Branding Luxury to the Postmodern Consumer.
A multimodal analysis accounting for the creation of brand equity in Louis Vuitton's core values campaign.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past years, the global financial crisis has been subject to much media attention and speculation. The effects of the crisis have been severe to several markets and industries, triggered by the failure of subprime mortgages and the general attempt to add credit to boost the economy. These efforts however, only postponed the problem and undermined the foundations of the economy.¹

One market that seems to be unevenly affected by the instability of today’s economy is the luxury industry. Here, some companies have been struggling, whereas others are doing remarkably well despite the effects of the credit crunch. One of these well-performing companies is LVMH, which among others holds Louis Vuitton in its stable. Louis Vuitton has been able to elevate sales and profits, resisting the wider consumption slump. According to luxury goods analyst at Merrill Lynch, Antoine Colonna, brand strength is the key to survive in a turbulent economy (Watchman, 2008). Thus, the value of the brand itself might carry evidence as to the overall performance of the company. This measure can be referred to as brand equity.

In a recent review of the World’s Most Powerful Luxury Brands, on Brandz.com², market research company Millward Brown, utilized the database of its parent company, WPP, a repository of brand equity data, to rank and review the top global luxury brands, and provide an estimate of each company’s brand value. Here Louis Vuitton, with an estimated brand value of $25.74 million, was placed No. 1 on the ranking (Jeffries, 2008). When a company is thriving during a failing economy, a study of its performances will be interesting in order to learn from that company’s success. This is why Louis Vuitton and their recent core-values campaign³ have been chosen as a case study for this paper.

A curiosity within the field of branding is how this concept of brand equity is to be conceptualised, and how it can be measured. Different schools of thought have different perceptions. While one scholar takes the position of brand equity as an economically measured and strategic tool, another puts focus on the

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¹ http://www.marketoracle.co.uk/Article6843.html
² http://www.brandz.com/output/brandz-top-100.aspx
³ The LV commercial: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5xCGZuW1 or watch enclosed CD
consumer and how this person engages with the brand as a viable relationship partner. These different perspectives will be taken into consideration when analyzing the core-values campaign by Louis Vuitton.

In relation to branding theory and marketing as such, the contextual aspect is another important theme to draw into the discussion. With the evolution of society, and the emergence of the postmodern consumer, marketing practice and theory need to evolve with it. In order to be able to critically analyze the results of the case study, the analysis will be put into the context of postmodern consumption and -society in general. Hence, the contextual framework will provide an overview of the notion of the postmodern consumer.

The above considerations have been gathered to create a problem statement, which is outlined in the subsequent paragraph.

1.1.1 Problem statement

With an outset in luxury brands, the objective of this thesis is to examine how the brand strategy for Louis Vuitton, with regards to their “core-values” campaign, has been affected by the context of the global financial crisis and the postmodern consumer.

In conjunction with this the thesis wishes to investigate and discuss what is understood by the concept of brand equity and how this is communicated in the before mentioned campaign.

In order to thoroughly answer the problem statement, three explicit research questions have been outlined below. These questions also function as to guide the structure of the thesis.

1.1.2 Research questions

1. How has the context of the postmodern era and the global financial crisis affected the consumer in today’s market?
2. How is the concept of Brand equity understood from the paradigm of;
   a. Kapferer and his strategically oriented paradigm
   b. David Aaker and his consumer oriented paradigm
   c. Susan Fournier and her relation oriented paradigm
3. How does the core values campaign by Louis Vuitton communicate brand equity in terms of;
   a. The product in a strategically oriented paradigm
   b. The identity in a consumer oriented paradigm
   c. The relationship in a relation oriented paradigm
1.2 Theory of Science

Science is the part of knowledge which is devoted to describing and understanding the universe. When knowledge gets perceived as a part of the universe, complexities arise as science becomes imbedded. In regards to theory of science, it is valuable to realize that postmodernism functions as the cultural and intellectual scene against which the scientific theory of social constructionism has taken shape (Burr, 2001, p. 12). The correlation between postmodernism and social constructionism is thus one of the arguments for choosing social constructionism as a scientific method (see 1.4)

1.2.1 Characteristics of social constructionism

Social constructionism is multidisciplinary in nature and draws its influences from disciplines such as philosophy, sociology and linguistics. However, no single description has been found adequate, instead it is possible to identify four key assumptions, which according to Burr, are fundamental for the social constructionist approach. Firstly, social constructionism insists that one holds a critical stance towards presumed knowledge and the taken-for-granted understanding of the world. Secondly, social constructionism maintains that the ways in which we commonly understand the world, are historically and culturally specific, and perceived as products of that culture and history. Thus there is no hierarchy of truth. Thirdly, it is believed by social constructionists that knowledge is sustained by social processes. Thus, “what is regarded as ‘truth’ is a product of the social processes and interactions in which people are constantly engaged with each other.” (Burr, 2001, p. 4) The fourth and final assumption regarding social constructionism is that knowledge and social action go together. I.e. each social construction of the world invites a different kind of action from the individuals’ within this negotiated understanding (Burr, 2001, pp. 2-5).

Here the subject of social constructionism has been explained to create an understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of this thesis. The subsequent section will outline the theoretical framework.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework has been provided with the purpose of creating an overview of the theories that will be employed in this thesis, and on which it is based and justified.

Litle, R. Graham: http://griphilosophy.co.nz/tos.htm
1.3.1 The theory of Jean-Nöel Kapferer

In this thesis, Jean-Noël Kapferer’s book “The New Strategic Brand Management” will be utilized in order to gain an understanding of his perspective on brand equity and how it can be measured. Kapferer is considered a world expert on brands. He is a professor of Marketing Strategy, an active consultant to many European, U.S. and Asian corporations and the author of six books on branding, advertising and communications (Kapferer, 2004). In his own words, the goal of Kapferer’s book is to unify the two approaches to branding which he sees has two major paradigms; a customer based focus on the relationship and aiming at producing measures in terms of capital. Due to a sender-oriented rationale in regards to the meaning creation of the brand, the author does not belong to the realm of social constructionism.

