

**High Fashion: an exploration of texts surrounding a
change in flight attendant uniform within the context of a
heritage brand**

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Submitted to satisfy the requirements of the Master of Research

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Acknowledgements

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my grandmother, Edna May Johanson, who fed this fascination of mine with that glorious monochrome shot of her, Melbourne-bound and boarding a TAA flight dressed in a swing coat and pillbox hat.

I am most grateful for the generosity of Mr David Crotty, Curator of the Qantas Heritage Collection, in offering his time and assistance as I was refining my topic. Professor Alison Pullen and Associate Professor Edward Wray-Bliss, both of the Department of Marketing and Management in the Faculty of Business and Economics at Macquarie University, have contributed valuable feedback to my work, and I thank them for their kindness and interest in the topic. Profound appreciation is due to my examiners, Dr Prudence Black, and Assistant Professor Alyssa Dana Adomaitis, for their efforts in reading and commenting on my work.

Simon Hildebrandt, my remarkable partner, managed to perfect a blend of intense theoretical discussions and late night Milos that kept me on track and in good temper.

My mother, Denise Roberts, rode to my rescue as usual with proof-reading and sundry administrative assistance.

This thesis would not exist without the long-standing support and guidance of my supervisor, Associate Professor Chris Baumann. To him I owe not only gratitude for helping to refine the work in these pages, but also for the comprehensive encouragement he has given me as I embark upon this new, academic, chapter in my life.

Abstract

Flight attendant uniforms perform a number of practical and symbolic functions. They frequently play a pivotal role in airline advertising, yet the interpretation(s) of a uniform may not be universally conceded. This study aims to make a methodological contribution to the nascent literature on heritage branding through the application of social semiotics to a thematic content analysis of online corporate, media, and consumer texts surrounding the debut of the latest Qantas flight attendant uniform. Analysis suggests that Qantas operates on a cultural as well as corporate heritage level; that references to glamour and fashion distance the uniform from its meaning and function as professional dress, particularly when glamour is combined with a sense of nostalgia; and that the interplay between the brand and other meaning-making systems such as popular culture is an inevitable but problematic result of Qantas operating on multiple social levels, not just at the level of the corporate brand. Texts authored by media and individuals external to the organisation are found to interpret the new uniform differently to the Qantas management interpretation on a number of points. It is proposed that the concept of *provenance*, as it is applied in an art-historical context, is a useful adjunct with which to approach the reactions to a single, specific event in corporate history within the context of the omni-temporal sweep expected of the healthy heritage brand.

Statement of originality

This statement is to certify that, to the best of my knowledge, the work contained in this thesis is my own work, and does not contain material written by other people except where due reference is made. This thesis has not been submitted for any higher degree or other purpose to any other institution.

Signed:  _____

Date: 7/10/2016

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Lockheeds and Louboutins: contextualising Qantas

On April 16th, 2013, Miranda Kerr took to the runway at Sydney Fashion Week. Press cameras captured the Australian model as she walked, clad in a classic, figure-hugging designer dress, black stilettos giving up glimpses of red sole with every step. The fashion set feted the debut: Martin Grant, the Paris-based Australian designer, emerged to accept his accolades.

This was no couture show; this was the new Qantas cabin crew uniform.

It was an extraordinary piece of theatre. Pine and Gilmore (1999) chart the contemporary shift from a services-based economy to the so-called “experience economy”, wherein it is not so much the product or service consumed than the associations and memories created through the act of consumption. Promotional events such as the Qantas catwalk show, conceived as a kind of anterior mnemonic, seem tailor-made for a sensation-based economy. Pine and Gilmore (1999) may be wary of overstating the extent to which aviation has morphed from service to experience, yet Kerr’s stilettos prove the point: the tell-tale red sole was intended to garner cache with global fashion mavens, to connect the presence of red underfoot with Christian Louboutin, the famous, and famously exclusive, Parisian shoe designer, in a shorthand symbiosis of signifier and signified (Barthes, 1964). The stiletto is impractical for the work of a flight attendant: even court shoes, with their smaller, sturdier heel, are regularly discarded in favour of flats once on board the aircraft. The Louboutin stiletto was entirely for show, a powerful simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1994) without real-world reference, except in the context of high fashion (See Figure 1).

Qantas Airways, the second oldest airline in continuous operation in the world, was established in 1920. The government-owned carrier was privatised in 1995, and has been variously affected by market deregulation, industrial disputes, fuel price volatility, and financial instability. Controversy ensued over the Qantas management decision to axe 5,000 jobs by mid-2015 in a bid to boost profitability (Freed and Smith, 2014), while a 2013 alliance with Emirates Airlines saw Qantas abandon its traditional partnership with British Airways in favour of improved access to European cities via the Emirates hub in Dubai (Flynn, 2015). Competition on international routes is fierce; a significant domestic market share provides Qantas with its largest revenue source (Zhong, 2016). Financial conditions

have improved, with Qantas posting a \$1.53 billion full-year profit for the year ended June, 2016, representing the most positive financial result in the airline's history (Chung, 2016). A new pilot's uniform, also designed by Martin Grant, was introduced in April, 2016 with, according to Grant, a significant nod to the military style that characterised the early days of Qantas uniforms (Chong, 2016).

The first female Qantas flight attendants embarked on their fledgling careers soon after World War II (Black, 2013). During the pre-War years, male stewards walked the aircraft aisles, performing similar duties to those of the ship's steward (Mills, 1998). Female flight attendants arrived with the arrival of the Lockheed Constellation, with its pressurised cabin and the corresponding corporate push to shift the image of air travel from dangerous to glamorous, with a little help from the new "hostesses" (Black, 2013). The proto-uniform adopted a military style, reflecting recent history as well as contemporary conceptions of how a uniform should appear (Black, 2011). The uniform changed as the airline and the mode of transportation itself matured, resulting in several substantially different uniforms rooted in distinct moments in socio-political history, such as the coral, Swinging Sixties mini-skirt of 1969-1971, or the abstract, quasi-paisley Pucci print of 1974-1985 (See Appendix 1 for a picture of Qantas uniforms through the decades).

Due to celebrate its centenary of operation in 2020, the corporation's promotional materials, extensive archives, and museum-style preservation of historical-corporate artefacts at the Qantas Heritage Collection at Sydney Airport – soon to be relocated to Qantas corporate headquarters at Mascot – indicate that the brand's custodians have been, and continue to be, cognisant of the crucial role played by corporate heritage (Balmer, et.al., 2006) in the enduring success of the carrier. The airline's pioneer standing, as the second oldest carrier in continuous operation in the world (KLM being the oldest), places it in the unique position of holding an industrial as well as corporate heritage. The attention to history is not solely a corporate inclination: collectors pay up to AUD\$100 for pins given to Qantas staff to commemorate their years of service, while Qantas travel posters and 1960s vinyl travel bags are regularly bought and sold on the open market (Cockington, 2015). At the Heritage Collection, items on display include a full suite of uniforms from the first days of female flight attendants to the present dress, designed by Martin Grant, debuted on the catwalk by Miranda Kerr in April 2013, and introduced into Qantas cabins in December of that year.

The Sydney Fashion Week promotion was not the first time a promotional campaign featuring the Qantas uniform made use of a fashion model, or of a shoe perceived as more glamorous

than the utilitarian court shoe (Black, 2011). It was, however, the first time a near-real-time, multi-way dialogue regarding a new uniform could be recorded: whilst the internet was prevalent at the time the previous uniform, designed by Peter Morrissey, was introduced in 2003, none of the major social media platforms, such as Facebook (established in 2004), YouTube (2005), Twitter (2006), or Instagram (2010), were yet in existence. The difference this shift in media infrastructure has made to the flows of images and texts, and to the content of these images and texts, is difficult to exaggerate. This study is designed to explore such interactions surrounding a specific corporate-historical event.

The purpose of my project is to examine the online texts that emerge regarding a change in flight attendant uniform, to discern what themes emerge regarding the perceived location of the new uniform within the existing brand image. The airline under study is Qantas Airways Australia, a full-service flag carrier with an extensive and commonly known history.

Figure 1: Miranda Kerr models the new Qantas uniform, 16 April, 2013

Australian model Miranda Kerr introduces the latest Qantas uniform on the runway at Sydney Fashion Week, 2013. The red sole of the Christian Louboutin stilettos may be glimpsed in the image on the left. Celebrity audience members included Australian actress Cate Blanchett, pictured bottom right.



(Source: Chandra, 2013)

1.2. Looking good and doing a good job: study aims and structure

Uniforms perform multiple functions. Corporate uniforms perform additional functions to those of profession-oriented uniforms, such as a nurse's scrubs or a scientist's lab coat. Corporate uniforms may, as well as identifying the wearer as a member of a particular profession (Timmons and East, 2011; Peluchette and Karl, 2007; Rafaeli, et.al., 1997), provide information about the organisation represented by the uniform (Tasci, et.al., 2014; Tu, et.al, 2011; Shao, et.al., 2004), its associated brand image (Shao, et.al., 2004), and the aesthetic experience and service quality a consumer might expect from the organisation (Tu, et.al., 2001; Shao, et.al., 2004). A uniform may be employed as a distinctive marketing and communications tool, showcasing the brand and contributing to brand positioning. It may even form the foundation of advertising efforts, as with the long-running Singapore Airlines campaign featuring the "Singapore Girl" wearing the traditional *sarong kebaya*. What the uniform signifies, however, is not as unified as the noun suggests: meaning is open to contestation at any point during the garment's life cycle, never more so than when an organisation undertakes to change its uniform (Adomaitis and Johnson, 2005).

Airline uniforms are one instance of a corporate uniform that operates across professional, organisational, and societal levels. Airline managements typically change flight attendant uniforms about once every eight years (Pine & Gilmore, 1999). The reasons for this may include brand refreshment objectives (Balmer, 2009; Melewar, et.al., 2005), a change of management or change in strategic direction (Muzellac and Lambkin, 2006), or a change in financial position or operating conditions (Black, 2011). The previous Qantas uniform, designed by Peter Morrissey, was active between 2003-2013, making it a particularly enduring incarnation of the Qantas brand brought to life through the dress of its frontline staff. Whether or not the current uniform boasts a similar lifespan, in an aviation culture characterised by competition, deregulation and service convergence (Nancarrow, 2014; Thurlow and Aiello, 2007; Spiess and Waring, 2005), remains to be determined.

Change often breeds turbulence, and the Morrissey uniform, for all its longevity, was no exception. It did not enjoy universal popularity with Qantas flight attendants, and there were protestations around sizing problems (Black, 2013, p.304-306). The issue of comfort in corporate clothing feeds into the concept of aesthetic labour (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009; Spiess and Waring, 2005), the extent to which "looking good" is perceived as a key aspect to "doing a good job". Is this pattern of protest repeated with the introduction of the Martin Grant uniform, and if so, what might it indicate about the popular image of the flight

attendant, as opposed to the reality and practicalities of flight attendant work? While the indigenous-patterned Morrissey uniform carried distinctive cultural connotations, and previous uniforms such as the Yves Saint Laurent-designed suit featuring a multitude of kangaroos might be said to trade on Australian motifs, is the most recent uniform viewed as evocative of Australian and/or Qantas heritage, or is it understood as a move towards a more globally standardised, less regionally specific, aesthetic? Is the new Qantas uniform, in its role as a sign-system (Barthes, 1977) or “language”, understood with reference to the previous uniforms and prevailing brand image of the corporation, or does its location within systems such as fashion and popular culture influence the manner in which the uniform is interpreted, and the attributes it is capable of embodying?

My previous quantitative study of airline uniforms, conducted in 2014 under the supervision of Associate Professor Chris Baumann (Baumann and Roberts, 2016; Roberts, 2014), discovered a correlation between a perceived sense of brand history in an airline’s uniform – particularly for full-service carriers of Western origin such as Qantas – and a favourable consumer response. My current project builds on this finding, working towards better understanding the relationship between heritage and currency within the context of a heritage brand. The research questions are:

Question 1:

What themes are apparent in communications surrounding a change in flight attendant uniform in the context of a national flag carrier with a commonly known corporate heritage?

Question 2:

How does engagement with these themes differ between stakeholders?

Question 3:

How do the themes contribute to, or detract from, the heritage brand’s attempts to maintain currency in an increasingly global marketplace?

The exploratory, “content-driven” nature of the study (Guest, et.al., 2013, p.255) is designed to facilitate theoretical latitude and an attempt to contribute to the methodological scope of the heritage brand concept.

I am interested to discern prominent themes emerging from online communications, and to better understand how these themes interact with the narrative of Qantas as a heritage brand.

The use of thematic content analysis from a three-pronged perspective (online corporate, media and consumer texts regarding the uniform change), should, through a methodology informed by social semiotics, allow me to contribute on a theoretical level, to the heritage branding literature. My aim is not to test hypotheses, but rather to conduct an analysis of texts (Guest, et.al., 2013) surrounding the introduction of the latest Qantas uniform in order to make consistent observations regarding the interpretation of themes around the change of uniform, with careful reference to the relevant literature.

This report begins with a review of the relevant literature. The subsequent chapter provides an explanation of my methodology from a theoretical and practical viewpoint, leading to a discussion of the key themes to emerge from my data analysis. An overview of the theoretical and practical implications of my research, together with possible directions for future research, will be presented, followed by concluding remarks on the subject.

1.3. A word about words

This thesis is about flight attendant uniforms. It is also about language. I am writing about the way people write about – and speak about – the change in Qantas uniform. A meticulous textual analysis seems to demand a meticulous approach to one's own meta-text, to the act of reporting on the research. This brief section is intended to elucidate some of the grammatical and compositional choices I have made.

Quotes originating from collected data appear as they appear at the source. I have not altered spelling, grammar, or punctuation, nor have I annotated textual idiosyncrasies in the traditional manner, by inserting [sic] into the type, as I consider its repetition may detract from the composition and subject matter of each text.

I make use of the first person in my thesis. This is not yet a prevailing academic trope, although it appears to be gaining traction. The first person is, I believe, the least complicated means of avoiding the use of the passive voice. It is also in accordance with the recommendation to reflexivity (Krippendorff, 2004; Mauther and Doucet, 2003), which aligns with my epistemological assumption that reality is socially constructed (Berger and Luckman, 1966). The first person allows me to acknowledge my influence on the outcomes of my research through the myriad choices I have made: topic, analytical framework, data collection, reporting, and so on.

I use the third person plural, where appropriate, throughout my work. It is not strictly grammatically correct, yet I am concerned to avoid what, for me, may cause an interruption of the narrative flow through the insertion of gendered pronouns separated by the forward slash, as typical of the more orthodox approach.

My use of the hyphen is, perhaps, more liberal than necessary as un-hyphenated compounding becomes the norm. I have long advocated the hyphen as an aid to the clarity and readability of text: to my eyes, certain words, particularly longer words, “read” more easily when hyphenated. It is my hope that my readers find this to be the case as well.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Corporate heritage: mapping brand history

In a crowded market where product and service attributes increasingly converge between brands, the brand itself assumes a greater importance as the point of difference. The brand becomes a symbolic marker, indicating to consumers the intangible qualities, such as an aspirational lifestyle or peer approval (Goffman, 1959), unique to the brand. In this competitive climate, the nascent field of corporate heritage marketing offers a potentially valuable point of difference for brands that adequately capitalise on their corporate history (Urde, et.al., 2007).

