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Re-Inquiries

The Politics of Consumption: A Re-Inquiry on Thompson and Haytko's (1997) "Speaking of Fashion"

JEFF B. MURRAY*

This article explores Thompson and Haytko's (1997) interpretation of fashion discourses by bringing together two opposing perspectives on consumers' use of objects as signs. The first perspective assumes that the consumer has free reign in the play of signs (i.e., the consumer is constituting). The second assumes that the consumer is imprisoned by the signs and codes of the historical moment (i.e., the consumer is constituted). The dialectical and discursive tension between these two perspectives is used as an orienting framework in the hermeneutic analyses of 14 phenomenological interviews. Thompson and Haytko's (1997) findings/claims remain pertinent in a professional, middle-class context. In addition, this research contributes to their lived hegemony premise by emphasizing the dominating tendencies of marketing systems.

Thompson and Haytko (1997) proposed that the plurality of fashion discourses results in a diverse combination of interpretive positions, enabling consumers to find meaning by contrasting opposing values and beliefs. These "countervailing meanings" are used by consumers in their everyday lives to mediate tensions arising from their efforts to develop a sense of individual agency (i.e., distinction) and perceptions of social prescription (i.e., social integration; Thompson and Haytko 1997, p. 15). This idea is important in that it suggests that the traditional meaning transfer model (McCracken 1986) is more dynamic and consumer centered than originally conceptualized. Thompson and Haytko (1997) conclude: "the meaning transfer process is a diffuse, transformative, and consumer-centered undertaking. In these terms, consumers' appropriation of cultural meanings is a

dialogical process in which individuals are continuously engaged in an interpretive dialogue, not only with those in their social spheres but also with the broader sociocultural history that is encoded in culturally conventional ways of talking about fashion and other distinct domains of consumer culture" (p. 38; emphasis added).

Given the fundamental significance of McCracken's (1986) theoretical account of meaning transfer, Thompson and Haytko's (1997) conclusions have notable implications for consumer research. Thus, in the spirit of learning more about what Thompson and Haytko (1997) call a "dialogical process," this article first constructs an orienting conceptual framework that is useful for interpreting the dialogic interplay between individual consumers and consumer culture. Then, using this framework, a re-inquiry of "Speaking of Fashion" (Thompson and Haytko 1997) was carried out, and two variations of Thompson and Haytko (1997) were emphasized.¹ First, the orienting conceptual framework was explicitly constructed to reflect the dialogical process between life worlds and social systems (with a more critical

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¹The original drafts of this article were positioned as a phenomenological study of the politics of style. The current positioning as a Re-Inquiries article emerged over the course of the review process.

emphasis on the dominating tendencies of marketing systems). Second, Thompson and Haytko (1997) conducted their research in a college setting, which was conducive to their goal of analyzing how fashion discourses operated in a specific social context. This research takes the analyses of fashion discourses out of the college setting and places them in a professional, middle-class context. The informants that participated in this research are, on average, eight and a half years older than Thompson and Haytko's (1997), and they occupy a wide range of cultural roles. As my analyses will show, Thompson and Haytko's (1997) general point that consumers combine, adapt, and personalize fashion discourses, as a way of negotiating key existential tensions, holds up well in this new context. In addition, Thompson and Haytko's (1997, p. 38) argument that identity is forged "as much by the meanings s/he feels impelled to resist as by those that are tacitly embraced" does not seem to reflect their informants' stage of psychological development (i.e., college is a time when issues of independence and autonomy tend to be paramount). My analyses support that constructing identity through salient negations is relevant to later life stages. The next section develops an orienting conceptual framework that emphasizes the dialectic by placing fashion discourses in the context of symbolic consumption.

TWO PERSPECTIVES ON SYMBOLIC CONSUMPTION

The first perspective, "sign experimentation," assumes that consumption is an "expressive movement" (Levy 1981, p. 51). Here, consumers have free rein in the play of signs to piece together a collage of meanings that expresses the desired symbolic statements. By expressing these statements, consumers distinguish themselves from alternative values and meanings. It is in this way that symbolic consumption has become associated with identity politics (Hetherington 1998). Here, agency is expressed in the context of subject positions (Laclau 1996) or the new social movements (Smith 1994). These movements include a plurality of middle-class (Bagguley 1992) interests such as different types of feminism, gay and lesbian activism, peace and environmental groups, vegetarianism, voluntary simplicity, animal rights, and various groups mobilized around race and ethnicity (Best and Kellner 1997). The "new" denotes the fragmentation of labor that accompanied the growth of consumer culture. This fragmentation shifted the focus of agency from class solidarity to localized subject positions and radical democracy (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Whereas the "old" social movements developed out of structural inequalities, new social movements have developed around fashion, style, identity, and what Maffesoli (1996, p. 9) calls "neotribalism" or "emotional communities." Thus, fashion results from a combination of subject positions, with meaning resulting from the play of differences in the context of identity performance.

Using fashion to express symbolic statements of membership and demarcation assumes that semantic codes are

open discursive systems. Consumers can therefore construct style by selecting opposing meanings available within their discursive space. This is analogous to the creativity involved in the speaking of a language. Speakers are bound by their ability to use a language in the same way that consumers are bound by their resources. Yet, speakers of a language, like consumers, often combine words, and objects, in distinct and extraordinary ways.

The second perspective, "sign domination," marks the transition from an emphasis on the historical agent to the extreme elimination of agency in favor of structural processes. This perspective combines a post-Marxist semiology of domestic objects (i.e., an analysis of hegemonic consumption codes) with a critical sociology of consumer society (Kellner 1989). Here, it is suggested that the classification systems that direct the meanings of things reflect the social order and are central to its reproduction of inequality (Slater 1997). Inequality reproduces a consumer ethic of false promises, resulting in a desperate desire for signs that are just out of reach (Aronowitz 1974). Postulating this persistent demand to adopt the appropriate images of the everyday is an application of Gramsci's theory of domination, which argues that ideological power takes hold through more provisional means and requires the consent of social actors (Forgacs 2000). Simply, without critical reflection, consent to hegemonic social structures is more likely than resistance (Adamson 1980).

Since consumption codes are reflected in language, when children become exposed to the mass media and begin to develop cognitive skills, they internalize codes as a natural part of their world (Fromm 1976). Primary socialization within a consumer culture, therefore, creates a mass of good consumers, all struggling for the signs that fuel corporate capitalism (Harvey 1990). This mechanism of discrimination and hierarchy sits at the very foundation of values and social integration (Baudrillard 1981). "Sign value," or fashion, is thus an institutional practice, and the discursive characteristics of the code appear across several representational forms. The use of signs and radical imagery to resist the system only creates a feeling of resistance. As a way of managing crisis and change, radical identities are also fashioned by the system.

It should be recognized that all societies, at all times and places, have prevailing sign systems. These systems are socially constructed by the participants and, over time, become social structures. While acknowledging the importance of the duality, most theorists tend to emphasize one side of the agency-structure dialectic. Although Thompson and Haytko (1997) were moving toward a more balanced critical analysis, their article developed the agency (i.e., sign experimentation) side more fully than the structure (i.e., sign domination) side. Given that a more balanced conceptualization of agency-structure is needed to understand the consumers' use of signs, the tension between sign experimentation and sign domination was used as an orienting standpoint for the analyses of the verbatim text.

