In Pursuit of Being Different

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[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1012392/volumes/v40/NA-40

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ABSTRACT

This study assumes that individuals’ desires for autonomy as well as concessions to conformity inform consumers’ attempts to create consumption styles that are different. Our interpretive study investigates into male consumers’ pursuit of being different and finds willful ignorance, non-conformity (provocative conformity, wearing the old and outdated, consuming the ugly), and defamiliarization practices (delocalization, delabeling, contrasting personal practice) of individualization. We introduce the notion of Anders-sein—a hybrid but distinct form of identity construction via fashion and lifestyle that we interpret as existentialist.

INTRODUCTION

Consumers want to be unique. In seeking individuality, consumers use marketplace offers in various ways to pursue a distinct lifestyle (Arnould and Thompson 2005), including social status consumption (Thompson and Tambyah 1999; Bourdieu 1984, 1986; Vehlen 1899), uniqueness and counter-conformity (Nail 1986; Tian, Bearden and Hunter 2001), alternative (Arslan and Thompson 2011), and resistant forms of consumption (Thompson and Haytko 1997).

According to Tian et al. (2001) public recognition of taste drives the consumption of counter-conform items. Apart from demonstrating self-directedness, counter-conformity seeks to prevent pigeonholing (Thompson and Haytko 1997), or marking as one of a kind (Tian et al. 2001). Further theorizations on uniqueness have portrayed anti-conform behavior as individual authenticating acts. Lipovetsky (1994) argues that a multitude of fashion consumption practices are informed by a ‘taste for autonomy’ rather than social differentiation.

However, in pursuit of differentness and uniqueness, consumers oftentimes conspicuously end up in sameness, or worse, conformity (Arslan and Thompson 2011). Literature offers several explanations. First, society rewards conformity more than differentiation (Snyder and Fromkin 1977). Transgressions of boundaries of legitimate consumption choices and behaviors (Rinallo 2007) might lead to social sanctions, which consumers try to evade (Ourahmoune and Nyeck 2008). Second, critics of consumer sovereignty uncover independence as a myth arguing that consumers are hardly free from market influences (Caruana, Crane and Fitchett 2008, Holt 2002, Thompson and Hirschman 1995), and unable to adjust to fragmented styles and rapid fashion cycles (Rocamora 2002).

In the context of fashion consumption, Chan, Berger and Boven (forthcoming 2012) recently showed in seven experimental studies that consumers can satisfy desires for assimilation and differentiation, both, within a single choice context by satisfying different motives on different choice dimensions. Previous research has typically studied these assimilation and differentiation motives in isolation, or from a one-dimensional perspective, Chan, Berger and Boven (forthcoming 2012) rightly criticize. This study picks up the thread, and extends their claims from a micro- towards a meso- and macro perspective of social conformity versus the pursuit of individual autonomy within mass-marketed domains of consumption. Consequently, we assume that both, concessions to conformity as well as individuals’ desire for autonomy, inform consumers’ attempts to create unique consumption styles.

To support our assumption, we first review current theory on conformity and uniqueness, and discuss it against the background of the philosophy of human existence. We investigate into consumers’ pursuit of being different in the context of fashion consumption of male handbags, and interpret this consumption style as paradoxical, non-conform. We introduce the notion of Anders-sein to denominate this phenomenon of a hybrid but distinct form of identity construction.

THEORY

Being different and being the same

Consumer attempts of differentiation and adapting to common fashion styles can be placed in a broader context of identity construction. In his seminal works on aesthetics, for instance, Simmel (1905/1995) asserted that people as social beings are driven by two oppositional forces—belongingness and differentiation. These sociological interpretations of identity construction are mirrored in social psychological concepts of conformity and uniqueness.

