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Looking good

Consumption and the problems of self-production

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ABSTRACT This article considers the anxieties and risks that attend the process of self-production in the context of consumption. Drawing from interviews with a small sample of British young adults – white, middle-class, university-educated – the article examines how material practices and discursive strategies resonate with theoretical accounts of the nexus of consumption, identity and individualization. The analysis highlights how respondents discursively cope with anxieties and risks associated with the question of style, the problem of conformity, the desire for confidence and the negotiation of gender. In doing so, the article indicates ways in which the process of self-production in contemporary consumer societies may be less reflexive, and more socially conservative, than some accounts of individualization would suggest.

KEYWORDS appearance, class, consumer culture, consumption, gender, identity, individualization, self-production, young adults

Introduction

In contemporary consumer societies, images of ideal bodies form the backdrop of everyday life, work is often a matter of making good impressions, and the market overflows with tools for reshaping appearances. In short, 'looking good' matters. Attention to appearances is inseparable from the broader emphasis on identity production in the contemporary period, variously described as late, high, post- or second modernity. Accounts of individualization draw attention to the ways in which identity has shifted over the course of modernity from a fixed set of characteristics determined by birth and ascription, to a reflexive, ongoing project shaped by appearance and performance (Bauman, 2000; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991). Individuals, free to choose their paths towards self-realization, are then faced with a loss of security; without fixed rules, individuals are constantly at risk of getting it wrong, and anxiety attends



each choice. The increasing attention to the problem of identity has been attended by the ascendancy of a consuming way of life. In the form of countless products, therapeutic experts and self-help media, consumer culture offers both the problems and the solutions to self-production (e.g. Ewen, 1999; McGee, 2005).

Identity formation is a lifelong process (Cherrier and Murray, 2007), and the work of self-production is common (although not uniform) across social groups in contemporary consumer societies. Nevertheless, young people's perceived affinity with, and strategic targeting by, the industries of consumption (Holt and Griffin, 2003; Kjeldgaard, 2003; McRobbie, 1994; Miles, 2000) make them a particularly fruitful lens through which to examine the nexus of consumption, identity and individualization. In working on their appearances, young adults negotiate the competing demands of forging an identity in a consumer society – to fit in and be accepted, but at the same time to stand out as an individual. It is this dynamic that drives self-innovation and self-production, as much as it drives the logic of fashion in consumer culture (Gronow, 1997).

In addition, work on the self and identity may be emphasized at particular life stages and precipitated by specific life events, such as new parenthood, redundancy, or sudden illness. Again, young adults constitute a significant group through which to examine the dynamics of self-production (O'Connor, 2006) – their liminal position between adolescence and full adulthood, with new experiences and contacts upon leaving the family for higher education or employment, opens up possibilities for a renegotiation of self-identity (Karp et al., 1998). That freedom, however, is charged with risk, anxiety and opportunities for failure.

This article draws from a small sample of semi-structured interviews with British young adults that explored the problem of 'looking good' and focused on uses of, and attitudes towards, a range of practices, such as clothing styles, grooming and styling habits, and exercise and diet regimes. The specific focus, here, is on how such material practices are intertwined with a range of problems that are emblematic of both reflexive identity projects and the consumer context within which they take place. We consider how respondents' discursive strategies for discussing such practices resonate with theoretical accounts of individualization and identity. The article proceeds with an overview of the problem of self-production and its link to consumer culture, before turning to a discussion of the interviews.

The problem of self-production

Writing at the start of the 20th century, Simmel declared the 'struggle between individuality and generality' to be the *sine qua non* of human existence ([1908] 1991: 63). This tension between a quest for distinction and a quest for belonging has been explored by a number of contemporary



authors concerned with the nature of identity and individuality, often connected with the process of modernization. Modernity's legacy is to pose to each of us the need to '*become* what one *is*' (Bauman, 2000: 32):

To put it in a nutshell, 'individualization' consists of transforming human 'identity' from a 'given' into a 'task' and charging the actors with the responsibility for performing that task and for the consequences (also the side-effects) of their performance. (Bauman, 2000: 31–2)

Self-production is thus rendered as a problem in a double sense – it is a technical problem, and it is problematic.