Corporate brand heritage does not itself possess a lengthy heritage (Hudson and Balmer, 2013). The field rests on the foundational work of a few key scholars, but is currently under-studied, under-theorised, and ripe for expansion (Balmer, 2013).

Hudson and Balmer (2013) define the concept as “...an approach to corporate marketing that involves reference to the past. It encourages the engagement of consumers with the history of the brand, or the engagement of consumers with history through the brand.” (Hudson and Balmer, 2013, p.357) Heritage brands, in this estimation, contribute to the “identity project” of stakeholders as well as offering them a good or service.

Cooper, et.al. (2015) build on the above definition by sectioning corporate heritage identity into three elements:

- Tangible, which includes all physical aspects of the business;
- Intangible, which includes organisational knowledge; and
- Metaphysical, or the experiential plane.

Flight attendant uniforms operate across all three elements of brand identity relating to corporate heritage: the materiality of the uniform; the training and expertise it signifies; and the incorporeal aspects which locate the uniform within a specific brand, within a specific culture, and link it to a certain service expectation. The flight attendant uniform is thus an important visual brand element to examine, with particular reference to two brand heritage concepts: the tripartite dimension of omni-temporality (Balmer, 2013), and the tripartite authenticity-affinity-trust iterative loop (Balmer, 2011).

2.1.1. Omni-temporality: mapping the brand longitude

Balmer (2011) stresses the difference between brands imbued with a heritage and heritage brands, defining the former as retrospective and concerned with the past, and the latter as more focussed on the past, present and future – what Balmer (2013) terms *omni-temporality* – with a relevance spanning multiple generations. The difference is nuanced, but significant: brands with a heritage may either elect not to capitalise on the heritage aspect of the business, or may do so in a manner that appeals to an idealised past (Balmer, 2013), a somewhat retrograde strategy contrary to the omni-temporality that makes the brand's heritage relevant from the viewpoint of present and future stakeholders.

Balmer (2011) develops the omni-temporality concept through the lens of the British monarchy, observing that the ruling family has access to a rich heritage, shared with substantial segments of the culture of the domain over which they preside, which delivers them authenticity and legitimacy (See section 2.1.2), whilst necessitating constant monitoring and refreshment of its image – the "brand" – over time, in order to retain currency. Viewed from this aspect, a heritage brand such as Qantas forms a flexible point on a socio-cultural map; the recent update of the Qantas flight attendant uniform may be understood as a visual attempt to maintain applicability in an increasingly global marketplace, and to situate the brand within its new operational locus, in partnership with Emirates as it seeks to expand its access to Europe.

The longevity of a brand such as Qantas does not discharge the necessity to adapt to, if not drive, change within the wider environment. Cooper, et.al. (2015) compare brand management approaches between corporate heritage brands and contemporary corporate brands, concluding that brand renewal – the process of altering brand elements or strategies to suit shifting corporate goals and/or market conditions – takes place with extra caution for a heritage brand, whereas contemporary corporate brands possess greater scope to make revolutionary changes. The revision of a single brand element, such as the introduction of a new flight attendant uniform, may be counted among the evolutionary changes a heritage brand may make with caution, over time, to refresh the brand without subverting the affinity consumers may feel for the brand. This evolutionary approach is a risky strategy, however, if the refreshed element is perceived as departing too much widely from the existing brand image, or as making the remaining elements appear "tired" by comparison.

Semiotic perspectives offer a particularly germane means of investigating the evolution of visual brand elements and their intended signification(s) over time: Davison's (2009)

investigation into the thematic evolutions evident in the bowler hat logo used to signify the heritage brand The Bradford and Bingley Bank reveals adjustments to the logo designed to keep pace with increased institutional competition and changing socio-cultural conditions. This, and studies like it, such as the semiotic analysis of the development of the McDonald's logo by Cowin, et.al. (2011), adopt a diachronic approach to the topic to suit the omni-temporal scope of the subject matter: that is the study of how corporate brands, and corporate heritage brands in particular (although Cowin, et.al. (2011) do not identify McDonald's as a heritage brand), maintain a sense of brand history whilst ensuring adequate momentum to remain current and to chart a course for the future. The rebranding literature (e.g. Muzellac and Lambkin, 2006) is similarly focussed on diachronic, and more comprehensive, instances of change within a brand than the reaction that a change in a single brand element may effect. There are, to my knowledge, no studies that choose a more synchronic conceptual lens, concentrating exclusively on a single instance of change within the heritage brand, such as the reaction to the change in Qantas flight attendant uniform. This may seem self-evident, however there is merit in understanding how perceptions of the operation of omni-temporality within a brand influence reactions to a single change in the brand, at a single point in time. The approach is not, strictly speaking, synchronic, as the texts surrounding a change in flight attendant uniform will, almost undoubtedly, refer to some aspect of the brand's past, and possibly to its future, be it through discussion of the uniform itself or the topics that news of the uniform inspire. However, I propose to contribute to the heritage branding literature by adopting this more "immediate" conceptual lens through which to view the omni-temporality identified within the literature as crucial to the successful operation of the heritage brand.

2.1.2. Trust, authenticity, affinity: mapping the brand latitude

Observation of the British monarchy led Balmer (2011) to identify three additional dimensions of importance to corporate heritage brands:

- The dimension of trust, as formed between the brand and those to whom it has relevance, including the wider society in which it operates;
- The dimension of authenticity, or the extent to which the brand appears consistent and delivers on its undertakings; and
- The dimension of affinity, as measured by the extent to which the brand remains relevant within its community.

The authenticity and affinity dimensions are found by Balmer (2011) to feed into the central dimension of trust. Holt (2004) approaches the dimension of authenticity from a postmodern branding, rather than heritage branding, perspective. Under this classification, brands may

attempt to achieve authenticity by positioning themselves as a cultural resource. The arrival of what Holt (2004, p.86) terms the “post-postmodern” branding paradigm involves the individual as a creative consumer of brands, no longer perceiving brands to be “inauthentic” if they fail to distance themselves from profit connotations, but rather accepting this aspect so long as the brand is appreciated as a profitmaking concern.

It becomes clear that trust, authenticity, and affinity are the socially constructed aspects of the brand that allow it to remain relevant on the omni-temporal plane. Understanding them as such indicates conceptualising brand heritage as a “dialogue” between the brand, its history, and its constituency. Given that Qantas enjoys enduring status as Australia’s national carrier, this conceptual framework delivers an ideal opportunity to provide insight into how cultural heritage negotiates with, and possibly disputes, corporate heritage, which in turn influences the evolution of the corporate and cultural symbols embedded in the flight attendant uniform, with the aim of appearing authentic and maintaining a sense of affinity between the brand and its stakeholders. In their study on the links between corporate brand heritage and corporate social responsibility, Blombäck and Scandeliuss (2013) flag the concept of cultural heritage, as an adjunct to corporate heritage, as an avenue for further research (Blombäck and Scandeliuss, 2013). Hakala, et.al. (2011) offer further support for this avenue by noting that the brand heritage literature is lacking in conceptual research, and in links between the key brand heritage concepts and national cultural heritage. The study proposes the twin axes of homogeneity – the extent to which cultural heritage is shared within the nation – and endurance – the length of time the nation and its cultural heritage has existed – as pertinent to the understanding of how a heritage brand may integrate into a country with a similarly established heritage. Hakala, et.al. (2011) do not state as much, but the logical extension to their conceptualisation is to posit that both homogeneity and endurance within a culture will impact all three dimensions that Balmer (2011) proposes as essential to a heritage brand: authenticity and affinity, leading to trust. The research of Hakala, et.al. (2011) may thus be adapted to better appreciate the process of introducing a new flight attendant uniform to a heritage brand functioning within an established national cultural heritage context.

Balmer claims that heritage brands embody “augmented role identities” (2013, p.312): a mix of socio-political, national and cultural identities generated externally to the identity of the organisation, which renders them a special case in the branding literature. Qantas has long marketed itself as “The Spirit of Australia”, and enjoys a corporate heritage that interacts, and occasionally clashes, with national, cultural and socio-political heritage. Individuals – be they employees, media professionals, or the general public – may experience an affinity for the

Qantas brand that is either supported or subverted by the introduction of the new uniform. The Qantas uniform itself may operate with symbolic relevance on multiple levels of identity, not just at the level of the corporation.

Venturing outside the handful of foundational studies within the field of corporate brand heritage, it becomes obvious that few research avenues have yet been explored. Studies exist, for instance, on the integration of family history into corporate brand heritage (Blombäck and Brunninge, 2013), and on the correlation between brand heritage and consumer attitudes towards automotive brands (Wiedmann, et.al., 2011), however the concept of heritage branding is, for the most part, developed from research and theories adapted from Balmer's original study of the British Monarchy (Balmer, 2004). Balmer (2011) notes that further research into heritage branding is required, in particular applying his frameworks to corporate heritage brands in other sectors, to discern the extendability of the findings. This study proposes to apply Balmer's conceptualisation of corporate heritage branding to the case of Qantas, with a particular focus on the evolution of its flight attendant uniform as a means of keeping the corporate heritage brand current.

2.2. Uniforms and organisational dress: revealing and concealing identity

There exists a large body of literature approaching the topic of uniforms and organisational dress from a number of disciplinary perspectives, the consensus being that uniforms comprise multiple facets with multiple effects at both the individual and the group level (Damhorst, 1990). Uniforms deliver a sense of legitimacy (Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997; Rafaeli, et.al., 1997) and inspire the un-uniformed population to comply with orders in a manner which, according to Bickman (1974), may exist independently of the individual wearing the uniform. Within a commercial context, the perceived "appropriateness" of a uniform may influence customer expectations regarding service quality, particularly if it forms a peripheral cue in low involvement purchase situations, as Shao, et.al. (2004) discovered in their inquiry into customer perceptions of banking service personnel.

A uniform not only sets an individual apart from the non-uniformed population, it serves to suppress the extra-occupational identity of that individual (Rafaeli, et.al., 1997; Joseph and Alex, 1972). This suppression need not be absolute: Rafaeli and Pratt (1993) conclude that the conflict engendered by a possible change of dress in a hospital rehabilitation setting indicates the presence of "hybrid identities" within the unit. Organisational dress, in other words, is not

a unified and uncontested signifier of organisational core values or occupational identity, whether viewed from inside or outside the organisation.

Uniforms identify a group as well as the hierarchical structure of that group, including the set of norms to which the uniformed individual is expected to submit (Peluchette and Karl, 2007; Adomaitis and Johnson, 2005; Nelson and Bowen, 2000; Joseph and Alex, 1972). Craik (2003, p.139) notes that female uniforms may follow one of two patterns: the “quasi-masculine” style meant to convey authority and discipline, and the “feminised” style associated with traditionally feminine traits of caring and emotional alignment with the uniform viewer: what Hochschild (1983) terms, with reference to the feminised, friendly service work expected of flight attendants, “emotional labour”. Whether or not the new Qantas uniform is associated with “feminine” style or signifies other, more gender neutral traits, attracts thematic attention in my research.

Organisational dress may be prescriptive, but it is not necessarily restrictive. Rafaeli, et.al. (1997) find that female administrative employees use their dress knowledge to select “appropriate” choices for their office environment, in order to embody their occupational role more convincingly to themselves as well as to others. The choice may be minimal for those in professions that require a uniform – the selection between the shift dress or the skirt, shirt and blazer combination for the new Qantas female flight attendant uniform, for instance – however Rafaeli and Pratt (1993) consider studies of organisational dress as crucial to comprehending organisational behaviour, and I propose that the same may be claimed regarding the centrality of organisational dress to the communication of brand promise and values, particularly in a heritage context.

2.2.1. The uniform in hospitality, travel and tourism

Uniforms may confer a sense of validity (Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997), however its legitimacy may be challenged, depending on the population in which it operates (Timmons and East, 2011; Craik, 2003; Joseph and Alex, 1972). This may be the case when a new flight attendant uniform is introduced: the legitimacy, authority and meaning of the old uniform – its authenticity, in corporate brand heritage terms – may not automatically transfer to the new garment. A telling study by Adomaitis and Johnson (2005) revealed that an airline’s decision to change its formal uniform of skirt or pants, teamed with a jacket, to the less formal shorts and t-shirt, impacted traveller interactions with cabin crew as well as the crew’s self-perceptions of their professionalism and ability to execute their role. This was found to be particularly true when flight attendants required a level of authority in dealing with

passengers, but also when interacting with flight attendants from other airlines maintaining a formal style of flight attendant dress (Adomaitis and Johnson, 2005). While the casual uniform was often reported as more comfortable than the formal attire, the formal uniform boosted grooming standards and self-perceptions of competence (Adomaitis and Johnson, 2005).

Black's (2013) research charts the progression of the Qantas uniform from quasi-military associations towards the engagement of international fashion designers to devise new uniforms from the 1960s as a means of marketing itself on the world stage – what Black (2013, p.180) terms a “cosmopolitan modernism”. This is balanced, Black (2013) concludes, by the fact that basic elements of the uniform – the dress, suit, and court shoe – have remained similar enough over time to establish a connection with the airline's history, marking at least two points, past and present, on the omni-temporal dimension identified as so important to the operation of a heritage brand such as Qantas (Balmer, 2013). If this is the case, the presence of the Christian Louboutin stiletto in the Sydney Fashion Week debut of the uniform assumes added significance, as the site of possible contestation between the cosmopolitan/fashion aims of the airline and the utilitarian aspects of the uniform, or at least of the occupationally prescribed court shoe, visible by its absence on the catwalk.

Research into post-war “sky girls” (Boris, 2006) essays the interplay between the acceptance and rejection of the image of sexual availability peddled by some airlines, particularly during the 1960s as designers such as Emilio Pucci and Oleg Cassini were engaged to provide an aesthetic of sexual availability to replace the association of flight attendants with glamour apparent in previous eras. Building on the work of Hoelsch (1983), Warhurst and Nickson (2009) examine the concept of aesthetic labour and sexualised labour, both useful concepts through which to examine the interplay between the expectations and behaviours of airline management, passengers and cabin crew themselves regarding the sexual and aesthetic commodification of the image of the flight attendant. If the current Qantas uniform is any indication, the last few decades may have ushered out the overtly sexual connotations in flight attendant uniforms, perhaps as a function of change within the travel industry and/or wider social, cultural and technological changes. The possibility is given consideration in the research presented below (see Section 4.3).

Studies exist in general hospitality contexts charting consumer preferences for uniform colour (Tasci, et.al., 2014), and the correlation between uniform style and employee satisfaction, which in turn influences guest perceptions of hotel employee performance (Nelson and

Bowen, 2000; Tu, et.al., 2011). However, my literature search did not reveal a wealth of research around the topic of the airline uniform. Aside from the above, the sole field report into flight attendant uniforms located is by Haise and Rucker (2003), examining discrete components of airline uniforms to ascertain the influence of each on flight attendant self-perceptions. Fit and fabric were revealed to be two major areas for dissatisfaction among flight attendants, with the conclusion that greater consultation with employees will improve employee satisfaction and performance (Haise and Rucker, 2003).

