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SUPERVISOR: LOVISA NÄSLUND

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**SYMBOLIC CONSUMPTION AND CONSPICUOUS POSTING: CREATING AND EXPRESSING SELF-IDENTITY THROUGH CLOTHING CONSUMPTION AND SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE**

LULU ZHANG 50135

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**ABSTRACT**

Clothing consumption possesses considerable symbolic functions in creating and expressing consumers' self-identities in the wider society. At the same time, social media also plays a large part in consumers' everyday lives, and it has been suggested that consumers use social media for their identity-creating purposes as well. This study investigates what role social media play in consumers' identity-work and how these fields are interrelated, in order to gain a better understanding of how consumers create their self-identities with the aid of apparel and social media. A qualitative study consisting of fourteen semi-structured interviews with consumers was conducted, as well as a documentary study of relevant content on social media. The findings show that consumers actively use clothing items and social media in order to create, express and present their self-identities. Specifically, both clothing and social media are used as tools for expressing self-identity, as well as for finding inspiration and serving as an influencing factor in consumers' identity-work. In addition, the data suggests that consumers are active in two connected but different worlds; the physical domain that covers their entire life, and the digital world on social media platforms where they only present parts of their self-identities. In the collective pursuit of a flawless self-identity, consumers are using social media in order to convey their best selves in the digital world. Therefore, the term 'conspicuous posting' was created in order to define this type of social media behavior, where content is created by the user in order to convey status and other social signals to others.

**KEY WORDS:** social media, conspicuous consumption, symbolic consumption, shopping, self-identity, self-expression

## LIST OF KEY CONCEPTS

*A list of key words and expressions used in this thesis, including a short definition of each, are presented below in order to provide guidance for the reader throughout the paper.*

**CONSUMPTION** Refers to the acquisition and usage of products or services.

**CONSUMERS** Defines the people who carry out the consumption or acquisition of products and services.

**SHOPPING** Similar to the concept of consumption and consuming and is used interchangeably throughout the paper.

**SHOPPERS** Refers to the people who carry out the consumption or acquisition of products, similar to the definition of consumers and is used interchangeably throughout the paper.

**SYMBOLIC CONSUMPTION** Similar to conspicuous consumption, however, this term is broader and includes all types of consumption that contains symbolic meanings, regardless of whether it is displayed to others or not (c.f. Kritsadarat 2005).

**CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION** First defined by Veblen (1899), the phrase denotes the consumption of goods that are used to display social status and other signals to others.

**CONSPICUOUS POSTING** A term coined by the author (Zhang 2015) in order to refer to the creation and publishing of digital content that is used to display personal status and other social signals (c.f. Veblen 1899).

**SOCIAL MEDIA** Refers to platforms or applications which consist of content created by users, such as Social Networking Sites (SNSs) and wikis amongst others (c.f. Beer, Burrows 2007, Kaplan, Haelein 2010)

**WEB 2.0** Although highly related to social media, Web 2.0 is viewed as the predecessor of social media and is commonly used to describe the new generation of web content that is created by users (Kaplan, Haenlein 2010).

**USER GENERATED CONTENT** Also related to social media and Web 2.0, however, User Generated Content (UGC) is narrower and only refers to the original content that is created by different users and posted on various social media platforms (Kaplan, Haelein 2010).

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

*In this opening section, the outline of the research background will be presented, followed by the research questions, the scope and purpose of the study and a disposition for the entire paper.*

### 1.1 BACKGROUND

In recent years, social media such as blogs and social networks have sprung up and gained an enormous impact on our everyday lives. Both the communication with close friends and family members as well as the communication with the public and business organizations is facilitated by these media. Social media channels are useful for reaching out to others with similar interests or to get your opinion heard in the cyber space, or to receive some inspiration by reading blogs.

The high level of social media penetration amongst people in the developed countries, combined with the speed and ease of which content on social media can be disseminated is highly alluring for companies wishing to reach their target customers. However, what is said about the company may have an impact as high as or even higher than what is communicated outwards by the company itself; today's consumers are co-creators of the marketing communication process (Berthon, Pitt, McCarthy & Kates, 2007). Consumers are not merely passive receivers of information and communication and social media has therefore led to an increased loss of control regarding a company's in- and outgoing communication (Ward & Ostrom, 2006; (Mangold, Faulds 2009). Furthermore, consumers are also using social media and brands for their own purposes, including self-presentation (Hollenbeck, Kaikati 2012). Previous research suggests that social media are platforms on which consumers can exhibit their selves, and showcase their self-identity towards others (Hogan 2010).

Meanwhile, the spending on products, clothes and brands in general continues in the developed countries, such as in Sweden. As the standards of living have increased during the past decades, much of this consumption could be considered "unnecessary", considering that we usually do not buy clothes or brands thanks to their utility (Bauman 2001). The usage of fashion and brands is more hedonic, and consumption per se is a common way of experimenting with and

expressing individuality or social status (Bauman 2001, Douglas 1997, Giddens 1991, Kritsadarat 2005, Rucker, Galinsky 2008, Veblen 1899). There has been much research on the identity-creating value of clothing and shopping and there is evidence suggesting that the value of products such as apparel is closely linked to its symbolic value and its usefulness and appropriateness in creating a self-identity and signaling status in the wider society (Kritsadarat 2005, Veblen 1899). Consumers' perception and judgement of clothing items are thus highly connected to its intangible assets and qualities.

In sum, both the usage and effect of social media communication and consumption as a tool for self-creation have been studied, more or less comprehensively due to their different levels of maturity in the academic world. However, in the intersection of these two fields, there is an obvious lack of research. How can social media influence consumers' consumption of apparel, and how does clothing consumption affect consumers' social media usage? Furthermore, how do social media and clothing consumption affect the consumers in regards to their identity-creating activities and what functions do they have?

Previous research into social media suggests that social media also plays a role in consumers' self-creating activities, and in addition, it is an important tool for marketers since it can create an effect similar to word-of-mouth (Colliander, Dahmén 2011, Kozinets et al. 2010). This implies that social media has an impact on consumption decisions regarding clothing, which is commonly used to express personality and self-identity or to satisfy other desires. From another angle, it is argued that consumers are also the co-creators of both social media content and influencers that co-construct social norms (Berthon et al. 2007, Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden 2011, Kritsadarat 2005). Therefore, goal of this study is to understand the linkages between clothing consumption, social media and how consumers use them in relation to their self-creating and self-expressing purposes.

## 1.2 RESEARCH QUESTION AND PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to answer the question below:

*What role do social media play in consumers' lives regarding their consumption of clothing and self-creating and self-expressing activities?*

Although not all consumers may be fully aware of their motives for shopping or why they have certain preferences, most people have some ideas about their preferences in terms of clothing, and how they would like to portray themselves with the help of their clothing (Douglas, 1997, Falk, Campbell, 1997). In today's digitalized world, these perceptions, preferences and desires regarding clothing and self-identity are likely to be influenced by the content on social media platforms. At the same time, consumers are the co-creators of the virtual social media world and they also use social media for their own identity-creating purpose both offline and online (Back et al. 2010, Colliander, Dahlén 2011, Hollenbeck, Kaikati 2012, Manago et al. 2008). Therefore, given the high level of interrelatedness between these subjects, it is interesting to see how they affect each other, and what relationships exist between them from the consumers' perspectives.

In order to narrow the scope of the research, there are some limitations of the study. Firstly, the research will not focus on cultural or demographical factors. Therefore, in order to diminish the possible effect of cultural or age-related influences, only young consumers based in Sweden, Stockholm County will be studied. Secondly, this study does not have a gender-perspective, although both men and women will be interviewed as part of the study. Lastly, the focus will lie on the consumer perspective, investigating how consumers influence each other's' identity-creating work in relation to clothing consumption and social media usage. Marketers will however be able to draw useful conclusions from the study (see section Managerial implications).

### 1.3 RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

This study will shed light onto a field that has yet to be thoroughly investigated, since it integrates two interesting and highly relevant fields of research in our current world. Social media is a relatively new phenomenon that has gained a huge impact on our daily lives that has not yet been studied thoroughly. Previous research into social media communication has focused more on the channel itself, or how it might be used to attract or manage customers (Kaplan, Haenlein 2011, Hoffman, Fodor 2010). Shopping and clothing consumption in order to create and express self-identity has been studied more comprehensively, but there are few studies that combine these fields. From the theoretical perspective it this research is thus adding to the field of studies within social media and crossbreeding it with previous research into shopping as a social and cultural phenomenon for creating the self. From a managerial perspective, it adds insight on how social media and the image of their brands and products on social media can affect or be used by consumers in regards to their own self-creating activities, and consequently how marketers can use these insights (see section 6.1).



## 1.4 DISPOSITION

This research paper is divided into seven (7) parts that are presented below:

PART	CONTENT
1	Introduction, background and research purpose
2	Theoretical frameworks
3	Methodology
4	Empirical background data
5	Analysis and discussion
6	Conclusions and managerial implications
7	Final remarks and suggestions for future research

*Figure 1. Thesis disposition*

The first part aims to introduce the scope and purpose of the study, including mentioning the theories that are the foundation of this study, as well as providing a short description about the method used. In the next part, the theoretical frameworks will be presented. In the following two sections some general background data will be provided in the section about empirics, and thereafter more data and analysis of the data will follow. In the sixth section, conclusions and implications of the study will be summarized and lastly some final remarks and suggestions for further research will be provided.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

The following section presents the theoretical frameworks of this study, which serve as the basis for constructing the research purpose and as guidance for the analysis and interpretation of data that is to follow. The literature review is “*an essential feature of any academic project*” (Webster, Watson 2002), p. xiii) that facilitates theory development and dismisses saturated research areas while uncovering those where more research is needed (Webster, Watson 2002).

This section starts therefore with an examination and review of the current state of research into shopping as a cultural and social phenomenon, followed by an examination of the previous research into symbolic consumption and identity-creation. Thereafter, we will delve into the research about social media and how social media can be used in the identity-creating and expressing work of consumers. Lastly, these fields will be combined by concisely discussing the implications of the prior research, thus creating a synthesized coherence (Locke, Golden-Biddle 1997) between these two fields of shopping and social media, with self-identity and identity-creation as the common factor.

### 2.2 SHOPPING

During the 90s, there was a surge of the number of studies within consumption, with scholars from different fields studying the phenomenon of shopping (Falk, Campbell 1997, Giddens 1991). Shopping may seem insignificant in the grand scheme of things, but it is an important and even crucial aspect of our contemporary life and culture (Falk, Campbell 1997, Kritsadarat 2005, Goss 1993).

As one might have noticed, in the developed (and in the developing) countries we are living in a world of consumption. There is reason to believe Goss’ (1993, p. 18) standpoint on shopping as the “*dominant mode of our modern life*”. Shopping or consumption in general is something that people have always been doing, such as the consumption of food and clothing for survival and

shelter. However, practical utility and the consumption for survival are no longer the main reasons why we are consuming today (Bauman 2001).