First, identity is a *technical problem*, with which particular tools, solutions, experts and rules are associated. This is an acknowledgement of the historical specificity of the individual: it is only when identity becomes an open question that must be addressed, rather than a closed category that is assumed and ascribed, that we can speak of an individual in the modern sense (Bauman, 1996; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Foucault, 1986; Giddens, 1991). The development of 'the individual' is therefore inseparable from the development of the ways in which an individual takes up and works on the self as a project. Foucault defines these as 'technologies of the self', the means:

which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, 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: 18)

The problem of self-production involves the individual recognizing and acknowledging the body and self as flawed, inadequate or at least incomplete, and identifying areas for transformation and the appropriate tools, practices and experts to perform that work. The self, in other words, becomes a do-it-yourself project (Hitzler, 1988, in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: 3).

Our respondents made reference to various means by which they judged or measured themselves, suggesting multiple ways in which individuals take themselves up as DIY projects. For example:

I'm pretty happy with [my body] most of the time, but it doesn't help that I live with seven boys. When we go out, I know that girls always look at them, not me, and I think it's 'cause I'm short ... My mates are more good looking, like girls always come up to them, so I feel a bit short and unattractive next to them ... So when it comes to girls, I definitely think I'm disadvantaged because I'm short and a bit big. (Nick, 22)¹

When I look in the mirror, I find myself looking at my reflection quite a lot, even though I don't think I'm a vain person. And when I get up in the morning and get out of bed, especially because I've got a big mirror right there, I do find myself looking in the mirror at my stomach and looking at how flabby



it is. But I do compare myself to other people. I don't do it very often but I guess subconsciously we do it all the time. (Katy, 20)

As Balsamo (1996) suggests with regard to cosmetic surgery, the problematization of the body typically involves modes of surveillance, confession and inscription. The two examples above suggest the interplay between images, ideals and modes of visibility in the process of self-surveillance; while Nick examines himself compared to his housemates, through the eyes of prospective mates, Katy measures herself through the filter of gender norms (including the normative suspicion of females as vain or self-obsessed). For both, this surveillance gives rise to a confession or acknowledgement that the body does not measure up, and an inscription on the body of the dominant cultural ideology regarding gender and appearance, through a variety of appearance and body work practices such as working out, styling one's hair and applying make-up.

As much as DIY identities are couched in highly individualistic terms – in advertising rhetoric as well as some theoretical accounts – they remain historically specific, deeply social identities (Alcoff, 2003; Hall, 1994). The norms against which the self is assessed, and the means by which the gap between self and norm is addressed, precede and exist independently of any given individual (which is not to imply that such norms and tools are static and unchanging). Consumption, as a primary (but never the sole) context of self-production, makes available certain categories and technologies of the self that enable the construction and expression of identity while also circumscribing an individual's flexibility, reflexivity and creativity.

Second, the problem of self-production is *problematic*. The quests for distinction and belonging are shaped by assurances, opportunities and rewards, as well as risks, challenges and penalties. Self-production is fraught with anxiety – and it is this issue on which the article focuses. Such anxiety stems from the historical weakening of traditional sources of authority and identity ascription (e.g. family, class, religion, work), leaving the individual faced with an expanding array of choices. Yet every choice is a choice that may go wrong; individuals are responsible not only for choosing, but also for the consequences of their choices.

In a reflexive modernity (Giddens, 1991) in which identity and self-production are individual tasks and responsibilities, it is little wonder that consumption has acquired such prominence in daily life (and academic research). Multiple historical factors and contingencies underlie the perceived shift from a culture of production to one of consumption, including the mobilization (through advertising, marketing, and so forth) of mass consumption as a response to advances made in mass production; the flourishing of a particular subjectivity that prizes novelty, sensations and fantasy; and the growth of a middle class and its need for tools to define and defend this new class position (Bourdieu, 1984; Campbell, 1987; Ewen, 1976; Martin, 1999). Among such factors is the resonance between the



particular qualities of consumption and the perceived antinomy between distinction and belonging characteristic of modern individuality:

Modern man acquires the right and freedom to be alone, but the existential condition of separateness is simultaneously a lack, activating the individualized utopias of perfection. And the remarkable thing is that both moments of modern self-building are supplied by the supplement-generator of modern consumption. (Falk, 1994: 145)

Consumption provides the tools and opportunities to negotiate Simmel's tension between individuality and generality: goods can be used as 'both fences and bridges' (Douglas and Isherwood, 1996: xv) to display distinction and membership.