The dearth of research into flight attendant uniforms, together with revelations that aspects of the uniform affect flight attendants themselves as well as the travelling public (Adomaitis and Johnson, 2005; Haise and Rucker, 2003), justifies further research into how meaning is generated at such intersections as between the uniform, brand heritage, and political-cultural narratives. As Black states (2013), the flight attendant's uniform operates on several levels, from the level of global and corporate brand signifier, to the level of safety and security, to the level of signifier of fashion, glamour, and femininity. It is the intention of this study to delve further into the meaning-making process, with a focus on the execution of a single campaign for the introduction of a new uniform within the context of Qantas as a heritage brand.

2.3. Symbolic consumption: the airline industry

Several aspects of airline operations have been the subject of research, dimensions related to the more symbolic and aspirational elements involved in air travel. A sense of safety and assurance (Gilbert and Wong, 2003), service quality (Ostrowski, et.al., 1993), and ticket price (Dolnicar, et.al., 2011; Thurlow and Jaworski, 2006) are undeniably important factors driving choice between airlines. However, loyalty to a particular carrier is not always driven by price: positive word of mouth is found to be an indication of customer loyalty across product and service classes, as it involves a level of personal risk to the individual providing the recommendation (Reichheld, 2003). Dolnicar, et.al. (2011) reveal that loyalty is best predicted by an airline's status as the flag carrier for the respondent's home country, by membership of the airline's frequent flyer programme, and by the airline's reputation as perceived by the respondent's friends, while airlines often use frequent flyer programmes to position certain travellers as the "elite" among their passenger base (Thurlow and Jaworski, 2006) as a means of inspiring loyalty.

Lash and Urry (1994, p.6) theorise on the increasing “expressive component” of goods and services as the locus of exchange value, particularly in the act of travel, constructed as a contribution to the “aesthetic reflexivity” project of the traveller, in that “place-myths” are fashioned through the practice of interpretation of the self and the social domain in which the self is located. The consumer of airline travel, in this paradigm, is transformed into a producer of meaning, via the semiotic conduit of the aesthetic experience of travel. It is not difficult to extrapolate that, under these conditions, the aesthetic components of a brand – be it a destination, a place of accommodation, or a mode of transportation – assume a greater competitive importance. The flight attendant uniform, then, must be designed with interpretation in mind.

A trio of studies provides social semiotic analyses of the visual branding elements of airlines. Commonalities in typeface and tailfin were discovered by Budd (2012) in a visual content analysis, which also revealed that low-cost carriers did not share the tendency of full-service carriers to use the colours of the home country’s national flag in visual branding design. Taylor, et.al. (2013) present complementary results in their visual branding analysis, showing that full-service carriers tend to use cultural symbols and elements of history in their livery, while low-cost carriers are more likely to include their corporate name on the aircraft tailfin. Thurlow and Aiello (2007) also note similarities in carriers’ choice of cultural symbols on tailfin livery, as well as commonalities in the use of colours such as blue and red, icons denoting flight such as birds, and celestial objects such as stars. The necessity of rebranding to remain current, with the concurrent risk of alienating the traditional customer base, is highlighted by Thurlow and Aiello (2007) in their documentation of the disastrous attempt of British Airways to appear “modern” by replacing its traditional tailfins depicting the British flag with more globally diverse imagery: in its haste to change with the times, British Airways misjudged the symbolic balance between global relevance and national identity.

Balmer, et.al. (2009) also document the failure of British Airways’ attempt at visual rebranding to a more globally diverse image, in a case study on the evolution of British Airways from struggling national carrier to competitive corporate brand over a 30-year period. The study is presented as a means of exploring the question of how managers identify and rectify corporate identity mistakes. A framework developed by Balmer, et.al. (2009) reveals the major concerns regarding corporate identity over the period leading to the privatisation of the carrier, and emphasises its evolving position as a premium airline with a livery reliant on British heraldry, visually reinforcing the idea of the traditional, polite, British approach to service available inside the aircraft. The concept of corporate branding was,

according to then-CEO Lord Colin Marshall an untested strategy within the airline industry, but which aimed to deliver “style and value”, rather than discount service, to customers, and a locus of pride for employees (Balmer, et.al., 2009, p.14). Balmer, et.al. (2009) conclude that the bonds which certain corporate brands foster within the community play a part in the formation of national identity, and therefore may raise the corporate brand to the national level. If a similar pattern might be observed with Qantas, examining the reactions to the introduction of a new uniform may illuminate the interplay between Qantas as corporate brand, and Qantas as Australian national symbol.

2.3.1. Assistance and resistance: the image of the flight attendant

Flight attendants have formed the subject of a small number of studies within the air travel and tourism literature. Baum (2012), who notes the “overtly sexualized” (2012, p.1191) representations of female flight attendants in the advertising images for many East Asian and South East Asian airlines, mines biographical material, comics and romantic fiction to provide an investigation of popular representations of female flight attendants from the golden age of flight to the present day. Baum (2012) offers insight into the exclusions inherent in the work of the female flight attendant, presenting as evidence the Singapore Girl, whose myth disregards those who do not fit the airline’s narrow parameters regarding culture and ethnicity. Mills (1995) discovers similar negative facts in his analysis of corporate imagery in British Airways’ in-house newsletters: until the 1990s, British Airways’ corporate materials mainly featured white men, rather than women, or men and women of other ethnicities. This finding illustrates how contemporaneous socio-political considerations affect the kinds of images used by corporations to represent the brand. Both studies skirt the issue of the flight attendant uniform, however they furnish potential for further analysis around how representations of the uniform interact with wider discourses such as culture and functionality, and how this might favour one particular “reading” of the uniform.

Murphy’s (1998) study of flight attendant resistance to organisational power reminds the reader that reality within an organisation is far less united than first appearance may suggest, and that power and meaning are discursive elements of organisational existence. Flight attendants find means to subvert the constant monitoring of their appearance and conduct, such as wearing managerially prescribed makeup only when attending an appearance check, and informing each other of when random bag searches may be executed (Murphy, 1998). Considerations of transgression and subversion such as this provide fruitful areas for study related to the meanings attaching to a uniform. The discursive nature of online reactions and

interactions around the introduction of the new Qantas uniform facilitate this type of approach: it is to the execution of this analysis that I now turn.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1. Epistemological approach

This paper studies the airline uniform as one aspect of corporate visual imagery; an aspect embedded with extra-organisational layers of meaning, yet frequently disregarded in more cursory definitions of corporate visual imagery as a name, symbol, logo or slogan (van den Bosch, et.al., 2005). Given the predicted divergence of meanings extracted from texts around the change in Qantas uniform, I undertook to devise a methodology that departed from positivist, uni-disciplinary approaches to marketing studies, and recognised the flexibility and legitimacy inherent in diverse interpretations, be it those uncovered in the course of data collection, or in the course of my own interpretation of the data. The sociology of knowledge, as described by Berger and Luckman (1966, p.15) in their influential text, prescribes this level of fluidity when addressing epistemological problems: theirs is an inclusive framework which seeks to address *all* knowledge within a society, not just those aspects that have been “validated” through scientific analysis or social consensus.

The critical and relativist roots of social constructionism as an epistemological foundation, and social semiotics as a tool through which to analyse the data, seem complementary, and facilitate a critical analysis of the applicability of the concept of heritage branding to a single, specific event within the history of a brand with a commonly known heritage. It is my hope that this will furnish a methodological contribution to the heritage branding canon, as well as provide a means of addressing corporate dress in a multi-disciplinary fashion, in line with the manner in which we interact with dress as a multi-layered symbolic construct within the consumer culture that characterises late capitalist society (Featherstone, 1991).

3.1.1. Social constructionism

Thematic analysis – the method employed in this study – readily accommodates a social constructionist perspective (Braun and Clarke, 2006). With roots in Marxist theories of the impact of the social on the individual, the central thesis of Berger and Luckman (1966), that reality is socially constructed, presented a seminal prompt that elements of reality, of how we acquire knowledge about those elements, occurs within a social context. Reality here is defined as “...a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition (we cannot ‘wish them away’)...” (Berger and Luckman, 1966, p.13). The change in Qantas uniform may be considered an unequivocal, empirical “reality” in that it would prove impossible to argue that no change took place. Equivocation occurs, however, when the social context is considered: what is significant about the change

may not be universally conceded. In other words, what is “real” about the uniform to Qantas management may not be what is “real” to the consumer inspired to comment about the change on a Facebook conversation thread. Points such as these have given rise to a critical turn in qualitative media research; social constructionism furnishes a means of understanding the selectivity – the “manufacture” – of news by media professionals, and the ways in which recipients of media texts apply social knowledge to permeate these texts with localised meaning (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011).

The idea of the primacy of language as creating and mediating individual experience aligns Berger and Luckman (1966) with the concerns of semiotics, which forms the foundation for my data analysis. The Saussurean view of language as the site of multiple meanings, which in turn creates, or constructs, social knowledge of a practice (Thibault, 1997; Berger and Luckman, 1966), validates my choice of thematic content analysis to parse the discourses surrounding a change in uniform, in search of the deeper structures of meaning around the practical and symbolic functions of organisational dress, and the social contestation that occurs when that uniform is altered. The idea that language serves as an instrument of legitimation (Halliday, 1978) establishes the importance of analysing textual reactions to a visual artefact such as the Qantas uniform. This is particularly true of instances of change such as the introduction of a new uniform, which may in the social constructionist view be seen as illegitimate, or at the very least problematic, as it has not yet entered the reality of everyday experience through the dialectical process of habitualisation and institutionalisation (Berger and Luckman, 1966). While the habitualisation and subsequent institutionalisation of new meanings for a new uniform, through corporate communications such as press releases or the Fashion Week catwalk uniform showcase, is by no means ensured, it may be rendered difficult for an individual external to the organisation to challenge this process as this entails positing a new narrative with which to interpret the uniform, and having this narrative become habitualised within the society to the point where it usurps the original reality, or is at the very least legitimised as a competing reality.

At this point, a qualification begs to be presented: Berger and Luckman (1966), having composed their influential text in a period pre-dating the internet, may not have appreciated the fluidity of the concept of objectivity engendered through the use of such easy-access platforms of social knowledge as social media. The coercive power of the uniform to be interpreted in a specific manner, if not the tangible, historical authority contained within the garment itself, may be easier to challenge under conditions in which the exchange of interpretations and re-interpretations of the meaning of the new uniform are rendered

extensive and almost instantaneous. It is the assessment of Strati (2000) that, within the bounds of organisational life at least, the social construction perspective does not favour one voice to the exclusion of others, regardless of respective levels of authority (See also: Creed, 2002). The data for my study thus encompasses corporate voices, media voices, and consumer voices; it is my intention to examine how the different voices “heard” at the time of the change in uniform are constructed in relation to the understanding of the new uniform, and in relation to each other.

Subscription to the concept of inter-subjectivity lies at the heart of social constructions of knowledge (Meyer, et.al., 2013; Flick, et.al, 2004): the social world needs must be produced and understood socially, with multiple sites of intersection between the individual’s conception of reality and that of their social co-habitants. Within organisational bounds, several cultures interact in the co-creation of ideologies, beliefs, and other dimensions that contribute to what Strati (Citing Barthes, 1998, p.1381) terms the “open text” of organisational symbolism. The permeability of boundaries allows an organisational text, such as those addressing the Qantas uniform – and, of course, the uniform itself – to be disseminated, interpreted, rejected, and re-negotiated by external and internal stakeholders. The individual contributes to the process of inter-subjective understanding on the broader scale, and perhaps has a role to play in shifting the foundations upon which this inter-subjectivity rests. Social constructionism, then, is adaptable to postmodern and post-structural modes of inquiry: the system may shape and constrain the individual (Foucault, 1977), but, over time, the individual is capable of shaping and constraining the system. This pluralistic, unstable cycle of meaning-exchange, highly dependent upon the individuals who constitute a system and the cultural codes that inform how they situate themselves within it (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011, p.45), alters the ways in which phenomena can accrue meanings, and the nature of those meanings.

There is, then, the temporal problem of legitimation that forms over-arching line of thematic inquiry for my thesis: the transference of established “knowledge” about a particular society from one generation to the next is by no means guaranteed (Berger and Luckman, 1966). Balmer (2013) introduces the concept of omni-temporality as a way for brands to stretch across time and diverse identities, however the transference of legitimation from one “generation” of uniform to the next is not a foregone conclusion. The ease of transference may be attributed to the strength with which the “symbolic universe” is internalised by the members of a society. Symbolic universes are defined as omni-temporal entities that connect disparate experiences, act as conduits for collective memories, deliver authority to the

dominant version of social reality, and provide a means of predicting the future at a social level by offering a template for individual behaviour (Berger and Luckman, 1966. See also: Flick, et.al., 2004; Goffman, 1959). Symbolic universes are, however, not as complete as they may appear: institutions may require “universe-maintenance” to establish or re-establish legitimacy, particularly during periods where the symbolic universe has shifted to the point that the institution no longer functions as it did in the past. A change in uniform may be seen as both an attempt by the company to perform “universe-maintenance” on the brand, particularly one that has a prominent heritage, such as Qantas, and an attempt by the recipients of the corporate message to accept or challenge the company’s refinement of the symbolic universe of the national flag carrier.

In a postmodern age, when corporations rival the historical role of religion as the site of immense institutional power, and brands form one currency with which we establish our identity in relation to society (Featherstone, 1991), we are granted ease of physical access to information – to knowledge within the symbolic universe we inhabit. We may thus find it easier than Berger and Luckman (1966) admit to question the monopolistic conceptualisation of our symbolic universe by any institution. In other words, the “plausibility structure” that governs the subjective response to a new uniform may require a surfeit of effort to understand within the context of the previous uniform; this is when the opportunity for reinterpretation, and for a new, and more plausible, symbolic universe to emerge, occurs.

A neo-Marxist interpretation might view the flight attendant uniform as a symbol of late capitalism, absorbing and transmitting meaning via systems such as fashion and consumer culture. Social constructionism allows the analysis of such systems through the concept of the symbolic universe and the assignment of meaning to events with reference to the social history that engendered them (Durepos, et.al., 2012; Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). The concept also aligns with the emphasis on omni-temporality as crucial to the successful operationalisation of brand heritage (Balmer, 2013; Hakala, et.al., 2011). It is, therefore, the ideal lens through which to conduct a thematic analysis of texts about how a uniform change is internalised by different society members. There exists an additional logical fit between the epistemology, with its debt to Mead’s theory of symbolic interactionism (Strati, 2000; Berger and Luckman, 1966), and the reference to symbolic interactionism as the theoretical lens through which Hudson and Balmer (2013) refine the extant heritage branding frameworks. If, as Thibault (1997, p.87) declares of Saussure’s position, a change in one element, such as a uniform, occasions change in the system in which it is located, be it at the level of the corporation or the macro-level narratives of fashion or brand culture (Schroeder, 2002), it is

impossible to view the change in Qantas uniform as a disconnected phenomenon. It must be viewed as constitutive of, and constituted by, the social order in which it exists.

