ideals. They play pivotal roles in shaping audience perceptions. The particular looks that they choose reflect the implicit theories of beauty as well as the beliefs of the gatekeepers of the types of beauty that will appeal to the intended viewers (Englis et al. 1994, 51). It is evident that there has always been beauty ideals that people have wanted to inhabit. However, the more confident and secure a consumer is with herself, the less effect these ideal images have. Consumers also realize that beauty ideals are always dependant on the era.

“It’s also what kind of ideals people have had. It always has an effect, different eras. There has always been beauty ideals and I don’t believe they will ever totally disappear. When Sex and the City came out Carrie was really skinny and everyone admired her and I believe she looked like what I wanted to be as well. But now when I watch it I just think how scrawny she was.” (Interviewee F)

It is clear for the viewers that fashion-forward television brings pressure to be fashionable as well. Sometimes it is seen as exhausting. Usually consumers are willing to put effort in their appearance. However, when they do not feel like paying attention in their clothes they have to deal with their own attitude and idea of always having to look their best.

“I don’t know I may feel pressure about fashion so that it has brought pressure to how much you have to put effort on clothes. So that it creates the kind of atmosphere that...there are always new clothes in the closet..but I don’t always want to dress up! Or somehow...you should pay so much attention to what you’re wearing. So you have to follow fashion blogs and fashion in general.” (Interviewee I)

Most research on consumer’s practices of ideological resistance underlines the smart and creative ways in which consumers critically view and reinterpret media and ideological to fit into their own circumstances rather than feel the pressure to adjust themselves to a specific ideological representation (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 874). However, sometimes the idea of having to put effort in the looks is not even questioned, as it is so strongly communicated from the media.

“And it’s just somehow..maybe we’ve been brainwashed into this world of being fashionable.” (Interviewee A)

4.1.4 Justifying money consumption

According to Wilska (2002, 195–196) recent sociological theories of consumption and lifestyles indicate that the role of consumption is essential in the personal identity creation and maintenance. Even though consumers are highly competent in their spending patterns, economic restraints are likely to affect their consumption patterns. The characters in the series [Sex and the City] may be used as examples of money consumption. However, this is only done if their spending patterns are seen as at least a bit realistic.

“But all the talk how everything is expensive reminds me that it is kind of reality-based because actually Carrie really doesn't have any money. So if she buys some shoes she's not able to pay her rent. It's like I could never do that here but it's like they are not portraying it like you can be a freelancer and at the same time live however you want. So it is reality-based that way.” (Interviewee E)

Consumption styles are often characterized by modest and rational spending. Saving money is often important but consumers may often also underestimate their consumption. According to many empirical studies social status and the level of income have a powerful effect on consumer choices and everyday practices. (Wilska 2002, 195 & 208). The characters in the series are portraying the kind of spending patterns that was perhaps before judged as reckless. However, nowadays putting pleasure ahead of rationality is usually approved and if one wants something, she will get it by using her credit card or borrowing money from a friend.

“I think it has made it more approvable for example to people our age to kind of prioritize. Like, payday is almost here so I guess I can buy that on credit and pay it back soon. So the kind of rationality like our parents could think that don't use your credit card because of some clothes. Wait for your payday and buy it then. So the kind of flexibility and putting pleasure ahead of practicality.” (Interviewee I)

However, even though spending money is not judged upon, it makes it more approvable if it is seen as something that has been earned by working hard. Spending money may be justified by the economical status of a person. People who have earned their money by themselves are also more respected compared to those who are for example living in a wealthy marriage.

“For me it`s mostly Carrie because all of the others...or well..I don`t really count Charlotte because she`s gotten rich thanks to men. Or actually no she is a gallerist! Anyway, I think that the rest of them are sensible people and they have money and I think they have the right to buy those Diors because they have money and they have made their career and worked hard and they are succesfull. So I think then it doesn`t matter if they buy their clothes from Dior or H&M.” (Interviewee A)

4.1.5 Reinforcing the sensibility of a buying decision

Most consumers have made buying decisions that they have regretted afterwards. In order to avoid wrong decisions, consumers tend to form ways to ensure making the right decision before buying an item. Fashion-forward television is seen as one way to ensure that the item a consumer is about to buy is actually worth purchasing.

“Yeah definitely if I get the association that there is something similar here than what I liked there [in the series] it reinforces my decision, because often when I buy something I feel like there is the risk of me not liking it the next day if I buy it only because of the spur of moment. But if I already liked it 2 months ago in television and I still like something similar it supports my sensibility, the thought that maybe I will lake it later then as well.” (Interviewee E)

Even though the characters of television programmes are fictional, they may actually appear as real people to the viewers and grant feelings of familiarity and intimacy (Russel et al. 2004, 150). In the moment of a purchase an imaginary approval of a fictional character may be compared to an approval of for example a friend. The point of reference in the series might be one character or also the appearance of a certain item in the series` in general. Especially if the urge to buy something is strongly based on a feeling, the series may offer a justification that is thought of as more sensible.

“Yeah sometimes when I see something really cool and I get this very strong feeling that I must get it.. so sometimes it affects me in a way..I somehow encourage myself to buy it on the basis of seeing it in the series. Like, Carrie would use it as well!” (Interviewee A)

Fashion opinion leaders have been highly important in spreading new clothing fashions. Consumers use them as sources of information about fashion and the opinion leaders have a powerful effect on the buying behaviour of consumers (Goldsmith & Clark 2008,

309). Seeing certain fashion items that have appeared in the series afterwards in a store creates a feeling of familiarity and almost calls the consumer to purchase them.

“Yeah that was well said. it`s like..buy me now! Buy me, I have been in Sex and the City as well.” (Interviewee B)

4.1.6 Seeing brands as status symbols

Brands have an important role in the series. As also Kuruc (2008, 200) has said, the creator of Sex and the City has stated that he wanted fashion to be very important in the programme. Viewers have spotted these luxury brands from both Sex and the City and Gossip Girl and become acquainted with and interested in them. Brands have become a part of the everyday life of consumers.

“I believe that when you think about those series in for example Finland that they have brought like Louis Vuitton and so on to the street view because someone has spotted them there..not necessarily us but someone and thought that this is good I`m going to use it as well. So they have definitely had an impact.” (Interviewee D)

Kuruc (2008, 198 & 213) has also stated that items like handbags, jewelry, accessories and shoes act as important status and class symbols within the western world and are maintained through the media and especially in television shows like Sex and the City. Fashion is also one of the ways in which social order is experienced and communicated. Already children seem to realize the communicative power of certain brands, even though the brands that are used are usually different to the ones used by adults.

“I remember that already in the first grade the brand mattered. It was important to have a certain number of stripes in your cap.” (Interviewee H)

Specifically fashionable clothing is considered to signal other people information about the status of the person wearing it (Goldsmith & Clark 2008, 309). Sometimes this might be tried to achieve by certain singular items, which are then highlighted in order to create a specific image of the status of the person.

