THE STORY OF KIASU (怕输)

Expressions of identity and status via conspicuous consumption:
An ethnographic study of Singaporean young women in a newly adopted culture

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CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any assistance I have received in my research and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated and referenced in this thesis.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I first flagged my interest in writing a thesis to a friend in 2004, he very wisely suggested that my life would never be the same again. He also mentioned that he has had two friends fall pregnant when undertaking a thesis (not to each other)! So, at the end of this journey, I was not and am not pregnant, but it does feel like I have given birth to a ‘living’ thing. I breathed, slept and ate the subject of *kiasu* for four years, to the chagrin and annoyance of those closest to me. While majority of people start this section by thanking the people who have stood and supported their venture, I have to humbly apologise for the ear-bashing that I have subjected everyone around me. With this thesis in print, rest assured, I will cease to talk about *kiasu*, for the next 6 months. Talking about my handbag collection is another matter altogether.

This work is extremely close to my heart: it is the extension of my life story – where I came from, why I am here and what drives me. Living the subject matter and knowing the subject matter is thoroughly different from writing about the subject matter, and I was able to do this with the help of the people I would like to give special mention to: I am indebted to Dr James Arvanitakis, who not only had the foresight to see the significance of my work, but who has stood by me through my toughest periods in the last four years. I am further honoured to have had inspiring guidance from Professor Brett Neilson, whose diplomatic sentences which begin along the lines of “Hmmm, I am not sure about that" has always ignited my *kiasu* tendencies and, always gets me doing mental gymnastics. I would also like to give special thanks to Associate Professor Elaine Lally for her kind support and advice in my first year as a candidate, which has motivated me to keep strong in the journey and believe in my own work. I would like to acknowledge the support of the academic and administrative members of the Institute of Cultural Studies (formerly Centre of Cultural Research), especially Erika Smith and Karin McKay, whose awesome and inspirational work constantly reminds me that I was accomplishing something extraordinary.

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My deepest gratitude goes out to the subjects in this study: I am humbled and inspired by your stories: thank you for teaching me about life, family and the importance about being ‘me’.

Penultimate special thanks to the ‘omnipresent magic sky fairy’: I wanted to do it, did it and done it. You listened. Amen.

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# CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS VI
GLOSSARY VII
ABSTRACT VIII

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Preface 1
1.2 Introduction 3
1.3 Method 8  
1.3.1 Identifying The Subjects 9
1.3.2 Methodological Issues 12
1.3.3 Profiles of Research Subjects 15

## CHAPTER 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Understanding *Kiasu* 19  
2.1.1 *Kiasu* and Status Anxiety 19
2.1.2 How *Kiasu* Takes Form 22
2.2 Status Anxiety and Veblenian Conspicuous Consumption 25  
2.2.1 Social Status Through ‘Having’: Possession and Accumulation 25
2.2.2 Social Status Through ‘Being’: Group Membership 27
2.2.3 Social Status Through Inheritance 29
2.2.4 Pursuit of Status and Emotional Malcontent 31
2.2.5 Bandwagon Effect and Snob Effect Explained 33
2.3 Weber and Social Groups 36
2.4 Bourdieu: Cultural Elite, Symbolic Capital and Habitus 38
2.5 Baudrillard and The Language of Consumption 44
2.6 Status Theories and *Kiasu* 47
2.7 *Kiasu* As An Individualised Self-Advancement 51

## CHAPTER 3 KIASU IN AUSTRALIA

3.1 The *Kiasu* Experience As A Source of Competition 53
3.2 *Kiasu*, Chronic Dissatisfaction and Malicious Pleasure 59
3.3 *Kiasu* As A Source of Anxiety 60
3.4 *Kiasu* As An Imagined Paradigm 63
3.5 Inheriting Social Status and The Impact on The *Kiasu* Competition 67
3.6 Observations of *Kiasu* in Australia 71
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION
Table 1: Summary of research subjects 15

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
Figure 2.1: Action and Desired Result of a conspicuously successful wedding 40
Figure 2.2: Linear progression of possession leading to social capital and the use value of the possession 46

CHAPTER 4: STATUS SYMBOLS AND STATUS SIGNALLING
Table 4.1: Kiasu levels in family and self as observed by first generation subjects 88
Table 4.2: Kiasu levels in family and self as observed by second generation subjects 88
Table 4.3: Self-assessment of kiasu levels before and after moving to Australia 93
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Translates as</th>
<th>Usage</th>
<th>Pronunciation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aiyah</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>term is used as a sigh. There is no direct translation</td>
<td>term is used to express frustration, a sigh</td>
<td>Eye-yah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atas</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>up, above</td>
<td>adjective</td>
<td>ah-tahs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheung</td>
<td>Hokkien dialect</td>
<td>race to compete, to race</td>
<td>verb</td>
<td>chee-ong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hutang</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>owe</td>
<td>verb</td>
<td>who-tung</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Hokkien dialect</td>
<td>fear of losing</td>
<td>Term can be used as a verb or adjective</td>
<td>kee-ah-sue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makan</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>to eat, eat, food</td>
<td>verb</td>
<td>marh-cant (with silent “t”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potong</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>cut, to cut, overtake</td>
<td>Verb</td>
<td>poh-tong</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tang Bo Chia</td>
<td>Hokkien dialect</td>
<td>nothing to eat</td>
<td>a combination of verb and adjective which describes one’s profession which does not provide much earnings</td>
<td>tung-boh-chiak (silent “k”)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This thesis is an investigation into experiences of *kiasu* as observed by Australian-Singaporean young women. I am primarily concerned with comparing the observations made by first generation and second generation subjects in situ, as well as in Singapore. For the purpose of this study, I interviewed five first-generation and five second-generation Australian-Singaporean women, aged between 20-36 years. Through their life stories, I analyse how their perspective upbringing, cultural memory and current environment has influenced the praxis of *kiasu*, and in turn how this affects their social relations. The experiences and praxis of *kiasu* is presented through the Veblenian and Bourdieun concepts of economic, cultural and social capital. Through this research, I argue that *kiasu* crosses both generations and geographical boundaries. The findings from this research reveal that subjects believe education and residential addresses to be the two primary *kiasu* facets observed in Singapore and Australia. Finally, I argue that *kiasu* functions as an emotive and affective state, as well as a competitive arena, or a habitus in itself.
1.1 Preface

It is difficult to say when it exactly dawned on me that I come from a competitive culture. As far as I can remember, my parents were incessantly making comparisons of our academic achievements with cousins, and other unwitting parties who get roped into the conversation. In my 11 years of primary and subsequent high school journey, the conversation of the family, without fail, in the months of October and November, centered on how many academic awards my older sister and I would receive that year. As part of the emerging Singaporean middle class, comparisons were also made on the cars our family drove, the watches we wore, the size of our house, and the restaurants we frequented.

My sister, who had stronger academic stamina than me, and who experienced very few distractions, was a recipient of multiple academic awards every year. On the other hand, the maximum number of awards that I would receive would be, shock horror, the very sad number of two. We were never asked about what we wanted to do with our lives. It was a given that my sister would be a doctor and I was envisioned to be a barrister, or failing that, a Pulitzer-prize winning journalist. My sister was called Dr Yap from a ripe old age of 7, while my parents had angst over my seemingly poor academic performance. I remember a running joke in the family that if my sister ever faced charges of malpractice, I would represent her in court. With such high hopes pinned on us, it was hardly unexpected that we planned our tertiary education from a tender age. I remember plotting my undergraduate schedule towards a Masters when I was 15, and presenting a ‘business case’ to my father on the universities which I have shortlisted: as an interminable entrepreneur, my father held great affection for ‘business cases’.

In January 1994, having chosen the appropriate university pre-approved by my parents following two years of research, I packed my bags, bid my friends, family and my old life farewell, and greeted my first sunrise in Sydney. When I bade my old life farewell, I breathed a sigh of relief. I believed that I had left behind the angst for success that we grew up with. There is nothing truly unique about the angst that I speak of; except that this angst is felt by most Singaporeans and it drives its citizens to not only succeed, but to succeed at their own social peril and to the detriment of others. What I am describing is called “kiasu”, a Hokkien term which approximately translates to “fear of losing”. This kind of pressure and stress is
not unique to a single cultural group or nationality, but it is something that permeates across Singaporean-Chinese society and sees parents place unrealistic expectations on their children (O'Brien et al, 2008, p. 42-48; Wong, 2009, p. 458-459). All the activities that I undertook as a child, teenager and young adult were beleaguered with the fear of losing to someone else. The fear mobilised me to want to perform par excellence in everything that I did: from badminton and studies, to extracurricular activities. When I landed in Sydney, I thought that the geographical distance and the lack of comparison meant that I have escaped the clutches of my parents' *kiasu*, but I was wrong.

While I have actually spent less time in Singapore compared to my years in Australia, I have found that the need to compete and achieve material success has shaped my professional, academic and social life. In my 15-year career in the legal industry, I was not content with winning employee awards: I wanted to be the most qualified employee, the fastest, and the most knowledgeable. To this end, I would earmark a potential competitor in my mind and attempt to ‘defeat’ this person. Once this is achieved, I proceeded to earmark another competitor. If another colleague performed better, I would be congratulatory on the outside and ‘dying’ on the inside. And if this same colleague failed to materialise success, I would be outwardly sympathetic, but privately pleased. I found out later that there is a term to describe this experience: which is *schadenfreude* or gaining pleasure from someone else’s misfortune. My hyper-competitiveness further motivated me to obtain various professional certifications and two postgraduate qualifications. As a first-generation subject mentioned in this study, ‘*If you are Singaporean, you can’t stop. You have to have multiple degrees*’ (quoted directly from Tasha, a first-generation subject). In a way, my manifestation of *kiasu* has motivated me to do well, but it has not brought any sense of fulfilment and contentment.

This issue of success and pressure is something that emerges whenever I have conversations with other Australian-Singaporean migrants. Interestingly, when I meet other Australian-Singaporeans, we simultaneously welcome the relief of an Australian culture that seems comparatively less competitive than that of Singapore and our parents, while maintaining an obsession with being competitive. And it is this contradiction that drives the research of this thesis. With this brief overview, I would like to point out that this research is driven by a combination of personal (reflexive) interest as well as a desire to better interrogate this complex cultural phenomenon in the Australian context.
1.2 Introduction

This thesis is an investigation on the concept of “kiasu”: a Hokkien term that, as noted, approximately translates to “fear of losing”. It is more than just that however, as I will explain in greater detail below. In addition to a fear of failure, the term also relates to the desire to succeed at the expense of other people.

As such, in this thesis, I investigate what the kiasu experience entails and how it is experienced by first-generation migrants, like myself, as well as second-generation Australian-Singaporean young women. Specifically, in order to understand the different manifestations of kiasu in Australia, I argue that kiasu crosses geographical boundaries and the generation divide. The key part of my research involves in-depth interviews with two groups of women: the aforementioned first-generation Australian-Singaporeans born in Singapore; and second-generation Australian-Singaporeans born in Australia.

The primary focus of my research then, is to locate, observe and understand the kiasu phenomena in Australia, as experienced by first-generation and second-generation Australian-Singaporean women. Through this study, I have developed a new way of understanding cross-cultural exchange in motion, as well as observing emerging cultural practice. It has also been an opportunity to gain some measure of reflexivity on my own motivation, personal beliefs and values. As such, the research questions that guided the development and core of this thesis are as follows:

1. How does kiasu manifest in the Australian context?
2. Does this vary between first-generation and second-generation Australian migrants?
3. Does conspicuous and status consumption through brand clothing emerge as a key attribute of kiasu, and how is this manifested?
To answer these questions, my research encouraged me to not only ask my respondents to reflect on their own experiences, but to verbalise experiences which they often considered ‘natural’. As I will discuss in detail, I found that the experiences they shared with me were simultaneously familiar and unique, providing results that I did not expect. As such, I found that *kiasu* is a cultural practice that continues in both groups of young women, but its shape changes considerably. Specifically, the issue of conspicuous consumption of education emerged as a dominant factor in the manifestation of *kiasu* within the Australian and Singaporean context. This is a surprise to me as the literature review indicated that women are more disposed to using luxury brand clothing and accessories to signal social status (Goldsmith et al, 1996, p.316; Ford and Ellis, 1980, p.125; Veblen, 1899, p.31). Throughout my field work, I was expecting the themes of luxury brand clothing to emerge. As I will discuss later, this opens potential new avenues for cultural research and understandings of cultural hybridity.

This research builds on a study on *kiasu* that was conducted in 1997 by Ho et al. This non-gender specific study was conducted in Australia on 30 Australians and 60 Singaporean undergraduate students to determine the understanding of “*kiasuism*” and to observe *kiasu* being operationalised (ibid, p.361-365). Ho et al hypothesized that “*kiasuism*” is not unique to Singapore and that it can be observed in other countries. The results obtained by Ho et al showed that all respondents associated “*kiasuism*” with negative outward behaviours in two ways: in public and private form. The public display of kiasu was illustrated by the respondents in describing actions like queue-jumping, road rage, and aggression when paying at counters. On the other hand, the private experiences of *kiasu* are described by respondents as feelings of distress when witnessing another person’s achievement. Ho et al’s view that “*kiasu crosses geographical boundaries*” is supported by other studies conducted in Australia and the US (Kirby and Ross, 2007, p.108; Ho et al, 1998, p. 358; Ryckman et al, 1990, p.630-639).

I would like to point out that I am not only using the findings of Ho et al to ground my research, but I am extending the breadth of their research. My research is different and unique as it focuses specifically on the following four ways:

1. By gathering, comparing and analysing the experiences and observations of *kiasu* from two generations of young women in Singapore and Australia;
2. By expanding on Ho et al’s assertion that *kiasu* crosses geographical boundaries by identifying the facets of *kiasu* which traversed from Singapore to Australia;
3. By focusing and expanding on the feelings of distress and malcontent, which were only briefly touched by Ho et al’s study in 1998. Specifically, I will also connect the concept of schadenfreude and kiasu; and

4. By arguing that kiasu exists in two forms: as an affective state, where the social actor is motivated to act and bring about a desired result, and that kiasu exists as a habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 177: see chapter 2 of this document)

In presenting this research, I have structured the thesis as follows. To being with, this Introduction provides the background outlined here, and presents the Method and Methodological Issues. Here, I explain the process and research approach which was used and I introduce my respondents in detail. I also detail the issues which I encountered during the research process. In Chapter 2, I present the Theoretical Framework, where I outline the theoretical foundation and literature review which has guided my research and methodology. My work is significantly influenced by Thorstein Veblen, who penned the term “conspicuous consumption” in 1899, followed by two contemporary social theorists, Pierre Bourdieu (2000, 2007) and Jean Baudrillard (2000 and 1994). As the first step of this investigation, I use the key arguments from Veblen to understand how social actors behave to gain social legitimacy in their milieu. In particular, I will be using Veblen’s arguments on pecuniary emulation and conspicuous consumption: in which these two actions are used as main social status signallers. In addition, my thesis is informed by Veblen’s assertions that social actors are highly motivated to emulate the consumption patterns of the "leisure class" ([1899] 2007). Among the status signallers identified by Veblen were luxury clothing and luxury household items, the social actor’s level of education and socio-economic status of marriage partners. As Veblen’s arguments emphasises social actors as catalysts of change, I believe it is essential for me to determine whether the milieu of the social actors motivates change. This is where I find Bourdieu useful in establishing kiasu as a social space, or a habitus. Bourdieu provides me with the ability to understand and analyse the different forms of capital recognised and used by the social actors in my research, and how these forms of capital are conflated with social power. Furthermore, this research is influenced by Baudrillard as his theories provide me with a strong foundation in understanding and analysing how social actors use social capital to communicate, to build identity and to relate to their habitus.

Having identified the catalysts of change and how change may manifest, I am able to construct a robust discussion that the research subjects from both the generational groups
can relate to. In the process, I am able to discuss how the two groups of women understand, experience and in some situations, practise *kiasu*.

In Chapter 3, I present the first part of my research findings, focusing on *Kiasu in Australia*. This chapter focuses on the *kiasu* experience in Australia as witnessed, experienced and practiced by the subjects, as well as highlighting the key differences of the *kiasu* experiences between Australia and Singapore. This section will address the first two research questions:

- How does *kiasu* manifest in the Australian context?
- Does this vary between first-generation and second-generation Australian-Singaporean migrants?

The emulative, ceremonial and socially alienating characteristics of the *kiasu* experience will be also discussed in this chapter. I further highlight how the subjects are conscious of the emotional and mental pressure that occurs in a *kiasu* pursuit, and yet still participate in the competition when the situation presents itself. In this chapter, I will draw a connection between *kiasu* and *schadenfreude*. In Chapters 3 and 4, I will be using the responses from the subjects to further understand the theoretical framework as well as apply it to the understanding of *kiasu*. As per the recommendations from the Ethics Board of University of Western Sydney, the names of the subjects have been changed to protect their confidentiality.

In Chapter 4, I present the second part of my findings, *Status Symbols and Status Signalling*. This chapter focuses on addressing the final research question of this study, namely: does conspicuous and status consumption through brand clothing emerge as a key attribute of *kiasu*, and how is this manifested. In this chapter, I identify and analyse the key status symbols as informed by the subjects with surprising results. The consumption of brand clothing and accessories is secondary to the consumption of education as a product. All subjects perceived the following as key status symbols: levels of education, type of tertiary degree, reputation of the university followed by residential addresses, and to a lesser extent, their life partner’s economic achievements. In the last section of Chapter 4, I have developed a sub-chapter entitled Experimental Case Study: Dinner with Erica, Veblen and Bourdieu. In this section, I combined a specific subject’s responses with the two key
theorists of this work, in an attempt to demonstrate the ‘live’ nature of this research and the applicability of the theories.

In the final chapter, **Discussion, Conclusion and Future Research**, I will return to the three research questions and respond to them in greater detail. Here, I discuss and highlight the key driver underlying the first-generation women’s choice to migrate to Australia and connect this to their Australian *kiasu* experience. I then proceed to compare their life story with the second-generation in an attempt to identify similarities in motifs, again with surprising results. I discovered that even if the children are raised in Australia, they are still subjected to the similar expectations of in-situ Singaporean parents, albeit at a subdued level.

My conclusions will reveal the emergence of *kiasu* not only as an affective state, in which social actors are motivated to generate change but it is also a social space which makes sense to the social actors involved. Further to this, I will present the data in which *kiasu* is seen to involve the action of “having”, to the state of mind of “being someone”. In addition, I argue that neither geographical distance nor time dilutes the *kiasu* experience. The data collected from the study has also provided numerous areas of future research, with an emphasis on mothers and the *kiasu* experience. Without prompting, all subjects revealed that their mothers were either “queen of *kiasu*” (as quoted by second-generation subject, Ina) or “super *kiasu*” (as quoted by second-generation subject, Cate). This, I argue, opens up new avenues of research.

With this overview presented, I will outline the research process and methodology employed for this research project.
1.3 Method

As discussed, the aim of the research is to investigate the way a cultural phenomenon is transported and evolves in a different setting. To achieve this, I planned to undertake a series of interviews with newly arrived Singaporean migrants in Australia. The aim was to ask the subjects to reflect on the different cultural setting, and evaluate whether *kiasu* has ‘travelled’ with them, or whether it has been left behind, hybridised or replanted itself. Following literature review and extensive consideration, I decided that more insightful results could be obtained if a cross-generational study was undertaken: looking at both first and second generation Singaporean migrants to Australia. This would allow better insights into the way this cultural phenomenon is shaped and influenced in different settings, and across time.

To achieve this, my research was undertaken in two-stages. The first stage was a literature review to establish the building blocks of status theories and how these could be used to explain the *kiasu* experience. The aim here was to build a theoretical framework of status theories to deepen the understanding of *kiasu* in Australia and in turn, develop a new insight into multicultural influences in Australia. The literature review which I conducted is not limited to the area of humanities, social sciences and cultural studies, as I found that Veblen’s work has been used and expanded in the areas of social psychology, economics and marketing.

The second phase of the research was to undertake in-depth qualitative interviews with two broad sets of subjects: first and second-generation Singaporean migrants to Australia. Once I had identified status signifiers as well as a framework to ground the theory, I was able to build a set of questions which both groups of the subjects could understand, relate to and be able to adequately respond.

In the rest of this section, I will detail the research methodology employed. Based on Madison’s research framework in *Critical Ethnography* (2005, p. 19), I was not merely a detached observer. My connection to the subject matter and preconceptions provided an advantage in understanding the cultural themes and emotive states which arose during these interviews.
1.3.1 Identifying The Subjects

To begin with, I would like to discuss the deliberate strategy of recruiting female subjects. On an academic level, I have identified a broad range of research which indicates issues of status associated with clothing and status feature more prominently with women rather than men (Dittmar and Drury, 2000; Heaney, Goldsmith and Wan Jusoh, 2005; Johnstone and Conroy, 2005). Furthermore, women in the age group of 20-36 living in metropolitan areas; which are the focus of this study, tend to be more status conscious and are suggested to have a strong sense of inter-group relations (Colls, 2004, p. 584-593; Wang et al, 1998, p.423-426). On a more personal level, and as noted above, I wanted to compare my kiasu experience and my migrant experience in Australia with the experiences of the subjects.

The ten female subjects were recruited from the Sydney and Melbourne metropolitan areas, aged between 20 and 36. All identified subjects hold tertiary qualifications. All but one subject are financially independent: the one exception is currently undertaking a medical degree and working part time at the Law faculty of a university in Sydney, while living with her parents. As noted, of the ten subjects, five are first-generation immigrants like myself, with the remaining five being Australian-Singaporean women born in Australia. Though not a deliberate choice, all first-generation subjects are of Chinese descent while the majority of the second-generation subjects are of mixed ethnicity.

The set of questions and broader research process were designed and subjected to the ethics procedures of the University of Western Sydney (Ethics Number H9521). Once approved, the set of questions, which is presented in Appendix A, was tested with two subjects for validity, flow and relevance. This was a necessary step to refine the line of questioning and to ensure that the query would facilitate the desired data. Some minor changes were made to the set of questions within the boundaries of the ethics guidelines. The responses of the two ‘test’ subjects are not included in this study.

I was concerned that using a pre-existing community; may it be émigrés from badminton clubs, church groups, law societies, student societies and other social networks would introduce bias (Davies, 2010, p.289-290). As such, I decided to recruit via the University of Sydney Research and Employment portal where other postgraduate research recruitment takes place, as well as placing recruitment posters on public hallways of University of

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1 In Chapter 2, I will discuss in detail Veblen’s argument on church membership and how this is used to signal social status.
Western Sydney and University of Sydney. I also managed to locate potential subjects from recommendations made by subjects themselves. My sampling was based on a non-random selection whereby the subjects are bound by their commonality of either being Singaporeans themselves or born to Singaporean parents. All subjects were subjected to the same set of questions and there were no variables used in all interview situations. Although the subjects were recruited on a random method, all first-generation subjects are Singaporean-Chinese, while half of the second-generation grouping is of mixed ethnicity. The sampling method is inherently biographical (Denzin, 1989, p. 70-72). As the primary investigator, I already hold in-depth knowledge of the habitus of the Singaporean culture, and knowingly recruit from a very select social and cultural group. In addition, the biographical method involves the disclosure of the subject’s life stories. The subjects’ stories will also challenge and enrich my understanding as an investigator (ibid, p. 162-188).

To ensure external validity is maintained, I adhered to the recommendations made by Payne and Williams (2005, p. 306-310), in which cultural-specific terms and experience are explained appropriately to the subject. Further to that, I also employed Silverman’s ‘data triangulation’ method (2001, p. 219-225) to test the reliability and validity of the data. This methodological approach recommends that the investigator test the data by the triangulation of interviewing, observation and comparison of information from the subjects. Silverman argues that this method would enable the investigator to “imagine multiple qualitative measures which might be simultaneously true” (ibid, p.225). In employing this validation method, every single time I conducted an interview, I found myself reviewing the previous interview responses and the actual interview process. This enabled me to compare not only the responses, but the experience of interviews itself. In Silverman’s words, my recruitment process was a triangulation of “talk, text and interaction” (ibid, p.19).

The recruitment process began with the placement of advertisement/recruitment poster in the University of Sydney Research and Employment Portal as well as public notice boards in University of Western Sydney and University of Sydney. The recruitment poster is presented in Appendix B. The recruitment poster provides a ‘call to action’ message and a brief headline which announces the objective of the research. Potential subjects would email or call me directly to obtain background information as well as to ask preliminary questions. Potential subjects were also provided with the set of questions by email so that they could consider their responses. The recruitment poster clearly states the three main criteria of the subject, namely: (i) the subject has to be female (ii) the subject is aged between 20-36 years of age, and (iii) the subject is either a first generation Australian-Singaporean, or born in Australia to Singaporean parents. Subjects who agreed to be interviewed were given a
choice to meet face-to-face in a public setting, or to a telephone interview during which the conversation would be recorded.

I would like to note that subjects who responded from Melbourne were recruited via recommendations from subjects who had already participated, based in Sydney. Notwithstanding, these subjects were also given pre-interview briefing and background information. Prior to recruitment, I had envisaged that it would be difficult to enlist subjects to discuss status symbols and *kiasu*: topics I considered to be somewhat sensitive and difficult to come to terms with. To illustrate, when I briefed a test subject, the potential subject became impatient, verging on irate, and asked to terminate the conversation. As we were to terminate the conversation, she clearly stated, “I am not *kiasu*”

As such, I did face difficulty in leading potential subjects from pre-recruitment briefing into the actual interview. Three potential subjects declined at the briefing stage, as they felt uncomfortable to talk about their *kiasu* experience, stating it was a subject matter that they considered too personal. On the other hand, one of the subjects who did participate found it refreshing to have such an open and honest conversation with someone who related to her, making the following statement: “Life which focuses on obsessive competition is not life” (quoted from Patricia, a first-generation subject).