3.1.2. Social semiotics and the (re)presentation of meaning

Raymond Carver (1981) wrote a collection of short stories called *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. A single-word modification of Carver's title distils my research aims and theoretical approach:

What we talk about when we talk about change

Change does not occur in a vacuum: if reality is socially constructed, statements about a new uniform may be inspired by perceived changes in political-cultural signifiers as much as they are an expression of opinion about the aesthetics of the uniform. The introduction of a new uniform occurs at a discrete moment in time; the *reaction* to the introduction of a new uniform references any number of moments in time. To apply Balmer's (2013) framework, past events, present conditions, and projections for the future create a patchwork of sites of possible significance through which the individual may access what, for them, represents the dominant interpretation of the change in uniform.

Brands are understood by Conejo and Wooliscroft (2015) as "semiotic marketing systems": that is, they operate on the level of meaning production, rather than offering a tangible adjust to a product or service. Social semiotics is a multimodal, multi-disciplinary tool (Van Leeuwen, 2005), ideal for identifying the semantic structures behind the manner in which a change in uniform is received. It does not seek to differentiate between high culture, such as the fine arts, and popular culture, such as advertising and branding (Bell and Davison, 2013), permitting the examination of texts and images whose meanings and effects might otherwise pass unnoticed due to judgements about the perceived "worth" of the topic of study. A semiotic methodology is one of several paradigms proposed by Strati (2000) as means through which to analyse organisations in a manner that challenges the more traditional methodologies, and to begin with the assumption that individual actors are capable of critical thought.

Social semiotics differs from so-called "structuralist semiotics" (Van Leeuwen, 2005 p.1) from which it stems in its situation of signs and sign systems (Meyer, et.al., 2013; Hodge and Kress, 1988). Whilst traditional semiotics follows its pioneer scholar, de Saussure, in parsing the tenets of "lexicon" – that is, what signifiers may be attached to what signifieds – and "grammar" – how signifiers and signifieds, combined to form signs, are ordered to create a

message with a meaning – in social semiotics there is no separation of the social from the semantic system through which, around which, and inside which it operates (Meyer, et.al., 2013; Van Leeuwen, 2005). In the words of Hodge and Kress (1988, p.2) social semiotics “...attributes power to meaning, instead of meaning to power.” It is not quite so uni-directional as this statement implies, particularly given the Foucauldian exploration of the circular relationship between power and knowledge – which, in this instance, might be altered to refer to the relationship between power and meaning. Hodge and Kress (1998) admit as much when they admit the possibility of divergence between the intended meaning and the received meaning of a message. The presence of possible divergence delivers justification for my decision to adopt a three-pronged approach to analysing themes emerging from texts around the Qantas uniform change: what Qantas wishes to convey with its communications may not align with what the media reports, or how social media users and existing and potential Qantas customers interpret the garment.

Language is viewed as the chief means of social exchange, and is therefore not a discrete system, but rather a “symbolic resource” that, over time, is itself impacted by the processes of social exchange (Halliday, 1978, p.4). Halliday (1978, p.2) uses the word *discourse* to explain the primacy of language, in its role as text, in facilitating the exchange of meanings between individuals; although the word is problematic in that it may evoke a certain mode of analysis (i.e. discourse analysis), the term is used in this paper as Halliday uses it, although scholars of social semiotics might contend that thematic analysis and discourse analysis are, in contexts such as the one this paper concerns, very similar.

A uniform is a visual artefact; it may seem counter-intuitive to analyse textual references to a change in uniform, however as Barthes (1967) suggests from a fashion context, the sign systems at work behind viewing an item of clothing are not necessarily identical to those that characterise textual representations and interpretations of the same item of clothing. This divergence between reality and language, reality and conception, and conception and language, falls within the theoretical remit of social semiotics (Hodge and Kress, 1988). It is reasonable to assume, then, that writing about a uniform differs from viewing the uniform, and that it is possible to build on the textual foundations of Barthes (1967) by analysing the discourses that contribute to the difference through social semiotics (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001). Such analyses might begin with the proposition that framing – identified by Van Leeuwen (2005) as a multimodal concept – might be applied to the flight attendant uniform to understand it as a means of physically “framing” its own genesis, of creating and constraining the cultural narratives that flow from it.

Language, Halliday (1978) suggests, is culturally determined, and functions to corral conscious experience into a finite number of interpretative possibilities. There is a connection between the ways in which an individual speaks about a thing, and the ways in which they make sense of it within their cultural and economic environment. This connection may yield organisational implications beyond a pure marketing sense, particularly for a brand with an established heritage, such as Qantas, operating within the same cultural and economic environment.

The social contextualisation of statements about the change in Qantas uniform allows for the combination of synchronic and diachronic analyses (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p.26): while the uniform change may be considered as occurring at a distinct moment in time, I predict that reactions to the change will include comparisons to the previous uniform (favourable or unfavourable), the perceived style or “glamour” (or lack thereof) of the uniform and the materials involved, and the legacy of the airline itself. The omni-temporality central to the idea of heritage branding (Balmer, 2013) is thereby satisfied through the application of social semiotics.

Van Leeuwen (2005) breaks the elements of social semiotic analysis into four dimensions: *discourse* – “knowledge about some aspect of reality” (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p.94); the *genre* of text, such as Twitter feed, Facebook post, or news article; the *style*, or manner in which an utterance is expressed; and *modality* as a measure of the extent to which an utterance is true, or represented as true. All semiotic objects contain these elements, according to Van Leeuwen (2005). Social semiotics does not, however, endeavour to provide comprehensive answers, but rather acts as a mechanism for generating questions and posing pathways to possible conclusions (Van Leeuwen, 2005). Halliday (1978, p.139) elaborates:

“...reality consists of meanings, and the fact that meanings are essentially indeterminate and unbounded is what gives rise to that strand in human thought – philosophical, religious, scientific – in which the emphasis is on the dynamic, wavelike aspect of reality, its constant restructuring, its periodicity without recurrence, its continuity in time and space.”

There is no universality, no objective “truth” discoverable through the application of social semiotics, although this does not imply that there are an infinite number of possibilities for the (re)interpretation of a particular semiotic resource, such as a new uniform. Van Leeuwen

(2005, p.4) designates the scope of possible interpretations surrounding a semiotic resource as its “semiotic potential”. This thesis, then, is about the potential meanings of change, or more accurately, the multiple interpretations of one particular instance of change.

3.2. Practical approach

This study employs secondary data, gathered from a wide range of online sources. There is an established strand within qualitative research that harvests extant data such as archival materials (See, for example, Mills, 1998) as the foundation for analysis; it is particularly, though not exclusively, apposite for studies with a theoretical approach rooted in social semiotics, wherein the initial step involves gathering a collection of data for the purposes of forming an “inventory” (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p.6). The approach may be used as a stand-alone method, as in Lazer’s (1986) examination of references to marketing-related issues in Soviet-era *Pravda* newspapers, or may form one segment of a multi-method study, such as the content analysis of advertisements in young adult fashion magazines used by Adomaitis and Johnson (2008) to furnish image categories for ensuing interviews about participant reactions to advertising targeted at young adults.

Guest, et.al. (2013) list two disadvantages to this method of data collection: potential reservations regarding the quality of the documentary evidence collected, and the possibility that the collected data may not be entirely relevant to the research topic, given that it is not generated specifically for the project. The inclusivity characteristic of social semiotics mitigates the first concern: hierarchies of quality or, more correctly, legitimacy, may prevail within particular social contexts, however every act of communication is viewed by practitioners of social semiotics as productive of meaning (See, for example, Van Leeuwen, 2005). As for the second point, the gathering of pre-existing data eliminates the problem of “reactivity” (Citing Padgett, Guest, et.al, 2013, p.252. See also: Krippendorff, 2004; Kolbe and Burnett, 1991) – the possibility that, in the artificial conditions of such processes as an interview, participants may respond in the manner they believe the researcher wishes them to respond – that may result from primary data collection methods.

3.2.1. Data collection and analysis

Data for the study were collected using purposive sampling techniques (Krippendorff, 2004; Boyatzis, 1998). Data collection began with the official Qantas website. The search term “new uniform” yielded two results with embedded links to three videos on the official Qantas YouTube channel. A search of media archives on the Qantas website for the singular term

“uniform” yielded no fresh results. One of these visual documents (Qantas, 2013) – a glossy promotional clip set to music, depicting Australian model Miranda Kerr coveting the new Qantas uniform – did not include any text or dialogue, but does furnish below the clip a paragraph of description, apparently composed by Qantas marketing personnel, intended as a viewer guide as to how the piece should be interpreted. The two Qantas YouTube channel videos that did include dialogue, in the form of personnel interviews (Qantas, 2013a; Qantas, 2013b), were transcribed for future reference. It is interesting to note that comments on all three YouTube videos are marked as closed, and no viewer comments are visible, although whether this is a product of the time lapsed since the introduction of the new uniform or a corporate decision by Qantas to disable this feature on at least some of its YouTube Channel content is uncertain.

A Twitter search for "Qantas new uniform" produced several references to the new Qantas pilot uniform, released in April 2016. The pilot's kit was designed by Martin Grant, also responsible for the flight attendant uniform introduced in 2013, however as my study is restricted to the flight attendant uniform, I utilised the advanced search function on Twitter to re-perform the “Qantas new uniform” search, omitting all results containing the word “pilot” or “pilots”. A similar advanced search was performed on Google, seeking results for "Qantas new uniform" but omitting the words “pilot” and “pilots”. The Google search was carried out until all relevant web page references were collected and captured as PDFs.

Search results for “Qantas new uniform” were also harvested from Facebook. Facebook does not feature the advanced search functionality of Google and Twitter; it was therefore necessary to manually sort relevant references from those that mentioned new uniforms in the context of the pilot kit.

To ensure an exhaustive data collection process, I performed separate searches of individual websites that, in my opinion, may have referred to the introduction of the new Qantas uniform, and that may not have turned up in the Google search results list. These sites included: *Factiva*, *Google News*, *Conde Nast Traveller*, *The Courier Mail*, and *Global Traveler*. This portion of the process yielded minimal results.

The task of “cleaning” the data entailed a number of decisions made to omit certain results in the interest of streamlining the process of analysis. I have, for instance, chosen to disregard references to the new uniform dated prior to the public release of information about the new uniform, April 16, 2014, even though this means disregarding such documents as a glowing

piece announcing Martin Grant as the designer in 2012, via media release on the Qantas website (Qantas announces new uniform designer, 2012). Other omissions include: duplicate items; items in languages other than English; webpages that only post images of the new uniform, with no accompanying text; webpages that do not specifically refer to the new uniform (If, for instance, the uniform is mentioned only in passing in a news article on an unrelated topic); purely technical references to the new uniform, such as Qantas listed as a partner on supplier websites; and references to Qantas employees on LinkedIn.

Data were imported into NVivo 11.3 for Mac. There were certain drawbacks to this decision: NVivo for Mac does not boast the full functionality of the Windows version, and while the NCapture function automatically captured most web pages for direct import into NVivo, the absence of this feature for Twitter and Facebook search results on the Mac platform necessitated my manually copying and pasting relevant Twitter and Facebook search results into Word documents for subsequent import into NVivo. This instance highlights the fact that computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) techniques are not always without inefficiencies (Saldaña, 2009), and that, particularly in the case of analyses of online data, vigilance and perseverance to ensure complete data capture and integrity (McMillan, 2009; McMillan, 2000).

Data were categorised for analysis by media type – news media, popular media, travel media, other trade media, Qantas corporate communications, personal blogs, Twitter and Facebook posts, and miscellaneous. Certain of these categories are fluid and contestable, such that one article may belong to two or more categories – or, as Bordieu (1990) might caution, belong to no category at all, except as an abstract concept. A good example is the Perez Hilton website (Hilton, 2005), which may be argued to belong to the personal blog and popular media categories. In these cases, I was compelled to use personal discretion, with the elementary heuristic that, if it was clear that the author(s) of a site received some sort of remuneration for their efforts, that site should be categorised as one or other of the professional media.

Halliday (1978, p.109) argues for the pre-eminence of the text as “the basic unit of the semantic process”: that is, the means by which statements accrue meaning within a particular context. Halliday approaches social semiotics from a linguistics perspective, and therefore prioritises speech acts, however several of his principles may be applied to written language. Following Halliday, I regard the text as my unit of analysis: each discrete article located online was considered *in toto*. In the case of comments and replies to articles, and tweets, each of these short messages was, likewise, considered a unit of analysis. Coding units, of

course, variously do and do not constitute the whole of a sampling unit, depending upon the size of the sampling unit and the number of disparate themes that may be extracted from the sampling unit (Guest, et.al., 2013). Care was, however, taken to ensure that this open coding method was an iterative process (Krippendorff, 2004), with emergent attributes and themes explored with continuous reference to the extant literature and the overall aims of the research project (Guest, et.al., 2013).

Thematic analysis is, according to Boyatzis (1998, pp.vi-vii), "...a process for encoding qualitative information..." that "...may be identified at the manifest level (directly observable in the information) or at the latent level (underlying the phenomenon)." Given my intention to extract structures of meaning through the practical application of social semiotics to the data, my method may therefore be described as thematic analysis. Despite the fact that my research employs thematic analysis, rather than strict content analysis, I undertook to code the data as if I were conducting a content analysis. This step is not strictly necessary for the type of thematic analysis that concerns me for this project (Saldaña, 2009), however I deemed it politic in order to fully acquaint myself with the vicissitudes of the data during the multiple readings required for coding, and to enable the categorisation of texts on a thematic basis for ease of future reference.

Coding entailed multiple readings of each text in order to extract common themes that emerged around the online discussions of the new uniform. A theme, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.82, "...captures something important about the data in relation to the research question..." and demonstrates prevalence within the data set, though not necessarily in terms of frequency of repetition. For example, I anticipated that many texts, across all three communication groups, would make some reference to the previous uniform, designed by Peter Morrissey, in their discussion of the new uniform, designed by Martin Grant, which relates to the brand history of Qantas and, by association, to the heritage branding concept that underpins my research questions. First cycle coding involved a combination of Exploratory Coding (Saldaña, 2009) to discern initial possibilities for thematic categories, and Theming the Data, to devise more comprehensive descriptions of each theme of interest (Saldaña, 2009).

Themes were altered, integrated, separated, and divested as needed during the Second Cycle Pattern Coding process (Saldaña, 2009). Second Cycle methods are designed to develop more parsimonious thematic and conceptual bases from which to progress (Saldaña, 2009). During this stage, I moved from the descriptive phase of the analysis – identifying themes frequently

addressed in the texts – to the inferential phase (George, 2009), during which I applied the principles of social semiotics in an attempt to parse the significance of the emergent themes and locate them within a wider socio-cultural context. My intention remained to progress towards a set of propositions or assertions, if not a comprehensive theory (Saldaña, 2009), regarding the manner in which a new uniform is interpreted, particularly within the context of a heritage brand. A total of 17 categories were devised within the first cycle of coding; these were further distilled during second cycle coding, with the three thematic constructs I consider to be most salient in terms of the literature and general prominence within the texts chosen for comprehensive analysis.