METHOD

In order to be consistent across methodological domains, Thompson and Haytko's (1997) methodological procedures, interpretive philosophy, and approach to analyses were generally used as guides for the present research design. As discussed in the introduction, two systematic variations were planned. The first was a more explicit recognition of structure in the conceptualization, and the second dealt with the selection of informants and social context.

Textual data were generated by means of phenomenological interviews with 14 middle-class participants. By investigating how middle-class consumers experience fashion as a way of negotiating agency-structure tensions, a broader contribution can be made to our understanding of how consumers seek identity in a mass-produced, market-driven society. The professional managerial class or, more simply, the "middle class" (Waites 1995, p. 338) is similar to Gouldner's (1979) "new class" in that most have at least a bachelor's degree, work in professional technical and managerial jobs, and were raised in families in which the parents were college educated.

Volunteers for the study were selected from a medium-sized college town located in the midwestern United States. The initial announcement asking for volunteers was made in a master of business administration course. The researcher asked for volunteers plus the name and phone number of a friend who was not currently a student. From a pool of 32 potential informants, 15 were selected (one informant better fit an undergraduate college context and was therefore dropped at the request of the reviewers). Eight females and six males were interviewed, ranging from 22 to 56 years of age, and seven were married. Eleven of the participants were Caucasian, one was Asian, one was of Hispanic descent, and one was a black South African. Eleven of the participants were from the United States, representing Arkansas, California, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Texas, and Virginia. The three foreign participants were from Germany, India, and South Africa (at the time of the interviews, these informants felt that they had lived in the United States long enough to understand popular consumption codes, fashion trends, and distinguishing styles). A diverse range of middle-class roles and occupations are represented, including full-time mother, paralegal, professor, financial planner, graduate student, communications consultant, advertising executive, marketing executive, engineer, and elementary school teacher.

A mixed-gender interview team consisting of four researchers (two male and two female) conducted the interviews (Adler and Adler 1994). All of the researchers on the interview team were experienced and trained in this interview technique. As a way of facilitating personal conversations relating to lived experiences, each of the interview dyads had a same-gender pairing (Thompson and Haytko 1997). Prior to each interview, the participant was assured of anonymity. After each team member had completed one interview, the team met to share experiences, procedures, ideas, and strategies. These meetings helped to prepare the

team for the next set of interviews. Team meetings continued until the interviews were completed. The length of the interviews ranged from 40 minutes to just under two hours. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim, resulting in a 394-page, typed, double-spaced text.

The first phase of analyses consisted of identifying a summarizing metaphor or metonym for each case that captured the informant's sense of fashion. Narrative framing therefore focused on issues relating to style construction and maintenance. In addition, issues relating to narrative, including where the informant's sense of fashion came from, were explored. On completion of this initial phase, analyses continued by interpreting across cases. In this phase, the researcher searched for common storylines between narratives. These storylines eventually became the overarching themes described in the next section. Once these themes were identified, the entire text was read again against the backdrop of these themes. At this point, sign experimentation—sign domination tensions, and other related literature, were used to further interpret and link these themes to a wider cultural context. This process of moving to an etic interpretation continued until a rich description of the text was constructed.

THE TENSION BETWEEN EXPERIMENTATION AND DOMINATION

Using the sign experimentation—sign domination opposition as the orienting frame of reference, three common storylines or overarching themes were interpreted: "We Are All Postcolonials," "The Strategic Mark(et)ing of the Body," and "The Power of Persona." These themes help describe the consumers' experiences of tension between agency and structure in the social construction of fashion and style.

We Are All Postcolonials

One of the themes emerging from the interpretation is that fashion can be used to mediate tensions resulting from cultural pluralism and complexity. The stories of three informants, Surendra, Dolores, and Wallace, are used to represent and describe this theme. These informants' expressions of fashion discourses reflect and, to some degree, reconcile cultural tensions. It is in this sense that we are all postcolonials, struggling for identity by coming to terms with the prior colonizing experience (Lemert 1997).

Surendra is a 29-year-old male college professor from Chandigarh, India, who has lived in the United States for seven years. He entered the interview wearing Levi's jeans, a gray T-shirt, Nike running shoes, and medium-length black hair with a blond highlight in the front. On the one hand, Surendra is cosmopolitan (Friedman 1994) in that he participates in North American, European (Surendra lived in London with his uncle for a year after moving from India), and Indian (specifically Sikh) cultures without fully committing to any of them. He is, as Friedman (1994) explains, betwixt and between without being liminal. On the other hand, Surendra expresses that, "Inside I am still a Sikh and always will be." Surendra's interview captures the struggle

to express a style that reflects his cultural experience and, at the same time, mediates complexity as worldwide interconnections and movements of people, images, and codes increase.

Surendra: If someone wears Levi's jeans in India it is considered a cool thing. You are more Western. Similarly, a pair of Nikes or Reeboks does the same thing. Many people rely on American products as being symbolic of Western culture.

Interviewer: Is that something that you want to portray?

Surendra: Yeah, and the younger people, not necessarily the people who are over 50, they don't like stuff like that. They are kind of conservative, they think that younger people should be more traditional, be like Indian people. But myself and the younger people are very much oriented toward material things that portray themselves as being Western, and not just American products but European products too.

Interviewer: Can you think of a specific example?

Surendra: Oh yeah, when I was growing up as a kid, I was always very oriented toward the Western culture. I was always an individual; most people tend to be very group oriented. I was never like that, I was always more of an individual and I was always concerned about how I look and about physical fitness. Most people in India don't work out; I used to always work out, jog and, you know, lift weights and stuff. My grandparents and older relatives would always think I was kind of funny. They would be like "your so thin, why do you need to work out?" They didn't have the concept of you don't have to be fat or big to work out, its healthy, and if you work out you feel good about your body and appearance.

Interviewer: That's interesting that the older group did not emulate Western cultures.

Surendra: Yeah, I think it might have to do with Indian history, because it was basically a kingdom, a big nation with a lot of small kingdoms. Then the British came to India, and they conquered the whole country and they ruled until 1947. So, I think the older people might have a negative feeling toward the British, like my Grandfather still can't relate to anything Western.

Later in the interview, when Surendra was discussing products and brands used to construct a Western style, such as T-shirts and faded Levi's jeans, the informant discussed the meaning of these objects:

Interviewer: So what cultural values do these products symbolize?

Surendra: I think liberation. It's a sign of being liberated from what you had to do, because these older people have been doing that for years and years and they want you to do the same thing. As an example, the turban I used to wear, I never wanted to wear it and I never wanted to grow my hair long but I had no choice, if I had chosen otherwise I would have pained everybody in my family.

Interviewer: Do you still have your turban?

Surendra: Yeah, yeah, because like I said, I hold those values, so if ever somebody has a doubt whether I'm a Sikh or not I can prove it. Because inside I am and always will be.

