Men’S Fashion and the Consumption of Clothes

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ABSTRACT
How do men deal with their masculinities through fashion clothing? How do they deal with fashion clothing through their masculinities? Conducting eight in-depth interviews with males aged between 23 and 40 years, this paper tried to explore such questions through an investigation of men’s decision processes when the consumption of fashion is involved. Three groups were discerned through the analysis of the interviews: “anti-fashion male”, “singular male” and “grooming male”. It was observed that different models of masculinity may be reinforced by not only the ways that men dress, but also the ways that men buy their clothes.

INTRODUCTION
To each society, an ideal of masculinity; to each ideal of masculinity, a body (Dutra, J. L., 2002). The construction of personal appearance is bound up with cultural and historical specifics. In this context, fashion has been mentioned in literature as a privileged tool for such construction (Dutra, J. L.; Frith and Gleeson, 2004). Although non-verbal, the communication of clothing has a powerful semiotic potential (McCracken, 2003). According to Thompson and Haytko (1997), consumers use the reflection on fashion to create social distinctions, construct narratives of their personal history, interpret the interpersonal dynamics of their social spheres, understand their relations with consumer culture, and transform conventional social categories. Gender may be a particularly important case of a category constructed, reinforced or contested through the reflection on fashion.

This study specifically focuses on masculine gender and tries to explore how men, through issues related to their masculinities, consume or do not consume fashion (fashion refers to articles of clothing here).

Since the 19th century, fashion has been more present and lived in the feminine sphere (Lipovetsky, G., 1989; Dutra, J. L., 2002). It does not mean that men were indifferent to their appearance, but rather that masculine qualities such as status, strength, virility and business success were a constituent part of appearance. Nowadays, however, some authors argue that men also seem to be increasingly focusing on the explicit formation of their image (Woodruffe-Burton, 1998, Bakewell et al., 2006).

Woodruffe-Burton (1998) observed that the concept of the “new man” that arose in the 1980s is part of a redefinition of men’s identity. The version of the “new man” shaped by the mass media places the body at the center of identity and sexuality, with appearance becoming vital to this construction of masculinity.

Nevertheless, values do not change all of a sudden, but rather new values coexist with traditional ones. The values of a culture tend to change slowly, affecting individuals and groups in different ways (Hawkins et al., 1998). Consequently, new ideals of masculinity seem to coexist with traditional ones. Dutra (2002), for instance, defended the viewpoint that the question “Did they have clothes for men where you bought those?” a joke that is still common in male circles, seeks precisely to embarrass the person involved by highlighting the ambiguous sexual information transmitted by the inappropriate nature of his clothes. The anthropologist suggested that such embarrassments are symptoms of a society which encourages plurality, while at the same time elects “a” new model and what is considered to be deviant.

Thus, this is a complex issue. The traditional ideal model of masculinity has been questioned as new kinds of male identities have been offered with the focus on the aesthetic paradigm. However, there appears to be a conflict: maintaining the virile identity, in which the ideal of masculinity is linked to a sober and austere bourgeois aesthetic; or adhere to contemporary trends in which there is a valuation of the aesthetic of body and fashion (Coutinho, 2004).

This article seeks to explore the following key questions: How do men deal with their masculinity through fashion clothing? How do they deal with fashion clothing through their masculinity?

If a series of social changes have occurred, then new self-concepts and lifestyles have emerged. The proposal of this research is therefore: if it is true that there is not just one model of masculinity, but a plurality of models, then there will not be just one way that men consume fashion, but a plurality of ways. Hence, the purpose of this article is to address those key questions above both by exploring the male’s decision processes, when the consumption of clothing is involved, and by investigating some issues related to their masculinities in these processes.

Understanding male behavior in fashion consumption is a relatively unexplored topic which deserves attention in consumer research, since it may provide important insights into how consumption is related to gender identity construction and expression.

MALE IDENTITY AT THE CROSSROADS
Studies of the male consumer were fairly scarce until the 1990s. The exclusion of the subject from the social sciences may have occurred due to the traditional dichotomy of seeing women as consumers and men as producers (Galilee, 2002). The belief that consumption activity was restricted to the female domain was linked to traditional conjugal roles at the heart of the nuclear family: men were the providers, the producers; women stayed at home, catering to family needs, and were therefore the consumers (Onnes & McGrath, 2001; Galilee, 2002).

