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# Inconspicuous dressing: A critique of the construction-through-consumption paradigm in the sociology of clothing

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## Abstract

Based on 'wardrobe interviews', this article studies how young Dutch men dress themselves. We argue that existing sociological studies of clothing have gone too far in emphasizing the symbolic aspects of clothing and have not paid sufficient attention to the role of routines and rules in daily dressing. Moreover, we find that young Dutch men dress rather inconspicuously, and are hardly interested in using clothes as a tool in 'postmodern' identity experiments. Insofar as clothing selection is a matter of reflexivity, it is primarily directed at conformity to meet social and situational requirements. Our respondents use clothing to construct coherent and authentic identities: their dress should express who they think they are. Convincing others of their unique identity is hardly desirable for these men. Finally, for most of them clothing is a negative act: they seek to avoid attracting attention through their dress. Our respondents are aware of the fact that their inconspicuous dress is similar to those of their companions, but this is a source of comfort rather than distress.

## Keywords

Clothing, consumption, identity, authenticity, wardrobe, cultural sociology, male dressing, routine behaviour

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## Introduction

*You are who you wear it's true  
A girl's just as hot as the shoes she choose  
Fashion put it all on me  
I am anyone you want me to be  
(Lady Gaga, Fashion lyrics)*

Not just in her lyrics, but also in her outfit Lady Gaga presents herself as a typical late-modern consumer, constructing, reconfiguring and playing with identity on a day-to-day basis through her clothing practices. Yesterday a paragon of discrete elegance in her classic Chanel suit, with peroxide blonde 'fifties' hair, today she walks a tight rope between insanity and avant-gardism in a Kermit the Frog doll's suit, tomorrow she tries on a political persona in a red lace mini burka.

The prevailing paradigm in the sociology of consumption suggests that late- or postmodern consumers make use of dress by and large like Lady Gaga does. The paradigm, which we will allude to in this article as the construction-through-consumption paradigm, emphasizes how consumption of self-selected commodities has replaced traditional sources of identity such as class. It has thoroughly embraced the concept of lifestyle consumption, resulting in a perseverant emphasis on the sign value of commodities (Baudrillard, 1983), while neglecting the endurance of other values such as sheer utility. As such, our society has perhaps too easily been characterized as an individualized consumer society.

In this article, the construction-through-consumption paradigm will be questioned on the basis of a concise qualitative wardrobe study. This research explores the ways Dutch urban male respondents choose their dress and the way in which concerns about identity inform their choices. Although we recognize that the paradigm is far from homogeneous and consists of several, sometimes contradictory, strands of analysis, our findings suggest that some of its central tenets require revision for both empirical and theoretical reasons. While Lady Gaga seems to confirm the image of the postmodern 'style surfer' (Polhemus, 1996), this article brings forward how far everyday sartorial reality is removed from her performance acts. Our study indicates that male Dutch consumers do not seek to permanently construct and re-construct their personal identities through reflexive, anxiety-producing consumption activities.

We view the construction-through-consumption paradigm less as a united strand of ideas than a reservoir of related theories, which we roughly group under a strong and a weak version. In its weak version, the paradigm proclaims the coming of age of a 'society of individuals' (Bauman, 2000) in which people are responsible for their own choices (Beck, 1992). Inspired by among others Zygmunt Bauman (2000) and Anthony Giddens (1991), the self-construction of identity is treated as a necessity since traditional, socially anchored sources of identity such as class, religion or occupation have become void. As a result, acts of consumption

have gained central importance in life, conceptualized as acts of self-expression. Commodities serve as building blocks for lifestyles (Bauman, 1995) that are in turn the basis for self-identity (Giddens, 1991). Within this weak version of the paradigm, clothing is seen as a language that sends out messages related to identity to the outside world (Barnard, 2002; Lurie, 1981). Moreover, consumption acts are treated as reflexive since 'lifestyles are structures that people very *consciously* choose' (Wilska, 2002: 198, author's emphasis, cf. Giddens 1991).

The strong version of the paradigm places emphasis not only on construction but on fluidity as well. The lack of durable structures in late-modern society has created a concomitant need for flexible, fluid identities since individuals find themselves in a constant flux of changing circumstances and requirements. Bauman (2005) speaks about a 'hybrid culture' in which individuals seek their identity not in belonging but in the freedom to defy pre-existing boundaries such as class, religion or race.<sup>1</sup> This version of the paradigm, which is loosely affiliated with postmodern theories of contemporary society (Featherstone, 1991; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; McRobbie, 1994), stresses the playfulness and creativity unleashed by consumer behaviour. Ted Polhemus, for instance, speaks of 'style surfers' who are free-floating between styles, mixing and matching to create their own reality in which identity is infinitely malleable (Polhemus, 1996). According to these theorists, consumers experiment with competing and contrary codes while resisting a single ascription of identity.

