

**THE ROLE OF BRANDS IN FEMALE  
CONSUMERS' IDENTITY PROJECTS:** An  
investigation of the negotiation of brand meaning taking place  
between a brand and its female consumers.

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Contemporary consumer behavior seems characterized by a felt agency of the consumer, to jump in and out of various identity roles, where the consumer potentially re-designate the intended meaning of brands, in order to make them fit into the performance of situation based identity-roles. Thus, the present study is motivated by a fundamental wonder; what is the role of the brand manager, if it is no longer to control the meaning of a brand?

In this connection, the present study suggests that brand meaning should be treated as a process of negotiation, between the intended brand meaning and the meaning, which arises from the consumption of the brand, whereby a modification of Grant McCracken's (1986) model of meaning-transfer is suggested.

The idea, introduced by the postmodern research position that brand meaning is entirely created by the consumer is however disregarded in the present study, since plural studies have found that sociocultural constraints impact the individual to an extent she might not be consciously aware of. Hence, the theoretical purpose is to illuminate the foundation of female consumers' agency to express female identity and negotiate brand meaning, independently from sociocultural constraints of their gender, further reflected in the intended meaning of brands targeting women.

The empirical purpose is to investigate the implications for marketing communication, when the consumer is considered a co-creator of brand meaning. For this purpose, the brand By Malene Birger (BMB) is applied as an example. In this connection, the research targets two groups of participants: Firstly semi-structured interviews were conducted with heavy users of BMB.

Secondly, a semi-structured interview with a representative from BMB was conducted in order to gain a as rich description of the intended brand meaning as possible. From the analysis it was found that the intended brand meaning of BMB seems only arbitrary linked to the usage of BMB, due to the various meanings the consumer-participants ascribe the usage of BMB, informed by which situation-based female identity role the usage of BMB helped them perform.

Hence, an empirical outcome is an identification of, which brand elements of BMB are most significant to the consumer-participants' interpretation of BMB, and what meaning these create in their female identity projects. Potentially indicating, which aspects of the brand make them repurchase BMB and not switch to competing brands. As such, the presents study suggest that in order to understand what makes a brand strong, and what makes the consumer value the brand potentially over competing brands, the marketer needs to pay attention to what meaning arises, from the consumption of the brand, and how this meaning becomes significant in the performance of situation-based female identity roles.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

A fundamental assumption within the dominating position of marketing communication management, the so-called ‘cognitive position’, suggests that a marketing message, tailored to emphasize the ‘right’ physical attributes and emotional benefits of the product, ensures that the consumer will interpret the brand and make use of it as intended by the brand manager. Thus, assuming that the brand manager can ‘control’ the positioning of the brand i.e. compared to competing brands (Keller, 1993).

The postmodern research position however challenges this assumption by suggesting that consumer behavior might be less predictable than previous anticipated (Firat & Venkatesh; 1995, Cova; 1997 etc.). Contrarily to the cognitive position, the postmodern research position argues that it is in the moment of consumption where brand meaning is created (Ibid). Thus, the intended brand meaning (as communicated via marketing activities) is considered only arbitrarily linked to the usage of the branded product, since the consumer is believed to ascribe her own meaning and significance to it, with the purpose of integrating the brand into the performance (Butler, 1999) of situation based identity role (WEB1, Firat & Venkatesh; 1995, Cova; 1997 etc.). In other words, consumers jump in and out of various identity roles, not loyal towards a brand, but towards the symbols and images, which they produce when consuming the brand (Ibid). This has important implications for product development as well as marketing communication, suggesting that knowledge into the what meaning the brand represents to the consumer, and thereby what makes the consumer value the brand over competing brands, implies a deeper understanding of how the brand is used and what role the usage of the brand plays in the life of the consumer. Thus, the present study is motivated by a general wonder; what is the role of a brand manager if it is no longer to control brand meaning?

The idea that brand meaning is entirely created by the consumer, as suggested by the postmodern research position, is however questioned in the present study. Hence, sociocultural constraints e.g. in terms of sociocultural meaning of what it ‘takes to be a woman’, further reflected in the intended brand meaning of brands targeting women (McCracken; 1986, Peñeloza; 1994) seem to structure female consumers’ sense of self and the meaning they ascribe to brands, to an extent they may not be consciously aware of (Holt; 2004; Holt & Thompson; 2004, Butler; 1999).

As a result, it is in the present study suggested that brand meaning should be treated as negotiation taking place between the intended brand meaning and the individual consumer’s twisting and diversion of it to make it fit into her sense of self.

To illuminate the implications of the idea that brand meaning should be treated as a negotiation, and the consumer as a co-creator of brand meaning, the Danish fashion brand By Malene Birger (BMB) (WEB2), owned by the group IC COMPANYS (ICC), is applied as an example. In accordance with the overall growth strategy of ICC, BMB plans to open 40 new retail stores within the coming four years, and aims at optimizing turnover per retail square meter (WEB3). Thus, by making the investment in terms of the costs and risks of building own retail stores, i.e. compared to selling through wholesale customers, BMB faces the challenge of enhancing the quantity of goods sold through own stores. On the other hand, the advantages of controlling point of sales are several. In this connection, International PR coordinator of BMB, Christina Neustrup argues that retail is an important communication channel to BMB, ensuring that the consumer interprets the meaning of BMB as intended (APPENDIX II). The idea of controlling how the consumer interprets and makes use of a brand is however, easier said than done. Thus, as earlier argued, the idea of emphasizing the intended brand meaning does not necessarily mean that the consumer will value the brand as anticipated by the brand manager. An aspiration to understand what makes BMB 'strong' and makes the consumer want to repurchase the brand, and not switch to competing brands, therefore calls for a deeper insight into the consumption practices of consumers' usage of BMB as part of their identity projects.

With that purpose, it is in the present study investigated what meaning heavy users of BMB ascribe to the brand, i.e. potentially different from the intended brand meaning, and moreover what role the brand plays in their expression of identity. In other words, which elements of the brand makes the consumer value BMB, what meaning does the consumer ascribe to these brand elements, and how do they become significant to her sense of self? Hence, in order to reach the growth objective of BMB, the planning of marketing communication (not only at the point of sales) can benefit from an awareness in terms of which aspects of the brand are most significant to the consumers' consumption of the brand. Thus, it might be beneficial to elevate these brand elements and make sure that these play a central part in the brand communication.

## 1.1 THEORETICAL POSITION

Due to the strong focus on brand meaning, human sense-making is a significant part of the theoretical foundation. Whereas the cognitive approach to marketing communication considers brand meaning controlled by the brand manager, the postmodern position suggests that brand meaning is entirely created by the consumer (Firat & Venkatesh; 1995). Hence suggesting that consumer behavior is less predictable than anticipated by the cognitive position (e.g. Keller; 1993; 2004). However, the postmodern idea of interpreting the individual as a 'bricoleur' i.e. an individual who is entirely guided by her own subjective sense-making and as a result form her self-understanding emancipated from the sociocultural meaning of her gender and moreover makes use of a brand independently from the intended brand meaning is questioned. In fact, plural studies have found that the individual is impacted by sociocultural constraints to an extent she may not be consciously aware of (Fischer & Arnold; 1990, Thompson et al; 1990, Thompson & Hirschman; 1995, Thompson & Haytko; 1997, Holt; 2002, Holt & Thompson; 2004, Ahuvia; 2005.). Thus, the investigation of female consumers' usage of brands as part of their identity projects includes a discussion of the sociocultural patterning of consumption i.e. suggesting that sociocultural constraints of the female gender impact women's aspirations, dreams, and anxieties - potentially guiding her identity project and usage of brands to an extent she is not consciously aware of. In this connection, studies concerned with the investigating of sociocultural patterning of consumption have investigated how institutional and social structures systematically influence consumer behavior, i.e. such as class, community, ethnicity, and gender. In this connection studies in gender and consumption include studies such as: (Fisher & Arnould; 1990, Bristor & Fisher; 1993, Thompson & Hirschman; 1995, Thompson; 1996, and Holt & Thompson; 2004 etc.).

A general assumption within the sociocultural research position is that consumers are situated within a culture, which function as a 'web of significance' further guiding consumers' sense-making processes. As a result, a woman's membership of a given culture enables her to interpret brand communication in the 'correct' way i.e. as the marketer intends (Ringberg & Reihlen; 2008 p. 176). For example, Holt & Thompson (2004) have found how sociocultural heritage leveraged from cultural myths related to masculinity functions as cultural meaning, which North-American men draw upon 'as ideological bricoleurs' when forming a masculine identity (Holt & Thompson; 2004). Hence, suggesting that the male individual may feel an agency to express identity, but his aspirations and efforts made to do so are however inflicted by cultural discourses in terms of myths related to his male gender, further guiding his sense of self and consumption practices (Holt & Thompson; 2004). Moreover, Thompson and Haytko (1997) suggest that when the individual is faced with plural

opportunities i.e. in terms of how to express identity, the individual addresses a series of paradoxes and tensions existing between her sense of individual agency (i.e. to do what she wants) and her sensibility to sources of cultural instructions (i.e. to do what is expected of her) in her everyday life. Thus, the interplay between individual agency of the consumer and the potential influence of culture potentially informing female consumers' consumption practices and moreover what meaning they ascribe to the usage of brands in their female identity projects is central to the theoretical discussion of the present study. Hence, whereas theory concerned with the sociocultural patterning of consumption is concerned with exploring cultural structures, which impact the individual's consumption preferences, the research stream concerned with 'consumers' identity projects' have discussed the agency of the individual as an active creator of meaning (Arnould & Thompson; 2005). Thus, within the latter research direction, research have been concerned with investigating the co-productive ways in which consumers make use of market-generated meaning, within the realm of a sometimes fragmented sense of self i.e. suggesting that consumption help the consumer forge a coherent identity (Ahuvia; 2005). In this connection, Ahuvia (2005) argues that today's consumers have a great deal of choice in terms of who they want to be and autonomy to lead their lives. The idea of discovering one's true preferences and presenting oneself in according to these has therefore become an overwhelming concern and the primary driving force of consumption. As such, it can be argued that consumption should be seen as a means to express 'a fragmented and multiple sense of self' where the consumer picks and chooses among competing brands, which leaves the individual brand as a mythic and symbolic image, which the consumer draws upon to 'produce' a certain aspect of her identity. In the present study Aaron C. Ahuvia's (2005) suggestion that 'loved objects' (e.g. a brand which the consumer feels especially attached to) help the consumer center meaning in her potentially fragmented identity project is discussed according to what meaning the individual consumer ascribes to the usage of the focal brand. Thus, Grant McCracken's (1986) perception of marketing communication as an act of 'meaning transfer' (McCracken; 1986) is in the present study argued rather to be a process of 'negotiation'.

## **1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The present study is motivated by a research interest informed by a general wonder; what is the role of a brand manager if it is no longer to determine the meaning the usage of a brand creates in the lives of the consumers? Hence, the suggested idea that the meaning of a brand should be treated as a process of negotiation between the intended brand meaning and the individual consumer's way of integrating the brand into her female identity project is the center of investigation in the present study. Thus, the following problem statement is applied:

**“The role of brands in female consumers’ identity projects: An investigation of the negotiation of brand meaning taking place between a brand and its female consumers”**

In order to investigate this process of negotiation the following research questions will be illuminated throughout the study:

- (1)** In what way do sociocultural constraints related to female physical appearance influence female consumers’ identity projects?
- (2)** How does a female consumer negotiate brand meaning, with the purpose of making the brand fit into her female identity project?
- (3)** What is the role of the intended meaning of a brand, in terms of adding meaning to the female consumer’s identity project?

### 1.2.1 PURPOSE

The present study is motivated by a fundamental research interest in terms of getting a closer understanding of what role brands play in contemporary consumers' lives i.e. potentially suggesting that it may not be the role of the brand manager alone to determine what meaning the brand represents. In this connection, the present study suggests that treating brand meaning as a negotiation between the intended brand meaning and the consumer's way of integrating the brand into her female identity project, provides a deeper insight into what meaning the brand represents i.e. potentially compared to competing brands. As such, the purpose is two-fold i.e. suggesting a theoretical and an empirical purpose.

**Firstly**, the theoretical purpose is to illuminate the foundation of female consumers' agency to ascribe meaning to a brand they use as a part of their identity projects, potentially independently from sociocultural constraints of the female gender and the intended brand meaning of brands targeting women.

**Secondly**, the empirical purpose is to investigate implications for marketing communication when the consumer is considered a co-creator of brand meaning. In this connection, BMB is used as an example. Hence, an empirical outcome is an identification of which brand elements of BMB are most significant to the consumer-participants and what meaning these creates in her female identity project. I.e. suggesting that such elements and the meaning she ascribes to these, potentially different from the intended brand meaning, may be an indicator in terms of what makes the brand strong and makes her value the brand over competing.

### 1.2.2 CONTRIBUTIONS

The present study offers an exploration of how sociocultural meaning of the female gender impact women's self-understanding and thereby consumption of brands. According to McCracken (1986) the intended meaning of a brand reflects cultural meaning i.e. principles in terms of what is considered appropriate/ inappropriate behavior of the category of consumers it targets (e.g. female consumers). Moreover, McCracken argues that such meaning is 'transferred' into the life of the consumer through grooming rituals e.g. the process of applying the brand on the body. The present study however suggests a modification of McCracken's conceptualization of meaning-transfer. Thus, whereas McCracken argues that the 'fragile' intended brand meaning is 'coaxed' out of the brand and transferred into the consumer's life when she makes use of the brand - the present study suggests that the idea of a 'meaning transfer' should be replaced by the notion of a negotiation, where the consumption practices of the consumer and her subjective sense-making is taken into consideration. Hence, an 'empirical' contribution is an insight into

female consumers' consumption practices. Even though the brand BMB is used as an example, the findings revile general aspects characterizing female identity projects, which may apply for other brands targeting female consumers.

### **1.3 STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY**

In **chapter 1**, the theoretical perspective, the research interest, and the purpose of conducting the present study were described. Moreover, the way in which the theoretical framework is designed to illuminate the research questions and how the present study is related to already existing research were introduced. **In chapter 2**, the theoretical foundation is presented and discussed according to the theoretical purpose as described in section 1.2.1. Moreover theoretical findings from chapter 2 will inform the empirical purpose. In other words, the theoretical foundation helps identifying aspects which might be significant to female consumers' self- understanding and hence indicate relevant concerns related to their way of making sense of brands, which they use as a part of their identity project. As such, theoretical findings from chapter 2 will inform the interview-guide and thus the collection of data. In **chapter 3** the method of collecting and analyzing data is described. **Chapter 4** is a presentation of the findings, which are further discussed in **chapter 5** according to the research questions of the present study. In **chapter 6** theoretical and empirical findings are concluded. Finally, in **chapter 7** the managerial implications of the findings are discussed.

## 2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

In chapter 2, theories selected for the illumination of the theoretical purpose of the present study are presented and discussed. In **section 2.1**, the cognitive research position's approach to marketing communication is discussed and criticized for not taking the subjective sense-making of the individual into consideration when planning marketing communication. Next, the postmodern positions suggestion that brand meaning is entirely created by the consumer is discussed in **section 2.2**. In this connection, the suggested agency of the individual to ascribe her own meaning and significance to brands is discussed in **section 2.3**. In **section 2.5-2.7** female consumers' usage of brands as part of their female identity projects is discussed in more detail. Thus, in **section 2.5** studies in consumers' identity projects are discussed and in **section 2.6**, sociocultural patterning of consumption is discussed. In **section 2.7** female consumers' agency to craft identity independently from socio-cultural constraints is discussed. In other words in the latter two sections, it is discussed how sociocultural constraints of the female gender impact female identity projects potentially to an extent she may not be consciously aware of. As such, section 2.5-2.6 draw upon the discussion of human sense-making from section 2.1-2.4, which as such allow for a discussion of the agency of the female consumer to construct identity independently from the sociocultural meaning of the female gender, further reflected in the intended brand meaning of brands she make use of as a part of her female identity project.

### 2.1. COGNITIVE MEANING CREATION

Most of marketers' taken for-granted knowledge about consumers, consumptions, and the marketplace rest upon Modernistic foundations (Firat & Venkatesh; 1995 p. 239). As a result, within cognitive marketing and communications studies, there is a strong tradition of interpreting receivers of brand communication (consumers) as a rational, cognitive agent, who are guided by uniform, rational, and linear information-processing (Ringberg & Reihlen; 2008). Hence, an important characteristic of Modernism is the idea of interpreting of the subject as a rational agent who is making sense of the world in a rational manner, i.e. in accordance with binary categorization of the world such as: female vs. male, body vs. mind etc. motivated by a search for universal truths (Firat & Venkatesh; 1993, 1995, Firat et. al. 1994).

In 1993 the American marketing researcher Kevin Lane Keller published the article: 'Conceptualizing, measuring, and managing customer based brand equity' and thereby introduced the theoretical term of "Customer Based Brand Equity" (CBBE) (Keller; 1993). In the article Keller suggests that a brand resides in the mind of the consumer as a cognitive construct and ever since, the mindset behind 'CBBE' has been widely adopted, as one of the most influential ways of

conceptualizing brands and marketing communication (Holt; 2005). Behind the idea that the brand is a cognitive construct in the mind of the consumer lies the assumption that the marketer has a large deal of control over how the brand is perceived and processed by the consumer (Keller; 2004). Hence, the target audience is treated as a generic entry, which the skilled communicator is able to program into an intended action, and thereby the cognitive research tradition, deliberately neglects subjective and emotional factors (Heding et al.; 2009). The primary purpose is therefore to understand the cognitive processes that take place in the mind of the consumer when exposed to brand stimuli in order to tailor an efficient marketing message that ensures attention, learning, acceptance, and emotional response in terms of strong, favorable, and unique brand association, which are assumed to lead to behavioral brand loyalty (Keller; 2004, Percy & Elliot; 2005). Hence, the cognitive processes of the consumer's mindset is the main point of interest of this approach to brand management, since brand value creation is believed to take place by the marketer's molding of brand associations in the mind of the consumer (Keller; 2004). Thus, within cognitivist communication research, it is believed that the meaning of a "text" (i.e. the intended brand meaning) resides as disembodied structures and that all receivers interpret these in a uniform manner (Ringberg & Reihlen; 2008).

