

**UNIVERSITY OF VAASA  
FACULTY OF BUSINESS STUDIES  
DEPARTMENT OF MARKETING**

Ville Holmqvist

**DRIVING WITH AN EXCLAMATION MARK – BMW OWNERS IN PURSUIT  
OF PRESTIGE**

Master's Thesis in  
Marketing

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**UNIVERSITY OF VAASA****Faculty of Business Studies****Author:**

Ville Holmqvist

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**Name of the Supervisor:**

Pirjo Laaksonen

**Degree:**

Master of Science in Economics and B.A.

**Department:**

Marketing

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**ABSTRACT**

The subject of this study is the notion of prestige in consumer behavior. This thesis focuses on gaining a better understanding of the research problem, which comes in the form of a question: “How is prestige pursued in consumption?” This problem is approached by analyzing how consumers use expensive BMW automobiles to gain acceptance, appreciation and admiration.

The theoretical framework delves into prestige-seeking consumer behavior firstly by defining prestige and the key concepts associated with it. This thesis views prestige as the social honor in the eyes of people. The theoretical framework concentrates on explaining what prestige is: the underlying needs and motives behind it, the sources of it, and how signaling is used to achieve it. The theoretical perspective is symbolic interactionism which guides the whole research. The assumptions and conclusions in the theoretical part are empirically explored through interviewing BMW automobile owners with newly bought models which were worth more than 80 000 euros. The primary research material consists solely of the interviews. The interviews are conducted in a semi-structured and open-ended manner. The resulting empirical data is analyzed using interpretive techniques, namely hermeneutic interpretation.

The central finding regarding prestige-seeking was that ‘good cars’ were membership facilitators in the group of ‘The entrepreneurial-minded successful people’. Automobiles were linked to success and having a ‘good car’ was relevant for the group and its value system, and through ownership one was an appropriate and accepted member. The second important finding was that explicit signaling as a way of attaining prestige and status was seen as ineffective compared to more subtle means. The informants thought that some of the more conspicuous choices seemed to invoke negative reactions such as annoyance and irritation in others.

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**KEYWORDS:** Prestige-seeking, need to belong, need for uniqueness, signaling.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Why are consumers willing to pay a substantial premium on cars, clothes and other products? Is a BMW so much superior to a Škoda with equivalent accessories that it is rational to pay 15 000 euros more for it? If there is no rational reason, what is the irrational reason? Questions like these still puzzle marketers and many of the fundamentals behind such behavior are still fuzzy or remain unanswered. One core concept which explains the aforementioned behavior is the need for esteem.

Humans have long been described as social animals. One notable aspect of this is the basic human need for social acceptance of other human beings. Abraham Maslow (1943) introduced the now classical hierarchy of human needs, in which the individual's need for esteem, in other words, recognition and respect of others, was the second highest need. A particularly interesting part of the need for esteem is the individual's social standing in the eyes of others and the will to improve one's social standing.

The need for esteem acts as a powerful motivator in the human behavior and it has an established role in social sciences. McAdams (1997: 26) argues that the two most important motivations for human behavior in social groups are the acceptance-seeking and status-seeking; this is because humans have lived in small groups for centuries and the groups have had different hierarchical systems. The innate need of humans to belong and compete with each other is one of the most lasting characteristics of human behavior. It is as much about keeping up with the Joneses as it is getting ahead of them.

This constant pursuit of acceptance and being more accepted than the others has fundamental consequences in consumer behavior. It is well established in consumer behavior literature that products function as a means to symbolically communicate oneself and for example symbolize one's social standing. One of the enduring aspects in social interaction is the use of objects to symbolize the recipient's social status. For example, in sports these items range from a yellow jersey for the leading cyclist in Tour de France to a championship belt worn by a boxer. These objects carry a meaning of achievement and are symbols that garner appreciation, at least within the people who understand the meaning of these objects. Similarly, the symbolic consumption of different publically consumed objects can share the same characteristics as the yellow jersey and the championship belt.

The particular products used to acquire prestige are usually publically consumed items, meaning that the items are visible to other people. One of the most common objects that have been linked with social status is the automobile. Dicken (2011: 337) reminds that automobiles are one of the most significant aspirational goods for consumers. The link between prestige and automobiles is substantial; so much that there is a product category that refers to prestige cars.

The individual pursuit for acceptance, appreciation and even admiration continues to be a crucial motive in consumer behavior. This thesis intends to clarify the notion of prestige in marketing context by utilizing an automobile as a way to understand how consumers use objects to acquire prestige.

### 1.1 Research background

The definition of prestige has not reached a consensus in scientific literature and different disciplines have their own definitions. For example in sociology, Talcott Parsons (1951: 132) defines prestige as following: “This hierarchical ordering we may call *prestige*, which is the relative esteem in which an individual is held in an ordered total system of differentiated evaluation.” Therefore it refers to an individual’s social honor in a social hierarchy. On the other hand, sociologist Bernd Wegener (1992: 273) argues that “prestige is a variable representing a hierarchy of individual social positions.” Max Weber (1991) maintains that prestige is social honor and one of the three sources of power, along with economic power and political power; power is essentially an individual’s ability to act according to his or her own will, even when resisted by others.

In anthropology prestige is related to social rank (Barkow 1975: 553). Moreover, it is differentiated from dominance, which is another way of attaining a higher social rank and it is done by violence or threats; prestige is ‘the authority and privilege freely given to an individual by others’ (Plourde 2008: 375). In anthropology prestige is often interrelated with status hierarchies.

The studies on prestige in marketing have concentrated on brands (see Vigneron & Johnson 1999; Baek, Kim & Yu 2010). In marketing literature prestige and luxury are often referred to describe brands that have significant intangible value (Dubois & Czellar 2002). Vigneron and Johnson (1999) link prestige to brands, which are either

upmarket, premium or luxury and they are different from ordinary brands. Therefore in this view luxurious brands are part of prestige brands. Although Vigneron & Johnson (1999) propose a conceptual model of prestige-seeking consumer behavior, their work largely constitutes of describing the attributes of prestige brands, in other words, luxury brands, and how they create value for consumers with different motivations. Vigneron & Johnson (2004: 488) refer to luxury rather than prestige in their more recent studies.

In marketing theory, luxury is often interrelated with prestige, even though they are not directly related. Tynan, McKechnie & Chhuon (2010: 1157) define luxury as something opposed to ordinary, in the eyes of consumers. Wiedmann, Hennigs & Siebels (2009) stress that one component of luxury value is the prestige value it provides. The use of visible luxurious goods signals prestige, while the functional utility of the luxury goods can be non-existent (Grossman and Shapiro 1988). Luxurious products are not necessarily prestigious, but highly prestigious products are often high priced. Kapferer and Bastien (2009: 314) stress the connection between luxury and social stratification by stating that luxury has the function to reproduce the social stratification of bygone times of aristocracy. This view is more consistent with the ideas stemming from sociology.

The notion of prestige is closely related to status and the two are strongly interrelated. Drèze & Nunes (2009: 890) state that: “Status in the conventional sense is defined as one’s position in society. More specifically, a person with status possesses a high ranking that is socially recognized and typically carries prestige, power, or entitlement.” O’Cass & McEwery (2004: 34) also note that status is linked to ‘sought-after social position’. Status is more closely related to prestige than luxury is, as status refers to a social position in a social hierarchy and prestige is the social honor related to that position. Social position in turn refers to power or access to resources. This view will be further conceptualized in chapter two.

The existence of hierarchies is strongly linked to prestige, as can be seen from the above-mentioned definitions. The view in sociology stresses the hierarchical structure of prestige, meaning that there is a clear structure of low, middle and high class. Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard & Hogg (2006: 437) note that the division of people into different ranks ranging from high to low, is evident in nearly all contexts. This thesis also addresses the hierarchies, but it is done from the group and individual perspective rather than at a class level. Individuals tend to compare themselves to a relatively small number of people (see Festinger 1954) and classes are hence partly

irrelevant. The class structures are less noticeable in many Western countries and the classes themselves are not central in prestige formation. The value systems which constitute what is seen to be prestigious are relevant, regardless of the number of people in the value system.

To conclude, *prestige* in this thesis is defined as *the social honor in the eyes of people*. To clarify this, a person may seek prestige, e.g. social honor by for example consuming products or services that are highly regarded. It can also refer to material and immaterial things, not just to people. As noted in previous research on prestige, it has a distinct hierarchical nature and this is important to understand to fully grasp the whole concept.

## 1.2 Research problem and research objectives

The research problem in this thesis can be formulated into a following question: *How is prestige pursued in consumption?* In order to answer this research question the notion of prestige-seeking consumer behavior has to be thoroughly defined and explored. To understand why consumers are motivated to pursue prestige, the underlying needs and motives have to be understood.

The research objectives in this thesis are threefold. *The first objective is to establish a theoretical framework on prestige-seeking consumer behavior.* The purpose of the first objective is to simplify what prestige is, describe the underlying needs for pursuing it, and clarify how it is sought. The prestige-seeking consumer behavior is then modeled to provide a clear structure of the whole phenomenon.

*The second objective is to empirically analyze the prestige-seeking patterns of BMW owners.* The purpose of this objective is to clarify how individuals consume products in hopes of acquiring prestige. The patterns consist of motives, signaling, and conformity-types.

*The third objective is to analyze the different group memberships of the BMW owners.* The purpose of the objective is to understand how the BMW owners perceive different groups and their memberships in them. The different groups are a source of belonging (conformity) and uniqueness (differentiation) and are consequently relevant for understanding prestige-seeking behavior.

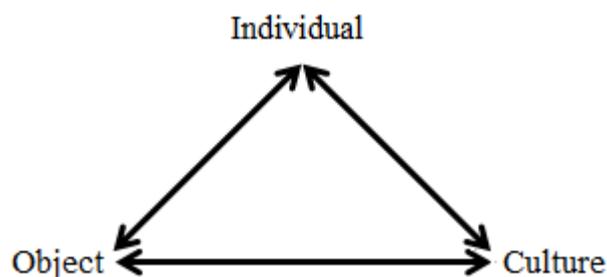
### 1.3 Research perspective, approach and methods

The theoretical perspective in this thesis is symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism as a perspective emphasizes the way how individuals make sense of their world and presumes that individuals use interpretation in assessing the actions made by others instead of just reacting to their actions (Solomon 1983: 320).

Blumer (1969: 2) argues that there are three premises which are central in symbolic interactionism:

“The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. Such things include everything that the human being may note in his world – physical objects, such as trees or chairs; other human beings, such as a mother or a store clerk; categories of human beings, such as friends or enemies; institutions, as a school or government; guiding ideals, such as individual independence or honesty; activities or others, such as their commands or requests; and such situations as an individual encounters in his daily life. The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters.”

As stated above, the meaning of different objects is central in symbolic interactionism. The meanings attached to different objects are similarly central in this thesis since the focus is on how consumers pursue prestige by consuming objects which have meanings related to getting accepted, appreciated and admired. However, the prestige related meanings are not fixed as they are subjectively interpreted and constantly reformed in human interaction.



**Figure 1.** Reciprocal dynamics of meaning construction (adapted and modified from Turunen & Laaksonen 2011: 469).

This thesis uses this substantially simplified figure of meaning transfer which is presented above. The meanings of objects are always interpreted by an individual and the culture to which the individual belongs to strongly shapes his or her interpretation by assigning meanings to these objects. It is vital to remember that culture is always a product of interacting people.

The different meanings of cultural objects and actions are always products of social construction; the meanings are formed in relation to other objects and practices, and objects and practices attain associations such as mental images, metaphors, and narratives (Holt 1997: 328-329). Prestige in this context is always dependent on the culture it is awarded in. Actions considered meritorious or honorific in one culture may be completely different in another culture.

As the research problem is explorative and the subject has not been studied directly, this thesis utilizes a qualitative research approach to shed light on the research problem. Moreover, the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism prefers qualitative methods. The use of qualitative research approach is further argued in the methodology chapter.

The empirical data collection is done by using semi-structured interviews. This thesis approaches prestige-seeking by analyzing the individuals' thoughts i.e. talk regarding this particular object. As noted in previous studies on status-seeking and conspicuous consumption, the use of direct questioning may not yield appropriate data (see Mason 1981: 42; Holt 1997: 339). Therefore the interviews require an indirect approach that focuses on day-to-day preferences and tastes of the informant (see Thompson, Pollio & Locander 1994) and the answers are then interpreted by the researcher. The interviews are analyzed hermeneutically in order to create understanding of the research problem especially from the consumer's perspective. Hermeneutic interpretation has been used on a relatively similar study regarding status consumption (see Üstüner & Holt 2010: 42).

The primary data used in this thesis consists solely of the material attained from the interviews. The secondary material comes in the form of scientific journal articles and books related to the topic.

#### 1.4 Research boundaries and limitations

Prestige in this thesis is viewed from a consumer's point of view. There is a substantial gap in marketing related literature regarding this consumer perspective. The notion of prestige-seeking behavior is a broad subject and in order for the research to be specific and relevant, certain aspects of the prestige-seeking behavior are not explained in detail. The areas relevant for the research problem and research objectives are related to what prestige is, why it is pursued and consequently how it is pursued. To specify this, the focus is on esteem needs, prestige-seeking motives, sources of prestige and signaling. Therefore variables like involvement, reference group influence and triggering stimuli receive less attention, even though they are indirectly explored. The prestige of an individual is always awarded by others, but this thesis does not explore the perceptions of the others. The perceptions of others should be further researched to understand if prestige is conveyed as the subjects want to.

The use of automobiles to explore individual prestige-seeking is the main way of bounding this thesis. BMW was chosen as the particular manufacturer, since it has been classified as a prestige brand in previous research (see Kirmani, Sood & Bridges 1999). The more expensive models were chosen to try and grasp the uniqueness and Veblenian aspects related to prestige-seeking. The reason why BMW was chosen is further argued in the methodology chapter.

The limitations in this study are strongly related to the topic of the study. The role of status in individual behavior may be downplayed when asked directly, since status-seeking is often thought of being a negative trait (Johansson-Stenman & Martinsson 2006: 131). Similarly, researching conspicuous consumption can be difficult, since consumers may be reluctant to admit that their purchase is motivated by gaining status or other social benefits (Mason 1981: x). Individuals may recognize that attempts of signaling status with an automobile is seen as shallow and superficial (Johansson-Stenman & Martinsson 2006: 133). Therefore the informant may be hesitant in answering questions regarding status and prestige.

#### 1.5 Structure of the study

This thesis is divided into five main chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction to the subject along with the research problem and research objectives. The first chapter

also provides a base for the theoretical framework by giving it the boundaries and the perspective. The second chapter delves into the theoretical part of the thesis that is central in providing understanding of the research problem. The second chapter focuses on the first research objective and provides the theoretical framework which is used in the empirical part of the study. The third chapter clarifies the methodological decisions and the justifications for these decisions. The fourth chapter is the empirical part of the study and it depicts the results attained from the empirical data. The fourth chapter is vital for reaching the second and third research objective. And finally, the fifth chapter provides the conclusions regarding how prestige is pursued in consumption.

## 2. PRESTIGE-SEEKING CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

The whole notion of prestige-seeking is closely related to status-seeking and in consumer behavior status often links to luxury. As mentioned in the introduction chapter, status is essentially an individual's social position which is acknowledged by the observing others and a high social standing in turn grants prestige and power to the individual (Drèze & Nunes 2009: 890). To establish the differences and similarities between these two concepts and to emphasize the importance of prestige in consumer behavior, further examination of status-seeking is necessary.

One of the most cited scientific articles on status consumption, especially in consumer behavior, regards status as a social position and *having status* as following: 'Status is a form of power that consists of respect, consideration, and envy from others and represents the goals of a culture' (Eastman, Goldsmith & Flynn 1999: 42). The main difference between status and prestige is that status refers to a social position in a social hierarchy, which is based on power i.e. access to resources. The power instead consists of economic, social and cultural capital (see Bourdieu 1984). Prestige in the context of power is essentially social capital; the more positively one is regarded by others, the more likely it is for the individual to acquire power.

Mason (1981: 117) asserts that in order to understand status theories, the relationship between consumption, income and prestige has to be understood. Duesenberry (1949: 30) summarizes this triangular relationship well: 'Prestige goes to successful people and success in society is closely correlated with income. Once a group of high income people are recognized as a group of superior status, their consumption standard itself becomes one of the criteria for judging success.' Findings of Nelissen and Meijers (2011: 344) further argue this by stating that being perceived as an affluent individual is desired as it can indicate the individual's skills in attaining different resources.

Mason (1992) notifies that the desire for status acts at every income-level. Belk (1988) found that even in countries, where people have not satisfied their physiological needs, conspicuous consumption is still evident. Regardless of the conspicuous aspect of consumption, individuals have a need for status (O'Cass & McEwen 2004: 29). Consumers may employ numerous strategies to improve their social status; they may for example pursue academic merits or learn to drink a lot of alcohol (Nelissen & Meijers 2011: 344). One of the main strategies is however linked to public display of different objects. Consumers may use conspicuous consumption to attain completely new status

gains or to preserve the existing level of status; similarly it can be directed to attain vertical status i.e. between different groups or horizontal status i.e. within a particular group (Mason 1981: ix).

Status concerns are strongly linked not only to individual consumption, but to the consumption of others; self-image in this context is central, since acting in accordance with norms and virtues such as social responsibility is often not enough, as it has to be done better than the others (Johansson-Stenman & Martinsson 2006: 134). The motives for status consumption are not strictly related to improving of one's social position, but to the need to fit in (O'Cass & McEwen 2004: 37).

The materialistic aspect of status-seeking is central in many phenomena, such as luxury consumption. Wiedmann, Hennigs & Siebels (2009: 627) perceive that luxury value is partly derived from the social factors like status and distinction they provide. A myriad of products, for example fashion apparel, are displayed in public and function as cues of the wearer's social status (O'Cass & McEwen 2004: 34). Nelissen and Meijers (2011: 343) reason that consumers wear luxury brands in hopes of gaining social status. Wiedmann et al. (2009: 632) argue that luxury brands are central in status-seeking behavior and they are often consumed conspicuously, as part of the value derived from luxury brands is the indicating ability of them. Han, Nunes & Drèze (2010: 18) argue that a product's ability to convey status is tied to the observer's ability to understand different status related meanings, like the price of the product. Moreover, status can be signaled even with mundane objects like a cup of coffee or a smoothie; if there are different size options available (see Dubois, Rucker & Galinsky 2012).

Hence, status is an individual social position in a hierarchy of power, which consists of economic, cultural and social capital. Prestige in this view is the social honor attached to the particular position and it is essentially social capital. Prestige is thus the social aspect of status. This leads to significant overlaps regarding status-seeking and prestige-seeking.

## 2.1 Prestige as a construct

'It is not ease or pleasure, but always honour, of one kind or another, though frequently an honour very ill understood, that the ambitious man really pursues' (Smith ([1759] 1966: 89)

The goal of this chapter is to provide understanding on prestige and what it is. Therefore this chapter addresses the characteristics of prestige and the “what” questions related to it. The different characteristics are then modeled to clarify the nature of prestige.

### 2.1.1 Hierarchies

One of the most enduring aspects of human action and organization is its hierarchical nature. The hierarchies are evident in almost any context, partly because of the competitive and playful nature of humans in general. Prestige in this thesis is seen as social honor, which is pursued by consumers and as a result there is a hierarchy. Therefore it is necessary to address these hierarchies to understand prestige-seeking as a phenomenon.

As mentioned, human action is distinctively hierarchical and groups and collectivities have status hierarchies, regardless of the formality or informality of the group or collective in question. This can be noticed on society level or grassroots level. For example, Muniz & O’Guinn (2001: 413) maintain that brand communities have distinct status hierarchies.

The notion of prestige is based on an assumption that there is a social hierarchy (Parsons 1951; Wegener 1992; Weber 1991; Plourde 2008). This means that individuals occupy different social positions and these positions have different levels of prestige. The social hierarchies are socially stratified meaning that there are classes. The whole notion of social class is complex (Coleman 1983: 265). The classes themselves are not necessarily relevant, but the ways how they are classified is extremely relevant in analyzing prestige.

Historically social status has been more closely linked to occupation than income and this can be observed even in pre-Christian societies. Correlation between the social honor attached to an occupation and the income from it has never been perfect. In many contemporary jobs, a person categorized as a blue-collar may easily out-earn white-collar workers, but still have less social status than the white-collar worker. (Coleman 1983: 273.)

The Coleman-Rainwater approach for national status hierarchy focuses on the interaction between people and how they treat each other as equal, superior or inferior.

Personal prestige and group prestige are the key elements in this approach and social standing is a diverse and multifaceted phenomenon. People in a particular class identify with other class members mostly due to similar educational and occupational backgrounds and income level – income functions as a measuring stick of one's success in work. Identification is also determined by social interaction skills, aspirations in climbing the status ladder, community participation, family background, taste in culture, leisure-time activities as well as physical appearance. But the most important status indicator is a person's acceptance in different social circles. (Coleman 1983: 267–268.)

An individual's social status in a social hierarchy is either ascribed i.e. born into (Han et al. 2010: 18) or achieved by merit or skills. Cultures based on ascription, where an individual's position in society is determined at birth or involuntary assigned, like caste systems, diminished during 17<sup>th</sup> century. Most contemporary Western societies can be described as more or less meritocratic, meaning that an individual's place in society is achieved by merits like diplomas or qualifications. The class structures are still evident in many Western countries, but the gaps between different classes have become less visible. In this thesis prestige hierarchies are seen as meritocratic, since it is awarded by others. An individual cannot stumble upon prestige or inherit it, therefore the hierarchies are meritocratic.

Brooks (2000: 44, 48) argues that the contemporary establishments are best described as meritocracies, in which the meritocrats form the different institutions according to their values; the hierarchies and elite still exist, but the status is achieved and not ascribed, and therefore people are evaluated by posts they hold. It can be argued that in an achieving society – a meritocracy – that has a high social mobility, the level of competition is higher in terms of prestige and social position, which in turn reinforces the use of conspicuous consumption to attain status (Mason 1981: 68). An individual, who has achieved something that the others or the society appreciate, will likely think that his conspicuous consumption is legitimized, since it is based on honest achievement.

Brooks (2000: 47) states that the modern elites are educated and open-minded, but still have distinct set of boundaries one cannot cross, in order to be regarded as elite; these things include extensive materialism, overt snobbism and anti-intellectualism. Brooks describes the American society in his works, but aforementioned statements reflect most Western countries and the ethos of the elites in them too.

Brooks (2000: 50) asserts that individual status is determined by the individual's net worth and anti-materialistic attitudes; both requirements have to be fulfilled and high to climb up the social status ladder. Even though the works of Brooks are partly sarcastic, for most part his arguments are on point in conceptualizing what kind of attributes highly regarded individuals have in meritocracies.

Status and prestige hierarchies come in many forms and the ways how individual social position is granted can similarly be based on numerous things. In the community of skydivers, status and privilege can be earned through effort and individuals get recognition from their mastery – the community is in essence meritocratic (Celsi, Rose & Leigh 1993: 11).

In Bourdieu's view life is a constant and multifaceted status game where individuals utilize resources that are economic, cultural and social in nature, in a contest for status; economic capital is characterized as monetary assets, social capital is social associations to organizations, networks and to other people and cultural capital is essentially taste, ability and knowledge (Holt 1998: 3). Weber (1991: 180) asserts that power may be pursued just for the sake of power, but the social honor is a key part of it; having social honor or prestige can often lead to acquisition of political and economic power.

This study argues that hierarchies of status are based on power i.e. individual access to resources and the power comes from three sources; economic, cultural and social capital. Prestige is seen as social capital and it has its own hierarchy, where individual position is based on acceptance and social honor. Furthermore, societies are seen as largely meritocratic and prestige is awarded accordingly.

### 2.1.2 Value systems

To understand how and why prestige is granted to an individual, the role of culture and more specifically the role of value systems have to be examined. In accordance with the perspective of symbolic interactionism, culture is always a product of interacting people and their mutual norms, beliefs and values. The value systems are central in understanding prestige, as they define what it is.

Parsons and Smelser (1964: 16) predicate that 'A social system is always characterized by an institutionalized value system'; the most important function of a social system is to uphold the integrity of its value system and institutionalize the values that should be

pursued. To exemplify, a social system like a society may value things like work and education and institutionalize these by introducing laws that make pursuing these things rewarding for the individual in this specific society. The value system can also be institutionalized by force, meaning that some members of the society may be permitted to use force to make individuals behave according to the values it has. These social systems can be smaller than societies, as even small collectivities have their institutionalized value systems; a collective of roller skaters may have their own formal institutions like associations with specific code of conduct that are based on certain values like solidarity and conformity (see Cova & Cova 2002).

Members of a specific culture learn the culture's values and norms, as well as the cultural biases, through socialization by institutions and people around them. The members are influenced by the general culture along with subcultures and often the subcultures provide heavier influence on individual beliefs and style of life. Both the general culture and subcultures affect individual's behavior since the individual is under the influence of their behavioral norms, which the consumer follows consciously or unconsciously. (Mason 1981: 20–21.)

In order for a normative order to exist in a social system, there has to be various things that uphold the norms and values and make the individuals for most part conform to the established values, and therefore behave as the social system expects. Individuals learn these values and norms, which in turn strengthens the collectivity, as there is a consensus between the individuals of these particular values and norms. However, the social system cannot function if it is not based on solidarity, loyalty and obligation. (Parsons 1966: 14.)

### 2.1.3 Legitimacy

Suchman (1995: 574) defines legitimacy as 'a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions.' A deed or an action may be evaluated as legitimate, when it is perceived as being appropriate by the others. Legitimacy in the context of prestige is a threshold of congruency with the particular value system's norms, values and beliefs. In other words it is the basis for granting prestige.

Legitimacy can be described as generalized, since it is evaluated as a constant and stable attribute, which makes it resilient to singular events, while still being tied to history (Suchman 1995: 574). To simplify this, legitimacy can be seen as a particular trend a plot follows; there might be slight deviations from the plot, but in general the plot follows a particular trend. Suchman (1995: 577) identified three categories of legitimacy in organizational contexts: pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy. Nevertheless, these types of legitimacies can be applied to consumer collectivities and to actions of consumers.