Of course, we are not the first to criticize the construction-through-consumption paradigm. For instance, Paul Sweetman has disputed the paradigm's claim that class no longer functions as a source of identity (Sweetman, 2003). Empirically, Terhi-Anna Wilska (2002) has likewise questioned the assumption that late-modern citizens see consumption as a key source of identity. 'Most of the consumption styles/lifestyles that were found [among Finnish respondents] were characterized by rather modest consumption' (Wilska, 2002: 208). Alan Warde (1994a) has, from the paradigm's beginnings onwards, been critical of both the belief that consumption is primarily driven by the desire to construct identities and the capacity of consumption to provide these identities. He does not deny a shift in consumption practices but rather relativizes it as a more trivial change that might conceal other continuities such as the enduring influence of traditional social categories (Warde 1994a: 65; Warde 1994b) and the importance of routine in consumer practices.<sup>2</sup> As Warde argued with Jukka Gronow in the introduction to a groundbreaking volume on ordinary consumption: 'The sociology of consumption has concentrated unduly on the more spectacular and visual aspects of contemporary consumer behaviour, thereby constructing an unbalanced and partial account.' (Gronow and Warde, 2001: 3–4).

Inspired by his programmatic work on theories of practice in consumption studies (Warde, 2005; see also Halkier et al., 2011), which serve as an alternative to the construction-through-consumption paradigm, empirical studies have more recently started to stress the mundane, ordinary aspects of consumption and the routine-like, non-reflexive and non-conspicuous aspects of consumer behaviour

(see, for example, Jastran et al. (2009) on eating routines, Gram-Hanssen (2008) on the consumption of water or Shove (2007) on domestic appliances).

Clothing, however, has remained a stronghold of the construction-through-consumption paradigm, probably because of its high visibility and apparent symbolic properties. In this article we develop an alternative understanding, which builds on Warde's reasoning and is grounded in empirical data. After discussing the methodology used (the following section), we question the assumption that consumption is by and large a matter of deliberate choice. Subsequently, we show how everyday clothing selection is co-determined by a wide range of material and functional aspects that the sociology of consumption has ignored because of its obsession with appearance and identity (the third section). We do not deny that concerns about identity inform our respondents' choices, but continue to argue that these concerns hardly involve the value of uniqueness, that is, using clothes to distinguish themselves from others (the fourth section). Moreover, questioning the strong version of the paradigm, we claim that consumers seek to construct stable, coherent identities rather than fleeting, fragmented ones through their clothing choice (the fifth section). Also, they hardly engage in playful behaviour but instead value authenticity: they hope to convey to others who they think they really are (the sixth section). We end the article with a discussion regarding the age, country and gender-specific character of our findings (the seventh section).

Before engaging in the critique of the construction-through-consumption paradigm, we highlight another innovative aspect of our research. Empirical studies of actual clothing behaviour that indicate the limits of the paradigm and that suggest an alternative are few. Focusing on men, as this research does, brings forward another neglected research area. Despite the increasing attention for fashion in sociology and related disciplines, little is known about the daily practice of male dressing. By and large, clothing scholars seem to have embraced what the psychologist John Carl Flügel in the 1930s called 'the great male renunciation': the assumption that men in modern times ceased to decorate themselves by means of clothing, denounced the accompanying narcissistic, playful impulse and were thus placed out of the logic of fashion (Flügel, 1930; see also Tseëlon, 1995; Wilson, 1992). This thesis has been challenged by a large number of historical studies on topics as diverse as the Savile Row tailor Henry Poole (Anderson, 2000 #1486), the British Men's Dress Reform Party (Bourke, 1996), 19th century upper and lower class male fashion consumption (Breward, 1999; Shannon, 2006), or early 20th century men's personal and emotional attachments to clothing (Ugolini, 2007).

In various ways these studies show men's continuing implication in the logic of fashion. Contemporary scholars, however, have focused their attention on women's clothing behaviour, thus paying lip service to Flügel (1930).<sup>3</sup> As far as men's clothing behaviour has been studied, it has been in the context of masculinity construction (Edwards, 1997; Frith and Gleeson, 2004; Rinallo, 2007), gay clothing styles (e.g. Dodd et al., 2005) or as part of erratic subjects such as fashion shopping by divorced men (Moore et al., 2001) or fitting problems for elderly men (Hogge et al., 1988). One of the few exceptions to the rule is a study by Frith and Gleeson

(2004: 45), who have countered the notion that ‘men have little invested in their appearance’ and have shown how men ‘deliberately and strategically use clothing to manipulate their appearance to meet cultural ideals of masculinity’. This lacuna in the literature is all the more remarkable given the obvious manifestation of male fashion in commercial settings, the discourse in the first decade of the 2000s on metrosexual men, the rise of men’s fashion magazines, and the explicit targeting of men by clothing companies (see, for example, Mort, 1996; Nixon, 2003; Rinallo, 2007). This study seeks to contribute to remedying the lacuna. Using wardrobe studies rather than plain in-depth interviews, it is one of the first to focus on men’s everyday clothing decisions and how they relate to identity construction.

