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The Levity of Homogenisation of Taste

A Critical Inquiry into the Standardisation Construct

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Abstract

For decades, Theodore Levitt's notion of the homogenisation of consumer taste, as a consequence of globalisation, has been used in the marketing literature to legitimise standardisation as global strategy. Levitt's notion of homogenisation of taste refers to a worldwide desire for modern, low priced, world-standard and dependable products from the modern, and primarily western, world. Homogenisation of taste also presupposes a homogenisation of the meanings assigned to products and a view of the customers as passive recipients of promotional activity.

The purpose of the thesis is to contribute to the understanding of the global corporation's role as an agent of homogenisation of taste, through a critical investigation of marketing guru Theodore Levitt's theory in practice, regarding customers as passive recipients of promotional activities.

The thought that meanings of modern, low priced, world-standard, and dependable products can be standardised in promotional activities are further investigated in view of that meanings are created in organised forms of social interaction in individual specific contexts. This is pursued by conducting a qualitative case study of how the promotion of standardised products is perceived by customers in a recently modernised market. In order to facilitate the comparison between corporate promotion and customer perceptions, the corporation's perception of the modern customer is in particular investigated. The customers' perceptions are examined through qualitative interviews and observations of products in a home environment. In a joint analysis the differences of corporate and customers' perceptions are singled out and discussed.

Our study proposes that the corporation's role as an agent of homogenisation of taste is limited to the moment of purchase. After purchase the customers seemed to decommodify and recontextualise the products, thereby assigning them other meanings than the ones promoted by the corporation. We found that this was not at least performed in order to handle the uniformity of the standardised products. Hence, our main conclusion is that customers are not passively receiving and accepting promotional activity. Therefore, a more careful usage of homogenisation of taste as legitimisation of the standardisation construct in the marketing literature is suggested.

Keywords: Standardisation, homogenisation, hegemonisation, taste, Theodore Levitt, perception, meaning, modernity, consumption

Preface

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1 Introduction

1.1 The Importance of Being Professor Levitt

Recent years have seen the emergence of a heated debate within international marketing strategy about the design and applicability of global strategies (Lemak and Arunthanes 1997). Two perspectives dominate the debate in the marketing literature: adaptation and standardisation of the marketing mix (product, price, promotion, and place). Advocates of adaptation argue that although human needs and preferences may be similar across the world, differences in cultural and environmental factors notably influence the buying behaviour of people in different countries. As a result, global strategies where the same products are sold in the same way everywhere are viewed as inappropriate. Instead the marketing mix should be adapted to local conditions.

At the other end of the spectrum, advocates of standardisation contend that the universalising tendency of modernity is leading to a homogenisation of taste across the world. Advanced communications technology binds people together, oversteps traditional borders and replaces old differences in lifestyles with the creed of modern life. Consequently, global strategies involving standardisation of the marketing mix are considered suitable.

Thus, far the dominant perspective of global marketing strategies has been standardisation. The influence of this perspective is highlighted in part through the large volume of articles published supporting standardisation over adaptation (Zou and Cavusgil 2002).

The origins of the standardisation perspective can be traced back to the work of Elinder and Fatt on international promotional policy in 1961 (Walters 1986). They argued that the time had arrived for uniform advertising in Europe. This was both feasible and desirable because of the increasing similarity between the European consumers as a consequence of greater availability of international media and geographic mobility. Buzzell (1968) also challenged the perception of the time which held that multinational marketing consists of a series of independent and localised marketing mixes. He observed that an increasing number of multinational firms were realising benefits linked to a globally integrated approach involving cost reductions through standardising elements of the marketing mix.

Another major contribution to the standardisation perspective was presented by Wind et al. (1973). They presented a framework that identified four types of orientations toward international operation: ethnocentrism (home country orientation), polycentrism (host country orientation), regiocentrism (regional orientation) and geocentrism (world orientation). In the geocentric phase, the company views the entire world as a potential market, ignoring national boundaries. Standardised product lines for worldwide markets are developed alongside promotional policy to project a uniform image of the corporation and its products.

Wind et al. contends “cultural differences are considered to be too great to permit substantial movement toward a geocentric orientation at least in the near future” (ibid.). They herein seem to imply a general desirability of the development of a uniform cultural environment conducive with standardised marketing strategy. More importantly, we also sense an implicit belief in an ongoing homogenisation process that will sooner or later result in converging consumer tastes, which is obviously a precondition for the viability of standardisation as a marketing strategy and for the legitimisation of standardisation as construct in the theoretical discussion.

The homogenisation of consumer taste worldwide was not treated as a fact in the marketing literature until 1983, when Theodore Levitt published the article “The Globalization of Markets”. Undoubtedly, the article set the direction for the standardisation discourse for years to come in international marketing. Today, twenty years later, Levitt's notion of homogenisation of taste is still quoted by leading marketing theoreticians such as Jain (1989); Hampton and Buske (1987); Samiee and Roth (1992); Yip (1995); Zou and Cavusgil (2002); Douglas (2000). Based on a study of several firms’ financial performance in relation to global strategy, Zou and Cavusgil (2002) concluded that firms should have marketing operations in all major world markets and seek a high degree of standardisation of products and promotion. In addition, they argue that the manager’s ability to establish common needs and desires among customer segments worldwide is crucial to corporate performance.

In the following we will take a closer look at Theodore Levitt's notion of homogenisation of taste, which is so often referred to in discussions of standardisation as marketing strategy, but seldom defined. It is merely presented as a simple fact that does not need to be explained or reflected upon. After the attempt of cracking the code of homogenisation of taste, the problem formulation, purpose and disposition of the thesis will be presented.

1.2 “The Globalization of Markets”

Theodore Levitt is one of the most widely read and respected authorities in marketing. His bestseller, *The Marketing Imagination*, has been translated into eleven languages and he is a four-time winner of the McKinsey Award for best annual article in the Harvard Business Review. Other awards include the Charles Coolidge Parlin Award as “Marketing Man of the Year,” the George Gallup Award for Marketing Excellence, and Paul D. Converse Award of the American Marketing Association for major contributions to marketing (www.hamiltonco.com).

In “The Globalization of Markets”, Levitt argues that communications technology and globalisation are creating a new reality for global corporations. He writes:

“Two vectors shape the world – technology and globalization. The first helps determine human preference, the second economic realities”. (Levitt 1983, in Enis et al. 1990, p. 57)

“The Republic of Technology [whose] supreme law...is convergence, the tendency for everything to become more and more like everything else”. (Daniel Boorstin in *ibid.*, p. 54).

“...proletarianization of communication and travel enter every crevice of life”. (*ibid.*, p. 54)

“The world’s needs and wants have been irrevocably homogenized”. (*ibid.*, p. 54)

The rise of global media such as MTV and CNN lend weight to the notion that communications technology is the major negotiator of convergence of human preference. Technology facilitates the global spread of, e.g., promotional messages resulting in homogenisation of consumer tastes across the world. Since the Internet was not widely used in 1983, we assume that by communications technology Levitt mainly refers to TV and radio. Today, communications as well as travel are accessible to most people in consumer society.

“Everywhere everything gets more and more like everything else as the world’s preference structure is relentlessly homogenized. (...) Corporations geared to this new reality benefit from enormous economies of scale in production, distribution, marketing and management”. (*ibid.*, p. 54)

Levitt distinguishes between the multinational and the global corporation. The multinational corporation operates in a number of countries and adjusts its products and marketing practices in each, resulting in relatively high costs. The global corporation operates as if the entire world were a single entity – the same things are sold in the same way everywhere. The supposed converging preference structure makes it necessary for all corporations to standardise their product offerings and marketing activities in order to stay competitive. He further writes:

“The difference between the hedgehog and the fox...is that the fox knows a lot about great many things, but the hedgehog knows everything about one great thing. The multinational corporation knows a lot about a great many countries and congenially adapts to supposed differences. ... By contrast, the global corporation knows everything about one great thing. ... It treats the world as composed of a few standardized markets rather than many customized markets... ”. (ibid., pp. 56-57)

Homogenisation of consumer taste makes economies of scale and standardisation of the marketing mix feasible. Not utilising standardisation is even described as medieval by Levitt. Standardisation becomes necessary; a natural condition for the survival of corporations. This is strengthened by the following quotes:

“The commonality of preference leads inescapably to the standardization of products...”. (ibid., p. 55)

“Selling a line of products individually tailored to each nation is thoughtless”. (ibid., p. 61)

“Companies that do not adapt to the new global realities will become victims of those that do”. (ibid., p. 65)

1.2.1 Cracking the Code of Homogenisation of Taste

What does Levitt mean by homogenisation of taste? What kind of taste is he referring to? The next excerpts suggest that Levitt’s notion of homogenisation of taste refers to a worldwide preference for low priced, world-standard, dependable and in particular modern products. For Levitt, modernity seems to be the denominator of purchases of standardised products.

“They [the Japanese] have discovered the one great thing all markets have in common – an overwhelming desire for dependable, world-standard modernity in all things, at aggressively low prices”. (ibid., p. 62)

“Preference structure is homogenized by technology and the knowing of modernity”. (ibid., p. 54)

“It [the multinational corporation] willingly accepts vestigial national differences, not questioning the possibility of their transformation, not recognising how the world is ready and eager for the benefit of modernity, especially when the price is right”. (ibid., p. 61)

Ultimately, converging tastes are shaped not by communications technology, but by people’s interpretations of technology. Studies on the effects of televised messages emphasise national differences in decoding them. The message only makes sense to receivers socialised into the codes of the sender's culture. This means that different nationalities and social classes may view internationally popular TV programmes and commercials through inappropriate codes. Additionally, uncontrollable misreading of messages, and counter-reactions to and resistance against prevailing discourses makes it hard for a homogenisation of tastes to take place (Featherstone 1991, pp. 143, 146).

However, the way Levitt writes about preferences for modern, low priced, world-standard, and dependable products suggests that the meanings of these words are as standardised as the products they signify. It suggests that all consumers perceive these products in the same way. Further on, the possibility of standardised products interpretation will be discussed. Next, we will take a closer look at what Levitt means with these product attributes.

Modern

“It [media] has made isolated places and impoverished people eager for modernity’s allurements. Almost everyone everywhere wants all the things they have heard about, seen or experienced via new technologies”. (ibid., p. 53)

Impoverished people in isolated places are fascinated by what they lack: modernity. They desire the modern products from modernised countries communicated to them through TV. Thus, impoverished people are not modern and contemporary but, according to Levitt, desperately yearning to catch up with the times.

“In Brazil thousands swarm daily from pre-industrial Bahian darkness into exploding coastal cities, there to quickly install TV sets in crowded corrugated huts and next to battered Volkswagens, make sacrificial offerings of fruit, fresh killed chicken to Macumban spirits by candlelight”. (ibid., p 54)

“Modernity is not just a wish but also a widespread practice among those who cling, with unyielding passion or religious fervour to ancient attitudes and heritages”. (ibid., p. 54)

“During Biafra’s fratricidal war against the Iboos, daily televised reports showed soldiers carrying bloodstained swords and listening to transistor radios while drinking Coca-Cola”. (ibid., p. 54)

Impoverished people live in the pre-industrial world where more primitive traditions and religious beliefs still exist. Modernity does however have the capacity to coexist with pre-industrial practice, at least in a transit period before tastes become homogenised. Thus, according to Levitt there is no conflict between religion and science.

“Worldwide communications carry everywhere the constant drumbeat of modern possibilities to lighten and enhance work, raise living standards, divert and entertain”. (ibid., p. 54)

Modernity lightens every dark corner in the world, resulting in exploding cities, raised living standards and entertainment of the masses. Everywhere people are informed about their right to mass consumption, the absolute necessity for mass production and convinced to dance to the beat of modern lifestyle.

“The products and methods of the industrialized world play a single tune for all the world, and all the world eagerly dances to it...Commercially nothing confirms this as much as the success of McDonald's from the Champs Elysées to the Ginza, of Coca-Cola in Bahrain and Pepsi-Cola in Moscow, and of rock-music, Greek salad, Hollywood movies, Revlon cosmetics, Sony TVs and Levi jeans everywhere”. (ibid., pp. 54-55)

“The organised smuggling of electronic equipment, used automobiles, western clothing, cosmetics and pirated movies into primitive places exceeds even the thriving underground trade in modern weapons and their military mercenaries”. (ibid., p. 54)

These quotes suggest that tastes are homogenised by a single tune of global corporations in the industrialised world. It is a taste for the type of modern products, produced by corporations

utilising standardisation as global strategy, and promoted on everyday commercial TV channels. This also suggests that the dancing to the modern tune is defined by global corporations.

“...the desire for the most advanced things the world makes and sells...” (ibid., p. 54)

Modern products are advanced products. They are the most advanced products we know of, including automobiles, electronics, jeans, refrigerators, TVs, weapons, Hollywood movies, Greek-salad, hamburgers, Coca-Cola, rock-music and TV. Here, the view of Greek-salad as an advanced product is left open for the reader to reflect upon since we have not been able to understand what Levitt means by this. Assumingly, by hamburgers he refers to fast food. Modern products are standardised concepts in design and promotion, affordable for the mass. Promoted in Hollywood movies and TV they embrace admired values such as freedom and being the ‘real thing’, (or perhaps the values are admired because they are embraced). Conversely, these products are often looked down upon as unsophisticated, commercial and American.

Levitt’s notion of homogenisation of taste entails above all an increased demand for modernity. Modernity is the social and cultural outcome of modernisation. Here, it might be appropriate to make a distinction between modernisation, modernity, and modernism.

According to Fornäs (1992) modernisation is the economical, political and technological developments of society that leads to modernity. The first stage of modernity is characterised by homogenisation of taste but because humans are not passive recipients of promotional messages, new differences will eventually come into being (Fornäs 1992, p. 19). In this sense, Levitt’s notion of the universality of modernity is questionable. Modernity involves a rationalisation of thinking where results are only valid if verified through measurements. This leads to a rejection of e.g. religion and folk-beliefs. Faith is viewed as irrational since it cannot be verified except through subjective experiences (Fornäs 1992, p. 17). Instead, world order is explained using science, which takes the place of religion. Modernism refers to collective ways of answering to modernity, e.g. cultural and social movements such as youth cultures (ibid., p. 21). However, collective behaviour is inconsistent with modern society’s single focus on the individual. In the anonymous city the individual is no longer tied to the family, s/he is free to be anyone of his/her choice. This absence also creates longing for togetherness, which can be recognised in attempts to identify with groups through consumption.

During the 1980's some thinkers (e.g. Baudrillard) argued that differences have ceased to exist due to the lack of product diversity on the market. Obviously, this lends weight to Levitt's assertion of homogenisation of taste. Moreover, they accused modernity for being an outdated western ethnocentrically affair. Instead, according to them, we have moved into a new post-modern era. Following Fornäs (1992), we will think of post-modern society as late-modernity, since post-modernity is not in conflict with or a substitution for modernity. Modernity has not ended; it is our way of living.

Modern products are an outcome of modern society. Therefore, the characteristics of modernity are incorporated in Levitt's notion of modern products. Accordingly, these products are rational in the sense that they are practical, logical to use, and have a use value where their quality and performance equal their price. Moreover, they are simple and minimalist, 'less is more', since adornments are perceived as irrational. Suited for urban life, they are contemporary with the charm of novelty with no references to past impoverished times. They also give a clean impression since dirt is a characteristic of countryside and hard labour. Consequently, according to Levitt, all consumers desire technically advanced, clean, contemporary, simple, and rational products. All modern products may not, however, be perceived in a universal manner.

In the following we will present the characteristics of world-standard, low price and dependability. As we see it, these qualities are directly related to modernity.

Low Prices

“It [the global corporation] knows about the great thing all nations and people have in common: scarcity”. (ibid., p. 57)

“The implacable truth of all modern production –whether of tangible or intangible goods—is that large-scale production of standardized items is generally cheaper within a wide range of volume than small-size production”. (ibid., p. 57)

“The new technological juggernaut taps an ancient motivation—to make one’s money go as far as possible”. (ibid., p. 56)

Levitt argues that money has three qualities: scarcity, difficulty of acquisition and transience. Subsequently, a low enough price will result in customers across the world abandoning their cultural preferences. He further writes:

“If the price is low enough, they [the customers] will take highly standardized world products, even if these aren't exactly what mother said was suitable, what immemorial custom decreed was right, or what market -research fabulists asserted was preferred”. (ibid., p. 5)

“Nobody's safe from global reach and the irresistible economies of scale”. (ibid., p. 57)

Low prices are made possible by “the scale economies of modernised plant dedicated to mass production of standardized lines” (ibid., p. 58). Global corporations should thus focus on obtaining economies of scale in order to offer standardised products at low prices. Low prices make consumption a reality for everybody. Economies of scale and low prices drive modern society allowing consumers to only be satisfied with a purchase for a limited amount of time, requiring constant updating of commodities to support mass production. Sometimes this mode of production and consumption is referred to as Fordism, a method that emerged with the attempts by Henry Ford to provide workers with sufficient income and leisure time to consume the products they produced. Fordism refers to the process of co-ordinating production with consumption, in order to proletarianise consumption to include everyone in consumer society (Best 2000).

What is a universal low price? Do product values result in globally uniform prices?

World-standard

“Everyone in the increasingly homogenized world market wants products and features that everybody else wants”. (ibid., p. 57)

“...it [the global corporation] sells the same things in the same way everywhere...” (ibid., p. 53)

The conception of world standard implies a referral to products that can be used worldwide and overcome external market barriers such as legal restrictions or differences in climate. It also suggests that standardised products are sold in the same way globally. Everyone wants what everyone else has got.

World-standard also involves the strong ideology of ‘standard’ in the American mind. As the cradle of modern life, America has, to a large extent, been able to define the modern agenda.

What dominates consumption in the American tradition is the utilitarian and materialistic side of consumption, rather than specific attributes that distinguish one product from another. Also, from the American viewpoint traditional product features are associated with past time, which receives low value (Usunier 2000, p. 78). From this perspective, symbols of growth and development that mark a distance from the past become important. Products perceived as world-standard are strongly related to the country of origin effect. Standardised products from the “Bahian darkness” are probably not included in the notion of world standard. World standard presupposes a degree of modernisation.

Does everybody want what everybody else wants? Is modern society’s creed of individuality compatible with uniformity?

Dependability

“...goods of the best quality and reliability at the lowest price”. (ibid., p. 54)

“They [standardised products] are exactly what the world will take especially if they come with low prices, high quality and blessed reliability”. (ibid., p. 65)

Levitt seems to use reliability and dependability synonymously. Hence, dependable products are reliable products of high quality; steadfast products on which one can trust. However, Levitt does not provide any definition of quality. What is quality? Is a steadfast table a steadfast table everywhere?

1.3 Creating the Modern Consumer -- Agents of Homogenisation of Taste

“Two things clearly influenced customers to buy: low price regardless of feature preferences and heavy promotion regardless of price”. (ibid., p. 60)

“Both unions [the American United Steel and Auto Workers] realize that they have become global—shutting down all or most of U.S. manufacturing...” (ibid., p. 61)

“The purpose of business is to get and keep a customer. Or, to use, Peter Drucker’s more refined construction, to create and keep a customer”. (ibid., p. 65)

When manufacturing has moved to countries where labour is cheaper the industrialised world is left with the task of producing customers. The creation of customers is achieved through promotion in the media. This is confirmed by the success of Coca-Cola, Pepsi-Cola, Levi jeans, Sony, and McDonald’s; corporations spending huge amounts on marketing activities to promote modernity, low price, world-standard, and dependability through certain cues.

Levitt illustrates how the use of aggressive media promotion can overcome cultural differences through the American washing-machine manufacturer Hoover, Ltd. Hoover is uncertain about the appropriate strategy to sell automatic washing machines in markets with different cultural perceptions of washing machines. Levitt advises Hoover to produce one type of standardised washing machine ignore cultural preferences and run an aggressive promotion campaign making consumers feel obliged to buy the washing machine not because of the need for a superior washing machine but for a modern lifestyle. In this sense, corporations are not promoting products as much as cultural values and lifestyle.