Early cultural studies research was, in many ways, a response to the Frankfurt School's pessimistic analysis of consumption and mass culture (e.g. Adorno and Horkheimer, 1976; Marcuse, 1964). With attention given to a range of activities and positionalities, from spectacular subcultures to the mundane practices of everyday life, cultural studies scholars have explored the intersections of consumption and identity, providing accounts of how individuals make use of the commodities available to them, actively negotiating, reformulating and rejecting prescribed meanings and uses through, for example, tactics, bricolage and symbolic creativity (de Certeau, 1984; Fiske, 1989; Hebdige, 1979; Willis, 1990). This conceptualization of consumption as a creative, productive process has become an important point of consensus in socio-cultural studies of consumption, tempered both by warnings against an overly-romantic or dangerously conservative notion of the creative, sovereign agent (e.g. Clarke, 1991; McGuigan, 1998), and by acknowledgements of global/local differences (e.g. Howes, 1996; Pilkington and Johnson, 2003; Sandikci and Güliz, 2002).

Consumption both enables and constrains the construction of identities, and the nexus of consumption, identity and individualization is not unproblematic. Three problems are of particular salience to our discussion of the interview transcripts. First, there is a tension between the singular and the mass. Commodities set up the seeming paradox of locating uniqueness in and through objects that are available on a largely indiscriminate basis, enabling processes of emulation and belonging while also restraining self-expression with the threat of conformity. Second, consumption elides and reproduces class. Despite the advertising rhetoric of equality and free choice (fuelled by consumer credit), and the heralding of the end of class as an explanatory social variable in some accounts of individualization (e.g. Beck, 1986), the objects, spaces and times of consumption are more and less available to different groups, enabling processes of distinction while also restraining who is able to participate, and how, thereby reproducing class positions (Bourdieu, 1984). Third, like class, gender mediates the ways in which consumption is accessed and practised (Scanlon, 2000). The consuming vision of identity production is one in which attention to



and investment in bodily appearances is paramount (Baudrillard, 1998; Ewen, 1999), enabling identity work (as the body, unlike the psyche, is an accessible site of work) while also restraining participants through gendered norms regarding the appropriateness and exchange value of self-attention and self-presentation.

Looking good: thematic analysis of the interviews

The article draws from interviews with a small sample of British young adults: 3 male, 5 female; aged 19–24 (average age 22); white and middle-class. All of the respondents were undergraduate students or recent graduates of a university in the Midlands. Recruitment and interviewing were carried out by the second author, using personal contacts and snowball sampling in order to establish an immediate level of trust between interviewer and respondent (Atkinson and Flint, 2001); this was felt to be beneficial given the personal nature of the questions, which included respondents' assessments of and anxieties about their appearance. We take the interviews to be both a reflection on self-production and an active moment in the narrativizing of the self (Giddens, 1991).

The discussion of the themes below is concerned primarily with issues of class and gender; this should not be taken as an indication that ethnicity does not mediate the link between consumption and identity (e.g. Chin, 2001; Lamont and Molnar, 2001; Zukin, 2004). However, unlike in some working-class white subcultures, in which ethnicity is explicitly deployed in order to signal difference from other subcultures (Nayak, 2003), ethnicity was unremarkable for our respondents. That is, respondents were not self-conscious about ethnicity and did not reflect upon it *because* of their ethnic membership (Bottero, 2004; Dyer, 1996; cf. Holt and Griffin, 2003). If whiteness was largely invisible to our respondents, it suggests that individuals may be less reflexive – and more conservative – about some of the very categories (such as ethnicity) that individualization is assumed to undermine and self-production is assumed to negotiate actively – a point to which we will return.

Unlike much cultural studies research that focuses upon 'peripheral' youth, our sample – white, middle-class, university-educated – is taken from a 'core' or dominant group (Pilkington and Johnson, 2003). Membership in a dominant social group (in this case, by virtue of class and ethnicity) does not preclude feelings of discomfort, unease or exclusion (Bottero, 2004; cf. Aries and Seider, 2005). While (economic) access to consumption is less of an issue than for peripheral youth, (Kjeldgaard, 2003) human relations are hierarchical, and white, middle-class youth have neither standardized nor uncomplicated experiences negotiating the intersection of consumption and identity. Our concern is with exploring the links between the discursive strategies respondents used when talking about



identity, style and appearance, and theoretical accounts of the consumption, identity and individualization nexus.