Firstly, pragmatic legitimacy is essentially the generalized assessment of an organization's actions made by the closest entities of the organization in question (Suchman 1995: 578). In the context of consumer behavior pragmatic legitimacy is evaluated by the actor's closest circles, like for example friends and family, and if the action is approved by them. Secondly, moral legitimacy is the generalized perception of an action's moral value; if it is right or wrong (Suchman 1995: 579). Again, in the context of this study, moral legitimacy is for example an assessment of an action's congruence with the moral view of the greater population i.e. is the action right or wrong. Thirdly, cognitive legitimacy is the acceptance that an organization is essential, unavoidable, and taken for granted in cultural terms (Suchman 1995: 582). In consumer behavior context cognitive legitimacy can be seen as something that is taken for granted and often not disputed, for instance that men do not wear skirts or paint their nails.

A society has to have a community with sufficient integration or solidarity along with clear memberships to provide a cultural system that legitimizes the norms, values and order that the society represents. The whole legitimization process revolves around the community's identity and solidarity, which is strengthened using symbolic actions such as rituals. (Parsons 1966: 17.)

Assessing legitimacy is a central process for different communities. In this process the members distinguish the true members from the members with less authority, and from the non-members. Brands in this context are strongly linked to being in the know and used for the right reasons. The wrong reasons may be linked to not understanding the particular culture, its rituals, traditions and symbols. The communities are often open, but they require devotion from actual members and people aspiring to be members; moreover the devotion has to be sincere. (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001: 419.)

The meritocratic elite may try building barriers to the isolate illegitimate claims to status by using taste as a main determinant of status. Therefore having a ‘good taste’ is granted to individuals from certain family or occupational background, or to those with enough refinement and skills to consume for right reasons in terms of social and aesthetic quality. Revealed taste therefore enables meritocrats to validate legitimate claims to prestige. (Mason 1981: 110.)

#### 2.1.4 Collectivities

The role of collectivities i.e. groups of people in prestige formation is of great importance since prestige is always linked to the others around the individual. Prestige is freely given by others as noted by Plourde (2008: 375) and it is never an act of dominance. Attaining prestige always requires the consent of others.

Collectivities are entities in society, which have their own hierarchies, norms and order. Since there are hierarchies, there are also different statuses and rights, which are obligated through memberships that vary in each collectivity. These social communities and collectivities require a shared cultural orientation that their members have to strictly or loosely follow, as the orientation is the foundation of social identity. (Parsons 1966: 10.)

Two major social groupings, membership groups and aspirant groups, affect individual behavior crucially. Membership groups are groups that an individual belongs to, voluntarily or involuntarily, and these groups impose the norms and codes of conduct regarding individual behavior. The groups can be formal with clear structures, rights and duties, or informal, which have minimal control and individuals follow them voluntarily. Regardless of formal or informal group nature, both expect that the individuals show commitment and are unequivocal. The other major social grouping, aspirant group, is a group an individual wants to belong to, but is not currently a member. The willingness to belong to these aspirant groups is a crucial motivator on individual level and the attempt to gain the recognition of the aspired group strongly shapes the social behavior of an individual and consequently their consumer behavior. (Mason 1981: 24.)

Members of different groups often feel a consciousness of kind with other members along with a collective sense of being different from other that are not part of the community. This consciousness is shared and it can be described as a way of thinking,

not just mere common attitudes or perceptions of being similar. (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001: 413.)

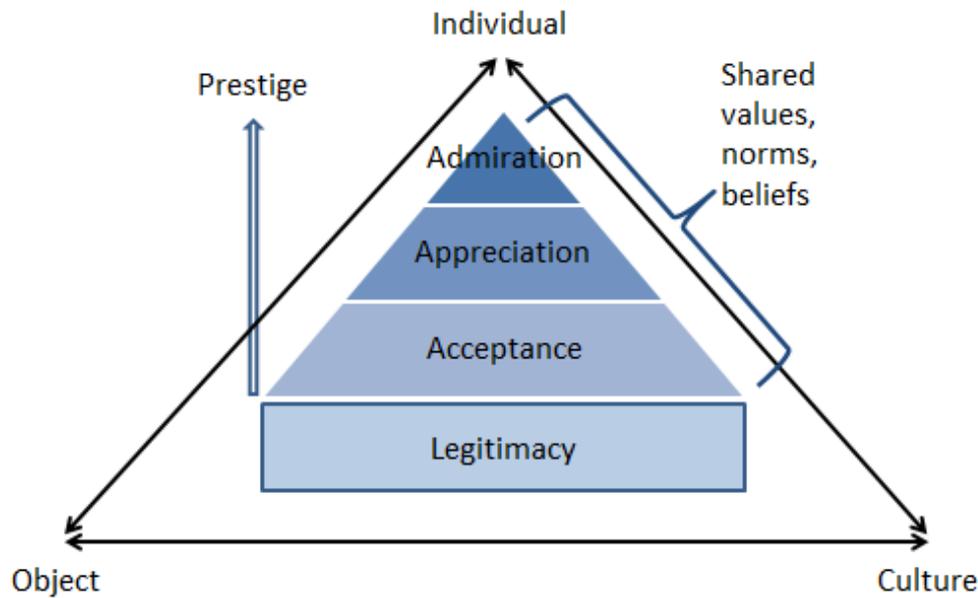
Socialization is an essential factor that keeps groups together. The members in collectivities are a product of socialization, as they are most often alike, when it comes to parental and educational backgrounds, peers, jobs and media exposure. As a result, members of collectivities have alike social relations and therefore they are treated alike by others. Most prominently due to socialization, members of collectivities have the same cultural understanding. (Holt 1997: 326.)

Consumption has strong social patterns, as consumers from alike social conditions attain alike tastes, which largely dictate their actions in consumption (Holt 1997: 343). For example, brand communities and the members in them often feel like being part of a big group, which is most often imagined (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001: 419).

In line with the findings of Festinger (1954), it is argued in this thesis that consumers compare themselves to a small number of people that are relevant for them, either for being similar or significantly dissimilar. The role of in-groups and out-groups in prestige formation is crucial, as the actions of individuals are always assessed and interpreted by others, either by in-group members or out-group members.

#### 2.1.5 The model of prestige

To properly address the research problem it is necessary to understand what prestige is. Therefore a model of prestige in a social system is presented, most importantly to understand why prestige is seen as something worthy of pursuing by the consumer. The model is combined with Figure 1. to further illustrate the nature of prestige.



**Figure 2.** Prestige in a social system.

Firstly, building from the findings of Parsons & Smelser (1964: 51) it is argued that social systems i.e. collectivities and groups and their value systems are the basis for prestige formation. Social systems and their value systems guide the values, norms and beliefs and thus the appropriate behavior in human interaction. The triangle in the figure represents the shared values, norms and beliefs of a social system. Secondly, drawing from the works of Suchman (1995) legitimacy is the threshold that has to be fulfilled in order to prestige to form. Legitimacy functions as its name suggests; it is a law or rule of the appropriateness of an action in the eyes of others and when fulfilled it can be accepted by the members in the social system. Thirdly, as noted by Parsons & Smelser (1964: 51) and Mason (1981: 29–30), prestige is awarded through conforming to the value system and getting the consent of acceptability from the others. The more congruent an individual's actions are with the value system, the more he is awarded with prestige and it ranges from acceptance to admiration. Prestige is a contested venue since it is often not enough for a consumer to be accepted, as the innate need to surpass others and be more accepted than others is central, which makes it a hierarchy. This hierarchical nature is illustrated by depicting the model as a pyramid.

Figure 1. relates to the formation of prestige in the following manner. Meanings are constructed in the triangular relationship of individuals, objects and culture. Meanings related to prestige are also constructed in this manner and the meanings are constantly renegotiated and are therefore not static. Meanings that are related to getting accepted,

appreciated or admired are then used consciously or unconsciously by individuals in their pursuit of prestige. Objects and their meanings have a central role in this pursuit.

Adam Smith saw that in modern societies the struggle for survival had taken a form of social survival, which included acting decently and accepting the normal manners and customs of propriety (Reisman 1976: 102). The majority of people desire to leave a good impression on others in order to be recognized as a person who conforms to different social norms, which in turn grants the people with acceptance and even respect; therefore there is a clear individual interest in being perceived as behaving better i.e. in accordance with norms (Johansson-Stenman & Martinsson 2006: 130).

Parsons and Smelser (1964: 51) state that individuals within a social system may be rewarded with respect, when they conform to the values that the social system upholds; the degree of respect an individual commands compared to others can be called prestige. Social systems can vary greatly in their size, ranging from highly institutionalized nations to small tribes or to tightly knit group of car enthusiasts, but the hierarchies and prestige still remain. Acquiring status and prestige means that the individual in pursuit of these has to achieve a consensus of acceptability and impressiveness regarding his behavior; the consensus is usually attained only if the opinion leaders are persuaded (Mason 1981: 29–30). Opinion leaders are seen as gatekeepers in groups and accordingly in culture.

A clear example of what prestige-seeking is in consumer behavior, is depicted well in this instance: An informant in the study of Üstüner and Holt (2010: 51) pursued her interest in international cuisine by going to a sushi course once a week for a month, but even though she enjoyed it, she felt that no one valued her hobby and gave her support and consequently stopped pursuing it; this example illustrates how the internal satisfaction from an activity may not be enough, but one desires recognition from others in order to continue an activity.

## 2.2 Prestige related needs

Esteem needs act as powerful motivators in individual behavior as noted by authors like Abraham Maslow (1943) and others. In the context of this study, esteem needs are critical as they shape the whole act of seeking prestige and the why questions attached to it. Prestige as a phenomenon revolves heavily around conformity, as can be noted

from the previous chapters as well as the forth coming ones. Conformity is a way for the consumer to attain esteem, but often mere conforming is not sufficient, since they still want to preserve their sense of own identity.

Hence, there are two main needs that affect prestige and prestige-seeking. Firstly, there is the need to belong, which is satisfied through conforming. Secondly, there is a need for uniqueness, which is satisfied through differentiation. To exemplify, Solomon et al. (2006: 90) state that motivation occurs after something arouses the needs of an individual and one wants to satisfy these needs. An individual has different needs related to prestige and a stimulus arouses and triggers the needs, which leads to a motivation to relieve and reduce tension and thereby satisfy the needs.

General values of a culture may be in conflict with the values of a certain subculture that an individual belongs to or wishes to belong; individuals may experience a conflict, as on one hand, the cultural and social memberships demand conformity to expectations and norms, and on the other hand, they may seek recognition of other (aspirant) groups and attain status in them (Mason 1981: 26).

As stated above, the need to belong and the need to improve one's social position often influence consumers both at the same time, leading to possible internal conflicts in a consumer. Society has a significant role in personality development, but the importance attached to status and prestige differs between individuals (Mason 1981: 26–27).

Products and services which satisfy esteem needs are usually symbolic, although they do serve other motives too. To exemplify, an automobile may be used in commuting to work which can be linked to fulfilling survival needs, while paying additional money for status attributes can transform the automobile to a symbol of the owner's authority and social value. (Csikszentmihalyi 2000: 269.)

The use of material goods to distinguish oneself can be explained with many secondary motives or drives like when a person pursues independence. This means that a consumer may use differentiating goods when he or she follows his or her own tastes and preferences, and the goods are not used to be different from others, but for being consistent with one's own identity. (Tian et al. 2001: 50.)

On the other hand, distinguishing from others can be a primary intention of a consumer, which stems from the need to be different (Tian et al. 2001: 50). The need to be

different can be described as counterconformity motivation (Nail 1986), which activates when a consumer feels that their individual identity is threatened, for example when a consumer is confronted with a situation where others are almost identical to him or her (Snyder & Fromkin 1977). The pursued end-state of consumers with counterconformity motives is differentiation, and this is most often pursued in domains with the least possible confrontations (Tian et al. 2001: 60). The outcome of these two needs can be the same, in other words differentiating from others, but for completely different motives, since counterconforming is other-oriented and independence is inner-oriented.

### 2.2.1 Need to belong

Individuals attain prestige when they act according to the norms, values and beliefs of a group. These individuals are fundamentally conforming to the group's implicit rules and consequently acquire acceptance from the particular group. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the need to belong is located at the midpoint and it rests on the argument that people fear being left alone and isolated; humans are social animals and genetically hardwired to pursue social contact with other people (Csikszentmihalyi 2000: 268).

The innate need to belong gets satisfied through conformity. For example as individuals use clothes or drive cars that are in fashion, they experience a sensation of being part of an aspired group and welcomed by its members. This need to belong is often utilized by marketers in advertising by urging consumers to 'keep up with the Joneses' and this phenomenon of conformity is a common characteristic in human behavior. (Csikszentmihalyi 2000: 269.)

Lascu & Zinkhan (1999: 1) notify that the counterparts of conformity have not reached a consensus within social sciences and that conformity has been used as a synonym with terms like social influence and persuasion. Kelman (1961) argues that there are three types of social influence, which affect individuals: compliance, identification and internalization. This thesis maintains that these three are the main conformity types.

Compliance refers to a phenomenon in which a person accepts influence from another individual or group in order to achieve a positive reaction from them. In other words, the individual may be motivated to gain rewards or evade punishments which the person or group is in control of. To illustrate, a person may form their opinion in a way that it pleases the other person, in hopes of gaining acceptance or to avoid negative outcomes; the individual complying behaves a certain way to please the other and to attain a

favorable response. Complying is about meeting expectations, even if the actions may be dissimilar from personal beliefs. Compliance requires that the influencing entity observes the individual's behavior. (Kelman 1961: 62-63.)

Identification occurs as a person implements behavior which comes from outside sources like other people or groups and the behavior links to defining one's self through this relationship to others. This is essentially a role relationship that is a part of the whole individual self-image. Therefore the influence through identification functions as means to create or uphold a self-concept that manifests in different relationships. Identification may manifest as a classical identification, where an individual tries to resemble or actually be the influencing person. Identification may also manifest as a reciprocal role relationship where the two entities define themselves through interaction with each other, as for example in a relationship between a doctor and a patient. These two forms differ from each other since identification is about identity and reciprocal relationship is about reacting to the other person's expectations, without feeling a sense of identification with the source. The main difference between compliance and identification is that in identification the influenced person is conforming because they believe in the source i.e. it is done willingly, while both compliance and identification do not give any intrinsic rewards, but extrinsic rewards. (Kelman 1961: 63-64.)

Internalization on the other hand refers to a process in which an individual accepts influence as the encouraged behavior matches with the individual's own value system and is consequently intrinsically rewarding (Kelman 1961: 65). This is particularly significant in self-actualization.

### 2.2.2 Need for uniqueness

When individuals have satisfied needs related to self-esteem i.e. to feel capable, appreciated and superior, they may consume items which signify their uniqueness and sets them apart from the mass or the crowd (Csikszentmihalyi 2000: 269).

When the need for uniqueness activates in an individual, they try to regain their self-esteem and reduce the negative tension by adopting behaviors which distinguishes the individual from others. The expressions of differentiation are pursued with various ways and forms, but most notably in ways that the individual does not get penalized heavily from differing from others. (Tian et al. 2001: 52.)

Counterconformity may arise in situations where consumers perceive or imagine themselves to be similar to others, for example when a consumer owns a product that was previously relatively unknown, but becomes commonplace. Particular consumers experience identity related threats more strongly than others. Consumers with similar identity threats as mentioned before, have a lasting inclination to pursue differentness compared to others. (Tian et al. 2001: 51.)

In the pursuit of uniqueness with publically consumed items, a consumer may select items that only some dare to mimic (Tian et al. 2001: 51). For example if a consumer intends to buy a new car, but notices that many people are driving with the particular make and model, they might choose a radically different color to satisfy their need for uniqueness. This is only one example how the need for uniqueness shapes consumer behavior, when a consumer tries to counterconform (Tian et al. 2001: 51).

A common way for consumers to resist conformity is by displaying items that are handmade, personalized or new (Tian et al. 2001: 51). Attaining or displaying goods is not the only way to feel distinguished from others, as knowledge regarding the objects that are consumed is also evident in pursuing uniqueness (see Holt 1998).

In line with the uniqueness theory, the individual need for uniqueness may manifest in many ways depending on the particular counterconformity motive. Counterconformity is about distinguishing oneself from others via use of goods and their visual display and it also involves pursuing differentiation consciously as an end-state. (Tian et al. 2001: 52.)

As stated, the ways of fulfilling one's need for uniqueness can be done by various ways (Tian et al. 2001), but in contemporary societies the role of products and their public display is a central way as noted by Belk (1988) in his work on products functioning as extensions of selves, or domain specific knowledge of a particular category (Holt 1995). Due to various ways of fulfilling this uniqueness need, the consumers may have varying tendencies in products or product usage in relieving the tension (Tian et al. 2001: 52).

Goods that are perceived as unique may be purchased to re-establish a consumer's self-view as being unique compared to others. Enhancing one's self-image occurs when an individual consumes products for the symbolic meanings attached to them and wishes that these attached meanings transfer to the individual; this is a result of an internal and subjective process. For the product to actually transfer meaning to others, it has to be

recognizable and public. Therefore unique goods may be consumed to portray desirable attributes to others, such as an image of a person who is different and in turn these favorable evaluations contribute to enhanced self-image. (Tian et al. 2001: 52.)

Consumers' need for uniqueness as a concept is the individual trait of seeking differentness compared to others by acquiring, using and disposing products or services in order to develop and elevate individual self-image and social image. The need for uniqueness manifests in three different behaviors: creative choice counterconformity, unpopular choice counterconformity and avoidance of similarity. (Tian et al. 2001: 52.)

Creative choice counterconformity is the process of seeking differentness compared to others, while consuming products or services that the others regard as accepted and good choices (Tian et al. 2001: 52). If done correctly by the consumer, the originality may arouse positive evaluations of the consumer's uniqueness (Snyder & Fromkin 1977).

In unpopular choice counterconformity, an individual uses goods that differ from group norms, and therefore he or she may risk some of the social approval granted to the individual, for the purposes of strengthening differentness compared to others. Deviation from existing rules, norms and customs may be seen as poor judgments of taste and thus be socially disapproved. Still the bending of rules may have positive social effects on the individual, as it can lead to an improved self-image and social image. (Tian et al. 2001: 52.)

The need for uniqueness may also appear as avoidance of similarity, in which an individual loses interest or stops the use of goods that are popular and mundane, and subsequently strays from the norm in order to fortify individual differentness again. Consumers, who pursue uniqueness highly, monitor the others and their use of goods and avoid the use of similar and commonplace items. This strategy to satisfy the need for uniqueness through discontinued use of commonplace goods may be a brief way of achieving a distinctive self-image. (Tian et al. 2001: 53.)

### 2.3 Prestige-seeking motives

Vigneron and Johnson (1999: ii) argue that "prestige-seeking behavior is the results of multiple motivations, but in particular the motives of sociability and self-expression".

These findings are further analyzed according to the work of Hatch (1989) to properly depict the depth of these different prestige-seeking motives. Prestige systems have been studied from the materialist and non-materialist perspectives; these two approaches differ in how they view individual motivations regarding prestige systems (Hatch 1989: 341). These perspectives are presented below.

Basically, the materialist view on social honor tries to explain status systems by the differences in individual economic resources or by the access to material power. One of the materialist approaches is the isomorphic approach, which argues that power and wealth are essentially the same and that individuals care strongly of securing these for their individual well-being. The individuals also recognize other individuals, who are more affluent or possess more power than they do; therefore the people with more material resources acquire more respect and prestige compared with an individual with less material resources. (Hatch 1989: 341–342.)

This materialist view is persistent in Western thought partly because it is a folk belief. Illustrative of this is the situation when a European or American individual is asked why an owner of a big company has more prestige than a professor; the individuals will likely infer that the businessman has bigger earnings making him more respected and therefore infer that people value wealth and power so much that they assign respect to individuals with wealth and power. (Hatch 1989: 342.)

This materialist view is consistent with the findings of Duesenberry (1949: 30), who argued that income is closely correlated with success. Hatch (1989: 344) argues that the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984) approaches status systems from both the materialist and non-materialist point of view, since the status systems are analyzed through economic capital and cultural capital.

From Bourdieu's point of view economic capital is scarce since the demand for it is almost limitless, but the actual supply of it is limited; the notion of taste is similarly scarce as it requires cultivation, which can be either hard to achieve or require excessive amount of time. These two forms of capital and the unequal distribution of them is the basis of the hierarchies of standing. (Hatch 1989: 344.)

The non-materialist view on prestige systems differs from the materialist view, as it is based on an immaterial thing, namely, social honor. The calculating prestige seeker is the most usual non-materialist approach to prestige; in this view the individual aims to

maximize prestige in a rational and calculative fashion and there are two types of seekers, benign and cynical. (Hatch 1989: 346.)

The benign prestige seeker appears in the work of Homans (1966) and the individual attains esteem by conforming and doing things that others accept and appreciate. Consequently the individual has a rational reason for conforming and signaling things that others appreciate, as it provides the individual with respect and even admiration (Hatch 1989: 346). In this view, an individual would attain prestige if he acts according to the rules set by others, for instance using brands that others see as fitting and so on. To exemplify the benign prestige-seeker, a violin player with notable talent will assess the prestige and acclaim that he thinks that is possible to achieve in pursuing the profession of a violin player and bases the decision on these risks and rewards of prestige (Hatch 1989: 346).

Hatch (1989: 346) continues the argument by stating that the view of benign prestige-seeking is flawed since the others would not grant prestige if the individuals only try to achieve a higher social standing; the others will willingly grant prestige if the individual is conforming to demanding norms in a difficult situation, since it is based on a genuine feeling of respect.

The benign prestige seeker is 'playing by the rules' just for individual benefits. The argument in this thesis is that prestige is granted through conformity similarly to Homans' view (1966), but it is freely given as it benefits the others more than the individual (see Plourde 2008).

Cynical prestige-seeker differs from the benign one by trying to bend and manipulate the rules that prestige is granted on in order to acquire individual benefits (Hatch 1989: 347). This approach sees the individual as much more cynical and almost narcissistic. Hatch (1989: 347) argues that the self-interested prestige-seeker, benign or cynical, who acts in a rational and analyzing way in order to maximize his prestige, has no reason for committing to a system of values and norms other than for individual benefits. This in turn would be impossible if the majority of the members in the society would act this way. There would be no reason for others to grant prestige if it did not benefit them in any way.

Prestige can be approached from a second non-materialist point of view which is the ludic approach (Hatch 1989: 347). This approach draws from the works of Huizinga

(1955) who asserts that playfulness is the central feature of human behavior. In ludic approach, people pursue challenges presented in contests and prestige is a by-product of enjoying the game (Hatch 1989: 347).

The systems of prestige take different forms when viewed from the non-materialist perspective of calculating prestige seeker and the playful prestige seeker. Most importantly, the whole reason for an individual in seeking prestige is different depending on the view. Playful prestige seeker aims to experience tension and relieve it, while the calculating prestige seeker aims to achieve esteem. The two types differ strongly, since the other is seen as a creative and playful individual, whereas the other is self-interested and scheming. Furthermore, calculating view sees that competition is required as the purpose is to attain more esteem than other people, while ludic view maintains that success can be achieved without competition. (Hatch 1989: 348.)

Third non-materialist prestige-seeker comes in the form of self-identity theory, which argues that individuals pursue individual accomplishment and fulfillment by doing things regarded as meritorious in the individual's particular social system, and the focus is as a result on individual feeling of worth and self-actualization (Hatch 1989: 348-349). To simplify, individuals do things that are relevant to themselves and the focus is on their own sense of self, not what others think and their actions might or might not be appreciated.

There are some essential questions regarding this self-actualization approach such as the role of hierarchies and why do they exist if people are inner-directed and not supposed to care of other's opinions. The social hierarchies are almost inevitable since the presence of other people is almost ever-present and they assess each other almost constantly. So even if the individual orientation is inner-directed, the dominant culture system outlines the meritorious activities and what is seen as a meaningful way of living. This leads to a conflict, where individuals might not pursue things that are relevant for their identities without being assessed by others, as the value system they belong to defines individual actions. (Hatch 1989: 349.)

Self-identity is related to the concept of calling, in which an individual devotes him or herself to a higher principle and tries to achieve things relevant to this calling. The individual devoting to a calling attains meaning to his or her life, as it guides and legitimizes the actions of the individual. Moreover, the individual does not just seek the

approval of others, but devotes to a calling to attain self-worth and self-congruence. (Hatch 1989: 350.)

To sum up, the ludic approach fails to explain some key notions such as possible acts of violence against each other in order to improve social position. The self-identity approach explains why low-ranking people would choose to take part in the prestige system, as even though they have a low status position they could still have strong sense of fulfillment and duty. (Hatch 1989: 351.)

This study asserts that the most accurate prestige-seeking motives presented by Hatch are the benign motive and the self-identity motive. In essence, prestige is awarded to individuals who perform actions which contribute to a group's well-being, whether it is through relieving stress by performing a soothing music act, cooking nutritious food or taking care of diseased individuals. In other words the person conforms to the values, ideals and norms set by the others. The others in a value system have a rational reason to grant prestige, if the activities benefit the group as a whole.

### 2.3.1 Prestige as a primary motive

Drawing from the findings of Vigneron & Johnson (1999), Hatch (1989) and Mason (1981), it can be argued that consumers have different motives for pursuing prestige. Prestige-seeking patterns are strongly shaped depending on whether consumers are other-directed or inner-directed. Other-directed individuals and their actions are mostly guided by the others as opposed with inner-directed individuals, who focus on themselves. Other-directed individuals seek prestige as a primary motive, while for the inner-directed prestige is secondary. These two directions affect conformity in many ways.

Consumers often assess third-party opinions and think of the reactions that their potential purchases will have on these third-parties whose opinions are important to them (Mason 1981: vii). The role of the others in prestige-seeking consumption is crucial. The definition of prestige always stresses the role of others as the ones who grant social honor regardless of the scientific field the definition comes from (see Weber 1991; Plourde 2008: 375). Therefore it can be argued that prestige-seeking as a primary motive is more usual among other-directed individuals. Other-direction means that a consumer's contemporaries guide and form his lifestyle and what to pursue (Mason 1981: 40).