## Methodology

The 20 respondents for this study were selected through a snowball sample, making use of friends, colleagues and family connections for initial contacts (in the end, only four respondents had any direct connections to the researchers). Selection criteria were urban settlement, class, age (between 20 and 30 years) and gender. Class was measured by profession and income using the categories of the EGP classification.<sup>4</sup> To reduce the possibility of sameness and selection bias associated with snowball samples, a wide diversity in backgrounds was secured. Among the higher class respondents were a researcher, two project managers, a graphic and a network designer, a financial consultant and a financial analyst, a teacher, an events manager and an account manager for a clothing brand. Among the lower class respondents were a catering employee, a driver, an animal care taker, a house painter, a bartender, a tennis teacher, a mechanic, a military police man and two chefs. Respondents were living either in Amsterdam, Rotterdam or Den Haag, the three largest cities of The Netherlands, with each between half a million and a million inhabitants. All of them were heterosexual, eight of them were single and most of the others were living together with their partner.

The intimate character of the research method made the type of sampling especially suitable, providing secure ‘entrances’. The in-depth interviews took place in the homes of the respondents, varying in length between one and a half and three hours. The interviews were semi-structured, making use of questionnaires but leaving abundant space for the ‘actor’s point of view’ (Mead, 1982).

The wardrobe study proved to be a suitable research method to solicit responses by offering stimuli, without becoming suggestive. The relatively new technique of the wardrobe study has been deployed and explored by the anthropologist Sophie Woodward (2007; see also Tseñlon, 1995) in order to study the daily act of getting dressed amongst women. Woodward spent time with her respondents in their bedrooms in London, observing them while getting dressed and questioning them on their choices regarding what to wear. She divided each wardrobe into active (worn regularly), non-active (worn seldom or never) and possible (considered or tried on as an option) clothing. Less than 38% of the wardrobe appeared to be active. However, the remainder of the clothes turned out to be just as telling as they

referred to the past (clothing imbued with memories) and to creative possibilities for the future (clothing that represent identities/styles that women 'could be'). This finding is related to the choice women make between habitual clothing ('safe', daily) and non-habitual clothing (a transforming opportunity reserved for certain occasions). Woodward sees the wardrobe study as a method to reveal aspects of the participants' self and self-image: 'Women are able to see aspects of themselves in the external form of clothing. Ranging from former selves to fantasy selves to work personas, the diverse aspects of the self are "distributed" through the array of items of clothing in the wardrobe' (2007: 11–12).

In this way, the wardrobe provides a basis to talk about the self: while going through all items in the wardrobe participants are stimulated to think about which items of clothing are stuffed away at the back of the closet and why, which items are preserved for work or for leisure only, which items they feel most attached to, and which items remind them of persons, periods or special events. Precisely because the relationship to clothing is sensual and involves a daily ritual, underlying reasons for choosing clothes are often hard to verbalize. They are, as Bourdieu phrased it, 'history turned into nature' (cited in Woodward, 2007: 32–33).

Our wardrobe study was laid out as an interview whereby the participants examined every item in their wardrobe together with the researcher. This technique appeared to be very effective, as the male participants were inclined to relate the clothing in their wardrobe to anxieties, memories and experiences as they glanced over their wardrobes with their eyes and hands. A precious gift was remembered, the softness of a favourite sweater was felt, and neglected items brought forward bad bargains; during the interviews all respondents encountered forgotten items and remembered relevant clothing anecdotes that were elicited by these very moments. The clothing itself can also function as a material archive for the researcher (and thereby as a triangulating device (Goffman, 1989)), as 'the tears and rips tell the tale of the trousers that have been worn until they fell apart, the still-attached price tag identifies the cocktail dress a woman had neither the occasion, nor the confidence to wear' (Woodward, 2007: 33).

While the wardrobe study thus enabled us to collect rich interview data, also on clothing items that are not or hardly worn in daily life, and that would therefore fall outside of the scope of, for instance, participant observation, the downside is that we necessarily rely on respondent's accounts of their clothing practices. We are not able to check if these accounts differ from their actual behaviour.

## **Satisficing consumer behaviour**

If clothing is seen as a vehicle of identity and the wardrobe as an identity bank (Cwerner, 2001), as the dominant paradigm in the sociology of consumption maintains, it should follow that the moment of getting dressed, usually in the morning, is crucial: this is the moment that playful behaviour should be manifested and

identity construction is engaged in. It should be a moment, as Bovone argues, of intense reflection, of choosing between identities instead of mere clothes (Bovone, 2006).

Our research among Dutch urban men suggests otherwise. For them it is hardly a moment of deliberate decision-making. In line with Woodward (2007), the daily ritual of getting dressed is more determined by routine and practical considerations. In particular, our respondents rely on 'clothing rules' that assist consumers in picking pieces out of the wardrobe and in putting several clothing items together. Other rules that respondents apply are picking clothing that is 'different from what I wore the day before', and picking clothing that is clean. In other words, instead of conscious, costly decision-making at a time of the day that is often characterized by lack of time and absence of concentration, rules of thumb are applied such as simply taking a piece that lies highest on the pile.

Our findings thus fit in a wider body of research in cognitive sociology (DiMaggio, 1997), neo-institutionalism and economic psychology which shows that consumers may under specific circumstances avoid choice because it is experienced as stressful. Behaving as satisficers rather than maximizers (Schwartz, 2004; Simon, 1957), they are not so much concerned about making the best choice of clothes available, whether in front of the wardrobe or in the clothing store. Instead these men rely on routines that provide them with a decent outfit and have the cognitive advantage of economizing on decision-making costs.

