

## **THE YOUNG NOUVEAU RICHE AND LUXURY-BRAND CONSUMPTION**

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Taste classifies and classifies the classifiers.

Bourdieu 1984

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

### **Social Class, Identity and Consumption**

Throughout history and across societies, it has been recognised that consumption archetypes have functioned as a significant domain for the articulation, reaffirmation and reproduction of social class boundaries (e.g., Bourdieu 1984; Coleman and Rainwater 1979; Douglas and Isherwood 1996; Featherstone 1991; Holt 1997; McCracken 1988a; Simmel 1978; Veblen 1912). Previously, these social class boundaries such as royalty, nobility or peasantry were relatively stable and socially determined at birth. By tradition, these boundaries between classes in some societies were maintained through identifiable ways of life that rarely traversed. That is, these social class boundaries were protected and reproduced by restricting practices. This is particular so in the sphere of consumption where there were sumptuary laws which regulated which class could consume which commodities and wear which types of clothing (Appadurai 1986), or there were some sorts of controlling possibilities for exchange (Douglas 1967). Hence, a particular consumption

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good or activity would hold a fairly stable symbolic meaning representing a particular class status.

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

Much literature suggests that in contemporary culture, social classes are differentiated, articulated and reproduced by consumption tastes (Bourdieu 1984; Douglas and Isherwood 1996; Featherstone 1991; Holt 1997). That is, our social standings are demarcated not only by what we consume but also how and when we consume it. Thus, we must have legitimate ‘tastes’ which enable us to appreciate and classify products aptly, and thus to use them appropriately and “with natural ease in every situation” (Featherstone 1991, p.17). Essentially, we must be able to integrate our ‘tastes’ being employed in and/or acquired through the consumption of high cultural goods (e.g., art, literature, philosophy) into the consumption practices of other more mundane cultural goods (e.g., clothing, food, drink). Bourdieu (1984, p. 40) notes:

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

In this sense, it is vital that we acquire symbolic resources and cultural capitals in order to cultivate particular tastes and lifestyles which help position ourselves within a particular “habitus” (Bourdieu 1984). This is particular so for groups such as the new middle class, the new working class or the new rich who need an admission ticket to access and settle down comfortably in their new class boundaries. By this, they actively look for resources and capitals through lived and mediated experience. That is, besides observing the lifestyles of other people in the aspired class or attending educational or training programmes, they can also acquire cultural capitals from “the new cultural intermediaries” – e.g., those in lifestyle and fashion magazines, self-improvement books and advertising (Bourdieu 1984). As the newly arrived struggle to position themselves in particular habitus boundaries through newly acquired tastes and lifestyles, they may simultaneously contest to impose their own particular tastes as the legitimate tastes. Through these dynamic social processes, social class boundaries as well as consumption tastes, practices and meanings are always contested and shifting – that they are continually subjected to be produced, reproduced, negotiated, renegotiated, classified and reclassified (Featherstone 1991).

### **The Study: Methods and Informants**

In this paper, I discuss my interpretations of ethnographic research studying the young nouveaux riche informants who consume luxury brands intensively in their everyday lives. My primary aim of this research is to explore the interplay between their self-creation projects and the symbolic meanings of luxury brands in their everyday consumption. To achieve this, as suggested by several prominent consumer researchers (Belk *et al* 1988; McCracken 1988a; Sherry 1990; Willis 1990), I adopt interpretive approach via natural inquiries of ethnographic fieldwork to grasp the in-depth accounts of the complex phenomena of the self and symbolic consumption. Principally, the data collection methods are observations, both non-participant and participant observations, and a series of “the long interview” (McCracken 1988b). Auto-driving like collages as well as diaries are also used as supplementary methods. Deliberately, I employed triangulation across methods not only to enhance the research creditability (Wallendorf and Belk 1989), but also to generate a multiplicity of perspectives on the behaviour and contexts of the phenomena (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Elliott 1999). The fieldwork is conducted for sixty weeks.