“I get the idea because I have this one friend. She`s a really lovely friend but she has this thing for the brands or like she doesn`t even make that much money but she saves money in order to get like a scarf or a key ring from for example Louis Vuitton or Burberry. And it`s quite funny when she`s just like that and she`s really

like she'd love it. Or if you bought wellies it's also like that and it's not like her style is like that otherwise because she doesn't buy other clothes like that or somehow like it doesn't define her completely, but it's definitely the one thing that's important to her that she highlights there." (Interviewee E)

Many consumers also try to avoid wearing brands, especially those that they consider as the kind of brands that are worn as obvious status symbols. They also respect modern brands that try to be recognizable in other ways aside of the logo. The ideal situation for consumers seems to be able to wear their favourite brands without the logo being too visible there. However, they still want people to recognize that they are wearing a certain brand in other ways.

"I think that brands have actually moved into the direction of not being so obvious. I don't really know about the really expensive ones but like the modern brands try to be recognizable in some other ways." (Interviewee H)

Social status and the level of income as well as socio-economic and demographic factors like age, gender and class still have a powerful effect on consumer choices (Wilska 2002, 195 & 208). The level of income as well as social status may be seen in the way how consumers use brands as well. Consumers seem to reckon that there is a certain pattern in using brands as status symbols.

"The more the economical situation evolves there is probably a certain point where the brands are really important in pointing out that you're doing well until you reach the point that actually I'm doing pretty well, do I really have to show off with the brands and then you start thinking that you don't want to show it. Because it's peasantry." (Interviewee D)

4.2 The meanings attached to others

4.2.1 The attitudes towards the opinions of others

Consumers are unpredictable, individualistic and expressive and they find a high level of similarity uncomfortable. Individuality and conformity are highly reflected in fashion consumption (Bertrandias & Goldsmith 2006, 29; Piamphongsant & Mandhachitara 2008, 439–440; Wilska 2002, 195). Bauman (1990, 205–207) has said that even though belonging to a social group is important, the significance of traditional social categories

is eroding. That can be seen in the attitudes of consumers. As long as they feel good about the clothes they are wearing themselves, the attitudes of others do not really matter. Consumers might actually seek to be different and arouse opinions. However, this kind of attitude requires the kind of good self-confidence that also the characters in the series have.

“Yeah it’s mainly about the attitude. That it doesn’t matter...that I wear the kind of clothes I like and it doesn’t matter what other people think. So yeah what I have taken from it [Sex and the City] is the attitude they have towards clothes like this is cool. I’m gonna wear this!” (Interviewee A)

Sometimes social regulation and conventions as well as routines and socialization with other consumers might affect and restrain the freedom of the individual consumer (Wilska 2002, 195–196). However, the social pressure from others was considered more evident during the teenage years. The attitudes towards the opinions of others are highly dependent on self-esteem, which usually seems to grow by age.

“When I was younger I had a really big social pressure to...I don’t really know where it came from but I had to have new clothes all the time. I bought new clothes all the time.” (Interviewee C)

4.2.2 The attitudes towards the opinions of friends

According to Wilska (2002, 196) social networks are likely to affect the notions of appropriate consumption far more than the ones mediated by the media and mass marketing. They might operate as an encouragement or a restriction to the identity of a consumer. Even though consumers are pursuing to be individualistic and the importance of the opinions of others has diminished, the opinions of friends, and especially close friends, do still matter. Consumers are hoping to get both positive and also negative, if necessary, feedback from their friends.

“I don’t know I feel like the opinion of the people I respect affects me a lot.” (Interviewee H)

However, the opinions from those friends that have a similar style are valued more compared to friends with a very different style. If one gets complimented by someone

who in her opinion does not understand her style, it might be thought of as suspicious and unpleasant. Usually this problem occurs with friends who are not that close.

”And somehow I recognize that there are different kinds of friends. So that there are those friends that we both know that we have different styles and we don’t even try or we just don’t know how to get any inspiration. But then again there are those friends with whom my style meets with more. So it’s maybe more the starting point you have, like do your styles match at all. If I get feedback from someone whose style I do not like or someone with whom I feel like we don’t have very similar style already from the beginning and then she praises my style, basically often they just know that it looks good on me but sometimes I notice that I start thinking if I have gotten a lot of positive feedback of some specific item from people who have a totally different style compared to mine I start thinking that perhaps..am I now..like is this what I want to be after all.” (Interviewee E)

4.2.3 The way to see others

According to Goldsmith & Clark (2008, 309–310) clothing is a publicly used good that communicates other people information about the personality of its wearer. Fashion is an important tool for communicating and representing one’s persona. Consumers seem to construct strong opinions about the characters of the series, sometimes by their looks and styles only.

“I don’t like Miranda exactly because she doesn’t look good. Partly. And she also has an irritating personality. She’s so rigid.” (Interviewee C)

The style of a person is relatively often used as an indicator of personality of an individual in real life as well. Different styles can be seen as a restriction to liking the other person or being friends. Sometimes there might be certain brands or fashion items that are basically seen as an unbridgeable obstacles for friendship.

“It’s like that one’d have to have quite an amazing personality that I wanted to be friends with someone who uses the clothes from Ed Hardy. I hate it so much.” (Interviewee C)

However, this is often seen as superficial and something that should not be done. The consumption culture of the western world is considered to restrict the way people relate to others and consumers are pursuing to be tolerant of a variety of styles. Usually they

are also able to get over the mismatching of styles. However, in some cases it might need some personal work.

“It’s one way of expressing yourself by your style but it can also be something like the way you talk. It’s like.. I would like to choose my friends according to something else than the way they dress.” (Interviewee E)

Clothing has a significant role in impression formation (Howlett et al. 2013, 39). The choice of clothing is often also linked to the state of mind of the person. The way one has dressed might be seen as an indicator of both where the person is going and how they are feeling. Certain items, as well as always using same clothes, are seen as indicators of being for example pitiful and boring. Versatile and fashionable items are considered to communicate for example joy, festivity and other positive emotions and elements.

“It’s so funny to notice that the way they are dressed indicates the mood they’re at. Like if Carrie is going to some spectacular event she’s wearing like a swan or something like that!” (Interviewee A)

“I hate Rufus because he’s always so miserable and he’s always wearing the same kind of thick sweater.” (Interviewee C)

4.3 The meanings attached to the fashion-forward television programmes

4.3.1 Accepting commerciality

According to Hirschman, Scott and Wells (1998, 47) what differentiates television programmes from advertisement as a cultural text is that the purpose of a television programme is not to change consumer behaviour. However, consumers clearly disagree. They are not even questioning if the series have a commercial purpose and it would be thought of as naïve not to recognize the commercial system there.

“You can’t actually be so blind not to realize that there is a commercial organization there in the background. There definitely is. And I’m sure there have been evidence of sales going up because of the series.” (Interviewee D)

The viewers do not see commerciality as a bad thing. What matters to them is the context where commerciality appears. In fashion-forward television commerciality is seen as a natural aspect, so it is not judged upon. It is actually bringing additional value to the programmes, as the designers are more interested in showing their designs in the series when they are aware of the promotional and commercial value of them.