According to Holt (2004) this conventional model may work for Fast Moving Consumer Goods, but they do not build identity brands, e.g. fashion brands such as By Malene Birger (Holt; 2004). In this connection, the postmodern research position criticizes Modernism and the cognitive approach to marketing communication for being unable to tap into the richness of human experience. Hence, whereas the individual is guided by rationality and the search for universal truths according to cognitive and modernistic philosophy, the postmodern position disregards the idea of universal truths and suggests that the individual as an active creator of her own life (Firat et al; 1995 p. 40). In the following sections the implications of this critique is discussed in more detail, with the purpose of understanding the role of the consumer in the suggested process of negotiation of brand meaning.

## **2.2 POSTMODERN IDIOSYNCRATIC SENSE-MAKING**

Whereas the consumer is perceived as a rational but passive target, reacting in a uniform and predictable fashion to marketing stimuli, according to the cognitivist position, the postmodern position elevates the role of the consumer, to be an active link in the creation of brand meaning. In fact, the postmodernist position states that brand meaning is *entirely* constructed by the consumer (Firat & Venkatesh; 1995). As mentioned in the introduction this means that the role of the

marketer as someone who encodes meaning into a brand, and who can manipulate the processing and usage of a brand is up for discussion. In other words, the postmodern position tends to liberate this process of sense-making from the control of the brand manager, which allows the consumer to participate in the process of ascribing meaning to a brand (Ibid.). Hence, a brand ('text') is considered open to individuals' interpretive frames, which means that brand meaning is in no way given (Eagleton; 1996).

As mentioned, the postmodern position suggests that consumer behavior is less predictable than anticipated by the cognitive position. Hence, in contrast to the cognitive research position, the postmodern position suggests that the consumer does not to commit or conform to just *one* sense of being. Instead, the consumer is described to have a fragmented sense of self (Firat & Venkatesh; 1995). In other words, the individual is described as a jigsaw collage of multiple self-images, among which she is creatively playing with different senses of selves, each finely tuned to the situation at hand (Cova; 1996, Firat & Shultz; 1997). As such, each of these senses of selves represents different images, styles, and personalities, and since they are performed by the same woman, it can be argued that she aspires to make herself marketable in each separate situation (Firat & Venkatesh; 1995). Thus, the modernistic sense of a central character or a consistent identity is neither possible nor even an aspiration (Firat & al.; 1994) which will be discussed in more detail in section 2.5. As a result, the postmodern position suggests that the ability to switch images and represent different selves, by switching brands that represent different images, leaves most brand-consumer relationships momentary as each transaction requires no deep commitment on the part of the consumer (Firat & Schultz; 1997). Thereby, the postmodern position argues that the consumer's involvement in a brand can be described as fragmented and as such, brands are left as sources of mythic and symbolic resources (images), among which the consumer selectively picks and chooses as part of her fragmented identity project (Firat & Schultz; 1997; Ringberg & Reihlen; 2008).

As such, the idea that marketers can predict and control consumers' usage of brands i.e. by tailoring the 'right' marketing message suggested by the cognitive position, is disregarded by the postmodern position (Cova; 1996). Hence, the outcome of postmodern sense-making is an 'idiosyncratic' interpretation e.g. of a brand, in which meaning continues to develop into a thousands of competing readings, resulting in a vast system of hyper-realities, where any object can take on any meaning (Ringberg & Reihlen; 2008). The intended brand meaning is therefore considered only 'arbitrarily linked' to the brand and product (Firat; 1992 p. 82) since brand meaning is considered created, when the brand is consumed (Firat & Venkatesh; 1995). In this connection, it is as mentioned argued that consumers are not loyal towards a brand, but towards the images and symbols they

‘produce’ when consuming a brand (ibid). Further suggesting that in order to understand what makes consumers choose e.g. BMB, the brand manager’s attention should be directed towards the micro-practices of consumers’ usage of BMB.

Within the direction of the postmodern research position, which Ringberg & Reihlen (2008) refer to as ‘Activist postmodernism’, the individual is as earlier mentioned referred to as a ‘Bricoleur’ i.e. a person who is fully aware and in control of her own mental representations of market stimuli (Ringberg & Reihlen; 2008 p.178). In this connection, Holt (2002) studied consumers’ critical attitude towards the power of brands and their attempts to break free from the power of market-place discourses, as independent agents crafting their own identity. Holt however found that a large majority of consumers remain unreflexive toward the fact that their consumption practices are informed by sociocultural constraints, in terms of ‘hidden’ instructions of how to use a brand (Holt; 2002). Hence, according to Holt, as long as consumers base their expression of identity upon consumption-based meaning, their postmodern liberatory potential cannot be fully realized. This point will be elaborated in more detail in section 2.6.3. Hence, it make sense to suggest that the consumer’s motivation and means to express identity, might consciously or unconsciously be influenced by sociocultural constraints, which as such questions the postmodern concept of a bricoleur and fragmented sense of self. In the following, it is suggested that such sociocultural constraints i.e. in terms of the sociocultural meaning of what it takes to be a woman is further reflected in the intended brand meaning, of brands targeting women e.g. BMB.

## **2.3 BRAND MEANING REFLECTS SOCIOCULTURAL MEANING**

As stated in the previous section, the postmodern concept of a bricoleur can be questioned. In this connection, a number of studies have found that the individual is consciously or unconsciously influenced by underlying mass-cultural discourses (E.g. Fischer & Arnold 1990, Thompson et al. 1990, Thompson & Hirschman; 1995, Thompson; 1996, & Holt & Thompson; 2004 etc.), which take the shape of sociocultural constraints. Sociocultural constraints are in the present study understood as sociocultural ‘expectations’ towards gender. As an example, Holt & Thompson (2004) have found that sociocultural constraints, impact North-American men’s sense of self and thus their consumption practices. Hence, it seems that North-American men unconsciously inflect their masculine identity and thus consumption practices, with class-structured understandings, of what it takes to be a ‘man of action hero’ (Holt & Thompson; 2004). In other words, Holt & Thompson (2004) found that sociocultural heritage, leveraged from cultural myths function as cultural meaning, which North-American men draw upon ‘as ideological bricoleurs’ when forming their masculine identity (Holt&

Thompson; 2004). No such study has been conducted within the realm of female consumer behavior. Thus, future studies could benefit from investigating cultural myths of the female gender e.g. the myth of 'Femme Fatale' (e.g. portrayed in David Lynch's film 'Blue velvet'). The myth of the 'Madonna vs. Whore' (e.g. portrayed in Luis Buñuel's 'Belle de jour'), or the myth of 'the girl-next-door' (e.g. portrayed in e.g. Tom Mendes 'American beauty'), arising from cultural subtexts, which might inflect female consumers' self-understanding and thus consumption practices. In other words, such research might provide a deeper insight into what motivates female consumer behavior.

According to the sociocultural perspective, brand meaning is embedded in social structures (Ringberg & Reihlen; 2008). In other words, it is believed that brand meaning reflects sociocultural meaning embedded in shared practices, rituals, and cultural subtexts (Ibid.). In contrast to the present study, the sociocultural perspective does not distinguish between the intended brand meaning and the meaning which arises from the consumer's subjective sense-making. Hence, it is argued that the consumer's subjectivity is molded by objectified systems of sociocultural meaning (Ringberg & Reihlen; 2008), which means that she automatically interprets brand meaning as intended by the marketer. In this connection, Grant McCracken (1986) works with the theoretical terms of 'Cultural Categories' and 'Principles'. As an example, 'women' can be understood as a cultural category, while principles refer to a cultural consensus about what is considered appropriate / inappropriate behavior of e.g. women. In alignment with the sociocultural perspective, McCracken argues that such principles are embedded in the meaning of brands e.g. targeting women (McCracken; 1986). Thus, in contrast to the postmodern position, meaning of the female gender is not considered free-floating. Instead, meaning of the female gender is rooted in "A shared conceptual world within which all members are completely instructed, or are embedded in a shared "web of significance" (Ringberg & Reihlen; 2008 p. 176). In other words, a woman is considered 'fully instructed' in terms of how to interpret e.g. the user imagery, which a brand targeting women intends to communicate.

McCracken suggests that brands targeting women play an important role in terms of substantiating the cultural category of women (McCracken; 1986). In other words, brands become an opportunity to make culture material, and allows for individuals to discriminate visually among culturally specified categories e.g. between men and women (McCracken; 1986). However, as described in section 2.2 the postmodern position suggests that such 'Modernistic' distinctions between masculinity and femininity are in flux. In this connection, Lisa Peñeloza (1994) calls for a more comprehensive interpretation of gender, than the stereotypical distinction between masculinity

versus femininity e.g. suggested by McCracken (Peñeloza; 1994). In this connection, Peñeloza has studied 'gendered' brands (Peñeloza; 1994) and she argues that a brand is 'gendered' due to the fact that cultural meaning of what is considered feminine is 'attached' to a brand targeting women e.g. BMB. In this regard, Peñeloza however argues that it is useful not to consider gender as an inherent quality of a brand. Instead, research should focus on the way in which the intended brand meaning 'recreates' the meaning of the female gender (Peñeloza; 1994 p 361). Relevant to the focus of the present study, Peñeloza further works with the term of 'gender consumption' (ibid.). By gender consumption, Peñeloza refers to the way the brand is used by the female consumer. In this regard, the focus is not on the brand itself, but rather on the way in which the female consumer 'employ and re-designates' constitutive aspects and properties of the brand (Peñeloza; 1994). Following Peñeloza the present study investigates how female consumers integrate the usage of BMB into her female identity project in a way that is meaningful according to the way she leads her life.

## **2.4 SUMMARY**

In chapter 2, the cognitive research position was firstly criticized for not taking the subjective sense-making of the consumer into consideration. According to the postmodern perspective, introduced in section 2.2, this was critical since an understanding of what meaning a consumer ascribes to a brand, provides insight into why the consumer chooses the brand over competing. The postmodern concept of a bricoleur was however questioned, as it was suggested that sociocultural constraints impact a female consumer's sense of self, to an extent she may not consciously be aware of. In contrast to postmodern philosophy, meaning is according to sociocultural as well as cognitive philosophy, created entirely by the marketer (sender), and as such the consumer (receiver) is assumed to interpret brand meaning as intended by the marketer, whereby the intended brand meaning is considered 'transferred' into the life of the female consumer. Hence, as long as the female consumer places her identity-work upon market-generated meaning, her identity work is to some extent structured by sociocultural constraints of the female gender, reflected in the meaning of brands targeting women. However, by discussing human sense-making according to the postmodern perspective, the present study suggests, in alignment with Peñeloza (1994) that the sociocultural meaning of the female gender, should not be investigated as an inherent quality of a brand e.g. BMB. Instead, attention should be paid towards the female consumer's way of 'employing and re-designating' the intended brand meaning. So far, the focus has been on the suggestion that brand meaning should be treated as a negotiation between the intended brand meaning and the female consumer's subjective sense-

making. The following sections offer a discussion of how sociocultural meaning may influence the agency of female consumers' efforts to craft identity independently from the intended brand meaning. Thus, in section 2.5-2.7, which take their point of departure in a discussion of the relationship between female consumers' agency to craft identity and the structuring influence of sociocultural constraints of the female gender i.e. reflected in brands she makes use of as a part of her female identity project (e.g. BMB). Thus, the following sections draw upon theory from the field of Consumer Culture Theory, where the dynamic relationship between consumer behavior and the structuring effect of marketplace culture is explored (Arnould & Thompson; 2005 p. 869). The following sections are structured as follows: **Section 2.5** discusses the role of a brand in the identity project of the consumer, which is then followed by a discussion in **section 2.6 and 2.7** of the agency of the female consumer to tailor identity emancipated from the sociocultural meaning of the female gender, reflected in brands she makes use of in her female identity project. These discussions has important implication for the management of brands targeting female consumers, since it might provide insight into how sociocultural meaning, further reflected in the intended brand meaning, influence women's sense-making, sense of self, and what motivate female consumption and brand choices.

## **2.5. CONSUMERS' USAGE OF BRANDS TO EXPRESS IDENTITY**

Russell W. Belk was among the first researchers to explore the relationship between consumers' identity projects and consumer behavior. In his article 'Possessions and the extended self' from 1988 he concludes that:

"It seems an inescapable fact of modern life that we learn, define, and remind ourselves of who we are by our possessions [As such belongings e.g. brands] provides a sense of past and tells us who we are, where we have come from, and perhaps where we are going" (Belk; 1988 p. 160).

In this connection, Belk distinguishes between a core sense of self (body, internal processes, and ideas), and an extended self (experiences, and those persons, places, and things to which one feels attached) (Belk; 1988 p, 141). Moreover, Belk argues that the 'fragile' core self needs support, and in this connection, the role of the brand is to extend the core self (Belk; 1988 p. 145). Furthermore, Belk suggests that brands may not only extend the self in terms of its physical functions e.g. a blazer jacket, but can also extend the self in a symbolic fashion, as it allows the consumer to convince herself and potentially others that she is a different person, due to her usage of a brand e.g. BMB (Belk; 1988 p. 145). In other words, in alignment with McCracken (1986) the usage of BMB does according to Belk suggest that (the intended) brand meaning is leveraged to the consumer, when she puts on BMB. Thereby, the usage of BMB provides direction in the identity project of the

consumer. As such, the idea that a brand helps develop the self further suggests that a brand has the power to structure meaning in the life of the consumer i.e. empowered by the idea that the fragile self, needs support.

In contrast, Ahuvia (2005) argues that the notion of a core self reflects a romantic view in which: “Each person has a true and authentic inner core self that is given to him or her from an external source, be that genetics, socialization, or God” (Ahuvia; 2005 p. 180). In other words, the individual must find herself and live authentically in accordance with this given inner nature. Ahuvia however emphasizes that the idea of an authentic self is by no means exhaustive. Hence, in the article ‘Beyond the extended self’ (2005) Ahuvia questions Belk’s idea of a core versus an extended self (Ahuvia; 2005). Instead Ahuvia introduces the postmodern subject who is characterized by inconsistency and by not seeking to conform or commit to any unified sense of being as further discussed in section 2.2. As such, Ahuvia argues that consumption is not a means of the individual to express an ‘extended self’ but more likely a means to express a ‘fragmented and multiple sense of self’ where consumption allows the consumer to jump in and out of different identity roles (Ahuvia; 2005). As earlier mentioned this means that brands are left as mythic and symbolic resources or images, among which consumers selectively picks and chooses as part of their identity projects, suggesting a greater agency of the consumer to construct identity than anticipated by Belk (1988). As further mentioned earlier, Ahuvia emphasizes that today’s consumers have a great deal of choice about who they want to be and the autonomy to lead the life they want to lead. As a result “Discovering one’s true preferences, navigating choice, and representing the self – both to oneself and to others has become an overwhelming concern and a primary fore in consumption” (Ahuvia; 2005 p. 172).

Ahuvia however questions the postmodern suggestion of a fragmented sense of self, with no need to commit or conform to a central and coherent identity. The argument is that even though a number of studies have investigated the concept of a fragmented sense of self, it has not been able to find many examples of consumers’ abandoning the desire of a coherent identity (Ahuvia; 2005). Instead, Ahuvia points at studies in which researchers have explored how individuals craft together a coherent identity within the context of a fragmented society (Gould & Lerman; 1998, Thompson & Hirschman; 1995, Murray; 2002). For this purpose, Ahuvia argues that consumers make use of ‘loved object’ to tailor a consistent identity narrative and suggests that: “Love objects serve as indexical mementos of key events or relationships in the life narrative, help resolve identity conflicts, and tend to be tightly embedded in a rich symbolic network of associations” (Ahuvia; 2005 p. 179).

Hence, Ahuvia suggests that a loved object (e.g. a brand which the consumer feels specially attached to) has the ability to transform the self into a new and desired form (Ahuvia; 2005 p. 180). Further, it is suggested that the usage of such a brand adds meaning to the consumer’s life in a

way that allows for a coherent narrative, which as such forges a link between diverse identity roles. According to the perspective of the present study, the meaning of such brands (loved object) should be treated as a process of negotiation allowing the consumer to ascribe her own meaning to the brand. This discussion will be continued in section 4.2 where the findings of the present study are presented, which includes what meaning heavy users of BMB ascribe to the usage of BMB potentially different from the intended brand meaning, which is presented in section 4.1.

### **2.5.1 GROOMING RITUALS AND NEGOTIATION OF BRAND-MEANING**

As argued above, certain brands may play the role of forging a link between fragmented identity roles. In other words, it was argued that brand consumption adds meaning to the identity project of the consumer. Hence, as discussed in section 2.3, McCracken (1986) suggests that the consumption of a brand is inflected by a transfer of meaning. Hence, McCracken suggests that brand meaning is ‘coaxed’ out of the brand and transferred into consumers’ lives when the brand is consumed. Thus, McCracken argues that this process of meaning transfer is: “(...) Inflected by symbolic actions in terms of a ritual which he describes as “(...)a kind of social action devoted to the manipulation of social meaning for the purpose of collective and individual communication and categorization” (McCracken; 1986 p. 78).

In this connection, McCracken works with four types of rituals related to the concept of meaning transfer: Exchange rituals, possession rituals, grooming rituals, and divestment rituals (McCracken; 1986 p. 79). Relevant to the focus of the present study is the concept of grooming rituals where the consumer:

“(..) Takes the special pains necessary to insure that the special, perishable properties residents in certain clothes, hair styles, and looks are, as they were ‘coaxed’ out of their resistant goods and made to live, however briefly and precariously, in the life of the individual consumer” (McCracken; 1986 p. 79)

An example could be imagining a woman preparing for a night out. In this case a grooming ritual illustrates the time and efforts with which she prepares herself for a special event. Hence, such grooming rituals are considered to arm the individual with the brand meaning. In other words, it is assumed that when a consumer puts on e.g. BMB, the intended brand meaning of ‘independency’, ‘mature sexiness’, and ‘sophisticated elegance’ (APPENSIX II) is considered transferred into the identity of the consumer. Hence, according to McCracken, once captured and made resistant in an individual, these meaningful properties give the consumer ‘new powers of confidence, aggression, and defense’ (McCracken; 1986 p. 79). As earlier argued, the present study suggests that McCracken’s concept of ‘meaning transfer’ should be replaced by the notion that allows for the consumers subjective interpretation of the brand, potentially informed by situation

based consumption. In other words, McCracken's concept of meaning transfer, where consumers so to speak 'down-loads' the intended brand meaning, should be replaced with the notion of a 'negotiation' where the consumer ascribes her own meaning to the usage of the brand, potentially dependent on the context in which she plans to make use of the brand e.g. professional vs. private identity roles. This discussion is continued in section 4.2

### 2.5.2 SUMMARY

In section 2.5 the idea that consumption enables consumers to express and build identity was discussed. In other words, it was discussed how the usage of a brand creates meaning, potentially a sense of direction, in consumers' identity projects. In this connection, it was suggested that brands, which the individual consumer feels specially attached to may forge a link between fragmented identity roles. However, McCracken's suggestion that the meaning of a brand is 'coaxed' out of the brand and transferred into the lives of the consumer, i.e. suggesting that the consumer makes sense of the brand as intended by the marketer, was questioned. Hence, in accordance with the perspective of the present study it was suggested that the usage e.g. BMB is more likely to be characterized as a process in which, the consumer actively negotiates brand meaning, with the purpose of integrating the brand into her identity work in a meaningful way i.e. according to the context or situation in which she makes use of the brand.