Interview transcripts were analysed using a thematic text analysis method (King, 2004; Titscher et al., 2000), combining the use of deductive coding (based on generic topics covered in the interviews and our interest in material practices) and inductive coding following a Grounded Theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Several interrelated themes emerged from this analysis, of which four are addressed here. The first centres on the question of style, highlighting the dynamic tension between standing out and fitting in, and setting the stage for the remaining themes: the problem of conforming; the desire for confidence; and the negotiation of gender. Pseudonyms are used to refer to the individual participants.

The question of style

Each interview began with the question: 'How would you describe your personal style?' Two patterns in the responses were of particular interest. The first concerned the use of style as a touchstone through which respondents assessed their progress. Reference was commonly made to the changes in personal style between secondary school and university (particularly with the end of school uniforms creating new possibilities – and responsibilities – to assemble outfits), and over the course of the university experience (particularly regarding the influence of peers, who were credited with introducing respondents – female and male – to new styles and modes of appearance work). Such remarks are suggestive of the respondents' liminal life stage and the ongoing process of identity formation, for which style may serve as a daily practice and reflexive mode of assessment.

The second pattern in the responses affirmed the complexity of the concept of style. On the one hand, style or stylization is a creative process by which goods are assembled, appropriated and given new meanings, potentially as an act of overt resistance (Hebdige, 1979). On the other hand, style is a rational means of coping with the proliferation of material culture (Simmel, [1908] 1991); style enables individuals to opt into broad taste categories rather than having to make endless taste choices – a view echoed in the promotion of branded goods as a means to reduce risk and streamline choice. For respondents, the meaning of style often shifted over the course of the interview, at times connoting individuality, while at other times blurring with trendiness and fashionableness, and connotations of a mass mentality.

Style can thus act as a crucible for the individual's active negotiation of the tension between the quests for individuality and belonging. For example, Katy insists that she does not keep up with the latest fashions, but instead looks at her friends and the general trends:

I hate to be a sheep, but you do see people wear something that a year ago, you'd go, 'Oh my god, that's horrible', then a year later I'm like, 'Yeah, get me a pair'. (Katy, 20)



Ryan, meanwhile, describes his style as ‘cool, bit odd, but still cool’:

My style’s based on independence ... At the moment, it’s very difficult not to be influenced by society and community, and if you’re not, then you’re going to be excluded from it, which I don’t want to be. I want to be involved. At the same time, I don’t want to follow. But it’s pretty hard not to, so I try and come up with my own sort of stuff, so you kind of balance it by being included but being someone who people say, ‘Yeah, he’s different, he’s cool, he’s not your average Joe Bloggs walking down the street’. (Ryan, 22)

Katy and Ryan highlight the risks of creating and expressing an identity. The question of style raises two of the central struggles in self-production – to fit in without being overly conformist (‘a sheep’; someone who follows) and thus rendering yourself invisible (‘your average Joe Bloggs’), and, at the same time, to stand out without being excluded as marginal or deviant.

Style is a combinatorial process involving choosing, assembling and using, which provides opportunities to carve an ‘individual’ style out of ‘mass’ objects. Style requires assessments of taste, which are then attributed to objects and, in turn, their possessors (Bourdieu, 1984). Such judgements are not fixed, but shift with the winds of fashion and social consensus so that styles always run the risk of being out of style – or, for those who engage in style as ‘refusal’ (Hebdige, 1979: 3), the risk of being in fashion. As Simmel suggests, style allows the individual to create a distance but, at the same time, when it is dictated from the outside (through fashion), style simultaneously ‘shows where the limits of the originality of the individual lie’ ([1908] 1991: 65). Hence, the question of style poses the problem of conforming.

The problem of conforming

Young adults (and consumers more broadly) must reconcile the inherent contradiction in expressing individuality through mass-produced products, negotiating the risk of conformity while seeking the security of a socially-approved style. Often, this results in incongruities within respondents’ accounts, between insistences that their style is independent of the influences of media, peers or celebrities, and worries about looking good enough to fit in and succeed in social life. Rachel, for example, demonstrates her independence through her consumer choices:

Obviously, I want to belong to a group, but I don’t mind being a bit different from people. I think as I’m getting more confident and independent, I’m liking being a bit more different from others. Like, I recently bought my winter coat, and I bought a bright orange one ‘cause I don’t know anyone who’s got a bright orange coat ... I’m not really up-to-date with the latest colours and styles in fashion. I just tend to stick to my style and go out and find it, which is pretty easy because casual jeans and tops and trainers are always around in Top Shop and H&M and places. (Rachel, 19)