The research informants consist of nine Thammasat University students from the nouveaux riche families who consume luxury brands intensively to express their social class. Their profiles are presented as follows:

**Ong:** Ong is a twenty years old male. He is the younger of the two sons in the family. His father is a retired army general and politician. His mother is a housewife.

Ong's parents are quite authoritative. Both parents are into luxury brands. The family frequently goes shopping together in Hong Kong. Examples of Ong's possessions are a Rolex watch, Versace and Armani shirts and jeans, a Prada rucksack, an Ericson mobile phone and a BMW coupe.

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

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

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

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

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

**Nook:** Nook is a nineteen years old female. She is the only daughter of the two children. Her father is a police officer. Her mother runs her own auditing and other businesses. Her parents are very protective; her mother still picks her up at the university everyday. Both parents are into luxury brands. Examples of Nook's possessions are Tag-Heuer and Baby-G watches, Louis Vitton and Chanel handbags, a Prada backpack, Ferragamo shoes, and an Ericson mobile phone.

**Pum:** Pum is a nineteen years old female. She is the second daughter among three daughters and one son. Her father holds a Mercedes-Benz auto-part dealership. Both parents are not much into luxury brands, but she has close cousins who are heavily into

luxury brands. Examples of Pum's possessions are a Rolex watch, a Louis Vitton wallet, a Celine handbag, Sisley and Benetton clothes, Replay jeans, and an Ericson mobile phone.

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

All informants but Ong and Oui are from Chinese background families. All of them live with their parents. Since the university is reputed to hold a relatively down-to-earth image, I am also interested to see how they negotiate the supposed conflicting images that they embrace in their self-projects.

The interpretations unfold the complex relationship between the nouveaux riche self and the dynamic and multifaceted symbolism of luxury-brand consumption. Evidently, the informants not only consume luxury brands to express the sumptuous image of the nouveaux riches but also to create and sustain their sense of beings (e.g., a sense of self-mastery and a sense of security) in the unruly world. To set background for my interpretations, I first discuss the phenomenon of the nouveaux riches in general and later I introduce a social setting of the nouveaux riches in Thailand. Then, I present my interpretations of the fieldwork.

### **The Nouveau Riche and Conspicuous Consumption**

The nouveaux riches are generally in reference to those who become wealthy through self-earned accomplishment (Costa and Belk 1990). Unlike the aristocracy or the old riches who are associated with the royal court or whose wealth is inherited in land preserved under a feudal system, the nouveaux riches' major source of wealth is commonly generated from their profession in trade. Although the nouveau riche is not a modern occurrence<sup>1</sup>, the phenomenon has become more apparent and socially contesting since the outset of industrialisation and modern capitalism. With their abundant economic capital, the nouveaux riches are often known by their attempt to buy social space in the aristocratic boundaries. That is, they usually engage in conspicuous consumption in an endeavour to imitate or even outshine the aristocratic lifestyles (Simmel 1978; Veblen 1912). Thus, their conspicuous consumption practices are often dismissed as vulgar and tasteless by the established aristocracy and those who are rich in cultural capital like intellectuals (Featherstone 1991).

Indeed, only economic capital to spend on expensive and lavish lifestyles is not enough for the nouveaux riches to position themselves in the aristocratic world. They also

<sup>1</sup> The new wealth from trade can be traced back to the ancient Roman era (Costa and Belk 1990).

need to acquire cultural capital and legitimate tastes held by the aristocracy (Bourdieu 1984). In other words, as Costa and Belk (1990, p.85) put it, “the nouveaux riches must learn to be wealthy”. Costa and Belk (1990, p.100) also propose that the social category of the nouveau riche may be viewed as a symbolic continuum between working class and wealthy, and the status of the nouveau riche is a dynamic one, a funnel through which individuals learn to advance their way towards the achieved position of ‘wealthy’. Nevertheless, some may choose to position relatively in the middle of the continuum. In their studies of nouveau riche American, Costa and Belk (1990) find that their informants learn their new consumption culture mostly from mediated resources in the magazines like *Town and Country* or *Travel and Leisure*. Costa and Belk (1990, p. 131) argue, “It is apparent that such magazines provide lessons in how to decorate, dress, drink, eat, travel, relax, and in general, live the life that wealth and taste make possible.”