In section 2.3 the agency of the consumer to ascribe *any* kind of meaning to the usage of a brand was questioned, as it was stated that the consumer's sense-making might be inflicted by sociocultural constraints, to an extent she might not be consciously aware of. As a result, sociocultural constraints, in terms of the sociocultural meaning of the female gender potentially informs female consumers' self-understanding and thus limits their agency to ascribe their own meaning and significance to the usage of a brand as part of their female identity projects. Thus, in section 2.6 the sociocultural patterning of consumption is explored in more detail. In other words; what is the sociocultural meaning of the female gender? The purpose of doing so is twofold:

**Firstly**, the purpose is to illuminate the sociocultural meaning of the female gender related to female physical appearance. In other words, how do such sociocultural constraints influence female identity projects?

**Secondly**, such discussion provides a foundation, useful in the later analysis of the agency of the consumer-participants to ascribe meaning to BMB, independently from socio-cultural constraints. In other words, what is the agency of female consumer to negotiate brand meaning?

## **2.6 SOCIOCULTURAL PATTERNING OF CONSUMPTION**

Research in sociocultural patterning of consumption, have as mentioned studied how institutional and social structures systematically influence consumption, such as class, community, ethnicity, and gender (Arnold & Thompson; 2005 p. 874). In this connection, Thompson & Hirschman (1995) have studied the socialization of the body and suggest, that the postmodern idea of a ‘fragmented sense of self’ might be a romanticized idea, since: “traditional cultural narratives, connected to the human body were found to be woven into the self-conceptions of the participants, to an extent where it influenced their everyday consumption activities” (Thompson & Hirschman; 1995 p. 151).

Hence, inspired by the study of Thompson & Hirschman, sociocultural constraints of the female gender is in the present study investigated in terms of the cultural meaning of the female body and female physical appearance (i.e. research question1). For the illumination of the sociocultural meaning of the female gender, the present study draws upon studies in consumer culture, which have dealt with the way in which the female body has been articulated historically and further how the female gender has been presented in consumer culture through advertisements.

In other words, the aspiration is to understand the sociocultural meaning of the female gender, suggesting that such meaning potentially inform female consumers’ sense of self, influences sense-making, and brand choices - potentially to an extent they may not be consciously aware of. Such knowledge further provides important insight into female consumer behavior, moreover useful to the marketing of brands targeting women (e.g. BMB).

### **2.6.1 THE CULTURAL MEANING OF THE FEMALE GENDER**

Perspectives on gender and the human body have changed over centuries and can be seen as an outcome of both cultural and historical forces. Prior to the 17<sup>th</sup> century the male body was described as ‘perfect’ whereas the female body ‘came very close’ (Joy & Venkatesh; 1994 p 341). Thus, since the male body was considered more perfectly developed than the female body, the male body occupied a higher status (ibid.). In Modernity however, the rise of science and medicine established a biological/ physiological differentiation between the male and female body. In this connection, Modernistic philosophy implies a binary categorization of e.g. gender. As a result, the female body is considered the opposite of the male body i.e. an expressive body in service to male aspirations and ideology (Joy & Venkatesh; 1994). The female body was further considered sexual, whereas the male body was considered neutral but compensated by the superior power of the rational mind. Since women’s bodies were resolved to be in the service of men and male-oriented institutions, women derived their strength through the power of attraction and seduction (Joy & Venkatesh; 1994).

Moreover, the interpretation of the female gender seems strongly influenced by the emergence of political and cultural differences between the female and masculine gender. Hence:

“Woman’s body and reproductive organs are now diffused in terms of how socially appropriate a woman’s sexuality is for her staying at home performing domestic activities. The body is also a sexual body of pleasure as much as it is a gendered body of the social order” (Bordo; 1993 in Joy & Venkatesh p.341).

During modernity there was however a lack of connection between a medical and a sociocultural discourse. The parallel nature of these began to melt in the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century with the rise of pop and consumer culture and was further elevated in advertisement imagery (Joy & Venkatesh; 1994). Hence, with the advent of the new consumerism, the connection between the medical body (inner body) and the aesthetic body (outer body) was firmly established. Advertising images were enhanced as a result of development in the fields of fashion, dieting, and exercise which became known collectively as the ‘body culture’ (Joy and Venkatesh; 1994). Thus, it seems that the female gender, in contrast the male, is strongly attached to the realm of ‘irrational’ senses of the female body, whereas masculinity seems attached to the rational mind e.g. logic and rational solutions.

From a dualistic view, the female body changes in unwanted ways and eventually deteriorates over time is readily seen as a natural object to be controlled by the rational mind i.e. through knowledge, and technology (Thompson & Hirschman; 1995). E.g. the idealization of youthfulness is perhaps the most commonly expressed form of the desire to transcend the limits of the female body (Ibid.). Thus, according to Belk, a great many female consumption activities reflect a desire to control natural forces, particularly those resulting from the inevitable passage of time and the equally inevitable prospect of aging and eventually dying (Belk; 1988). This cultural bifurcation between an enduringly youthful inner self and the aging body underlies a consumption ideology in which, the use of products and services offered by the fashion, cosmetic, beauty, medical, and fitness industry are portrayed as a decision to take control of one’s life and preserve a youthful appearance (Bordo; 1993). Hence, it seems that sociocultural meaning of the female gender is related to the meaning of the female body. Moreover, sociocultural constraints of the female gender suggest that women are ‘expected’ to control and take care of their bodies if they want to be feel like and be perceived by others as ‘feminine’.

In this connection, Joy and Venkatesh (1994) have found that words often used in advertisement of women’s products are the words of: ‘clean, nourish, protect, and refine’ which mean to ‘nurse, to cover’, and to make something ‘of high quality’ (Joy & Venkatesh; 1994 p. 350). Moreover, the phrase adornment, which refers to the process of making oneself ‘attractive’, does in a similar fashion characterize such advertisements (Ibid.). According to Thompson and Hirschman (1995), such social

influences all exert a shaping influence on the way in the female consumer interprets what it means to be a woman (Thompson & Hirschman; 1995). The following section offers a discussion of female consumer behavior. In other words, the ways in which women conscious or unconscious perform a female identity according to such sociocultural constraints.

### **2.6.2 FEMALE GROOMING RITUALS**

According to Dennis Rook (1985), women respond to such sociocultural ‘expectations’ towards female physical appearance, through grooming rituals, which presuppose some form of modification of the body through ‘cleaning, cutting, shaping, or anointing’ (Rock; 1985 p. 258). The result is a form of socialization that inspires a deeply internalized duty to control, discipline, and normalize the female body, i.e. to be thinner, more toned, less gray, and less wrinkled and to hide a variety of imperfections are acts of self-care that serve to discipline the body that has without conscious consent deviated from valued cultural norms of appearance (Thompson & Hirschman; 1995 p. 150). In this connection Susan Bordo characterizes such cultural norms in terms of a ‘normalizing’ of the female body:

“Indeed, such preoccupation may function as one of the most powerful normalizing mechanisms of our century, insuring the production of self-monitoring and self-disciplining “docile bodies” sensitive to any departure from social norms and habituated to self-improvement and self-transformation in the service to those norms” (Bordo; 1993 p. 186).

Furthermore, Featherstone (1991) distinguish between the inner and outer body. In this connection, the inner body refers to health and functioning of the body (diet and exercise), whereas the outer refers to appearance and aesthetics of the body (beauty and style). In this vein, it is argued: “that the person who feels good (inner condition) is the one who looks good (outer body condition) and therefore is good in a moral sense” (Featherstone; 1991 in Joy & Venkatesh; 1994 p. 349). In this connection Bordo (1993) argues that:

“The firm, developed body has become a symbol of correct attitude; it means that one cares about oneself and how one appears to others, suggesting willpower, energy, control over infantile impulse, and the ability to shape your life” (Bordo; 1993 p. 195).

According to Holman (1981), there appears to be three ways in which a woman typically responds to the cultural expectation i.e. with the purpose of feeling and being perceived as a ‘true woman’, which takes the shape of a felt personal aspiration to ‘normalize’ the body (Holman; 1981 in Block & Richins; 1992).

**Camouflage adornments;** means that women through consumption seek to conceal or downplay innate physical characteristics that the consumer is unable to change e.g. vertical stripes in clothing may make a short person appear taller (Holman; 1981 in Block & Richins; 1992 p).

**Enhancer adornments;** means that women through consumption draw attention to innate physical characteristics that are viewed positively e.g. include tight clothes that call attention to a the female body shape (Holman; 1981 in Block & Richins; 1992 p. 6).

**Decorative adornments;** means that women through consumption seek to enhance their physical attractiveness via the aesthetics of the product themselves e.g. a piece of jewelry, a colorful piece of clothing, or a pleasing perfume may delight the senses of both observers and the user and thus enhance one's physical attractiveness (Holman; 1981 in Block & Richins; 1992 p.6).

Such adornment strategies are as mentioned used by women in order to how to 'live up' to the ideal of the 'normalized' female body i.e. what it takes to be a true woman, and as such considered an important motivation consciously or unconsciously informing female consumer behavior. In the following section the agency of the individual to construct identity independently from such sociocultural constraints of the female gender is discussed. Hence, the following discussion has implications for the management of brands since it potentially suggest that an agency to make use of a brand independently from the intended brand meaning e.g. of BMB.

## **2.7 PERFORMING FEMALE IDENTITY**

As mentioned in section 2.6.1, the rational (masculine) mind is considered privileged over the irrational (female) body, according to Modernist philosophy. In this connection, an analytical technique used by both postmodernists and feminists in criticizing such modernistic distinctions between the male / female gender, is the process of 'deconstruction' (Joy & Venkatesh; 1994).

Deconstruction is not only a process of uncovering, but also refers to the process of displacing existing meaning e.g. of the female gender (Ibid.). In this vein, postmodern feminism draws upon French poststructuralism and argues that there is no essence in femininity (Bristor & Fischer; 1993). As a result, the categorization of gender i.e. where the female gender is associated with the realm of the female body and the masculine with the rational mind is criticized. As such, the self-understanding of 'postmodern subject' is considered emancipated from sociocultural constraints of gender i.e. as described in section 2.6. However, as argued in section 2.3 the postmodern agency and emancipation can be questioned, as it was argued that the individual might unconsciously be influenced by underlying mass-cultural discourses e.g. in terms of expectations towards female physical appearance, further reflected in the intended brand meaning of brands, which women make use of as part of their identity projects. In the following Judith Butler's

concept of gender performance and subversion of the female gender is discussed according to the discussion of human sense-making presented in section 2.1-2.3.

### **2.7.1 GENDER SUBVERSION: NEGOTIATING GENDER**

In 1990, the first edition of Judith Butler's book 'Gender Trouble' was published. Butler's gender theory is a poststructuralist theorization of feminism based on a broad spectrum of French theory such as; Foucault, Levi-Strauss, Lacan, Kristeva, and Wittig (Butler; 1999 "Preface 1999" p. 10). Butler is however critical towards the feministic research position and argues that due to its tendency of interpreting women as a uniform group, whose identity is defined according to gender, it is trapped in the modernistic idea that the nature of men and women are essentially different.

According to Butler there is no essence in gender. Therefore gender should instead be understood as a construct which is 'performed' by women (Butler; 1999 p.9). In other words, femininity is a part of a woman's identity, which is produced in everyday interactions. In this connection Butler argues:

"There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results" (Butler; 1999 p.34).

Butler emphasizes that female gender performance should not be understood as a one-off performance but instead as a set of repeated and ritualized behaviors, which becomes naturalized in the context of the female body as described in section 2.6.1 and moreover through body rituals as described in section 2.6.2 (Butler; 1999 "Preface 1999" p. 15). Hence, Butler argues that:

"Just as bodily surfaces are enacted as the natural, so these surfaces can become the site of a dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself" (Butler; 1999 p. 186).

A radical suggestion of Butler is that the subject is situated in a gendered world, with no autonomy suggesting that all behavior and activity is predestinated according to the roles, which one involuntarily is given as either man or woman (Butler; 1999). Hence, the differential construction of the gendered subject is according to Butler taking place since these processes through an illusion of own autonomy is kept hidden from the subject:

"The subject is constituted through exclusion and differentiation, perhaps a repression, that is subsequently concealed, covered over, by the effect of autonomy. In this sense, autonomy is the logical consequence of a disavowed dependency, which is to say that the autonomous subject can maintain the illusion of its autonomy insofar as it covers over the break out of which it is constituted" (Butler 1997:162).

In other words, Butler argues that the postmodern feel of agency to express situation based identity is an illusion. In fact, this felt agency can be seen as a construct that forges a feeling of

independency and individuality and keeps the individual from reflecting over the fact that gender is nothing but a cultural construction, which she does not necessarily have to copy. As such, Butler as mentioned argues that a woman's sense of self is informed by the cultural meaning of her gender to an extent she may not be consciously aware of. In this connection, Butler however argues that through subversive actions 'gender trouble' can be made and hence reveal that the female gender not a universal truth (Butler, 1999). Butler is however not very clear in her description of how these subversive actions appears and how they are realized, which is an area of which she has been criticized by other researchers.

The pop icon Madonna is however widely understood as the embodiment of Butler's idea due to her artistic way of 'expressing herself' especially in the beginning 1990's (E.g. in the music videos of "Express Yourself" 1989, "Justify My Love" 1990, "Erotica" 1992, and the book "Sex" 1992). Due to Madonna's way of combining masculine and feminine stereotypical gender characteristic and playing with and crossing traditional ideas of gender roles, she might illustrate a certain form of subversion (which Butler is looking for) (Gauntlett; 2002 p.143). Further, Madonna has been referred to as a postmodern heroine, since she is considered in control of her own image and further the ability to construct and reconstruct identity and hereby challenges what is considered feminine (Joy & Venkatesh; 1994).

In the article 'Problematizing Performance' Edward L. Schieffelin (1998) moreover criticizes Butler's subversive strategies for not being concrete. Instead he argues that the performative approach of Butler could benefit from being explored by focusing on the performer and others in the particular situation (Schieffelin; 1998). In this regard, Schieffelin emphasizes that the control of the expression does not belong to the performer but more likely belongs to 'the situation'. In other words, does a given performance make sense according to a given situation? E.g. in the situation of taking care of one's baby the performance of the role of an efficient business manager may not apply. Likewise, does the performance of the role as a carrying mother, when aspiring to become a member of a board of directors, seem inappropriate. As such, it makes sense to argue that gender performance takes place to the extent it makes sense to others according to the situation/context. In other words, in the interaction with others, a woman's identity is determined according to how others interpret her performance, and accept it. Hence, according to Schieffelin, when women perform femininity they do so in accordance with the material and cultural resources available in the given situation (Schieffelin; 1998). In other words, gender subversion should be seen as a negotiation between the agency of the individual and the available cultural discourses and symbols (Schieffelin; 1998). In this connection, Thompson & Haytko

(1997) as mentioned suggest that the individual address a series of tensions and paradoxes existing between her sense of individual agency and her sensibility to sources of cultural instructions in her everyday life. As such, understanding which of these discourses will play a dominant role in her performance requires an understanding of her life goals and projects, and context specific aspects influencing on her sense-making (Thompson & Haytko; 1997 p. 151). As such, it can be argued that the idea of actively combining countervailing cultural meaning e.g. by drawing upon and combining what traditionally is considered masculine and feminine traits and symbols according to central life themes and goals seems important if the postmodern agency to form identity emancipated from sociocultural constraints. And further to the agency of the female consumer to ascribe her own meaning and significance to a brand (e.g. BMB). Hence, it makes sense to argue that the situation in which a focal brand is consumed impact the meaning, which the female consumer ascribes to the brand e.g. professional vs. private contexts. This discussion will be continued in section 4.2 where it in a similar fashion was found that the consumer-participants' sense-making of BMB seem informed by the situations in which they make use of the brand.

## **2.8 SUMMERY: THEORETICAL FINDINGS**

As mentioned in section 1.2.1 the present study is motivated by a fundamental research interest in terms of getting closer to an understanding of what role brands play in contemporary consumers' lives i.e. potentially suggesting that it may not be the role of the brand manager alone to determine what meaning the brand represents. In this connection it was suggested that in order to understand what makes consumers value a brand over competing a deeper insight into what meaning the consumer ascribes to the usage of the brand is needed. Hence, the theoretical purpose was to illuminate the foundation of female consumers' agency to ascribe meaning to a brand they use as a part of their identity projects independently from the intended brand meaning.