“But I don’t think there’s anything wrong with it to use it because you can also get really nice ideas from there. And yeah it can also be used to spread awareness of some things that otherwise we would not know about also on a wider scale.”
(Interviewee C)

As television media is nowadays an important fashion communication tool, the shows presented in television inspire and influence people worldwide. It is a powerful tool for circulating trends and fads within the fashion world globally (Kuruc 2008, 194). The series working as a springboard for the designers is well appreciated by the consumers as well. It is thought of as a refreshing and fun marketing channel.

“Yeah and as you said it’s an incredible marketing channel for some small brand of clothes.” (Interviewee H)

The trends that appear in the series are copied and mass produced by the cheaper brands immediately. However, it is seen as an evident circle of fashion trends and also as good publicity for the original brand. For consumers it is highly important. As most of the consumers are not able to buy the expensive designer items, they may purchase an equivalent copy from for example Zara, Top Shop or H&M. Consumers accept the commerciality of fashion-forward television partly exactly because they feel like they benefit from it as well.

“And obviously if some brand gets into like Gossip Girl and someone uses the clothes there it is huge for the brand because they know that all the cheaper stores are going to copy the same...some piece of clothing or something immediately.”
(Interviewee G)

Fashion opinion leaders have been highly important in spreading new clothing fashions. Consumers use them as sources of information about fashion and the opinion leaders have a powerful effect on the buying behaviour of consumers (Goldsmith & Clark 2008,

309). When consumers want to be fashionable they usually follow some trendsetters. Trendsetters are also seen as an evident part of the commercial system. After all also according to Bertrandias & Goldsmith (2006, 25) fashion apparel marketers encourage opinion leaders to promote their products.

“And it`s exactly because...if you can get the opinion leader of a certain target group to wear your clothes everyone else gets on board quite easily.”
(Interviewee F)

The fashion-forward television programmes have created modern fashion-icons of the actresses in real life as well (Richards 2003, 147; Warner 2010). When the viewers follow the style of a specific character, they often start following the style of the actress in real life as well. They may transfer the meanings attached to a certain character to the real life actress as well.

“That reminds me that from Gossip Girl at least the character of Blake Lively...what was her name...Serena. Yeah I think she`s really beautiful and she has a lovely style and when I watch Gossip Girl she`s like a style idol for me and I follow her style particularly and I`ve often gotten inspiration from her [...] I have also definitely been following Blake Lively. For example I pay attention to her if I see her on the red carpet.” (Interviewee A)

4.3.2 Identifying with the characters

According to Kuruc (2008, 201) fashion acts as an important factor in signifying the personas and the roles of the characters in each episode [in Sex and the City] so that the viewer is able to identify and relate to them. Fashion may also be viewed as a fifth character that dictates the roles and development of the women in the show. It seems like all of the characters have been chosen to portray a certain genre of style. This makes the show more versatile and interesting for the audience.

“They all have their own styles. Specific styles.” (Interviewee F)

The possibility to identify with the characters is an evident factor in the charm of the series. Many consumers have engaged themselves in a kind of identity play with their friends. The characters are sometimes also used as a way to compliment or symbolically describe other people. This can only be done with people who are also familiar with the

series. However, it may also cause wrong interpretations as the characters can be evaluated from numerous points of view. As Halkoaho (2012, 87& 89) has said, every consumer interprets television programmes differently and the meanings we take from them are in relation to our experiences

“Yeah exactly...like some of the characters are used as compliments. It’s really common to hear something like oh my god you’re exactly like Carrie! And maybe no one wants to be Miranda and then if you say that you’re like Miranda it might be taken as an insult.” (Interviewee A)

Originality and versatility are the kind of features that are valued and admired in a person’s style. This means trying new and different things without prejudice. Versatility makes the character also easy to identify with. According to Russel et al. (2004, 150) the characters of fictional television may grant feelings of familiarity and intimacy to the viewers. There might also be a fine line between identification and idolization. Consumers might also see the characters or actresses as style idols or trendsetters and identify with them at the same time.

“Maybe Carrie because her style is the most original. The others are more stereotyped and they have the kind of specific styles whereas Carrie tries more different things.” (Interviewee E)

“Yeah she’s unique and that’s what means something to me.” (Interviewee D)

As often the characters of a series are older than the individual consumer, they may also be seen as an inspiration for the future. This makes it possible to dream about and pursue the kind of things that are not reachable at the moment, often because of economic factors and the life situation. The aspects of identification may be seen as changing and evolving by age and by era, as consumers grow older and evolve as well.

“But I might also think like when I’m that age I’ll be like them! So then I can buy Dior and so on. So I just have...just because I can!” (Interviewee A)

Products may empower consumers and this may cherish a sense of mastery (Park, MacInnis & Priester 2006, 12–15). The meanings of identification with a character might come up in the feelings attached to a certain items as well. Identification with a character can create feelings that might be stronger than expected and there might

appear a strong web of meanings between the consumer, a product and fashion-forward television at the moment of finding a specific fashion item.

“You somehow get some kind of power from it because Carrie is like a style idol and if she looked at the necklace and she`d be like this is really nice and then you could say that well, it`s mine. It`s somehow twisted but you`d get the feeling that Carrie liked it as well and she might even envy me! Kind of.” (Interviewee A)

4.3.3 The way to relate to life situations

Viewers select the kind of media contents that meet the needs of their social identity. Consumers look for messages that support their social identities and avoid the ones that do not. Media messages are interpreted and evaluated through processes that are affected by social symbolism and self symbolism as well as the interpretive strategies and current life projects of an individual consumer. The background of a consumer may have an effect on the choice of media vehicle, for example television, as well as the choice of media content. Also, every consumer probably interprets a particular television programme differently (Halkoaho 2012, 85; Harwood 1997, 204).

The way a consumer sees a certain television programme is often related to their goals and needs, for example self-enhancement and the strive for self-verification (Halkoaho 2012, 89 & 100). Consumers may look for either similarities or something totally opposite to their own lives in the series, depending on their current life situation. The series may also work as an inspiration for the future. As the lives of consumers are often quite different to the series, they may choose to watch certain series because they see them as an example of something that could be pursued. They may also offer them a point of reference of what life is like in a big city, for example in New York.

“Maybe it was because I was from a small town that those series offered a point of reference to the “big world”. It also depends on what you`re interested in. And what your family..obviously it can also be that someone rebels against their family if the family has been really hidebound and then they think that I want to live for fashion and look for escape that way.” (Interviewee A)

Life themes, experiences and projects shape the interpretations and meanings that consumers make of media contents. Those meanings may be instruments for the ongoing maintenance of identity or also a basis for a new one (Halkoaho 2012, 89).

Sometimes changes in life situation offer a chance for big identity and lifestyle changes as well. A character from a favourite television show of a consumer may work as an example and inspiration of what the consumer wants to become in this kind of situations when they are looking for a new social identity.

