

Speaking of Fashion: Consumers' Uses of Fashion Discourses and the Appropriation of Countervailing Cultural Meanings

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This article explores the ways that consumers use fashion discourse to inscribe their consumption behaviors in a complex ideological system of folk theories about the nature of self and society. Verbatim texts of 20 phenomenological interviews concerning consumers' perceptions and experiences of fashion are interpreted through a hermeneutic process with specific consideration given to gender issues. Whereas critics of consumer culture frequently argue that fashion discourses enshroud consumer perceptions in a common hegemonic outlook, our analysis suggests that this ideological system offers a myriad of countervailing interpretive standpoints that consumers combine, adapt, and juxtapose to fit the conditions of their everyday lives. By appropriating fashion discourse, consumers generate personalized fashion narratives and metaphoric and metonymic references that negotiate key existential tensions and that often express resistance to dominant fashion norms in their social milieu or consumer culture at large. A theoretical model is derived that portrays a dialogical relationship between consumers and this cultural system of countervailing fashion meanings. The implications of this model for future research on the meaning transfer process and the sociocognitive dimensions of consumer beliefs are discussed.

A lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or a structure. It is a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits . . . it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has to be continually renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own. . . . One way of expressing the necessary distinction between practical senses within the concept is to speak of the hegemonic rather than hegemony and of the dominant rather than simple domination. (RAYMOND WILLIAMS, "Selections from *Marxism and Literature*" [1994, p. 598])

A lived hegemony'' may initially seem far removed from the topic of fashion discourse. However, the

original purpose of this study—to analyze the meanings that consumers use to interpret their experiences and conceptions of fashion—provided entry into a complex system of cultural meanings that are encoded in conventional ways of talking about fashion (i.e., fashion discourses). Rather than present a unified, hegemonic (or culturally dominant) viewpoint on fashion, these cultural discourses present a multitude of countervailing interpretive positions that, in the sense discussed by Williams, reflect the historical legacy of an ongoing social dialogue over the societal consequences of fashion phenomena. Through this legacy, the concrete issues of dress, clothing tastes, and public appearances have been encoded in a panoply of folk theories concerning topics such as the morality of consumption; conditions of self-worth; the pursuit of individuality; the relation of appearance to deeper character traits; the dynamics of social relationships, gender roles, sexuality, standards of taste, economic equality, and social class standing; and the societal effects of capitalism and mass media.

Hence, fashion discourses provide consumers with a plurality of interpretive positions that, because of their diverse associations, can enable them to juxtapose opposing values and beliefs. Consumers use these countervailing meanings of fashion discourse to address a series of tensions and paradoxes existing between their sense of

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individual agency (autonomy issues) and their sensitivity to sources of social prescription in their everyday lives (conformity issues). This article reports on two research goals that emerged from this realization.

Our first emergent goal is to analyze the historically established cultural meanings manifest in consumers' interpretations of fashion phenomena and the ways in which they use these countervailing discourses to create emergent, personalized consumption meanings. The historical background to our analysis is the so-called Western fashion pattern (Davis 1992; McCracken 1988a), which is characterized by novelty, rapid changes, a proliferation of styles, and, more important, the mass consumption of fashion goods. The development of the Western fashion pattern (and the corresponding meanings and images diffused by advertising, mass media, and the broadly defined fashion industry) has often been interpreted as an important basis of the ideology of consumption that energizes the variously termed "post-Fordist," "advanced," or "late" capitalist economies of North America and Western Europe (Bocock 1993; Giddens 1991; Jameson 1991; Lury 1996; Nichter and Nichter 1991; Rubenstein 1995; Sparke 1995; Williams 1982).¹

From this critical perspective, fashion discourses indoctrinate consumers in this ideology of consumption. An example of this viewpoint is offered by Faurschou (1987), who writes, "fashion is the logic of planned obsolescence—not just the necessity for market survival, but the *cycle of desire* itself, the endless process through which the body decoded and recoded, in order to define and inhabit the newest territorial spaces of capital's expansion" (p. 82; emphasis added). These critics further argue that this ideological process immerses consumers' self-perceptions in cultural meanings and social ideals that foster depthless, materialistic outlooks, and a perpetual state of dissatisfaction over one's current lifestyle and physical appearance (e.g., Bordo 1993; Ewen 1988; Ewen and Ewen 1982; Firat 1991; Jameson 1991).

In contrast to this indoctrinating view, our analysis will demonstrate that fashion discourses are used by consumers in a number of creative and proactive ways that do not reproduce a single, hegemonic outlook. This facet of the analysis has been informed by research arguing that the countervailing meanings manifest in complex ideological systems enable consumers to engage in novel juxtapositions and creative reworkings of dominant meanings (Arthur 1993; de Certeau 1984; Probyn 1987). In a similar spirit, we will show that consumers' uses of fashion discourses are intertextual affairs (Scholes 1982) that incor-

porate a wide array of cultural viewpoints, including those that express countervailing tendencies to the ideology of consumption typically deemed by cultural critics to hold a dominant status in advanced capitalist economies. By juxtaposing and combining these countervailing meanings, consumers construct interpretations of fashion phenomena that often run against the grain of the ideological influences frequently attributed to fashion discourses.

These intertextual disjunctures are particularly relevant to the second emergent goal of this study: to analyze how consumers actively combine and adapt culturally established fashion discourses to fit the conditions of their everyday lives. Our analysis highlights that consumers' interpretive uses of fashion discourses create emergent meanings that reflect a dialogue between their personal goals, life history, context-specific interests, and the multitude of countervailing cultural meanings associated with fashion phenomena. We focus on the ways that consumers use fashion discourses to forge self-defining social distinctions and boundaries, to construct narratives of personal history, to interpret the interpersonal dynamics of their social spheres, to understand their relationship to consumer culture (e.g., fashion trends, popular brand names, and advertising and mass media images), and to transform and, in some cases, contest conventional social categories, particularly those having strong gender associations.

An Illustrative Analysis

Before undertaking a more extensive discussion of the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this study, we would like to demonstrate these research issues in a more concrete manner. We offer the following divergent interpretations that two participants in this study gave to an icon of the fashion world. Their differing interpretations foreshadow a number of fashion-based consumption issues and themes that will be analyzed more extensively in the body of the article:

Hanna: When I think of fashion I think of all the glamour, the runway shows in Paris, the real glamorous models walking down the runway, the fun, the glamorous clothing, not the ho-hum denim shorts thing. I think of glamour most of all. Photographers and lights, beautiful people, beautiful clothing, people who are impressed with what they see.

Brandon: I always think about the runway models. I guess it has always sort of fascinated me—the reason behind the whole thing. Because you really don't see those things anywhere; you don't see people walking around in some of the getups that they have on the runways. Like when you are paging through a *Vogue*, you can always find someone on the runway with like these antlers on her [model's] head and wearing some kind of a disc skirt. So I tend to think about the ridiculous; that tends to stay in my mind. Cellophane dresses and that kind of thing. And what I don't like about that is that it's just ridiculous.

Although Hanna and Brandon express different views about the meaning of the high-fashion runway, each has

¹The social science literature offers a multitude of definitions and connotations for the term "ideology" (Hetrick and Lozada 1994). In this article, we refer to the conception of ideology as a process of socialization that reproduces, at the level of individual thought and action, culturally conventional social categories, commonsense conceptions, established patterns of social relationships (such as gender roles), and the taken-for-grantedness of everyday social practices (Barthes 1972; Eagleton 1991).

a ring of familiarity. These alternative interpretations express two contrasting story lines that have become central to everyday conceptions of fashion. Through these countervailing cultural discourses, one can choose to interpret fashion as an exciting realm upon which to project dreams and fantasies about a life of glamour *or* one can choose to interpret fashion dismissively as a superficial and frivolous enterprise lacking in practical value (see Wilson 1985).

Hanna's interpretation expresses a family of meanings that renders the world of high fashion as an idealized consumer dream world and that have been constantly reinforced through fashion and lifestyle promotion (Barthes [1967] 1983; Ewen 1988; Randazzo 1993; Williamson 1986). Social theorists have argued that these glamorizing discourses have facilitated the emergence of the consumer-driven capitalist economy by widely diffusing an image of "the good life" based on the attainment of material affluence (Belk and Pollay 1985; Bock 1993; Campbell 1987; Ewen 1988; Leach 1991; Sherry 1987; Williams 1980). This glamorizing discourse has also likely contributed to the celebrity status ascribed to leading fashion models, whose fame often rivals that of Hollywood stars (Craik 1994; Weiss 1993).

In Hanna's interview, the high-fashion runway offers a salient image of the extraordinary and glamorous world of fashion that she distinguishes from the ordinary and practical nature of everyday life (and dress). Throughout her interview, she discussed her fascination with fashion celebrities and how these icons symbolized her own dream of a glamorous lifestyle replete with world travel, wonderful clothing, and personalized attention. The following passage offers a sense of this interpretive orientation:

Hanna: It's just the whole glamorous aspect of being a model. How she's in New York, then she's in Los Angeles, then she's in Europe. You know the travel, all the people, the camera, the lights. It's something you kind of look at as sort of a fantasy sort of thing, I suppose. Something I probably would never do in my life, but I would never turn down if the offer came up.

Interviewer: So, would you want to do that?

Hanna: Oh yes. I'm sure it's a lot harder than it looks, but, sure, having all those people paying attention to you, being able to travel, and people doing your hair, people doing your makeup. I think it's always fun dressing up, that sort of thing.

In sharp contrast to this ethos of glamour and celebrity, Brandon's disparaging view of the high-fashion runway expresses a populist ethos emphasizing practicality, industriousness, conservatism, and, above all else, seriousness of purpose (Ewen and Ewen 1982). This story line has been materially represented in the dress standards emphasizing a businesslike demeanor that have long held sway in the business and professional sectors (Wilson 1985). By virtue of this contrast to the glamorized, elitist aesthetic of frivolous high-fashion styles, fashions representing a conservative, serious look can be interpreted

in ways that divert attention from the many backstage activities of fashion designers and merchandisers who market a current "plain" style. Second, this interpretive standpoint also obscures the interpenetration of fashion phenomena and everyday life, such as the social dynamics that drive fashion conformity. The icon of the fashion runway then enhances the plausibility of this "nonfashion" classification. The focus on the runway's impractical styles and fantastic imagery enables fashion to be interpreted as a distinct category of cultural life that one can choose to embrace, reject, or simply ignore.

Another historical current running through Brandon's narrative is the social construction of gender. Glamorous, eroticized, eye-catching styles have been a particularly prominent feature of women's designer fashions since the late nineteenth century (Davis 1992). In the context of male clothing, however, a rejection of the excesses of fashion and the embrace of plain dress styles have been important themes of the Western male dress code since the so-called great masculine renunciation of lavish dress that germinated in the mid-eighteenth century (Bell 1976; Kong 1973). Hence, antifashion discourses have historically played a prominent role in the merchandising of men's clothing (see, e.g., Craik 1994).

In terms of this narrative, a strong personal interest in fashion is rendered as an atypical masculine characteristic. Conversely, these historical currents have created a strong association between femininity and the pursuit of fashionability (Sparke 1995). This gendered fashion meaning has contributed to long-standing stereotypes such as women being labeled as "fashion plates" and rabid clothing shoppers, and, in so doing, it has also served to magnify the importance of appearance in the social construction of femininity (Silverman 1994; Young 1994). Brandon invokes this same cultural association by characterizing fashion as being something that is really for women. Brandon's association between femininity, and an explicit interest in fashion is further articulated in a description of his male roommate, whose interest in personal appearance and fashion inspires a gendered comparison and a pop-psychological explanation:

My roommate has all of the high fashions. Dresses up like he is on [Beverly Hills] 90210 everyday. Does his hair all up. He spends more time on his appearance than most, as much as a woman. Maybe it's just a sense of being real conscientious and maybe even a little anal retentive.

Summary

These contrasting interpretations of fashion (glamorizing vs. trivializing) situate these consumer understandings in two countervailing, historically established, cultural discourses on fashion. Through the glamorizing interpretation, the world of high fashion provides an image of success that can be used to generate enjoyable moments of fantasy and dreams for the future (see, e.g., Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Hanna's use of fashion discourse

resembles a mode of fashion consciousness that Campbell (1987) terms "imaginative hedonism." Here, the pleasures of fashion are generated by envisioning an ideal consumption world rather than the actual consumption of fashion goods. The dream of participating in the world of high fashion (e.g., having expensive designer clothes and a glamorous lifestyle) also invokes a version of the Horatio Alger myth that has attained wide circulation in the discourses of North American consumer culture (Hirschman 1990). In this case, the myth's traditional motif of "rags to riches through hard work" is replaced by a more contemporary cultural narrative emphasizing a transformation from anonymity to celebrity through the management of one's image (see Gamson 1994).

Through the trivializing interpretation of fashion, consumers can assume a moralistic, inner-directed stance by appropriating a set of antifashion meanings that, paradoxically, have often been incorporated into the promotional themes of fashion merchandising (see Davis 1992). The rejection of fashion (which also entails the paradoxical embrace of antifashion styles) is then rendered as a sign of positive moral virtues such as seriousness of purpose, sensibility, and rational self-directedness. Interwoven throughout these fashion meanings are conceptions about masculinity and femininity that have become historically associated in conventional fashion discourses.

Understanding which of these countervailing fashion discourses will play a dominant role in a consumer's outlook on fashion also requires an understanding of the personal meanings, life goals, self-conceptions, and context-specific reference points that s/he brings to bear in formulating an interpretation. For example, Hanna and Brandon use fashion discourses to articulate certain ideals and images salient to their sense of identity. However, their respective viewpoints grant a dominant status to different fashion meanings. For Hanna, fashion holds a number of future-oriented meanings related to her envisioned ideals of the good life, which included an exciting career, travel, and public recognition. As we will later discuss in the section on gender issues, Hanna also adopts a critical stance toward some aspects of the fashion world, such as the so-called waif look, by appeal to these more glamorous images.

Brandon's interpretations of fashion serve present-centered goals by supporting his personal desire to be judged on the basis of his character, abilities, and achievements. Through this interpretation, Brandon sustained a distinction between who he really is and the superficialities of his appearance. For Brandon, his desired appearance is an innocuous and relatively transparent one that enables his "real" qualities to be readily recognized. This self-conception directly relates to several historical reflections about his father that magnify the importance of dressing in a way that does not make a big statement. In light of this personal history, Brandon interprets dressing in a manner acceptable for a given social situation as a means of consciously defying a socially problematic familial influence and thereby obviating the threat that his appear-

ance would lead others to make snap judgments about his inner qualities:

Brandon: It's funny umm, someone I know they made a comment to me. They met my dad at some business function and said, "Ya he's a real nice guy and everything but he's kind of a sloppy dresser." And I thought that was funny because he does refuse to dress up no matter what the occasion. I kind of see that in myself sometimes. So I think, you know, the family influences are important.