In the set of questions, luxury-clothing brands were used as a primary status indicator. My decision to use this as a lead indicator was based on the wide ranging literature review which indicated that clothing is a conspicuous way to demonstrate status and gain approval following automobiles, body accessories (including jewellery) and housing (Goldsmith et al, 1996, p.316; Ford and Ellis, 1980, p.125; Veblen, 1899, p.31). Inspired by Baudrillard’s “system of objects”, McCracken (1986, p.76) and Durie (1981, p.27-20) have suggested that clothing is a language that serves to shape and define human relationships. Belk (1985, p.139) adds to this perspective by stating that clothing also forms the relationship between the brand personality and the extension of the self.

Further, the role of clothing in a woman’s life has been researched extensively (see Dittmar and Drury, 2000, p.109; Heaney, Goldsmith and Wan Jusoh, 2005, p83; Johnstone and Conroy, 2005, p236)). Such studies highlight the importance that clothing plays in aspects of status consumption, and confirm the strong connection between clothing, and status and

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2 Referring to Appendix A: Question 7: What are your ideal brand preferences when it comes to fashion and apparel? What do you associate these brands with?

Another consideration in designing the set of questions was culturally specific sensitivities. My approach in the design was guided by Hofstede (1981), who identified important differences between Western-based individualistic cultures and Eastern-based collectivistic cultures. In a collectivistic culture like Singapore, the questions should include considerations on family, influence from reference group, perceptions of prestige and perceptions of hierarchy. For Hofstede (1991, p.118), these themes must be considered differently when considering collectivistic cultures in contrast to Western-based cultures (see also Craig and Douglas, 2006, p.323; Sojka and Tanuhaj, 1995, p.463-468; Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998, p.17).

1.3.2 Methodological Issues

My methodology fits into the ‘ethnographic deconstruction’ as described by Madison’s research framework in Critical Ethnography (2005, p.19). As per Madison’s recommendations, my subjects directed my study whilst my connection (ethno-centric and interest-wise) to the subject matter was only a secondary presence. It should be noted that this is something that was achieved as my pre-conceptions about the dominance of clothing and status were quickly usurped by the subjects who identified ‘tertiary degrees’ as the dominant factor (see Chapters 3 and 4). I would also note that as all the subjects are either current university students or have pursued postgraduate qualifications, I noticed a bias professed by the subjects towards tertiary qualifications.

Madison (ibid, p.20-21) also introduces the term “bracketing one’s subject”. This is a concept which means the identification of subjects relevant to my hypothesis and framing the purpose of the study to reflect the experience of the subjects. Again, as my study progressed, I was reflexively able to employ this methodological approach (see Chapters 2 and 3).

Further to this, Van Maanen defines ethnographic research as a research method in which the researcher “lives with and lives like those who are studied, usually for a year or more” (1996, p. 263-265). I find this definition not only helpful, but providing key instruction on relating to my subjects as a potential subject myself. This was also important in managing the ethical concerns of the research: how do I research something that I am so exposed to?
As an ideal subject for my own research, I found that I have had to exercise great diligence to include pure description from the subjects and not lead responses with my knowledge, bias or experience. To ensure this was not the case, unless solicited, I would not offer my experience of the *kiasu* incidence, and during transcript, I would leave my own ‘pure description’ from the analysis. Further, when asked for an example of behaviour, I would refer to examples brought up by other subjects, so as not to introduce prejudice in the matter.

A second concern that I identified in preparing the interview process was that the subjects may agree with me and attempt to ‘save face’. This was an issue highlighted by Nevid and St. Maria (1999, p. 307-311), referring to research that specifically involves Asian cultures. In collectivistic cultures such as Singapore, there is a strong tendency for subjects to express what they believe the researcher wants to hear. In addition, it was suggested that the subjects might even tailor their responses if they perceive the investigator to be a high status individual. I responded to this challenge pro-actively by not asserting dominance in the conversations and being willing to share my side of the experience when asked. I was also extremely mindful not to engage in competitive behaviour so that the subject did not experience loss of ‘face’ during the conversation. Another concern which I faced was the sensitivity of the subject matter and how the topic relates closely to the subjects’ family and lifestyle. A qualitative interview into the praxis of *kiasu* means that the subject would not only have to consider their lifestyle choices, their achievements and their family history, but also, being able to communicate these personal details to the researcher without feeling judged. I addressed this challenge by using Mangen’s cross-national approach in which he recommends the researcher to build trust by “avoiding innuendos, hyperbole and irony” (1999, p. 111) and to combine the “dialect and non-verbal cues” to capture the subject’s narrative (ibid, p. 111-112). Mangen’s approach further recommends that the researcher use language which is familiar to the subjects so as to acknowledge the shared life experience of both the researcher and the subject. Aside from the usage of the term *kiasu*, as detailed in the *Glossary*, I have also employed other common Hokkien and Malay terms during the interviews.

Another concern I held was the ‘snowball effect’ (Noy, 2008, p. 328-331) of the recruitment process: on one hand, I was excited that I would gain access to a unique set of data through the subjects’ network. I was also pleased that some of the subjects were highly interested to promote this research on my behalf. However, I was concerned that working with a non-random sample would return a set of biased data and or worse, a set of experiences whereby the subjects are (independently) competing to outdo each other. My concern
reflects those posed by Noy in 2007 in his work on snowball sampling or ‘chain’ sampling on female backpackers (ibid, p. 328).

This concern was unfounded as I found that even as I was conducting the interviews and transcribing the conversations, the subjects revealed details, insights and themes that I had not even considered. This successful sampling experience is reminiscent of the fruitful sampling method which is derived from a “unique social knowledge of an interactional quality with subjects” (ibid, p.328). The subjects’ experiences are detailed in Chapters 3 and 4.

The survey design itself was informed by the Spradley model (Van Maanen, p. 263-265) in which subjects were asked to describe experiences with ‘how’, ‘why’ and ‘what’ questions (see Appendix A). Further, the survey has its grounding in observational research as I was attempted to see and understand the reality through the eyes of the subject (Silverman, 2001, p.31-46). In the process, I was able to contextualise the life story and the life experience of the subject. This ‘ethno-methodology’ approach instructs a researcher not to impose meaning but to “locate meaning within the conversation” (ibid, p. 11-38). Prior to recruitment, I believed that one conversation would provide motifs that could be raised in another conversation. This process confirms the ‘reliability in data’, allowing me to employ a triangulation method of interviewing, observation and comparison of data (Silverman, 2001, p. 219-225; Golafshani, 2003, p. 597-607). Following the transcription stage, I found that I could easily make correlations from one response to another.

I am informed by numerous literature recommendations that qualitative methods are the most effective in the collection of ‘pure description’ and ‘thick description’ when undertaking ethnographic research (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006, p.314-319; Silverman op cit, p.11-38, 156-159; Greatbatch and Clark, 2010, p. 96-105). I employed an open-ended interview in order to capture the meaning behind the words, actions and feelings, which I proceeded to record, analyse, compare and ground with the theoretical framework. In short, I was interested not only in the words and actions, but what the subject feels when faced with a stimulus like kiasu.

With this background, I will now turn to introduce the subjects of this study.
1.3.3 Profiles of Research Subjects: What Is My Life Story?

The recruitment process began in Sydney, namely in University of Western Sydney and University of Sydney. However, the recruitment process spread to Melbourne as subjects started to recommend their contacts and friends who fit the recruitment criteria. The subjects recruited from both Melbourne and Sydney, were either interviewed face-to-face or via telephone. The following section provides a brief background on the subjects: their life, their family and their attitudes to *kiasu* as summarised in Table 1 below. Their stories will be further contextualised in Chapters 3 and 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Generation Australian Singaporean</th>
<th>Second Generation Australian Singaporean</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Young women born in Singapore and have</td>
<td>Young women born in Australia to Singaporean parents, or moved to Australia before 12 months old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>moved to Australia(^3)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Patricia, aged 33</td>
<td>Martha, aged 34</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rachel, aged 36</td>
<td>Cate, aged 28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Erica, aged 27</td>
<td>Leslie, aged 24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Annie, aged 36</td>
<td>Gina, aged 34</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tasha, aged 35</td>
<td>Ina, aged 21</td>
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</tbody>
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Table 1: Summary of research subjects

**Group 1: First Generation Australian Singaporean, born in Singapore\(^4\)**

**Patricia, aged 33**

Patricia arrived in Melbourne with her husband in 2004. She is a practising child psychologist and currently pursuing a PhD in developmental psychology. She is an only child. Patricia and her husband decided to stay in Australia following her first tertiary qualification. She tries to visit her parents in Singapore whenever she is able to, and to indulge in her passion for ‘makan’ (Malay for food). Patricia, who works with children with special needs, is grateful to be living away from Singapore and being able to appreciate, in her words “life’s simple pleasures”.

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\(^3\) All first-generation subjects are of Chinese descent

\(^4\) All names have been changed to maintain subjects’ confidentiality, as per recommendations to Ethics Board. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or by telephone, in which subjects were sent a copy of the questions, consent form and information sheet.
Rachel, aged 36
Rachel came to Sydney in 2007 to pursue postgraduate qualifications in occupational therapy. After graduating, she met her husband and both chose to live in Sydney to start a new life. She currently practices as an occupational therapist in Sydney. Rachel returns once a year to Singapore to visit her parents and older brother. In Singapore, Rachel’s family lives in an affluent area, and as a teenager, she attended one of the state’s top schools. Rachel, who has an extensive network of church and work friends, prefers the company of her clients who in her own words are “people from lower socio-economic status are not kiasu”.

Erica, aged 27
Erica came to Melbourne in 2009 to pursue postgraduate qualifications in developmental psychology. Her husband was already studying in Melbourne, thus making her transition somewhat easier. Erica currently works in a primary school as a child therapist. She returns once a year to Singapore to visit her parents and older brother. Erica is disappointed that her parents do not understand the passion underlying her work and believes that “people move overseas because they realise that the material things which they hang on to are pretty empty”.

Annie, aged 36
Annie moved to Melbourne with her husband and children in 2008 with the primary objective of “pursuing a new life”. Her two daughters are aged 6 and 5, and a son aged 3. Annie is a full-time mother and works in a university. Since moving here, Annie and her young family have not been back to Singapore to visit family, (her parents and two older brothers). With initial misgivings of adjusting to a new life and new culture, Annie is grateful to be a leading a life different from that she led in Singapore and to have discovered a new appreciation for cooking home-style foods. Annie misses the ‘three Fs’ in Singapore: food, family and friends.

Tasha, aged 35
Tasha graduated from Monash University and returned to Singapore in the late 1990s. Her father, who owns a business in Perth, strongly advocates that Tasha pursue a new life and career in Australia. In 2001, Tasha reluctantly moved to Melbourne, but decided to live in Sydney in light of a stronger church network. Tasha, the youngest of three siblings, works in the field of marketing and in the last 4 years, has learned “to speak up for herself” in the work place of her new home. Tasha, who is proud to identify herself as Singaporean, misses the 24x7 food culture there.
Group 2: Second Generation Australian Singaporean, born in Australia or moved to Australia before aged 12 months old

Martha, aged 34

Martha was born in Singapore in 1978, but moved to Melbourne when she was 6 weeks old. Her family (parents and an older brother) used to visit their grandmother in Singapore annually until her death 15 years ago. Martha has very little contact with her Singaporean cousins but her Singaporean connection remains via the badminton club in which she is involved in, and her parents’ church group. Martha who qualified as a solicitor, is currently practising as a town planner in Melbourne and has been married for approximately 3 years. Her husband, who is of Scottish-English heritage, is aware of the kiasu experience. They often laugh and lament about their observations of kiasu friends and family members. Martha, who is especially maddened by bad table manners exhibited by kiasu friends and family during meal times, calls herself “a non-practising kiasu”. Martha is of Chinese, Malay and Indian descent.

Cate, aged 28

Cate was born in Australia, and moved to the US when her father accepted an academic role there. When Cate was 12, her family moved to Singapore where she attended school for 6 years. Upon finishing her high school, Cate moved back to the US to pursue tertiary education and subsequent postgraduate qualifications. Cate is a medical scientist and is currently undertaking a PhD in a Sydney-based university. Her parents are still living in Singapore whilst her older brother is residing in the US. Cate remarks that her mother and grandmother are “big kiasus”. Cate is planning to visit Singapore in September 2012 to attend a high school reunion and to indulge in the food. Cate is of Chinese-Malay, or Peranakan descent.

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5 All names have been changed to maintain subjects’ confidentiality, as per recommendations to Ethics Board. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or by telephone, in which subjects were sent a copy of the questions, consent form and information sheet.

6 Peranakan is a term used to describe descendants of ethnic Chinese and Malay natives. Peranakan ethnics are usually identified as Chinese ethnics who are not able to speak any Chinese dialect, but are extremely proficient in the Malay language. The Peranakan food and traditions are unique and separate from the Chinese form. Source: peranakan.hostoi.com, accessed 12 September 2012
Leslie, aged 24

Leslie, born in Australia, spent her teen years in Brunei. Due to the small distance between Brunei and Singapore, her family visits the island nation every year. Leslie’s father, who is Anglo-Australian, is familiar with the *kiasu* experience. According to Leslie, he teases her mother about *kiasu* practices from time to time. Leslie has not been back to Singapore since 2006. She believes that *kiasu* is not unique to Singaporeans, but it has been embraced as a positive quality. Leslie, who is currently pursuing a medical degree in Sydney believes her mother is a “*little bit kiasu despite everything*.”

Gina, aged 34

Gina was born to Singaporean-Chinese parents in 1978, and has lived in Melbourne ever since. She is married and has a Bachelor’s degree, and works in the legal industry in the CBD. Gina’s family used to visit Singapore once a year when she was younger, but has not done so for the last 8 years. Gina believes that living in Australia has diluted the *kiasu* tendencies in her parents. The younger of two siblings, she remembers competitive conversations taking place between her Singaporean aunts and uncles. Gina believes that whilst *kiasu* is present in other cultures, the Singaporean version is unique as it is a popularly recognised term. Leslie terms her parents as “*sedate kiasus*”.

Ina, aged 21

Ina, an only child, was born to a Singaporean-Chinese mother and an Australian-Italian father. Ina lived in Singapore for 3 years from 1999-2002. Ina has an auntie whom she terms “*queen of kiasu*” and cousins who live in Sydney. She believes that her mother is pressured by this auntie to behave in a *kiasu* manner. She also believes that having a father who is not Singaporean, balances her mother’s *kiasu* tendencies. Ina is currently pursuing a medical degree and lives with her parents in Sydney.

This brings me to the end of the first chapter in which I presented both the background to this research project and the methodology employed to address the research questions. In the next chapter, I will present the theoretical framework employed and discuss the key theorists who have shaped this project.
Chapter 2  Theoretical Framework

2.1 Understanding Kiasu

2.1.1 Kiasu and Status Anxiety

*Kiasu* (pronounced kee-ah-sue), a Hokkien term, approximately translates to “fear of losing” (Hwang et al 2002, p. 70-98). The structure of the word *kiasu*, combines the word “kia” which directly translates to the word “fear” in English, and the term “su” which translates to the verb “lose” in English. *Kiasu* is usually described as an affected state, an emotion or behaviour, but can also be used to describe an action. A detailed definition of *kiasu* is offered by Hwang et al in where it is described as “an obsessive concern of getting the most out of every situation or transaction and the compulsive desire to get ahead of others” (2002, p.70: emphasis added). Another definition is offered by Jones and Brown in which they described kiasu as “if you are not one up, then you are one down” (1994, p. 86). Additional descriptions on *kiasu* portray it as a form of hyper-competitiveness and an aggressive desire to win (Bing, 1999, p.80; Leo, 1995). I believe that the most simple way of understanding *kiasu* is from the title of a best-selling comic book depicting a Singaporean citizen by the name of Mr Kiasu, entitled “Everything I also Want” (Yu, Lau and Seresh, 1990), which translates in proper English as “I want everything” (emphasis added).

*Kiasu*, though a Hokkien term, is widely used and recognised in Singapore, in which its diverse population associate it with the action of getting ahead, and the fear of losing, as described by the definitions above. There are numerous works that points to *kiasu* as being the contributing factor to the city-state’s success: a success defined in material terms (Ho et al, 1998, p. 359-363; Kirby and Ross III, 2007, p. 109). Kirby and Ross III (ibid, p. 109) further argued that *kiasu* is a “strongly ingrained behaviour” in the Singaporean psyche, in which the hyper-competition and fear of losing is displayed not only in professional and social life, but also in mundane activities like queuing up, shopping, and rushing to the elevators. While I am using the definitions as outlined by Hwang et al (2002), Kirby and Ross III (2005) and Ho et al (1998), it is important to note that it is unclear whether their observations of *kiasu* was extended to all ethnicities, or whether *kiasu* was predominantly

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1 While Ho et al (1997) and Hwang et al (2002) provides definitions of *kiasu* which I use in my work, their descriptions fall short of defining *kiasu* as a feeling state, descriptive state, an end-result or an action. In using *kiasu* as a descriptive state, one can say “She is a *kiasu* person”. On the other hand, the term *kiasu* can to describe an action, in which one can say “She *kiasu* and got the biggest pie”. As a feeling state, one can use this term “I felt *kiasu* and I refuse to talk to her”.

2 The title is “Everything I also want” is in Singlish, or Singaporean-English, a form of street English spoken locally in Singapore, which contains expressions from Malay, Hokkien, Cantonese, Mandarin and English.
observed with Singaporean-Chinese, which is the dominant ethnic group in Singapore. My work, which was aimed at observing *kiasu* with Australian-Singaporean women, provided me with a more textural insight. The reason for this is because I was able to recruit subjects who are not only of Chinese descent\(^3\).

Often used as a stereotype, *kiasu* can also be observed in other cultural groups across South East Asia, but none has evoked more jocularity and attention than the Singaporean version (Ho et al, 1998, p. 359-370; Kirby et al, 2007, p. 108; Thorn, 1999, p.1087; Chouy, 1991, The Strait Times online). As indicated by a second-generation subject, Cate:

> “The Singaporean form of *kiasu* is not as looked down upon compared to other cultures, as it is a form of competitiveness to advance one’s career”.

*Kiasu*, in essence refers not only to the affected state of anxiety due to a perceived loss, but also describes the aggressive desire to get ahead in all situations.

In broader terms, *kiasu* can be understood as the Singaporean version of ‘status anxiety’. Status anxiety was repopularised by social commentator and writer Alain De Botton (2004) in describing the “malaise” of 21\(^{\text{st}}\) century society caught in a never-ending spiral of consumerism. According to De Botton, ‘status anxiety’ motivates individuals to purchase high value material goods as a way of demonstrating and elevating their economic status, with the belief that the acquisition and possession of such goods will bring about contentment (2004, p.21-23). This malaise is linked with identity building, as individuals use possessions to gain recognition, and anxiety is experienced if they sense they are failing in the pursuit of social recognition. One of the earliest references to status anxiety, ignored by DeBotton, was made by Alex deToqueville, in which he described that in times of prosperity, citizens seem to have a preoccupation to accumulate material wealth, and the subsequent despondency which takes place when the sense of fulfilment never arrives ([1862], 1969, p.538).

The terms *kiasu* and status anxiety overlap as they are both characterised by perceived deficiency as well as a desire to compete, and subsequent victory in the status game (Amaldoss and Jain, 2005, p. 1449; Belk, 1988, p.139-142). In the pursuit for status and in ‘*kiasuism*’, this perceived deficiency is key to the development of self-identity. If the social

\(^3\) The first-generation subjects were of Chinese descent while the second-generation subjects were of mixed ethnicity. For a profile of the first and second generation subjects, please refer to section 1.3.3 Profile of Research Subjects
actor perceives a lack of status in any activity or possession, concerted efforts will be made to improve the situation. For example, if the social actor believes that wearing a certain brand of clothing produces recognition in a social situation, the *kiasu* social actor will seek this end by acquiring and subsequent conspicuous usage of the item believed to elevate social status. In this example, the self-identity is closely linked with what the social actor possesses, and how the actor believes the exterior world perceives him. By ‘winning’ the status game, and having established the winner and losers in the game, the social actor’s identity as ‘person with status’ is proven. In short, *kiasu* simultaneously induces anxiety and desire to win, and in turn, this anxiety spurs one to take action towards perceived positive identity-building (Veblen, [1899], 2007, p. 21-23; Douglas and Isherwood; 2000, p. 73-78).

At the time of his writings, Veblen made the observation that “pecuniary emulation” ([1899], 2007, p. 21), which is used to dispel status anxiety, cannot be done in isolation: the win and loss has to be witnessed (Veblen, [1899], 2007, p. 25-26). Similarly, the modern day *kiasu* pursuit has to be witnessed and the actions taken to dispel *kiasu* have to be conspicuous. The facet of “pecuniary emulation” was captured by the comments made by a second-generation subject, Martha:

“My mother in-law is so *kiasu*. She recently changed her car to the Range Rover Vogue model. She only picked that model because the Queen Mother used to drive one, and so that anyone who sees it can say ‘wow, that model was driven by royalty’.”

In her comments, Martha revealed that her mother in-law’s purchase decision was primarily based on how effective the brand and item signalled status. In the interview, Martha sounded appalled that a purchase decision would solely be driven by the need to signal social status.

During my four year research on *kiasu* and status anxiety, I am often asked about the term ‘keeping up with the Joneses’. In fact, during an interview with a second-generation subject, Ina commented that “*kiasu is like the Singaporean version of ‘keeping up with the Joneses’*. This widely recognised description was first popularised by in a comic strip entitled “Keeping Up With The Joneses” published in 1913 by cartoonist, Arthur Momand. The comic strip depicted the ups-and-downs of residents in a New York suburb whom he observed, were living beyond their means (Hendrickson, 1997⁴). The term ‘keeping up with the Joneses’ is

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usually used to describe the social actors’ efforts in their attempts to outdo each other in a social situation. I will discuss this form of competition in detail in the next sub-chapters.

2.1.2 How Kiasu Takes Form

As kiasu is used to describe an affected state, behaviour and action, I believe it is important to understand the most common way in which kiasu takes place. The more mundane variety of kiasu manifest itself in queue-jumping in shops, jostling in crowded areas, rushing and hoarding at buffet tables, frenzied crowds during Boxing Day sales and refusal to share information (Ho et al, 1998, p. 363; Coclanis, 2009, p. 451-459). While all these kiasu actions were observed by the research subjects in this project, I would like to draw attention to the more systematic way in which kiasu takes shape in inter-individual comparisons in this section.

Social interactions which take place in a professional or schooling environment, as well as social events, provide the basis for a kiasu experience as this is where the social actor competes to establish social standing. This is an environment in which social actors, in order to enforce self-identity and build self-esteem, make social comparisons to confirm and to enhance their own self-image (Stapel and Koomen, 2001, p. 766-781; Blanton, 2003, p. 75-87). Using the work from Stapel and Koomen, I argue that kiasu social actors make comparisons in three distinct ways: namely, upward, downward and motivational comparison (2001, p.766-781).

In the first form of comparison, ‘downward comparison’, social actors make comparisons in order to assert their sense of superiority and feel better about themselves. The primary objective of this form of comparison is to establish one’s exclusivity and to gauge how the other social actors fit in the shared reality. ‘Downward comparison’ is reminiscent of the ‘Snob Effect’, a theory which I will discuss later in this chapter under Bandwagon Effect and Snob Effect. ‘Downward comparison’ is most commonly used in a kiasu pursuit.

The second form of comparison, known as the ‘upward comparison’, is made with the primary objective of identifying a source of envy or frustration (ibid, p. 766). This is where social actors make upward comparisons to parties who are perceived to be a source of envy. This form of comparison often creates angst and a sense of worthlessness for the social actor. In the Singaporean kiasu experience, ‘upward comparison’ is usually made by the social actor’s parents to highlight the former’s perceived deficiency, in the hope that this action would spur the social actor into self-improvement (Ho et al, 1998, p.360-361).
Combined, ‘downward comparisons’ are employed by Singaporean parents in order to feel more superior to others.

The last form of comparison, ‘motivational comparison’ is more commonly used by social actors themselves to self-motivate towards an ideal (Stapel and Koomen, 2001, p. 766). This form of comparison is commonly used by the social actor as a reflexive tool and is often used to inspire self-improvement, or as a negative reinforcement, that is exemplified by the statement “If I don’t study hard, I won’t get a good job” (ibid, p.766; Blanton, 2003, p. 76-80). ‘Motivational comparison’ is exemplified by the response made by a first-generation subject, Erica, where she describes how her brother’s academic achievements motivated her to strive harder at school: “My brother is very smart, so I want to compete with him”.

In addition to the forms of comparisons which take place during a kiasu experience, comparisons are made in order to cope with threats to the social actor’s identity. To cope, social actors who do not wish to participate in social comparison or participate in the kiasu pursuit, choose to avoid the subject matter, the person or the social situation itself. This is what Shelton et al terms as the ‘flight strategy’ (2006, p. 321). On the other hand, social actors who wish to participate and escalate the kiasu race may choose to dismiss the other person’s achievements by “devaluing and de-emphasising” methods (ibid, p. 328-358). The different ways in which kiasu is manifested via upward, downward and motivational comparisons, plus the identity coping mechanisms used in kiasu will be analysed further in Chapter 3: Kiasu In Australia.

In addition to the comparisons undertaken by kiasu social actors, kiasu is a social space in which social actors not only interact, but is used to derive their identity. Here, I use Bourdieu’s argument that as a habitus, it is “a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which integrate past experiences and functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions” (2000, p. 82). Kiasu, as a habitus, is sustained not only through the past and present experiences of the social actors, but the shared “logic of practice” (Skeggs, 2005, p. 85). Social actors, who do not inhabit the kiasu habitus, do not understand the rules of the game or even the rationale of the game. It is in this habitus in which the praxis of kiasu holds some form of logic and provides a way for the social actors to conceptualise self-identity. I find the following statement from a first-generation subject, Annie, useful in identifying kiasu as a habitus:
“In Singapore, there is always pressure to keep up. You have to be in a certain job to be seen to have status. It is all about the degree, the car, the bag. You know if I stayed there [Singapore], I would be like that too”.

