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# Class Consumption

## *Understanding Middle-Class Young Men and Their Fashion Choices*

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*During the past fifteen years, it has been asserted that men are increasingly becoming active, independent consumers especially in relation to the consumption of fashion and vanity goods. Over a much longer period, sociologists have attempted to explain clothes choices using various macro-consumer preference models. Using four of these paradigms—the fashion hierarchy, the fashion process, the neotribes model, and the mass consumer theory—this article examines how relevant elements of these four models are in explaining the clothes choices of thirty-five middle-class young men who were interviewed. The assertion that such young men are now active, independent consumers is also explored in relation to fashion goods. The data drawn on in this article challenges the masculinization of consumption thesis, as well as highlights which sections of the consumer preference models are more applicable in explaining the fashion choices of middle-class young men.*

*Key words:* middle class, young men, consumption, fashion, bodies

### INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1980s, studies into collective and individual consumption habits have become an important method used by sociologists to study a diverse array of areas such as social inequality and identity. At the same time, it has been alleged that consumption is playing an increasingly important role in the everyday lives of people. Although traditionally viewed as a feminine arena, journalists and academics alike have asserted that since the late 1980s, men have become more active consumers especially in relation to new male fashion and vanity markets. Despite these assertions, there has been very little empirical work that has examined the importance of consumption to various groupings of young men. Moreover, for a number of years, various sociologists have developed consumer preference models that have been used to

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discuss individual and societal consumption practices, particularly those around fashion. This article seeks to explore how true the assertion is that men are now active consumers in these markets, along with how applicable parts of selected consumer preference models are for explaining male clothes choices, especially in relation to a group of middle-class young men.

### *Outline of Research*

The main aim of my project is to rectify the dearth of contemporary empirical research focusing on young, middle-class men. Various commentators (ranging from broadsheet journalists to cultural studies theorists) have maintained that during the 1990s, the exclusive positions that middle-class young men have traditionally held have been challenged by recent economic and social changes. My research has attempted to identify, clarify, and focus on the changes affecting middle-class young men in the last few years of the twentieth century. Concentrating on four interrelated areas that affect young, middle-class men in the current epoch—consumption, work, friendship, and leisure—I have explored how they are conductive in identity formation in society and for a grouping, which is experiencing radical changes. The sample of the research is young, middle-class men who graduated from Lancaster University between 1991 and 1994 and who are currently aged between twenty-four and twenty-nine years. The participants were initially contacted by a letter that was randomly sent to them via the University Alumni Association. The graduates were asked to return a reply slip if they were willing to be interviewed. The graduates were drawn from all academic disciplines, and by chance there was an almost equal split between the five specialist subject areas: arts and humanities (seven respondents), social sciences (eight), engineering (seven), computing (six), and the natural sciences (seven). As I ascertained from a questionnaire given to all respondents before the interview, all of the interviewees were employed in middle-class occupations (e.g., marketing managers and teachers). Furthermore, the vast majority of the interviewees' parents (either or both) were employed in middle-class positions when the respondents were aged sixteen. The sample was predominantly made up of white, Anglo-Saxon heterosexuals; however, it did also include minority ethnic men and a self-identified homosexual. In total, thirty-five semistructured interviews were conducted, and all of the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed by the author. On average, the interviews tended to last between one and one and one-half hours.

This article is based on the preliminary analysis of the interviews, particularly the data that were collected around the respondents' clothes choices. Approximately half of the interviews were conducted with graduates who resided in a large county in the north of England (Lancashire), while the other half were with respondents who lived in Greater London. This allows

comparisons to made between the work, consumption, leisure, and friendship habits of those living in provincial (Lancashire) areas and those living in metropolitan areas (Greater London). Nineteen of the thirty-five respondents lived in Greater London, with the remainder living in Lancashire. Although it is not possible to generalize from this very specialized sample, what I have attempted to do is generate generic analytic themes and categories.

### *Men, Class, Consumption, and Fashion*

One of the four main areas of focus for my empirical research is the consumption habits of middle-class young men, an area that until the 1990s was almost totally ignored by sociologists. The exclusion of this area may be due to the recent recognition of the importance of consumption to sociology and the traditional dichotomy of viewing women as consumers, with men being viewed as producers. In recent years, however, there has been a plethora of academic accounts that have acknowledged the "mascularization" of consumption, which the authors argued allegedly intensified since the late 1980s (see Rutherford 1988; Mort 1988, 1996; Nixon 1992, 1996; Edwards 1997; Winship 1998). This period has also witnessed the growth of journalistic expositions on the growth of male consumerism and the invention of journalistic labels such as the "new" man and the "new" lad to describe these new male consumers (see O'Hagan 1991; Simpson 1994, 1996; Savage 1996).