According to Fenigstein, Scheier and Buss (1975), self-consciousness is an individual's coherent tendency to focus attention based on inner or outer stimuli. The self-consciousness is similar to self-monitoring and they both are key factors that affect prestige-seeking behavior. There are two different self-conscious categories, one is the publically self-conscious people, who care more about how they appear to others; second is the privately self-conscious type, who care more about their own emotions and thoughts (Vigneron & Johnson 1999: 3). These publically self-conscious consumers are principally other-oriented and usually pursue prestige as a primary motive.

The tendency for consumers to make inferences of other consumers by what objects they consume is arguably one of the most universal phenomena within consumer behavior. The phenomenon can be seen as negative or positive, since it may lead to prejudicial stereotyping and overall superficiality, even though it also provides consumers with the ability to communicate nonverbally about their own identities (Belk, Bahn & Mayer 1982: 4).

Individuals make comparisons to other people and in the case of upward comparison an individual compares himself to people, who are better off, and reversely, individuals may downward compare; both of these behaviors occur often (Wood 1996). Upward comparison is usually done for self-evaluation and it is ego deflating, and downward comparison is done for the purpose of self-enhancement, even though upward comparison can be done also in a self-enhancing fashion (Collins 1996).

#### *Veblenian motives*

Veblenian consumption is commonly referred as conspicuous consumption, regardless of their differences. Conspicuous consumption has been defined as the 'ostentatious display of material prosperity to achieve status gains' (Mason 1981: 51). O'Cass & McEwen (2004) share a similar view. Conspicuous consumption in this thesis is seen as a form of signaling that is explicit and loud rather than just ostentation (see Berger & Ward 2010). Veblenian consumption is consequently a form of explicit signaling.

Veblenian consumption i.e. ostentation always requires an audience, the 'others', as the purpose is to impress these 'others' through public, visible and overt consumption of items that signal affluence (Veblen 1899). Ostentatious use of status goods is a reflection of the consumer's identity and their need to reinforce or inflate their ego

(O’Cass & McEwen 2004: 35). O’Cass and McEwen (2004: 27) argue that consumers engage in conspicuous consumption, because they seek to enhance their prestige through the public display of wealth. An individual who consumes conspicuously gets satisfaction from the response of others and the response has to garner enough of appreciation and admiration to trigger the satisfaction in the individual (Mason 1981: 28).

The objectives of a consumer who consumes conspicuously are twofold. Firstly, an individual may want to secure status horizontally in membership groups he already belongs to, or in aspirant groups that are parallel in status. Secondly, an individual may pursue recognition vertically from higher groups, in order to be classified as one of them in terms of status and prestige. (Mason 1981: 28.)

Veblenian consumption views that individuals, who invest their wealth in publically consumed goods, receive favorable treatment from social contacts as it signals desirability (Bagwell & Bernheim 1996). Status brands are used publically and conspicuously to signal one’s status as a visual representation (O’Cass & McEwen 2004: 26). Mason (1992) argues that ostentation in a Veblenian manner has lessened and status is displayed less conspicuously.

The notion of conspicuous consumption has been central in the studies on prestige, but conspicuousness is not a prerequisite for a prestigious product, as many products are consumed privately, without being publically displayed (Vigneron & Johnson 1999: 4). The findings of Berger & Ward (2010) are similar, as many luxury brands have inconspicuous markings, even though they are publically visible.

It can be concluded that Veblenian motives are other-directed. Veblenian motives are pursued through counterconformity since ostentation and overt signaling are about being seen and being different from the mass.

#### *Bandwagon motives*

Leibenstein (1950: 189) depicts that individuals may use products ‘to be one of the boys’ and this sentence explicates the bandwagon motives effectively; it is the individual desire to be associated with a certain group by conforming to their, for example, consumption practices.

Festinger (1954) showed that individuals often form their attitudes by conforming to the opinions that their groups have. This notion is central in understanding why and how the bandwagon effect works. Consumers often seek opinion from their immediate groups, as often the trust towards other members in the group is strong. Maffesoli (1996) argues in his work that the ongoing pursuit of individualism has led to that consumers form 'small masses' i.e. tribes based on their shared opinions and values. In the contemporary world consumers have numerous group memberships and the belonging to these is signaled with consumption, as in the case of Harley Davidson riders (see Schouten & McAlexander 1995). Conspicuousness and public display of goods is crucial for consumers, who seek to be approved and accepted by a certain group, as socially visible objects can be approved or disapproved by the group members (O'Cass & McEwen 2004: 29).

Han et al. (2010: 15) stress that consumers use luxurious goods to show their belonging to a group perceived as their own and to distance themselves from groups which are not perceived to be theirs i.e. 'the others'. This might be the case when consumers use brands due to their desire to belong in groups perceived as elite or aristocratic (Vigneron & Johnson 1999: 5). The use of certain brands can enable an entrance to a certain group by being similar to the group's members; therefore brands can be used to portray an image that helps the individual to be part of groups (O'Cass and McEwen 2004: 29).

Status products in particular are used for impression management and to gain an access to particular groups (O'Cass & McEwen 2004: 34). The use of brands can be a result of a consumer's desire to resemble others that use the particular brand (Escalas & Bettman 2005). O'Cass and McEwen (2004: 28) state that the actions of status-conscious individuals can be described as socially motivated, since they seek social relationships and influence in these relationships.

Bandwagon motives are certainly other-directed and clear examples of prestige-seeking through conformity. Consumers who tend to conform are often fairly insecure and have a strong need to belong and consequently be liked (Lascu & Zinkhan 1999: 8).

### *Snob motives*

The conceptual framework on prestige-seeking consumer behavior by Vigneron & Johnson (1999) argues that one source of prestige value is derived from the sense of uniqueness an object gives to the recipient, also known as the snob effect. Snobbism is

the motive for buying items that are seen as having a high quality and being relatively rare; the exclusiveness aspects of the product is central for snobs (Mason 1992). Leibenstein (1950) argues in his classical work that snobs do not consume objects that other people i.e. the mass is consuming. The motive for snobs is to be distinguished and different from the mass and standing out from the mass gives them a feeling of prestige and dignity (Leibenstein 1950: 184).

Rogers (2003: 115) states that the prestige an individual gets from adopting an innovation before the most of his or her peers, is central in innovation adoption and one of the major motivators in fashion adoption. Vigneron & Johnson (1999: 6) propose that snobs use price as cue of exclusivity and avoid brands used by the mass. Some certain product categories like clothes have a high social prestige factor and the prestige can be the sole benefit that the consumer gets from purchasing certain products (Rogers 2003: 230).

Consumers acquire recognition through consuming products, which exhibit status and achievement (O'Cass & McEwen 2004: 28). Interaction with brands is central in identity creation and it contributes to the individual's sense of achievement and furthermore brands are sources for identification (O'Cass & McEwen 2004: 25). Individual personality traits regarding to the susceptibility to consume conspicuously are hard to describe; nevertheless it can be attractive for an individual who enjoys social competition or to an individual who seeks to establish or fortify social group memberships (Mason 1981: 27).

For example Celsi et al. (1993: 10) found that the main motivator for skydivers in continuing their hobby was the desire to improve their skills for the purpose of individual satisfaction as well as social status in the particular community; skydivers who performed high-risk jumps, became concerned not only of their skills, but what perceptions the other skydivers had of their competence. This process of pursuing self-worth, while still seeking outer validation is illustrative of prestige-seeking via snobbism.

A need for uniqueness is closely related to the concept of social comparison theory of Festinger (1954), in which people want to be distinguished and different from other people. Therefore consumers use products that are seen as scarce and rare, to strengthen their identity and their perceptions of themselves. The products and services that have the most potent distinctive power are the ones whose quality is most easily recognized,

as this functions as a cue of the owner's own quality, since the quality of an individual is tied to his or her ability to acquire objects with high quality (Bourdieu 1984: 281). Counterconformity is evident in snobbism.

### 2.3.2 Prestige as a secondary motive

Secondary motives in prestige-seeking are strongly related to inner-direction. Inner-direction can be described as the motives that are strongly related to acting according to one's own identity and own set of values. In other words, inner-direction is linked to non-conformity. This means that the motive for action stems from an individual's own identity and the others are not considered in this process. Wiedmann et al. (2009: 631) maintain that products may derive their value from being congruent with the individual's self-identity, as in the case of luxurious items, which can provide internal value for the individual. The inner-directed motives are important to understand, since often individuals that are held in high esteem seem to be strongly inner-directed and not pursuing prestige as their primary motive.

Therefore it is conceptualized that individuals who have satisfied their need for esteem and need to belong may make them more inner-directed, since they already feel that they have the acceptance of others and thus prestige-seeking is not relevant for them. Similarly this argument is supported by the findings of Han et al. (2010: 17), who argue that 'patricians' e.g. people with high wealth and low need for status consume less for prestige's sake and less conspicuously. However, a person described as inner-directed is more anxious of satisfying himself and his pride by attaining a lifestyle and goals that are congruent with his own values, even if to some extent he cares what others think of him and enjoys their admiration (Mason 1981: 39).

#### *Self-actualization motives*

Self-actualization motives are classified as perfectionist and hedonist motives. Vigneron and Johnson (1999: 8) propose that one of the components of prestige value is a product's or brand's perceived high quality, which gives reassurance for consumers who are driven by perfectionism. These consumers value functional utility and the prestige value of an object is derived from its superior performance (Vigneron & Johnson 1999: 9).

It is well established in marketing literature that products and services may be chosen by the consumer for their emotional value rather than their functional value (Hirschman & Holbrook 1982). Vigneron & Johnson (1999: 8) conceptualize a hedonic effect in luxury brand consumption, which influences consumers' decision-making by arousing emotions and affects that they value. The consumption of luxuries is argued to provide the consumer with various intangible benefits that are subjective in nature and are often linked to emotions (see Dubois & Laurent 1994).

Hedonists are more inner-directed and follow their own thoughts and emotions, rather than conform to norms of their groups, and they do not perceive price as a strong cue of prestige (Vigneron & Johnson 1999: 8). Consumers whose motives are related to perfectionism assess products and their quality based on their own perceptions, and therefore are inner-directed (Vigneron & Johnson 1999: 9).

#### 2.4 Sources of prestige

Symbolic interactionism as a perspective sees that the reality for people and groups of people consists of objects, which are outputs of symbolic interaction; these objects can be defined as something that may be indicated or referred to i.e. a car, a friend or a ghost. Objects can be divided into three categories: physical objects, social objects and abstract objects. Firstly, physical objects are things such as furniture or trees, secondly, social objects are students or professions like priests, and thirdly, abstract objects are values, moral principles or prestige. (Blumer 1969: 10–11.)

In accordance with symbolic interactionism, the sources of prestige can be generally described as objects which have meanings that contribute to attaining acceptance, appreciation or admiration. These objects are then used by consumers in social interaction in hopes of achieving prestige. This thesis divides the sources of prestige to material and immaterial objects. Cultural capital i.e. skills and knowledge, is central in this context, as it guides the choice and use of different objects and the appropriate way of consumption.

Goods can be described as markers, since they are the materialized and visible part of the entire social process; goods function as markers in classifying categories. Goods get their value socially, meaning that there is a consensus or an agreement of their worth among other consumers. Every individual holds an opinion and a classification of a

particular good, so an individual is a subject, and at the same time they are the objects of classification done by others. (Douglas & Isherwood 1979: 74-75.)

Goods, or a particular way of using or displaying them, can attain a meaning of breaking a norm and therefore become vessels of uniqueness and specialness (Tian et al. 2001: 50). On the other hand, goods can function as symbols of group memberships and that an individual is conforming to a group.

#### 2.4.1 Cultural capital

As noted by Plourde (2008: 375) and mentioned in subchapter 1.1, prestige is ‘the authority and privilege freely given to an individual by others’. The reason why an individual is granted with prestige by others is due to the individual having knowledge or high level of skill in a particular domain that is appreciated and valued by the others (Henrich & Gil-White 2001: 167). Skill can be broadly described as the particular elements of culture that are internalized by an individual (Parsons 1966: 15). Acquisition of cultural capital enables consumers to get respected by similar others, as it permits the consumption of objects that only consumers with required abilities and skills can consume (Holt 1998).

Cultural capital comes in three different forms: as embodied, objectified and institutionalized. The embodied form is mainly intangible and it consists of implicit knowledge and expertise. The objectified form consists of tangible objects that ‘contain’ cultural capital. The institutionalized form is essentially degrees and diplomas which work as tangible certificates of the embodied cultural capital. (Holt 1998: 3.)

Cultural capital has different forms in different fields: for example, in academics, it comes in the form of intellectual abilities and research expertise, which are embodied in lecturing and informal discussion, objectified in publications, and institutionalized in highly regarded degrees. Cultural capital is a significant source of status, since it manifests in taste, which guides many consumption patterns. (Holt 1998: 4.)

Products that require a significant amount of time – either when consuming or learning to consume them ‘properly’ – helps the user in differentiating himself or herself from others. Therefore products that require skills also demand investments of time. Skills cannot be attained quickly and as a result they tell something of the owner’s personal quality. Ultimately this provides the owner with distinction. (Bourdieu 1984: 281.)

As Arnould and Thompson (2005: 874) note, contrary to the traditional sociological point of view on subcultures, in-group social status is not attained by merely conforming to monolithic norms, but by showing localized cultural capital – which can be described as ‘particular forms of knowledge and skills valued in the group’ – and ability to merge, reformat and innovate symbolic resources common to the members. In the works of Bourdieu (1984) status consumption and cultural capital revolve around taste; the main focus is on aesthetics, improvisation and authenticity. Similarly, Üstüner & Holt (2010: 52) argue that often the most effective indications of cultural capital come through improvisation and in unexpected fashion.

Bourdieu (1984: 466) argues that the notion of taste is the practical ability of classifying things, which gives individuals the ability to use intuition or hunch to assess what is fitting for individuals in a certain social position; taste orients individuals to act fittingly to their social position in a given social space. This is especially evident in consumption. Bourdieu (1984) also argues that cultural capital is mostly acquired through socialization and often unintentionally. Üstüner and Holt (2010: 53) offer their take on cultural capital in the form of deterritorialized cultural capital; the authors argue that it can be acquired through active learning and is similar to learning a complex language, but still, it can seem borrowed and not authentic.

Bourdieu (1984: 475) asserts that things that challenge shared and learned values and classifications violate common sense, in other words, they violate the distinction of certain things that should be kept separate. To exemplify, every social system has its own value system, which guides the norms, beliefs and common sense rules that the members in these value systems conform to. Therefore a person from a certain social and value system might classify swine as an accepted form of food, but a person from Islamic culture would strictly classify it as unclean and unfit for eating. Similarly eating dog meat will most likely generate a great sense of avoidance or disgust in people from European culture. To extend this example to cultural capital, members in a certain value system will recognize fitting and acceptable behavior, since they have internalized the values and norms of their social system; the more the domain specific cultural capital an individual has, the more refined is the skill of understanding what is fitting.

Possessing cultural capital as a source of prestige means that the individual has a refined sense of understanding what is acceptable in a particular value system. This in turn means that the individual has refinement and can decipher what meanings different

objects have. The rapid development in information and communications technology has had enormous effects on both the quantity of information available to consumers and the access to it. Information in many ways has become limitless, as it crosses national borders and is almost instantaneously available to consumers, regardless of where the information comes from. These developments have also changed how things like products and services get their meaning, but these meanings are not fixed or static, instead they are constantly being altered.

As information is more available, the cultural capital required to decipher subtle signals may have been lessened. To exemplify, prior to the introduction of Internet in everyday life, to be in the know regarding new underground music bands, one needed to know the right people locally or spend time in the right music avenues. In contrast, it is now easier to find these upcoming artists and in other words get the implicit insider knowledge, even without being in part of the music communities, as the information is available online in music blogs. This accelerates cultural change. Access to information does not necessarily translate into understanding, as it still requires cultural capital to decipher the message. Therefore, domain specific cultural capital will probably persist as being valuable for consumers, for instance in acquiring group memberships, even when technology changes rapidly. (Berger & Ward 2010: 566.)

The study of Üstüner and Holt (2010) on status consumption in less industrialized countries is particularly relevant in this thesis, as it focuses on how cultural capital shapes status-seeking patterns, which in turn is closely related to prestige-seeking. Üstüner & Holt (2010: 37, 41) maintain that status consumption is related to individual display of social class position; moreover they measure cultural capital using three components which constitute of upbringing, education and occupation. This view is an established way of assessing cultural capital in status oriented studies, as cultural capital is one of the three sources of power.

Üstüner and Holt (2010: 42) found that Turkish consumers employed different status-seeking strategies depending on their level of cultural capital; lower cultural capital consumers in Turkey seek status by purchasing expensive products that have been approved by Turkish upper class opinion leaders, and the products are conspicuous and used to signal distance from people with less economic capital.

Consumers in Turkey with higher cultural capital level seek status by acquiring knowledge of Western lifestyles and then utilizing the knowledge in conforming to the

Western ways of life in a strict fashion (Üstüner & Holt 2010: 47). The knowledge is about the right ways of consuming or appreciating things, and this knowledge sets apart the lower cultural capital consumers from higher cultural capital consumers. The findings of Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) about using brands correctly within brand communities are strongly related to the knowledge aspect of consumption as a boundary marker.

Cultural capital in Turkey is mostly imported, meaning that the legitimate consumption patterns come from Western lifestyles, and Turkey's cultural elites use Western middle classes as tastemakers and conform to the rules established by them. Therefore the cultural capital of Turkish elite is the ability to understand, absorb and internalize ways of consuming and consumption objects used by Western people. (Üstüner & Holt 2010: 50.)

Higher cultural capital consumers in Turkey reason that Western people are motivated by certain consumption experiences due to their intrinsic value, e.g. for their ability to satisfy personal needs of being oneself or being true to oneself. The Western consumers are seen to be self-actualizing, while Turks conform to norms, which they fear to deviate from. Higher cultural capital consumers stated that they would self-actualize, but they realize that it is not seen as acceptable. Many hobbies labeled as Western lack the critical mass of practitioners to achieve the status of being accepted by the general population, and thus a Western hobby maybe shunned or seen as weird. In other words the social risks are too great to pursue many Western hobbies. (Üstüner & Holt 2010: 51.)

#### 2.4.2 Tangible and intangible objects

It is well established that consumers project their actual and desired identities through their use of products (Solomon 1983; Belk 1988). Brands are central in this process, as they are used by the consumers as tools of communication (Berger & Ward 2010: 555).

Berger & Heath (2007) assert that possessions are important signalers for consumers. Wiedmann et al. (2009: 632) argue that if individuals are classified as materialistic, they have a favorable stance on acquisition of products and prioritize resources to attain material possessions. Consuming brands that are regarded as prestigious is a facet of materialism, as materialistic individuals signal their prestige through their possessions and inversely assess other's prestige through their possessions (Vigneron & Johnson

1999: 7). In line with the argument, Richins & Dawson (1992) argue that highly materialistic consumers use external cues excessively, especially products that are consumed in public.

The use of tangible goods in signaling individual skills or knowledge can be a possible way to acquire admiration, since the others observing have a visible object through which they can assess these otherwise usually unobservable qualities like skills. From this perspective the item in question has to be an end-product of the particular skill. To clarify the aforementioned, a hunter could display feathers which are particularly difficult to obtain as a testament of his skills in hunting. (Plourde 2008: 376.)

This view of prestige goods as honest signals of skills could therefore apply in numerous domains. To continue the example presented in the introduction, the leader in Tour de France gets to wear a yellow jersey as recognition of his position and ultimately his skills. Similarly a BMW X6 could then signal that the owner has skills in something that is rewarded with a notable amount of money, whether it is excellent engineering skills or talent in design. Johansson-Stenman & Martinsson (2006: 133) argue that expensive objects, whether a product or a service, may signify wealth, and moreover, they can also convey an image of high skill level or competency.

Plourde (2008: 374) defines prestige goods as tangible items, which are used to communicate higher social status and contribute in reinforcing status. This thesis views that prestige is not necessarily attached only to tangible objects, since prestige can be acquired with any objects that are relevant and meaningful for a value system. Seeking prestige is essentially a communication process and tangible objects function as better communicators than intangible objects, but the importance of intangible objects persists. To exemplify, a person might consume a service like a live concert of music, which is intangible in nature. Consequently, if the concert goer pursues prestige with this action, he or she might signal it through speech or by posting a photo of the tickets on Facebook or Instagram. The intangible objects such as services can rarely be used in prestige-seeking without physical and tangible cues of them, as it cannot be perceived by other people.

Recognition can be described as a public display of appreciation granted by a collectivity to people, who do deeds which the collectivity want to or appreciate, and even if recognition can come in some form that has economic value, as in the case of

prizes, it mostly consists of symbolic value like a plaque offered to a volunteer (Fisher & Ackerman 1998: 264).

Belk, Wallendorf & Sherry Jr (1989) argue that objects can acquire a sacred status among groups of people. For example for many BMW enthusiasts the M Series has a legendary status. Many consumers might not recognize that these M Series cars are any different from standard BMWs, since they are not radically different from the outside. However, the M Series automobiles have higher performance compared to other models and consequently a higher price. The M Series automobiles can be recognized from an M-badge.

## 2.5 Signaling prestige

The relationship between signaling and cultural capital has been explored in studies by Berger & Ward (2010) and Han et al. (2010). The studies assert that the level of cultural capital affects the signaling practices of consumers. O’Cass and McEwen (2004: 37) note that the display of items can be done consciously or unconsciously. This has a notable effect on prestige-seeking by using signaling, as noted by Hatch (1989).

Signaling prestige is essentially a communication process, in which a consumer tries to communicate in a way that he or she will acquire the acceptance, appreciation or even admiration of others. As noted before, the sources of prestige are mostly based on skills and knowledge – which are essentially cultural capital – and they guide the use of material and immaterial objects in prestige signaling. Prestige-seeking in consumption relies heavily on the use of material objects to signal things that give the individual social appreciation and honor.

To simplify, there is no attempt of acquiring prestige, if it is not communicated in any way. Therefore the attempt of acquiring prestige has to have a vessel of some sort to carry the message to the receiver. The vessels e.g. cues or signals have to be sent in a way that it is perceived by the receiver, so the message has to be in some form that is decipherable by the human senses. Most often this communication is in visual or verbal form. Marketers design their brands and logos in a way that they facilitate the interpersonal action and often loud signaling, and cater to the needs of consumers in their pursuit of keeping up with the Joneses (Berger & Ward 2010: 565).

Signaling processes are often linked to vertical differentiation, but it is also relevant in horizontal differentiation. This means that individuals with high-status desire distinction from lower-status individuals, which is classified as vertical differentiation, to gain esteem and help interacting with similar people. Furthermore, groups desire to differentiate themselves from other groups that have same level of status and this in turn is classified as horizontal differentiation. The following example sheds light on these two types of differentiation processes; jocks pursue differentiation from the nerds and further, the football players and swimmers also pursue differentiation from each other. Subtle signaling can facilitate differentiation vertically and horizontally. (Berger & Ward 2010: 566.)

Visibility is a significant part of the whole communication process. Consumption of products or services alone does not guarantee the recognition the consumer pursues, as the visibility of consumption plays an essential part in the communication, since visibility makes it easier for others to make the wanted conclusions. (Berger & Ward 2010: 557.)

A construct of 'brand prominence', which analyzes the conspicuousness of brands and their logos on certain goods, is a useful concept for this thesis. According to this construct consumers can be classified into four different groups, which are based on the consumer's affluence and the need for status. The desire to use conspicuous or inconspicuous luxury goods within each group is determined by their will to associate with groups that are seen as their own, or to dissociate from groups that are seen as 'others'. (Han et al. 2010: 15.)

The four Ps of luxury is derived from the group names of different consumer types: patricians, parvenus, poseurs and proletarians. Consumers are assigned to certain group using two different variables on a scale ranging from high to low: wealth and the need for status. 'Patricians' are high in wealth and low on need for status, 'parvenus' are high in wealth and high on need for status, 'poseurs' are low in wealth and high on need for status, and 'proletarians' are low in wealth and need for status. (Han et al. 2010: 17.)

The four groups associate and dissociate from each other differently. The two groups, 'patricians' and 'parvenus', are categorized as the haves. 'Patricians' associate with other 'patricians' and compete with each other, while not dissociating from other groups. 'Patricians' consume luxuries that are categorized as quiet, meaning that their signaling is subtle and it can be only interpreted by other 'patricians'. 'Parvenus'

associate with both other 'parvenus' and 'patricians', and dissociate from 'poseurs' and 'proletarians'. 'Parvenus' signal loudly, meaning that they consume luxuries that are clearly and easily deciphered as luxuries. 'Parvenus' lack the knowledge and cultural capital to understand subtle signals of different luxuries, but importantly they want to differentiate from 'poseurs' and 'proletarians', who can decipher the meaning of loud luxuries but cannot afford them. 'Parvenus' and their need for status becomes evident through their will to dissociate from have-nots. (Han et al. 2010: 17.)

The two groups categorized as have-nots are 'poseurs' and 'proletarians'. 'Poseurs' wish to associate with the haves, as their need for status is high, but their affluence is limited. Therefore they often consume knock-offs of authentic luxuries, but can become 'parvenus' if they acquire wealth. 'Proletarians' are less status conscious and have less wealth, and therefore are not driven to consume luxuries. (Han et al. 2010: 17.)

The ability to decipher signals is a thing that sets apart patricians from the others and consequently affects their behavior. Patricians and their ability to understand quiet signals enable them to use quiet signaling in horizontal communication, e.g. to other patricians. The groups with less cultural capital on the other hand require louder signals to decipher them. Therefore, parvenus choose explicit markers to signal their difference in terms of affluence to groups below and that they belong to the affluent, even while patricians recognize that they do not belong to them. (Han et al. 2010: 25.)