Literature differs in explanations of why individuals want to be unique. Berger and Heath (2008) succinctly summarize motives for divergence driven by low-status others, by disliked others, or even by similar others, when too much similarity leads to negative emotional reactions. Some people feel a stronger need for uniqueness than others, experience a decline in self esteem and feel bereft of their identity when similar to others (Tian et al., 2001; Snyder and Fromkin, 1980). Fromkin and Lipshitz (1976) characterized uniqueness prone people as independent, nonconforming, and inventive. In fashion contexts, particularly fashion innovators and opinion leaders rate high on uniqueness scales (Workman and Caldwell, 2007). Thompson and Haytko (1997) noted that the desire for consuming differing fashion items is rooted in the resistance to fashion conformity, which is deeply embedded in Western consumers’ values of being a self-directed individual. Public recognition of taste drive the consumption of counter conform items. According to Tian et al. (2001) counter conformity relative to conventional behaviors, possessions and taste notions elicit uniqueness and differentiation. The authors identified three dimensions of the pursuit of uniqueness—creative choice counter-conformity, unpopular counter-conformity, and avoidance of similarity. Creative choice counter-conformity refers to the consumption of novel, unique and original products to create social distinction. Such consumption bears comparatively low risk and is considered a good choice amongst others, eliciting positive evaluations by consumers’ social environment (Snyder and Fromkin 1980). Unpopular choice counter-conformity, on the other hand, represents high risk consumption as it deviates from social norms and conventions. Consuming socially illegitimate objects may even elicit social sanctions. Nonetheless, consuming the unpopular also creates an enhanced self and social image. Avoidance of similarity refers to the discontinuation of items considered as mainstream or common on the account that these objects are no longer available to generating uniqueness. Fashion innovators dispose items attracting style copies or fashion followers as they violate their standards of individuality and uniqueness (Workman and Caldwell, 2007).

Further theorizations on uniqueness have portrayed anti-conform behavior as identity signaling and individual authenticating acts. Identity-signaling reflects individual’s attempts to avoid sending undesired identity signal to others. People diverge from mainstream consumption patterns to ensure that others understand who they are (Berger and Heath 2007, 2008). Authenticity quests in con-
consumption refer to the generation of a genuine self. Strong quests result from authenticity threats emerging from a postmodern consumer society (Rose and Wood, 2005; Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). Thompson, Rindfleisch and Arsel (2006) assert that these threats for the authentic self are born out of the increasing homogenization of consumption in consumers’ everyday lives. Authentication strategies in consumption thus reflect defense strategies against mass production and consumption, standardization, or popularization of consumption activities (Arsel and Thompson 2011, Beverland and Farely 2010, Rose and Wood 2005). Arsel and Thompson (2011), for example, highlight how high status indie music consumers authenticate their music consumption through strategies of demythologization to protect themselves against popularization.

Counter-conform fashion consumption could also bear activist purposes of trying to change the moral and ethical conceptions of other consumers. Thompson and Haytko’s study (1997), for example, shows that consumers resist particular fashion aesthetics and fashion brands so as to demonstrate what they are not. Goulding and Saren (2009)’s study exemplifies how self styling within the Goth subculture constructs individual aesthetic appearances through rebellious and provocative behavior as well as highlights differing individual aesthetic style projects within an aesthetic subculture.

Critics of consumer independence problematize independence as a myth arguing that consumers are hardly free from being subjected to any market influence, guidance, or control of other people (Caruana et al., 2008; Holt, 2002; Thompson and Hirschman, 1995). Consumers can only revert to the similar, limited, and increasingly globalized choice of market offerings in their consumption activities. Although independence from the market system is often thematized in the context of emancipatory and resistive consumer action (Kozinets and Handelman 2004, Kozinets 2002), researchers still assume only partial or temporal escapism until markets have re-conquered escapist consumptionscapes (Kozinets 2002, Holt 2002, Caruana et al. 2008). Caruana et al. (2008) and Schouten and McAlexander (1995) conclude that outcries for consumer autonomy and independence reflect market discourses, which, in the end, dictate how independence and differentiation from mainstream conventions need to be performed thus, contradicting independence.

Fromkin and Synder (1980) maintain that society, in general, rewards conformity and the refusal of differentiation more than differentiation and anti-conformity. On that account, conformity is the rule rather than the exception. Simmel (1905/1995) detects people’s desire for being different relative to others in people’s little, inconspicuous reworking and alterations of dresses to display the individual, differing character of personal fashion. Ouraumoune and Nyeck (2008) describe male’s concealing and clandestine consumption of items considered as illegitimate for males. Males hide their boundary crossing consumption of lingerie due to fears of stigmatization. Rinallo (2007) discussed the oppression of individuality in favor of conformity and found that consumer’s immediate environment sets boundaries of legitimate consumption choices and behaviors. Transgressing these boundaries leads to social sanctions from the immediate social environment, which consumers try to evade and mitigate by relapsing into conformity.