“Hoover’s media message should have been: this is the machine that you, the homemaker, deserve to have to reduce the repetitive heavy daily household burdens, so that you may have more constructive time to spend with your children and husband. The promotion should also have targeted the husband to give him, preferably in the presence of his wife, a

sense of obligation to provide an automatic washer for her even before he bought an automobile for himself. An aggressively low price combined with an aggressive media promotion of this kind, would have overcome previously expressed preferences for particular features". (ibid., p. 61)

If the world's taste is irrevocably homogenised why did not Hoover's commercial read: "Modern, dependable, world standard, cheap washing machines for sale". Levitt believes that the meanings of these four words need to be conveyed through symbols such as a beautiful American housewife or an idyllic family. Hoover communicates modernity as a man who can afford to let his wife stay at home, world-standard through the American family and dependability through the spare time the housewife can spend with her husband and children. In this way Hoover aims at defining the associations of these words and thereby their meanings. It is evident that the Hoover commercial is foremost directed to women, as all advertising has been since the early twentieth century. Advertisers and marketers have long viewed the customer as primarily women who are viewed as easy targets for manipulation through romantic and social aspirations (Poster 1990, p. 51).

The advertisement also illustrates the essence of marketing imagination. The title of Levitt's book, *The Marketing Imagination*, highlights the importance of imagination in his thinking. Marketing imagination embraces the practice of ignoring what consumers say they want and adding enough imagination to their statements to legitimise actions of corporations. This is supported by the following statements:

"The Hoover case illustrates how the perverse practice of the marketing concept and the absence of any kind of marketing imagination let multinational attitudes survive when customers actually want the benefit of global standardisation". (ibid., p. 61)

"The global competitor will seek constantly to standardize his offering everywhere. He will digress from this standardization only after exhausting all possibilities to retain it, and he will push for reinstatement of standardization whenever digression and divergence have occurred. He will never assume that the customer is a king who knows his own wishes". (ibid., p. 56)

In this way, corporations cease to exist as customer-satisfying organisms and ultimately become ends in themselves. Levitt writes:

"There is only one significant respect in which a company's activities around the world are important, and this is in what it produces and how it sells. Everything derives from, and is subsidiary to, these activities". (ibid., p. 65)

This severely contradicts 'the marketing concept', which essentially views the customer as the chief dictator of corporate direction. Instead of kings the customers are turned into passive and anonymous recipients of marketing activities.

"Most executives in multinational corporations ... falsely presume that marketing means giving the customer what he says he wants rather than trying to understand what he'd like. So they persist with high cost, customized multinational products and practices instead of pressing hard and pressing properly for global standardization". (ibid., p. 58)

Levitt is radical in his views by not giving the firm the right to choose between a multinational or global strategy (contrary to for instance Buzzell and Wind above) (Hampton and Buske 1987). He does not accept the argument that analysis of barriers to standardisation may result in a departure from a standardised to an adapted marketing approach. Instead, the firm must use innovative ways of circumventing barriers to standardisation. In situations where market heterogeneity limits opportunity for standardisation, the firm should actively promote global convergence. Instead of

adapting to what Levitt sees as superficial differences within and between nations corporations should seek “sensibly to *force* suitable standardised products and practices on the entire globe [italics added]”. Ironically, the major agents of homogenisation of taste are the very ones most, at the same time the same ones mostly dependent on its existence: the global corporations.

1.3.1 Hegemonisation of Taste

If one of the consequences of globalisation is homogenisation of taste, then the question of who is globalising whom arises. In this context, Mazrui (1999) introduces the twin-concepts of homogenisation and hegemonisation. While homogenisation is increasing similarity, the second accompanying characteristic of globalisation is hegemonisation, or the “paradoxical concentration of power in a particular country or in a particular civilization”. As Mazrui puts it, “while ‘homogenisation’ is the process of expanding homogeneity, ‘hegemonisation’ is the emergence and consolidation of the hegemonic centre”. To exemplify, people these days dress more alike all over the world than they did at the end of the nineteenth century (homogenisation). But the dress code being globalised is overwhelmingly the western dress code, e.g. the men’s suit and jeans (hegemonisation). Hence some, like Ning (2002), argue that a cultural globalisation is taking place where the single tune of the industrialised world can be seen as agencies of western cultures that absorb cultures of non-industrialised countries through intensive marketing activities. This practice ultimately leads to a global convergence of tastes and preferences. The fact that the amount of information and consumer goods leaving western countries is larger than the amount of goods flowing in from non-western countries (Ritzer 1998, p. 56) implies that homogenisation of taste can (or should) be seen as hegemonisation of taste; a monologue of western corporations.

It is thus reasonable to argue that consumption of standardised products merely represents the process of hegemonisation (corporations pressing hard for standardised products on the global marketplace) and not necessarily homogenisation of taste. Yet, by asserting that homogenisation of taste inescapably leads to the standardisation of products, Levitt presupposes the homogenisation process in order to legitimise standardisation as global strategy. The notion of homogenisation of taste is not supported by anything other than Levitt’s belief in the superiority of modern corporations and their capacity to create uniformity worldwide through the use of promotion.

1.4 Problem Formulation and Research Questions

The logic behind the standardisation perspective of global marketing strategy holds that the proletarianisation of cosmopolitanism, through the global spread of communications technology, has led to a homogenisation of consumer taste, where customers worldwide, abandon their individual preferences for the benefit of modern, low-priced, world-standard and dependable products.

For Theodore Levitt, homogenisation of taste refers to a communal desire for modernity among consumers, creating an opportunity for global corporations to disregard actual consumer preference and “sensibly force” modern, low priced, world-standard and dependable products in markets through certain cues in promotion. The global corporation is an important agent of modern values and lifestyle. The products listed by Levitt are essentially cultural products (originating from Greece, USA, Japan, France), but marketed in the name of modernity, carrying the same modern creed. In this sense, globalisation becomes a one way communication from the modern world, primarily the west, to the rest of the world, paving the way for a collective and generic perception of products.

Invariably, people do buy standardised products. However, the purpose of purchasing standardised products may differ. Two persons buy the same standardised TV. While one uses it as interior decoration, the ultimate symbol of modernity, the other keeps it in the closet and only plugs it in on Wednesday nights to watch wrestling. Do these persons have the same taste? Is it, in this light, reasonable to ascribe high sales figures of standardised products to homogenisation of taste, although products may be perceived differently in different contexts and in different countries? To return to the previously asked questions: Are modern products assigned identical meanings everywhere? Is a low price a low price everywhere? Does everyone want what everybody else has got? Is steadfast table a steadfast table everywhere?

We argue that Levitt's reasoning overlook what consumers do with the products after purchase. It does not consider the possibility of consumers rereading, reconfiguring and re-contextualising their purchases, and in so doing, recreate and refashion the meanings of standardised products leading to diversities of tastes in markets. Because meaning is dependent on individual taste (this will be discussed in more detail in the theoretical base), Levitt's conception of homogenisation of taste also presupposes that consumers assign meanings to products in an identical way. Meanings of products are as standardised as the products they signify and promotional activities are incorporated into consumers' minds in a standardised fashion dictated by the corporation. Thereby, it essentially views the consumers as passive recipients of promotional activity who uncritically accept and conform to corporate product promotion. Do consumers not react and answer to the activities of global corporations and assign products their own meanings?

This question will be further examined in the thesis by way of the following research questions.

- Do corporate promotion and customers' perceptions of modern, low priced, world-standard, and dependable products converge?
- What implications do this have for homogenisation of taste as legitimisation of the standardisation construct?

We will examine Levitt's notion of homogenisation of taste in the light of a study concerning a corporation's capacity to incorporate standardised perceptions of modern, low priced, world-standard, and dependable products into the minds of customers through promotional activity.

If there is uniformity between corporate promotion of modern, low priced, world-standard and dependable products and customers' perceptions of these product attributes, we will regard it as an indication of the customers as passive recipients of promotion and the global corporation as an agent of homogenisation of consumer taste, as asserted by Levitt. In a reversed scenario, incoherencies between promotion and perceptions indicate that promotion does not have such a strong impact on customers and that the corporation is not serving as an agent of homogenisation of taste. This suggests a more careful use of homogenisation of taste as a way to legitimise the standardisation construct in the marketing literature.

1.5 Purpose and Delimitation

The purpose of the thesis is to contribute to the understanding of the global corporation's role as an agent of homogenisation of taste, through a critical investigation of Theodore Levitt's theory in practice, regarding customers as passive recipients of promotional activities.

Our inquiry regards the use of homogenisation of taste as legitimisation of the standardisation construct in the marketing literature. The inquiry does not regard the existence of homogenisation of taste across the world. This would require a wider longitudinal study of the cause and effect relationship between communications technology and consumption, something that obviously stretches beyond our resources. Foremost, we are interested in gaining a better understanding of the role of the corporation as an agent of the values of modern society in globalisation. As such, we are more interested in the role of the corporation in the process of homogenisation of taste (which is referred to by Levitt as a communal preference for modernity) than the role of homogenisation of taste for the feasibility of standardisation as marketing strategy.

The corporation chosen for the case study will be regarded as the sole representative for the values of modern society promoted by global corporations. Hence, the similarities between the customers and the corporation will solely be ascribed corporate influence on the customers. It should however be noted that, in reality, this corporation is only one among many agents advocating the modern lifestyle.

The examination of customer perceptions will go through the meanings assigned to the products attributes of modernity, low price, world-standard and dependability. Here, the objective is not to examine meaning creation as a process but as a product generated in the customer's specific context.

Following Levitt, we will primarily focus on the components of promotion and products in the marketing mix. By promotion we mean any corporate activity that aims at reaching or reaches customers.

1.6 Outline of the Thesis

The disposition of the thesis is as follows. As a starting point, the methodology of approaching our research questions is explained. Here, we will also present our research proceedings and how the empirical data was collected and used. Thereafter, some prerequisites for the comprehension of the analysis of the case study will be presented. This part is necessary for the reader to be able to apprehend the reasoning behind approaching our research question of whether or not meanings of products are perceived by customers in a standardised manner.

The case study is divided into a corporate part and a customer part which are presented in chapter four and five. Chapter four deals with the standardised promotional activities of a global corporation who claims to sell modern, low price, world-standard and dependable products. The aim is to illustrate that the same belief in modernity, as promoted in Levitt's article, is prevalent in contemporary practice. In order to facilitate the comparison between corporate promotion and customer perceptions in the joint analysis, the corporation's view of the modern customer's perceptions are particularly investigated. Chapter five deals with how customers, in a non-western market, perceive modern, low priced, world-standard and dependable products. This is done through observations of how standardised products are consumed at home as well as qualitative interviews. The two analyses will then be compared in a joint analysis, where differences between the findings of customers' perceptions according to the global corporation and actual customers' perceptions will be discussed. This part of the study does not give an all-embracing analysis of the material that is presented in the two analyses. It rather focuses on some differences between promotion and perceptions that according to our view are the most interesting. Finally, we will conclude with a discussion of our findings in relation to Levitt's notion of homogenisation of taste and its future use as legitimisation for the standardisation construct.

2 Methodology

2.1 General Approach

2.1.1 A Critical Stand

“...and if the day came when I felt a natural emotion I’d get such a shock I’d probably jump in the ocean”. (The Smiths)

As work with the thesis proceeded, we came to take a critical stand towards the thinking behind the standardisation perspective. It should be noted that this is not a criticism against professor Levitt per se, but against the philosophy he strongly advocates that views modernity as a superior state of being and desirable to everyone. The kind of modern lifestyle advocated in promotional activity effects how all of us view and relate to nature, culture, gender and age (Fornäs 1992, p. 21). It is therefore disturbing that the conditions of homogenisation of taste seem to be defined by a small number of actors who share the same views of what modern life should include.

According to Weedon social meanings effecting how we lead our daily lives are produced within societal institutions. Individuals such as publicity experts and marketers, who have been shaped by the institution, serve as agents of change to either serve hegemonic interests or challenge existing power relations (Weedon 1987, p. 27). There seems to be a set of dominating social norms in advertising. For example, the commercial of Hoover is recognised in contemporary Swedish TV commercials, e.g. for the floor wax AJAX where a woman sweeps the floor and then happily does a split jump in front of two children who smile. What kind of reality is communicated in these commercials? From a democratic aspect, it seems crucial to critically examine the power interests behind this reality. Considering that the majority of the global corporations are American, the fact that only eight percent of American commercial directors are female suggests that the values promoted in commercials are mainly defined by men. This is further supported by only four percent of the Hollywood directors being female and that ninety-four percent of the Oscar writing awards have gone to men (www.guerillagirls.com).

It can be argued that marketing is not a harmless way of giving customers what they want, rather it should be examined as the questionable manipulation it is (Alvesson 1994). Alvesson suggests that one of the ways of examining the ideology of marketing is through the use of critical theory, described as:

“Critical theory is motivated by an interest in emancipation, i.e. the freeing of individuals from social forces that dominates self-understanding and ways of relating to the social world”. (Alvesson 1994)

This involves taking a sceptical approach towards what seems, at first glance, to be unquestionable and natural in advertising. The critical approach also means taking an ideological stand. What makes us so sure that there are power interests hidden under the surface? For example, with regard to the aforementioned AJAX commercial we initially wrote “Is dad at work?” Why did we cynically assume that the woman was a housewife and a mum? Another person may have perceived the woman as a professional cleaner or a sister. Assumptions of this kind are influenced by our own pre-understanding of the world, though it could be argued that it is influenced by advertising. According to Bignell, the problem with beneath-the-surface studies is that we have nothing except our pre-understandings to control our findings against.

2.2 Research Proceeding

The empirical data was collected in Beijing summer 2002 and in Sweden during fall 2002. The main reason for collecting the data in Beijing was a personal interest in Chinese interior decoration and how the products from Swedish home furnishing retailer Ikea were incorporated into a Chinese interior context. The purpose of this was to inquire how standardised products change depending on the context they are placed in. Since two of the authors spent the summer in Beijing it was natural to collect the data at that time. Then, we were not aware of that Ikea Beijing also has the closest a company can get to a fully standardised marketing mix. Recently, Ikea has had to make small adoptions in markets where competition is fiercer, including Japan (where the first Ikea store opens 2005) and America (interview with co-worker B 2002).

Interior products from Ikea were specifically chosen since the company is the largest home furnishing retailer on the Chinese market if not in the world (Usunier 2000, p. 102). At the time of the data collection we did not have a clear research problem. Therefore, we tried to keep our minds as open as possible and regard everything as being of interest. We did not have a set questionnaire but adapted to the individual interview sessions and discussed whatever the interviewees felt comfortable speaking about regarding interior decoration.

A further discussion of the empirical data will be presented below. At this point, it should be mentioned that a qualitative methodological approach has been used in order to gain a deeper understanding of the integration of Ikea's products in different contexts. The qualitative approach aims at understanding rather than explaining a phenomenon. Therefore, depth of empirical data becomes more important than representation (Holme and Solvang 1992, p. 92).

Starting to write the thesis, a couple of months after the data collection in Beijing, we decided to construct a qualitative case study, taking both the corporate and the customer perspective into consideration. This was mainly due to the development of a clearer research area involving perceptions of standardised promotion. Also, the limited amount of interviews and observations conducted in Beijing contributed to the need for richer empirical data. Thus, additional collection of data was conducted in Sweden concerning Ikea's standardised promotional activities in Beijing. We commenced by conducting interviews with managers at Ikea in Helsingborg to get an overview of the global strategy.

Any material relating to Ikea's promotional activities was collected in an initial stage. Since Ikea has a fully standardised strategy supplementing the Chinese promotional material with Swedish did not constitute a problem. After the data collection was done we proceeded to decide on a specific research question and theories with which to illustrate the data. This procedure may be regarded as inductive and will be further discussed under 2.3.

2.2.1 Choice of Research Topic

Levitt's article "The Globalization of Markets" is used as a tool to critically examine the ideology behind the standardisation perspective. Reading the article for the first time it merely represented the debate on international marketing strategy twenty years ago. As we began to read contemporary articles on global marketing strategy, especially those taking the standardisation perspective, Levitt followed us as a ghost, as his article is quoted by leading, contemporary marketing professionals. After returning to the credo it was discovered that the empirical data collected corresponded quite well with Levitt's writing.

Ikea embodies Levitt's 'hedgehog company' claiming to have a fully standardised product range with an identical assortment around the world. Market adaptations are made in promotional material by way of translations (interview with co-worker B 2002). Despite obvious differences of taste in its many markets, Ikea's management has persistently pursued a strategy that in pursuit of low cost, homogeneous organisation culture and external image, product policy, distribution, and retail format, manifests greater standardisation of approach than almost any other global company (Pitt 1996). Ikea's business concept of producing modern, standardised, low-priced and high quality furniture are very much in accordance with Levitt's notion of homogenisation of taste for modern, low-priced, world standard and dependable products. In addition, during customer interviews, these product attributes were frequently mentioned.

2.3 Discussion of Research Proceeding

The methodological approach may be regarded as inductive. The basic characteristic of induction is that the research process begins in the empirical reality, and then moves on to search for formal theories. The formal theory and research question should fit the data, as opposed to deduction, which proceeds from theory. Advocates of inductive methodology say that it forces the researcher to keep an open mind in the data collection and to avoid being limited by theoretical pre-assumptions, thereby dismissing certain information as unimportant (Brante et al. 1998, p. 108). However, personal pre-understandings of the world restrict research to be subjective practice. Pre-understandings include formal theories as well as prejudices, values and perceptions of the world. It also excludes that which cannot be understood (Spivak in Ljundahl 2002). Thus, things which cannot be related to are lost. It is only possible to see and hear what our pre-understandings enable us to see and hear, so we do not regard our method inductive.

Abduction is a more appropriate way of illustrating the research process. The abductive approach aims at gaining an understanding of a phenomenon rather than explaining it. Like induction it proceeds from empirical data but recognises the pre-understandings of the researchers (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 1994, p. 43). Abduction is a relative of the hermeneutic circle where patterns of interpretation (theory), text (data), dialogue with the text (data) and interpretations are reciprocally alternated shaping and re-shaping each other (*ibid.*, p. 171). In other words the hermeneutic approach involves having a dialogue with the empirical data with the help of theoretical pre-understandings while one's own theory is taking shape.

Abduction involves finding hidden meanings in the pattern of interpretation and using it, as if it were valid, to make sense of the empirical data. In this way, the data embodies the revealed hidden meanings of the pattern (*ibid.*, p. 44). Obviously, Levitt's article constitutes our pattern of interpretation. The purpose of the analysis of the article above was to unmask its ideological content as well as to crack the code of homogenisation of taste.

Formalisation refers to some sort of a correspondence between reality and theory (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 1994, p. 34). To become formal the abductive approach needs to be controlled against a series of independent cases. In our case, the findings must be compared with additional examinations of corporate promotional activities and customers' perceptions to become formal.

2.3.1 The Collection of Empirical Data

“How was it in those years?
She straightened her back, and said as if to herself, 'Every day we ate coarse food and worked hard from early morning. But we managed because we had each other.'
'It can't have been easy,' I sighed”.
("Life in a Small Courtyard," by Wang Anyi, 1988)

The quote illustrates the living standard in Shanghai during the 1950's. With Mao's death in 1976, China broke its fifty years long isolation from the west and began an extensive modernisation process. It seems logic to conduct the collection of data in a developing market since Levitt argues for the enforcement of modern products in countries in transition from being considered developing to developed countries. However, Beijing is not the ideal market for such a study since all major corporations have been established here for over twenty years and modernity has already become a natural condition which makes it hard to identify customer divergence from the values promoted by Ikea. Perhaps, other elements have been absorbed and ceased to exist. However, even if the respondents all lead modern lives today, they grew up during the harsh conditions of the Cultural Revolution which strongly rejected the values of modernity. Moreover, the lives of their parents, the generation born in the politically turbulent era of the 1930's, were fundamentally different. Since the beginning of 1980's, the living standard for people in the larger cities has gotten increasingly better. It may have affected the customers' perceptions in the way that modernity is positively viewed. We will return to this discussion in the analysis. The Ikea customers we talked to is perhaps best described as cosmopolitan elite who can afford to travel abroad and buy foreign products which are still expensive in Beijing being a fairly young consumer society. Consequently, our findings have to be considered against the paradox of China being labelled as a developing country and Beijing as a rapidly growing modern city.