Interviewer: So, do you see yourself following in that kind of mode?

Brandon: No, because I actually think that it may have hurt my dad's business success sometimes. I mean you do have to look good for some occasions. You know if you go to a social function you want to try dress up 'cause it's just the polite thing to do. Like if you're going to someplace where everyone has on real nice dress shirts and ties and shiny shoes and everything, and you show up in maybe a nice pair of tennis shoes, button-up shirt, and like, slacks—not even slacks, blue jeans, then it's probably not . . . you're kind of making a statement. I don't think it would be the kind of image that I would want to make. I wouldn't go to that far, extreme to the other side.

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. These appropriated fashion meanings, in many cases, served to reinscribe the culturally conventional meanings of garments, styles, and fashionable brands in context-specific interpretations that expressed localized social distinctions, archetypes, gender conceptions, folk theories of motivation, moralistic conceptions, and strategies for managing interpersonal dynamics. The participants' use of fashion discourse also spoke to broader social dynamics, such as their perceived relationships to the influences exerted by the marketing of fashion goods and their conceptions of gender and gender relationships. In all these cases, fashion discourses became a means by which consumers aligned themselves with certain cultural viewpoints while resisting or subverting others.

METHOD

Methodological Procedures

Textual data for the present study were generated by means of phenomenological interviews (Thompson, Lorcander, and Pollio 1989) with 20 volunteer participants regarding their perceptions and experiences of fashion. All participants in the study were assured of anonymity. Table 1 provides a list of the participants' pseudonyms and a brief description of their backgrounds. The participants were male and female college students, ranging in age from 20 to 30. Half of the informants were Caucasian, while four were African-American, three were Asian, two were of Hispanic decent, and one was Native American. The non-Caucasian participants and two Caucasian parti-

TABLE 1
PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTIONS

Gender	Name	Age	Description
Female	Alison	21	Caucasian, business major, from Wisconsin
Female	Amy	21	Asian, finance major, from Wisconsin
Female	Connie	26	Caucasian, business major, from Wisconsin
Female	Eve	20	Caucasian, retailing major, from Wisconsin
Female	Gabrielle	21	Hispanic, criminal justice major, from Texas
Female	Gretta	22	African-American, accounting major, from Kentucky
Female	Hanna	20	Caucasian, marketing major, from Minnesota
Female	Joan	20	Caucasian, nutritional science major, from Virginia
Female	Kate	20	African-American, ag journalism major, from California
Female	Kerry	21	Caucasian, accounting major, from Wisconsin
Female	Marla	21	Caucasian, retailing major, from Texas
Female	Natalie	21	Hispanic, business major, from Illinois
Female	Sarah	24	Asian, journalism major, from Korea
Male	Alex	21	African-American, sociology major, from California
Male	Brandon	21	Caucasian, marketing major, from Wisconsin
Male	Charles	20	African-American, marketing major, from California
Male	Dave	30	Native American, finance major, from Wisconsin
Male	Greg	21	Caucasian, marketing major, from Illinois
Male	Lawrence	20	Asian, marketing major, from Hong Kong
Male	Zachary	20	Caucasian, accounting major, from Florida

Participants were enrolled in a university-sponsored exchange program that drew from universities across the country. The female and male non-American participants had been continuously living in the United States for six and three years, respectively.

The interviews were characterized by a conversational quality in which the course of the interview dialogue was set largely by the participant. Rather than follow a predetermined format, the interviewer's questions were formulated in concert with a participant's reflections and are directed at bringing about more thorough descriptions of specific experiences. The interviewer's probes and follow-up questions were, of course, informed by a general familiarity with the research domain and insights gained through the process of interviewing. However, the primary objective of the interview was to allow each participant to articulate the network of meanings that constitutes his/her personalized understanding of fashion phenomena (Thompson et al. 1989).

Prior to each interview, participants were informed that the purpose of the study was to gain an understanding about their feelings, experiences, and perceptions related to fashion. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The length of the interviews ranged from 45 minutes to nearly two hours. Each interview was conducted in a private office with only the participant and the researcher present. Interviews were separately conducted by two researchers (one male and one female) who were experienced in this interview technique. Each of the interview dyads had a same-gender pairing, on the assumption that this matching would facilitate personal discussions about positive and negative experiences of fashion phenomena.

As advised by McCracken (1988b) and Thompson et al. (1989), the interviewers sought to create a context in which the participants felt at ease and comfortable in discussing their experiences and perceptions of fashion. The interviews began by attaining general background information about the participants (e.g., their hometowns, parents' occupations, college majors, personal interests, career goals, and future plans). Following these grand tour questions (see McCracken 1988b), the interviewer shifted to the topic of fashion using the question, "when you think about fashion, what comes to mind?" In keeping with phenomenological interview techniques (Thompson et al. 1989), this opening question was designed to begin the dialogue in an open-ended manner. After this point, the interviewers encouraged participants to describe actual experiences related to their general perceptions rather than allowing the dialogue to stay at an abstract, experience-distant level. For each participant, the ensuing dialogue covered a variety of topics ranging from perceptions of the high-fashion world to emotionally charged experiences of fashion phenomena arising in their social circles.

Although the participants in this study exhibited a fair degree of diversity in terms of their ethnic, socioeconomic, and geographical profiles, all were grappling with a number of issues typical of early adulthood, such as making decisions about careers (and hence the kind of life they will lead), forging meaningful personal relationships, negotiating sexual dynamics, and an accentuated awareness of self-discovery and self-definition (Erikson 1968). For our purposes, these localized considerations were useful because they served to heighten the relevance of fashion phenomena to the participants and greatly facilitated the ease and natural flow of the interview dialogue. This college setting was also conducive to our goal of analyzing how fashion discourses operate in a specific social context. Nonetheless, the applicability of this account to other social contexts and to other social groups remains a question that will have to be addressed by future research.

Interpretive Procedures and Logic of Analysis

The analysis of the verbatim interview transcripts involved an iterative, part-to-whole reading strategy by

which researchers develop a holistic understanding of each interview transcript, while also noting similarities across the transcripts that have been analyzed (see Hirschman 1992; Thompson et al. 1989). In this process, earlier readings of a text inform later readings, and, reciprocally, later readings allow the researcher to recognize and explore patterns not noted in the initial analysis. In the present study, the researchers read through, in an iterative manner, the entire set of transcripts independently, developing notations regarding substantive content areas. These initial areas were discussed by the researchers and aggregated into meaning categories (such as self/other, natural/fake, mundane/extraordinary, etc.). The transcripts were then reanalyzed to further develop thematic categories and to identify holistic relationships among the meanings and categories participants used to describe their experiences of fashion phenomenon.

A procedural description of the hermeneutic circle, however, does not specify the interpretive logic by which higher-order (e.g., etic) relationships were abstracted from the emic meanings expressed in the interview texts. To elaborate upon this issue, we will briefly discuss the logic by which we moved from emic meanings to an etic account (the interpretive case method) and our interpretive perspective (a specific genre of poststructuralist social theory).

The Interpretive Case Method. This mode of analysis assumes that the particular (or microlevel) case represents an instantiation of macrolevel cultural processes and structures. Accordingly, the analysis of the particular case can provide insights into the operation of larger societal processes (Burawoy 1991; Geertz 1983). In these terms, specific personal experiences, social practices, or cultural texts are interpreted as sites where cultural traditions of meaning and social value systems are enacted, negotiated, and transformed.

As our interpretation began to take shape, we began to focus on the cultural meanings and beliefs that were implicit to the participants' descriptions (see Thompson, Pollio, and Locander 1994). At this stage, a more explicit effort was made to position the described themes and meanings in relation to existing research on fashion phenomenon, a movement between emic and etic constructs that is referred to as "dialectical tacking" (Geertz 1983; Thompson et al. 1994) or grounded reading in the data (Belk and Coon 1993). This circular interplay between the interview texts, the thematic interpretation, and research on the sociocultural aspects of fashion phenomena called attention to a number of salient conflicts, paradoxes, and strategies of resolution that marked the participants' descriptions. This stage of the interpretation also generated additional insights into the localized meanings that participants generated through the creative appropriation of the countervailing cultural meanings associated with fashion phenomena.

A Poststructuralist Focus. The last stage of our hermeneutic process entailed additional iterations in which

our interpretation was further developed in light of four questions characteristic of poststructural consumption research: (1) How are consumption texts read by specific interpretive communities (Jenkins 1992; Scott 1994)? (2) How do specific ideological beliefs shape the taken-for-granted meanings, metaphoric conceptions, and distinctions that consumers use to interpret their consumption motivations and behaviors (Thompson and Hirschman 1995)? (3) How do consumers combine and reformulate different cultural discourses to create novel consumption meanings (Jenkins 1992)? and (4) How do individuals use fashion meanings to subvert the dominant meanings and values they perceive to exist in their specific social spheres or society at large (de Certeau 1984, 1988)?

In conducting our analysis, we found two poststructuralist conceptions to be quite helpful in analyzing consumers' appropriation of fashion discourses and highlighting the ideological subtexts of these constructed consumption meanings. The first of these—naturalization—refers to what is probably the most discussed function of ideology. Through this ideological function, individuals become immersed in a shared understanding whereby the culturally contingent aspects of social life (such as common cultural associations, social practices, or power relationships) are seen as being the natural order of things (Barthes [1957] 1972; Hebdige 1979). In the words of Bourdieu ([1977] 1994, p. 159), "Every established order tends to reproduce (to very different degrees and with very differing means) the naturalization of its own arbitrariness." For the poststructuralist, naturalization is part and parcel of the socialization process. By becoming fluent in this cultural vernacular, consumers learn the tacit rules for successfully maneuvering in their social context.

Problematizing interpretations are the reciprocal counterpart to naturalizing discourses, and they commonly can arise in one of two ways. The first is when a social practice or cultural representation deviates from naturalized conceptions and hence is interpreted as a problem in need of censure and/or correction (see Thompson and Hirschman 1995). Another type of problematizing interpretation arises when a conventionally accepted social meaning or practice is interpreted in a manner that highlights its culturally contingent and, hence, potentially contestable qualities. As we will show, consumers' use of fashion discourse expresses a multitude of problematizing interpretations of this latter variety.

While fashion as a cultural system of meanings has often been critiqued for being an oppressive ideological force that enmeshes consumers (particularly women) in disempowering, superficial, and materialistic concerns (see Coward 1985; Ewen 1988; Ewen and Ewen 1982; Fallon 1990; Finklestein 1991; Freedman 1986), our analysis of consumers' problematizing interpretations tells a different story. Through their intertextual structure, fashion discourses encode a nexus of countervailing meanings that oppose their supposedly predominant values of stylistic obsolescence, social conformity, and the aggrandize-

ment of appearances. These countervailing values provide consumers with a narrative means to construct critical readings of the fashion industry and media, to attribute localized meanings to fashionable goods and trends, and, as we will show in the case of our women participants, to reinscribe idealized images of beauty in a system of oppositional meanings.

CONSUMERS' INTERPRETIVE USES OF FASHION DISCOURSES

Distinctions Never Go Out of Style: Fashion Discourse and the Negotiation of Self-Identity

I don't go out of my way to buy what's hot or what's in or to go to the Gap or Limited. Usually if something is hot, I'll go out of my way to stay away from it. Even if I like it at first, if everyone's wearing it, I don't want to be wearing it. I don't know if it's just because I don't want to follow everybody else or I just don't like everyone to be wearing the same thing I'm wearing.
(CONNIE)

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. Through this logic of self-identity construction, the sense of "who I am" is constantly defined and redefined through perceived contrasts to others. Hence, personal identity does not reflect a stable set of essential features but is negotiated in a dynamic field of social relations. As these interviews indicate, fashion meanings and perceptions of fashion-oriented behaviors play an important part in creating these boundaries of self-identity.

As illustrated by Dave—a self-described serious cyclist—these defining contrasts are often tied to significant questions about one's own personal identity and one's place in society and can be envisioned as occurring even in highly transient social encounters:

Dave: In general if I'm walking down the street and I've got a pair of Bermuda shorts and a T-shirt, that may or may not be clean, then that's fine with me. I don't care, but when I'm riding, maybe it's repressed exhibitionism or something, I figure like I'm kind of in shape so I might as well show off a bit. I figure a bright \$40 cycling jersey is just as expensive as a plain \$40 bicycle shirt. And then if you run into someone else who rides a lot then you're more in with them.

Interviewer: So is that the standard look with the serious cyclists around here? The brighter colors?

Dave: Something bright. A team jersey, a kind of "show your colors" kind of thing. . . . I guess more like as compared to somebody in a rusty touring bike with blue-jean shorts and a plain T-shirt, that kind of thing. That would differentiate between recreational Sunday-riders as compared to a young and fast type of image. And I guess I want to look serious. If I'm going with traffic down [Jones]

Street, I don't want to look like the guy who plods along at 10 miles per hour. Like I said, that's where it's different from everyday fashion.

Interviewer: Could you talk a little more about the difference between someone who rides on the weekends and someone who's younger and faster?

Dave: Just like the cycling clothes are more like the whole "be young, have fun, drink Pepsi" kind of image, as compared to the yuppie-suburbia type of thing. The whole career-focused person rather than the "let's have fun" type of individual. It's more like a statement. It's difficult to explain. I don't know if I can explain it. It's kind of like I'm 30, I should, according to society, have this kind of stuff. You know, the house, the three kids, that kind of thing. I'm having more fun riding a bike than I would be changing junior's diapers. I don't feel my age and I don't feel any reason I shouldn't act this way. I like passing cars and thinking maybe they're a little jealous, trapped in their cars like they are. I kind of like being seen I guess, as a cycling fashion model.

Dave's interest in fashion is highly context-specific. Throughout his interview, he expresses a general disregard toward clothing and the notion of "dress for success" that predominated many of the other participant's fashion views. In the broader context of the interview, it became clear that Dave symbolically associates the world of everyday fashion with a nexus of professional and family obligations, constraints, and societal pressures to conform to a particular lifestyle mold. This social contrast enables Dave to associate cycling fashion with a rebellious, youthful, and unencumbered identity. For Dave, the "serious" look of a "cycling fashion model" includes not only clothing but his self-described fluorescent pink racing bike (symbolizing his refusal to own an automobile) and, finally, a lean/muscular build that embodies his freedom from being trapped in a more sedentary lifestyle. Dave's embrace of cycling fashion is situated in a personal narrative of resistance toward the perceived path of adult conformity. Cycling fashions represent a way to stand out both literally (via a bright cycling attire and equipment) and symbolically via a refusal of a middle-class ethos (and loss of youthfulness and freedom) that he attributes to the standard fashion conventions of the business (and conventional adult) world.