The reason why we are shopping, seemingly at an ever-increasing rate, might perhaps have some practical explanations, such as the heightened standards of living and higher disposable incomes that allows for more consumption. However, merely looking at incomes does not explain why we wish to consume more. Therefore, shopping and consuming in general has been examined from a social, cultural and psychological viewpoint (Falk, Campbell 1997). Researchers in sociology have argued that consumption is used to navigate the social life and to express identity. As Bauman (1988, p. 808) described, the consumer is achieving *“self-construction by a process of acquiring commodities of distinction and difference”*, thus the consumer is someone that is buying an identity. However, more consumption may instead be viewed upon as gluttonous excess and vanity (Bauman, 2001). This prompts the question of why people are still consuming in such a large extent, in quantities that cannot be justified purely based on ‘needs’, as subjective as they might be. The desire, or even wish, to consume is satisfying in its own right, so consumers are consuming for the sake of consumption: *“In the consumer society, consumption is its own purpose and so is self-propelling”* (Bauman 2001, p. 13).

While there are many possible reasons for why we are shopping and how our preferences or dislikes are formed, we will be focusing on the symbolic or self-creating and self-expressing part of consumption for this study. A literature review of prior research in this field is presented below.

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### 2.2.1 SHOPPING AND SELF-IDENTITY

One of the most established theories for why people consume has been attributed to the desire to create a social self-identity, as touched upon above and described by various researchers (Giddens 1991, Kritsadarat 2005, Douglas 1997, Bauman 2001, Gabriel 2015). As stated by Gabriel (2015, p. 27);

Western consumers do not establish profound relationships with the majority of the goods they consume. Instead they choose them, use them (singly or in combinations) and discard them in

opportunistic but highly visible ways, being very conscious of the inferences which others will draw from them, and by the ways their image will be affected by them.

Another way to phrase this viewpoint can be seen in the famous quote by William James (1892, p. 177):

A man's Me is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account.

Therefore, shopping has a significant symbolic value and a self-creating and identity-creating ability, allowing the shopper to present him/herself adequately in the social environment. Clothing acts as the bridge between the bearer and the 'others' in the society (Grove-White 2001, Kritsadarat 2005). Furthermore, the pleasure of shopping is not solely based on the collection of shopping items, i.e. the actual spending, but also the shopping activity as an *"escape from the confinements of the house"* and finding good investments (Miller 1997, p. 41).

This kind of symbolic consumption (Kritsadarat 2005) or conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899) that creates a bridge between the self and others can occur both consciously or unconsciously. Regardless of which, previous research suggests that consumers are choosing what to buy in relation to how she/he wants to be perceived by others. The shopper's taste is a differentiator, alienating from or affiliating with certain groups of people and showing one's social status in the society. This close relationship between clothing and self-identity is therefore the reason why shopping involves such high stakes: *"This is why it takes so much deliberation and so much time, and why women have to be so conscientious about it, and why it gives them so much satisfaction"* (Douglas 1997, p. 18). Douglas (1997) further writes that men's clothing and hairstyles are much more prescribed by their occupational spaces, but it should be noted that the society has changed during this past 18 years since this was written, so it is reasonable to hypothesize that today's men are as aware of clothing and style as women, and Douglas' citation above should therefore apply to both sexes.

Nevertheless, the shopper is considered to be more complex than merely being a creature that is formed and influenced by the different fashions reigning or the prices of the goods (Falk & Campbell 1997, Douglas 1997). Consumers are not only part of the society that forms them, and from which they derive their social standing (since the status of somebody is best measured by comparing with the status of others), but they are also forming these standards and norms as well (Falk & Campbell, 1997). In addition, as much as they are being judged by others, the shoppers are also evaluating the potential shopping items themselves, creating a dimension of self-relatedness (Falk 1994). Falk & Campbell (1997, p. 4) describes this as a constant but rather unconscious evaluation of the goods presented to the shopper, which may sound like *“is that for me?”* or *“could I be like that?”*.

Eventually, the shopper must make a decision, either to buy or not to. Even in the case of a dismissal of the shopping item, it may have an important self-creating or self-expressing effect. According to Douglas (1997), the items that the shopper dislikes signal their viewpoint and who they wish to ally with and who they see as their enemies. Therefore, consumption behavior is *“... continuously and pervasively inspired by cultural hostility”* (Douglas 1997, p. 17). These protests may be aimed towards other generations, or other cultural types, as described in her work. In any case, the shopper is much more aware of what she does not want than what she wants, and these standardized hates are more constant and revealing than desires according to Douglas (1997). Nonetheless, in either case the forming of likes or dislikes is, according to this stream of research, based on the ability of the shopping items to convey an identity for the shopper in their social environment, and for themselves.

Closely related to the self-creating concept of shopping motives, there has been research on shopping as a way to present oneself in the crowd as more affluent or successful, by buying items that convey status and power. Social status might be attained based on your apparel and other personal possessions (Rucker, Galinsky 2008) Research has shown that shopping and using certain products that are related with high power and status may compensate for the shopper's sense of inferiority, and thus the consumption desire is derived from a wish to compensate for one's lack of social status (Rucker, Galinsky 2008). What is considered to convey

more or less status or any other attribute is collectively constructed (Kritsadarat 2005) and Douglas (1997, p. 17) argues that “...culture is the arbiter of taste”. Bourdieu (1993) also suggests that a person’s taste distinguishes him from others; those who are knowledgeable have a finer sense of style, and this sense of style is difficult to acquire. Therefore, taste, however intangible and difficult to define, is a powerful tool for conveying one’s status in the society (Bourdieu, Broady & Palme 1993).

## 2.3 SOCIAL MEDIA

As stated in the introduction, there has recently been an increase in the amount of research into social media, partly due to its relative novelty, although the first social media emerged around twenty years ago with the foundation of “Open Diary”, which could be classified as a social networking site (Kaplan, Haelein 2010). However, as technological and economical advancements combined with the new generation of “digital natives”, the usage and consumption of social media has increased tremendously and the field is increasingly expanding, with new research shedding more light on this area. From the earlier research on web 1.0 to web 2.0, today there are several research studies into social media in particular (Kaplan, Haenlein 2010, Beer, Burrows 2007).

In order to discuss about social media and the role it plays in consumers’ shopping and identity-creating activities, a short review of the foundations of social media and the definitions of what constitutes social media is warranted. Kaplan & Haelein (2010) argues that the term social media should be separate from the related concept of Web 2.0, which provides the ideological and technical foundations for Social Media, which in turn allows for the creation and sharing of User Generated Content (UGC). With this viewpoint, social media includes the applications and platforms for creating and sharing content by users, and for the purpose of this research, it suffices as a broad definition.

Within the umbrella of social media, there are various different subcategories as well. According to (Beer, Burrows 2007), social media can be divided into wikis, folksonomies, social networking sites (SNS) and mashups (web applications that are created by combining different technologies).

(Kaplan, Haelein 2010) suggest another typology for social media depending on the media's social presence and media richness and self-presentation or disclosure. The social media richness or presence is the degree to which the users are socializing with each other on the platform, while the self-presentation measures how much the user discloses the own persona on the platform. The six categories they propose are blogs, social networking sites, virtual social worlds, collaborative projects, content communities and virtual game worlds. For this study, all types of the aforementioned social media platforms will be covered, except for virtual social worlds and virtual game worlds, as the disclosure of the real self and one's visible consumption of clothing are low on these platforms (Kaplan, Haelein 2010). Similarly, mashups will not be investigated further.

Except for the category of mashups, these two models of social media from Beer & Burrows (2007) and Kaplan & Haelein (2010) can be combined, as illustrated below:

SOCIAL PRESENCE/MEDIA RICHNESS				
SELF- PRESENTATION/ SELF- DISCLOSURE				
		<i>Low</i>	<i>Medium</i>	<i>High</i>
	<i>High</i>	Blogs	Social networking sites	Virtual social worlds
	<i>Low</i>	Collaborative projects/ Wikis	Content communities/ Folksonomies	Virtual game worlds

Figure 2. Social media categories

Blogs are the earliest form of social media and are *"the Social Media equivalent of personal web pages and can come in a multitude of different variations, from personal diaries describing the author's life to summaries of all relevant information in o one specific content area"* (Kaplan, Haelein 2010, p. 63).

In Sweden, the largest blogs, measured by the number of views each week, are Blondinbella.se, Kanzas.se and Kissies.se (Bloggportalen).

Social networking sites (SNS) are platforms or applications that allow the users to connect and interact with each other, as well as posting personal information on profiles. A frequently used social networking site in Sweden, as well as in many other countries, is Facebook.

Wikis are user-generated content that is edited and contributed to by anyone who wishes to, and the arguably most famous example of a wiki is the online encyclopedia Wikipedia. (Maness 2006) offers a short definition of wikis as *“open web-pages, where anyone registered with the wiki can publish to it, amend it, change it”*.

Lastly, content communities are exemplified by applications and sites such as Pinterest and Youtube, where the users can be educated, entertained or simply gain some inspiration of various sorts. Folksonomies is another term for these types of applications, as they involve the use of tagging that allows users to describe and organize content with different labels and tags. Besides Youtube, Flickr.com is another well-known folksonomy, according to Beer & Burrows (2007).

In general, the most common social media platforms in Sweden are Facebook, which is used by 68 % of the Swedes, Instagram and Twitter, which is used by 25 %. Instagram users have increased tremendously the last year, with usage in Sweden increasing from 15 % to 28 %. The activity level on Twitter and Instagram is higher for younger the users are, while Facebook usage is more evenly spread throughout different age groups (Findahl 2014, Wetterborg 2013).

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### 2.3.1 SOCIAL MEDIA AND SELF-IDENTITY

With the explosion of social media usage across the world, companies are increasingly active on social media platforms, trying to reach their target customers with this new channel for marketing (Kozinets et al. 2010). Previous research has focused much on how companies can and should manage social media as part of their business operations, but researchers have also investigated from a psychological or sociological viewpoint, examining how consumers are using it for their self-creating or self-presenting purposes (Bargh, McKenna & Fitzsimons 2002, Back et al. 2010, Hollenbeck, Kaikati 2012, Manago et al. 2008). Although the aforementioned



researchers are undecided about whether people are more inclined to express their actual selves or their ideal selves, the choice seems to be made deliberately (Hollenbeck, Kaikati 2012). Hollenbeck & Kaikati (2012) suggest that consumers are trying to both portray an actual image of themselves and an idealized one on Facebook by publicly liking or talking about different brands. Depending on what brands that are publicly visible and connected to the user, other users will draw inferences about who they are and therefore brands can help consumers to build and maintain their own actual and/or desired self-identity. When these different selves are congruent, users will use brands to enhance them further, usually placing more emphasis on their ideal selves. However, when the dimensions of the self are conflicting, many users will choose to only portray their ideal selves with the help of brand linkages. Yet others will avoid self-expression at all, even closing down their Facebook accounts (Hollenbeck, Kaikati 2012). The three dimensions of the self as described in Hollenbeck and Kaikati's study (2012) are the actual self (who I am), the ideal self-representation (who I could be) and the ideal self-presentation (who I want to be perceived), and although we will not delve deeper into theories about self-concept as such, it is worthwhile to understand this broad classification of the self.