The major limitation of this study is the small number of respondents and the small number of interior observations. The respondents were also quite similar to each other. They all lived in the better areas of Beijing and lead similar, cosmopolitan oriented lives as well as being updated and fashionable. These people may be equivalent to opinion leaders in Beijing and will probably stop coming to Ikea when its charm of novelty wears off. Considering that only one of the respondents had children it is possible to already conclude that interviewees' perceptions of family life differ considerably from that of the modern nuclear family, promoted in, for example, the Hoover commercial. It would thus have been desirable to have more diversity of lifestyles among the respondents. Re-conducting the data collection, all of the respondents would not have been asked at Ikea. In order to get a wider scope of respondents it would have been worthwhile to source additional respondents in other places.

The ideal would have been to be able to study the cause and effect relationship between consumer behaviour and corporate promotional activity. However, this would have had required isolating the specific variables of interest, which is not possible. The respondents were Ikea customers which mean that they had somehow been influenced by Ikea. However, the information flow is huge and it seems impossible to decide how and which customer perception or behaviour that have been directly influenced by Ikea. Hence, the customer's perceptions are an outcome of many different influential factors and not only affected by Ikea. Nevertheless, in this thesis, Ikea will be regarded as the sole agent of modernity promoted by global corporations, though in reality Ikea is only one among many.

2.4 The Case Study

2.4.1 Definition

According to Yin, a case study is:

“... an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and in which multiple sources of evidence is used”. (Yin 1986, p. 19)

There are no specific guidelines for the collection of data for the case study. All kinds of data can be used. In the analysis all data is reviewed together (ibid., p. 78). Are the findings of present case study applicable to similar cases? Yin says that since qualitative case studies rely on analytical and not statistical generalisations, its sets of results can only be generalised to theoretical propositions not to universes or populations. It should thus be seen as an illustration of a problem in a specific case. Scientific facts are seldom based on only one case study but several that point towards the same phenomenon (ibid., p. 21).

2.4.2 Practical Procedure

The case study deals with customers' perceptions of modern, low priced, world-standard, and dependable products as promoted by the global corporation Ikea. Our ambition is to gain a deeper understanding of the global corporation's role as an agent of homogenisation of taste.

As aforementioned, Ikea is viewed as a representative for the global corporation in Levitt's article. There are several similarities. Ikea claims to be in the business of selling cultural products in the name of modernity, low price, world-standard and dependability and spends considerable resources on promotion.

We will examine the promotional activities of Ikea through an analysis of how the customer appears, according to Ikea. To who is their promotion intended? The analysis of the customer according to Ikea is, to a large extent, based on a close reading of promotional activities as well as on passive observations of the Ikea stores in Malmö and Beijing and interviews with Ikea managers. In order to get beneath the surface of Ikea, and gain a better understanding of the meanings of the promotional activities, the intertextual, political and cultural conditions that may have affected the content, will be taken into consideration.

Customers' perceptions of modern, low priced, world-standard, and dependable products are examined through an inquiry of their relation to products from Ikea in combination with other interior decoration in the household. Following Russel Belk (1988), meanings of possessions can be regarded as indications of how a person values relations to, for example, family, nature, tradition or status. Special attention will be devoted to the functions and purposes of the interior products in the household. This is done by an examination of the positioning and combination of products as well as direct statements about Ikea and interior products. Through such inquiry it should also be possible to gain an understanding of customers' perceptions of themselves. If meaning is defined as a subjective perception the self is central to the understanding of how Levitt's product attributes are perceived.

Interpreting the case study we initially set up broad parallel categories involving similarities and differences between Ikea and the customers in terms of modernity, low price, world standard and dependability. Later, major differences and similarities were singled out and analysed one by one.

2.5 Empirical Data

Three kinds of empirical data were used in the case study: interviews, observations and documents. By documents we mean the various components of Ikea's promotional activities such as product tags, Ikea catalogue, Ikea homepage (where summaries of Ikea's TV programme on Beijing TV can also be found), brochures, folders, catalogues flyers, informational material (see reference list for more detailed information). In addition, observations of the Ikea store were conducted, especially examining customer radio, restaurant, furniture display and showrooms. In the analysis of the customers' perceptions interviews and observations were used which will be presented in more detail below.

2.5.1 Qualitative Interviews

Respondents

Unstructured interviews were conducted with seven Ikea customers in Beijing. The interviews were conducted in the homes rather than at the Ikea store, since we were interested in how Ikea's products were incorporated into the interior decoration, i.e. consumed at home. Throughout the thesis, they will be referred to as we have thought of them during the analysis rather than by some fictitious formal names.

The respondents were approached randomly outside the cashiers at Ikea Beijing. Those who agreed were all open in character and lived in new large apartments with modern facilities and had an above the average income. Therefore, they may not be representative of the average Ikea customer. This may affect the findings in the way that our respondents may be less concerned with what is appropriate interior decoration having already achieved a certain status. The fact that many people did not agree to be interviewed indicates that the people who did accept regarded their homes to be something above the ordinary.

Group interviews

The interviews were conducted in Mandarin to encourage the respondents to express themselves freely, without feeling limited by language. This corresponds to Merton's description of the procedure of the qualitative interview. Merton writes that it is important to let the "interviewee, not the interviewer, initiate and develop the components of his response". (Merton 1990, p. 99) An outline of three themes was set up for the interviews. These included relations to family, home, and Ikea. The interviews were recorded and, after returning home, translated. This constitutes a limitation as well as an advantage. As non-native speakers, we are limited in expressions and in catching the nuances of the Chinese language.

The respondents wanted another person present during the interview, such as a sister, spouse, friend or parents. Although these persons were not focus of attention and did not speak much, we still consider the interviews as being group interviews since there were at least four persons (including us) present each session. The other persons present affected what was being said either directly or indirectly through body language or laughter.

The disadvantage with group interviews is that the presence of the other persons might prevent the respondents to talk about certain topics or feel that s/he has to demonstrate a certain social status (Merton 1990, p. 149). For example, when talking to the Internetman his male friend was constantly making faces and laughing, especially when the Internetman told about his pink walls.

On the other hand, the respondents can remind each other of things, as in the case of the Couple who triggered each other in a positive way.

Likewise, it is possible that the interviewee will say things s/he thinks the interviewer wants to hear or think will impress him or her (Merton 1990, p. 26). Therefore the respondent's description of reality is more a representation of reality in relation to the interview situation than a depiction of how reality is or how the respondent is experiencing reality (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 1994, p. 271). The respondents saw us as representatives for Ikea. The Singer even apologised for criticising Ikea, while the Couple and the Dandy took a more critical stand towards the company. This might also have effected how they presented themselves in general. For example, the Singer served Singoalla cookies from Ikea. Perhaps, they were her favourite cookies; perhaps she thought they were ours. Moreover, there are different motives behind people's ways of presenting themselves (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 1994, p. 185). This was evident in the Couple's concern of giving us what they felt was a correct image of China. Among others, they directed critic against director Zhang Yimos for portraying China in distorted ways to appeal to western public.

Interviews were also conducted with Ikea managers who pretty much told us the same things. The impression created was that there is a strict set of promotional information portrayed to researchers. Occasionally, information folders contained the exact same sentences. When interviewing the Ikea representatives, one of us held the interview while the other two wrote down what was being said. These interviews where not recorded since no managers would agree to that.

2.5.2 Observations

The purpose of the observations was to examine how Ikea's products were integrated in the home. Thus when conducting the observations, focus lay on where the Ikea products were placed in the home and how they were combined with other furnishings. The observations where open in the sense that the respondents knew that their home was being observed and passive since little interaction took place between the observer and the furniture.

While one of us spoke to the respondents another observer, Henrik, took field notes of the interior decoration. The Ikea products observed where marked in the Ikea catalogue and the observer drew a sketch of each of the households (see Appendix I). This made it easier for the other group members to picture the homes upon analysing the data.

The observations carried out at the Ikea store in Beijing and Malmö, were hidden and passive i.e. we went there as customers. In conducting the observations focus lay on what was excluded from the showroom context. If the table was set for six, we asked why it was not set for two. The showrooms at the Ikea store in Malmö were different from Beijing because more focus lay on home offices.

2.5.3 Reflections

The respondent's homes would probably have looked different if we had showed up spontaneously. It is possible that everything had been carefully put in order before our arrival. This is supported by the observations conducted at the Friend to whom we arrived unannounced. The Friend's home is the only home in our study that had a distinct smell other than perfume. We also felt that belongings not obviously displaying affluence had been hidden. Confirming this is Avon lady's room where a lot of odd things had been put, ranging from make-

up to large photos of her boyfriend to books. Even though the Singer played rap music during the whole interview we did not see a single CD. Furthermore, we realise that it is possible that products from Ikea may, in particular, have been put in strategic places to give a good impression. It is possible that some of the respondent's may have put things in an order so as to respond to the Ikea way. However, we do not consider this a major issue. In either case, it is their perception of what the household should look like.

Understanding another person requires sympathy, empathy, and trust. To move beyond the politeness of the interview situation as well as the order of the home, we would have had to meet with the respondents several times. The ideal would have involved spontaneous visits during a month. Not only would this have offered a more natural picture of the homes but also given us the chance to get to know the respondents better. Moreover, it would have enabled us to appreciate the position from which the respondents spoke including the social and cultural context s/he was in. As it is now, this is something we have only come to understand implicitly. Surely, gaining deeper understanding for another person in 1-2 hours is an impossible task.

When conducting the interviews the aim was to find out how the respondents felt before the interior decoration. To the largest possible extent laddering was used, the technique of referring back to what the respondents just have said, using questions, in order to gain further understanding. The interview with the Friend illustrates how this was conducted:

“All people like good products.
What are good products?
General acknowledged products that people of all nationalities can appreciate.
Such as...
Coca-Cola (Laughter)”. (The Friend)

Laddering was a peaceful procedure compared to our ice-breaking questions. Sometimes they created confusion and suspicion, as in the case of the Dandy:

“*What is most important in your home?*
What do you mean?
Which room is most important?
What kind of question is that? All rooms are equally important”. (The Dandy)

This might give an indication of the difficulties we sometimes had asking things that did not immediately relate to Ikea. These difficulties were mainly due to cultural differences, the language barrier and the fact that we are not experienced interviewers.

3 Theoretical base

Levitt's notion of homogenisation of taste involves an assumption about a corporate defined formula of the meanings of modern, low priced, world-standard, and dependable product. The way meanings are created in social interaction in individual specific contexts contradicts the existence of such a formula.

In this chapter our reasoning behind the analysis of customers' perceptions of standardised products, as communicated in the promotional activities of Ikea, is presented. First, a definition of meaning will be given after which we will discuss meaning creation in relation to taste and promotion.

3.1 Meaning

3.1.1 A Definition of Meaning

Subjective perceptions entail assigning the surrounding world meanings. Language can be interpreted as a place where the world is assigned meanings. Language consists of a chain of signs that are used to communicate meanings (Bignell 1997, p. 5). A sign consist of a signifier which is a representation of meaning (sounds and written words), and a signified (meaning). Signs gain their meanings by virtue of its equivalence to or difference from other signs in the chain. For example, a product is assigned the meaning of modern because it is popular and hence not out of date or a person is labelled woman because the person has breasts and hence is not a man. Language gains its meaning within social interactions (Holton 2000). The meanings assigned to modern and woman in interpretations, depend on specific cultural and individual circumstances. For some, modern may mean popular while others think of science fiction or crusaders. For some, woman may mean a pair of breasts while others think of a person or grace. By interpreting a sign in thought, as well as in interaction with others, through speech or body language, the sign is assigned meaning and becomes a symbol that can be communicated between people.

Accordingly, the school of symbolic interactionism proposes that meaning is not something that is given to and accepted by a person. Nor does it stem from a solitary mental process but is assigned in interaction between people. According to the forefather of symbolic interactionism, Herbert Mead, gestures (such as speech or body language) become symbols when they bring forward the same kind of response in the person who makes the gesture as in the person to whom it is addressed. They become symbols when they answer to a meaning in the experience of a first individual and call out the meaning in a second individual. When the gesture reaches that situation it has become what we call 'language'. The gesture is now a symbol that represents a certain meaning (Mead 1934/1962 in Ritzer 1996, p. 46).

Symbolic interactionists, even though focusing on the individual, do not deny that culture and society act as a framework for negotiation of meaning. The meaning that a product takes on depends on both the individual consumer and the consumption context in which s/he acts. Consequently, Levitt's conceptions of modernity, low price, world standard and dependability do not have a meaning until someone has interpreted them.

When Ikea opened in Beijing five years ago they had difficulty understanding why their children's stool MAMMUTH sold more in Beijing than in all other locations compounded. Co-worker B says:

“The reason for MAMMUTH's popularity in Beijing is that many people here like to sit on low stools when socialising on the streets”. (Co-worker B)

In an urban outdoor context the meaning of MAMMUTH changed from being a children's stool to grown-up street furniture. As such, meanings of products are shaped by and reflect the values of the cultural context the individual is in (Watson et al. 2002).

It can be argued that our identities are constructed by possessions and that a person's most important possessions reflect personal values and inner self (Belk 1988; Watson et al. 2002). For example, people who value 'modernity' might appreciate symbols of modernity such as digital watches, while a more traditional person may treasure handicrafts. Like signs, when a product is communicated between people it derives meaning and becomes a symbol (Ritzer 1998, p. 127).

Like the meaning of signs in the language chain, meanings of signs of products are also dependent on their relationship to other signs of products. In this sense products attain their meaning in terms of what they do not mean or what they equal (Poster 1990, p. 58). We know the meaning of Ikea because its difference from 'Europamöbler' but equivalence to 'Lagerhaus'. Thus, the very purpose of fashion and lifestyle becomes to exclude or unite (Featherstone 1991, p. 99). In choosing one brand over the other or eating at certain types of restaurants, we are, expressing our tastes, saying that we are like some people and different from others (Bourdieu 1984 in Ritzer 1998, p. 129).

3.1.2 Taste and Meaning

“Taste is an acquired disposition to differentiate and appreciate ... to establish and mark differences by a process of distinction ... (ensuring) recognition (in the ordinary sense)”. (Bourdieu 1984:466 in Harker et al. 1990, p. 19)

The notion of taste as a means to affiliate or distinguish oneself from others seems to render homogenisation of taste impossible. Pierre Bourdieu is one of the most prominent thinkers in the science of taste (Harker et al. 1990, p. 142). In the following, we will present the basics of his theory of taste as means of distinction. Based on several studies of the French intellectual elite, Bourdieu has showed that taste is a practice working as a system of classification through social distinction. Judgements of taste are based upon differences in social practice of various groups and classes in society (ibid.). When people classify cultural objects they also classify themselves (Johansson and Miegel 1996, p. 206).

Taste is bounded and determined by, what Bourdieu calls, habitus and refers to a set of basic objective dispositions which govern the individual's judgement of cultural objects (ibid.). Habitus works unconsciously and cannot be controlled by the will. The dispositions are dependent on background and upbringing and related to society's class structures. People of the same class tend to have the same habitus (ibid., p. 205). Thus, an individual is disposed to make judgements of taste in a certain way, though only to a certain extent (Harker et al. 1990, p. 11). Since habitus includes older generations' knowledge and understandings of the world as well as one's own, habitus is not a fixed concept. Even if the child is disposed to see the world as older generations, ultimately it is s/he that has to make the world conform to the myth (ibid., p. 12). In this sense habitus is both structured by societal structure and structuring societal structure. Thereby, Bourdieu recognises both the existence of objective structures in society as well as the participation of people in constructing the social reality.

Bourdieu sees the world as consisting of different fields on which each one of us has a position. Individuals have different positions on different fields. The position is determined by the amount of capital one has acquired on the field. Capital refers “all the goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation”. (Bourdieu 1977:178 in Harker et al. 1990, p. 13). Hence, capital includes material objects, as well as symbolic capital, which refers to prestige, status, authority etc. Habitus is closely linked to capital in that it may serve as multiplier of various kinds of capital and constitute a symbolic capital in and of itself (ibid., p. 12).

On the academic field cultural capital, such as knowledge, is important, while cultural capital concerning sport is necessary for a central position on the sport field (Johansson and Miegel 1996, p. 206). Bourdieu argues that intellectuals, especially university teachers, compensate their lack of economic capital with cultural capital. The aesthetic taste of individuals with high cultural capital is used to secure status through distinction. He argues that since teachers do not have the means to obtain objects which reflect their cultural taste, they develop a kind of “aesthetic asceticism” where ethical choices reflect their aesthetic choices (Bourdieu 1984:289 in Harker et al. 1990, p. 35). This forms a protest against the social order that restricts the teacher's entry into the bourgeoisie and the world of luxury art (ibid., p. 11).

In this way the field is a site of everlasting struggles for power why the positions of the field are constantly changing. The individual's habitus changes as the positions on the field change. The struggles are about recognition, legitimisation, capital and access to capital both symbolic and material (ibid., p. 11). To be perceived as a person with class and prestige is to be legitimate on the field. This also means the right to define good taste and the meaning of things on the field

(ibid., p. 13). Every work of art is a cultural object within a field which limits the range of its possible meanings and the possible positions that can be taken in relations to it. People with a high amount of symbolic and material capital on the field, such as for example critics and opinion leaders, not only determines the meaning of objects but also its value (Bourdieu 1983:318-19 in ibid., p. 156). Bourdieu writes:

“Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed”. (Bourdieu 1984:6 in Harker et al. 1990, p. 133)

Thus, according to Bourdieu, the meaning of an artwork is socially constructed and exists only for those that have the means to decipher and understand it. While intellectuals expect art to challenge social reality, the bourgeoisie expect it to deny it. Art is never appreciated for what it means in itself but for what it represents in the cultural system. A cultural object is never an expression of subjective meaning but an artefact “which may disclose significations at different levels according to the deciphering stencil applied to it”. (Bourdieu 1968:590 in ibid., p. 135). In this way perceptions of cultural objects lie in the eye of the beholder and cannot be predefined by for example the artist. Appreciating things is about making distinctions and telling others of who we are.

Following Bourdieu, perceptions of Ikea's products as modern, low priced, world-standard and dependable can be seen as determined by the consumer's habitus which is determined by both societal and objective structures.

3.1.3 Promotion and Meaning

If the artist cannot define the meaning of her or his artwork, can the corporation define the meanings of their products through promotional activity? This is a debatable question. From the perspective of thinkers like Baudrillard and Poster assigning the world meaning take a different shape.

They argue that the information intensity of late modern society has lead to an overload of signifiers, i.e. representations of meanings, in the media, resulting in the sign no longer being a unit (Poster 1990 p. 46). Under these circumstances, signifiers and signified cease to have a logic connection, leading to distorted meaning creations, e.g. AJAX floor wax=perfect housewife. Since the surroundings and relations showed in advertisements cannot be found anywhere in everyday life, the receivers have no defined reality against which they can evaluate the content of promotion (ibid., p 58). In addition, meanings of products are created in loneliness, in front of the TV or reading magazines, to a larger extent than before (ibid., p. 63). This makes it possible for the individual to continuously remake the self through the combination of different signifiers in eclectic mixing of codes from different lifestyles and make paradoxical juxtapositions of products (ibid., p. 46). It also leads to distorted perceptions of what is real and not. Baudrillard even argues that we live in a hyperreality, created by the media, which is very different from what the world actually look like.

Accordingly, the media is ascribed a greater role in defining meanings in society than asserted by Bourdieu, something that corresponds to Levitt's belief in the corporation as having the capacity to turn consumers into passive recipients of meanings in commercial messages.

4 This is Ikea

As one of the world's largest home furnishing retailer, with a standardised strategy across the world, heavily promoting and selling modern, low priced, world-standard and dependable products, Ikea is representative for the ideology of modern life central in Levitt's thinking as well as in marketing literature. Below, the promotional activities of Ikea are introduced, as reconstructed by us through a close reading of various promotional activities. Special attention is devoted to whom Ikea wish to communicate their promotion and what this imagined recipient look like according to Ikea.