The mascularization of consumption thesis also sits comfortably with changes in paid work that occurred during the 1970s and 1980s in most Western developed countries. These changes have been associated with the shift to postmodernity, the advances of feminism, the alleged transition from Fordism and post-/neo-Fordism, and the introduction of new technology (Murray 1989; Lee 1993). Affecting predominantly working-class men, once-permanent male jobs, especially those within the manufacturing industry, have been threatened by these reorganizations. These jobs have been replaced by temporary, short-term positions in the "feminised" service professions that reward "feminine" skills such as caring and flexibility (Crompton 1993; Lash and Urry 1994). In an increasingly global economy, manufacturing jobs have been transferred to the low-labor-cost countries of Asia or have been replaced by developments in new technology (Waters 1995). With increased (although still somewhat limited) welfare and child care provision, women are also making (restricted) advances into traditional male managerial positions. Due to the threat of redundancy, the constant desire to enlarge profits, and increased competition within the labor market, workers, especially those in professional positions, are being forced to work longer hours. Thus, in the late twentieth century, traditional male work roles are being challenged by a whole array of forces. With the shift to "feminine," multiskill, short-term jobs, the role work historically has played in

determining male identity is being questioned (Chapman and Rutherford 1997; Segal 1997). The expansion of the service industry, along with the subsequent decline of the manufacturing industry, has also led to selected academics' claiming that the middle class is now the dominant strata in society (Goldthorpe 1982; Abercrombie and Urry 1983). Likewise, it is alleged that the distinctions between rival classes have diminished, as the majority of British society is now middle class (Savage et al. 1992). These societal and occupational changes have all contributed to the viability of the masculinization of consumption debate. Increasingly, it is argued that men construct their selfhood through repeated but restricted (due to economic and cultural boundaries) consumption activities, either individually or collectively with relatives, friends, and acquaintances. This transformation led Edwards (1997) to comment that the growth in white-collar work for men, where appearance is essential for success, has created and sustained a men's fashion market since the late 1980s.

As I have already highlighted, the masculinization of consumption thesis also recognizes that traditionally, consumption has been seen as a feminine sphere, which now due to structural changes, has shifted to become also a male arena of life. Until the early 1980s, the activity of consumption had been defined conceptually as a feminine activity, and the limited work on this area typically depicted consumers as being female. Undoubtedly, such beliefs were linked to the traditional division of conjugal roles within the nuclear family: the male members were the breadwinners, while the female members stayed at home to service the needs of the family. Most manufacturers and marketing personnel viewed shopping as being an arena principally for women, and the majority of mainstream food, clothing, and household advertising was aimed at women. Simpson (1996) argued that although men were not excluded from this field, they were viewed by manufacturers and advertisers as only being interested in the consumption of alcohol, cigarettes, condoms, and selected white goods.

Although the fruits of the male consumer expansion did not start appearing until the late 1980s, many of the seeds of this potential growth market, especially in relation to men's fashion, were sown during the 1950s and 1960s. As Mort (1996) documented, the 1950s witnessed the reinvention and expansion of the British men's High Street retailer, Burton's, which coincided with the intensification in the mass production of the suit. Also, 1950s Britain witnessed the arrival of certain male (principally youth-oriented) identity groupings such as the teddy boys (who adopted the Edwardian look), skinheads, Rastafarians, and punks (see Hebdidge 1979) as well as other groupings such as homosexuals. However, although important to the masculinization of consumption debate, the groups' memberships were usually small, and apart from the latter group, as the members grew older, the subcultures tended to die. In the *Conquest of Cool*, Frank (1997) argued that the birth of a more advanced men's fashion market occurred in America

during the 1960s. The expansion of this market occurred alongside the growth in popularity of *Gentleman's Quarterly (GQ)*, which had been launched as "the fashion magazine for men" in 1957. It provided an important discursive forum for the exchange and promotion of images and views on contemporary men's fashion. The late 1960s in America also saw the importation of Carnaby Street and King's Road styles from Britain, most notably the mod look, which Frank (1997) argued revolutionized the "grey flannel suit" in America, as well as men's fashion as a whole.

As Mort (1996), Nixon (1996), and Edwards (1997) demonstrated, although the process took a number of years to gather momentum in Britain, it was during the 1980s that consumption of male surface goods (clothes, vanity goods, and male-gender interest magazines) finally took off. For centuries, clothes have traditionally symbolized various social, cultural, and economic signifiers about their owners/wearers (see Finkelstein 1991; Edwards 1997). However, the range and type of clothes have been limited for men, with some men wearing their work clothes during "out-of-hour" periods as well. With the emergence of the postwar youth subcultures, different types of clothes were worn by men according to their social(able) situation (i.e., leisure/work). During the 1980s, the distinction between work and leisure clothes became more apparent, especially for middle-class young men. With a realignment of various retail clothes shops operating during the 1980s (e.g., Burton's Group and Next), shopping for clothes became a viable and enjoyable pursuit for whole groups of men. Although there is anecdotal evidence that suggests that working-class and black men had been interested in clothes and were independent consumers of such goods for a number of decades (Hebdidge 1979), for other groupings, female relatives or acquaintances (either wives, mothers, or girlfriends) had traditionally bought clothes for their men. To participate fully and symbolically in this new consumption environment, men (particularly white, middle-class men) needed support and advice for dealing with this expanding market. Such assistance was provided by the birth and growth of men's general interest and style magazines (*The Face*, *I-d*, *Arena*, and *British GQ*) during the 1980s, which provided an arena of homosociability in which men could be socialized into this world of consumption and looking good. In tandem with the expansion of the male clothing market, the male vanity market also grew in size and importance at the same time. Looking good and "fitting in" for men was not just about wearing the right clothes: it was also about wearing the right aftershave and using the appropriate kind of skin moisturizer.