Dave's narrative of differentiation offers a personalized expression of Simmel's proposal that an underlying motivation for fashion consciousness is a desire to sustain a sense of personal uniqueness in the relatively depersonalizing milieu of modern social life (Simmel [1904] 1971). As Dave's example demonstrates, however, this desire is not for a generic form of uniqueness but rather for a specific sign of distinction from a particular social typification (such as being a "suit-and-tie" family man).

For a number of participants, the desire to be unique is formulated in terms of an anticonformist narrative that expresses a theme of autonomy and independence:

Alison: I like to stand out. Honestly, I like people to notice that there is always one odd one in the group. And I've always been referred to as that. But I'm comfortable

with that because I'm my own person. I wear what I want to wear whether people like it or not. I wear it because I'm comfortable with it and because I want to wear it. And if people look at me funny, then they look at me funny.

Greg: I really am into, like, silky shirts and that kind of thing. Just not your standard dress. Like around the business school everyone is wearing the long sleeve cotton shirts in white. I just tend to go more with the off-colors, pastels or whatever.

Interviewer: What do you think of that standard business school look?

Greg: It just sort of bores me. It's nice, it's fine, it's respectable, but it's not for me. I guess there is maybe a bit of a desire in me just not to look like everyone else in the business school. I tend to see quite a few people that are kind of clonelike. So I'm trying to stay away from that.

These anticonformist narratives moderate the paradox that the desire to be a self-directed individual is a commonplace Western consumer value. Furthermore, this mythic idea of identity construction through the uniqueness of one's consumption choices has long served as a promotional theme for mass-produced fashion goods (Emberley 1987; Forty 1986). One way that consumers negotiate this paradoxical situation is to create a contrast to a generalized other, who is consistently characterized as a conformist who is highly sensitive to the opinions of peers. Through this contrasting image, the participants' can buttress their sense of being unique and, more important, the perceived uniqueness of wanting to be unique:

I don't like dressing like everyone else, I like being different and I like standing out. That's pretty much what fashion is all about. I like being unique, not a number. I guess it stems back to my biggest fear [which] is to be a statistic or something like that. The thing that I don't like is being one among a crowd. I like to stand out. I guess I'm more individualistic whereas most people like to blend and that. (Zachary)

This image of the fashion conformist is situated within Zachary's personal fear over just being "a statistic." In the context of Zachary's interview, this phrase invokes a number of disliked associations, such as not being able to control one's destiny, failing to leave a noticeable mark on the world, and, finally, being a follower rather than a leader. The meaning of "standing out" is further articulated through a contrasting series of meanings related to his conception of heroic individualism, such as climbing to the top of the socioeconomic ladder and attaining power, prestige, and wealth. By "standing out" in his current social context, Zachary can see himself as enacting a course that will eventually culminate in these life goals. By typifying "everyone else" as followers who do not want to be innovators and leaders, Zachary can also interpret his consumer actions as representing a fundamentally distinct orientation from others in his social sphere. This interpretation helps to sustain a paradoxical view in which his own fashion conformity—in the sense of closely following clothing trends breaking on the fash-

ion progressive East and West coasts—is interpreted as an act of differentiation:

Zachary: I have a subscription to *GQ* and *Details*, and *International Male* sends stuff [catalogues] to me. I like looking at the latest fashion trends and seeing where they are going because you get a pretty good idea of what is hip and what is not. I like to stay ahead of the trends because pretty soon everyone is going to be wearing it and then you don't really have individuals who stand out. I've noticed that East and West coast are about six months ahead of us trendwise. So stuff that I was wearing six months ago people are wearing now. It's neat wearing it before them. I like that.

Interviewer: So what happens when something you're wearing catches on?

Zachary: I make sure I don't wear it. Usually, I'm on to something else. I don't like wearing what other people do. I like to be individualistic. I don't want to be like other people. It all boils down to being your own self and not having people copy you because then you don't stand out as much. I live by a motto; wear a different outfit everyday. I never wear the same combination of clothes in the same semester.

Zachary interprets clothing styles as strategic instruments deployed in a broader-perceived social competition. To stay ahead in the realm of fashion trends is to symbolically gain an advantage in the more significant contest for career opportunities and his personal project to not become one of the masses. His narrative again demonstrates the tension between autonomy and conformity that fashion discourses moderate. For example, Zachary's anticonformist stance of abandoning styles once they have caught on or never wearing the same outfit twice, if assessed independently of his interpretive use of fashion meanings, could easily be read as a socially reactive, outer-directed behavior. In Zachary's narrative, however, this latent implication is dominated by the power of fashion discourse to render clothing as potent symbols of individuation and as vehicles of perpetual identity transformation—an ethos that not only reflects the dynamic spirit of postmodern consumer culture but also expresses a masculinized ideal of having an unencumbered identity that can be transformed at will (Kellner 1992).

The perceived individuating and transformative power of clothing is ultimately contingent upon a belief that others will notice and care about one's appearance. This belief lends itself to a more intensive focus on identity management and a tacit assumption that one can become the center of the social spectacle. Zachary's preceding passage demonstrates this dialectic between the conception that one's fashion choices exert an influence on the behavior of others and an increased sensitivity and responsiveness to the actions of those who are supposedly being influenced. The next passage presents this same dialectic in relation to his goal of gaining personal attention from professors, which Zachary perceives as contributing to his future success by increasing the likelihood of receiving personal recommendations.

It also offers a dramatic example of how a consumer's self-worth and perceived sense of "symbolic capital" (Bourdieu 1984; Featherstone 1991) can become intertwined with issues of standing out via one's fashion style:

I mean, after a while people start expecting to see what you wear. Like Professor [Smith] in Cost Accounting likes to see what I wear, so in a way I feel obligated. . . . And like Professor [Jones] loves the way I dress. He won't start class until he asks me where I got this outfit or that. Professors notice me. I've had a close personal relationship with 'most every professor I've had. If you do it right you can get professors to meet with you outside of class and give recommendations and stuff like that, that they most likely wouldn't when you blend in with other people.

If the Metonym Fits: Fashion Discourse and the Construction of Social Identities

In the preceding section, consumers' self-defining, fashion-based distinctions express an implicit identification with (or distancing from) a relevant social group, such as the hard-core cyclist versus the settled, sedentary family man or those who wanted to stand out versus business school clones. This section discusses this process of social identity construction in more detail by focusing on how participants use fashion styles to metonymically represent specific social types and to forge a sense of affiliation or disassociation with these constructions.

A metonym is commonly defined as figure of speech in which a part is used to stand for a larger whole. A simple example is a phrase such as "Paris is introducing short skirts this year." Here, a famous locale for the fashion industry is used as a summary reference for the multitude of activities undertaken by a large constellation of fashion designers and merchandisers (see, e.g., Lakoff 1987, p. 77). Cognitive linguists argue that this type of linguistic trope reflects an important characteristic of human cognition. Through metonymic thinking, a complex and abstract concept can be understood in terms of one of its more well known or easily comprehended aspects (Lakoff 1987).

In this study, the entire set of interviews is pervaded by metonymic constructions in which specific fashion styles stand for a larger social identity. This metonymic use of fashion imagery demonstrates that dress styles are interpreted not just as symbols of personal identity (and deep underlying character traits) but also as situating individuals in particular social spheres. In the following passage from Marla, the "granola-ish" type is interpreted as being most at home in the broadly defined social sphere of liberal, cause-oriented politics. Conversely, this liberal social space is one where she feels decidedly out of place:

Marla: A lot of people in our sorority dress very, very natural. Like granola-ish, if you will.

Interviewer: Could you explain that a little?

Marla: Just a lot of liberal people in our house. I associ-

ate this kind of dress with being liberal or conservative. I think people do it every day. We have a lot of people that wear grungy-looking stuff, and always have the cut-off jean shorts on . . . they always have the T-shirt that is tie-dyed. They don't wear a lot of makeup. . . . That's their attire for the whole week, maybe they'll change their shirt. They have Birkenstocks and all those things. They're really nice, and I like them a lot. They're just different than me. They always have the tie-dye T-shirt that says [Jones] Street Block Party. Then we have people, only a couple of us, and I consider myself in that—that are desperately conservative. And then there are people that are just middle-of-the-road.

In this passage, the term "granola-ish" is a metonym that encodes an entire constellation of fashion goods in a meaning system that ultimately harkens back to the cultural icon of the countercultural hippie.² Marla's narrative erases the evolution of granola products into a mainstream consumer product and highlights its earlier cultural meaning as a quintessential food for the naturalist-oriented, hippie counterculture. In this narrative framing, Birkenstock sandals are the contemporary equivalent of Earth Shoes, and cut-off jeans and "grungy looking stuff" are the symbolic equivalents of beads and tie-dyed clothing. Finally, not wearing makeup is interpreted as a rejection of a more conservative, feminine aesthetic.

Thus, an entire social history—albeit a stylized one (see, e.g., Ewen 1988)—is encapsulated by a casual fashion-based categorization that implicitly identifies Marla with a conservative, proestablishment social type. The perceived differences among these contrasting political and lifestyle orientations obviously harbor the potential for interpersonal conflicts. However, reducing this network of social differences to matters of visual appearance may help to diffuse some of this tension (as opposed to focusing on specific differences between these contrasting worldviews). For example, a sensitivity to this latent potential for interpersonal conflict can be seen in Marla's explicit use of nonjudgmental qualifiers (e.g., "they're really nice, and I like them a lot").

The following passage from Kerry, whose own style resembles the "granola-ish" dress noted by Marla, offers another metonymic use of the term "natural." Here, identifying with a natural look establishes the superiority of her own look over those whose fashion styles are seen as being fake. Kerry uses this natural/fake distinction to critique and reject not only specific fashion styles but, more generally, an entire social construction of feminine identity:

²This historical background is implicit to the local knowledge expressed in her reference to the granola types' characteristic tie-dyed, (Jones) Street Block Party T-shirt: in this community, the annual block party is a major social event that occurs in a near campus neighborhood. This area is home to a natural foods co-op (adorned by a very large antiwar mural drawn during the height of the campus's Vietnam War protests) and is widely regarded as a throwback to the 1960s spirit of campus life.

Kerry: I think of the little CNN clips from Paris with the women who are size 3 who walk down the runway in almost nothing or something I wouldn't be caught dead in. Even if I thought I could wear it, I wouldn't. Fashion sucks. It does. It's a popularity contest and I don't like to conform to anything like that. Because everyone wants to look the same, but not the same.

Interviewer: Can you explain that a little bit?

Kerry: Sure. Everyone wants to be in fashion or in style, and wear what everyone else is wearing, but you don't want to be caught at the same event wearing the same dress. That would be like "Ohhh, nooooo!" It's another way of everyone being the same. I want to break from the norm. I want to be different. I was talking to this girl on the way to class. She was talking about how you can't wear white socks with black pants and black shoes. My roommate and I rolled for an hour. We thought that was hilarious. Who cares! It's just that is the norm wearing your jeans and your little polo shirt, with the short sleeves and button down. And the little thing in your hair and it's all poofy, I can't stand that either. The little hair that comes up like this, you know. How do they get that to do that? It's just hilarious, I can't do it. More natural is not the norm. They have the little underwear and their bra. They have to have the little girdle in their panty, or whatever, just so they're not themselves. That's the norm, faking it. Faking everybody out. Shoulder pads, whatever.

In Kerry's passage, the association between fashion and artificiality enables her own self-defined "natural" look (which is nonetheless the predominant fashion motif in her social setting) to be interpreted as going against the norm and thereby standing outside the realm of women's typified fashion conformity. Her critique of fashion's artificiality is also a rejection of the traditional feminine look—petite undergarments, an artificially shaped body (via girdles), elaborate hairstyles, and a slavish devotion to arbitrary fashion rules. Conversely, a natural appearance is aligned with traditionally masculinized ideals of individuality, authenticity, independence, and an ironically tinged detachment from feminine fashion norms.

Despite expressing an overt rejection of feminine fashion styles, the cultural meanings underlying Kerry's passage are highly consistent with a historical feature of women's fashion merchandising. Becoming liberated from traditional gender constraints has long been a promotional theme targeted at particular segments of the women's fashion market, and it has almost invariably employed masculine motifs (Davis 1992; Wilson 1985). This cultural construction of androgyny (i.e., the masculinization of women's fashion) is often found in advertisements targeting adolescent and college-age women, such as the masculinized look exemplified by the icon of the Dakota woman (see Stern 1993). While these masculinized styles have been a major design characteristic of women's fashion throughout the twentieth century (Sparke 1995), the appeal to more conventional women's fashion imagery and discourse (i.e., eroticized, frilly, and nonutilitarian) provides an interpretive frame of reference in which the embrace of these contrasting masculinized

styles can plausibly be read as a rejection of both women's fashion and traditional conceptions of femininity.

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) and, in a more negative experiential vein, the sense of being constrained by an intolerant community:

Joan: I have red boots, cowboy boots, and I thought they were really cute. I completely wear them at home with absolutely no problem. I walk around with them, I think they look really cute with jean skirts, with jeans, like completely showing. Nobody looks at them. They look at them like they are normal clothing, but I came here and wore them, and everyone, the first thing they look at is your boots. And then I was dating this one guy and he just even said to me, and it was the first time I actually wore them. I never wear them here, I never do—they sit in my closet and it's horrible because they're so cute. It's to the extent that I feel really uncomfortable wearing them because people, all they do is stare at my feet. This one guy said, he was from Minnesota, "Well, I guess they're just too much east coast for me." First of all, cowboy boots are not from the East Coast and ever since then I haven't even wore them. And now maybe I'll wear them so all you see is red and you don't see the boot part, the top part. I wear those under the jeans. But at home I don't have a problem at all so I don't understand why there is such a difference.

Interviewer: How did you feel when he said that?

Joan: I felt horrible. I said that is absolutely ridiculous. I'm like they're not too east, that was the last time we saw each other . . . if you really like them it shouldn't really matter what everyone else wears here, but for some reason it does. It makes me feel too uncomfortable for other people to stare at me all the time. But if people haven't seen something, I think they look at it differently. That makes you feel a little funny or awkward and I don't know I guess it should matter just how much I want to wear them, and that I really shouldn't care what other people think, I should just wear it if I feel comfortable. It's just very interesting to me why I should feel so confident wearing them at home and not thinking anything about it but here think twice.