1.3.2 The theory of David A. Aaker

Another author which will be explored is David A. Aaker and his book “Building Strong Brands” where he argues for an organic perspective of brands and emphasizes that “a brand is more than a product” (Aaker, 2002, p. 7). Aaker is a professor of Marketing Strategy. His ten books and more than eighty articles on branding, advertising and business strategy has been some of the most cited within this field (Aaker, 2002). Aaker, and his position regarding the role of the consumer in the shaping of brand identity, has been included in this paper in order to highlight the authors roots in the sender oriented brand identity tradition, where the focus is on identity as something coherent, essential and constant. His bias towards essentialism thereby exclude him from the paradigm of social constructionism, however his theory has been included in this paper due to his extensive acknowledgement within branding theory.

1.3.3 The theory of Susan Fournier

The third and final main author contributing to this paper is Susan Fournier and her article “Consumers and their Brands” (Fournier, 1998). Fournier is one of the strongest advocates of a dynamic approach to the ‘brand as person’ metaphor. The author takes a point of departure in an anthropomorphized notion of the brand as a person, with whom the consumer engages in different relations. Due to the emphasis on the context of which the relation is embedded, Fournier can be said to belong to the paradigm of social constructionism. Fournier is the assistant professor of Business Administration at Harvard University, Cambridge. This article evolved from the author’s dissertation at the University of Florida (Fournier, 1998).

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5 Anthropomorphism: the attribution of human characteristics to non-human creatures and beings, phenomena, material states and objects or abstract concepts.
p. 343). Fournier’s relation oriented paradigm has been included in this paper in order to give greater priority to the consumer in the construction of the meaning of the brand.

1.4 Method and Delimitation

The problem statement and research questions will be answered by use of existing theory and empirical data. Based on the choice of the scientific tradition, the methodology of the paper will draw on the method of the hermeneutic circle, which describes the iterative process of understanding a text interpretatively. The hermeneutic circle implies that a subjective interpretation according to a cultural and historical context is inevitable and that no concept can therefore have an ultimate unequivocal meaning (Wæver 1996, p. 171). This substantiates the social constructionist approach, since it refutes the idea of a single truth.

In this thesis the analysis, which will investigate the case study of the core values campaign by Louis Vuitton, will be interpreted within the paradigm of Kapferer, Aaker and Fournier. The analysis contains four parameters (see fig. 1) that will be investigated within the context of the theory of brand equity. With an outset in the three paradigms the objective is to examine how brand equity has been established in Louis Vuitton’s campaign. The interpretation of the campaign will thus be based within these three subjective contextual understandings of the concept of brand equity. Furthermore, the analysis will take into consideration the social construction of the surrounding the world, and is therefore placed within the contextual framework of the postmodern consumer and the global financial crisis.

Due to limited space the thesis will not aspire to analyze the entire core values campaign, but focus on the TV commercial. Furthermore, the thesis will not touch upon the topic of counterfeit goods in its discussion of brand equity.

1.5 Structure

The main body of this paper is structured by use of research questions (see 1.1.2). To provide the reader with an overview of the entire paper’s structure, the model below has been created by the author of this thesis. The model shows how the chapters are interconnected in order to reach a solid conclusion.

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6 The whole campaign also includes a website www.louissvuittonjourneys.com and posters, which can be found in the appendices (no. 1)
The thesis itself, both in terms of methodology, theory and analysis, is placed within the context of the postmodern consumer and the global financial crisis. This makes it possible to discuss the findings within a context of the surrounding social world and reach a conclusion based on these premises.
2. CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter will answer the first research question of this paper (cf. 1.1.2) by looking into the concept of the postmodern consumer and the current market situation for luxury brands. The contextual framework functions as the foundation upon which the analysis will be made and sound conclusions can be drawn.

2.1 The Postmodern Consumer

The postmodern era requires marketers to be conscious of the changes within their field and proactively react in order to ensure the discipline’s relevance. This is why the context of postmodern consumerism is highly relevant when considering the marketing efforts in today’s market. Two dominating perspectives exists however, both of which will be shortly outlined below.

The first position perceives “the essential nature of postmodernism as a liberatory force with fragmentation central to the experience.” (Simmons, 2008, 300) This fragmentation is represented in the postmodern consumer by their loss of commitment to a specific lifestyle or belief system, which results in inconsistent preferences. Consumer loyalty is therefore a questionable concept in that the postmodern consumers exercise freedom of choice in order to creatively construct desirable self-images. In comparison with the first position, which sees development as a possibility for new constellations and possibilities, one can argue that the second holds a more deterministic view in that the belief is that the lack of order leads to decay. Within this view, the postmodern society is perceived as dystopian and alienating, with a lack of depth to the postmodern consumer. There is “a focus on a superficial and surface “reality” rooted within a postmodern society characterized by identity confusion.” (Simmons, 2008, 300) The firstmentioned perspective is the one held by the author of this thesis, primarily due to a personal standpoint as regards to the outlook on life.

Despite differences, both perspectives can agree that consumption is no longer a passive act of discovering the meaning intended by the producer. “Postmodern consumers interpret and use the products and messages differently from their original purpose, reshape and adapt them to personal use [...] in ways not imagined by the sender.” (Christensen et al., 2005)

In one sense, the fragmentation of the postmodern consumer can be seen as an opportunity for marketers to develop new strategies to retain and attract consumers; on the other hand, one might begin to question the relevance of branding. Is branding a tool for which profit can be gained or merely a trend for which there is no longer any use? This discussion will be elaborated on in chapter 5. In the following, some of the consequences of the global financial crisis will be outlined.
2.2 The Global Financial Crisis’ Affect on the Luxury Market

With less money between their hands, a reasonable conclusion would be that consumers seek to spend less, and cutting back on luxury brands might be one way to achieve this. A luxury brand can be defined as “an outstanding brand, justifiably priced highly and destined, at least primarily, to a select group of the social-economic elite.” While the wealthy elite are still spending freely, 60% of the luxury market, however, is based on the demand from the middle-class consumer who is faced with a decline in private capital. Thus, according to The Economist (2009), sales in the luxury industry are expected to fall by a tenth in 2009. For some luxury firms, the current recession has claimed its toll, as fashion houses have been forced to renegotiate debt, restructure loans and even file for bankruptcy. While the companies are faced with the risk of decreasing profits and sales, the trend to trade up has occurred amongst consumers, putting an emphasis on investing money on quality. The money that consumers actually do have is increasingly spent on fewer, classical items, which also goes hand in hand with a shift in consumer preferences towards discretion and value. To some, the word luxury might imply showing off, however, according to chief executive of LVMH, the time for that is gone, and a more ‘back to basics’ kind of approach have been preferred (The Economist, 2009). This might be why an emphasis on values as part of the branding strategy appeals Louis Vuitton, as it emphasizes the need for centering oneself on what is essential.