Although Mort (1996), Nixon (1996), and Edwards (1997) do share a number of similarities in their accounts of late-twentieth-century male consumer and fashion markets, especially the belief that such markets have expanded since the late 1980s, their accounts differ quite markedly. Although all are concerned with the arrival of "new man" imagery during the late 1980s, their viewpoints on the representations contrast. Mort's (1996)

account is centered on the personalities who shaped the representations, as well as long-term consumption and cultural changes. Nixon (1996), on the other hand, prioritized how the new male representations are produced and circulated, rather than how they are consumed by their target audience. Alternatively, Edwards (1997) viewed the arrival of the new-man style in relation to the wider history of men's fashion. However, all three texts do share similar limitations that my research and this article are seeking to remedy. First, the class aspect of the masculinization of consumption is given little salience by these accounts. The texts appear to assume that all men regardless of social class (and age) will enter into and participate in such markets in exactly the same ways. Second, although very important, the books draw almost exclusively on secondary sources (magazine articles, trade information) without talking to the participants of these new markets. Finally, it could be claimed that the accounts are too metro-centric, dwelling predominantly on the consumption/fashion of markets in London, rather than considering how men may deal with the markets differently outside of the large international city context. The purpose of this article (and my research as a whole) is to reintroduce issues of class into the debate on men's fashion and consumer markets. The three accounts (Mort 1996; Nixon 1996; Edwards 1997) appear to be talking about the consumption habits of middle-class, young, urban men but without actually stating so. This study places less emphasis on secondary sources and instead focuses on the participants of these new markets. My research questions revolve around whether the respondents have experienced these new consumer markets in the ways suggested. Are they active consumers of fashion and vanity goods as these academics suggest? How important are men's magazines for the respondents in the production of personal knowledge(s) around fashion? Respondents who live in London (metropolitan area) are also compared and contrasted with those who reside in Lancashire (provincial area).

Before examining how the respondents talk about their clothes choices, I will provide an overview of sociological consumer preference models in an attempt to see whether I can map the clothes choices of the respondents to these models in the way these sociologists predict.

### CONSUMER PREFERENCE PARADIGMS

There have been numerous attempts by sociologists during the past one hundred years to develop customer preference paradigms. These models have been particularly useful for the understanding of notions of taste and fashion. I have identified four of such paradigms that I believe are useful for understanding men's fashion choices: the fashion hierarchy, the fashion process, the neotribes model, and the unstructured, mass consumption archetype.

### *The Fashion Hierarchy*

The first model, the fashion hierarchy, has been predominantly concerned with how the tastes of the upper classes percolate down to the lower strata. Through their use of high levels of social, cultural, and economic capital(s) (Veblen 1961; Bourdieu 1984), the upper classes are seen as exhibiting good taste and having high levels of social status. Due to this power, the differentiation and identification practices of the elite are eventually mimicked by subordinate classes. What is essential for the continued existence and popularity of these elite versions of taste is a structured hierarchy and cycle attached to these practices. Selected sensibilities that originate at the top of the hierarchy gradually steep downward to the lower extremes. However, once the downward journey commences for these practices, the cycle starts again, with the upper strata once again needing to adopt and create new fashions and distinctions so that their power for determining taste continues. Originating in the work of Veblen (1961) and Simmel (1981) during the nineteenth century, this hierarchical structure of taste and fashion is still important today. Even though attempts have been made to disrupt the belief that fashion hierarchies are linked to class models (see Blumer 1969), the majority of sociological accounts on fashion always tend to revert back to the traditional paradigm. As Gronow (1997) commented, "It is . . . evident that sociologists have found it very difficult to consider this simultaneous identification and differentiation without considering some kind of hierarchy attached to it" (p. 47). As has been widely documented, the velocity of items entering and moving down this hierarchy has increased with the shift to postmodernity (see Jameson 1984; Harvey 1989).

Veblen's (1961) work is also premised on the belief that the upper classes, in their need to advertise personal taste and status, use their large stock of economic capital to purchase expensive goods and services. Veblen argued that these groupings believe the more expensive an object is, the more beautiful it is said to be, particularly if the item is handmade. However, due to the logic of capitalism, these products are eventually imitated and mass produced, which subsequently allows the reducing of price, allowing the lower strata the opportunity to purchase them. For Simmel (1981), fashion is a method by which the upper classes promote their distinctive sense of superiority, and due to wider societal changes, other classes are becoming more affluent and are adopting the habits and lifestyles of the upper classes. Fashion in a money economy also provides a contradictory function (especially for the upper classes), allowing self-identification with a collective group but also creating the opportunity for social distinction (individuality). These differences are mimicked in the fashion cycle, in which fashion designers constantly need to innovate but also at the same time to imitate. The speed of the fashion cycle and the descent of tastes and fashions down this hierarchy led Kant (1980) to



comment that fashion is dying almost as soon as it is born, with fashion socially binding people into a process of continuous change (see Gronow 1997, 90).