My data collection and analysis techniques may, at first glance, be labelled content analysis; indeed, I have referred to a number of key texts on the subject of content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004; Neuendorff, 2002; Kassarian, 1977; Berelson, 1971) during the conception of this research. However, the emphasis of many of these texts is on content analysis as a quantitative methodology. For example, Neuendorff (2002, pp.5-6) separates content analysis from other forms of textual analysis, such as discourse analysis, in which the analyst is interested to reveal language attributes through analysis of manifest topics and themes inherent in a text, and semiotic analysis, in which the analyst interprets latent meanings from the text with the aim of uncovering themes of relevance to the society for which the text is perceived to hold significance. This is a somewhat arbitrary separation; semiotic analysis, for instance, necessarily entails a close content analysis of the texts (signifiers) under examination, before their meanings (signifieds) may be discerned.

Boundaries and definitions are, however, contested: George (2009, p.145) uses the term “non-frequency” to indicate the genre of content analysis that focuses on locating (or failing to locate) certain characteristics within the data and inferential hypothesis generation, rather than statistical methods and hypothesis testing. This description sits more closely with the kind of analysis that concerns my research. Duriau, et.al. (2007) note the focus of content analysis on the link between language and cognition; my topic is clearly concerned with aspects of both, and particularly acknowledges the importance of language to the formation and expression of meaning. Krippendorff (2004), too, is less categorical about the statistical imperative, allowing for the emergence of more qualitative approaches to content analysis based in such epistemological traditions as symbolic interactionism, even as he charts the course of its conception in quantitative studies. Krippendorff (2004, p.15), translating Merten, offers this more inclusive definition of content analysis:

““Content analysis is a method for inquiring into social reality that consists of inferring features of a nonmanifest context from features of a manifest text” ... ”

This conceptualisation of content analysis as progressing from the text to the context of use, parallels the process of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis does not present the same criteria for verification as more positivist approaches (Boyatzis, 1998): reliability must be sought by the thematic analyst as a means of establishing the validity of the research. According to Boyatzis (1998, p.146), “Reliability is consistency of judgment that protects against or lessens the contamination of projection.” This definition offers ample scope to form an adequate guideline for researchers producing qualitative, interpretive, or conceptual work. Boyatzis (1998, p.4) indicates that thematic analysis is not a standalone method, but rather a “process” that may be used with a variety of qualitative research methods. I consider the preceding points to provide justification for labelling my practical methodology as thematic content analysis.

3.2.2. Ethics, reliability, and the case for reflexivity

The data used in this project are in the public domain; consultation with Dr Nikki Balnave, of the Faculty of Business and Economics Ethics Committee at Macquarie University, confirmed that I do not need to apply for ethics approval. This does not discharge my obligation to establish an ethical framework with which to approach my research. The concept of reflexivity provides such a framework, ensuring that I question conclusions as I analyse the data and present my findings (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). Krippendorff (2004, p.17) endorses reflexivity with the recommendation that the qualitative content analyst “...acknowledge working within hermeneutic circles in which their own socially or culturally conditioned understandings constitutively participate.” It is difficult to fathom how it might be possible to conduct research via a post-modern or post-structural theoretical lens, or to reference semiotics or consumer culture and branding theories without the researcher first positioning themselves socio-culturally and with respect to their own narrative, particularly in the case of non-frequency thematic content analysis research (George, 2009), even if they do not explicitly state as much.

I have also identified reflexivity as a means to improve the reliability (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000) and “internal coherence” (Holloway and Todres, 2003, p.350) of my study. Validity, achieved in research when an instrument measures what it sets out to measure (Janis, 2009;

Kassarjian, 1977), is problematic concept for qualitative analyses such as thematic content analysis, particularly in the case of such semantic analyses as characterise semiotic studies (Janis, 2009). If, through the transparency facilitated by a reflexive approach to my research, I may convince the reader that my argument has its foundation in the careful application of theory, rather than in personal assumptions, the reader will be convinced of the “face validity” of the work (Krippendorff, 2004), a concept commonly appealed to in qualitative content analyses, in which the reader accepts as reliable any research claims that make sense within a shared cultural framework. There is the additional support of the concept of “construct validity” (Krippendorff, 2004, p.315), which “...acknowledges that many concepts in the social sciences – such as self-esteem, alienation, and ethnic prejudice – are abstract and cannot be observed directly.”

Reflexivity is itself problematic: it may be used to conceal bias (Finlay, 2002); if disconnected with the operation of the text, it can appear irrelevant or self-indulgent (Lynch, 2000); certain modes of reflexivity may invite an endless deconstructive cycle of reflection that robs the research of authority (Finlay, 2002). Lynch (2000, p.47) argues for imbuing reflexivity with “methodological advantage”, so that it illuminates the topic as well as the methodological approach. This forms the justification for my decision to be present within my paper (As with the short observational field notes and commentary on grammar above), and to discuss motivations and processes, together with possible alternative readings, as a means of imbuing my methodology and findings chapters with transparency, and of creating a “rising-above-the-data heuristic” (Saldaña, 2009, p.32) to fuel my analytic processes.

Chapter 4: Discussion of Findings

4.1. The medium distorts the message

It is prudent to begin this chapter with an acknowledgement of the arbitrary separation of sign-systems required to distil the topic to a manageable size. Under the Saussurean model, according to Thibault (1997, p.340), non-linguistic sign systems form a “second order language” incapable of existence outside the language that assigns meaning to them. The reality – the social reality – is somewhat more fluid: if the physical entity of the uniform constitutes a second order language, its very tangibility suggests it should be capable of exerting some level of influence on the first order system inside which it is understood, even if the means of expressing influence are constrained by the limits of the first order sign-system. The opportunity for this quasi-usurpation is perhaps never more pronounced than when a new uniform is introduced, and thus introduces change into the second order system – the physical uniform, the second order, might be said to commandeer, or at least to temporarily co-opt, the substantive power of the first.

The medium of communication is another second order system capable of engaging in this manner of boundary-crossing: writing before the advent of the internet, Marshall McLuhan (1964) famously theorised on the ways in which the medium affects not only the message it transmits, but also the society in which it operates. This is doubly true of online media, which deliver messages with haste and dislocation across heretofore ungovernable distances, facilitating exchanges between strangers in a manner that invites the world into our homes whilst simultaneously distancing us from it. The genre of communication, too, is certain to impact the content (Van Leeuwen, 2005): corporate texts, for instance, bear little structural or thematic resemblance to lifestyle blog posts; any similarities between the two may be a quirk of the medium: if a member of the press or a paid blogger is writing to a deadline, the temptation to copy and paste corporate public relations text may present itself.

Thus we return to the question of how real is the representation (Baudrillard, 1994) when the mimetic object – a photograph of the new Qantas uniform – inspires Facebook user comments such as:

“Red + Black -so chic + indictative [sic] of red+ black in Australian landscape....Love It Especially the ladies coat !!” (Cream, 2013)

The uniform is French navy, not black; user comments mistaking dark blue for black were relatively common within the data set. This neatly establishes a semiotic link between what Barthes (1964) termed the denotation and connotation of the message: the fact of the Qantas uniform, and the evocation it presents of the carrier's country of origin, suggesting that certain cultural narratives pre-exist the garment to guide the interpretation of it. However, these same narratives, combined with the quirks of transmitting images via pixels on a computer screen, lead to a fissure in the first order system through which the second order language – that of the online medium – bleeds into the first order and becomes a demi-linguistic tool, capable of framing thought and co-producing the means of expressing it, if only until the moment of correction.

4.2. The spirit of Australia: corporate and cultural legacy

“I really do see Qantas as being as sort of an ambassador for Australia. It really feels like I’m contributing something to Australia’s history.” Martin Grant (Qantas, 2013a)

Martin Grant, designer of the current Qantas uniform, summarises with this statement a recurrent theme in Qantas promotional materials: the uniform is situated within, and evocative of, a cultural heritage as well as a corporate heritage. This deep connection to place, to a distinctive territorial and cultural identity, is, according to Balmer (2013; see also Balmer, et.al., 2006), an element common to corporate heritage brands. The discourse of nationhood that informs Grant's assessment of Qantas as a national “ambassador” and situates the designer as an individual actor within that grand discourse, delivers to the organisation a dual, performative and reflective, role. It establishes the dimension of affinity (Balmer, 2011) between the brand and its cultural constituents: in this case, the designer Martin Grant.

Culture is notoriously difficult to define. For the purpose of this project, I refer to Hofstede's (1991, p.5) broad classification of culture as “...the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another.” Culture is acquired over time, from diverse sources such as family and friends, educational and occupational institutions. This implies, Hofstede (1991) explains, that culture is a communal, and therefore social, experience. The Qantas corporate view corresponds with this conception: Chief Executive Officer Alan Joyce (Qantas, 2013b) claims that the new uniform designs “...speak of a confident Australia, an Australia that is quietly proud, an Australia that is home everywhere in the world. What could be a better fit for Qantas?” Joyce links the corporation to the country in a relationship that appears, at first, to be symbolic – that is, arbitrary (Van

Leeuwen, citing Peirce, 2005) – for there is no objective phenomenon to suggest the link is organic. The concluding question is employed as a linguistic gambit to anchor the airline more securely to its country of origin: Joyce, in effect, performs the semiotic task of “motivating” the relationship between signifier (Qantas) and signified (Australia) by appealing to the indexical nature – the presence of a “causal relation” (van Leeuwen, 2005, p.49) between signifier and signified – of the new sign (the new uniform). The rhetorical bent of the question is offered as surety that the new uniform, and by extension the brand, may be read as metonymic shorthand for Australia.

Defining “Australianness” proves as problematic as defining and delimiting “culture”. There are certain signifiers that can be viewed as common cultural knowledge (Barthes, 1977), however, as Berger and Luckman (1966) might claim, the “right” to define a particular social reality, such as what constitutes Australianness, is open to contestation, particularly during moments of change. This may explain why the corporate texts surrounding the change in uniform exhibit a high degree of modality, or “truth claims” (Van Leeuwen, 2005): Qantas is not only compelled to establish recognition for the new uniform, it is also, and more strenuously, required to reassert its privileged position as a signifier of Australianness. The dialectical relationship between the brand and the culture it performs and reflects, at the nexus of change, forms the logical extension to research on the interaction between heritage brands and host cultures presented in Hakala, et.al. (2011) and Banerjee (2008), and presents a reminder that culture is fluid at both the micro and macro level. If this were not the case, Qantas would not be required to so explicitly link its moment of change with a sense of change in the discourse and presentation of Australianness. The corporation, in effect, re-positions itself at the cultural hub of its country of origin in an attempt to boost the modality of its claims to heritage at the micro and macro level: what Holt (2004) identifies as a strategy to influence all-important perceptions of authenticity within postmodern consumer culture.

Corporate heritage brands are sources of stability in a changing world, and as such may be capable of sharing aspects of their history with other heritage brands: hence, the British monarchy can be claimed to exist in a relationship with the heritage brand of Great Britain (Balmer, 2011). The proposition that Qantas is synonymous with at least one perceived aspect of Australian heritage – that of adventure – is confirmed in official website copy (Qantas Uniforms, 2013) introducing the uniform with the claim that, “Since it first hit the runway in 1938, the Qantas uniform has been an evocative symbol of service excellence and the irrepressible Australian spirit of travel.” This statement is instilled with an anonymous authority over the process of assigning meaning to the new garment, an elevated modality

achieved courtesy of the unsigned, effectively “author-less”, nature of the claim, for there is no competing identity to that of Qantas: the corporation speaks for itself, establishing a disembodied legitimacy that delivers it a social semiotic verisimilitude (Hodge and Kress, 1988) missing from texts external to the corporation. The claim also appeals to two concepts identified by Cooper, et.al. (2015) as crucial to a successful heritage brand: maintaining the continuity of the brand throughout the change process by connecting the new uniform to previous uniforms, whilst providing a space for an “evolutionary” (Cooper, et.al., 2015, p.422) change with the apparent purpose of keeping Qantas relevant to the contemporary market. Whether or not this succeeds, or is even possible when a single brand element changes without significant alteration to other brand elements, is a latent issue debated in texts external to the corporation, despite its absence from official interpretations of the event.

Media engagement with the theme of corporate and cultural heritage resembles the interpretation proposed by Qantas, albeit with some subtle semiotic refinements. In a 2GB interview with Martin Grant, journalist Ross Greenwood (2013) describes the Qantas uniform as “...almost the most identifiable Australian product...”, attributing to the garment a tangibility absent from the indexical-symbolic construct offered by Joyce, or the immanence inherent in the corporation's insistence that the garment represents the “spirit” of Australian adventure and service excellence (Qantas Uniforms, 2013). Greenwood's description of the dress as a “product” references its operation on the mimetic plane (Hodge and Kress, 1988), as a signifier for the reality of the Qantas cabin experience. Meanwhile, on the semiotic plane (Hodge and Kress, 1988), the Merino wool used in the manufacture of the uniforms takes centre stage in a *Rural Weekly* (2013) report that claims the material is, like Qantas, “central to the fabric of our nation.” This dual-pronged metaphor (wool as literal and figurative fabric) deepens the discursive flow around the cultural heritage narrative by removing the economic dimension: the material, like the airline, emerge from the assumption of a shared experience of the past as authentic, uncontested symbols of Australianness. This category of symbolic brand performativity operates within the dimension defined by Hudson and Balmer (2013, p.351) as “mythical heritage”: appealing to a common, possibly invented, cultural and brand history. A problem occurs, however, when the operation of mythical heritage becomes too rooted in the past, or overly estranged from the brand history; this problem will be further discussed in sections 4.3 and 4.4.

Journalist Melissa Hoyer (2013) uses prescriptive and inclusive language, rather than metaphor, to naturalise the ideology that informs her interpretation:

“What I love about the new uniforms is they reflect where Australia is now, when it comes to style.

“We are now playing on a global stage and we don’t need to take literal meanings into our uniform choices.

“When Australian designer Peter Morrissey created the Qantas boomerang print, well over a decade ago, it fitted into that mode of post Sydney Olympics, loving-allthings-Aussie glory.

“These new uniforms, designed by tailoring master Martin Grant put us on a grown up, global and stage equal to the rest of the world.”

Hoyer’s piece, and other media texts like it, may not extract identical meanings from the new uniform, still they tacitly endorse the corporate narrative, that of the continued cultural relevance of Qantas. Koh (2015, citing Peirce) labels this discursive agreement *commens*. Commens permits a brand to be performative, to affect signification within the socio-cultural sphere. The indigenous print of the previous uniform is now too literal a signifier of Australianness; the “global stage” necessitates, for media professionals such as Hoyer, the standardisation of cultural signifiers in a kind of converse relationship to the one that is, perhaps, expected. Thus, although the cultural narrative encompasses the corporation, rather than Qantas conforming to more manifest historical symbols of the narrative, such as the indigenous print of the Peter Morrissey uniform or the prominent kangaroos that decorated the Yves Saint Laurent-designed uniform of 1986-1994, the new uniform is interpreted as an unproblematic instance of the “corporatisation” of the country of origin. The uniform is an abstraction of Australianness, a latent step sideways in the chain of signification, indicative of what Thurlow and Aiello (2007, p.308) term the “...increasing deterritorialization of visual imagery” characteristic of 21st century aviation. The use of the pronouns “we” and “us” connote a sense of solidarity, of a collective ideology that functions as a meta-sign (Hodge and Kress, 1988), encouraging the interpreter to submit to this reading of the garment.