In chapter 2 it was argued that that the agency of the female consumer to ascribe meaning to a brand independently from the intended brand meaning is challenged by the structuring influence of sociocultural constraints of the female gender - to an extent she may not be consciously aware of. As a result, the postmodern concept of a fragmented sense of self, where the individual crafts together identity roles independently from sociocultural constraints and ascribes her own meaning and significance to the usage of brands was questioned. In order to further illuminate the influence of such sociocultural constraints of the female gender, an illumination of the socio-cultural meaning of female physical appearance (i.e. research question 1) was considered an important source of insights into female consumer behavior, further significant to the marketing

of brands targeting women (e.g. BMB). In this connection, it was found that the sociocultural meaning of the female gender was strongly related to the female body and women's efforts to manage the body i.e. an aspiration to 'normalize' the female body, which was realized through grooming and adornment rituals seem to characterize female consumer behavior. As such, it was argued that a woman's sense of self and hence the aspirations guiding her identity projects and consumption of brands is informed by a duty to 'normalize' her female body. Accordingly, Butler (1999) argues that such influence is possible since women's efforts to 'control the female body' through an illusion of own autonomy is kept hidden from the subject. Suggesting that such aspiration might feel like a personal quest, which makes the consumer feel an agency to be whoever she wants to be. However, female efforts and means to construct identity seem rooted in the sociocultural meaning of the female gender – i.e. that a woman needs to enhance her physical appearance in order to be recognized as feminine thereby challenging the agency of the individual female consumer. In this connection, it was found that the agency of the female consumer to construct identity was realized through a practice of actively combining countervailing cultural meaning e.g. by drawing upon and combining what traditionally is considered masculine and feminine traits and symbols according to central life themes and goals. Moreover it was argued that the situation in which a focal brand is consumed impact the meaning, which the female consumer ascribes to the brand e.g. professional vs. private contexts. These theoretical findings will be discussed in more detail and in accordance with the empirical findings presented in chapter 4.

As described in section 1.2.1 the empirical purpose of the present study is to investigate what managerial implications emerge as a result of the idea of interpreting the consumer as co-creator of meaning i.e. due to the idea of interpreting the meaning of a brand as a process of negotiation. For this purpose, the brand BMB is as mentioned applied as an example. Hence, an empirical outcome of the present study is as mentioned an identification of which brand elements of BMB are significant to the consumer-participants and what meaning these creates in their female identity projects. I.e. suggesting that such elements and the meaning they ascribe to these, potentially different from the intended brand meaning, may be an indicator in terms of what makes BMB strong and makes the consumer-participants value the brand over competing. In chapter 3, the method of data collection and analysis is described.

### **3. METHOD**

Until now the focus of the present study has been concerned with a theoretical discussion of what role a brand and its intended meaning plays in female consumers' identity projects i.e. suggesting that sociocultural meaning reflected in the intended brand meaning impact female consumers way of making sense and valuating a brand. In the following part of the present study the empirical purpose; i.e. the investigation in terms of what managerial implications appear when the consumer is considered a co-creator of brand meaning is the focus. In other words, it is investigated how female BMB consumers make sense of BMB and how the sociocultural meaning of the female gender, as discussed in section 2.6, influence the consumer-participants agency to ascribe meaning the brand independently from the intended brand meaning i.e. due to the fact that the theoretical findings suggest that the female consumer's agency is challenged by such sociocultural constraints.

The ambition was to get as close to the participants' description of BMB as possible. Therefore semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method for the collection of data. By conducting semi-structured interviews a qualitative method was used, which allowed the interviewer to tap into the richness of the participants' description of the meaning of BMB. In contrast a quantitative method, where the researcher typically makes use of surveys, would not allow probing follow-up questions i.e. with the purpose of making the participant elaborate on a particular answer given or for the illumination of unexpected themes presented by the participant during the interviews (Hair et al; 2006). In this connection, Steiner Kvale (2009) argues that: "The qualitative interview is a research method, which enables a privileged access to human's fundamental experienced life world" (Kvale; 2009 p. 47(translated from Danish))

#### **3.1 DESIGN**

The research was designed according to the empirical purpose of the present study. Hence, with the purpose of investigating the suggested process of negotiation and thus the managerial implications of regarding the consumer a co-creator of meaning the collection of data targeted two groups of participants: Firstly, semi-structured interviews with four heavy users of BMB were conducted in order to investigate what meaning they ascribed to the brand and what meaning the consumption of the brand creates in their female identity projects. Secondly, a semi-structured interview with a representative from BMB was conducted with the purpose of getting an as rich understanding of the intended brand meaning as possible. The order in which the two 'groups of participants' were interviewed was important. Hence, if data related to the intended brand meaning had been collected prior to the interviews with the consumer-participants the

interviewer's pre-conception might have influenced the questions asked during the interviews with the consumer-participants. Hence, the idea of interviewing the representative of the brand last served the purpose of not 'polluting' the meaning, which the consumer-participants describe as characteristic for BMB and which the usage of the brand provides as little as possible.

### **3.1.2 SELECTION CRITERIA FOR PARTICIPANTS**

Due to the empirical purpose of the present study, the collection of data did as mentioned target two groups of participants. In the following these two groups of participants are described in more detail.

#### **3.1.2.1 CONSUMER-PARTICIPANTS**

The primary criterion applied for the selection of 'consumer-participants' was that these participants should feel attached to BMB and find the usage of the brand significant to their female identity projects. As such, the selection criterion for these participants was of an emotional dimension. The consumer-participants were found via BMB's Face book fan page (WEB 4). Hence, the idea that the participants in public had declared a 'fan-status' of the brand, might suggest that these participants feel attached to the brand and have formed an opinion about the usage of it. However, the idea of being a 'fan' of something on a social media might not necessarily imply an actual consumption of the brand. As a result, another selection criterion was that the participants selected had to be heavy users of the brand. In other words, they needed to buy and use the brand on a frequent basis. Hence, after contacting the participants via e-mail and receiving a positive response, the potential consumer-participant was asked how often she buys and uses BMB. As such, a second selection criterion was that the consumer-participants had to purchase at least five BMB items each season - further suggesting that the brand was central in their female identity project. As such, the age, occupation, social background, and other demographics characteristics of the participant were not considered important selection criteria. However, in another setting discrimination between variables such as age, income, class etc. might reveal other significant patterns. Due to the limited number of consumer-participants, the findings may not be representative to all BMB consumers, but should be seen as an exemplification of patterns, which characterizing the meaning the consumption of BMB, might create in identity projects of female consumers (see further limitations of the method in section 3.3). In the following a brief description of the consumer-participants is offered:

**Participant 1 (P1):** 28 years old and lives with her boyfriend and her daughter in Copenhagen. P1 has a Master degree from University of Roskilde and is currently working in a Ministry.

**Participant 2 (P2):** 54 years old, married and have two grown-up daughters. She lives with her husband north of Copenhagen. P2 has a Ph.D. and works as a manager of research within the health sector.

**Participant 3 (P3):** 22 years old. She has no children but lives with her boyfriend in Copenhagen. SP3 is a student of University of Aalborg and runs a fashion blog.

**Participant 4 (P4):** 27 years old, she lives alone in Copenhagen and has no children. P3 has a master degree from the University of Southern Denmark and works as a consultant in the bio-medical industry.

### **3.1.2.2 INTERVIEW WITH REPRESENTATIVE FROM BMB**

The brand's International PR Coordinator Christina Neustrup (CN) was chosen as a suitable representative of the BMB brand. Hence, due to her job as International PR Coordinator it was assumed that CN would be a useful source of information due to her routine and knowledge in terms of how the brand is communicated externally on a daily basis. CN has a Master degree from University of Copenhagen.

### **3.1.3 INTERVIEW WITH THE CONSUMER-PARTICIPANTS**

Prior to the conduction of the interviews with the consumer-participants an interview guide was written (APPENDIX I 9.1.1). In this connection, the interview questions functioned as themes which the interviewer sought covered throughout the interviews. It was considered significant to ask as many 'which' and 'how-questions' as possible, in order to encourage the consumer-participant to describe her thoughts and feelings related to the usage of BMB in as much detail as possible (Kvale; 2009 p 154). Moreover, the themes, which were sought covered through the interviews, took their point of departure in the theoretical findings informed by the theoretical purpose as described in section 1.2.1. In other words, the interview guide was informed by the theoretical findings presented in chapter 2, in terms of the implications found as significant to how female consumers ascribe meaning to brands they use as part of their female identity projects. Moreover, the meaning emerging from the interviews with the consumer-participants is built on their individual experiences, thoughts, and emotions connected to BMB. In other words, the consumer-participants were not exposed to any BMB brand material or description of the brand prior to the interview situation. This was significant in order not to 'pollute' their descriptions of BMB. Furthermore, the aim was to encourage the consumer-participants to provide a detailed insight into their thoughts and feelings related to the consumption of BMB and therefore it was important that they felt 'at home' in the interview-situation. Thus, it was further important that the interview questions were easy to understand. As a result, the interview guide was free from

theoretical terms and academic language (Kvale; 2009 p. 152). The interviews were further conducted in Danish since most consumer-participants argued that they did not feel comfortable in English. The interview guide reflects four main themes, with a number of sub-questions related to each one of them. As a result the:

**First theme** was: What meaning does the consumer-participant ascribe to BMB? In this connection, the ambition was to uncover which general associations were connected to the brand and which of these were most significant to the consumer-participant. Moreover it was investigated from which brand elements brand, such meaning was leveraged.

**Second theme** was: Which emotions emerge from the usage of BMB? In this connection the consumer- participants were asked to describe situations in which the usage of BMB was significant to them. Moreover, with the purpose of uncovering how the participant ‘negotiates brand meaning’ i.e. integrate the brand into her female identity project.

**Third theme** was: What meaning the participant ascribes to being a woman. Hence, due to the fact that the present study has been concerned with uncovering the agency of the female consumers to craft identity, independently from sociocultural meaning of the female gender (as described in section 2.6), it was as a result important to gain insight how the concept of being a woman becomes significant in the identity projects of the consumer-participants.

**Fourth theme** was: How the usage of BMB helps the consumer-participant be and feel like that kind of woman she wants to be. I.e. with the purpose of uncovering what role the intended brand meaning of BMB (and thereby the brand manager) play in the identity projects of the consumer-participants.

Prior to the interviews, the purpose of the interview was described to the consumer-participants, as an exploration of how female consumers make use of BMB to express identity. Moreover, the participants were asked to think of three words that described their thoughts and feelings related to the consumption of BMB. This was a way to open up the interview and ensure that the interviews were conducted on the basis of the consumer-participants’ experiences with BMB (Kvale; 2009). Furthermore, it was an attempt to ensure that the consumer-participants’ attention was directed towards the theme of the interview. The interviews were conducted in the consumer-participants’ private homes and ranged from 50 minutes to 95 minutes. Within the general topic

areas, the interviewer attempted to phrase follow-up probes in concert with the consumer-participant's descriptions in order to make sure that all relevant meaning related to the particular question was provided by the consumer-participant. In general, the consumer-participants were interested in the topic of the interview and it did not seem difficult for them to answer and elaborate on the questions asked in the interview.

#### **3.1.4 INTERVIEW WITH REPRESENTATIVE FROM BMB**

As mentioned in section 3.1.2.2 an interview with BMB's International PR coordinator, Christina Neustrup (CN) was conducted at the company head-quarter on Frederiksberg, after the conduction of the interviews with the consumer-participants. The purpose of conducting the semi-structured interview with CN was mentioned to get a richer understanding of the intended brand meaning of BMB, than available in secondary sources of data, such as annual reports and news-articles etc. For this purpose, the interview guide (APPENDIX I 9.1.2) was written with the theory of brand personality in mind (Aaker, J; 1997). As such, the interviewer sought to get an insight into the brand, asking questions if the brand was a real-life woman. Hence, the theory of brand personality was chosen, as it was considered capable of exploring the richness and texture existing beneath the brand identity statement e.g. communicated via the brand web-side (Aaker, D; 1996).

### **3.2 ANALYSIS**

The conceptual model of interpretation, used for the analysis of both the interview with CN and the consumer-participants, reflects a hermeneutic process (Kvale; 2004). The two sets of data were analyzed separately as two 'texts', which were later compared with the purpose of investigating in what way the consumer-participants ascribe meaning BMB, independently from the intended brand meaning. Originally 'hermeneutic' refers to the act of 'interpretation'. Moreover, hermeneutic is also referred to as a term, which characterizes all philosophical theories related to human being's interpretation of the world, themselves, and other individuals (Højbjerg; 2005). Hence, the hermeneutic methodology provides a clear and reliable tool, in terms of how to analyze a text. Methodologically, the hermeneutic logic rests on the principle of the 'hermeneutic circle' i.e. suggesting that the parts (themes emerging in the individual interview) need to be understood in accordance with the 'whole', and the 'whole' needs to be understood in the light of its parts (Højbjerg; 2005). In other words, the assumption is that understanding is provided through an on-going interplay between a 'global understanding' and close repeated readings of the text. In this process, the researcher built her interpretation upon an overall impression i.e. an understanding, which was continuously corrected in accordance with the researcher's gaining a closer

understanding of the parts. In this way, the interpretation of the text was continuously built in the light of the 'new' and more detailed knowledge, into the global meaning of the text. Hence, according to Heidegger, the hermeneutic circle should not be understood as a method. In other words, suggesting that human's way of making sense of themselves and the world around them, is always built on interpretation, suggesting that there is no nature given truth behind the emergence of a phenomenon (Højberg; 2005). As such, Heidegger suggests that sense-making is always impacted by the situation the individual is in, and her historical background. Hence, in the end, sense-making is built on the interests and projects of the individual.

In 'Wahrheit und Methode' Gardemar adds that the individual (the researcher) is situated within his/her own interpretive circle, which s/he cannot escape (Gardemar, 1960 in Højberg; 2005). Thus, interpretation is built as interplay between the individual's (the researcher's) initial preconceptions of the object, and the participant's description of the object (i.e. reflected in the interviews). In this connection, Gardemar suggests that it is not possible to arrive at a true interpretation of the object (i.e. female consumers interpretation of BMB) (Højberg; 2005). It is therefore suggested that the objective of the researcher is to explore new themes, which help for a closer understating of the research object. As such, the analysis of the present study is conducted in accordance to a 'part-to-whole process' (Højberg; 2005) in which the researcher, sought to gain a holistic understanding of each individual interview. Hence, in a hermeneutic sense, the logic applied, presumed that understanding develops as earlier readings of the interview serve to inform later ones and, reciprocally, later readings recognize and explore patterns that had not been previously noted. Thus, in the analysis of the collected data, the researcher's interpretation emerged from interplay between initial preconceptions (theoretical foundation concerned with women's usage of brands as part of their female identity projects) and the insights and unexpected results i.e. in terms of the meaning the consumer-participants ascribed to BMB arising through the interviews. The process of analyzing the interview transcripts (i.e. both the interview with CN and the female consumers of BMB) is based on Kvale's principles of data analysis (Kvale; 2004 p. 49-67 & 186-206) and described step-by step in section 3.2.1

### **3.2.1 ANALYSIS STEP BY STEP**

**Step 1:** The recorded interviews were transcribed right after each interview. In general, the idea of transcribing interviews serves the purpose of documenting, what the participants said, with the purpose of creating an overview of the content of the interviews. In this connection, Kvale argues that: "transcriptions are not copies of representations of a original reality but interpretive constructions which serve as useful tools for a given purpose" (Kvale; 2004 p.166 (Translated from Danish)).

**Step 2:** The structuring of the text implied first of all a transcription of the interviews (APPENDIX II). After each transcription, the text was read through a number of times, in order to identity global (tacit) understanding of the text i.e. following the hermeneutic methodology. In other words, the objective at this stage was to gain an overview of the collected data, with the purpose of identifying those parts of the data, which were most relevant to the focus of the present study.

**Step 3:** After the process of gaining an overview of the text all data, which were found irrelevant to the research interest, was disregarded. At this stage of the analysis, the preconception i.e. in terms of the research interest was founded on the research questions and the theoretical foundation of the present study (i.e. further reflected in the interview guide). Hence, at this stage, themes from the interview guide provided a sense of direction and enabled a better overview.

**Step 4:** After having identified the most significant data of the text, the objective was to identify themes and significant expressions of each interview, with the purpose of developing the meaning within the text. Afterwards these ‘parts’ were compared with the global meaning of the text, according to the elaborated meaning of the found themes. This process was repeated until arriving at a solid gestalt where no logical inconsistencies appeared (Kvale; 2009 p. 233).

**Step 5:** The next step of the analysis was concerned with the interpretations of the gestalt found at the previous stage, which was tested according the global meaning of the text as a whole. Moreover, the intertextuality between the interviews was tested and identified. The interpretations of the significant expressions of the interviews were hereby compared to the global meaning of the text (Kvale; 2009 p. 233). At this stage, the analysis was exclusively based on the content of the significant expressions as described by the participants.

**Step 6:** The next step of the analysis was to compare the findings to central aspects of the theoretical foundation as described in chapter 2.

**Step 7:** By combining step 5 and 6 in a continuing dynamic interpretive processes new differentiations appeared and hereby the meanings of the texts were elaborated. In general, the themes emerging from the text and further presented in the findings (chapter 4) are build on the participants’ statements, the research questions, and the theoretical perspective obtained in the present study.

Within the interview with CN four themes related to the intended meaning of BMB were found. These findings are presented in section 4.1.

From the analysis of the data collected through the interviews with the consumer-participants three main themes were found. In this connection eight sub-themes provided insight into the three main themes. The three main themes were informed partly by the question asked e.g. the question of ‘what meaning do you ascribe to the concept of being a woman’, whereas the subthemes emerged more spontaneously. Hence, in section 4.2, the findings concerned with what meaning the consumer-participants ascribe to the usage of BMB as part of their female identity projects are presented. In section 4, the structure of the findings is described in more detail.

### **3.3 LIMITATIONS OF THE METHOD**

Obtaining all the measures necessary to assess all BMB consumers’ thoughts and feelings related to the usage of BMB would require a considerable amount of time, as a result the number of consumer-participants in the present study was necessarily limited (see Mitchell; 1996, Voss et al. 1980). Thus, as mentioned the findings of the presents study are built upon semi-structured interviews, with four consumer-participants (and one representative from BMB). The use of a limited number of consumer-participants allowed for a more in-depth understanding of each consumer-participants’ usage of BMB, however it also reduced the degree to which, the findings are representative for all BMB consumers (Thompson et al. 1994). It is however not unusual for researchers to make use of only a few participants. E.g. Thompson et al. (1994) published an article in *Journal of Consumer Research*, where they made use of only three participants, and similar to the present study made use of a hermeneutic strategy of analysis to illuminate cultural viewpoints, which underlie the meanings expressed by their participants. According to Thompson et al. (1994) subjective sense-making is always inflicted by shared cultural meaning, e.g. about the female gender. Hence, as mentioned female consumers may feel an agency to express identity independently from sociocultural constraints, however their efforts to do so seem inflicted by longstanding cultural meaning of their gender, to an extent they may not be consciously aware of. In this connection, Thompson et al. (1994) suggest that:

“Personal meanings and intentions do not exist separately from the intricate network of sociohistoric meanings that have been established by the various sources of cultural knowledge and socialization”. (Thompson et al; 1994 p. 433)

Hence, even though, each of the consumer-participants is the ‘author’ of her own unique interpretation of what meaning BMB adds to her female identity project, her statements are inflicted by the sociocultural meaning of the female gender (Thompson et al; 1994 p.433) and does as such potentially revile general meaning of what it takes to be a woman:

“Thus, every new personal understanding—no matter how seemingly novel or innovative in nature—always entails some transformation of an already existing cultural viewpoint” (Gadamer; 1976 in Thompson et al; 1994 p. 434).