As Joan has construed this situation, her red boots were read by her former dating partner as a metonymic representation of an "East Coast" fashion orientation that stood in contrast to a more (locally) familiar, traditional, and unflashy style. This aspect of her narrative expresses a cultural tension between modesty and adornment that has long been a salient theme of cultural discourses on the social acceptability of fashion (Konig 1973). However, Joan contextualizes this tension by noting the profound differences she perceives to exist between the fashion norms of home (which incidentally is located in the eastern United States) and her campus setting. Her red boots function as a metonym that encapsulates this nexus of social differences and its implications for her self-identity. Furthermore, Joan's red-boot story expresses a tension between masculinized and feminized constructions of selfhood. Whereas the masculinized self is de-

defined by a sense of autonomy to social influences, the feminized self is defined in relation to its contextually social relationships (see Chodorow 1978). Although Joan expresses a normative preference for a masculinized self-definition (I shouldn't care what other people think), her self-conception is grounded in a feminized, relational mode, such that her confidence to wear whatever she likes is understood as being contingent on the supportiveness of her social surroundings.

Other participants (one man and four women) similarly describe the dominant look in this campus setting as being an informal style and note that deviations from this look are subtly (and sometimes not-so-subtly) censured. This dominant style typically includes garments such as blue jeans, sweatshirts, flannel shirts, and footwear options such as Doc Martens, Timberlands, Birkenstocks, and athletic shoes. Joan's narrative reflects the perspective of someone who has perhaps inadvertently challenged this informal dress code. For her, this social ethos of informality constrained the degree to which she could express her own sense of style and uniqueness in dress. This sense of being constrained is particularly salient among those who had transferred to this campus from other schools where the local fashion conventions encouraged dressing up:

I do like to dress up a lot. Which I've found that people don't do too often here. Which really pisses me off because I have all this stuff in my closet and I can't wear it. . . . I mean I do because I spent money on the clothes so I definitely wear them. But I feel awkward because nobody else does. Like they will go to the bars on a Friday night or go to the clubs and they will just have on like what I'm wearing now [jeans and a sweatshirt] and I'm in, like, nice slacks or my little short skirt and a nice silk blouse or something. . . . At first I feel like kind of out of place. I notice that other people aren't dressed like that. (Kate)

Joan and Kate both speak from a social position that they experience as being stigmatized within their social setting and conversely, their own logic of differentiation problematizes what they perceive as the dominant fashion ethos. That is, the informal dress code—what everyone else does as a seeming matter of course—is treated as a contestable situation that warrants protest and critique.

In contrast, participants who identify with this dominant code express a very different interpretive orientation. They adopt an explicitly judgmental tone and tend to interpret those seen as embracing unconventional dress styles as a type whose self-worth depends on intentionally flaunting "normal" dress standards. From the perspective of this dominant position, these unconventional types invoke a number of negative readings:

Brandon: It's like you see some of these kids walk around school everyday, with a full suit on. It's only a few but I mean that's ridiculous. It's like "Hey I'm better than every one else because I have a suit on."

Interviewer: When you see these people going to class in suits, what comes to mind for you?

Brandon: Fraternity boys. That's what I think. Maybe

insecure a little bit. And I think a lot of those guys who are very materialistic come from rich families and that's just a reflection of wearing a suit when you're a student and going to class. I mean, come on. They try to act professional but in reality they just goof off all the time. And they drink just tons! I like to drink too, but I mean, they do it just to get drunk. Just stuff like that.

In this passage, wearing a suit to class provides the metonymic representation of "fraternity boys." The structure encodes an implicit model of moral superiority. Those seen as wearing suits at inappropriate times are characterized as not only ridiculous but as bundles of fairly transparent contradictions—kids wearing adult garb, "goof offs" who try to project a professional image, and so on. Through this contrast, the superiority of the naturalized dress code and, hence, of Brandon's own value system and fashion orientation is symbolically established. In forging this contrast, he invokes a moral theory of character in which dress and appearance are interpreted as misleading facades that are designed to obscure shortcomings in one's inner qualities and virtues. As typical of dominant group readings of deviant actions, Brandon's explanations draw negative inferences about the others' character and motivation. Hence, wearing a suit in this everyday college setting is interpreted as symbolizing elitism, materialism, superficiality, inauthenticity, and irresponsibility.

The next two illustrations show how the metonymic use of fashion imagery can be 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 American social context and generational differences that she sees as emerging in her home country:

Sarah: The interesting thing is, in my country, the college students they more dress up, and people here on campus, they dress down. Sometimes I got an impression that they intentionally dress down on campus especially for undergrads. And that's interesting. And for me, I like formal wear and more classic things if I go back to my country or when I work. To go to firms or companies, I wear things like that but when I just spend time at home or I go to school I like comforts, comfortable clothes, you know, jeans, T-shirts.

Interviewer: Tell me more how college students dress in your country.

Sarah: More formal. Female students love to dress up in their pumps and skirts and mini skirts and wear jackets, suits something like that. But that is my generation and those who are younger than me are, right now, their styles are more informal and they don't have any rules. They just put on whatever they want and what its called, grunge? And I think they become more westernized more and more, so it is similar to here.

Once again, fashion styles are used to situate this participant in place and time. Although Sarah has adapted to the dress conventions of her new social setting, she retains

an aesthetic preference for her native tradition of wearing formal, feminine attire in public settings. In so doing, her fashion preferences are interpreted as reflecting a broader generational predilection for order, rules, and respect for tradition. This interpretive framing enables Sarah to regard her fashion preferences and traditional orientation as standing apart from not only the vicissitudes of stylistic changes but also the perceived encroachment of Western influence.

The next passage from Lawrence—also an Asian student studying in the United States—offers a contrasting case of wanting to stay contemporary by wearing the latest Western fashion styles. For Lawrence, the desire is not simply to look fashionable. Rather, he aims to present a metonymic image (i.e., appearance as representation of the whole person) that dramatically differs from a social stereotype that he feels might otherwise be applied to him.

Maybe someone in the magazines, they have a new idea about fashion, and I follow their idea. I don't think that I can create a fashion. I don't have that kind of mind. But I like to follow people at the top of fashion. As I told you, I don't want to be out of date. . . . Sometimes I see some girl or boy—American I mean—I can feel that they do look at me. They think “Oh, he is a Chinese guy but this guy is different. This guy has long hair and baggy jeans.” Sometimes I feel that and I feel good. Absolutely. This is why I wear this [e.g., a hip-hop look featuring hip-riding baggy jeans, untied high-top basketball shoes, an oversized black T-shirt, and a backward turned baseball cap].

Ready-to-Wear Relationships: Fashion Meanings and the Construction of Social Affiliation

That is generally what I do. I will wait and see what other people are wearing and that is what I will wear. . . . I mean overall I always want to fit in. I always want to be accepted by society, you know, by people in my sorority, by my friends, by this university, by my family. (HANNA)

The countervailing nature of fashion meanings is well demonstrated by this family of consumer interpretations. Fashion meanings can be used to forge distinctions and to foster a sense of standing out, or they can be used to forge a sense of affiliation with others and to foster an affirming sense of social belonging. As the following passage from Zachary illustrates, this countervailing meaning of fashion frequently emerged in the same interview. In the case of Zachary, his conventionally masculine interpretation of fashion—as a means to stand out as unique and to affect a sense of heroic individuality—is balanced by a more conventionally feminine interpretation that focuses on the affiliative quality of fashion. Here, his experience of affiliation extends beyond identification with a subcultural identity (Cosgrove 1984; Hebdige 1979) to provide a foundation for intimate, interpersonal relationships:

Zachary: Well, I guess I look at it like someday I'll be paying her [stepmother] back [for subsidizing his clothing expenditures]. I guess it's sort of like a loan-type thing and that. It's not really a loan, she doesn't really expect me to pay it back. The thing is that I'll definitely give back after I get out. The thing is too, it's more like a bonding-type situation, I suppose.

Interviewer: Could you elaborate on that a little bit?

Zachary: I guess we both like styles quite a bit. It somehow draws you near. It's like we talk a lot about it. We both get into it quite a bit and talk about it. We like to look at fashion and stuff and a lot of times we take shopping trips together. And it's just like something we have in common I guess. She's the one who actually got me interested in clothing and so I pretty much went from there.

Interviewer: So what kinds of things do you do when you get together?

Zachary: We go to stores. We talk about fashion and I'll say look at this, this is pretty cool. Like in our last conversation, I told her that they [fashion mags] are showing bell-bottom jeans and I can't figure out where to order them. I asked her to look for me and stuff like that and she said no problem. She likes that. She enjoys shopping and has good taste in fashion. She dresses pretty wild too. We pretty much go from there. Actually we have a pretty unique relationship. Whereas most people don't like their mothers shopping with them, we like shopping together, and after that we'll go to the Fannie May shop and stuff like that. It's fun, it's pretty cool, I like it a lot.

A psychologically grounded interpretation of this dual function of fashion discourse (i.e., for purposes of individuating and for creating a social bond) is that it assuages a profound tension, originating in childhood, between identification with and autonomy from one's parents (Erikson 1968; Silverman 1983; Wiley 1994). In adulthood, this emotionally charged issue is transferred onto the broader realm of social relationships. According to Lacan (1968), the adult experience of personal autonomy is marked by a sense of absence of a self-affirming unity afforded by symbiotic identification between a young child and the nurturing parent (a role conventionally assumed by the mother). To fill the symbolic void precipitated by the formation of an autonomous adult ego, individuals are motivated to seek out various forms of social affiliation and often turn to symbolic forms of social relatedness, such as participation in a common consumption activity or a lifestyle based on consumption (Elliott 1997).

Brand names often arose as focal concerns in the context of these affiliative narratives. Although this tendency obviously reflects the preponderance of brand-image advertising in fashion merchandising, it also provides insight into how the language of the marketplace becomes intertwined into consumers' self-identities and social relationships:

Gabrielle: You know, you have to learn how to blend all types and sorts, and you can't just be one total person, you gotta know how to wear Calvin Klein at the same time as wearing Ralph Lauren. You just gotta learn how to blend. I would never buy all my clothes from one certain name brand, because that's a major faux pas, you just don't

do that. Then you're a walking name-brand and you don't want to be a walking name-brand. You want to have the name brands, but if you can put different name brands together, if you can put the right Calvin Klein top with a pair of Liz Claiborne pants and it looks good, kind of tells a lot about the person.

Interviewer: What does it tell you about the person?

Gabrielle: That they know about fashion. They took the time to look around, and sometimes you go to a department store and they'll give you the whole outfit there, you know, the top, the shoes, and everything. You don't want to buy whole outfits. I never buy coordinated sets. I'll buy a top because it'll be a perfect shade of orange—I may not have anything to wear with it, but I'll look for something. And if you can do that, it just shows that that person, not necessarily is intelligent, but they have their act together. If they take time out to put something good together, then you know they're willing to take time with other things.

For consumers who have some knowledge of the common tactics of fashion merchandising, reproducing well-known brand-name images or highly promoted "looks" stands as the antithesis to developing one's own style. Hence, the perceived uniqueness and authenticity of the messages being communicated through ready-to-wear branded garments needs to be carefully cultivated and reformulated in more personalized (and context-specific) meanings. Gabrielle's stance of being a fashion *bricoleur*—who combines and adapts culturally available resources to make something new—presents one such means for personalizing her fashion style. In her passage, fashion functions as a metaphor in which the abstract existential life project of making coherent choices among life's diverse options is embodied in the everyday world of dress and appearance management. Accordingly, creating a coherent ensemble from a range of brands and styles is taken to signify a number of positive meanings such as creativity, organization, competence, and conscientiousness. Conversely, the prefabricated designer ensemble conveys an undesirable lack of fashion savvy and the broader implication of not being able to effectively put one's life together.

The meanings expressed in this passage also relate to Giddens's (1991) argument that a major tribulation of self-identity in modern Western consumer societies is a tension between personalized and commodified experiences. Hence, the process of identity construction "is in some part necessarily a struggle against commodified influences, although not all aspects of commodification are inimical to it" (Giddens 1991, p. 200). 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. On the one side, the fashion world is seen as offering the possibility of selecting, without creative thought or personal styling, a prefabricated identity. However, these ready-

made wholes can be broken apart and remade to present a more personalized image.

As illustrated in the following passage, a socially shared use of fashion discourse can also provide a basis for creating and sustaining interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, Gabrielle interprets her fashion experiences as a concrete demonstration of abstract social norms and patterns of relationships that exist among her familiar home context and her new college setting:

Gabrielle: Even when I came here the girls looked at me funny because of my backpack. I coordinate my backpack with what I'm wearing, because I bought a brown leather backpack and a black leather backpack and then my regular backpack, and then my purse, I coordinated with my shoes, and you know, the girls here aren't that much into it so I couldn't relate to them on certain things like that. And I miss that. I miss that about home.

Interviewer: What do you miss?

Gabrielle: When you're around people who really place an emphasis on fashion and they're all looking good, it sharpens your skills, and you can become a critic and you can take criticism. I'm starting to get really relaxed in what I'm wearing. I've caught myself doing that, even sometimes I'll just wear my hair straight, or I'll just go for the "natural" look, or I got some plain, simple Birkenstock's and I'm okay with it. So I started getting a little worried, "Gosh maybe I'm getting too relaxed." As opposed to when I'm home, everything's always perfect. Like my main worry on the way over here, I was thinking, "Well I gotta find a place where I can do my nails, and I gotta find a good dry cleaners," and I haven't had to worry about that while I'm here. I'm still worried about how I look but it's on a different level because of the crowd I'm with.

Cultural analyses of fashion have often emphasized its psychological role in "fashioning the self-concept" (Finklestein 1991). However, Gabrielle's passage demonstrates that fashion can also play a prominent role in fashioning an entire sphere of social relationships. Her sense of home is characterized by a circle of friends who share an avid interest in fashion via conversations and activities centered around fashion. In this regard, Gabrielle describes her circle of friends as acting like an interpretive community—in the sense described by Jenkins (1992)—in which their fashion sensibilities are grounded in a socially negotiated set of rules of interpretation and aesthetic standards. Reciprocally, the avid participation in the world of fashion provides a context to develop and foster particular modes of social, creative (and critical) skills. Hence, Gabrielle's response to living in a more relaxed fashion setting was not one of liberation but rather a concern over the diminution of her contextually situated fashion know-how and a longing for the sense of affiliation gained by a shared immersion in a fashion world.