Although we did not observe our respondents when dressing for special occasions, we did question them about this. The men admitted they usually paid more attention to what they wore when going out. Yet half of them did not automatically change into different clothes, which means the moment of choice in the morning can be defining for habitual as well as non-habitual situations. Almost half of the respondents wear a uniform at work. They see their wardrobe as a collection of 'safe' options that likewise facilitate rapid decision-making. As Michael, a 27-year-old chef says: 'I get dressed in less than 5 minutes. . . most of my clothing combines easily er. . . hoodies, t shirts, jeans. You can't go wrong'. A minority of the respondents adjust their clothing choice according to the requirements of work situations in the day ahead. Although more reflexive, their clothing selection is also routinized: their wardrobes contain specific 'work' items such as 'jackets' or 'smart shirts'.

In our research, we also found that mundane criteria frequently surface in our respondents' clothing routines. Almost invariably, our respondents say that one of their first actions before getting dressed is to look out of the window to see what the weather is like in order to make sure their pick matches the meteorological conditions. Afterwards, the focus is on 'whatever is clean'. When this first rudimentary sifting of clothes has been executed, material characteristics of clothing rather than the immaterial properties relevant to identity construction continue to inform clothing decisions. In fact, when asked about their most favourite items of clothing, respondents frequently say they like these items because they are 'comfortable' to wear or feel 'soft' on the body. One might expect the attention dedicated to the selection of clothing to be influenced by the variety of options available in the

respondents' wardrobe, yet both for respondents with uniform and for those with diverse wardrobes, functional, mundane and material concerns prevail.

While sociologists of consumption in general and of clothing in particular have of course been right in emphasizing the symbolic meanings involved in consumer behaviour, our study indicates that the paradigm may have gone too far in ignoring functional aspects whatsoever (cf. Ilmonen, 2004). Nevertheless, such functional characteristics do surface in other strands of literature, largely ignored by the sociology of consumption, such as textile studies. Bye and McKinney (2007), for instance, have found that one of the most important reasons why clothes are no longer worn is that they do not or no longer do fit the body. Hsu and Burns (2002) argue that such assessments of clothing related to fit and comfort vary little across countries with cultural repertoires as different as the United States and Taiwan, while Kaplan and Okur (2008) find that for Turkish consumers issues related to comfort as mundane as sweating and ease of movement figure prominently in garment preferences.

This is not to suggest that the focus on fit and comfort is a male predilection. Indeed, we are critical of studies who endorse a gendered division of motives when it comes to dressing the body. Frith and Gleeson (2004), for instance, find in one of the rare – albeit psychological rather than sociological – studies of male clothing behaviour that 'practical rather than aesthetic aspects of clothing' predominate. Implicitly endorsing the aforementioned 'great renunciation', they interpret their results in gendered terms: while for women shopping is 'an opportunity to "try on" new identities', Frith and Gleeson argue that men 'regard shopping simply as a process of acquiring new clothes; if a garment fits correctly, then they are likely to buy it' (Frith and Gleeson, 2004: 43; cf. Hogge et al., 1988). Our research suggests differently: as we show in the following section, immaterial aspects matter for men as well, albeit in a different way than the construction-through-consumption paradigm suggests.

## **Renouncing uniqueness**

The emphasis on material characteristics does not mean that identity concerns are excluded from clothing decisions. In fact, our interviews indicate that identity and the materiality of clothing are hard to separate: material comfort should not only be understood as a fit with the body, but also with the self. The preferences for certain items are frequently developed in a historical process of regular wear. Tygo, for instance, a 27-year-old computer network designer, favours old clothing that has 'shaped itself to my body' after years of wearing. Woodward (2007) likewise suggests that the longer clothing is worn, the more the wearer feels at ease with these items: 'it is as if they age with the wearer, becoming like a second skin' (78–79). Conversely, the respondents emphasize that they feel uncomfortable in clothing that is not fitting their own perceptions of their identity: wearing clothing that is not 'you'. In other words, what respondents in our and previous studies allude to as the right fit, is not only related to the material characteristics of the

garments but also to the owner's identity and the way clothing has become enmeshed with it.

Although concerns about identity are in this way relevant to clothing behaviour, this does not mean that our interpretations fit in the strong version of the construction-through-consumption paradigm. To begin with, our respondents hardly seem to be concerned about constructing individual identities and distinguishing themselves from others. As Mike Featherstone phrased it, 'the new heroes of consumer culture make lifestyle a life project and display their individuality and sense of style in the particularity of the assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance and bodily dispositions they design together into a lifestyle' (Featherstone, 1991: 86). But in dressing themselves, the individualizing impulse that has already been theorized by Georg Simmel in his famous essay on Fashion (Simmel, 1957) and that is thought to be the hallmark of our 'society of individuals' (Bauman, 2000) seems underdeveloped when it comes to our respondents. Five of them classify their clothing style in the category 'mainstream' and the greater part of them admits instantly that this style resembles the one of others. Moreover, they think this is self-evident and they would rather be surprised and even worried if that would *not* be the case: 'I would start thinking I'm not normal', Marcel, a 27-year-old down-to-earth truck driver explains laughing. Apart from Rudy and Xander, two respondents who *are* eager to show how unique and forward their style is, none of the respondents undertakes an effort to convince the interviewer of their distinct clothing behaviour.