“Maybe it’s like when you move from somewhere outside Helsinki so then you..I mean because there was this girl who started at our school and she moved from the countryside and then she was like now I’m in Helsinki and I want to live like Samantha in Sex and the City. She really said it out loud. She’s quite extraordinary and she definitely did live like Samantha. But maybe she felt like her adulthood has begun now that she moved to Helsinki to study. And somehow she put a lot more effort to her style and lived her life like they do in Sex and the City like going out a lot and seeing her friends so maybe it was also a life change at the same time.” (Interviewee I)

4.3.4 Admiring the fashion oriented lifestyle and New York

According to Richards (2003, 147–148), the city of New York plays an important role in the lifestyle of the Sex and the City characters and the series is deeply rooted in the city. This can clearly be seen in the mindsets and attitudes of the viewers and this highly applies to Gossip Girl as well. New York is seen as this magical city full of opportunities. Big cities in general are considered as offering more options and career opportunities and better places to follow one’s dreams.

“Yeah maybe the milieu is quite different to ours and maybe it is a kind of a dream to be living in New York or in some other big city and that way somehow of get in touch with the kind of life full of chances.” (Interviewee A)

Some viewers have actually visited the set of the series and the series have worked as an inspiration to visit the city. The commercial value to the tourism of New York is also recognized by the consumers. Visiting the sets of the series might create a sense of actually living the life of the characters for a moment. The viewers remember particular events on particular sets extremely well.

“Both series have been filmed in New York and I love it. When I was in New York a year ago I visited all the main stages of Gossip Girl there. My boyfriend followed me and took photos of me sitting on a stairs and then I told him that these are the stairs of Met where they were sitting and pouring frozen yoghurt on each other’s hair and so on.” (Interviewee C)

The visual media works as a bank of images, from where consumers may absorb specific cultural lifestyle attributes (Jansson 2002, 15; Kellner 1995, 257). As Richards (2003, 147–148) has said, the characters of the show wear the latest fashion trends from Cosmo or Glamour, shop in designer boutiques, attend ballet and gala openings and engage in glamorous consumption of clothes. This is something that is seen as an admirable lifestyle. However, as it is definitely also seen as unattainable, it is more of a distant dream than a goal that is realistically aimed at.

“I would definitely want to be filthy rich and living in New York. So basically I would like to have their life.” (Interviewee C)

Usually consumers are hoping for only small things that would make life just a bit more glamorous. Even though they admire the lifestyle in the series, they are usually realistic about the things they could actually implement in their lives. What consumers long for is some variation and celebration in the everyday life. As the characters of the series are always wearing beautiful outfits, pretty clothes are easily linked with good times and a glamorous lifestyle. The series often work as a bank of ideas for doing something special compared to the casual life.

“Because in those series they have the kind of fancy party dresses or like they’re so dashy that you just wouldn’t wear them in a bar. But sometimes I feel a bit wistful and think that it would be so cool to go for drinks on a Saturday night and really put effort in the outfit.” (Interviewee E)

Nowadays there is an incessant quest for personal distinctiveness in lifestyle choices (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 873). The viewers of the series admire the lifestyle of the characters also because they are individualistic and because they set an example of being able to enjoy life no matter what age they are. It is thought of as something to be pursued. Knowing and being yourself is seen as an extremely important theme in fashion-forward television. The series are also seen as liberating. They offer women example for being independent and self-confident. When *Sex and the City* started it was very daring and brought up issues that had not been talked about before.

“Maybe it has offered women the kind of new role models. So nowadays if you are 27 years old and outgoing you can be that.” (Interviewee F)

As *Sex and the City* started already in the 90`s it has had very different starting point to *Gossip Girl*. The themes and attitudes in both of the series reflect the attitudes of the different eras. According to Irving (2008, 10) many of the fans of *Gossip Girl* believe that if they imitate the characters of the show they too will have a life full of glamour.

“Then again Gossip Girl has already started from the idea that both women and men can do anything they want already at school.” (Interviewee D)

Consumers critically view and reinterpret media and ideological baits in creative ways, bending for example advertisements to fit their own lifestyles and circumstances rather than feel the pressure to adjust to a certain ideological representation of something that should be pursued (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 874; Wilska 2002, 198). Even though the life of a person is not exactly the same as in the series, there are often some similarities that are valued. The ability to relate to the lives of the characters even in some ways might overpower the sense of admiration. It is rewarding for consumers to find points of reference to the lifestyles in the series in their own lives.

“I also feel like it somehow resembles the life we are living. So that even though we do not go to the fanciest places we go out anyway. And buy clothes. So in a way I don` t admire it but I feel like I can relate to it.” (Interviewee H)

Sometimes the meanings that are looked for in the lifestyle portrayed in the series are bigger life themes and encouraging examples instead of material issues. These themes are encouraging as they can and might already have been achieved also by regular consumers.

“There [in Gossip Gir]) is definitely also the theme of surviving on your own and being independent.” (Interviewee G)

4.3.5 Creating fantasy in real life

One of the central issues in Consumer Culture Theory research is experiential consumption activities that foster collective identifications that are based on mutual meanings and beliefs as well as mythologies, rituals, social practices and status systems (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 871). Consumers like to create consumption situations

that offer them a chance to imagine being one of their favourite characters and living their life. Usually these imaginary plays are based on certain contexts, like having cocktails with friends, or based on certain brands that regularly appear in the series.

“When I went to Ladurée for the first time I definitely got the Blair-feeling like: Now I’m here and they are eating the same macarons there across the Atlantic [in Gossip Girl].” (Interviewee C)

According to Wilska (2002, 197–198), the best way to express the meaning attached to a lifestyle is visible consumption. The need to indicate a certain lifestyle leads to a desire for certain goods. When it comes to fashion-forward television the atmosphere that is sought for is usually created with goods that are often thought of as glamorous and festive, as is also the lifestyle that is portrayed in the series`.

“Yeah sometimes when you`re out with your friends and really dressed up you may get the feeling that heeeey this is like a real life Sex and the City -moment. Or something like that. When you`re having cocktails and wearing heels.” (Interviewee E)

4.4 The meanings attached to fashion

4.4.1 Looking for fashion idols

Products that offer symbolic resources by presenting one`s current, past, future or ideal self may be linked to the self. Also media products can be used for self-enablement, as entertainment products are the key elements that consumers use to construct their identities and to identify what matters in life (Halkoaho 2012, 86; Kozinets 2001, 85). Fashion-forward television is an important self-enablement factor. Consumers feel more confident about their fashion choices when they can relate their own style to the fashion in the series. The characters are often used as fashion idols when it comes to items that are somehow unusual and their style can be used as a justification for extraordinary fashion choices. According to Bertdandias & Goldsmith (2006, 27) and Goldsmith & Clark (2008, 309) fashion opinion leaders are a prime example of information sharing and setting an example. Especially women who are concerned with their appearance

make use of a complex range of strategies for impression management (Piamphongsant & Mandhachitara 2008, 439–440).