According to a new market report from Datamonitor Group, ten customer tendencies or trends for financial service providers pertains for the year 2010. Despite the report’s focus on financial service providers, four of the trends have here been highlighted in that they provide key insights on how consumers are reacting as they emerge from the global economic crisis and contemplate the future. A full list can be found in the appendices (no. 2). First trend to be mentioned is the focus on simplicity and certainty as a drive in the product selection of consumers. Secondly, the report states that a renewed focus on ethics, sustainability and social responsibility will permeate choice of product. Thirdly, it claims that customers will look beyond price to find value, and finally that trust and heritage will play an increasing role in brand choice.

With the context of the global financial crisis and the postmodern era affecting today’s consumer, branding can suddenly seem like an impossible task. Not only is the consumer said to hold inconsistent preferences, making it harder for the marketer to generate a loyal customer base, the consumers are also limited in their

7 http://www.themanager.org/Marketing/Eternal_principles_for_luxory_brands.htm
purchase power due to a financial setback. These challenges will be elaborated on further in the discussion of the relevance of branding (see ch. 5).
3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this paragraph, the theoretical background will be provided with the purpose of answering research question 2 (cf. 1.1.2) and thereby gain an understanding of the theories within the field of branding, and the concept of brand equity, that will be employed in this thesis. First, the history and development of brand equity will be shortly outlined in order to understand the basis of the concept.

3.1 Historic Development

According to Feldwick, brands have been a major aspect of marketing reality for more than a hundred years (Feldwick, 2002, p. 35). However, the theory of branding is much more recent. The mentioning of the importance of brand image can be traced back to David Ogilvy in 1951, and was more fully articulated in Harvard Business Review in 1955. Despite this authoritative origin, the concept of brand image was still perceived as peripheral to mainstream advertising theory, and regarded a rather vague theory, associated with a more ‘soft’ approach to marketing. A shift of perception came in the 1980’s when radical business people began to notice that brands appeared to generate money. In a takeover the difference between balance sheet valuations and the prices paid in the acquisition was significantly attributed to ‘the value of brands’. This changed the perception of the concept, and as a reflection of this, brand image was increasingly replaced by a more solid financial equivalence ‘brand equity’ (Feldwick, 2002, p. 36).

Since then, the concept of branding and brand equity has experienced a rise in popularity and many books have been published on the subject. However, the concept has also been subject to criticism and proponents hold different viewpoints as to how brand equity is to be understood and measured (Feldwick, 2002, p. 36-37). This is why this paper will investigate the field of branding and the concept of brand equity from different perspectives, in order to apply these alternative paradigms in the analysis of the case study.

3.2 The Strategically Oriented Paradigm

As part of the classic brand management literature, Kapferer (cf. 1.3) argues for the union of the consumer- and financially based approach to branding. The paradigm will in this thesis be referred to as strategic in that it encompasses the notion of the brand as a tool, for which the primary purpose is to generate profit. Within this classical rationale, the brand can therefore be said to serve a strategic purpose, which without its benefit (i.e. monetary profit) has no value (Kapferer, 2004, 14).

In his book, The New Strategic Brand Management, Kapferer has chosen to bring both Keller’s consumer-based definition and the financial perspective on what defines a brand. The two perspectives are not meant to exclude one another, but to be unified in order to strengthen the concept. On one hand, there is an
emphasis on “a set of mental associations held by the consumer, which add to the perceived value of a product or service.” (Kapferer, 2004, 10) On the other, Kapferer argues for brands as intangible and conditional assets, the later referring to the brands reliance of a product or service. The product or service thereby becomes an embodiment of the brand by which it is evaluated.

In extension to this rationale, Kapferer proposes to distinguish between three levels of brand equity; brand assets, brand strength and brand value. Whereas brand value can be said to include the financial aspect of branding, namely the ability of brands to deliver profits, brand assets are the mental associations and relationships that influence consumers in their purchase decision. As an intermediary between the two, brand strength is the result of the previously mentioned assets, i.e. the outcome of the assets, which might in return become financially valuable (Kapferer, 2004, 13-14). The relationship between the three is demonstrated below, however indicating a conditional, as opposed to direct, consequence.

\[ \text{Brand assets} \rightarrow \text{Brand strength} \rightarrow \text{Brand value} \]

Brand awareness \rightarrow Market share \rightarrow Net discounted cash flow

Common for Kapferer and Aaker, whose paradigm will be investigated next, is their emphasis on the sender’s definition of the brand. “It is not up to the consumer to define the brand and its content; it is up to the company to do so.” (Kapferer, 2004, 82) This position is likely to conflict with the existing belief within the postmodern era, where the consumer interpret and reshape brands to personal use (cf. 2.1). Another thing to be noted is Kapferer’s rather linear relationship between product and brand, which argues that a brand is simply a product with a name that influences buyers. Though this might be a square understanding of Kapferer’s rationale, and does not fully articulate his brand theory, it is this message that have been chosen as the focus of this paper. This has implications for how the brand is valued in terms of financial worth, due to the static perception of what the brand entails. To nuance this picture of brands and brand equity, the following will examine Aaker’s consumer oriented paradigm.

3.3 The Consumer Oriented Paradigm

David Aaker (c.f. 1.4) argues for an organic perspective of brands and emphasizes that “a brand is more than a product” (Aaker, 2002, 7). Aaker thereby argues for the necessity of separating the brand and the product in that he argues for the uniqueness of brands, whereas products can be easily copied.

One of the most central elements in Aaker’s brand building theory, underpinning the “a brand is more than a product”-philosophy is the concept of the brand’s identity. The author defines brand identity as a unique set of brand associations which “represent what the brand stands for and imply a promise to customers from the organization members” (Aaker, 2002, 68). The brand identity is what provides direction, purpose
and meaning for the brand. The identity contains dimensions, which is highlighted in order to define the core- and extended identity of the brand. The *core identity* is defined by Aaker as the timeless essence of the brand, “central to both the meaning and success of the brand, [which] contains the associations most likely to remain constant as the brand travels to new markets and products.” (Aaker, 2002, 86) It is the values of the brand which serves as the central point of reference. The brand’s *extended identity* includes “brand identity elements, organized into cohesive and meaningful groupings that provide texture and completeness.” (Aaker, 2002, 68) The extended identity thereby gives the brand direction, by including nuances and details that help portray what the brand stands for, but do not contain fundamental values.