Human existence and individuality

When we critically review different strands of literature we necessarily come to the conclusion that what seems contradictory, might eventually be just two sides of a coin. While we see the importance for analytical distinctions and the need to investigate conformity as well as individuality, here we aim to re-integrate two theoretical concepts that belong together when viewed from a biographical perspective of identity construction. In our search for an integrated conceptualization, we review important philosophical notions of human existence and individuality.

Talking about identity construction necessitates an understanding of both, human identity, and how it is constructed. Sartre partly accords with Marx in that he views human creative acts as constituting element of human being (Sartre 1989/2011). In criticizing the traditional view of a single, coherent and stable individual subjectivity (the Cartesian cogito) in the 18th century, he accords with other existentialists (cf. Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty) on the superiority of existence (Existenz) over substance (Wesen). Hence, becoming is a life-long endeavor without end yet, accompanied by a never-ending search and pursuit of being (Sein). Whereas Merleau-Ponty (1945/1974), later, postulates that human existence is unthinkable without existence in the lifeworld (Lebenswelt), Sartre speaks of pour-soi of human consciousness, which is different from any notion of person or individual ego but simply Sein. The conscious being, as such, lives in a constant yearning for something which is not (yet) (Sartre 1943); human beings develop life projects, live for something to happen in the future or in relationship to their past. Human existence is everything that is possible; that I could eventually be. Human beings are never fully what they are and constantly desire for being. This is why and how we construct ourselves. Yet, human consciousness is not just Sein as Sein but radically complicated through the existence of the other (human being) through which the I becomes an object. We need the other existence in order to comprehend what we are. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty’s Being-in-the-world to a Deleuzian Being-for-the-world, contemporary philosophers, such as for instance Schirmacher (1994) focus on the self-generative powers of the human being. His homo generator (the art of giving one’s life a certain, distinct form) provides a model for the question of how the art of living could be envisioned; an art of living which makes use of different methods of self transformation and takes to heart Nietzsche’s premonition that we need to “give style” to our existence (Koppensteiner 2009).

Based on these philosophical groundings two different explanations for the need of individuality permeate the literature. One is that we want others to understand who we are; the other is that we ourselves want to understand who we are (through ourselves and through others). Our main argument here is that we cannot pursue one without the other. We adopt a view that accepts the juxtaposition of both, the human existence and the other, not as a contradiction but as a paradox instead that needs no solution.

METHODOLOGY

In the present study we employed a variety of qualitative and interpretive methods. The data were collected with phenomenological interviewing (Thompson et al., 1989), participant observation, and diary research (Alazewski, 2006) among male fashion consumers in Central European cities. Our purposive sampling followed the principles of criterion sampling (Patton, 1991), which focused on the phenomenon of boundary-crossing male handbag consumption,
where handbags are reflective of the aesthetics of female handbags. Aesthetic phenomena in urban areas, particularly fashion related ones, are subject to certain contemporaneity and similar emergence across different locations (Eicher and Sumberg, 1995), which allowed us to sample in different urban locations. We sampled in several cities in order to level out local occurrences endemic to a particular urban environment, such as local trends or local fashionistas. Respondents were sampled in smaller (from 130,000 inhabitants) and larger European cities (up to 1.3 mio inhabitants). Theoretical saturation (Goulding, 2005) was achieved with 14 respondents. The sample yielded a wide range of different fashion appearances, aesthetic understandings, interests and occupations, ranging from company owners, students, employees, designers, editors to social workers and teachers, thus demonstrating the demographic heterogeneity of the limited number of consumers engaging in male handbag consumption. Despite these vast differences, an astounding similarity of self reflection and consumption patterns underlie their different styles.

We developed our study in a two step process. The first step involved observation of handbag consumption in different locations so as to understand why and how this would be different from common male bags. We, then, approached male consumers either online or directly on the streets in urban areas. People, who agreed to participate in our study, were provided with a diary. We asked them to freely write report not just about their particular handbag consumption but also their fashion experiences and related thoughts for a period of two and a half to three weeks. In addition, we asked participants to take pictures of items they evaluated as aesthetic, and characterize their style.

In a second step we conducted phenomenological interviews (Thompson et al., 1989) with the participants at their homes or in their offices. The long interviews and the trips through their homes and offices informed us about the respondent’s life biographies, the different aesthetic styles they developed, and their consumption patterns. We further included questions focused on societal changes and general opinions, specifically with regard to boundary-crossing topics. Diaries were used to identify additional important topics and stimulated stories and narrations about respondents’ reflections and developments of aesthetic styles. Photoelicitation (Heisley and Levy, 1991) additionally supported our attempts to gather a rich data set on boundary-crossing aesthetic consumption.