An article on *Yahoo 7* makes similar reference to the “non-literal” interpretation of the new uniform, in relation to the “iconic red triangle” unique to the Qantas livery (Ashton, 2013). The abstraction read into the uniform may be prudent, depending on the strength and flexibility of the cultural heritage of the diverse countries into which Qantas seeks to insert itself as a possibly competing culturally-branded presence (Hakala, et.al., 2011). However, capitalising on brand heritage may, over time, result in passengers and community members investing the brand with a national significance that cannot be supported by a standardised

uniform: the brand is, in effect, operating within and manipulating social discourse at a national as well as corporate level (Balmer, 2009). Qantas is still “iconic” (Ashton, 2013): it means something about Australia, about “us” (Hoyer, 2013); it presents and represents the country to the world. Whether or not the majority of interpreters believe the representation should be indexical, or a more abstract set of signifiers open to interpretive latitude regarding whether or not they evoke the corporation and/or the country, is the pivotal point of success or failure for the uniform as a visual brand artefact. A perceived sense of authenticity is established as an important dimension for heritage brands (Balmer, 2011); a widespread failure to accept the corporate proposition of meaning may result in the uniform being interpreted as “inauthentic”, un-representative of the brand and the country of origin. The choices to be made regarding each uniform refreshment or replacement are therefore significantly more complex than the design and functionality concerns of other, non-heritage brands.

The confluence of corporate and media interpretations of the event integrate the new uniform into the existing logonomic system (Hodge and Kress, 1988); should the narrative be widely accepted, the Qantas brand may be said to achieve maximum performativity, in that it directs the semantic labour of corporate message interpreters towards company-defined ideas about Australianness, and away from competing Qantas narratives such as the outsourcing of certain maintenance operations to Asia, and the recent spate of redundancies. This would indicate that Qantas has maintained the sense of affinity with its stakeholders so important to the enduring success of brand heritage as a point of difference (Balmer, 2011). The above shows, however, that the change in uniform opens a space through which complementary discourses may be reworked, and new modalities established, or at least proposed. A change in uniform may prompt people to think more deeply about what it contributes to the heritage of Qantas than might be the case at other, more stable points in the brand’s history. This is the exchange between normalisation and differentiation that Leitch and Motion (2007) caution must be managed expertly. Schroeder (2002, p.114), citing Heilbrunn, makes a similar point about the “contradictory principle” that may co-exist within a brand, however there are limits when it comes to the pull between the past and the present for a brand trading on its history, as the corporate heritage literature (E.g. Balmer, 2009; Urde, et,al, 2007) suggests.

Stakeholder contemplation about the relevance of the brand as a cultural resource is something Holt (2002) predicted of postmodern consumer culture, however the texts surrounding the change in uniform signify that it may be difficult to simultaneously market a brand on cultural and corporate heritage dimensions: certain public online comments illustrate

the fact that the semantic shift between the two may not always be smooth, and a design decision towards a more corporate or “global” style may be interpreted as a rejection of the country of origin, of the “affinity” bond between brand and host country, or at the very least of its traditional signifiers. This will not necessarily be viewed as contrary to the corporate heritage of Qantas, as the following exchange on a *TripAdvisor* thread indicates:

“Where is there anything Australian in the design...nothing they could be an Icelandic airline. What is with the pink ?? I know it should be fashionable but they are not Paris models they are symbols of our country !!!! Bring back our kangaroo or at least something that makes them Australian !!!!”
(Robyn27, 2013)

“That's fair enough, but it's not all about displaying national icons, and has a lot to do with corporate identity. It would be akin to saying why aren't the US based carriers wearing uniforms with Stars and Stripes or patterned prints of baseballs or burgers on them...” (KVE1005, 2013)

“At last there is a sensible design. I love the look, will make our countries airline crew stand out. I believe it is based on a corporate look, not so much Australia.” (AndyOz (2013)

The debate here is to what extent the uniform is, or should be, a signifier of Australia rather than of Qantas: corporate heritage as semiotically estranged from cultural heritage. The first user cannot separate the uniform from the socio-cultural discourse within which it produces and reflects symbolic significance; the absence of traditional Australian motifs such as the kangaroo destabilise the uniform as a sign-system to the extent that it is now a floating signifier, representative of nowhere and everywhere. The second user counters with the reminder that Qantas is a corporation first and foremost; the second sentence adopts a quasi-sarcastic style and exaggerated version of “Americanness” to imply, as certain media texts such as those above do, that a non-literal approach to the uniform as a symbol of its country of origin signifies a more mature, less insular country. The final comment dismisses the idea of cultural heritage, although the use of “our countries” to describe the distinctiveness the uniform will deliver for the crew suggests this user is at least partially situated within the dominant logonomic system even whilst rejecting its relevance to the discussion: regardless of the fact that the design is more corporate than cultural, “we” expect from the uniform some manner of presentation and representation of Australianness.

It is important to conclude this section with a comment about the thin but semiotically cavernous divide between heritage and nostalgia. Nostalgia seeks to idealise the past in order to evoke a feeling of safety and well-being within the individual (Balmer, 2011). It is a bittersweet, backward-looking discourse that does not suit the socio-technological bent of Qantas, particularly as it discards its traditional alliance with British Airways in favour of greater access to Europe via partnership with Emirates Airlines. It is surprising, then, that the tight, anonymous corporate machine that produced the slick texts such as those above advertise Grant as using this awkward, un-progressive word – “nostalgia” – to describe his feelings towards the symbolism Qantas evokes for him as an expatriate Australian (Qantas, 2013b). The conservatism of the word, of the state, and of attempts at branding products and services as “nostalgia”, perhaps matches the restraint, the corporate uniformity, of the uniform. However, it is a decorative but ultimately empty signifier (Baudrillard, 1994), devoid of referent, existing in a present that looks to an imagined past with a deliberate ignorance of the future. It is the type of symbolic semiotic link that is one step weaker than that to which Qantas, with its appeals to cultural authenticity, aspires. A similar complication arises in a *Yahoo 7* report on the new uniform:

“Unlike the previous 2003 design by Peter Morrissey, the new uniform does not feature aboriginal motifs. It's retro chic with a modern twist.” (Ashton, 2013)

Arguably, retro branding (Brown, 2001) is not as complex as heritage branding; it is, like nostalgia, concerned to idealise, and occasionally invent, the past (Balmer, 2013; Hudson and Balmer, 2013; Brown, 2001). It is less temporally situated than heritage branding requires (Balmer, 2013), less solid, more performative as a simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1994), a copy without an original that attributes to the uniform a symbolic passivity that does not sit easily with the multiple, multi-faceted, functions the uniform is, and must be, capable of performing. Retro branding is not unique; it is eminently reproducible, available to any organisation to exploit (Hakala, et.al., 2011). The construction of the uniform as “retro” may be interpreted as referencing not Qantas, but a generic marketing strategy that lacks the history, the sense of *provenance*, of the brand.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001, p.10) define provenance as the practice whereby “...we constantly ‘import’ signs from other contexts (another era, social group, culture) into the context in which a new sign is formed, with the intention of signifying ideas and values associated with the initial context by those who import the sign.” The word *provenance*, used in art history as a method of tracing the lines of ownership of valuable artefacts, forms an

effective addition to the concept of corporate heritage branding, to describe the process by which a corporation links corporate and cultural heritage. In the case of Qantas, three signifiers – corporate history, country of origin, and the new uniform – are linked in an attempt to re-establish Qantas’s “ownership” of their corporate and cultural heritage. It is perhaps, then, in instances of change that provenance becomes most significant: it functions as a means of anchoring the change to some pre-existing cultural code, so that it does not become a floating signifier, or a nostalgic nod to a hollow history.

4.3. It’s a glamorous job, but someone’s gotta do it: fashion and the flight attendant

“You want that sense of glamour in the air, and even on the ground. To me, flying is so exciting, it’s still glamorous and we create that experience by the clothes that we, you know, put on our people.” Katya Noble, Project Style, Uniform Designer (Qantas, 2013b)

The theme of glamour, the location of the flight attendant uniform within the discursive narrative of fashion, surfaces regularly in the corporate, media, and consumer texts collected for analysis. The interpretation of the uniform as a signifier for glamour is encouraged by the corporation: Noble, above, repeats the word twice in quick succession, connecting the physical experience of travel with the theatrical experience, to create a sign-system whose referent – the uniform – has not only shifted from the mimetic to the semiotic plane (Hodge and Kress, 1988), but has assumed a decorative connotation which sublimates the functional and regulatory aspects of cabin crew dress, and calls into question its legitimacy as a garment capable of signifying a particular occupation (Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997). Fashion media frequently agree with the corporate assessment: *Vogue Australia* (2013) quotes Martin Grant, designer of the uniform, as claiming Qantas staff informed him that “they wanted glamour back”.

Corporate appeals to glamour are as problematic to a heritage brand as the appeals to nostalgia (Balmer, 2013) discussed in the preceding section. The heritage branding literature is, as far as my research indicates, silent on the issue, yet I contend that glamour aligns closely with nostalgia and retro-branding in that it harkens back to a “Golden Age” (Leitch and Motion, 2007; Thrift, 2006), an age that never existed as socio-temporal certainty. Jameson (1998, p.5) labels this type of imitation pastiche, a “blank parody” of styles existing with more semantic certitude in other spatio-temporal systems. Unlike organisational dress that does not so specifically establish a semiotic connection with glamour, a uniform that

relies too heavily on this dimension may become incapable of signifying the brand. Indeed, the “glamorous” uniform may be rendered incapable of signifying anything other than the idea of glamour. This is what Barthes (1967, p.8) refers to in his assertion that “written clothing” – that is, the text accompanying photographs of clothing in fashion magazines – harbours no function outside its own signification, as a textual referent to the discourse of fashion that consumes it. External recipients of the corporate text emphasising the glamour narrative are thus likely to respond in kind, with language that positions fashion as the fulcrum, decreeing the colour-blocked uniform “on trend” and reserving special admiration for “the accessorised waist belt” (Alexandra, 2013), or the manner in which the “smart trilby hat complements the tailored trench coat” (*UK Telegraph*, 2013); all comments that would not be out of place in fashion editor copy describing new season catwalk designs. The omni-temporality identified within the literature as imperative to the successful management of a heritage brand such as Qantas (Urde, et.al., 2007; Balmer, et.al., 2006) cannot be operationalized without reference to a real past, whether that past be located within the confines of the brand, or within the wider cultural economy. It is this aspect that breeds authenticity, which establishes the mutual trust between the brand and its stakeholders (Balmer, 2011) necessary to preserve brand heritage throughout a period of change.

Martin Grant plays a pivotal character around which Qantas mythologises (Barthes, 1957) its new uniform – its “makeover”, to adopt a fashion industry colloquialism. For if the thematic recurrence of glamour were not enough to demonstrate the case, it is difficult to deny, given the evidence on its official website, that Qantas emphasises the link between fashion and the uniform through the trope of the “name” designer, alongside Miranda Kerr, model and Qantas brand ambassador. The point is perfectly illustrated in the text below a glossy Qantas YouTube channel clip featuring Kerr coveting the uniform:

“It would make perfect sense for her to model the new Qantas uniforms. Except, of course, these outfits are so exclusive, that no matter how famous you are, even a supermodel isn't allowed to wear them.” (Qantas, 2013)

This statement at first appears to make little sense: Kerr does, of course, wear the uniform; she is the impetus for the existence of the clip. Barthes (1967, p.280) notes that fashion “...enters into almost no relation with its signifieds.” When Qantas connects the uniform to the fashion system via the signifier of the supermodel, it discards the idea that the dress can function outside the fashion system, and thus introduces into the uniform its own obsolescence. This makes it especially odd that Martin Grant, a designer whose living is earned through the condensed, cyclical nature of fashion, declares his designs “classical” and

“timeless” (*Vogue Australia*, 2013), and claims to have avoided a print “...because for me a print is the thing that dates the fastest in fashion, and particularly in a uniform.” (Qantas, 2013b) Despite the relatively high modality of his claims, Grant appears to be labouring to influence interpretations of his work through two very diverse semiotic lenses.

Glamour may also be interpreted as a sanitisation of discourses on sexuality. Societal notions of female sexuality have been linked in a tight and turbulent bond with the flight attendant since the early days of commercial aviation (Mills and Helms Mills, 2006; Mills, 1998). Appeals to glamour inject a more dialectical relationship into the discourse, such that the binary oppositions that populate Western notions of sexuality – permission and prohibition, for instance (Foucault, 1976) – are subverted through the use of glamour as a semiotically “safe” metaphor for sex, and the flight attendant – as played by Miranda Kerr – established as the ideal-typical desirable signifier for glamour (Baum, 2012; Thrift, 2008). Qantas promotions exploit the idea of the gaze to place the interpreter in a privileged position (Schroeder and Borgerson, 2005) with regard to Kerr and, through the chain of signification, to the uniformed flight attendant, who assumes a passivity that the reality of the occupation does not support.

There is space to dispute the corporate reading of the garment and, while many media seem to support the official interpretation regarding the cultural and corporate heritage discourses, there is some dispute regarding the glamour angle, mostly centred around reports of protests from flight attendants about the impracticality of the uniform: a *Daily Mail* headline (De Lacey, 2013) acts as a voice for those rendered passive, or even silenced, within the fashion discourse:

“‘But we don't all look like Miranda Kerr!’ Qantas staff upset by airline's 'sexy, tight and impractical' new uniforms”

If glamour must appear effortless to maintain its thrall (Thrift, 2008), introducing practicality not only destabilises the sign-system, it threatens to divest the uniform of its role as a functioning signifier on any semiotic level. It does so in this instance by standing in ideological opposition to the two preceding words, “sexy” and “tight”. The material aspects of a corporate visual artefact should be heeded to the same extent as the immaterial aspects (Strati, 1996); the uniform, in this headline’s estimation, does not accomplish its material or immaterial (semiotic) tasks particularly well, since the impracticality of the garment shatters the illusion of glamour whilst also making work impossible. It is inauthentic, and thus incapable of establishing affinity (Balmer, 2011) with the flight attendants who wear it.

Black (2009, p.500) alludes to the “strained” relationship between uniforms and fashion. The impossibility of the co-existence of fashion and vocation as meta-signs within the uniform is explicitly referenced in this lifestyle website post:

“Flight attendants at Qantas Airlines are extremely dissatisfied with their new uniforms, which seem to put a premium on sex appeal and lack in the practicality department. It doesn’t help that the new uniforms were unveiled on none other than Victoria’s Secret Angel Miranda Kerr, further driving home the idea of sex appeal being paramount.” (Sonenshein, 2013)

The intimation of high modality media and user texts such as the above – for the comment is universal and adamant in its declaration about flight attendants’ feelings – is that, though cabin crew may attempt to reclaim their space in the discourse, glamour cannot be easily dislodged, and cannot coincide with occupational reality without destabilising both. Hochschild (1983) introduced the term “emotional labour” to describe the practice of service personnel expressing certain expected, “favourable” emotions within a service encounter that they themselves may or may not feel: the idea here, as with glamour, is that the expression should appear effortless, sincere. The appearance of sincerity is rendered, as Baudrillard (1994) might have predicted, more importance than the presence. It is difficult, then, for flight attendants to contest the prevailing interpretation of the new uniform without exposing the “manufactured” nature of their appearance and demeanour, which, in airline promotional material at least, forms a substantial aspect of their marketability (Spiess and Waring, 2005; Hochschild, 1983).