“At least for me it’s really important and I can notice that sometimes now over the years if I have for example some clothes that are a bit unusual, like once I had this black petticoat which was really...a bit over the top. So I remember that I was thinking how Carrie had it as well. Or that Carrie could use this as well and others said that it’s exactly something that Carrie would wear! So like it is something that she has had as well and it looked good on her even though it is a bit over the top. Maybe it’s the confidence that you get from there. You feel more confident. Maybe that way it affects your style as well. And I notice that because you can often see her bra, that if I have a some kind of chiffon shirt that is see-through and I’m thinking if it’s too much I always think that she had it as well and it looked elegant. I think that every time I wear something see-through so that you can see my bra.” (Interviewee B)

4.4.2 Sharing the interest for fashion

According to Warner (2009, 181) fashion-forward television shows offer a promotional function, given that their circulation have powerful links to education about and consumption of modern fashion. Fashion often becomes a central discussion item between the viewers of the series. Fashion-forward programmes are seen as a way for fashion-oriented people to share their mutual interest for fashion and their fashion knowledge between other people who are interested in it. The fashion-forward television programmes have been acting as common ground for discussion about different aspects of fashion. As *Sex and the City* was one of the first fashion-forward television programmes, it is seen as a forerunner.

*“I feel like if I had been watching the series [*Sex and the City*] when I was younger it would’ve given a nice approach to the issue of fashion being okay and that it is trendy to talk about it. Because I feel like when I got interested in fashion it was a bit like...I didn’t really get any response or people just didn’t seem to care. It was like it would’ve been a bit stupid. So it wasn’t like I shared with it many people. I think that when the series came it was a new and a refreshing way to think about fashion.” (Interviewee H)*

Fashion-forward television programmes might even be seen as an early counterpart to fashion blogs, which are nowadays highly popular. One of the meanings in both is to display fashion to the masses and bring people who are interested in fashion together.

“Yeah and maybe fashion blogs...so that through fashion blogs people who are interested in certain styles and fashion have kind of found each other. So maybe Sex and the City could’ve also brought people together somehow. I don’t think blogs originated from it but maybe they were kind of a continuum to it.” (Interviewee I)

Talking about fashion is important to consumers following fashion-forward television, even though they may feel that other people find that superficial. However, talking about fashion is recognized as a part of being fashionable and being judged upon it is merely thought as amusing and narrow minded, as also according to Goldsmith & Clark (2008, 310) fashion is nowadays an essential part of contemporary culture. According to Kuruc (2008, 213) and McCracken (1986, 76) fashion is also a way to experience and communicate social order.

“When you’re interested in fashion you talk about it. Like what you see in television and magazines and all. It’s nice.” (Interviewee B)

“And you can notice that people often have prejudice towards people who follow trends. And they are often like you’re just a fashion kitten, you don’t know anything besides clothes.” (Interviewee A)

4.4.3 Adopting the way to consume fashion

According to Kozinets (2001, 83–84) mass media reception is driven by a close relationship with the culture of consumption. The series present an example to consuming fashion and consumers easily adopt consumption habits from there. Even though the consumption habits might not be absorbed consciously, the continuous consumption of new clothes and other fashion accessories in the series makes it seem normal to the audience. Continuously shopping for new clothes is more of a rule than an exception. The example consumers see in the series is considered to be reflected in the way they think and feel about fashion consumption.

“For me it’s maybe because those series are so fashion-oriented and the trends change so often and they never use same clothes twice so I feel like...I don’t want to use these anymore because I’ve already used them at least ten times..or I just feel like that.” (Interviewee C)

The issue of certain cultural production systems, like marketing communications and fashion industry, systematically predisposing consumers to certain types of identity

projects is a central research problem in Consumer Culture Theory research. Consumption is a practice mode that occurs within the ideological imperatives and structures of dynamic marketplaces. (Arnould & Thompson 2005, 874–875). Consumers are wondering if they are sometimes reflecting the spending patterns of the examples they get from fashion-forward television, usually unconsciously. The characters are seen as portraying an example of a certain spending patterns that encourages consumers to spend money on and consume fashion.

“Yeah now I actually started to realize how much Carrie does it that she uses so much money on shoes. So how much does it affect young people like if they didn’t even realize it that they just think they can order stuff online like crazy and pay by credit card because it is so cool and important to have a lot of shoes. I don’t know. Does it provoke that kind of...splurge?” (Interviewee B)

4.4.4 Appreciating Nordic brands

According to Kuruc (2008, 213) and McCracken (1986, 76) fashion is a significant aspect of culture and fashion also discovers new meanings in a modest way. The Finnish viewers of fashion-forward television programmes notice the familiar domestic brands easily and get excited about the fact that a part of Finnish-, or Nordic culture in general, is represented in the globally popular series. Nordic fashion is well appreciated and it is considered as definitely earning to get global attention.

Yes and remember the Marimekko-curtains Carrie has!?! (Interviewee B)

Finnish consumers appreciate the possibility to buy something that has appeared in the show in the store next door. They often feel like their identity matches more with Nordic than American brands. They are also happy for their favourite brands being successful and feel proud for them.

Yeah it was probably seen like “this fits my style as well” because it isn’t so American. (Interviewee D)

4.5 Conclusions and re-evaluating the theoretical framework

In the theoretical framework of the study cultural meanings were divided into four categories and these categories were depicted in figure 2. In the empirical data of the study there were identified specific cultural meanings that were negotiated from the fashion-forward television programmes *Sex and the City* and *Gossip Girl* and attached to the four categories. The category of television media in figure 2 was re-established as fashion-forward television. The specific cultural meanings negotiated from fashion-forward television programmes *Sex and the City* and *Gossip Girl* were attached to the categories on the basis of the focus of the meanings. The meanings attached to self, others, fashion-forward television programmes and fashion are depicted in figure 4.

The meanings attached to self

- Expressing personality
- Expressing fashion consciousness
- Feeling pressure to look good
- Justifying money consumption
- Reinforcing the sensibility of a buying decision
- Seeing brands as status symbols

The meanings attached to others

- The attitudes towards the opinions of others
- The attitudes towards the opinions of friends
- The way to see others

The meanings attached to fashion-forward television programmes

- Accepting commerciality
- Identifying with the characters
- The way to relate to life situations
- Admiring the fashion oriented lifestyle and New York
- Creating fantasy in real life

The meanings attached to fashion

- Looking for fashion idols
- Sharing the interest for fashion
- Adopting the way to consume fashion
- Appreciating Nordic brands

Figure 4 Cultural Meanings Negotiated from Fashion-Forward Television

The meanings attached to self consist of expressing personality, expressing fashion consciousness, feeling pressure to look good, justifying money consumption, reinforcing the sensibility of a buying decision and seeing brands as status symbols. These meanings reflect the relationships between the identity, personality, feelings and style of a consumer and how these are connected and communicated. According to Kuruc (2008, 193–194) fashion can be seen as an extension of one's persona. Individuals also have a way of comparing themselves with the images created by the media, for example the idealized images of attractiveness (Kubic & Chory 2007, 285). Being fashionable is seen as a part of the identity and personality of a consumer. However, sometimes it is seen as exhausting as they always have to both look their best and also fight against the prejudice of fashionable women not being smart.