Similar statements were made by the majority of Banister and Hogg's (2004) respondents who did not classify their dress as 'individual' but rather as 'simple' and 'inconspicuous' and said their friends dressed in a similar way. Their respondents negatively evaluated clothing behaviour that they described as 'trying to hard'; moreover, they refer to Wilk's (1995) study whose respondents critiqued products that were too 'flash' or 'exclusive'. Our findings are also corroborated by Andrew Hill's casual observations of everyday clothing on the streets of London. Starting from the idea that we live in an 'age of sartorial expressiveness, richness and heterogeneity', in which 'people dress stands as a testament to the individualism celebrated in our era' (Hill, 2005: 67), Hill is surprised to find that the majority is dressed in the 'indistinct' style of casual wear (Hill, 2005: 69). Lipovetsky (1994) has likewise registered the predominance of casual wear, while Woodward finds that 'there is an overall uniformity in what is worn' and that high street is 'notably uniform in the styles it presents' (Woodward, 2009: 90–91).

A variety of explanations for this surprising uniformity has been provided in these studies. Woodward refuses to view her findings as a refutation of the prevailing construction-through-consumption paradigm, seeing the individualizing impulse in the subtle differences consumers display by engaging in bricolage and combining pieces of clothing and accessories in unique ways. In our interview data, such subtle differences, however, hardly play a role.

Hill, by contrast, interprets the absence of sartorial expressiveness as a manifestation of a wider 'casualization' of society (Hill, 2005: 72) that has resulted in the

erosion of formalities and hierarchies (cf. Janssen, 2005; Wouters, 2007). One could argue the other way around, however, that this very casualization has enabled the age of individual, sartorial expressiveness since it allowed consumers to deviate from stringent, formal and widely shared clothing norms. Another interpretation offered by Hill is in terms of the postmodern consumer's blasé attitude: a consumer who no longer can be shocked by deviant clothing behaviour, and is 'adrift in a world of consumption, without direction, context and meaning' (Hill, 2005: 75). Our respondents by contrast come across as far from blasé.

Banister and Hoggs' explanation fits our data better. They argue that for their respondents, dressing 'safe' is seen as a way to avoid negative interpretations of their dress, reflecting 'the view that wearing the "wrong" items is likely to receive a stronger reaction than wearing the latest or the "best"' (Banister and Hogg, 2004: 860). Likewise, our respondents explicitly state they prefer to wear clothing that does not stand out too much, clothing in 'inconspicuous colors such as blue and grey' (Marcel) that is not 'too obvious or peculiar' (Tom). Mark, a 25-year-old chef, likes clothes that are comfortable and not too prominent, since 'I am like that too: easy going and not attracting too much attention.' But apart from the negative motive of not wanting to stand out, positive motives may exist for our respondents' lack of interest in sartorial expressiveness, as we show in the next section.

## Dressing coherently

In strong versions of the construction-through-consumption paradigm, clothing seems to be a perfect facilitator for postmodern identity adaptations, allowing consumers to change, fragment, experiment or play with identities (Bovone, 2006; Lipovetsky, 1994).<sup>5</sup> Our respondents, by contrast, indicate that they consciously refrain from doing so. Such sartorial experiments would conflict with two values around which their constructions of identity evolve and which they seek to convey in their everyday clothing practices. To begin with, our respondents emphasize that they wear clothes that correspond in a coherent way with their overall image of self, even if they wear different clothes from day to day. René, an ambitious 25-year-old financial consultant remarks:

Yes, I do have a coherent style. . . I do find that important, that everything fits together.

*Why?*

Because otherwise things would be chaotic, and you don't want to wear something completely different every day.

*Why not?*

Er . . . I think because you are after all *one* person with *one* taste, and not all sorts of different types of persons.

Jerry, a 26-year-old house painter, thinks it is very obvious that his clothing style is coherent as he blankly replies: ‘who wears all different kinds of styles at once? Only someone who doesn’t know what he wants or something?!’ Coherency does not seem to be a conscious effort. Some respondents seemed to realize during the interview, when looking at their wardrobe, that their clothing preference indeed showed consistency in terms of style. For them, a coherent style of clothing is related to being one person, one’s self. Joost, a 26-year-old analyst at a bank, says he does not have ‘to emanate something different every day, I’m just being myself’. Paradoxically, this also holds for Rudy (25), who works for a fashion brand. He favours his collection of blue jeans, which he calls ‘denims’, as these items ‘reflect who I am I think: crazy about fashion. And also: I like unusual, outstanding items, trousers that almost nobody would wear’. In short our respondents indicate that clothing choices are not so much a matter of playing with new identities but instead construct stable, coherent ones. Or as Banister and Hogg (2004) put it: ‘individuals use clothing in the constant negotiation of who they are (...) and who they are not’ (852).