In addition to indicating status and creating distinctions, it has been argued that fashion has a more instrumental purpose in that it represents our subjectivity to the outside world (which is applicable to all four consumer preference paradigms). In *The Fashioned Self*, Finkelstein (1991) demonstrated how the shaping and the adorning of our bodies with clothes becomes a way for the individual to present his or her desired self-image to others. Thus, in addition to fashion's being important for individuality and collective identification purposes, it is also essential for representing our subjectivity. Relating this behavior to the ancient science of physiognomy, Finkelstein illustrates how it has been traditional in the Western world to view human beauty and tidy appearances as representing inner worth and virtue. Following the thinking of Veblen (1961), Simmel (1981), and Bourdieu (1984), Finkelstein (1991) argued that fashion and clothing should be seen as a form of language, with clothes conveying certain information about the beholder to those suitably qualified to understand. But, as Finkelstein highlighted, the consequence of judging people through their clothes (or surfaces) has the detrimental affect of steering people away from considerations in relation to the nature of human character.

### *The Fashion Process*

Rather than being a vertical model, the fashion process paradigm views fashion horizontally, with the invention, introduction, and adoption of various styles being less concerned with shifts caused by social class and instead more by production requirements. This model too can be used to explain the complexities of the fashion cycle. Gronow (1997), in his account of the fashion process, adopted Blumer's (1969) three themes, which he used to explain the creation of new styles by fashion designers/producers. The three themes that he identified were selection, shared ideologies, and new ideas. However, Davis (1992) explained the process much more comprehensively through his reassessment of Sproule's (1985) account of the process. The five stages that he identified were invention, introduction, fashion leadership, increasing social visibility, and the waning phase. Davis (1992) was keen to highlight that there are no clear boundaries between each of these stages; instead, the phases can be entered out of sequence, or a number of stages can be adopted simultaneously. Starting with the invention stage, Davis argued that this is probably the most mysterious phase of the fashion process, as it is concerned with how and from where the designers get their ideas. Most designers gain their credibility from being original and innovative. This ethos is sustained by key institutions such as the fashion press and key selection of the fashion

market. Paradoxically, the new items that are supposedly invented must be related to what already exists. This can either be through the process of distinction (the fashion item must be different from what already exists) or due to inspiration from what already is available, popular, and marketable. It also should be remembered that innovativeness is restricted due to the designers' being subjected to the same economic and cultural processes that will contribute to the production of similarly designed clothes (which has been labeled by Davis as *cultural continuity and aesthetic rules*). The style of the fabric used in the manufacture of the clothes is also dependent on other external factors such as the selected preseason production of fabrics.

The second stage of this process is that of the introduction of the designs to the fashion community. As Davis (1992) highlighted, very few of the fashions that are invented actually make it to the catwalk. The successful introduction of these new designs by these clothes houses is essential to the survival of these businesses and results in a great deal of conflict between designers. The introduction of such fashion also heralds a competition between store clothes buyers to choose a winner that will be economically profitable for their store. The next stage of the scheme is that of fashion leadership, whereby the newly introduced fashions will be hopefully adopted by certain key persons or consumers. Various methods have been used to identify who these important personnel are; for instance, Donovan (1983) distinguished between three types of fashion leaders: the *avant-garde* (i.e., stylistically adventuresome), *luxury* (i.e., expensively dressed), and *real-life* (i.e., everyday middle- and upper-middle class fashion-conscious women; Donovan 1983, quoted in Davis 1992, 147). Davis (1992) argued that fashion leadership is a lot more heterogeneous than Donovan (1983) asserted, believing instead that visual forms of media (magazines, newspapers, television, and film) are the new fashion leaders.

The fourth stage of the process is that of increased social visibility, which is argued to be the most critical stage. Will the wider public adopt the fashions that the corporate buyers and the fashion leaders have selected, thereby increasing its popularity and social visibility? Fashion history has many such examples that highlight how the general public has shunned certain styles. For example, there were attempts during the 1980s to reintroduce the miniskirt; although moderately successful with some, the design was shunned by the general public (Davis 1992, 150). Similar to the descending of fashion to the lower strata of the fashion hierarchy, Davis's (1992) final stage of the fashion hierarchy is that of waning. If and when a style is adopted by the mass population, the novelty value of the fashion is diminished, forcing some groupings to search for new distinctive fashions. The style thus enters a period of decline, and certain sections of the fashion process are thus pushed into action again so that new successful styles are produced.

### *Neotribes Model*

The third consumer preference model that I will examine is the neotribes model. This model, while also emphasizing the rapidity of the fashion cycle, is primarily concerned with the buying into and adopting of the consumption habits of attractive lifestyle groupings (Maffesoli 1995; Bauman 1990). It too emphasizes the distinctions that fashions can provide, as well as the contradictory collective and individual purposes it fulfils. Although undoubtedly there is a hierarchy of such neotribes, with some being presently more tasteful, fashionable, and important than others, fashions from the more popular tribes provide a useful function in that each tribe defines their identity or lifestyle in accordance with their difference(s) from others. Unlike the fashion hierarchy paradigm, the neotribe model emphasizes the potential to move freely between tribes without sanction. To be successful and alluring to potential new participants, the neotribe must at all times appear open and accessible to all (even when they are obviously not). The only entry requirement is the style of consumption (the ability to consume the right kinds of goods), which is intrinsically linked to the monetary power of the consumer in the market and the promotion of the myth of the equality of the consumer. As with the hierarchical paradigm, the influence of the market on the neotribe model means that only those with the greatest supply of economic and cultural resources can buy into the most coveted and respected tribes (an example of a neotribe could be the yuppies of the 1980s). As Bauman (1990) demonstrated, the need for various levels of capital means that certain people low in such assets are excluded from entering these tribes. Rather than take their frustration out on wider society (and the market) for not being able to enter their grouping, the ideological structure of the market forces them to project their despair back on themselves. Their inability to enter the tribe is seen as being due to personal deficiencies rather than because of the vagaries of the market. The invisibility of these structural inequalities also ironically creates an environment whereby other ascribed inequalities (due to race and gender) are made even more conspicuous. Due to their new found visibility, these inequalities are no longer tolerated and are subsequently challenged. The acknowledgment of these other inequalities, according to Bauman (1990), shifts the blame once again away from the inadequacies of the market.