Interviews accumulated to a total of approximately 30 hours of recorded information. The interviews were transcribed and subject to a hermeneutical interpretation (Thompson and Haytko 1997). The hermeneutical analysis proceeded from idiographic analyses to cross-case analysis and the development of themes that permeate the stories of our informants (Goulding 2002). We applied constant comparative method of interpretation (Charmaz 2006), based on literature in the area of gender-related consumption, aesthetics, fashion, uniqueness and conformity, and philosophy. Additionally, diary entries helped us with the development of our interpretations in a constant discursive interaction among researchers.

**FINDINGS**

Some consumers are *anders*. Their style irritates. We present our findings according to three paradoxical practices of *willful ignorance*, *non non-conformity* and *defamiliarization* that aim at distancing themselves from societal conventions in various consumption domains; they reflect personal life projects and convictions about how to make sense of these domains in life.

**Willful ignorance**

Willful ignorance depicts the deliberate avoidance of signifiers of prevailing tastes and ideologies (Gould et al. 1997). Whereas willful ignorance characterizes various consumption cultures (Schouten and McAlexander 1995, Goulding and Saren 2009, Muniz and O’Guinn 2001), we found that our respondents ignore mainstream consumption on a broader scope, which surfaces in a plenitude of life aspects that are subject to boundaries of legitimate consumption. Ignorance manifests, for instance, in fleeing from societal blueprints of gender, family life, relationships, or profession. One of these societal blueprints concerns common gender concepts and traditional lifestyles, which respondents strongly criticized. Respondents claimed that imposed conventions aim at restricting people’s freedom. Ignoring these lifestyles, for Nico, means liberation.

> At the age of 23, this episode was over. I have been a little petty bourgeois, who thought at the age of 20 that something he needs to do is (...) to do it the way everyone else is doing it. Marry, having children, build a house, buy an apartment–like that. Now when I think of that, it is (...) stupid.

**Interviewer:** What was changing?

> Well back then I thought that everything needs to be done away with. All the legacy of junk needed to be done away with. The beliefs and ah (...) expectations that I was talked into. All the suppression and the expectations of society, and the people, and so forth. I abandoned all and (...) what I also did was that I questioned all other things in my life. And set up new rules; one of these was not to wear what others want me to wear but to dress the way I want it. (Nico, 35, self employed)

Nico liberated himself from prevailing normative concepts through willfully ignoring them at a certain stage in life when he started questioning societal conventions. Nico’s narrative also reveals that he applied willful ignorance in other life areas as well.

| Interview 1: Daniel, teacher, 29 | Interview 8: Patrick, designer, 30 |
| Interview 2: Marcus, company owner, 28 | Interview 9: Simon, editor, 31 |
| Interview 3: Steve, student, 25 | Interview 10: Marc, student, 25 |
| Interview 4: Robert, PhD student, 27 | Interview 11: Oliver, make up artist, 24 |
| Interview 5: Peter, hairdresser, 29 | Interview 12: Richard, social worker, 27 |
| Interview 6: Thomas, employee, 28 | Interview 13: Nico, self employed, 35 |
| Interview 7: Michael, employee, 42 | Interview 14: Lukas, student/ marketer, 28 |
where he felt societal pressure. At the time of the interview, for instance, Nico reported being in an open relationship with a man, and living separately.

Ignorance frees consumers from predefined lifestyles and consumption patterns but requires elaborate consideration and critical reflection of own desires, needs and convictions that match the autonomous self. In doing that, consumers liberate themselves from societal blueprints, and localize themselves. Willful ignorance is commonly a first step in people’s search for a self-determined identity and leaves consumers with a number of important decisions to be made in almost all areas of life. Yet, only after careful reflection—sometimes over years or even decades—when respondents found prevailing societal conventions not to fit their selves, they were apt to apply non-conformity and defamiliarization practices.

**Performing non-conformity**

Overall, respondents report about three main practices of non-conformity, which is provocative conformity, wearing the old and outdated, and consuming the ugly. Whereas ‘provocative conformity’ displays fashion-consciousness, ‘wearing the old and outdated’, and ‘consuming the ugly’ is practiced in order to avoid being categorized as mainstream fashionable.