In her interview, Annie made the observation that in Singapore, to be kiasu is the accepted norm. Annie’s comments indicate that moving to Australia provided her with the mental space to re-evaluate life priorities, with an emphasis that if she had stayed on in that habitus, she would be part of that “logic of practice” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 82; Skeggs, 2005, p. 85).

2.2 Status Anxiety and Veblenian Conspicuous Consumption

In this section, I will use the works of Veblen, Baudrillard and Bourdieu, as well as a cross section of status theorists to develop a framework for the kiasu experience. Firstly, to win in a kiasu pursuit, the social actors have to display conspicuous consumption. This victory is two-fold; not only does the social actor believe that social recognition will be conferred, but the actor gains personal self-esteem. Secondly, winning the kiasu pursuit means that the social actor can choose not to relate, or deliberately exclude individuals deemed to have lost. I will address this in the following section on ‘Bandwagon Effect’ and ‘Snob Effect’. The concepts of conspicuous consumption, social desirability and exclusion, ‘Bandwagon Effect’ and ‘Snob Effect’ were first argued by Thorstein Veblen in 1899, with modern day extensions by contemporary social theorists. Finally, kiasu is not only characterised by hyper-competition or the thrill of the race, but it is also typified by the pleasure which is derived from witnessing someone else’s failure. This is the connection which I draw between kiasu and schadenfreude, or ‘malicious pleasure’ in the following section.

Thorstein Veblen (1899) first raised the concept of ‘conspicuous consumption’ in late 19th century to describe high society consumption patterns. In his work, “The Theory of The Leisure Class”, Veblen made observations of emerging social structure and patterns following the intense industrialisation of the Western civilisation. Veblen ([1899] 2007, p. 17) argued that even though the days of a “barbaric” life were long gone and new social hierarchies have replaced the feudal system, symbols of status remained useful in social interactions. Veblen proposed that social status can be signalled and acquired through two main methods: by acquiring and possessing symbols of status, and by belonging to certain institutions. That is, status is signalled by a social actor through the action of possession of certain items and membership in select institutions. In his day, Veblen identified such institutions as churches, country clubs and universities (ibid, p. 201-237). At that time,
Veblen’s observations were not only reflexive of the historical context which he was living in, but also reflects his viewpoint that status is derived from economic wealth. He noted that the possession of economic affluence usually meant that the social actor would be perceived as socially legitimate (ibid, p. 8-11). In other words, in the competition to acquire private property in the aim of elevating social status, the winner not only gains the ownership of the good, but also wins social and economic legitimacy. As indicated from my fieldwork data, the connection of social status and economic wealth is not as straightforward: social status was not only derived from possession of economic wealth, but possession of socially recognised symbols, which I will explore in detail in Chapter 4: Status Symbols and Status Signalling.

Notwithstanding, I still find Veblen’s explorations on ‘possessions of symbols’ pertinent to my work and I will apply his arguments on social status through the actions of ‘having’ and ‘being’, which are two key themes explored in my fieldwork.

2.2.1 Social Status Through ‘Having: Possession and Accumulation

As discussed in earlier section, Veblen argued that the one of the key ways to demonstrate one’s social status is through conspicuous consumption or what he terms “pecuniary emulation” (ibid, p.21). “Pecuniary emulation” refers to consumptive patterns which imitate those of social actors perceived to hold high social status in a specific social environment. Veblen suggested that the possession of wealth or articles which imply wealth, once seen to be the result of economic efficiency and success, is now perceived to be a way of distinguishing one’s social superiority (ibid, p.24). If acquisition and subsequent possession of status symbols confers social status to the actor, it is inevitable that a contest will take place as social actors seek to compete in order to compete for social recognition. The competitive cycle put forward by Veblen is highly reminiscent of the hyper-competition which takes place in a kiasu experience, where social actors compete incessantly to gain social recognition and legitimacy.

Veblen’s observations on “pecuniary emulation” remain relevant today. I believe his argument is corroborated by the rise and rise in the consumption of luxury goods globally (Silverstein, 2003, p. 50-55; Vickers and Renand, 2003, p. 462-470; Hauck and Stanforth p.177-183) and, the wasteful manner in which ‘lower classes’ pursue consumption in order to appear ‘upper class’ (Colls, 2004, p. 584-592; Woodward, 2011, p.370-379). There is a misconception that the act of “pecuniary emulation” is limited to the ‘lower classes’: as the social actors from this class strive to improve their social standing. According to Veblen, the
competition to improves one’s social standing crosses all classes of social actors: from the lowest working class strata to the “leisure class”, that is, actors who do not participate in any form of industrial or economic activity (ibid, p.49).

A century and half later, I have identified numerous studies which indicate that conspicuous consumption is made by social actors from all income levels as it performs two functions (Ellemers et al, 2000, p. 6064; Jaramillo and Moizeau, 2003, p. 1-24; Carlisle et al, 2007, p. 2-5; Shipman, 2004, p. 278-281; Colls, 2004, p. 593). Firstly, conspicuous consumption is one of the key method in which an individual can relate to their social reality. By acquiring and possessing a status symbol, the social actor communicates the public self-image to the external world. I found that a simpler way of understanding the consumptive functions is by using the term “cheating” and “connecting” (Colls, 2004, p. 592-593). Colls used “cheating” to describe this first consumptive function, in which the social actor acquires an item, in order to deceive others into thinking that he/she is of high status. In “connecting” (ibid, p. 592) the conspicuous consumption functions as a ‘social lubricator’ (Veblen [1899], 2007, p. 30-48; Douglas and Isherwood, 2000, p. 73-85; Baudrillard, 2000, p. 19-25; Baudrillard, 2000, p. 236-238; Shipman, 2004, p. 277-280). This is where the accumulation of items like jewellery, luxury clothing, certain food types and prime real estate not only signal one’s social status, but also functions as a language in that specific social reality.

In addition to conspicuous consumption and accumulation of items which he terms as “unnecessary goods” (ibid, p. 50), Veblen also observed that even the action of eating, which is a physiological need, can involve the consumption of status symbols. This is illustrated by consumption of certain foods like alcohol, meat, fish roe, chocolate, sugar, honey and oysters among other food items. Veblen goes on to describe how certain foods are only available to the upper class due to its unaffordability and scarcity, and the consumption of these specific foods signal one’s status and entitlement to such foods (ibid, p.53; Sorbal,1995, p.68-70; Van der Veen, 2003, p. 406-410). Another way to consider the use of “unnecessary goods” is from Van der Veen (ibid, p.407) who she explains that while physiological needs are socially imperative, luxury goods fulfil a cultural imperative.

Conspicuous consumption also extends to diseases, in which ailments which arise from over-indulgence in foods mentioned above, were perceived to be the ‘nobleman’s disease’. Such ailments include gout, usually associated with excessive consumption of red meat and alcohol, and obesity, usually associated with general over-consumption (Veblen, [1899], 2007, p. 44-48; Visscher and Seidell, 2001; p. 357-370). It is interesting to note that in present day, obesity is perceived to be the result of poor diet and sedentary life. In Veblen’s
time, obesity was perceived to be the result of exclusive access to exclusive food items (Veblen, [1899], 2007p.53; Van der Veen, 2003, p. 406-410).

2.2.2 Social Status Through ‘Being’: Group Membership
Notwithstanding “pecuniary emulative” actions which facilitate positive social standing, Veblen also argued that social status can be elevated through membership in select networks or groups widely perceived to hold high social esteem. As previously noted, Veblen specifically identifies universities, churches and country clubs as the select groups or networks in which high status is conferred (op cit, p. 195-200, p. 236-238). Veblen argues that membership to such groups which involves ceremonial activities and specific consumptive patterns serve two functions: firstly, the membership symbolises one’s belonging and secondly, as a sign of exclusivity. He argued that ritual activities such as graduation ceremonies, end-of-year-balls, fraternity house inductions and even the religious mass, are formalities which are used to demonstrate group membership, and within that membership, the identification of high status and low status members (ibid, p.238-239). Veblen’s argument on group membership and social standing is extremely pertinent to this research project as the subjects indicate that, aside from accumulation and possession of status symbols, membership in tertiary institutions, certain suburbs, country clubs and certain church denominations symbolises high social status.

When I commenced my research, I believed the subjects would draw a strong connection between social status and luxury clothing brands. This belief was based on literature review which indicated that young women are predisposed to using clothing brands to signal social status (Goldsmith et al, 1996, p.316; Ford and Ellis, 1980, p.125; Veblen, 1899, p.31). The subjects, however, revealed that the primary manner in which social status is conferred is through possession of a tertiary qualification, followed by the reputation of the university and number of university degrees held, then by residential address and type of church attended. Even though Veblen himself was an academic member of prestigious institutions of Cornell, John Hopkins and Yale (ibid, p.10-12), he was highly critical of the exclusivity of universities and how “scholastic traditions were tied to an economic value” (ibid, p. 236): that is, the pursuit of higher learning only serves to protect the status quo of the upper class. Veblen also argued that the institutional rules, wardrobe and other related ceremonies serve to create a class of elites, and exclude others who are not able to afford admission either due to lack of financial or time resources (ibid, p. 236-241). Veblen’s final point on group membership reiterates the theme of “unnecessary goods”, in which he argued that the ceremonies and accoutrements of higher education as represented by special garments,
books and other sporting regalia, are wasteful and unoriginal, and does not serve any utilitarian purpose (ibid, p. 26). The connection between social status and tertiary qualification as observed by the research subjects in this investigation, will be explored further in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4.

The final point I would like to highlight about Veblen and group membership relates to the matter of membership in religious organisations. Similar to the point which I raised earlier on possession of tertiary qualification, I did not expect the matter of religion to enter the sphere of this research even though Veblen did make assertions on organised religion and conspicuous consumption. As it was brought up by one of the subjects, I believe it is pertinent to connect Veblen’s assertion to the responses collected. This connection will be discussed in further in Chapter 3.

In both his works, “Theory of the Leisure Class” ([1899], 2007, p.199-200) and “Absentee Ownership” ([1923], p. 319-325), Veblen was scathing on the role of institutional religion on social relations. He believed that organised religion, referring specifically to the Christian church, merely serves to forward the interests of social actors who already hold high status within the religious network ([1899], 2007, p. 198-199; Leathers, 1986, p. 1107-1112). Veblen argued that devotional activities are strongly linked to the consumption of religious and ceremonial paraphernalia as exemplified by specific attire, relics, charms, food items (as demonstrated by fish and eggs), donations and other religious materials (ibid, p. 199). Veblen observed that while these objects of devotion are consumed to provide a public signal of one’s faith, it also protects the “habits of the regime of the status”, in this case the priesthood and certain members of the congregation who patronise the church financially (ibid, p. 200). Veblen viewed consumption of religious paraphernalia as well as consumption of religion as wasteful, serving only to further the interests of the leisure class and the clergy, whom he regarded as having no imperative to undertake economic activities. The connection between social status and the Veblenian argument on organised religion will be expanded further in Chapter 3: Kiasu in Australia.
2.2.3 Social Status Through Inheritance

Veblen’s final point on social status and conspicuous consumption refers to concepts of inherited status and newly acquired social status. In his work, Veblen defined inherited status or “inherited gentility” as social status which is transmitted through family or relational lineage ([1899], 2007, p. 54-57). Social actors who hold “inherited gentility” usually do not contribute economically to acquire the social standing. In common day language, we recognise Veblen’s term of “inherited gentility” as old money (Buris, 2000, p.361). When considering the term “inherited gentility” or old money, it brings to mind the American family names like the Vanderbilts, the Morgans of J.P. Morgan, the Carnegies, the famed Mars family who created the confectionary M&M and the Kennedys5. Closer to home, “inherited gentility” or old-moneyed families include the Hancock-Rineharts, the Packers and the Murdochs who started to build their wealth in the 1950s, and the Lowys amongst others6. Using Veblen’s terminology of “inherited gentility”, the Australian identities named above do not have fit with Veblen’s definition of ‘old money’ as the wealth was amassed after the turn of century, compared to the American families whose fortune stretch as far back as 1885, as demonstrated by the Vanderbilts. Instead, the Australian families, as I indicated above, would be known as Veblen names it, “created gentility” ([1899], 2007, p. 54-57). “Created gentility” refers to the new found status of social actors who actively and industriously strive to elevate their social standing by emulating the consumption patterns of “inherited gentility”. “Created gentility” is commonly known today as the nouveau riche (Farrar, 2011; Goesling, 2006, p. 314-316).

Veblen argued that while the “created gentility” or nouveau riche may have elevated their social standing by accumulation of status symbols, their status is still not on par with the status of “inherited gentility” or old money. This, he argued, was because the latter’s social status was not gained from industrious effort. The symbolic capital is also perceived to be more potent as “inherited gentility” has held the social status for a longer time (Veblen, [1899] 2007, p. 54-57). Furthermore, Veblen argued that since the social status attained by “created gentility” is wholly dependent on the standards laid out by the members of the “inherited gentility”, the former does not hold any form of social legitimacy despite accumulating and possessing the very same artefacts of status.

The issue of social status, “inherited gentility” and “created gentility” was raised in this project by Ina, a second-generation subject whereby she describes:

“Status is sometimes inherited. You are born to a good family, but then you can also develop and improve your status by how hard you work and what you achieve in life”.

In this response, Ina identifies that primary social status stems from one’s family, just like Veblen’s ‘inherited gentility’ but this status, she believes, can be improved via one’s efforts and achievements in life.

In my attempt to identify the names of families who hold old money as well as how much their fortune is worth, I found it difficult to locate a definitive list of individuals who make up the nouveau riche class. I found that the Forbes Rich list, which quantifies and qualifies these seemingly successful individuals, changes its selection annually, from top millionaires, to top entrepreneurs to top billionaires. I believe the nebulous Forbes list substantiates my argument that the actual high status is unattainable and unsustainable as the benchmark constantly varies.
2.2.4 Pursuit of Status and Emotional Malcontent

Veblen observed that non-stop emulation creates a permanent state of malcontent and chronic sense of dissatisfaction with one’s life (ibid, p. 53). Consumption of goods and services is generally made to fulfil an utilitarian need, with the end affective state of being satisfied (Derbaix and Pham, 1991, p. 326-328). For example, a social actor purchases a car which has low fuel consumption and state-of-the-art safety features, due to its economical maintenance and assurance of safety in the event of an accident. In this instance, a transportation need was identified and met. On the other hand, consumption of status symbols, as a purely hedonic action, serves only to create gratification or sense of superiority, as status goods usually do not hold any utilitarian function (Ho et al, 1998, p.361; Arnold and Reynolds, 2003, p. 77-78; Khalil, 1996, p. 556-558). The instant gratification which takes place is quickly usurped by malcontent when the social actor discovers that the very same status symbol has been acquired by someone else, or it is no longer recognised as status symbol. As such, the emotional benefit is fleeting as the social actor now seeks to acquire a new iteration of status symbol. I contend that this chronic dissatisfaction of one’s achievement, financial wastefulness and the continual dependency on externalities for internal contentment creates malcontent as observed by Veblen. The unattainability of status symbols is succinctly described by Berry as “widely desired, but not widely attained” (1994, p. 45).

In addition to personal malcontent, the pursuit of status also creates an anti-social behaviour in the form of malicious pleasure: the actors experience a form of enjoyment upon witnessing another person’s failure to achieve status (Veblen, [1899], 2007, p. 25). This is a type of malicious pleasure which is not only evident in kiasu, but is also captured in the German concept of schadenfreude (Leach et al; 2003, p.932). This term originates from the German word ‘schaden’ which means damage and ‘freude’ which means joy: relates to the joy experienced by a social actor when witnessing someone else’s failure (Sundie et al. 2006, p. 96). One of the earliest exhortations against the ills of schadenfreude can be found in the Old Testament, with modern day theoretical explorations similarly made by Adorno and Horkheimer ([1944], 1972), Schopenhauer ([1897], 2003), Spinoza ([1675], 1884) and Nietzsche (1967).

For my research, I refer to Nietzsche’s broader considerations on schadenfreude as I find his deliberations emphasise the interconnectivity of social actors. Nietzsche argued that schadenfreude enables social actors to feel connected to one another, either via the resentment or envy towards another person’s achievement (Portmann, 2000, p. 109; Aspers,
Far from being an alienating force, Nietzsche argued that *schadenfreude* provides context for social actors to concretise their perception of their social milieu (ibid, p. 110). In addition, Nietzsche viewed *schadenfreude* as a way to alleviate envy, especially if the misfortune befalls a person perceived to be socially superior. ([1880], 1996, p.318). In short, *schadenfreude* helps a social actor feel better in a situation where it is perceived that he/she is socially inferior.

In the *kiasu* experience, there is a perceived winner and perceived loser: a sense of winning and losing. The winners experience what Nietzsche describes as “delights which are tied to cruelty” (ibid, p. 86-88), and extract a form of “passive vengeance” (1967, p.64-68). This expression of indirect vengeance is taken by the social actor who, Nietzsche argues, “does not have the necessary strength to take revenge in a direct manner” ([1880], 1996, p. 314). The winner of a *kiasu* experience is often a loser from another experience, hence by winning in the subsequent experience, the social actor exacts “passive vengeance”.

The “cruel delights” as described by Nietzsche, is best illustrated by Martha, a second-generation Australian-Singaporean, who describes the sense of pleasure in winning at the expense of others: “I knew it would be nice if my parents can win at the kiasu game”. In the conversation, Martha described to me that her parents took great pleasure in talking about her qualifications and profession, particularly to parents whose children who do not hold the same level of qualification or professional achievement. Even though the words used by Martha appear to be benign, her tone in the conversation implied that she felt it was a personal triumph that she was able to help her parents compete and win in a *kiasu* competition.

Such conversations also meant that Martha’s parents could exact “passive vengeance” on family friends who had the audacity to broach the topic of children’s achievements in the first place.

Further to the state of malcontent and malicious pleasure, Veblen argued that this form of consumption was wasteful, inefficient and lacked originality as it is emulative and exclusive ([1899] 2007, p. 49-53). As conspicuous consumption is the primary method in which a social actor wins a *kiasu* pursuit, I argue that being *kiasu* involves wastefulness in time and financial resource, and an unoriginal and inefficient way of utilising the very same resources. I believe that the *kiasu* pursuit arises from an imaginary deficiency, and instead of self-advancement based on one’s strength and weakness, the social actor is compelled to achieve the similar outcome of the incumbent winner. I also argue that *kiasu*, as observed by
the subjects in this study, echoes Veblen’s argument that pecuniary emulation is undertaken by social actors to seek social legitimacy. He observed the pursuit to accumulate and possess unnecessary items seemed to bestow prestige on the successful social actor and at the same time, a sense of dissatisfaction befalls on the social actor who was not successful in the pursuit (ibid, p. 21-23). Veblen’s themes of wastefulness and the lack of originality in conspicuous consumption are best illustrated by comments made by a first-generation subject, Tasha:

“When I was younger, my friends [in Singapore] would keep talking about cars and Prada bags. For the price of a single Prada, you can get so many other things. I try not to talk about these things, there are other things to talk about, but they come back to it”.

In this discussion, Tasha detailed how her friends kept resorting to comparing car and handbag brands in conversations; a conversation she found boring and at the same time, frustrating. Tasha also found the interactions with her friends in Singapore showed how wasteful their consumption patterns were.

Further explorations of the emotional malaise experienced by the first-generations subjects which precedes and proceeds after conspicuous consumption is found in Chapter 3: Kiasu in Australia as the subjects reveal their experiences in Singapore and Australia.

2.2.5 Bandwagon Effect and Snob Effect Explained

The literature review that I conducted is not limited to the field of humanities. In this research, I have found that Veblen’s work has been used and expanded in the areas of social psychology, economics and marketing. Specifically, there are two economic concepts which have assisted me in establishing the theoretical framework that allows me to discuss the kiasu experience in greater detail. They are the ‘Bandwagon Effect’ and the ‘Snob Effect’ (see Leibenstein, 1950, p.184-202; Bagwell and Bernheim, 1996, p.349-373; Amaldoss and Jain, 2005, p.1449-1466).

The Veblenian argument on status, as expanded by Baudrillard (2000) and Bourdieu (2003), proposes that the value of the service or good is wholly dependent on how the consumption is perceived by external parties (Veblen, [1899], 2007, p. 49-54). The relationship between the actual value of the good or service, and the perceived value, is known as the ‘Bandwagon Effect’ (Leibenstein, 1950, p. 183-201; Giacalone, 2006, p.33-37; Barnett, 2005, p. 1386-1391). The ‘Bandwagon Effect’ is a phenomenon which suggests that
individuals will follow certain consumption patterns in order to be recognised as a high status actor. If a consumer item or a lifestyle activity is perceived to hold high symbolic capital within the social environment, a social actor who desires high social status will acquire this specific item, or pursue a particular lifestyle activity. The ‘Bandwagon Effect’ was described aptly by Martha, second-generation subject, when relating her work 3-month work placement in Singapore:

“I was staying with my uncle at this suburb. I remember someone remarked that the suburb was full of apartments. In Singapore, if you are a successful professional or if you are from a good family, you should be living in a house. My uncle and aunt lived in an apartment, but that doesn’t mean they are any less of a human being”.

Martha’s narrative describes the Singaporean ‘Bandwagon Effect’: a successful person must reside in a house, as opposed to an apartment. If the social actor lives in an apartment, he/she will not be recognised as having any social status, even if the actor is successful professionally or academically.

In contrast, the ‘Snob Effect’ explains the social actor’s desire to be identified with the wealthier and exclusive segments of society (Amaldoss and Jain, 2005, p. 1449). The ‘Snob Effect’ not only describes the social actor’s desire to exclude but also emphasises the exclusionary nature of status symbols. As I emphasised in the previous section, status symbols are exemplified by their financial cost, scarcity and their relationship to time: as such, only a few have the financial capability, time resource and capacity to possess status symbols. Even though this object can only be available to a very few people at the same time, its exclusivity is universally recognised. The ‘Snob Effect’ was observed by a first-generation subject, Tasha, in describing residential addresses:

“I think Aussies are very ambitious too. They try to size you up depending on what suburb you live in. If you live in Mosman or Balmain, then you are ‘atas’ [Malay for higher class]. If you live in Lidcombe and Ashfield, well, it is not high class”.

In her experience and observation of the Australian ‘Snob Effect’, Tasha describes how certain suburbs are perceived to be exclusive whilst other suburbs hold negative social connotations, and that to be perceived to be socially acceptable, one should reside in a ‘socially acceptable’ address.
Her sentiment was shared by another first-generation subject, Rachel:

“In Sydney, I always get asked what I do and where I live. When I answer that I live in Ryde, what I say seems to shut them up”.

In her description of social interactions which take place, Rachel relates how her residential address in Sydney is perceived to appropriately commensurate with her high status profession as an occupational therapist. In the social interactions described by Tasha and Rachel, the areas of suburb and type of profession were used as potential exclusionary methods as prescribed by the ‘Snob Effect’.

Referring to the real-life experiences above, these two terms can be understood in relative terms: the ‘Bandwagon Effect’ is driven by the desire to conform, and the ‘Snob Effect’ describes the desire to exclude. Together they capture, in contemporary terms, what Veblen described as new ways in establishing new social hierarchies. Bringing these terms to date with the kiasu experience, the ‘Bandwagon Effect’ can be used to explain how social actors conform: to the indicators and benchmarks perceived to signal high social status, i.e. by obtaining tertiary qualifications from prestigious universities and accumulating luxury items, and conforming to the kiasu habitus, that is, a constant state of hyper-competition. On the other hand, the ‘Snob Effect’ can be used to explain how kiasu practices enable social actors to exclude other actors who are perceived to have ‘lost’ in the kiasu game. In short, I argue that the ‘Bandwagon Effect’ explains what kiasu social actors do, while the ‘Snob Effect’ explains the motive underlying the actions of the kiasu social actors.

The observations made by first-generation and second-generation subjects on ‘Bandwagon Effect’ and ‘Snob Effect’ will be discussed at length in Chapter 4: Status Symbols and Status Signalling.
2.3 Weber and Social Groups

While Veblen provides the starting-point for conspicuous consumption, his work has been extended by Weber ([1921]1978), as well as Baudrillard (2000) and Bourdieu (2001). By drawing on these key theorists, I was able to establish a theoretical framework to aid in understanding *kiasu* and symbolic consumption.\(^7\)

To begin with, Weber expands Veblen’s arguments that certain possessions signal the social group that someone belongs to, adding that status is defined by a seemingly exclusive claim to economic resources ([1968], 1978, p.306). Such claims can be linked to occupation or inherited status of special esteem such as inherited wealth or assets (ibid, p.306). Individuals within each status group live by a set of unspoken rules that are used to regulate movements between hierarchies (ibid, p.33). As such, not only are tangible items used to signal one’s status but also profession, proximity to economic resource and family lineage.

The Weberian argument that status is signalled by type of profession, economic involvement and ‘inherited gentility’ mirrors the assertions made by Veblen in which he described the leisure class “which is economically and socially legitimate by not being actively involved in the economic production” (Veblen, [1899], 2007, p. 23-25).

Weber further argues that actors in a common social group are often competing with one another, as well as in inter-group relations, to assert influence. For Weber, this demonstrates an inherent anxiety among human beings (ibid, p.25-31). This anxiety belies a belief in the social hierarchy, and the legitimacy of the existing social order. As a social language, the concept of status contains binding rules. These rules are expressed in a “form”, or the tangible material possessions one has, and “content” which describes how one behaves in a social setting (ibid, p.33). Conformity to the rules is voluntary, and while there is no formal policing of rules, social actors who deviate from the rules will be met with disapproval or worse, ex-communication (ibid, p.35). Like Veblen, Weber points out that the proof of economic success does not necessarily guarantee entry into the status group. The expectant individual has to prove themselves according to the conventions of the status group (ibid, p.937).