Consumers feel pressure coming from themselves as well as others. They have to be both fashionable and professional and wrong fashion decisions might end up weakening their public image and self-confidence. As brands are often used as status symbols, wearing a certain brand may be seen as representing what the brand represents. According to Goldsmith & Clark (2008, 309) especially fashionable clothing is considered to signal other people information about the status of the person wearing it. Consumers often look for reinforcement for both fashion choices and money consumption, even though according to Wilska (2002, 196) they are usually highly competent in their spending patterns.

The meanings attached to others include the attitudes towards the opinions of others and the opinions of friends as well as the way to see others. These meanings circulate around the issues of social networks and the role and importance of them for an individual consumer and her fashion choices as well as the role of fashion in image formation. Bauman (1990, 205–207) has argued that even though belonging to a social group is important, the significance of traditional social categories is diminishing. However, social networks are likely to affect the individual consumer by operating either as an encouragement or a restriction to the identity of a consumer (Wilska 2002, 196).

The category of the meanings attached to the fashion-forward television programmes includes accepting commerciality, identifying with the characters, the way to relate to

life situations, admiring the fashion oriented lifestyle and New York as well as creating fantasy in real life. The visual media works as a bank of images, from where consumers are absorbing cultural lifestyle attributes (Jansson 2002, 15; Kellner 1995, 257). Consumers seem to be able to use the fashion-forward television programmes as points of reference to their current lifestyle, future lifestyle and also fantasy lifestyle. However, they also realize that it is an idealized lifestyle.

How consumers react to commerciality in fashion-forward television is connected to the context where it appears. Fashion-forward television is considered an appropriate context for commerciality and that is why it is seen as relatively acceptable. Their attitudes towards commerciality are also in relation to the benefits that the commerciality of the programmes offers for them. Identification with the characters has a multidimensional nature and the way consumers relate to and how they want to relate to the characters varies according to the background, personality, age and life situation of the consumer. According to Halkoaho (2012, 89) life themes, projects and experiences influence the interpretations and meanings that are made of media contents by consumers.

The meanings attached to fashion are looking for fashion idols, sharing the interest for fashion, adopting the way to consume fashion and appreciating Nordic brands. Fashion has a communal nature. Consumers use trendsetters as fashion idols, they want to talk about fashion and they want to share their interest for fashion with others. According to Bertrandias & Goldsmith (2006, 27) and Goldsmith & Clark (2008, 309) fashion opinion leaders are a prime example of information sharing. Consumers also easily adopt fashion consumption patterns from trendsetters, such as Carrie Bradshaw.

Fashion and identity construction are interconnected (Piamphongsant & Mandhachitara 2008, 440). According to Kuruc (2008, 213) and McCracken (1986, 76) fashion is a significant aspect of culture, hence it is natural for Finnish consumers to feel that their cultural identity is more related to Nordic than American brands. Finnish consumers seem to pay attention to the Nordic brands that appear in the programmes. They appreciate it and rejoice if there are familiar Nordic brands appearing in the global fashion-forward television programmes.

The categorization of the cultural meanings negotiated from fashion-forward television programmes *Sex and the City* and *Gossip Girl* was made on the basis of the focus of the meanings. However, this categorization cannot be viewed as strict and omniscient, as cultural meanings may continually be transferred between categorizations. Cultural meaning has several locations in the social world and it flows continually between those locations by the help of individual efforts (McCracken 1986, 71–72).

5 SUMMARY

The number of fashion-forward television programmes has grown drastically over the last decades. The relationship between television and the fashion industry has also become more synergistic. Television is an effective tool in circulating fashion trends globally and it enables the maneuvering of the expectations, motivations and desires of consumers. The symbolic meanings of consumption are an important factor in the decisions made by consumers in the contemporary culture of consumption. People often purchase products mainly because of their symbolic meanings.

The purpose of the study was to identify what kind of meanings consumers negotiate from fashion-forward television programmes *Sex and the City* and *Gossip Girl*. In this study fashion-forward television referred to television series in which fashion is recognized as an essential part of the programme concept and that are seen as being able to influence future fashion trends.

The purpose of the study was completed by answering to the research question: How consumers negotiate meanings from fashion-forward television programmes? This research question was divided into the following sub questions:

- 1) What meanings are attached to self?
- 2) What meanings are attached to others?
- 3) What meanings are attached to fashion-forward television programmes?
- 4) What meanings are attached to fashion?

Consumers are continuously embedded in interaction with a variety of cultural meanings in order to legitimate and express what matters to them. Consumers must also engage themselves into an interpretative process in order to make sense of media products. Cultural forces and the background of a consumer may have a strong impact on the way media messages are read and what kind of meanings are negotiated from the media. Television programmes may also be a resource for both individual and social identities of a consumer. The interpretation and evaluation of media messages are in relation to self symbolism, social symbolism, interpretative strategies and the current life projects of an individual consumer.

The identity formation of a consumer is strongly related to consumption experiences. Consumption also has an essential role in providing meanings to consumers. Even though the market has been argued to produce certain kinds of positions for consumers to inhabit, they are seen as individualistic and unpredictable. Consumers also choose the kind of messages that support their social identities and the rewards from this may be described as social identity gratifications, meaning self-enablement, self-gratification and self-enrichment. The self is a symbolic project that an individual consumer builds out of the symbolic materials.

Even though belonging to social groups still matters to consumers, the role of the traditional social categories has diminished and consumers are choosing between different identities and lifestyles by themselves. However, the consumption choices consumers make define not only how they act but also who they want to be. Social networks are more likely to affect the notions of appropriate consumption styles compared to the ones that are communicated by marketing and media and social regulations and conventions may act as restrictions to the identity of a consumer, even though consumers still are dependent on mass media as well. In lifestyle choices individualism and distinctiveness are dominating the traditional bases of sociality. Lifestyles can easily be seen as materialistic expressions of the identity of a consumer. Visible consumption expresses the meaning attached to a lifestyle. Often consumers are able to adjust their desires to match with their resources and they are relatively competent when it comes to spending patterns.

Nowadays fashion is a significant part of culture, an important communication form and the identity and a status of a person may be represented via fashion. Consumers experience fashion as a way to be individualistic and negotiate images. The clothes we wear are a highly powerful personal statement and fashion signifies both personal and cultural identity. Clothing acts as an important factor in symbolic consumption and identity formation. Television media spreads fashion trends globally and acts as an important fashion communication tool. Also fashion opinion leaders are spreading new fashion trends and consumers tend to use them as fashion information sources and fashion idols. However, consumers are also clever in critically viewing and interpreting market and media messages.