This “naturalisation” (Hodge and Kress, 1988) of the signifiers of glamour possibly occurs at the cost of the trust derived from the dimensions of authenticity and affinity perceived as contained within the brand (Balmer, 2011). This appears to be the objection inherent in user comments such as this, found below a post on the official Qantas Facebook timeline:

“And why have professional models? Why not put it on someone who is actually going to WEAR it day in, day out so we get a true idea of what it looks like? As for the Louboutins - what a load of bloody nonsense to have them if they aren't part of the uniform as has been said - and if they ARE, how bloody impractical are those ridiculous high heels for long haul flights??” (Michele Fowler, 2013)

The user sees through the simulacrum and objects to it as a kind of semiotic deception: the dress, as worn by a model, cannot be decoded and assessed within its practical context, while the Louboutin heels are an empty signifier, devoid of even a symbolic connection to the uniform. The corporate response – “Hi Michele, the entirety of the fashion parade, bar Miranda Kerr, consisted of our fantastic Crew. Jay” (Michele Fowler, 2013) – is as careful to connote the sincerity and effortlessness of glamour as is expected of flight attendants at work. This is achieved through the deliberate relegation of the main character in the fashion performance to what amounts to a linguistic parenthesis – the phrase “bar Miranda Kerr” could be removed from the sentence without obfuscating the subject – and the omission of any reference to the high heels that are superfluous to the official function of the uniform. The official response lacks the authenticity required (Balmer, et.al., 2006) to reduce the semiotic slipperiness that emerges around the references to glamour: if consumers judge employee effectiveness to some extent by the perceived suitability of the uniform, as Shao, et.al. (2004) find, the dimensions of authenticity of and affinity so crucial to the heritage brand may prove problematic to achieve with external as much as internal stakeholders.

These objections could be interpreted as instances of unease over change as workers pass through a period of destabilisation and restabilisation – the presentation of the (corporate) thesis greeted by antithesis before synthesis is achieved, in the dialectical model. Any uniform change may be greeted with some form of distrust and disagreement (Craik, 2003; Joseph and Alex, 1972), whether it changes from indigenous print to corporate, pan-European appearance, or from formal to casual (Adomaitis and Johnson, 2005). However, as Murphy (1998) discovered, cabin crew resistance to dominant narratives regarding flight attendant dress can become habitualised, to the point of re-presenting the uniform as a site of subversion due to its perceived inauthenticity within the role. From the viewpoint of the current or potential Qantas customer, Martin Grant and Miranda Kerr may not constrain the comprehension and regulation of the new uniform in the same way that the undiluted discourse of fashion might (Van Leeuwen, 2005), yet the use of the model, the designer, and the dress in a catwalk context (the signifiers) establishes a gender-based meta-sign (Hodge and Kress, 1988) that connotes a glamour, a narrative of feminised personal service and style, that may sit at odds with the mass-produced, in-cabin experience, and recent Qantas economic rationalisation projects. Had there been less emphasis on the glamour of the uniform, and more on its minimalism, it might not have met with contestations that imply a semiotic slippage between corporate aesthetic and political-economic messages: “So new uniforms and new advertising. Doesn't sound like an airline with financial difficulties to me...” (JeffDec,

2013). Here, Qantas is interpreted as falling short on the dimension of trust that forms a pillar upon which to rest its brand heritage.

Social semiotics, with its emphasis on discursive flows and the socio-temporal construction of meaning, delivers the latitude to observe what texts are *absent* from the flight attendant uniform change. It is clear from the relative lack of comments regarding the male flight attendant uniform that fashion is, largely, a female narrative; the logonomic system of gender dictates who can and cannot assume prominence within the narrative, according to socially constructed gender rules (Hodge and Kress, 1988). It is furthermore a naturalised system (Hodge and Kress, 1988), which acts not only to conceal the toil that constitutes the aesthetic and sexualised labour expected of the flight attendant by passengers as well as employers (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009; Spiess and Waring, 2005; Taylor and Tyler, 2000), but also to erase the possibly problematic, certainly subversive, suggestion that the male uniform could signify anything other than the occupation for which it was designed. Despite the initial prevalence of male stewards on board the earliest commercial flights, the relationship between masculinity and the flight attendant role has, as Mills (1998) notes, been an uneasy one. That glamour is a specifically female undertaking may be deduced from Mills' (1998, p.178) study of the manner in which British Airways actively muted signifiers of glamour in their first female flight attendants, and in a later historiographical study of how Trans-Canada Airlines actively connected female flight attendants with dominant contemporary discourses about glamour and sexuality (Mills and Helms Mills, 2006). The implicit activation of the gender meta-sign extends the gap between the real and imagined history of Qantas, and tips the dialogue towards notions of nostalgia which, it has already been established, often run counter to the aims of heritage branding (Balmer, 2011), particularly when it comes to creating an aura of authenticity.

The social semiotic concept of provenance (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001) has, in the preceding section, been suggested as a useful means of deconstructing the corporate and cultural heritage themes that emerge surrounding the change in uniform. Provenance also furnishes an explanation as to why the use of a signifier such as glamour is an inadvisable strategy for a heritage brand: the discourse of fashion has a far different provenance, a far different traditional seat of power, than the travel and tourism discourse. Glamour serves as referent to a former, more stylish age, which positions the airline as nostalgic rather than progressive. Glamour is not so much a part of Qantas heritage as an element guiding the civilian dress of the periods in which Qantas has operated; Qantas may therefore exhibit no trace of ownership of the cultural codes (Schroeder, 2009) that drive the fashion discourse.

The fashion paradigm is an exemplar of Foucault's (1977) theory of the arbitrary nature of power: those who define fashion do so from no foundation of expertise (Van Leeuwen, 2005). Fashion is a performative system, legitimising its own authority and situating individuals in relationship to each other and to its own discourse. This arbitrariness of authority does not align well with the foundational premises of heritage branding, which dictate a close rein on the brand narrative and its place within the discursive flows that constitute the society within which it is situated. Fashion is cyclical and self-referential in a way a flight attendant uniform cannot aspire to; it is, therefore, unlikely to achieve the omni-temporal relevance that research suggests is crucial for a brand whose essence relies on a heritage dimension (Cooper, et.al., 2015; Balmer, et.al., 2006).

Stakeholders may interpret brand messages through a discursive lens unintended by the brand (Leitch and Motion, 2007). This is operationally difficult to account for, as the following section will demonstrate. However, the above sheds light on a lesser-known sub-division of this tendency: the idea that the brand itself may, perhaps unwittingly, encourage this discursive clash, such as when attempting to present a flight attendant uniform as a fashion statement. This may encourage consumers to interpret it according to the discourse of fashion, rather than the technological discourse of travel, and to call into question the functionality of the garment as the signifier of the brand, and even of the occupation itself.

4.4. To boldly go where *Star Trek* has gone before: brand culture, popular culture, and inter-textuality

"While the main body of the uniform, including suiting, is created in classic navy blue, diagonal slashes of Qantas red are blocked with fuchsia pink, another Grant signature, on tops and dresses, often finished off with a fuchsia scarf." (Traill-Nash, 2013)

Postmodern modes of textual engagement favour irony, depthless pastiche, and inter-textuality (Jameson, 1998; Featherstone, 1991). Far from being confined to literary conceit, inter-textuality – the referencing or borrowing of aspects of one text to furnish a second text – may be multimodal: that is, it may operate across discrete textual genres and discursive flows. The above text, extracted from an article on *The Australian* website, alludes to the appropriation of colour by Qantas, uniting two separate sign-systems. If, as Holt (2004) claims, postmodern consumer culture is characterised by such extensive textual cross-pollination that authenticity has become a scarce resource, reference to a less manifestly complex system, such as colour, is a germane means of reclaiming authenticity. There are

numerous mentions across all media genres of the so-called “Qantas red” (E.g., Junkee, 2013; Liberty London Girl, 2013), perhaps echoing such official Qantas promotions as the assertion by Katya Noble, of the Qantas uniform design team, that Martin Grant “...used Qantas red, which is our colour... But then added the frivolous fuchsia pink, you know, just adds that liveliness, that element of joy.” (Qantas, 2013b) The phrase “our colour” assumes ownership over this particular shade of red, whilst simultaneously assuming a cultural knowledge – whose symbolic foundations rest on the brand heritage Qantas has created – that permits the meaning of “Qantas red” to be understood and accepted by the interpreter.

The corporation appears to have convinced external stakeholders to accept the authenticity of its claims for Qantas red: texts exist critiquing the perceived success or failure of the pink/red colour blocking combination in the new uniform, however the use of, and absence of protest over, the appellation “Qantas red” by media and consumers alike indicates extensive agreement on the “branding” of red. This is provenance at its most effective: the elevation of a colour to a symbolic, almost ceremonial, significance within the brand’s corporate and cultural heritage (Balmer, 2011; Balmer, et.al., 2005). The fact that there is no dispute over the term in the collected data may indicate that this particular signifier is strong enough to function as a fixed point around which to rotate the change necessary to maintain the brand’s currency, particularly during times of institutional turbulence (Cooper, et.al., 2015).

Van Leeuwen (2005, p.40) claims the practice of importing codes from other discursive contexts adds a connotative layer to an airline uniform. The process may be labelled inter-textuality on a multimodal, socio-cultural scale: this level of inter-textuality is a crucial component of what allows a heritage brand to appropriate, accrue, and activate meaning, and by doing so, to maintain affinity with its stakeholders. “Qantas red” has its genesis within the discourse surrounding the Western attribution of meanings to colours, where red is a “transparent signifier” of energy (Hodge and Kress, 1988, p.105); pink, despite its feminine connotations, is a relative of red on the colour spectrum (Hodge and Kress, 1988), and is similarly capable of signifying active, if less potent, states such as the “liveliness” described in the corporate document above (Qantas, 2013b). However, because the codes that govern it are socially constructed, inter-textuality is susceptible to interpretative work performed through multiple narratives. While the Qantas corporate view (Qantas, 2013b) frames the signifier, fuchsia pink, on the new uniform as “frivolous” and connotative of “joy”, certain media texts note the frequent appearance of fuchsia in Grant’s designs:

“The understated look bears Qantas’ signature red logo on its lapels and skirt vents as well as a splash of fuchsia, Grant’s favourite colour.” (UK Telegraph, 2013)

This is the kind of “detail” that Black (2009) notes as pivotal to the comprehension of fashion as an osmotic system, open to the diachronic accumulation of meaning from other systems. Fuchsia, in this reading, signifies not what Qantas dictates, but rather the inter-textual exchange between the brand, the colour, the designer and, by extension from the designer, the fashion system. The colour is not simply a signifier of playful emotional states, as Qantas directs; it is also, in texts such as the above, framed as the insertion of Martin Grant, via the use of his favourite colour, into the corporate heritage of Qantas. Difficulties arise if, as Koh (2015) finds, the manifest presence of “social actors” within the brand’s signifiers lead the interpreter to identify one or more of the actors as the “author” of a visual brand element: the brand element – in this case, the Qantas uniform – risks signifying the author rather than the brand. This kind of presence is open to interpretation as a foreign “signature” on the brand’s visual palette, leading to rejection of the possibility of dual signification, such as this comment on *The Project* Facebook timeline asserts: “...isn't the pink the signature colour of the designer - pure selfish indulgence!!!!” (Lindi Claassens, 2013) Grant, in this view, “signs” the uniform as an artist might sign a canvas, despite being an external actor to the brand. The textual integrity of Qantas is, for this interpreter, undermined by a too-obvious attempt at inter-textuality. Continuity of ownership is one aspect of “trait constancy” identified as essential for the smooth operation of heritage brands (Balmer, 2013). Brand heritage may support some manner of inter-textuality, however if what is essentially a co-branding exercise results in the prominence of an external author, there is the risk that ownership will be viewed as discontinuous in a metaphorical, if not literal, sense. This may not seem a risk of much magnitude until it is recalled that it is, after all, on the semiotic plane, the level at which metaphor generates and manipulates meaning, that the very definition of heritage is established, in relationship to the discourses that infuse and inform it.

The use of symbols is important to the fostering of a heritage brand. Symbols may produce a strong recognition factor, eventually signifying the brand on their own (Urde, et.al., 2007). The flying kangaroo is such a signifier for Qantas, having entered into an iconic semiotic relationship with the airline. The corporation sees the “Qantas red”, specifically the triangle of red, as having a similar iconic relationship with the brand (Qantasb, 2013). Other interpreters may not necessarily misunderstand the intention of the designer, and the corporation, in presenting red on the uniform as a stark contrast to the navy, however the abstract nature of

the red triangle at the top of the garment opens a space for intentional misinterpretation of the signifier:

“All it's missing is a communicator beam me up Scotty”
(Christina Graham, 2013).

Texts such as this, situated below a *Today Show* Facebook post about the uniform, exploit inter-textual references to create an alternative cultural reading of the uniform as aesthetically redolent of the uniforms on the TV series, *Star Trek* (See Appendix 2). There are frequent references to the garment's apparent resemblance to the fictitious Starfleet kit (E.g. “that design is going to make them look like frumpy star trekkers.” (i-need-a-martini, 2013)), indicating a common knowledge and interpretative framework exists between message recipients, as well as a common willingness to engage in semiotic re-composition. The abstract nature of the icon allows space for recipients of the corporate message regarding the uniform to manipulate and complete the picture in their mind (Davison, 2009).