The choice of an orange coat may signal to Rachel her individuality, but it is still a prescribed choice – the shop offered a limited number of options



for the coat, all of which were considered by the retailer to be the 'latest colours' for the season. Rachel's narrative of self-production glosses over the suspicious convenience of discovering one's sovereign taste represented in the high street shops. Criticisms of the pseudo-individuality of commodities and the illusion of choice (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1976) are dealt with through a discursive strategy of individual exceptionalism: Rachel's insistence on what she is *not* (up-to-date) allows her to experience buying the coat as an expression of individual preference, rather than the outcome of conforming to social forces.

A related discursive move occurs in Nick's account of his style, which closely links clothing choices to music preferences (cf. Willis, 1990). He says he wears clothes 'that make me feel good, not what other people like', describing his style as 'casual and individual':

Most of my clothes are like the kind of clothes that indie bands wear, so the style is fashionable and casual but not too trendy and fashionable ... I've been into music since I was well young, probably about 10, so I've grown up with this style. I'm not one of these that has jumped into the indie scene now it's become trendy and cool. (Nick, 22)

Both respondents position fashion in relation to conformism and distance themselves from it, preferring to underline their individualistic notion of style. The long-standing commitment to a music scene is mobilized as an inoculation against conformity; Nick frames himself as an exception, much like Rachel. In addition, Nick employs an exculpatory strategy, shifting the responsibility and blame for the overlap between his personal style and popular fashion onto more recent (conformist) converts, who have 'jumped' on to the popular bandwagon of the indie music scene. This is suggestive of the taste dynamic outlined by Bourdieu (1984), in which the working class prefers the familiar and popular, while the middle classes prefer the more esoteric or unusual – all the better to demonstrate their superior reserves of cultural (if not economic) capital. Bourdieu's findings point to *how* choices are made, not *what* is chosen. Nick and other indie fans may choose the same style of clothes, but Nick's sense of authenticity and individualism stems from his mode of choice, which relies on personal knowledge of, and long-standing investment in, the cultural field.

As in Kjeldgaard's (2003) research on 'core' youth in Denmark, our respondents construct personal narratives of authenticity that revolve around the reflexive choice and assemblage of commodities. Consumer goods such as clothes require an active negotiation of the symbolic (if not material) uses of the item, offering the subjective experience (if not objective reality) of sovereignty (Willis, 1990). This is not to suggest that exceptionalist and exculpatory discursive strategies are simply illusory matters. On the contrary, authenticity is a negotiated, not primitive, concept (Cohen, 1988); the active, reflexive expression of style is essential to the construction of claims to authenticity and individuality, however riddled with inconsistencies those claims may appear from the outside. The process



of self-production requires a reconciliation at the level of narrative – not material reality – of the contradictions between the individual and the social: we ‘seek biographical solutions to systemic contradictions’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002: xxii).

This suggests that self-production is inherently a conservative social process, reproducing the status quo *because* it preserves the (illusory) ideal of a coherent, sovereign self (cf. McGuigan, 1998). Moreover, the reflexivity regarding fashion that gives rise to feelings of authenticity does not extend to reflexivity about the class-based nature of stylistic preferences, reproducing middle class tastes as the taken-for-granted norm – an issue that also arises with regard to the desire for confidence.

The desire for confidence

The third theme arising from the interviews underlines the problematic nature of self-production: as a process framed by risk and anxiety, one of the key desired outcomes is confidence. In discussing the problem of looking good, respondents predominantly focused on their body work practices and anxieties – what they liked and disliked about their appearance, their choices in clothes and hairstyles, their daily grooming practices versus preparing for a ‘night out’, and their habits and worries regarding exercise and diet. However, when asked, ‘What does looking good mean to you?’, answers invariably departed from the focus on appearance and instead focused on attitude:

I think things have a lot to do with how people carry themselves and act in public ... I think it’s important to walk tall and confidently, ’cause it says a lot about a person. People have said I seem a bit intimidating before, and I can understand it ’cause I *am* confident with myself ... and I let people know it through how I act and behave ... Attractiveness comes down to personal style a lot. Any girl can be pretty if she has style. (Jess, 24)

Here, style is invoked not as an attribute of particular objects but rather a mode of self-presentation. When asked to define what it means to ‘look good’, the majority of respondents referred to notions of ‘being natural’, ‘just being yourself’ or ‘being comfortable’. Such comments signal aspirations to a more self-assured, socially competent, *adult* mode of embodiment. It is also, significantly, a *middle-class* mode of embodiment (Bourdieu, 1984). The respondents’ discussions of confidence and attitude, however, were class-neutral, suggesting that middle class dominance – at least in this respect – is so normalized as to be invisible (Skeggs, 1997).