The cultural meanings in the mass media culture of consumption were divided into four categories, which are the meanings attached to self, the meanings attached to others, the meanings attached to television media and the meanings attached to fashion. However, as cultural meaning may be transferred between categorizations, this categorization is more descriptive than omnipresent.

The research was conducted as a qualitative and descriptive case study. There were two cases in the study. The cases were the fashion-forward television programmes *Sex and the City* and *Gossip Girl*. In a qualitative study reality can be created by social, cultural and time-related meanings. The main idea in a qualitative study is to describe experiences in the way that a person has experienced them. Cultural texts enable us to access particular accounts of specific phenomena. The idea of a descriptive study is to produce a rich understanding of the phenomenon under study and the meanings attached to it. This study proceeded like a hermeneutic helix and was a continuous comparison of data and theory.

This study used focus group interviews as the research method for data generation. Focus group method means a group of selected people who are gathered together to discuss a certain topic. It is applicable for a wide range of theoretical frameworks. The members of a group offer each other an opportunity to reflect and comment on culture and in some way they write culture together. The main idea of a focus group is for the participants to interact with each other and answer the questions of each other instead of the ones asked by the researcher. The researcher is merely supposed to encourage the participants in the discussion. Focus group as a research method aims at an in-depth understanding on the ideas of the group and in creation of the data about why people behave in a certain way. The people in focus groups are considered as extremely valuable sources of information.

In this study there were two focus groups that consisted of 3 and 6 people. In the beginning 10 people in total were recruited but one of the candidates cancelled her participation. The first interview was held in a coffee house in Tampere on the 7th of March and the second one at the home of one of the interviewees in Helsinki on the 15th

of March. The recommended number of people for a focus group interview is between 2 and 10 persons.

The participants were recruited via social media and they were identified as suitable candidates for the study because they belong to the target audience of the fashion-forward television programmes. The people were divided into two groups on the basis of location and all the participants knew each other already in advance. They were also from the related party of the researcher. All the participants were Finnish females aged between 22 and 28 years. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were conducted in Finnish and translated into English by the researcher. The interviewees are referenced to anonymously in the study in order to secure their privacy.

The data collected in the study was interpreted and evaluated. This study uses the term interpretation, as analysis is better linked with explicit quantitative research. This research aimed at being systematic but also equally intuitive and experiential. Human qualities and ethics are at least as important as rigorous research techniques. The quality of the research was secured by indicating the specific interpretive perspective as openly and explicitly as possible in order to express the perspective from which the interpretations were produced. The underlying premises of a research should always be made as visible as possible. Methodological consistency and generic coherence are also standard goals for good cultural interpretation.

In the empirical data of the study there were identified specific cultural meanings that were negotiated from the fashion-forward television programmes *Sex and the City* and *Gossip Girl*. These cultural meanings were divided into four categories on the focus of the meanings. These categories were the meanings attached to self, the meanings attached to others, the meanings attached to fashion-forward television programmes and the meanings attached to fashion. The category of television media in the theoretical framework of the study was re-established as fashion-forward television.

The meanings attached to self reflect the relationships between the identity, personality, feelings and style of a consumer and how these are connected and communicated. Fashion may be seen as an extension of the personality of a consumer and fashion statement has become a personal statement as well. Fashion is a meaningful way to

express the personality, identity and individuality of a consumer. Being fashionable is seen as a part of the identity and personality of a consumer. However, female consumers may also have to fight against the prejudice of fashionable women not being smart. As there is pressure to be both fulfilling the beauty ideals as well as proving to be intelligent, it is every now and then exhausting. Wrong fashion decisions might also end up weakening the self-confidence of a consumer.

Consumers are carefully choosing which brands to wear, as certain brands that are seen as status symbols possess strong meanings in the eyes of consumers. Wearing these brands might communicate something that the consumer does not want to represent. Surprisingly consumers may not want to represent a certain brand even though they actually like the products. This finding underlines the importance of symbolic meanings. Consumers often look for reinforcement for both their fashion choices and money consumption patterns. The attitudes towards spending money on fashion are relatively liberal and consumers are not afraid to purchase products on credit or borrow money from friends. Even though the attitudes towards consumption patterns have become more liberal, consumers are usually relatively sensible in their spending patterns.

The meanings attached to others circulate around the issues of social networks and the role and importance of them for an individual consumer and her fashion choices as well as the role of fashion in image formation. Consumers are looking to be individualistic and they try to avoid a high level of similarity. Fashion is considered to reflect both individuality and conformity extremely well. The importance of traditional social categories has diminished. However social networks are still likely to act as either restriction or encouragement for the fashion decisions of an individual consumer.

The attitudes towards the opinions of other people depend on if they are friends of the consumer or not. With friends consumers usually appreciate and might even ask for their feedback on style issues. However, the opinions of close friends and friends who have a similar style are valued more. When it comes to the opinions of other people, consumers seem to have absorbed an attitude of wanting to be individualistic and maybe even hoping to arouse opinions. However, this requires good self-confidence which usually grows with age. Sometimes completely different styles may act as a restriction

to becoming friends, even though consumers are hoping to be tolerant of all kinds of different styles.

The meanings attached to the fashion-forward television programmes are relatively multidimensional. Consumers see commerciality as an acceptable, obvious and natural part of fashion-forward television. They appreciate the fact that it offers good publicity for designers and it also benefits consumers, as they are able to buy the more affordable copies made by cheaper brands like H&M and Zara. The context of fashion-forward television is also seen as appropriate for commerciality. Fashion opinion leaders are a part of the commercial system. As the characters act as trendsetters, some of the actresses, like Blake Lively, have become real-life fashion icons as well.

Many consumers have taken part in some kind of an identity play with the characters and identifying with them is an evident part of the charm of the series. Identification with the characters has a multidimensional nature and the way consumers relate to and how they want to relate to the characters varies also according to the background, personality, age and life situation of the consumer. The characters are also used to symbolically describe self or other people with other viewers of fashion-forward television. However, this may also cause conflicts, as people interpret the characters in different ways. When it comes to lifestyles, consumers are able to use the programmes as points of reference to the previous, current and future as well as fantasy lifestyle of theirs. Consumers may use the lifestyles portrayed in the programmes as an inspiration for the future or as an example during a change in life situation. They also realize that it is an idealized lifestyle.

The meanings that are negotiated from the programmes are often shaped by past experiences, current lifestyle and future goals. The city of New York plays an important part in both *Sex and the City* and *Gossip Girl*. It is seen as a city full of opportunities and a place to fulfill a variety of goals and dreams. However, consumers also find similarities to the lifestyle portrayed in the series in their own lives and are mostly hoping for small things to get more variety, glamour and celebration in their everyday life. This can often be created with specific moments that are based on certain contexts, like having cocktails with friends.