### *Mass Consumption Thesis*

Finally, the mass consumption model is another paradigm that has been used to explain the sociological importance of fashion. Deriving out of the work of such academics as Adorno, Orwell, and Hoggart who were concerned about the eroding of human culture by mass or popular culture, this model is concerned with the alleged shift toward homogeneous, uniform

consumer culture (or “massification” as Warde (1997) labeled it). With the creation of mass media, mass culture has the potential of being transmitted to large audiences. The culture is used to project and promote capitalism and various mass-produced consumer objects and ways of life associated with it. Traditional distinctions centered around class, gender, and nationality are minimized by this totalizing rational, mass culture. As Warde (1997) argued, the dominant themes associated with this sphere of consumption are uniformity and apathy. Examples of this process would include the transnational changes associated with Americanization and more recent variations such as the “McDonaldization of Society” (see Ritzer 1993). Relating this model more directly to fashion, it can be argued that mass culture has created a sphere of consumption around mass-produced, standardized forms of male dress. Examples that illustrate this mass consumption model in relation to men’s fashion would include the suit and denim jeans. Even though the suit has been the dominant form of Western male dress since the eighteenth century (see Martin and Kodd 1989; Hollander 1994), in the late twentieth century it still remains the most popular, uniform-style of dress for men (especially in relation to the world of work). During leisure time, men also tend to wear the same standardized form of dress—denim jeans. Jeans have also become a signifier of American mass consumer culture.

In the following section, I turn to examine the clothes choices of the middle-class young men. I will attempt to examine their responses in relation to certain arguments that these four paradigms raise. Other issues that I have already mentioned will also be explored, such as the questions, Are the respondents active consumers of fashion and vanity goods? What reasoning influences the clothes and goods they buy? Are there any differences between the clothes choices of respondents living in London and those who live in Lancashire?

## TALKING ABOUT FASHION

### *Reluctant Narcissists*

Various methods were used in my attempt to get the respondents talking about fashion, but whatever method I adopted, the interviewees were typically reluctant to discuss clothes choices and/or their bodies. During my first few interviews, I took along photographs of men wearing fashionable clothes that were taken from advertisements and fashion spreads in men’s general interest magazines. I encouraged my respondents to talk about the images, such as whether they would like to own the clothes themselves and what they thought about the representation. Typically, my request was matched by silence, bemusement, and embarrassment by both the interviewee and myself. In later interviews, I adopted a much subtler approach by asking

questions about where they bought their clothes from, what type of clothes they would buy, what their clothes say about them, and how much they spent when they last bought an item(s) of clothing. Even though the interviewees spoke much more freely about the clothes choices, their responses were still more limited than I expected. Contrary to what various writers have asserted about young men becoming active consumers and being concerned about the shape of their body (see Simpson 1994, 1996; Mort 1996; Nixon 1996; Edwards 1997), my interviews suggest that this is not as clear-cut as had been asserted. Clothes shopping and being too overly concerned with appearance were still linked by my respondents to femininity. Also, I assumed as Finkelstein (1991) had argued that clothes would be important for my respondents due to physiognomic purposes, particularly the need to promote through their way of dress and appearance an ambitious and successful subjectivity. However, despite repeated efforts to encourage respondents to talk about these issues, some of the answers to the questions were remarkably brief. As the following quote demonstrates, it was difficult to get some interviewees to talk for even a few seconds about their clothes choices. The quote also highlights other themes that will be discussed later in the article, such as the clothes' having to be value for money as well as practical so that the individual can conform with his peer group and other groupings:

Interviewer: What about things like clothes, would you buy them yourself?

Respondent 2: Yes, I don't buy that many clothes, I don't really need them for work. I've got so much scruffy jeans and scruffy shirts, so I don't really dress up all that much.

Interviewer: Where do you normally get your clothes from . . . the High Street?

Respondent 2: Yes. Places like Next and Burtons or Debenhams.

Interviewer: Do you have any like designer clothes?

Respondent 2: No, none at all. I can't afford ought like that. It doesn't appeal to me either. I can't see the point on spending sixty or seventy pounds on a shirt.