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7 Karl Marx is another theorist that may prove relevant at a later point. Marx observed that status can be determined through the distance or proximity of a social actor to the mode of production ([1867], 2000, p.10). This observation is similar to Veblen’s study of the leisure class, whereby social status explicitly implied when the social actor is not actively involved in any form of labour or production. The Marxist position on status and ‘commodity fetishism’ is beyond the scope of this thesis.
The Weberian argument that social actors compete in intra and inter-group relations is echoed in the 1980s by the Social Identity Theory, developed by Tajfel and Turner (1980, p. 193-210). Similar to Weber, Tajfel and Turner (1980) argued that individuals are highly motivated to maintain personal and collective self-esteem. This concept was expanded further by Crocker and Luhtanen (1990, p. 60-67), who argued that personal self-esteem was highly connected to group self-esteem. Social Identity Theory suggests that if the social identity of the individual is threatened, then the individual will start making in-group comparisons in order to protect the status quo. I will expand on the Social Identity Theory under the later sub-section entitled Status Theories and Kiasu.

I would like to highlight that in the research undertaken for this subject, there appeared little evidence to support the positions put forward by Weber, Tajfel, Turner, Crocker and Luhtanen. I found that the immediate social group is used as a benchmark, but at no point is kiasu practised in order to advance the group’s social standing. The role of reference groups as prescribed by Social Identity Theory will be discussed further in Chapter 4: Status Symbols and Status Signalling.
2.4 Bourdieu: Cultural Elite, Symbolic Capital and Habitus

My research was strongly influenced by Baudrillard and Bourdieu. Both authors independently explore the themes of social capital, social image and identity, but converge on how an individual uses possessions to create self-identity and understand social reality. In this section, I will introduce key Bourdieuan concepts which have helped shape the direction of this research, beginning with the main Bourdieu and Baudrillard convergence on the concept of ‘mystification’ (Bourdieu, 2001. p.36).

Similar to Baudrillard’s “hyper-reality” (1994) which I will explore in the next section, Bourdieu argues that a form of “mystification” takes place when a social actor purchases a symbolic good (2001, p. 36-45). Bourdieu argues that this “mystification” takes place on an individual and collective level: in which both parties are participating in a co-deception that the symbolic good will elevate the status of the social actor (ibid, p.94-95). Bourdieu’s concept of co-deception strongly echoes Veblen’s argument on conspicuous consumption and Baudrillard’s simulacra (1994).

This is reflected in the kiasu experience, where the social actor purchases a specific item in the belief that this acquisition and possession will elevate social status. Even though there is external recognition and acknowledgement that the social actor now has ownership of a status symbol, there is no tangible development aside from ownership of a symbol. I would like to highlight that the social actor’s hold on the new status is tenuous: it is challenged constantly by new iterations of status and when other social actors begin to acquire the same status symbol. Further, as soon as the social actor’s new status is acknowledged, other parties will be forming immediate plans to overthrow the new found social supremacy. As such, in the kiasu experience, by participating and perpetuating the imagined reality and purported status conferring, the social actors participate in a circular process of co-deception and mystification.

Apart from this ‘mystification’, Bourdieu extends Veblen’s view by arguing that status signalling has to be witnessed. The social actor has to be seen to “be someone” or “have something”, or in Bourdieu’s terms, the social actor must be seen to use symbolic capital to commit “symbolic violence” (ibid, p.103). The action of “being” and “having” is a public means of confirming one’s status and reputation (Veblen, [1899] 2007, p. 54-57). As the pursuit of status produces winners and losers, the prize is not limited to the status that has
been achieved. Rather, part of the achievement is in reveling in the fact that only an exclusive few are entitled to enjoy the privileges (such as certain possessions, foods or special treatment). With reference to the concept of *schadenfreude* discussed earlier, the social actor who wins the status contest not only commits symbolic violence, but part of the prize is experiencing malicious pleasure from the ‘violence’ committed.

The 150 years of connection between Veblen and Bourdieu and *kiasu* can be encapsulated in the following comments made by Martha, second-generation subject, when describing her wedding a few years ago:

> “When we organised my wedding, I remembered this comment from a fellow Singaporean that it was the best wedding reception they had been to, great food and great views of the city. I know that mom and dad spent a bit more money so that these comments can be made”.

For Martha’s parents, the success of the wedding was not simply a measure of her own pleasure, but how it would be perceived by their peers and relatives. She expressed that her parents were secretly happy, knowing that Martha’s wedding outdid everybody else’s. In the flowchart overleaf, I have attempted to visually capture some of the points raised in my interview with Martha.
By organising a lavish wedding, Martha’s parents not only honoured their daughter, but through this action, they have achieved social recognition, accumulated symbolic capital and they have ‘won’ in the wedding simulacra. I will discuss Baudrillard’s concept of ‘simulacra’ (1994) in greater detail in the next section. Relating back to the key theories which I have discussed, Martha’s parents’ private ‘triumph’ is signified by the presence of a witness, malicious pleasure and sense of legitimacy.

Veblen first made mention that that certain possessions and lifestyle activities entitle a social actor to be “treated and served differently” ([1899], 2007, p.23). This concept was re-
introduced by Bourdieu as a key benefit of holding symbolic capital (2007, p.374). Veblen also noted that items that are deemed to be socially acceptable are usually determined (and subsequently consumed) by the financial elites with a belief that individuals from a lower social status have no understanding of the significance of the item ([1899], 2007, p.21-22). Bourdieu expanded this view with the concept of “cultural nobility”, where he argued that cultural taste is a result of distinctive upbringing and education, and an intrinsic understanding of symbolic capital.

Further, Bourdieu made the case that ownership of high economic capital facilitates access to high cultural value goods and services like higher education and access to cultural arts. But this does not necessarily mean that possession of high cultural capital automatically mean high economic capital (1985, p. 724-725; 2000, p.95-97). This is because the significance of the form of capital is highly dependent on the specific space in which the social actors interact in (op cit, 1985, p.725). In the social space inhabited by my research subjects, social actors who possess tertiary qualification are perceived to hold high social capital and cultural capital. It is here that I would also like to emphasise Bourdieu’s view that even in this social space exists a ‘hierarchy of capital’ (ibid, p. 726), that is, certain degrees are perceived to be of higher status compared to others. I will further explore the research subjects’ perceptions towards different degrees in **Chapter 3: Kiasu in Australia**.

Further to the tenet that the legitimacy of the type of capital is highly dependent on the inhabited social space, Bourdieu also puts forward that higher education in itself is reflective of “aristocracy of culture”, that is, there is a sense of nobility of having one’s social standing being measured by higher standing in education (2005, p.11-19). This claim is highly resonant with the social actors interviewed in this study. All the subjects, from both first and second generation groupings, believed that in their social milieu, the level of education provided one with a sense of social legitimacy. The ‘aristocracy of culture’ was illustrated by Cate, a second-generation subject, who disclosed that her mother and relatives did not find her choice of life partner suitable when they discovered that he did not have university degree:

“In family gatherings they said, why are you dating him? He didn’t go to uni, you shouldn’t socialise with someone who does not have a degree”.

Similar to the inter-class snobbery displayed between upper class and working class (Tyler and Bennett, 2010, p. 380-385; Steiner and Weiss, 1951, p. 264-266; Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007, p. 513-515), Cate’s responses highlighted that certain kiasu members in her family...
practised such snobbery in rejecting individuals who did not fulfil their social criteria, in this case, the possession of a tertiary qualification.

The pursuance of a higher education not only requires financial resource, but also time. I would like to refer to one of Veblen’s key observations on status building in the early 19th century and the concept of time. A social actor’s high social status is not only derived from economic power and possession of exclusive assets, but also the fact that the social actor has the financial means and time to pursue non-economic activities or, as Veblen names it ‘leisure activities’ ([1899], 2007, p.23-25). In similar fashion, Bourdieu argues that if the specific social space recognises higher education as a cultural capital, the social actor is just conferred not just academic capital and cultural capital, but a recognition that the person has symbolic ‘time’ capital (2000, p. 231).

To acknowledge the existence of cultural elites is at the same time recognition that there is a social hierarchy comprised of both high and low status members. Hegel ([1807], 1977, p.58-60) argued that humans hold an immediate and innate objective “to make sense of things”, or what he terms “sense-certainty”. Importantly, this ‘social hierarchy’ is one of the ways in which sense is made; no matter how unjust and punitive the hierarchy is, and one way the social order is organized is via consumption practices (Weber, [1921], 1968, p.932; Barnes, 1992, p.259-263; Baudrillard, 2000, p. 236-238). It is through these practices that social actors gather information about self-identity and make sense of the social reality (Kaiser, 1985, p.280; Miller, 2005, p.2-5).

I emphasise that conspicuous consumption is used as a non-verbal language “to make sense of things”, as argued by Hegel. As a language, it has the power to organise and announce one’s social standing. I also argue that while signalling status via consumption remains valid today, the responses which I have captured in my study indicate that kiasu social actors are more interested in advancing their own social standing in a hierarchy, and the group is merely used as a means to identify the appropriate symbols, and an environment in which to compete. In light of this, I argue that the pursuit of social status is a uniform practice, to achieve the uniform goal of ‘winning the kiasu race’, and that the pursuance is not done to conform to immediate social group, but to conform to the common desire to win. I will expand on the subjects’ experiences on the issue of conformity versus uniformity in Chapter 4: Status Symbols and Status Signalling.
While Veblen provided preliminary thoughts on how social actors use institutional and group membership as a means to social legitimacy ([1899], 2007, p. 195-200), Bourdieu expands his argument through his concept of habitus. I indicated in the previous section that *kiasu* takes form as a habitus. I use Bourdieu’s definition of habitus in which he viewed it as “a system of lasting, transposable disposition which integrates past experiences, and functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions and actions” (2000, p. 82-83). This habitus, is used by the social actors or as Bourdieu termed it, agencies, as a “technology of strategic game playing”, (Skeggs, 2005, p. 84; Bourdieu, 1977, p. 177) in which the “agencies play for stakes which are non-material and non-quantifiable” (ibid, p. 177). In light of Bourdieu’s definitions on habitus, I argue that *kiasu* can be perceived as a habitus: a social space which is highly dependent on the social history, cultural memory and daily praxis of the actors (ibid, p. 77). *Kiasu* as a social space or habitus, is shaped by the social actors’ perceptions and subsequent actions towards building self-worth and social capital. The *schadenfreude*, the hyper-competition to win in the race and the rejection of actors who do not possess the appropriate social capital take place in this habitus without “rational ideology or thought” (ibid, p. 177) or in Bourdieu’s words “the agents do not know what they are doing, and that what they do has more meaning that they know” (p. 179).

Bourdieu also expands Veblen’s considerations on the clergy and membership to churches, by presenting the concept of “spiritual capital” (1991, p. 5; Verter, 2003, p. 150). The concept of ‘capital’ expands from his deliberations on cultural capital, symbolic capital (and symbolic power) and social capital. “Spiritual capital” refers to the social power, sense of entitlement and social legitimacy felt by a social actor when associating with certain denominations or when performing certain religious practices. According to Bourdieu, the primary function of religious membership is that it replicates the hierarchies within a social arena, or as he argues “one may construct the religious fact in a strictly sociological manner, that is, as the legitimate expression of a social position” (1991, p. 5). I will make the connection between Veblen and Bourdieu’s “spiritual capital”, and the emergence of religion as a status symbol in Chapter 3.
2.5 Baudrillard and The Language of Consumption

Whilst Veblen and Bourdieu have been useful in providing an understanding of how agencies behave, I have also found that Baudrillardian concepts useful in understanding the actions of social actors within a habitus. Both Baudrillard and Bourdieu independently consider the themes of social capital, social image and identity, but converge on how an individual uses possessions to create self-identity and understand social reality. I indicated earlier that both Baudrillard and Bourdieu converge on the concept of ‘mystification’ within a reality. Baudrillard (1994) terms this created social reality as “hyper-reality” where the social actor believes that by adhering to the ‘rules’ of status contest, their imagined and coveted status elevation will become real. This was explored in Baudrillard’s (1994) seminal work “Simulacra and Simulation”, in which he uses the example of Disneyland (ibid, p.10-12).

Baudrillard argued that Disneyland, as a hyper-real environment, was created not only as a place of escapism for children, but a place which ‘sells’ happiness for its adult participants, even if for a couple of hours. This is a world where all princesses get their prince, all evil characters are punished and everyone lives happily ever after. The colours, characters, activity and product messaging promote this as the place where wishes come true, as demonstrated by the Disneyland theme tune entitled “When You Wish Upon A Star”. The ‘simulacra’ does not end when the customer leaves the physical environment, as the customer usually has purchased a souvenir to capture this moment of imagined happiness, no matter how fleeting it is. Not unlike Disneyland, kiasu social actors believe that participation and victory in hyper-competition will bring about a happy ending, and that the accumulation of a status symbol, a souvenir of the competition, will capture the moment of happiness. However, the moment of happiness never arrives and the social actor is caught in an unremitting cycle of accumulation.

I argue that there is an important connection between Baudrillard’s ‘simulacra’ and the kiasu experience. In kiasu, there emerges an imagined, ubiquitous competition with no explicit rules, referees or medal ceremonies except to get ahead. In this imagined competition that has no ending, one can only experience a sense of happiness and satisfaction that someone else has lost. The feeling of happiness if felt, is fleeting, as the social actor ‘loses’ to another actor in the status pursuit. To validate this victory, as indicated by Veblen ([1899], 2007, p. 49-53), the triumph has to be recognised by those around us who act as third party witnesses. The competing, the winning, the subsequent losing and social recognition are all taking place in the social actor’s mind with no clear indication of who the competitors or adjudicators are.
Veblen’s third party acknowledgement of victory is expanded by Barreto and Ellemers (2003, p.139-170) who termed this exercise as ‘Social Identity Model of De-individuation Effects’ or SIDE. Here, social actors are not only highly motivated to establish and maintain desirable and enviable social identity, but will actively seek public acknowledgement, as the social identity is only a valid experience if the victory is witnessed by a third party.

Further to the ‘simulacra’, Baudrillard uses the term “system of objects” to describe the language of consumption. “System of objects” is a language which is focused on objects and the action of ‘having’ (2000, p.236). It strongly resonates with my earlier argument that social status can be achieved via ‘having’. This language does not contain a structured syntax, nor does it set out the rules for social relations. Rather, it assists individuals to understand and adhere to the social hierarchy. In short, it is a language in which the etymology is based on social statuses (ibid, p.237). Baudrillard recognises that the use-value of a good or service is determined by social and cultural factors. That is, that the commodity system stems from the individual’s need to belong and need to grow; using symbolic goods to make sense of their reality and as way to relate to others (ibid, p.19-24).

In the kiasu experience, the use-value of symbolic good is to signal someone’s advanced social standing. To provide a more graphical presentation on the use-value of a status symbol, I have developed a flow chart below which details the linear progression of the possession, use-value and social recognition, using tertiary education as a symbolic good. To explain, the possession of a publicly acknowledged achievement like higher education means that the social actor now possess the social capital to feel superior. Further to this, the social actor now has symbolic capital to exact symbolic violence onto other people, as exemplified by exclusion in conversations or social interaction, derogatory comparisons and so forth. The use-value of the tertiary qualification is that it enables the social actor to feel superior and as having social legitimacy.
Similar to his argument on Disneyland and ‘hyper-reality’ (1994), Baudrillard (1994, p. 8-10; Lane, 2000, p. 81-88) also suggests that consumption is a modern day fairy-tale: in which the consumer collects the signs and symbols of happiness through consumption, and waits for the moment of happiness to arrive. Like Veblen’s propositions that status consumption is wasteful, this moment of happiness never arrives as another symbol of happiness supersedes the original. If I extend this to my focus area, if one is *kiasu*, then getting ahead is believed to bring about happiness. However, the moment of contentment never appears as new items of status emerge to set the standards higher. Hence, *kiasu* brings about ‘mental distress’ (Ho et al, 1998, p.361) or a form of anxiety, echoing De Botton’s contemporary ruminations on the emotional ‘malaise’ of contemporary society and Veblen’s 150 year-old observation.

Material consumption, as described by Baudrillard as “the accumulation of signs of happiness” (1998, p.30-32), is a crucial to my argument on status anxiety. *Kiasu* social actors pursue material possessions, and “signs of happiness” in the belief that the action would bring about social recognition and belonging, yet the end result is usually feelings of anxiety and malcontent as more status symbols emerge. There is a misconception that the pursuit of material wealth is predominantly conducted by individuals experiencing low-esteem (Smith and Tyler, 1997, p.146-170). There is a wide range of literature, however, indicating that there is no direct correlation between low self-esteem and material pursuits (Bat-Chava, 1994; Wagner et al, 1986; Porter et al, 1979; Smith et al, 1997; Tyler et al. 1992). In addition, I would like to restate that conspicuous consumption is made by social actors from all income levels as it performs identity-building and communicative functions (Ellemers et al, 2000, p. 6064; Jaramillo and Moizeau, 2003, p. 1-24; Carlisle et al, 2007, p. 2-5; Shipman, 2004, p. 278-281; Colls, 2004, p. 593).
2.6 Status Theories and Kiasu

In this section, I want to highlight the status theories derived from the field of social psychology. These theories have assisted me in developing a better insight in how kiasu manifests itself in social interactions and indeed, how it thrives in a social setting. This is especially pertinent as I indicated in Section 2.2, that a kiasu winner has to be witnessed. The first theory, ‘Social Identity Theory’ reflects Weber’s theory of common social groups. This social psychology theory was expanded by Tajfel and Turner (1980), who described how individuals who belong to a specific social group are highly motivated and committed to maintain the esteem, public identity and social power of that group. Like Veblen’s position, ‘Social Identity Theory’ postulates that consumption patterns are used to uphold the rules of the group membership and that wealth itself is not a status qualification, even though it is an important factor (ibid, p. 305-307). ‘Social Identity Theory’ further describes how self-identity is defined by membership into social groups (Tajfel and Turner, 1986, p.7-24). Furthermore, it is conceived that individuals are motivated to belong to social groups that are positively perceived based on status (Hogg, 1996, p66-67; Tajfel and Turner, 1986, p7-10).

To expand on this theory, I will use the example of golf club membership as this is widely-recognised in land-scarce Singapore as a status symbol (Neo and Savage, 2002, p. 399-410; Neo, 2001, p. 192-200; Yao, 1996, p. 339-405). Employing the ‘Social Identity Theory’, if a social actor belongs to the Singapore Island Country Club, the membership criteria of this reference group is not only identified by the annual club membership, but is also defined by accompanying accoutrements that is the golf clubs, the apparel, the food and beverage choices which reflect the group’s social status. ‘Social Identity Theory’ further suggests that to belong to such a reference group, the social actor is highly motivated to invest high financial and time resources so that the club membership is not only up-to-date but it is membership of the right club. In this example, the social actor feels that by associating with the island’s most prestigious and expensive golf club, there is a sense of exclusivity and social legitimacy. To demonstrate loyalty to the reference group, the social actor will make a concerted effort to fit into the ‘club’ identity through consumption of the ‘correct attire’, socialising and being seen to socialise with the ‘right’ people (Scheepers et al, 2006, p. 363-373). In addition to these actions, it is suggested that the social actor will make visible

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8 Singapore Island Country Club, located or SICC as it is known, is the most prestigious and expensive golf club in Singapore with an annual fee of S$225 000 (or A$176 600) per person. Information derived from www.forbes.com, accessed 23 September 2012
comments favouring his/her own club, and at the same time, making derogatory remarks as a way of eroding social legitimacy of another club (Branscombe and Wann, 1994, p.641-644; Barreto and Ellemers, 2000, p.891-894). Relating back to the kiasu experience, the social actors in this group believe that their social exclusivity and the kiasu victory are derived not only from their exclusive membership to the golf club, but also, that their membership is visibly known to people who are not members. This self-promotion is usually done in conversations and the passing reference to club membership is done by social actors who desire to feel superior and socially legitimate. The social actors experience a sense of malicious pleasure knowing that their lifestyle activity is limited to a privileged few.

Finally, the theory stipulates that members of this group are not only highly motivated to maintain the group’s perceived high status in inter-group relation, but are also highly motivated to stay in a group perceived to hold high status. The correlation between personal and collective social status, and the significance of the immediate social group will be discussed further in Chapter 4: Status Symbols and Status Signalling. I would like to note that I will also highlight how the subjects disclosed that personal interest supplants that of collective interest in Chapter 4. This in essence, challenges the tenets of ‘Social Identity Theory’.

The second status theory which I have used is the ‘Status Construction Theory’, which very much echoes Bourdieu’s work. This theory, also drawn from the social psychology field, (see Ridgeway 1997 and Anderson et al 2006, 2008) considers intra-group dynamics, posits that high status members within a group are generally perceived to be more socially competent than low status members. As such, they are considered to hold an entitlement to respect and rewards. As high status has been bestowed on these individuals, there is an expectation that these individuals will lead decision-making processes and will perform better in social interactions and in work environments (Randel et al, 2005, p.25-26; Anderson et al, 2006, p.1094). Using the previous example of a social actor who belongs to a social group with the common interest of golf club membership, according to the ‘Status Construction Theory’, the decisions on the time of next round of tee-off, the brand of golfing equipment and other social events, are usually led by the high status member of the group. If an individual is perceived to hold high status within the group, this individual is expected and entitled to make social decisions, and the decisions are perceived to be reliable as it came from a high status member.

This loyalty to the high status members brings to mind the syndrome of “Queen Bee” (Resnick, 2008, p. 99-113; Wiseman, 2009, p. 30-31) largely popularised by Hollywood-
made films depicting life as a high-schooer as seen in *Grease 1 and 2, Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* and *Mean Girls* to name a few. These films contain a common and predictable plot-and-ending of the anti-hero or heroine who has low status and who is on a usually painful journey of self-discovery. Along the way, the anti-hero or heroine has an impasse and subsequent reconciliation with the ‘Queen Bee’ of the school, or the high status individual in that reality. The ‘Queen Bee’, a publicly recognised high status member, is usually typified by wealthy family, possession of status symbols, never-ending entourage of obsequious friends, success with teachers and the opposite gender. My focus is not so much on the anti-hero or heroine, rather, how the ‘Queen Bee’ characters are usually depicted to lead decision making in social situations. In this research project, I discovered that high status was afforded to social actors who had tertiary qualification from certain universities. Social interactions as described by the research subjects from both generations reveal that once a social actor’s academic qualification is revealed and acknowledged to be of high status, there is a retreat in aggressive questioning by *kiasu* antagonists.

The tenet of ‘Status Construction Theory’ was exemplified by the comments made by Rachel, first-generation subject:

“When I told them I studied in Sydney Uni, that seems to satisfy their criteria and they back off”.

This is because, in line with this theory, by disclosing that her qualifications were obtained from a prestigious university, the antagonists in the interaction would cease their questioning, and accept that Rachel is entitled to respect. In another light, Annie, another first-generation subject, revealed that “*Academic qualification means that you have the right to speak louder*” while Cate, a second-generation subject, made the comment that “*Smart is status*” meaning that higher education entitled one to respect. Though neither Rachel, Annie or Cate saw themselves as ‘Queen Bees’, their possession of tertiary qualification from prestigious universities meant that they felt they held legitimacy in social interactions, and were entitled to verbalise their opinions.

The final status model I will draw on is the ‘Frog Pond’ theory which is also known as ‘Big Fish in Little Pond’ theory. It is a status concept which was introduced in the area of social psychology in the early 1960s to describe inter-group status perceptions and how status organises itself within a social group (Espenshade et al, 2005, p.272-280; McFarland and Buehler, 1995, p. 1060-1068; Davis, 1966, p.17-31; Marsh, 1987, p.280). The ‘Frog Pond’ theory posits that social actors prefer to be perceived to have high status in a low status
group, rather than having low status in a high status group. In short, a social actor feels higher esteem being associated with high status, under all circumstances. The *kiasu* pursuit reflects the argument of the ‘Frog Pond’ theory as *kiasu* relies on the proposition that all social actors want to be recognised as possessing high social status or being associated with a high status social group. This pursuit of personal and collective high status means that social actors will continually try to self-enhance and leave for another ‘pond’ perceived to be of higher status. As I discussed earlier, there will always be new iterations of status symbols and as such, social actors who are caught up in the *kiasu* pursuit, is participating in a never-ending competition. Similar to Baudrillard’s ‘Disneyland’ analogy and Bourdieu’s concept of co-deception, the ‘Frog Pond’ theory shows that the ceaseless ‘pond’ jumping carried out by social actors does not produce fulfilment but in fact only causes further anxiety and dissatisfaction.

The ‘Frog Pond’ theory also argues that low-high status ordering naturally emerges and often takes place even when the social actor is not present (Chen, 2005, p. 44-46). I find this last consideration important in helping me understand how first-generation Australia-Singaporean decipher social status in a new place of residence vis-à-vis their pre-existing concept of status, and how these subjects retain their status in absentia from Singapore. This theory also helps me understand how second-generation subjects try to maintain their self-identity and advance their social status when interacting in a different social paradigm with family and friends from Singapore. I have chosen to employ a social psychology theory as I have found the premises of this theory helpful in developing an understanding on the transferability of one’s social status, that is, the question of whether a social actor high status in place of origin, equates to high status in a new place of residence as well as how social status organises itself when the social actor is not present. I would like to point out that the ‘Frog Pond’ theory is highly reminiscent of Veblen’s argument that “inherited gentility” holds more legitimacy compared to “created gentility” as discussed in the previous section. I will explore the concept of status transferability at length in Chapter 3: Kiasu in Australia.
2.7 *Kiasu* As An Individualised Self-Advancement

In preparing and locating a literature review to deepen my understanding of the Singaporean-Chinese attitude towards social competition and *kiasu*, and combining this initial understanding with the empirical data, I have identified an interesting facet to the research. Due to the limitations of my scope, I will only provide some basic outlines on *kiasu* as a form of self-advancement and how this highly individualised behaviour sits in juxtaposition in a collective culture like Singapore.