Another significant stream of research within this field is those built around Goffman's (Truong, McColl 2011, Goffman 1959) work on self-presentation and impression management (Hogan 2010, Miller 1995, Papacharissi 2002, Trammell, Keshelashvili 2005). Goffman suggests that self-presentation could be seen as performing the self on a stage for an audience. The actor performs in real time, and what is left of this performance is called artifacts, which can represent the actor. (Hogan 2010) argues that this could, with some adaptations, be applied on the social media world, where people display themselves as exhibitions. However, in today's online world, people can have a huge number of 'friends' in their social media networks that are all bundled together regardless of their relationship with the individual – they might be real friends, or coworkers, relatives, neighbors and so forth. This makes it difficult for the actor to present himself and to choose what content to share. Nonetheless, Hogan suggests that the reason for why there is no self-presentation paralysis is because you only need to consider two types of audiences; those who you may present an idealized self for, and those who would find such idealization questionable (similar to the reasoning in Back et al.'s (2010) study, where the

authors argue that idealization of self is difficult since friends will provide feedback and question any misrepresentation). A complicating factor is however the existence of a third-party curator that curates who the audience will be. Social networking sites such as Facebook have algorithms built in that adapt your audience, as well as what you will see on your Facebook wall. Therefore, the actor does not solely choose his audience himself. However, Hogan (2010) argues that if you know that your boss or parents might see your message, you adapt it accordingly, even though it is not intended for them. In this way, *“these individuals define the lowest common denominator of what is normatively acceptable”* (Hogan 2010, p. 383). In sum, this means that the self-presenting work on social media has to be adapted to the most salient members in the audience, which can be a difficult task when there is uncertainty about the audience.

Anyhow, similar to the work of Hollenbeck and Kaikati (2012), there are only two main types of self that can be presented – the ideal or the actual self, and this dictates how one carry out the self-presentation. In this study, we will likely see the types of self-presentation that were presented above and evidence of how the consumers manage their different self-identities. In the following section, a short discussion about how social media can influence people will be presented, as it provides guidance on how consumers affect each other in their self-creating work.

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### 2.3.2 SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCE

Contagion theory, which is based on the concept that certain behaviors can spread and grow over time is one of the theories that aim at explaining how social media can influence people (Burt 1987, Contractor, Eisenberg 1990). In particular, social contagion occurs when people change their behaviors after having interacted with others. The causes for this might be an increased awareness, or the wish to fit into the group norms through a process of relating (Rapp et al. 2013). Social media supports such social contagion, as it exposes people to the information, attitudes, behaviors and beliefs of others in these networks (Contractor, Eisenberg 1990, Burt 1987). Knowledge about contagion is valuable in understanding how preferences, attitudes and behaviors regarding consumers’ self-expressing activities are formed. Word-of-mouth is a key

channel for contagion, and with today's technological tools, influencers have an increased ability to reach out to more people. Opinion leaders can use these social media platforms to facilitate contagion and increase for example product adoption (Iyengar, Van den Bulte & Valente 2011). Keeping this in mind, it is reasonable to believe that such opinion leaders might be able to influence or establish norms about different identities or the linkages between different clothing items and identities. Strong belongingness to a group is likely to activate normative imitation, where the group members collectively praise their favorite products (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig 2002). Although Jeep-owners were researched in the study, the effect is likely to apply as well for clothing consumption, which also has high social and symbolic values. The group identity can be closely linked to the personal identity; therefore, it is likely that clothing choices are highly correlated with the choices of the group.

Adding to the influence of social media is a phenomenon called para-social interaction, which is described as the illusion of having a face-to-face relationship with a media performer (Horton, Richard Wohl 1956). In a study about the power of blogs, the researchers found that blogs generated higher brand attitudes and purchase intentions than online magazines, partly thanks to the higher para-social interaction that blogs create with the readers. Blogs, unlike magazines, expose more of the person behind it, including excerpts from their personal lives (Colliander, Dahlén 2011). In sum, the higher level of para-social interaction creates the illusion that the blogger is a friend, and consumers are more likely to listen to friends whom they trust for shopping advice – similar to the concept of word-of-mouth, which has been said to be one of the most influential types of communication (Allsop, Basset & Hoskins, 2007), and it also facilitates social contagion. However, in order for such word-of-mouth marketing influence to be effective, the blogger has to be perceived as credible, otherwise negative responses on such marketing efforts will arise (Kozinets et al. 2010). In addition, the writers also have to convey an honest and unbiased relationship to the brands that he or she endorses. Consumers are said to reflect upon their motives, questioning whether they are genuine in their advising efforts or if they are simply salespersons wanting to sell a product for material reasons (Campbell, Kirmani 2000, Dichter 1966). Nonetheless, if the blogger meets these criteria, the readers are likely to follow the advice of their 'fashionable friend' (Colliander, Dahlén 2011). Based on this research, it is

expected that large bloggers with a high level of credibility and trustworthiness would have significant impact on how the readers perceive brands and clothing pieces that are mentioned in their blogs. Ultimately, this effect would influence what types of clothing the consumers associate with different personality traits or groups and how they want to portray and express themselves.

## 2.4 COMBINING THE DIFFERENT FIELDS

The research on consumption as self-creating is relatively advanced and could be classified as in a mature state of research, according to (Edmondson, McManus 2007). Social media on the other hand, has been studied intensively recently, due to its relatively novel appearance, and there is thus room for further studies within this field. In addition, in the cross-border of these two highly relevant and interesting fields, there is an apparent lack of research undertaken. This study aims to bridge the gap between these two interrelated fields, examining the possible connection and influence both have on consumers, considering the substantial self-creating and self-expressing abilities of both subjects.

Combining the previous knowledge gained about shopping and social media with identity-creation as the common factor, the research suggests that self-creating and self-expressing activities are undertaken by consumers both when they are shopping, and when they are using social media. Furthermore, regardless of which activity they undertake, the consumers are simultaneously being influenced by outside factors such as other consumers or influential people, as well as creating and reinforcing norms themselves by choosing to play by the rules or making a statement by breaking them. Lastly, given the high social and symbolic value of both clothing consumption and social media usage, consumers are likely to bring some elements from social media to clothing consumption, and vice versa in relation to their identity-creating work.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

*In this section, a thorough review of the research methodology used will be presented, including ethical considerations and an evaluation of the reliability of the study.*

#### 3.1 MAIN STUDY

The main study has been carried out with an iterative and abductive approach, using qualitative data and methods as described by (Flick 2014). The empirics consist of primary data from semi-structured in-depth interviews with fourteen (14) respondents.

This investigation method was crafted based on the research question, purpose and theoretical framework described above, as suggested by Justesen & Mik-Meyer (2011). (Edmondson, McManus 2007) also argue that the methodological fit is dependent on connecting the research question, purpose and the state of the prior theory and research, where the state of prior research can be categorized within a continuum from mature to nascent. Nascent theory is defined as one that *“proposes tentative answers to novel questions of how and why, often merely suggesting new connections among phenomena”* (Edmondson, McManus 2007, p. 1158). After having reviewed and examined the previous research in the chosen field and combining two different streams of research, as well as defining the research questions of this study, this study was concluded to belong in the nascent category. Although there are existing concepts and theories of both social media and of shopping as a symbolic, self-creating activity, the existing research on the connection between these two fields is scarce, as described earlier. For nascent research fields, Edmondson and McManus (2007) argues for the collection of qualitative data, using open-ended questions that need to be interpreted and analyzed in order to find patterns and understanding the topic to be studied.

Furthermore, qualitative data can *“offer insight into complex social processes that quantitative data cannot easily reveal”* (Eisenhardt, Graebner 2007, p. 26). This ability to reveal complex social processes is crucial for the research question of this study, which aims to answer questions of “how” or “why”, and understanding the reasoning of the consumers. Therefore, instead of

testing hypotheses, an iterative and abductive approach using qualitative data was applied, in accordance with common practice (Edmondson, McManus 2007, Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2009, Flick 2014).

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### 3.1.1 DATA COLLECTION

As described above, since the goal was to understand the thought process of the consumers' and thus reconstructing subjective theories, collecting verbal data through semi-structured interviews was deemed to be the most appropriate method (Flick 2014). Wengraf (2001) also argues for the semi-structured interviews as the most appropriate method for both building new theories and for testing existing theories, since it lies in the middle of the spectrum between unstructured and fully structured interviews. Furthermore, this data collection method was the most appropriate from the interviewer's perspective, in regards to personal preferences and abilities as well as for the interviewees, who had the freedom to express themselves both within the scope of the research framework, as well as outside it. Lastly, the semi-structured method is appropriate for the research purpose, which is to find and understand patterns or contexts that are complex, rather than finding limited or clear answers (Flick 2014).

After having decided on the research approach and the type of verbal data to be collected, an interview guide based on the theoretical framework was devised. A loose framework for the interviews can help guide the interviewer throughout the interview (Trost 2010), as well as distinguishing interview-questions from the research-questions or theory-questions, which Wengraf (2001) argues must be kept separate.

The interviews began with more open questions in order to warm up the interviewee and to establish a good relationship between the interviewee and the interviewer (Trost 2010). Questions asked during the interview were neutral but specific in regards to the topic studied, sometimes drawing upon the details that were disclosed by the interviewee during the interview, or probing into certain details into what the interviewee had said. The question "why" was however avoided, as it may sound impolite and cause the interviewee to feel questioned, leading to defensive answers (Trost, 2010). The questions were not predefined, as it is important

to be flexible and to follow the interviewee's thought processes (Trost 2010). However, the interview guide that was created before the interviews included the broad topics to be discussed and thus offered a certain level of guidance and structure for the otherwise open and unstructured interview format, as suggested by Trost (2010).

In general, all interviews lasted for around an hour, a reasonable amount of time that is long enough to provide sufficient data, but short enough to show consideration for the interviewees' personal schedules (Trost 2010). Notes were taken during the interview, and all interviews were recorded digitally to assist in the following interpretation and analysis of the data.

Directly following the interviews, the author, which was also the interviewer during all interviews as advised by Trost (2010), listened to the recordings and wrote down key findings, sometimes including the non-verbal cues that the interviewees had expressed. Transcripts were also made, in order to assist the interpretation and analysis of the data. The immediate processing of the interview data allows for memories to be preserved efficiently and thus provides the foundation for more accurate analyses, as memory plays an important role in qualitative interviewing (Beer, Burrows 2007, Trost 2010).