From a point of departure in the core- and extended identity a value proposition needs to be provided, which is “a statement of the functional, emotional and self-expressive benefits delivered by the brand that provide value to the customer.” (Aaker, 2002, 95) This proposition is what Aaker defines as one of the cornerstones in the construction of a relationship between the brand and the consumer. The purpose of branding thereby becomes to construct and communicate a coherent, consistent and meaningful identity that the consumer can adopt. Meaning is hereby encoded by the brand strategist or company and decoded and adopted by the consumer.9

In relation to David Aaker’s understanding of branding, the author defines brand equity as;

“[…] *a set of assets (and liabilities) linked to a brand’s name and symbol that adds to (or subtract from) the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or that firm’s customers.*” (Aaker, 2002, 74)

The concept contains four primary categories, namely; brand name awareness, perceived quality, brand loyalty, and brand associations. A thorough explanation of these concepts as well as the model providing an understanding of how each category underlies brand equity can be found in the appendices (no. 3). In the following paragraph the two categories most prominent for discussion have been touched upon.

Whereas Kapferer operates with three distinct forms of brand equity (cf. 3.2) Aaker works within a clearly defined consumer approach. Aaker’s four categories of brand equity would in Kapferer’s terms be classified as the brand assets. The concept of *brand awareness* reoccurs, and the consumer approach is made evident in that Aaker’s definition of brand awareness is elaborated as to entail recognition and recall, a feature within consumer behavioral psychology. According to Aaker, *brand loyalty* heightens brand equity in that a loyal customer base can be expected to generate sales and profit. As for ways to enhance loyalty, Aaker suggests developing or strengthening the customers’ relationship with the brand, which brand awareness

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9 The previous section has been inspired by Ph.D scholar Sophie Esmann’s analysis of Aaker’s brand building theory.
and perceived quality as well as a clear brand identity can contribute to. To this, two comments can be made. Firstly, within the postmodern era, brand loyalty is a questionable concept due to the fragmentation of the individual, which results in inconsistent preferences (cf. 2.1) Secondly, Aaker’s suggestions as to enhance loyalty by simply suggesting to develop or strengthening the customer relationship is too theoretical and lacks concretization. A problematic task coupled with a lack of concrete tools to solve the challenge, calls for new measures if this question is to be unraveled. In an attempt to do so, this thesis encompasses Susan Fournier’s investigation of the consumer-brand relationship, contrasting Aaker’s paradigm due to her psychological-anthropological rationale.

3.4 The Relation Oriented Paradigm

Susan Fournier is based on her article “Consumers and Their Brands” a strong advocate of a dynamic approach to the ‘brand as person’ metaphor. Here, the author argues for conceptualizing the brand as an active relationship partner in the consumer-brand context.

In her article, Fournier legitimizes the concept of brand-as-partner by use of an exposition of the various ways in which brands are animated, humanized or personalized. This claim is the point of departure as she investigates the relation between the consumer and brand as well as the impact that this relation has for the consumer. The relationships both affect, and are affected by the contexts in which they are embedded, identified in this article as the psychological, the sociocultural and the relational context. The article argues for the relationship as a multiplex phenomenon, that is, the existence of more than one form of relation, distinguished by the nature of the benefits they furnish to their participants, the relation-intensity and -character. Furthermore, the relations are conceptualized by means of a dynamic perspective, i.e. relations involve repeated exchange and evolve, both in response to these interactions and to fluctuations in the contextual environment (Fournier, 1998, 346).

With an outset in the abovementioned conceptualization and based on the analysis of several in-depth interviews, Fournier creates a typology of consumer-brand relationship forms which can be found in the appendices (no. 4).

One of the focal points of Fournier’s study is the holistic character of the consumer-brand relationship phenomena which dictates that a thorough understanding of the consumer-brand relationship can only be obtained by considering the large whole in which the relationship is embedded. In addition to this the author argues that the consumer does not simply mimic and adopt the brands identity, but rather

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10 As an example the use of a spokesperson can be mentioned, as well as the use of a fictive brand character, which is to be perceived as if it is human.
participate in an negotiation of the brand’s meaning in the context of individual as well as social life projects. This is why one might argue that Fournier’s notion of Brand Equity can be established as:

the value added to the product (or brand itself) by the formation of a consumer-brand relationship, which in turn creates value and meaning to consumers’ lives within the context in which the relationship is embedded.\(^\text{11}\)

Fournier’s relation oriented paradigm hereby gives greater priority to the consumer in the construction of the meaning of the brand. Thus, the author becomes a proponent of the dynamic brand concept, questioning the appropriateness of the static brand notion defined by the sender.\(^\text{12}\) This is what ultimately serves to differentiate Fournier from Kapferer’s and Aaker’s economical marketing rationale, even though all three authors can be said to operate within an identity- and personality-concept in the conceptualisation of a brand.

A question which can be raised within the relation oriented paradigm is, if it is always the consumer-brand relation which is essential in the formation of brand equity? According to Cova (1996) the postmodern consumer prefers to create and maintain relations with other consumers, not necessarily with a brand. To compensate for the erosion of a universal and shared perspective of meaning by the consumption of corporate images and symbols, is a common mistake of many marketing approaches in their attempt to reinforce a degree of control. What is of interest to the consumer however, is the “linking value”, i.e. their ability to link people with likeminded individual identities (Cova, 1996).

In this chapter the three paradigms have been accounted for in terms of their branding rationale and individual emphasis on the product, identity and relation, in the branding process. These paradigms will be employed in the following analysis of the case study (see 4.3)

In the subsequent chapter the paper will temporarily move into a different field of studies in order to analyze the case study of Louis Vuitton’s core values campaign. For this, theories from multimodal discourse analysis will be employed to facilitate the analysis of how brand equity is communicated.

\(^{11}\) Definition constructed by the author of this thesis

\(^{12}\) The previous section has been inspired by Ph.D scholar Sophie Esmann’s analysis of Susan Fournier’s theory of consumer-brand relationships
4. CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

In this chapter the *core values* commercial by Louis Vuitton will be analyzed focusing on how the brand communicates with the viewer through the use of the four parameters; image, sound, text and inclusion/exclusion. The analysis draws upon theory within the field of multimodal discourse analysis, explaining how meanings reinforce each other across varies semiotic modes. The outcome of this will facilitate an analysis of how brand equity is communicated in the *core values* campaign, in this chapter referred to as *the film*. Before embarking on the analysis, a brief introduction to the company of Louis Vuitton will be given.

