Men, Bags and the City – Male’S Adoption of Non Traditional Gender Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT
This article studies male’s overt consumption of non-traditional gender aesthetics. Phenomenological interviews revealed that consumers use these items to build a unique aesthetic gender identity. Consumers apply strategies of differentiation and contrasting to safeguard their aesthetic individuality and set themselves apart from communal forms of consumption.

INTRODUCTION
“Look, this guy carries a handbag…” Whereas several years ago such a whisper would have led to surprised glances at the guy with the handbag, men carrying handbags in cities are not that much of a surprise anymore. Rather, when taking a walk through cities one can see an increasing number of men carrying handbags in their hands, in the crook of their arms or draped over one shoulder. Uninformed observers may ask themselves “Aren’t handbags for women? … Have guys become the new gals?”

In recent years males have been increasingly in researchers’ foci, since males started to participate in what we denominate here as non-traditional gender aesthetic consumption. We define non-traditional gender aesthetic consumption as forms of aesthetic consumption which break with long held aesthetic conceptions of a certain gender in Western societies. Since the advent of the metrosseux trend (Simpson, 2002), different studies researched such male consumption practices intended for the stylistic and aesthetic display. Changes on the macro-social, social and individual level, caused a reshaping of male identities (Schroeder and Zwick, 2004; Simpson, 2002; Patterson and Eliott, 2002; Nyeck et al, 2002).

Schroeder and Zwick (2004) and Patterson and Eliott (2002) argue that advertising portrayals of men led to a renegotiation of male identities in society. Bakewell et al. (2006) regard women’s emancipation and the gay liberation movement as impacting factors on the increasing aesthetic discourse among men. Subcultural communities and peer groups also set boundaries of male’s legitimate consumption of grooming products (Rinallo, 2007; Nyeck et al, 2002). An increased male narcissism (Sturrock and Piocch, 1998, Ourahmoune and Nyeck, 2008), rebellions against societal conventions (Nyeck et al., 2002) or transitional lifetimes (Ourahmoune and Nyeck, 2008) were found to be influencing factors on males’ embellingish consumptions. However, particularly heterosexual males still fear stigmatization and engage in avoidance behavior (Ourahmoune and Nyeck, 2008, Kimmel and Tissier-Desbordes, 1999). Non-traditional gender aesthetic items go beyond male narcissism, beauty rituals, and new male aesthetics as norms of gendered consumption seem to be relevant here as well. Furthermore, fear of stigmatization and avoidance behavior runs counter overt displays of non-traditional gender objects as fashion items and aesthetic statements of male consumers. We draw on Nietzsche’s nihilism, the denial of objectivity and persistent truth, which define the beauty of consumption items. We use Nietzsche’s contribution as a theoretical introduction into aesthetic theory.

In this article we understand aesthetics as consumer’s interpretation, evaluation and meaning production, which define the beauty of consumption items. We use Nietzsche’s contribution as a theoretical introduction into aesthetic theory. Nietzsche’s nihilism, the denial of objectivity and persistent truth, renders aesthetics into the sphere of the individual and its interpretations and meaning creations. Nietzsche claims that people are active producers of their (aesthetic) worlds and realities (Welsch, 1997). Aesthetics is understood as being formed by people’s individual perception, understanding and interpretation of the world.

Postmodernism resumes this notion of the subjectivity in aesthetics. Aesthetics and Postmodernism are particularly closely tied together, since Postmodernism is inter alia born out of fundamental aesthetic changes, such as the collapse of the boundaries between art and everyday life, between high art and the mass/popular culture or an overall promiscuity of styles (Featherstone, 2004). A postmodern approach to aesthetics deems that aesthetics is mixed and strongly interrelated with aspects of the everyday lives, where facets of the political and social life, popular arts or everyday aesthetic issues, such as environmentalism, fashion, and lifestyles, are constituted by aesthetics. A Postmodern aesthetic understanding also implies a plurality of styles and diverse aesthetic notions that exist next to each other, without claiming that a particular style is more important or meaningful (Welsch, 1997).