South-East Asian cultures, as embodied by Thai, Malaysian and Singaporean among others, are characterised by its emphasis on advancing the interests of the immediate reference group (Singelis and Brown, 2006, p. 355-396; Schutte and Ciarlante, 1988, p. 10-18). The significance of maintaining social harmony has its roots in Confucianism whereby the interests of the community supplants the interests of the individual. To this end, the individual holds the responsibility to strive towards the prosperity and the general well-being of the community as exemplified by immediate family and friends (Huat, 1989, p. 7-15). It has also been suggested that social actors from collective cultures are more reluctant to self-enhance compared to Western-based, individualistic cultures (Kurman, 2003, p. 496-510; Triandis, 2000, p. 147-150). The argument for maintaining group esteem and well-being is further supported by the ‘Social Identity Theory’ which argues that social actors are highly motivated to maintain the group esteem and public image of the group (Tajfel and Turner, 1980, p. 305-307). I have also located research which suggests that social actors from collectivistic cultures tend to emphasise conformity and similarity within a reference group (Hofstede, 1991, p. 74-78; Triandis, 1989, p. 507-520).

As I have outlined in the previous section, the practice of *kiasu* is highly individualised and serves only to advance a social actor’s social status. *Kiasuism* is personified by a high motivation to self-enhance and a high commitment to maintain personal self-esteem, often to the detriment of others. In fact, *kiasu* social actors derive malicious pleasure in witnessing another actor’s failure. This means that the *kiasu* experience in essence, would be antithetical to a collective culture like Singapore, yet my research shows that not only does *kiasu* manifest itself in Singapore, but its version is more aggressive than the one witnessed in Australia. Referring to the fieldwork data, I will discuss the tri-impasse between *kiasu*, collectivistic and individualistic cultures further in *Chapter 4: Status Symbols and Status Signalling*. 

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
According to Veblen, ‘in order to gain and hold the esteem of men and women, it is not sufficient to merely possess wealth and power” ([1899] 2007, p. 42). From Weber to Baudrillard to Bourdieu, status theories and self-conceptual theories reflect that status begets social power and influence that, in turn, further legitimates status.

With this literature review presented, it is important to understand kiasu as an emotive and affective state, as well as a social arena where actors develop their self-concept, as described in the previous sections. With this established, I will now turn to discuss the first part of the research findings: Kiasu in Australia.
Chapter 3  Kiasu in Australia

In this chapter, I present the first set of research findings. In writing and analysing the concept of kiasu, I aim to connect the academic definition of the concept with the real-life experience as described by the subjects of my research. As outlined in Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework, kiasu is a Hokkien term which approximately translates to “fear of losing”. Another definition is offered by Hwang et al in which it is described as “an obsessive concern of getting the most out of every situation or transaction, and the compulsive desire to get ahead of others” (2002, p. 70).

In this chapter, I focus on how the lived experience reflects and challenges a number of the theoretical arguments as well as highlighting the manner in which kiasu crosses the generational divide. That is to say, many of the kiasu dimensions are evident in both the first and second-generation subjects.

As indicated in the discussion of my methodological approach, I worked to build rapport with my subjects due to the sensitive nature of the topic. I did not want to alienate my subjects by creating a situation whereby they feel they have to ‘justify’ their actions. In fact, I wanted them to guide the conversation in such a way that they felt comfortable and open about the subject-matter. In light of this, I began all the conversations by asking them to provide a description of their background and family history, which allows us to discuss and establish some commonality and trust. When trust was established and the subject was appropriately ‘warmed up’, I began the more formal part of the interview. The subjects’ responses in this chapter and Chapter 4 should be read in mind of the subjects’ brief background, family history and attitudes to kiasu, located in Chapter 1.

3.1 The Kiasu Experience As A Source of Competition

The first question was general, as I wanted the subjects to orientate themselves within the subject-matter. I asked them to describe the experience of kiasu in their own words. The response was telling: each subject clearly identified the ‘inherent fear of losing out’ and not wanting to fall behind – in essence, capturing the theoretical core of kiasu. With this in mind, I begin my analysis in this section by looking at how kiasu manifests itself as an ongoing
form of competition. The competitive sentiment is best summarised by Erica and Annie, both first-generation subjects and Cate, a second-generation subject:

“Trying to be first. Afraid to lose out. If you think you are about to lose out, you should try your best not to lose out. You must get there first at all costs”. (Erica)

“You must be first in whatever, in a line, in an elevator. You must do whatever it takes to be first. You must not give way”. (Cate)

“You do not want to lose out or miss out. So you do whatever it takes to make sure you are keeping up”. (Annie)

The kiasu experience, as described above by the subjects not only outlines the affect-state of fear, but the description also includes the actions of a person who will do, in Annie’s words “whatever it takes” in order to gain advantage, even if this causes harm to another person. This ‘winning at all costs’ facet of kiasu was echoed not only by Erica and Annie, but also by Cate. The similarity in describing kiasu demonstrates that kiasu crosses generations.

In Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework, I emphasised introduced that kiasu is not only found in highly competitive environments, but it can also be found in the most mundane everyday activities such as shopping, sitting down for dinner, catching public transport. Kiasu, as observed in mundane activities, were described by the first-generation research subjects, Erica and Patricia as follows:

“When I am on a crowded train and I want a seat, I will potong [overtake] this person to get the seat, or I will plot my way to get in the train faster”. (Erica)

“You know Boxing Day sales, and you always see Asians rushing in? I am afraid I am like that. I don’t want to lose out on a good deal”. (Patricia)
The same insights were also made by the second-generation subjects, Cate, Ina and Martha:

“You know, recently AirAsia released really cheap fares but you have to stay online to get a $1 fare. My mom stayed online for hours! Only a kiasu person who do not want to lose out, will do this. She did get the fare though”. (Cate)

“In exam time, you see the Asians who are really kiasu in trying to get the best possible marks. Some of them don’t even share notes, they are withdrawn and they won’t tell you anything. That is really an inefficient way of studying and there is no room for improvement. I don’t hang out with people like that”. (Ina)

“My parent’s bible study group is composed of Malaysian and Singaporeans. Everyone brings a dish to their meetings. Invariably, during dinner time, the very same kiasu person who rushes in will always get the biggest piece of meat or fish”. (Martha)

In Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework, I discussed the concepts of downward, upward and motivational comparisons (Stapel and Koomen, 2001, p. 766-779). These comparisons are made in the kiasu experience for different purposes. As such, these relational comparisons allow the subjects to assess their own status within the hierarchy: for example, ‘downward comparison’ is made by social actors to feel better about themselves and to affirm their status in the social hierarchy. ‘Downward comparison’ in a kiasu setting was observed by subjects from both generations:

“I knew it would be nice if my parents can win at the kiasu game. I know my parents would never initiate a kiasu conversation comparing their children’s profession, but if they are ever roped in, I know they will win because I was a lawyer”. (Martha, second-generation subject)

In her comments, Martha revealed that when making comparisons to both her qualification and profession, her parents felt that they held higher social status due to Martha’s
profession. While parents usually feel proud and happy when their children achieve academically or professionally, kiasu parents feel more than happy: they now experience the ‘cruel delight’ of having ‘won’ the conversation, as demonstrated by Martha’s comments.

This was particularly the case when conversations concentrated on comparing children and their achievements. These sentiments are mirrored by the observations of Rachel, a first-generation subject:

“My aunts and uncles love comparing what we are doing [professionally] and what my cousins are doing. It is not a pleasant conversation because I have made it: I am married, I have a Masters, I live in Sydney. I can’t explain it…but it is how they talk at you”.

In addition to this comment, Rachel also made an observation which challenges the idea that kiasu is material and achievement-based. Here, Rachel revealed that it makes her feel superior when she discloses that she is from Singapore:

“With Asians, I always get asked what country I am from and when I say ‘Singapore’, it seems to satisfy them. You know, because if you say you are from Singapore, they will say that you are affluent, well-educated. Not if you say you are from China”.

The second form of comparison, known as the ‘upward comparison’ is made with the primary objective of identifying source of envy or frustration (Stapel and Koomen, 2001 p. 766): where social actors make upward comparisons to parties who are perceived to be a source of envy. In reading the responses from the subjects, it appears that this type of comparison provides a motivating force for social actors to ‘climb’ the social ladder, a concept which I will return to below. As such, this form of comparison is usually employed by parents or immediate family for two reasons: first, as a way to highlight the one’s perceived deficiency, in the hope of motivating the social actor into self-improvement (Ho et al, 1998, p.360-361); and secondly, as a way to feel more superior to other parties. ‘Upward comparison’ was observed by both first and second generation subjects in their parents and immediate family in Singapore:
“When I was younger, my cousins seem to be doing better (academically) than me and my aunties used to talk. I felt the pressure, But now, I am doing a PhD, I am sure they are now talking about me”. (Patricia, first-generation subject)

“When I was living in Singapore, my mother used to compare me to my cousins. She would say things like ‘why are you not like so-and-so? She is such a good girl’. That made me kiasu and I want to be like that”. (Erica, first-generation subject)

“My auntie loves asking my mother what we are up to. My cousins are not kiasu but they live under her rule and they have to listen to what she says. My auntie and my mom get into these comparing conversations. Because I am doing a medical degree, I know my cousins are being compared to me”. (Ina, second-generation subject)

In another example of ‘upward comparison’, Cate, a second-generation subject, explained how her grandmother constantly referred to her (Cate’s) and her brother in family gatherings as a way of ‘showing off’:

“My grandmother loves to talk about how well my brother and I are doing”.

The last form of comparison in the kiasu experience, ‘motivational comparison’, is commonly used by social actors themselves to self-motivate (Stapel and Koomen, 2001, p. 766). This form of comparison can be used to inspire self-improvement, as typified by the comments made by the research subjects across both generations:

“My brother is very smart, so I always want to compete with him”. (Erica, first-generation subject)

“Smart is good, smart is status for me. I want to be seen as smart”. (Cate, second-generation subject)
In a typical social interaction, aside from making comparisons, social actors may feel that their place on the social hierarchy is under threat. To respond to this threat, social actors can escalate the comparisons. On the other hand, if social actors do not wish to participate in the *kiasu* race, they will choose to avoid the subject matter, the person or the social situation itself. In *Theoretical Framework*, I highlighted this as the ‘flight strategy’ (Shelton, 2006, p. 321-358). The following comments from Erica and Rachel, illustrate how they both employ the silent treatment as a ‘flight strategy’ during a *kiasu* situation:

“In Singapore, we always get asked what we are doing with our property. No matter what we say, people would start giving advice and dismissing what we just said. It doesn’t even matter if you tell them that you don’t want to talk about it. They think they know more than me. So I just keep quiet”. (Erica, first-generation subject)

“When I went back to Singapore with a Master’s degree and an Australian husband, my cousins were very nasty to me. It came out in the way they talked. My cousins would go on and on about what they know about Sydney. But I live here! I am not confrontational, so I just let them say their piece, and I keep quiet. What is the point?” (Rachel, first-generation subject)

On the other hand, social actors who wish to participate and escalate the *kiasu* race may choose to dismiss the other person’s achievements by “devaluing and de-emphasising” methods (Shelton, 2001, p. 328). These methods were brought to light in comments made by Patricia, a first-generation subject, and echoed by Martha and Cate, second-generation subjects:

“When I’m prompted, I will start talking about material things. There is a pressure to do it”. (Patricia)

“Generally I don’t care where you live, what car you drive, I don’t care about your profession but it is a trend to ask all these. I would never be the one to initiate this game but, I want to beat you at your game when it starts”. (Martha)
There is this guy who is really self-absorbed in my centre. Anything he asks of you is to facilitate him telling you what he has done. I tried to compete with him, but you know, it just escalates. (Cate)

3.2 Kiasu, Chronic Dissatisfaction and Malicious Pleasure

In Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework, I discussed that the pursuit of status produces a sense of chronic dissatisfaction. I argued this chronic dissatisfaction occurs because the social actor is highly dependent on external achievements for internal contentment and the pursuit of status is never-ending as new iterations of status continue to emerge. Even if the social actor feels gratification in achieving high status, this feeling of fulfilment is short-lived as the very same status symbol are quickly acquired by someone else, or it is no longer recognised as the status symbol it once was.

In addition to this chronic satisfaction and anxiety to keep ‘winning’, social actors in a kiasu pursuit also experience Schadenfreude. As described in Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework, Schadenfreude is a form of pleasure or enjoyment derived from witnessing another person’s failure (Leach et al; 2003, p.932). This is a malicious pleasure at someone else’s expenses. This is represented by Martha, a second-generation Australian-Singaporean, who explains by outlining the way her academic achievement and profession has allowed her parents to ‘win’ in the kiasu race:

“I knew it would be nice if my parents can win at the kiasu game. I know my parents would never initiate a kiasu conversation comparing their children’s profession, but if they are ever roped in, I know they will win because I was a lawyer”.

In her response, Martha goes on to describe that her parents “take delight” in the fact that it is not simply their daughter’s achievement, but that she has outperformed the children of their friends. Martha’s parents use her academic and professional achievement as a way to make other parents feel their children’s success has been relatively inadequate. Further to this, Martha herself admitted in taking pleasure in the knowledge that her parents can triumph in such circumstance. In this description, Martha has successfully helped me to identify kiasu and schadenfreude as practised and experienced by two generations.
Malicious pleasure was also observed by Cate, a second-generation subject, when describing her grandmother’s antics in showing off her Rolex watch and disclosing the monetary value of the timepiece. Cate noted that the malicious pleasure was palpable when other family members could not afford such expensive and high status possessions. Cate’s comments about her grandmother helped me to locate kiasu in another generation. The subjects also noted that they were often on the receiving end of this type of malicious pleasure. For example Erica, noted that some of her friends seem to take pleasure in the fact that she had fallen behind in the pursuit of material accumulation:

“Because I was doing my Masters, my earning capacity was not as high as my other friends. Of course I would like to have the branded stuff but there are other things to consider. Once I got together with a friend and I said her handbag was lovely. She replied ‘why don’t you get your husband to get you one?’ They don’t get it, that there is life outside materials. I felt pressured”.

3.3 Kiasu As A Source Of Anxiety

As outlined in Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework, kiasu is not only the pursuit to confront concerns about status (DeBotton, 2004, p.21-23; Amaldoss and Jain, 2005, p. 144), but it also produces anxiety as the social actors compete to demonstrate their social capital. In the pursuit of status, the activity creates financial pressures, as well as social and psychological costs (Veblen, 1899 [2007], p. 49-53; Bourdieu, 2001; Green and Minchin, 2010; Douglas and Isherwood, 2000; Angle, 2008). This occurs as there is a sense of chronic dissatisfaction with one’s achievements – be they material, professional or educational.

In his writings, Veblen outlined that the financial cost is represented by the “consumption of unnecessary goods which are perceived to signal one’s station in life” (Veblen, [1899], 2007, p. 50). This wastefulness is best represented by responses from both Annie, a first-generation subject and Martha, a second-generation subject:
“It is a never-ending race. You buy this and that, but at what price? Are you a better person because you have the latest car or the LV [Louis Vuitton] bag? In Singapore, all the priorities are strange. If I am back there [Singapore], I would buy, buy and buy as well”. (Annie)

“When I got engaged, mom’s kiasu came out, by saying things like ‘oh the diamond is not big enough’. There was pressure applied to my fiancé to get a bigger diamond”. (Martha)

As noted above, Annie described the pressure to participate in the material pursuit while Martha describes the anxiety created by her mother which undermined her enjoyment of her engagement ring.

Further, the “unproductive consumption” (Veblen, [1899], 2007, p. 62) does not dispel the level of anxiety. Rather, it adds to the current level of anxiety. This was observed by Patricia and Rachel, both first-generation subjects:

“You always feel you are being compared. The pressure to keep up is great in Singapore”. (Patricia)

“You grew up in an environment where you are taught that you cannot fail…so I didn’t know how to take failure”. (Rachel)

The anxiety, in turn, affects social relationships as social actors continue to compete to signal their social superiority. The negative effects on social relationships are best described by the following comments by responses gathered from first-generation subjects:

“I stay away from family gatherings. That is where they start making comparisons”. (Patricia)

“When I went back to Singapore with a Master’s degree and an Australian husband, my cousins were very nasty to me. So I try not to have anything to do with them”. (Rachel)
Negative impacts on social relationships with family and friends are similarly iterated by second-generation subjects:

“In exam time, you see the Asians who are really kiasu in trying to get the best possible marks. Some of them, who I usually am friends with, don’t even share notes, they are withdrawn and they won’t tell you anything. That is really an inefficient way of studying and there is no room for improvement. I don’t hang out with people like that”. (Ina)

“When you know kiasu people, it puts you off from developing closer friendship with them”. (Martha)

The anxiety is similarly explored by Baudrillard, who suggests that we are witnessing a modern-day fairy tale but without the happy conclusion (2000, p.237). This is because despite the social actor’s efforts in accumulating symbols of purported happiness and success, the sense of fulfilment is fleeting and temporary. In the kiasu experience, the sense of contentment never arrives due to the never-ending nature of the kiasu competition. This is well-summarised by Annie, a first-generation subject, and Martha, a second-generation subject:

“There will come a point that you just can’t keep up”. (Annie)

“My mom wanted to make a big show out of my wedding. I felt like a performer because everyone is looking and comparing. I didn’t want to be a part of that but my parents did. And it just kept escalating, you know, certain foods on the menu certain wines. I know that mom and dad spent a bit more money so that these comments can be made”. (Martha)
In addition to the comments made by Annie and Martha, Leslie, a second-generation subject, highlighted the sense of transient contentment when describing how her relatives compare litany of never-ending status symbols:

“To them [the relatives], there is the right degree, the right partner, the right family, the right suburb. Whatever right is”. (Leslie)

In the kiasu competition, any sense of victory does not remain unchallenged. In addition, the anxiety is not only felt by the social actor who allegedly wins the kiasu competition, but also by the alleged ‘loser’, creating a complex and relational interplay. The discontent felt by the loser stems from having lost the kiasu competition, as well as direct result of ‘symbolic violence’ from another person (Bourdieu, 2001, p.103). The sense of loss and feeling of inadequacy was revealed by all of the subjects from both generational groups. As revealed by Erica, when asked how she felt about the kiasu experiences with her friends in Singapore, there is no ease on the pressure felt:

“Because I was doing my Masters, my earning capacity was not as high as my other friends. Of course I would like to have the branded stuff but there are other things to consider…. Once I got together with a friend and I said her handbag was lovely. She replied ‘why don’t you get your husband to get you one?’ They don’t get it, that there is life outside materials. I felt pressured”.

3.4 Kiasu And The Imagined Competition

As noted in Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework, the kiasu experience in itself is not just a habitus space where social actors socially compete (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 177), but this is an imaginary competition, echoing Baudrillard’s ‘simulacra’ (1994, p. 10-12). The kiasu experience is a competitive environment in which there are no explicit rules or adjudicators and no clear ending, as new high status members continuously emerge. The single constant in the kiasu experience is that the victory has to be witnessed by a third party (Veblen, [1899], 2007, p. 49-53). This witness may not even need to be a contender in the kiasu competition. As such, the competing, the winning, the subsequent losing and social recognition are all taking place in the social actor’s mind: hence the description of kiasu as an imagined competition.
In **Chapter 2**, I noted that the *kiasu* victory has to be witnessed. This public-private acknowledgement was observed by subjects across both generational groups who noted that victory is only validated in the *kiasu* competition if witnessed by another party. The public-private victory is illustrated by Annie and Patricia from the first-generation grouping:

> “I stay away from family gatherings. That is where they start making comparisons”. (Patricia) – in describing how comparisons usually take place in family gatherings

> “There is a pressure to keep up in Singapore. You have to be in a certain job to get the status. It is about the bag, the car. If I remained in Singapore, I would be like that too”. (Annie) – in describing how her interactions with Singaporean friends create anxiety and frustration

Martha and Ina, from the second-generation grouping acknowledged the public-private aspect in the following statements:

> “When we organised my wedding, I remembered this comment from a fellow Singaporean that it was the best wedding reception they have been to, great food and great view of the city. I know that mom and dad spent a bit more money so that these comments can be made”. (Martha)

> “My mother’s sister is the queen of *kiasu*. She lives here in Sydney and she keeps talking about her kids. She and my mom get into conversations, and my mom is pressured to respond”. (Ina)

Referring to the comments above, Martha’s experience indicates how her wedding was used as a public signaller to extended family and friends, while Ina highlights how her auntie uses family gatherings to draw attention to her children’s achievement.

Such comments also signal a common theme of being present (or not present) in situations where comparisons are made, and subsequent victors are acknowledged. In Patricia’s and Annie’s instances, two first-generation subjects prefer not to be in Singapore at specific time
of the year where the kiasu conversations take place within the immediate family, while Martha and Ina comment on how their immediate family uses social interactions as a public way to participate in kiasu conversations, and ‘win’ in the exchange. The above comments also reflect ‘upward comparison’ methods (Stapel and Koomen, 2001, p. 766) in which kiasu social actors make comments to highlight someone’s perceived deficiency in an attempt to confirm their social status. I would like to restate that the subjects indicated that ‘upward comparisons’ are usually carried out by parents and immediate family members.

Further, the experience of kiasu in a truly imagined paradigm materialises in the virtual world, confirming the idea that this competition crosses all dimensions of life. Gina, a second-generation subject, raised the issue of kiasu in a virtual space. It is worthy to note that the kiasu can thrive in an environment like Facebook as it is a virtual, social environment whereby normal social etiquette is not observed (Morris and Leung, 2004, p. 127-147; Underwood et al, 2011, p. 1621-1626; Kim et al, 2008, p. 291-292):

“I think Facebook is a major kiasu forum. Everyone is bragging about where they have been and ‘check in’ different locations. Seriously! No one in Facebook world ever does anything ordinary”.

Facebook, as a social forum, provides fertile ground for kiasu pursuits as the technology has enabled instant public acknowledgment as well as wider geographic coverage. Facebook’s virtual environment means that social actors do not have to be physically present in order to participate in the race. As we turn more to social media as a relationship tool, I believe that there is merit in investigating kiasu practices in social media environments.

While further investigation of social media is beyond the scope of this thesis, it was one of the areas that highlighted how innovations move faster than theoretical postulations and opens a space for additional research. My research indicated that this was a gap in literature and one which will continue to grow as social media plays an expanding role in our daily lives.

In Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework, in addition to my argument that kiasu exists as an imagined competition yet still requires the private-public acknowledgement, I also asserted
that only social actors from the habitus will understand the 'rules' of the game or the “logic of the practice” (Skeggs, 2005, p. 85). It is useful to note that all the first-generation subjects commented that the practice of *kiasu* is the norm in Singapore. This sentiment was best encapsulated by Annie, Patricia and Erica:

“In Singapore, there is always pressure to keep up. You have to be in a certain job to be seen to have status. It is all about the degree, the car, the bag. You know if I stayed there, I would be like that too”. (Annie)

“The stress to compete is pretty great. I think when I am in Singapore, I start making comparisons too”. (Patricia)

“I think I am less kiasu here, compared to when I was in Singapore. They do it [kiasu] all the time”. (Erica)

These comments, which were made independently of each other, highlighted two aspects of *kiasu* as a habitus in Singapore: its ubiquity and the apparent logic which is accepted by the social actors. Further, Annie, Patricia and Erica, as former members of this habitus, emphasised that they too would participate in hyper-competitiveness if they were still living in Singapore.

That *kiasu* is recognised as a habitus in Singapore was also observed by second-generation subjects, as indicated by the comments made by Ina, Leslie and Martha:

“You know, they do it [kiasu] like it’s a normal thing that families do. It is very predictable”. (Ina)

“It is a self-perpetuating problem, the old ones do it and the young ones follow suit”. (Leslie)

“In Singapore, it would be an exception to the rule if you are not kiasu. Everyone is, every moment of the day. From queuing to conversations. There is no respite”. (Martha)
In comparing the comments made by the second-generation subjects, it is noteworthy to highlight that these are comments made by social actors who do not live in the habitus, yet are able to witness and observe how embedded *kiasu* is in Singaporean life. I would like to highlight this very interesting aspect: in the interviews, while the first-generation verbal tone hinted at a sense of resignation to the ‘logic’ of hyper-competition, the second-generation responses intimated a sense of detachment and incredulity that *kiasu* is ubiquitous in Singapore. The differences of attitudes towards kiasu, as expressed by first and generation subjects will be discussed in detail in **Discussion**.

### 3.5 Inheriting Social Status and The Impact On The *Kiasu* Competition

According to Veblen, a key social status marker is inherited wealth, which brings about the concept of ‘inherited gentility’ (2007, p. 54-57). This form of wealth, Veblen argues, is the most desirable as not only is the sense of social legitimacy perceived to hold a longer tenure, but it purportedly demonstrates that the ancestors and the members of the present generation did not have to work to arrive at this level of gentility. To this end, Veblen argues that the social actors with new found wealth or ‘nouveau riche’, are ‘created gentility’ (ibid. p.54), whose legitimacy is highly dependent on the ‘inherited gentility’. It is important to note that those who have created their wealth can only achieve social legitimacy if it is accepted by ‘inherited gentility’.