The growth in male consumption and the invention of labels such as the “new man” is related to the changes in the labor market that occurred in the developed western countries during the 1970s and 1980s. Such changes are associated with post modernity, the advances of feminism and the introduction of new technologies (Galilee, 2002). With the growth of the feminist movement, women began to claim rights that had hitherto been the preserve of men, demanding autonomy, equality in the labor market and in the division of domestic chores. Additionally, the homosexual movement began to demand that their sexual practices no longer be regarded as pathological. Both movements discussed their position in society and their causes gained visibility by questioning the traditional model of masculinity and patriarchal relations (Sant’anna, 2002).

Hence, with all these upheavals in the symbolic world, men began to relativize their own ideal of masculinity and consequently the extreme differentiation of sexes. If in the past there were clearly marked points of reference defining the nature of male identity, that is, men as producers, providers and protectors, it seems that today, in a world where the concept of plurality predominates, it is very difficult to consider only a single model of masculinity.

According to Sant’anna (2002), there is a rereading of the masculine and feminine, whose values have not been abandoned, but rather updated and confirmed in another way. The author is referring precisely to a more plural and varied way of choosing and manipulating gender categories.
Pinheiro (1999) reveals that post-modern subjectivities have to be permanently creating their internal references, beliefs and models. That is as if currently one must create all identity references internally without being able to count on the support of external references that have become excessively unstable.

Nowadays, consumption may act as an important agent in the creation of meanings, including those meanings related to the identity construction (Holt and Thompson, 2004, Belk, 1988). Holt and Thompson (2004), for the sake of illustration, observed how men construct themselves as masculine through their everyday consumption. They observed that the most potent masculine model in American culture is neither the breadwinner nor the rebel, but their fusion. The “man-of-action hero” ideal, as they called, blends the rebel’s individual initiative and unwillingness to conform to the status quo with the breadwinner’s care for the commonweal and sense of responsibility.

Nevertheless, there are still few studies that address specifically to the relations between men and clothing consumption behavior. Some of them are shown below.

**SOME RESEARCH INTO MALES CONSUMPTION OF FASHION**

Gender differences regarding the world of fashion are consistent with the socialization process of men and women in American consumer culture: from the continuing conception of femininity handed down from generation to generation to the mass media representations and the material influences during socialization (e.g. Barbie dolls), physical appearance and femininity have been unceasingly associated in the practices of consumer culture (Thompson & Haytko, 1997).

According to Bakewell et al. (2006), in their study carried out in the United Kingdom, a relatively high consciousness of fashion was observed in “Generation Y” men. However, this high consciousness did not necessarily translate into the adoption of fashion. In reality, the existence of a strong “anti-fashion” dimension was noticed in the analysis. This research also proposed that conservatism in fashion may be representing an attempt to avoid inadequacy regarding gender roles. Thompson e Haytko (1997) revealed that an “anti-fashion” posture is very much associated to the link made between fashion and materialism, class differentiation and conformity. In other words, the rejection of fashion is a sign of moral virtues, such as seriousness of purpose and sensibleness.

Gold and Stern (1989) suggested that fashion-conscious women tend to focus more on their external appearance, as reflected in the positive relation between fashion consciousness and what the authors called “public self-consciousness”. Such a public consciousness seems to function as a psychographic description of who these women are. Men, on the other hand, focus more on what they are, as reflected in the positive relation between fashion consciousness and “private-gender consciousness” (the extent to which each individual is conscious of his gender). This relation supposedly indicates that these men connect fashion with their identity and their internalized masculinity (their concepts of what it means to be a man).

Similarly, Cox and Dittmar (1995) observed that men use clothes in a more self-oriented way, emphasizing the functional benefits of clothes and their use as expressive symbols of their personality. Women, on the other hand, also have an outwardly directed concern, choosing their clothes as a symbol of their social interrelations with others.