These anxieties of talking about male fashion and bodies could have been generated or amplified by their knowledge and assumptions about me. Despite being the same age, gender, and class as these respondents, it was obvious that during the interview, some of the interviewees were intrigued and anxious about my sexuality and masculinity. Due to the critical nature of gender studies, some people may automatically assume that a male researcher interested in masculinity is homosexual (see Mac au Ghaill 1995). During one of the interviews, this fear became obvious, as when I asked the respondents about where he would shop for clothes, he snapped back, "I do have a girlfriend, you know." Likewise, an interview situation with a stranger may not be the best arena for creating a conducive homosocial environment to discuss personal issues. Despite this reluctance to talk about fashion, I did identify a number of other dominant themes that appear to influence the respondents' clothes choices. They are individuality, value and quality,

functionality, and appearing relatively fashionable. I first turn to examine the individual and his (contradictory) fashion statements.

### *The Individual and (Contradictory) Fashion Statements*

As I have already outlined, particularly in relation to the first paradigm of fashion—the hierarchy, fashion has a contradictory function in that it is important for signifying individuality as well as for collective identification purposes (see Simmel 1981). Miles, Cliff, and Burr (1998) argued in their research into the consumption habits of young people that consumer goods provide this dual role in relation to identity formation. Such goods are used by the young people both to highlight their own individuality, as well as to align themselves with their peers (even though this peer-group influence is usually denied). This paradoxical situation highlights the belief within the young people that “everybody’s individual taste somehow transforms itself into communal taste, that the group context merely provides an arena for personal expression, despite the inherent realisation that the group context is a crucial factor in influencing consumption patterns” (Miles, Cliff, and Burr 1998, 89).

Despite this contradictory situation, a number of respondents spoke about the importance of feeling that they were an individual with their clothes choices. These respondents were generally the most assertive of the interviewees and spoke for a number of minutes about their clothes and bodies. As this extract shows, the respondent goes to great lengths to appear as an individual in the clothes he wears and buys, but he also acknowledges in his quest for certain clothes that he cannot escape from mass consumer society:

I like to be more of an individual; I buy my things from The Gap. OK, it’s a chain store, but if I buy something there, it’s a distinctive item of clothing, I don’t see many people wearing that. You buy something distinctive from [High Street retailer he works for], like a skiing jumper, you just see everyone wearing it. . . . A brand is really good because it has certain values associated with it, you know, psychological benefit, perceived values, the quality and the risk reduction and everything else, but just very simple things is what I wear.  
(Respondent 8)

This quote also highlights the respondent’s skepticism toward branded and designer goods, and it also demonstrates the respondent’s complex reasoning behind buying certain types of clothes. It was ironic that the respondents who spoke about the importance of being an individual in clothes choices wore suits while being interviewed. As Hollander (1991) recognized, the suit is a good metaphor for the paradoxical situation constructed around fashion: it is both a form of clothing that represents individuality but due to its sheer popularity is an important collective form. Like Simmel (1981), Hollander (1991) argued that

fashionable clothes thus always look personal, since the forms composing them refer to individuality, even if the clothes share in the looks of everybody else's at the moment. Fashion indeed owes its extraordinary power to the way it can make each person look truly unique, even while all the people following the mode are dressing very much alike. (P. 36)

In addition to the cut and fabric of the suit, the wearing of ties and waistcoats is an important method of distinction for suit wearers. Other respondents also demonstrated other levels of cognitive reasoning behind their clothes choices, which was typically centered on why they would not buy designer clothes or their anxiety in admitting to owning such clothes. Due to low levels of economic capital available to be spent on clothes, respondents' choices in clothing tended to be centered around quality and value for money items rather than for designer clothes.

By "designer goods," respondents usually meant something with a distinctive label, associated with high cost, quality, or exclusivity. Paradoxically, these goods are usually mass produced. Such designer clothes were also associated by the interviewees with other groupings that they wished to distinguish themselves from. As one respondent commented,

No way am I a labels man. . . . You associate all that with the barrel boys from the East End [working class area of London] who got lucky in the eighties. (Respondent 15)

As the quote demonstrates, part of the respondents' reluctance to owning or admitting they owned designer clothes could be due to associating these forms of clothing with the late 1980s and/or with the lower classes. Chenoune (1993) documented how in the late 1980s the consumer boom in both Britain and America generated a new market of men's designer clothes. Designer clothes were used by the new upwardly mobile classes to designate success and authenticity. The style of these clothes also took on a distinct form, with the "authentic" labels being signed by their designers. Some labels attempted to create a mythical tradition around their brand, by advertising on the clothing the date when the label was created. In the early 1990s, Chenoune claimed that designer clothes, particularly sportswear, were adopted by young, working-class men to designate class aspirations and money and also to win respect from their peers. Contrary to what some sociologists may suggest, expensive designer clothes could now be associated by some with the working-class and/or teenage males. This hypothesis could be further validated by the example of the British city Newcastle-upon-Tyne, whereby its population, particularly those from working-class backgrounds, spent the largest amount of money on designer clothes in the country. Negative associations with the arrogant, cutthroat, upwardly mobile world of the late 1980s could also be reasoning behind their reluctance to owning or admitting that they owned designer clothes. For most of the other respondents, their

motivations for buying certain clothes were instead influenced by themes of quality and value for money. They saw no need to buy designer clothes, even though the need to appear as an individual did affect their reasoning.