4.1 For Anyone and No one

“Most of the time, beautifully designed home furnishings are created for a small part of the population — the few who can afford them. From the beginning, Ikea has taken a different path. We have decided to side with the many. That means responding to the home furnishing needs of people throughout the world. People with many different needs, tastes, dreams, aspirations and wallets. People who want to improve their homes and create better everyday lives”. (www.ikea.com/cn 2002)

“The Ikea product range? modern but unpretentious, functional yet attractive, human-centred and child-friendly carries on these various Swedish home furnishing traditions”. (Ikea homepage 2002)

“Ikea’s ambition is to offer a wide range of well-designed, functional home furnishing products at prices so low that as many people as possible will be able to afford them”. (Ikea co-worker B)

Ingvar Kamprad has articulated that the corporate goal is to help customers in their quest for democracy and a healthy and rewarding lifestyle (Pitt, 1996). Ikea’s loosely defined notion of contributing to democratisation processes entails the company’s capacity of providing “the many people” with products previously restricted to the elite and thus facilitating the redistribution of resources in favour of the less well-off. The viewing of the “the majority of people” as having a democratic outlook is a reflection of Ikea’s “democratic social roots” where “people who are not all that well off should still be given the same opportunities as people who are” – a concept described as “Swedish values” (Democratic Design, 1995). This implies that Ikea’s global customer is defined as either being democratic in orientation or aspiring to become “democratic”.

Democracy is founded on the slogan from the French revolution; freedom, equality and brotherhood. It can be discussed who democracy includes. Stefan Jonsson writes, in a review of a new book by Jaques Derrida, that democracy has always excluded groups in society, be it slaves, women, foreigners, animals, plants, unborn or born children. Therefore, democracy is arbitrary and has so far only worked in the brotherhood: equals of the same sex or of the same culture; a limitation which would make it hard for a global democracy to be possible, for what system can include and speak for everyone? (Jonsson 2003)

The customer being democratic in nature does not mean that s/he is politically active. Ikea regards its customers as composed of people who are young, highly educated, and liberal in their cultural values and white-collar workers (Mårtensson 1987). The Ikea vision of the democratic customer more accurately means that the customer is liberal, humanist, tolerant, modern, environmentally aware, cosmopolitan and free to express him- or herself (Democratic Design 1995). These are all celebrated words in our society, but what do they actually mean? Towards

what kinds of behaviour or opinions should the democratic customer be tolerant? Does liberal include supporting the discontinuation of public service? Is it enough to buy ecological milk to be considered environmentally aware? Unless further specified, these words can almost mean anything...or nothing. Co-worker A explains the Ikea spirit like this:

“Quality in life is most important at Ikea. Everyone is the same. It does not matter whether you are a manager or floor staff, we all eat together. In Beijing, the local staffs were surprised by this “. (Ikea co-worker A)

In siding with the many, responding to the home furnishing needs of people, which entails a constant creation of new products to satisfy customers, Ikea also sides with mass consumption. The many are hereby restricted to customers part of the consumption society; a society characterised as having global and universal norms in terms of tastes and preferences, at least if one is to believe Ikea’s standardised strategy. However, for Ikea, the materialist and consumerist outlook does not imply ‘irresponsible shopping’ – rather purchase decisions should be based on long-term considerations as a response to the customer’s and the environment’s limited resources. Ikea emphasises that its products are not “buy-use-throw away” (Democratic Design 1995).

Ikea’s furniture may not be of poor quality; e.g., our parents have had Ikea’s bookshelf Billy for over twenty years, but many of Ikea’s products are fashion products that customers will want to replace as trends change. It’s unlikely that Ikea would be able to maintain its size if it wasn’t for the “buy-use-throw away” mentality of consumer society that Ikea reproduces every day through constant mass production.

We believe that Ikea’s vision statement rings true for all global corporations benefiting from economies of scale. They all want to side with the many since mass production is dependent on mass consumption. Therefore, to side with the many is to side with anyone in consumer society. This can also be interpreted as siding with no one, since siding with anyone contradicts siding with someone in particular.

4.1.1 There is no Sign of (a) Life

In the bookshelves in the showrooms are Swedish book-titles such as “Mina 28 yrken”, “Kamp för demokrati”, “Dagsmeja”. In the CD-rack there are titles such as Louis Armstrong and Earth Wind and Fire. Two black and white photos of flowers hang on one of the white walls in a bedroom; on the opposite wall is another large black and white photo of Central Park. A couple of brand new magazines are nonchalantly placed on a shelf. There are no signs of activity. (Observation, Ikea Malmö and Beijing 2002)

Ikea’s showrooms are well composed and give the impression that all that should be there is present. The showrooms can be seen as discourses fixated by a set of furniture, designed by someone who did not intend to live here, to attract the perceived customers. The lack of activity in combination with a sterile perfection reminds of a hotel-chain room; nothing sticks out and nothing displeases. It is like a person with too much perfume on; the real smell of the person is hidden under an artificial surface. The showrooms are nice and correct and we do not dare to sit on the white sofa. It is a little bit tempting to spill something on the sofa or leave a personal mark in the showroom.

Personal belongings are arranged and matched in such neat rows, staples, frames and drawers that their character is lost and become impersonal. In line with Ikea’s minimalist spirit, “less is more”, most of them are also hidden.

“Where are all the knick-knacks? In a box stored away in the attic. Where are the records from the 1980’s hiding? Behind the doors of BONDE wardrobe”. (Ikea catalogue 2002)

The belongings are carefully selected to avoid offending anyone. The magazines are about fishing and furnishing; the music is mostly jazz, the books are about democracy and the photos picture smiling people on holiday. An imagined person living in one of the showrooms might be described as a ‘secularised’ cosmopolitan. This modern-liberal outlook of the customer leaves little room for any kind of religious, spiritual or political contemplation. Ikea’s marketing mix is drastically mainstream in character resulting in an overall absence of religious or political connotations other than democracy.

The absence of such connotations is well illustrated by the mainstream art posters that Ikea sells. It is the same kind of generally recognized works by i.e. Monet, Rodin, and Picasso, that can be found in hotel rooms. Works once considered avant-garde are popularised for the many; still beautiful but no longer magic. The meanings that once made people angry, happy or sad are lost and their function is reduced to something-to-hang-on-the-wall. Even pop art such as Andy Warhol’s Campbell soup can be found at Ikea; in the past considered controversial, a symbol of bad taste; now sold just because it no longer carries meaning in itself.

4.2 Welcome to Happiness

“A low price is linked to the happiness of finding just what you need for your home and the joy of being able to own it without having to forsake everything else”. (www.ikea.com 2002)

The tables were set for up to 10 people and the at least four people. (Observation Ikea store Beijing)

“Sometimes you are 14 noisy people for breakfast.... And almost always the kitchen is the middle of the universe”. (Ikea catalogue 2002)

In the showroom halls are blackboards on which reminders are written such as ‘do not forget to pick up Kalle from football practice 7 pm’ or ‘8:30 pm French class’.
(Observation Ikea Malmö, 2002)

The household should be organised in a way that facilitates an active and social lifestyle as well as a modern life characterised by limited resources in terms of time, space and money. The Ikea customer is contemporary in the sense that s/he is a hard working white-collar worker and at the same time seeking self-actualisation through social interaction and activity. Thus the ultimate way of living one’s life according to the Ikea customer is to balance work and career, with family, social activities and playfulness.

Consequently, the customer regards the household as the primary venue for activity and play and at the same time places family and social activity in the centre of daily life. It is thus possible to interpret what the Ikea customer is not, namely lazy, idle or anti-social. Neither can the typical Ikea customer be interpreted as being unemployed, on sick leave or lonely. S/he can usually be inserted into a specific phase in life, which means that if the customer happens to be living alone it is because s/he is a student or a young professional. We have not managed to find any references to older people in the Ikea message; all models seem to be around thirty and the oldest children look like young teenagers. Ikea’s stages of life seem to be child, teenager, move away from home, start to work, get married, have kids. After that, nothing happens.

Several persons (a family) are sitting around a table in a kitchen. They are all engaged in various activities: a woman is sowing, a child is laying on the table drawing, a young man

types at a laptop, another child lies on the floor reading children's books and finally a smiling child and a man is playing on the far side of the table. Above the picture the caption says: "Choose family first. Choose a table that can endure jokes, discussions, homework, arguments, baking and play. Choose a table that can grow if you are going to expand your family or social circle". (Observation Ikea catalogue 2002).

The above quote, exhorting us to choose our partner and future children, indicate that we choose our life; we are in control of our life. Are we? We are uncertain of whether Ikea's advertisements simply are representations of our own lives or if we are replicas of the ad. Daniel Boorstin writes that

"At home we begin to try to live according to the script of TV programmes of happy families, which are themselves nothing but amusing quintessences of us ...a celebrity is nothing more than a more publicized version of us. In imitating him, in trying to dress like him, talk like him, look like him, think like him, we are simply imitating ourselves...By imitating ourselves, we become a tautology standing for what we stand for...we look for models and we see our own image". (Boorstin in Baudrillard 1998, p. 195).

We, the authors, fear not becoming like the Ikea customer. What if we make the wrong choices and our lives turn out miserably? What if we are forgotten about; reduced to anyone and no one? If we do not conform to the smiling Ikea image then who can we be? People with no family and no smiles; lonely people. Therefore, it feels safe to rely on the Ikea way as a guarantee of a happy life. In this sense, what Ikea really promotes is hope about the good life.

According to Baudrillard the notion of needs is falsely based on the belief that we have natural abilities to be happy. Happiness has come to equal comfort, manifested in modern goods like TV sets or cars. Since this is accessible to the majority of the population in western society happiness has become a human right. In this way the inner enjoyment of happiness that others cannot measure or see is overlooked (Baudrillard 1998 p 50). In the intensified importance of being happy, sadness is forgotten. If we never feel sad, how can we feel happy?

4.2.1 Fear Control

The Ikea customers are characterised by having a desire and an ability to control themselves and their surroundings. The desire to control is directed towards society, nature and ultimately the self given that controlling the environment is only possible through the control of one's own lifestyle and consumer choices. Consequently, there is an optimism incorporated into the customers' mind holding that mankind can dominate society and nature through intervention and the exercise of control. Such behaviour seems to contradict the upbringing of the wild Ikea child that painted and climbed on the walls.

As Peter Englund (1993) points out, the conception of nature has until recently been based on the peasant perspective and his/her dependency on the earth and its cycles. Mankind constituted fearful servants subject to an impulsive and tyrannous nature. When the flowerpot and the modern garden made its debut it demonstrated that this ancient conception started to disappear. Mankind separated itself from nature and started to idolise it, organise it, objectify it and "manage" it. Thus Englund sees the flowerpot essentially as a display of power, symbolising the European finally coming out as the champion in the long struggle against nature. Simultaneously nature became conceived as having moral capital - the flower should be grown for its sign value and not for its use value. Deforestation, pollution and cruelty against animals became ugly and sympathy and compassion for nature ensued. As a result, the consumer mustered enough confidence to literally move nature into the living room and transform it into home furnishing.

Ironically, in the same instance that people achieved the long aspired goal of supremacy over nature, this supremacy is being increasingly questioned in the name of environmentalism.

Englund's notion of mankind's universal desire for control over nature is concurrent with the Ikea concept. When browsing through the Ikea catalogue, it is noticeable how nature has been disciplined and "put on display". Most of the furniture, and especially the core range, is made out of light wood symbolising Scandinavian forests – thus nature is serving mankind and mankind, being separated from nature, delicately patronises its subject through policies of "sustainable development" and "resource efficiency (www.ikea.com 2002). Furthermore, various 'trophies' can be observed. The practice of keeping a cat can be viewed as domination, the cat itself (as opposed to the loyal dog) possibly symbolising independence and control (Ikea catalogue 2002). Other expressions of the patron-client style relationship between man and nature are the numerous plants and flowerpots incorporated in the Ikea living environment combined with (most likely fake) furs lying on the floor or on chairs (Ikea catalogue 2002).

Rationality is another expression of the control orientation that Ikea projects on its customers. The constructed Ikea customer is rational and questions the desirability of beauty if it is not combined with quality, functionality and, in particular, low price. The customer is viewed rational. This rationality is reflected in the cost-benefit analysis the customer has gone through before assembling the furniture himself/herself. The customer is logical to the extent that s/he appreciates that home assembly is a precondition for the low price. Consequently there is an unspoken customer desire for financial and practical control according to Ikea (read: low price, function and quality) as well as a social control (or social affiliation) such as design.

Rationality can be translated into risk averse. The Ikea customer perceives risks (e.g. physical, social and economic risks) that s/he has a desire to eliminate through consumption of appropriate products. Thus, according to Ikea, the customer sees the Ikea product as having a primarily instrumental purpose. According to Mårtensson (1987), the Ikea customer is not concerned with status symbols. The household is portrayed as a place for people and for human interaction, as opposed to a place having strictly symbolic value (e.g. a place for displaying status symbols). Possibly, customers can be considered risk averse in their association with all product categories. It is conceivable though, that Ikea has a more risk-oriented approach when interpreting customer wants (defined as function, low price, quality, and design) as opposed to e.g. a vintage car dealer or a wine distributor who might define its clientele as less risk averse and more self-indulgent.

Another aspect of control is the pivotal role of restraint:

"They, [the customer] just like anyone else, want ... *sensible* furniture". (italic added, Democratic Design, 1995).

The idea of defining the Ikea customer as restrained conceivably goes back to Ikea's 'Smäländska' heritage where self-control, cost-consciousness and simplicity are key notions (En Möbelhandlares Testamente 1996). At the same time Ikea puts forward that "the Ikea values seem to work well globally [and] you can find similar values in most cultures of the world" (The Ikea Symbols 2001). Ikea more or less suggests that there is a segment of 'Smälänningar' in all markets of the world desiring high quality at low price and being less concerned with status symbols. This is further emphasised by co-worker B:

"Does Ikea have insight in whether the products will be used differently on the Japanese market? We do not believe they will be used any differently. The Japanese will adopt the Swedish lifestyle". (Ikea co-worker B)

The rational backbone of the Ikea customer is mirrored in the way Ikea labels its products. Product names such as FAKTUM, OBSERVATÖR, KURS, FORMULA, GRUNDTAL, PRONOMEN, ORIGINAL, EFFEKTIV, NUMERÄR, DUKTIG, FRAMÅT, all convey an air of rationalism, predictability and the products' potential in terms of satisfying the customer's desire to maintain order and discipline in life.

4.3 Make Believe

4.3.1 "The Most Important People in the World"

"Paint one wall in the living space with blackboard paint so the kids can express themselves in the chalk". (www.ikea.com/cn 2002)

"...put your thoughts into your kid's fun and games and watch them grow before your eyes. Develop motor skills by encouraging rocking, swinging and spinning activities that challenge your child's sense of balance...Turn a corner of the playroom into an artist's studio so your children can paint pictures, shape clay and develop a sense of creativity". (www.ikea.com/cn 2002)

"We [Ikea] know that to a child a simple table can be a playhouse, a car, or even a whole kingdom". (www.ikea.com/cn 2002)

When arriving at any Ikea store the first thing one is likely to meet is the children's ballroom. The ballroom, which we never dared to set foot in as children, since it was always full of raving kids, running around, and climbing on the walls to throw themselves in the colourful ball ocean.

The wild Ikea children remind us of children with concentration problems, too impatient to sit still, always in motion. We get the impression that these children, with their sticky fingers and muddy shoes, are problems that are solved with fixated shelves and washable sofa covers.

When children are concerned, creativity is a key word at Ikea. Creativity gives positive connotations of inventiveness and imagination. Children's Ikea is solely focused on developing children's inner qualities turning them into frank and independent individuals.

Children are encouraged and enabled by Ikea to play imaginative role games with the help of princess-kits including a golden crown and pink laced dress and knight-kits including a sword and a coat of mail. In the catalogue girls play princess and boys play knight. The princess-kit makes it harder to rave around, forcing the princess to behave carefully out of worries of making the pretty dress dirty.

4.3.2 "Smart Solutions for Everyday Life"

"... After that continue by getting a new bedspread, put up a new lamp and put an intellectual book on the bedside table. Ready!" (Ikea catalogue 2002)

"Here the bed is disguised into an armchair, which can be folded out into a bed. Is it not perhaps a fact that when someone says that they're going to work they in fact take a little nap?" (www.ikea.com/china 2002)

"...use the boxes in home furnishing (sounds better than saying that you're too lazy to unpack!)". (www.ikea.com/china 2002)

When the Ikea children grow up do they stop playing imaginative games? The above quote suggests that they continue. Instead of admitting to be lazy and tired, they play 'furnishing with

furniture boxes' or 'going to work'. When their friends are coming over they play 'intellectual' by putting an intellectual book on the bedside table. This also suggests that it is good to be intellectual and bad to be lazy or tired. This is confirmed by the following:

“Don't forget that time is your most important resource. You can do a lot in ten minutes. Lost ten minutes are gone forever. You never get them back. Ten minutes is not only the hourly wage divided by six; ten minutes is a part of your self. Divide your life into ten-minute units and sacrifice as few as possible to meaninglessness”. (Möjligheternas tid är inte förbi, 1984)

The Ikea customer thus seem self-conscious, worried about what other people might think. S/he also needs help with solving problems in her/his home. This seems to stand in sharp contrast to the frankness of the Ikea children. The princess is now portrayed as a woman in cotton trousers, seldom wearing makeup, mostly socialising with children and husband. She is handy and knows how to sew and cook. The knight has turned into a man in blue shirt in front of a laptop or playing cards with the kids. They might have been rebel teenagers who listened to Pearl Jam but now they are family members.

“Use the same floor material in the whole apartment. Everything to make the surface conceived as bigger”. (Ikea catalogue 2002)

“Doesn't it look neat and tidy on the surface? But open a drawer or peep into a wardrobe and out comes sweaters and underwear and curlers and dresses. Peaceful forms and mild colours make the home feel like a tranquil oasis”. (Ikea catalogue 2002)

The interview with one of Ikea's co-worker indicates that emphasis on different solutions in the promotional material constitutes a form of adaptation Ikea makes to international markets. Solutions are thus an important part of Ikea's marketing strategy.

“There are more similarities than differences between people across the world. I believe we all have the same basic needs. Beside that Ikea provides different solutions depending on the market. Every interior shall picture the everyday life on the particular market. It is up to the individual to perceive the product in her or his individual way. We only give tips of how the furniture can be used in different ways”. (Ikea co-worker C)

4.4 “The Ikea Way”

“Make your home as unique as the people who live in it”. (Ikea catalogue 2002)

“Our armchairs come in all sizes, shapes and colours. Just like the people who sit in them”. (Ikea catalogue 2002)

Ikea encourages customers to combine products and personalise the home. In the showrooms ideas are born of how to create a distinct home. Self-assembling at home strengthens the customers' feeling of being part of creating something unique. Some might even use Ikea's bathroom products in the kitchen or repaint furniture with a special kind of paint available at Ikea. The customer is encouraged to experiment with the furniture in different ways. This is further emphasized in the Ikea catalogue for 2003, where a chair is turned up-side down and used in a various ways, such as a Lucia head-crown with candles on top of the table's legs or as a fire wood stand with wheels underneath.

“TERTIAL (working lamp)
- fits with MAGNESIT lamp stand
- suitable for low-energy light”. (product tag, Ikea store Malmö 2002).

Here, Ikea explicitly tells the customer which lamp stand suits which lampshade. Ikea thus encourages customers to differentiate themselves and be unique inside the scope of a set of well-defined rules. The customers are free to combine any lampshade and lamp stand as long as s/he matches TERTIAL with MAGNESIT.

Sometimes suggestions are subtler. In the Swedish TV programme “Form”, a freelance designer explains that Ikea had asked her to design a collection of products with a common denominator, so that the customer would recognise her products in the different departments and combining them in the belief that they themselves had come up with the idea. By calculating combination patterns Ikea makes customers feel unique.

4.4.1 The Highway

There are yellow arrows on the floor to guide the way through the store. (Observation Ikea store Beijing 2002)

“Look! (Points at a half unpacked box in the store) We would never have left it like this in Sweden. The Chinese workers make a mess and then they just leave it and begin working with something else. (...) E.g., when customers wants to buy a cup, they won't take a cup from the shelf but start looking for cups in the unpacked boxes, examining and comparing them against each other. They are very careful about quality.

Do they bargain for the price?