Some individuals in groups categorized as affluent care less about being distinguished from others and more about associating with similar individuals, namely patricians, and they prefer subtle signals recognized only by other patricians (Han et al. 2010: 18). Different consumers have different signaling practices and the explicitness of signaling is largely dependent on how much cultural capital the signaler possesses; consumers with high cultural capital favor subtle signals and consumers with low cultural capital favor loud signals (Berger & Ward 2010: 559).

As Berger and Ward (2010: 559) noted, cultural capital in sociology is typically linked to affluence and class; the authors were more interested in how cultural capital affects individual distinction seeking processes, both in vertical differentiation (status related) or horizontal differentiation (peer related). Berger and Ward (2010: 559) argue that goods may lose their ability to project a certain social identity, when they are used by multiple groups like geeks and jocks, as the signal is no longer clearly decipherable.

Berger & Ward (2010: 558) note that status-laden goods can lose some of their signal value, when the cultural and historical meaning attached to them has changed and have lost their ability to convey the intended message, as the meaning has changed over time. This also applies to goods associated with prestige, as it is essentially an agreement, a consensus on the object's meaning.

### 2.5.1 Explicit signaling and conspicuous consumption

Explicit signaling in prestige-seeking is an act of signaling in a loud and particularly visible way, often with a material object. Veblen (1899) argues that people use conspicuous consumption to communicate to others. Belk (1988) confirms this by arguing that people express their identity with the use of products that are visible and easily observable. According to Veblen (1899), explicit and loud signals are more effective signals. These findings suggest that noticeable and visible markers like logos with clear prints can be used by consumers to portray an image they want to (Berger & Ward 2010: 555).

Easily noticeable markers such as explicit brand names function as potent signals in public interaction, as they are easily seen and easily identifiable by the others. When the marker is easily identifiable, it can function better as a signaler in the consumer's communication process, since it can help them in projecting a desired image. (Berger & Ward 2010: 557–558)

In a Veblenian sense, an individual has to show evidence of the wealth and power in order to acquire esteem (Mason 1981: 7). Consumers that are described as high self-monitors may use status brands more conspicuously than low self-monitors, since they are more aware of themselves in terms of status and appearance, and they understand that goods can portray an image (Sullivan & Harnish 1990). Consumer groups which utilize conspicuous consumption and keenly invite their members to do so are those who conceive that the possession and showing of wealth is a key to attaining the group membership, or that conspicuous consumption is a way of attaining prestige in that group (Mason 1981: 25).

Adam Smith and Thorsten Veblen argue that conspicuous consumption is a product of a particular social and economic setting, where the conspicuous display is determined by the society's values. If the society in question does not condemn conspicuous consumption, then the members of the society will implement this form of consumption

in their behavior, since it is not socially punished. Vice versa, if the society or social system condemns conspicuous consumption, individuals will use other means to attain prestige and establish social position. (Mason 1981: 20.)

The main motivators for conspicuous consumption are status and prestige considerations (Mason 1981: ix). Veblen asserts that conspicuous consumption of goods and services that are costly and held in high esteem offers an individual a way to acquire social prestige in a society, as long as the particular society identifies wealth as the most important factor contributing to status (Mason 1981: 8). Similarly, Adam Smith argued that in societies categorized as stratified, individuals could increase their power and prestige by increasing their wealth and consuming symbols in a proper conspicuous manner (Reisman 1976: 103). In order to conspicuous consumption to be useful for a consumer, ostentation has to be a form of acceptable behavior in the eyes of most dominant cultures within the society (Mason 1981: 21). The use of conspicuous consumption to secure status gains may decline, since one determinant of status, namely education, has acquired a more central role in social prestige (Mason 1981: 104).

Equality affects conspicuous consumption in many ways. When equality is high, bottom-tier consumers consume more status-goods, since the number of people being passed is higher, compared to when equality is low. In the case of high equality, the possession gap between individuals is shorter and therefore people are more satisfied with their possessions, but on the other hand the position gains are greater, since the gaps between classes are shorter. When equality is low, the possession gap is significant and bottom-tier consumers are not satisfied with their belongings, and thus have to 'keep up with the Joneses'. (Ordabayeva & Chandon 2011: 27.)

Plourde (2008: 376) asserts that prestige goods have to be costly signals to function reliably. Nelissen and Meijers (2011) demonstrated how an individual who used luxury brands was treated more favorably by people, compared with using brands classified as ordinary; luxury brands consequently functioned as costly signals that made observing people estimate a wearer's social status as higher than compared with ordinary brands.

Any behavior has to meet four criteria in order to be classified as costly signaling. Firstly, the signal has to be perceived relatively easy. Secondly, it has to be difficult to imitate or fake. Thirdly, the actual signal has to be linked to an unperceivable but still desirable attribute, such as good genes. Fourthly, the signal has to provide fitness benefits. (Bliege Birde & Smith 2005.)

Brands and their labels qualify the first criterion, since they are intended to be perceivable and identifiable. Brands qualify the second criterion validly, since branded items tend to be more expensive than otherwise functionally identical items, which makes them costly signals. Brands in some cases qualify the third criterion of signaling an unperceivable and desirable attribute, more specifically in the case of luxury brands, they signal a socially valued trait of being affluent. Ultimately, particular brands can meet the fourth criterion by for example signaling skill of attaining resources, which in turn provides fitness benefits. (Nelissen & Meijers 2011: 344–345.)

Conspicuous consumption as an attempt to pursue prestige has been historically effective at least in value systems which have stressed the importance of having economic capital. Therefore explicit signaling in the form of Veblenian conspicuous consumption has been effective as it has been a costly signal and an honest display of affluence.

#### 2.5.2 Subtle signaling

Products may be explicit i.e. the logos or prints are clearly observable; while some products are discreet i.e. the signals are less loud. The items that are categorized as subtle signalers may remain unidentifiable for most viewers and therefore have less general communicative value, but these subtle signals can be interpreted by consumers with high cultural capital in the particular product category. These high cultural capital individuals prefer subtle signals, as they help distinguish them from the mass, and provide interaction with other high cultural capital individuals. (Berger & Ward 2010: 555-556.)

‘Insiders’ are consumers, who have a significant amount of cultural capital in a certain product or activity domain. Insiders have a contradictory attitude toward visible logos, on one hand they avoid them, but in specific situations they are suitable and even preferable. The suitability depends on the distinction it provides from the mainstream. Insiders have a strong need to signal their own identity. They communicate to others with the use of items and they prefer quieter signaling, when the objects are relevant for their identity and more publically on display. (Berger & Ward 2010: 556.)

The study of Berger and Ward (2010) demonstrate how discrete signals influence consumers’ likes and how they work as cues for making inferences; their study shows

how high-end goods with more quiet markers are perceived as the same as less expensive low-end ones by consumers with less domain specific cultural capital.

Han et al. (2010: 25) recognized that patricians do not need explicit markings to assess a price of an item, as they recognize less prominent details to draw a conclusion of the item's price. The discreet and silent signals of certain objects are therefore decipherable by consumers with knowledge on the signal's meaning (Berger & Ward 2010: 556). As noted, quiet signals may be more difficult for consumers to recognize or they may be even misinterpreted, but people with enough connoisseurship, in other words more cultural capital, will decipher the message (Berger & Ward 2010: 558). Quiet markers gain their signal value from knowledge and how it is divided between groups. In order to understand subtle signals, information of other domains and categories is not needed, but decoding them requires domain specific cultural capital. (Berger & Ward 2010: 560.)

Berger and Ward (2010: 559) examined the concept of cultural knowledge and how uniqueness motives and the need to express one's social identities direct individuals with high cultural capital to occasionally favor more quiet signals, even when they may function less well in general. Berger and Ward (2010: 559) propose that insiders favor quiet signals since they are more driven by expressing themselves and communicating their identities i.e. they have a stronger need for uniqueness; this need for uniqueness becomes stronger in product categories, which are identity-relevant for the insider and where the particular product is consumed publically.

The studies conducted by Berger and Ward (2010: 566) suggested that wealth and tendency to use quiet signaling was not consistent and cultural capital was better at predicting preferences of consumers, rather than wealth. Consumption patterns are solid at signaling identity, when the patterns are limited to people that are alike; therefore groups may sacrifice mainstream identification by using less explicit markers to assure precise signaling within in-group. (Berger & Ward 2010: 567.)

In the context of prestige-seeking, individuals may use subtle signals to communicate things that are relevant for acquiring prestige such as attributes linked to success. Consumers with value system specific cultural capital recognize what is deemed as appropriate by others. If seeking prestige is a game, individuals with high cultural capital understand the game's rules better, in other words they recognize the shared

values, norms and beliefs that are the basis for granting prestige. They understand what can be done and what not in seeking prestige.

### 2.5.3 Signaling membership

People use consumption to classify themselves and as a way to communicate (Holt 1995). Similarly, consumers classify others through their consumption and consequently make assumptions of the others' identities (Holt 1998). The symbolism attached to certain brands is often interpreted by consumers as the relationship between the brand and the people who use it (Muniz & O'Guinn 2001). Consumption is essential in multi-group settings; it helps consumers to form either bridges or gaps between different groups (Douglas & Isherwood 1978: 89) or to build borders (see Bourdieu 1984).

Muniz & O'Guinn (2001: 420) note that consumers understand the link between brands and its users, more specifically; they perceive that certain groups of people use certain brands and may use or avoid the brands, because of the group association. In the aforementioned example the brand has gained signal value from the people who use it, whether it is negative or positive. Berger and Ward (2010) argue that when products or brands are used by numerous similar people, these objects attain cultural and symbolic meaning. In the study of Muniz and O'Guinn (2001: 419), one informant, a Saab enthusiast, disliked that 'yuppies' had bought Saabs in the 1980s for it was in fashion during that time, and therefore the brand had attained a 'yuppie' image.

Easily perceivable markers like big logos function as effective cues for consumers in identifying other consumers and their group affiliations or identities. Therefore a consumer maybe perceived as a jock if he or she wears clothes made by Abercrombie and Fitch or as a yuppie by driving a BMW. These easily identifiable markers may then be adopted by consumers, who aspire to belong in these groups, as they recognize that these brands are symbols used by these particular groups of people. Well-known and recognizable symbols are more wanted by consumers, since the symbols may increase the odds of favorable treatment inside the target group; this is largely due to the greater signal value attached to an object that is well known. (Berger & Ward 2010: 558.)

This relationship between brands and its users depicts the meaning transfer that contributes to signal value. Consumers may adopt brands, products and consumption practices of different groups in order to acquire this signal value that comes from being associated with a particular group (Berger & Ward 2010: 558). Englis and Solomon

(1995: 14) state that the consumption of different social groups may be mimicked by consumers, when these consumers aspire to be associated with a particular group and its lifestyle.

Feltovich, Harbaugh & To (2002) examined signaling theories in game theory and concluded that one group may not signal, or may even copy signals used by a second group, to avert being misidentified with a third group, when several signaling dimensions can be used. Consumers, who aspire to belong to a group within a particular consumption domain, may poach the loud signals used by the 'insiders' to be perceived as one of them (Berger & Ward 2010: 559). For example a person might buy a BMW to be perceived as a business man or a yuppie.

The said example is relevant, when there are numerous ways to differentiate from other groups, for example affluent people may own automobiles that are associated with less affluent people, but they still can be identified as affluent through their use of costly clothes (Berger & Ward 2010: 560). Feltovich et al. (2002: 631) argue that 'high' types, for instance in terms of affluence, productivity or fertility, may use costly signaling (for example Veblenian consumption) to distinguish themselves from others who are lower types, but may also countersignal to distinguish from medium types. Feltovich et al. (2002: 631) assert that as the nouveau riche indulge in ostentation, the old rich show disdain towards ostentation. Thus a high type may dress down instead of dressing up to countersignal and therefore differentiate from the medium type. Feltovich et al. (2002: 631) maintain that countersignaling is a sign of confidence, as medium type have to clearly distinguish themselves from the lower types through signaling.

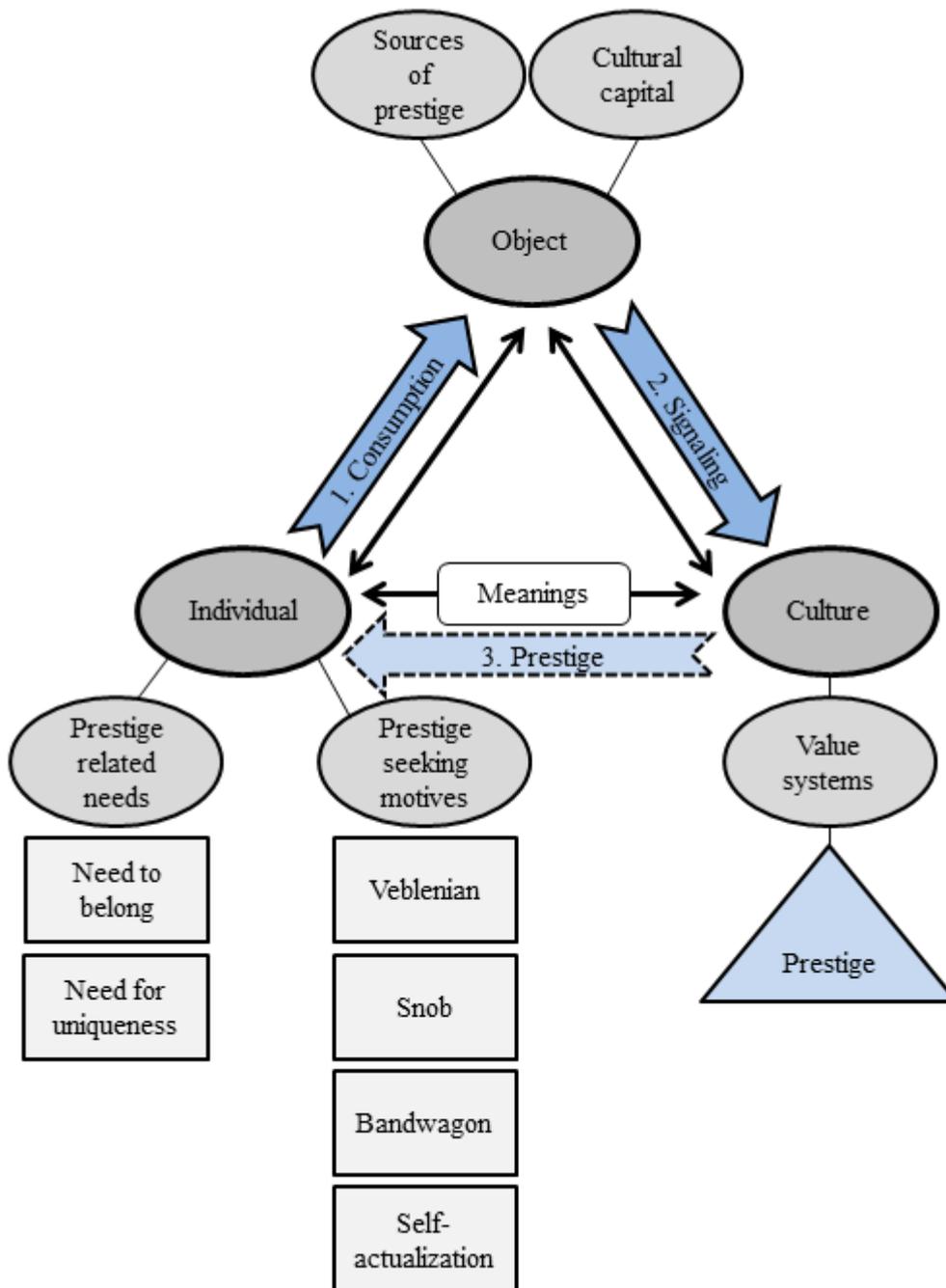
Some groups may use subtle signaling to avoid poaching from out-groups, when their message is aimed at the in-group. In these kinds of situations subtle signals may work better. On the other hand, a particular group may imitate one group to distinguish themselves from a third party. (Berger & Ward 2010: 556.)

If the 'mass' – mainstream consumers – favor loud signals, the people in the know – insiders – may reject these loud signals to not be linked with these consumers (Berger & Heath 2007; Escalas & Bettman 2005). Therefore insiders prefer subtle signals to distinguish themselves from the mass and to help them interact with the likeminded (Berger & Ward 2010: 559). Consumers who want to distinguish themselves from others in a bigger group often do so by signaling with material objects that are visible (Tian et al. 2001: 50). Consumers often have conflicting assimilation and differentiation

motives regarding one purchase; this can lead to a choice, in which the consumer on one hand assimilates to a group on certain domain and on the other hand differentiates from the group members in other domain (Chan, Berger & Van Boven 2012: 561).

## 2.6 Theoretical framework on prestige-seeking consumer behavior

The first research objective in this thesis was *to establish a theoretical framework on prestige-seeking consumer behavior*. This objective is simplified into a model, which ties together the fundamentals described in previous sections. Taken together, the process of seeking prestige according to the previous theoretical findings can be modeled as shown below in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** Theoretical framework on prestige-seeking consumer behavior.

Culture and the value systems in it define what prestige is and how it is awarded. As noted, the shared values, norms and beliefs of a social system define prestige and the more congruent an individual's actions are with the value system, the more the individual is awarded with prestige.

Firstly, individuals have different needs and motives that affect their prestige-seeking. When their need for esteem is triggered, they try to relieve tension through acquiring objects that they deem to be sources of prestige, consciously or unconsciously. Secondly, individuals then acquire and consume these objects – material or immaterial – and use them in signaling to attain prestige. The value systems and the people in them decide if the action is appropriate and then reward the individual with acceptance, appreciation or admiration.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter argues the choices regarding the research methodology and aspires to justify the use of particular methods. “A methodology refers to the choices we make about cases to study, methods of data gathering, forms of data analysis etc. in planning and executing a research study” (Silverman 2006: 15).

#### 3.1 Categorizing the study

As stated earlier, the research problem of this study is formulated as “*How is prestige pursued in consumption?*” and the empirical part of the thesis approaches this problem by analyzing how consumers use products and more specifically automobiles, in hopes of acquiring prestige. The concept of prestige and how consumers seek prestige is a relatively unmapped territory within marketing, as the primary studies to it are few in number (see Vigneron & Johnson 1999). Prestige has been studied in marketing using quantitative methods, but the particular study focused on luxury value and viewed prestige only as a symbolic group membership facilitator i.e. bandwagon effect (Wiedmann et al. 2009).

Therefore to fully grasp the notion of prestige and especially how consumers perceive and pursue it, some of the fundamental questions regarding prestige have to be explored and understood. Due to the research problem, research objectives, research perspective and the understudied nature of the subject, qualitative research approach and methods were chosen. It is argued that prestige is a complex concept with a multifaceted nature (see Vigneron & Johnson 1999; Hatch 1989) and hence requires more in-depth knowledge of the essential questions regarding it, which in turn justifies the use of qualitative methods.

Epistemology focuses on the nature of knowledge and moreover what are the sources of knowledge and what limits its extraction (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008: 14). The research perspective of symbolic interactionism has epistemological assumptions which follow the view of social constructionism. To specify, “all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty 1998: 42). Therefore the

existence of meaning is always tied to a mind and meanings cannot be merely discovered, as it has to be constructed (Crotty 1998: 8-9).

### 3.2 Choosing the research method

In the context of consumer research, qualitative research is commonly seen as being connected or even paralleled to personal interviews (Moisander & Valtonen 2006: 71). However, interviewing was used as a method in this thesis based on the fact that exploring prestige related motives requires an access to individual motives and talk is a convenient way of doing it. Of course, individual talk may not reflect the actual thoughts of the informant as he or she might have different cognitive biases that filters or alters their talk. Moreover, the informants and their behavior may be significantly different from their own recollections and point of view.

Holt (1997: 339) argues that direct questioning related to the social meanings attached to an individual's consumption patterns may not provide proper data; instead the meanings should be interpreted by the researcher through extensive discussions with the consumer about their daily life preferences, taste and activities (see Thompson et al. 1994) or by observation (Holt 1995). Similarly, Rogers (2003: 231) notes that the examination of status related motives can be difficult using direct questions, as the informants may be reluctant to admit their choice was affected by status-seeking motives.

Primary research on individual conspicuous consumption and their pursuit of status and prestige has notable difficulties. One of the main problems is the fact that individuals who consume conspicuously and show their wealth keenly in hopes of acquiring prestige, will seldom or never admit that their consumption has such objectives. From the informant's point of view, this is a rational decision since individual expenditures in hopes of impressing others can create a contrary reaction. Recognition and status are usually granted and bestowed, but pursuing them openly is seen to be a negative thing, which may prompt the status seeker to deny intentions of purchasing status or recognition. (Mason 1981: 42.)

In case it is unrealistic that the interviewed consumers will speak of their reasons for consuming conspicuously in an objective manner, a substitutive approach to research methodology has to be utilized. Observation is in this case a valid approach to analyze

conspicuous consumption in attempts to explain motives for it. Observation is partly problematic due to its subjective nature and it can be difficult to assess if consumption of an object is described as a conspicuous display. Observation is about making informed judgments, but it is justified to adopt observational methods in the research strategy regarding conspicuous consumption. (Mason 1981: 42–43.)

Within consumer culture theory, also known as CCT, there have been studies of product symbolism and they encourage using multiple methods and using natural settings (see Arnould & Thompson 2005). Despite these arguments in favor of observation and multiple methods, this thesis utilized semi-structured interviews as the source of empirical data. This was mainly due to the research problem and research objectives, which focused on understanding prestige-seeking from a consumer perspective. The fact that the research material had to be purposeful for the research project played an important part as well. Still, to understand the needs and motives of the consumer, semi-structured interviewing was seen to be effective and convenient in addressing these matters.

### 3.3 Research object

To argue why cars and the BMW brand in particular were chosen as the consumer's object of seeking prestige, it is necessary to illustrate the findings of Mason (1981: 43):

“If the product chosen for consumption is distinctive by its high cost, its conspicuous design, its social appeal and its ostentatious display in use, and shows at the same time a very limited practical utility value relative to its cost or to the price paid, then it is reasonable to suspect and believe that the consumption decision has been motivated primarily by display considerations.”

BMW as a brand had many models that fit the description stated above. This was especially accurate in an X6, which was a relatively big sport utility vehicle without being spacious and thus rendered it less pragmatic than other similar SUVs. BMWs are also premium priced and have an arguably conspicuous design along with high social appeal. Therefore it was justified to assume that buying an expensive BMW automobile was partly motivated by prestige related matters.

### 3.4 Sampling

One of the central issues in qualitative research is the sample; often the size is secondary to the sample's authenticity (Silverman 2006: 15). The informants were selected by using convenience sampling. As this study was done as a part of a larger project, a car dealer was contacted and their willingness to participate as a case company was inquired. The procedure started by contacting the person in charge of the BMW dealership at the particular dealer. He was then given the details of the project and asked if the case company could contact their customers and ask them to participate in interviews. The person in charge was willing to provide assistance for the project. The person in charge was guided to contact customers who owned newly bought BMWs which were worth above 80 000 euros. Initially the objective was to study X6 owners. This proved to be difficult so the model of the car was then unrestricted, but the price category remained the same. The age and gender of the customers were not restricted in any way. This then resulted in five informants and five interviews.

First and foremost, convenience sampling was chosen since getting an access to BMW owners whose cars are worth more than 80 000 euros is tremendously difficult without a customer record of some sort. Therefore a joint effort with a car dealer provided an inexpensive and convenient way of accessing consumers relevant to the research problem. Moreover as the purpose of this study was not to provide statistical generalizations, but to create understanding of the research problem, the use of convenience sampling was seen to be plausible.

### 3.5 Research material collection

The interviewing was conducted in a semi-structured and open-ended manner. The interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder. The interview questions were structured from the existing theory and divided into different categories that were relevant for the research problem. The interview questions and the categories can be seen in Appendix 1. As the previous studies stressed the avoidance of direct questioning, the questions were mostly indirect and focused on aspects like decision-making, social context and the owner's identity.

The interviewing followed the categories and the questions were asked in a fluid manner, so as the informant talked of a certain subject, he would be asked with a

question from the relevant category to provide a steady flow of talk. All of the questions were not enquired, as the purpose was to reach a certain saturation level in the categories and often the informants spoke of relevant categories without excessive prompting.

The interviews were conducted in different locations, but largely in ordinary and natural settings to avoid being similar to a laboratory situation. This was done to help the subjects generate talk in a more relaxed fashion. Moreover, the interviews were done face-to-face in a private location without one exception that was conducted in a café. The café had relatively few patrons in and they were few tables away and the interview was consequently private. The privacy was a key thing as some parts of the interview were sensitive and the informant might have moderated their behavior because of the presence of others.

### 3.6 Research material analysis

As pointed out by Mason (1981: 42–43), Holt (1997: 339), and Johansson-Stenman & Martinsson (2006: 131), individuals may avoid answering objectively to direct questions regarding status-seeking and prestige-seeking since it is a relatively sensitive subject. Therefore interpretation was required in the analysis. Hatch (1989: 346) argues that the research on social honor demands the use of interpretive methods as it has an intangible nature and it has its roots in culture.

Symbolic interactionism utilizes a qualitative interpretive framework. Symbolic interactionism relies on using techniques such as analytic induction or grounded theory. Analytic induction is dependent on using inductive reasoning along with empirical evidence from specific contexts. The particular methods used by symbolic interactionists are for example ethnography, observation, unstructured interviews and focus groups. (Pascale 2010: 88.)

However as the nature of prestige and the research problem were such that they could be difficult to access in spontaneous talk, inductive reasoning was seen to be unfit alone. Certain aspects of deductive reasoning were needed to properly address the research problem. Consequently this thesis utilized abductive reasoning to create understanding of the research problem. The abductive reasoning could be seen for

example in how after the first interview some relevant questions and categories were added to clarify some of the aspects that were relevant for the research problem.

The empirical data was analyzed using interpretive techniques, namely hermeneutic interpretation. Hermeneutics can be defined as a theory as well as a method for interpreting individual actions and it focuses on understanding the doings of the individuals from their point of view (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008: 306). A central concept in hermeneutic tradition is pre-understanding; pre-understanding means that before any interpretation is done, the observer and the object already exist and therefore all interpretations by observers are affected by culture (Arnold & Fischer 1994: 56).