Of course, this desire to construct a coherent identity does not mean that the respondents always dress in the same way, if only because they need to engage in situational adaptations of appearance. As Jarno exemplifies:

I clearly have a neat, smart style and also a very casual, trendy style represented in my wardrobe. I kind of enjoy playing with these two, because both of them are sides of me. In a nice suit I feel comfortable and very er... competent. But I evenly enjoy wearing a baggy jeans and a bright blue shirt at another occasion. Because I’m like that as well. [You are like what?] I’m also not that serious, also someone who indulges in the pleasures of life.

This, however, is no straightforward confirmation of the strong version of the construction-through-consumption paradigm, since also in these situational logics coherency is still what these urban men strive for; their dress should not be a form of masquerade but should reflect ‘who they are’. Jarno, for instance, makes clear both styles are sides of the same ‘me’. He plays two different roles in his daily life as his rather formal work environment at the ministry contrasts with his laid back private environment. Jarno emphasizes: ‘for me [my wardrobe] is reasonably consistent, I mean every represented style fits with me.’ A same unification of differences is seen with Jan (a 27-year-old, socially engaged teacher) and René whose work environments also contrast with their personal environments and preferences. Jan says:

Sometimes you do not feel like wearing tight, formal clothing and you just want to wear a loose sweater. But other days I do feel like dressing up...at work my clothing also shows who I am, but these are just different characteristics than those represented in my leisure time.

René emphasizes that the way he dresses at work ‘is who I am’ but the way he dresses at the weekend is also who he is. Kris says he sometimes changes into

something different when going out to 'show that I know to dress the right way. That you don't show up in shorts when you go to a fancy restaurant...that you don't wear the same to a party as you wear to work'. Apparently the respondents are familiar with encountering differing situational requirements, but they do not need to engage in identity transformations to cope with this instability. They adapt to the different 'meaning domains' in which their lives are enacted (DeBerry-Spence, 2008) without experiencing anxiety, 'identity crises' or inconsistent identities.

While these findings are at odds with the strong strands within the construction-through-consumption paradigm that stress the inevitability of fragmented identities, the desire for an 'open' identity or an experienced need for fluidity, they do resonate with other strands, including the work of Giddens (1991), who acknowledges a need for coherence and unification in contemporary society, which he suggests can be accomplished by the construction of coherent, personal narratives. Likewise, Colin Campbell has suggested that consumption 'far from exacerbating the 'crisis of identity' is indeed the very activity through which individuals commonly resolve the issue' (Campbell, 2004: 30).<sup>6</sup> Empirical studies confirm the consumers' motivation to create a sense of sequence or narrative self through consumption practices (DeBerry-Spence, 2008; Gould and Lerman, 1998; Murray, 2002). Arnould and Price (2000) argue, for instance, that one way personal narratives are created and sustained is through authenticating acts, in which consumption objects and practices are felt as an expression of the 'true self' (see also Belk, 1988). In the next section, we will further explore the role of authenticity in our respondents' clothing practices.

## **Desire for authenticity**

Apart from seeking to dress themselves in a coherent fashion, the respondents want to convey a true, accurate image of their selves through their clothes. Marius (25), who works for a catering company, enjoys his unstructured, relaxed lifestyle and is eager to give people the 'right' impression with his appearance. 'Right' for him refers to a true reflection of his identity. He would never wear 'very neat clothing, a suit and tie or so' since he would feel 'as if I was fooling everybody you know, I'm just totally not like that'. Casper, a 25-year-old cheerful bartender, feels the same as he would never wear a 'neat shirt' when in fact he is not neat at all. Jarno (25), who works for the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, admits he does sometimes wear clothes that enhance certain qualities (like being decent or trustworthy) to make a good impression, but only if these qualities are truly part of his identity. Tygo explains he dresses rather disorderly and shabby since he does not want people 'expecting somebody who's spick and span' [laughs].

Why is conveying an accurate sense of self considered so important and playing with identity is refrained from? We argue that in two different ways these results should be seen as part of a more widely embraced discourse of authenticity in contemporary Western society. First of all, experimenting with clothing has

negative moral connotations within this discourse: it is qualified as superficial, phony, artificial and inauthentic. This is most clearly illustrated by Kris' (25) example. Kris holds a managerial position at a hotel chain and says he likes to wear a simple V neck sweater with a shirt underneath: 'It makes me feel at ease. It fits me, I don't have to be worried that I'd be wearing it wrong or it is much too "hip" for me'. Even though he would like to dress more trendily he is worried his 'fashion conscious' colleagues and friends might interpret his attempt as 'fake', since he knows he is actually not as trendy as he would like to be.

Secondly, consumption can in itself be seen as an authenticating act, as Arnould and Price (2000) have argued. Instead of using consumption to revel in postmodern identity experiments, our respondents use consumption to anchor their identities: clothing enables them to create narratives that 'provide a means for expressing and understanding the self, its change over time and across contexts' (2000: 145). Our respondents' construction of their authentic self involves wearing clothing that they *feel* expresses their 'true self'. This is an experience that need not necessarily *be* authentic; rather, respondents endow it with authenticity (Arnould and Price, 2000: 146). It may offer them a sense of consistency. Moreover, clothing can assist consumers in fostering 'the creation of a personal belief system in which the individual acknowledges that his/her first loyalty is to [her/himself]' (Arnould and Price, 2000: 146).