Yes, they bargain for at least half of the price, preferably they want the good for free (laughter). Even if there is a price tag on the good they still think that the floor staff can lower the price”. (Ikea co-worker D)

Senior manager A emphasis that Ikea does not accept price bargaining:

“In the beginning we allowed more wear and tear in the Beijing store. Still, the wear of the Ikea store is biggest of all markets where we are active. Also, we hade problems with customers wanted to bargain for the prices. This is something Ikea never will accept”. (Ikea co-worker A)

Going to Ikea there are several rules to attend. We have summarised them like this. No smoking, littering, eating, and drinking in other than marked areas. Please, do not bargain for prices, fall asleep in one of the beds, sit too long in the cafeteria or leave your kids in the ballroom while going to work. Avoid leaving the store after closing time and unpacking the boxes of self-assembly furniture before you have bought them. Upon opening the Beijing store, all of these rules where violated.

Co-worker C told us that several misunderstandings occurred during Ikea's first year in Beijing:

“In an early Ikea campaign for Beijing we wrote as a joke: 'Ikea needs carriers. Come to the Ikea store on Monday and help carry'. When Monday came a lot of people applied for the job as carrier. This made us rethink our advertising strategy. Now we run an educational 30 minutes TV-show similar to “Äntligen Hemma” (on Swedish TV 4), where we remake homes of Beijing citizens. The customers in Beijing were tough in the beginning. Sometimes they even demanded that the staff should be fired. They were not used to our way of doing things and we had to constantly repeat our concept on written signs in the store. We also put a lot of effort in training the local staff”. (Ikea co-worker C)

As illustrated by co-worker C, IKEA put a lot of effort in 'educating' the consumers to behave according to the IKEA way. This indicates how controlled we actually are when entering an IKEA store which defines us as customers. To be able to participate in the defining of what it

means to be a customer, interdeterminacy is Baudrillard's idea of responding to the determinant norms of the corporation (Ritzer 1998, p 171). Behaving interdeterminant is not unlike the behaviour of the IKEA customers in Beijing, above. However, it requires *deliberately* misreading of the IKEA way, and acting in order to disturb the smooth operations of IKEA, to gain control over our identity as customers (ibid.). Baudrillard mentions graffiti artists as the ultimate representatives of the kind of passive resistance interdeterminacy involves. They protest against the anonymity and the undemocratic appearance of the city by turning the public sphere into their own. Graffiti could constitute a form of passive resistance, violating the code of cleanliness of modern corporations by turning their facades into canvas (Ritzer 1998, p. 171).

4.5 Twister

A back-drop in the living room pictures a hectic Hong Kong surrounded by massive Chinese characters. In front of it are a black leather sofa and a glass table on wheels. (Observation Ikea store Malmö 2002)

On display is the country folk style furniture from the Leksvik group in light coloured wood, Dalecarlian horses, books about the art of Zen, bamboo, bast, cane. (Observation Malmö, Beijing 2002)

“GUSTAVA
-Pillow cover with tassels”. (Ikea product tag 2002)

“With FAGERUM pine, you will enjoy modern design that retains traditional charm”. (Ikea catalogue 2002)

There were Italian olive oil, rucicola salad and herbs on the kitchen sink. The table in dark brown wood (connoting teak) was set with beige bast mats, snow-white porcelain with small sake cups. (Observation Ikea store Malmö 2002)

If children's Ikea were the future, then the adult Ikea is now, mixing styles from various countries, keeping up with the latest TV-programmes and mainstream trends. When conducting observations of the showrooms the black leather sofas and the glass tables referred to the TV-show Sopranos.

Ikea can also be seen as a reflection of the political climate across the world. Presently, influences from the fashionable marketplaces of Vietnam and China dominate interior decoration. Influences from areas normally neglected in the global public opinion, such as the African continent and former Soviet Union, are absent. The way an 'Asian lifestyle' is portrayed is very much a reflection of (or the reason to) the stereotype image of Asia, as relaxed, peace loving, collective and harmonious.

Compared to the Chinese characters and the books about Zen art, the Lappish inspired pillowcase GUSTAVA and the 'Swedish' country folk furniture of the Leksvik group stood out in its exoticness, perhaps because they looked alien to anything we imagine being Swedish. The placement of the GUSTAVA pillowcase beside the books of Zen art made us think of the outfit called “Silence Speaks” of the Swedish musician Roger Pontare.

4.5.1 Sweden

The restaurant is on the third floor and serves Swedish dishes like pancakes with cream and cowberry jam, raw spiced salmon, meatballs and coffee. The white walls are covered by pictures of summer along the Swedish west coast. (Observation Ikea store Beijing, 2002)

“Ikea was founded when Sweden was fast becoming an example of the caring society, where rich and poor alike were well looked after. This is also a theme that fits well with the Ikea vision. Sweden has an international reputation for safety and quality you can rely on, and Ikea retailers take pride in offering the right quality in all situations”.
(www.Ikea.com 2002)

“Many people associate Sweden with a fresh, healthy way of life. This Swedish lifestyle is reflected in the Ikea product range. The freshness of the open air is reflected in the colours and materials used and the sense of space they create: blond woods, natural textiles and untreated surfaces”. (www.Ikea.com 2002)

As described above Ikea has made the country of Sweden part of the Ikea experience. According to *En Möbelhandlares Testamente* (1996), Ikea’s core range of products should be conceived as typical Ikea in Scandinavia. They should also be recognised as typically Swedish outside of Scandinavia. The ability of Customers in foreign markets to associate Ikea’s furniture and design with Sweden suggests a view of the customer as international and culturally open in character. The above also shows that Ikea closely associates itself with the Swedish welfare state where all people are well looked after. The Swedish lifestyle is referred to as a healthy way of life.

Ikea co-worker D tells us that Ikea creates an exotic experience for customers outside Sweden through e.g. serving coffee and meatballs:

“When we opened in Beijing, to attract people, we gave them the second cup for free. Here, people think coffee is something intellectual and still exotic

Are the chopsticks designed in Sweden?

I do not know. I think so. It is a bit of a waste...for Swedish people to design chopsticks to produce them in Asia and sell them here when they are the experts and not we. We know knife and fork”.

Do you serve with knife and fork?

Yes, have you seen it? It's an experience for people to come here and eat spaghetti and meatballs with knife and fork”. (Ikea co-worker D)

The following excerpt from Ikea’s homepage gives connotations of Ikea adopting an old Swedish technique of furniture making, also indicating that Ikea’s products are made in Sweden:

“Swedish artisans have always worked with natural materials, often finishing their rustic handicrafts in cheerful colours. They also mastered the art of working smart, wasting as little material or energy as possible. Today, Ikea is a global company but the Scandinavian Natural Collection shows we have never forgotten where we came from”.
(www.ikea.com/china)

According to doctoral candidate Linda Rampell (2002), the conception of blond wood being Swedish is a marketing myth. “The Scandinavian Natural Collection” consists of a series of blond furniture made of birch wood, which Ikea imports from Czech Republic. If not treated with a special preparation, birch darkens with time. The darker wooden furniture of other Scandinavian modern designers such as Carl Malmsten and Arne Jacobsen also point in Rampell's direction. Turning the products upside down seeing the production origin, we realise that Ikea is a global company.

“Casseroles, knives, kitchen appliance and the glass bowl BURKEN made in China. Porcelain, glass made in Romania/Thailand Cane chairs and baskets handmade in Vietnam. Wooden furniture made in Poland”. (Observation Ikea store Malmö, 2002)

Ikea’s global character and usage of Sweden as building of image were confirmed by co-worker A, B, C:

“Ikea’s image is Scandinavian. This makes us exotic abroad. We once ran a German campaign of ‘Die unmöglichen Schweden’ with matching products such as clogs and moose. The Germans thought it was terrible”. (Laughter) Ikea is a global company. There are as many nationalities, at our headquarter in Älmhult, as markets where we are present”. (Ikea co-worker A)

“We market a Swedish-Scandinavian design, regardless of from where the products originate”. (Ikea co-worker B)

“We try to co-ordinate all demands in the world and take them into consideration when we develop new products”. (Ikea co-worker C)

Today, Ikea has moved all its production from Sweden to countries where labour cost is lower. However, the product range and the branding of products “Ikea of Sweden” are still controlled by Ikea Sweden, thus giving the impression of a Swedish corporation. In 2002, 100 million copies of the Ikea catalogue were printed and handed out in 34 language versions (www.biodiversityeconomics.org). Seventy percent of Ikea’s raw material comes from the world’s forests. Requirements for Ikea’s environmental policy are that timber used in solid wood products must have been certified according to the Forestry Security Control (FSC) criteria (www.ikea.com). Ikea also has its own forests:

“In case of a price cartel against us, we have our own forests”. (Ikea co-worker A)

5 Customers' Perceptions

Leaving the promotional activities, we will go on presenting how Ikea's modern, low priced, world-standard and dependable products are perceived by the customers.

5.1 Modernity

5.1.1 The Past

All respondents mentioned modernity in relation to Ikea. A common definition of modern design was that which differed from the interior decoration of their parents.

“I like more modern things than my parents. When I was a child all our furniture were made by handicraftsmen. When it comes to furniture I prefer lighter colours and simpler design, like Ikea, while my parents prefer darker colour and more practical furniture, more robust but not aesthetic. Overall, the design from 70's and 80's where not aesthetic. Ikea's products are more adapted to modern life”. (The Guy)

“Why do you like Ikea's products?”

It is modern and simple. The design is linear and comfortable. I do not like old furniture like antique European or Chinese furniture. They are too heavy. My grandmother had Ming style furniture when I was little but up to this day I have never liked them”. (The Avon lady)

A wish to break with the past was noted in the observations of the kitchen and in conversations about cooking habits. The kitchens had all the modern facilities and contained numerous utensils from Ikea. In the apartments visited, none of the kitchens had room for a dining table. The dining table was usually in the living room or in an adjacent dining room. Some of them had visible traces of cooking, e.g. onion peels in the sink. The Dandy's parents were actually cooking when we arrived. Therefore, it was somewhat surprising that several of the respondents claimed that they hardly ever cooked and mostly ate out. The Singer said:

“No, not that often, up to this day. I do not think Chinese food is suitable to cook at home because it is too sticky and oily. That is why I seldom cook; at home I only eat simple food like hotpot. It is not greasy; you only put a pot with boiling water on the table and add to the pot what you want to eat. Very tasty! Otherwise, I mostly eat out”. (The Singer)

In the Singer's kitchen there was an Ikea thermos of white plastic with a blue lid, a stand for dishes on the kitchen sink with blue and yellow Ikea cups and a transparent plastic trashcan from Ikea on the floor. Also the kitchen was equipped with several storage containers from Ikea on open shelves without doors. In the containers were pasta, cornflakes and Swedish crisp bread. On the shelves there was also an Ikea glass carafe and glass boxes from Ikea with spices, soy and vinegar. The floor was black concrete with colourful stones and the wall was painted in a light pastel colour. In the corner of the kitchen, a big photography of the Singer had been stored away behind a silver coloured washing machine. Two bamboos in an Ikea glass vase were on top of the washing machine (Observations the Singer).

Although the Singer obviously had done a great deal of shopping, especially at Ikea, to equip her kitchen, it did not seem to be used. In her kitchen, plenty of foodstuffs, Ikea containers, pots and pans were visible signalling a decorative function. She said she preferred to eat out since Chinese food was “too oily and sticky to cook at home”. Her parents had always preferred to cook at home but, as she puts it:

“The ways of life of my generation compared to the generation of my parents are different; there is a generation gap. I like having lots of people over all the time, whereas my mother thinks it is a hassle. She cooks at home. I never cook at home because it gets too greasy. Everything is different”. (The Singer)

Perhaps the choice of not using the kitchen can be regarded as signifying a break with the past. It demonstrates the Singer's wish to distance herself from the traditional ways of cooking in the parent's home.

The kitchen may be used more as a symbol than a place for cooking. The visible Ikea kitchen utensils on the shelves in the door less kitchen cabinet seemed to be ornamental. In view of the assertion that the Singer did not eat at home, even the food in the kitchen was ornamental. Various food products, purchased at Ikea, were stored in transparent containers (for easy viewing?). Mostly dry foods were stored, such as pasta, which can hardly be regarded as greasy to cook.

Further evidence that the Singer did not use the kitchen for cooking was its function as a storage space, for instance, the photo of herself she had stowed away on the floor next to the washing machine. This also indicates that the kitchen was used as a room to do laundry in, highlighting alternative functions for the kitchen and also downplaying the role of the kitchen as a place for cooking and socialising. The Singer's refrigerator a 170 centimetre, American 1950's -style refrigerator in yellow, did not fit in the small kitchen and was placed in the open living room close to the entrance. On the dining table opposite it, she had a boiler and a hot plate used for making hot pot, giving additional support to the kitchen having another function for the Singer. The Singer had a lot of food products bought at Ikea such as Swedish crisp bread and Singoalla-cookies. These products may symbolise that the Singer has a cosmopolitan taste and are able to appreciate Swedish food, very much in the same way we feel cosmopolitan by appreciating food from distant cultures.

Having a never used functional and well-equipped kitchen may be seen as a status symbol. In having no use, it is thus assigned another function of a marker of distinction, indicating that the owner can afford to eat out. When products, such as the kitchen, are consigned to mental practices of a magical type or to modish social practices, then the technical object itself becomes a mere gadget (Baudrillard 1998, p. 112). Hence, the kitchen had a functional uselessness, i.e. it was a place to refer to, rather than to use, like a technical gadget in a car. Nevertheless, our thesis of the kitchen as having the meaning of a status symbol is tentative. Perhaps the Singer cannot cook or does not have time to cook; accordingly she is obliged to eat out!

The statement that “Chinese cooking is oily” might be a local cliché. Most of the other respondents voiced the same exact words. It was also common among the other respondents to point out that they often went out to eat. Having a complete but more or less discarded kitchen goes for the Avon lady as well.

Above her kitchen table, on the wall to the right of the entrance, there were two cupboards in frosted glass in the same brown wood as the kitchen table. In the cupboards a big wall clock, packages of instant noodles and Nescafe bags were visible. (Observations Avon lady)

Asked if she ever cooked or had friends over for dinner the answer was:

“No, not at home. I do not cook, not even for myself (laughter). I eat out. Actually I'm quite busy, and often I am only in Beijing about 3-5 days a month. [My kitchen is] nice because I never cook in it.

That is why I can have it so open. You should see the kitchen in my parent's home. It is located outside the main entrance because cooking Chinese food is very oily and sticky. That is why a good fan is crucial. My fan is very simple because I never use it". (The Avon lady)

We, the authors, do not cook as much as our parents. During weekdays we often eat simple meals, such as soup while our parents cook almost every day. Does that mean that we want to break with the traditions of our parents? We believe that our own lifestyle in some aspects serves as a marker of a different life from our parents', though not necessarily involving cooking habits. Considering that it takes time to cook, that fast food is not yet big in China, and that Avon lady and the Singer are busy women, our suggestion of the kitchen as social marker or a symbol for a break with the past and tradition is uncertain.

The Dandy told us that she had just renovated her apartment in order to include her kitchen with the rest of the apartment. Her neighbour still had the kitchen outside the apartment without a fan, making frying the meat and vegetables often involved in Chinese cooking- greasy and oily. Twenty years ago, when the 35-year old Avon lady still must have lived with her parents, the kitchen did not have a fan and was located outside the apartment. Therefore, some respondents' perception of the modern kitchen may still be the perception of this kitchen. In this way, the ways of the past becomes associated with grease and therefore dirt. This is confirmed by the Couple:

"In the old days, they would not have had appreciated Ikea's products. Coarser furniture that could stand dirt was needed in the household". (The Couple/wife)

This statement also implies that Ikea's products are seen as sensitive to dirt and not suitable for the past. Hence, the Couple regards them as modern. Being perceived as modern, Ikea's product may be used as manifestations of modernity and means of the distancing from past times.

The Internetman had a fully functional kitchen. There was a stand for cutlery from Ikea, a cupboard with grey doors in laminate and a knife stand from Ikea. These were the only things that had been made visible in the somewhat oily kitchen. The walls were white. Did he invite people over for dinner?

"No, we mostly eat out. My wife and I are not too good at cooking. If I have friends at home, we watch TV or talk. We had a moving-in-party and invited classmates and work friends. Unfortunately I do not have that many friends". (The Internetman)

In view of the fact that the Internetman's kitchen was noticeably used, contrary to his assertion, additional weight is given to the notion of the kitchen as a symbol of status. The same reasoning can be applied on the Friend whose kitchen was also noticeably used, plates were washed and peels of vegetables lay in the sink. Did he cook?

"I do not cook. Chinese dishes are complicated and time consuming. I eat breakfast at home but usually I eat out for lunch and dinner". (The Friend)

In contrast to the Friend, the Guy said that he mostly cooked at home:

"I cannot afford to eat out alone. I only eat out if we are a couple of friends sharing the bill". (The Guy)

The Guy's kitchen was not oily. As a 28-year old art teacher at the Beijing School of Fine Arts, his salary is in the average to above average range. If he considers eating out alone expensive, it cannot be reasonably priced for most people in Beijing. Hence, eating out can symbolise

affluence. The Guy also gave an impression of spending considerable time alone, which may explain why he used the kitchen more than some of the others.

“I am alone most of the time. I like to paint alone”. (The Guy)

The Couple also cooked at home:

“I think it is like this. In the old days everybody ate at the work-unit, but nowadays people want to cook at home. Western kitchen utensils and products are perhaps more customised for the private kitchen than the Chinese are, since we used to cook in big public kitchens before”. (The Couple/husband)

The Couple's assertion that eating at the local work-unit was the norm in the old days is contradicted by the perception of the Avon lady and the Singer that cooking at home is the traditional way. This reverses our reasoning and implies that making a statement about breaking with tradition is best being done through using the kitchen for cooking. In this sense, not using the kitchen may signify not wanting to lead a regular modern life.

5.1.2 Modern Lifestyle

According to the Guy, the prevalence of women preferring to eat out has to do with modernity.

“What is your girlfriend like?”

Hmm, she is a modern woman. She likes to use make-up, fancy clothes and watch movies, especially American. My mother was a house wife, she did everything at home but my girlfriend does not like to work or do household chores like cooking”. (The Guy)

The modernity of the Guy's girlfriend was manifested in a large painting, painted by him, of her speaking in a cellular-phone in his living room.

Opposite the white corner sofa (Ikea) in the living room was a large portrait of his girlfriend that he had painted. She half lay in this sofa talking seemingly absent-minded (or bored) in a mobile phone balancing her sandal on one of her toes. Her nails were red, she wore a short dress and around her wrist was a pearl bracelet. Below her on the floor lay a copy of Elle. (Observation the Guy)

The Guy's perception of the modern woman appears to be an opposite of his mother; someone who does not perform household work and whose existence seem glamorous. The central position of the portrait of his girlfriend makes us think of Veblen's assertion about using women as objects for conspicuous consumption, i.e. the husband buying a fur for his wife to show off wealth. The Guy's portrait may, of course, be a symbol of pride for the girlfriend, but may also symbolise his own desire to be in vogue. To convey this in the painting the Guy uses modern attributes such as a mobile phone, pearl bracelet, red nails and an Elle magazine.

The Avon lady brought us to her new home in a suburb to Beijing; a two-floor apartment. The tiles in the kitchen were lime green, an idea she got from the Ikea catalogue. Upstairs was a small room without windows, solely for playing computer games in.

“Are you going to live here by yourself?”

Yes, I think it is better to live with your fiancée one or two weeks at the time. Each person has his or her special habits. I talk a lot on the phone, come home late from work, meet friends, go to parties. My finance is quieter. He likes fishing and tranquillity. We would just argue if we lived together. My parents tell me to marry him quickly but I'm not in a hurry”. (Avon lady)

The Avon lady had a very personal home in which she had hired handicraftsmen to get it exactly the way she wanted. The fact that she did not want her boyfriend to live in her new home implies a view of the home as being a symbol of independence for her. Here, perhaps she can be whomever she wants and do what she pleases, i.e. play computer games or paint the kitchen lime green.