Hermeneutic interpretation is relevant in marketing research as simply as pointed out by Walker & Olson (1991: 111): 'Marketers need models to analyze and interpret how consumers perceive products in relation to themselves'. This relates to the hermeneutic perspective and the consumption experiences told by individuals are a fruitful way to understand the aforementioned (Thompson 1997: 439).

The hermeneutic circle rests on the premise that in order to fully comprehend a part's role, the whole has to be grasped. To understand for instance the role of an advertisement slogan, the institutional context of the company has to be explored. After getting a crude picture of the whole, these specific parts are explored again numerous times, with an altered conception of the whole thing. (Moisander & Valtonen 2006: 111.)

Hermeneutic circling is done to attain comprehension that is without any internal contradictions; the researcher has to persist in this effort to reach a coherent view of the research subject (Arnold & Fischer 1994: 63). The dialectic back and forth process used in hermeneutic interpretation generates explanations of individual behavior that cannot be seen as having causal explaining power (Moisander & Valtonen 2006: 112).

The whole hermeneutic interpretation process follows a particular part-to-whole approach, where the researcher first immerses in previous information regarding the subject and this defines the researcher's initial frame of reference. Then the researcher continues by looking at the research material, reading it through numerous times and highlighting possible patterns. From these parts, i.e. patterns, the researcher tries to grasp the whole. (Thompson 1997: 441.)

In hermeneutic interpretation the quality of the whole study is dependent of the previous knowledge and understanding that the researcher has, as well as individual ability to make astute connections between the previous knowledge and the research material. (Thompson 1997: 442.)

As a researcher I understand that all my findings and conclusions are tied to my skill to interpret the research material. The whole research process craves much from the researcher and the chosen methods even more so. Therefore as a novice researcher, the findings are subject to criticism and open to discussion.

### 3.7 Validity and reliability

Validity refers to the degree how well a study measures the concept that it tries to measure (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008: 310). Silverman (2010: 275, 290) argues that validity is a synonym for truth and he maintains that reliability is ‘the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions’. Validity as a criterion in cultural research can be difficult since knowledge is never value-free (Moisander & Valtonen 2006: 24). Building from the above-mentioned remarks, it is important to pursue trustworthiness in the study. Lincoln & Guba (1985: 290) argue that the trustworthiness in qualitative research is central and it can be assessed through four different variables and especially in naturalistic settings: Credibility, Transferability, Dependability and Confirmability.

Credibility refers to the matter that the researcher can have confidence in the trustworthiness of the findings. This credibility can be enhanced through five different techniques. First technique, *activities increasing the probability that credible findings will be produced* and this consists of three different activities. *Prolonged engagement* with the investigated topic or object is seen to strengthen the credibility. Secondly, *persistent observation* refers to focusing on elements that are most essential in terms of the research object, and it provides depth for the research. Thirdly, *triangulation* is argued to enhance the credibility. (Lincoln & Guba 1985: 301-305.) Denzin (1978) suggests that there are four ways to triangulate: using multiple sources of data, research methods, researchers and theories. The second technique is *peer debriefing*, in which the researcher shares his research and related ideas with a peer, who understands the field the research covers. This peer can help in uncovering possible biases the researcher

has by voicing them out. The third technique, namely *negative case analysis* is the way of enhancing credibility through revising hypotheses in hindsight and searching for negative examples that do not fit the hypothesis. *Referential adequacy* is the fourth technique which involves storing some of the raw data separately and testing it against the findings made from the preliminary analysis. The fifth technique is *member checking* where the obtained data and possible interpretations and conclusions are returned to the informants for their validation. (Lincoln & Guba 1985: 305-315.)

Credibility related matters in this thesis were approached through an extensive theoretical engagement. Persistent observation was an aspiration, but some aspects of it were difficult to achieve due to limitations set by the research method and overall purpose of the research material collection. This is under focus on later chapters. Using triangulation to enhance the credibility was mostly done by using different theoretical perspectives. Peer debriefing as a technique was only in adequate use, since the other researchers in the project focused on other perspectives. Negative case analysis was used in improving working hypotheses and assumptions, for example in the case of Harri, who as an informant was close to a negative case. Referential adequacy was not done due to relatively scarce primary research material. However, the method of hermeneutic interpretation helped in uncovering some minor but significant details not seen by the few first analyzing phases. Finally, member checking was not done as suggested by experts.

Transferability is about showing that the findings can be applied to other different contexts. In naturalistic settings addressing external validity can be difficult, so in order to enhance trustworthiness, the researcher should focus on thick description of all the relevant factors. Thick description helps in assessing transferability to other contexts. (Lincoln & Guba 1985: 316.)

Transferability in this thesis was pursued through thick description to ensure the reader sees the bigger picture from where the interpretations are made of. Some details regarding the informants were left out to safeguard their identities and thus make the research ethically responsible.

Dependability is about indicating the consistence of the findings and their replicability. One way to achieve this is through a procedure called inquiry audit, where an outsider examines the research process, data and findings – especially that the data is consistent

with the findings. (Lincoln & Guba 1985: 316-318.) Dependability in this study received less attention, as ultimately the supervisor examines these.

Confirmability is similar to the notion of objectivity and confirmability is achieved through transparency of the whole research process. A confirmability audit requires thorough records of what was done and importantly how. This includes everything from raw data to findings and how the researcher has reached these conclusions. The main focus is on clarity behind each step in the research process. This ultimately provides the reader with the necessary information to potentially reach the same conclusions as the researcher. (Lincoln & Guba 1985: 318-327.)

Confirmability was approached with the same mentality as transferability, since thick description and transparency tend to go hand in hand. To exemplify, the attempts to clarify how I as a researcher reached certain conclusions was made as transparent as possible.

There are several things that should be taken into consideration when assessing validity and reliability in hermeneutic interpretation. Madison (1989) notes that it is impossible to make an objective interpretation, even if some interpretations can be better than others, there are still various ways to interpret a certain thing and a single interpretation cannot be therefore deemed as ultimate or correct. Still, hermeneutics differs from utmost relativism and it is similar with the basic understanding that ‘there is a more than one side to every story’ along with recognizing that understanding has various points of perspective (Arnold & Fischer 1994: 59).

This has important implications regarding the generalizability of this study. The findings and conclusions apply to the research material and no larger scale conclusions can be drawn from the evidence provided in this study. However, the conclusions and findings should be taken into consideration when generating hypotheses regarding prestige-seeking and status-seeking.

### 3.8 Pre-understanding and researcher’s position

The hermeneutic interpretation has a notable emphasis on pre-understanding, as noted from previous chapters. As a researcher the process of buying cars was familiar to me, since I had previously worked at a car dealer, where I assisted in sales. The particular

dealer did not offer BMWs, so the brand and its customers were rather unfamiliar to me. This experience in sales did however spark my interest in the underlying reasons why people chose certain makes and models.

Prestige and status were in many ways new concepts for me in the initial part of the research process. The marketing related aspects of it were scattered in numerous journal articles and only few of them approached the subject on a deep level and directly. The core concepts in this thesis were taken from sociology and social psychology, as well as evolutionary biology, which seemed more accurate on describing day-to-day behavior of individuals. Difficulties in finding plausible theories from marketing journals led to a broad scope, which in turn helped establishing an exploratory framework on prestige that encompassed various perspectives. My pre-understanding was hence heavily shaped by previous scientific findings from different fields and from these I established the framework necessary to generate new understanding. Thompson (1997) argued that an extensive immersion to previous research material enhances the quality of the research and from this view the framework and approach is apt at generating new insight regarding prestige.

As a researcher I am fully conscious that my own thinking, values, beliefs and ideals are largely shaped by the culture and social world around me. This consequently has its effect on the findings, even if I pursued objectivity and constantly criticized my own thinking and conclusions.

#### **4. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON PRESTIGE-SEEKING**

The fourth chapter sheds light on the empirical findings regarding prestige-seeking. This chapter is particularly essential in reaching the research objectives and consequently creating understanding of the research problem. The chapter delves into the informants' identities, their use of automobiles and social behavior linked to attaining prestige.

##### **4.1. Analysis**

The topics in the interviews roughly matched Figure 2. and its dimensions. Firstly, the informants communicated in many ways what owning a BMW meant for them and why they chose it, which reflects the individual dimension and more specifically the identity related aspects of it. Secondly, the informants talked of their BMWs and various meanings related to the product such as the different accessories in it, which in turn was linked to the object dimension of the figure. Thirdly, the informants reflected on their social relationships and social influence, which corresponds with the culture dimension.

The whole analysis procedure started with the transcription of the interviews. The transcription was done with excessive focus on each word to ensure that the content was as accurate as possible. The transcriptions were done using a program, which was specifically designed for transcriptions. The transcription was first done in Finnish and the relevant parts were then translated to English.

After all the research material was transcribed the analysis took place. The interview transcripts were first read and the content was labeled and roughly categorized. Remarks and notes were constantly written after specific passages. The emerging prestige-seeking patterns in the content were highlighted. After the initial reading, the transcripts were then re-read and the themes were built from the patterns. The analysis as a result followed the process of hermeneutic circling. The whole was formed from the parts until there were no internal contradictions.

##### **4.2. Context and informant descriptions**

Understanding the informants required a closer inspection on their milieu and context, as the social and cultural environment largely shape the actions of individuals. The research was conducted in Finland, more specifically in Vaasa, a city located on the west coast. There are around 65 000 inhabitants in Vaasa, which makes it the 15th biggest city in Finland. Vaasa can be categorized as being one of the smaller big cities on Finnish scale. People in cities of this size tended to know or recognize each other, as noticed by some of the informants.

Informant descriptions are presented below to give a basic understanding of the informants and their backgrounds.

#### *Ilkka*

Ilkka is a retired entrepreneur in his sixties. He worked in the metal industry and retired recently having sold his share in the company. When he was young he studied at a vocational school in order to acquire a profession of a car mechanic. He continued in the same trajectory and got the profession of a diesel mechanic. He then continued to polytechnic and focused on metal related processes and consequently ended up selling metal related products to different industries.

He is a car enthusiast and the current automobile is his first BMW. His father drove a truck and this sparked his interest in automobiles and they have interested him ever since. He drives around 25 000 kilometers per year – almost purely for leisure. He drives a BMW X6 and a Porsche.

#### *Aleksi*

Aleksi is a third-generation entrepreneur getting closer to his fifties. He works actively for his company. He is enthusiastic about all kinds of motored vehicles and he has owned different kinds of vehicles like jet skis and boats. He drives around 10 000 kilometers per year and only a small fraction of it is work related. He prefers sporty cars and he owns a BMW X5 M and a BMW 1M.

#### *Lauri*

Lauri is an entrepreneur in his sixties whose company operates in B2C-sector. He has worked in different industries and being an entrepreneur is a way of life for him. He is

an upper secondary graduate and has a vocational qualification in business and administration. He drives mostly for leisure and only around 500 kilometers of his annual mileage is work related. Lauri drives with a BMW 528i.

#### *Otso*

Otso is a retired manager, who got invited to be a board member in few companies and subsequently acquired stakes in these companies. He continued in business even when he had a chance to retire, as it felt good for him and he had a certain calling for it. He drives around 20 000 kilometers per year and it is mostly work related. Otso drives a BMW 520d.

#### *Harri*

Harri is an entrepreneur around his sixties, who works in the medical industry. He has a university degree. He used to drive quite a lot, around 30 000 kilometers annually, but now less than 15 000 kilometers. The car is not an important part of his job, but he still uses it in work related matters. He drives a BMW X6 and a smaller and sportier BMW during the summer. Harri has owned BMWs since the beginning of the 90s.

### 4.3. Groups and memberships

The third research objective was *to analyze the different group memberships of the BMW owners*. As stated in the theoretical framework, Parsons & Smelser (1964: 51) saw that prestige was always tied to a social system i.e. a group. Analyzing the social milieu of the informants was a logical starting place to understand the individual prestige-seeking. One of the key questions that arose during the first stages of the analysis was simply “What is prestige for the informants?” and this was crucial to shed light on the research problem. It was assumed by the researcher that the decision to buy a BMW was partly motivated by prestige considerations, but the assumption had to be confirmed. The following excerpt describes the ethos of the informants regarding prestige or social honor. Lauri was asked if owning a BMW was socially acceptable or appreciated, to which he replied the following:

*Lauri: Well I do remember, I haven't pondered it that much, but my son who is 29 and when he started here [at the family company], he was considering of buying an Audi A4*

*or a BMW, and I said that buy a BMW, a four-wheel driven one, it's a hell of a good car, and he said that he is not sure if he dares to go to customers with it, "Can I?", "Yeah, buy it, yes you can", and he did buy one and has since then switched them to newer four-wheel drives. But it is like, as you asked, many people feel like reserved, and many people horse around and leave their BMW or Mercedes behind a corner, when they go to a customer, so that the customer won't see...*

*I: [Laughs]*

*Lauri: ... Finns are a bit like that. "He's doing a bit too good, so we won't bother to buy from him". But I suppose that the communists have diminished in number here...*

*I: [Laughs]*

*Lauri: [Laughs]*

The informant therefore asserted that the success of a person could be assessed through the car he or she drives. He also implied that people in business may be reluctant to buy from a person who drives a BMW or a Mercedes-Benz, as things are going too well for them. He jokingly referred to these people as communists. Lauri further elaborated his view on vehicles as symbols of success. He was shown a short passage from a forum post, where a BMW driver reflected on his buying decision and it contained a remark on yuppie culture and a following discussion ensued:

*I: Did you notice something [yuppie culture] like that when, because you have owned more of those BMWs already, were there something at some point...*

*Lauri: Well I wouldn't say that there has been, been anything like that. But that's certain that if you have had like an expensive car, whether it was a BMW or a more expensive model, it will then be difficult for in terms of your self-esteem to go and drive a Nissan Micra.*

*I: [Laughs]*

*Lauri: At least like, so that you are recognized and known, "That's that guy who drove with that", then indeed many Finns will be overjoyed that "So now it's going poorly for him" ...*

*I: [Laughs]*

*Lauri: ... "For a long time he thrived." Unfortunately the Finnish character is just like that...*

*I: ... Bitter...*

*Lauri: It is what it is. And you can't flaunt here, and in Finland, or talk like I've talked to you, you can't normally talk like this, they will think you are a jerk, damn it, even if many think like this, but people won't talk like this.*

*I: Right.*

*Lauri: Everyone, it is a lot better, better to cry, cry in a Jaguar than cry in a Lada.*

*I: [Laughs]*

*Lauri: Isn't it like this? It's exactly like this, so it's like, but the Finnish character is such that it [is not said aloud], it's just the way it is.*

Lauri's reflections were consistent with the findings of Duesenberry (1949: 30) who argued: 'Prestige goes to successful people and success in society is closely correlated with income. Once a group of high income people are recognized as a group of superior status, their consumption standard itself becomes one of the criteria for judging success.' Here Lauri argued that success was tied to having an expensive car. The remarks made by Lauri were important as they indicated that other people shared a similar view on success and cars, but that they might not share them openly as it was not socially acceptable in Finland.

Lauri continued and said that Finns were bad at giving compliments. He often complimented people and their cars, even less familiar people, when he interacted with them. He said he tried to raise people's mood up as he was used to do it, since he had worked in sales. But he said people never complimented his car, when they were for example about to drive. He assumed that Finns thought it was different and abnormal. Lauri then said that he had never felt envious of anyone or thought that some people had it better than him, because there always were people who had it better. He thought that

the complementing did not fit the Finnish nature, as Finns were unable to admit that some had it better. He on the other hand complimented people's cars even if they drove Toyotas and complimented that they had nice rims on the car. He said such nice things to make them feel better. Taken together, Lauri clearly saw automobiles as an indicator of an individual's success and that he sought positive reactions from other people through giving compliments.

The other informants were not so vocal about their beliefs, but Harri and Aleksi described their relationship with cars and the brand as aspirational. When Harri was asked if any of his friends who owned BMWs had influenced his buying decision in any way, he replied that no and he did not think so. The friend whom he had mentioned earlier in the interview and to which he referred in this context, was an old friend of his and with whom he talked of cars quite a lot, even when the friend's profession had nothing to do with cars – he was a doctor. Harri described the friend as a car enthusiast and the technical aspects of cars interested the friend and he read numerous car magazines and which he routinely brought to Harri, who took them even if he did not read them that often. Having described the relationship between him and his friend, he told the following:

*Harri: And, maybe, maybe I have, I've known him since being young, so, so that we have always talked of BMWs, and then I, if I sometime can afford, I will buy a BMW. Now I'm hooked.*

BMWs were aspirational objects for the informant and he recalled that he had spoken of BMWs with his friend since he was a youngster and the day he had enough money he would buy a BMW. The first BMW might have functioned as a tangible symbol with which he proved to himself that he 'made it'.

Similarly, Aleksi described his attitude towards BMW M Series as aspirational. The Mercedes ML he drove before the BMW 1M was with a 3.2 liter engine and with notable torque, but the 1M had tremendous torque and described it as a rocket. He described the aspirational nature of the car in the following passage:

*Alexsi: ... I first bought the 1M, which had like tremendous amount of torque, and and, five-, 4.7 seconds from zero to sixty, so it blasts off, like a, like a, well, a proper rocket, so I in some way, the M Series, like I basically fell for it, I have always thought highly of it. My brother once had, the previous car was a M5 and I drove it and in some way*

*thought highly of it like “Damn this is a nice and expensive car” or like “I wish I got one someday”, or like to buy one.*

*I: Alright.*

*Aleksi: And now that I basically have two of the M Series, so I am kind of like excited about it, so I think it is, it ha-, it has a sort of own, like basically an image and for me, for me [stresses] kind of personally, like I dig that, machines go fast and they have like top notch, state-of-the-art engines, it is a kind of like important thing to me.*

Otso was motivated to buy his car for both functional reasons and emotional reasons. Otso said that he did not drive that much, about 20 000 kilometers per year and it was mostly work related. He also drove quite a lot on the highway. Otso described that his present car was his third BMW and the first diesel powered car he had owned. Before the BMWs he used to drive Audis. He had minor prejudices about diesel engines and how they made a knocking noise. But someone had said to him that the contemporary diesel engines with the Common Rail technology were really good and the engines had made a great progress compared to traditional gasoline engines. He then told that he had studied the performance charts of the Common Rail engine and then test-drove one and absolutely fell in love with the machine. He specified that the thing that made him fall for it was the fact that the engine was relatively small, 2 liters, but it still had a monstrous torque and the speed was sufficient for Finnish speed limits. Otso also argued that BMWs attributes were best seen in higher speed, for example that it was almost silent and that the gearbox was almost a stepless automatic.

On the other hand, the informant perceived that German cars were good. He acknowledged that sort of thinking might have been outdated but that he was quite stuck with the idea. When Otso was asked to specify some emotional reasons why he chose the particular car, he replied the following:

*Otso: Well I don't know, it can be that, it feels a bit childish, but you have to be truthful to yourself and to the researcher in this kind of a situation. So the emotional reason is, is that BMW's like the sort of profile is quite high.*

He continued this by stating how he as an entrepreneur could relate to the fact that BMW was a family business and its stock was going up and that it was a good and altogether appreciated brand. He also described how he was interested in motor sports

and that his son had driven karts and that he had spent a lot of time at the pit with his son. He had spent this time partly working with the engines and spectating in general. He then concluded that the aforementioned emotional experiences were meaningful for him, but it did not mean that other brands could not fulfill similar yearnings too. He added that BMW did that particularly well.

Otso thus liked driving a BMW partly because of its technical properties and partly due to its high profile. This became evident also when he addressed the BMW drivers as a group, and how there were two distinct groups; enthusiasts who cared a lot of the technical properties and the less involved people for whom it was meaningful to drive a good car or at least have the image of driving such. He indirectly implied that the people in the group, who drove for image reasons, were seeking status. He added that he identified himself as belonging to both groups. In essence, Otso's decision to buy a BMW was motivated by prestige considerations.

#### 4.3.1 The in-group of entrepreneurial-minded successful people

One of the key observations was that all the informants had an entrepreneurial background. This observation along with the remarks made by the informants gave an accurate description of their social milieu as a whole. The informants described other BMW owners as following. Firstly, when Ilkka was asked if he could exemplify some negative images that he had heard to be linked to BMW drivers, he replied the following:

*Ilkka: Maybe it's this sort of speeding. Yeah, certain defiance towards the rules of traffic. But it [the negative image] comes just from this... these teenagers, who have to get a BMW even if they can't afford it and can't afford its upkeep [laughs]. Only then they realize what they had bought.*

*I: Exactly, exactly.*

*Ilkka: But in all seriousness, I do in general, if one thinks of BMW owners, so I guess they are such that they appreciate the quality and like to drive with a good car.*

*I: Alright, alright. Do you feel that BMW owners have a certain set of values, the same...*

*Ilkka: I don't know, can be, but... It can be similar with others who drive good cars [laughs]. So is it any different from others then.*

The informant consequently implied that the BMW owners and their set of values could be similar with others who drove 'good cars'. Otso provided a significant remark on BMW drivers as a group:

*I: You described that you had at your work, these like BMW people, who are like [laughs] BMW people, so what are they like, can you describe which kind of type they are?*

*Otso: There are surely two different kinds. Others can be – and not even can – but surely are such that they are not that deep in the anatomy of the car, but it just is important for them to have a good car and, and the image of driving with a good car, and then they classify BMW as being appropriate for that. But then there are such, even co-, I mean associates, there are, there are even several, who are such intense 'car men' that they know everything about driving and who have ended up choosing BMWs.*

*I: Are they about the technical properties or...*

*Otso: Exactly the technical properties...*

*I: ... Why they drive them, okay...*

*Otso: And it's kind of nice, nice to listen to them, as I, I belong somewhere in the middle. [Laughs]*

In essence, the informant implied that there were two types of BMW drivers. One group consisted of drivers, who had less know-how and understanding of cars, but who found it important to drive a 'good car' and having a mental image that one drove a good car; BMW was classified as fitting for them. The second groups consisted of people, who were extremely knowledgeable regarding automobiles and had chosen BMWs due to their technical aspects. The informant also maintained that he partly belonged to both groups.

When the informants were asked to describe the BMW drivers and their set of values, they answered the following. Ilkka described BMW owners as having a sporty and a

youthful outlook on life. Alekski had always thought that BMW had a youthful image and when asked of the owners and their set of values, he replied that his friends and acquaintances that had BMWs were similar to him – that is youthful and not old-timers – or at least they tried or wanted to be such. Otso thought that BMW drivers valued technological advancement and quality, as well as the fact that BMW was a successful family company.

When Lauri was asked if he felt that other BMW drivers were like him, he replied that he was not sure, but he thought others were not at least as rigorous about their cars' condition and cleanliness. He then further described his approach to cars and likened it with his approach to work and how he had to be pedantic in order for his company to be successful. He then came back to the subject of like-mindedness with other BMW drivers and thought that in some ways they were similar to him. When he was asked to describe the other BMW drivers from work or his circle of friends, he replied that many of the BMW drivers were 'forward-striving people'. He continued this by stating that boys from vocational schools had older BMWs but not the newer ones and there were rarely any 'wussies' behind the steering wheels of newer BMWs, people in Mercedes-Benzes might have been such, but that they were a bit different people according to him.

When Lauri was asked to further elaborate the characteristics of BMW owners and if there were similarities between them and their set of values, he replied:

*Lauri: Yes, I do think that they are, maybe they are like that kind that they, at least they would like to be at the forefront, so I am not sure if they are, but I do think they aspire to be like that. If you [laughs] buy a new BMW, then you do indeed have in some ways an idea like that I think.*

Lauri asserted that BMW owners were or wanted to be pioneers, show the way and if a person bought a new BMW, he suspected that the person wanted to signal being at the forefront. He essentially implied that the BMW owners sought status.

When Alekski was asked how people saw the BMW brand in general and if he could describe it, he described BMW as being held in high esteem, maybe sporty, and he could imagine it being driven by youthful people or people who considered themselves youthful, and that he drove BMWs as opposed to Audis or Range Rovers precisely because it had a youthful image. Alekski had a mental image that BMW drivers were more aggressive and sportier than compared with for example Mercedes-Benz drivers.

He did not perceive himself as an aggressive driver. When Aleksi was asked if he had ever received positive attention with his car for example in the form of compliments, he replied that all of his friends gave compliments. He then specifically remembered a colleague of his, who was a hardcore BMW fan and who had immediately said to him that his car was nice, when he changed from ML to X5.

#### 4.3.1. Legitimacy

The theoretical framework stressed the importance of legitimacy as a threshold that has to be fulfilled in order to acquire prestige. Legitimacy was approached in the empirical part by various questions and the questions were mostly about the acceptability of BMW automobiles. The following excerpts detailed how the legitimacy related aspects of BMWs were perceived by the informants. Legitimacy in the context of the study was particularly vital, as questions related to it helped clarifying the fuzzy boundaries between different groups.

When Otso was asked if owning a BMW was socially acceptable or appreciated, he said that he thought that they were socially acceptable and argued that all cars look similar and that an ordinary person who was not interested of cars would not possibly recognize Korean cars from BMWs or other Western European cars. He implied that this made them socially acceptable. The informant indirectly argued that cars, which were not too distinctive, got accepted. He then continued and said that he felt that BMWs were appreciated and when he was asked of an example, he mentioned the following:

*Otso: Well I can't come up with an example, but you do notice it, like I have my car in a garage that has other cars too, and there you sometimes meet those, other colleagues who keep their cars there, and you can notice it [the respect] in the comments, when you discuss, and and, somehow you like sense it.*

The social acceptability of BMWs came up in other contexts too. When Ilkka was asked of what kind of cars there were in his group of friends or at his work, he replied that two of the partners had Mercedes-Benz MLs. He continued by saying that even the workers and surprisingly many of them had BMWs and the partners had actually counted that there were more BMWs than Toyotas, but he also briefly mentioned that the cars were 3- and 5 Series and older. He then concluded that this showed how BMW was appreciated on different 'levels'. Ilkka implied that there was a certain hierarchy.