Defying the notion that men invest little in their appearance, the participants in Frith and Gleeson’s (2004) research seem to use clothes strategically to manipulate their appearances and correspond to cultural ideals of masculinity. Men in this study were shown varying the color, pattern, fit and size of clothes to look slimmer, bigger or muscular. According Frith and Gleeson (2004), the use of clothing is part of a daily practice of body modification, which is not as dramatic as plastic surgery or exercises, but requires knowledge, attention and money.

**METHODOLOGY**

In order to explore how men deal with their masculinity through fashion and how they deal with fashion through their masculinity, this research undertook a survey, in which eight indepth interviews were conducted with men residents in the city of Rio de Janeiro. This group of eight individuals was accessed for convenience. It was asked different masters’ students in business administration of a private university in Rio de Janeiro to indicate an acquaintance who could be a participant of our research. The researchers have sought to include in the study males with different occupations so as to enclose a variety of lifestyles and, consequently, clothing behaviors. On the other hand, their age range was limited to those aged between 20 and 40 years. This range was chosen due to the fact that men who are these ages lived significant part of their socialization process (childhood and teenage) in the 1980’s and the 1990’s, decades when the emphasis on the aesthetical paradigm started to gain relevance in the masculine construction.

All those interviewed were middle class and most lived in the South Zone, the noblest part of the city. The participants’ ages and occupation are listed in Table 1.

The interviews were undertaken in the interviewee’s home. All participants were assured anonymity. Lasting on average 45 minutes, all interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The interview script was divided into two parts. Firstly, it has tried to explore and describe the different kinds of male’s decision process related to clothing purchases. For this purpose, the questions in this part of the script were based on the decision process model presented by Engel et al. (2000), considering the following aspects: (1) need recognition; (2) search for information; (3) evaluation of purchase alternatives. As observed, only the pre-purchase aspects were considered relevant, since the focus was on what motivates purchases, on the interest in clothing issues, and on the attributes valued when a clothing article is to be selected.

Secondly, the interview script was concerned with how masculinities issues may be expressed through their relation with (and their discourse about) fashion. For this purpose, there were topics in the interview script particularly useful to encourage a direct reflection on masculinity and clothing behaviors. Trying to favor the fluidity of their discourses, some questions were formulated in the third person. For instance, there was a topic where the interviewer asked for two sentences to be completed: (1) “When a man goes out to buy clothes, he...” and (2) “A man never buys...”.

Questions regarding the role of clothing in the formation of a person’s image and in the interpersonal relations were also explored in this part of the interview script. However, it is important to highlight that the existence of a previous script did not exclude the conversational quality of the interview, which had its dialogue largely set by the participants.

Regarding the analysis of the interviews, the researchers took the existential-phenomenology method of interpretation, which considers the hermeneutical circles and global themes (see Thompson et al., 1989). The hermeneutical circles refer to a part-to-whole reading strategy by which the researchers seek an individual understanding of each interview, while trying to relate separate passages
of that transcript to its overall content. After this level of analysis, the researchers note similarities across the transcripts, identifying common patterns, which are referred to as global themes.

**ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS**

The analysis of the interviews suggests that the decision process styles used by men are not in fact univocal. Important similarities and differences appeared in the narratives of many of the interviewees. It was thus convenient to group them in accordance with some similarities to facilitate the analysis of the decision processes.

One central mediator for the analysis related to the decision processes was the observation of the respondents’ level of involvement with clothing. The importance of these levels in shaping the decision processes is recognized in literature. Engel et al. (2000) stated that the degree of personal involvement is the most important factor that influences the type of decision process behavior that follows. Involvement, according to the authors, is the degree of perceived personal importance of a product or service in a specific context.

Three kinds of decision processes observed in the male’s discourse are presented below. These groups are not an exhaustive description of the men’s consumption of fashion phenomena, but represent an effort to capture figural aspects that emerged from the male’s experiences.

**Anti-fashion male:**

Two of the eight interviewees were classified in this group. The anti-fashion males have demonstrated a low level of involvement with clothing. They were the shortest interviews, reflecting their lack of enthusiasm for the subject. They said that they do not like to buy clothes. In their narratives, words that expressed the unpleasant sensation (such as “torture”) when they were shopping for clothes commonly appeared.