As I noted in **Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework**, both Veblen and Bourdieu argued that “cultural nobility” is a direct result of distinctive upbringing and education. I also highlighted the ‘Frog Pond Theory’ which argues that social actors are motivated to leave for another ‘pond’ perceived to be of higher status. The theoretical arguments from Veblen and Bourdieu, as well as the premises of the ‘Frog Pond’ theory prompted me to consider the following question: if the subject held high status in Singapore, when she moves to Australia, will she hold the same high status? In undertaking the research, I have found that the subject-matter of status transferability began to differ between the two generational groupings, with transferability being more pertinent to first-generation subjects as compared to second-generation subjects. Meanwhile, the identification of high status is still relatable to both groups.
The overall responses from the first-generation subjects indicated two motifs: that (i) high status in place of origin does not denote automatic admission of high status in a new place of residence and, (ii) status symbols in place of origin usually remain status symbols in a new place of residence. The following comments by the first-generation subjects provide confirmation for these two premises. Rachel, when asked to consider the subject of social status in Singapore and Australia, made the following observation:

“When I was in Singapore, I lived in an affluent area and I went to the top school. I always felt that my social status was already defined before people met me. I wanted to leave that behind so that people can know me as a person. When I came to Australia, I became a nobody. I was simply an Asian. I was treated like an outsider. It was really hard, it was harder than I thought”.

Rachel’s comments revealed that she felt that her schooling in one of the top schools in Singapore identified her with a particular social status. This status, however, did not automatically transfer to her new country of residence, Australia. While she identified postgraduate qualification as a status symbol in both countries, Rachel disclosed that at times she “had to work really hard to prove herself in Australia”. Similar to Rachel, Patricia also referred to tertiary qualification as a status symbol in both Singapore and Australia:

“It is more paper qualifications. You know, they [the parents] want be able to say things like ‘my daughter is so hard-working. She is working on her PhD’. Or something like that. I don’t feel pressured here but I do get asked about my uni a lot”.

While Patricia did not specifically comment on her own social status in Singapore, she indicated that her academic achievements in Singapore and Australia have given her the self-assurance of a high status member in her social group and immediate family. I refer to Patricia’s comments that her parents constantly engage in competitive conversations with relatives and seem to gain pleasure in “Having a daughter who is so hard-working, a daughter who is working on her PhD”. In Patricia’s instance, her social status in the Singaporean ‘pond’ seemed to have transferred to the Australian ‘pond’. I argue that Patricia’s status transferability is possible because tertiary qualification is perceived to be a
status symbol in both countries. I will discuss in detail the emergence of tertiary qualification as a status symbol in Discussion.

Tertiary qualification as a status symbol also emerged for Erica, a first-generation subject. When asked what she observed as a status symbol in Singapore, Erica responded:

“It is academic grades. The family must have someone who is academically gifted. I think my parents are quite happy now because my brother is an economist with the Prime Minister’s Office in Singapore. Come to think of it, my parents were really sad when they discovered that my brother is colour blind. Because that meant that he couldn’t do medicine and become a doctor. But they are happy now”.

While Erica did not disclose how she viewed her status in Singapore, she provided me with the distinct impression that she did not hold high social status within the family, even though she is a qualified therapist in developmental psychology. At one stage of the interview, Erica lamented that her parents persist in describing her profession as “social work”, indicating that this was a disappointment to them, and subsequently, a point of emotional dissatisfaction for her.

On the other hand, Annie, one of the first-generation subjects, revealed that as her family came from modest beginnings where “life was about making ends meet”, there was a noticeable absence of status symbols. As such, Annie found it difficult to identify status symbols for her family but acknowledged that she felt that in Australia, private schooling and residential locations are the primary status symbols she has observed. As Annie did not go to a top ranking school in Singapore, she did not feel that she held any special status to begin with. But, in coming to Australia, Annie felt that she now had the ability and capacity to make a fresh start, and choose her own ‘status symbols’.

One subject of the first-generation grouping, Tasha, did not reveal her social standing in Singapore but disclosed that status symbols in Singapore usually revolved around apparel and luxury brands. She further added she found Sydney-siders not unlike Singaporeans, to be brand and status conscious. She noted, like Rachel, an important aspect of status in Australia was residential addresses.
I would like to note that for Tasha, the topic of status was also observed in the area of religion. This is something which did not emerge in the rest of the group nor is this discussed elsewhere in the research. Tasha’s comments provided me with the impression that she felt that she was a member of a high status denomination. Tasha remarked that in choosing an Australian city to live in, she decided that:

“Sydney was the most cosmopolitan and the plus-side was that it had Hillsong. Hillsong is certainly a high status Christian brand”.

Her comment revealed that there are certain Christian denominations, like the Hillsong Church, which are perceived to be high status denominations as they have larger financial support, premises and membership, representing a form of aspirational religion. In Theoretical Framework, I presented Veblen’s and Bourdieu’s (1991) arguments that organised religion is can be linked to status, and that organised religion serves the “habits of the regime of the status” (Veblen [1899], 2007, p. 200). I found that Tasha’s observations on religion and status symbols strongly reflect both Veblen’s and Bourdieu’s sentiments. I would like to point out that I have located journal articles which explore the connection between wealth and theology specifically in Pentecostal-based churches like Hillsong, who advocate the “intertwining of faith and financial wealth” (Connell, 2006, p. 324; Hunt, 2002, p.89-104; Hong, 2005, p. 239-255).

In saying this, the observations on status and organised religion provide new insights into kiasu, and opens up the potential for further research. While such research is beyond the scope of this thesis, the observation certainly provides additional understanding into the phenomenon of kiasu.
3.6 Observations of *Kiasu* in Australia

After establishing the subjects’ understanding and insights into *kiasu*, the next phase of questioning was focused on identifying how *kiasu* is observed and perceived in Australia. When I commenced my research, the majority of literature pointed to the fact that *kiasu* practices would emerge in the consumption of clothing, accessories and in particular, brands of cars. The responses across the two groups were surprising and provided new insights in the literature relating to *kiasu*: all subjects indicated suburbs, types of qualification, level of qualification, universities attended and life partners as source of competition, pride and achievement. The subjects did make mention of more mundane *kiasu* incidences like jumping queues in stores, rushing to the buffet table and food-hoarding at the dinner table, it was the key themes of education, residential addresses and profession which resonated strongest with the subjects. In Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework, I highlighted both Veblen’s and Bourdieu’s argument that higher education is reflective of “aristocracy of culture” (2005, p.11-19). Veblen and Bourdieu’s assertions are mirrored by the comments made by second-generation subjects when asked on their observations of *kiasu* in Australia:

“A medical degree is a status symbol”. (Ina)

“I think it is the level of education. Although my parents never pushed me to be a doctor or lawyer, there was still an expectation that they can compete with their friends in conversations”. (Martha)

“To an extent, my mother wants me to be a doctor or lawyer”. (Leslie)

“Higher education is a status symbol. Smart is good, smart is status”. (Cate)

That tertiary qualification was observed as a status symbol and a source of *kiasu* competition in Australia was similarly observed in Singapore, as indicated by first-generation subject, Patricia who is currently working on her PhD:
“It is more paper qualifications. You know, they (the parents) want be able to say things like ‘My daughter is so hard-working. She is working on her PhD’. Or something like that”.

Other first-generation subjects also made similar observations on *kiasu* and tertiary qualifications:

“*It is academic grades. The family must have someone who is academically gifted*”. *(Erica) (Author's note: Erica recently completed her Masters in Educational and Developmental Psychology recently)*

“It’s what grades you have, what degree you have, what job you have”. *(Rachel) (Author's note: Rachel is an occupational therapist)*

Given such comments, it is important to highlight an extremely interesting point: four of the first-generation subjects hold postgraduate qualifications. While I hesitate to assert that the academic achievements of the subjects can be *solely* attributed to *kiasu* in motion, it is difficult to ignore the ambition and the drive to succeed as evidently demonstrated by the preceding comments above.

Continuing with the theme of education, children’s schooling and childcare options were also brought up as a source of *kiasu* pursuit in Australia. This was mainly raised by the first-generation subjects:

“I think *Aussies are kiasu* when it comes to their children’s schooling. I’ve heard of kids who are just born, that are already placed into desirable schools”. *(Annie)*

“I think *Sydney people are very kiasu*. I find that they keep talking about the childcare centre, but not just any childcare centre. It has to be the childcare centre. It is not the school you go to, it is the private school you go to”. *(Rachel)*
“Australians are competitive too. They keep talking about private schools as opposed to public schools”. (Tasha)

In contrast to the first-generation subjects, only one subject from the second-generation grouping, Martha, found that childcare options were used as kiasu pursuit:

“I have heard of friends who talk like this ‘my daughter is in such-and-such crèche, and it is the most expensive crèche in the neighbourhood’”.

Interestingly, two of the first-generation subjects did not include education in their discourse on kiasu pursuits. Though difficult to know why this is the case, I speculate that their profession may be a contributing factor. Both subjects, Patricia and Erica, work in the area of developmental psychology and are currently engaged in the socialisation process of children with special needs. As such, the two subjects did indicate that education was more a social right rather than a commodity.

In Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework, I outlined that even physiological needs like food and shelter can involve the consumption of status symbols (Veblen, [1899], 2007, p. 50). The penultimate common kiasu theme which emerged in this study revolved around the subject of residential addresses or suburbs. The observations from first-generation subjects reveal that social interactions were often preoccupied with one’s residential address:

“I think Aussies are very ambitious too. They try to size you up depending on what suburb you live in. If you live in Mosman or Balmain, then you are ‘atas’ (Malay for higher class). If you live in Lidcombe and Ashfield, well, it is not high class”. (Tasha)

“I always get asked about what suburb I live in. I never knew why until I found out that there is a social status attributed to the suburb”. (Rachel)

“My friends are always talking about suburbs, maybe because we are at that age when you are buying property”. (Patricia)
Of the second-generation grouping, only Martha found that residential addresses emerged as a *kiasu* pursuit in social exchanges:

“I hear my parents talking and they always get asked ‘where does Martha live, where does she work’.”

The final common *kiasu* theme observed by both groups of subjects was the choice of life partners. This was observed as a *kiasu* aspect both in Singapore and in Australia. As observed by first-generation subjects:

“When I went back to Singapore with a Master’s degree and an Australian husband, my cousins were very nasty to me. I can’t explain it…but it is how they talk at you”. (Rachel)

“So-and-so’s husband has done this and that. Aiyah [Chinese sigh], who cares?” (Annie)

These remarks express the frustration felt by both Rachel and Annie during social interactions which allude solely to spouses. In Rachel’s example, she was treated badly by her cousins as a form of punishment for ‘winning’ the *kiasu* pursuit: by having found a life-partner and a career in Australia. On the other hand, Annie feels irritated that her social interactions with immediate family and friends seem to revolve around the profession and earning capacity of spouses. These feelings mirror the ones observed in Australia by second-generation subjects:

“Why are you dating him? He didn’t go to uni’ That kind of thing”. (Cate)

“A boyfriend is a status symbol. Well-earning with a degree and from a good family”. (Ina)
I would like to emphasise that the comparisons made on tertiary qualification, residential location, childcare and life partners reflect the ‘downward comparison’ as argued by Stapel and Koomen (2001, p. 766), whereby these comparisons are made by social actors (often the comparisons are not made by the subjects themselves) to feel good about their own lives.

In this section **Observations of Kiasu**, the subjects were asked: “**Question 4: What are the examples of kiasu you have observed?**” All subjects revealed that they have witnessed *kiasu* exhibited in other ethnic groups. Their observations are in line with the findings in the study by Ho et al that other ethnic groups exhibit *kiasu* tendencies (1997, p. 361-362). Examples of *kiasu* in Anglo and non-Anglo ethnic groups are illustrated below from the comments made by second-generation subjects:

“My brother in-law, who is Italian, is definitely kiasu, but it is a different kind of kiasu. It is about his watch, his car, his suburb and who he knows. The difference between his kind of kiasu and the kind we are talking about is this: his version does not become a detriment to someone else”. (Martha)

“I know this student who is really self-absorbed and anything he is asking, is for you to facilitate him telling you what he has done. The first day I arrived at this centre, he asked how much I was getting for my scholarship. Who asks that? How offensive! He is Turkish”. (Cate)

“I have a friend whose boyfriend is Greek. He is really annoying. When he says something, it is because he wants to brag about what he has done. And he has no shame in asking the most personal questions, like ‘How much do you earn’”. (Gina)

Similar observations were made by the first-generation subjects in relation to *kiasu* practised by non-Singaporeans:

“I think Sydney people are very kiasu. I find that they keep talking about the childcare centre, but not just any childcare centre. It has to be the childcare centre. It is not the school you go to, it is the private school you go to”. (Rachel)
“I think Aussies are kiasu when it comes to their children’s schooling. I’ve heard of kids who are just born, and are already placed into desirable schools”. (Annie)

“Australians are competitive too. They keep talking about private schools as opposed to public schools”. (Tasha)

In contrast, one first-generation subject, Erica found that Anglo-Australians in general do not display kiasu traits like Singaporeans do due to the country’s “good cultural mix”. However, Erica did add that she observed that:

“If you go shopping, you will always see an older Asian auntie or Chinese auntie pushing in”.

I would like to point out that the competitive traits displayed by Anglo and non-Anglo cultures as mentioned above, are very similar to the ‘downward comparisons’ made in a typical kiasu pursuit. I speculate that the Singaporean hyper-competition, known as kiasu is well-known not because it is ethnically unique, but because there is an actual descriptor for the behaviour. In this last section of Observations of Kiasu, I would like to use the responses captured from the last question in the survey “Question 16: Do you believe Singaporeans are more inclined to be kiasu”. A majority of the subjects echoed my sentiments:

“It seems like kiasu is something that Singaporeans cling to like a quality, like a personality trait”. (Leslie, second-generation subject)

“I think Singaporeans are more inclined to be kiasu because that is what defines them. The environment is like that, everyone thinks like that and everyone is brought up like that. Maybe they think there is no other way of living”. (Ina, second-generation subject)

“See, there is a word to describe the Singapore kiasu. But it doesn’t mean that other countries or cultures are not kiasu either”. (Gina, second-generation subject)
“That [kiasu] is what Singaporeans hang on to”. (Patricia, first-generation subject)

“I think Aussies are mostly relaxed. [Kiasu is] Definitely a Singaporean thing”. (Erica, first-generation subject)

In contrast, Cate and Martha from the first-generation grouping believe that Singaporeans are not more inclined to be kiasu, but this is where their opinions diverge. Cate believes that the Singaporean version is not as frowned upon, as per her comments below:

“I don’t think they are more inclined to be kiasu, but I think that the Singaporean kiasu is not as looked down upon as other kiasu. I think this is because this kiasu is about being competitive to advance yourself and getting your life, career going. That isn’t a bad thing, but if you keep talking about how great you are, that is certainly a bad thing”. (Cate)

While Martha’s comments are in agreement with Cates, she finds that the Singaporean version of kiasu is comparably more anti-social and poses a detriment to other people, as reflected below:

“No, I don’t think only Singaporeans are kiasu, but their version is certainly more harmful. I don’t see the food contest displayed by my Italian brother in-law but he is certainly kiasu about other things”. (Martha)

Two first-generation subjects, Annie and Tasha, felt that Singaporeans are more inclined to be kiasu, but believed that the proclivity has underpinnings in the city-state’s cultural, economic and national history as a leading Asian tiger (Cowley, 1991. p. 3-5; Marginson, 2011, p. 587-611; Henderson, 2012, p. 69-83). Both expressed that hyper-competition may not be a negative thing when it is required for survival. These comments show that the subjects understood kiasu as a form of ‘motivational comparison’ (Stapel and Koomen, 2001, p. 766) whereby social actors make comparisons in order to self-motivate towards academic or professional success:
“I don’t know if it is a race thing or a society thing, whereby if there are a lot of people fighting for the same thing, you will automatically be kiasu. Just like Singapore, China and Hong Kong. Naturally, you grow up to fight. So people are ingrained to compete, otherwise, you lose out”. (Annie)

“I think Singaporeans are more inclined, but look at its history, such a little city state but it has the best airport, the fastest port. It is not necessarily a bad thing. I think you can look at kiasu as an Asian work ethic, and well, I’m proud of it”. (Tasha)

One subject from the first-generation grouping, Rachel, did not believe that Singaporeans were more inclined. She offers this explanation:

“I think Sydney people are very kiasu. I find that they keep talking about the childcare centre, but not just any childcare centre. It has to be the childcare centre. It is not the school you go to, it is the private school that you go to. (emphasis added). It was evident when I was going to uni, but now in my social circles at work, and even at church. I think maybe because the people in my social circle are high achievers themselves: they are professionals who earn good money and they are competitive anyway. My husband and I talk about how Sydney has adopted the Singaporean 5Cs too”.

Rachel’s comments bring to mind the premises of ‘Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986, p.7-24), whereby social actors are highly motivated to belong to reference groups which are perceived to hold high status. I argue that the social group which Rachel belongs to is perceived by its members as a high status group, and as such, social interactions invariably focuses on ensuring that the group membership remains exclusive, hence the kiasu exchanges which take place.

1 The 5 “C” is a Singaporean concept whereby one’s achievements are encapsulated by the possession of a Credit Card, Condominium, Carat (in diamond weightage), Cash and Country Club. All these descriptions begin with the alphabet “C”. The 5 “C” is not an academic concept.
In concluding this chapter, I would like to emphasise that this research has found a number of themes that cross the generational groupings. There are themes which feature more prominently in the specific generational groups. While the majority of insights provided by the subjects confirm the observations made by Ho et al (1998), a number of new dimensions of kiasu were identified, namely education and residential addresses. The emergence of these two new dimensions required me to re-orientate both my understanding and research focus. In the following chapter, I will discuss further how education and residential addresses are used as status signallers.
Chapter 4  Status Symbols and Status Signalling

In the earlier section entitled Observations of Kiasu in Australia, I highlighted that subjects have observed kiasu in motion in Australia. All subjects were asked “Question 4: What are the examples of kiasu observed in Australia?” This question was designed to help understand what, if any, effects are recognised as status symbols in Australia. To recap, the key status symbols as observed by the subjects in Australia and Singapore were possession of tertiary qualification, residential addresses, types of profession and to a lesser extent, luxury clothing and car brands. When comparing the status symbols as observed in Singapore and Australia by first-generation subjects, I find that there is little difference to the status symbols observed in Singapore and Australia. I argue that there exists very little variability between the observations made in Singapore and Australia since the subjects were already inculcated on specific status symbols in Singapore, it was entirely possible that they would identify similar symbols in Australia.

Interestingly, the second-generation subjects also identified the same status symbols as cited by the first group. This is noteworthy: the second-generation Australia-Singaporean subjects were born and grew up outside the island state. They have spent less time in Singapore and hold somewhat weaker connections to the Singaporean culture as compared to the first-generation. The emergence of similar status symbols across the two groups strengthen my argument that kiasu not only crosses geographical boundaries, but is inherited through the generations, via the parents. The two general issues considered in this section are: what status symbols are recognised by the subjects and how are the status symbols used in the social setting. As education was indicated by both generational groupings, I will start this chapter by analysing how higher education is perceived by the subjects as a status symbol, both in Singapore and Australia.
4.1 Education As A Status Symbol Singapore and Australia

In the previous section of this thesis, I highlighted that the subjects from both groups have observed kiasu in Australia, whereby the kiasu pursuit focuses on possession of higher qualification, residential addresses and types of profession. In my study, in an attempt to identify if status symbols traverse geographical boundaries, I asked the first-generation subjects to identify status symbols in-situ in Singapore. All first-generation subjects overwhelmingly identified possession of higher qualifications, residential addresses and types of profession as status symbols in Singapore.

“It is more paper qualifications. You know, they (the parents) want be able to say things like ’My daughter is so hard-working. She is working on her PhD’ or something like that”. (Patricia)

“It is academic grades. The family must have someone who is academically gifted”. (Erica)

“In my extended family, it was always about the school you went to, the grades you have, what job you have”. (Rachel)

Comments from Patricia, Erica and Rachel underscore the significance their respective families place on academic achievement, which reflects the notion that high status is perceived to be gained from academic achievement. In a similar ilk, another second-generation subject, Annie, disclosed that because her brothers were enrolled in one of Singapore’s top schools, their family felt that it elevated their social status. Similarly, when the subjects were asked to identify status symbols in Australia, all first-generation subjects identified education as a source of competition and pride. This is illustrated by the comments made by Rachel:

“I always get asked about the university I went to. When I reply Sydney Uni, they will stop probing. It is almost like an approval that I went to the right uni”. (Rachel)

Rachel’s comments highlight a new facet of competition: not only does the type of higher education have the potential of conferring social status, but where the qualification was
gained from, also holds importance. From Rachel’s comments, her ‘interrogators’ are satisfied when she discloses her alma mater, which demonstrates that some universities are perceived to hold higher prestige than others. On the other hand, Erica and Annie highlight that even primary and secondary education have the potential of conferring high status:

“I think people in Australia think of private schooling as a status symbol”. (Erica)

“I think even Australians are kiasu when it comes to education. I have heard of kids who are just born, and are already placed in desirable schools”. (Annie)

The identification of higher education as a source of status competition and pride was also echoed by the second-generation grouping. The second-generation subjects overwhelmingly identified tertiary qualifications as a status symbol:

“Higher education is a status symbol. I can appreciate different degrees but smart is good. Smart is status”. (Cate)

“Medical degree is a status symbol”. (Ina)

“I think, in Australia, the definition of success is holding a good degree which then means that you will become a professional. Good degree, well, like medical or law degrees”. (Leslie)

“I think for girls it is medicine, or dentistry or law. For boys, engineering is highly regarded”. (Martha)

I would like to highlight an interesting point: Cate. Ina and Leslie are currently pursuing tertiary qualifications in a Sydney institution widely perceived to be prestigious. Cate is pursuing a PhD in medical science while Ina and Leslie are medical students. Martha is a qualified solicitor, currently practising as a town planner. I find it interesting that the subjects, who can be perceived as high status social actors due to their qualifications, raised the issue of higher education as being perceived a status symbol.
Similar to the first-generation subjects, the second-generation grouping also revealed that their immediate family not only recognised higher education as a form of status signaller, but used it as a way of competing with immediate family members. Leslie and Ina indicated that their respective mothers were competitive when it comes to their academic achievement:

“*My mom is kiasu, but not hardcore. It is always about education. To an extent, my mother wants me to be a doctor or lawyer*”. (Leslie)

“*My mom is kiasu to an extent. She is always talking about doing well academically*”. (Ina)

The comments from Leslie and Ina reveal that the mothers held predispositions towards certain qualifications and harboured high expectations that the daughters would be successful academically. Meanwhile, Cate, another second-generation subject, revealed that at family interactions, her grandmother “*loves to talk about how well we are doing*” in the family where Cate’s father is a highly regarded academic in Singapore; her brother is a qualified engineer in the USA and Cate, who is currently pursuing PhD in medical science. Preoccupation with academic achievement was further referred to by another second-generation subject, Martha. She revealed how her parents held preconceptions that certain qualifications, in this case, a law degree, held more social prestige compared to other qualifications. As such, Martha’s parents attempted to dissuade her from enrolling in a town-planning degree. I would like to note that dissuasion was successful to a point: after having obtained a law degree and practiced as a solicitor, Martha decided to return to her original plans to be a town planner. Martha is currently a town planner in Melbourne:

“My parents did try to sway me to put town planning as a third preference when I was in Year 11 [laughs] I did law at the end, but then I went back to town planning”. (Martha)

When I commenced by study, I believed that clothing brands would emerge as a key conspicuous status signifier with my belief supported by initial literature review (Dittmar and Drury, 2000; Heaney, Goldsmith and Wan Jusoh, 2005; Johnstone and Conroy, 2005). During the interviews, possession of tertiary qualification kept emerging as a conspicuous
status consumption, which means that a university degree and the institution in which the degree is being pursued are ‘accepted’ forms of status consumption both in Singapore and Australia. The theme of tertiary qualification is in line with Veblen ([1899], 2007, p. 236-241) and Bourdieu’s argument (2000, p. 231-234), that there are certain activities and lifestyle practices, like higher education, which are used to signal social status. The emergence of tertiary qualification as a key theme, caused me to even reflect my own reasons for pursuing tertiary qualification, as reflected by Patricia and Tasha on the subject of PhDs:

“You know I feel the pressure. Mom and dad used to hammer on about school being important. Now I doing a PhD, I find myself saying ‘do I really need this PhD?’”. (Patricia)

“I spoke to two friends about your study. They are both like you, working full time and doing a thesis. I think if you are Singaporean, you can’t stop. You have to have multiple degrees”. (Tasha)
4.2 Residential Address As A Status Symbol

In Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework, I highlighted Veblen’s argument that even physiological needs like food and shelter can involve the consumption of status symbols (Veblen, [1899], 2007, p. 50). This argument was confirmed in the previous section where I brought to light the comments from subjects that residential addresses are often used in the *kiasu* competition. The observations from first-generation subjects reveal that social interactions were often preoccupied with one’s suburban address:

“I think Aussies are very ambitious too. They try to size you up depending on what suburb you live in. If you live in Mosman or Balmain, then you are ‘atas’ (Malay for higher class). If you live in Lidcombe and Ashfield, well, it is not high class”. (Tasha)

“I always get asked about what suburb I live in. I never knew why until I found out that there is a social status attributed to the suburb”. (Rachel)

“My friends are always talking about suburbs, maybe because we are at that age when you are buying property”. (Patricia)

Similarly, second-generation subjects also revealed their experience of residential addresses being used as a status signaller. One subject, Cate, revealed that her type of abode was a source of envy and *kiasu*:

“I live in a one-bedroom apartment and if I tell anyone, they get shocked and jealous. So I don’t tell anyone where I live”.

Another subject, Gina, disclosed that she recognises how her friends seemed to be competing on “who has the best degrees and who has the most expensive mortgage”, which reiterates the previous assertion on higher education and a high-value mortgage as status symbols.
Of the second-generation grouping, Martha provided great insight into the perception of residential address in both Singapore and Australia. In Australia, she reveals that residential locations emerged as a *kiasu* pursuit in social exchanges:

“I hear my parents talking and they always get asked ‘Where does Martha live, where does she work’.