Ilkka responded to a question related to the social acceptability and respect of BMWs by stating that he felt it was socially acceptable and he had not received any negative feedback from it. More so, when inquired of getting admired for his car, he mentioned that some had even given compliments like how good looking the car was. He inferred that the X6 differed from other cars and that other manufacturers did not have equivalent ones, which made it a source of admiration. The informant continued that he was not sure if the X6 annoyed or delighted people on average.

Aleksi on the other hand replied to the same question that many of his friends drove BMWs and many of them had driven for longer than he had. He then told how he and his best friend once drove to Lapland with the friend's BMW, which was a diesel powered station wagon and how it was great to drive his friend's car. Importantly, he mentioned that the fact that his friends drove BMWs strengthened his decision to change to BMW.

*I: How about those, do you have... Do you play golf, did you mention that?*

*Aleksi: Yes.*

*I: What kind of cars do they drive there, have you seen, or at the work...*

*Aleksi: Well, there [amongst golfers] are quite a lot of, many friends have BMWs, really many of my friends have BMWs, like quite many friends that are my age drive X6s, or then with X5s, really a lot, so it's like, quite many of my golf buddies drive BMWs.*

*I: And in your work there were some BMWs or?*

*Aleksi: Yes, the CEO of mine [CEO of the company he owns] drove, drove few, few previous have been BMWs, he also has a company car, but he has like, he has had few, few BMWs, one sedan and one station wagon, but he now changed to Range Rover, so that he as well has driven BMWs before, and like, he likes BMWs.*

On the other hand, Lauri's response to the question regarding BMWs social acceptance illustrated the mixed acceptance of BMWs. He gave a lengthy explanation on how people in business left their BMWs and Mercedes-Benzes behind a corner, when they visited their customers and basically hid them, as the customer might think the person with such a car had things going a bit too well for him.

Similarly, when Harri was asked how others who do not own BMWs perceive BMW owners, he replied that he had not thought of it, but that he had encountered a negative tone everywhere. He was not sure if it was because of envy or similar, but he thought that it might be easier to drive a Mercedes rather than a BMW. Harri was then asked if he felt similarly with people on BMW forums, who described that the image of BMW was challenging and not accepted in some circles and to which he replied the following:

*Harri: In certain circles it is not accepted, it apparently annoys. So that I've like many ti-, I haven't like, I don't ever think of it, but it can be that in some crowds you might even get punched for it...*

*I: [laughs]*

*Harri: If you speak with a [certain tone], then I don't know, but fortunately I haven't gotten punched, but...*

*I: [laughs]*

*Harri: But there are annoying people [among BMW owners].*

When Harri was asked about the social acceptability of BMW on a general level, he replied that he thought it was accepted and if someone reacted to the brand negatively, he felt that it was their problem. He added that some might feel negatively about his car, but he did not mind.

The informants thus had mixed feelings of the brand's social legitimacy. This was in line with the argument that prestige was always tied to a particular value system. When pragmatic and cognitive legitimacy were approached, some patterns became clearer and defined the borders of the value system and the group.

Ilkka was asked if owning a BMW was taken for granted among his closer circles and to which he replied that some did feel that way at least more so than he did. He gave a more detailed explanation by stating that for some driving a BMW was just experimentation like other brands, but he did feel that there was an ethos that if one could choose, BMW would be their choice.

Aleksi had similar thoughts on the subject and he stated that he did not have any extremely brand loyal friends, who took driving a BMW for granted. Aleksi added that many of the friends felt like BMW was the number one, but not irreplaceable. Harri in similar vein stated that owning a BMW was not taken for granted in his closer circles, but he did have many acquaintances that had BMWs. Lauri asserted that not many of his close friends and family members had BMWs, but that they had even more expensive cars, which they perceived to be better. Lauri clarified the aforementioned by adding that his sister had a Volkswagen Touareg with a V8 and the other one had an S-series Mercedes.

Otso however provided the most significant insight regarding pragmatic legitimacy. When he was asked if owning a BMW was taken for granted in his closer circles and if there were BMW people in his friends or family and who were determined that BMW was the only brand, he replied the following:

*Otso: In my close circle of friends and acquaintances there are, and I'm talking about the business world, there are a lot of them, so it feels like it is quite... If not taken for granted, then in some way even natural.*

Otso was also asked if he had received positive attention with his car and he replied that he had gotten some. When he was further asked if the positive attention came from friends or strangers, he answered that it was from both. He categorized them as friends as well as acquaintances and labeled it as the garage phenomenon.

The previous excerpt taken together with the personal backgrounds of the informants indicated that there indeed was a distinct in-group with a value system to which the informants belonged to. BMW was one of the socially accepted brands in the particular value system, but the brand was not the only one. The BMW brand was not widely accepted. On the contrary, as Harri mentioned, in some groups BMW was rejected to a point where owning a BMW could have ended in a physical confrontation. Of course the example given by the informant was extreme, but it did illustrate the borders of acceptance in different value systems.

#### 4.3.2. Out-groups

The presence of out-groups was notable in the research material. Excerpts such as the following showed how the informants perceived particular BMW drivers. When Ilkka

was asked to describe the general image of BMW's cars and what kind of an image others had of BMWs, he replied that he assumed that the image was formed by the teenagers who drive BMWs and they contributed in the image that BMW drivers were speeding, made outrageous overtakes and irritated others. He continued by stating that it was a small group that formed the image. When the informant was asked to further elaborate the negative images attached to the BMW drivers, he replied that it was speeding and certain defiance towards the rules of traffic. He also added that the teenagers had an urge to buy a BMW even if they could not afford the upkeep.

Similarly, Lauri asserted that boys from vocational schools drove old BMWs. When he was asked if he had encountered any negative things like being provoked by other drivers, he described how some younger boys had tried to race him for example when he stopped at the traffic lights. The boys had looked at the informant and tried to challenge him to a sort of drag race. He admitted that few times he had accelerated fast and watched how the younger boys had cracked up laughing. So the informant thought of it as playful competition and nothing serious, but he did feel that he might encounter more of the negative things if he drove more and particularly on the highway.

Otso was asked if he identified with other BMW drivers, who drove for example with the same model, he first replied that he did not identify with them and he criticized the others for condemning BMW drivers. He then had a short laugh and stated that the typical BMW drivers were unlike him and they were often younger buddies who had gotten a BMW and that they tried to show off with it; how they were driving with a 'tough' car and needed to get past everyone. He then continued and elaborated the like-mindedness by saying that he did not relate with those BMW drivers, but related with the ones who appreciated the car and who made use of the car's properties for example when driving past someone in a safe way. He added that he hated people who drove too slow or blocked the way and he disliked that drivers who went past them were getting condemned for it. Otso confessed driving past the people who drove too slow and he felt that in someone's eyes he might have been seen as a 'BMW-man', who needs to get past others and drives recklessly, even when he did not go above the speed limits. He clarified this by stating that he did not want to drive behind the slower individuals, when he was driving a longer stretch; for example when he drove to Helsinki and the farmers would drive to the nearest village to shop and they trundled along the highway.

Otso was asked of how he felt that others who did not own BMWs perceived BMW drivers, to which he replied the following:

*Otso: There can unfortunately be a sort of, sort of image that... BMW's image is like that high that it is thought so that the driver, who drives one, has a terribly strong goal to, as if to show off, that you are behind the wheel of a better car and then also this negative thing that, that when this is many times combined with a higher speed and especially among the younger buddies, the kind of, like BMW drivers have the right to go above the speed limits and take the interpretation of the law in their own hands... so yes, maybe this is most distinctive among BMW drivers this kind of, this kind of thinking, in the eyes of others.*

The question was followed up by describing how other BMW drivers from Internet forums had felt the same way and how in some circles it was hard to admit being a BMW driver, as the image was at times so negative. Otso then replied the following:

*Otso: But I think that BMW drivers, and I still refer to the younger group, it gives others a reason to think that way. It gives a reason for that, but there can be the sort of... That in some circles, it is about envy.*

When Aleksi was asked of the negative images attached to BMW and what he had heard to be linked with BMWs, he replied that the classic image was linked to people and how they drove their 3 Series off the road, when they pretended to be rally drivers. He further described this by saying that they like to drift with the rear-wheel drive and especially with the older 3 Series and that the 3 Series were involved in crashes quite often. The informant argued that he was not moved by the negative image. He added that the image used to be pervasive, but he did not know if it still was.

The previous remarks illustrated how the informants had a shared out-group. The out-group consisted of younger males, who had a significant urge to show off and who drove recklessly. The out-group was also described as aggressive and that the members in the out-group tried to be dominant. The masculinity attached to the brand was also evident. According to the informants, the out-group members drove older BMWs and the less expensive models like the 3 Series. Interestingly, the informants also described how the teenagers had gotten their BMWs in an illegitimate way compared to the in-group. Remarks on how youngsters drove their parents' BMWs or how they had to loan money to afford them, illustrated the illegitimate way of getting a BMW. Informants also perceived that the group of status-seeking younger males was the reason, why other people attached negative meanings to BMWs. The younger BMW drivers gave others

reason to condemn the BMW drivers as a group, but in some circles the negative meanings were attached to the car because of envy.

The informants actively wanted to distance themselves from the out-group, which could be noticed when the informants described themselves as being different from the youngsters. This was done by stressing how youngsters drove older inferior models and much more aggressively than compared with the in-group. The constant legitimacy checking between the groups is further analyzed below.

#### 4.3.3. Good cars as group membership facilitators

The term ‘good’ or ‘better’ car appeared numerous times in the research material and it was mentioned by all of the informants. The meaning of the term became more evident when the context of it was approached.

When Otso was asked about his car and how important it was to his identity, he replied that it was surprising how nowadays cars did not mean anything to his son, even when his son drove go-karts for ten years. His line of reasoning was that it was a generational gap and for the younger people like his son, cars had no meaning in terms of their identities, and for them cars were just tools for getting from one place to another as cheaply as possible. Having pondered this Otso got back to the original question and replied:

*Otso: So I would say it like this that it [the car] isn't in any way like central, that I can't say, but I can confess that I do like to sit in a BMW and maybe at the same time it does mean that... It does bring some pleasure, when you see friends that for example, these... Who work in the same industry and who drive an equivalent car, so it does give a feeling like, here we are on the move and drive proper, proper [a short laugh] cars and [laughs shortly again], it does have a some kind of positive meaning, when you just dare to confess it.*

The previous passage described the importance of ‘good cars’ as a membership facilitator in the group of successful people. Driving with ‘proper’ cars gave the informant a feeling of like-mindedness and belonging to a group.

Ilkka addressed ‘good cars’ when he talked of BMW owners and what they appreciated in cars and he maintained that BMW owners might have been no different from others

who drove good cars. As mentioned, Otso felt that there were two types of BMW owners and the other group felt important to drive with a 'good car' and that BMW was classified as an appropriate brand among them. The second group consisted of the heavily involved car enthusiasts, who made their decision based on the technological and functional properties of BMW. These two examples further illustrated the role of 'good cars' as membership facilitators. Aleksí further described 'good cars' and their meaning in the following excerpt:

*Aleksí: Yes, in principle a car is important to me in that sense that I, like I do waste, or I can't say that I waste, because it isn't wasting, but I invest a lot of money in cars since I like to drive with good cars, as, as it is a tool for me and secondly, as I don't have any other gadgets, the things I drive have to be in order.*

*I: Alright, alright.*

*Aleksí: So in that sense it is important.*

*I: So the car is on some level an important part of identity as well, that...*

*Aleksí: Well in principle. Yes.*

*I: So that they have interested you since being a kid or something similar?*

*Aleksí: Yeah yeah, yes. And my grandfather, who has already passed away, was like really close to me and he used to drive a Jaguar XJ6, model year -71, I was born in -67, so I was like – he bought after it had been in use for few years – so I've been like maybe six when he bought it. And the car is still in our family, so he drove with it for his whole life and died like few years back when he was 88, he drove with it until that and now it is owned by my dad's brother, that's the youngest son, and the car is still in the family, so that like represents that...*

*I: That's a nice, fine car...*

*Aleksí: Yes, yes, so I've been in good cars since a little kid.*

Aleksí had in many ways been brought up in an environment, where cars and more specifically 'good cars' had a central and valued role. Driving a 'good car' could have

been taken for granted in his family. This also illustrated that cars appeared to have been culturally significant among the successful for a longer period of time.

When Lauri was asked of the general image of BMW's cars and how they were perceived, he jokingly replied that if one looked at magazines and the letters to the editor, BMW was perceived as an extension of manhood. He continued that this was a common conception, but he had never encountered any comments like that. He then specified why he had not encountered such remarks by saying that he had always had a 'good car' and it did not come out of nowhere and that he had had the possibility to buy the car for a longer period of time.

Lauri then continued to illustrate the relationship between 'good cars' and success by explaining how he felt being perceived by others, when he drove a Saab 9-3, which he bought as new from a friend who owned a Saab dealership. He perceived that friends and acquaintances were more eager to say hi and wave to him, when he was driving the Saab, and he thought that others perceived that he was having a decline in success. Therefore he thought that Saab was a symbol of being less successful compared with other cars he had owned. Lauri had also sold cars and when asked if he sold BMWs back then, he replied:

*Lauri: No, I sold Fords and Nissans and Chryslers and Subarus and Mazdas and Jeeps. And there they were, those makes, yeah. I have never sold these so to speak, better, so I have sold mass produced cars. Yeah.*

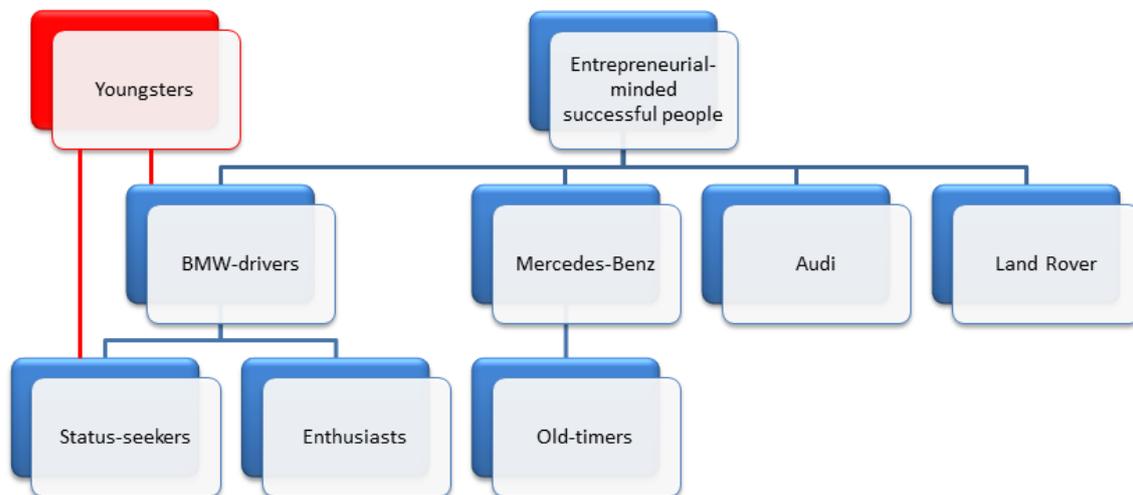
Harri was the only informant whose use of the term 'good car' was clearly interpretable. When Harri was asked about the prevalence of BMWs and if there were BMW people, he replied that there definitely were such people and he had met them. The informant was then asked if he included in them and he replied the following:

*Harri: No, I don't feel like being one, I choose, as I said, I always approach the car with an open mind. But I'm not a BMW-man. But, no, no I don't classify myself as such and to my mind I am not that type, a so-called... Like I said, I am not, I only have the car because it's a good car.*

It can be argued that the 'good cars' functioned as membership facilitators. Being part of the group of successful required a 'good car'. This was essentially a legitimacy check, which decided the true membership in the group. This process of assessing

legitimacy was similar to the process described by Muniz & O'Guinn (2001: 419). The youngsters had illegitimate claims to membership, as their BMWs were older and less expensive, as well as being different due to their driving style. Driving a 'good car' was the main prestige-seeking pattern found in the research material. In other words, prestige was pursued through signaling membership in the group of successful.

Figure 4. illustrates the relevant groups and sub-groups, which were prominent in the research material and which were crucial in understanding how the informants sought prestige. It also explains the role of 'good cars' as membership facilitator.



**Figure 4.** Groups and memberships.

Enthusiasts had a lot of knowledge regarding cars and genuinely felt that BMWs were excellent cars in terms of their overall quality, functionality and drivability. Essentially, these enthusiasts were self-actualizing and people with less cultural capital followed their opinion. Status-seekers were less involved regarding cars and driving and cared more of the image. Old-timers were older people, who were a bit more conservative, traditional and less masculine. Youngsters were aggressive, young and less educated.

#### 4.4. Signaling

Upon closer examination, it became apparent that cars were used as signals, but informants argued that symbolic consumption was done more by others. For example

when Ilkka was asked if people tried to signal something as they bought BMWs, he replied the following:

*Ilkka: Some people probably feel like that, but not me, for me it is just a nice car to drive, and like I don't [think of it as a signaler or a symbol], if it annoys someone, then so what? Or if it doesn't evoke any feelings, that's nothing either. [Laughs] I just like that I am feeling comfortable, nice to cruise around.*

The following excerpt further illustrated how BMWs were used as signals:

*Lauri: Yes, I do think that they are, maybe they are like that kind that they, at least they would like to be at the forefront, so I am not sure if they are, but I do think they aspire to be like that. If you [laughs] buy a new BMW, then you do indeed have in some ways an idea like that I think.*

Lauri thus asserted that BMW owners were or wanted to be pioneers, show the way and if a person bought a new BMW, he suspected that the person wanted to signal being at the forefront. This implied that BMWs were indeed used in status-seeking.

When Lauri was asked if he had encountered any really enthusiastic BMW fans, he replied that he had not seen them, but he had read of them and how they wore BMW caps and there were many of them, but he did not know anyone like that, nor would he ever wear a BMW cap or a BMW jacket for that matter. He continued that he liked cars and liked to keep them clean and felt satisfied when they were clean, but the car and the brand was not a tool for displaying anything. He concluded by saying that the car gave him personal pleasure.

Otso shared his signaling practices in the following passage:

*I: Yes, is it important for you to make a good impression with your car?*

*Otso: A good?*

*I: Impression. With your car.*

*Otso: Go-, that...*

*I: Like a good impression, a good first impression that you, is it important to you?*

*Otso: That I make a good impression with my car?*

*I: Yes, with your car.*

*Otso: ... Well I have to say that it is not, of course, a bad thing, but if I try to answer the question and what it seeks, it is not however important for me and that when I drive, it would be all about [laughs] making an impression, it is only important for me that I am satisfied when I drive, and that it brings me the experience that I expect to get from driving.*

Otso admitted that it was not a bad thing to make a good impression, but his decision to drive a BMW was not just about making a good impression, but rather to feel satisfied while driving. Making a good impression, in other words, acquiring prestige was not the most vital thing for him, but it was still central.

Towards the end of the interview, Otso was asked if owning a BMW signaled something or was it used to signal something, he replied the following:

*Otso: That he tries to...*

*I: For example a BMW driver, who drives...*

*Otso: So that he tries to signal something?*

*I: Yes.*

*Otso: Well [laughs], since I don't belong in any BMW club, nor have ever gone deep into it, but I could imagine that if you think of the BMW mark on the hood, there still is a rather heterogeneous group behind it, there are the kind of young guys, who drive an old BMW or with their father's BMW, so it can be that their urge to signal, when they are looking for girls, are completely different from the likes of me, so that, I don't think that me ending up with the brand was influenced with... that I change to it [BMW] as I want to signal something. Like I, just as it already came up before, I find it more important that it [laughs] is like the BMW slogan is, "Sheer driving pleasure", so that it gives me the satisfaction, so when I drive it, it is easy, it is safe, this safety aspect has*

*not come up. This again does not mean that many other cars would not also be safe, but somehow I have a certain image that BMW does not have the wors- [laughs] it isn't at a bad level, so I don't think the signaling to others is important, at least not for me, but I stress the fact that I myself am satisfied with driving it.*

The previous passage further detailed Otso's view on signaling and the informants' general attitude towards signaling. The symbolic role of consumption in individual behavior was downplayed, but the informants thought that others tried to signal status. The biases regarding status-seeking and prestige-seeking were noticeable, especially when the questions even remotely addressed status. When the topic of status and prestige was under discussion, there appeared to be a huge elephant in the room, figuratively speaking. Most of the informants knew that BMWs were used for it, but they did not see themselves as such.

Aleksi was the only informant who admitted that he signaled anything with his BMW. Aleksi was asked if people tried to signal something when they bought BMWs and he replied that it might be possible. Aleksi then reflected on the question and his own behavior. He stated that he drove a BMW rather than a slightly too old-fashioned car and that he could have bought a new S-Class Mercedes-Benz, but decided not to, as he felt it was a car for men who were over 55 years old. He thought the car was really nice, but he felt that he was too young for it. He also described how the salesman had said to him, albeit jokingly "Don't kid yourself, come on!" and "Who are you?". Aleksi had already decided that he would not buy a ML and the S-Class was the second option, but he then thought that "Hell no". He specified that he could have bought a really nice S-Class with the price of his M Series BMW. The informant then confirmed that he directly signaled that he did not want to be the kind that wore a gentleman-like suit, which he could, but rather someone who wore a pullover and drove a BMW instead of an S-Class with the same price. He felt that he signaled quite a lot with his decision to drive a BMW.

Therefore Aleksi consciously signaled being a more relaxed character rather than an old gentleman. In essence, the informant felt that BMW was more congruent with his identity. He was consequently signaling membership and group belonging.

#### 4.4.1 Explicit and subtle signaling

When Aleksi was asked if it was important for him to make a good impression with his car, to which he replied:

*Aleks: If... If truth be told, I really don't think of it like that, as, as I really don't have a need to, or even a want to prove anything with the car, kind of like, so I am not creating an image that way. On the contrary it sometimes feels like I could drive a bit lo-, lower profile-, like drive with a lower profile car sometime, as sometime I can imagine that it can, may even cause irritation, a bit like driving with a too fancy car, as in some way, when you drive a special car like that, so as this city is a rather small one, people here still, especially the ones who know about cars, they know which car is whose.*

Aleks thought that he had no need, nor want, to signal his success or similar with his car. He felt that driving a less special car could have been a better choice, as some people might have felt irritated by luxurious and conspicuous cars. Therefore he thought that explicit signaling could have had a contrary effect in attempts to acquire prestige. Aleks also stated that driving a special car in a smaller city might single a person out and make the driver recognizable in a negative way.

Aleks was also asked if his car attracted attention in some way. The following discussion ensued:

*Aleks: Yeah, yeah. Yes. Both of the cars.*

*I: Yeah, exactly.*

*Aleks: Yes, both of the BMWs attract attention. And they are built for that in a way, to attract, so my M1 is Valencia Orange, it's bright orange, so it is sort of like driving with an exclamation mark.*

*I: [Laughs shortly]*

*Aleks: But it does not bother me at all, as I am proud of the gadgets [cars] in a way.*

The informant therefore clearly stated that his cars were built to attract attention and in a particularly explicit fashion. Aleks did not mind that his cars were explicit signalers; on the contrary, he felt pride in owning them.

Lauri argued that people generally felt that BMWs were extensions of manhood but he had not personally been exposed to such comments. He thought it might have been because he had not bought his BMW out of the blue: he had always had a special car. Buying a BMW suddenly was deemed as status-seeking by others. Lauri stated clearly that ostentation and loud signaling was an ineffective way of pursuing status in Finland. He argued that obvious and straightforward status-seeking was frowned upon in Finnish culture.

Harri was asked early in the interview that if the car was important to him, to which he replied the following:

*Harri: It is not important like that, it isn't in any way, like a status symbol for me, I hope that it doesn't cause any envy, since as a person I'm not like that.*

The informant recognized that others might perceive his car as a status symbol, even when the interviewer had not addressed status during the interview. This indicated that the status related matters were indeed on the informant's mind and that he understood that the car could be perceived as a symbol of status, even if he did not intend it that way. Harri did not want to signal in a Veblenian manner and make others envious, as he argued that it was not part of his personality to make others jealous.

Harri told that he avoided going to certain places with his car and sometimes said to his wife that they should go with a different car. Harri said that the car might cause annoyance even if he did not understand why people reacted in that way. He reasoned that it might be because of the fact that BMW was portrayed in a negative light in the media. He illustrated this by describing how drivers became BMW drivers in the headlines of magazines. He argued that the brand got highlighted and singled out in a negative way. He said he had always wondered why it happened.

Harri stressed numerous times that he had bought the car because it was functionally good. Harri was adamant that the car did not reflect his identity in any way. He did not feel likeminded with other BMW drivers and for him it was only a car. The brand itself was not that relevant to him and the brand itself did not create any value for him. He also stated that it would not surprise him if he changed to a different brand like Audi for instance. This illustrated Harri's need to feel different from the status-seekers and how he was close to changing to a completely different brand.

The remarks made by the informants were similar with findings of Han et al. (2010: 17), who argued that people with high wealth and low status, i.e. patricians, preferred subtle signals and they were more effective for acquiring prestige. The informants favored subtle signaling and it appeared to evoke less negative feelings, as noticed in the remarks considering explicit signaling. Loud signaling was linked to status-seeking and informants argued that status-seeking was perceived to be negative by others. Therefore the more subtle signals appeared to be better in prestige-seeking.

Apparently less was more, when it came to attracting attention. Otso for one shared his thoughts on subtle signaling. Otso mentioned in a determined manner that he had not had any special rims on his car or a lowered chassis. When the interviewer concluded that apart from the color, which was brownish, the car looked pretty normal, Otso replied that it was exactly normal and specified that the color was also normal. Otso stressed that his car was 'normal'. He was also asked if he thought his car was in any way distinct when he was driving. He replied the following:

*Otso: Well yeah... You could sometimes think that it is distinguishable, but if you really ponder this – which I haven't ever done – but if I try now, so indeed nowadays the streets are filled with cars that are more gorgeous one after the other. BMWs as well as competing brands so I don't think that you stand out there that fast. In the end, you need to have a quite special car that will clearly turn heads [laughs].*

Otso's responses could be interpreted as such that he wanted to avoid standing out in the crowd.