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### 3.1.2 SAMPLING

The sampling of interviewees was carried out using a set of predefined sampling dimensions as described by (Flick 2014). These dimensions were based on the research question and topic; since the goal is to study consumers' thoughts and perceptions of both social media and apparel, the two main criteria were that the interviewees had a self-expressed interest in these two topics, being active shoppers and consuming social media on a daily basis. Furthermore, in order to limit the scope of this study and to reduce the variation between the interviewees due to their demographic, socioeconomic, geographic or cultural differences, only people in the ages of 19-29 who were had been living in Sweden for a long time were selected. Both men and women participated in the study and none of the participants had any children. This sampling method is also similar to the strategic sampling method advised by Trost (2010), who argues that for qualitative interviewing, it is advised to use a predetermined set of variables such as age and

gender for sampling and thereafter search for heterogeneity within the relatively homogenous group that is to be studied. The people that matched these predefined criteria were initially found in the author's wider network, and thereafter the so called snowball sampling (Trost 2010) was used occasionally. In those cases, the previous interviewees referred to other people that matched the criteria and were willing to be interviewed. All the participants resided in the county of Stockholm, including the municipality of Stockholm and its surrounding municipalities.

The objective of using the aforementioned sampling methods was to find the most suitable people to interview for this study and to understand their individual reasoning and thoughts. Therefore, these sampling methods were deemed to be the most appropriate ones, rather than using a statistical sampling that is not well-suited for qualitative studies (Trost 2010).

A list of all the participants is presented in the table below:

INTERVIEWEE*	GENDER	AGE	OCCUPATION	MUNICIPALITY
LI	Male	23	Architect Intern	Stockholm
ANDY	Male	24	Communications student	Järfälla
MALIN	Female	25	Economics student	Lidingö
EMMA	Female	23	Law student	Sundbyberg
HENRIK	Male	24	Medical student	Solna
NATALIE	Female	24	Marketing Director	Sundbyberg
DAVID	Male	29	Entrepreneur	Stockholm
VERONICA	Female	20	Law student	Sollentuna
MONA	Female	20	Communications student	Nacka
HANNA	Female	24	Economics student	Täby
SARA	Female	19	Waitress	Haninge
IDA	Female	24	Charity worker	Nacka
DANIELLE	Female	25	Consultant	Stockholm
ANTON	Male	25	Architect Intern	Huddinge

*Figure 3. List of participants*

*\*The interviewees' names have been changed.*

Lastly, in regards to the sample size, there are different opinions on how many interviews or cases are appropriate. Trost (2010, p. 143) argues that the proper sample size when doing



qualitative interviews depends on many different factors, but that generally speaking, a small sample size of four up to eight interviews is enough. For this study, the author decided to speak with fourteen different interviewees in order to reduce any biases that could arise with a smaller sample, while keeping the sample size manageable considering the time and resource restraints of this study. Furthermore, after around ten interviews, saturation was apparent, i.e. the interviewees started to repeat the same patterns derived from previous interviews.

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### 3.1.3 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Both the analysis and interpretation of the data collected was carried out using a qualitative and abductive approach, looking for variations and patterns that were expressed during the interviews, in accordance with the type of research and questions in this study (Trost 2010).

As mentioned above, all interviews were transcribed immediately after the interview and before the next interview, in order to both preserve all impressions and memories, as well as allowing for a preliminary analysis and coding of the data. This approach also ensured that relevant themes that occurred during the interviews could be investigated further in the subsequent ones.

After having interviewed all respondents and transcribed the data, the data was sorted into the different preliminary categories that had emerged during the transcription and coding of each individual interview. All information was then re-read and examined several times, before the final theme of living in two parallel worlds emerged and the data was analysed with the tools provided by the theoretical framework described in part two (2). The theoretical frameworks helps in organizing and directing the analysis, however, this inductive approach based on prior research increases the risk of a premature closure on the topics investigated (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2009). Therefore, during the structuring and organizing of data, the data was analysed using an abductive approach, searching for the patterns and themes that arose gradually. As new patterns emerge, the theoretical framework was updated in order to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon. This mixture between the deductive and inductive approach is frequently applied in practice when doing qualitative research (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill 2009, Reichertz 2014).

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### 3.1.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Following the ethical guidelines are important for any study, but perhaps even more so when doing qualitative interviews that might have a highly personal tone (Trost 2010, Flick 2014).

The interviewees were all informed of the topic of the study, and were assured that they had the right to cancel or end the interview at any time. Consent was acquired before all interviews. Furthermore, before the interviews started, the author asked for the interviewee's permission to record the interview, as well as informing them about their right to anonymity. Similarly, in the list of interviewees, only pseudonyms, gender, age, residence and occupations were presented and used to distinguish between different interviewees, since information about their demographics were deemed negligible for this study. Furthermore, asking for such data could have negatively affected the comfort felt by the interviewees, and thus lead to less honest and open conversations (Trost 2010).

In addition, all interviews were conducted in an undisturbed and private setting that was familiar to the interviewees, such as in their homes or at their school, in order to improve the probability of honest, unbiased and confidential answers. Lastly, in order to facilitate communication, interviewees were able to speak in their native language, Swedish. The interviewer, being fluent in Swedish as well, could then translate the interviews and analyze these data accordingly. All citations from the interviewees have therefore been translated to English by the author.

## 3.2 SECONDARY STUDY

The data from the interviews comprise the majority of the empirics used in this study; however, an additional stage of data collection was conducted as well in order to complement the main study. This secondary research was carried out using a document study method (Flick 2014).

### 3.2.1 DATA COLLECTION AND SAMPLING

The primary data collected consists of texts and pictures from the most popular social media platforms and blogs amongst the interviewees, including the discussions on these social media that were related to the research topic.

Therefore, the social media that were examined were first chosen based on the information derived from the interviews conducted for the main study. The most popular social media channels were examined, including the interviewees' personal social media platforms, as well as from bloggers' or companies' social media updates. This data was then used to complement the main study in the following analysis. Using this method, it was possible to follow the lives of the interviewees, and to understand what content they were receiving or being exposed to. Furthermore, by looking at the discussions going on in these social forums, it is possible to gather information about the social "small talk" that takes place in the interviewees' lives, without intruding their private space.

A list of the sites and blogs examined is shown below:

NAME	TYPE	LINK
KENZAS	Blog	<a href="http://www.kenzas.se">www.kenzas.se</a>
BLONDINBELLA	Blog	<a href="http://www.blondinbella.se">www.blondinbella.se</a>
KISSIES	Blog	<a href="http://www.kissies.se">www.kissies.se</a>
LISA OHLSSON	Blog	<a href="http://www.imnext.se/lisaplace">www.imnext.se/lisaplace</a>
FACEBOOK*	Social Networking Site	<a href="http://www.facebook.com">www.facebook.com</a>
INSTAGRAM*	Social Networking Site	<a href="http://www.instagram.com">www.instagram.com</a>

Figure 4. List of blogs and social media sites

*\*Links to the personal sites that were examined will not be provided on the request of the participants.*

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### 3.2.2 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The analysis was conducted using the same approach as described in section 3.1.3, using a qualitative and abductive method that aims at identifying themes and meanings of the data by switching between looking at the data without theories in mind, and looking at the data and interpreting it using theories and prior research knowledge. The focus lied on finding themes that were similar to those of the main study, or to find contrasting data in order to gain a deeper understanding of the subject.

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### 3.2.3 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

When conducting the document study and presenting those data, the personal privacy of the interviewees was protected by only describing extracts or pictures verbally, so that no participants could be identified based on the documents. All concerned participants were asked for permission to investigate their private social media profiles or channels that were not visible without their private access.

## 4. EMPIRICS

*In this section, the background data collected from the main study will be presented. These empirics will cover some general information about the interviewees, including their shopping behavior and their use of social media. The majority of the data, including the data from the document study, will thereafter be presented and analyzed in the following analysis section in order to reduce the amount of repetitive information for the reader.*

Shopping is considered to be a fun and engaging activity by all of the interviewees, who often shopped for fun or as a pastime activity, or in order to compensate for a stressful life; *“When I was working, I could meet up with friends afterwards, but usually there would be a gap in between. In those cases, I would usually stroll around in stores”* (Hanna), and further: *“It is fun to shop, it is a bit relaxing, when it is not sales... It is fun with some variety and it feels nice to have something new to dress in, you can get bored of your old clothes”*. Another interviewee says that how often she shops varies a lot, but that *“I am the kind that does therapy shopping; as soon as there is something stressful in my life, like when I have deadlines, I’ll go online and place some orders, and then I forget about it and become surprised when it arrives a week later ”* (Veronica). However, not all kinds of shopping is considered fun; the participants preferred to shop clothing items, rather than groceries or buying things that they have run out of. Veronica says *“I also do boring shopping, the shopping that you have to do, not because you want to, like when I have to buy things that I have run out of, such as stockings and hair pins”*.

Although all the participants were highly active online, they did not always shop clothing online. Many of them like to browse for items online on e-stores or through reading blogs, searching for inspiration or a specific type of clothing item. After having researched online, they then go offline to buy the items in brick-and-mortar stores. Returning items bought online was deemed to be a hassle by several interviewees, however, some impulse purchases could occur online. How often they purchase clothing varies, and there is also variation in terms of how often they look for clothes, versus how often they actually make purchases. For all interviewees, clothing was deemed very important and they had certain criteria for what clothes they would purchase.

Except for their own judgement on the style of the clothes, the fit of the clothes was consistently mentioned as an important factor. The most common places for purchase are physical stores such as H&M, Zara, MQ, Gina Tricot and Bikkok, or online retailers such as asos.com and nelly.com.

Concerning the social media consumption, it was evident that the interviewees were all active on social media in various forms. The most common social media platform used by the interviewees was Facebook. However, other sites and apps such as Instagram, Pinterest, Twitter, Youtube, Snapchat and Wikipedia were also well-known and used frequently. Blogs were also regularly consumed by most of the interviewees, and some of them also wrote their own blogs. The type of blogs most frequently mentioned was fashion or lifestyle blogs, where the interviewees could enjoy watching the pictures on the blogs, or just follow the lives of those bloggers they had followed for a longer period. Two frequently mentioned blogs were Kenzas.se, Blondinbella.se, but several others were mentioned as well (see Appendix 2 for examples).

Social networking sites such as Facebook were commonly used for distraction of all sorts, and for catching up with friends or being updated with events and happenings. Other social media platforms such as Pinterest or Youtube was used for a more specific purpose of finding inspiration, for example by browsing fashion pictures, learn new skills or getting entertainment by watching videos. LinkedIn was also quite popular amongst the interviewees; however, it was solely used for professional purposes. Facebook was also used for professional networking purposes in some cases. As with shopping, using social media can fulfil different needs and it has different purposes, of which one is to create a personal brand. Andy says *"When I was younger, I was painting a lot and that was actually how I ended up where I am today, in the entrepreneurial world... but I think, without knowing it, that I was creating my own brand and I got myself heard out there [on social media], even though my paintings were not really the best"*. Besides using social media as a pastime and as a tool for communicating with people, Andy could also convey a message about who he was, which we will further discuss in the analysis next.