Featherstone (2004) argues that the consumer culture contributes heavily to an ongoing aestheticization quest of people. People constantly consume and strive for new styles and tastes in order to construct different lifestyles. Consumers aspire aesthetically constructed lifestyles, since aesthetics is the only principle, which still holds in a world where norms and conceptions are in flux. Since modern conventions of “right and wrong” behaviors or styles macerated, people need to individually make sense of what they consider as beautiful and aesthetic (Featherstone, 2004, Welsch, 1997, Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). This aestheticization trend is particularly lived out in urban areas by a young middle class, who is usually more active in the stylization of their lives. The urban context provides people with a style plurality from which they can individually make use of. Aestheticization manifests itself in accumulations of expressive goods such as clothing, furniture, in bodily alterations, and other aesthetic projects, which help people demonstrate their individuality and aesthetic differentiation (Featherstone, 2004; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Verzyer, 1995).

Venkatesh and Meamber (2008) argue that consumers are constantly seeking aesthetics in their everyday consumption, highlighting the centrality of aesthetics for people’s lives. Venkatesh and Meamber (2008) further contend that aesthetics in people’s lives and in consumption practices impact not only on people’s taste formations, but also on their emotions and feelings, which are central for people’s identity formation. Based on these findings, Venkatesh and Meamber (2008) conceive consumers as aesthetic subjects,
who use meanings of various aesthetics in their identity creations (Thompson and Hirschmann, 1995, Venkatesh and Meamber, 2006). Non-traditional gender aesthetics add to identity creations, which is not limited to the adoption of styles, or to idiosyncratic consumption styles but derives much of its meaning from ‘gendered’ consumption. Gender aesthetics are playfully mixed and matched so as to define one’s gender identity on the continuum between femininity and masculinity.

**CONSUMER GENDER IDENTITY PROJECTS**

Thompson and Haytko (1997) define identity as a sense of the consumer of who s/he is, which is constantly (re)defined, negotiated and created. In contrast to the postmodern identity conception (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995) or the empty self concept (Cushman, 1990), we assume that consumers actively construct identity narratives in which personal histories and conceptions of the social and cultural environment are interwoven. Consumers refer to market offerings by negotiating meanings and symbols via which they further develop their identity narratives. Nevertheless, consumers try to forge a coherent, if diversified identity narrative (Arnauld and Thompson, 2005; Schau and Gilly, 2003; Thompson and Hirschmann, 1995).

Consumption patterns and objects provide people with means to create not only desired, utopian identities, but also to foster the development of consumer’s individual identity narratives (Kozinets, 2001). In the case of transitional life episodes, for instance, consumption objects, such as loved objects also help people to give meaning to these episodes or/and to stay “true” to their own identity. Similarly, certain consumption objects stand for specific personal meanings to which people refer to and by which they construct their subjective individual identity narratives (Ahuvia, 2005). Consumption objects also serve the purpose of socializing and categorization (Holt, 1995). Furthermore, recent research has shown that consumption is also deeply interlinked with individual’s self-understanding of their gender identity.

Fischer and Arnould (1994) define gender identity as the extent to which people think of themselves as masculine or feminine. Connell (2002) conceives gender as a project, where personal and society’s gender understandings are negotiated. Patterson and Elliott (2002) assume that males are currently reevaluating their gender identity understandings since advertising increasingly promotes the groomed, slim and sexy male, attributes which were formerly regarded as feminine. Nyeck et al. (2002) found that the extent of consuming non-traditional gender aesthetics also depends upon the different gender identity understandings of gays and straights. Males consume these items either to blend into their reference or peer groups, thus adhering to the reference groups’ gender understandings or to rebel against gendered conventions and norms of society. In a similar vein, Rinallo (2007) concludes that peer groups of males set boundaries of legitimate male consumption behaviors. Ourahmoun and Nyeck (2008) found that males participate in clandestine consumption to overcome stigmatizations and social sanction due to their deviation from their peer’s or society’s gender conception. Male’s gender identity understandings are in flux, which is why males have become more involved in their aesthetic appearance. However, males still use non-traditional gender aesthetic items primarily to hide bodily imperfections or to act out their narcissistic needs (Ourahmoun and Nyeck, 2008; Nyeck et al, 2002). These findings run counter empirical observations of overt, public display of traditionally feminine items, such as handbags, which are neither hidden, nor just serve to compensate imperfections or narcissistic needs. It is the aim of our study to address this specific form of non-traditional gender aesthetics consumption and its role in male’s identity narratives.