**Provocative conformity.** Respondents portray themselves as adjusted and as non-conformers at the same time. Although respondents clearly aim to set themselves apart from group think, they do however not construct themselves as oppositional to others. Such non-conform behavior, which generally accords with contextual fashion rules, is commonly spiced with a provocative element, as for instance wearing a black suit and a pink baguette handbag in the opera, a suit with torn sneakers in a business meeting, or dressing in crème at a white party, as for instance Patrick reports.

“ For example to a white party I won’t go in white. Because I think it is stupid. Well I am not the revolutionary type, but it is stupid. I (...) I don’t like white at all anyways and accordingly when I am invited to a white party I avoid that by simply wearing crème, ebony or similar and then some (...) something else, some other color. Yes.” (Patrick, 30, designer)

By using misplaced objects, respondents distance themselves from the conventional style of social contexts and at the same time exhibit their consciousness of these social settings to ensure that they are accepted as knowledgeable. All of these provocations exhibit sophisticated, playful boundary transgressions without putting social acceptance in danger. It is these boundaries; the other; that which is not me that is used by respondents to reflect about what they aspire to be. The other is always different; a moving target that demands sophisticated differentiating aesthetic styles for different social environments. Fashion items, or life concepts are taken out of the situational and/or time context so as to break consumption rules.

**Wearing the old and outdated.** Wearing the old and outdated is not to be confused with nostalgia or retro consumption (Brown, Sherry and Kozinets 2003). Respondents rather apply specific practices to render recently bought consumption items as old and outdated thus negating the act of purchasing. Informants withdraw from the gaze of others through commoditization of the shiny and new; recognition is not their purpose and still, they become exactly recognized for that; because it is peculiar in a world of conspicuousness and gaze. In order to conceal newness, respondents report that they wash their new clothing items several times until they look muddy and old. “All that jazz” supports consumers in creating a personalized, distinctive appearance. The worn and the old have a history and bear the hallmarks of the owner. The item has thus lost its characteristics as a mass-marketed fashion item; it has lost the sameness of the newly bought item that is bought fresh from the rack.

Wearing the old and outdated is non-conformal because consumers do not break with fashion conformities at all. Practicing the old and outdated is not restricted to fashion items. Nico for example, reported that he only went to cafes and restaurants which were once trendy, but have now been abandoned by the in-crowds. He evades being part of a crowd of people who chases after new trends. Practicing the old and outdated thus inverts conceptions of what is generally conceived as trendy and fashionable. The untrendy becomes fashionable, different and, most importantly, a statement of who we are/want to be.

**Consuming the ugly.** Another practice of creating the self as non-conformal is the appraisal of objects or behaviors despite other people’s negative evaluations and reactions. This practice resembles Tian et al.’s (2001) behavioral category of unpopular counter conformity. However, in contrast to Tian et al.’s (2001) findings, respondents in their consumption narratives, referred to well known and even popular brands and consumption objects. Oliver, for example, reports about using an eau de cologne, which a lot of people do not like.

“One I like a lot is from Dior “Fahrenheit” but ah (...) but a lot of people hate that. I really like it because of that. So many people said “Boah, Oliver you are really smelling bad, like rotten moss” or something. I really like it a lot when people talk like that about my eau de Cologne” (Oliver, 24, Make-up artist)

Oliver’s excerpt reveals that he uses a perfume, which produces social sanctions like ridicule. More accurately, for Oliver the appeal of wearing this eau de cologne results from its negative evaluation. Being a make-up artist and working with people in the aesthetic industries exposes Oliver to constant aesthetic evaluations. Being fashionably groomed yet, using objects that other people dislike sets Oliver apart from his peers, and even puts his own profession into question. Consuming the ugly very strongly resists common conventions of beauty and aesthetics. Therefore, it is non-conformal. Respondents borrow from other people’s negative evaluations. At the same time, respondents challenge others’ conventional aesthetic evaluations. By turning things upside down, which is rendering ugly stuff beautiful, and vice versa, informants construct themselves as unconventional.

**DEFAMILIARIZATION**

Defamiliarization practices aim at altering popular consumption objects, behaviors and conventions in order to disguise their origin or primary purpose. Respondents report that they remove or add features to render consumption objects unusual. Similarly, familiar behavior is contrasted through its adoption in inappropriate contexts so as to render them unfamiliar. Defamiliarization practices comprise delocalization, delabeling and contrasting personal practice.