### **The Nouveaux Riche in Thailand**

Akin to their counterparts elsewhere, the nouveaux riches in Thailand amass their wealth through trades and businesses. Most of them are Chinese ethnics who were formerly suppressed by the controversial modernisation scheme under the military dictatorship regime in mid 20<sup>th</sup> century (Sivaraksa 1991). In concert with the dramatic growth of capitalism in late 1960’s, these nouveau riche Chinese emerge as a new economic power in Thai society (Samudavanija 1991). As the capitalist economy becomes the dominant factor in the kingdom, the old power elites and the aristocratic Thais are inevitably forced to yield power to the new wealth. However, this is not an unproblematic social process. Not only ascending the social hierarchy from the working class status but also being an ethnic Chinese, the nouveaux riches in Thailand have to struggle tremendously to be accepted in the aristocratic society. They are commonly looked down upon by the old aristocratic Thais as being unrefined in their mannerism and utterance as well as unreserved and tasteless in their displays of wealth.

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

### **Interpretations of the Research Fieldwork**

The interpretations illustrate the importance of the informants' everyday consumption of luxury brands in their symbolic project of the self. It provides some insights into the complex nature of their thoughts, feelings and behaviour, and highlights the use of symbolic meanings derived from luxury brands as valuable resources in the creation, maintenance and expression of the self. Superficially, we often assume that these young people exploit luxury-brand consumption to reaffirm and reproduce their *nouveaux riche* selves. In other words, they use luxury brands to reflect their glamorous self-images and sumptuous lifestyles. Undoubtedly, this conspicuous aspect of the informants' luxury-brand consumption is a legacy that their parents aspire them to carry on. However, after iteratively interpreting and reinterpreting the fieldwork texts, I argue that the symbolic meanings of luxury-brand consumption, which these informants incorporate into their self-creation projects, operate much far beyond generating and/or illustrating *nouveaux riche* images. Evidently, the informants also employ their luxury-brand consumption symbolically as the rite of passage into adulthood, as emblems of liberation from authoritative or over-protective parents, as talismans to provide a sense of security in the postmodern world, as cultural capital in the age of globalisation and as sources of excitement and fantasy.

### **Luxury-brand Consumption: An Inheritance**

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

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

Certainly, the informants' symbolic self-creation is a continuous process, in which their life history plays a significant role in making sense of who they are today and who they want to be in the future. These informants are *nouveau riche* offspring whose parents consume luxury brands intensively. Since offspring can be perceived as the parents'

extended selves (Belk 1988), it is not uncommon that these parents endeavour to ensure that their children (i.e., the informants) sustain their nouveau riche images. Additionally, Feibleman (1975) suggests that parents by late middle age tend to live vicariously through their children. Hence, the parents continually encourage the informants to consume luxury brands. Unsurprisingly, the informants and their parents always go shopping for luxury brands together. It seems that luxury-brand consumption is a form of cultural capital that the parents hand over to the informants so that they can reinforce their nouveau riche selves.

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

### The Self-project and Symbolic Resources

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

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

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

Indeed, luxury-brands consumption is central to the informants' symbolic project of the self. The evident examples can be observed from their collage of the self, where luxury brands dominate the self-defining space (see Picture 1 and 2). Particularly in Pum's collage (Picture 1), the centred image with the statement 'I want to possess' appears to reflect a sense of control that she wants to have over those luxury brands so that they become a part of her extended self (Belk 1988; Sartre 1998). From the interviews, all informants also share the same 'I feel good to use them' feeling towards luxury brands. Presumably, those brands must have provided the informants symbolic resources to achieve some sort of "an ego-ideal which commands the respect of others and inspires self-love" (Gabriel and Lang 1995, p. 98).