4.1 Introducing Louis Vuitton

Traditional and modern are seemingly the two contrasts that the company Louis Vuitton aspires to fuse. Traditional, due to its long lived success for one and a half century, and modern, due to its innovative and creative designs. Initiate by the founder Louis Vuitton, in France, the company plays on professionalism and exclusivity, claiming to be the world’s leading luxury brand. In 1987 Louis Vuitton became a subsidiary of LVMH. However, this analysis will only take into consideration the company of Louis Vuitton, and more specifically, their *core values* campaign.

4.2 The Analysis of Louis Vuitton’s *Core Values* Campaign

In order to outline the film in regards to *images*, the concept of structure by Rick Iedema will be utilized in regards to how meanings are multimodally sequenced and integrated. To elaborate on this, Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen’s theory regarding the visual positioning of the viewer will be employed in order to analyze how meanings position characters and viewers. To further the analysis, the aspect of *sound*, will be analyzed according to Theo Van Leeuwen’s theory of sound levels. Jørgen Stigel’s theory of the invisible voice will facilitate in the investigation of *text* as well as Leeuwen’s theory regarding information linking, investigating the text-image relation. Finally, the aspect of *inclusion/exclusion* will be commented on. All of the above mentioned parameters will be analyzed with respect to how these semiotic modes come together in creating meaning and how this facilitate to establish brand equity in accordance with the paradigm of Kapferer, Aaker and Fournier (cf. ch. 3). The minutes referred to can be found as still pictures in the appendices (no. 5)

13 [http://www.louisvuitton.com/hr/en/recruit/index_ent.htm](http://www.louisvuitton.com/hr/en/recruit/index_ent.htm)
4.2.1 Image

In this paragraph, the visuals in the Louis Vuitton campaign will be analyzed with regards to how these images characterize the relation between the viewer and the portrayed participants. This will influence how the viewer perceive the commercial and as a result the brand behind it.

Visually the film is constructed of a series of collective images from around the world of people, nature, and cityscapes, separated by numerous cuts. The visual expressions are used as a scene upon which a narration is told. The generic stages generally contain a beginning, middle and end (ledema, 2001, 189). Here, the beginning [0:00-0:17] introduces the narration, setting out on a quest to answer what a journey is. Travel is the illustrated, literally (by means of scenes from different places in the world) and figuratively (highlighted by the theme of travel as a mental journey). These stages function as the middle. In the end, the solution to the first question is given; “The journey is life itself” [1:22]. This is visually romanticized by use of images of a couple embracing. The conclusion [1:26-1:36] is thereby left for the viewer to answer (i.e. where will life take you?) The visuals accompanying the question are glimpse of the Louis Vuitton logo on one of their classic bags. Along with brand name and website, the implied answer, and preferred meaning, then encourage the viewer to action; wherever life takes you, bring a Louis Vuitton design.

The relation between the viewer and the represented participants is characterized in terms of distance, and angle. Short personal distance and long impersonal distance (Leeuwen and Kress, 2006, ch. 4) have primarily been employed. The viewer is thereby brought either face to face with the depicted participant, connoting a personal relation and an emphasis on inner values, or observing them from a distance as strangers. This functions as to continuously draw the viewer closer, but also give an overview of the feel of the scene. The long impersonal distance sets the frame and the mood by use of colors (blue and white to symbolize cold [0:24]) or visual effects (glimpse of light e.g. [1:15-1:17], blurriness [0:15]). The glimpse of light used in several instances, serves to give the film a romantic appeal. Light is a symbol of life and is used here to play on the discourse of the beauty of life. The blurriness functions as to make the scenes vague or indistinct, connoting a dream like state.

The dominating angle used throughout the film is an oblige angle, portraying the depicted participants seen either slightly or considerably from the right or left. This indicates that the viewer is not seen as part of the depicted world (Leeuwen and Kress, 2006, ch. 4). The viewer is thereby identified as an invisible observer.

The way in which the viewer can partake is by answering the final question put forward by the sender (where will life take you?) However, this is a question to be reflected upon, and does not require, or demand, an answer. An even more subtle indication of how the viewer can partake is the encouragement to take action by going to Louis Vuitton’s website, or better yet, invest in their products. However, this
encouragement is made especially subtle, or romanticized, by the continuous use of light glint, so as to not disturb the feel and mood of the film.

In extension to the angle it is pivotal to notice how the commercial refrain from using demand pictures, i.e. a direct angle shot with eye-contact with the viewer (Leeuwen and Kress, 2006, ch. 4). The one time it is used [0:49] it is along with the text “a journey brings us face to face with ourselves” anchoring the meaning of the text. Even here, only one eye is portrayed and the face is placed horizontally, thereby letting the viewer close, but not so close as to disturb the feel of the film.

4.2.2 Sound

In addition to visual relation, the sound also functions to establish a connection between the subject and receiver as will be touched upon in the following. Furthermore, the aspect of sound will be investigated in terms of how music and sound layers facilitate the meaning making of visuals.

The film is accompanied by the captivating Gypsy guitar of composer Gustavo Santaolalla, which functions as the tonal figuration, creating the mood and the emotional temperature of the visual images. Though sound and image are distinctly different media both of them can “create relations between the subject they represent and the receiver they address” (Leeuwen, 2006, 181) in terms of perspective and social distance.

The sound perspective hierachizes elements in terms of a three-stage plan; foreground (figure) middle ground (field) and back ground (ground). Due to the fact that the text fragments are used as a form of voice-over (see 4.2.3) one can argue that the text functions as the figure. The text is the immediate voice that is to be listened to (i.e. read) and functions as the focus of interest. Musically it is the prominent guitar sound that guides us through the film and functions as field. It supports the figure in that it has a direct bearing on the rhythm and nearly functions as a time signature for the text. The melodic tune or assembly of string players then functions as the ground in that it sets the scene of the film. This melody works to create cohesion and tie the different scenes together.

The figure, field and ground are created in order to position the relation between the listener and what is listened to (Leeuwen, 2006, 183). As figure, the text is thus what is closest to the listener (i.e. viewer), obliging the viewer to read it. This purposely creates a close relation between the viewer and the message.