The fact that authenticity plays a key role in the way the respondents evaluate items of clothing is paradoxical, since this value is perceived as antithetical to mass consumption (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1944 [1972]; Houtman et al., 2009). We are not the first, however, to argue that a predilection for authenticity and the consumption of standardized commodities can be reconciled (cf. Arnould and Price, 2000). Gilmore and Pine (2007), for instance, see the heightened demand for authenticity as the result of shifting consumer sensibilities in the past decades: from scarcity to abundance to authenticity. In line with our results, they define authenticity in consumption as the extent to which purchases confirm the consumers' self-image: 'what they buy must reflect who they are and who they aspire to be in relation to how they perceive the world' (2007: 5). Woodward demonstrates that street style is about authenticity and should be seen as a response by consumers who see 'high street as homogenized and inauthentic, leaving no space for individuality' (Woodward, 2009: 88). But as we have argued here, the concern for authenticity is not so much tied up with a desire for individuality but more with a predilection for sincerity.

## Discussion

Our results paint a rather down-to-earth picture of daily dressing practices defined more by routine, conformism, coherence and authenticity than individual expressiveness. The question arises to which extent this picture is specific to the gender, age, nationality and ethnicity of the group we focused on. Based on existing

literature in the sociology and anthropology of consumption, we discuss the generalizability of our findings in this section.

When it comes to nationality, one interpretation of our results is that they are bound to a particular Dutch cultural repertoire that entails an appreciation of sobriety and a condemnation of flaunting (see, for example, Kuipers, 2010). However, as we made clear above, a lack of 'sartorial expressiveness' and a predilection for comfort has been found in other countries as well, including the United Kingdom, Taiwan, the United States and Turkey (see, for example, Hsu and Burns, 2002; Kaplan and Okur, 2008; Woodward, 2007).

Regarding age, our group (20–30 years) may already be past the adolescent years in which experiments with identity through material artefacts such as clothing are most likely to be encountered. Here, however, media images of teenage shopping may be deluding: previous studies suggest that they are motivated not only by symbolic considerations such as brand values but also so by practical considerations (see, for example, Zukin, 2004a: 185; Zukin, 2004b). One might expect single men to be more inclined to engage in identity transformations yet we found no remarkable differences in clothing behaviour between our single respondents and those in a relationship.

When it comes to ethnicity, previous research has shown that ethnic groups in Western societies have frequently played key roles in the development of sub- and youth cultures, of which extravagant clothing styles have been part (Crane, 1999). In the Netherlands, Moroccan youth have been found to spend more than twice as much on clothing than the average of their age group. Among other things, by wearing expensive brand names, they seek to carve out unique identities (Dibbits, 2006). But while in this respect their behaviour is different from the way our respondents dress themselves, in other respects their motives are remarkably similar: a desire for authenticity and a fear of being perceived as 'fake' or 'not real'. In constructing these authentic selves, dressing themselves is an authenticating act for these Moroccans as well (Dibbits, 2006).

Finally, regarding gender, women may be more attentive to their outer appearance in general; dressing might be a more reflexive experience for them due to, for instance, social pressure or bodily insecurities (Tseëlon, 1995). Indeed, compared to studies on female clothing practices that emphasize efforts to revealing some and concealing other parts of the body (Frith and Gleeson, 2008; Guy and Banim, 2000; Tseëlon, 1995; Wilson, 1992; Woodward, 2007), it is remarkable how absent bodily concerns were in our respondent's accounts of clothing practices (see Gill et al., 2005, for similar findings).<sup>7</sup>

However, we expect that the differences between men and women are a matter of degree rather than principle for the following two reasons. First of all, on the basis of recent literature on the rise of a new type of urban 'metrosexual' man, reflexive clothing behaviour and a heightened concern for outer appearance could equally be expected of our urban male respondents (Nixon, 2001, 2003). Admittedly our results might be constrained to heterosexual men as homosexual men might be more consciously involved in identity constructions and appearance.

Secondly, our findings are corroborated by studies focusing on women that likewise emphasize coherence and custom instead of fragmentation and transformation. For instance, Diana Crane has found that women in her focus groups resist the ‘postmodernist conception of multiple identities’ and instead seem to have ‘a distinctly modernist outlook toward their identities and, consequently, toward fashionable clothing’ (Crane, 1999: 553). Thompson and Haytko argue that in everyday fashion discourses women seek to distance themselves from ‘the narratively disjointed and noncommittant stance of postmodern resistance’ and to impose a ‘coherent sense of order upon potentially disparate, fragmented styles and activities’ (Thompson and Haytko, 1997: 35–36). Finally, Alison Guy and Maura Banim have found that clothes are used by women to create ‘continuity of identity’ (Guy and Banim, 2000: 323; see also Ahuvia, 2005; Wilson, 1992). Nevertheless, to reach a conclusive stand on the specificity of our findings regarding gender, age, ethnicity and nationality, more research is warranted.