## 5. ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

*In this section, further empirical data is examined and analysed using the theoretical frameworks presented in section two.*

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

As mentioned in the empirics, the interviewees enjoyed shopping, including shopping to acquire new items and shopping in order to find a good deal, as suggested by Miller (1997). The joy of the process of finding new shopping items is described as *“The hunt, to feel that you can pimp yourself a bit, to feel updated. It feels nice when you have brand-new clothes”* (Li), whereas the pursuit of a good deal is noticeable in this quote by Andy, who says: *“Shopping can be seen as a fun challenge; sometimes I just shop around, not knowing what I am looking for. But it is fun to search for new outfits, and to compose new outfits with cheaper brands. It feels cooler to have done that with maybe a thousand kronor, instead of buying all the designer labels directly”*. The urge to shop is frequently spurred by a sense of “needing” a new item; *“Sometimes I just need a sweater to match with these pants, and sometimes I just want to buy something. It is fun, I buy just for fun, and because I change styles so often”* (Mona). Her motive for going shopping corresponds with Bauman’s (2001) reasoning about shopping for the sake of shopping itself; the shopping activity has a value in its own right and it might explain the perceived need to consume more, even though the wardrobe is full: *“I usually put my old clothes in the basement... I feel most comfortable in new things, maybe because you have just chosen them, the old stuff maybe aren’t your style anymore”* (Mona).

Nevertheless, not all kinds of shopping is fun, and regardless of the different functions that shopping can fulfil, all the interviewees expressed the importance of having the right outfit or clothing items in order to express themselves properly, as suggested by previous research (Douglas 1997, Kritsadarat 2005, Giddens 1991). Shopping is therefore also the means to an end; the means to creating and expressing your self-identity: *“Shopping is fun, but it is also important to have, to wear the right clothes. The clothes say a lot about who you are as a person”* (Malin). This statement is common amongst all interviewees, who are adamant that clothing has the power to portray oneself in different ways. Social media also have similar functions; *“You think about what*

*you post on social media, because you want to give the right impression” (Danielle) and Emma also states that “The sum is me and my clothes, so the clothes have to fit in with the rest of ‘me’”. This concept of the self is very similar to the one proposed by James (1961), who stated that “A man’s Me is everything that he can call his”. In today’s digitalized world, this also includes your social media pages.*

In the following sections we will delve deeper into the identity-creating function of shopping and social media. During the data collection and analysis, the overarching theme of living in two parallel worlds emerged. This theme consists of two sections; the creation and presentation of self in the physical world, and the creation and expression of self in the digital one. In both these domains, the interviewees use clothing consumption and social media in their identity-creating work. Lastly, after having analyzed the data from these two sections, an examination of the common factors between both worlds as well as an analysis of the contrasts between them will be provided.

## 5.2 IDENTITY-WORK IN THE PHYSICAL WORLD

### 5.2.1 SELF-CREATION AND SELF-EXPRESSION

The signaling and symbolic functions of clothing as proposed by (Giddens 1991, Kritsadarat 2005) are frequently touched upon by the interviewees; several interviewees believed that clothing is important because of their value in creating and expressing their personas. Although the signaling and symbolic functions are usually said to be useful for creating a social self (Bauman 2001, Douglas 1997, Gabriel 2015, Giddens 1991, Kritsadarat 2005), clothing items also have symbolic meanings that are directed solely towards the bearer. One of the interviewees stated that *“If I am alone and feel bad, I just want to wear the most comfortable and ugliest things that I have and cuddle up somewhere. But sometimes, you just want to feel good about yourself, like wearing beautiful underwear even though no one will see them... I have made an effort, I have tried to be my best self”* (Veronica). Furthermore, another participant stated that *“I think the clothing really affect how I feel, how confident I feel, but there is no one item that I feel confident in, so that is why sometimes I can stand for an hour and don’t find anything. Sometimes, if you wear flat shoes, maybe you take less space;*



*don't walk as confidently even though you don't feel less confident"* (Mona). These examples suggest that the consumers can use clothing in order to enhance or change their moods or their confidence level, irrespective of whether others notice their clothing or not. The process of self-relatedness that Falk & Campbell (1997) mentions is evident here, as the consumers are evaluating how they would feel in the clothing item and whether it fits with their desired self-identity.

Nonetheless, for the most part, the symbolic function and value of clothing is closely related to the outside world and it is highly important in creating the social self (Bauman 2001, Giddens 1991, Grove-White 2001, Kritsadarat 2005). Veronica states that *"How you dress, move and do your makeup is the first thing that people see, and it is something that I think is a beautiful way to express yourself, using your body as a canvas. It is a very beautiful form of art that exists in our everyday lives, and it is a good way to reach out, no matter if you use it or not, so you might as well use it"*. Using clothes in order to express creativity is also mentioned by several other interviewees, such as Andy who says: *"For me, clothing is a creative expression, entrepreneurship or whatever should be creative. If everyone is wearing the same black suit, then you just showed that you are not creative. And you are your company in a physical form, so I think people should be creative. I want people to feel that I am a creator and that you think that my clothes are good-looking"*. The purpose is clearly to convey a certain image or message towards others, and whether you like it or not, people will judge based on appearance, which several participants also mentioned. Sara says *"You shouldn't judge people based on their looks, but that's how the world works"*. No matter what the consumers think of it, clothing has significant symbolic and signalling values, and the participants were all aware of this. Clothing is therefore used attentively by them for self-branding, which is further indicated by these two quotes: *"The clothes reflect on who you are, and they are a tool for building trust, for example. They can enhance a message and increase or decrease an impression... It is not just about function; it is a way to create your own brand"* (David) and *"I think you just want to be you best self, you need to market and sell in yourself. I heard from people around me that I look like an esthete, and I thought 'I think it like it; it is something that I can identify myself with, like being creative, doing marketing etc.' So clothes are important, it is a lot about identity"* (Natalie). In sum, it is evident that clothing is highly connected to the interviewees' self-identity, including the values they share. A

confirmation of the clothing is also a confirmation of the person wearing it, as stated by Henrik: *"It definitely feels good if others like my clothing. I think that if the group acknowledges your clothing, then they kind of acknowledge you as well"*. With this statement, he also touches upon the need for belongingness, which will be further discussed later on in the next section about managing dilemmas.

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### 5.2.2 BALANCING ACTS

Although clothing clearly has the power to create a certain image, creating an identity is complicated; it is dependent on many different factors and people are usually multifaceted, with different roles to fulfil. There is also a constant struggle to balance the personal style, which is highly influenced by others, with other social norms and the life that you live. Connecting to the notion of creating a bridge, which was mentioned both by previous researchers (Kritsadarat 2005, Grove-White 2001) and by two interviewees, this balancing act may be interpreted as the process of creating compatible bridges that fit both yourself and the others that you interact with. Natalie says *"I think it is important to fit in, it is human to want to be accepted by others, but I don't want to compromise with myself... you have to balance that"*. Several other participants expressed similar thoughts on the conflict between personal interests and social norms. Anton says *"Clothing is a hobby, but it's only half true; the other half is that you want others to accept you"*. It is evident that although one part in explaining the consumption of clothing is due to free will, another part stems from the need to feel belonging to others and to become accepted in society.

The need for affirmation creates however issues and personal conflicts, as several interviewees mention their wish to stay unique, while being accepted as well. This dichotomy is evident in Veronica's quote, as she says *"I started to wear a watch before it became popular, but then one of the biggest bloggers started to wear it as well and it sold out at once. It felt very personal and nice that one of the blogs that I had followed for a while started to wear the same watch that I was wearing, but at the same time, as was also angry because I thought that now people will think that I am just copying her"*.

It is evident that conflicting interests can arise in the work of creating the self in relation to the social surrounding. Nonetheless, for most part it seems as the wish to fit in and become accepted

is stronger than the need to maintain uniqueness, and it is highly difficult not to succumb to the social norms. Hanna describes the difficulty, saying *“It really should not matter, but it does... and if you explicitly say, ‘Today I will wear this even though it might be too much, but I feel like wearing it’, then you kind of acknowledge that you know that you are not supposed to wear it”*. She is therefore aware of the social norms, and while she makes the decision to rebel, she is simultaneously cementing the norms by openly acknowledging them.

Another balancing act is that of comfort and style, where style is more influenced by social norms and comfort is what is most convenient. Even though you have managed to overcome the first issue of choosing something that you like and that is deemed acceptable by the society as well, you still have to make that choice to function in your everyday life. Malin says: *“If the society doesn’t think it is nice then I would not wear it, even if I think it is nice. I wouldn’t feel comfortable in such things, for example, I really should wear sports shoes because of my knees, but it doesn’t feel right to wear those at school so I avoid that. There is a conflict between my comfort and looks, and I usually adapt and wear what looks good. But I wish I did not, I try to think ‘whatever’...perhaps I will get better at it as I age”*. Here, it is evident that the social norms are making the interviewee feel uncomfortable in certain items, although she would like to wear it. Malin also expresses an insecurity and hesitancy to break the norms, wishing that she could become more assertive with age. The need to fit in is strong, which will be further discussed in the next part. Other participants reported similar issues but from another angle, such as the conflict between personal style and comfort. Danielle says *“High-heels look great on others, but I am wouldn’t wear it myself, it’s too much work”*. In addition, Natalie says *“I want people to look at me and think like they do when they see the bloggers, like ‘wow, so nice!’, but I don’t want to compromise with my comfort, so it becomes an internal conflict of interest. I can spend a lot of time in front of the mirror, but in the end I choose what is most comfortable. [...] just the fact that I have to bring a big bag with workout stuff, I have a big conflict between comfort and looks, between what I feel like and what I actually buy”*. She struggles with finding the clothes that fits with her need for fashionable clothing and with her everyday life, which is entirely different from that of a fashionista’s in her mind. Natalie also feels the need to pack different clothing items for different occasions; hence, this quote also highlights the

awareness of different social contexts in the interviewees' lives that they have to adapt to, which will be further discussed in the next part (5.2.3).

Lastly, the participants expressed concerns about balancing their preferences with their lifestyles and economic situation: *"I like the old-fashioned style, a bit British or Italian with nice suits and quite dressed up... but I think there is a discrepancy between how I dress and how I would like to dress, although I am starting to find more of the clothes I want... But still, the style I like usually cost a lot and also I am a bit lazy"* (David). Veronica also says *"I don't have the money and the time to dress like I would want to; I am more into fashion than I look"*. Perhaps these sentences explain why conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899) works; the desired clothing items are often costly or difficult to acquire, so if you do have the time and money to spend on clothing, others can easily notice that and draw inferences about your social status. As Anton says, *"A pair of Converse for 700 kronor is not as cool as another pair that is more expensive, if you can afford it"*.

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### 5.2.3 DRESSING FOR THE OCCASION AND FITTING IN

Besides the balancing acts described above, in the physical world, consumers also have to fit in at different contexts and groups. Therefore, the bridge between the self and the others in society has to be adapted accordingly. While navigating the different settings in the offline world, the interviewees aim to emphasize different qualities depending on the context, as described here: *"This tight dress is super nice and has a deep cleavage and think 'oh my god, I look hot in it', but I maybe shouldn't wear that when I meet my date's parents for the first time. And you can think that you should be able to do whatever you like, but it is a way to tell... to say something and this shows yourself off, and that is maybe not the impression you want to make"* (Veronica) and further; *"You don't want to wear a polo-shirt to an event where everyone else is wearing a suit; it becomes a bit wrong then"* (David). Once again, the symbolic and signaling functions of clothing are evident in these statements.