Picture 1: Pum's Collage of the Self



Picture 2: Sue's Collage of the Self

***Mediated Experience of the Self***

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

**Sue:** I love to read Elle. I'd like to keep up with what's new in the market. Fashion magazines are always a good source to learn about trends in the market. There will be advertisements of new models or new brands in every issue. So, we will know what's in? Or what's out? I feel stupid and *cheoy*<sup>2</sup> if I don't know it.

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

In fact, the informants do not derive only brand knowledge from advertising. Advertisements also give them ideas about their self-concepts. Nook, who majors in marketing and advertising, describes the advertisements she puts in her collage of the self as if they are a script she writes for her self-project (see Picture 3). Apparently, Nook employs a copy-writing format she learns in her advertising class to compose her narrative self.

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

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<sup>2</sup> Out of date.



**Picture 3: Nook's Collage of the Self**

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

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

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

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

Indeed, the relationship between mediated experience and lived experience is dialectical. The symbolic meanings appropriated through mediated experience become

more powerful when the informants apply them in their realms of lived experience, and vice versa.

### ***Lived Experience of the Self***

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

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

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

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

### **Luxury Brands: the Self-Social Symbolism**

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

lecturers), they simultaneously need to balance their self-social symbolism with others outside their nouveau riche group as well.

### ***The Self among the Nouveau Riche Peers***

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

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

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

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

**Au:** I've improved a lot. When I was a fresher, I dressed plainly... quite out of date. My friends called me "A-ma."<sup>3</sup> They still do. Well, they didn't mean to look down on me. They just teased me lovingly. Most of my friends are heavily into brands. You may reckon that they're chic. I've learned how to dress from friends. I've observed how they dress and see what would fit me. I go shopping with them quite often. I don't really shop myself, but it's fun to watch them shop...see how they choose things. I like to listen to their discussions about fashion as well. They always suggest, "This is good...this is gorgeous." Now I read fashion magazines more, so I can participate the discussion.

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

**Nook:** Of course, my friends have some influence on my buying decisions. Sometimes I want to buy something because I think it's beautiful. I like it. But if my friends think it doesn't look good, I may not feel confident enough to buy it. If we want to look good, we

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<sup>3</sup> A Chinese word for "grandma".

should listen to our friends' opinions, shouldn't we? If my friends say "okay...pass", I believe them. But if they think it's unacceptable, I reckon that "hey, may be I didn't look at the thing carefully." So I tend not to buy it. ... However, if my friends didn't like a thing that I've already bought, I would hesitate to use it at first, and then I would try to use it again. Well, I didn't want to throw it away. I've spent money on it already. If my friends don't say anything, I would use it. If they still made comments, I wouldn't use it again.

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

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

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

### ***Balancing the Nouveaux Riche Self with Other Fellow Students***

As mentioned earlier that the informants avoid intimidating their university colleagues with their nouveau riche lifestyles, they appear to dress down in the university (see Picture 4 and 5). By this, they can lessen the tension between the group's luxury-brand consumption practices and their colleagues' attitudes towards their nouveau riche lifestyles. This dressing down strategy seems to allow them to balance their self-projects in the social environment where they relatively hold a superior socio-economic status. Nevertheless, we can also view this strategy from another perspective, that is, this strategy is a subtle way that the informants employ to create their social boundaries. Indeed, it is only people in the same habitus who can recognise that the sandals Ong wears in Picture 4 are Versace, or the handbag Sue carries in Picture 5 is Gucci. Through this strategy, they can apparently generate high admission barriers and effective techniques of exclusion. That is, they are not only able to exclude those who do not consume luxury brands but also those who are a novice in the sphere of luxury-brand consumption.