**METHOD**

Our empirical study followed a two step process. First, male handbag wearers were observed and approached online, or personally approached on the streets in urban areas. Our purposive sample followed the principles of snowball sampling (Patton, 1991). However, snowball sampling turned out problematic as handbag users rarely knew other handbag consumers. Hence, we adapted our methodology accordingly and followed the technique of criterion sampling (Patton, 1991) which focused a male handbag usage and did not address other characteristics such as e.g. sexual orientations. People, who agreed to participate in our study were asked to write a diary over a period of 2.5 to 3 weeks in which they were asked to write freely about their usage of handbags (Alaszewski, 2006). In addition, informants were asked to take pictures of items of which they particularly liked for their design. In total, 14 participants took part in our study. All of them live in urban areas in Central Europe, with ages ranging from 25 to 42.

In a second step we conducted phenomenological interviews (Thompson et al, 1989) with the participants at their homes or in their offices if participants did not feel comfortable being interviewed at home. Informant’s home and office styles were also observed. We chose phenomenological interviews to learn about the participants’ experiences with non-traditional gender aesthetics and to reveal the deeper meanings of non-traditional gender aesthetics consumption. The interviews started with broad general questions about consumers’ lives and then focused on their experiences with aesthetics and non-traditional gender aesthetics. Secondly, we asked for other experiences with other non-traditional gender aesthetics to reveal the overall importance of non-traditional gender aesthetic consumption to their lives. Subsequently, our questions focused on perceived societal changes and on a self estimation of masculine and feminine traits. We asked about other people’s reactions to the participant’s usage of non-traditional gender aesthetic consumption to reveal stigmatization experiences and behaviors. Additionally, a set of questions aimed at the identification of situations when appearance and style are particularly important to the informants.

**Table 1: sample characteristics**

<table>
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Diaries were not only used to identify important usage situations of handbags but also stimulated stories and narrations about experiences with non-traditional gender aesthetics and about the informant’s general aesthetic preferences. Photo-elicitation (Heisley and Levy, 1991) also helped with eliciting relevant stories of non-traditional gender aesthetic consumption.

Interviews lasted between 1h 30 min and 2h 45 min and accounted to a total of a bit less than 30 hours of information. The interviews were transcribed and accounted to 290 single spaced pages of interview transcription. A hermeneutic-phenomenological analysis according to the principles of phenomenological analysis by Thompson et al. (1989) was conducted. An idiographic analysis documented the individual life stories and meaning of non-traditional gender aesthetics. Integrative analysis revealed similarities and differences and allowed us to formulate themes, and relate them to processes of identity construction and differentiation through aesthetic consumption.

**FINDINGS**

Defining individual gender identity through non-traditional gender aesthetics

The findings revealed that the male handbag usage is not a singular, restricted activity, but it joins the ranks of a personal history of activities related to non-traditional gender aesthetic consumption. Male handbag consumption and usage is merely a continuation of such consumption activities and starts as a search for an aesthetic gender identity.

“In the past it was more colorful, more flashy, also items from the women’s collection. Well, my favorite designer in the 1990’s was Helmut Lang. I changed between a woman’s trousers with a sash … and also the tops were all for women when I went out”

(Simon)

“[…] or make up, I also used make up back then and that kind of stuff […] even as a child and I always wore handbags. Male bags, those real …men bags, like the Freitag ones, I never wore them.”

(Patrick)

These verbatim demonstrate that consumers used non-traditional gender aesthetics already in their youth and teenage years when these items were not at all advertised in the media (Schroeder and Zwick, 2004). We assume that a history with non-traditional gender aesthetics facilitates an easier adoption of other or further non-traditional gender aesthetic consumption activities in their later lives. Gendered forms of consumption usually follow a certain path until they become part of an individual’s self-understanding. The meaning of non-traditional gender aesthetics consumption is not homogenous and changes over the course of lifetime. Some meanings may become dominant for the individual consumer during a specific phase of life. Other meanings may add to the overall pattern of consuming non-traditional gender aesthetics as a part of their aesthetic life project.