Hence, according to Thompson et al (1994) the hermeneutic method may not be exhaustive in its scope. However, it reveals plausible relationships existing between the texts being analyzed i.e. the interview transcripts of the consumer-participants (Thompson et al. 1994).

### **3.3.1 LIMITATIONS OF THE FINDINGS**

In the final face of the analysis, it became clear that the consumer-participants' usage of BMB was associated with the performance of respectively private and professional identity roles. In this connection, the strategy of the interviewer had been to let the consumer-participants describe situations, in which they use BMB unaided. As a result, an identification of specific female identity roles, which the usage of BMB might help women perform, was not included in the theoretical foundation. Hence, future studies in female gender identity and consumer culture, could therefore benefit from exploring the dynamic relationship between public vs. private female identity roles, related to brand consumption in more detail. Further, such exploration would allow for a more in-depth discussion of the concept of a fragmented sense of self, presented by the postmodern position.

### **3.3.2 DELIMITATIONS**

In alignment with research question 1, a great focus has been paid to the sociocultural meaning of female gender in relation to female physical appearance and the meaning of the female body. The initial focus of female physical appearance was selected out of two reasons. Firstly, since the brand BMB is a fashion brand, selling products targeting women's need for clothes. Secondly, this focus was chosen due to the fact that much research in female gender, have focused on the meaning of the female body e.g. the feministic research position (Joy & Venkatesh; 1994). If the present study had paid more attention towards other aspects of the sociocultural meaning of the female gender, e.g. related to the meaning of being 'caring', which e.g. Thompson (1996) has studied, the theoretical findings would potentially differ. However, a significant finding from the analysis of the data suggests that all consumer-participants (unaided) mentioned the way they felt about their body, as a significant part of their female identity – suggesting that the female body plays a significant part in defining the sociocultural meaning of the female gender.

Moreover, a significant finding appearing from the analysis of the interviews with the consumer-participants was the fact that three of them referred to what they called the 'traditional meaning of masculinity' when they described their performance of professional identity roles. The meaning of the masculine gender is only briefly described in the theoretical foundation, since the sociocultural meaning of the female gender was the focus of the present study.

Lastly, the description of the sociocultural meaning of the female gender as presented in section 2.6 is built on findings from existing research, and should not be seen as an exhaustive description of the sociocultural meaning of the female gender. Instead, this description is used as a frame of reference, which the present study draws upon in order to discuss how sociocultural constraints seem to impact female consumer behavior.

## 4. FINDINGS

In chapter 4, the findings of the present study are structured in the following way:

**Section 4.1** offers a presentation of the findings from the interview with the representative from BMB and a description of the intended brand meaning of BMB.

**Section 4.2** presents and discusses the findings found from the interviews with the consumer-participants. The findings are structured to illuminate the research questions (see section. 1.2), which have motivated the present study:

**Firstly:** In section 4.2.1 the first main theme of: **‘What does it mean to be a woman’** is discussed. Here the focus is to illuminate the way in which sociocultural constraints impact the female identity projects of the consumer-participants (research question 1). Hence, in section 4.2.1 the suggestion, discussed in section 2.6 that the sociocultural meaning of the female gender seems strongly connected to the realm of the female body is discussed, according to the sub-themes emerging from the consumer-participants’ description of, what it means to be a woman. As described in section 2.6, it can be argued that women’s sense of self is structured by long-standing meaning of her gendered body. However, by discussing human sense-making according to postmodern interpretation, the present study opened up for the idea of an agency of the individual to form identity independent from such sociocultural constraints (section 2.7). Hence, in order to illuminate the consumer-participants’ agency to form identity independently from sociocultural constraints, the interviewer asked open general questions, such as ‘what meaning the consumer-participant ascribed to the idea of being a woman’ (theme 3 in the interview guide, see section 3.1.3). Even though questions related to the female body were not asked, all four consumer-participants did unaided mentioned their bodies as central to their feeling of being a woman. This might suggest that the sociocultural meaning of the female gender impact their self-understanding, which later was found to further inform the meaning, which the consumer-participants ascribed to the usage of BMB. Section 4.2.1 is structured according to two sub-themes related to the first main theme of ‘what it means to be a woman’:

**1) Section: 4.2.1.1 ‘The size and shape of the body’**

**2) Section: 4.2.1.2 ‘Maturing with grace’**

**Secondly:** In section 4.2.2 the second main theme of: **‘The balancing act of being a woman’** is discussed. Here the focus is to illuminate, how the consumer-participants integrate the usage of BMB into their female identity projects i.e. suggesting a process of negotiation (research question 2). To begin with, section 4.2.2 includes a discussion of the meaning the consumer-participants

ascribe to BMB, with the purpose of integrating the usage of the brand into their female identity projects. Hence, in order to illuminate, what meaning arises from the usage of BMB, open questions were asked, related to what meaning the consumption of BMB created in the consumer-participants' lives, and in which situations they made use of BMB (Theme 2, and 4 in the interview guide, see section 3.1.3). Hence section 4.2.2 is structured according to two sub-themes related to the main theme of 'the balancing act of being a woman':

**1) Section 4.2.2.1 'BMB makes me appear just as strong and serious as a man'**

**2) Section 4.2.2.2 'BMB makes me feel like a woman'**

**Thirdly:** In section 4.2.3 the third main theme of: **"The meaning of BMB"** is discussed. Here it is discussed, what role the intended brand meaning plays in terms of adding meaning to the consumer-participants female identity projects (research question 3). In this connection, the purpose is to investigate to what extent the intended brand meaning of BMB is arbitrarily linked to the usage of the brand. In other words, it is investigated, what meaning the consumer-participants ascribe to BMB potentially different from the intended brand meaning. For this purpose, the meaning, which the consumer-participants ascribe to BMB is compared and discussed according to the intended brand meaning as presented in section 4.1. In this connection, the sub-themes presented related to 'the meaning of BMB' further includes the brand elements of BMB, which the consumer-participants mentioned as significant to their interpretation of the brand. In other words, from which brand elements are their interpretation of BMB leveraged? Moreover, a significant sub-theme was the need to combine BMB with other brands (i.e. in one outfit), since three of the consumer-participants felt a need to be in control, of their own female physical appearance, and not let one brand alone define the way they looked. Section 4.2.3 is therefore structured according to four sub-themes related to 'the meaning of BMB':

**1) Section 4.2.3.1 'Malene Birger / An independent woman'**

**2) Section 4.2.3.2 'The little detail'**

**3) Section 4.2.3.3 'The need to combine BMB with other brands'**

**4) Section 4.2.3.4 'The role of BMB'**

A further outcome of the analysis was an investigation of what role BMB plays in the consumer-participants' identity projects presented in section 4.2.3.4. In chapter 5, the findings are summarized, elaborated, and discussed according to the research questions of the present study.

## **4.1 THE INTENDED BRAND MEANING OF BY MALENE BIRGER**

From the interview with the representative from BMB, Christina Neustrup (CN), the following themes showed central to the intended brand meaning of BMB: ‘Independency’, ‘Mature sexiness’, and ‘Sophisticated elegance’. Moreover, a theme related to the brand’s approach to marketing communication was found. In the following the intended meaning of BMB is described.

### **4.1.1 INDEPENDENCY**

A significant theme related to the intended brand meaning of BMB, which emerged from the interview with CN, was the meaning of ‘independency’. In the following quote, CN argues that the idea of being an independent woman can mean a lot of things, depending on the context and the way, a woman leads her life:

“It is a bit double (...) The idea of being an independent woman ... one can be independent in many ways. She can be a mother. She can be single. She can be traveling. She can be old. (...) we do not have a target audience based on age. Instead we sell clothes to women who appreciates quality in life” (Line 1857-62)

CN further describes the meaning of independency:

“With Malene’s [designer Malene Birger] own words the user of By Malene Birger is an independent woman. She is an independent woman who travels. She knows how to take care of herself and she is capable of creating a life of her own. She is a woman who enjoys the small details in life. Our latest collection was communicated in accordance with the image of a ‘cosmopolitan woman’ who appreciates clean bed sheets. It may sound banal but the idea is to communicate a woman with an overview, she is extrovert, and at the same time she appreciates quality” (Line 1838-42).

Accordingly, the intended meaning of ‘independency’ is meant to be communicated very broadly, with the purpose of targeting a broad group of female consumers, who as a result can identify with the brand.

### **4.1.2 MATURE SEXINESS**

A second significant theme related to the intended brand meaning of BMB, which emerged from the interview with CN, was the meaning of ‘Mature sexiness’. In the following quote, CN describes mature sexiness as an understated sensuality:

”It is not a naked kind of sexiness. I think that we think of a sexy sophisticated woman ... more of a mature kind of sexiness, different from that baby-doll sexiness. It is a mature kind of sexuality more than an ‘open’ kind... sensual and understated” (Line 1902-5)

CN explains that the brand element of ‘mature sexiness’ is communicated through the styling, and the elegance of the individual products, and as such, mainly product related.

### 4.1.3 SOPHISTICATED ELEGANCE

A third significant theme related to the intended brand meaning of BMB, which emerged from the interview with CN was the meaning of ‘sophisticated elegance’. According to CN, the meaning of sophisticated elegance further includes plural aspects. In the following quote CN describes the intended meaning of ‘sophisticated elegance’:

“The word sophisticated connotes various aspects. It includes something elegant, a worldliness, an enlightenment, that one knows what is going on in the world (...) [To us] a sophisticated elegance has nothing to do with something refined. It has something to do with having a global outlook. That one knows what is going on in the world. It has something to do with the way one presents oneself and one knows how to behave. It is the idea of the open-minded woman who has been around the world... she is open and has experienced a lot. She is not bound to her home. We do not distinguish between being Danish or from Morocco. We think of people. As a result By Malene Birger does not distinguish between where one comes from, due to the fact that we are an international brand (...) Our users are all kinds of women” (Line 1913-25).

The meaning of sophisticated elegance is partly communicated via the product but further reflected in the user imagery e.g. presented in marketing campaigns.

### 4.1.4 BRAND COMMUNICATION

A fourth theme found, was related to the brand’s approach to marketing communication. In this connection, it was as mentioned in the introduction found that the BMB’s retail stores are considered important communication channels, which enable the brand to communicate the BMB universe, which according to CN, is an important part of the product and brand. Hence, according to CN, BMB obtains a holistic approach to marketing communication. In the following quote, CN describes why the retail stores are significant to the communication of the intended brand meaning:

“Retail is an extremely important communication channel to us since part of our product and brand is our universe. [our universe] is what it looks like here [company headquarter] and what it looks like in our stores. As a result our stores have been important tools to express who we are [to the consumer]. Especially in export markets. When you [penetrate] a new market, as a Danish unknown brand, retail is an important tool to make sure that consumers interpret us in the intended way. It is easy to be By Malene Birger in Denmark where everyone knows her [Malene Birger]. But when you take the brand outside the national borders and still want to tell a story, the stores are important to us in order to let people know what By Malene Birger is about” (Line 1937-1943).

Thus, due to the holistic idea of the brand in general, retail does according to CN become important, in order to make sure that the consumer interprets the meaning of the brand as intended, which might not have been possible through a whole-sale customer.

## **4.2 FEMALE CONSUMERS' USAGE OF BMB**

In section 4.2 findings from the interviews with the consumer-participants are presented and discussed. (See chapter 4, for a detailed description of the structure of the following sections).

### **4.2.1 WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A WOMAN**

In section 2.6 the way the sociocultural meaning of the female body has been articulated historically and the way the female gender has been presented in advertisements were discussed. As mentioned, it was suggested that the sociocultural meaning of the female gender seems strongly related to the realm of the female body and female body practices i.e. where the sociocultural meaning of masculinity is, in contrast seemed related to the power of the rational mind. In this connection, an interesting finding from the analysis of the interviews with the consumer-participants was as mentioned that all four consumer-participants, unaided mentioned the way they felt about their body as central to their feeling of being a woman. It was moreover found that the consumer-participants' female self-understanding seemed influenced by an aspiration to manage the 'size and shape' of their bodies and moreover a desire to 'mature with graze' i.e. realized through consumption and grooming rituals. In the following sections, sub-themes related to the main theme of 'what it means to be a woman' are discussed.

#### **4.2.1.1 THE SIZE AND SHAPE OF THE BODY**

Three of the consumer-participants expressed strong concerns related to the idea of not being 'too big'. This concept was especially important to P2, who is the oldest of the four participants. In the following quote, P2 argues that the size and shape of her body, informs her feeling of being free to present herself physically, in the way she likes:

"The size and shape of my body determine what kind of clothes I can wear. I want to be able to wear a dress that highlights the shape of my body. To me the shape of the female body is extremely beautiful" (...) "I do my best not to become too big in order for me to be able to move in the way I want and to wear the kind of clothes I like" (Line 919-23).

As such, P2 seeks to promote parts of her body, which she finds attractive. Further she ascribes a sense of freedom to the idea of having a slender body; due to the fact that it enables her to wear the kind of clothes she likes and prevents her from feeling inhibited. In this connection Bordo (1993) argues that:

"The firm, developed body has become a symbol of a correct attitude; it means that one cares about oneself and how one appears to others, suggesting willpower, energy, control over infantile impulse, and the ability to shape your life" (Bordo; 1993 p. 195).

The idea that the 'right' body shape symbolizes willpower and control is a concept, which P3 further draws upon. P3 argues that she is ambitious and goal-oriented in life - an ambition, which is both related to being successful in her professional life, but also refers to an ambition of preserving a beautiful physical appearance. In this connection, P3 argues that she is not satisfied with herself, if she senses that she carries one or two kilos too much. The concept presented by Bordo (1993) in the quote above that the firm body is a symbol of willpower and ability to shape one's life is a notion, which is evident in all four interviews. In other words, it is important to all consumer-participants to show to others that they make an effort out of taking care of their bodies and are concerned about their physical appearance. Thus, on the basis of the findings from the interviews with the consumer-participants it seems that the idea of being satisfied with the shape of their bodies provides a feeling of freedom, which potentially enables them to be the kind of woman they want to be.

#### **4.2.1.2 MATURING WITH GRACE**

Three of the consumer-participants expressed a concern related to the fact that their bodies have changed as they have grown older. In this connection Belk suggests that many female consumption practices are informed by a desire to control natural forces, particular those resulting from the inevitable passage of time, which reflects a glorification of the youthful body (Belk; 1988). In contrast P2, the oldest of the consumer-participants, argues that it is a natural thing to get older, and that being young is not in itself an aspiration to her. P2 however argues that she feels a duty to 'mature with grace' and to present herself in an aesthetical way physically. In the following quote, P2 argues that the idea that some women try to look younger than they are, turns her off:

"Last Friday my husband and I attended a party at D'Angleterre [hotel in Copenhagen]. At the party there were quite a few women who were app. 5-10 years older than me. Some of them were exposing their bodies in a not very tasteful way. They were exposing wrinkled skin around the bosom. Some wore blouses that were so tight that they revealed the edges of bras etc. To me exposing one's body like that is a major turn-off" (Line 906-9)

As mentioned, P2 argues that a woman needs to accept the fact that she grows older. This argument challenges the sociocultural glorification of the youthful appearance as suggested by Belk (1988). However, her refusal to expose undesirable body parts, as reflected in the quote above, may suggest an aspiration towards a 'normalizing' of her female body as suggested by Bordo (1993):

"Indeed, such preoccupation may function as one of the most powerful normalizing mechanisms of our century, insuring the production of self-monitoring and self-disciplining "docile bodies" sensitive to any departure from social norms and habituated to self-improvement and self-transformation in the service to those norms" (Bordo; 1993 p. 186).

Moreover, P2's suggestion that it she is turned off, when women expose undesirable body parts, seems in alignment with Holman's suggestion that women are expected to 'conceal or downplay innate physical characteristics' (Holman; 1981 in Block & Richins; 1992 p. 5). In other words, whereas P2 does not strive towards having a youthful appearance, perhaps because she does not find that a youthful appearance fits into her sense of self, she seems to draw upon other sociocultural discourses available, as a part of her female identity project (Schieffelin; 1998). In this connection, Thompson & Haytko (1997) as mentioned argue that when a woman faces these plural opportunities, she addresses a series of tensions and paradoxes existing between her sense of individual agency and her sensibility to sources of cultural instructions (Thompson & Haytko; 1997 p. 151). In other words, P2 might feel an agency and autonomy to form her female identity, independently from the ideal of a youthful appearance. However, her argumentation for refusing to do so, seems inflicted by other cultural instructions, i.e. the sociocultural expectation, that a woman should conceal undesirable body parts. Hence, as suggested by Schieffelin (1999), the individual chooses among discourses available, and incorporates these cultural meanings, into her identity projects, in a way that is meaningful according to the way she leads her life, which according to Butler further forges a feeling of own-autonomy (Butler, 1999).

In a similar fashion, P1 describes that she have had to compensate for the fact that her body has changed, after giving birth to her daughter. In the following quote, she describes how she makes sense of herself as a woman after her giving birth:

“After giving birth to my daughter my breasts changed quite a lot. They went from ‘plus plus’ to ‘minus minus’ right? ... Before I became a mother my breasts were quite important to my feeling of being feminine. To be honest they were quite central to my feeling of being attractive. But now they are not the same anymore. And as a result I am trying to put focus on my waist, my bud, and I have realized that my legs are quite a turn-on – earlier I thought that it was only breasts that counted in order to turn men on (...) what men demands of women” (Line 293-302).