The meanings attached to fashion include different aspects of fashion consumption. Consumers may look for fashion idols in order to feel more confident about their own style. The characters of the series are often used as fashion idols considering items that are somehow unusual or extraordinary. They also want to talk about fashion and share their interest with congenial consumers. Nowadays this may also be done via fashion blogs that may be seen as a possible continuum for fashion-forward television in some ways. Both fashion-forward television and fashion blogs act as common ground for sharing interest for fashion.

Consumers may adopt certain fashion consumption patterns from the series. The continuous change of outfits in the episodes communicates a message of always having to have new clothes. The characters of the series set an example of spending a relatively lot of money on fashion in order to be able to wear something new every day. One of the most interesting findings in this study was how consumers appreciate the appearance of domestic brands in the global fashion-forward television. Finnish consumers seem to be able to gain the symbolic properties of Nordic products especially well, as those brands represent the same cultural background as them.

This study identified cultural meanings that consumers negotiate from fashion-forward television. As a managerial implication the findings of this study underline the importance of symbolic meanings of products and brands for consumers. Further research opportunities could be studying how the meanings negotiated from fashion-forward television programmes are reflected in the consumer behaviour of the audience of the series. This research assisted in gaining understanding on the cultural meanings of fashion. However, further research might offer more detailed information on the topic. These research opportunities might be used in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural meanings in fashion-forward television and also offer further ideas on fashion marketing opportunities.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: Online conversation applied in the study

SYMBOL	NAME AND FORUM	COMMENTS	TIME PERIOD
A	The Fashion of Sex and the City (Sex and the City Homepage)	22	02.01.-02.03.2013

APPENDIX 2: Blogs applied in the study

SYMBOL	NAME AND URL	TIME PERIOD	PAGES (TIMES NEW ROMAN, 12)	COMMENTS
B	Gossip Girl Fashion http://gossippgirlfashion.tumblr.com/	02.01.- 02.03.2013	13	13
C	Style blog http://styleblog.ca/2010/05/20/style-fille-carrie-bradshaw/#comments	20.01.- 02.03.2013	12	8

APPENDIX 3: The Interviewees

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Focus group interview 1. Coffee house Length: 98 min	Focus group interview 2. Home of an interviewee Length: 112 min
Interviewee A	F	25	07.03.2013	
Interviewee B	F	26	07.03.2013	
Interviewee C	F	22	07.03.2013	
Interviewee D	F	27		15.03.2013
Interviewee E	F	28		15.03.2013
Interviewee F	F	26		15.03.2013
Interviewee G	F	27		15.03.2013
Interviewee I	F	28		15.03.2013
Interviewee J	F	27		15.03.2013

APPENDIX 4: The online message sent to the interview candidates in Helsinki in Finnish

Hei!

Huomasin facebookista, että kaikki teistä on joko Sinkkuelämän tai Gossip Girlin faneja! Minähän teen nyt gradua aiheesta "absorbing trends from fashion-forward television". Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on siis selvittää, miten tällaisista muotiin keskittyneistä ohjelmista kiinnostuneet kuluttajat havainnoi ja poimii sieltä trendejä ja miten se näkyy heidän kulutuskäyttäytymisessään. Ohjelmina keskityn juurikin kahteen aiemmin mainitsemaani.

Kerään empiriaa fokusryhmähaastatteluilla ja Helsingistä juurikin te olisitte nyt toistaiseksi lupaavimmat kandidaatit. Olisitteko siis kiinnostuneita osallistumaan tähän tutkimukseen ja antamaan hetken päivästäne haastattelua varten? Ja toki, jos tiedätte muita tutkimukseen mahdollisesti sopivia ja kiinnostuneita ihmisiä niin mitä enemmän ihmisiä sitä parempi! Suunnitelmana olisi tehdä haastattelut suunnilleen maaliskuun puolessavälissä. Voisin tulla Helsinkiin vaikka yhdeksi viikonlopuksi ja tarvittaessa sitten uudestaan.

Ilmoittelettehan jos olette kiinnostuneita, pakko ei tietenkään ole!

t. Heidi

APPENDIX 5: The online message sent to the interview candidates in Tampere in Finnish

Hei!

Huomasin täällä facebookissa, että kaikki teistä on joko Sinkkuelämän tai Gossip Girlin faneja! Minähän teen nyt gradua aiheesta "absorbing trends from fashion-forward television". Tutkimuksen tarkoituksena on siis selvittää, miten tällaisista muotiin keskittyneistä ohjelmista kiinnostuneet kuluttajat havainnoi ja poimii sieltä trendejä ja miten se näkyy heidän kulutuskäyttäytymisessään. Ohjelmina keskityn juurikin kahteen aiemmin mainitsemaani.

Kerään empiriaa fokusryhmähaastatteluilla ja Tampereelta juurikin te olisitte nyt toistaiseksi lupaavimmat kandidaatit. Olisitteko siis kiinnostuneita osallistumaan tähän tutkimukseen ja antamaan hetken päivästäne haastattelua varten? Ja toki, jos tiedätte muita tutkimukseen mahdollisesti sopivia ja kiinnostuneita ihmisiä niin mitä enemmän ihmisiä sitä parempi! Suunnitelmana olisi tehdä haastattelut suunnilleen maaliskuun puolessavälissä.

Ilmoittelettehan jos olette kiinnostuneita, pakko ei tietenkään ole!

t. Heidi

APPENDIX 6: The online message sent to the interview candidates in Helsinki in English

Hey!

I noticed in facebook that all of you are fans of either Sex and the City or Gossip Girl. I'm currently working on my master's thesis on the subject of "absorbing trends from fashion-forward television". The purpose of the study is to analyze how consumers who are interested in these kinds of fashion-forward television series absorb trends from there and how it is manifested in their consumer behaviour. The programmes that I will be concentrating on are the ones mentioned previously.

I'm collecting the empirical data by focus group interviews and in Helsinki you would be the most promising candidates at the moment. Would you be interested in participating in the study and sacrificing a moment from your day for the interview? Also, obviously if you know other people who would possibly be suitable and interested in participating please let me know. The more the better! The plan is to conduct the interviews approximately in the middle of March. I could come to Helsinki for a weekend and another time as well if necessary.

Let me know if you are interested. However, this is obviously totally voluntary!

t. Heidi

APPENDIX 7: The online message sent to the interview candidates in Tampere in English

Hey!

I noticed in facebook that all of you are fans of either Sex and the City or Gossip Girl. I'm currently working on my master's thesis on the subject of "absorbing trends from fashion-forward television". The purpose of the study is to analyze how consumers who are interested in these kinds of fashion-forward television series absorb trends from there and how it is manifested in their consumer behaviour. The programmes that I will be concentrating on are the ones mentioned previously.

I'm collecting the empirical data by focus group interviews and at Tampere you would be the most promising candidates at the moment. Would you be interested in participating in the study and sacrificing a moment from your day for the interview? Also, obviously if you know other people who would possibly be suitable and interested in participating please let me know. The more the better! The plan is to conduct the interviews approximately in the middle of March.

Let me know if you are interested. However, this is obviously totally voluntary!

t. Heidi