For occasions like going out, clothing can be used to signal whether you want to join or not, and unsuitable clothing is accepted by others in the society as an excuse for not going: *"Clothing can be used as an excuse, for example, if you are at a bar and then some people want to go to a fancy club, then you can say that you are not dressed up enough"* (Hanna). On the other hand, Ida, who works with a

charity, says *"If I am attending a meeting with my charity, I would perhaps not wear something like flashy clothes or expensive brands, that wouldn't feel right"*. Conspicuous clothing is clearly not appropriate when working with charities, but for going to the club it would be appropriate. All in all, these statements convey a high level of awareness about clothing, what messages they signal and which occasions they belong to. For the consumers, who all have to manage different roles in their lives, this knowledge is crucial in creating a satisfying social life. Otherwise you might create the wrong impressions and end up in an unpleasant situation, by for example forming the wrong alliances and enemies, as suggested by Douglas (1997).

Nevertheless, the most common situation where clothing needs to be adapted is at work; several participants mentioned the professional arena as a specific context where certain adaptation was required. Even those who enjoyed standing out with their clothing said that they try to tone down their personal style for such occasions: *"If I have an important meeting I dress down a bit [...] Maybe I choose the clothes that do not stand out as much, you want to stand out but still look professional"* (Mona) In addition, Andy states that *"If you are wearing more extreme things, it is very polarizing. Every time I wear my winged sneakers I get a lot of comments, some will say 'wow, those are awesome', and others will be like 'are you kidding me, you can't wear wings'. So you have to know your audience, for professional contexts you tone it down a bit"*. These statements above indicate that the interviewees are aware of different contexts and adapt their style accordingly. The 'polarizing effect' of clothing mentioned by Andy is also highly comparable to Douglas' (1997) view on clothing as a way to imply alliances or animosity, and this notion is implied throughout the interviews.

Besides dressing (correctly) for the occasion, there are also certain groups within the society that have their own clothing norms. Even amongst those individuals who emphasize their uniqueness, the awareness of groups, subgroups and norms is apparent: *"It is quite easy to spot where people come from, where they live... maybe what they work with, like if you see someone in a suit they probably work at a bank. And also that you see what is right or wrong in certain social groups, some groups are not allowed to wear that. Hipsters can't come in Uggs, and brats can't wear... something second hand"* (Mona). This statement implies that members of certain groups are not 'allowed' to wear certain clothing styles or items. If these norms are broken, beholders will be noticing and

questioning these incongruent choices: *"I have noticed that some of my friends are dressing in a certain kind of genre, but it doesn't make any sense, so I notice it"* (David). Even bloggers have to fit into certain norms; Mona says that different bloggers appeal to different age groups and have different niches, which they *"probably feel pressure from their readers to stay within"*. However, it is not all negative and about conforming to rules; knowledge about styles and group belonging can also be useful, as Andy notes: *"You can identify different groups and subgroups by looking at the clothes, and then it is easier to find the ones that you want to be in"*. Therefore, the symbolic functions of clothing works both ways; you have to convey an identity for yourself, as well as decoding the identity of others by looking at their appearance, much in line with Douglas' (1997) reasoning about clothing as a standpoint. In addition, the quotes above indicate that consumers place substantial value in conveying a congruent self-image, which corresponds with previous studies that showed how consumers avoid expressing themselves at all when they cannot achieve congruency (Hollenbeck, Kaikati 2012). Creating congruency and an effective self-presentation requires knowledge about the audience (Hogan 2010), and luckily, this ability seems to be deeply embedded amongst the participants: *"During high school I could go crazy and wear pink dots and stripes, I thought it was nice then... but now you are more serious, so the clothes have adapted as well. I think you are like a chameleon, you adapt depending on where you are, but unconsciously. Like, 'this is how people look like here'"* (Emma).

Last but not least, regardless of the individuality and independence that is often emphasized by the participants as discussed in the previous section, the need for belonging to a group is unmistakable. Li says *"If I feel that I have nice clothes, I feel handsome and if I feel handsome, I have more confidence and...you know, it feels good to show yourself to others, in some way... Somewhere deep in, unconsciously, it feels better but in the end I don't really care what others think"*, but he also reluctantly admits that it 'feels better' to have nice clothes when others are watching. Another interviewee says *"I am quite stubborn so I don't think I am so influenced by others... but maybe when you wear something and people give you compliments, you buy more similar clothes. And if you are going to some event, you always ask each other 'what are you going to wear', and it is a typical herd behaviour, you don't want to be alone"* (Hanna). Therefore, the data suggests that consumers wish to belong and to fit in, and when in doubt, they look at each other for advice.

## 5.3 IDENTITY-WORK IN THE DIGITAL WORLD

### 5.3.1 SELF-CREATION AND SELF-EXPRESSION

Given the preceding discussions on how consumers think deliberately about what type of clothing they wear and how they want to portray themselves in the physical world, it is not surprising to find that they are also highly aware of themselves online.

Amongst all the interviewees, there is a remarkable level of awareness of how you express yourself and portray your identity online. Emma says that she would never post 'weird things' on her social media channels, and that once, she felt the need to remove a post with a video link that was posted by her boyfriend on her Facebook page because it was so strange: *"I told him to delete it, because people are going to look at it and think that I am crazy... So I said, no, don't post things like that again!"*. Implicitly, she was a bit embarrassed to admit that she 'grooms' her Facebook profile like this, however, she was not alone in thinking about self-image. Several participants said that they think twice before uploading something on their social media channels. Especially profile pictures are thoroughly scrutinized: *"Before you changed picture a lot and people posted anything, from cancer to how it was standing in queue. But now if you know that your profile picture will stay on there for a while, you think 'is this picture good enough?' before you decide"* (Hanna). This interviewee also told a story about how a friend of hers was highly stressed about his profile picture: *"I was meeting a friend and I noticed how stressed out he was [...] Apparently, someone had said that he would have looked more muscular if he had not cropped his profile picture on Facebook, and he was fretting about it! But then we kind of decided that well, you already have twelve likes on that picture, so they would kind of go to waste if you changed picture now. But it shows how important it can be, having the right picture!"*(Hanna). A good picture can showcase yourself and your personality in the most flattering way, according to several interviewees. If the pictures that you are choosing between are similar, taken during the same occasion, you take time to decide on which one makes you look most handsome according to several participants (Sara, Danielle, Hanna). The above quote also shows that the self-expression on social media is highly conspicuous – the goal is to receive 'likes' and other positive reactions from others in your network. The use of social

media together with clothing as tools for creating and expressing self-identity is noticeable, and this quote from Veronica illustrates it clearly: *"Fashion is just one way to express yourself, and social media is another. You often have your internet-persona, I mean, what you post are the things that you want others to see. If you want to be portrayed as someone that is fit and put-together, then maybe you don't want to post something where you just put a sweatshirt on. You show the sides that you like, the flattering sides"*. Social media usage contains considerable symbolic and signalling functions that the consumers can benefit from, and it is evident that the consumers engage in 'conspicuous posting', just like they engage in conspicuous consumption (Veblen 1899).

Nonetheless, the data suggest that having nice-looking and representative pictures is important, and fortunately, it is also fairly easy to achieve. In the digital world, the consumers have the power to choose what to show and they all prefer to show the better sides of themselves. In addition, they also prefer to see the better sides of others; the importance of posting good pictures applies to bloggers as well, as suggested by a participant: *"You follow the whole person and they wouldn't post a bad picture of themselves... they have to Photoshop and make it pretty, there is a huge pressure on how one's life is shown... You can post something that is a bit more down to earth, but if you do it too much, you become 'that kind of blog', the depressing one"* (Mona). Looking at the famous blogs, it is obvious that they choose the most glamorous pictures (see Appendix 2), except for Blondinbella that *"[...] is not a fashion blog, rather a lifestyle blog"* (Veronica). The same goes for much of the content on the participants' social media channels; the photos featuring themselves seem to have been taken deliberately, even staged in a sense, considering the angles and so forth. Consumers enjoy beautiful and positive pictures and since they also want to portray their ideal selves, they strive to create the same kind of polished content as the bloggers do. This is also suggested by previous studies, which have shown that users are prone to emphasize their best self on social media (Hollenbeck, Kaikati 2012, Manago et al. 2008).

Furthermore, there are also more opportunities for experimenting with your identity online, probably because of the significant disconnection between what is 'real' and what is your online, ideal persona. David said that he notices how some people in his social media network are trying to portray a certain image, but it did not work for one of them, since David noticed the



mismatch between what he was trying to communicate and what was being said by others: *"I have one friend on Facebook who is really strange; he wants to be seen as an entrepreneur, so he posts things like 'entrepreneurs work all night' in the middle of the night, and then his wife comments the next day with something like 'hey you was just babysitting tonight', and you think 'OK...'"*. Others however, are more successful in building their personal brands in the digital domain. Several interviewees mentioned how they see people who seem to always have a good time and are successful, at least on the social media. Bloggers for example are very apt at creating the illusion of a perfect life, including a perfect body. Veronica says *"The whole thigh-gap [having a gap between the thighs, i.e. being skinny] discussion, if a blogger shows that, like wearing a bikini, there can be a backlash and they can be highly criticized about that [...] People recognize themselves in these girls, and if there is discrepancy between how they look like and how these girls look like, whose jobs are to look perfect from head to toe, they become offended because they identify themselves with them"*. In this case, the bloggers seem to be so good at creating illusions of their perfect selves, so that others, their readers who highly relate to them, cannot possibly reach their level of 'perfection' in their own struggle to create a self-identity. So while some people avoid expressing themselves on social media altogether (Hollenbeck, Kaikati 2012), others use Photoshop and flattering angles in order to create better photos and thus their ideal self.

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### 5.3.2 BALANCING ACTS

With regard to the discussion above, the question arises of how much differently you can portray yourself in the digital world, versus in the physical one. This is one of the balancing acts that consumers have to carry out in their work in creating and expressing a self-identity online. As Hogan (2010) stated, the actors have to decide on which audience to perform for, and there are basically only two types of audiences: the one you can portray the ideal self to, and the one where you cannot. However, the line is often not clear and in cases where the audience is wrong, the user run risk of being perceived as a pretender, such as in David's example above about the entrepreneur who appeared to be a stay-at-home dad. Other participants state similar incidents; *"Some people post things so it looks like everything is perfect in their lives, but you know that it isn't"* (Veronica). These data suggest that most people, although being aware of what identity they like

to portray, are not fully aware of whom their audience consist of and therefore the self-creating work is not as successful (Hogan 2010).