Hereby P1 argues that her sense of feeling good about her body is mainly related to what men find appealing or demands of women, as she describes it. Thus, on the basis of this quote it seems that her desire to maintain an attractive body is out of concern to what to men find attractive. In this connection, P1 seems to draw upon the Modernistic distinction between men and women, as described in section 2.6.1, where a woman gets her strength, through her power of attraction. This is a concept, which P1 further draws upon, when she describes her aspiration to 'beat men', which P1 finds necessary when a woman seek to succeed in what she mentions as the 'masculine' labor market. This discussion will be continues in section 4.2.2.1

Based on the above it makes sense to suggest that the sociocultural meaning of the female gender, which in section 2.6 was described to associated with female body practices seem to inform the four consumer-participants sense of being a woman. It was moreover found that their consumption practices seemed motivated by a felt personal quest, to normalize and manage their female bodies, which suggests that the postmodern idea of an agency of the individual to craft identity independently from sociocultural constraints can be questioned in alignment with the argumentation in section 2.3. As argued in section 2.7, such agency might be realized, when a woman combines countervailing cultural meanings e.g. by drawing upon and combine what traditionally are considered masculine versus feminine traits and symbols, according to central life themes and projects in her expression of identity. In this connection, a significant finding, which will be elaborated in the following sections, was the idea that the consumer-participants' identity projects were characterizes by a performance of situation-based female identity roles. In this connection, it was found that a significant concern informing the consumer-participants identity projects, further motivating their consumption of BMB, was an aspiration to find a balance between traditional masculine and feminine symbols and traits. This aspiration further seemed to inform the meaning they ascribed to BMB, with the purpose of integrating the usage of the brand into what was found to be the performance of situation-based female identity roles. This discussion, will be continued in the second main theme of 'the balancing act of being a woman' presented next.

#### **4.2.2 THE BALANCING ACT OF BEING A WOMAN**

As briefly introduced above, it was found that the identity projects of the consumer-participants' were characterized by an aspiration to balance what they described as traditional masculine and feminine traits and symbols. Moreover, the consumer-participants made a distinction between the women they were in professional context vs. the women they were in their private lives. As an example, P2 explains that she finds it much easier to be 'herself' in her private life, whereas she in her professional life needs to fight and prove to men that she is just as 'tuff' as them. Moreover, P2 argues that she in her professional life often is met by prejudgments, due to the fact that she has a job, which is traditionally performed by men. In the following quote, P2 describes the difference between the woman she is in her private versus professional life:

[In my private life] ... I enjoy all the roles I have to fulfill... being a mother, being a wife... I enjoy that. And I would not exchange it for anything. [In my private life] it is easier... because here I am allowed to be me. Here there is a coherency between being a woman and those expectations facing you. In contrast to the labor market, where men might have the idea that women are not as strong and capable of reaching as many goals as men are. But of course they [women] can – if they want to. In that way it is easier to be a woman in my private life. Here I don't need

to fight to show my worth” (Line 481-87).

The idea of making a clear distinguish between private and professional identity roles were most clearly described by P2 and P4. Hence, both P2 and P4 argued that they in their professional lives needed to promote masculine aspects of themselves. Contrarily, in their private lives both participants enjoyed exploring more traditional feminine sides of themselves (i.e. as described in the first main theme of ‘what does it mean to be a woman’).

It was moreover found that the four consumer-participants characterize the labor market as being dominated by what they mention as masculine values. As such, the consumer-participants’ ideas about, how women can succeed in ‘a masculine labor market’ was concerned with finding a way to define their female identity into a masculine environment. The second main theme found from the analysis was as mentioned the theme of ‘The balancing act of being a woman’. In this connection, two sub-themes were found. The two sub-themes describes two ways of making use of BMB, with the purpose of finding such balance:

**1) Section: 4.2.2.1 BMB makes me appear just as strong and serious as men**

**2) Section: 4.2.2.2 BMB makes me feel like a woman**

In the following, the two ways of interpreting and using of BMB (i.e. to integrate the usage of the brand into their female identity projects) are discussed in more detail. Hence, exploring how the female consumer-participants re-designates the intended brand meaning of BMB with the purpose of making the usage of the brand fit into the performance of situation-based female identity roles provides insight into what meaning the usage of BMB adds to their female identity projects. In other words, which elements of BMB, make the brand strong and makes the consumer-participants want to repurchase it, potentially instead of switching to a competing.

**4.2.2.1 BMB MAKES ME APPEAR JUST AS STRONG AND SERIOUS AS MEN**

The identity projects of P1 and P3 seemed strongly impacted by thoughts and feelings related to their physical appearance. In the performance of professional identity roles, both participants found it necessary to draw upon masculine symbols e.g. (BMB) blazer jackets, with the purpose of physically imitating men. This was a way to express strength and power to both participants. However, both participants expressed a need to combine such masculine symbols, with female physical symbols out of two different reasons.

In this connection, P1 argued that the idea of combining masculine and feminine symbols in her

physical expression of identity, serves the purpose of imitating men's strength, which she argues is useful when she as a woman strive towards succeeding in a masculine territory (the labor market). In this connection, the idea of combining such masculine symbols with feminine symbols, such as jewelry, high-heeled shoes, etc., provides her with a sense of 'getting her way with men' i.e. which is achieved through the power of her physical attraction.

As described in section 2.6.1, the idea that a woman gains her strength through the power of attraction seems rooted in a Modernistic idea that men and women are essentially different. This concept was further discussed in section 4.2.1.2 where P1 in a similar fashion argued that she felt a need to enhance her female physical appearance, out of concern to what men 'demanded' of her as a woman. As described above, this is a concept which further characterizes P1's performance of professional identity roles. In the following quote, P1 describes her thoughts related to being a woman who seeks to succeed in the labor market:

"It is like one is trying to enter something masculine ... imitate their strengths in some way...in order to try to enter a masculine territory [the labor market]... in such situation it feels like a support to wear my masculine BMB blazer jacket ... but then I also draw upon feminine details such as jewelry, high heel shoes, and perhaps a nice lip-stick... or nice perfume...in order to beat men in a way (Line 216-220).

In this connection, P1 argues that the usage of BMB enables her to express that she is as tuff and strong as men. As a result, the usage of BMB functions as a 'back-up' to P1, since the usage of BMB enables her to express masculine strength. In the following quote, P1 describes what meaning the usage of BMB adds to her performance of professional identity roles, which is her primary occasion for consuming BMB:

"When I am physically wearing BMB ... I gain more self-confidence (...) You get a feeling of being more on top of things... hmm... you get a kind of back-up... for instance in the business environment where women need to compete with men ... and prove that she is strong as they are. In this connection wearing BMB is a kind of back-up" (Line 228-233).

Perhaps due to the situation in which P1 makes use of BMB (and thereby her experience with wearing the brand), P1 further argues that a woman signals power and control, when she wears BMB. To P1, power and control are as mentioned considered masculine values, which she as mentioned finds necessary to imitate, via the way she looks, in order to succeed in her professional life. It appears that P1 does not find such values a natural part of her self-understanding (in contrast to P2 and P4 – which will be explored in the next sub-theme), but argues that such values are something she seeks to express through the usage of BMB. Hence, potentially in order to integrate the usage of BMB into her female identity project, she further

ascribes the meaning of 'knowing what one wants in life' and being 'goal-oriented' to the imagery of the woman who uses BMB (imagery of the typical user). Thus, according to P1, the typical user of BMB is therefore on top of things. In the following quote P1 describes what it tells about a woman when she wears BMB:

“By wearing BMB a woman signals ambition in life, that she knows what she wants in life ... perhaps the idea of being goal-oriented, that she knows what is going on in the world, but at the same time she might also be a sexy mother” (Line 332-333).

Whereas P1 describes her aspiration to combine masculine and feminine physical symbols in order to 'beat men' i.e. to succeed in the 'masculine' labor market, P3 finds the idea of physically combining masculine and feminine symbols useful to preserve a feminine physical appearance and thus not 'dawn in the crowd of men'. In this connection, P3 argues that she finds it important to find the right balance between the masculine look and her individual sense of being a woman:

“It is important not only striving towards being like a man it is important to preserve an attractive female appearance. Thus, the usage of traditional feminine symbols such as high-heeled shoes and jewelry allows a career woman to preserve her femininity – even though she might adapt to masculine values such as being goal-oriented and ambitions in her professional life” (Line 1276-79).

Moreover, according to P3, the feminine aspect of BMB allows a woman not to look like a man besides the fact that she might have to follow a masculine dress-code at work in terms of wearing a black blazer jacket. Thus, in contrast to P1, P3 ascribes a less masculine meaning to BMB.

As mentioned, P1 argues that her usage of BMB serves the role of a 'back-up'. This seems evident to P3 as well. In this connection, P3 argues that when she is wearing BMB she gets the sense of 'being in control', 'more on top of things', 'gains more self-confidence', and feels 'more at ease', which she associates with values that are traditionally the domain of men. Moreover, P3 argues that these emotions arising from wearing BMB are important, especially in situations where she is surrounded by people she does not know. Further, P3 argues that to her, BMB represent the woman she would like to become in 5-10 years:

“[Wearing] BMB gives me a feeling of being the kind of woman who I would like to become in 5-10 years... someone with energy, someone who is successful career wise... a beautiful woman... isn't that what everyone wants to be? To mature with grace?” (Line 1283-85)

In the present study the ability of brands (loved objects) to structure meaning in consumers' lives i.e. by forging a link between fragmented identity roles suggesting a coherent identity as suggested

by Ahuvia (2005) was only present in the interview with P3. As shown above, P3 describes BMB as the embodiment of the woman she wants to become over time i.e. a successful, goal-oriented, and beautiful woman. Thus, it can be argued that the symbols and images P3 produces when consuming BMB directs meaning in her identity project as it becomes a symbol, which guides her image of the kind of woman she wants to become.

Based on the sub-theme of ‘BMB makes me appear just as serious as men’, it was found that to P1 and P3 the usage of BMB enables them to physically balance traditional masculine and female symbols, which they find useful in the performance of professional identity roles. In this connection, the idea of succeeding in the labor market is inflected with great many efforts connected to the idea of adapting to what they mention as masculine values i.e. signaling the concept of knowing what one wants, being strong, serious, on top of things, and in control, which was achieved via their physical appearance. The strong focus on the meaning on their physical appearance may suggest that their sense of self is inflected by sociocultural constraints i.e. the sociocultural meaning of the female gender as related to the body and physical appearance. This discussion will be continued in section 4.2.3 ‘the meaning of BMB’

#### **4.2.2.2 BMB MAKES ME FEEL LIKE A WOMAN**

In contrast to P1 and partly P3, P2 and P4 does not consider their gender significant to their ability to perform their job. In other words, P2 and P4 do not need support from traditional ‘masculine’ physical symbols to express that they are ‘just as tuff as men’. In this connection, a significant finding is the idea that both P2 and P4 different from P1 and P3 make use of BMB to elevate a feeling of being feminine and accordingly ascribe a more traditional feminine meaning to the brand. Whereas P2 mainly makes use of BMB in her private life i.e. where she feels free to be a woman as described earlier, P4 makes use of BMB in her professional life, with the purpose of stressing her femininity. In other words, P4 argues that what she mentions as ‘traditional masculine values’ are a natural part of her personality. Hence, to her masculine values such as being goal-oriented and not willing to compromise are central to her personality. She however argues that her usage of BMB means that she never feels like a man, even though her attitude and the way she performs her job might seem very masculine. In the following quote P4 describes how she finds a balance between being masculine and feminine:

“Even though I am in control when it comes to performing my job, which to me is associated with something masculine, my performance is wrapped in a feminine package and that is a good feeling” (...) “Thus, besides the fact that I have plural masculine values and to a certain degree live them I never doubt my femininity” (Line 1540-42).

In other words, even though being in control may traditionally be considered a masculine trait, P4 rejects the idea presented by P1 that traditional masculine values are still the domain of men and something which women need to adapt to by the way they look. Instead, the quote above suggests that P4 seeks to tone down her masculine traits by presenting herself physically in a ‘feminine package’ which BMB further enables her to do. In the following quote P4 describes her feelings of wearing BMB:

It is as if I put it on as a uniform for work. But at the same time it allows me to be a bit feminine due to all the small feminine details sitting in her clothes. In a way one can present oneself just as serious as men however still allowing one self to be a women (...) I feel well-dressed. Like nothing can get completely out of hand. I put it on and then I am ready to work. I feel that I am ready to fight in a way (Line 1456-59).

In this connection, P4 argues that the reason for finding BMB suitable for her professional identity is due to the small details sitting in the BMB products, which enhance her feeling of being feminine. Accordingly P4’s interpretation of the typical user of BMB differs significantly from the one of P1 and partly P3 who mentioned associate the typical user of BMB with a goal-oriented potentially ‘masculine woman’. To the contrary, P4 argues that the typical BMB user might be better capable in resting in her female gender, than P4 does herself. In the following quote P4 describes the typical user of BMB and why she finds her aspirational:

“She is not that hard-core career woman – such as in finance, law, business ... CBS. I think she is more oriented about cultural issues, dealing with what is going on in society – perhaps a journalist at least a very open-minded person” (...) “I have the idea that she is quite idealistic... she might be a writer, or maybe she owns a shop ... I think this imagery works very well on a woman like me... who is... working in a very masculine industry ... because I would very much like to more like such women... women who are idealistic ... if I put on their clothes I feel more like them... of cause... They are free to be feminine, idealistic, and sensitive (...) I think that they might rest more in their femininity whereas I have to draw upon more masculine values... (Line: 1687-92).

Thus, the typical BMB user has according to P4 a freedom to explore what she mentions as female idealism and emotional sides to an extent that is not possible to P4, due to her profession. Moreover, P4 suggests that such a woman [the typical BMB user] might feel more confident in being a woman than she does herself i.e. because she feels a need to promote more masculine values in her everyday life. As such, the concept of combining what the consumer-participants describe as masculine and feminine traits and symbols seems important to P1, P3, and P4 to their work life out of various reasons.

Interestingly P4 emphasizes that she does not feel comfortable wearing her ‘By Malene Birger uniform’ in private settings, where she argues that for now she finds other brands more suitable for her private life i.e., potentially because she associates the usage of BMB with wearing a

‘uniform’ as described above. In other words, the usage of BMB seem to provide various meanings to the consumer-participants of the present study, suggesting that the brand meaning of BMB seem only arbitrarily linked to the usage of BMB. This discussion will be continued in section 5.2 and 5.3.

In contrast, P2 primarily makes use of BMB in her private life. Moreover, whereas P1,P3, and P4 buy into the more classic items of the BMB collections such as blazer jackets, skirts, and black dresses etc. P2 objects to the idea of wearing such items, since they to her represent a uniform. Instead, P2 buys into lighter parts of the collection, and the usage of these products makes her feel feminine, which is a feeling she connects to her private life, where she as mentioned feels free to be herself as a woman. Moreover, P2 argues that in her private life she enjoys being able to express a traditional female identity, which she associates with the idea of never being afraid to speak her mind, which she further describes as the drama of life. Hence, to P2, BMB is the embodiment of this idea, due to the shapes, colors, and the female expression the clothes symbolize. In the following quote, P2 describes her feelings of wearing BMB:

“I appreciate that life is sometimes a bit dramatic. With big tempers ... and it [life] needs to be fun and a bit dramatic. And it is connected to the design and its shapes, colours, and expressions and I appreciate that. I get the feeling that there is a meaning behind the expression of the clothes. And a appreciate that I as a user of the brand can sense that idea ...The other day when I got home after shopping a BMB top I realized how all the details such as the lining and the way it was sown so neatly... it was very thoroughly made... I enjoyed that a lot. Just looking at it was a pleasure since I could sense her [Malene Birger’s] sense of detail through all aspects of that piece of clothing” (Line 561-69).

Accordingly, P2 further associates the typical user of BMB with a woman, who knows what she wants in life, and who is not necessarily adapting to the norm:

“She is might be working in one of the ministries... holding a position that demands something from her (...) She is a woman who dares standing up for herself and is able to stand on her own. She might wear BMB because she wants to challenge the more conservative dress-code traditionally facing women in those positions. Perhaps when using BMB and wearing pieces of clothing with significant colors this woman is able to stand out of the crowd and emphasize her own personality – this is me – I can stand on my own. I know what I want in life. I have my own opinion and I am not afraid to speak it” (Line 975-80).

Hence, it can be argued that the usage of BMB in the identity projects of P2 and P4 help them balance traditional masculine and feminine aspects of themselves. Thus, the idea of combining traditional feminine and masculine symbols might be the P2 and P4s’ way of defining their female gender in their own terms. In contrast, to the other consumer-participants P2 seems to find this balance across various identity roles. In other words, in her professional life P2 seems to

be indifferent about the fact that she might seem 'masculine'. But by exploring more traditional female aspects of herself in her private life seems to be a way for her to find a balance between the two.

As earlier discussed Butler (1999) questions the agency of women in terms of challenging sociocultural constraints, since women might not be consciously aware of the fact that her personal quests e.g. to enhance and promote their feminine physical appearance is a result of sociocultural expectations towards the female gender:

"The subject is situated in a gendered world with no autonomy and all behavior and activity is predestinated according to the roles which one involuntarily is given as either man or woman. The excluding and differential constitution of the subject is taking place since these processes through an illusion of own autonomy is kept hidden from the subject" (Butler; 1999 p.197).

In other words, Butler argues that the postmodern feel of agency and autonomy to express identity independent from traditional gender roles is an illusion. In fact, this feel of autonomy can be seen as a construct that keeps the individual from reflecting over the fact that her gender is nothing but a cultural construction - suggesting that a woman do necessarily have to act like a 'woman'. This idea seems most directly reflected in the interviews with P1 and P3 who as mentioned directly associated the concept of being 'strong' with something masculine. In contrast, P2 and P4 seem to suggest that values, which traditionally might be associated with masculine, are not necessarily the domain of the male gender. As such, P2 and P4 seem to combine these countervailing cultural meanings (i.e. male vs. female), which according to the postmodern perspective may suggest an emancipatory potential. Moreover, both participants express a strong wish in terms of being 'allowed' to preserve their feminine identity. Hence, suggesting that the idea of being a woman is something, which they enjoy and actively chooses, and not as suggested by Butler something, which they cannot avoid, because they are not consciously aware of the fact that they do not have to behave like a 'woman'.