Feelings of confidence can override the materiality of the object to produce its symbolic meaning and social cachet. For example:

I think you just have to be genuinely confident to look good. It doesn’t matter what you wear ... Like this ‘apple jacket’ I have ... It wasn’t a cool jacket, but when I wore it out, a lot of people said I pulled it off and it was cool. And the thing is, that there are nights when I go out and I’m in a good mood and



I've had a good day, and things are going right, and you'll just walk into a room and not be worried about what people are thinking about what you're wearing, 'cause you're just confident and that feeds into them and so therefore what you're wearing *is* cool. (Ryan, 22)

Here, the performative nature of style is underlined. Arnould and Price (2000) outline two modes of self-making in the context of the consumption. The first concerns 'authenticating acts': instances of symbolic creativity and appropriation that produce feelings of authenticity and individuation. Goods are tools in self-authentication: this is particularly salient for Ryan, given the jacket's uniqueness. The jacket provides a conduit for a heightened experience of confidence, as the reaction to the jacket then reinforces the sense of confidence that has animated the object in the first place, suggesting a 'flow' experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) in which pleasure is derived from a loss of self-consciousness.

The second mode of self-making is the authoritative performance (Arnould and Price, 2000), in which feelings of community, acceptance and belonging arise from shared participation or shared rituals. Particularly revealing are moments when authoritative performances fail: participation turns to empty role playing and confidence eludes the individual. Katy, for example, highlights a moment in which feelings of confidence and connectedness were lacking, irrespective of the socially-esteemed object – a beautiful dress – mediating the social interaction:

I have real up days, attractive days. Like last night at the ball, I knew I had a beautiful dress on, but I didn't feel that attractive ... Some days I go out and I walk past men and I go, 'Yeah, I look good' and I know they're looking at me, and it's a really bigheaded thing to say. But last night people kept coming up to me and saying I looked lovely, but I didn't feel it at all. Not once ... It just seemed like words, like a role-play thing. (Katy, 20)

Like the danger of slipping from belonging to conformity, the quest for authenticity may slide towards artificiality. While Arnould and Price regard authenticating acts and authoritative performances as necessarily separate moments (2000: 159), Katy's account highlights the possibility (albeit through failure) of the convergence of such modes of self-making, particularly in the context of shared consumption rituals such as university balls. The dresses and suits – carefully chosen to reflect an ideal self that is more attractive, confident and mature – mediate both a sense of individuality and an experience of community.

The interviews raised the complicated relationship between consumption and self-production. The consumer market is the wellspring of resources for constructing appearances and expressing identities. At the same time, the consumer market also poses obstacles and constraints; authenticity is always a fleeting, tactical victory (de Certeau, 1984), as marketing and fashion co-opt the unusual and sell it as ready-to-wear 'cool' (Frank, 1997; Miles, 2000). Consumption also has its limits, especially as one of



the desired outcomes of self-work is defined, at least by our respondents, as residing outside the realm of commodities: a sense of confidence and ease with oneself. Moreover, this desired middle-class habitus suggests the resilience of class in an age of individualization, even if (and more properly, because) it is invisible: 'People do not have to explicitly recognize class issues, or identify with discrete class groupings, for class processes to operate' (Bottero, 2004: 989). As with ethnicity, if membership in the dominant group disguises class and shields it from reflexive negotiation, then the process of individualization may help to perpetuate traditional categories while individualizing them. Individuals, charged with the responsibility of self-production, are expected to achieve the hallmarks of the dominant group; failure to do so is taken as evidence not of systemic inequality but of insufficient or inappropriate work on the self.