Harri gave an extensive description of his preferences regarding his signaling patterns. When he was asked if he had been in a situation where someone had given a compliment regarding his X6, he confirmed that he had encountered such compliments. He was then further asked to describe the situation, to which he replied that the ones who admired the car were interested of the kind of motor the car had under the hood, as he had the motor related markings only on the side and not in the back. Harri described the markings in his X6 as not that visible. He also detailed that he had the X6 sign on the back, but he knew that they could be removed, but did not feel it was necessary. He jokingly added that he thought the people who had removed the signs had smaller engines.

Harri also described his decision-making regarding the car's exterior. He had always wondered why people who bought BMWs put rims that were not manufactured by BMW on them. He referred to the rims as hara-kiri rims and argued that the appearance of the car was greatly diminished with such rims, as rims were part of the car's beauty. He had always used BMW's own rims and usually the picked ones that were not from the flashy end of the spectrum, but normal good looking ones. When Harri was asked if the usability of the rims was important and if he therefore had a smaller rim size on the wheels, to which he replied that he had basic ones. He did not care about lower profile tires or anything of that sort. He also argued that the people who had accidentally gotten low profile tires wanted to change them. Harri reacted to the exterior related questions rather strongly.

Harri was asked if the design in cars was meaningful for him and to which he agreed and specified that he liked how BMW did facelifts in longer intervals and still kept the similar style, even if the look changed. He liked that the differences were subtle. He also described how BMWs were not like Japanese cars which changed the design frequently and within few years they could look completely different compared to the older models. He appreciated the consistency in BMWs.

#### 4.4.2. Conformity and bandwagon effect

Bandwagon motives were described to be linked to the need to belong to a group, to be one of the boys (Leibenstein 1950: 189). The findings in this study were similar. The particular ways how for example Otso pursued prestige was via means of conformity, i.e. bandwagoning. The following excerpts showed the bandwagon effect particularly well.

*Otso: So I would say it like this that it [the car] isn't in any way like central, that I can't say, but I can confess that I do like to sit in a BMW and maybe at the same time it does mean that... It does bring some pleasure, when you see friends that for example, these... Who work in the same industry and who drive an equivalent car, so it does give a feeling like, here we are on the move and drive proper, proper [a short laugh] cars and [laughs shortly again], it does have a some kind of positive meaning, when you just dare to confess it.*

He further described the bandwagon effect in the following excerpts:

*Otso: Well I can't come up with an example, but you do notice it, like I have my car in a garage that has other cars too, and there you sometimes meet those, other colleagues who keep their cars there, and you can notice it [the respect] in the comments, when you discuss, and and, somehow you like sense it.*

*Otso: In my close circle of friends and acquaintances there are, and I'm talking about the business world, there are a lot of them, so it feels like it is quite... If not taken for granted, then in some way even natural.*

Driving BMW was thus a safe option in his closer circle of people. It seemed to maintain the harmony and not evoke jealousy or other negative feelings. Aleksi had similar motives as Otso. When he was asked to confirm if he had a black car, he agreed. He was then asked if his previous cars had always been black, he answered the following:

*Alekski: Well I had a few silver MLs, they were at the time kind of 'in', but that did not like... The first time I changed to black, it has since then been black.*

*I: Alright, alright.*

*Alekski: Now it was close to being white, but it didn't...*

*I: The son...*

*Alekski: Yeah [laughs], yeah.*

Alekski clearly followed trends and conformed to them, which can be seen as a bandwagon effect. As a result he followed the expectations and norms set by others and acted accordingly to gain acceptance. His tendency to conform was illustrated further, when he was asked to confirm that he had not built his X5 and he started describing the situation as following:

*Alekski: Yeah, so the salesman ordered two X5s straight away, M Series, umm, ordered two of them, a black and a white, straight from the papers [without seeing them] and ordered accessories to them which he knew that had to be in a premium car.*

*I: Okay, alright.*

*Aleksi: So they were almost, the black and white, were almost with identical accessories so... So I have, I could basically choose which one I wanted, so I first picked the white one, as I have had a black car for many years, or many, many of them in a row, so I had this ML in black and I thought that I'll pick the white one, but umm, then I talked with my son, he is in the army, so I said to him, were are going to change our car and that I picked this white one and there is this black and a white one, so he just said to me that "It's going to be black one".*

*I: [Laughs]*

*Aleksi: On the other hand, the black one had these completely white leather seats, which the salesman had picked and the bla-, the white one had black leather seats and I have had a black interior, like for hell of a long time, umm so, I kind of fell in love with the white interior and son said that – and for my wife it did not matter, she was okay with both – so my son said that "It's the black and not the white". So we took the black then.*

He conformed to his son's will, even when he had first picked the white BMW. White was the most popular exterior color in newly registered Finnish cars during the time of the interview. The initial choice to buy a white BMW can be interpreted as a bandwagon effect.

When Aleksi was asked if his closer circles had affected his decision-making in any way, he replied that they had not influenced him in any way. He then added that his good friend drove a new BMW and he was in the car as a passenger and he then noticed that the car was sweet. He also felt that the BMW was nicer than his ML and at that point he got tired of Mercedes. When his father bought a new ML and he drove it, he thought it did not 'have any balls'. Aleksi concluded by saying that the point was that no one said to him anything, but he had just sensed that it was time to change his car. The reasons behind Aleksi's choice to drive a BMW were seemingly inner-oriented, but closer inspection revealed that he was mostly in the bandwagon.

#### 4.4.2. Counter-conformity, snobbism and Veblenian consumption

Counter-conformity via the means of snobbism was a particularly relevant and strong way of seeking prestige in the research material.

*Snobbism*

Ilkka was asked if he thought that his car attracted attention on the streets, to which he replied the following:

*Ilkka: I don't think of it from that point of view at all. That if it's noticed or not. Maybe it then in some ways differs from the mass, as after all those, as it is a quite rare model and there isn't – in parking garages or parking lots – that many of them, so it does differ in that sense, but I never think of it.*

Ilkka described that cars were an important part of his identity, even too important sometimes, as it still was a car used to travel from one place to another. But the informant stated he could not live without one. He stated that everyone has to have a sort of craziness and he compared his approach to cars as being enthusiastic about motorcycles or playing golf. When the informant was asked if it was important to him that the car was like him, he replied that maybe it was because he ended up with it. Ilkka then further described this in the following excerpt:

*Ilkka: Because these other options would have been like boxy and BMW had the X5, which is basically the same car, but the rear end's design is different, so maybe then, I was looking for something different from the mass.*

*I: Alright.*

*Ilkka: So I guess it [that the car was similar to him] is in some way important.*

Ilkka maintained that his decision to buy the X6 was not influenced by other people like friends or family. On the contrary, he felt that he had influenced others as noticed from the following excerpts:

*Ilkka: No they [friends] haven't, the colleagues have actually followed me.*

*I: [Laughs] This way around.*

*Ilkka: Yeah, I bought the first E Mercedes, so then col-, colleagues straight away bought the same, or then when I changed, changed to another one, a colleague got one*

*at the same time. Then when I changed to ML, then even two colleagues changed to similar MLs afterwards.*

*I: Alright.*

*Ilkka: But like there are no BMWs yet, in a way, like the employees at the factory have gotten some, but they haven't of course followed me in that.*

These excerpts made by Ilkka are clear illustrations of snob motives. Ilkka showed an ongoing interest to differ from others, to be unique and counterconform. This was in line with findings of Tian et al. (2001) and especially with the creative choice counterconformity process.

Ilkka also described that he was the person in his circle of friends that talked more about cars. He also described his enthusiasm regarding cars as a craziness, which had affected him throughout his life. Ilkka also described that he read all kinds of car magazines and he hence knew a lot about cars. He also told a vivid story about going to a car dealer, when he still had an Audi, and the salesman knew less about cars than he did. He also described that the salesman felt awkward because of it. He still could understand why the salespeople had a great challenge in remembering all the details from different makes and models, as the number of different models was so broad. Ilkka concluded that it did annoy him, when salespeople were incompetent and knew less of the cars than he did. These examples were illustrative of Ilkka's cultural capital regarding cars and how he used it to justify his choice and to drive the car for the right and appropriate reasons.

When Ilkka was asked if it bothered him when he saw an almost identical car, he replied that it did not bother him and he had seen a similar car with identical color in another city. He then interestingly added that X6s were still so unique that it did not annoy him, if he saw similar ones. His X6 therefore satisfied his need for uniqueness and was consistent with the findings of Mason (1992) and Leibenstein (1950), who argued that snobs derived valued from standing out from the mass.

Ilkka also described that the design of the car was a key factor in his decision-making. He stated that the car had to please the eye. He also added that he felt nice as he watched the car. Ilkka also told that he liked to keep his car in a good shape by washing and waxing it regularly. Sometimes he felt that he took too good care of the cars, as

when he sold them to the dealers, he only got a minor economic compensation for keeping them in good shape. The informant drove a burgundy colored X6 and he had a principle regarding the car's color. Firstly the car's interior had to be something other than black as it hid details and made the interior seem smaller. Secondly, the exterior color had to be something other than silver. Ilkka's tendency to keep the car's exterior in good shape can be seen as snobbism and his choice with the color can be interpreted as counterconformity, as silver was and is a popular color among BMWs.

Taken together, it can be argued that Ilkka's choice was motivated by reasons related to signaling. The informant's car was a burgundy colored X6 and its design was arguably conspicuous. Mason (1981: 43) stated that if a selected object is expensive, conspicuous and has notable social appeal, it can be argued that the object is bought due to display considerations.

Aleksi had previously owned three or four Mercedes-Benz MLs in a row, he did not remember. The informant described this period as a Mercedes phase. During the interview he had been a BMW owner for a year and he owned a 1M and an X5. He described his decision-making strategy by stating how he had a car for a particular function; one big car as a family car, which was driven by his wife and a smaller sporty car for himself. The informant argued that the main reason for buying the X5 was that he had decided that there would be no ML this time. When Aleksi had started his decision-making process, he described it as following:

*Aleksi: And then I don't have that many options, since, since I have never liked to drive with an Audi, I have never been an Audi man and, and I indeed have experiences, previous experiences of BMWs, so I thought BMW could be one choice and, but it was due to this new ML, it went in the wrong direction, it went, too much in the old timer direction, the de-, the design failed in it, in my opinion. Then the X5 came with the completely new design, this new body type, which was like – I think a car always has to be a bit sporty – and my previous ML was insanely sporty, I built it myself and it probably is the all-time finest ML in the city and... And it actually happened so that I went with this M1 to change the winter tires to it, I mean buy new rims, for that M1, so the salesman said to me, "Come and see this, we have just gotten the new X5 to our courtyard, or two of them actually, there are only few of these in Finland." I was not even going there to buy a new car, but this salesman as an old friend just said that "Come and see, shouldn't we make a deal."*

The informant further described his decision-making process by saying that he had always liked German cars, but had sometimes played with an idea of driving a Range Rover, but he had never been that excited of them. He basically preferred BMW and Mercedes and recently BMW felt more and more like his first choice. He jokingly referred to an identity crisis as he was getting closer to being in his 50s. Aleksi felt like driving a more youthful car rather than a car related with the older types, as he had always perceived the image of BMW as a youthful car.

As can be noted, Aleksi stressed his older car's uniqueness and superiority and that it was the finest one in the whole city. When he further added that there were only few X5 Ms in Finland, it depicted the snob motives of the informant and how he appreciated standing out and feeling unique. Aleksi's snob motives already became apparent, when he discussed his signaling practices and how the cars were built to attract attention. Moreover, he signaled his group belonging by abandoning Mercedes-Benz and the 'old-timers' and instead bought a BMW. Within this group he used counterconformity to reinforce his snob motives and distinguish from the more ordinary BMW drivers.

When Aleksi was asked if he had the M Series marks on the back side of his car, he confirmed. He continued that he had removed the marks from his old ML, but he enjoyed looking at them in the X5. This was the first time he left the markers in his car and he wanted to look at them, as he really liked the image of it. Leaving the relatively loud markers on the back, he signaled to distinguish himself from other drivers with more common BMWs. The following remark clarified this:

*Aleksi: Well, there [amongst golfers] are quite a lot of, many friends have BMWs, really many of my friends have BMWs, like quite many friends that are my age drive X6s, or then with X5s, really a lot, so it's like, quite many of my golf buddies drive BMWs.*

Aleksi was asked if he had seen an identical car anywhere and he replied that he had not. He then told that the salesman had said that there had arrived only few of them in Finland and the other white one had gone to Helsinki. He then continued that there was only one in the city during the interview and if someone ordered an X5 M, it would arrive in five months and during that time he got to drive one alone. He then added in a steadfast manner that he would not meet one by chance. When he was asked if seeing similar cars bothered him, he replied that it would not. He then continued by saying that the Ms were quite expensive, so it would be unlikely to encounter them. He argued that the more basic models like X5 30d would be seen relatively soon, but he also thought

that encountering M Series would not occur as fast. These remarks made Aleksí's motives even clearer.

Aleksí did not feel that owning a BMW was unique in Finland and he thought that there were numerous BMWs nowadays and their number had risen recently. He said that it did not bother him; on the contrary, he felt it was nice that people drive BMWs. He further argued that the 3 and 5 Series were sold a lot and BMW had succeeded in their marketing of for example four-wheel drives. He also mentioned that owning a BMW was no longer a marking or labeling factor, neither in a positive or negative way. This indicated that Aleksí was affected by the perception of others and that he wanted to differentiate himself from the bulk of BMW drivers, who according to him drove 3 and 5 series.

Harri was asked which accessories he used to pick on the cars he bought as new. He then informed the interviewer that BMW had a different approach to accessories and that they were built from a stripped down car and that other brands had packages. The informant therefore asserted that BMW was different from other brands and it had a different approach compared to others and consequently highlighted the brand's uniqueness compared to other manufacturers.

Lauri said that owning a BMW was not seen as unique anymore, at least compared to the situation 20 years ago. He then corrected himself and stated that 20 to 30 years ago BMW was nothing and that its image had started to rise at the end of the 90s. The informant also recalled that in his youth BMWs were almost like Škodas; hideous because of their boxy design. Lauri mentioned that some car brands like Kia had pretty nice models, especially the bigger ones. Nevertheless even if they had BMW markers on them, it could be noticed that they were not BMWs. He argued that a BMW could not be mistaken to a different brand and it could be seen from a longer distance, as BMW was so massive that made it different from others. He concluded that when one started to drive a BMW the difference could definitely be felt.

Lauri was asked if seeing identical cars bothered him while for instance driving around the city. He replied that it was not nice if he was completely honest. Especially if the cars had identical rims and so on, but he then added that luckily there were no identical ones in the city. He argued that Vaasa was so small that there were none. Lauri noted that there were similar BMWs, but they were with diesel engines and did not have lower chassis or bigger tires and rims. He thought his car looked quite different compared to

the basic models. He further argued that it would indeed disturb him, if there was an identical one. Lauri then concluded that he chose extra accessories to make his car more distinctive. He described this as the small joys of an old man.

The ways how Lauri stressed the difference of BMWs compared to other brands and his own car to similar ones in Vaasa, could be clearly interpreted as being motivated by snob motives. The need to feel unique was also evident in Lauri's accessory choices, as he mostly picked exterior related accessories such as a lowered chassis, bigger tires and rims and a black rear curtain. He also mentioned the cost of the accessories were over 20 000 euros. Therefore the informant was willing to pay a significant amount of money to satisfy his need to feel unique.

#### *Veblenian consumption*

Aleksi demanded that the bigger car he owned was a four-wheel drive and had enough room to fit his family and golf bags in, for example when they went for a trip. The informant used to drive a lot more, when his children were smaller and they lived farther away. He stated that nowadays the bigger car got around 10 000 kilometers per year, but in the past it was even 30 000 annually. He described the kilometers driven as everyday related, since his wife did not work. Therefore the X5 could not be described as a tool, even if it was bought for functional reasons, according to him. The informant categorized his 1M as a tool, even if he did not drive for more than few thousand kilometers with it annually. The commuting for his work was only few kilometers per day. Therefore the functional use of the car was minimal, albeit it was a tool to some degree. He also felt that BMW was one of the best cars quality-wise and appreciated that one could be sure that the car functioned. The feeling of quality was similar to a Mercedes-Benz, he added.

When Aleksi was asked which accessories the X5 had, he replied that it basically had everything and the M Series came with a lot of interior related accessories that were top notch from the beginning. The car also had a panorama roof which he thought was sweet, even if he had not possibly picked one when building the car on his own. The accessories ranged from adaptive headlight range controllers to best possible LED-lights and best possible stereo equipment, in his words. Aleksi also selected almost all the accessories he could get. He had in the past built the cars himself, but this car was an exception, as he respected the salesman and his skill in building cars and noticed that

it had all the necessary accessories. He described his approach to cars as getting them with all the trimmings.

The choices of Aleksí fit the classical descriptions of conspicuous consumption made by Veblen (1899), as many of the accessories were almost non-functional for him, but still he chose to pick them. It can be argued that Aleksí also appreciated the Veblenian aspects of his choice to drive a BMW X5 M. Aleksí partly revealed the wasteful nature of his choice in the following remark:

*Aleksí: Yes, in principle a car is important to me in that sense that I, like I do waste, or I can't say that I waste, because it isn't wasting, but I invest a lot of money in cars since I like to drive with good cars, as, as it is a tool for me and secondly, as I don't have any other gadgets, the things I drive have to be in order.*

The informant also described that a car was important to him, as he had always had all kinds of motored vehicles like snowmobiles, jet skis and other gadgets. He also told that he had gradually started to grow out of them and they did not interest him that much. He had had a large boat that was 40 feet long, but he had sold it recently, so he did not own any other gadgets than his car. He also stated that two things had to be top notch in his life, his car and his home, as he used them the most.

This argument that the car was a tool contradicted with his annual mileage, which was 10 000. Therefore the car was mostly used in displaying, which can also be interpreted from his signaling practices and how the cars were built to attract attention. Taken together, Aleksí had a Veblenian motive in his decision to drive a BMW.

Interestingly, Aleksí was also asked if driving a car was still considered morally right and he answered that he had thought of it and he should drive a small electric car, as he had a short commuting distance. The informant acknowledged that there was no sense in driving a BMW 1M with 350 horsepower because of the commuting distance, but he did not want to drive an electric car. His choice to not drive an electric car did not bother him, as he rather drove with a 'good car'; he argued that it was better to do things that one liked, rather than suffer because of reasons like global warming. He further argued that his decision to drive a petrol powered car instead of an electric car had no effect on the climate. Having said this Aleksí still acknowledged that an electric car would be the smartest option for him.

Aleksi thus recognized that his choice of car was irrational, but he wanted to drive a car he enjoyed, rather than suffer from driving a rationally chosen car. Aleksi specifically mentioned good cars in this context, so it can be argued that the importance of belonging to the group of successful was more critical to him than to act according to moral norms.

#### 4.4.3. Non-conformity and self-actualization

It was assumed by the researcher that the decision to drive an expensive car was linked to identity and self-actualization. Non-conformity referred to a tendency to follow one's own values and beliefs, rather than conform to the others around the individual. This non-conformity was then linked to inner-direction and self-actualization. In the context of prestige-seeking, Mason (1981:39) argued that inner-directed individuals followed their own values, but still cared what other people thought of them and appreciated their admiration. This self-actualization was interesting due to the notion that self-actualizing people tended to be awarded with prestige. A person 'doing his own thing' is in many ways a virtue in contemporary Western societies.

Self-actualization motives were classified as perfectionist and hedonist motives in the framework made by Vigneron and Johnson (1999). They proposed that one of the components of prestige value was a product's or brand's perceived high quality, which gave reassurance for consumers who were driven by perfectionism. Moreover, the authors argued that hedonic motives were linked to the need to get emotional rewards. This was also prevalent among the informants. However, seeking emotional rewards and avoiding punishments is evident in all human behavior, so it is vital to analyze where these particular positive feelings stem from.

Lauri described that his car was a central part of his identity and that he was extremely strict about his car and especially its cleanliness. He stated that he always had a brush under his seat with which he brushed off all the dirt and sand, if he noticed any. He also stated that his car was never dirty. Lauri said that there was a carwash company at the parking lot where he kept his car and they washed his car. The informant argued that he was really pedantic regarding his possessions like cars and home. This attention to detail showed a degree of perfectionism, but on the other hand, the commitment to outer details of the car also indicated a degree of other-directedness.

However, he described his motives and what the car meant for him as following:

*Lauri: ... I like cars and I like to keep them – and enjoy driving them – when they are clean, but it is not like in a way, like a tool for displaying, so that I do not see it like that, it just brings me pleasure.*

*I: Alright, alright.*

*Lauri: So that I don't like think of what someone other thinks, which car I come with, so I have, I have never been the kind that. I just like, when my car is clean and neat, I think it [the car] goes a lot more nicely, you know...*

*I: [Laughs]*

*Lauri: You get a feeling like that straight away [laughs]. And then if you are stressed at work and then you like get a really clean car, shiny, and then you leave with it, so you sort of feel relaxed...*

*I: Exactly.*

*Lauri: At least I calm down [laughs]...*

*I: Well umm, it does...*

*Lauri: Like think if you leave from here and everything has went straight to hell, then you jump in your totally shitty car and drive, so it's like, you are a bit depressed and then you get even more depressed about it, but if you have a completely clean and neat car, and you leave, then it might be like 'We will bounce back from this' [laughs].*

Lauri's response was seemingly inner-directed and that a clean car gave him a better mood and a sense of getting through a difficult day. This inner-direction was also apparent, when Lauri argued that his closer circles had not affected his decision in any way. He said that he always decides himself what he does. He did not understand people who went to a car dealer and the sales person could steer the customer to buy a car that salesman wanted to sell, or the salesman decided the color. He stated that when he visited a dealer he knew exactly what he wanted and did not ask the salesman what color he thought was nice. If the salesman tried to explain or steer him, he ignored them.

Lauri then recalled when he owned a car dealership 20 years ago and some customers came from the surrounding smaller towns to the dealer and stayed for the whole day and talked with the salesman. The salesman could steer their choice in any way he wanted. He acknowledged that there still were people like that and that they did not know what they wanted. These remarks showed that Lauri was inner-oriented and that he appreciated the hedonistic aspects of his car, which are scrutinized in more detail below.

Lauri said that he did not drive more than 500 kilometers because of his job and concluded that it was nothing. Therefore the car was not functionally important. The informant was asked what kind of attributes he required from the car and he replied that it had to be automatic and that was unconditional. He also required that the car had AC and cruise control. He did not mind if the car's fuel efficiency was minimal. Lauri had a traditional approach to cars and he was not interested in newer technologies like hybrids. He stressed that the cars should be simple and he thought that hybrids required tinkering and thinking, for example when to use electricity and when gasoline. He expressed that he did not know how much a liter of gasoline cost. Lauri told that he was not interested of such things and compared it with his decision to not buy a ground-source heat pump to his second apartment by the beach. He stated that he could not take care of such things as he was not a technical person or a pragmatic. He appreciated easy and simple solutions. The preceding remarks were particularly illustrative of hedonism.

He also stated that he was slightly childlike, as he liked the sound of gasoline powered engines rather than diesel ones. He also said that he wanted to buy his car from the particular dealer, as he wanted to buy from the local dealers since it gave him flexibility in servicing and other things. Moreover, he had acquaintances that worked at the dealer.

Ilkka, on the other hand, when asked of the accessories in his X6, he replied that there were all kinds of accessories. He also said that he appreciated a sort of luxuriousness. The informant was then asked to give examples of the accessories and if they were more comfort oriented, he replied that they indeed were comfort related. He did not have any exterior related accessories, as most of the accessories were things like leather interior and comfort seats. He also stressed that his car needed to be automatic.

Otso had picked different accessories to his car and most of them were functional in nature. He had chosen a trailer hitch that was electronic and it could fold to be invisible. When he had told his wife of his intentions to change to a new car, she had insisted that he would at least put a trailer hitch on it. Trailer hitch was convenient because it was

needed for towing things to the cottage. Otso had also chosen a GPS with a bigger screen and a steering wheel heater. He also had bought a Stop & Go system, which was an adaptive cruise control. He praised the system and argued that he would not pick a car without one in the future, as it eliminated most of the problems with an ordinary cruise control. The functional attributes were clearly valuable for him, as he drove a lot on the highway. Otso was more practical and stressed the “Sheer driving pleasure” of his BMW.

Harri said that even if he drove only little, he wanted that even the smallest trips were enjoyable. He specified that it was the pleasure that he sought. Harri usually chose leather seats and he had previously thought that they were uncomfortable. Harri also mentioned that he usually chose all the basic comfort options and no ‘stupid stuff’. The current car had accessories that he would not have picked if he had bought it as new.

Harri was asked which other brands had he considered and he replied that when he changed his car, he usually looked at all cars with an open mind and tested them, but he had almost always ended up with a BMW. He said he could not help himself; he thought BMW was a good car. The way the informant stated that BMWs were good cars was clearly meant as functionally good.

Harri replied to a question regarding the attributes that he required from his car, by saying that the car had to be a four-wheel drive. Secondly, as his secondary sports car was such that he sat close to the ground, he wanted to sit higher up in the other one. He felt that the X6 was less spacious than his previous 535 in terms of luggage capacity. Harri liked the stability and robustness of BMWs and that he had personal experience with car brands like Mercedes-Benz, Audis and Japanese cars. He added that he would no longer change a German car to a Japanese one. He also thought Volvo was an okay car.

Harri also said that he drove less than before. He used to drive around 30 000 kilometers but during the time of the interview he drove less than 15 000 kilometers. Harri described that the car was not that central for his occupation, but he occasionally had to move things from one place to another and that he preferred to do it himself rather than outsource it to someone. The car was registered to the company and even if it was not an essential tool of his trade, he felt that it was a tool nonetheless.