Another aspect of Gabrielle's description is that fashion discourse (as an interpretation of social practices centered around dress) provides a set of meanings that encode a history of social relationships that are significant to her self-identity. The following description offers a case in

which a consumer uses an aesthetic preference—which is also linked to his historical background—as a rationale for resisting perceived social pressures to alter his dress style:

Because my neighborhood was very traditional, just about everybody was very very wealthy, so everybody had plaid pants on, you know, everything was very traditional, brown loafers on or whatever. And so I guess I grew up with that. And to me that looks really good if it's well put together. And I've just been dressing that way the whole time and it's different whenever I come here because they dress completely different. And to them that's the way to dress but for myself I'd rather dress more traditional even though people say "oh that's too conservative." To me it looks presentable and it looks good so I'd rather dress that way. (Alex)

Alex's narrative also demonstrates that the sense of dressing for oneself is not so much a matter of being a strong-willed, inner-directed individual (e.g., the romantic ideal) as it is dressing to fit into a community that is symbolically present but that may be distant from one's current setting (in place and time). For example, Alex defines his own style in a way that fits in to the social context of his hometown neighborhood and that differs from his current social context. Fashion discourse represents a relevant community of interest that can transcend one's temporal and spatial setting. Hence, one can sustain a valued sense of social identity by dressing in accord with fashion norms and standards relevant to a phenomenologically defined reference group that may be far removed from one's face-to-face peer group.

A Discourse to Fit Every Occasion. Whereas fashionable brands are frequently merchandised as markers of individuality, these participants frequently discussed brand meanings in terms of social affiliation. Rather than covet a specific meaning that a fashion brand evokes (as would be suggested by McCracken's [1986] meaning transfer model), their reflections express a desire to create a personalized style that would ensure that they would fit in to a given social setting. For these participants, this relational meaning of fashion also became incorporated into their biographic narratives: that is, the self as reflexively understood in terms of stories about one's personal history (Giddens 1991, p. 53). Accordingly, fashion becomes a salient marker of the social situations in which one has felt that s/he fits in or felt out of place. This retrospective upon one's relations to different social settings, particularly those having a formal or public quality, harbors important implications for this biographical sense of self, that is, the sense of who one has been, who one is, who one is becoming, and who one hopes to be.

The following passage from Charles expresses this mode of self-understanding. Here, wearing more formal attire is characterized as an enjoyable activity where he can show a little flair but still fit into the structure. Hence, dressing up for an occasion stands as a symbolic metaphor that encapsulates many of his beliefs about what it takes

to be successful in the business world, such as being adaptable, disciplined, and being able to fit the mold while still adding something unique to the setting:

Charles: I really like suits and dress shoes in general. I like wearing them, I like shopping for them. I like to see them on display—there is just something captivating about formal wear. I just really like it. And I like to be a part of formal occasions. Sometimes I look for excuses to dress formal. It is just like you have a different persona or aura when you are dressed up—you feel more distinguished. I guess you really find out about yourself that you can calm down, you can be a part of like a structure or whatever. I guess there is a lot that ties into why I like dressing up.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit more about fitting into the structured situation?

Charles: That there are usually certain guidelines that you must follow. That is what I mean by structure—they are set up for you and you tend to follow them. But that is just like the black-tie occasion. Most everybody goes with the black and white tuxedo. . . . you just sort of show up dressed as everybody else so that you can fit in, but you show up a little different, like with a little flair. I think it shows that you are a diverse individual that you are able to, like, dress for the occasion with structure; it's okay you can fit into the situation, but it's possible for you to add something a little bit different and you are willing to do that also. So I guess I'm saying with a structured occasion you can fit the mold as well as doing something different.

Interviewer: Do you see other situations as having a structured form to them?

Charles: I think so. I mean, as far as like coming in for a job interview, the dark coat, suit, white dress shirt, tie and just the whole conservative type. Things like that should be structured because, like I said, you have to have discipline about things. . . . I try to follow the structured guidelines because I know that is what the interviewer is expecting. Especially in situations that they don't know anything about you but your name or whatever is on your resume. So I think that you shouldn't try to push it by making too much of a statement in an interview. But follow the guidelines of what is expected because it shows that you are willing to be a part of that team.

A background consideration to this passage is Charles's expressed career goal of becoming an executive in a Fortune 500 company. Charles also discussed in detail his preference for clothing that has a conservative flair (e.g., darker colors, double-breasted suits, and pleated pants)—which he felt conveyed a sense of being disciplined and serious—rather than flashier styles that have combinations of brighter colors. In this narrative context, formal situations and the wearing of formal attire stands as a symbolic metaphor for attaining success in more structured organizational contexts. His participation in these events has a self-affirming quality and also provides a concrete demonstration that becoming part of the team need not entail an homogenization of his own identity.³

³Charles's issue of "fitting in to a structure" also presents an ethnic subtext tied to the social realities of being a young African-American in American society. In terms specific to fashion, this supplemental

In the following passage, the symbolic power that can be attributed to fashionable brands is made clear by Gretta's reflections on a time in her life when these symbols of social acceptance were conspicuous in their absence. When fashion is used as a means for negotiating social boundaries, those lacking basic resources can feel excluded from many modes of affiliative bonds. For Gretta, not fitting in had immediate social consequences, such as feeling like an outsider, having her history misperceived, and the potentially negative long-term consequences of being stigmatized:

Like I grew up in a project-hood. When I tell my friends this they think "oooh, Chicago ghetto"—but it wasn't like that. Our projects are just like apartments. This is where black and white kids lived. Mainly there's two sets of projects: the white projects and the black projects but it wasn't like *Good Times* [television show], it wasn't a ghetto. I mean, we weren't extremely poor. We weren't like eating from hand to mouth but we just weren't the elite. So when I went to school I was shipped like maybe a mile from the edge of town with the rich little kids, the doctor's and lawyer's kids. And so being from the projects it was like a stigma because I always feel like I didn't fit in with them. I mean, I was as smart as they were but the teachers had a tendency to be like "you're the project kids" and that sort of thing. You could feel it and then they would come to school with their—what was the thing at the time?—those little Bass shoes; they were ugly little shoes. But at the time they were just all the rage and all the kids had them. And I guess I wanted a pair. . . . I was never in the latest fashion 'cause I never had like the K-Swiss and the Liz Claiborne and all that and it really made me have a bad self-image because I could never look like the others did. I could never have the name-brand stuff, and I mean it really made me feel bad, seeing everyone else having something you can't have. And like umm, I remember when the Polo shirts were out. Those were just—you had to have a Polo—you had to have a Polo so umm—one time my mom went and got some Polos and I was just all excited. I was just "Yes! Yes! Yes!" and now I can go to school and I can fit in. I don't have to be like the outsider. (Gretta)

This passage also demonstrates that fashion discourse provides a logic for reducing the complexities (and social inequities) of class dynamics to a seemingly more manageable and perhaps acceptable form. Gretta expresses an implicit understanding that one's symbolic capital—that is, the array of symbolic goods, cultural knowledge, and social skills that mark one's social-class standing (Bourdieu 1984; Featherstone 1991)—subtly and pervasively influences the extent to which one can feel at home in a given social setting and, more important, the perceptions of authority figures who make pivotal judgments (such as whether or not a person is college material).

reading suggests that Charles's fashion orientation offers a compromise between the dress conventions of mainstream (e.g., Anglo-dominated) society and the fashion sensibilities of younger, fashion-forward, African-American males (hooks 1992; Ross 1994).

Although symbolic capital extends beyond matters of dress, fashion is one of its most tangible and potentially controllable dimensions. In the case of Gretta, wearing fashionable brands offered a way to combat some of the stigma associated with being a "project kid," so that her abilities could be recognized by teachers and other students. 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 (e.g., Molloy 1975, 1977).

Who Says Blue Is for Boys and Pink Is for Girls? Fashion Discourse and the Naturalizing and Problematizing of Gender

Greg: I always laugh at, like, if a woman says "I have to get up at 5:00 A.M. tomorrow so I can't be up this late." And I'm like, "Well, what time do you work?" And [she's] like, "9:00." I mean it's just ridiculous, you know? I would never, you know—I get up 45 minutes before. I quick take a shower and comb my hair, throw on whatever and go to class. I don't think twice about it. Some people plan out their wardrobes the day before. I haven't met hardly any men that do that. I'd say at least half the women I know say they do.

Interviewer: Alison, you mentioned that you like to look at fashion magazines. What kinds of things do you look at in those magazines?

Alison: The models, what they are wearing. Their skinny bodies.

Interviewer: Their skinny bodies?

Alison: Yeah. I really look at what they are wearing and I try to put myself in the magazine to see what that type of clothing would look like on me. It is also sort of fantasy-like too. Like those skinny models, sometimes you envy them. I'm sure everyone does especially around summertime when it's swimsuit season and you look in there and they are so skinny and you think god, "I'd better run a few miles a day." That kind of thing. It gives me a push to do something, dress nicer, dress the way they dress or to lose some weight.

As a thought experiment, read these passages in terms of an imagined gender reversal (Stern 1993). In this reversal, Alison would be commenting on men who spend so much time getting dressed and Greg would be describing his desire to look more like a "skinny model." The point of this imagined reversal is to highlight the subtle ways in which fashion discourses encode a vast number of socially constructed, gender conceptions—such as women being more meticulous than men in managing their appearance—that are taken for granted and, conversely, that pose an unusual circumstance when transgressed.

The context-specific manifestations of general cultural predispositions, however, are always more complex than can be represented by general descriptions about the social construction of femininity and masculinity (see Epstein 1988). Several of our male participants—such as

Charles and Lawrence and Zachary—did express a definite interest in matters of fashion and appearance. A characteristically feminine use of fashion to create a sense of social affiliation and sharing can also be discerned in the reflections of our male participants, such as Zachary's use of fashion to forge a common bond with his stepmother. Conversely, our female participants also attribute masculinized meanings to their fashion behaviors such as creating a sense of personal autonomy or being seen as a unique individual who stands out. The theoretical implication of these consumer narratives is that gender categories—as a nexus of sociohistorically constructed characteristics—are relatively fluid ones and that consumers' uses of fashion discourses can juxtaposition historically typified masculine and feminine interpretive orientations.

Nonetheless, our participants did invoke gender-distinct meanings that express differing relationships to the world of fashion. One of the most apparent gender differences is that a number of issues that were focal in the interviews with female participants simply did not arise in those with male participants. Absent from the male interviews is any expressed top-of-the-mind knowledge about the lives of fashion models, desires to emulate famous fashion models, sensitivity to the beauty ideals represented in fashion magazines, or concerns over the effects that mass media images might have on their self-identity or those of other men they know. In contrast, these and many other issues related to fashion, physical appearance, and the potentially negative consequences of the "beauty myth" pervade the interviews with women participants. Whereas the representation of masculinity in fashion imagery is treated as a nonissue by our male participants, women interpret fashion's beauty ideals as being far more consequential to their self-identity. They also expressed a multitude of differing and often ambivalent interpretive relationships to these images.

These differing gendered relations to the world of fashion are consistent with past work on the socialization of males and females in American consumer culture. Whereas girls are socialized in meanings that inculcate a sensitivity to appearance and fashion, boys are socialized in a system of cultural meanings that do not forge such a strong and direct link between physical attractiveness, fashionability, and self-identity (Fallon 1990; Nichter and Nichter 1991). For example, a much noted feature of women's "teen-zines" is their instructions on the management of weight and physical appearance (e.g., skin, hairstyles, and fashion styles) and continual reinforcement that these characteristics are essential to women's esteem and social success (Bordo 1993; Cooke 1996). From enduring cultural conceptions about femininity that are transferred across generations, to mass media representations and more material influences on socialization (such as Barbie dolls), physical appearance, fashionability, and femininity have been routinely and continuously associated in the texts and practices of American consumer culture (Chapkis 1986; Douglas 1994).

Women participants, however, did not treat these forces of gender socialization as naturalized aspects of their daily lives. Rather, they invoked a number of critical narratives that problematized these idealized representations, particularly those featured in fashion magazines and advertisements. Furthermore, their problematizing interpretations focus on the idealized representations of feminine beauty, particularly those featured in fashion magazines. Their use of fashion discourse involves a continuous juxtaposition of divergent fashion discourses that are directed at resisting and contesting specific fashion meanings and images they deem as exerting a negative influence on their self-conceptions and those around them. As our analysis will show, however, that these acts of rejection and critique are nonetheless grounded in a profound sense of ego involvement with these images.

In other words, women's desire to explicitly reject fashion ideals—in a way not found in the interviews with men—reflects the strong personal significance that they vest in these fashion discourses. Women's conscious, rationalizing narratives of rejection stand in opposition to a more habituated, emotionally charged involvement with these fashion ideals. As will be shown, Barthes's (1972) description of the "mythical thinking" (or interpretive orientation) required to negotiate the internal contradictions of cultural ideologies—"I know, but all the same . . ."—holds a high degree of resonance for these women participants.

What to Wear? Oppositional Meanings or a Technology of the Self

I think women see me on the cover of magazines and think I have never had a pimple or bags under my eyes. You have to realize that's after two hours of hair and makeup and [photo] retouching. Even I don't wake up looking like Cindy Crawford. (SUPERMODEL CINDY CRAWFORD quoted in Cooke [1996, p. 140])

Models do not have a negative impact on women. They have a positive impact because they set standards. Women are going to look like themselves but they will look like their best selves because models set the standards. (SUPERAGENT EILEEN FORD quoted in Cooke [1996, p. 145])

In recent years, the popular press (Ingrassia 1995; Lague 1993; Nemeth 1994; Webb 1994; Wolf 1991) and a significant amount of scholarly work have implicated the fashion industry (through its models, advertising campaigns, and thin-oriented clothing designs) in a plethora of societal problems afflicting women, including, but not limited to, eating disorders, reduced self-esteem, body-image distortions, and increased predilections for cosmetic surgery interventions (Bordo 1993; Fallon 1990; Joy and Venkatesh 1994; Nichter and Nichter 1991; Probyn 1987; Richins 1991, 1995; Rosen 1990; Stephens,

Hill, and Hanson 1994). These critical narratives have now attained widespread circulation through newspapers, popular press magazines (such as *Time* or *People*), and women's magazines (such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Ms.*, and *Self*) that present stories revealing the inner workings of fashion imagery (such as the rigorous diet and exercise regimes of fashion models and the manipulation of appearances through makeup, lighting, and photo retouching). These critiques and critical exposés can even be found in women's fashion magazines themselves. As discussed by Rabine (1994), this latter media form presents a site of conflicting ideologies and purposes instead of functioning as a seamless web of oppression (Rabine 1994). On the one side, the photo layouts and advertising images of women's fashion magazines reproduce long-standing meanings about the importance of women's appearance and the near imperative to enhance attractiveness through clothing, cosmetics, and dietary regimes. To appeal to a media-savvy audience, however, these articles frequently espouse an oppositional viewpoint that calls attention to the artificiality and potential negative consequences of fashion imagery.