Barthes (1967) claims of captions in fashion magazines that garment references are frequently situated via cultural references; these inter-textual references, Van Leeuwen (2005) notes, exist regardless of whether or not the interpreter accepts or rejects, or even comprehends their intended meaning. Interpreters may be guided by corporate texts towards the intended connotation, yet they remain at liberty to re-interpret the uniform as a cultural artefact via codes external to the system in which it predominantly operates:

“Qantas’ New Uniform Is Your Basic, RunOf-The-Mill Carmen Sandiego Cosplay” (Junkee, 2013)

“A bit too SIMPLY IRRESISTIBLE'ish” for my taste. It's like Robert Palmer has been reincarnated.” (LD of BNE, commenting on Hoyer, 2013)

Comments such as the first do not necessarily indicate dispute, or a lack of affinity with the brand and its promise. The playful re-interpretations by media and the general public (See Appendix 2) do, however, witness interpreters assuming the semiotic mantle of communicator in the sender-recipient dyad (Hodge and Kress, 1988), appealing to inter-textuality in contravention of the prevailing flow of discursive power from corporation to community. It is a kind of postmodern textual pastiche (Jameson, 1998) infused with the idea of consumer as producer of meaning, performing collage work with the brand (Holt, 2004; Lash and Urry, 1994). The practice is relatively benign until nostalgia is invoked as a textual referent, as in this travel website headline:

“Qantas Flight Attendants To Dress Like 1940’s Gangsters In An Effort To Save The Airline” (Stabile, 2013)

The headline does not seriously propose that imitating film noir costume (See Appendix 2) could rescue Qantas from perceived economic and image-related turmoil. It does, however, pick up on the glamour/adventure meta-sign the corporation establishes (Qantas, 2013) by depositing the "Golden Age" gangster film narrative within the Qantas corporate heritage narrative. The film narrative is, like the previous examples of recipient-led inter-textuality, a simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1994) without a real-world referent. Unlike the previous examples, it bears a closer resemblance to real-world reality, such that the detection of its presence in the Qantas uniform may invoke connotations of the "Golden Age" of Forties Hollywood Glamour. As discussed in the previous sections, nostalgia may, similar to appeals to "mythical heritage", remove the imperative for a brand to remain current, to connect the past with the present, and to effect a three dimensional spatio-temporal construct capable of projecting past and present into the future (Hudson and Balmer, 2013). If the uniform is designed to signify retro-chic, rather than something specific about the corporation, the affinity that Balmer (2011) identifies as crucial to stakeholder appreciation of corporate heritage is established not between the message interpreter and the brand, but between the interpreter and a fashion referent. The brand becomes lodged in a dialectical relationship with the fashion system and renounces the possibility of spatio-temporal continuity, of permeating the cultural discourse with brand-specific icons. In short, the uniform itself becomes a simulacrum, infused with multiple signifiers directing the interpreter through multiple meta-signs until it becomes an aspirational vessel, signifying rather than embodying functionality on the traditional dimensions associated with a uniform, existing outside the indexical/symbolic relationship with the brand that helps to anchor meaning, particularly during times of change.

Chapter 5: Implications and limitations

5.1. Implications

Is there such a possibility as a postmodern flight attendant uniform? Without the foundation of professional significations imbued into other, less mutable uniforms, such as the doctor's white lab coat (Timmons and East, 2011), does the flight attendant uniform cease to function as anything other than a decorative cultural artefact when it injects the garment with deliberate inter-textual references? Is the flight attendant uniform a relic of a modernist age, an age when a brand could still be considered the author of its own narrative? The unadorned, pan-European style of the new uniform suggests that Qantas is nostalgic not so much for glamour as for what Jameson (1998) describes as a universalist version of modernism, whilst simultaneously appealing to the less functional, more aesthetically ornate, postmodern signifiers that appear as a modernist alternative (Van Leeuwen, 2005).

5.1.1. Theoretical implications

Halliday (1978) distinguishes between the interactional potential of communication – the extent to which the recipient is able to interact with the message and its sender – and the ideational potential of communication – the set of possible meanings contained within a message. Thematic analysis of online texts surrounding the change in Qantas flight attendant uniform reveal message recipients as active semioticians – that is, they produce meaning as much as they absorb it. There may be a finite list of possibilities regarding the ideational potential of the texts, but the list does not end at the meaning Qantas has established for the new garment.

This co-production of meaning between the corporation, the media, and consumers distills to what Van Leeuwen (2005, p.78) calls “The balance between the social and the individual”. It is not so much evidence that images cannot always be assumed to belong solely to the mimetic plane of referential reality (Hodge and Kress, 1988), than evidence that the mimetic plane is also socially constructed, and that the semiotic plane (Hodge and Kress, 1988) connects signs with the socio-cultural discourse in such a way that a uniform, as a social and visual artefact, will symbolise different things to different members of the society that attempts to make sense of it. The importance of this phenomenon cannot be overstated, as British Airways discovered in its abortive attempt to alter its tailfin designs to appear more diverse, without appreciating that it was the very traditionalism of the red, white, and blue tailfin icon that signified the brand to the travelling public (Balmer, et.al., 2009).

Pine and Gilmore (1999, p.101) declare that “work is theatre”. They stipulate, in a step beyond the embodied work of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), aesthetic labour (Witz, et.al., 2003), and sexualised labour (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009), that businesses must ensure any labour witnessed by a customer should constitute a theatrical performance. That Qantas introduced the new uniform, as modelled by Miranda Kerr, during Sydney Fashion Week, fits the theatrical bill, however my study suggests this may cause some customers to experience a semiotic disjunction between the ideal and the real: the “spectacle” Qantas and the “mode of transport” Qantas. The idea of the cynical consumer, wise to feigned authenticity (Holt, 2004), may render it difficult for the brand to develop a true sense of affinity, and therefore trust, when resorting to such promotional gambits. This is particularly so of the concentration on the idea of glamour and explicit references to the discourse of fashion as symbolic frames for the uniform, for appropriating the past in an unspecific manner (Jameson, 1991) accomplishes little save the fetishisation of former glory and a relegation to the passive state of nostalgia.

The above research shows that a change in flight attendant uniform destabilises knowledge about a brand. Brand authority is weakened as power and knowledge interact (Foucault, 1977) to produce a volatile narrative regarding the new uniform. Brand heritage should assist with tethering the uniform to a shared corporate/social history, however if the signs are disregarded or meanings changed by interpreters, the uniform becomes a signifier of something other than the brand. In these instances, the concept of *provenance*, adapted from the discipline of social semiotics (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001), understood in a similar manner to which it functions in an art-historical context, assumes a greater importance. Provenance – the tracing of history and ownership of one specific artefact – may supplement the concept of omni-temporality as established in the heritage branding canon (Balmer, 2013; Hakala, et.al., 2011). Both are located in opposition to nostalgia, yet both heed the history of the artefact. The contribution made by the concept of provenance is in its ability to focus attention on one specific brand artefact, to chart its position within the brand history, and to discern whether or not it is “owned” by the brand’s heritage in a way that accommodates the flexibility necessary for a brand to appeal to multiple stakeholders (Leitch and Motion, 2007) while acting as a semiotic resource to signify the brand. Provenance is particularly germane during times of change: a change in a single visual brand element requires the stability provided by locating the uniform within a pre-existing brand culture discourse in a way that delivers the uniform a history, rather than the simulation of one. Provenance may also reveal that there is possible wisdom in separating the uniform somewhat from the flow of fashion, attaching it more

directly to the brand's heritage by implanting a familiar signifier of the brand into each generation of the uniform, such that the uniform becomes more like the evolution of a logo (Davison, 2009), which retains some continuity across its iterations, rather than departing almost entirely, with the exception of a few basic elements (Black, 2013), as each new Qantas uniform appears to do at present.

It is perhaps unsurprising to discover that meanings are never more primed for negotiation than during a period of change. The above texts show a dialectical relationship constructed around the change in uniform that follows the *thesis/antithesis/synthesis* pattern that frequently frames organisational change (Barrett, et.al., 1995): Qantas introduces a signifier and proposes for it a signification (thesis); media professionals and potential customers establish a counter-proposal that may or may not co-exist in harmony with the thesis (antithesis); and finally, an accord is ideally reached between the parties regarding the set of meanings available to the uniform (synthesis). The debate may never achieve synthesis: it may instead settle into obscurity, particularly given the speed of media cycles, yet silence on the subject should not be mistaken for acceptance. Symbols, and symbolic experiences, are the plane upon which many contemporary brands compete (Schroeder, 2002; Pine and Gilmore, 1999), and it is here that the idea of *synthesis* – of an accord regarding the place of the new uniform within the brand and within the culture, assumes significance. If individuals exist in a utilitarian relationship with the airline that does not exhibit a level of synthesis, of agreement with what the corporation signifies, to the individual and to the country of origin, the individual may be more likely to direct attempts at cultural synthesis towards a more experiential brand, whether in the aviation industry or other discretionary, symbolic areas such as theatre or music performances (Schroeder, 2002) that typically contribute to individual and social image projects (Goffman, 1959). The social construction of reality is a shifting scheme; it is through the internalisation – the synthesis, rather than the forgetting – of a change in the pattern of social reality that the change is experienced as an institutional phenomenon, independent of the individual who (unconsciously) framed it as such (Berger and Luckman, 1966). A heritage brand has at its disposal the ideal, socially institutionalised tools with which to solidify a change, with reference to a dialectical framework such as thesis/antithesis/synthesis, that facilitates careful navigation through the inevitable rupture around the immediate event.

5.1.2. Practical implications

Heritage brands experience operational constraints that do not concern corporate brands without a commonly known heritage (Cooper, et.al., 2015). As the airline industry reaches maturity, deregulation and service convergence renders it difficult to establish a point of difference. An airline with an established heritage, such as Qantas, enjoys a structural point of difference, however as my analysis shows, this does little to protect it from variable interpretations of its semiotic resources. A means of protecting against weakening the iconic relationship between the brand and its symbols is to ensure spatio-temporal consistency: that is, consistency across the suite of brand elements the corporation oversees, as well as historical consistency across brand elements. Heritage requires consistency, and in at least some of the texts regarding the change, the new uniform was shown to be inconsistent with the previous uniform, and with the Qantas brand itself.

There is merit in considering a change of uniform, if it reflects the brand in its time, as “symbolic profit” (Bordieu, 1977, p.181) intended to entice consumers to associate Qantas with positive symbolic traits. Introducing a new uniform in straitened financial times is, however, a risky strategy, particularly given that symbolic capital is attached to the existing uniform, and must be dislodged before the new uniform may assume its position within the brand heritage. Prior to any change, a visual audit is a means to engender more continuity between uniforms. Baker and Balmer (1997) do not explicitly include uniforms in their analysis of corporate visual identity, however it can reasonably be included under the category of visual symbol of a corporation. A visual audit assists in uncovering fragmented identities and lack of unified communications within a corporation (Baker and Balmer, 1997), and may help to re-establish focus on the visual expression of the essential nature of the brand.

5.2. Limitations

The nature of my work, prepared to meet the requirements for a research degree, necessitated the study being conducted by one person, with the exception of acting on feedback from my supervisor. The lack of multiple coders may result in a lack of multiple viewpoints, however it does ensure analytical consistency (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

A second limitation concerns the scope of the study. The analysis of a single event at a single corporation inspires caution regarding attempts to extrapolate more general conclusions from the results presented here. The study was, however, designed in the first instance as a response to calls for more diverse topics and methodologies to be addressed within the heritage branding literature (Balmer, 2013).

Given the time lapsed between the introduction of the latest Qantas uniform and this study, there is difficulty in discerning the completeness of the online data collected. This is one of the challenges of analysing online media texts (McMillan, 2009), however the prevalence of the internet in contemporary society renders it essential to persevere with the medium as both an object and source of research.

5.3. Further directions

The application of diverse methodologies to the concept of heritage branding will solidify its theoretical and practical relevance. Future critical studies in the area might include Foucauldian perspectives on heritage branding, to examine its dialectical nature, while analysis of a similar event – a change in visual brand element such as a uniform – might furnish interesting results when analysed through a critical sense-making framework (Helms Mills, et.al., 2010).

There is merit in considering a comparative study between an airline such as Qantas, whose uniform changes tend to mirror changes in fashion and/or corporate strategy (Black, 2011), and a carrier with a similarly manifest heritage, such as Singapore Airlines, whose uniform has changed very little over the life of the airline. This is a particularly promising line of inquiry given the importance for a brand that markets heavily around the image of the Singapore Girl to understand how the changing gender balance of its flight attendants changes the in-cabin experience for its passengers, and whether or not this causes dissonance between the symbolic representation of the airline and the tangible experience of it.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The past is another country. History is characterised by continuities and discontinuities (Hodge and Kress, citing Foucault, 1988) that shape the present, yet change at the level of the brand may be more discursive than binary, more negotiated than inevitable. It is this discourse between the past and present, the practical and the playful, the cyclical and the perennial, that has concerned me in this research.

Discontinuity may breed, perhaps reinforce, continuity, however as my analysis of texts surrounding the change in Qantas flight attendant uniform demonstrates, this is only possible when the uniform – the new signifier – is suffused with enough references to the prevailing understanding of the brand to allow the transference of signification from existing brand elements. It was established, through semiotic analysis of the themes emerging from online texts regarding the new uniform, that this was not always the case with Qantas. Prominent themes proposed by Qantas include references to corporate and cultural heritage, and to glamour and fashion. Media professionals frequently refined the corporate message, while users actively supported or rejected it, often with inter-textual reference to other socio-cultural codes. A chief semiotic sticking point was the reliance of the brand on appeals to nostalgia, on corporate and cultural legacy as well as fashion dimensions. The texts that touched on this indicated a draining of meaning from the signifier (Lash and Urry, 1994) – the uniform – until it was variously understood as an item of fashion rather than a corporate or professional artefact, and as the icon for an imaginary history. The concept of provenance, and the dialectical model of thesis/antithesis/synthesis, provide means of understanding how a heritage brand may circumvent this problem. It is on this dimension, and on the adoption of a critical methodology to my knowledge not yet used within the canon, that I trust I have made my contribution to the heritage branding literature.

According to Black (2011, p.69) the phrase “to hand in your uniform” is used by Qantas cabin crew to signify their retirement from the company: a sure sign of the significance of the uniform in terms of the corporation as well as the occupation. This study suggests that the significance of the uniform extends well beyond these bounds, located as it is within socio-cultural narratives that may, if correctly handled, deliver it an authenticity and affinity with its stakeholders, that lead to a trust in the brand with a more solid foundation than that available to many corporate brands without a commonly known heritage.

Visual images form the foundation of contemporary market society (Schroeder, 2002). The flight attendant uniform is a semiotic resource; those who engage with it perform semiotic work in the interpretation of its meanings, subsequently expressed through the first order system of language. Language cannot be expected to accurately describe an aesthetic reaction, and may even, through discursive convention, constitute a separate system to the object it purports to describe (Barthes, 1967), however it is the nexus around which society negotiates meaning (Van Leeuwen, 2005). The act of responding to a Facebook post or commenting on a blog about the new Qantas uniform is a social practice, existing among corresponding and competing social practices. Proponents of the “experience economy” (Pine and Gilmore, 1999) may present performativity, in a literal, theatrical sense, as the locus around which to generate a meaningful brand experience, however the very theatrical nature of the performance may jeopardise perceptions of authenticity, and consequently the trust and affinity consumers feel for a brand. It is one thing to send a model down a catwalk wearing a uniform and to make subsequent claims for the corporate relevance of the garment; it is quite another, as the texts show, to expect those who view the spectacle to accept these claims and applaud the performance without hesitation.

Appendix 1: Qantas uniforms in history

Qantas flight attendant uniforms throughout the airline's history, with Martin Grant, designer of the current uniform, pictured centre



(Source: news.com.au, 2013)

Current Qantas flight attendant uniform, introduced late 2013



(Source: Black, 2013a)

Detail of the Flying Kangaroo on the uniform trench coat lapel



(Source: news.com.au, 2013)

Appendix 2: Inter-textual comparisons

A selection of garments the new Qantas uniform was compared to, by media or consumers, following its debut

1. Carmen Sandiego



(Source: Junkee, 2013)

2. The Star Trek uniform



(Source: Trekkcore, 2016)

3. Film noir costume



(Source: Manferdini, n.d.)

4. Robert Palmer's "Simply Irresistible" band members/dancers



(Source: Sooney, 2010)

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