The relation between viewer and message can also be characterized in terms of the social sound distance. The social distance establish relations of different degrees of formality between what is presented and the listener such as intimacy (e.g. whispered voice) informality (e.g. the relaxed, casual voice) and formality (e.g. the louder voice). The written text can here be interpreted as a whisper, thus reaffirming the intimate
relation between viewer and message, upon which can be concluded that the message is vital for the meaning making of the visuals. The string players can be said to have a more casual, relaxed voice due to its low volume, which ties in well with its function of setting the scene. It is also what introduces the film in terms of sound, an introduction which can thus be characterized as informal, i.e. everyone is invited to listen. Finally we have the guitar, which to some extend is characterized as more formal, i.e. louder, due to its role as a time signature. Throughout the film, the guitar has several prominent beats in terms of volume, which in some instances indicate an emphasis on the message, almost like making two lines under a sentence. One example is after the introduction [0:17] suggesting the beginning of the main part of the film. Another example is at the end [1:28] in order to put emphasis on the sender.

Sound is dynamic, it can move us towards something or away from a certain position, and it can change our relation to what we hear (Leeuwen, 2006, 184). In the Louis Vuitton commercial the listener is drawn into a world of music by making it the prime tonal figuration. The message is conveyed as text, whispered by use of letters in order as to not disturb the feel and mood of the music. It thereby functions as to make the film more sensory oriented. This is also due to its choice of music, which with its soothing, meditative feel is not only to be listened to, but to be felt and internalized. This tie into the theme of inner values and mental journey touched upon in previously (cf. 4.2.1). The two semiotic modes (image and sound) come together to generate an intimate feel with an emphasis on serenity and harmony.

4.2.3 Text

The subsequent section will further the analysis by touching upon the use of text and how it facilitates to guide the viewer and specify the images. A complete transcript can be found in the appendices (no. 6)

The on-screen text functions as a mute voice over, directing and guiding the viewer through the film. The so-called voice-over format can be identified as asynchronous, i.e. the person or place from where the text emerges is invisible. Throughout the film the text creates coherence and continuity, linking the scenes, guiding us through them and anchors the preferred meaning of the images. The voice creates proximity between the viewer and the represented participants and mediates between the two (Stiegel, 2001,338). This is also affectively realized by the use of personal pronouns. “We (in: “but how we fit in it”) levels with the reader, suggesting a unit, as well as “ourselves” (in: “A journey brings us face to face- with ourselves”) making the relationship between sender and receiver an equal one. The directive “you” (in: “Where will life take you?”) followed by a question mark, functions as to invite the reader to interact.

Several times the text pauses to let the message sink in and to let the visual scene play out. Between “A journey shows us not only the world,” [0:55] and “but how we fit in it.” [0:58] separated by a cut and a
change of scene, a rhetorical pause is used. This functions as to emphasize the philosophical character of the film. The conjunction “but” is used in order to extend the sentence and add additional information (Leeuwen, 2005, 225). This function as to make this specific text fragment stand out, highlighting how the brand restates travel as the fundamental and defining value of Louis Vuitton, here interpreted as a personal journey.

The use of textual and visual linking is ultimately what establishes the narration. The fragments of text written across the screen facilitate to anchor the images. Without the use of text the film would be a beautiful series of scenes from around the world, carrying connotation of a discourse of the beauty of life, however it would not get the same meaning across. The text-image relation can therefore be characterized as anchorage, i.e. the text functions as to elaborate on the images, making them more specific (Leeuwen, 2005, 230). However, the text and images also function as to complement each other, taking the meaning to a higher level of understanding. The illustration adds further information on an emotional level that the words itself would not get across, the images are thus a large part of the persuasive strategy. This identifies the text-image relation as extension-complement, i.e. the content of the images adds further information to that of the text, and vice versa (Leeuwen, 2005, 230).

4.2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion

As a fourth and final parameter, the aspect of inclusion/exclusion will be touched upon. Furthermore, the overall image/sound/text relation will be commented and concluded upon facilitating the subsequent analysis of brand equity.

The concepts, inclusion and exclusion, are knowledge selection processes that are used when a social practice is re-contextualized in a discourse. In other words, consciously submitting or omitting a perspective or feature when presenting an idea or message by means of discourse. In the film, the most essential exclusion is the product itself. The focus is put on the ‘experience’ of the film, the adventure of travel and the journey of self-discovery. Thereby the film promotes the brand itself and not a specific product. The Louis Vuitton designer bags are therefore only shown in short glimpses [00:36]+[00:39] and even here we do not see the whole product. What we do see however, are parts of the brand’s classic bags, which serves as another indication of the company’s emphasis on going back to their roots. Another exclusion is of sound, in that we do not hear any voice either by commentary or singing. This omission seems to be based on the belief that this would disturb the feel of the film, taking away from its sensory orientation. An inclusion, which is paramount for the making of this film, is the core values behind it. This indicates a focus on corporate values as part of the business strategy.
The company of Louis Vuitton has with this commercial achieved to fuse the brand’s emphasis on tradition and modernity. Traditional due to the theme of paying respect to the company roots; the art of travel, an integral part of the brands DNA, and modern, due to the creative combination of semiotic modes, accentuating company beliefs in alignment with the trend of promoting these as part of the brand strategy. The image, sound and text come together to create a discourse of ‘time as luxury’ and ‘the journey of life’. With an emphasis on inner values both in terms of images, sound and text, the company of Louis Vuitton invites the viewer to reflect upon one’s own life, promoting every second of it as an exclusivity.

A point of critique, however, is seen in the light of the emerging trend of highlighting corporate social values as part of a reputation building strategy, with the aim of generating publicity and thus monetary profit. From this point of view, a commercial like that of Louis Vuitton risks to be perceived by its audience, as superficial and made for the sole purpose of financial gain.

4.3 Salient Patterns and Brand Equity

The interplay of the multimodal parameters above creates salient patterns, facilitating the identification of meaning making ways in which the corporate image is constructed. In the following these salient patterns will be analyzed according to product, identity and relation within the respective paradigms to which they belong. This will facilitate to answer research question 3 (cf. 1.1.2).

4.3.1 The product in a strategically oriented paradigm

The objective of the following paragraph is to investigate the brand equity of Louis Vuitton, communicated in their core values campaign, according to the paradigm of Kapferer (3.2).