**Picture 4: Ong**



**Picture 5: Sue**

### **The Dynamic of Luxury Brands**

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

#### ***Luxury Brands as the Rite of Passage into Adulthood***

The interpretations suggest that the informants consume luxury brands symbolically to facilitate the process of self-transition to adulthood. To them, luxury-brand consumption not only symbolise a continuing family legacy but also a lifestyle of a nouveaux riche adult. Indeed, such consumption is used as an agent of transformation yet continuity of their self-project (Belk 1988; McCracken 1988a). Endeavouring to achieve a sense of adulthood, they actively search for a social idea of what it means to be an adult and what kind of adult they would like to become. Presently, their primary symbolic project of the self is to create the grown-up self. From a sociological perspective, adulthood is not only biologically but also socially constructed. There is a common conception concerning the ingredients that constitute adult status, formed by the members



of a culture. Evidently, the interpretations suggest that the informants view luxury brands as an essential element that symbolises adulthood. Thus, acquiring a certain set of luxury brands makes the informants feel that they have transited into the grown-up world. This symbolic consumption becomes the informants' instrument to manipulate their possibilities (Belk 1988) and the core element in the rite of passage to adulthood (Gabriel and Lang 1995).

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Ong:** Yes, if I want to look respectable, for example, if I'm giving a presentation in class, I'll put on trousers and a white shirt. When I go clubbing, I'll wear something else... jeans maybe. If I want to look cool, second-hand Levi's and an Armani shirt will do.

**Sue:** No, I don't stick to one particular style. It depends on how I feel on the day. Sometimes I get up and feel like being a sexy woman. I'll put on make-up and a black Chanel dress. Sometimes I feel like being a Rave teenager; I'll put on DKNY T-shirt and Tommy jeans. I don't know. It depends on where and with whom I'll be too. It's fun that we can be anything we want to.

**Tam:** Of course, we feel different when we wear different clothes, don't we?

Willis (1990, p. 89) comments, "Clothes can make people feel differently in different contexts. For some young people, and especially young women, the clothes they wear on any particular day will influence the way they talk, behave and present themselves." Creating and expressing gender identity is a vital part in the process of constructing the informants' grown-up selves. Consumption of luxury brands becomes a crucial medium for symbolic creativity that the female informants pursue to express their femininity. They feel that those sumptuous designer brands help to enhance their feminine appearance.

**Val:** I tend to go for dresses these days. No more unisex outfits. I want to look more feminine. I like Joose dresses. They look simple, but neatly cut. I bought designer clothes not because of their brands, but because of the designs, the materials and the cuts. You can see the difference. It's worth buying.

**Tam:** When I buy my clothes, shoes or handbags, I choose them carefully. I'm pretty concerned about how I look. We women don't want to look sloppy, do we?

Similarly, the male informants also reckon that designer brands can enhance their masculine charisma. They believe that those famous brands help improve their personality and give them confident.

**Al:** I'm a man. I want to look credible. These things [*e. g., clothes, shoes, watch*] help create good personality...a leadership look maybe. Dressing up is not only for women. It's not that we want to look sexy. We just want to look good.

As some informants are finishing their university education, they also use luxury brands to prepare themselves for the transition to the business world. They believe that luxury brands help construct the 'professional-look' self.

**Nook:** We should prepare ourselves. We can't transform from sloppy students into working women in one day. How can we walk with confidence if we never wear them [*high heel shoes*]? A workingwoman should look self-confident, eh?

**Al:** I want to be an investment banker. I have to look neat and mature. Neckties are very important. I like Gucci. It looks more subdued... more professional. A Versace tie is too much for me – its design is a bit over the top.

**Au:** I have a job interview next week. I think this suit will make me look professional. My mum helped me choose this one. She's also a workingwoman.

Solomon and Anand (1985, p. 315) affirm, "the female business suit is approached as a modern manifestation of a timeless occurrence: A ritual artefact integral to a contemporary rite de passage."