“I find it pure torture (shopping for clothes)... Well, it’s such a hassle! When I go into a shop and someone comes up to me, I feel awful. I don’t want anyone to speak to me. When I go to the Rio Sul (a mall), for example, I always find it so crowded. That makes me feel uncomfortable.” (28, economist)

In regard to the need recognition, these interviewees only shop when they really need to. Their view is purely utilitarian: the need appears merely when they have to replace old items of clothing that are “unusable”.

“I only shop when I need something. It’s very sporadic... If I need to buy some socks, I go and buy some socks. If I need to buy sneakers, if my sneakers get torn, I go and buy another pair. I buy when the things I have no longer fit or when they’re really old.” (28, economist)

With respect to the search for information, the sources reported were merely the point of sale. Moreover, they seem to limit themselves to the brands they know so as not to have to go to trouble in their quest:

“There are two or three shops, at the most, that I go to whenever I need some clothes. There, I know that I’ll find what I’m looking for, so I won’t have to go to umpteen shops and spend ages looking around.” (31, engineer)

As for the evaluation of the purchase alternatives, the price was considered to be important, but seemed to be an attribute of secondary relevance. The replies indicated that the most important factor is the clothes’ style.

The maleness in this group seems to be associated with the utilitarian view, in which being a man means to be objective, as the aesthetic concerns was considered to be futile. This observation is in accordance with what Thompson and Haytko (1997) noticed about the anti-fashion dimension: the rejection of fashion may be a sign of seriousness of purpose.

**Singular male:**

Four interviewees were grouped here. This group was relatively heterogeneous and demonstrated some traits of low involvement and others of high involvement. For instance, the interviewees reported the following behaviors: when they go shopping, they already seem to have something in mind and don’t deviate from what they had planned beforehand; they may spend longer in the shop trying on clothes so as not to have to return and change them; they may buy more than one item at a time not to have to go back to the mall to buy more.

A position contrary to uniformization or conformity regarding fashion was strongly underscored here. The fear of appearing to be “fashion victims”, just because they are speaking of their relations with clothes and consumption, permeated their discourses. In this
context, the term “fashion” seems to be very much associated with what everyone is wearing exclusively because it is in evidence and not because it expresses the person’s individuality. Women and the “average man”, as one of them labeled, follow the mass, not them:

“I’ve always had my style. I’ve had this style for nine years now, because I don’t change it all that much, you know? (...) I’m not so attracted, as I sometimes see… Sort of, a new boot comes out, or a new style, and all women begin to wear it. Something different appears and everyone wears it. I think I’ve hardly changed at all.” (23, designer)

“(…) many people don’t have any style at all and just wear what’s in the shop window, what’s on show, don’t choose their own thing. I don’t wear just any average thing; I choose something I really like. (...) If a person doesn’t have his own style, then he’s not fashionable. Although he is wearing things that are fashionable, right?” (30, lawyer)

Attaching such importance to a personal style may be related to the fact that these subjects believe that clothes communicate their personality and lifestyle, which may also influence the creation of relationships:

“When you don’t know someone, you analyze the person by his clothes. Sometimes, you get it wrong, sometimes you’re right, but you can get an idea of what a person likes, the places he goes to, you can get an idea of the person’s personality. The first impression you have of a person is through their image, and the image is provided by their clothes.” (28, body-piercer)

“They (clothes) communicate a person’s image, as if it was a product, packaging. It communicates my style. I reckon that we communicate our personality. As I’m a little more laid back, more informal, young, so I try to wear something younger, more relaxed. I don’t like very formal situations, so it’s my personality that I end up transmitting through my clothes. (...) And we judge people by their appearance, right?” (23, designer)

Regarding the need recognition, the replies ranged from merely utilitarian needs to some indications that purchases are made when there is some spare cash or when their clothes are worn out or old, making them look “disheveled”.

As for the search for information, the interviewees also said that they do not read magazines. They said that they like to hear or ask for other people’s opinions, preferring to go shopping with someone else (their girlfriends mainly). They also revealed that they are informed by what they observe in shop windows. Nevertheless, only one of the eight interviewees said that he buys on impulse.