**Delocalization.** Delocalization strategies are related to the adoption of typical urban lifestyles which are unfamiliar to the places that respondents inhabit. These practices are straight forward attempts to consume the latest urban styles in small hometown contexts, and show dissent of local narrow-mindedness. Respondents report about their discontent with rural lifestyles and aesthetics:

“I am actually a country boy, who on the other hand is not. I have always been someone who (...) does not see [the respondent’s home town] as the centre of the world and I am not like others (...) Last year in spring I have been to Hongkong for
two months. My last relationship has been abroad, too. I orient myself on other things. For me [the respondent’s home town] is nice, but it’s not that I think that I should stay here; people are very provincial here. Like what the local magazine reports about styling, that is, yes, well, that is for people who want to blend in. Those are people who are satisfied with what society tells them to do. I am different. I think “I want to try this and that – different things”. I simply try things out and I am the only one in my peer group who does that.” (Robert, 27, student)

Respondents delocalize themselves primarily through the adoption of urban and cosmopolitan aesthetics. They adopted specific aesthetic styles, which they encountered in metropolitan areas like Paris, London, or Berlin. As these aesthetic styles are unknown in their home cities, they serve them to display their distinctiveness, which, in an urban context, would blend smoothly into contemporary urban lifestyles. Examples of such urban aesthetics are skinny jeans before they became stylish a couple of years ago, male handbags, specific hairstyles, color combinations, or particular shoes. Apart from aesthetics, respondents also engage in activities they connect with urbanism. They listen to particular music, prefer ethnic food and try to escape to urbanities whenever possible. Delocalization practices liken typical cosmopolitan lifestyles (Thompson and Tambahy 1999) and could therefore be straightforwardly be misinterpreted as cultural capital accumulation. In addition to that, the urban lifestyle also exposes respondents to resentments from their local environment, and confronts them with two paradoxical ways of living and being.

Delabeling. Delabeling aims at detaching consumption objects, and lifestyles from their sources so as to decontaminate them from their mainstream origins. Practices range from ripping off labels to transgressions of gender boundaries.

“When I see an item with something sewn on the back, which you can get rid of, then I would consider it. But when it is ahm (...) like Dolce &Gabbana there is a big logo imprint on it; well I would not spend money on that.”

Interviewer: “Because?”

“Because the thing would be worn by like a million other people and everyone would see what label it is. I am my own person and therefore I don’t like that.” (Patrick, 30, designer)

Patrick is very clear about his attitude towards mainstream labels and mass consumption. The deep resentment against depersonalization through mass marketed brands is noticeable here. His resentment resembles Tian et al.’s (2001) avoidance of marking as one of a kind and expresses a deep desire for developing a distinct personality, keeping some mystique, undefined facet of self. Such authentication acts (Lipovetsky 1994) become even more pronounced through cross-gender consumption. Through consumption of opposite gender styles, respondents renegotiate typical societal gender blueprints (Tuncay and Ottes, 2008, Holt and Thompson, 2004, Firat and Venkatesh, 1995). They engage in male and female performances and situate their self gender in between the extremes of maleness and femaleness. Contrasting, blending, and altering male and female aesthetics and performances supports the accomplishment of a unique gender.

Contrasting personal practices. Contrary to delocalizing and delabeling, which is directed towards others, contrasting personal practices aim at altering own behaviors and personal consumption habits in order not to become a prototype of oneself. These findings, specifically, moved our interpretive frame from nonconformity and gender-crossing concepts towards Lipovetsky’s (1994) argument of the authenticating self, existentialist notions of Sein, and psychological notions of individuation, and self-transformation (Koppensteiner 2009). Whereas previous findings strongly point towards respondents’ attempts to differentiate from the aesthetics- and gender-illiterate crowd, here, respondents seek to render themselves unfamiliar through alterations of styles, genders and related practices. According to the respondents, such style reworking is independent of life transitions but pursued regularly so as to keep style imitators out, and

Figure 1. Semiotic square of Anders-sein and conformity distinctions
experience how they themselves change as their styles and behaviors change. By doing that, respondents continuously alter their selves—including gender—reflecting an inner desire to better understand who they are. Strict consumption rules provide structure; contrasting personal practices provide the means for self-transformation.