**Coming out phase**

While Ourahmoune et al. (2008), Rinallo (2007) or Nybeck et al. (2002) highlight the distinction between a heterosexual and homosexual involvement, usage, and personal history with non-traditional gender aesthetics, our findings contradicted these results. Both, heterosexual and homosexual males were equally involved in non-traditional gender aesthetic consumptions, yet the purpose of these consumption activities is different between gay and straight males. Gay informants heavily use non-traditional gender aesthetics for their coming out.

**B:** sparkling, colorful skirts for males… very, very much so, yes; and deliberately taking them to the countryside to go out. Yes, yes, 
**A:** for what purpose? 
**B:** To show that this here is a gay guy.

(Daniel)

**B:** […] then it happened very quickly - my coming out phase. Flashy, wrap around skirts, I was bleached blond […] I also wore handbags then, well such nylon ones. 
**A:** What did you want to express here? 
**B:** that I was gay… apparently…

(Simon)

During this coming out phase non-traditional gender aesthetics help gay males not only to demonstrate their sexual orientation, but also assisted them to define themselves as gay and to negotiate a gay identity during a time when gayness is a central topic for them. As the next respondent demonstrates, these non-traditional gender aesthetics can also fulfill a social-political purpose during the coming out phase. Using non-traditional gender aesthetics is a public statement to the public that being gay is not a problem, and normal.

“[…] I am different, I am gay, I am that obviously gay; look, you can all notice that I am gay, because I don’t have a problem with that. I publically demonstrate that I don’t have a problem with it. That everyone, the world may know it.”

(Daniel)

During the coming out phase respondents also reported that non-traditional gender aesthetics are extensively consumed and applied as the gay scene offers a liminal zone for such activities and aesthetics. When this coming out phase is over, the extent of the usage of non-traditional gender aesthetics often decreases. Hence, we assume that non-traditional gender aesthetics for gay males is also a coping strategy with these turbulent times of defining one’s own sexual orientation on the one hand, and dealing with publicity on the other hand.

**Urban change and freedom**

Some respondents mentioned that they were more heavily involved in this form of consumption when they either moved to a city (Ourphahmoune and Nybeck, 2008) or started to spend most of their time there. Here, the contrast between the city and countryside, where the respondents felt constrained in their possibilities, becomes apparent.

**A:** You mentioned that you wanted to move to a bigger city, why was that? 
**B:** I don’t know, I am just like that. A lot of people say “Listen Alex, you just belong to a big city”. In the village I was always the odd duck, and therefore I thought that I needed to go to a big city […] well and I was being looked at in an odd way. Particularly when you are not coming from a big city, where there are different people like you. And that is why I am feeling quite comfortable here.

(Oliver)
The city liberates and provides freedom to act out one’s own identity and to consume products, such as non-traditional gender aesthetics, which would render the individual as the odd one out on the countryside. However, respondents also used non-traditional gender aesthetics to symbolize their transition from the rural area to the city and to establish a stark contrast to the rural social environment. Non-traditional gender aesthetics are used as a strong sign of a genuine urban lifestyle identity.

“For a country bumpkin, XXXX was a metropolis par excellence. Then it was also to show your friends from the countryside “look I have been to the city and I have become really city-like”, because I wear glittering clothes....”

(Daniel)

Individual gender understanding

The responses concerning the gender understandings of the respondents supported the notions that male identity conceptions are currently changing drastically (Ourahmoune and Nyeck, 2008, Schroeder and Zwick, 2005). On a continuum contrasting of what the individual respondent connects with masculinity on the one hand and femininity on the other hand, informants rated themselves as being somewhere in between the masculine – feminine continuum. In describing themselves, respondents also referred to attributes which they used to describe femininity.