### *Quality and Value for Money*

Despite the majority of respondents now being in well-paid, middle-class jobs, economic factors still restricted the amount of money that was spent on clothes and which particular items were chosen. It could be argued that the interviewees were in an economic, social, and cultural transitory stage between the semidependent student life and independent adulthood. Due to recent changes in the funding of higher education in Britain, many of the graduates left university either having taken out a student loan or being in debt with a bank. Even though they were all well paid, very little money was spent on conspicuous consumption because a large amount of their income went to pay of debts. Five of the respondents had taken out mortgages on houses either individually or with a partner, and the majority of respondents also ran cars. Those who owned homes tended to be slowly renovating and decorating their homes; however, the speed at which they did this and their choice of furnishings and decorations were limited by their cash flow. A couple of the cohabiting respondents commented that they hoped to start a family within the next few years, which they were already planning and saving for. There also appeared to be no difference in attitudes in spending habits between those who lived in Lancashire and those in London. Both sets of respondents (the provincial and metropolitan) commented that they had very little spending money.

These cautious attitudes toward spending appeared to reflect on the fashion choices and clothes bought by some of the young men. Even though there was a general reluctance to admit owning designer clothes, their anxiety in owning such clothes tended to diminish if they were seen as quality items, which were perceived as being value for money. The difficulty in admitting having spent large sums of money on clothes could be reduced if they could justify their choices in relation to these two themes. For example, the following quote is from an interview with a respondent who was embarrassed to admit that he spent more than £100 a month on expensive clothes. He was able to reduce his anxiety by arguing that he viewed his purchases as being value for money:

I don't like to pay what I consider to be over the odds for a piece of clothing, I wouldn't pay more than say £40 for a pair of trousers or a pair of jeans. I'd pay up to about £80 for a pair of shoes. But I like to think I'm getting value for money for what I buy. (Respondent 9)



Furthermore, as the following quote from another respondent demonstrates, quality and the authenticity of the item (which was maximized by the perceived tradition of the shop from where he bought it) were two of the main reasons why he decided to spend a large sum of money on a hat:

I'm not a labels man. It's the look of things really. I certainly won't pay hundreds of pounds for a pair of trousers that a particular make, I'll buy them from Marks and Spencers, not label stuff. I've got a Barbour coat, for instance, but I bought that because I thought it was quality, not because of the label. My hat here [the hat that he was wearing], that comes from Block which is a shop in St. James and that's reputedly the oldest hat shop in the country but that was to do not with the label but with the quality of the item really. (Respondent 5)

Relating this statement to Finkelstein's (1991) work on how clothes are used by an individual to present his or her desired self-image to others, for this respondent buying quality fashion items such as the hat allowed him to construct an eccentric identity in which he was able to demonstrate his high levels of cultural capital. This interviewee was employed as the head of art at a top public school within London, and as he admitted later in the interview, he needed an appearance that reflected his aesthete position.

### *Practicality and Conformity*

Closely related to the preceding two themes are the notions of practicality (the covering up of and keeping the body warm) and conformity, which appear to be powerful factors in dictating the fashion choices of these young men. The clothes worn and spoken about by the respondents tended to be everyday items (such as suits and jeans) worn by most young men of their generation. Especially in work environments, the suit took on its usual function as being the uniform of commerce, signifying power, professionalism, and trustworthiness. As the example of the head of art demonstrates, such clothes were worn in various combinations, but it appeared that none of the respondents experimented with any forms of alternative clothing that were aesthetically rather than functionally significant:

I think I do wear clothes that are plain in style. . . . If I find a nice piece of clothing which would suit me, then I'd buy it. (Respondent 9)

Earlier, I outlined that Simmel (1981) argued that fashion has a contradictory function of representing individuality, as well as collective identification. As I have already argued, for some of the respondents fashion was important because it allowed them to view themselves as an individual. But it was equally important for respondents to use fashion for collective

identification (conformity) purposes, especially in relation to work and socializing. Clothes enabled respondents not only to conform to their situational roles but also to project an appropriate image to significant others. As one respondent who was a secondary school teacher commented, wearing a suit and formal wear was important for him because he believed that it affected his career opportunities (it "fit" in with professional expectations) and also allowed him to keep discipline with his pupils:

I suppose I spend quite a bit on shirts and ties each year. . . . If I didn't look good at work I'm sure it would affect my future prospects. . . . I don't think the kids would take me seriously. (Respondent 4)

I also observed that the clothes worn by the respondents in the interview situation tended to be standardized male fashions, and their style and design appeared to follow contemporary mass consumer market definitions of what is fashionable. This leads to my final question, which concerns how the respondents' knowledges toward fashion are learned, as well as continually generated and contested.

### *Knowledges of Fashion*

Along with the new technologies of selling and the development of new style retail developments aimed at men, Mort (1996), Nixon (1996), and Edwards (1997) also argued that the late 1980s saw the establishment of new British men's general interest magazines that were predominantly centered around men's fashion. All three of these developments are viewed as having contributed to the expansion of the men's fashion and vanity markets, as well as generating new knowledges within certain groupings of men of issues centered around appearance and clothing. The creation and success of men's general interest magazines is seen as particularly significant in relation to these changes because it created a homosocial environment where such issues could be displayed, marketed, and discussed. Since the mid-1990s, the men's magazine market has been subject to a great deal of expansion, with certain titles now outselling popular women's titles (the circulation figures for the second half of 1997 show that the men's magazine *FHM* is selling more than 600,000 copies per issue). Due to the popularity of such magazines, especially with the age group I am focusing on, and the preponderance of space dedicated to fashion issues (both in advertising and copy), it has been assumed that such titles are important for the generation of fashion knowledges within men.