The diffusion of critical anti-beauty-myth narratives can be seen in a number of other media forms. Oppositional readings of fashion and media imagery are encouraged by the media awareness curriculum being used in many high school and college classes. Consciousness-raising videos such as *Still Killing Us Softly*, (Kilbourne 1987), *Slim Hopes* (Kilbourne 1995), and *The Famine Within* (Gilday 1990) are widely available for classroom use and present strong critiques of fashion and advertising imagery as perpetuating a problem-inducing "beauty myth" (e.g., Wolf 1991) among women consumers. Finally, a number of apparel and cosmetic marketers, such as Aveda, The Body Shop, Esprit, and Birkenstock, have explicitly positioned themselves as offering alternatives to the traditional objectifying narratives of feminine beauty. In so doing, their promotional campaigns further inject a critical voice into the field of cultural discourses.

This diffusion of critical narratives—in mass media and academic contexts—raises the question, just do how women consumers make sense of this complex of idealized images and countervailing narratives? For the women participants in this study, well-known fashion models are particularly focal aspects of the fashion world, with Kate Moss, Naomi Campbell, Claudia Schiffer, and Cindy Crawford being frequently mentioned exemplars. For several women participants, these competing narrative constructions of the fashion model became incorporated into a critique of what they perceive as objectifying social forces. This critique employs a dichotomy between the real and the artificial (or fake), which, in turn, is associated with other morally tinged distinctions such as healthy/unhealthy, happy/unhappy, and normal/not normal.

It's obvious the women in these magazines are not typical women. It's crazy to think that they are. I personally

don't think it's that attractive that they're so skinny sometimes. In society today, women have a great pressure on them. Other people look at these models and for some reason think that everybody should look like that. So women have a great pressure to have bodies that have no curves and are completely straight, like Twiggy. Women look at these, and either they can pretend that they have these bodies or they can feel bad because they don't have these bodies. I don't think it's very good. It causes a lot of problems. I think if someone looked deeper into it, they would find that a lot of those people aren't very happy, because they're spending a lot of their time not eating and exercising excessively. Their lives aren't normal. They aren't enjoying life. I can't imagine how they could be because they're spending so much time wondering how they are going to fit into these size 0 jeans for a layout. (Amy)

One noteworthy point of Amy's passage is her interpretive use of the 1960's fashion icon Twiggy. Her reading of Twiggy as an oppressive icon is consistent with many popular press analyses that render the Twiggy phenomenon as a culturally important manifestation of the "ideology of thinness" that is, in turn, widely associated with eating disorders (see Lague 1993; Leland 1996); hence, the "waif" look exemplified by supermodel Kate Moss and the so-called postwaif look embodied by the newly controversial model Trish Goff are commonly characterized as a regressive turn toward to this oppressive ideal (e.g., Goodman 1996). This revisionist interpretation of Twiggy overlooks historical research indicating that the Twiggy phenomenon represented an intersection of class and gender politics (e.g., the mod movement and the symbolic protests of youth culture). This historical reading suggests an alternative, more resistance-based or liberatory explanation of Twiggy's iconic status (DeLibero 1994; Hebdige 1988). For example, DeLibero (1994) argues that Twiggy presented a very reassuring image to many middle- and upper-middle-class adolescent girls whose bodies were not developing in accord with the then dominant feminine ideal of voluptuousness—as embodied by celebrity icons such as Marilyn Monroe and Jayne Mansfield.

This difference between a historically contextualized and a revisionist reading of the Twiggy phenomenon illustrates that cultural icons of femininity exist in a social space of ideological conflict in which hegemonic ideals are rejected by embracing other naturalized, culturally available images (see also Scott 1997). In the current social milieu, women have access to a number of social narratives that problematize the thinness ideal and that motivate innumerable critiques of media images representing this contestable ideological construction of femininity. The reciprocal counterpart to this problematizing discourse is a naturalizing one in which another cultural ideal—the athletic, fit, toned body—is interpreted as a look that is both aesthetically pleasing and liberating.

This dynamic is illustrated in the following two quotes from Hanna. The first excerpt primarily expresses a problematizing interpretation. In this interpretation, the natu-

ral/fake distinction (and its ensuing system of subdistinctions) not only provides a logic for rejecting a fashion image but it also enables fashion models to be reinterpreted as really being ordinary individuals; as such, her critical narrative affords a logic of deglamorization that expresses a resistance to the much noted desire of younger women to emulate these unattainable physical ideals (see, e.g., Nichter and Nichter 1991; Richins 1991, 1995; Stephens et al. 1994):

Hanna: I would say their faces are beautiful, but I think their bodies are disgusting. You read everything now about how they maintain their weight. They starve themselves; all they eat is popcorn and diet soda. I mean, I think their faces are beautiful but then I also think, look how many hours go into that, hours and hours just for the makeup and hair. You know, they're just normal people. I think anyone can look like that if they have the right tools.

Interviewer: Tools?

Hanna: All the artists, the makeup artist, the hair artist and all their makeup. They just have tons piled on and the clothes, the lighting, the brushing over like Playboy does, the unnatural things; there is beauty, natural beauty too, but for models it's much more tools, makeup. Like Estee Lauder has Paulina—beautiful woman—but also I've seen pictures of her without makeup on and she looks just like you and me.

Here, the thin body of the fashion model is not taken as an ideal but rather it is rejected as an extreme that is disgusting, unnatural, unhealthy, and requiring extreme dietary restrictions. In Hanna's narrative (as well as those of the other women participants), the starvation/exercise-extremist discourse dominates the alternative explanation offered by modeling agency and fashion media spokespersons asserting that waiflike fashion models simply have naturally high metabolisms (see Lague 1993). Although Hanna would seem to have constructed a strong narrative of resistance, her interpretations also manifest a clear case of "I know, but all the same . . ." thinking. For Hanna, some extreme artificial images are easily rejected, while others—that are also seen as being artificially constructed—have an attractive quality that inspires an emulative orientation:

I haven't read any of them [fashion magazines] lately because this whole grunge thing is in. It just totally disgusts me how anorexic these models are, and I think what they're showing right now is just absurd and trying to push on people. Like Kate Moss. She has this straight front middle part, just stick-straight gross greasy hair, just skinny, and she always has the grunge look, like torn shirts, with like a tank top underneath, the big military boots, torn jeans on the bottom or bell-bottoms, torn bell-bottoms—it's supposed to be a "put on whatever you have look," just throw all kinds of prints and patterns together. It's just very unrealistic. I would never want to look like that [Kate Moss type]. I would want to look like someone who has muscle you know, who looks good. . . . Those women on *Bodyshaping* on ESPN. The one oriental woman is my idol even though I know I'm sure she's had a boob job and tons of other plastic surgery but I think she looks great.

I mean I still know there's no way I could look like that unless that was my job eight hours a day so it's a goal, she's a role model, but I still have it in perspective because I know that's not going to happen because I have to go to school and that's my job.

Hanna's description of what looks good—the fit, strong, muscular, yet femininely shaped body—characterizes a body ideal that captivates the imagination of the other female participants in this study. As such, their self-perceptions and personal ideals have become steeped in the aesthetic of the "fit and toned body," which is emerging as a new standard of feminine attractiveness (Brubach 1996; Thompson and Hirschman 1995). This shared ideal and the consumption behaviors it supports—such as working out—exhibits a form of fashion consciousness that Blumer (1969) characterizes as a "collective mood." That is, a preference for a style or appearance evolves from a shared aesthetic sense, which, in turn, reflects a confluence of societal influences. Blumer argues that this collective mood facilitates the diffusion of new fashions by fostering a feeling that the embrace of something new offers an improvement over the existing status quo. In the context of these women participant's fashion discourses, the "fit and toned" ideal is a contemporary look that stands in opposition to the conventional, oppressive, problem-inducing thinness ideal.

The social relativity of the ideal feminine physique embraced by Hanna and most of the other female participants is readily revealed by historical comparison; for example, a mere 20 years ago, the type of muscular appearance exhibited by contemporary icons of feminine beauty—Sharon Stone, the Nautilized Madonna, the *Terminator 2* physique of Linda Hamilton—would have been deemed as overly masculine and unattractive (Bordo 1993). However, the emergence of this athletic and powerful-looking female standard offers a dramatic contrast to traditionally passive and weak images of femininity (Brubach 1996). Furthermore, this athletic image evokes notions of health, vitality, and control that stand in opposition to problematizing discourses that consistently link ideals of thinness with eating disorders and other health threats (e.g., Nichter and Nichter 1991). Although the fashion industry has received much criticism for glorifying a socially repressive waif look—embodied in the form of childlike, anorexic-appearing models—it may be that this particular trend has actually denuded the influence of fashion imagery on their intended target markets. The waif image maps on so closely to the problematizing discourses about fashion imagery that it is easily critiqued and rejected. Conversely, the toned, aerobicized look that fits with the collective mood offers a body image ideal standard that is not so easily discounted.

The frequent use of the word "natural" by these participants—as a means to attribute positive meanings to specific fashion looks and icons—also warrants some discussion. In particular regard to women's fashion, a tension between artifice and naturalness has been a prominent theme of fashion design, fashion merchandising im-

agery and narratives, and the texts of popular press analyses of fashion trends (Craik 1994; Davis 1992; Sparke 1995). In these contexts, "natural" has been used as an honorific term for endorsing a new style by means of an association with positive meanings such as authenticity, an expression of timeless aesthetic principles, and freedom from fashion pressures. The demarcation of "natural" also expresses an implicit or explicit critique of the existing look being displaced. In comparison to the new natural look, the displaced fashion can be read as an abominable exaggeration or an oppressive artificiality.

The term "natural" then functions as a mythic construct in the context of fashion discourse (Barthes 1983), that is, an amorphous ideal whose form is continuously reformulated in ways that sanction present-day standards. Designating a particular style as natural then forges an alignment between the currently fashionable look and a socially shared aesthetic that is in vogue at a particular time and among a particular social group.

The following two interview excerpts demonstrate the ways in which the naturalized aesthetic ideal of the fit and toned body is interpreted in a manner that Foucault (1988) terms as expressing a "technology of the self" narrative. This conception of self-identity is based on meanings and practices that "permit individuals to effect by their own means a certain number of operations on their bodies and souls, conduct, and way of being so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault 1988, p. 18). This "technology of the self" narrative finds general representations in a long-standing promotional theme for women's clothing, weight-loss programs, and cosmetics. In these promotional narratives, beauty is portrayed as an outcome that women can attain through the judicious use of products and services (Craik 1994). As shown in the following passage, however, consumers can also use fashion images and meanings to envision a personal orientation and lifestyle that is not currently attainable. In this way, the technology of the self fashion discourse becomes intertwined with narratives about one's hopes for the future and the goals that are salient in these future-directed life projects:

Interviewer: You mentioned *Vogue* and *Elle* several times. Are you familiar with those magazines?

Sarah: Actually I subscribed to them when I was in Korea.

Interviewer: What kind of things did you look at in those magazines?

Sarah: I like some beauty tips and the fashion. But *Vogue*, *Elle* it is very hard to follow. If I want to wear things like the models it's impossible. But I like to see what do they look like these days.

Interviewer: Why is that impossible?

Sarah: That is all very expensive, and second, a lot of fashion in that kind of magazine is really radical. I cannot wear that kind of overexposed dress in school or at work. Not impossible but very hard and I don't want to look like that. But there are some more decent clothes. There are something that I like.

Interviewer: Could you tell me a little more about radical?

Sarah: It's like, you know the metallic fabric. We never wear in ordinary life. And something like too transparent so we can look at everything of the model's body. That kind of thing. That is what I call radical.

Interviewer: So that kind of look is not for you?

Sarah: No. If I have confidence in my body maybe I will. But usually I can't because the designs are too bold to me. Too overexposed.

Interviewer: When you said "confidence in my body," what did you mean?

Sarah: Well, do you remember what Cher wore on the Oscars? I won't wear that kind of see-through stuff. But I can wear more elastic-Lycra thing, Spandex. If I wear that kind of stuff then the contour of my body can be seen. I don't wear that kind of stuff but if I have confidence, then I would be willing to wear it—if someone who has great body wears that kind of stuff, that is pretty.

Interviewer: So do you think you are going to be wearing those kinds of clothes somewhere along the way?

Sarah: I hope so 'cause I think it will make me happy if I can wear what I want to wear. Right now I can't wear exactly what I want to wear sometimes because it doesn't go well with me and it doesn't look pretty on me. So why wear it? Because one of the reason that I wear clothes is to be good, pretty. So if it doesn't go well with me then there is no point in wearing it. But I know that if I had great body, that it would go well with me.

The following passage demonstrates some of the ways that fashion discourses and corresponding body-image ideals are embedded in a field of social relationships and a nexus of naturalizing and problematizing discourses. A long excerpt is presented to show the multitude of internal conflicts and cases of "I know, but all the same . . ." thinking that are invoked by Joan's effort to effect a workable compromise between her own sense of self-directed behaviors and this (perceived) collective mood:

Joan: I mean, friends of mine, you hear people in a sorority just talking. Last night, for instance, we came back from the bar and I was falling asleep on the couch but [Jamie and Elsbeth] and her friend [Eileen] were sitting there eating cookie dough—everyone seems to be eating cookie dough these days—and I think Elsbeth was looking at the *TV Guide* and I think Heather Locklear was on the front and she said, "You know with that body she can go to hell." And Jamie was like, "Yeah, I'm starting Slim Fast tomorrow." And like looking through the Victoria Secret catalog with friends and you think, look at the bodies. Everyone is into wanting to look like that and that's why I said people want to look like the women in the Guess ad.

Interviewer: Have you ever felt like that yourself?

Joan: Yeah. There was a point I was working out a lot. I mean your body really does change when you work out, and I mean it's incredible how it can go from being size 8 to 6 and I was thinking to myself, okay I am going to look like one of these models now. But then the thing is that in my head I know they're models and that they probably don't look like that with all the computer stuff they can do. They've got their flaws and everything. But my

mind was saying those pictures are real. I was telling my friend showing me a picture in a magazine and me saying "Oh, I'm going to look like that." She said, "You are going in for psychological counseling, you are not looking like that. It's impossible." Well, I wasn't obsessive, not eating and working out 24 hours a day. I just did it normally but I was very excited about the changes I noticed in my body and I was like wow I can look like a model. I wasn't completely done like toning my body but I was noticing changes, but it hit me that those are all models and that's not how normal people really are. I just kept picturing all these thin girls like they really looked like that and all I needed to do was lose weight to look like that, but that's not even true, even thin people don't look like that, do you know what I mean? They should have fat like people having sex in movies, do you know what I mean? Like people who have cellulite on their legs, like normal people do. I think that I was just so wrapped up about how they looked in movies and that's how I want to look.