Another decision to take concerns how much you share of yourself and your life with others, which is connected to the above discussion on creating a congruent self-image. Anton says that *"The majority of what I would like to post I never post... I think it is about being insecure, not knowing how others will perceive you"*. He also adds that the pressure is high since everyone is participating in the inflation of themselves, striving for better pictures and nicer facades. Therefore, he feels that the things you post have to achieve a certain level of quality. Nonetheless, the fear of being perceived as a loner without a social life makes him post things occasionally. Hanna on the other hand believes that people have arrived to a point of balance by a process of trial and error: *"I think social media has affected the society; in the beginning everyone was sharing everything... people were writing about matters large and small, from cancer or telling about standing in a bothersome queue [...] But then people started to become aware of this, or maybe they just got tired of it...you realized that everything that was written wasn't interesting unless it was your closest friends, and now people post less"*. Several other interviewees had similar thoughts on this topic, and it seems that people come to realize what content works for their particular audience, just like the bloggers realize that certain parts of their lives are more interesting for their readers, such as beautiful pictures and clothing consumption. Emma for example says that *"I know that certain things are more interesting to my followers... not that I have so many, but they like my posts about workout and training, so I know that if I post such content, I will receive more likes"*. Although she adds that she does not really care, looking at her Instagram account, it is noticeable how much of the content evolves around training and fitness.

Furthermore, the interviewees also deliberately think about what parts are appropriate to share, as suggested by Veronica: *"There are some things that you shouldn't post on Facebook, like super private things, but maybe in those contexts, you shouldn't use Facebook as the channel to reach out with those kinds of messages. And it is the same way I see fashion"*. She mentions how disturbing it is if people in her network posts negative comments about their lives: *"If someone posts something about them feeling bad, it could be a cry for help... then I ask them, but I often receive the answer that*

*everything is fine. Maybe they don't say anything because they did not want to talk to me, or maybe they didn't really mean that... And if it is about them not trusting me, then maybe they should not post that so that anyone can see it".* Apparently, the message was not intended for her, but it is difficult to know for the sender, since one's network on Facebook consists of many different people with whom you have different relationships with. In this case, Veronica should perhaps have been in the audience who only sees the idealized version, as suggested by Hogan (2010). Anyhow, there seems to be a pressure to only convey the ideal self on social media, as discussed previously. The interviewees prefer to see the polished versions, even though these beautified versions also add pressure to display a perfect front and might cause stress about their own, imperfect beings (Manago et al. 2008).

Lastly, concerning the choice of social media to use and the bloggers to follow, the consumers were divided between doing what the others do, and doing what they preferred to do. Some report saying that they did not want to use Instagram at first, but were convinced by friends (Sara, Malin). The difficulty with deciding on which bloggers to follow derives from the concept that different signals are emitted, depending on which ones the consumer chooses. Emma says *"You follow those bloggers that are famous, and that suits your taste. I look at the pictures they post, but if they annoy me, I delete them [from my Instagram feed]. Like Rebecca Stella, the one who was on Let's Dance. She is so 'posy', and too much, like too deep cleavages and too much posing. It looks mannered, not natural. I like the others that are more like 'normal girls'... but I follow Kissie as well, although I wouldn't identify myself with her. But she feels less 'posy' and she is interesting to follow, she does things that I don't do, and she is being herself, not like Rebecca who just tries to be sexy".* Although not spoken explicitly, Emma was a bit uneasy, hesitating a while and smiling apprehensively when telling that she followed Kissie's blog. The choice of bloggers tells others something about who you are, just like brands can tell a story about a person (Hollenbeck, Kaikati 2012). Therefore, this interviewee had to manage between reading the bloggers she finds interesting, versus reading the blogs that are more accepted in society. One way to handle this conflict is to avoid mentioning certain interests, while putting more emphasis on other in order to create the desired image (Hollenbeck, Kaikati 2012). Emma probably would not have mentioned that she

likes this blog, if it weren't for the interview situation where she felt the need to be entirely honest, resting assured that she would remain anonymous.

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### 5.3.3 SHOWCASING THE RIGHT OCCASIONS AND FITTING IN

Rather than attending events and being exposed to different contexts physically, the participants are also aware of the different situations that arise in the digital world. Therefore, they adapt in a similar way, noticing what type of happening it is, and even reflecting upon whom their audience consist of. They do not necessarily dress for the occasion, but just like in the physical world, there are norms and social rules to consider for different contexts in the digital world. In addition, the consumers also know which things to showcase and what to avoid. The clothing is important in strengthening the self-expression and functions as an additional aid in creating their persona online.

LinkedIn for example is the equivalent of the professional context; on this platform, you only portray your professional self. The interviewees stated that they only use it for posting messages that are related to work, and they choose profile pictures that are more serious. When Malin needed a new profile picture for her LinkedIn page, she turned to a friend who is a skilled photographer, rather than taking any current picture that she has, or taking a new one by herself. David also believes that you have to fit in in different contexts and he says he rather uses social media to portray his professional self: *"I think that I stopped seeing social media as my private domain for a long time ago; I usually use social media to promote the things that I am working for... the private and professional me has fused together. The professional me is very systematic and I think of a plan to reach my target audience and promote my projects, social media is a tool for amplifying messages and mobilize people [...] I think social media is the most important channel to create your own brand, although I don't do it consciously... I think many people around me do, but maybe unconsciously as well"*. This quote illustrates how he has merged the different parts of his identity, as well as reinforcing the idea that social media is important in self-branding. However, the thought of doing it consciously seems to be taboo; many interviewees express similar opinion about it and do not like to admit that they for example groom their social media channels consciously. Nonetheless,

all of them agree that you have to think about what you upload: *"It is about your personal brand, and you show that on social media. If you are wearing sweatpants maybe you don't want to upload that"* (Malin). Her statement reinforces the notion of using social media for self-branding purposes, as well as indicating that clothing can increase or decrease the strength of the message and your self-presenting work. These statements are in line with the previous research into self-presentation on social media, which showed that users are likely to emphasize one facet of themselves and thus create a more congruent self-identity (Hollenbeck, Kaikati 2012). Everything has to fit together; the type of situation, the activity held, and the clothes worn.

Outside the professional context there are also certain norms or standards that the consumers aim towards. Being in the right places with the right people is important, and perhaps the reason why several interviewees avoided to post pictures of themselves only: *"I think it is superficial to post selfies or outfits on social media, so I would never do that. I don't want to be associated with being superficial... I want people to see me as sporty, but having fun and being social. Party pictures shows that you have fun and that you are in a cool environment with others, but I also upload other pictures that show that I don't take myself too seriously"* (Anna). By posting pictures of yourself with others, you simulate the occasion of going out and socializing and signal that you have a good social life, rather than that you are superficial or egocentric. If you do something fun but do not show it to others, it is like it never happened, according to some interviewees (Anton, Li).

Travelling is another type of occasion that is frequently showcased; most people upload pictures from their trips and these pictures can be used to further enhance the desired self-identity: *"On Snapchat I want to just communicate in a humorous way to my friends... on Instagram, it is more about conveying something... If we look at what I upload there, it is all about travelling, different events, food, some inspiring quotes and if I have taken some cool photos. And these things are really not the typical things you do, and it is not like I am planning it but still, people should see who I am... And it is filtered in some way, I have to look good [...] it should look like I am interesting, adventurous, that I do a lot of things"* (Natalie). It is evident when examining the social media pages of the participants; most of the content evolves around travel occasion, dining out with others, or similar activities that signal status or an accomplishment.

Nonetheless, most of the participants are aware of this tendency to only post the ‘cool stuff’; several of them state that they notice that people are trying to show a certain type of personality (David, Sara, Hanna, Anton). Regardless of this, they feel influenced by this increasingly high standard, and Anton has a pedagogical explanation for it, saying *“You know it is all a façade, but still, if you have 100 friends on Facebook and each one of them post something special every day, the impression is that everyone is doing something fun, except for yourself, you are working or studying alone at home”*. The identity work in the digital world is mostly centered in creating and maintaining the ideal self, as suggested by previous studies (Hollenbeck, Kaikati 2012, Manago et al. 2008), and the wish for approval. Andy expresses it frankly by saying *“You are not buying the sweater; you are buying the moment when the girl is looking at you”*. In the new digital world, this can be translated into the need for ‘likes’, and once again the notion of conspicuous posting comes to mind.

## 5.4 NAVIGATING THE TWO WORLDS

### 5.4.1 COMMON FACTORS AND INFLUENCERS

Connecting the two realms are the interviewees themselves, and it should be noted that despite the strict division above, there are certainly factors that overlap either worlds, or that spills over to the other. Social media influences the choices the interviewees make in the physical world, and the clothing items from the physical world is transferred to the digital one. In both realms, the interviewees express themselves with social media and clothing simultaneously, but since there are still some major differences, the division was made for simplicity’s sake. Social media as a tool for expressing self-identity is predominately used in the digital domain, whereas clothing is used more in the physical one.

Nonetheless, the formation of individual preferences is a prerequisite for the subsequent self-creation and self-expression in both realms; however, the process is complex. Considering the substantial effect of social norms that were previously discussed, the interviewees could not easily describe their personal styles without mentioning others: *“I used to dance when I was small, so I grew up looking at the street-dancing girls with cropped tops and baggy pants, and that has*

*influenced my style*" (Sara). Some of the participants even had difficulties to put their preferences into words, but most of them were aware of what do not like, which is also suggested by Douglas (1997) who suggests that hatreds are highly revealing, even more so than preferences. One of the participants said that *"I started to pick my own clothes when I was around 15... and then when I was 18, I travelled alone to the US and I had saved money in order to shop there [...] I compared a lot between stores and I went online and looked... This huge supply of clothing forced me to compare, because you have to deselect many things, and you get to know more about yourself in this process"* (Anton). Several interviewees reported a similar process of experimenting and finding your own style, in conjunction with finding out who you are: *"You always have your period of experimenting, when you discover your style [...] I think it has to do with when you grow up and don't know who you are, how you want to express yourself, and understand that how others perceive you doesn't necessarily mean that that is who you are, and that the bridge between how you want to be and then adapting yourself according to that, has not been created yet"* (Veronica). To create the self is also to create a social self and a bridge that connects you with others (Kritsadarat 2005, Grove-White 2001), both in the physical world and in the digital one.

Furthermore, while there are certain differences in for example what to consider when manoeuvring the online world as opposed to the physical one, there are some influencing factors that play a central role in both spheres. Social media is used daily for their identity-creation in both worlds, and it seems to be a door-opener to the world of fashion and clothing consumption. Social media are platforms on which consumers share their opinions and give advice to others in terms of clothing, and they can have an immense impact on their peers and how they think and behave. For example, social media can be used to find inspiration on what to shop, as suggested by Veronica, who says *"Sometimes I can see something really nice, either on my friends or on a webpage, and then I look it up online to check the price, and then maybe I will go and buy it"*. Another interviewee says that she uses the hashtags for fashion in order to find specific style inspiration (Sara).