However, as my interviews have shown, the influence of such magazines in generating knowledge is not as important as sometimes is assumed. Few of the respondents admitted reading such publications, and they tended to buy

them only when they were on a long train journey or when they were on holiday:

If I'm going on a train and got a three-hour journey, I'll buy three magazines and I'll read them. I'll buy *Men's Health*, other magazines like *Loaded* or *GQ*. I do that no problem. But that's the only function they have for me, a train journey or on an aeroplane. (Respondent 8)

This reluctance to admit they read men's magazines was reinforced when I asked respondents what they would least like to do in their spare time. Again, respondents replied that they would not waste time reading men's general interest magazines. This dislike of men's publications by these young men may highlight what trade statistics have shown for a number of years: that only 7 percent of men aged between eighteen and forty-four years regularly read a men's magazine (Close up perspective 1996). However, there could be an indirect influence of these magazines on such men. For instance, non-magazine-reading men may be influenced by observing fashion worn by magazine-reading men.

Their knowledges of what clothes to wear appeared to have come from other sources that could include other forms of visual media, Internet sources, social networks, observations from the street, and the influence of partners. As the following quote highlights, female partners were an accepted and active purchaser of clothes for their men:

Interviewer: Do you normally buy your clothes or your girlfriend?

Respondent 5: Well, I used to and the she started buying them for me. Taking over!

This could suggest that the traditional role women have played (either as wives, partners, or mothers) in selecting and buying clothes for men still exists either directly or indirectly. It also emphasizes that the masculinization of consumption thesis is not as clear-cut as has been suggested. Some of my respondents are not active, independent, fashion-conscious consumers as this thesis suggests.

## CONCLUSION

As my evidence suggests, the masculinization of consumption thesis and various arguments that the consumer preference paradigms raise are open to contestation in relation to my sample of thirty-five middle-class young men. Despite some interest in fashion and their appearance, there is little evidence to suggest that these respondents are prime examples of this consumption hypothesis. Their buying of new fashion and vanity goods could be described as cautious rather than wholly proactive, with their value judgments in

consuming such items being centered on various themes such as individuality, quality or value for money, and practicality and conformity. However, due to the ignorance of social class in existing literature on the masculinization thesis (e.g., Mort 1996; Nixon 1996; Edwards 1997), the viewpoint that men are becoming active consumers is probably still correct for certain groupings within society. For instance, these respondents appear to be in a transitory stage between student life and independent adulthood, which could restrict the spheres of consumption available to them. Despite the metro-centricity of the masculinization of consumption texts, there also appears to be no identifiable differences in clothes choices between those who reside in Lancashire (the nonprovincial area) and those who live in the urban metropolis (Greater London). This raises questions about where the vain, male consumer actually resides. The masculinization thesis thus may be more appropriate to other groupings, particularly those with a different social class, age, ethnicity, location, or sexuality.

As Hebdidge (1979) highlighted, some of these other groupings (e.g., subcultures such as mods, Edwardians, Rastafarians, and also other groups such as homosexuals) have played an important role in the consumption of male fashion and vanity goods in Britain for the past forty years, which could invalidate the contemporariness of the current debate. Furthermore, despite the success of numerous men's general interest magazines in recent years, the respondents were reluctant to admit reading or being directly influenced by such publications. This observation could be used to further invalidate the masculinization hypothesis, which has suggested that there is an important homosocial space dedicated to the promotion of male consumption. As some of the responses of these respondents highlight, the reluctance in reading such publications could be an important site of distinction between themselves and others. Reading such magazines could be associated with other types of men (groupings formed around class, generation, sexual orientation, and ethnicity) from whom they may wish to disassociate themselves.

Although the consumer preference theories I outlined were macro theories in that they proposed to explain the fashion/clothes choices of society as a whole rather than a few individuals, I attempted to examine the respondents' attitudes in light of some of the arguments that these paradigms raise. For instance, there was no evidence that any of the men aspired to or were members of any particular neotribes or style grouping. However, it could be argued that they were indirectly influenced by such groupings. Although some of the respondents were mildly individualistic in their discussions of clothes, the items they tended to buy and wear were mass produced and ordinary. Through adopting a uniform of conformity, it could be suggested that they have created a normative style grouping. Furthermore, their discussion of fashions ignored any hierarchical system, and they refused to discuss who they might be copying and emulating in their clothes choices. Admitting that their style choices were influenced by others might have been perceived as a

sign of weakness or a lack of sophistication. As the interviews highlighted, the subtle influences on consumer choice are also often difficult to identify or recognize. However, it did seem that price and function were articulated as two important criteria in rationalizing clothes choices. The respondents' silences, or lack of discussion on clothes, is also consequential. These silences could be explained by young men still lacking the rhetoric to discuss fashion and their bodies. Apart from a couple of the interviewees, the respondents did not seem self-reflective in their discussions, and there was little evidence to suggest that they were fashion conscious or had any notion of style. However, what these transcripts do suggest is that what the respondents do not say in relation to fashion (their silences) could be the most interesting feature of these interviews.

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