“Yes, well, probably something in between a bit. Yes, because, since I am not embodying what I consider as masculine, yes, well I am rather ... a bit androgynous.”

(Simon)

“Puh, I would say somewhere in between these two. Well in between these two, I don’t hope that I am appearing too feminine, but I also don’t feel the need to appear too masculine....”

(Marc)

These findings also highlight that the respondents, gay and straight, do not have a problem to incorporate feminine traits into their self understanding. Heterosexual and homosexual males do equally not try to neglect them and spoke freely about aspects of their identity which could be rated as feminine. Male’s gender identity understandings are not set in opposition to feminine attributes but rather combine attributes of both genders into their aesthetic identity.

(Non)stigmatized

In contrast to the results by Kimmel and Tissier-Desbordes, (2000), Ourahmoune and Nyeck (2008) or Rinallo (2007) that non-traditional gender consumption behaviors are stigmatized and that males, in particular heterosexual males, enact avoidance behaviors due to fears of social sanctions such as ridicule, our study rather supports the opposite. Informants are quite bold in their public display of non-traditional gender aesthetics and did not fear social sanctions or stigmatization. Several informants, heterosexual as well as homosexual, already experienced some forms of sanctions such as name calling or ridicule, but instead of avoiding carrying non-traditional gender aesthetic items, they vehemently defend their individual identity project.

B: “why are you running about with a bag like a fairy?”
A: Who said that?
B: These were close acquaintances.

Not only did the informants not refrain from using non-traditional gender aesthetic objects when they experienced social sanctions but some also reported that they actively fight against such ridicule. Although the participants were sampled in urban areas of different population size (from 130,000 inhabitants to 1.3 million), larger urban areas are not different in that regard. Nevertheless, respondents reported that such social sanctions are quite rare.

Stigmatizations and social sanctions do occur, however our study did not support previous findings of avoidance behavior and fear of stigmatization. Also heterosexual’s fear of being judged as gay (Ourahmoune and Nyeck, 2008) was not supported, which gives rise to the assumption that non-traditional gender aesthetics consumption is rather a deliberate, bold statement of one’s uniqueness and individuality as a male consumer.

Constructing aesthetic individuality

Uniqueness and Otherness

Non-traditional gender aesthetics facilitate differentiation from others and from mainstream consumption. Respondents report a particularly strong desire to demonstrate their otherness within their surrounding social environment. Non-traditional gender aesthetics provide the means to construct a unique individuality even at the odds of being totally out of fashion, or far ahead of any fashion trends.

“I even have more extreme ones[watches], the one is pink with turquoise and has in the centre a diamond, which is rotating, such a... everyone would think that I am nuts. No one would wear anything like that.”

(Steve)

“The lacquered shoes, the bags, be it the normal shoulder bag or the handbag, doesn’t matter, because no one in my environment wears any bags like that. Ahm sunglasses, huge Dior sunglasses, Ray Ban, whatever, ahm jewellery, ...everything that the XXX newspaper is spreading as styling tips, that is, yes, well, that is for people who do not want to draw attention, these are people who are satisfied with what society tells them to do. I am different.”

(Robert)

Apart from the creation of aesthetic boundaries from the surrounding environment (Featherstone, 2004), individuals thereby also negotiate their individual need for attention or blending in. Using non-traditional gender aesthetics does not only facilitate differentiation, but due to this purposeful public display individuals draw attention to themselves as aesthetic subjects. Yet throughout the interviews it became obvious that non-traditional gender aesthetics are not geared at provoking others. Rather, respondents emphasize their aspiration to differentiate themselves from the masses. Individuals sort of participate in a tightrope walk between catching attention and blending into contexts such as events, job environment or leisure time activities. They also indicated that they did not have a history of provocation, oftentimes not even during puberty or teenage years.
“I am a person who needs a tremendous lot of attention. Ahm … probably that’s also one of the reasons why I am dressed like this and buying those things. Not to boost my ego, but to … simply… I am against this group thinking, this collective thinking. Ahm I am rather, I was born as an individual and I don’t need to be like everyone else. That means that I also don’t need to please everyone.”
(Robert)

Non-traditional gender aesthetics help people create their self as non-conformist. Respondents repeatedly judge the mainstream as negative from which they want to distance themselves. Perceived narrow-mindedness, constrained thinking or collectivism were noted characteristics of their environment from which the individuals want to (aesthetically) distance themselves. Hence, respondents in most cases were the only ones in their environment to carry handbags and only few knew other males who used handbags. Informants also did not participate in handbag consumer communities. None of the informants would be active or know about handbag communities as this would run counter to their deep inner aspiration to be unique; different; interesting.