I would like to note that Martha further added that when she was completing her legal internship in Singapore and stayed with her uncle in an apartment located in a particular suburb. When asked where she was staying, Martha received disparaging comments about the type of abode and the location of the suburb. This indicates that the type and location of residence featured highly among Singaporeans.

I would like to emphasise that while Veblen made strong suggestions on how daily life can be consumed by status consumption, neither Baudrillard nor Bourdieu made a direct observation or argument on symbolic capital and daily life activities such as places of abode and consumption of food. I believe that Bourdieu’s concept of symbolic capital and social capital can certainly be developed to include the consideration of these activities, which I attempt to do in **sub-chapter 4.8 Experimental Case Study**.
4.3 *Kiasu Crossing The Generational Divide*

In *Education As A Status Symbol*, I highlighted that higher education was used and recognised as a status signaller not only by the first and second generation subjects, but also by their immediate family members. To me, this indicates that *kiasu* and the status symbols used in the pursuit crosses the generational divide. In the next two sections, I will attempt to analyse the responses captured from two of the more reflexive questions in the project in order to understand their self-perception of *kiasu* and how they perceived their family to be *kiasu*. The subjects are asked if they are asked if they are *kiasu* and if they participate in the pursuit.

In *Theoretical Framework*, I presented Veblen’s arguments on ‘inherited gentility’ and ‘created gentility’. This is a salient point to consider as I attempt to establish if status consumption and indeed, if *kiasu* crosses generations: from parents to offspring. In the interviews, all subjects were asked whether they believed their family was/is *kiasu*.

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2 Question asked are Q9: On a *kiasu*-meter from 1 being Not Kiasu At All to 5 Extremely Kiasu, where do you place yourself and why, and Q11: Is your family kiasu
3 The question used as located in Appendix A: Set of Questions For Subjects : Q11: Is your family kiasu
CHAPTER 4: STATUS SYMBOLS AND STATUS SIGNALLING

**First-Generation Subjects**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Is your family kiasu?</th>
<th>Who in your family is kiasu?</th>
<th>Are you kiasu?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No One</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No One</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasha</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1: *Kiasu* levels in family and self as observed by first generation subjects

**Second-Generation Subjects**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Is your family kiasu?</th>
<th>Who in your family is kiasu?</th>
<th>Are you kiasu?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Martha</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cate</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gina</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No One</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ina</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2: *Kiasu* levels in family and self as observed by second generation subjects

Referring to Table 4.1, a majority of the first-generation subjects revealed that their parents and immediate family members displayed *kiasu* tendencies. In general, the subjects in this grouping found it difficult to respond to this question as they did not perceive their parents’ constant intra and inter-family comparisons as being *kiasu*. The ambivalence to outright label competitive tendencies as *kiasu* is captured in the following:

“My family is not really *kiasu*. But my mother does engage in the talk which goes like ‘My son has done so-and-so’. Because I don’t want to handle that kind of questions, I try not to go back so often”. (Patricia)

“My parents are competitive but it is different. When I was living in Singapore, my mother used to compare me to my cousins. She would say things like ‘Why are you not like so-and-so? She is such a good girl’”. (Erica)

From those reflections, and from subjects who believed that their parents and immediate family members were not *kiasu*, the responses indicate a tacit acceptance that being *kiasu* was the norm in Singapore. Even when the subjects indicated that their parents were not
*kiasu*, the comments were usually followed by a description of a *kiasu* behaviour or practice, as illustrated below:

“My parents are not that *kiasu* but they encouraged us to work hard…but I guess being *kiasu* is so normal, that perhaps they were and I didn’t see it”. (Tasha)

“My mom and dad are slightly different. They are very humble people….but we were always taught that we cannot fail”. (Rachel)

“They weren’t that kind of parents. They are not that competitive. My dad is very regular. Maybe my mom is a little bit (*kiasu*). I was left to my own devices but my brothers went into top schools. And now it is already too late, they were sucked into the system and they are way *kiasu* now”. (Annie)

While all the subjects were forthright in revealing that they were, and still display *kiasu* tendencies, all subjects were reluctant to represent their parents and family as being *kiasu*. This may be attributed to the Asian tendency to ‘save face’ (Markus and Kitayama, 1991, p. 224-253; Kim and Nam, 1998, p. 524-530; Rozario, 2011, p. 5-8) and the Confucius-based predisposition in refusing to critique older members of the family, or portray social discord within their community (Huat, 1989, p. 7-15; Triandis, 2000, p. 147-150).

In contrast, referring to **Table 4.2**, the second-generation subjects were more upfront in their appraisal of their family. Again, a majority of the subjects believed that their family is *kiasu*. All subjects were candid in identifying the *kiasu* member in the family as being female members as exemplified by their mothers, grandmothers and aunties as illustrated in the following comments:

“My mom is a big *kiasu*….imagine the family gatherings and they say things like ‘Do you know your cousin is doing such-and-such. I think my mom is *kiasu* because she came from a poor family, so it followed her. When I dated someone without a degree, I got a lot of crap. My grandmother is *kiasu*: she loves talking about her Rolex and how well we are all doing”. (Cate)
“My mom is kiasu but not hardcore. It is always about education though…. To an extent, my mother wants me to be a doctor or lawyer”. (Leslie)

“My mom is kiasu to an extent. She is always talking about doing well academically. My mother’s sister, my auntie, is the queen of kiasu. She lives here in Sydney and she keeps talking about her kids. She and my mom get into conversations, and my mom is pressured to respond”. (Ina)

“When it came to materials, my mother is not kiasu. But they [the parents] did try to sway me to put town planning as a third preference when I was in Year 11 [laugh] I did law at the end, but then I went back to town planning”. (Martha)

The candid manner in which the second-generation subjects identified the kiasu members in their family, as well as in disclosing their kiasu tendencies belie the influence of Western-style values as argued by Schutte and Ciarlante (1988, p. 7-18). In Theoretical Framework, I highlighted the difference between Asian-based cultures which are collectivistic in character as opposed to Western-based cultures which are more individualistic. In review, I presented that Asian-based cultures emphasise the harmony and prosperity of the community, with a communication style which is aimed at creating harmony, and creating an interaction which avoids any form of direct confrontation (Gudykunst et al 1996, p. 5150–530). In contrast, social actors from Western-based, individualistic cultures favour a more direct, ‘say what you mean’ approach (Markus and Kitayama, 1991, p. 224-253; Sanchez-Burke et al, 2003, p.365-370). The key difference is embodied in this research by how the two groups express their evaluation of their perspective families: the first-generation subjects were more diplomatic, taciturn and attempted to depict their family in a positive light, while the second-generation subjects were comparably more direct and blunt in describing their mothers’ kiasu tendencies.

This causes me to argue that kiasu is more intense in a collectivistic culture as it is an effective way in which a social actor can demonstrate individuality. By being hyper-competitive and over-achieving, a social actor from a collective setting can set himself apart from the reference group. In a collective setting, a hyper-competitive member will motivate others to follow suit, thus creating a never-ending spiral of kiasu. On the other hand, the
second-generation subjects who have grown up in a individualistic setting (like Australia and the USA) manifest and observe a milder form of *kiasu*, as they have grown up in a different habitus. As such, the second-generation subjects are not predisposed to use hyper-competition as a way to prove one’s identity. The difference between the achievements in Singapore and Australia are best encapsulated by the comments made by Erica and Patricia, who are first-generation subjects:

“In Singapore, you do not have the chance to be what you want to be. There is no space to develop in areas like arts or sports. If you have disabilities, straight away, you are isolated. In Australia, you are free to have the best life you can get”. (Erica)

“I don’t mind if my daughter takes up music, arts or sports. In Singapore, she will be seen as doing something which is ‘tang bo chia’ (translates from Hokkien as not being able to earn a living). Success is really dependent on what the child wants. I feel that tapping into a child’s strength is the most important thing. But in Singapore, you have to make it academically, and that’s that”. (Patricia)

This sentiment is echoed by another first-generation subject, Rachel who revealed that she most enjoys the company of her clients because:

“They are from lower socio-economic status. They are people who are truckies, carpenters, forklift drivers and tradies. But they are not competitive. They are not hung up on what suburb you live in and what car you drive”.

In the data which I have collected, the responses indicated two key points: firstly, *kiasu* motivates social actors to strive and succeed for both first and second generation groupings. Secondly, according to the data collected, the form of *kiasu* observed in Singapore is more aggressive, compared to the observations made in Australia.

In order to ascertain if the subjects and their family are *kiasu*, the interview questions of “Are you *kiasu*? Is your family *kiasu*?” were developed, based on Veblen’s arguments on ‘inherited’ and ‘created gentility’ ([1899]. 2007, p. 54-57). I outlined in Chapter 2, Veblen’s argument that ‘inherited gentility’ refers to social actors who hold social status which is
transmitted from through family lineage. On the other hand, ‘created gentility’ refers to social actors who actively and industriously strive to elevate their social standing by emulating the consumption patterns of ‘inherited gentility’. In simpler terms, the ‘created gentility’ is known as the ‘nouveau riche’. At this stage of the research, I identified two key challenges. Firstly, while Veblen’s arguments helped me develop the questions, and Bourdieu’s argument helped me identify different social capital, I found it difficult to pinpoint how social capital actually moves from one generation to another. In addition, I did not find that the arguments put forward by Veblen, Bourdieu or Baudrillard were able to serve me in understanding why the generations were so highly vested in maintaining the social capital. In short, while I was able to prove that kiasu moves geographically and across generations, I was not able to ascertain the underlying reason for the movements.

4.4 Let’s Be Honest: Are You Kiasu?

As I attempt to establish how the subjects observe or even perform status signalling, I asked, in my opinion, a highly sensitive question of how kiasu they believed they were. I believed it was a sensitive question as I was concerned that the subjects may attempt to prove their social desirability (Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004; Nancarrow and Brace 2000; Kreuter, et al 2008), and, downplay their kiasu tendencies. Notwithstanding, I believed that through this question I would be able to establish how subjects perform status signalling, if at all, and if signalling was done to conform to the kiasu pursuit as described by the ‘Bandwagon Effect’, or to appear socially exclusive, as per the ‘Snob Effect’.

The group of first-generation Australian-Singaporean subjects provided a textured response to this question. All subjects volunteered that their levels of kiasu were either high or medium-high prior to moving to Australia. All first-generation subjects also believed that their kiasu level has declined since settling in Australia.

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4 The question used as located in Appendix A: Set of Questions for Subjects: Q9: On a kiasu-meter from 1 being Not Kiasu At All to 5 Extremely Kiasu, where do you place yourself and why?
Table 4.3: Self-assessment of kiasu levels before and after moving to Australia

Table 4.3 above illustrates the kiasu levels as ranked by the first-generation subjects themselves, before and after moving to Australia. All subjects, except for Annie, indicated that they exhibited medium to high kiasu when they were attending high school and living in Singapore. This degree of kiasu declines after they move to Australia. When prompted on why they believed the level of kiasu is higher when living in Singapore, the majority of subjects communicated that the kiasu pursuit was the norm of the society and a race in which everyone participated in:

“It was something that everyone did. The pressure is always there in Singapore”. (Patricia)

“There is no life in Singapore. So people divert their attention to being competitive on tiny things”. (Annie)

“There is only so many good schools, good jobs around. Of course, everyone wants to compete”. (Erica)

The high kiasu reading in Singapore highlights how first-generation subjects participated in status signalling, via their academic achievements and shopping patterns in order to conform to the norms of the society, as described by the Bandwagon Effects in the previous sub-
chapter. On the other hand, the low *kiasu* levels, as ranked by the subjects after their move to Australia, highlight their change in lifestyle and self-development in the absence of a once-ubiquitous competition. When probed on why they believed the levels were lower after their move, all subjects revealed that they believed they have evolved from the influence of different cultures of people who now constitute their social network. This change was reinforced by the different lives in which they currently lead, thereby providing them a fresh perspective on what is important in life. I argue that the change in perspective is attributed to the nascent influence of Western-based culture which values individual uniqueness and less on material achievements. The change in life perspective is demonstrated by the following comments:

“There is no pressure here, like that in Singapore. I have different friends here. Maybe it is because I work with children with special needs. It gives me perspective about life and what status is about. I don’t really need to compete anymore”.

(Patricia)

“In Singapore, there is no space for developing other areas of life. Not like Australia. You don’t have a chance to be what you want to be. You just meet people who are just like you. In Australia, you are free. You can have the best life you can get”.

(Erica)

As noted in **sub-chapter 3.5**, Annie, a first-generation subject, rated herself as low in *kiasu*, both when living in Singapore and after moving to Australia. This low rating, she believes, is attributed to the modest and unpretentious life which her family led when she was a child. Annie remembered financial shortages as a child in which the family would ‘*hutang*’ (Malay term for owing money) to the local grocer. She believes this has shaped her indifference towards status symbols and social status. Annie further disclosed that she did not consider her life in Australia was better than her old friends, but if she returned to live in Singapore, she would “*join the kiasu game*”. Not dissimilar from other first-generation subjects, Annie felt that moving to Australia gave her an opportunity to grow as a person.

The group of second-generation Australia-Singaporeans were also queried on their levels of *kiasu*. All subjects rated themselves on a low-medium rating, which is a “2” in the scale:
which underscored for me that the *kiasu* competition appears to thrive in an environment when every single person in the society participates. The second-generation subjects encounter *kiasu* from their mothers, intermittent contact with *kiasu* relatives and in certain cases, *kiasu* associates from university or work. In addition, the physical distance between the *kiasu* relatives in Singapore and immediate family in Australia means comparisons can only be made if inter-country visits are made. This means the second-generation subjects are not exposed to constant comparison and angst. Further to this, previous works show that while *kiasu* may not be unique to Singapore and has been detected in Australia (Ho et al, 1998; Hwang 2003), the praxis is different with Australians. I believe that the praxis of *kiasu* in Australia requires further investigation.

Both groups were queried on whether they would be provoked into being *kiasu*\(^5\), with every response indicating they would not initiate the comparison, but if they felt badgered by another party, they would retaliate with the objective of winning the ‘game’. This form of retaliation, which is reminiscent of the premise of the ‘Snob Effect’ and ‘downward comparisons’ as described in **Theoretical Framework**, is best summarised by Erica, a first-generation subject; and Martha and Ina from second-generation group:

“*My friend’s boyfriend was showing off his knowledge on something. I didn’t like it, so I became competitive and started to brag about my knowledge too*. (Erica)

“There are certain people you want to play this game with, and you want to make sure you are better than them. I know you are *kiasu* and I want to put you in your place … I would never be the one to initiate this game, but I want to beat you at your game when it starts”. (Martha)

“I am not *kiasu* but if I am approached that way, I say ‘bring it on’”. (Ina)

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\(^5\) The question used as located in Appendix A: Set of Questions for Subjects: Q10: Would you be provoked into being *kiasu*?
4.5 *Kiasu* and Reference Group Relations

My theoretical framework was not only informed by Veblen, Baudrillard and Bourdieu, but also guided by the foundations laid in the Social Identity Theory developed by Tajfel and Turner (1980). In *Theoretical Framework*, I outlined that this theory describes social actors as being highly motivated to maintain the esteem, public identity and social power of that group. I further explained that the Status Construction Theory (Ridgeway 1997; Anderson et al 2006, 2008) is useful in helping me understand intra-group relations. This theory posits that high status members within a group are generally perceived to be more socially competent than low status members. As such, aspiring social actors will always look up to the decisions made by high status members. Both theories suggest that if the social identity of the individual is threatened (by competition in the form of comparisons, that is, following the data of this research, how many degrees one has, the type of car being driven, suburb one resides in), it is theorised that the individual will start making inter-group comparisons in order to protect the status quo.

Before I commenced my field work, I believed the subjects would disclose that the *kiasu* pursuit is carried out in order to not only improve one's social standing, but the social standing of the immediate social group. I further believed that the *kiasu* practices would emulate the actions of the member of a group perceived to hold high status. The *kiasu* experience, as described by the subjects, disproves the premises of these two status theories. I will attempt to demonstrate this invalidation by referring to the comments made by Erica and Patricia from the first-generation grouping, and Martha and Cate from the second-generation grouping:

“*There are certain people you want to play this game with, and you want to make sure you are better than them. I know you are kiasu and I want to put you in your place ... I would never be the one to initiate this game but, I want to beat you at your game when it starts*. (Martha)

“You must be first in whatever, in a line, in an elevator. You must do whatever it takes to be first. You must not give way”. (Cate)
“My friend's boyfriend was showing off his knowledge on something. I didn't like it, so I became competitive and started to brag about my knowledge too". (Erica)

“I felt the pressure when growing up in Singapore. My cousins seem to be doing better than me and my aunties used to talk. My parents kept hammering about the importance of school grades... Is that why I am doing a PhD now? To beat them at their game ultimately?” (Patricia)

Referring to the conversation pieces above, when a subject felt that her status was threatened, instead of referring to the immediate social group’s position; all subjects indicated they would actively respond to maintain personal self-esteem using socially recognised status symbols. Further, the kiasu experience suggests that the subjects were participating in the kiasu pursuit in order to advance their personal esteem and not the immediate social group’s esteem, as suggested by the Social Identity Theory. This is best represented by Patricia’s comments above on “To beat them at their game ultimately”.

In addition, while subjects recognised and acknowledged the benchmarks of status, that is in this study, levels of tertiary qualification, the subjects do not acknowledge the purported high status of an individual in the discussion or interaction. In short, people with tertiary qualifications were not perceived to be more socially superior; rather, it was a point-of-reference for the subjects to make comparisons with. This strongly echoes the ‘motivational comparison’ as argued by Stapel and Koomen (2001) whereby social actors make comparisons as a form of self-motivation. The verity that possession of a status symbol does not automatically confer high status is best illustrated by Annie, a first-generation subject, in which she states that:

“My brothers were in top schools, but so what? They were sucked into the system. I was kiasu in the sense that I was working hard to keep up to their standards. But the most important thing was trying my best”.

From her responses, Annie revealed that while her older brothers were sent to top schools in Singapore, it did not necessarily mean that her brothers held high status. In contrast to other first-generation subjects, Annie indicated that her family came from modest beginnings.
where “life was about making ends meet”. While Annie and her family were aware of status symbols, ownership of these symbols was not a priority. As such, even though her brothers were admitted to better schools than herself, she did not believe that her brothers held any special status.

4.6 Signalling To Conform or To Exclude: Bandwagon Effect and Snob Effect

In the earlier chapter of Theoretical Framework, I discussed that status symbols are used to demonstrate exclusivity and conformity, as argued by Veblen ([1899], 2007) and Bourdieu (2005). Key to the Veblenian argument is that possessions signalled one’s station in life (op cit, p. 201-210). This argument was expanded by Leibenstein in 1950 and further expanded by Amaldoss and Jain in 2005, in which Leibenstein introduced the terms the ‘Bandwagon Effect’ and the ‘Snob Effect’. As noted previously, the ‘Bandwagon Effect’ is a phenomenon which suggests that individuals will follow consumption patterns to join the ‘bandwagon’ while the ‘Snob Effect’ explains the individual’s desire to be identified with the rich. In short, the ‘Bandwagon Effect’ is driven by the desire to conform, and the ‘Snob Effect’ describes the desire to exclude.

In this study, I observed that the “Bandwagon Effect” was transpired differently: that is, status signalling is not done to conform to an immediate group or as an inter-group exercise. Rather, status signalling is performed to indicate one’s participation in the kiasu competition. As indicated by the responses, kiasu social actors are more interested in advancing their own social standing and the group is merely used as a point-of-reference, and as an environment to compete. As such, status signalling is performed to conform to the ‘rules’ of the kiasu competition with the common desire to win and to promote self-exclusivity.
That ‘Bandwagon Effect’ observed in this study, describes conformity to the *kiasu* competition, is best illustrated by Patricia and Erica from the first-generation grouping, describing their involvement in *kiasu*:

“I am normally not kiasu but then, let’s say *Boxing Day sales*. That is when I am *kiasu*, I find that external pressure makes me kiasu”. (Patricia)

“When I was in school, I was very kiasu because everyone else was like that. Everyone else was working very hard to get good marks”. (Erica)

Their comments resonate with the ones made by Martha, Ina and Cate from the second-generation grouping, in describing how their family interactions transform into a *kiasu* competition:

“I knew it would be nice if my parents can win at the kiasu game. I know my parents would never initiate a kiasu conversation comparing their children’s profession, but if they are ever roped in, I know they will win because I was a lawyer”. (Martha)

*Imagine the family gatherings. It is about the uni, the degrees, your job, your car, your lifestyle and your partner. You get asked, why are you dating him? He doesn’t have a degree*. (Cate)

“My auntie, my mother’s sister is the queen of kiasu. *She and my mom get into comparative conversations and I know my mom feels pressured to respond. My auntie is always asking what we are doing*. (Ina)

Along with the “Bandwagon Effect’, the desire to appear socially exclusive, or the ‘Snob Effect’ was observed by the subjects from both groups:

“When I am prompted, I will start comparing too…what I am doing, where I live, what car I drive”. (Patricia, first-generation subject)
“I have studied hard, I have worked really hard. Why shouldn’t I talk about my achievements”. (Rachel, first-generation subject)

“Generally I don’t care. I would never be the one to ask...but if it starts (the comparisons), then I want to make sure you don’t beat me”. (Martha, second-generation subject)

“I am not kiasu but if I am approached that way, I say ‘bring it on’”. (Ina, second-generation subject)

I have chosen to highlight these three comments as they share a common theme: that they will not initiate a typical kiasu conversation, but the subjects will participate as there is not only pride in their individual achievements, but also a desire to appear better or more superior to other parties. The desire to appear better than others reflects Veblen’s suggestions on conspicuous consumption ([1899], 2007, p. 50), the desire to be perceived as possessing high status as suggested by the “Frog Pond” theory (Espenshade et al, 2005, p.272-280; Davis, 1966, p.17-31) and connects directly with the objectives of a ‘downward comparison’ (Stapel and Koomen, 2001, p. 766).
4.7 Status As A State of Having or Being

In this last section, I will complete the journey on *kiasu* and conspicuous consumption by attempting to determine if status is defined by the state of being, or through possessions. The last question in the survey was developed to gauge whether status signallers were used to signify one’s social superiority via possessing an item or being someone influential. This question is inspired by both Veblen ([1899], 2007) and Bourdieu (2005) who argued that acquisition and subsequent possession of a status symbol provides a sense of achievement and exclusivity to the social actor. In their works, status symbols were derived from tangible items from specific food, to household goods like lamps and upholstery, to membership into country clubs and admission to certain universities (Veblen, [1899] 2007, p. 49-57; Bourdieu, 205, p. 231-281).

In *Status Symbols in Singapore and Australia*, the two groups offered convergent reflections that possessions and achievements pave the way to social recognition, that is being recognised as someone important. The first-generation group, which has had prior exposure and active participation in a *kiasu* environment like Singapore, overwhelmingly responded that status is derived from achievements. This strongly reflects the cultural encoding that social status is bestowed unto the person with the best academic and professional achievements. The response that achievement equals social status is in itself interesting, but even more so, as all five subjects offered further disclaimers that the achievements must reflect one’s natural talent, as illustrated by Patricia and Rachel:

“Status is about achieving, but only according to what you are good at”. (Patricia)

“Some people have stuff to announce their status. I think social status is based on profession. But I am not like that”. (Rachel)

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The question used as located in Appendix A: Set of Questions for Subjects: Q8: Is status having something, being someone or achieving something?
The three remaining first-generation subjects felt that there is a social price to pay for academic and professional achievement, and that the type of achievement is dictated by the social actor’s social milieu:

“I think achieving is very important. In Singapore, there is no space for developing other areas of life. Not like Australia”. (Erica)

“I think it is achieving something, because that leads you to being someone. I don’t know, it is a middle class problem, isn’t it? There will come a point you can’t keep up”. (Annie)

“I think society defines this for you: how much you earn, what position you have at work. My real definition? It is what you do with your life what with you have”. (Tasha)

The second-generation Australian-Singaporean subjects, unsurprisingly, offered more divergent responses to this question. One subject, Martha, believed that social status “is about being successful in life, but outside your profession, your car and your address. What do you do in your spare time”. The leitmotif of ‘being an inspirational person’ is repeated by Ina, Gina and Leslie in the following:

“I suppose it's your contribution to the society with your profession and how you change people's lives”. (Leslie)

“You know, you can inherit status. But you can also develop your own status by working hard and achieving the best in life. Like, I am doing a medical degree, which is high status. But I am doing it because I really like science and I want to use this knowledge to help people”. (Ina)

“You know, if you are a good person, there is no obvious sign which says you are a good person. I think it is about doing something really amazing in society”. (Gina)
I argue that the contrasting notions of status symbols between the two groups are strongly attributed to the environment which each group has grown up and socialised in. The first-generation subjects have grown up, participated and socialised in a highly competitive habitus in which self-identity and indeed, social status is derived from achievement and endemic *Schadenfreude*. Further to this, the subjects have grown up in a collectivistic society, in which definitions of power and status do not change (Schutte and Ciarlante, 1988, p. 7–18; Hofstede, 2005; Smith, 2006, p. 916-921). In a society where everyone participates in being *kiasu* is the norm, social actors either participate or leave the paradigm, as demonstrated by the exodus of the subjects. It is interesting to note that though the subjects have physically left, their definition of social status is still highly reminiscent of definitions of status in Singapore.

On the other hand, while the second-generation subjects have been exposed to *kiasu* practices through intermittent contact with extended family and on rare occasions, at the workplace and school, they did not experience the intensity and ubiquity of hyper-competition in Singapore. Having grown up and socialised in an individualistic society, the subjects prize individual freedom and expression, and possess the freedom, capability and capacity to define their understanding of social status and priorities in life. I would like to underline the significance of the disclaimers made by the first-generation subjects in this final section: their disclaimers reveal that the subjects, while still aware of and have preconceptions of social status, are beginning to evolve in their prospective lives, and beginning to question the merits of hyper-competition, and in turn, the merits of *kiasu*.  