Finally, regarding the assessment of purchase alternatives, price seems to have been considered an important attribute, but so was style, quality, cut and brand. However, they emphasized and reemphasized that they only buy brands because they are references for quality, not because they are in evidence.

“For me what counts more is not the label, it’s if the clothes fit well. If the cut is ok and it’s from Renner (a department store) that’s fine. If the cut is horrible and it’s from Zoom, I hate it. The problem is that the more expensive labels, end up being the labels (...) that fit better.” (30, lawyer)

Grooming male:

Two of the interviewees were classified in this group, which has shown a high involvement level with fashion and appearance in general. Besides being the longest interviews, they were the only two participants that said they preferred to shop on their own, because they may spend a long time window shopping, “eyeing up the clothes” or trying on them:

“I like going on my own, because I’m quite capable of spending two hours in a shop. I don’t shop very often… but when I do, it’s to make a big purchase. I try on a pile of clothes, one by one, look at everything, if I don’t like anything I go to another shop, and then decide whether or not to go back to that one. That’s it.” (35, master’s student in administration)

When it comes to the need recognition, they showed that clothes for them are more than just utilitarian. The pleasures that they take in the activity and the hedonism involved seem to be an important motivation for the outing:

“I’m quite vain, I like buying clothes a lot, arriving home, wearing the clothes for the first time. I love it, and it gives me a lot of pleasure!” (40, travel agent)

The maleness here is not contrary to appearance concerns. On the contrary, appearance has a central role in their model of masculinity. However, it seems that fashion is much used to create a good impression or to gain more respect, what could be related to the traditional model of masculinity:

“When I lived in São Paulo, I had a top position. I was a director at the age of 30, so I used to wear a suit and tie. It was important for me to dress well both to be on equal terms with other people in my position, and to have a suitable posture in relation to those in lower positions. When I used to go out in those circles, I dressed up neatly and asked my wife to do the same.” (35, master’s student in administration)

With respect to the search for information, they also recounted a lack of interest in any kind of magazine that deals with fashion. On the other hand, the interviewees said that they are keen observers of daily life, looking at shop windows and the fashion other men dress:

“As my work takes me out of the office a lot, I always look at many shop windows. I think that this is the main vehicle, everything in shop windows looks more beautiful, it’s what is currently in. I observe a lot. (...) if I see a friend of mine with a cool pair of sneakers: “Wow, those sneakers are cool”. People end up influencing each other.” (40, travel agent)

Regarding the alternatives evaluation, the interviewees openly showed that they had favorite labels and stores. According to their narratives, their choices are related to quality, design, cut and comfort.

General Considerations:

Withdrawing the observation lens by group and returning to the general approach, each subject seems to have used the interview, whose main theme was his relation with clothes and the consumption of fashion, to reflect on some issues such as the differentiation of sexes, and gender and body identity.
Though classic male values such as the working, strong, objective and determined man arose constantly, a concern with the explicit formation of their self-image was present in most of the male discourses. Most of them manipulate the use of clothes, varying the fit and size of clothes to feel better in relation to the contemporary standard of male beauty.

However, the fear of jeopardizing their masculinity was manifested. Four of the interviewees said that they did not like “clinging” clothes. They revealed that they would not wear them because they are associated with a homosexual aesthetic:

“Interviewer: What kind of article of clothing would you never wear?”
“Subject: A tight-fitting shirt, clinging to the body. (...) I think they’re ugly, sort of thing a faggot would wear. I find them tacky: for a faggot or samba singer. Can I say these politically incorrect things? (laughter) Don’t get me wrong, but they’re horrible, not for me.” (28, body-piercer)

Such discourse and the following one reflect the extent to which the concept of masculinity is established in opposition to that of homosexuality or femininity:

“A man has to dress like a man. A woman who has a job, an executive, draws a little on a mannish style. But a man who wears clothes that are a little womanish, something prettier with a different design...I don’t think that’s very appropriate, it’s not manly. Designs with a very low neckline, with a skewed collar... (...) I like a basic style, but some people like something that isn’t very conventional. I can even appreciate this, the guy has his own style, but I would feel rather strange wearing it.” (40, travel agent)

This was a passage from one of the “grooming males”, which shows that the grooming activity does not necessarily means a relativization of the traditional masculine values. Again: “A man has to dress like a man”. In this context, man seems to be associated with sobriety.