To conclude, the informants appeared to be driven by hedonistic motives. This however can be interpreted in many ways, as it was a safe subject compared to identity related matters such as prestige and self-worth. Otso's remarks were particularly illustrative of this, as he confessed enjoying the brand's high profile and that his peers drove them, but when scrutinized in greater detail, he said that he bought one for 'sheer driving pleasure'. Signaling related aspects were constantly downplayed most likely due to personal biases. A degree of self-actualization was evident in some of the informants like Ilkka, Lauri and Aleks, who thought their cars were meaningful to their identity. Self-actualization as a phenomenon provided insight in terms of group distinction and how enthusiasts differed from status-seekers.

#### 4.5 Prestige-seeking patterns

The informants pursued prestige in their decisions, but their need for it was not as strong that was first hypothesized. This however was consistent with the findings of Han et al. (2010) and their notion of patricians, who had lower need for status. Therefore it can be argued that the informants had partly satisfied their need for status and consequently prestige, but it still played a part in their decisions. Harri's remark on described the aforementioned especially well. During the earlier part of the interview he argued that the car was not a status symbol for him, but the social appeal was still important to him, as could be noted from the following excerpt:

*I: This is about it [the interview is about to end], I could still ask some clarifying questions, so, do you feel that your car attracts attention, if you are driving with it? Is it seen, does it stand out?*

*Harri: I do believe that, this is now my own image, and I could think that it attracts attention. And I wish that there is some positive too, not all negative.*

*I: [Laughs]*

*Harri: And I do believe that it attracts positive attention too, like, I have many who say, my acquaintances, that "You have a marvelous car". So that, and I can't say anything other than that it is a marvelous car.*

The prestige, in other words, the social acceptance and appreciation of his acquaintances, was important to him. This remark combined with his resentment of overt status-seeking, showed that driving a BMW might have an adverse effect on acquiring prestige. It can be argued that driving a BMW and his perceived negative effect on prestige could have played a part in his remarks regarding the possible switch to an Audi.

Otso had a similar attitude toward acquiring prestige. He said he had partly bought his BMW due to its 'high profile', which can be interpreted as prestige-seeking. However, when Otso was inquired more closely, he said that making a good impression was not a bad thing, but it was not the only reason why he drove a BMW. He then added that the need of youngsters to signal was completely different from him, so he thought that status related matters were much more central to them than to him. In essence, Otso still sought prestige gains with his decision. Otso's remarks again fit the arguments of Han et al. (2010: 17) who argued that 'patricians' used products less conspicuously, since they had a lower need for status and prestige.

Aleksi had built his cars to attract attention in a conspicuous fashion. On the other hand, he argued that he had no need, nor did he want to prove anything with his choice of car. He also notified that a lower profile car would have been better for those purposes. This however contradicted with numerous statements he gave. Why build a bright orange sports car that was purposefully a conspicuous car, if not for display reasons? Aleksi recognized that others may have tried to signal status with their BMWs, but he signaled that he wanted to be perceived as a certain type of person, namely other than an old timer driving a Mercedes-Benz. Therefore it can be argued that Aleksi pursued prestige and more precisely social acceptance from the ephemeral group of the successful. He was partly conforming to the norms of this group, but at the same time he counterconformed to strengthen his own identity.

Lauri on the other hand pursued prestige progressively. He had always driven fancier cars and had not bought them out of the blue. This again was in line with the findings of Han et al. (2010), who argued that patricians sought status less obviously and explicitly. Lauri pursued status gradually. He argued that signaling was not important to him, but the way he approached his car's cleanliness illustrated how the display reasons were in fact central to him. He stated that it was internally rewarding for him to keep his car clean, but looking at the bigger picture, it became evident that he was motivated by

display reasons. This became evident when Lauri described the accessories of his car; most of them were exterior focused.

Lastly, Ilkka was mostly driven by snob motives, which could be construed from his statements regarding the car's uniqueness and how it was different from the mass. He described himself as an enthusiast and a trend setter in his closer circles. He did not care of others and their opinions and cars were important in his self-actualization process. But then again, he drove a X6, which was certainly a conspicuous car and had little functional use, which he himself stated. He therefore sought prestige by differentiating himself from others and the mass.

As mentioned previously, the second objective of this thesis was *to empirically analyze the prestige-seeking patterns of BMW owners*. To summarize these prestige-seeking patterns of the informants in a clear and concise way, the findings are drawn together with the model of group memberships.

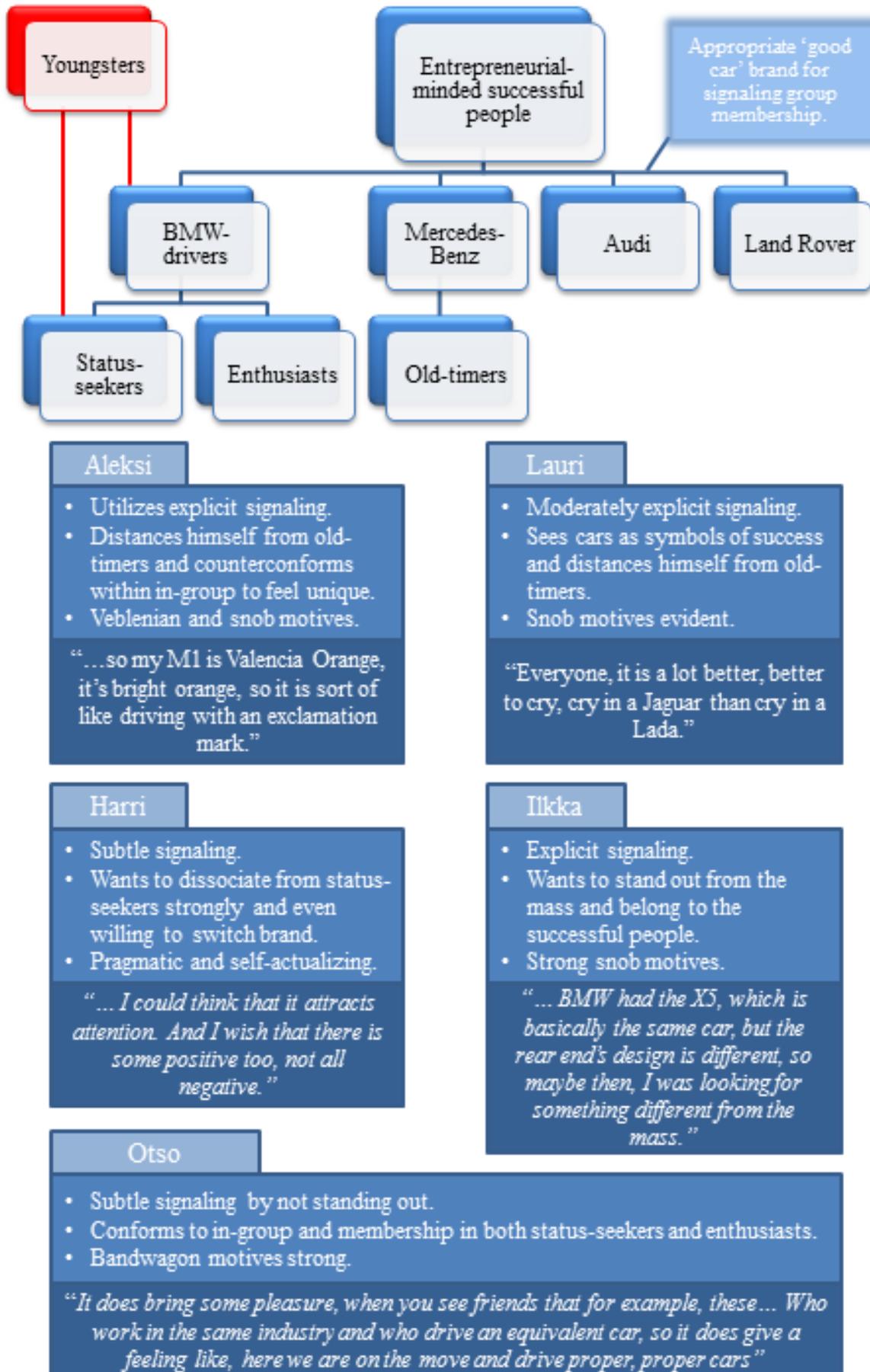


Figure 5. Prestige-seeking patterns.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter shows the conclusions made in the research and dwells into the guiding research question: *How is prestige pursued in consumption?* Moreover, this chapter presents methodological considerations and possible future research opportunities.

### 5.1 Conclusions

The purpose of the study was to examine how prestige was pursued in consumption. This research problem was approached through three research objectives. The first objective was to establish a theoretical framework on prestige-seeking consumer behavior. This guided the research in defining what was meant with prestige, why it was pursued in the first place and how it was pursued. The theoretical underpinnings focused on prestige on a bigger scale and detailed the context surrounding the phenomenon. Hence, the framework explained how human collectivities and social systems formed value systems, which in turn defined prestige and the basis for awarding it to individuals. The concept of legitimacy was introduced as a threshold that had to be fulfilled, so that a consumer could achieve prestige. It was also argued that prestige was awarded through conforming to a value system's shared values, beliefs and norms.

The theoretical framework then addressed the needs and motives behind prestige-seeking and the purpose of examining these matters was to grasp the 'why' questions around the phenomenon. The direct needs linked to prestige were the need to belong and to feel unique, which appeared in behavior either as conformity, counterconformity or non-conformity. Prestige-seeking needs on the other hand were closely related to prestige-seeking motives and the motives consisted of primary motives and secondary motives. Motives such as bandwagoning, snobbism and Veblenian consumption were essential, as they had been researched more than other prestige related matters. This provided the research with more depth and empirical evidence to support and illustrate the different motives.

The final part of the theoretical framework involved objects, which were sources of prestige and in turn how these objects were used in signaling and attempts of seeking prestige. The focus was on interpersonal signaling where consumers signaled with material and immaterial possessions to gain approval and appreciation. Cultural capital

as a source of prestige was explored and this was constantly linked to the bridge between consumers and their relevant groups. Cultural capital was a key concept affecting signaling and these were addressed to make the phenomenon of prestige-seeking more concrete.

After the theoretical framework was established, the research continued in the empirical part. The empirical part was guided by the second and the third research objective. The third objective, *to analyze the different group memberships of the BMW owners* was explored first, as it was a natural way of shedding light on the social context where prestige-seeking took place.

Building from the remarks made by the informants, it was evident that driving a BMW or another expensive brand was a measuring stick of individual success and BMW was an aspirational brand with high profile. This high profile was tied to an ephemeral group, namely 'The entrepreneurial-minded successful people', and BMW was an appropriate brand within the group. Remarks such as how BMW was common and even natural choice within the business world shed light on the group and its value system. Within BMW drivers there were two distinct subgroups that drove the car for apparently different reasons, where one cared more about the image of driving with a 'good car' and the other were more interested of the technical properties. The first group was named Status-seekers, as they were described as less involved, image-conscious and forward-striving. Enthusiasts on the other hand were 'car men', who had an excessive amount of understanding regarding cars and who chose the brand, because it had good driveability, functionality and unique design. The Enthusiasts did not follow opinions and were more pragmatic and inner-oriented.

Assessing the legitimacy of BMW gave details of the group structures and helped clarifying prestige-seeking as a whole. The informants identified a common out-group of Youngsters, who also drove BMWs, but in an appropriate manner. They appeared to be reckless, aggressively status-seeking, overtly masculine and less educated. Moreover, the Youngsters drove inferior and older models, 3 Series and 5 Series, or borrowed their BMWs from their parents. Some of the Mercedes-Benz drivers were seen as Old-timers, who were older, less masculine and a bit old fashioned. These Old-timers still belonged in the in-group, but few of the informants did not want to be recognized as such.

The second research objective was *to empirically analyze the prestige-seeking patterns of BMW owners*. The central finding regarding this was that 'good cars' were

membership facilitators in the group of ‘The entrepreneurial-minded successful people’. Having a ‘good car’ was relevant for the group and its value system, and through ownership one was an appropriate and accepted member. ‘Good cars’ were in many ways taken for granted. So in essence automobiles were used to conform to the group’s shared beliefs, values and ideals.

The other relevant patterns were linked to signaling practices. The informants understood and recognized that their cars could be perceived as signalers and that they could be used to signal something, but their decision was not motivated by such cravings. On the other hand, they said that other BMW drivers might have had such motives. The informants recognized that some BMW drivers were aggressive status-seekers, but mostly attributed this to Youngsters, although they also saw that buying a new BMW could be seen as status-seeking.

Explicit signaling as a way of attaining prestige and status was seen as ineffective compared to more subtle means. The informants thought that some of the more conspicuous choices seemed to invoke negative reactions such as annoyance and irritation in others. Being too unique was a quick way to get recognized and singled out not in a positive way. Moreover, buying a new conspicuous BMW was seen as an attempt to better one’s social position, if it was bought suddenly rather than gradually improving makes and models.

As noted, driving a ‘good car’ was the main prestige-seeking pattern found in the research material. This was directly linked to conformity and bandwagoning. Bandwagon motives were articulated particularly well by Otso, who said that driving equivalent cars with colleagues gave him a positive feeling. He said that it was hard to explain. This was illustrative of the difficulty in expressing prestige related feelings and emotions.

Snobbism and consequent counterconformity was similarly strong in the research material. Informants stressed the uniqueness of their vehicles as well as other aspects, which made them different from the mass. Driving cars few or no one had gave the informants a sense of uniqueness. A remark made by Alekski illustrated this accurately: He got to drive alone with his X5 M in the city for at least for five months. Similarly, Lauri felt discomfort if he saw an identical car and was willing to pay for accessories that made his car more unique.

Veblenian consumption was partly evident in some of the informants' behavior and talk. Ostentation and Veblenian consumption was evident in the case of Aleksi. He drove a BMW 1M that got annually around 2 000 kilometers and the bigger 'family car' X5 M's annual mileage was around 10 000 kilometers. The discrepancy between the price of the cars and the actual functional use was noticeable. This was further illustrated through the accessories and how he usually chose all the possible accessories. This lack of functionality and wastefulness exemplified the Veblenian aspects in consumption.

Self-actualization and non-conformity motives were apparent in the informants' talk, particularly in the form of hedonism. Most informants saw that their decision was irrational and based on emotion. The informants appreciated simple solutions and making the driving experience as enjoyable as possible. This hedonism was also apparent in the choice of accessories, which for many of the informants were linked to being comfortable. Harri argued that his choice was based on pragmatic reasons and that he extensively tried other makes and models, but always ended up choosing a BMW. Ilkka was strongly inner-oriented regarding cars and took great pride in being an enthusiast. This however did not mean that prestige was not a motivator, as pointed out by Harri's remark on how he wished his car aroused positive reactions, while still resenting overt status-seeking.

## 5.2 Discussion

Why are groups and memberships in them so important in attaining prestige? The most plausible explanations are directly linked to the theory of evolution. Groups are inherently stronger than individuals, and groups that adapt quicker get more resources. Individual skill in an activity that grants the group resources and thus increases its chance of survival is therefore valuable. If the particular skills spread in the group fast, the group is even more adaptable. Granting prestige and a higher social position for the skilled individual benefits the group, if it fosters faster skill attainment. Therefore the less skilled individual has a rational reason to grant prestige, since he has access to knowledge that could be difficult or impossible to attain. Conforming to the group's values, ideals and norms heightens the cohesion in the group.

Being accepted and approved by a group with high status grants a halo-like effect for the individual and to achieve this, the individual needs to signal the membership. Without external cues the pursued or actual position may be difficult to discern by the

on-looker. Signaling group membership is therefore essential in group-level communication and status-seeking.

Counterconformity and pursuing uniqueness on the other hand is related to communication within the in-group. Having conformed to in-group's norms, the individual tries to regain his sense of self through counterconformity. The individual as a consumer consequently signals belonging to the group, but at the same time differentiates from other in-group members. Being unique fosters a feeling of individuality, which in turn heightens self-esteem and self-worth. Ultimately, having a high self-esteem has been linked to various evolutionary fitness benefits. In the context of this study the evolutionary explanation above is plausible and the hermeneutic circle is fulfilled, in other words the whole has no internal contradictions.

Conceptually one simple remark was crucial in uncovering the nature of seeking prestige; how often do individuals behave and consume in a manner that decreases their social acceptability in a group and consequently their social value? Consciously or unconsciously, avoiding the aforementioned is a critical driver in behavior. Consumers and their pursuit of feeling accepted, appreciated and admired is still not properly understood, but the slow and steady baby steps towards the right path can be seen in recent studies.

Pursuing prestige and status is often not a conscious act but unconscious. Status appears to have intrinsic value, as pointed out by Huberman, Loch and Öncüler (2004). The findings in this research have the same trajectory. Surely, the informants and their thought process did not go as following: "This car will enhance my social value and people will accept and like me more, if I buy it." Still, all the informants recognized that their decision to buy was based on emotions and that it was irrational. What was this emotion then? My thesis is that it was motivated by prestige; feeling accepted, appreciated and even admired.

### 5.3. Methodological considerations and further research opportunities

The study was done part of a research project in which the consumption of cars played a smaller part. The main focus was on prestige and how businesses could utilize it in creating value and especially in a service-oriented context. The role of my research was to explore prestige from a consumer's perspective and provide descriptive information

to help in further research on the subject. The research material was collected according to a research plan, which focused on reaching a certain saturation level in certain subjects, such as legitimacy, identity, emotional and rational decision-making. The closer details of the interview questions and categories are listed in Appendix 1.

The research plan and the accompanying interview guideline affected the research process and the consequent results significantly. Firstly, the interview guideline was not specifically designed to answer the research problem, although it did provide necessary depth to understanding how prestige was pursued. Interviewing as a method had its weaknesses due to the biases regarding seeking prestige. The biases did not come as a surprise, since the preceding research on prestige and status had encountered them. Moreover the indirect approach suggested in previous research functioned relatively well. Longer interviews might have provided more detailed information, as prestige related reflection was often found in side remarks. To avoid future pitfalls in terms of the biases, it is justifiable to utilize alternative methods, which measure actual behavior rather than individual description of motives. The use of alternative methods is further justified by the fact that prestige-seeking is often unconscious and innate: the consumer might not recognize that his decision to buy a certain product is motivated by prestige.

One way to test how prestige is sought innately is through making social acceptability discernible, while other variables are kept the same. This could be achieved in a situation where a person makes a donation to a charity; the person making a donation may be given an option to get a certificate which signals clearly that the person made a donation. The certificate itself has no functional value, so if a person demands one, it can be argued to be motivated by prestige. Similarly, if a person runs a marathon he or she may be given an option to be rewarded with a shirt. This shirt can be either blank or with the text "Marathon finisher". Again, the two items have exact functional attributes, but the other functions as a signaler of something relatively meritorious.

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## APPENDIXES

### Appendix 1. Interview questions and categories.

#### **Emotionaalinen ja rationaalinen päätöksenteko**

Miten päädyit valitsemaan juuri tämän auton? Mitä muita automerkkejä ja malleja harkitsit?

Mitkä asiat vaikuttivat tämän auton valintaan? Millaisia ominaisuuksia vaadit autoltasi?

Kuinka monta kilometriä ajat vuodessa? Onko auto tärkeä osa työtäsi? Voisiko sitä luonnehtia työkaluksi? Entä tunneperäiset syyt?

Kävikö mielessä muiden suhtautuminen, kun valitsit autoa?

#### **Edeltävät kokemukset ja odotukset**

Kuinka kauan olet ajanut BMW:llä?

Millaisia edeltäviä kokemuksia sinulla oli BMW:n autoista? Entä odotuksia?

Mitä muita automerkkejä olet omistanut? Mitkä ovat kolme viimeisintä autoasi?

Mitä autoja et suostuisi ostamaan? Miksi?

#### **Identiteetti / Imago**

Kuinka tärkeä autosi on sinulle? Onko se tärkeä osa identiteettiäsi?

Koetko samaistuvasi muihin BMW-kuskeihin jollakin tasolla?

Kuinka kuvailisit muita BMW-kuskeja?

Minkälaisena luulet että muut (ei-asiakkaat) näkevät BMW-asiakkaat?

Miten BMW-merkkisiin autoihin suhtaudutaan? Mikä on yleinen mielikuva?

Osaatko eritellä sekä positiivisia että negatiivisia mielikuvia, joita olet kuullut liitettävän BMW-kuskeihin?

Jakautuvatko mielipiteet ryhmittäin?

#### **Arvomaailma**

Onko BMW:n omistajilla tietynlainen arvomaailma?

Millaisia arvoja uskot heidän edustavan?

#### **Sosiaalinen legitimitetti / hyväksyntä**

Onko BMW:n omistaminen sosiaalisesti hyväksyttyä tai arvostettua? Kuinka tämä käy ilmi?

#### **Moraalinen legitimitetti**

Onko autoilu ja autoihin liittyvä kuluttamisen arvostus moraaliselta/eettiseltä kannalta muuttumassa?

### **Kognitiivinen legitimizeetti**

Onko BMW:n omistaminen itsestään selvää lähipiirissäsi?

Onko olemassa BMW-ihmisiä? Millaisia he ovat?

### **Pragmaattinen legitimizeetti**

Koetko että muilla lähipiirisi henkilöillä on samankaltaiset mielipiteet BMW:stä kuin sinulla?

### **Status**

Onko sinulle tärkeää tehdä hyvä vaikutelma autollasi?

Onko BMW arvostettu merkki?

Oletko saanut positiivista huomioita autollasi? Entä kateutta?

### **Maine**

Onko BMW:llä jotenkin erityinen maine? Voitko kuvailla sitä?

Entä BMW-kuskeilla? Onko se positiivinen vai negatiivinen?

### **Ainutlaatuisuus**

Ostitko auton uutena?

Onko sinulle tärkeää, että auto on sinun näköinen? Esimerkiksi varustelun tai värin suhteen?

Heijastuuko autovalinnassasi oma identiteettisi?

Häiritseekö sinua, jos näet lähes identtisen auton kuin sinulla on?

Nähdäänkö BMW:n omistaminen jotenkin uniikkina tai erityisenä Suomessa?

### **Sosiaaliset vaikutukset päätöksentekoon**

Koetko että lähipiirisi on vaikuttanut siihen minkä auton valitset? Perhe, naapurit, kaverit, työkaverit?

Onko lähipiirisi suosituksilla ratkaisevaa roolia?

Onko ystäväpiirissäsi henkilöitä, jotka tietävät autoista paljon? Kysytkö heiltä neuvoja?

### **Kokemuksesta kommunikointi**

Kerrotko eri ajokokemuksistasi muille? Kenelle?

Jaatko kokemuksiasi sosiaalisessa mediassa?

**Nostalgia / kokemuksen jälkeen**

Onko sinulla nostalgisia kokemuksia BMW:stä? Esimerkiksi lapsuusmuistoja?

**Signalointi**

Mitä BMW:n hankkimisella halutaan mielestäsi viestiä toisille ihmisille?

Millaisia viestejä BMW:n omistaminen kertoo?

Tiedostavatko ihmiset BMW:n liittyvät sosiaaliset viestit sitä hankkiessaan?

**Näkyvyys**

Onko auton muotoilu sinulle tärkeää?

Onko sinulle tärkeää, että autosi erottuu liikenteessä?

Koetko autosi herättävän huomiota? Millaista?

**Ryhmät**

Millä autoilla työpaikkasi henkilöt ajavat?

Entä ystävät?

**Emotional and rational decision making**

How did you end up choosing this car? What other makes and models did you consider?

Which things affected you to choose this car? What kind of attributes did you require from your car?

How many kilometers do you drive annually? Is car an important part of your job? Can you characterize it as a tool? What about emotional reasons?

Did you think what others might think, when you were choosing the car?

**Prior experience & expectations**

How long have you driven a BMW?

What kind of previous experiences did you have of BMWs? What expectations?

What else brands have you owned? What are your three most recent cars?

What cars would you not buy? Why?

**Image / identity**

How important is the car for you? Is it an important part of your identity?

Do you feel likeminded with other BMW-drivers on some level?

How would you describe other BMW-drivers?

How do other non-BMW owners perceive BMW-owners?

How do people perceive BMW's cars? What is the common image?

Can you specify both positive and negative images that you have heard to be linked with BMW-drivers?

Are the opinions divided by different groups?

### **General values**

Do BMW owners have certain values?

What kind of values do you think they represent?

### **Social legitimacy / acceptance**

Is owning a BMW socially accepted or appreciated? How is this manifested?

### **Moral legitimacy**

Is appreciation regarding driving and driving related consumption transforming from a moral / ethical point of view?

### **Cognitive legitimacy**

Is owning a BMW taken for granted in your circle of acquaintances?

Are there BMW-people? What are they like?

### **Pragmatic legitimacy**

Do you think that the people in your close circles share the same opinion of BMWs as you do?

### **Status**

Is it important to you to make a good impression with your car?

Is BMW an appreciated brand?

Have you gotten positive attention with your car? What about envy?

### **Reputation**

Does BMW have a certain kind of reputation? Can you describe it?

What about BMW drivers? Is it positive or negative?

### **Uniqueness**

Did you buy the car as new?

Is it important for you that the car looks like you? For instance in terms of accessories or color?

Does your choice of car reflect your identity?

Does it bother you, if you see an almost identical car that you have?

Is owning a BMW seen as unique or special in Finland?

### **Social influence on decision**

Do you think that your close circle of acquaintances have influenced your choice of car?

Family, neighbors, friends, colleagues?

Do the recommendations of your close circle of people have a crucial role?

Is there any people in your circle of friends who know a lot about cars? Do you ask their advice?

### **Communicating about experience**

Do you tell others of your driving experiences? Who?

Do you share your experiences on social media?

### **Nostalgia dimension / after experience**

Do you have nostalgic experiences of BMWs? For example childhood memories?

### **Signaling**

What do people want to signal to other people, when they buy a BMW?

What kind of signals does owning a BMW tell?

Do people recognize the social signals attached to BMWs, when they buy one?

### **Visibility**

Is the design of your car important?

Is it important for you that your car is distinguished from others?

Do you think your car attracts attention? What kind of attention?

### **Groups**

What cars do people from your job drive? How about friends?