## Conclusion

Opposing even weaker strands of the prevailing construction-through-consumption paradigm, in this article we have stressed the role that practical, mundane criteria such as clothing comfort and weather conditions play in clothing behaviour. This may be perceived as stating the obvious, but such down-to-earth aspects of consumer behaviour have become by and large excluded from the analysis in the prevailing paradigm in the sociology of consumption. However, they continue to play an important role in strands of literature that address the materiality of clothing.

In constructing their identities, we found our respondents to be more concerned with being authentic than being unique. Dressing for them is also a negative act: they want to avoid standing out and attracting undesirable attention in case they dress themselves in a way that others would subsequently disqualify. This does not mean, however, that they can be thought of as members of what Michel Maffesoli (1996) has called neo-tribes. Their negation of uniqueness and individualism does not imply that they engage in an empathetic form of sociality centred around shared, fleeting lifestyles or taste. When our respondents state – without remorse – that they are aware that their clothing style is shared by a wider group of young urban men, they do not express wishes to be members of a tribal collectivity or express affects with those other men (cf. Maffesoli, 1996: 43). Clothing is deployed by them not so much as a symbolic gesture but as an authenticating act that anchors the self.

Critiquing strong versions of the construction-through-consumption paradigm that proclaim the existence of, or even cherish the need for a fluid, fragmented self, the respondents display a need for coherency. They do not want to convey a false image of who they think they are, and therefore express disdain at wearing clothing that ‘is not me’.

Our arguments may have wider implications for the sociology of consumption. The critique of the prevailing paradigm we have developed in this article can be read as a plea to re-assess the role consumption plays in contemporary society and the way citizens go about being consumers. The construction-through-consumption paradigm may have put too much emphasis on consumers as individual choosing agents and too little on the rule-following and routine-like behaviour that dressing up our selves entails. In order to complement the symbolic approaches to consumption that now dominate the literature, we think a stronger integration of findings in, for instance, institutional, economic and cognitive sociology could be beneficial.

Surely the aim of this study has been no more than explorative, so further research would be needed to substantiate the claims we make. Nevertheless, a limited number of previous empirical studies have pointed in similar directions, and everyday observations of street style suggest that the sartorial expressiveness of contemporary citizens and their willingness to construct unique identities through their clothing are limited at best. Or, as Hill put it: 'The display of individuality that should be evident hasn't happened. It seems very far away. (...) what people wear reveals a fault line in the claims made by individuality and the contemporary historical moment.' (Hill, 2005: 71). For Lady Gaga daily dressing may be a performance act, but for the rest of us late-modern consumers it is rather an everyday practice.

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### **Notes**

1. It would be even more accurate to renounce the word identity altogether, since Bauman (1995) sees identity as a modern invention whereas late-modern individuals no longer try to maintain identity but instead try to avoid a fixed identity.
2. The enduring influence of class relations is outside the scope of this article, yet this research confirms the latter argument as the consumption practices of the respondents shows consistent differences for the higher and lower classes.
3. See Gill et al. (2005) for a similar complaint regarding heterosexual men and their body discourse and practices.
4. The EGP schema was developed by Erikson, Goldthorpe and Portocarero (1979) as an internationally applicable socioeconomic measure. EGP identifies three basic positions: employer, self-employed and employee. Employees are divided into classes on the basis of employment relations. There are 11 basic classes which can be collapsed to a 7 class scheme: (I) professionals, administrators and managers, highergrade (II) professionals, administrators and managers, highergrade; technicians, higher-grade (III) Routine

- nonmanual employees, higher and lower grade (IV) Small employers, self-employed workers (non-professional), farmers (V) Technicians, lower grade, supervisors of manual workers (VI) skilled manual workers (VII) nonskilled manual workers, agricultural workers. We divided these into three classes. Classes I, II and III have been labelled 'higher class' and classes V, VI and VII have been labelled 'lower class' (no respondents in category IV). Respondents were additionally divided into 'higher' and 'lower' education categories according to the European Social Survey classification. This proved to correspond exactly with the 'higher' and 'lower' class division.
5. According to Davis, the identity ambivalences of contemporary society should even be seen as the 'engine to fashion' that 'affords dress and fashion endless opportunity for innovation and variation' (Davis, 1989: 340).
  6. An interesting point of view comes from Sweetman (2007), whose research shows how tattoos and piercings can be interpreted as practices 'dedicated to the construction of a coherent sense of self-identity' (309). His tattooed respondents explain how tattoos have 'a lot to do with memory' (2007: 307) and representation. Opposed to postmodern fluidity, the tattoos are seen as 'an attempt to fix, or anchor one's sense of self through the (creative) process of the modification' (2007: 309). A coherent collection of items of clothing may function in a similar way.
  7. However, Frith and Gleeson (2004) found that the 75 British men in their sample did use clothing strategically to appear slimmer, taller, bigger and/or more muscular. The clothing practices of the male respondents were related to their body image, shifting between 'fat' and 'thin' days. Interestingly, the men stated they were not very concerned with their appearance, yet the attention paid to their clothed appearance suggested differently.

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