### ***Luxury Brands as Emblems of Liberation***

All informants claim that they come from loving and warm families. Even though the interpretation suggest that most of their parents are either authoritative or over-protective, the informants affirm that they are close to their parents. The informants feel that their parents have given them the best any parents can. Like many Thai, to re-pay and express gratitude to their parents, they have tried to follow the Thai values of being good children. Simply put, they feel obliged to fulfil their parents' needs and to avoid upsetting them. In such efforts, they seem to be trapped in their parents' realms – they have not yet been adults in their own right. Although all informants are adults in the eyes of law<sup>4</sup>, they are still 'babies' in the eyes of their parents. They still need to ask their parents for permissions to do things. The informants always listen to their parents' opinions and are inevitably obedient to them. They try their best to live up to their parents' expectations

**Val:** I'm the first child in the family. I know that I'm my parents' favourite. I don't like the idea though. Especially my father, I feel that he loves me more than my sisters. Maybe because I always live up to his expectations. He's so proud of me. He loves to talk about me with relatives and friends. He hopes that I will inherit our family businesses after I graduate. I want to do a master's degree and possibly work in an advertising agency though. ... Sometimes I still act like their little daughter. I love to cuddle my mum. But I want my parents to see me as a person who can be responsible for myself, a trustworthy person. My parents are quite concerned about us [*Val and her sisters*]; they would like us to be home before dusk. Every evening once I get back home, I have to call them to let them know that I've been home safely [*Val's parents live in another province where their main businesses are based.*]. If I haven't called them yet, they will be very worried and frustrated. They won't have dinner until I call them. So, usually I try to be home by half past six. ... My parents are very strict – they don't want me to stay the night anywhere

<sup>4</sup> All informants are over twenty years old. Legally, Thai citizens are eligible to vote if they are over eighteen years old.

else. I can't stay the night at my friends' houses. I can't go anywhere alone with my male friends. But if I want to go with only female friends, they won't allow me either because they think it's too dangerous for us.

**Nook:** My parents are very protective of me. My mum still drives me to university and picks me up in the evening everyday. My mum bought me this mobile phone so that she could reach me. They hardly let me go anywhere by myself. For example, I wanted to go to a [*English*] summer course abroad. My dad didn't let me go. I wanted to go to the 'rub nong'.<sup>5</sup> Again, my dad didn't let me go.

**Ong:** We have a warm family. I'm close to my parents. We always do things together. ... No, no, I'm still their son, not their friend. I still need to be obedient to them. ... I don't like to study business, but my parents want me to so. I can do it, but I don't enjoy it much. I'm thinking of taking a course in interior design after I finish this degree. I haven't told my parents yet. I don't want to upset them. I think I'll wait until I graduate, then I'll tell them. Well, at least I will get the degree that they want me to have.

**Tam:** Our family is very warm. We are intimate, deeply loving and caring for each other. We always do things together. ... Yes, there have been a few incidences that my parents do something that upset me. Once my mum read my letters. ... No, I wasn't angry with her because I thought it wasn't appropriate [*to be angry at parents*]. I've never have any secret with my mum any way. We have to understand that our parents are concerned about us and just curious about what's in the letters. They didn't mean to read them. I asked my mum not to read my letters and told her that I'd tell her about the contents in the letters if she wanted to know.

Nevertheless, although the informants' parents are strict with the informants in many aspects, they are relaxed with how their children spend the money. The informants are allowed to buy what they like. Thus, it seems that choosing the brands or the models is one of a few decisions that the informants can exercise more freely. It is also suggested that luxury brands can be used to form an autonomous adult ego since their meanings can be used to forge a sense of affiliation with other social groups outside their own families; thus, mark a sense of distance from the parents' realms (Thompson and Haytko 1997). Symbolically, the informants' luxury-brand consumption symbolise an emblem of liberation from their parents.

However, for the informants' parents, to allow their children to buy luxury brands at their own choices can be perceived as a strategy to control them. Ironically, instead of liberating themselves from their parents' realms, these informants seem to become more and more financially dependent on the parents. Hence, this will make the informants feel more obliged to comply with the parents' demands and expectations. In other words, the informants' habitual luxury-brand consumption offers their parents a potential means to control their behaviours.

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<sup>5</sup> The party organised to welcome the fresher, usually being held in a resort/camping place outside Bangkok.