“I was inspired by the Ikea catalogue to paint my new kitchen in a lime green colour. The handicraftsmen were surprised by the colour. Lime green? It is not a colour you would normally use in a kitchen”. (Avon lady)

When stating the above the Avon lady looked notably contempt with the fact that the handicraftsmen considered lime green an awkward colour to paint the kitchen in. This indicates a function of the green colour as a symbol of wanting to differ from that which is regarded by others as normal. Since the idea was taken from the Ikea catalogue, the Avon lady is also indirectly using Ikea as a tool to achieve difference, showing that she perceives Ikea as trendy and out of the ordinary. This suggests that the modern interior decoration promoted by Ikea is not necessarily generally accepted by the majority in Beijing.

Modern lifestyle as pictured in TV-commercials or advertising is often closely associated with the American way of living. As in the Hoover commercial it includes a harmonious nuclear family life, perhaps having barbecues with another couple on Saturdays, going to work and watching one's children play football. The Dandy directed harsh criticism against this kind of living:

“I love to have a lot of people at home. I am very fond of life and noises. Perhaps, that is typically Chinese. In the west you only socialise with a few people at a time. I know an American man who only work and work and do not have time for anything else. One day in the middle of the week we went out to dinner and at nine o'clock, I am not joking, nine o'clock, he went home because he had to work the next day. He only has time to socialise on the weekends. It is a harder climate at American companies than at Chinese, perhaps because they are privately owned. In China it is not easy to fire people. (...) He [the American man] is strange. He has not met his brother for over ten years. In China such a thing could never happen. People's relations in the west are so shallow. Everybody seems lonely. (...) Here, when a bunch of friends go out and eat, one pays for everybody. But in the west everybody pays separately. Am I right?” (The Dandy)

This reflects the Dandy's impression of the American and hence modern lifestyle. She talks about shallowness, unhealthy workload, egoism, isolation and loneliness. The obsessive practice of measuring success in modern society breeds shallow relations through restricting freedom of expressing feelings, ultimately leading to loneliness but also a loss of self. If no one knows us we cannot be confirmed by others, and if not confirmed in relation to others, can we ourselves know who we are? The Dandy's assertion seems to be far from Levitt's claim about the strong yearning for modernity.

“In the 1930's and 40's, Shanghai was very influenced by the West. Then the 60-year olds were as open as today's youths in Beijing. Still, Shanghai's economy is developing much faster than Beijing's. While we in Beijing still mostly drink tea, they are especially fond of drinking coffee in Shanghai (Laughter)”. (The Couple/wife)

In contrast to the Dandy, the Couple associate modern lifestyle with youths, open-mindedness and coffee and western influence. As mentioned above, Ikea has aggressively used coffee as a way to marketing themselves in Beijing, presumably to convey these associations. This may tell us something of how the Couple perceive themselves. The wife in the Couple was thirty-eight while the man was above fifty. If Ikea is open-minded and youthful and the Couple centrally positions

Ikea products at home, such as the red three-seated sofa in the living room, it implies that they may want to be associated with these values.

“Mostly youths like Ikea’s design”. (The Couple/wife)

This statement may be interpreted as: Young people like Ikea. We like Ikea. Hence, we are like young people. The Couple wants to be perceived as young people.

5.1.3 In Order not to Loose it

The apartments gave an authentic impression with solid materials in dark brown wood and glass together with handmade interior decoration, handicrafts and natural things such as plants, traditional art, antiquities, and reproductions of heavy Ming-style furniture. How where the Ikea products effected by this? We begin with the Singer's glass bowl from Ikea:

On the table was a cylinder shaped glass bowl (Ikea) with sand stones and fresh yellow flowers. (Observation the Singer)

In this context the glass bowl from Ikea became a small installation of nature with gave connotations to meadows and beaches. The Singer's apartment was very spiritual with fresh yellow flowers everywhere and a place for contemplation on a platform in front of the big panorama window in the living room:

In the ceiling were several fixed spotlights in a row leading towards a big panorama window on the opposite side of the room. The windows were covered by transparent yellow, white and blue curtains (Ikea). In front of the window, she had made a platform, large enough for two to sit at. On it she had placed a small fell made of something that looked liked sheep’s wool (Ikea) on two glass plates. Under the glass plates there were a hollow in the floor, which she had filled with sand, small white stones and blue glass pearls (Ikea). On the wall, to the left of the window, were a bodhisattva and burning incense. (Observation the Singer)

Here, several items purchased at Ikea are used in an imaginative way to create a spiritual ‘cosy corner’. Ikea products such as the blue glass pearls from the children's department and an Ikea fell made of sheep’s wool are combined with incense, a bodhisattva, white stones and sand to convey a spiritual atmosphere with references to nature and higher forces. The Singer hence expresses a longing for nature brings it into her apartment. This is further emphasised by the bodhisattva and the burning of incense, showing that the Singer's personal character is oriented towards spirituality and contemplation. She describes her apartment like this:

“I have decorated everything in here. Originally there were only white walls. I replaced a lot of them with glass to make the apartment more open. I think cherry wood suits my apartment since it is very feminine, regarding lamps, colours and plants; they are soft and not very refined. The dark cherry wood is a nice contrast”. (The Singer)

The Singer views her apartment as feminine and soft as opposed to refined. Regarding that most products in her kitchen came from Ikea, as well as her bed with the flowery bedcover and the components of the cosy corner described above, she used Ikea’s products to convey a mood of softness, femininity, spirituality and nature. This indicates that she regards Ikea’s products suitable for conveying such a mood or easy to combine with other products. It also suggests that the Singer regards modern products as feminine as opposed to refined male products of the past (?). Her music, a sad slow ballad and her way of speaking with a soft low voice, support the

assumption that this is the way the Singer perceives herself. Similarly, the Friend also made references to nature through the interior decoration, however, in a different way.

The windows in the living room were covered by long off white curtains (Ikea). On the floor, were two bongo drums, a cactus and a large green plant, behind which, two speakers loomed. In the ceiling were two lamps in stainless steel (Ikea). Opposite the window was a fireplace, above which a deer head and a mask of Nephritides hung. Two muskets lay on the fireplace. (Observation the Friend)

The Friend's mask of Nephritides, the muskets, the cactus and the bongo drums conjured images of adventure, pirates and exoticness.

In the guest room were a blue sofa bed (Ikea) and a ceiling lamp in stainless steel (Ikea). Opposite the sofa bed was a dark brown piano which looked old and antique. Over it hung an antler and a deer's skull. To the left of the piano were four folding chairs in cane with the price tag not yet removed (Ikea). In the TV-room was one-, two- and three-seated fluffy sofas (Ikea). A silk carpet in green and red with diamond patterns covered the wall to the left of the TV-set. In the windows hung beige linen curtains (Ikea). In the corner of the room was a reproduction of a dark brown heavy Ming style table. (Observation the Friend)

The silk carpet, the deer cranium, the African mask and the old muskets observed in the Friend's home seem to be examples of a longing or excitement before exoticism and traditionalism, despite being comprised only of carefully selected fragments of dead things. It is a safe taste of the wild in a controlled form, a symbol of, e.g., fascination about animals and primitive cultures. The deer's skull and antlers on the wall are an object of fascination and also a symbol of power and control. Because of the context, these meanings transfer to Ikea's products. They become matching components by being cultivated forests. The Singer's view that feminine and refined are opposites could suggest that she may see the Friend's apartment as masculine and refined, due to his sharp contrast with hers. If refined is translated as dignified and cultivated, it suggests that status is important to the Friend. The fact that the price tags were not yet removed from Ikea's folding chairs gives a clear signal of where they were purchased. The price tags may have been used to emphasise this. It is also possible that the Friend simply forgot to remove the tags.

Apart from the Friend, we found that respondents generally tried to distance themselves from nature. A wish to protect oneself from nature was manifested by covering windows to block the sun, protecting remote controls and TVs from dirt with cotton or plastic covers, using air conditioners and perfume spray. Naturally, one of the explanations to this is that the temperature in Beijing, during the summer, is around forty degrees and that the city is heavily polluted by coal burning in the northern part of the country. How the protection of nature was performed is illustrated in the following:

A dark brown wooden screen was placed in front of the beige linen curtains blocking the view of Fragrant Hills. (Observation the Friend)

It was shiny clean everywhere and it smelled of Dolce Gabbana perfume from the bottle in the bathroom. All windows were covered with blue, yellow and red curtains. (Observation the Singer)

The remote control was covered with plastic to protect it from dirt. (Observation the Dandy)

"I like blue light inside when it is hot outside. In the wintertime, I will switch the bulb into a yellow one to make it warmer. [...] Ikea's sofas are hard to clean. That is why I protect mine with this bedspread". (Avon lady)

Although the Friend had several natural artefacts visibly placed around his home, suggesting an interest in nature, he seemed reluctant to get into contact with the immediate nature outside the door. A heavy wooden screen in front of the window blocked the view of green wooded slopes and the apartment was heavily air-conditioned. Similarly, the Singer lived on the 21st floor and had a magnificent view over Beijing, though behind drawn curtains. They also had a strong desire to protect their belongings from dirt. The Dandy protected her remote control with plastic, the Singer sprayed her apartment with perfume to eliminate any natural scent, while Avon lady protected a dark blue sofa from dirt and controlled the inside climate by switching light bulbs.

This behaviour suggests that nature is not desirable in its own shape only in a cultivated form. It also indicates a fear of dirt. If dirt can be associated with the past then perhaps this is also a fear of past times where the lack of control over nature made life vulnerable and dangerous. The Singer's apartment was full of references to nature but smelled artificial. The cleanliness and controlled references to nature may be viewed as a way of imposing control over one's own life; a fear of losing grip and become vulnerable. It also means restraining oneself through, e.g. eliminating smells by constantly showering, washing, dishing, cleaning and perfuming. The Dandy's room differed from the order and cleanliness of the other apartments visited.

Suitcases and piles with clothes, scarves and underwear lay on the bed; the wardrobe was wide open and drawers were drawn-out. Sanitary products, make-up (eye shadow, lipstick, mascara, foundation, powder, pencils and brushes), perfume bottles, shoes, handbags and necessities were displayed on the bed. In the drawn-out drawers were soap, shampoo and cotton pads. (Observation the Dandy)

Upon our arrival, the Dandy had put things in order in the two other rooms of the apartment, resulting in a feeling of staged chaos. It is possible that her retired parent, with whom she resided, disapproved of mess outside the Dandy's own room. All of her most private products, including items such as sanitary protection, were displayed, suggesting a lack of the restraint and control characterised in the other respondents. Supporting this suggestion was the glass cupboard opposite the entrance, in which Dandy displayed bottles of liquor brands and a carton of cigarettes. Together with the Dandy's assertion of having many friends at home, this may suggest that having a good time is important to her. The products can also be seen as symbols for losing it.

5.2 Low Price

When interviewing Avon lady, her twenty-year-old sister was also present. This is what she said about Ikea:

“What is the difference between your sister's home and your parent's?”

My parent's home is so old fashioned. My sister's home is modern, contemporary”.

Do you also shop at Ikea?

(Quiet)

Perhaps, you buy small things for your room?

No, I do not shop at Ikea, university students are poor, but sometimes I go there to drink coffee with my friends.

Drink coffee! (Laughter) She does not have to shop at Ikea; she still lives with our parents”. (Avon lady and her sister)

The Avon lady and her sister did not think that Ikea's prices were affordable for students' lifestyles, which implies that Ikea is regarded as expensive in Beijing. For the sister, Ikea functioned as a café where she drank coffee with her friends since she thought it was too expensive to shop there. When Ikea opened in Beijing they ran a heavy promotional campaign

offering free additional cups of coffee, which became very popular (co-worker B 2002). Other respondents also stated that they thought Ikea was expensive.

“Ikea’s bedcovers are expensive. I think they cost around 400 RMB. I can buy handmade for 100”. (The Singer)

“Ikea is not very expensive but not cheap”. (The Guy)

“Larger wooden furniture is very expensive at Ikea”. (The Friend)

“It is not particularly expensive to shop smaller things at Ikea. Larger furniture is more expensive”. Of course it depends on one’s income. The major part of the Chinese population cannot afford to shop at Ikea. It is not like in Sweden. When you think ‘Oh, it is so cheap’, we might look at the same thing and go ‘Oh, it is too expensive’”. (The Couple)

Ikea is clearly more expensive in Beijing than in Sweden. Its products may therefore have a different function and different meanings for the people who purchase them.

“As I see it, people with a certain degree of cultivation, even if they are well off, shop at Ikea as well as use public transportation, while rich people with no cultivation often prefer more exclusive interior decoration”. (The Couple/wife)

The Couple feels that people (like themselves) who shop at Ikea, above all have a high level of cultural capital. Here, it becomes evident that those with economic capital and less cultural capital are viewed as compensating this lack with expensive products. We almost sense that the Couple regards exclusive interior decoration as vulgar. Considering that the husband is an artist to the profession, the statement indicates a view of Ikea in Beijing as representing cultivated taste.

5.3 World-Standard

The Couple spoke a lot about Ikea’s kitchen products not being sufficiently customised to Chinese methods of cooking at home, although they were considered far better than the Chinese utensils on offer, which are mainly made for commercial kitchens.

“[Ikea’s] kitchen products, from a design perspective, are not really suitable for Chinese cooking. The handles of the frying pans are good at Ikea. The handles of the bowls are too small though, they often do not even have any handles and become too hot when you put food in them. Moreover, the bowls are not deep enough, and the teacups are way too big [laughter]. In my opinion Ikea’s kitchen products are best suited for western cooking and Ikea should pay more attention to the needs of the Chinese kitchen”. (The Couple/wife)

This issue became a bit more complex when the Couple said:

“Ikea’s chopsticks are not useful. We eat with chopsticks made of bamboo, not materials like wood or plastic. In Sweden you do not use chopsticks, do you? No, precisely, since you are not used to eating with chopsticks you do not know what material that is appropriate. The best is if Ikea sticks to selling Swedish-style products. If I want Chinese style products, I will not go to Ikea”. (The Couple/wife)

The Couple requested an adaptation of Swedish-style products to Chinese kitchens and not a reproduction of the products used in Chinese kitchens. We also noted an irritation over Ikea not being local enough to be able to respond to the demands in Beijing in an efficient way.

“It is OK if Ikea wants to be fully controlled from abroad but the best thing is synchronisation, e.g. not ship products from Sweden. Who wants to wait three months for a sofa?” (The Couple/wife)

The Singer followed the same line of reasoning and told us that she did not like Ikea anymore:

“(Quiet) I do not like going to Ikea anymore, everybody goes there, everybody has got Ikea’s products at home, and everything looks the same. It is not fun anymore. The atmosphere at Ikea is nice, but they are too slow in ordering new products. It is not fun to visit your friends and discover that they have the exact same lamps as you”. (The Singer)

The Singer here expresses a desire for individuality perhaps explaining why she had combined her products, e.g. the cosy corner, in ways to make them look different from the Ikea catalogue and her friends’ house. This suggests a view of the Singer as someone exhibitionistic, not self-conscious, with a desire to separate herself from others.

5.3.1 Decommodification of the Interior Picture

Ikea’s products looked very different depending on the context they were placed in. In the following we aim to give illustrations of this.

On the light colour wooden Ikea dining table the Singer had placed a large decorative plate.

“Where does this come from?”

It is a modern version of a traditional plate made by Beijing’s handicraftsmen. It is hand painted; they do not use a machine. All plates are unique”. (The Singer)

The Singer explicitly pointed out that the plate was painted by hand rather than machine produced. She further emphasised that all plates are unique, showing this is important to her. The purpose of placing the plate on the Ikea table may therefore be seen as a way to “wash off” the impersonal and standardised aura surrounding globally standardised products by decorating and combining them with products that are unique. In this way the meaning of Ikea’s products become solely practical as a mean to convey something other than an Ikea product, e.g. exceptionality. This is further illustrated in the following statement:

“A person who buys everything at one place, e.g. buys a home at Ikea, does not buy what s/he really likes; such people cannot find their own joy in life. Life is about combining. You cannot buy small ideas like this [points at her odd cups and saucers] at Ikea; they are your own”. (The Singer)

The Singer believes that people who do not creatively match products in an individual way are unable to find joy in life. The tone is almost a bit condescending; such people do not know what they like. The Singer strongly believes that ideas emanate from people and not corporations. It is therefore impossible to find joy by following in the leaches of Ikea. The Singer regards Ikea as a way to create her own personal environment rather than a model to duplicate. It can be seen as a desire to put one's own signature on the seemingly neutral Ikea furniture, to refashion them so that they cannot be mistaken for being someone else's. People who cannot do this are seen as ordinary and lame. Similar observation was made at the Couple:

A small cuddly toy in the shape of Santa Claus lay on the Couple's bed. (Observation the Couple)

The cuddly Santa Claus lying in the Couple’s bed, seem to load the bed with connotations of homeliness and safety. The Santa acts as the signature of the bed’s owner, indicating that the bed is off-limits for anyone else.

A common way of personalising the interior decoration was to hire handicraftsmen or construct furniture and decorations themselves. The husband in the Couple, for example, had constructed a large lamp of dark wood that hung over the dining table. The lamp consisted of a solid piece of wood with four metal arms on which four bulbs with white lampshades were attached. Similarly, the Avon lady had hand worked panel doors and the Guy kitchen cabinets. Contrary to the Singer, Avon lady said that she got many ideas from magazines and catalogues.

“Did the doors come with the apartment?”

No, I drew the pattern and then handicraftsmen made them. I got the idea from a catalogue. I get a lot of inspirations from books, magazines, catalogues”. (Avon lady)

“Nice kitchen cabinets!”

They are made by handicraftsmen. They are not from Ikea”. (The Guy)

The Internetman had been involved in designing a “TV-wall” in his living room. Behind the TV-set was a pink and purple wooden wall with two engraved waves. Behind the waves were blue lamps. The walls in the living room were matching pink. When asked why he chose this specific colour he said:

“Others told me that you can only have pink in the bedroom, but I chose to paint this room in pink anyway, for fun. I think the colour is special.” (The Internetman)

When making this statement the Internetman's friend, who also was present, laughed and laughed. The Internetman continued to talk about his pink living room and although he was smiling we got the impression that he did not find the situation comic. Thus, the pink colour may have been chosen for fun but not as a joke. Instead, he seemed to use it as a statement to show others that he goes his own way and does not care about conventions. In contrast to Avon lady and the Singer who looked fashionable and expensive, the Internetman looked like a regular man working with computer software (blue shirt, glasses). This suggests that the purpose of the pink colour is not to make a statement about his stylish home but his spontaneity. Perhaps it also works as a symbol for expressing his inner desires.

The decommodification of the household was also manifested in the way Ikea's products were combined with a wide range of knick-knacks and bric-a-brac products. These products, even though being standardised themselves, served as a way to personalise and refashion the household. The following observations illustrate the methods used:

The refrigerator was decorated with international flags and a large Spiderman doll.
(Observation the Singer)

The tiles in the bathroom was decorated with Disney's “The ten Dalmatians”.
(Observation Avon lady)

In the bedroom, to the left of the entrance, was a bookshelf in white laminate (Ikea). In it were framed (Ikea) photographs, a red alarm clock, a plastic model of a stripper in g-string and high heels and a playing pig family in plastic beside Chinese tea pottery. (Observation the Singer)

Opposite the window, in the living room, was a fireplace on which there were two tall candle holders in black iron with thick white candles (Ikea) and two lanterns decorated with snow flings (Ikea). To the left of the fireplace was a fully ornamented 1, 20 meter high Christmas tree in plastic (Observation the Couple)

5.4 Dependability

While Avon lady preferred Ikea's lighter contemporary furniture as opposed to old heavy furniture, the Dandy did not trust them.

"I would never buy bigger furniture there. Ikea's products are not practical. They (Ikea) should improve the outer appearances of their products. Their products look way too lanky. That is how it is with everything from the outside, not sturdy. I did not buy my TV-bench at Ikea and why not? Because, if I put that TV on anything from Ikea it would probably fall down and I would not have a TV". (The Dandy)

The Dandy felt that Ikea's products were not dependable enough to put her TV on. Her referral to Ikea's products as products from 'the outside' (outside China), indicates that the Dandy did not specifically link Ikea with Sweden, but with a surrounding world. The west? The Dandy specifically mentions improvement of 'outer appearance'. By that she did not primarily direct critic against the quality per se but the looks of the quality. According to her Ikea's products looked lanky. This indicates that perceptions of how steadfastness is supposed to look as more important than the steadfastness in itself. The Guy followed in the Dandy's footsteps saying:

"The most important [regarding interior decoration] is looks, and then comes quality and then price". (The Guy)

The Dandy suggested making Ikea's furniture by hand since she did not trust Ikea's manufacturing skills but sometimes liked the design.