Interviewer: When your friend said you should get psychological help, what was that all about?

Joan: It was just I kept saying that I was working out every day, and she said you don't need to work out every day. That that's excessive. That's not excessive. It would be if excessive if you worked out and didn't eat or worked out to try to keep losing weight. But, I actually ate more that summer than ever. So, I don't know why she said that. I think a lot of the members in her sorority are into working out. There are a lot of anorexic girls in that sorority and bulimics. They are so excessive. My one friend used to go down to dinner and eat what there was there, and there would be cookies and she would want to eat one for dessert but she felt very funny doing that because no one else would. Everyone there just had salad with no dressing and tons of water and just had come from working out. I think it consumes the whole sorority. In mine, I don't notice it as much but I do notice people talk about it a lot even though they do eat. They do want to be thin like models, they go to work out to the gym every afternoon and say, "Oh I'm having a treat, I really shouldn't do this." I mean people are very consumed with how they look. It seems like that's the main concern, how they look, their body, that seems to be their concern. The things I really can think of are that people are always concerned with working out and what they are eating. And looking at girls who are thin and saying "Look at her body, she can eat whatever she wants and look at how she looks." I see a lot of that or when there's people every night at the sorority saying "I shouldn't be eating this."

This passage encapsulates both Joan's self-perceptions and her interpretations of others in her immediate social setting. A global issue that cuts across these two modes of understanding is that the sorority is perceived as a site where conflicting ideological meanings are contested and negotiated. In the first segment of the excerpt, different media (i.e., Heather Locklear on the cover of *TV Guide*, a Victoria's Secret catalogue, and advertisements for Guess jeans) are all read as presenting a singular construction of the culturally idealized female body. Joan offers a fairly conventional interpretation that these images unduly influence the body image perceptions of her peer group.

The remainder of her narrative details a more personalized understanding of the ideological conflicts that are being socially negotiated in this sorority context. Joan interprets her experiences of working out as being intrinsically motivating and rewarding and in which she witnessed enjoyable transformations in her body. From the (reported) perspective of her friend, Joan's efforts to transform her body raised concerns about eating disorders and other problems commonly discussed as consequences of women's pursuit of the beauty myth. Although Joan interprets her behaviors as not belonging in this socially salient category of excessive behavior, she did come to reinterpret her goal of eventually looking like a fashion model as an unhealthy one that was neither normal nor realistic. It is important that this perceptual shift is described as resulting from a social negotiation between herself and friends who read her actions in terms of the problematizing discourse of anorexia and psychological obsession with thinness.

Although Joan takes exception to interpretations of her own exercise and diet routines as being excessive, she readily invokes this epithet to characterize similar behaviors undertaken by others in her social circle. In this way, her interpretation uses fashion discourse to create a self-defining social distinction between her own behaviors (and those of her sorority peers) and the excessive behaviors of women in another sorority. Just as her expression of her own self-understanding contained some ambivalence over whether or not her working out and body-image goals were problematic, Joan also recognizes some potentially worrisome behavioral and attitudinal tendencies among her own sorority peers. However, the identity threatening prospect that her sorority may to be obsessed with the thinness ideal is tempered by her interpretation that their orientation has not crossed the line separating the normal from the excessive.

In sum, Joan's narrative of self-identity is structured by meanings that problematize the body-image orientations of another sorority and that naturalize similar orientations seen in her immediate peer group. The broader point being that the narratives of the socialized body—that is, the way in which meanings ascribed to the body are constructed and negotiated in a social setting (e.g., Thompson and Hirschman 1995)—play a central role in the gendered identity of this participant. For Joan, a critical defining characteristic is whether she and/or her female peers are excessive or not excessive in their pursuit of a particular body image ideal.

In her sorority milieu, cultural narratives that forge an association between exercise, obsessiveness, eating disorders, and an obsessive pursuit of the beauty myth appear to have a dominant status over those that emphasize the empowering and potentially liberating properties of strengthening the female body. The salient metaphoric image of this dominant discourse is the calorie-obsessed anorexic, rather than that of the powerful athlete. This image of the calorie-obsessed anorexic is also prominent in the works of feminist theorists (see Bordo 1993) and

cultural critics who contend that the exercise/fitness/strength complex is yet another unattainable and oppressive beauty ideal fostered upon women by a patriarchal culture (Kilbourne 1995; Gilday 1990; Wolf 1991). However, cultural discourses on the female body are clearly in flux. For example, the alternative "empowering" reading is gaining more currency among so-called third-wave feminist theorists (Scott 1997) and is being diffused through advertisements for women's sporting equipment, particularly those developed by Nike (see Brubach 1996). The differing connotations of working out reported by Joan offer a specific example of these conflicts among countervailing fashion discourses are negotiated in the context of everyday life.

DISCUSSION

We have analyzed some of the ways in which consumers derive personalized consumption meanings from a network of countervailing fashion discourses. Through these acts of meaning appropriation, consumers juxtapose and integrate a multitude of implicit folk theories to interpret various aspects of their daily lives that are closely associated with the fashion world, such as the fashion norms and tastes that operate in a particular social setting, fashionable clothing brands, store images, media icons, beauty ideals, and social categories identified vis-à-vis fashion styles. By using fashion discourses to create localized social categories and novel metonymic and metaphoric images, the participants gain concrete reference points from which to understand more abstract issues of social-class dynamics, gender relations, and the tension between personal autonomy and social dependencies. In this latter case, fashion discourses forge a number of symbolically charged and nuanced social distinctions within their social sphere (grungers, granola-ish types, business school clones, etc.)

These interpretations also serve to incorporate cultural meanings into participants' life projects and life themes (see, e.g., Mick and Buhl 1992) and to adapt cultural meanings to the localized conditions of their everyday lives. For these participants, fashion phenomena provide salient markers in their narratives of personal history from which they also envisage the trajectories of their future lives. In this regard, participants interpret favored aspects of the fashion world as repositories for dreams of an envisioned good life. Conversely, disliked aspects of fashion become salient targets for critiques of materialism, classism, sexism, mindless conformity, and the perceived manipulative techniques of marketers. One psychological function of these localized interpretations is that they help each participant to see his or her self as an active creator of a personally unique style, rather than as a passive, trend-following consumer.

Although some of their interpretations do reproduce the naturalized understandings suggested by culturally dominant fashion meanings, others express critical readings of those selected aspects of the fashion world they

deem relevant to their everyday lives. These problematizing interpretations, however, do not express a view independent of the ideological structure of fashion discourse. Rather, their resistant and oppositional readings are formed through juxtaposing and combining countervailing fashion discourses. In this way, consumers make use of the ideological tensions among culturally available fashion discourses to articulate a personalized sense of fashion that runs against the grain of what they perceive as a dominant fashion orientation of their social settings. Conversely, this contextualized use of ideological meanings enables their own engagement in the world of fashion—via preferred styles, body aesthetics, or social identifications—to be interpreted as an antifashion and self-directed orientation.

In regard to this last point, these consumer interpretations of fashion express a system of values that Berman (1982) describes as the ethos of modernity: the sanctity of individuality and self-directed reason, the individual as a locus of control (over of one's body, one's image, one's life course), a commitment to progressive improvement (i.e., self-development), the belief in meritocracy and social mobility, and a generally optimistic outlook on the future. Furthermore, these participants all express a preference for a modernist design aesthetic (see, e.g., Forty 1986) by rejecting looks that appeared to be thrown together, artificial, or unrealistic. It should be recalled that modernity arose in opposition to the economic and social restrictions posed by rigid class hierarchies, unquestioned adherence to social customs, and the hegemonic status of dogmatic religious beliefs (Borgmann 1992). In a parallel manner, appropriating these modernist values enables these participants to interpret their fashion behaviors as self-determined actions that can be distinguished from fashion conformity or trendiness.

This situation warrants some discussion in light of social analyses contending that the ideals of modernity have themselves congealed into an oppressive order that serves the economic needs and interests of global capitalism (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Giddens 1991). From this postmodernist perspective, consumers can escape "the totalizing logic of the market" only by adopting a postmodern ethos of fragmentation and decenteredness to construct "emancipated spaces" by "engaging in nonlinearities thought and practice, improbable behaviors, contingencies, and discontinuities" (Firat and Venkatesh 1995, p. 255).

The viability of consumers' sustaining this postmodern stance, however, is called into question by research suggesting that psychological life remains organized around decidedly modernist themes such as the need for a coherent narrative of self-identity and life purpose and the desire for a sense of social ties and community involvement (Bellah et al. 1985; Romanyshyn 1989). The consumer interpretations expressed in these interviews bear little resemblance to the narratively disjointed and noncommittal stance of postmodern resistance. Through the appropriation of fashion discourses, these consumers impose a

coherent sense of order upon potentially disparate, fragmented styles and activities, and they use interpretive strategies (such as the mythic thinking of "I know, but all the same. . . .") to resolve the fashion-centered paradoxes and tensions manifest in their narratives of personal history. Yet, it does not seem an adequate description to propose that these consumers are uncritically indoctrinated in the totalizing narratives of the marketplace.

Indeed, their interpretations suggest that fashion discourses exhibit far too many disjunctures and offer too many countervailing interpretive positions to function as a totalizing ideological system. Although hegemonic fashion discourses are typically thought of as a language of seduction and commodification, these consumption narratives exhibit intertextual tensions that can be used to problematize and resist the potentially seductive qualities of consumer culture. The next section offers a more extensive discussion of the theoretical implications raised by the intertextual and countervailing nature of consumers' fashion discourses.

Refashioning Hegemony and Meaning Transfer

We suggest that consumers' uses of fashion discourse manifest a broader sociocultural process that has been conceptually discussed as a "lived hegemony" (Williams 1994). Whereas hegemonic (e.g., culturally dominant) meanings have traditionally been viewed as an oppressive ideological force (controlled by cultural elites) that consumers can escape through liberating acts of critical reflection (see Murray and Ozanne 1991), contemporary social theorists have shifted from this class-conflict view (Hetrick and Lozada 1994). For this latter view, ideology is an inevitable and essential feature of social life. Cultural ideologies provide a foundation of culturally shared meanings and values that mediate between macrosocietal structures and the micropractices of everyday life (de Certeau 1984, 1988; Hall [1980] 1994; Hebdige 1979; Silverman 1983). Through ideology, the actions and thoughts of individuals are organized in a manner that allows for a sense of collective identity, the coordination of societally important functions, and the maintenance of social order. Although ideologies can reproduce institutionalized inequities, they also benefit individuals by providing rules that enable them to negotiate the complexities of social life and, in some cases, opportunities to turn the ideological system to their unique social or economic advantage (de Certeau 1984; Sparke 1995).

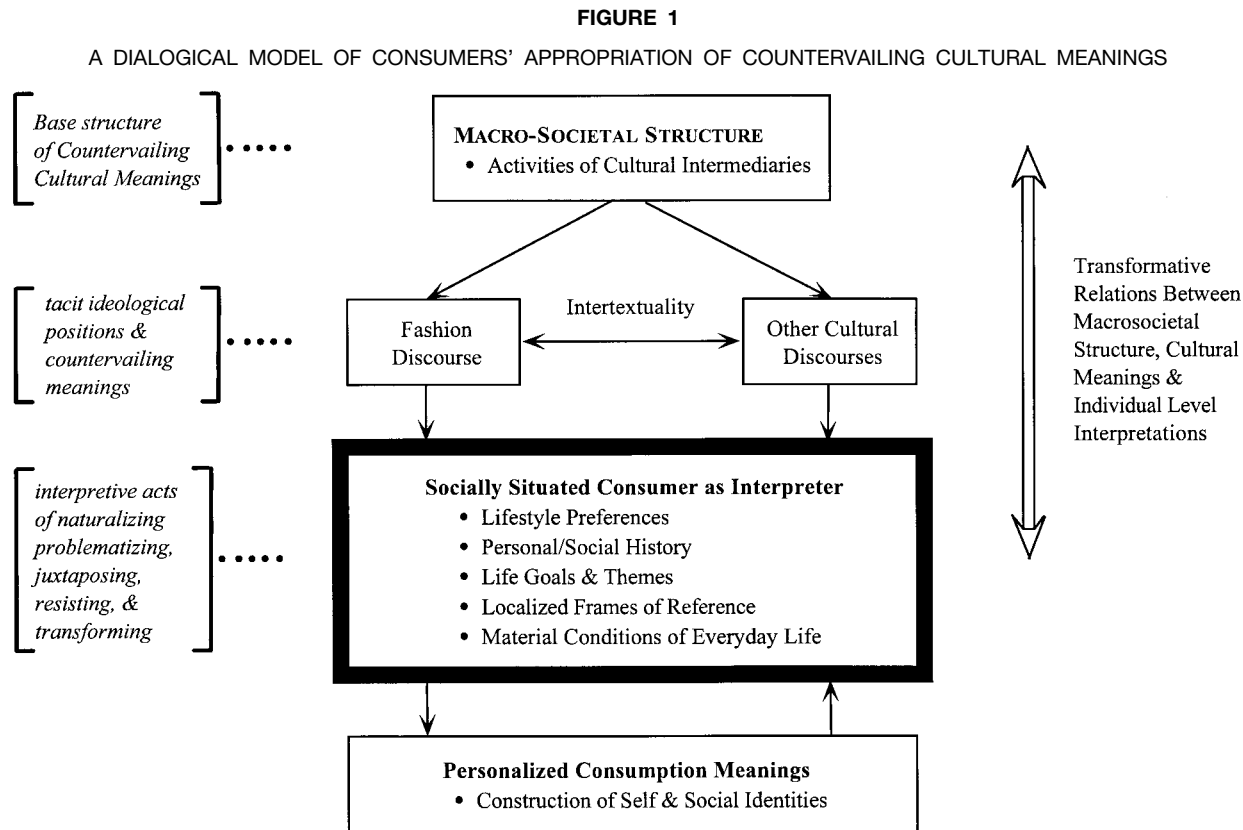
To this revised conception, we add that a lived cultural ideology is structured by countervailing discourses, rather than being an internally consistent, monolithic narrative system. As illustrated in these interviews, ideological relationships emerge through a dialogue between consumers who are interpreting the conditions of their everyday lives (microlevel influences) and these countervailing cultural narratives (macrolevel influences). Through this dialogue, consumers derive meanings in ways that place

some (or some combination) of these cultural narratives in a dominant position relative to others. Figure 1 offers a representation of this consumer-centered dialogical process of meaning appropriation.