In relation to the strategically oriented paradigm, the primary discovery is, as mentioned in the analysis (cf. 4.2.4) that there is a lack of focus on the actual product. According to Kapferer the product\textsuperscript{14} is the embodiment of the brand, no brand can therefore exist without a product to carry them. In one sense this is validated in the Louis Vuitton commercial. Despite the lack of focus on the product itself, Louis Vuitton manage to identify themselves in terms of brand name, which, due to a general long lived success of the company, generates mental associations in the mind of the consumers. According to Kapferer this will then influence buyers in the purchasing decision when faced with the actual product. This relates to the perspective of brand equity referred to as brand assets.

\textsuperscript{14} Or service (due to the industry of Louis Vuitton, the focus of this discussion will be the product)
The brand value, on the other hand only pertains for the ability of the brand to generate profit. Since the brand is dependent on its products in order to deliver their benefits, i.e. financial value, one can argue that if there is no direct correlation between the campaign and increased profits, the initiative would, inside this perception, be a failure. As previously mentioned (cf. 1) Louis Vuitton has been able to yield consistent profit margins, despite the financial crisis. If the core values campaign set of in 2007 is a contributing factor to this fact, this thesis will not aspire to answer. However, one might argue that a value building approach is strategically wise due to the mentality of the postmodern consumer. This will be elaborated further (see 4.3.4).

Despite Kapferer’s definition of brands as intangible, his brand conception still puts an emphasis on the need for something tangible behind it, a product. A company cannot simply sell itself, a message or their values. Even though Louis Vuitton manages to identify themselves in the commercial, the actual product, or brand name is not made the core focus. It is the message, the discourse of ‘the journey of life’ which is central, a strategy which seems to conflict with Kapferer’s rationale of the conditionality of brands.

A salient pattern throughout the film is the relation between sender and receiver in terms of image, sound and text. Through the use of personal distance, mediating sound levels, questions and personal pronouns, the sender aspires to engage the audience, to invite them into a world of reflection and exclusivity. Again this contrasts Kapferer’s focus on the sender’s definition of the brand, who does not account for any interaction with the consumer.

4.3.2 The identity in a consumer oriented paradigm

To nuance the preceding understanding of the brand equity communicated in Louis Vuitton’s core values campaign, this paragraph will take its departure in the identity of the brand, which is central to the paradigm of Aaker (3.3).

Within the consumer oriented paradigm, brand awareness is a key element in establishing brand equity. In the Louis Vuitton commercial, brand recognition is triggered in that the company identify themselves in terms of brand name and logo. The logo (which is also part of the extended identity) and brand name facilitates the identification of the brand. Without indication markers, the brand cannot establish recognition and brand awareness is thus unattainable.\(^{15}\)

\(^{15}\) This aspect of brand awareness has not been elaborated as it has been covered in the previous paragraph accounting for brand assets
According to Aaker, a contributing factor to the enhancement of brand loyalty (and thereby brand equity) is a clear brand identity. This is identified in the core values campaign by emphasizing corporate values. The core identity of the brand is communicated, by means of a theme of travel, which is central to the meaning and success of Louis Vuitton. Travelling (in style, one might add) accounts for the timeless essence of the brand, and has remained constant throughout the history of the brand. The extended identity encompasses the brands personality characteristics; traditional, modern, professional and exclusive (c.f. 4.2.3) which functioning as to give the brand direction. From a point of departure in the core- and extended identity, the value proposition of Louis Vuitton includes the functional benefit of high quality bags. Due to the brand’s luxury category, the self-expressive benefit identifies the consumer as fashionable (in the traditional, yet modern sense) with a high priority for quality. These benefits are however, not central to the message of the film. Here, it is the emotional benefit which is in focus, playing on the theme of travelling as a mental journey. This value proposition is ultimately what constructs the relationship between the brand and the consumer. A salient pattern of intimacy and equality (by use of multimodal semiotic modes) has thus been created in order to proposition the consumer with a value scheme to be readily adopted. Due to a sender-oriented rationale, the value proposition is not seen as a negotiated concept.

In corresponds to the focus on the identity of the brand, there is hardly any display of the product. The glimpse that we do see has no relation to the stereotypical notion of luxury as ostentatious or pretentious. This is in line with the tendencies of consumer preferences towards discretion and value as a consequence of the financial crisis (cf. 2.2)

4.3.3 The relationship in a relation oriented paradigm

The following paradigm aspires to depict how brand equity is communicated in the core values campaign according to the relation between the brand and the consumer. Furthermore, the context in which this relation is embedded is touched upon.

According to the brand as-person metaphor, one can argue that the Louis Vuitton brand has been humanized in order to act as an active relationship partner. By emphasising corporate values, the brand has been assigned with the human quality of a value scheme. The importance of travel as a means to self-discovery, becomes a value that surrounds the brand, a value which the consumer is invite to participate in an negotiation with, by reflecting upon where life will take them (i.e. “Where will life take you?)

Due to an emphasis on the consumer-constructed meaning of the brand, the thesis has chosen not to attempt to identify which forms of consumer-brand relationship are shaped. However, one might argue that the typology created (see appendix 4) can be used to identify which relations the brand aspires to
attract. Due to salient patterns of an intimate relation identified in the film by use of image, sound and text (c.f. 4.3.1) one could argue that the film is imitating a relation of courtship or committed partnership. For Louis Vuitton customers the commercial can be said to imitate the committed partnership that the consumer already have by putting emphasis on intimacy and equality. By letting the viewer into the core of the brand’s identity, the film generates a sense of trust, and openness, which in this paradigm is part of the creation of brand equity. For prospective new Louis Vuitton customers, one could classify the commercial as courting the consumer to engage in such a relation as committed partnership.

However, this simulated relation is one-directional, and therefore not enough to create a relation with the brand. The consumer has to participate in a negotiation of the brand’s meaning. This is why the commercial ends with the encouragement to take action by visiting the company’s website. Here the consumer has the opportunity to further explore the world of Louis Vuitton. However, as previously mentioned (cf. 3.3) it is a mistake to think that it is always the company or brand itself that the postmodern consumer wants to interact with. In terms of “linking value” Louis Vuitton could, to further engage the consumer in a negotiation of the brand, create a Louis Vuitton community, in order to link likeminded consumers.

Relationships affect and are affected by the context in which they are embedded, and a thorough understanding of this relation can only be obtained by considering this context. Here the psychology of the consumer during the recession might come into play, and affect their mentality towards luxury brands. Due to the tendencies to focus on ethics and social responsibility, it might be considered bad taste to be ostentatious and showing of in a time where the economy is struggling. This could explain the film’s emphasis on values in order to match the tendencies among consumers. The socio cultural and relation context will also be of impact in the construction of the consumer-brand relation. However, this aspect has not been included in the thesis due to its magnitude.