As further discussed in section 2.7.2, Butler has received critique for not being very concrete about the idea of gender subversion. In this connection, Schieffelin (1998) suggests that gender subversion should be seen as a negotiation between the agency of the individual and cultural meanings and symbols available in the particular context/ situation. In other words, when a woman performs femininity, she does so in accordance with the material and cultural resources available in the given situation (Schieffelin; 1998). As such, it can be argued that the postmodern agency is realized when the individual combines countervailing cultural meaning and puts it together in

her own personal way, which further seemed evident to identity projects of P2 and P4.

In the above two sections, the way the consumer-participants integrate BMB into their female identity projects was discussed. Thus, it was found that the consumer-participants ascribe various meanings to the BMB - potentially influenced by the fact that they make use of BMB in different situations (contexts). Moreover their 'goal' of making use of the BMB, i.e. to either elevate masculine or feminine aspects of themselves, further seems to influence the meaning they ascribe to the brand. Hence, whereas P1 and P3 make use of BMB to enhance a masculine expression, which they find useful in work-settings, P2 and P4 make use of the brand to enhance feminine sides of their identity. Accordingly, the latter two participants ascribe the meaning of something feminine to the brand and value the usage of it accordingly. As such, the postmodern critique of the cognitive conception presented in section 2.2 of the present study that: "the intended brand meaning is only arbitrarily linked to the product" (Firat; 1992 p. 82) seems evident according to the various meanings the consumer-participants ascribe the usage of BMB i.e. in their efforts to integrate the brand into their identity projects, in a way that is meaningful according to the situation in which, they make use of BMB. In other words, it can be argued that the usage of BMB is arbitrarily linked to the intended brand meaning, as it appears that the consumer-participants make use of BMB in various contexts and with different 'goals'. In addition, it can be argued that the value proposition of BMB is strongly associated with the usage situation and hence, which identity roles the usage of the brand helps the consumer perform. As such it makes sense to wonder, what role the intended brand meaning plays in the consumers' usage of BMB. This discussion will be continued in section 5.3

#### **4.2.3 THE MEANING OF BMB**

As described in section 4.1, BMB intends to communicate the brand meaning of 'independency', 'Mature sexiness', and 'Sophisticated elegance'. As mentioned, the consumer-participants were not introduced to the intended brand meaning of BMB, prior to the interviews. As a result, their descriptions of BMB are built entirely on their own subjective interpretation and experience with the usage of the brand prior to the interviews. In the following, the brand elements, which the consumer-participants draw upon, when they describe their thoughts and feelings related to the usage of BMB, are discussed according to the intended brand meaning. I.e. suggesting a process of negotiation between the intended brand meaning, and the meaning, which arises from the consumption of BMB and thereby the consumer-participants' way of integrating the usage of BMB into their female identity projects. The following four subthemes were found to significant

to the third main theme ‘The meaning of BMB’:

- 1) Section 4.2.3.1 ‘Malene Birger’ / ‘An independent woman’
- 2) Section 4.2.3.2 ‘The little detail’
- 3) Section 4.2.3.3 ‘The need to combine BMB with other brands’
- 4) Section 4.2.3.4 ‘The role of BMB’

The third main theme ‘the meaning of BMB’ includes a discussion of, what role the intended brand meaning plays, in terms of adding meaning to the consumer-participants female identity projects (research question 3). In other words, which brand elements are significant to the consumer-participants’ interpretation of BMB, and which brand elements make the value BMB potentially over competing?

#### **4.2.3.1 MALENE BIRGER / AN INDEPENDENT WOMAN**

To P1, P2, and P3 the imagery of designer Malene Birger (the founder of BMB) was important to their interpretation of BMB in general. Especially P2, found the imagery of designer Malene Birger central to her interpretation of the brand:

“I have followed her [Malene Birger] through the media for years... and I have always interpreted her as a very characteristic woman (...) funnily enough as a woman who has had to fight for what she stands for. She had had to legitimize her design... into a culture... where she perhaps was up against some owners of the company [when she worked at Day Birger et Mikkelsen]. She had to fight to be able to do what she wanted” (Line 501-6).

P2 further argued that she has a lot of respect for Malene Birger and thinks she is a source of inspiration, due to her approach to life. In a similar fashion, P1 and P3 found the imagery of Malene Birger important to their interpretation of the brand. However, in contrast to P2, P1 and P3 ascribed a masculine trait to the imagery Malene Birger. In the following quote P1 describes her perception of Malene Birger:

Malene Birger as a person is very significant to the brand ... it is her brand ... I strongly feel her personality reflected through the brand and the clothes... I very much associate the brand with her personality. To me Malene Birger seems strong... she knows what she wants... she has accomplished a lot and come far within the business... she had had a lot of success, which to me is something quite masculine in a way... she is someone one wants to identify with right? (Line 349-53)

What in general seems significant to the meaning, which the consumer-participants ascribe to the imagery of Malene Birger, is that it seems informed by the situation in which they make use of BMB, and as such the identity role, which the usage of the brand help them perform. Thus, as suggested by the postmodern position described in section 2.2, the consumer tends to twist and

divert consumption based meaning to make it fit into her identity project, in a way that is meaningful according to the way she leads her life. Hence, P2 ascribes the meaning of 'have had to fight for what she stands for' to the imagery of Malene Birger, which she further characterizes as significant to her own life as earlier detailed (section 4.2.2). In a similar fashion, P1 and P3 finds BMB useful in their identity projects related to the performance of professional identity roles, where the imagery of Malene Birger, as earlier detailed, functions as a 'back-up', since Malene Birger is a living proof that women can succeed in the 'masculine' labor market.

In this connection, it can be argued that the intended meaning of 'independency' may be the meaning, which to the consumer-participants is leveraged from the imagery of Malene Birger. I.e., the meaning which P2 associates with 'a woman who fights for what she stands for' and 'not afraid to speak her mind' and which P1 and P3 associates with something masculine, which in their performance of professional identity roles functions as a 'back up'.

#### **4.2.3.2 THE LITTLE DETAIL**

A second sub-theme, found from the interviews with the consumer-participants was the meaning of 'the little detail', which refers to BMB' special eye for details reflected in trimmed expression of the core products. As earlier detailed, to all four consumer-participants, the way the brand pays attention to 'the little detail' is central to their interpretation of the brand and an aspect, which makes them associate the usage of BMB with a feeling of being 'very feminine'. This brand element further seemed to help the consumer-participants balance traditional masculine and feminine traits and symbols, as part of their female identity projects.

Another meaning, which P1 and P2 ascribed to the details of the core product, was a feeling of being sexy, when wearing BMB. According to CN, BMB intends to represent a 'mature sexiness', which P1 and P2 in a similar fashion found significant to their usage of the brand. However, perhaps due to the fact that P1 and P2 as earlier detailed, make use of BMB in two different contexts, and with two different outcomes (i.e. respectively the performance of professional or private female identity roles), the significance of the feeling of sexiness, further differed among the two consumer-participants. Thus, P2 who mainly makes use of BMB in her private life argued that the way the brand pays attention to 'the little detail' to her emphasizes her femininity and elevates a feeling of being a bit erotic too. In the following quote, P2 describes the feeling of being erotic, which the usage of BMB provides and further how this feeling to her, is associated with an aesthetic dimension of life:

I do not think of myself as any sex-object... but being erotic means a lot to me both when it comes to sounds,

colours... and my physical appearance in general including the kind of clothes I wear. To me being erotic has something to do with the aesthetic dimension of life. There is a connection between the two which is essential. As people we are here for our own sake and for the sake of others and in that sense I feel that everyone ought to contribute with something beautiful” (Line 712-16).

P1 argues that to her, BMB is a tribute to femininity. since she finds that the brand represents an understated sexuality, which she explains as being sexy on a woman’s terms. Moreover, P1 argues that an understated sexuality is much ‘stronger and powerful’ than, what she mentions as the ‘normal’ sexuality (which she argues characterizes reality-shows and traditional commercials). In the following quote P1 describes what this element of BMB means to her:

BMB is not afraid of glorifying femininity. It is a tribute to the female body shape... and in a way that makes the more understated sexuality stronger... to me that is much more appealing expressing a discreet form of sexiness... In a way that is much more powerful than being too obvious” (Line 19-21)

As argued in section 4.2.3.1, P1 states that she feels a need to ‘beat men’ in her performance of professional identity roles, which she realizes by combining masculine and feminine physical symbols. In this connection, she further argues that BMB’s understated sexiness i.e. reflected in the products is stronger and more elegant than the kind of sexiness, which is too obvious. Hence to P1, the idea of being understated sexy becomes linked to the ability of her performance of professional identity roles. As such, the intended brand meaning of ‘mature sexiness’ seems to become significant to the two consumer-participants in two different ways, potentially informed by situation the consumer-participants make use of the brand. The remaining two participants did not mention the meaning of ‘mature sexiness’ as significant to their interpretation of the brand and their way of making use of the brand, which might suggest that this aspect of BMB is not significant to the female identity-roles, which the usage of BMB helps them perform.

#### **4.2.3.3 THE NEED TO COMBINE BRANDS**

A third sub-theme related to the main theme of ‘the meaning of BMB’ was as mentioned the ‘need to combine brands’, which was significant to three of the consumer-participants. In this connection, P1 argued that to her it is important that her physical appearance reflects who she is. Moreover, she argued that the idea of being loyal towards just one brand is connected to the idea of a ‘bought identity’. In the following quote P1 describes her aspiration to combine brands:

“If one allows the brand to determine what one looks like, it becomes boring and impersonal. I want to have a say in the matter too. If I bought an outfit advertised in a window display of the BMB store it would be completely embarrassing. To me it is important to express that I am a creative person... and if I was following the lead of just one brand, I would not be able to express that sense (...). If others saw me wearing that outfit... if people with a sense of fashion saw me... they would think that I was trying to be someone who I am not. It would seem fake...

too easy... as if I was trying to buy an identity (...) It has something to do with independency... you want to show others that you have your own opinion” (Line 404-423)

In a similar fashion, P2 argued that she finds it necessary to combine BMB, with other brands in order to feel comfortable wearing it and ‘tone the brand down a bit’ and in general aspires to the idea of being in control of what she wears and how she presents herself physically:

”If I put on a dress for instance it is always because I like that dress. And I am very aware of what pieces of jewelry I wear with it. Yesterday for instance, I was wearing a BMB dress. I was very cautious not wearing a bracelet that was too trimmed and neat. Otherwise, I would not be able to stand myself. As a result I put on a Paul Smith bracelet, which I have bought at Louisiana... in order to emphasize to myself and to others that there is an edge to my wearing BMB. I don’t want to be neat (...) because then it is not me who is in control anymore. I accept that society needs to put up certain rules in order to make everything work. But when it comes to my furniture, my way of dressing in my private life, or what I spend my leisure time doing I don’t let others decide what I do... That right has no one. It is related to my need of freedom. That need is [to me] quite big” (Line 586-90).

To P3, the need of combining BMB with other brand does similar to P1 seem related to a desire of expressing her personality and personal taste. P3 (the youngest of the consumer-participants) further argued that to her it is significant to combine BMB with high-street brands [H&M, Topshop, Zara], in order not to look older than she is. Moreover, she argued that she appreciates the idea of putting her soul into what she is wearing, and as a result she enjoys mixing brands, with the purpose of expressing her own sense of style and personality. In the following quote P3 describes why it to her is significant to combine BMB with other brands:

“If I was only wearing BMB I might feel older than I actually am and I allow to feel a bit younger by combining BMB with high-street labels” (...)“In many ways clothes reflect who we are... to me it is crucial important to express a sense of personality to show others that there are some thoughts behind the way I dress. It would be boring if it was too copy-cat-ish” (Line 1325-27).

As such, it appears that the three consumer-participants feel a need to combine BMB with other brands in order to make the usage of BMB fit into the performance of situation based female identity roles. The idea that they do not want BMB to define who they are, is a significant sub-theme, related ‘the meaning of BMB’ and thereby contribute to the illumination of what role the intended brand meaning plays, in terms of adding meaning to the consumer-participants female identity projects. In other words, the finding that the three consumer-participants felt a need to combine BMB with other brands’ (i.e. in one outfit), might suggest that the consumer-participants seeks to integrate the usage of BMB into their female identity projects, independently from the intended brand meaning. Potentially suggesting that the consumer-participants may not be loyal towards BMB, but towards the images and symbols which are ‘produced’ when they consume BMB. This discussion is continued in section 5.3.

#### 4.2.3.4 THE ROLE OF BMB

Based on the findings from the interviews with the consumer-participants, it can be argued that the main value proposition of BMB (in terms of what meaning the usage of BMB provides in the identity projects of the consumer-participants), is the ability to balance traditional feminine and masculine symbols and traits. In this connection, the consumer-participants' interpretation of BMB seemed to refer to two elements of the brand: The imagery of 'Malene Birger' and 'the little detail' reflected in the trimmed expression of the core product. As mentioned, the consumer-participants' way of making use of BMB in their attempt to balance feminine and masculine traits and symbols, seemed associated with two different strategies. Hence, P1 and P3 found that the usage of BMB enabled them to express masculine traits (i.e. being goal-oriented, successful, strong, and serious). In this connection P1 and P3 suggested that the imagery of Malene Birger, functions as a 'back-up', since Malene Birger is a living proof that women can succeed in the 'masculine' labor market meanwhile preserving a feminine physical appearance.

In contrast, the usage of BMB seemed useful in the attempts of P2 and P4's to balance what might be considered 'masculine aspects' of their personality. As such, the usage of BMB made them feel and express to others that they were women, even though they might have a 'masculine' approach to the performance of their job. Hence, to P2 and P4 this feeling seemed leveraged from the core product in terms of 'the little detail'. Moreover, P2 argued that the imagery of Malene Birger serves as 'source of inspiration', due to Malene Birger's willingness and ability to fight for what she stands for and believes in. Hence, in contrast to P1 and P3, P2 does not ascribe a masculine trait to the imagery of Malene Birger. To P4, the imagery of Malene Birger was not significant to her usage and interpretation of BMB.

An element of the intended brand meaning i.e. the intended meaning of 'sophisticated elegance' (in terms of worldliness and enlightenment) was only reflected in P1's description of BMB, where this meaning became significant to her imagery of the typical user. In this connection, P1 associates the idea of a worldliness (knowing what is going on in the world) with the idea of having ambitions in life (see section 4.2.2.1), which to P1 as mentioned was associated with a masculine trait, leveraged from the imagery of designer Malene Birger. To the remaining three participants, the idea of 'sophisticated elegance' did not seem significant to their usage and interpretation of BMB, which might suggest that this aspect of the intended brand meaning may not be significant to the identity roles, which the usage of BMB help them perform.

## 5. DISCUSSION

As stated in the introduction, it is beneficial for brand managers to understand, how the brand is made use of in female consumers' situation based identity projects i.e. with the purpose of understanding, which elements of the brand make the consumer value the brand over competing. Thus, it has been investigated how female consumers make use of BMB as part of their female identity projects, suggesting that they might ascribe another meaning to the brand, than intended by the brand manager. In order to investigate the agency of the individual, suggested by the postmodern position, the meaning of the brand BMB has been investigated as a 'process of the negotiation' taking place between the intended brand meaning and four heavy users of the brand. In this connection, it was found that sociocultural meaning of the female gender to a large extent seemed to impact the consumer-participants' sense of self, i.e. as they seemed to draw upon the traditional differences between what is considered masculine and what is considered feminine, when making sense of them self. In this connection, it was found that a great many efforts related to expressing of their female identity seems associated with finding the right balance between the two. This notion was further found to characterize the meaning, which the consumer-participants ascribed to the usage of BMB, in their integrating the brand into their female identity projects. In Chapter 5 the empirical findings are discussed according to the research questions presented in section 1.2 and the theoretical findings presented in chapter 2.

### 5.1 THE AGENCY OF THE FEMALE CONSUMER

In section 1.2 it was initially asked: *"How do sociocultural constraints related to female physical appearance influence female consumers' identity projects?"*

In order to illuminate this research question, the present study firstly drew upon findings from among others, the research of Joy & Venkatesh (1994), in order to illuminate, how the female gender has been articulated historically and presented in cultural subtexts, in terms of advertisements. On this basis, the present study suggested that the sociocultural meaning of the female gender, seems connected to the realm of female body and women's efforts to manage their bodies e.g. through grooming rituals. In contrast, the sociocultural meaning of the male gender seemed connected to the power of the rational mind.

According to the sociocultural perspective, such long-standing sociocultural interpretations of gender (unconsciously) influence the contemporary female consumer's sense of self, and thus consumption practices. However, as described in section 1.2.1 the theoretical purpose of the

present study is to investigate the agency of the contemporary female consumer to express identity independently from such sociocultural constraints, potentially suggesting a fragmented sense of self, situation-based sense-making and consumption of brands. Hence, by discussing human sense-making according to the postmodern perspective, where the individual is supposed to stand above such sociocultural constraints, the present study includes a discussion of the agency of the female individual to express identity, independently from sociocultural constraints, and further from the intended brand meaning of the brands, which they make use of as part of her female identity project.

In order to investigate how the sociocultural meaning of the female gender, potentially influence the female consumer-participants sense of self and thus consumption of brands (e.g. BMB), it was therefore investigated, what meaning the consumer-participants ascribed to the concept of being a woman. Even though, questions related to the female body were not asked, all consumer-participants mentioned their bodies and their efforts to manage their bodies (i.e. the sub-themes of 'the size and shape of female body' and further the aspiration to 'mature with grace'), as central to their sense of self and further a factor, which motivated their consumption of brands. Moreover, this aspiration to manage their bodies was by the consumer-participants described as a 'duty' to present themselves in the best way possible, out of aesthetical reasons. In other words, it seemed important to all consumer-participants to express that they were concerned about their female physical appearance. It was moreover found that the idea of being satisfied with the shape of their bodies provides a feeling of freedom to be the kind of women they want to be.

This finding might suggest that long-standing sociocultural difference between the male and female gender, perhaps unconsciously, inform the consumer-participants consumption practices and sense of self. Hence, it was found that the distinction between what traditionally is considered feminine versus masculine, further seemed to inform the meaning, which the consumer-participants ascribed to the usage of BMB, and thereby their ways of making sense of the brand with the purpose of integrating the usage of it into their female identity projects. As a result, this finding questions the postmodern concept of the 'bricoleur' and further the suggestion that contemporary consumers have a 'fragmented sense of self'.