Here, Surendra describes an older generation struggling to retain their identified world against the intrusions of colonizers. However, at the same time, the younger generation views the older cohort as an imposing force: as Surendra remarks, "Because in India, if I want to be something, if I want a look that doesn't go with what most people think, like getting rid of the turban, then I'm constrained, there's no way. Well, there is a way, I can just say well I'm going to do this anyway, but then I'm going to have a lot of problems, I'm going to lose a lot of friends and family, and some people will say, 'We don't want to talk to you anymore.'" Thus, although Surendra's style reflects the interests and values of the younger generation in India, it has not been constructed as a sign of protest or rebellion against the older generation. His use of fashion discourses reflects the younger generation's need for flexibility in fashioning a style that blends with popular culture and the global marketplace.

Interviewer: When you started to wear more Western clothes, did you feel different?

Surendra: I felt really good because now I could have the kind of hairstyle I wanted, and look like I wanted to. Because with a turban it constrains the way you look because you can't cut it short or long. I mean basically you can't do that much with your general appearance. So, that was the best part, I thought I could have the kind of hairstyle I wanted and look the way I wanted to.

Note that the turban is a key symbol for both the older and younger generations. For the older generation, the turban is a symbol of emancipation from injustices that took place in the late eighteenth century. As a member of the younger generation, Surendra experiences the turban as a symbol of the many social constraints he associates with Sikhism. Interestingly, the same object is coded and interpreted as liberating by one group and dominating by another. In the context of Surendra's narrative, it is tempting to assume that globalization results in a superordinate identity that suppresses cultural differences. However, Surendra's mediation of Sikhism with a more flexible Western style may reflect new forms of difference, some regional, but increasingly based on distinctions that may not be identified with space (Miller 1995). These distinctions allow for new forms of style, which may not be contiguous with prior traditions (Miller 1995).

Although the turban is not as meaningful to Surendra in its original context, it is still significant in that it embodies important personal experiences. The turban symbolizes family experiences and cherished memories associated with growing up in Chendigara. In this sense, the turban remains an important part of Surendra's style. Surendra's look may be Western; however, his turban is prominently displayed in his home, and he still wears a Kara (a steel bangle worn

on the right wrist symbolizing discipline and commitment to the Sikh faith). Surendra's style can, therefore, be summarized as a combination of objects, meanings, and discourses that have evolved as a way of mediating complex cultural oppositions. Dolores's narrative further explores the ways that fashion discourses can be used to negotiate cultural identities.

Dolores is a 56-year-old communications consultant who has lived in a number of cities in the United States and has traveled extensively in the Far East (i.e., India and Nepal). Dolores arrived for the interview driving an old Mercedes; she was dressed simply in faded jeans and a cotton shirt, and her hair was long and natural looking with some gray. Dolores's style mediates the material comfort and flexibility of the West with the spirituality and material simplicity of the East:

Interviewer: When you traveled to India, what kind of impact did this have on your sense of style?

Dolores: I think that India had a tremendous bearing on simplicity and my feeling about simplicity. Because I experienced being with people who had a very simple life yet seemed very happy. And I realized when I was there, although I lived in a two-story townhouse with a fireplace and all, how little we need, how little we need to be happy.

Interviewer: What a neat thing to discover so early.

Dolores: So if there were lots of us, we would just ruin the American economy. (Laughter)

Interviewer: Yeah, that's interesting. (Laughter)

Dolores: And I try all the time to get rid of things. I think compared to people my age, you know, forties and fifties, I probably have very few things. But when I compare myself against people in other countries, I have too much.

The above comment about ruining the U.S. economy indicates that Dolores is aware of the political implications of her style. Dolores is also aware of the existential responsibility involved in making deliberate lifestyle choices: "The first time I got into that [Buddhism] I was just divorced and the whole idea of you're responsible for your life and your choices and you are what you are right now because of the choices you made; not because of your mother or your father or anybody else."

Voluntary simplicity, in the context of interpreting Dolores's narrative, involves two things. First, it entails the relativization of consumption codes. In *Voluntary Simplicity*, Duane Elgin (1993) seeks a way of life that is outwardly simple, yet inwardly rich: "As one who has spent a great deal of time in the East, I've had the chance to view intimately a way of life that, in its simplicity, is very different from the style of living to which we in the West are accustomed" (p. 11). Second, to live voluntarily is to live more deliberately (Elgin 1993). Historical and collective identities are the most constraining under circumstances of unreflected action. Thus, conscious reflection helps one to interpret, personalize, negotiate, and challenge collective identities or

dominant consumption codes. This is the reflectively defiant consumer (Ozanne and Murray 1995) or the voluntary downshifter (Schor 1998), struggling for balance in order to construct a style of greater purpose, authenticity, and satisfaction. Shi (1985) has suggested that the spiritual teachers of the East (Zarathustra, Buddha, Lao-Tzu, and Confucius) and the combined heritage of Greco-Roman culture and Judeo-Christian ethics have influenced the voluntary simplicity movement. More contemporary influences have come from authors writing in the tradition of Thoreau, the "hippies" of the 1960s, and ecofeminist activism (Cuomo 1996).

A recent trend is the institutionalization or official management of the voluntary simplicity lifestyle. There are now experts in how to get started in voluntary simplicity that make their living giving lectures and workshops, and directors of simplicity projects. Associations, simplicity circle consultations, newsletters, books, nonprofit organizations, and various grass roots community organizations are increasingly defining the simplicity identity. The movement has its own heroes (e.g., Cecile Andrews, Duane Elgin, and David Shi) and even its own holiday (i.e., Buy Nothing Day; see <http://www.adbusters.org>). Clearly, as more books are written on how to downshift, as more associations better define the performance of the role, and as national conferences continue to recruit new members (e.g., "No Purchase Necessary: Building the Voluntary Simplicity Movement," September 1998, Los Angeles), the identity becomes better articulated and more easily commodified. This process of commodification drains meaning from voluntary simplicity, leaving only surface impressions or a staged authenticity. In this way, voluntary simplicity represents one outcome of the culture of cynicism that has grown up in response to a materialist culture that emphasizes superficial meanings. From this perspective, Dolores is typical of the jaded, post-materialist baby boomer of late capitalism, seeking authenticity by exploring more spiritual modes of consumption. At first glance, Dolores seems to embrace what Surendra rejects; however, by romanticizing the spirituality and poverty of the East, Dolores constructs a Western take on Eastern values. This simplicity style is made possible by the large, wealthy democracies of the West and characterizes this upper-middle-class movement. Whether this style results in greater purpose, authenticity, and satisfaction depends on Dolores's ability to realize autonomous control over meanings associated with it.

Wallace is from Klerksdorp, South Africa, and has lived in the United States for one year. He is a 25-year-old graduate student completing a degree in agricultural economics. Wallace carries a backpack for his books, is dressed in oversized cotton pants and shirt, and wears a traditional African bracelet on his right wrist. The South African government is paying for his education in exchange for a commitment to return to South Africa and accept a position in public administration. Wallace was raised in an extended family, which has been part of the same close-knit community for generations. He uses fashion discourses to express identi-

fication with this group, as well as a way of responding to the political and economic changes taking place in South Africa. Wallace has reached a phase of life and is participating in social changes that both make personal and interpersonal growth inevitable. Not only does Wallace sense the cultural impact of social change on his family and community, but his recent travels throughout Europe and the United States have also provided the opportunity to understand and experience new lifestyles. Hall (1990, p. 230) suggests that a black cultural identity is constituted through the different positions of *presence Africaine*, *presence Européenne*, and *presence Americaine*. These different positions are used to create a sense of shared identity. Although Wallace understands the potential of these influences in the process of identification, he avoids this process as an expression of commitment to his local “upbringing”:

Wallace: I would say my style is pretty down-to-earth. By that, I don't mean sometimes I won't be seduced by name brands and other expensive commodities. But generally, my upbringing and my culture, to a great extent, influences my expenditure pattern.