For the sake of illustration, a preference for more discrete colors and conventional forms was repeatedly expressed. In some way, deviate from the mainstream seems risky. One of the participants commented that people regard him as “hippyish” precisely because his style is different from that of the “average man”:

“A friend recently made this joke (“did they have men’s shirts where you bought yours”) regarding a shirt of mine. The shirt is cool. I suppose that it’s more colorful than one that an average man would wear. It’s enough not to be the same as everyone else for people to become defensive. Men are put on the defensive, they are afraid.” (30, lawyer)

When it comes to the topic in the interview script that asked for two sentences to be completed (“When a man goes out to buy clothes, he...” and “A man never buys...”), the replies were diverse. Regarding the first sentence, some showed impatience and total displeasure with the purchasing situation, while others showed just how much men are “prudent”, objective and concerned with the monetary factor. Others showed a concern with a good image:

When a man goes out shopping for clothes, he...
“He wants to get it over with as fast as possible.” (28, economist)
“Buys what he should without exaggerating. He buys what he can afford, right? Even if he is tempted by something. A woman says: “Wow, but that blouse is also cool!” and there she goes. A man is more restrained.” (40, travel agent)
“(...) wants to look good, present a positive image of himself to other people, wants to buy nice new clothes that gives him an agreeable appearance.” (28, body-piercer)

The second sentence to be completed seems to have created some difficulties and resistances. This was the point they thought most about before proffering a verbal reply. Curiously, two interviewees cited jewelry:

A man never buys...
“Look, that’s a difficult one because nowadays there isn’t such a big difference. (...) I think that a real man never buys jewelry. (...) But that’s my prejudice. But bracelets and collars for men, I really don’t like that.” (23, designer)
“A man never buys? I’m rather consumerist, I think that... a man never buys... Some jewelry for himself. But well, I think that nowadays a man probably does, yes. I am going to contest this sentence! (laughter)” (40, travel agent)

It seems that they were hesitant to show their prejudiced or, maybe, their conservative side. The replies of most participants pointed to some lack of differentiation between female and male clothing. But if one reexamines their discourses during the course of the interviews, one arrives at the same conclusion as Dutra’s (2002) regarding the signs of the masculine: “everything is allowed and at the same time something is improper”. (p. 408).

**FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Diferent masculinities consume fashion clothing in different ways. It seems that different masculinities may be reinforced by not only the way men dress, but also the way they buy clothes: each of the participants, in his own way, showed that not only what they consume, but also how and how much they consume may be related to their concepts of masculinity. For instance, there are those who admit to be vain, openly consumerist, mindful of aesthetics, clothes and beauty. Although these characterizations may seem rather distant from the ideal standard of masculinity, they clearly correspond to their own ideal standards. Being well-dressed may enable them to gain respect, that is, it may connote seriousness and bearing, what allows them to find traditional ideals of masculinity again.

As observed by Dutra (2002), it still seems that one of the most important impediments that these men find in adhering to fashion is the fear of putting the traditionally and socially required model of masculinity in danger. Although some participants tried to express a movement towards a relativism of masculine signs, their discourses upon fashion consumption throughout the conversation showed that they try to deviate from what could be considered deviant (here, the feminine and, specially, the homosexual). Possibly, if the researcher was also a male, this and further important issues could be more evident or expressed with less resistance. This fact may be considered as one limitation of the present research. However, the resistance somewhat communicates and has its relevance.

Given the exploratory and qualitative nature of this research, the results are not conclusive and no generalization should be made from them. What is essential to notice is: as observable changes in consumption behavior are correlated with changes in cultural ideals and values, it is fundamental to heed the new ideals, bearing in mind that they do not replace the traditional ones but coexist with them. Following this path, marketing and retail professionals can create more effective strategies to communicate with, and relate to, this vast and plural segment: men.
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