4.3.4 The contextual affect on the brand strategy of Louis Vuitton

The TV commercial was launched in Great Britain in February 2008, and is the brands first TV commercial (Marketing, 2008). This might function as an indication that the company saw the need to promote the brand more in the light of the financial crisis. Thus the way in which the financial crisis could be said to have influenced the brand strategy of Louis Vuitton is by means of the need to create increased awareness. However, due to the tendency of consumers to invest and buy fewer, classic items Vuitton generally gains market share in a (financial) crisis (The Economist, 2009). This might also explain the brand’s strategy to focus on its classic designs.
In consideration to the fragmentation of the postmodern consumer, one might argue that segmentation has become increasingly challenging. Instead of profiling the audience according to demographics or socio-economic status, it might be valuable to target more fundamental characteristics, like for instance values. In line with the social context of the postmodern consumer, the brand strategy of Louis Vuitton has focused on values, as it emphasizes the need for centering oneself on what is essential.
5. BRANDING – TREND OR TOOL?

In this chapter, the application of branding theory will be discussed in the light of the challenges that the postmodern era and the financial crisis have brought forth.

In the challenging context of today’s social environment, where needs and wants of customers are “unclear and highly fluid, and in which the lifestyle of consumers exhibit disconnectedness and fragmentation” the classic marketing approach of assessing and adapting to the needs and wants of consumers is being challenged (Christensen et al. 2005). The static models and theories touched upon in previous sections (cf. 3.2 and 3.3) can in the light of post modernity be viewed as an expression of control. The sender-oriented rationale held by Kapferer and Aaker conveys this exact expression by omitting the consumer in the creation of the brand. Due to the complexity of the consumer, and the context surrounding them, successful branding is neither easy to create nor to measure. Why is it then that these models, ideas and theories are still being applied within the theory of branding? One might argue that despite the postmodern era, there is still an overriding need for measurement and evidence. Seen in the light of how brand equity gained recognition (cf. 3.1) there is little wonder as to why the argument that the branding process is more complex and non-rational (socio-cultural, emotional, unconscious and interactive) has to some extend been ignored (Gordon, 2006).

Recognizing the challenges might then facilitate the verdict that the popular conception of branding is simply a trend for which there is no relevance. Implied that it is a tool for which there is a singular, unambiguous application contradicts with the underlying scientific principle of this paper, in the sense that there is no such thing as one truth. Ergo, there must be more than one answer to this discussion.

When reading articles by marketers in favor of direct response marketing there is a bias towards a metamorphosis in the field of traditional branding, where the borders between branding and direct marketing is becoming less defined. “While the simple answer is, of course, no, traditional brand advertising is not dead, the reality is that the marketing landscape has changed and branding campaigns no longer stand alone in any successful company’s marketing plan.” (Haire, 2009) The marketing landscape which is refered to however, is the increased need for marketers to immediately measure a campaign’s effectiveness in a troubled economy. Revisiting the hypothesis that the branding process is challenged due to the characteristics of the postmodern consumer, one might therefore argue that the financial crisis is adding injury to insult in that monetary constraints is limiting the scope of branding. While the complexities of the postmodern era requires a need for sophisticated approaches to marketing, the financial crisis necessitate a focus on limiting the budget. The question is if the two can be reconciled. In line with the before mentioned article from Response Magazine, it is also possible to argue that branding is in fact dead,
due to its omission to the primary purpose of marketing, namely to sell (Potter, 2006). The solution, Potter argues, is to utilise direct response marketing for TV commercials, thereby refusing the relevance of the attention/awareness concept which is part of the branding process.

To sum up, within the field of marketing practitioners, there are generally two opinions, the first of them stating that branding is not dead, however in order to employ it as a practical tool to generate profit, it has and needs to be altered. The second opinion validates the stance that branding is a trend, a hyped marketing solution, which needs to be replaced with concrete and measurable initiatives.

Within the field of marketing theory, there are different opinions as to what is essential in the formation of the brand. Be it the product, the brand-identity or the consumer-brand relation, the three authors represented in this paper all agree on the significance of branding. What has then later been questioned by the social anthropologic rationale to marketing is the static brand image created solely by the sender. Though the ambition to control the branding process is understandable, the approach is questionable.
6. CONCLUSION

In this thesis the objective has been to examine how the brand strategy for Louis Vuitton has been affected by the context of the global financial crisis and the postmodern consumer. In order to facilitate an answer, the previous chapters of this paper have indicated which consequences the financial crisis and the postmodern era has had on the consumers in today’s market (cf. 2). From this it became evident that within this social context, branding becomes a challenge due to the fragmentation of the consumer and their simultaneously, limited purchase power.

In conjunction with the first mentioned objective, the thesis aspired to investigate and discuss what is understood by the concept of brand equity. This was answered by an investigation of three diversified paradigms to branding and the accordingly different approaches of establishing brand equity (cf. 3). By including three different paradigms the paper drew upon the method of the hermeneutic circle, in that the brand equity concept was understood by undergoing an iterative process of conceptualization. The paradigms were also viewed within the social context of the surrounding world. This facilitated to prove that there is no one unequivocal meaning of concepts, which has been one of the cornerstones of the philosophical underpinnings of this thesis.

In order to examine Louis Vuitton’s brand strategy, the core values campaign had been chosen as a case study. The thesis then embarked upon a multimodal analysis of the core values campaign, in order to identify how brand equity is communicated in correlation with the three identified paradigms (cf. 4). This revealed how brand equity was communicated in terms of the paradigms’ emphasis on the product, brand identity and consumer-brand relation. From this the social context’s impact on the Louis Vuitton campaign could be identified, concluding that the financial crisis has added a need to increase the awareness on the Louis Vuitton brand and focus on the corporate values due to consumer preferences.

From the context of the financial crisis and the postmodern era, it became evident that branding theory has become a questioned concept. This is why this paper engaged in a discussion of the relevance of branding theory by highlighting opinions stated by marketing practitioners and -academics. From this it became apparent that different fields hold different viewpoints as to the application of branding. This is in line with the philosophical underpinnings of social constructivism which holds that there is no one unequivocal meaning due to the context specific understanding of the world.