Interviewer: Could you describe your upbringing?

Wallace: We were brought up in very strict families, like, you never wear a shirt or a T-shirt hanging outside your pair of pants. You always have to tuck it in, and also, the kind of clothes that you wear largely reflect the kind of person you are. Not only your character but also your financial status and the like. With respect to my culture, the way our Grandparents brought us up, it is bad for a person to have a lot of nice clothes, a lot of money while his brothers and sisters are going poor. That is, to go around with name brands, designer clothes, amid people who are not as adorned would be like an insult to those who are less fortunate. So you always have to pull yourself back in some part to those who can not and give them whatever you can.

In the above excerpt, Wallace describes the process of “pull[ing] yourself back” in order to achieve a “down-to-earth” style. This “down-to-earth” discourse is an expression of empathy with like-minded people, a way of seeking solidarity based on locally shared ethical and aesthetic values. In many ways, it is already too late for Wallace; he realizes that his opportunities and experiences have made him different and now needs to reflectively adjust his style to express a nostalgic interpretation of the past. This style is, therefore, an expression of desire for an intentional emotional community that Mafesoli (1996) describes as neotribal. By expressing this style, Wallace identifies emotionally with the local and, at the same time, challenges the dominating impact of globalization, particularly U.S. commercialization:

Wallace: I think the media plays a large role in terms of commercializing the South African consumer about the products from the United States. One area is sports I think.

Interviewer: Can you give me some examples?

Wallace: The NBA, not only are the players held in high

esteem. Also, the products like Nike and Reebok, and the way generally the NBA takes a person from humble beginnings to celebrity status.

Interviewer: Are there any role models that you can think of?

Wallace: I think partly because of our history, people like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X are in high esteem and our leaders also tend to follow in the desire for pacifist ends and a culture of nonviolence. But, the sports heroes are really making inroads, Michael Jordan, Shaquille O'Neal, and Magic Johnson, once in a while celebrities travel to troubled South Africa like internationally acclaimed models from the United States and just lately Evander Holyfield. Yeah, it was very recent, and he also came to meet our president.

In the above excerpt, Wallace combines the names of civil-rights leaders who are interested in human rights with sports celebrities who travel to South Africa because of their endorsement contracts. Both the civil-rights leaders and the companies contracting with the sports celebrities are interested in emancipation, albeit for different reasons. If global capitalism is going to continue to be successful, it must market its consumption code to “free” individuals, elevating its interests above local concerns. The commodification of reality involves diverting the concerns of everyday life away from community issues. Only then can fashion and style separate from an allegiance to communally shared values and historical concerns. Having sports celebrities, as representatives of companies such as Nike and Reebok, meet with political leaders is part of the commercialization process.

Wallace's down-to-earth style is an expression of desire for the local and, at the same time, a way of avoiding the imposing hegemony of globalization. In this sense, his style is the outcome of a nostalgic view of community and the globalizing force of the present and future. As Wallace travels to various parts of the world, the global media culture becomes a backdrop from which to experience new opportunities. A transnational diaspora from every continent produces the conditions for new hybridized cultures and identities that have not yet realized their full potential. Style is more and more a question of mediating often conflicting cultural elements into new types of hybridized identities that combine the local with the global (Cvetkovich and Kellner 1997). However, in the context of Wallace's narrative, this process is also leading to the fragmentation and domination of traditional identities, eroding cultural customs and distressing local communities.

Whereas Surendra's style expressed a mediation of the global and local, Wallace's use of fashion discourses challenges a global commercial identity. Dolores was also challenging a collective commercial identity but was drawing on a global discourse to express her style. Interestingly, although these informants do not represent a college context, they are adopting a critical stance toward specific facets of consumer culture (Thompson and Haytko 1997). In addition, they are appropriating countervailing meanings on the basis

of their localized knowledge and value systems (Thompson and Haytko 1997). They are cosmopolitan (Thompson and Tambyah 1999) in that their sense of self may be more versatile and flexible than persons who have lived only in one culture. From a sign-experimentation perspective, Wallace and Dolores are seeking authenticity in the face of widespread commercialization. From a sign-domination perspective, they are prey to a more subtle form of commodification: adopting a ritual form of staged authenticity. The actual experience of fashion expression involves a complex dialectic that lies in the tension between these perspectives. On the one hand, it is clear that fashion is often an expression of deep-seated cultural imperatives. On the other hand, the experience of style projects involves identification with others, the commercial and creative use of stylistic effects, and situated performances. Style is a local site of tension where issues related to competing subject positions, difference, and identity politics are marked and experienced.

The Strategic Mark(et)ing of the Body

The fashioned body mediates tensions between personal autonomy and social dependencies. In this sense, the appearance of the body can be used to strategically manage particular styles and impressions. This theme is illustrated with excerpts taken from Miguel, Sarah, and Rebecca.

Miguel is a 25-year-old project engineer from South Texas. He was raised in a close-knit, lower-class, Hispanic family and is married with one child. Miguel currently has a good job with a successful company, has completed a MBA by going part-time in the evenings, and is enjoying the rewards of a middle-class life. He arrives for the interview after work wearing a dark navy suit, white oxford shirt and tie, short-cropped hair, and black loafers, carrying a black leather briefcase. Miguel's use of fashion discourses reflects themes of escape, competition, a drive to succeed, and social mobility: as he remarks, "You try to stay within this social group at work and try to do the things they like to do just to stay within sight of all these people so they won't forget you and you won't end up dying in an office somewhere ten years from now in the same spot."

It was Miguel's physical prowess that enabled him to be noticed by particular groups and made it possible for him to get a college education (football scholarship to Texas A&M). Thus, it was the disciplined body that provided a means of escape from a lower socioeconomic group. Miguel now expresses the essential nature of these physical activities in a corporate context so as to construct a style poised for mobility. He strategically manages an impression to be recognized as a strong team player, willing to sacrifice time and energy for the company. For example, as Miguel moved from the football field to the boardroom, the context of weight lifting shifted from performance (i.e., injury prevention, strength, and quickness) to appearance (i.e., the appearance of strength—size, shape, and definition). The bodybuilding community codes the appearance of strength in amazing detail. The body is first fragmented, and then each part is sculpted according to a consensual set of strict

specifications: as Miguel states, "You start working out at these gyms, Gold's Gym, places like that, where it is more focused on bodybuilding. You have people looking at themselves in the mirror and showing their biceps and doing a muscular pose or something like that. You tend to see that but you really don't know what they're doing so you start picking up the literature and start reading magazines, and the next thing you know, people ask you a question about something and it just pops in your mind because you saw it in the magazines." Miguel manages a group of engineers so he does not need (i.e., use value) to be physically powerful. However, the appearance of physical strength has sign value because of positive ascriptions:

It gives you a sense of confidence . . . like at work, we're talking and we're all in a meeting and we're talking about design and we're all with the operations people and my boss would say joking around, "Get off my case or I'll get Miguel to jump on you," something like that, or, "You're bigger than me, I'm not gonna argue with you," just stuff like that. So, it gives you a sense of people respect you because you're bigger. . . . I used to work in operations before and he [Miguel's supervisor] said people tend to respect you more than they tend to respect me or somebody else because you're bigger. "People see you and they think of authority, they think of someone in an important position."