In this model, the macrosocietal structure provides an ever present background to systems of countervailing cultural discourses and the idiographic meanings that consumers construct from them. For example, all of the meanings expressed by the participants are situated within the socioeconomic conditions of an advanced capitalist economy, although this background of structural relations seldom became a focal aspect of their fashion-based interpretations. The activities of cultural intermediaries (Featherstone 1991)—such as advertisers, fashion designers, producers of artistic goods (e.g., music, television, cinematic programming), news and info-tainment reporters, retailers and fashion merchandisers—provide a critical communicative linkage between institutional factors and the diffusion of culturally shared consumption meanings. The relationships between institutional structure and diffused meanings are discursive, rather than direct, because a given cultural intermediary is likely to be responding to multiple institutional forces and stakeholder interests. The discursive and underdetermined nature of these relationships is typically overlooked by social critics who interpret cultural intermediaries as creating and presenting a nearly uniform voice of oppressive economic and gender ideologies (e.g., Bocoock 1993; Bordo 1993; Chapkis 1986; Ewen 1988; Ewen and Ewen 1982).

The next level of the model is constituted by the countervailing cultural discourse that emerges from these institutional alignments and that provide the ideological vehicles through which macrosocietal structures and individual-level perceptions become aligned. The model simplifies this field of cultural narratives by only representing fashion discourses and a broadly defined category of "other discourses," which could be further specified in terms of discourses on morality, health, politics, gender, class and racial relations, the American dream, and many others. In these interviews, participants drew from a wide array of folk theories offered by these discourses to interpret their fashion experiences. By virtue of these intertextual constructions, their narratives of fashion meanings expressed a diversity of contrasting and often competing ideological positions. The intertextual conflicts and contradictions, however, afford a space for consumers' creative acts of interpretation and reflected the dynamic relations that exist between microlevel meanings and broader macrosocietal conditions and culturally shared meanings.

The fashion discourses expressed in these interviews encode tensions among historically predominant countervailing meanings or between traditional beliefs and contemporary views that have arisen (or are arising) in response to macrosocietal changes. Some of the tensions included (1) traditional versus nontraditional models of femininity and masculinity; (2) modernist values of meritocracy versus socially recognized class, race, and gender-



based barriers to social mobility; (3) masculinized narratives of individuality, distinction, and autonomy versus feminized narratives of social affiliation; (4) moralizing narratives condemning ostentatious display and self-aggrandizing acts of adornment versus glamorizing narratives equating self-worth with symbols of attained social status and material affluence. These polyvocal meanings were articulated through innumerable distinctions such as natural versus artifice, authentic versus imitative, and superficial (e.g., appearances) versus deep (e.g., one's inner character).

Consumers' use of fashion discourse entails a complex interpretive dance in which they continuously take up different interpretive positions from which to ascribe meanings to their fashion behaviors and to impute the motivations for other's fashion behaviors. For both men and women, this dance of interpretive positions serves a goal of resisting perceived pressures of conformity exerted by group norms, advertising and marketing efforts, and status consciousness. In the case of the female participants, a juxtaposition of fashion meanings and images is additionally used to problematize culturally prominent ideals about feminine appearance and to cultivate a sense of resistance toward the perceived objectifying forces of fashion imagery. However, this resistance did *not* entail a radical transformation in their worldviews that reflects an escape from the influence of ideological beliefs.

Rather, their oppositional interpretations are created by forging a critical contrast between countervailing ideological values (and gender ideals), such as displacing the thinness ideal with a countervailing idealization of feminine beauty.

Historical research further suggests that these localized meanings can, at times, inspire more widespread societal changes that circle back to alter not only a hegemonic discourse but also macrosocietal structures as well (Cosgrove 1984; Forty 1986). In this regard, the sensitivity of marketing research to emergent consumer meanings (particularly in the realm of fashion) and the propensity of commercial interests to translate these meanings into promotional texts and product designs can be seen as something other than a manipulative process of commodification (e.g., Ewen 1988). Rather, market responsiveness is a means by which consumers can effect large scale changes in social discourse.

Implications for "Meaning Transfer." The image of the interpreting consumer who makes use of the conflicts and contradictions among culturally available hegemonic meanings—rather than being oppressed by a monolithic ideological system—harbors important implications for consumer research's theoretical accounts of the relationship between consumers and the broader field of culturally shared meanings. Of particular interest to our analysis is

McCracken's meaning transfer model, which posits that the fashion and advertising systems are major conduits by which relatively abstract cultural meanings and values become concretely embodied in products and then materially integrated into the lives of consumers (McCracken 1986, 1988a). Although McCracken's model acknowledges the role of consumers in decoding advertising and fashion meanings and in actively incorporating these meanings into their everyday experiences, his model presumes that consumption meanings are nonetheless handed down to consumers' by cultural intermediaries. That is, consumer object-meaning associations are forged by advertising texts and the "fashion system," which McCracken defines as a constellation of fashion designers, fashion-oriented advertising, fashion media (and other journalistic gatekeepers), socially recognized opinion leaders (such as media celebrities), and, finally, radical countercultural groups whose styles can influence the creations and perceptions of designers, cultural gatekeepers, and opinion leaders.

Since McCracken's original work, consumer researchers have called more attention to the role of conversational discourse and linguistic tropes—such as metaphor and metonymy—in transferring abstract cultural values and systems of belief into the fabric of everyday life (Parker 1988; Sherry and Carmago 1987; Stern 1995; Thompson and Hirschman 1995; Thompson et al. 1994). The present analysis follows in this emerging stream of research. Our analysis of consumers' use of fashion discourses endorses the poststructuralist view that cultural discourses are not free-floating narratives. Rather, they are grounded in the social, economic, political, and technological structures that underlie cultural ways of life (Hall 1990, 1994). The relationships between these institutional structures and cultural meanings are heterogenous, dynamic, and marked by tensions among intersections of competing political, economic, and societal (class, gender, racial) interests (Lears 1985).

Our poststructuralist orientation calls attention to two issues that call for a more dynamic and consumer-centered account of the cultural movement of meanings. First, our analysis supports the proposal that consumer meanings are constructed across diffuse social contexts, each of which is structured by polyvocal cultural discourses and multiplicities of consumption objectives (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Sherry 1990). Through these juxtapositions, some aspects of the participants' fashion views and reported behaviors become naturalized as autonomous choices, whereas other behaviors (and those of other social groups) are problematized as signs of social conformity or manipulation by dominating forces. In this way, these participants were able to use conventional fashion meanings to sustain a sense of self-autonomy within a field of affiliative relationships and to adopt a critical stance toward specific facets of consumer culture. For the women in this study, many of these issues coalesced in a very salient manner around the negative consequences of the beauty myth manifested in fashion imagery.

Second, these consumer narratives reveal that fashion

meanings are not simply accepted or rejected on the basis of their fit with the prevailing cultural norms and conventional symbolic associations (see, e.g., McCracken 1988a). Rather, the meanings conveyed through fashion discourses present a contestable terrain that consumers rework in terms of their localized knowledge and value systems. This active reworking is further shaped by consumers' desire to construct self-identities through fashion discourses. This constructed identity is a socially negotiated one involving interpretations about one's social affiliations and contradistinctions to other social types. A consumer's sense of personal identity is defined as much by the meanings s/he feels impelled to resist as by those that are tacitly embraced. For women, a salient image to be resisted was that of the exercise-obsessed anorexic, whereas males tended to forge identity contrasts against the generalized image of the fashion conformist. In both cases, however, these interpretations afforded a sense of resistance to fashion-based symbols, ideals, and dress styles that were seen as having a hegemonic status in their social spheres.

These considerations suggest that the meaning transfer process is a diffuse, transformative, and consumer-centered undertaking. In these terms, consumers' appropriation of cultural meanings is a dialogical process (see, e.g., Bakhtin 1981) 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. While some discourses are more dominant—in the sense of offering a conventional or preferred reading of cultural events—and others are more marginal, all exist as possible narratives from which consumers can construct an understanding of everyday life. Through the juxtaposition of countervailing meanings, consumers can create a localized understanding whose whole differs from the sum of its constituent cultural associations.

Implications for Future Research

Rather than provide a list of future research directions, we would like to explore one specific theoretical implication suggested by a subtext of these interviews. Our participants frequently described conversations and interpersonal encounters they experienced and/or witnessed in social settings typical of college life, such as the sorority or fraternity house, classrooms, and dating sites (restaurants, clubs, and bars). For purposes of the present analysis, we viewed these reports as consumers' interpretations that expressed personal meanings salient to their narratives of personal history. For purposes of developing theoretical implications, however, let us view these participant reflections as descriptive reports on social processes operating in this context.

Several of the meanings and images that Joan describes as arising in the conversations among members of her sorority—particularly the ideal of the shapely woman

who can eat whatever she wants—corresponds to a characteristic that middle-class adolescent females almost invariably list when describing the “ideal girl” (see Nichter and Nichter 1991). Hence, it may well be that college age women reproduce these idealized conceptions, and hence a uniquely gendered cultural milieu, in their interpersonal relations; in other words, a shared understanding of the ideal female becomes a conversational means for constructing a sense of shared experiences concerning personal desires, dreams, guilt, and confessional practices through which these feelings of guilt can be allayed (see, e.g., Thompson and Hirschman 1995). The gendered identity formed through these confessional narratives also heightens the symbolic significance of food. For example, Joan describes eating cookie dough as a food fad symbolizing a guilt-inducing act of indulgence that is countered by a symbol of repentance (the Slim Fast diet).

The conversational creation of a shared world of experiences, meanings, and ideals relates to recent sociocognitive research on the processes by which consumer beliefs are shared within social groups (Ward and Reingen 1990) and on the effects of cultural belief systems on the shared reasoning among consumers situated in a given microculture (Sirsi, Ward, and Reingen 1996) or what we have termed “localized interpretations.” By addressing the individual/culture dialectic, the sociocognitive perspective broaches a number of concerns relevant to previously discussed work on consumers’ relationships to ideological systems and processes of consumption meaning transfer. A potential synergy exists between these theoretical orientations: the sociocognitive approach offers a logic for developing more detailed models (e.g., cognitive maps) of how ideological discourses are represented and associated in the minds of those who are socialized in a cultural meaning system (see Sirsi et al. 1996). Conversely, a poststructuralist perspective can provide the sociocognitive approach a richer and more dynamic account first of how shared beliefs are diffused and negotiated in a given social context and, second, of the means by which competing belief systems are juxtaposed and integrated in a given microcultural consumption setting.

To speak of fashion is then to employ a system of cultural discourses for making sense of the complexities of self-identity, social relationships, and the rapidly changing diffusion of styles, images, and meanings that pervade consumer culture. These interviews demonstrate that consumers use fashion discourses to construct personalized narratives (or stories) that coherently organize and interrelate this rather nebulous constellation of beliefs, shared social meanings, and consumption-based folk theories about individual and group characteristics. These consumer stories, however, present localized interpretations that often vary greatly across social contexts. Accordingly, the cognitive maps of consumer beliefs may well be relative to the type of narrative (and the specific metaphoric and metonymic references) a consumer uses to generate his or her understanding of a particular consumption experience or setting. These interviews further

suggest that the narratives (and hence belief systems) consumers use to interpret their own consumption behaviors often differ from those they use to interpret others in their social sphere or the general state of consumer society.

This poststructuralist perspective harbors three implications relevant to the sociocognitive analysis of consumer beliefs. First, it suggests that the microanalysis of shared beliefs should be situated in a broader analysis of the stories consumers construct from culturally available ideological positions. Second, this set of consumer interviews suggests that many of these consumption stories are constructed in a conversational matrix (Parker 1988) through which multiple consumers negotiate a common understanding from countervailing meanings and ideological positions. Through these conversational encounters, a shared understanding is developed and diffused among members of a microculture. This shared understanding would include not only beliefs but also conceptions of individual and social identities, a collective mood regarding aesthetic preferences, and an ideological outlook on naturalized and problematized consumption behaviors. Under circumstances in which consumer reasoning is driven by symbolic and aesthetic considerations, the critical differences among consumers situated in a common microculture may have less to do with their being experts or novices (see, e.g., Sirsi et al. 1996) than with the extent to which they tacitly accept or actively resist locally hegemonic standards and discourses. Third, recognizing that a shared microcultural understanding is articulated and developed through conversational means also suggests that there is likely to be a dynamic relationship existing among countervailing meanings. That is, the dominance of certain shared beliefs and underlying folk theories is constantly being negotiated and altered in response to changes among macro- and microinfluences upon conventional ways of talking about consumption, such as the emergence of a countervailing fashion narrative in the mass media (i.e., a macroinfluence) or the active resistance to a hegemonic aesthetic by a subset of individuals in the microculture (i.e., a microinfluence).

A conversational model of ideological sharing among consumers also offers an alternative to the sociocognitive assumption that the formation of stronger social ties encourages greater belief sharing (Ward and Reingen 1990). Sirsi et al. (1996) extended this assumption by arguing that individuals choose to form strong social ties with those who have similar belief systems. A poststructuralist perspective highlights, however, that individuals do not always select their social relationships. In many cases, individuals find themselves in settings (sometimes by choice and sometimes due to institutional decisions) in which they encounter individuals who hold very different beliefs. One example from this data set is offered by Marla’s description of the different types in her sorority (i.e., the granola-ish types vs. the conservative types). Socially diverse settings in which conversations (in which beliefs and broader ideological positions) are shared, debated, and negotiated may provide a basis for forming a

stronger social tie among individuals who hold diverse outlooks.

In a related manner, the presence of shared consumption discourses—such as those on fashion—may provide a common and relatively unthreatening language for building a social relationship despite differing viewpoints on potentially polarizing social or political issues. However, this seemingly innocuous conversational domain can still encode latent ideological differences that allow a shared understanding to be implicitly negotiated over these more divisive issues. In this way, consumption-focused conversations—which are dismissed by some theorists as being depthless and superficial chatter (e.g., Baudrillard 1988; Jameson 1991)—may provide a tacit but important means of sharing ideological views and negotiating differences in beliefs. Accordingly, the analysis of consumers' conversations in everyday life could offer a path for generating a more richly textured understanding of the meaning transfer processes, the social diffusion of cultural ideologies through consumption meanings, and the social structuring of consumer belief systems.

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