The negotiation of gender

The final theme emerging from the interviews concerns gender norms. Unlike ethnicity and class, gender was a conspicuous element in respondents' discussions of appearances. Unsurprisingly, female respondents' comments indicated the conservative nature of the consumer body discourse:

I used to be really unhappy with my breasts, 'cause they're titchy tiny. Girls are supposed to have big boobs! So it used to be that every time I went to the beach and stuff I'd be embarrassed. (Claire, 24)

I think I'd just like a flatter stomach 'cause that's what I've always been told and shown to be beautiful. Women are just expected to be slim and toned. (Lisa, 21)

I've been told I've got quite big boobs for my body size, so I'm proud of that! And that's what men always judge, isn't it?! (Rachel, 19)

However, such remarks also bear evidence of reflexivity: an awareness that feelings towards the body – the parts to value, or feel ashamed of – are shaped by socially constructed gender norms. If the respondents' material practices are relatively hegemonic, at least their discursive strategies suggest aspects of a negotiated, if not oppositional, position (Hall, 1980).

All of the respondents commented on how attention to grooming and appearance was increasingly commonplace – indeed, socially expected – for men in their generation. Hair styling, in particular, was noted by all in accounts of daily grooming routines, with males participating as much or more than their female counterparts in styling, buying styling products, and using the services of hair stylists. Similarly, the question of defining personal style drew mentions of clothing and fashion from both male and female respondents, confirming O'Connor's (2006) finding that Irish youth made reference to clothes in their self-narratives irrespective of gender.

If both young men and women are self-conscious about appearance management, however, it does not follow that appearance management



is gender neutral. Traditional gender norms have associated attention to appearance and consumption with femininity. Despite recent work that demonstrates increased emphasis on appearance and consumption in contemporary practices of masculinity (e.g. Edwards, 1997; Luciano, 2001; Nixon, 1996), men continue to occupy a peripheral position (relative to their female counterparts) in the field of consumer identity work. This is reflected in both the male and female respondents' accounts of young men's appearance work, in which such practices are described as expected but also problematic, requiring qualification and rationalization. For example, Matt describes a friend as a 'big woman' because of his attention to appearances:

I've got a mate from footie [football] ... and we all take the piss 'cause he bleaches his hair and gets it cut all the time. And he's a big woman in the fact that he never goes out unless he looks good, and he wears really trendy clothes and always smells good and stuff. And although we all take the piss, he's a really good-looking guy and he gets more attention than we all do, and he always ends up with the fit girls, so it just shows that it does work. So, although I'd never admit it to him, I think I'd like to spend more time on looking after myself and looking good. (Matt, 22)

Similarly, Jess describes her group of male friends as all liking to look good and groom themselves: 'They're like a bunch of women!' Too much attention to hair, clothes and so forth, and young men are accused (by male and female peers) of 'behaving like girls'.

However, opting out of the grooming regime is not an option. Young men are expected to look good; failure to do so translates into failure to compete well in the social and – especially in a service economy – occupational market. But they are also expected to be 'men'. Comments from two of the female respondents highlight this conundrum:

I think it's good when boys spend a lot of time on their hair, that's good. I think it'd be weird to have a boyfriend who cleansed and moisturized, but then I've given my boyfriend moisturizer when his skin's not very good. (Lisa, 21)

I wouldn't want to go out with a boy who was as concerned about himself as me, or spent longer in the bathroom than I did. I think being masculine means you're not supposed to be as concerned about grooming, but if you're really hairy and, like, don't like it then fair enough, but I think it's more attractive when boys mainly stay the way they are. ... And I'm very concerned about hair! ... They need to have good hair. My favourite is a bit scruffy and rock boyish. (Claire, 24)

Lisa and Claire both express concerns about the limits of acceptable male behaviour, highlighting the challenges posed to the category of femininity when a perceived monopoly on appearance management is eroded. Lisa's comment brings to light the exceptionalism of identity narratives – while she may have doubts about males, in general, worrying about cleansing and moisturizing, she wants *her* boyfriend to do so. Claire's



comment, meanwhile, brings to light the contradictions of gender norms – while she is suspicious of males who are as concerned with appearances as females (and, again, this says much about the interdependence of gender norms), she wants to date boys with appropriately styled hair: a classic gender double bind!