Since golf is an important part of Miguel's corporate culture, this activity also contributes to his strategic expression of style:

Hey, you've got to play golf if you want to make it here. You gotta, so you can socialize with these guys. So, you pick up some golf clubs and you start playing. When you start playing with middle management it's a sign that people are starting to look at you, it's a sign that you're gonna start moving up in the organization. . . . Finally, the president of the company division calls me up and says, "Hey, Miguel, I want you to come and play golf with me." So, I hung up the phone and called my wife up, "Hey, I'm gonna play golf with the president of the company." Now I'm not just down here anymore.

Miguel uses social drinking with his colleagues on business trips in the same way. Although he does not enjoy this activity, the signification is useful for being noticed as a dedicated team player:

Sometimes you do things you don't want to do, and that's part of the pressure. When I went to Minneapolis, the president of the meat section called me up and I had already had three or four beers. I'm not a heavy drinker so I already started feeling a little dizzy and he grabs a beer and he hands it to me. Well, if my wife would have done that, I would have said, "No, I've had enough, I don't want it." But, in this case, you just take the beer and drink it. You drink it because this man that represents someone important in the company told you to drink it and so you drink.

Exploring the historical roots of instrumental rationality aids interpretation of Miguel's story. Weber (1958) claims that religious sentiments were important in structuring the iron cage of corporate capitalism. Here, bureaucratic control of the body was anticipated by the discipline of the monastery in which bodies were subordinated to ascetic rules of practice. In this context, corporate culture is a secularized asceticism demanding sacrifice and conformity. The consumption codes regulating activities such as weight lifting, golf, and social drinking are instrumental in helping Miguel enact a style that mediates his experience, interests, and motivations with the values of the organization. These values are consistent with the iron-cage theme: discipline, sacrifice, conformity, bottom-line value, and teamwork. As Miguel says, "The bottom line is you're here to make more money, and this is a way of marketing yourself and putting yourself up there for sale."

Although these codes represent an iron cage, containing individual creativity, they are also the keys to Miguel's movement from a lower socioeconomic group. This is important since Miguel's experience has vividly demonstrated how frustrating life can be in the lower class where ideologies claiming easy mobility abound but resources for achievement are scarce. What may be interpreted as domination in one context becomes a liberating force in the context of Miguel's overall narrative. Again, the experience of fashion needs to be understood as a mediating tension between domination and expression.

Sarah is a 49-year-old, divorced mother of two from Santa Rosa, California. She is a small, slender, and attractive woman with medium-length blond hair brushed neatly back; on the day of the interview, she wore tights, an oversized turtleneck sweater, and delicate jewelry. Sarah's description of her expression of style can be summarized with the metaphor of "clean aesthetic." This metaphor is used not only to describe the role that Sarah's body plays in the experience of style but also other physical surroundings, including landscape architecture and interior design. By "clean," Sarah does not mean sanitized: "I don't mean clean as in germ-free, I mean as in aesthetics." This style began with an interpretation of her parent's sense of style:

Interviewer: Can you describe for me where this sense of style came from?

Sarah: Yes, I think from my childhood because my parents were very sweet, very nice, but their sense of style was not good enough for me as an adult, so I wanted to improve on that. But, the important things I had in childhood, they were there. It was just like, kind of an artistic sense I had, I think better or deeper than my parents need for it.

The first way that Sarah describes the clean aesthetic is in the context of landscaping: "Large green yard, edged perfectly with an edger and not a weed whacker. Weed whackers make it brown around the edges. And then, pretty gardens filled with a variety of flowers, all very well kept. Sometimes, the dirt was literally swept." Interior design was described in a similar way: fine straight lines, simple structures

and angles, high ceilings, open space, large windows, and light colors, usually white. This design can be contrasted with her parent's style, which was described as extravagantly ornamented to the point of bad taste or kitsch. In this sense, the clean aesthetic reflects the change in interior design from the heavily decorated bric-a-brac adorning of the late nineteenth century to the open space architectural fine lines of the late twentieth century (Sparke 1995). As with landscaping and architecture, Sarah's body also reflects the clean aesthetic metaphor. In the following conversation, Sarah describes what she refers to as "the body rule":

Interviewer: Did the moms dress similarly?

Sarah: Well, I think more than fashion was the body rule.

Interviewer: Oh, interesting.

Sarah: Yeah, the body rule. The body rule is that you aren't overweight. You know, we weren't anorexic or anything but you worked out and you were in shape. And then, when you put your jeans on and your cute little top and your cute little headband, then you looked cute.

Interviewer: Right . . .

Sarah: Yes, no dumpiness allowed.

Interviewer: Did you weed out dumpy moms?

Sarah: No. Okay, yeah, but that's because my friends who I did things with, one of the big things we did was meet at the swim club, then go for a jog and do Nautilus and go to aerobics class and take our kids to the park; we did active things. So, dumpy people couldn't go jogging with me, you know.

Here Sarah touches on what has become the popular topic of the causes and consequences of thinness and the commercialization of identity by the diet and fitness industries (e.g., Hesse-Biber 1996). In many ways, these industries contribute to the cultural context of body regulation and fashion; however, Sarah's body project needs to be understood relative to the clean aesthetic metaphor. Here, clean aesthetic draws attention to the pressure Sarah feels to conform to the norms of suburban middle-class living. Things that deviate from this norm such as a brown edge in her yard, bric-a-brac interior design, and fat on her body are identified as things that need to be cleansed from her lifestyle. This project also needs to be understood within its historical context. Once the reflection of agrarian values, the body of the midtwentieth century started to take on the characteristics of an abstract, market value (Ewen 1988). Featherstone ([1984] 1991) argues that the growth of consumer culture coincides with the culture of narcissism, which places greater emphasis on appearance, body display, and the performing self. Thinness creates new markets for both men and women; as the slim form is promoted it gains sign value, and consumers struggle to achieve this look.

Sarah's style is aesthetic in that she perceives it as more artistic and tasteful than her parents' sense of style. The

modifier “clean” connects the symbolic to the political in that Sarah’s expression of fashion is inseparable from the dominant ideological forms that are at the core of the middle-class’s struggle for political hegemony. Two excerpts help to illustrate this interpretation. The first involves one of Sarah’s earliest memories of code conformity:

Sarah: In eighth grade my friend Donna and I cut our hair.

Interviewer: How did you cut it?