### ***Luxury Brands as Talismans***

In their transition to adulthood, the informants symbolically use luxury brands as talismans to provide security for them in the unruly world of grown-ups. Gergen (1991, p. 15) describes the unruly world under postmodernity as “a world in which we no longer experience a secure sense of self, and in which doubt is increasingly placed on the very assumption of a bounded identity with palpable attributes.” Challenged by the fragmented and uncertain nature of postmodernity, the informants try to pursue a sense of security in their lives, especially when they are in the world outside their homes. Mulder (1996) comments that, to the Thai, the reliable and trustworthy world is centred on their mothers; thus, the further away from the mothers, the less secured the world. Undoubtedly, the Thais often acquire different kinds of talismans – amulets such as images of Buddha, to protect them in the untrustworthy world. Symbolically, luxury brands are the present day talismans to safeguard the informants in the social interactions outside homes. They believe that those celebrated brands can aid them to avoid unwise buying decisions, hence social embarrassment. Presumably, luxury brands offer consistency in an ever-changing world and this reassurance is a vital element in their additional meanings (Feldwick 1991).

**Pum:** These are famous brands. They are widely recognised for their qualities and designs. They give us peace of mind. I feel confident to use them. It’s a sure thing.

**Al:** We usually drink Black [*Johnny Walker Black Label*]. Possibly, because everybody drinks it. ...No, I’ve never drink Red [*Johnny Walker Red Label*]. I don’t know why. I started [*my drinking*] with Black and stick to it. Red is something I never think of drinking. ... When we’re broke, we go for Spay [*Spay Royal*], not Red. If we can’t afford Black, we wouldn’t want to remind ourselves [*by going for Red*], eh? Spay is to be a good alternative. It seems to be an ‘in’ cool brand.

**Sue:** I don’t want to look *cheoy*. I want to be chic. I’ll never go wrong with these brands.

To obtain a sense of security in the unruly world of the grown-ups, the informants need to feel a firm sense of social acceptance. “The Thai person is socially defined and subject to the acceptance of others. As a consequence, he must find and cultivate his resources in the social world, the commonly accepted validation of the person being defined in term of his capacity to present himself (Mulder 1996, p. 111). Obviously, the informants believe that these luxury brands are talismans that can magically bring them a sense of affiliation with other sophisticated adults with minimal effort and time. Indeed, participation in such mutual consumption and lifestyle symbolises a form of relatedness in the society (Elliott 1997; Thompson and Haytko 1997).

### ***Luxury Brands as Cultural Capital***

Evidently, the informants consume luxury brands to illustrate not only their economic wealth but also their sophisticated tastes. The informants’ knowledge of luxury brands becomes symbolic resource (Elliott 1994) to be accumulated into the cultural

capital employed to create distinction in society (Bourdieu 1984). As a hierarchical society, Thailand is a place where most social relationships are characterised by relative superiority versus inferiority (Mulder 1996). Such cultural capital promises to locate the informants in a desirably superior social status. To maintain their status quo, it is essential for the informants to keep up with the knowledge regarding the world of luxury brands. Apart from basic information such as the latest models or brands in the market, the informants also acquire sophisticated knowledge such as a brand history, its designers and customers or the brand's special materials. They even claim that they are able to detect the counterfeits.

**Val:** Of course, I can spot the fake ones. People may think that there's no difference between the bogus and the real. Yes, they may look similar, but if you know the product well enough, you'll be able to tell. There're some people in my class who use fake Versace [*rucksacks*]. I can spot them right away.

**Nook:** Do you know that this Prada rucksack is expensive because of its special material? It's the same material they use to make an astronaut's outfit. It isn't flammable.

Additionally, the informants' luxury-brand consumption also characterises their cultural capital in the age of globalisation. To become globally refined citizens, the informants judge that they need to acquire certain knowledge of global culture. To them, global culture means Western culture, more specifically the consumer culture of the West. Without a doubt, they merely know the material aspects of Western culture via media and shopping centres. In this capitalist world, it is essential for the informants to learn about world-class brands; never mind Socrates, Shakespeare or Mozart. Knowledge and use of those renowned brands helps them achieve a sense of global belonging. Interestingly, the informants also hold that their luxury-brand consumption can elevate the image of Thai people as a whole.