"If they have something I like, I prefer to take the catalogue with me and show the furniture to a handicraftsman and let him/her make it for me". (The Dandy)

On the contrary, Ikea's products coming from the outside was crucial to the Couple:

"We buy products from Ikea since we think the quality of your things should be higher due to the fact that the living standard in your country is higher. (...) An important reason to why Ikea is popular in China is that Chinese people think foreign products symbolise quality". (The Couple/wife)

Here, the Couple associate the quality of Ikea's products with high living standards and a high degree of modernisation. The perceived link between high living standard and high quality products, although vague and not necessarily true, may be based on a stereotype about the advancement and superiority of modern products. It is also possible that the Couple's positive impression of Ikea is related to a stereotype of Sweden where Swedish products might be viewed as more dependable regardless of whether or not China can offer similar products. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that perceptions of dependability are closely related to perceptions of the degree of modernisation of the country of origin.

"We feel that quality is especially important and especially registered trademarks since there are so much counterfeits in Beijing. Therefore we only buy products in department stores". (The Couple)

The Couple may perceive more risk in purchasing products made in countries with weaker images. The assumption that Ikea's products are actually produced in Sweden illustrates how positive connotations of 'Swedish' products are based on the false conception that Ikea means 'Made in Sweden'. Ikea's products are made in developing countries, e.g. China, perceived by the Couple as having poor manufacturing skills. It is possible, however, that the Couple's belief that

Ikea's products are produced in Sweden refers not to physical production but to design and construction.

6 Joint Discussion

Having presented the promotion of modern, low priced, world-standard and dependable products alongside customers' perceptions of these characteristics we will now discuss whether corporate promotional activities have incorporated these concepts in the customers' minds in a standardised fashion. Central findings will be presented in terms of the global corporation vs. the customers.

6.1 Normality vs. Freedom of Lifestyle

The social dimension in the Ikea code is reflected by the enormous weight Ikea places on the kitchen as the centre of social interaction and play. Ikea's kitchen is the centre of the universe and a place where the whole nuclear family or the circle of friends gather to cook and socialise. An Ikea table is seldom set for less than four people. The kitchen also mirrors Ikea's cosmopolitan outlook containing Italian herbs and/alongside Japanese saké.

The kitchen also had an important social function in the respondents' households. All of the respondents had carefully planned and well-equipped kitchens. They invested substantially in kitchen products from Ikea, signalling that the kitchen served important purposes. The Singer offered us Singoalla cookies and Löfbergs Lila coffee bought at Ikea. The kitchen did not; however, seem to serve the same purposes as conveyed in the Ikea catalogue, since few of the respondents claimed to cook food at home. Instead, they preferred having larger meals in restaurants. The kitchens in the respondents' homes were too small for dining in which naturally assigns it a different purpose.

Earlier, we suggested that the kitchen could be seen as a way of breaking with the past and the tradition of one's parents. We later revised this suggestion and proposed instead that the decision to not use the kitchen could be seen as a way not wanting to conform to the norms of modern lifestyle. This may seem exaggerated but was supported by customers' deviations from the Ikea stages of life of moving away from home, starting work, getting married and having kids. The facts that only the Friend had children, the Dandy lived with her retired parents, and the Avon lady did not want her fiancée to live in her large apartment, are examples of such deviations.

Furthermore, none of the women were interested in cooking or sewing but were more career focused. All the men interviewed with the exception of Internetman were artists of some kind and we did not see the obligatory laptop belonging to men in the Ikea catalogue. In summary, the nuclear family life of mother, father, and children did not seem to be very important among the respondents.

Normalness is strongly emphasised in the rhetoric of Ikea. The Ikea standardised model of a customer is not idle, lazy or antisocial. The IKEA customer was also found to be self-conscious and avoided showing its true spirit, pretending, instead, to be intellectual by strategically placing academic books on the bedside table. We can only imagine what it would be like having an Ikea standardised girl/boyfriend. Someone who wakes up every morning before sunrise thinking that ten minutes is not only the hourly wage divided by six. Many of our respondents did seem to work very hard. There were exceptions such as the Dandy who did not seem to appreciate a good day's work as much as socialising. Conversely, the Internetman claimed not to have many friends and the Guy stated he preferred seclusion to be able to paint. The Dandy and the Singer liked to socialise with friends. Obviously, social life was also important for the Couple and the Friend who seemed to spend a lot of time together.

In the Ikea catalogue, products are shown in combination with joyful, smiling families. Existing without a family equates to loneliness and unhappiness. Thus, in consumer society, happiness is turned into a commodity available for consumption with 'satisfaction guaranteed'. The Dandy's criticism of modern life shows a divergence from Ikea values. When Ikea promotes happiness through hard work and discipline, this becomes for the Dandy, shallowness and loneliness.

Measurable happiness can lead to a loss of self, since we are never confirmed by others for who we are but rather by what we choose to convey. This also leads to restrictions on what feelings we can express. We have almost total freedom of speech in some respects but in others, are stifled. There is nothing wrong to talk about sexual adventures on the bus but try crying or being angry.

These restrictions are frequently confirmed and supported by promotional activities. For example, smiles as a symbol of being happy are risk averse. It is a way to avoid being punished through social rejection and perceived as normal. The respondents complied with Ikea's promotion in the sense that they all had the products Ikea seems to tell them they need to be happy in modern society.

6.1.1 Control

According to modern society's norm of rationality, nature is something fickle and inconsistent that should be kept on a tight leash. Ikea's slogan "Choose family first, then table" incorporates optimism in the consumers' minds, that s/he can control the environment by controlling his/her lifestyle and consumer choices. Throughout the analysis of Ikea and the customers, we have constantly returned to the manipulation and exertion of control over nature. We have observed the patron-client style relationship between man and nature in several ways. Forests are owned for the purpose of transforming them into home furnishing, dead animals are hanging on the walls, natural scent is being eliminated by the use of perfume, temperature is regulated through bulbs and air-conditioning. We found little difference between the customers' perception of control and Ikea's.

The Ikea way is characterised by cleanliness and strictness, offering rational solutions to problems in life. It may be argued that the opposite of clean is not dirty but nature. Dirt in nature is not dirt, but soil; it only becomes dirt when it is brought into a controlled environment. While cleanliness is a symbol of modernity, dirt represents the poverty and vulnerability of past times. Then, people were dependent on nature, unpredictable and impulsive as it is, for survival. Today, cleanliness has become a ritual act, serving as means of self-perseverance.

The order and cleanliness of Ikea and the respondents' homes can be seen as attempts to demonstrate that nature and thus poverty do not exist in the home environment. This was observed in the way the Dandy's remote control were covered by plastic, the Avon lady's protection of her sofa, and the fear of oil and grease when cooking. However, one of the respondents made a departure from this worldview. The Dandy's messy room and display of sanitary products is an expression that can be regarded as non-complacent with the norm of order and self-control promoted by Ikea. For the Dandy, being a modern person did thus not necessarily mean being in control. This was further emphasised by her display of hard liquor and cigarettes.

The Friend's deer skull and antlers can also be seen as representations of control over nature. It is probably not conceivable for Ikea to use preserved animals in the showrooms, since it might

offend certain parts of its clientele or other groups in society. Otherwise, we feel that the idea is in line with Ikea's values.

Religion is not compatible with control. The strong belief in the modern creed makes Ikea an atheist. The Singer's bodhisattva and incense, conveying an orientation towards spirituality, is therefore not embraced. This suggests that the Singer may have different needs than the Ikea customer construct.

6.2 Sensibility vs. Exclusivity

According to Mårtensson (1987) the Ikea customer is not concerned with status symbols. Ikea's "Smäländska" heritage is based on simplicity, humbleness and sensibility. None of the respondents wanted to be sensible and modest. Instead, Ikea's products seemed to be one of the refined components in their households. Indicators of this were the ways in which Ikea's products were combined with other interior decoration, such as handicrafts, famous liquor brands, antiques, stucco work, oil painting, muskets, genuine wooden floor, silk carpet, specially designed kitchen tiles and panel doors. Ikea seemed to be viewed as compatible with these notably much more refined decorations. The not yet removed price tags on the Friend's furniture also suggest that Ikea is used as a means for social difference. Furthermore, all of the respondents were well employed, as a singer, Avon lady, artist (Couple/man, Guy, and Friend), publisher (Couple/wife) and Internet blocker. Obviously, the Couple used Ikea's products as means of distinction. They asserted that Ikea represents good taste for those with a higher amount of cultural capital.

Ikea's prices are approximately the same in China as in Sweden. Recently, prices have gradually been lowered to be affordable for the middle-income consumer (Dagens Industri 2002). According to Ikea's own figures the average customer income in Beijing is 6,598 RMB (average income for a University teacher is around 3000 RMB). Only 10 % of the customers stated that they did not attain a higher education (co-worker C). Co-worker C also told us that when opening in Beijing five years ago, the majority of customers were celebrities. This may give an indication of the status of Ikea in Beijing.

Ikea's status also became evident when talking to Avon lady's sister who was a University student. Even though obviously privileged by having the 'affluent' Avon lady as a big sister, she said she could not afford to shop at Ikea. The Couple were aware that Ikea's products are relatively cheaper in Europe. They even irritably contended that it is typical of western corporations to not adapt to the living standards in developing countries. In Beijing, Ikea is not for the masses and consequently, they are not perceived as selling low price products. According to 2003 prices, a two-seated TOMELILLA sofa, which both the Friend and the Couple had, cost 4,990 RMB; more than the average income of a University teacher. In Sweden the same sofa cost 4,495 SEK (1 RMB=1,2 SEK). Surprisingly, this means that Ikea is actually cheaper for Swedish customers than for customers in Beijing. Taking the average Beijing income into consideration, Ikea's prices are everything but low. What happened to creating a better everyday life for everyone? What happened to taking good care of rich and poor alike? Here, it becomes obvious that standardisation is more important than Ikea's own creed. The standardisation jargon has been adapted to the degree that it has replaced Ikea's own ethics.

6.3 Plurality vs. Singularity

Ikea's products are standardised and the same range of products are sold across the world. The customers handled the conformity of standardised products through decommodification of the interior picture. This entailed transforming standardisation into uniqueness by 'washing off' its uniformity and making it personal. The longing for uniqueness is intensified by the innumerable reproductions, making products widely accessible in consumer society. The unique is something exceptional, one of a kind, which has become rare with the increasing utilisation of standardisation as global strategy.

We noticed that Ikea's products looked differently depending on the context in which they were placed. Combining Ikea's products with other interior decoration was a way for the respondents to achieve singularity and make the products unattainable to others.

When the Singer put a large plate on the Ikea dining table, the table did not look like the mass produced low-priced good it in fact was, but something distinguished and exclusive. In a similar way, the Internetman's cuddly Santa loaded his bed with connotations of homeliness and safety. The Singer told us that the plate was not made by a machine but by hand. She particularly emphasised that all plates were unique; her plate did not look like anyone else's. The symbolism of this seemed very important to her. Her attraction to the unique may have contributed to her boredom with Ikea standardised products, especially when they became more widely owned.

Again, the Couple was irritated at Ikea for not being local enough to answer Beijing customers' demands in an efficient way. They wanted Ikea to adapt to the Chinese way of cooking by adjustments in the Swedish design, rather than producing Chinese-style products. This shows that world standard products are related to country of origin and indicates that local adaptations are desirable.

Buying things at exhibitions and utilising handicraftsmen were some other ways that respondents decommodified the interior picture in order to wash away the artificiality of mass-produced goods and turn them into authentic expressions. It can also be seen as an indication of a negative response to the mainstream conformity promoted by the global corporation. Decommodification is a way for consumers to compensate for compromising their preferences, as they do when purchasing standard goods. By hand constructing furniture, as in the case of the Couple, or hiring handicraftsmen to make kitchen cabinets and panel doors, the respondents included themselves in the production process as co-producers.

The wish to personalise the household was also evident by the frequent use of bric-a-brac products. It suggests that the uniformity of style, which characterises the universality of the early stage of modern society, is rejected. Spiderman, the Christmas tree, the Disney decorated tiles, the tall iron candle holders, and the stripper, all stood in sharp contrast to Ikea's modern minimalist concept.

"Make your home as unique as the people who live in it." The practice of re-contextualising and re-configuring standardised products after purchase to suit individual needs is sanctioned, even calculated by Ikea to a certain extent. The simple design of Ikea's products gives plenty of leeway for different product interpretations. Currently, there are over 10, 000 Ikea products for the customers to combine and derive individual meanings from. Even if Ikea imposes a certain control over the combination patterns, as was seen in the interview with the freelance designer,

does it, in the end, have the capacity to control meaning creation at home? Poster writes that when the customer comes home with the good and discovers that a perfect family life cannot be provided by the TOMMELILLA sofa, s/he are left to his/her own product interpretations (Poster 1998, p. 47).

The controlling side of Ikea was revealed in the handling of the differences between customers' perceptions and Ikea's, when first opening the store in Beijing. Ikea succeeded in reducing the gap by aggressive advertisements, educational TV-shows, and written instructions on signs. The intolerance of the global firm was highlighted, and customers had to conform to be welcome in the store.

6.4 Rationality vs. Appearance

Ikea perceives the customers as a segment of "Smälänningar" who want sensible high quality furniture at low prices. Furthermore, the constructed Ikea customer is rational and questions the desirability of beauty if it is not combined with quality, function and particularly low price. In other words, the customer is viewed as having a desire to be rational.

The recognition of dependability seemed to be closely connected to appearance and country of origin. Not all perceived Ikea's products as being dependable. The Dandy even suggested bringing the Ikea catalogue to handicraftsmen who were better skilled in making furniture than Ikea. She further stated that Ikea's products looked lanky and that she did not trust them enough to put her TV on them. This suggests that the Dandy felt more concerned with appearance as an indicator of quality than for example country of origin. Impressions of dependability thus seem more important than actually dependability. Adding support to this is the Guy's statement that looks is the most important quality of a product. Viewed together it seems like the customer is not as rational as held by Ikea; they instead value appearance over quality. Internetman's decision of painting the living room pink "for fun" despite being told that the colour was inappropriate suggests that he is not afraid of being socially rejected. This constitutes a difference from the self-consciousness of the Ikea customer.

On the other hand, the Couple seemed to use Ikea as a way of reducing the risk that making a purchase involves. For them, dependability is closely associated with the degree of modernisation of the country of origin effect. The country of origin effect provide cues that are both tangible and intangible in character, regarding the quality, dependability, and value for money of the product, when more specific information is not readily available (Ahmed 2001). The Couple associated Ikea's products with quality because of Sweden's high degree of modernisation.

The perceived link between modernisation and high quality products, although not necessarily true, is similar to Levitt's statement that modernised countries make the most advanced products in the world. Thus, Ikea's products are viewed as better, regardless of China's ability to offer similar products. The Country of origin effect can also be seen as risk aversion tool in the sense that the Couple use their trust in products from modernised countries as a tool of reducing risk. Ironically, Ikea's relation to Sweden is strictly for marketing purpose. Their products are all produced outside Sweden, in developing countries, and their Swedish heritage is tentative. This tells us something about how distorted the perception of country of origin really is.

7 Conclusions

7.1 Retrospect

The standardisation perspective of global marketing strategy rests on the premise that consumer tastes are homogenising. Ever since Theodore Levitt published the article, “The Globalization of Markets”, the inevitability of converging global preferences has been presented as a simple fact in the theoretical discussion that followed on standardisation. Back in 1983, Levitt argued that communications technology and the spread of cosmopolitanism has irrevocably lead to a communal desire for modern, low priced, world-standard and dependable products. He refers to this development as a homogenisation of consumer taste across the world.

We argued that Levitt’s notion of homogenisation of taste does not only entail the consumption of identical products, which is merely a statistical fact, but that people are becoming increasingly alike in the way we think and act; in our attitudes and values. Since meaning is dependent on individual taste his notion of homogenisation of taste also means a homogenisation of the meanings assigned to products. We are moving towards a new global reality where everyone acts according to the creed of the modern world. Thus, the notion of homogenisation of taste builds on a strong belief in the advancement and the superiority of the modern world.

As a result standardisation becomes a necessary tactic for survival in a global world. Levitt argues that global corporations should employ a standardised approach to marketing strategy, where the same products are sold in the same way everywhere. In reality, this means utilising aggressive promotion to press hard for modern, low price, world standard and dependable products. Global corporations are seen as having the capacity to incorporate standardised perceptions in the minds of the consumers, thereby serving both as beneficiaries and agents of homogenisation of taste. This means that the customers are viewed as passively receiving and accepting promotional activities.

In order to not confuse the reader we want to emphasise that our purpose has not been to direct criticism against Ikea. Ikea has been used solely as an illustration of Levitt’s philosophy. We set out to investigate Levitt’s article not because of a doubt of the popularity of standardised products, not to inquire the feasibility of standardised strategy, but because we wanted to contribute to the understanding of the corporation’s role as an agent of homogenisation of taste and test the belief held by Levitt that the corporation has the capacity to make customers perceive and assign meanings to products in identical ways. We argued that Levitt reduced the customer to a passive corporate construct, not taking into consideration that we are active and creative human beings with different backgrounds acting in different social contexts.

By conducting a study of seven customers’ perceptions of the products of a global corporation selling modern, low priced, world-standard and dependable products, in a recent modernised market we wanted to inquire if the customers’ perceptions correspond to those of the corporation. We reasoned that if their perceptions corresponded with the corporate conception of the customer we would view this as an indication of the global corporation serving as an agent of homogenisation of taste. In a reversed scenario, where customers’ perceptions and the perceptions of the corporation differed, we would regard it as sign that Levitt’s notion of homogenisation of taste should be used more carefully to legitimise the standardisation construct in the marketing literature.

7.2 Findings

In our view, there were small but nevertheless important differences between how the standardised products were contextualised and perceived in the respondents' homes and how the corporation promoted these products. These dissimilarities were presented in the joint discussion, including variances in adopting the modern lifestyle, sensibility vs. exclusivity, plurality vs. singularity and rationality vs. appearance. They indicate that the customer is not a commodity with predefined ideas fully compatible with standardised strategy; rather the customer is a subject with the capacity of injecting her/his own meanings into products, leading to a diversification of tastes.

The Ikea message was perceived differently in several aspects. The customers' perception of modernity sometimes differed from that of Ikea. They perceived Ikea as modern but for different reasons. This was seen in how the kitchen was being used or how Ikea's minimalist concept of 'less is more' was turned upside down by the use of knick-knacks and bric-a-brac products. The difference in perceptions of modernity may be a consequence of the paradox of Beijing being a recently modernised market and China being labelled as a developing country. This seems to have resulted in using modernity as means to achieve distinction and protect themselves from being classified as behind the times because they are citizens of a developing country. Ikea's products seemed to be used in this process as manifestations of modernity and cosmopolitanism.

In view of the fact that the respondents will probably distinguish themselves in other ways using something else as a means of distinction as more and more of the population become modern, this does not confirm Levitt's notion of homogenisation of taste. Indications of this were already noted in the Singer's complaint of Ikea as mainstream and boring. This corresponds to the logic of consumption serving as a means of manifesting individual taste in order to communicate that we are like some people and different from others.

Furthermore, Ikea and the customers did not seem to share the same perceptions of the modern lifestyle. Especially the Dandy felt that the American lifestyle involved shallowness and loneliness. Except for the Friend, none of the respondents had children. None of the women interviewed were married and did not seem to be in a hurry to start a family. This is far from the image of the nuclear family promoted by Ikea.