Self-production is mediated by gender norms. In the case of young men, balancing distinction and belonging in the construction of appearance requires attention to the line between acceptable and unacceptable gender behaviour. As such, young men must find ways of negotiating traditional expectations while taking up new consuming habits. Two discursive strategies are suggested in the interviews. The first is an insistence on the instrumentality of attention to appearance. That is, working on one's appearance is not about narcissism or pleasure, but about improving one's odds of success in the social market. As Baudrillard (1998: 132) suggests, 'beauty is such an absolute imperative only because it is a form of capital'. The second is a flexible definition of limits that reinscribes the traditional view of gender as a mutually exclusive dichotomy. That is, young men's appearance management routines are acceptable insofar as they do not include certain unacceptable *female* practices. For example, Ryan draws the line at plucking his eyebrows or getting a fake tan. Similarly, Matt admits to moisturizing and trimming his nails, but says, 'Girls are still definitely worse. Like I say, I don't know any bloke that fake tans or anything.' Gender remains a collectively defined category, even if it is treated increasingly as a vector for individual negotiation, performance and difference.

Conclusion

Self-production is the mundane work of everyday life – not the rarefied stuff of contemplative self-reflection so much as the ordinary work of trying to look good, fit in, stand out. It is its very mundaneness that gives self-production its taken-for-granted quality and helps to reconcile the internal contradictions of the dynamic of identity at the level of everyday practices and narratives. In their descriptions of their clothing choices and grooming habits, respondents spoke to the ongoing negotiation of the tension between individuality and belonging, and the difficulty of pursuing the goals of authenticity and acceptance while contending with the risks of conformity and exclusion. At the same time, the ordinariness of self-production obscures some elements of identity – such as ethnicity and class – which might, in other contexts, be visible and explicit; this lack of reflexive awareness potentially reproduces some of the very norms and categories that are assumed to be weakened and negotiable in an age of individualization.

Consumer culture makes available a range of techniques of self-production but also poses obstacles and challenges to narratives of



authenticity and individuality. Dealing with such risks involves the use of particular discursive strategies – tools for accomplishing the technical problem of self-production while addressing its problematic features. Several examples came to light in the course of the interviews, from means of reducing risk (by striving to meet social ideals) to means of transferring risk onto others. Exculpatory discursive strategies shift the responsibility (and blame) for the risks of self-production onto others – an understandable coping strategy in an era of individualization in which people may increasingly bear the burden of responsibility for their choices, but have diminishing control over the material factors shaping their chances of success (Bauman, 2000).

Exculpatory narratives often overlap – particularly around the issue of consumption – with narratives of individual exceptionalism, which acknowledge the power of fashion while claiming personal taste as an expression of sovereign preference. The ‘proof’ that one is an exception to crowd rule often lies in the combinatorial logic of style – even if all of the constitutive elements are mass produced, one regards the overall outcome as an individual accomplishment, thereby sidestepping the deeply social nature of taste and style (Bourdieu, 1984). Furthermore, ‘proof’ of individual exceptionalism resides in one’s attitude, because confidence is seen to trump consumer goods in displaying identity (so much so that a confident attitude can overwrite the social consensus on whether an item is ‘cool’ or not). Here, we see a naturalization of the desirability of the body habitus of the dominant class (Bourdieu, 1984) – manifesting as confidence, ease with one’s self and less anxiety about one’s body-for-others. Contrary to the dominant advertising rhetoric of freedom of choice, this suggests that class norms remain a powerful force constraining the range of available, acceptable choices.

Narrative coping strategies rely heavily on – and reproduce – normative social values, including traditional gender norms (despite the seemingly new male investment in appearance). At the centre of such narratives is the normative myth of the authentic, sovereign individual. A commitment to such an ideal – one who is uncorrupted by social pressures and thus free to be who one *really* is – provides a flexible defence mechanism against charges of conformity and artificiality. While social scientists may debunk such an ideal as illusory, it remains a deeply-entrenched aspect of people’s self-conception. Furthermore, the ideal of sovereignty is perpetuated by the social system more broadly, as it undergirds the neo-liberal reliance on individual choice and responsibility; rather than taking the system to task, individuals are encouraged to locate success and blame within themselves.

In the current era of individualization, there is no more central problem than that of self-production. Style, a *process* of negotiating double binds, paradoxes and tensions, is a constituent practice of self-production. If we take consumption as the stylistic field *par excellence*, then we see



that consumption and self-production share the same internal logic: to negotiate, if not reconcile, the 'struggle between individuality and generality' (Simmel, [1908] 1991: 63).

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Note

1. Respondents are referred to by pseudonyms, with age indicated.

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