Sarah: It was long, and I would wear it pulled up with a barrette and down my back like Alice in Wonderland. Donna and I cut our hair into a style called the artichoke, so ugly, it was layered all over in like little bubble fashion and then the front layers, you had several layers of front bangs.

Interviewer: Did it resemble an artichoke?

Sarah: Oh, I think an artichoke looked much better! (Laughter)

Interviewer: So why did you do this?

Sarah: I think Donna and I decided we should get our hair cut, we thought that we would look better. The little bubble [artichoke] hair cut was coming in so everyone had it.

Constructing a well-groomed, suburban landscape, “edged perfectly. . .the dirt was literally swept”; reacting negatively to the heavily decorated bric-a-brac multiplicity that characterized her parents’ home; weeding out “dumpy” bodies; and getting an “ugly” hair cut since “everyone had it” indicate that Sarah’s aesthetic sense is an ideological and historically conditioned expression. The second excerpt further reveals the political character of Sarah’s style:

Sarah: [Referring to observations of punk symbolism in San Francisco] I can’t imagine those freaks at 40, you know, these are like 20-year-olds, and I can’t believe at 40 their gonna look the same way, so when people are extremely freaked out like that I think it’s a phase they’re in and they will modify it later on.

Interviewer: Can you take that and go with it a little bit?

Sarah: I think they’re experimenting with an alternative life-style that they have seen or read about and they’re trying to emulate something on TV or a movie, and that’s why I think it’s a phase and not going to last. When they’re 40 they aren’t gonna look like that. I mean, they might have two rings in their ear but they’re not gonna have purple hair spiked up a foot.

For Sarah, openness to all kinds of styles in an image-driven world implies the abandonment of criteria of cultural value. Thus, Sarah’s style can be interpreted as a reaction to the threat of multiculturalism, diversity, and difference to ethnic and middle-class advantage.

Rebecca sits down for the interview wearing a long linen dress, simple brown leather shoes, and a necklace with a small cross. She describes her expression of fashion as “comfortable”: “Really, for me, I want to be comfortable in

what I’m wearing, just comfortable with myself.” This style represents Rebecca’s desire to be normal and is constructed in opposition to the discomfort she feels toward pluralism: “Like I told one of my teachers, whenever I started questioning who I was, I knew there was a problem because you shouldn’t go someplace and totally question whether your beliefs are true or not whenever you’ve been raised in a Christian home.”

Rebecca was raised in a middle-class, religious family in the midwestern United States. This socialization has given Rebecca strong, and at times inflexible, opinions about right and wrong. Rebecca’s expression of fashion discourses reflects the politics of symbolic consumption in that “comfortable” can be interpreted as a signifier for center. Her narrative reflects an ethno- or unthinking Eurocentricism (Shohat and Stam 1994), which is juxtaposed with the pluralism and hybridity of a liberal college town:

Rebecca: There’s the whole grunge look of Dickson Street, looks like they went to the Salvation Army and bought a bunch of clothes, just looks dirty, it’s just not me. They also have the whole body piercing thing going on.

Interviewer: What do you think about that?

Rebecca: Honestly, I think it’s disgusting. It looks so painful, my brother had a friend who was kicked out of his house and came over to our house for Thanksgiving dinner. He’s got this baldhead, he’s got this eyebrow pierced, and I think his ears pierced and maybe his nose pierced or something, and it just makes me cringe.

Later in the interview when Rebecca is discussing why she quit her job, she states: “My boss was gay. I’m not saying that’s a problem. I was told that you are supposed to celebrate, just celebrate everything that’s different about the other person whether it goes against your beliefs or not. I spoke up and said there’s a difference between accepting and celebrating and that was kind of my last straw.”

Thus, for Rebecca, the reflection and open-minded questioning that pluralism encourages is uncomfortable and threatening. What might create a sense of expansiveness and adventure for some may strike fear and apprehension in others. On the one hand, Rebecca’s style is a good example of one-dimensionality since it reinforces a center that is under attack by the new social movements. On the other hand, this style stands in opposition to a consumption code that encourages flexible, in-style, mobile, and up-to-date packaged identities.

Miguel, Sarah, and Rebecca use the appearance of the body and physical movements as important elements in their fashion projects. From an experiential viewpoint, bodily modes are ways of being in the world (Merleau-Ponty 1981). Since the body is where individuals and cultural systems meet, body styles can be used to mediate self and society. Much of the research in marketing on the body has focused on the effects of the media in establishing norms and expectations. The media plays an important role in coding the system of objects and therefore the body. However, it is the

context of the consumer's lived experience, in combination with cultural codes, that influences the appearance, conceptions, and use of the body. Consumer narratives provide insight into what is motivating the body project. If just one dimension of the disciplined body (e.g., thinness) is analyzed, in aggregate, the researcher misses important contextual information. For instance, Miguel is not lifting weights solely to appear strong; this is part of an overall body strategy aimed at managing an impression for mobility. In addition, mobility is not desired because of cultural discourses alone, Miguel's lived experience in South Texas motivates this style. Both Sarah and Rebecca adopted conservative styles. Sarah's "clean aesthetic" is a reaction to both her parent's sense of style and to the threat of being decentered. Similarly, Rebecca's "comfortable" narrative is a reaction to the uncertainty and unrestrained openness resulting from pluralism. By using fashion discourses to create a localized body project, the informants were able to gain a concrete reference point from which to understand abstract issues of social class dynamics, gender relations, and identity politics (cf. Thompson and Haytko 1997, p. 35).

The key here is that style reflects a subject position, which signifies a vision of how society should be organized. Symbolic consumption is, therefore, political. Since consumers are faced with a plurality and complexity of subject positions, often demanding contradictory responses, fashion becomes a way of mediating this complexity.

The Power of Persona

Commenting on the "commodity self," Ewen (1988, p. 71) discusses how mass-produced goods become resources for forging a persona that can be used to represent a perspective. Personae become meaningful on the basis of cultural practices, improvisation, and the antagonism created by opposing styles. The narratives of Anna and Valerie help to explore the power of persona.

Anna is from Mountain Home, Arkansas, and the overriding metonym of her narrative is dressing up. She is tall and athletic with long straight hair; on the day of the interview she is dressed formally in a short dress, hose, earrings, makeup, and black leather shoes with heels. The figure of speech, dressing up, is meant to convey what Anna calls a "classy and sophisticated look." Anna shops at a number of popular stores, including Ann Taylor, Dillard's, the Gap, Banana Republic, and Victoria's Secret. These stores, together with magazines such as *Bazaar*, *Cosmopolitan*, *New Woman*, and *Vogue*, help Anna construct her sophisticated persona: "Yeah, because I mean I'll look at pictures [in the magazines] then I'll look at what they have and see what I have, and see how I can kind of create what they have sometimes." An additional influence on Anna's persona was experiencing everyday life in a sorority: "Because I lived in a sorority house, everyone got ready together and was always looking at someone else, and, you know, wanting to outdo the other." When Anna is not dressed up, even in a private context, it affects her mood: "I just felt disgusting all day." Being from a small, unsophisticated town in Ar-

kansas, Anna is amazed when her friends ask her for advice regarding fashion and style:

Anna: I'm from Mountain Home, a small town, and most of my friends are from St. Louis or Kansas City. And so I thought that was really weird because, generally they would come to me and say, does this look okay? Can I wear this? Can I put this together? And I just thought that was always really weird because I wasn't ever around that growing up, the big city.