Although our respondents were in the same income range, they did not regard Ikea prices in the same way. While some perceived certain products as low priced and easily replaceable, others made careful long-term investments in Ikea's products. We also found that the Beijing customers were status oriented and concerned with fashion in contrast to Ikea's ideals of democratic design. We feel that Ikea's products were used as means of social distinction even if not all of the customers were as frank about it as the Couple; this was more or less noted in all of the respondents' homes. Even if our study had shown that Ikeas prices were regarded as low, it would still not have provided a satisfying explanation of Levitt's assertion that all people across the world perceive the same price as low, unless they live under the same economic conditions. At the moment people across the world certainly do not, and will not within a foreseeable future. Even if all consumers probably are attracted by low prices, we do not see how a standardised price can be low for everyone.

The conformity of world-standard products and Ikea's radically mainstream message, for anyone and no one, creates a longing within the customers to single out and be different from others. Ikea's products were used for different purposes thereby meaning different things for the

respondent's depending on their individual background and context. As we have showed, Ikeas products were blended with unique products such as the Singer's plate, the Friend's muskets, the Internetman's TV-wall, Avon lady's panel doors, the Couple's home made lamp and the Guy's kitchen cabinets.

Obvious indications of that everybody wants what everybody else's got were not found. On the contrary the respondents indicated a desire of making distinctions and not necessarily conform to the ways of the corporation. Sometimes, we even sensed boredom with the mainstream products. The respondents' desire to put their own marks on standardised products, in different ways, to wash off their uniformity, did not give the impression that the customers were passive recipients of promotional activities. On the contrary, they participated very actively in unique integrations of Ikea's products in the household.

Perceptions of dependability were closely associated with the degree of modernisation of the country of origin as well as product appearance. Most of the respondents associated Ikea with Sweden. A few did not make a distinction between Sweden and Europe. Even though all of the respondents seemed to have an overall positive view of Europe some, like the Dandy, questioned the quality and reliability of Ikea's furniture, and the Couple was notably irritated by western corporations' way of doing business in developing countries. Associations to country of origin and appearance suggest that dependability is a subjective perception depending on individual factors such as political opinions, trust, perceptions of aesthetics, world views, experiences and education.

Throughout the analysis nature was given a central role, as modern society perhaps foremost is characterised by the manipulation and abuse of nature. Nature is viewed as being fickle, inconsistent and as something that has to be kept on a tight leach. This is not unlike how the customer is viewed by Levitt; as someone who does not know his/her own good. The customer is an alien, an Other, someone who must be manipulated not unlike nature. Just as nature is feared for its inconsistency; the customers are feared for theirs.

The levity of homogenisation of taste entails only being based on sales statistics of standardised products, and therefore ignoring what happens with the products after purchase. What happens to the meanings of products when the customer discovers that Ikea cannot offer a perfect family life? Our study proposes that the corporation's role as an agent of homogenisation of taste is limited to the moment of purchase. After purchase, products were recontextualised and decommodified and in that way also assigned other meanings than the ones promoted by the corporation. Even if the respondents bought the same standardised products, indications were found of how they seek to single out and make distinctions through creative placing and combinations of products. When the products are taken home and assigned different meanings, the customers become agents of heterogeneity themselves. This implies that globalisation may be viewed as a reciprocal process where customers answer to the ways of the corporations.

We have shown how customers bought the same products from a global corporation. However, they were not bought for the same reasons or used in the same manner. Neither were conceptions of modernity, low price, world-standard, dependability, and Ikea perceived in the same way among the respondents or in comparison with Ikea (and therefore also Levitt). This suggests a more careful usage of Levitt's notion of homogenisation of consumer taste to legitimise the standardisation construct.

Instead, a more appropriate way of describing the role of the global corporation is as an agent of hegemonisation of taste. In light of how Ikea made the Beijing customers conform to the Ikea

way of behaving in the store, Ikea can be viewed as having the capacity to incorporate standardised meanings in the minds of the consumers through heavy promotional activities. There were similarities between how Ikea wants to be perceived and how they were perceived by the customers. This was in particular noted in the way Ikea was associated with modernity by all of the respondents. This is further emphasised by how obvious cultural products in Ikea's product range such as Swedish food products and kitchen utensils could be promoted and perceived as something cosmopolitan and modern. It can also be argued that differentiation is convergent with the ways of Ikea which calculates and encourages customers to single out through the combination of a wide range of products. Achieving true difference in modern consumer society requires a break with the dominating ways of living and viewing the world, everything else merely constitutes reproductions of, what Mazrui refers to as hegemonisation of taste where the western world serves as the main supplier of culture and meanings of modernity.

It would have been interesting to interview consumers, over a longer period of time, in all of the countries that Ikea is active, and in that way really put the homogenisation theory to the test. Would consumer groups all over the world have shown the same differences and similarities that our respondents did, or would they have been completely different? We would very much welcome further research on this subject when, for us, more questions have arisen than have been answered.

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Ulf Smedberg, Co-worker Marketing and Sales, Ikea Beijing

Lars Wingren, Manager Ikea Services, Helsingborg

Tommy Kullberg, Managing Director, Ikea Japan

Tobias Roos, former co-worker, Ikea Beijing

Observations Ikea store, Beijing 2002-08 and Malmö 2002-11

APPENDIX I

Presentation of the respondents:

“The Singer”

24 years, singer, single

“The Artist”

28 years, work as an art teacher at Beijing School of Fine Arts, girlfriend

“The Blocker”

35 years, works for State Department of Technology, wife, no children

“Avon Lady”

35 years, responsible for Avon trainees in China, fiancée

“The Couple”

Woman: 38 years, publisher

Man: 50 years old, artist, live in a suburb to Beijing

“The Dandy”

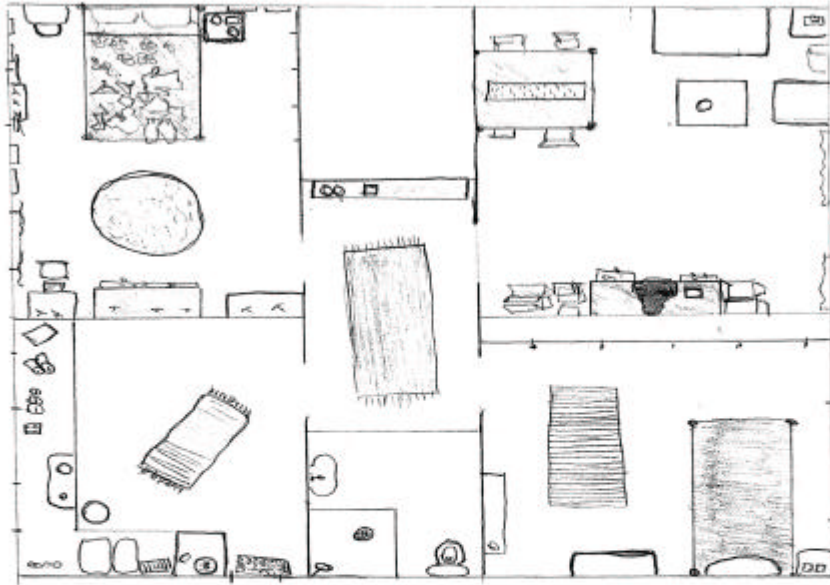
40 years, single, live with her retired parents, profession unknown

“The Friend”

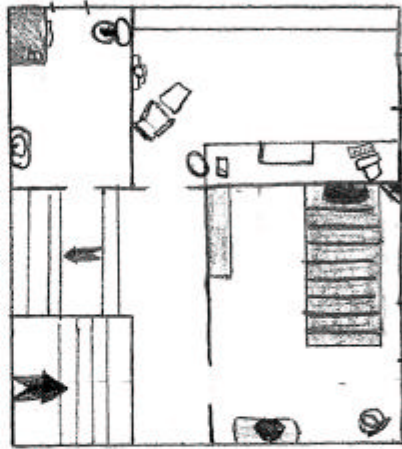
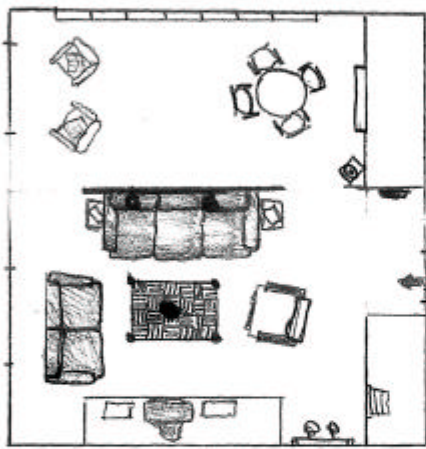
50 years, neighbour and friend to “the Couple”, married, one child, artist

APPENDIX II

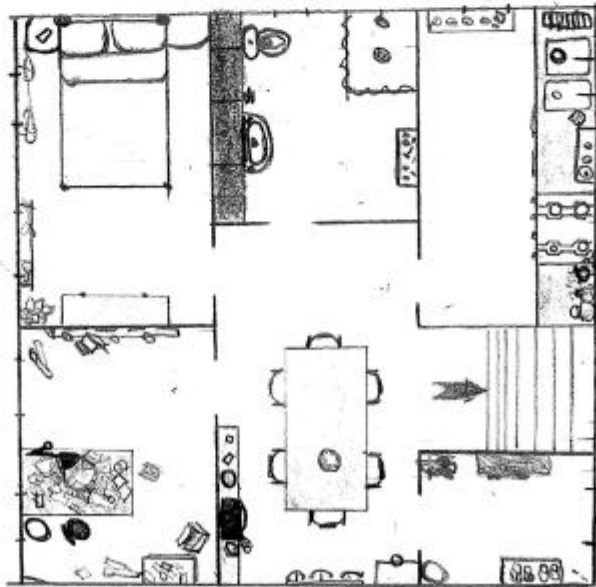
Outlines of the respondents' homes

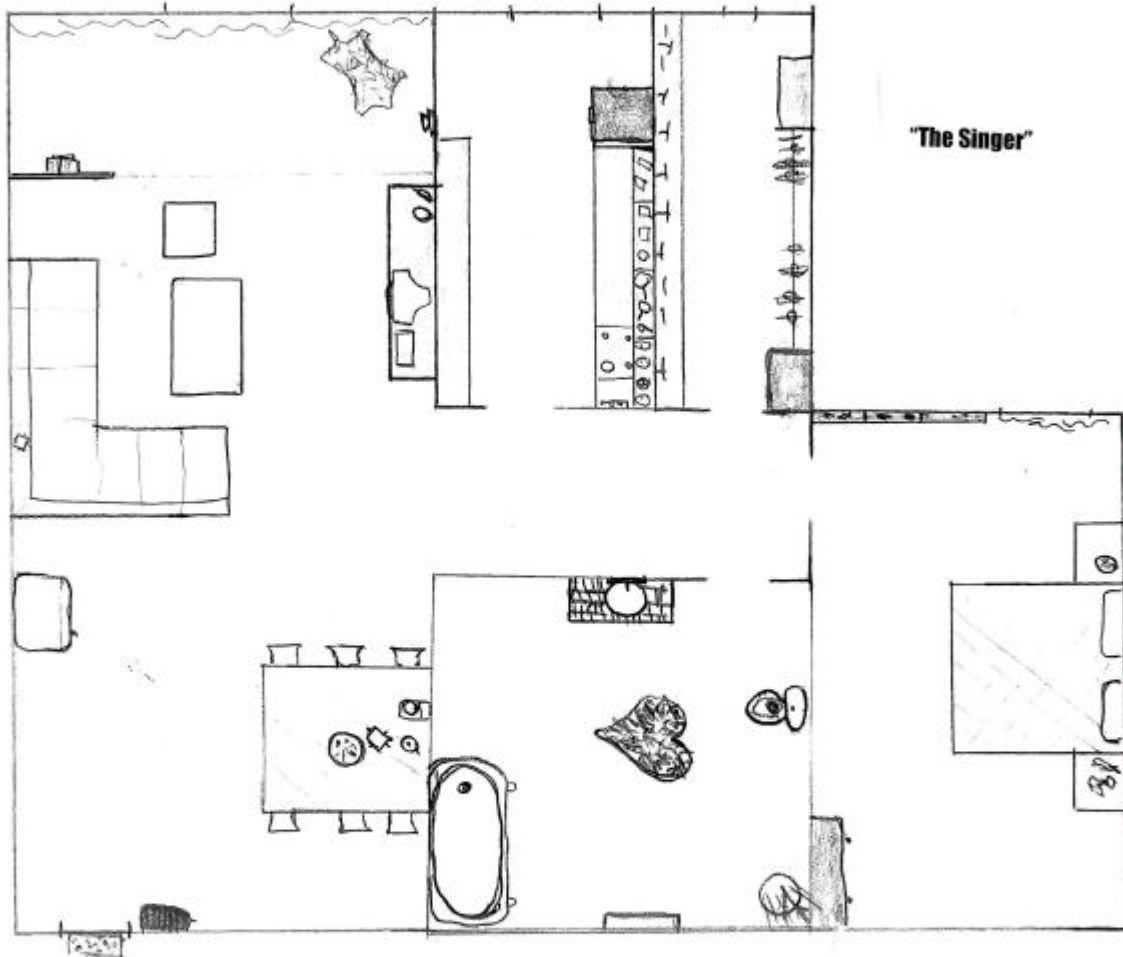


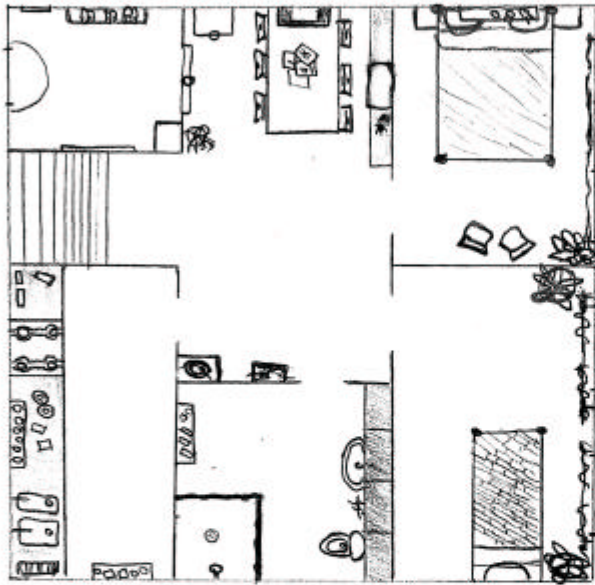
"The Bandy"



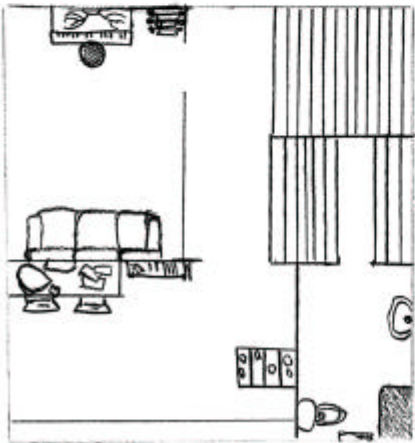
"The Couple"



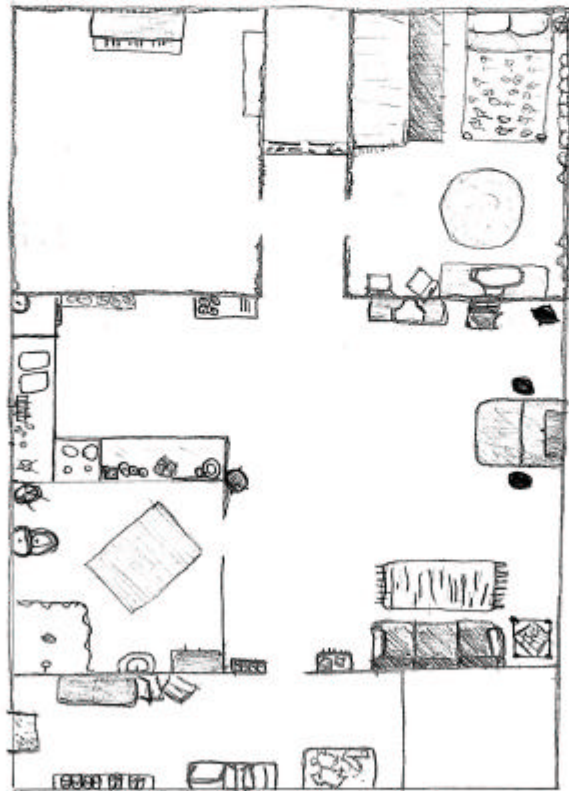


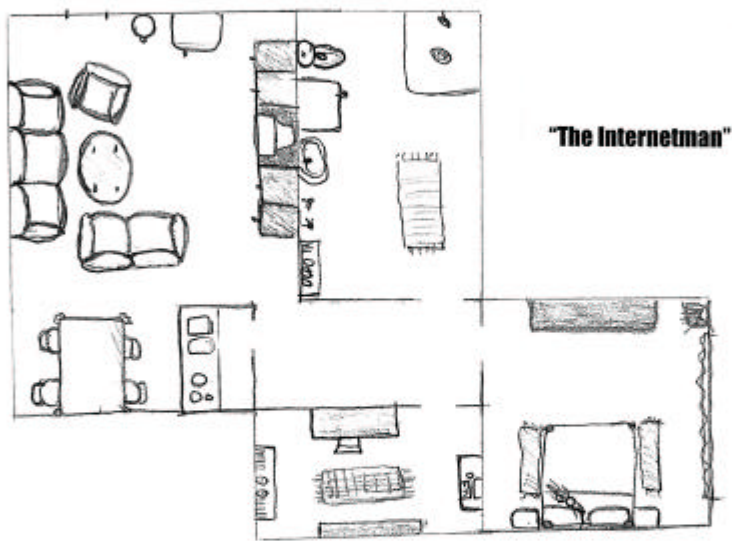


"The Friend"

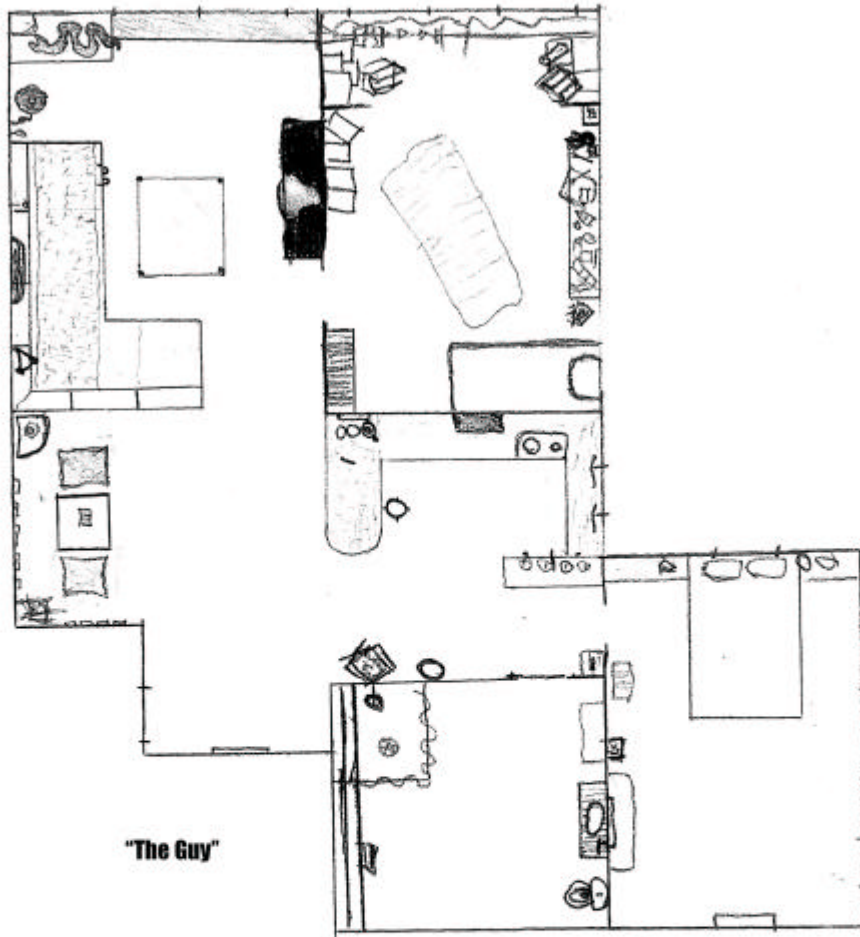


"The Avon Lady"





"The Internetman"



"The Guy"