As an example, it was found that in order to be a successful in the performance of professional female identity roles, two of the consumer-participants found it useful to draw upon traditional physical masculine symbols, i.e. such as blazer jackets, which made them feel just as serious,

strong, and goal-oriented as men. In contrast, the remaining two consumer-participants argued that what might traditionally be considered masculine personality traits i.e. such as being goal-oriented, successful, and serious is not necessarily the domain of men. To the contrary, the latter two consumer-participants argued that such traits were a natural part of their personality. In this connection, an interesting finding was that the latter consumer-participants felt a need to enhance and draw attention to their feminine physical appearance. In this connection, the usage BMB, made them feel feminine, and as such helped them balance feminine and masculine traits and symbols. In other words, finding such balance, helped them express to others that besides the fact that they might have a masculine approach to the performance of their job, they were not men.

Relevant to this finding, Butler discusses the potential of gender subversion, which is realized when a woman draws upon and combines countervailing cultural meanings, e.g. in order to be in control of her own female appearance, which in section 4.2.3.3 was found to be important to the consumer-participants. Hence, the idea of combining masculine and feminine characteristics showed significant within the identity-projects of the four consumer-participants, related to their professional life, potentially suggesting a subversive potential related to the performance of female professional identity roles.

Butler is as mentioned however not very concrete, when it comes to a description of how gender subversion is realized, which is further made complicated due to the fact that Butler argues that a woman's sense of self is informed by cultural influences to an extent she might not be consciously aware of, and thereby in control of. As an example, P2 argued that even though, it might be a cultural ideal to preserve a youthful body she does not find the concept of a youthful appearance aspirational. In other words, P2 might feel an agency and autonomy to form her female identity, independently from the ideal of a youthful appearance. However, her argumentation for refusing to do so, seem inflicted by other cultural instructions, i.e. that a woman needs to conceal undesirable body parts. Hence, as suggested by Schieffelin (1999), the individual chooses among discourses available, and incorporates these cultural meanings, into her female identity project, in a way that is meaningful according to the way she leads her life. In this connection, Peñeloza (1994) suggests that in order to understand the sociocultural meaning of femininity, attention should be paid towards 'how' the gendered product (BMB) is 'consumed' by the female consumer. That is, how the female consumer re-designates the intended brand meaning to make it fit into her sense of self. As such the finding that BMB offers an opportunity

to balance traditional female and masculine meaning suggests that the idea of associating the female gender with the realm of the female body may not be a sufficient description of the female gender and female consumer behavior.

## **5.2 INTEGRATING BMB INTO FEMALE IDENTITY PROJECTS**

The second research question asked in section 1.2 was: *How do female consumers negotiate brand meaning with the purpose of making the brand fit into their female identity projects?*

In order to illuminate research question 2, it was investigated what meaning the consumer-participants ascribe to the usage of BMB - potentially different from the intended brand meaning. In other words, what meaning arises from the consumption of BMB? Hence, as mentioned in section 1.2.2 the present study suggests a modification of McCracken's concept of meaning-transfer, which in alignment with the sociocultural perspective assumes that the individual, due to her membership of a culture, is fully instructed in terms of how to interpret the meaning of a brand targeting women. In other words, the basic idea reflected in McCracken's model of meaning-transfer is that the female consumer interprets the meaning of e.g. BMB as intended by the marketer (as described in section 4.1).

As mentioned, the present study however suggests that in order to understand what meaning a brand creates in the life of the female consumer – and thereby what makes her value the brand i.e. potentially over competing, the marketer should seek to gain a deeper understanding of in which situation-based identity roles the usage of the brand helps the consumer perform. In other words, how does the consumer integrate (negotiate) the intended brand meaning into her female identity project? As a result, the brand meaning of BMB has in the present study been investigated by illuminating what meaning the usage of the brand adds to the identity projects of four heavy users of BMB, and later compared to the intended brand meaning, in order to identify, which aspects of the brand the consumer-participants' interpretations are build upon.

From the interviews with the consumer-participants it was found, that they ascribed various meanings to the BMB - potentially influenced by the fact that they make use of BMB in the performance of various situation-based identity roles, which seemed to inform the meaning, which they ascribed to the brand. In this connection, it was argued that the meaning which the usage of BMB adds to the identity projects of the consumer-participants i.e. the value proposition of BMB, can be described as an ability to balance traditional feminine and masculine traits and symbols. As an example, P1 and P3 make use of BMB, with the purpose of imitating men

physically (by wearing masculine BMB blazer jackets), moreover the imagery of Malene Birger, functioned as a back-up, which made them feel ‘strong, serious, and goal-oriented’. In a similar fashion, they ascribed a masculine sense to the imagery of designer Malene Birger. In contrast, P2 and P4 argued that the idea of being strong, serious, and goal-oriented was natural aspects of their personality and as such not something, which they needed ‘a back-up’ to perform contrarily to P1 and P3. Instead, they made use of BMB to enhance their female physical appearance. In this connection, they argued that the idea of physically wearing BMB helped them express that even though, they might have a ‘masculine’ approach to the performance of their job, they are not men, and as such the usage of BMB made them feel and express to others that they were women. In this connection, P2 argued that the usage of BMB served the role of a ‘source of inspiration’ which encouraged her to explore and express more traditional feminine traits.

As such, the postmodern suggestion, presented in section 2.2 that the intended “brand meaning is only arbitrarily linked to the product” (Firat, 1992 p. 82) seems partly evident due to the various meanings the consumer-participants ascribe the usage of BMB i.e. in their efforts to integrate the brand into their identity projects, in a way that is meaningful according to the situation in which, they make use of BMB. In other words, it can be argued that the usage of BMB is arbitrarily linked to the intended brand meaning, as it appears that the consumer-participants make use of BMB in various contexts and with different desired outcomes.

### **5.3 THE ROLE OF THE INTENDED MEANING**

The third research question asked in section 1.2 was: *“What is the role of the intended meaning of a brand, in terms of adding meaning to the female consumer’s identity project?”*

As argued in section 5.2, the intended brand meaning of BMB seems only arbitrarily linked to the usage of BMB. Hence, the meaning, which the consumer-participants ascribe to BMB, seems informed by the usage situation, e.g. the performance of either private or professional identity roles. In section 1.2.1, the empirical purpose of the present study was described as an investigation of the implications for the marketing communication of BMB, when the BMB-consumer is considered a co-creator of brand meaning. As a result, it has been investigated, which elements of the BMB brand make the consumer-participants value BMB. In this connection, it was investigated, which brand elements the consumer-participants’ interpretation of BMB seemed built upon, since such identification, would provide insight into what makes the consumer-participants repurchase BMB.

As described in section 4.2.3, it was found that the main value proposition of BMB is an ability to balance traditional feminine and masculine traits and symbols, which is provided via the usage of the brand. This ability was found leveraged from two main elements of BMB: Firstly; the imagery of designer ‘Malene Birger’, and secondly ‘the little detail’ (i.e. a product related features, in terms of the trimmed expression of the BMB product).

Whereas the four consumer-participants agreed that ‘the detail’, represented a ‘very feminine’ expression, the imagery of designer Malene Birger represented different meanings to the consumer-participants. In this connection, the imagery of Malene Birger does to P1 and P3 serve as a ‘back-up’, due to the fact that Malene Birger, in their opinion is a living proof that women can be just as strong, successful, and goal-oriented as men. As mentioned, P1 and P3 mainly make use of BMB in the performance of professional identity roles. Potentially due to the fact that both participants describe the labor market as a masculine domain, both participants further ascribes a masculine trait to the imagery of Malene Birger.

In contrast, P2 makes use of BMB in her performance of private identity roles, where the usage of BMB elevates a feeling of being feminine. Hence, P2 does not ascribe a masculine trait to the imagery of Malene Birger. Instead, P2 argues that the imagery of Malene Birger is a ‘source of inspiration’, which encourages her to explore and express feminine aspects of herself. P4 did not mention the imagery of Malene Birger as significant to her interpretation of BMB.

In this regard, a significant finding, which might further support the postmodern idea that consumer behavior is less predictable than anticipated by the dominating cognitive research position (as described in section 2.1.) was the finding, presented in section 4.2.3.3, that three of the consumer-participants expressed a need to combine BMB with other brands, informed by an aspiration to personalize their female physical appearance. Thus, according to the postmodern perspective, it can be argued that the consumer-participants may not be loyal towards BMB, but towards the images and symbols they ‘produce’ when consuming BMB. As mentioned, it was found that the value-proposition of BMB seems related to the fact that the usage of BMB enables female consumers to balance masculine and feminine traits and symbols. Hence, the ability of the brand to communicate the intended meaning of an ‘independent woman’ (the idea of ‘knowing what one wants in life’ – which, according to three of the consumer-participants represents a masculine trait) meanwhile promoting the trimmed aspect of the product, i.e. the little detail, which the four consumer-participants argued made them feel feminine, seem central to the

consumer-participants' usage of BMB, and as such important elements, which make them value BMB potentially over competing.

In the present study, the role of brands in the identity project of the female consumer was discussed according to the suggestion of Ahuvia (2005) that loved objects (brands which a consumer feels specially attached to) can forge a link between fragmented identity roles. Such ability, was however only partly present in the interview with P3. As argued in section 4.2.2.1, P3 argues that BMB represents an image of the woman she strives towards becoming in 5-10 years, a woman she describes as successful, goal oriented, and beautiful. Thus, it can be argued that the symbols and images produced when P3 consumes BMB, directs meaning in her life, due to the fact that BMB becomes a symbol of the kind of woman P3 wants to become in the future. However, it can be discussed if such potential influence elevates P3's loyalty towards BMB to an extent where it leads to an increased purchase behavior, since it was further found that P3 along with two of the other consumer-participants expressed a need to combine BMB with other brands in order to be in control of her own female physical appearance.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The present study was initially motivated by a fundamental research interest: What is the role of the brand manager, if it is no longer to control the meaning of a brand? As such, the theoretical motivation was based on an interest in terms of investigating the implications for marketing communication, caused by contemporary consumer behavior, which seems characterized by a felt agency of the consumer, to jump in and out of the performance of various situation-based identity roles, and to ascribes her own meaning and significance to brands, she uses for that purpose.

In this connection, it was in the present study suggested that the meaning of a brand should be treated as a process of negotiation, between the intended brand meaning and the consumer's usage of the brand. In other words, in order to understand, what makes a brand strong and the consumer repurchase it (and not switch to a competing), an understanding of which situation-based identity roles, the brand helps the consumer perform, and what meaning the consumer ascribes to the usage of the brand in the performance of these, seems beneficial.

The theoretical purpose was therefore firstly to illuminate the foundation of female consumers' agency to express identity, independently from sociocultural constraints, further reflected in the intended brand meaning of brands targeting women. In this connection, it was however found that long-standing sociocultural difference between the male and female gender, consciously or unconsciously seemed to inform the consumer-participants sense of self and consumption practices, which as such seem to limit their agency to perform female identity roles independently from the sociocultural meaning of their gender.

In the investigation of what meaning arises from the consumption of BMB it was however found that the consumer-participants drew upon and combined countervailing cultural meaning of respectively the male and female gender. In other words, in order to perform professional female identity roles two of the consumer-participants ascribed a masculine trait to the imagery of Malene Birger and thereby to their female identity projects. The idea that the consumer-participants combine such countervailing cultural meaning, in their performance of professional identity roles, may with Butler's words suggest a subversive potential.

The empirical purpose of the present study was to investigate what implications emerge for the marketing communication of BMB, when the consumer becomes a co-creator of brand meaning.

By investigating the brand meaning of BMB, as a process of negotiation and thereby take the subjective sense-making of the female consumer-participants' into consideration it was found that the value proposition of BMB is the ability to balance traditional feminine and masculine traits, which the usage of BMB offers the female consumer-participants. In this connection, it was found that the intended brand meaning of BMB seemed only arbitrary linked to the usage of BMB. In other words, it was found that the meaning, which the consumer-participants ascribed to the usage of BMB, seemed informed by, which female identity roles the usage of the brand helped them perform i.e. private vs. professional identity roles.

Thus, investigating brand meaning as a negotiation between the consumer and the intended brand meaning allows for a deeper understanding of the value proposition of a brand i.e. potentially compared to competing brands. Hence, an empirical outcome of the present study was an identification of, which brand elements of BMB are most significant to the consumer-participants' interpretation of the brand, and what meaning these create in their female identity projects. In this connection, it was found that the intended brand meaning of 'independency', which might correspond to the meaning, which three of the consumer-participants described as the idea of 'knowing what one wants in life' seemed leveraged from the imagery of designer Malene Birger. This brand element was further ascribed a traditional masculine trait, and seemed significant to two of the consumer-participants' performance of professional identity roles. In contrast one of the consumer-participants did not find BMB useful in the performance of her professional identity. Instead, she mainly made use of BMB in her private life, where the imagery of Malene Birger in contrast encouraged her to explore and express more traditional feminine aspects of her identity. As a consequence, this participant did not associate the usage of BMB with something masculine. The second significant element of BMB was found to be 'the little detail' provided via the trimmed expression of the core product. This brand element provided a feeling of being 'very feminine' to the four consumer-participants. In other words, the brand element in terms of the imagery of 'Malene Birger' and the 'little detail' were found to be the two most important elements of BMB, which made the consumer-participants value BMB - potentially over competing. An answer to the initial question can therefore be that the brand manager needs to pay attention to what meaning arises from the consumption of the brand, and how this meaning becomes significant in the performance of the female identity roles. Such meaning does according to the perspective of the present study, provide insight into what makes the brand strong, which potentially indicate why consumers repurchase it.

## **7. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

It was initially suggested that a deeper insight into what meaning the usage of BMB creates in the identity projects of its consumers', would provide insight into, what makes consumers repurchase BMB and potentially, what makes them value the usage of BMB over competing brands.

In the present study, it was found that the main value proposition of BMB seems to be the ability to balance traditional masculine and feminine traits and symbols, which the usage of BMB enables female consumers to do. In this connection, it was found that two main brand elements of BMB seemed significant to the consumer-participants' interpretation and usage of BMB, in the performance of situation-based female identity roles.

The first significant brand element was BMB' special eye for details, reflected in the trimmed expression of the core product (i.e. 'the little detail'). This brand element, provided a feeling of being 'very feminine' when physically wearing BMB products. The second significant brand element was the imagery of designer Malene Birger, to which the consumer-participants ascribed the meaning of: 'knowing what one wants in life', 'being strong', 'ambitions', 'goal-oriented', and 'successful', which three of the four consumer-participants further described as masculine traits.

As mentioned, the usage of BMB enabled the consumer-participants to balance traditional feminine and masculine traits and symbols, which they drew upon in various ways as a part of their female identity projects. Especially the performance of professional female identity roles were characterized by an aspiration to be perceived just as serious, goal-oriented, and strong as men, meanwhile preserving a female identity. In this connection, the imagery of designer Malene Birger played an important role, since she was described as a living proof that women can succeed and be just as tuff, strong, goal-oriented as men, meanwhile preserving a female identity.

Due to the fact that Malene Birger end October 2010 sold her 49% block of shares in BMB, and in the future will have less vivid role, future marketing communication of BMB could potentially benefit from finding additional support for the brand imagery, i.e. the 'masculine' aspect of BMB, which currently seems leveraged from the imagery of Malene Birger.

### **7.1 CULTURAL BRANDING OF BMB**

Harvard Business School Professor Douglas B. Holt works with consumer culture and cultural branding and suggests that the strongest identity brands (iconic brands) target cultural contradictions, which characterize the aspirations and anxieties of the identity projects of

contemporary consumers' (Holt; 2004). In this connection, Holt argues:

“We experience our identities – our self-understanding and aspirations – as intensely personal quests. But when scholars examine consumer identities in the aggregate, they find that desires and anxieties linked to identity are widely shared across a large fraction of a nation’s citizens. These similarities result because people are constructing their identity in response to the same historical changes that influence the entire nation” (Holt; 2004 p.6).

As earlier mentioned, it was found that the consumer-participants’ identity projects seemed motivated by an aspiration to define their female identity into a ‘masculine’ context (i.e. the labor market). According to Holt, such aspiration can potentially be characterized as a cultural contradiction, since it might characterize a large fraction of female consumers’ identity projects. Even though, the findings of the present study are based upon the micro-practices of Danish female consumer’s consumption of BMB, it makes sense to suggest that the aspiration to succeed in the labor market, which historically has been the domain of men, while preserving a female identity (i.e. by balancing masculine and feminine traits and symbols), might further apply to a broad range of female consumers, living in the metropolitan areas of BMB’s exports markets.

According to Holt, a brand targets cultural contradictions, by performing ‘identity myths’, which smooth over tensions e.g. the aspiration to balance traditional masculine and feminine traits and symbols, whereby the identity myth help reinforce a desired female identity (Holt; 2004 p. 8). Identity myths, find their source of inspiration in ‘populist worlds’ often existing in the margins of society. Hence, what units ‘people’ living in populist worlds is that they act the way they do because they want to, not because they are being paid or because they seek status or power (Holt; 2004).

According to the perspective of the presents study, it can be argued an identity myth useful in targeting female consumers, could find its source of inspiration, in women who challenges sociocultural constraints of the female gender, which potentially could inspire female consumers to think differently about the concept of being a woman.

In order for an identity myth to have a positive effect, the consumer must perceive it as credible, and it must further be performed in a charismatic fashion, in order to win consumers over. It is moreover significant that the identity myth has strong roots in the existing brand meaning, out of two purposes: Firstly, to protect it from being copied by competing brands. Secondly, it increases the chance that consumers accept the myth as a part of the brand, whereby the myth will succeed in reinforcing brand imagery. In other words, it is important that there is a natural ‘fit’ between consumers’ existing interpretation of the brand and the myth leveraging imagery to the brand. As earlier argued, BMB might benefit from reinforcing its imagery, due to Malene Birger’s playing a

less vivid role in the future. Hence, by tailoring an identity myth which embraces, what the consumer-participants described as being goal-oriented, knowing what one wants in life, successful and strong, the brand could reinforce the brand imagery of BMB.

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