**Sue:** I think it is essential that we dress well, especially when we travel abroad. If we wear sloppy clothes, those foreigners will not only look down on us, but all Thai people. I wear these brands because I want them to realise that we, the Thai, also have good taste. We are not savages; we are as civilised as they are.

The above statements clearly reflect Sivaraksa's criticism (1991, p. 46) regarding 'the crisis of Siamese identity':

We just grope and strive to be like a developed country. We try to be one of the Newly Industrialised Country (NIC), to look East [Japan] as we used to look West, as if these countries were so perfect or ideal, a hallucination of the elites who are mostly half-educated or only educated in the material aspects of the West without understanding our own spiritual and cultural identity.

Obviously, in the age of globalisation, the nouveau riche Thais appear to strive harder to become like their western counterparts. Paradoxically, as they believe that their luxury-brand consumption helps enhance the image of Thai people in the global village, they are criticised by many Thais, largely among intellectuals, as a source of national embarrassment since such behaviour is often looked down upon by foreigners.

### ***Luxury Brands as Sources of Excitement and Fantasy***

Since most informants feel bound to behave in accordance with their parents' expectations, they try to avoid doing anything inappropriate or 'naughty'. The extravagance of luxury-brand consumption seems to become their primary source of excitement and fantasy. It is like playing a challenging game: who is the first one to know of the latest popular model or brand? When and where is it available? Who is the first one to get it?

**Val:** I feel thrilled to find a rare model or colour. I don't like to shop in the same places as my friends. I prefer to shop in a little-known store. I don't like to tell my friends where I buy things either. ... I'm always among the first few people to use something [*a particular brand or model*]. When everyone in the group uses it, I switch to something else.

**Ong:** I love shopping; it makes me feel good. Recently we [*Ong's family*] went to Hong Kong. It was a fun shopping trip. We shopped...shopped...shopped from one store to another.

**Tam:** I love Prada. It's 'my' brand at the moment. I knew about the brand before it became popular in Thailand. I'm always excited when a new Prada model comes out. I'm looking forward to its new gimmick. Unlike Louis [*Vitton*], Prada doesn't stick to the same material; it's more dynamic and exciting.

**Nook:** I like this pair of shoes. I like the design. It doesn't cover the entire foot. I feel sexy when I put them on.

Indeed, with their design, luxury brands are also sources of romantic fantasy. Although the informants consume common luxury brands to relate themselves to their nouveau riche friends, they also endeavour to create their own sense of differentiation. It is exciting for them to mix various brands or styles in order to create new meanings to achieve their personalised style. Indeed, a mixture of brands is a decommodification strategy that allows the informants to experience a sense of uniqueness and self-guidance in their personalised style (Thompson and Haytko 1997).

**Sue:** I don't like to wear a particular brand from head to toes. Okay, we all are brand crazy, but I always try to differentiate myself. For example, I may use this 'Khun Nai'<sup>6</sup> Gucci handbag with second-hand Levi's to create my own style.

<sup>6</sup> A female boss or a boss's wife. When referred as style, it usually associates with 'formal', 'sophisticated', and 'prestigious'.

Interestingly, towards the end of the fieldwork, some informants begin to experiment their dressing styles by combining luxury brands with other low-priced clothing bought from the flea market. Indeed, this symbolic creativity seems to make them achieve a sense of ‘ultimate fashion’ at play.

## Summary

The research interpretation illustrates that the lived symbolism of luxury-brand consumption among these nouveau riche informants is more dynamic than just being a symbolic resource for the creation of the glamorous selves. Indeed, luxury-brand consumption is a legacy of the nouveau riche narratives that their parent aspire them to carry on. However, perhaps more importantly, the symbolic meanings of luxury-brand consumption, which the informants incorporate into their self-projects, are recontextualised as the rite of passage into adulthood, as emblems of liberation from authoritative or over-protective parents, as talismans to provide security for them in the unruly world of grown-ups, as cultural capital in the age of globalisation and as sources of excitement and fantasy.



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