CHAPTER 4: STATUS SYMBOLS AND STATUS SIGNALLING  103
4.8 Experimental Case Study: Dinner with Erica, Veblen and Bourdieu

When I embarked on this journey, my primary concerns were that I would be not be able to unearth and locate theories to support my studies. I was also concerned that the field work would produce futile information. The first interview provided me with a high-powered torch which not only illuminated the other proceeding interviews, but supplied me with theoretical ammunition and confidence to produce this thesis. During the interviews, I had an indelible image of sitting at the dinner table with Veblen and Bourdieu, and with my subjects. In this last sub-chapter, I have created an experimental presentation of the transcript, drawn from the responses of a first-generation subject, Erica, and applied to the works of Veblen and Bourdieu.

In this simulation, I am having dinner with Erica, Veblen and Bourdieu in a French restaurant in Sydney to celebrate the end of the project. I would like to note that poetic licence has been taken to make the conversation come alive, but the theoretical framework and the responses to my questions have not been altered.

Me: Erica, can you tell me a bit of yourself, your life in Singapore and why you moved to Australia?

Erica: I was born in Singapore in 1985. I moved to Melbourne in 2009. I wanted to do my Masters in Educational and Developmental Psychology. I came with my husband, he was already studying here.

Veblen: You know, I postulated that higher learning is a form of admission into the leisure class, or what you now know as the upper class. So, you already had this exclusivity in Singapore and now you seek it in Australia ([1899], 2007, p. 237-239)

Bourdieu: I call it the aristocracy of culture. Higher education is a product which holds extremely high social capital. Your status or nobility is measured by your possessing not only one, but two higher qualifications. (2005, p. 199)

Erica: You can say that. There was such stress in Singapore. My friends were always working long hours, overtime and even weekends. I now work as a child therapist in a primary school, very normal working hours.

Me: In Singapore, can you describe your experience of kiasu?
Erica: Because I was doing my Masters, my earning capacity was not as high as my other friends. Of course I would like to have the branded stuff but there are other things to consider. Once I got together with a friend and I said her handbag was lovely. She replied ‘Why don’t you get your husband to get you one?’ They don’t get it, that there is life outside materials. I felt pressured.

Veblen: That old chestnut, conspicuous consumption. It is commonly used to demonstrate one’s social standing. You know, individuals believe that if they possess a particular item, they automatically belong to the upper class. It is a mere feeling of prestige: no one is actually conferring the status (op cit, p. 929-937).

Bourdieu: I agree, but Erica, I would also like to point out that your friend believes that she has the social capital to inflict symbolic violence on you (2001, p. 36-55)

Erica: What do you mean?

Bourdieu: C’est ca. Your friend believes that by owning a branded handbag, she now possesses higher social status. The handbag is symbolic of the higher status she believes she now holds. Further, your friend believes that by holding this symbolic capital, she can make inappropriate remarks about your life, that is, exacting symbolic violence (ibid, p.103).

Erica: I have not seen it like that before.

Veblen: Bravo! Let’s order some food. All this talk about status is making me famished.

(The waiter arrives to take our orders)

Erica: I think I will order foie gras and lobster thermidor.

Veblen: Erica, in my days, due to the unequal distribution of capital surplus, there are foods which are not only inaccessible, but forbidden to the working class ([1899], 2007, p. 53)

Erica: What do you mean forbidden? As in people are not allowed to eat certain foods?

Bourdieu: I think my esteemed colleague means that that certain foods hold symbolic capital and social capital (2001, p. 36-45). To illustrate, foie gras is not a cheap food ingredient. In order to purchase this ingredient, you would first
need to have financial capital. By purchasing this, you demonstrate this: foie gras symbolises your financial capital.

**Veblen:** Why yes! But let me go back to our question, Erica. Forbidden not only due to its unaffordability but because consumption signals one’s station in life. When you eat a particular item you signal your entitlement to the item (ibid, p.53). I brought it up as foie gras and lobster are perceived to be upper class food. Not only have you chosen the most expensive items in the menu, but the food item has high social and psychological implications.

**Bourdieu:** Let us leave the poor woman alone to her foie gras.

(laughter)

**Me:** Would you consider yourself *kiasu*?

**Erica:** When I was in school, I was very *kiasu* because everyone else was like that. Everyone else was working very hard to get good marks.

**Bourdieu:** Aha, that is the cultural habitus of the place (2001, p. 44-46). Everyone is *kiasu*!

**Veblen:** But don’t forget that higher learning is one of the primary ways in which an individual can demonstrate their social exclusivity ([1899], 2007, p. 237-239), this would apply to primary and high school as well.

**Erica:** That is true, because the ultimate goal of getting good marks is to get to university.

**Me:** Is your family *kiasu*?

**Erica:** Yes, I think they are. My parents are very competitive. My mom would say things along the lines of “Your cousin is such a good girl. She does this and that. But you, you are always arguing back.” Our grades were always good so they don’t compare much. My dad is a typical Chinese dad: he goes to work, he comes home, and he doesn’t say anything. But my mom, she would be the one who would say something. I think I am the most *kiasu* in the family, because my older brother is very smart. I always wanted to compete with him. But after moving away from Singapore, my *kiasu* is less. My mom can’t compare anymore because I live here and she doesn’t know what I am up to.

**Bourdieu:** You compete with your brother on grades? That means academic achievement is certainly embedded as a symbolic capital (2007, p. 374), not
only in your family, but in Singaporean society.

**Erica:** Let me add that a status symbol in our family is academic grades. The family must have someone who is academically gifted. I think my parents are quite happy now because my brother is an economist with the Prime Minister’s office. Actually, come to think of it, my parents were sad when they discovered that my brother was colour-blind. That meant he couldn’t do medicine. But they are happy now. I think my parents don’t really know what I am doing. When I was studying psychology in Singapore, they both kept asking “Is it social work?” and I had to keep enforcing the message that psychology is not social work. I think my brother is the pearl of the family.

**BOURDIEU:** I am going to say something and I am sorry if this is offensive to you, Erica. I have a friend in France, his name is Jean Baudrillard. He said once, how people accumulate symbols of purported happiness thinking that such accumulation will bring about fulfilment and contentment. Yet, that contentment never arrives (Baudrillard, 200, p.237). It sounds like your parents were like that.

**Erica:** I am able to see that now because I live away from Singapore. I don’t want to be like my parents because I don’t want to pressure my children like that. I don’t want them to think they are somebody only if they achieve something. I don’t want them to think that their family doesn’t love them if they don’t achieve. Don’t get me wrong, achievements are important but do what you can and do what is best for yourself, that is more important.

**Me:** Is that why you moved?

**Erica:** I think a lot of people move overseas because they realise that the things that they hang on to are pretty empty. Perhaps we move to a new country which is more aligned to our personal growth. In Singapore chasing after grades, cars, brands, houses…it is really tiring. In Australia, you are free to have the best life you can.

**VEBLEN:** That kind of lifestyle is invidious! ([1899], 2007, p. 44-46)

**Erica:** What do you mean, invidious?

**VEBLEN:** Well, the primary reason that people buy into such consumption habits is to
signal their superiority. As one does that, it also causes resentment with fellow human beings. And it is never ending because there will always be a new standard of superiority (ibid, p.25-26)

**Erica:** So you are saying a *kiasu* person is trapped in a never-ending cycle of malcontent?

**Veblen:** Exactly! Not only does this form of consumption waste financial resources, it does not serve to improve the person’s well-being (ibid, p. 61-62)

**Bourdieu:** Don’t you think that if one believes he holds symbolic capital, he will feel better about himself? Thereby, improves his well-being? (2000, p. 231)

**Veblen:** I doubt it.

**Erica:** I disagree, Pierre. Achieving is important. Being someone comes from achieving something. But if you look at Singapore, there is no space for developing any other areas of life, like arts or sports. In Singapore, you don’t have the chance to be what you want to be. If you have disabilities, you are disadvantaged automatically. If you are rich and you go to an elite school, you meet people who are exactly like you and that’s all you see. That kind of life is meaningless. Like Veblen said, it is never-ending. There is no understanding about life beyond status symbols or brands. I am glad I am in Australia.

**Me:** So am I!

**Erica:** Actually, do you consider yourself *kiasu*?

**Bourdieu:** Hoho…that is a can of worms.

**Me:** Thanks Pierre, very funny. I do consider myself *kiasu*, but that’s another project. Let’s eat.

(Closing notes: In this simulacra, the dinner continues with the two gentlemen debating on the issues of status symbols and social capital, while the two first-generation Australian Singaporean women enjoy their crepe suzette and quietly reflect on their new perspective on life.)
Discussion

The analysis of this thesis has been done using theoretical foundations from Veblen, Bourdieu and Baudrillard. This is not to say that all three theorists converge on the issues of social capital, social signalling and habitus. For me, Veblen offers the historical grounding necessary in understanding the motivations of self and the meanings of possession. As a result of this grounding, I was able to consider the works of Bourdieu and Baudrillard to further understand how the self relates and uses the social reality. Veblen, a structuralist in his time, certainly focussed his arguments on the social actor as the agent of change. He argued that social actors will always be motivated to ‘appear legitimate’ ([1899], 2007, p. 30-31) within a structure. To this end, Veblen argued that social actors will strive to accumulate and possess symbols of social power. His theories stressed the connection between acquisition and use of symbols, and the acquisition of social power. Veblen argued that the pursuit of symbols and subsequent social legitimacy takes place in all the institutions he referred to in his time, namely universities, country clubs and churches.

While Veblen’s attention was somewhat restricted to the social actor as the catalyst of change, Bourdieu complemented Veblen’s theory by highlighting the role of the habitus. Bourdieu stressed that the habitus is key to understanding how the social actor moves in the society. Bourdieu argues that the habitus is not only the result of the social actors’ strategies but it is a “system of lasting, transposable dispositions which integrate past experiences and functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions” (2000, p. 82-83). In other words, Bourdieu views both the social actor and the habitus as live ‘agencies’.

To this theoretical combination, I applied Baudrillard’s post-structuralist understanding of the self as I found that his theories were useful in analysing the meaning underlying a social actor’s action. In other words, Baudrillard’s approach allowed me to understand how, and what the social actor communicates in their social milieu. Baudrillard’s theories on simulacra and ‘system of objects’ (2000, p.236) enabled me to evaluate how the kiasu experience contains its own unique language and symbols, discernible only to the social actors within that milieu. As Veblenian thought does not extend beyond the social actor’s need and drive to elevate social status, Baudrillard’s models helped me identify other possible reasons underlying the actor’s actions and how that in turn, shapes the habitus.
Of the three major theorists, I cannot unequivocally say that one theorist served me better than another. My work was certainly strongly influenced by Veblen and Bourdieu; in a way that Veblen provided the overarching vision of the drive of a social actor within a structure, while Bourdieu provided me with the details on how the social actor is motivated to behave. Veblen’s work is certainly reflective of his social status and historical context: his writings reveal contempt towards the “leisure class” ([1899], 2007) and pessimism that the common man will always remain at the mercy of the “leisure class” and its institutions. I find that Veblen’s writings do not adequately explain the motives of the social actor aside from the “need to appear socially legitimate” (ibid, p. 8-11) nor does he provide adequate exploration on how the structure affects the social actor. This is where I believe Bourdieu provides the crucial key in evaluating the social actor’s motives within a structure. Further to his work on cultural capital and social capital, Bourdieu’s theory on habitus provides me with the necessary context in connecting the self, its motivations and the cultural space. Kiasu, as outlined in this study, is not only an emotive and affective state, but it is a habitus which drives the self and relations, and we have observed how this habitus moved from Singapore to Australia.

While I was able to successfully trace the movement of kiasu across two-generations (and third, if the anecdotal comments on the subjects’ mothers are included) and across two habitus, I also identified a theoretical gap with the three key theorists used for this research: Veblen, Baudrillard and Bourdieu. While all three make arguments on “inherited gentility” (Veblen, [1899], 2007, p. 54), movement of social capital and cultural-social capital production, none of them consider the transference of symbolic capital and social capital from one generation to another, or the struggle between the family doxa and the cultural doxa at large. From this research, a primary learning for me is in identifying how specific social capital remains strong, even when the subjects have moved geographically.

Another key challenge of this research is in identifying the most common denominator of kiasu. While the subjects were able to define kiasu as emotive states, namely, the ‘fear of losing out’ and ‘desire to get ahead’, the focus of kiasu is not easily definable. Kiasu manifests itself in different forms to different people, as shaped by their environment and life.

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1 A child of migrant farming family from Middle America, Veblen strived and rose to become an academic at Cornell and John Hopkins University, whereby he was renowned for being vociferous in his challenges to the ideas put forth by fellow economists. His unkempt appearance, lack of reverence displayed to the university boards, and verbal attacks on the church made him unpopular with fellow academics. Veblen was later dismissed from the institutions after allegations of misconduct with female students (Diggins, 1999, p. 14-20)
experiences. My life experience has shaped my preconception that kiasu would emerge in luxury brand clothing, while a first-generation subject brought up the issue of membership to certain religious denominations. Other subjects believed the financial background of a spouse to be key to kiasu, while others perceived private schooling for children as an arena for kiasu competition. In short, the research subjects and I agree what kiasu can cause one to feel and do, but none of us can specifically define what people are kiasu on.

Following on from the above point, the final comment I would like to make about kiasu is this: while its affective and affected states are easy to describe: fear of losing, schadenfreude, constant dissatisfaction, anti-social competition, and I was able to locate theories to describe kiasu in praxis, I observed that kiasu brings out contradictions. I saw the contradictions in the manner in which the subjects viewed the concept of kiasu and the simultaneous revulsion-acceptance which takes place. Further, the uneasiness in which kiasu is situated is also evident when hyper-competition is perceived to be 'normal' and, only negative, if it poses as a harm to someone else. The kiasu characteristic of ‘harming another person’ and kiasu to the ‘detriment of others’ (quoted from Martha, a second-generation subject) immediately conjures up public humiliation and social alienation of another party. The contradiction arises here, in the sense that none of the subjects viewed that by participating in kiasu, they were emotionally ‘harming’ themselves in the process.
Conclusion

“No class of society, not even the most abjectly poor, foregoes all customary conspicuous consumption. The last items of this category are not given up except under stress of direst necessity. Very much of squalor and discomfort will be endured before the last trinket or the last pretence of pecuniary decency is put away” (Veblen, [1899], 2007, p. 59)

In my concluding remarks, I revisit Veblen’s arguments that conspicuous consumption and status consumption affects all social actors. Veblen introduced these concepts in the early 19th century as he made observations on the changing consumption patterns and social interactions within the New York society he lived in. The term conspicuous consumption: the characteristics and the effects on social interactions; have been explored in the various disciplines, from sociology as demonstrated by the likes of Weber, Baudrillard and Bourdieu to economic psychology where the status theories emerge.

In this thesis, I have proposed that kiasu crosses the geographical and generational divide. I argued that there exists a connection between kiasu, conspicuous consumption and status anxiety. Using works from Veblen, Baudrillard and Bourdieu on consumption and symbolic capital, I have presented through the fieldwork responses that kiasu can be observed and experienced in both Singapore and in Australia.

I have discovered that the kiasu experiences between the two generations do not differ. However, the kiasu as observed, practiced and displayed in Australia is comparably less aggressive to the Singaporean version. I have also learned that the status signallers used in Singapore are not dissimilar to the ones used in Australia: namely, the type and number of tertiary qualification one holds, the suburb one lives in, one’s life partner, level of income, the profession of one’s spouse and the brand of car being driven are among the frequently-mentioned signallers. Further to this, tertiary qualification is used as a primary status signaller by both the parents and the subjects across the two generations. I would like to note that my pre-conception that clothing brands as primary status signallers were quickly undermined as the research subjects identified tertiary qualifications as the primary status symbol and the key status symbol in both countries, and across the two generations.
Through the interviews, I have uncovered a recurring theme of *kiasuism* displayed by parental figures of both first and second generation subjects. The *kiasu* behaviours are usually observed with the subjects’ mothers across the two generations. The second-generation subjects, indicative of their upbringing in a Western society, were predictably more forthright about their mothers’ display of *kiasu*. In one conversation, a subject referred to her mother as a ‘big *kiasu*’ (from Cate), to another subject who referred to her maternal aunt as ‘queen of *kiasu*’ (from Ina). In contrast, the first-generation subjects, socialised in the Asian-style of non-confrontational language, were more circumspect and respectful in describing their family. This non-confrontational style was illustrated by the first-generation subject’s contradictory descriptions of her mother: “My mother is *kiasu* but only when comparing us with cousins” (quoted from Erica).

Through the theoretical framework, I have sought to identify that *kiasu* not only produces status anxiety, but the anxiety fuels the former, making one feel deficient and motivated to compete. And, the primary manner in which a social actor competes is by participating in conspicuous consumption. To win in this *kiasu* pursuit, not only does the social actor compete to ‘win’, but this victory must be witnessed and there must be a loser. This victory is short-lived as another *kiasu* social actor undertakes to unseat the victor. I also argued that *kiasu* not only exists as a state of mind, but as an action and a competitive arena: whereby perceived deficiency fuels action which then fosters competitive behaviour. As Veblen suggests, this form of emulative consumption is never-ending (ibid, p. 25). In this thesis, I make the connection between *kiasu* and the German concept of schadenfreude, or malicious pleasure. Here, I found that one of the key victories of *kiasu* is not only in the ‘conferring’ of recognition, but the pleasure one gets in witnessing someone else’s failure. The observation of Schadenfreude is best represented by Martha, a second-generation Australian-Singaporean: “I knew it would be nice if my parents can win at the *kiasu* game. I know my parents would never initiate a *kiasu* conversation comparing their children’s profession, but if they are ever roped in, I know they will win because I was a lawyer”.

In this investigation, I argued that *kiasu* is observed as an affective state, that is, it motivates social actors to behave in a specific way. As observed in this research, *kiasu* motivates the social actors to compete in their social environment to gain recognition. *Kiasu* was observed in the actions of possessing the right status symbols, as exemplified by tertiary qualifications, branded cars and in some instances, life-partners who are financially affluent. *Kiasu* was
also observed through the action of ‘being’ someone, that is being a university graduate from a prestigious institution. I also presented the case that *kiasu* is also a habitus, a hyper-competitive social space in which the social actors share a commonality of ‘one upmanship*’ and the irrationality of the hyper-competition is understood only by the social actors within this structure.

My research framework was further informed by two theories namely, ‘Status Construction Theory’ (see Ridgeway 1997 and Anderson et al 2006, 2008) and ‘Social Identity Theory’ (1980). The former suggests that high status members are perceived to be more socially competent, and therefore are entitled to make decisions on a group level. The latter theory by Turner and Tajfel, suggests that social actors are highly motivated to maintain personal and collective self-esteem. Both theories suggest that if the social identity of the individual is threatened, then the individual will start making in-group comparisons in order to protect the status quo. The responses captured, coded and analysed for this research contravenes these two theories. I have found that *kiasu* social actors regard high status members as a point of reference, or someone to defeat in the *kiasu* game. The social actor may not necessarily trust a high status member to make decisions at a group level. In addition, I also learned that *kiasu* social actors use the social setting as a competitive arena, and not as a socialisation tool. Further to this, I was interested to find out if social status moves geographically. Through the fieldwork, I have uncovered that a social actor’s high status in point-of-origin does not automatically translate into high status in the new place of residence. This finding is consistent with my own experience when I first moved to Australia, as well as the experience of one of the first-generation subjects, Rachel, who said:

“When I was in Singapore, I lived in an affluent area and I went to the top school. I always felt that my social status was already defined before people met me. I wanted to leave that behind so that people can know me as a person. When I came to Australia, I became a nobody. I was simply an Asian”.

One of the key points I would like to highlight from this research is that *kiasu* is already present and alive in Australia, but it is not popularly recognised or verbalised. Furthermore, the term *kiasu* is usually associated with Asian-based cultures. In its present form as

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2 This term is a direct quotation from a second-generation subject, Martha when asked to define the meaning of *kiasu*.
observed and informed by the subjects, the Australian version of *kiasu* can be brushed off as harmless competition, necessary to drive productivity and self-motivation. This encourages me to consider how truly classless and laid-back Australia is as a culture and a nation, and how new cultural practices help us old and new citizens create a greater Australian story (Duncan et al, 2004, p. 9-11). At the end, this research begs me to pose this question, does being Australian mean not being *kiasu* or does it mean that Australians practice a gentler version of *kiasu*. Mummery and Rodan (2005) suggest that being Australian means ‘integration into the wider community and not isolating oneself in a cultural group’ (ibid, p. 351). As I have identified *kiasu* as a potentially anti-social and self-destructive behaviour through this study, does this mean ultimately that a *kiasu* person is un-Australian. Further to this, from the research, I have uncovered that *kiasu* is present and displayed by other ethnic groups. In light of this, I present that *kiasu* crosses not only geographical and generational barriers, but cultural barriers as well. Moran (2011, p. 2154) argues that ‘true multiculturalism requires a national identity which is post-ethnic’. As *kiasu* crosses ethnic divide, I argue that being *kiasu* is a true multicultural expression in Australia.

When I commenced the literature review for this project 4 years ago, I kept coming back to the lines of my favourite on-screen psychopathic villain, Hannibal Lecter. In the film entitled “Silence of the Lambs”, Hannibal taunts the heroine incessantly and one of his taunts left an indelible mark in my memory “And how do we begin to covet? Do we seek out things to covet? We begin by coveting what we see everyday”\(^3\). Not unlike my exodus to Australia, the first-generation subjects interviewed for this research, left Singapore to escape the environment where there were endless things to covet and to compete on. Not unlike my experience, the subjects have found that *kiasu* exists in Australia, albeit in a less harmful and intense form. In Australia, there are still bigger cars, bigger houses, bigger diamonds and more academic degrees to covet, but the competition is not as ubiquitous and intense as experienced in Singapore.

I would like to conclude this research with a high note, by quoting Erica, one of the first-generation subjects: “In Australia, you are free. You can have the best life you can get”

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Suggestions for Future Research

Clearly, the analysis of *kiasu* has limitations. Firstly, the sample which I have undertaken is limited not only to first-generation and second-generation Australian-Singaporeans, but the first-generation grouping comprised predominantly of Singaporean-Chinese ethnics. Confirmation of the presence of *kiasu* in other ethnic cultures from Singapore is certainly warranted for future research. Second, the discussion on achieving social capital in this thesis is restricted to Veblen’s ([1899], 2005, p. 49) and Bourdieu’s definition of social class as defined by possession of economic, cultural and symbolic capital (1977, p. 177). As my research was largely informed by Bourdieu, I would like to highlight his recommendation that investigation into social class needs to be conducted in reference to the superstructure, which was not undertaken for this study. I believe my research is the first step in future longitudinal studies and multi-method research on *kiasu* as a habitus in Australia.

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first study to have examined and compared the *kiasu* experience between first and second generation Australia-Singaporean women. There is still much to learn about hyper-competition in its manifestations in work, education and in other ethnic groups. I found most of the ideas for future research were gained from feedback from the subjects. During this project, I received overwhelming feedback from both groupings of subjects that I should undertake the same research using male subjects. The subjects I interviewed were interested to find out if men were as attuned to *kiasu* as women. Further, I am also amazed that the majority of subjects brought to light their mothers’ *kiasu* tendencies. I believe that my current data would be further enriched if the research is expanded to include mothers in future fieldwork. This study uncovered that first and second generation Australian-Singaporean women identified tertiary qualification and number of degrees as primary status symbols. It is a point of interest to understand further if level of education is proportionate to one’s level of *kiasu*. Further, I believe that there should be further investigation into relationship between social status and membership in religious groups, a concept first considered by Veblen and then by Bourdieu. Finally, in the age of ubiquitous texting, tweeting and Facebook-updating, I recommend that further research be conducted on how *kiasu* thrives successfully in a virtual world, thus creating a new hyper-competition arena.
APPENDIX A   SET OF QUESTIONS FOR SUBJECTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>First Generation (a)</th>
<th>Second Generation (b)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What year were you born</td>
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<td>(a) And (b)</td>
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<tr>
<td>When did you arrive here</td>
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<td>(a) only</td>
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1. Can you briefly describe your family history in Australia (how many siblings, when did you arrive here, how large is extended family in Australia)
2. As you were growing up, did you make holiday trips to Singapore? Do you still make these trips? (this is to establish if participant has emotional connection to Singapore)

2a. How would you describe your experience in Singapore?
3. In your own words, how would you describe “kiasu”?
4. What are the examples of “kiasu” observed in Australia?
5. What are the examples of “kiasu” observed in Singapore?
6. Again, in your family, do you have items, activities, professions or anything recognised a status symbol? Can you name them? (this is to establish benchmark for status symbols)
7. Can you tell me what your ideal brand preferences when it comes to fashion and apparel? What do you associate these brands with?
8. Do you believe status is about being someone or having something?
9. On a kiasu-meter from 1 being Not Kiasu At All to 5 Extremely Kiasu, where do you place yourself and why
10. Would you be provoked into being kiasu?
11. Is your family kiasu?
12. Do you find that your concepts of status symbols have been inherited from your parents or family, or you have developed your own?
13. What is your status symbol?
14. What do you feel when you see someone having the status symbols that you have just mentioned?
15. What do you feel when you see it?
16. Do you believe Singaporeans are more inclined to be kiasu?
APPENDIX B  RECRUITMENT POSTER

Are you a woman aged between 18-35?
Are your parents Singaporean?
Were you born in Australia?
Would you like to be part of a unique study into brands and status symbols?

If you answered YES to the questions above, you are eligible to participate in a unique study on status symbols in Australia.

*All responses are kept private and confidential*

Interested? For more information, please contact SuAnne Yap for a private chat and briefing document on:
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132


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