DISCUSSION

Our study investigated into the lifestyle of young males for making an important theoretical point. We describe and interpret a lifestyle which is neither conform, nor non-conform; which is unique, yet only within specific social contexts. We introduce the notion of Anders-sein for this paradoxical, yet coherent life project. The term Anders-sein is rooted in German philosophy and literature (cf. Nietzsche 1969/1983, 1989). Anders depicts differness and deviating behavior, or conception, whereas sein is related to an existentialist notion of self. Figure 1 presents a semiotic square that depicts how Anders-sein is related to common conceptualizations of conformity and non-conformity.

Anders-sein refers to a general quest for being different, relative to what is common and typical, in an attempt to ulimate one’s self. We understand its opposite, non-Anders-sein, as the lack of differntiation desires in favour of generally accepted behaviours and conventions. Whereas non-Anders-sein reflects a deliberate individual decision, conformity refers to the concepts of belongingness and identity construction through and within communities, tribes, or subcultures (Wooten 2006, Kates, 2004). Counter conformity as the opposite of conformity willingly and explicitly diverts from group behaviour, while Anders-sein lacks this turn against a particular, defined group, or notion. Rather it tries to contrast what is generally perceived as normal in society.

Anders-sein is a concept that informs our understanding of individuals’ pursuit of differntness in at least two ways. First, Anders-sein transcends uniqueness and conformity and remains inconspicuous and un-ideological. While uniqueness is infused by counter conformity (Tian et al. 2001), Anders-sein embraces practices that may be indeed popular. Second, consumer’s small scale boundary transgressions in important life domains through practices of provocative conformity are neither bold social signals, nor unimportant subtleties. They confront consumers with reactions from their environment, which they reflect upon vis-à-vis their own critical conviction.

Respondents’ accounts are reminiscent of critical and liberal discourse of the intellectual elite, spiced with a pretentious undertone. Still, critique is not a matter of public discourse and, through practices of non non-conformity, remains within the aesthetic domain. Respondents’ styles could be interpreted as aestheticism. Just as dandyism came up during the 19th century as style “entrepreneurship” so as to gain deference in a period of cultural decay (Smith 1974), Anders-sein likens dandyism’s refined aesthetics as a form of disregard of social structure, and willful ignorance of social conventions. Yet, in stark contrast to dandyism, Anders-sein is far from conspicuous, and social competition. Rather, Anders-sein seeks to contrast other, contemporary forms of social conventions, as for instance, common understandings of beauty, for instance through wearing the old and outdated and consuming the ugly; gender definitions, and the localism-cosmopolitan dualism through practices of delocalization, and delabeling.

Gender crossing practices of informants, which are not overtly homosexual, remind of Marcel Proust’s famous modern novel A la Recherche du temps perdu (In Search of Lost Time), and its use of feminized masculine names for the portrayal of the novel’s main character’s desires (O’Brien, 1949). The gender-crossing practices found in our study remain widely uncontested and liken contemporary, everyday popular media representations of boundary crossings that are legitimized as popular arts form. Similarly, critique on provincialism in local communities rather remains a still expression of dissent through practicing of different styles hence is non non-conform. By mimicking normality, practices of Anders-sein remain apolitical and un-ideological. Still, as normality is transposed in other contexts, their pursuit of being different gains a slightly provocative touch, which is sufficiently anders.

Apart from the distinct but mostly unspectacular outer-directedness of Anders-sein, its pursuit has a strong inner-directedness. Through defamiliarization and contrasting personal practices, in particular, males permanently oscillate among styles, geographical locations, genders, habits, and selves, so as to find out what they like, dislike, what kind of gender understanding they have, and have not, thereby developing self-understanding. Although less radical and less public, Anders-sein practices liken the “constantly changing chameleon persona” (Kelley 2000:7) of 20th century popular music culture. We interpret this permanent search for self-understanding as existentialist. The self, while not unconscious, is impossible to conceptualize, nor directly accessible (Sartre 1964). Instead, individuals engage in gradual rapprochement to their self, which they will probably never be able to denominate. While we are cautious with the notion of the authentic self, we nevertheless could also interpret practices of Anders-sein as practices of authentication towards an unknown self. Still, Anders-sein strategies help getting a glimpse of inner desires, (dis)likes, tastes, and particularities that commonly remain inexplicable.

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