Interviewer: What is Mountain Home like?

Anna: It's really nice; it's a nice place. I really liked growing up there. It's definitely not a place to live right now at my age. I get teased a lot and I know that they are just teasing, but I don't know how far the tease is real to them.

Anna's dressing-up persona is used to mediate the potential stigma of being from Mountain Home with the desire to be accepted in what Anna perceives as a more sophisticated reference group. Given that beauty is achieved and asserted, one's physical appearance becomes a sign of one's ability to procure resources. In other words, physical attractiveness may relate more to the ways in which it is obtained. The sign value of a sophisticated look may compensate for the perceived lack of sophistication that characterizes Mountain Home. Since the presence of stigma can justify the unequal distribution of cultural and economic resources, a sophisticated look becomes symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1984). This is essentially Molloy's (1975) "dress for success" message, which entered the popular vernacular in the 1970s (cf. Thompson and Haytko's [1997, p. 26] third theme, "Ready-to-Wear Relationships: Fashion Meanings and the Construction of Social Affiliation"). Once signs become free floating (i.e., there is no object or referent [foundation] to fix meanings within a classificatory system), the code is completely secularized, and the old rituals of caste or ascribed status become obsolete. Thus, on the one hand, fashion becomes a democratizing force. People merely need to learn the nuances of impression management, and they can create a style that overcomes their background. On the other hand, this process has opened the possibility for new barriers and exclusions that may characterize consumer culture. For instance, if individuals are judged by how they look or by what they own, this reinforces superficial views of identity, self, and style. In addition, if people lack basic resources, if they are unwilling to engage in the continual process of sign competition and sign struggle, or if they lack the cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) necessary to understand the coded use of objects, they risk stigmatization and exclusion from particular groups. Since the media often constructs simulated identities, based around product and brand ensembles, which are portrayed as successful, healthy, secure, happy, youthful, and sexy, consumption sometimes becomes a source of false promises.

Valerie is a 34-year-old, full-time mother who, until recently, worked as a paralegal. She was raised in Virginia Beach, and when asked to describe her fashion, the actual

beach became the defining theme of her story. Growing up, the beach was a reference point for Valerie's group of friends and, over time, became a symbol of liberation, freedom, independence, escape, youth, fun, peace, and bonding. As Valerie says, "At the beach, I love that fashion; I just love that life. It was just serene when things got stressful and when you start to get into, you know, all the crossroads that you hit as a young adult. It was a place of peace and I just loved it. Everything surrounded the beach."

Valerie described this persona as "cutting edge, casual, fun, tan, music (Tubes, Romantics, Ramones, B-52s), four wheeling, surf board racks, and J. Crew." The beach persona was further clarified with reference to opposing consumption codes. For example, Valerie described her persona in opposition to "preppies" (i.e., turtlenecks, Izod, blouses, and oxford shirts), "heads" (i.e., hippies, long messy hair, guitars, drugs, Metallica, jeans with holes, and bell-bottoms low on hips), and "jocks" (jeans without holes and less faded, T-shirts, caps). Although Valerie now lives in the mid-South, the symbolism of the beach continues to inspire her persona. For instance, the beach influences the way that she dresses and her hairstyle, jewelry, interior design, leisure activities, travel, and choice of cars. One of the first things you notice on entering Valerie's home is the large seashells that she uses to decorate her living room. For Valerie, this fashion is value expressive and liberating, providing a sense of continuity and connection to valued relationships and activities. The beach has become symbolic of a happy childhood, cherished memories, lifelong friendships, and the rites of passage associated with primary socialization. The beach dimension of Valerie's style is autotelic in that the spontaneous intrinsic enjoyment she feels when experiencing beach life is an end in itself.

A second important persona that helps to construct Valerie's identity is associated with her marriage. Valerie's husband works for Proctor and Gamble (P&G), and, as a couple, they are well integrated into P&G's corporate culture. Valerie describes the consumption codes associated with this culture to be arbitrary and repressive. She describes the P&G persona as "prim and proper," and it is clear that it imposes conventional and conformist behavior. Although Valerie finds this role playing somewhat sterile and at times frustrating, the trade-off is worth it in order to maintain a particular economic position:

Interviewer: How do you feel preparing to go to a P&G function?

Valerie: I feel more comfortable with myself now. At the beginning, I wanted to make sure I was dressed okay, you know; I didn't want to expose too much. I think at the beach we expose more. We're not worried about covering up our chest and worrying about certain things. P&G is, I don't know the word, just prim and proper.

Interviewer: Less exposed?

Valerie: Yes, cuz at the beach, we're, you know, if we had underwear on, fine, if we didn't, you know.

The P&G persona is instrumental or strategic in that it is used to maintain a middle-class lifestyle; it is clearly not an end in itself.

Saussure's structural analysis of language (Mick 1986; Noth 1990) aids the interpretation of Valerie's experience of style. Here, style is used paradigmatically (i.e., fashion code ensemble) to mediate the autotelic-strategic opposition. This mediation results in syntagmatic meaning, which is central to Valerie's expression of style. Interestingly, her sense of fashion mediates liberating and dominating perceptions, resulting in an everyday life experience that blends her beach and P&G identities.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Thompson and Haytko (1997, p. 15) begin their article by suggesting that the topic of fashion discourses may initially be seen as far removed from political discussions involving hegemony. Yet, in our combined 34 cases, style projects became a means by which consumers aligned with particular cultural perspectives while resisting or subverting others. As stated earlier in this article, it is in this sense that symbolic consumption is political. Thus, a lived hegemony, one that is continually renewed and resisted through "a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities" (Williams 1994, p. 598; cited in Thompson and Haytko 1997, p. 15) helps to contextualize a dialectical perspective.

Empirical descriptions/themes from existential-phenomenological studies may emerge in the course of the analyses, or they may be conceptual propositions, which are contextualized by the informants' narratives. Table 1 presents a summary of Thompson and Haytko's (1997) key findings/claims. The illustrative quotes are intended to direct attention to the context in which these findings/claims are put into perspective and described in the respective articles. Note that in both studies, fashion is described as intertextual, consisting of hegemonic and nonhegemonic discourses. Consumers find meaning by selecting fashion statements that align them with specific cultural values and subject positions. At the same time, this process of alignment is forged as much by what individuals are resisting as by what they believe in and express. This process of alignment provides a vehicle for expression and enables the individual to mediate a number of tensions. Specifically, these mediations enable the individual to cope with tensions arising from cultural complexity, the need to balance autonomy and conformity, and problems that may occur while managing class dynamics. Acting to settle these tensions enables the individual to negotiate and forge identity. It is clear that Thompson and Haytko's (1997) descriptive interpretation remains pertinent in a professional, middle-class context. In addition, it is clear from my analyses that the intertextual nature of style reflects a dialogue among personal narrative, the discursive possibilities, and context-specific interests. As interpretive researchers demonstrate time and again, consumption decisions cannot be understood outside the specific context of an individual's life world. Style projects emerge through a dialogue between the consumers' life worlds and social systems, which consist of countervailing

TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF RELATED FINDINGS

Findings/claims	Undergraduate college students (quotes from Thompson and Haytko 1997)	Professional, middle-class consumers (quotes from re-inquiry)
Fashion is intertextual consisting of countervailing discourses	Rather than present a unified, hegemonic (or culturally dominant) viewpoint on fashion, these cultural discourses present a multitude of countervailing interpretative positions that, in the sense discussed by Williams (1994), reflect the historical legacy of an ongoing social dialogue over the societal consequences of fashion phenomena (p. 15).	Thus fashion results from a combination of subject positions with meaning resulting from the play of differences in the context of identity performance. Personas become meaningful on the basis of cultural practices, improvisation, and the antagonism created by opposing styles.
Fashion statements align with cultural values and meanings	In all these cases, fashion discourses became a means by which consumers aligned themselves with certain cultural viewpoints while resisting or subverting others (p. 18).	The key here is that style reflects a subject position, which signifies a vision of how society should be organized. Symbolic consumption is, therefore, political.
Fashion is an expression of life history or narrative	Our general analysis will show how consumers appropriate (i.e., adapt, combine, and transform) culturally shared fashion discourses to fit the circumstances of their immediate social settings and their sense of personal history, interests, and life goals (p. 18).	Consumer narratives provide insight into what is motivating the body project. If just one dimension of the disciplined body (e.g., thinness) is analyzed, in aggregate, the researcher misses important contextual information.
Fashion is used to negotiate cross-cultural differences	In the first passage from Sarah, fashion styles provide a means to understand both cultural differences between college life in her home country (Korea) and her current U.S. social context and generational differences that she sees as emerging in her home country (p. 25).	Surendra's style can, therefore, be summarized as a combination of objects, meanings, and discourses that have evolved as a way of mediating complex cultural oppositions.
Fashion is used to forge identity	One prominent use of fashion discourse by consumers is to develop a sense of personal identity through a contrast between their perceived fashion orientation and that of others in their social setting (p. 21).	The experience of style projects involves identification with others, the commercial and creative use of stylistic effects, and situated performances. Style is a local site of tension where issues related to competing subject positions, difference, and identity politics are marked and experienced.
Fashion mediates tensions between personal autonomy and fitting in	The next passage reveals how fashion metonyms can become implicated in a tension between fashion meanings emphasizing autonomy and individuality and those that emphasize the importance of fitting in (e.g., social conformity; p. 24).	The consumption codes regulating activities such as weight lifting, golf, and social drinking are instrumental in helping Miguel enact a style that mediates his experience, interests, and motivations (autonomy) with the values of the organization (fitting in).
Fashion mediates tensions resulting from class dynamics	Her use of fashion meanings appropriates the common cultural belief that fashion, when placed in the service of skillful impression management, can serve as a democratizing force that can overcome barriers to success posed by one's background (p. 29).	Anna's "dressing up" persona is used to mediate the potential stigma of being from Mountain Home with the desire to be accepted in what Anna perceives as a more sophisticated reference group.
Fashion mediates tensions between personalized and commodified experiences	The social stigma that Gabrielle understands as being attached to anyone who is a "walking name-brand" and the importance that she places on appropriately mixing brand names is a narrative strategy of decommodification that allows her to experience a sense of uniqueness and self-directedness in her fashion style (p. 27).	When the consumer's appropriation of countervailing meanings is done in the context of distinction, then commercialization of the style creates a staged authenticity, and the consumer may move on to something new. This makes the construction of a distinctive style a continuous struggle involving a tug-of-war between life worlds and social systems.

NOTE.—These findings/claims were recontextualized with professional, middle-class consumers. Since the authors' interpretation is relative to their understanding of the agency-structure dialectic, direct quotes from each of the respective articles were used to represent the context of their discussion.

cultural discourses and institutional structures designed to persuade and influence. In short, my analyses concur that “through this dialogue, consumers drive meanings in ways that place some (or some combination) of these cultural narratives in a dominant position relative to others” (Thompson and Haytko 1997, p. 36).

An important contribution that my interpretation can add to that of Thompson and Haytko (1997) is the further development of the lived hegemony viewpoint. Thompson and Haytko (1997) discuss market responsiveness as a means by which consumers can effect large-scale changes in social discourse. On a general level, my interpretation supports this; the voluntary simplicity discussion in Dolores’s narrative is a good example. However, “market responsiveness” can be, more critically, interpreted as domination of the consumer’s life world. The process of translating consumer meanings into promotional texts and product designs suitable for larger consumer segments removes them from their local contexts. This process of abstraction inevitably transforms their distinctive character. What starts out as a concrete, local, and contextualized fashion, something that may be perceived as not yet commercial and therefore authentic, is drained of its original sign value as it is marketed and mainstreamed. If one’s customization of the code appears authentic, it has value, which is exactly what marketing research communities are after. When the consumer’s appropriation of countervailing meanings is done in the context of distinction, then commercialization of the style creates a staged authenticity, and the consumer may move on to something new. This makes the construction of a distinctive style a continuous struggle involving a tug-of-war between life worlds and social systems. This interpretation is consistent with contemporary analyses of marketing and consumer culture suggesting that the interpretive positions of consumers become important information for market researchers (e.g., the *Coolhunters* as portrayed in the Public Broadcasting Service’s *Frontline* special *Merchants of Cool*).

Finally, although my informants are organizing their psychological lives around decidedly modernist themes, a post-modernist perspective is still relevant (cf. Thompson and Haytko 1997, p. 35). From a postmodern perspective, one can escape the “totalizing logic of the market” only by constructing localized “emancipated spaces” (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p. 255). These safe spaces are constructed by “engaging in improbable behaviors, contingencies, and discontinuities” (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p. 255). “Improbable” behaviors may be distinguishing acts that appear to be outside the logic of commercialization. For example, as discussed earlier, whether Dolores’s style remains personally vital depends on her ability to realize autonomous control over meanings associated with voluntary simplicity. As the voluntary simplicity lifestyle becomes appropriated by experts, packaged, and sold, it loses its distinctive character. When this happens, even a lifestyle based on anticonsumption becomes defined in terms of commodities, possessions, sign value, and commercial success. This domination of Dolores’s life world alters the meaning of her style, which

encourages her to seek new discourses. What started out as an “emancipated space” ended up just another packaged, historical identity.

Interpretive consumer researchers, working within the Association for Consumer Research—JCR community, have not historically emphasized the political dimensions of symbolic consumption. By arguing against a positivist, utilitarian form of consumer research that, at the time, was the dominant intellectual paradigm, the early interpretivists were emphasizing an extreme form of agency. Hudson and Ozanne (1988, p. 510) reflected the sentiments of the time, stating that interpretivists assume that “people actively create and interact in order to shape their environment.” This assumption of agency directed attention to a form of interpretive research that emphasized the creative role of the consumer. At the same time, this view of agency turned attention away from the political and oppressive potential of the symbolic. Future interpretive research in consumer studies needs to embrace the dialectical interplay between agency and structure, or what is referred to here as the sign experimentation—sign domination tension. By doing this, a more critical view of consumption begins to emerge.

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