Self branding
In a similar vein, people use non-traditional gender aesthetics for the purpose of “self branding”. They purposefully display their handbags and / or extravagant outfits to portray themselves as unique and to generate a lasting impression. Self branding with non-traditional gender aesthetics means to ease the identification and recognition of people at social events, or in business situations. This form of self branding was particularly widespread among individuals who run their own (fashion) business.

“Yes, there are always looks and laughter that he has his bag with him that’s an identifying feature […] yes, people know you because you always have the bag with you […]”
(A: How is that…?)
“Actually that’s pleasant, positive. And it supports the brand. Hm… the ego”
(Marcus)

“I also wear one from my collection in the evening when I go out, then I wear the clutch I have my business cards, the cigarettes, the money and the cell phone and that is often the first topic when I am talking. With the rich women, when they ask me where I got that great bag from then I say “from my own collection” and you strike up a conversation like that.”
(Patrick)

Here, non-traditional gender aesthetics are used in a business context for self branding and for branding the business. Hence, non-traditional gender aesthetics are part of the fashion system, and are used to demonstrate uniqueness and innovativeness.

“You get attention in certain circles and you develop an own brand and it is prototypical for someone that he always appears like that, that’s important […]”, Marcus).

In this context the personal identity project coalesces with the company purpose and serves to build a strong (self and corporate) brand identity. Individuals purposefully select the appropriate handbag and outfit to draw attention to their specific business idea.

Contrasting
Individuals create their own aesthetic identity by consuming aesthetically unique or exceptional items. When a certain style, which they liked at the onset, is taken over by several people, the same style can become unaesthetic to them.

“The funny thing is that there are products that are beautiful in my opinion and which I like, but when a lot of people wear them, they become ugly.”
(Steve)

“I would say indeed that I would not wear something that a lot of people are wearing. If there are one or two then it is okay […]”
(Thomas)

Consumers actively search for styled products, such as clothes which few other people consume. This quest for consumer individuality is not restricted to fashion but is also to be found in other areas of aesthetic consumption, such as food or hairstyles. It can even pervade a consumer’s whole consumption behavior, where items are actively avoided as soon as other people possess them.

A: when did you start to search for your very own style?
“it started… it has actually always been like that that I always wanted the items that others did not have.”
(Steve)

This aesthetic life projects are not restricted to consumption in a narrow sense. For certain consumers this aesthetic striving is central to their lives and extends into other life areas, such as their choice of partners or friends.

“I have to admit that the particular look - being particular, also applies to my girlfriends. [A: yes?] Well I don’t like normal girlfriends; they are too boring for me. They need to be special in a way. I had completely different types. But they always draw attention. They always stand out.”
(Steve)

Another way to achieve one’s aesthetic goals is not by avoiding consuming mass aesthetics but by avoiding items that are in fashion. Instead of using purchased fashion items, they are stowed away until it is out of fashion and other people do not use or wear it. Individuality becomes the dogma of consumption, even at the expense of not being able to use new fashion items and being totally out of fashion.

“Right, it will become old and shabby and then in ten years no one will wear such a thing, but it is classic enough to look okay and in ten years I can wear it. No one will wear a thing like that and then it will just be fine”
(Nico)

One way of understanding the desire for individuality is that respondents feel an intrusion into their private sphere when other people are similarly dressed or have similar aesthetic understandings.
“When there is a point where you are converging, and clothes are one example of that, then you need to deal with this person and this may cause, well not anxieties, because nothing is happening, but ah... well.. it’s a strange feeling” (Richard)

Similar to the striving for uniqueness and otherness, contrasting serves the need for individuality. Contrasting, though, goes beyond just using non-traditional gender items, and is psychologically distinct. Whereas uniqueness supports the extended self, contrasting helps delineating individual identity from collective identity and sameness.

Non-traditional gender aesthetic consumers also had recurring aesthetic styles in their consumption behaviors. Thus we assume that consumers have certain aesthetic styles according to which they, inter alia, choose products and base their consumption decisions on. However, this does not mean that consumers have only one specific style but they deliberately choose different ones, which they can use to contrast their aesthetic style with others. In an aesthetic context, respondents evaluate authenticity based on mass consumption of items (=unauthentic) or on individually used, unique products. Aesthetic authenticity can be achieved when very few or no other people possess the same items, or are unable to copy a particular aesthetic style mix. Whereas Beverland (2005) contends that authenticity is socially constructed, our findings rather indicate that non-traditional gender aesthetics serve the purpose of highly individualized aesthetic authentication.

DISCUSSION

The findings of our study contribute to theory in at least two important ways. First, they show that consumers use non-traditional gender aesthetic items to deal with important life projects, such as the negotiations of gay, of urban and of gendered self understandings and to create a unique and authentic self. Our study highlights that rather consumer’s gender identity than their sexual orientation influences non traditional gender aesthetic consumption. Second, by contrasting consumption behavior and styles with those of others and emphasizing otherness, respondents also contrast the current emphasis of communal forms of consumption in consumer research. Instead, they highlight the necessity to redress the balance between highly individual and highly communal forms of consumption.

Our findings address motivations and strategies to achieve individuality by participating in individual aesthetic identity projects. Consumers of non-traditional gender aesthetics demonstrate a particularly high need to deviate from common, mass consumption. Similar to Nietzsche’s (1969) and Featherstone’s (2004) notion of the individual aesthetic self, individuality is expressed by a constant quest for uniqueness and otherness and the creation of an authentic, inasmuch individual, aesthetic identity. For this purpose consumers pursue different strategies to aesthetically escape commoditization. One strategy refers to the creation of distinct consumption activities by public display of non-traditional gender aesthetic items. Contrary to prior findings (e.g. Ourahmoune and Nycek, 2008, Kimmel and Tissier-Desbordes, 1999) stigmatization is not an issue, as being different is the prime motivator for non-traditional gender aesthetics.

A further strategy is the creation of aesthetic contrasts. People create contrasts in their personal, individual styles so as to emphasize otherness. Furthermore, contrasts are created through the application of diverse styles to facilitate an aesthetic break from the ordinary. A third strategy relates to the individualization of consumer objects. Consumers either remove parts, redesign or olden consumer articles to distinguish themselves from the masses.

Contrasting is also used to negotiate consumers’ individual place in society. Rather than provoking and standing out at any rate, they try to style themselves appropriately (e.g. not in tutu for opera) to contexts and occasions. However, within this context dependent aesthetic range, aesthetic individuality is emphasized through non-traditional gender aesthetics. By contrasting context-dependent with non-traditional consumption, individuals sharply distinguish themselves from others.

Three different indicators also support our assumption that non-traditional gender aesthetics are a highly individual rather than communal form of consumption. First, snowball sampling technique could not be successfully applied to recruit interview partners and respondents frequently mentioned the individuality of their aesthetic behavior. Second, to our knowledge participants did not participate in internet communities of male handbag wearers. Third, a lacking of a consciousness of kind (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001) became obvious in respondents narratives. Male handbag users rather emphasized their uniqueness and striving to set themselves apart from the masses. Based on these indicators, we may conclude that non-traditional gender aesthetics are a genuinely individual life project which runs counter communal forms of consumption in brand communities (Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). When items, which consumers judge as expressive for their individual aesthetic identity, are copied or become fashionable, their aesthetic identities are endangered. Consumers, again, seek to contrast communal forms of mass aesthetics by seeking for the non-traditional. Interestingly, non-traditional gender aesthetics does not oppose social norms or communal forms of consumption in a resistive manner but rather seeks to authenticate a unique and distinct aesthetic gender identity.

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