With this newfound tool for searching for inspiration and items, the process of consuming clothing has dramatically changed, according to several interviewees: *"It is so readily available*

*now, before you had to go to the stores, or read some magazines if you want to know what is in... the world was smaller. Today you can shop online or browse online to find inspiration"* (Hanna). Another interviewee says *"It is a tool for discovering and experimenting with your own style... before you had to go and try the clothes in order to test, and you had to depend on the supply that was there in stores, but now on for example Pinterest, you can see other clothes and pick different pictures and mix and match, and this process is so much quicker and easier than going out, searching and trying and remembering"* (Li). He adds that using social media can be likened to creating a mental shopping list, which is activated when needed. This 'mental preparation' makes it easier to find suitable clothing items, thus facilitating the reflection about clothing that consumers engage in (Falk, Campbell 1997) .

Furthermore, besides friends and family that have a substantial influence on the interviewees' personal preferences, bloggers can also aid the consumers in their identity-creating work in both worlds. It is easy to follow them since they have the power to establish trends or break old norms, as one interviewee explains: *"I think the bloggers have an enormous impact; if they wear a pair of shoes, I promise that those shoes will sell very well. They are role-models, they look good, they wear good-looking clothes and many people think so too. 'If she says that is nice, then it must be so', so they are fashion-experts. I mean, I would listen to their advice, instead of a janitor's. I think even my friends' opinions weigh less than the bloggers... I would listen more to Kenza than my friends. But everyone follows them, so you do the same anyway"* (Emma). Several other interviewees report similar beliefs on the bloggers' expertise, which is in line with previous research on social contagion and normative influence (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig 2002, Contractor, Eisenberg 1990, Burt 1987, Iyengar, Van den Bulte & Valente 2011). Bloggers can create higher marketing effectiveness thanks to their less biased relationship with the brand that they are marketing, and their general credibility (Kozinets et al. 2010, Dichter 1966, Campbell, Kirmani 2000), and they seem aware of this power as well. Many fashion blogs offers links to the clothing they wear or wish to promote (see examples in Appendix 2). One interviewee says *"When I see something on social media I like it more, because I have chosen to be exposed to it. It is cooler to see someone wearing this piece, like a real person wearing it, than to see it in the company's own commercials. 'Cause if he wears it, or others wear it, then it must be cool for real, and not just because the company wants people to think it is cool"* (Andy). Here, it is evident that the consumer reflects upon the relationship the



blogger has with the products they are promoting, and what motives they have. If the blogger wears the clothing because he or she thinks it looks cool and wants to share the style, rather than just being paid for marketing it, the message is being viewed more positively and consumers are more likely to be influenced (Campbell, Kirmani 2000, Dichter 1966).

In addition, even ordinary people can become influencers with the help of social media: *“Before it was the upper level that influenced the style, but now it is different, and the street style can affect upwards. So normal people have more power today, they can create fashion styles. Like the hats with the fur balls, a blogger was sponsored with them and then it spread really fast, someone saw it and they started wearing it as well, and then it became part of a certain style...”* (Mona). This influence seems to derive from the para-social interaction that makes marketing messages so powerful in blogs, especially those who have existed for a while and have had time to disclose personal information (Bass 1969, Horton, Richard Wohl 1956). The effect is clearly suggested by several interviewees, who say that people who have followed blogs for a while feel like the blogs are their friends, rather than just mannequins. Natalie says *“People feel like the bloggers are their friends, and you feel like there is closeness because you have followed them for a while. The things you see at the stores, you buy them because you like the person who wears it, and not because of the brand of the clothes. [...] You buy the whole ‘Kenza kit’, which includes that you are adventurous and hot, and everything else that she stands for. So bloggers have become like a house of brands that you can identify yourself with”,* and further *“Maybe I don’t feel very sporty, but I like the Adidas sneakers, and then I see, oh, Kenza is wearing Adidas shoes together with suit trousers, and then I wear ‘Kenza’ and it fits together and I can justify my clothing”*. Looking at Kenza’s blog, it is clear that she actively promotes certain looks or pieces, often from her own brand IvyRevel (Zouiten 2015). Bloggers are therefore useful in justifying and legitimizing one’s own clothing choices, making them acceptable in society. Ultimately, they are also a legitimization of one’s self-identity that comes with the clothing.

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#### 5.4.2 MANAGING DISCREPANCIES

As discussed in the previous section, there are some common factors and similarities that overlap the two worlds. However, there are some major differences as well. Consumers have to

manage the discrepancies between the two worlds that they live in. Natalie says *“We are living in these two parallel worlds... like Kenza says, ‘today I wore sweatpants’, but she never posts pictures of herself in sweatpants, she only posts the fashion pictures. And what I upload, it is the same, I post the more special things, so you create a certain identity outwards... And in the end, it is the media that is the reason why, we see each other and we encourage and spur each other to do this...we buy things for the digital window, and then we buy things for our everyday life”*. There is a struggle to balance the different side of the self, as well as choosing which window to showcase yourself through. During which occasions do you adapt more to the ‘digital’ world, and during which occasions do you act according to the limitations of the physical world? Natalie says that it depends on the setting; if she is in a store, influenced by pictures from catwalks, she is more likely to buy things that are fashionable but not necessarily functional in her everyday life.

In addition, given the option of only portraying certain parts or the ideal parts of your identity, consumers have to adapt to this new world of facades, being aware of the specific norms on social media and the digital world. Several interviewees state that consumers are prompting each other to create flawless self-images, and Anton says that the hunt for a better self-identity and a better façade has turned into an involuntary competition that is hard to withdraw from: *“You can’t really avoid it, and you can’t just delete your social media accounts, because it is difficult to change from knowing what’s going on to not knowing”*. Even though he is highly critical about this new rally in creating a perfect façade, he cannot boycott it altogether. As mentioned previously, the interviewees were all aware of how a skilfully created self-image is useful for reaching out, emphasizing messages and creating opportunities for yourself, thus it is better to use it than not to. The interviewees all state the need to create and express themselves in both worlds and this process is constantly ongoing as they adapt to different contexts, influences and changes in the social surrounding.

However, even though all the interviewees more or less willingly participates in this acting (Goffman 1959, Hogan 2010), the difficulty of managing the discrepancy between the two worlds still exist. Hanna says *“I have a friend that is very affected by the social media, she follows bloggers who seem to be travelling all the time and then she feels that her life is so boring in comparison”*.

She further says that although most people are aware about that what is posted on social media is usually filtered, so that you only show the special occasions or moments where you look the best, people might still be negatively affected by it. As Anton mentioned previously, it is difficult to post content sometimes because he feels the pressure to achieve a certain standard, even though he knows that it is all a façade. Thus, it is possible to be cognitively aware of the improbability that everyone is constantly on vacation and looking fashionable from morning to night, but at the same time be affected by it. Yet, there are ways to handle this struggle, as suggested by David's statement: *"I don't take it too seriously; it feels more like a game. I have a friend who was in Italy over the weekend, but he spread out the pictures over a month so it looked like he had been away for a long time"*. His statement suggests that a strategy for coping with this new standard of living in the digital world is to take it with a grain of salt. Other interviewees have similar ideas, and say that it is wise to remind yourself about that reality is different from what you are exposed to in the digital world (Hanna, Natalie, Sara, Malin & Anton).

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Previous research has shown that clothing has several different functions and regarding the identity-creating function in particular, clothing consumption has the ability to convey a social self-identity and status for the consumer (Bauman 2001, Douglas 1997, Falk, Campbell 1997, Gabriel 2015, Giddens 1991, Grove-White 2001, Kritsadarat 2005, Veblen 1899). In addition, there have been studies on consumers' self-construction and self-presentation online and on various social media platforms (Back et al. 2010, Bargh, McKenna & Fitzsimons 2002, Hogan 2010, Hollenbeck, Kaikati 2012, Manago et al. 2008). Further research has focused on how social media can affect consumers (Colliander, Dahlén 2011, Kozinets et al. 2010).

In line with these previous studies, the data of this research shows that both clothing consumption and social media play important roles in consumers' work on creating and expressing their self-identities. Furthermore, this study has connected the research in these fields and not only showed that these two fields are highly interrelated, but also what the linkages between them are, from the consumers' perspectives. What emerged as a central theme in the data were the existence of two parallel worlds, one physical and one digital, where both clothing and social media were used by the consumers in order to create and express their self-identities.

Specifically, clothing is mainly used in the physical world, but to a certain extent in the digital as well in order to create, manage and enhance self-identity. The purpose is to make a point, to convey a message, to fit in at different contexts and to symbolize alliances and group belonging. Social media also have several functions in the identity-creating work of consumers; however, it is more concentrated to the digital domain, even though aspects of it are transferred to the physical one as well. Firstly, it serves as an aid in finding clothing that suits the consumer's taste and self-identity; users could look at content communities or bloggers in order to find inspiration. Secondly, it is also an influencing factor on clothing styles and social norms because it contains and showcases the opinions of the society and thirdly, it is a tool for expressing the self in the digital world. Consumers frequently express themselves on various social media applications by posting pictures and comments, creating their online exhibition of the self

(Hogan 2010). In line with Hollenbeck & Kaikati's (2012) study, the findings indicate a bias towards presenting the ideal self in the digital world. In the digital world, there is more room for experimenting with your self-identity and self-presentation, showcasing the 'finer' clothing items and activities that represent only a small part of your life. The physical world has more boundaries; both social, such as social sanctions for idealizing your self-identity (Back et al. 2010), and practical, such as physical and financial limits. Nonetheless, ultimately, the goal with all the work is to attract attention and status (Veblen 1899) by creating a self-identity that is ideal but not too far from the actual one (Hollenbeck, Kaikati 2012, Back et al. 2010), in order to receive as many 'likes' as possible in both worlds. Therefore, the notion of conspicuous posting was created in order to refer to this kind of identity-work that consumers engage in on the digital domain.

Additionally, the findings show that although consumers routinely look at each other in order to legitimize their own choices, or to compare with others, they express a high level of criticism towards such comparisons. The pursuit of a flawless self has intensified with the proliferation of social media usage, where everyone can compete with each other, showing only their 'best' selves. Although there is a playful tone to clothing consumption and social media usage, it is first and foremost an important activity. The self-identities of the participants are being formed with every step they take, so they are constantly monitoring themselves and their surroundings, more or less caught in this 'involuntary competition'. On one hand, they wish to join the competition and present themselves, but on the other hand, such superficial competition is tiresome and time-consuming, as reported by some participants. Therefore, they have yet to create the optimal strategies for coping with this competition and the discrepancy between the two worlds, and the other dilemmas they face in their identity-creating work as well.

Lastly, the findings show no apparent differences between men and women; clothing is regarded as highly important by both sexes, rather than only women, which was previously assumed (Douglas 1997). All the participants, regardless of gender, residence or age expressed concerns about creating and showcasing their identities correctly. The only noticeable difference was in the reading of blogs, where more women than men followed bloggers on social media.

To conclude, this study has contributed to the field of research on social media, clothing consumption and self-identity in the consumer society, showing what the connections between them are, how they relate to each other and how the consumers use clothing consumption and social media in order to create and express their self-identities in the two worlds they live in.

## 6.1 MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Given the above findings, some implications for managers and marketers are evident. Starting off, the data shows that certain influential people can affect much of the consumers' shopping decisions. Bloggers and other people who are deemed to be the 'experts' in their fields have a strong persuasive power and the ability to dictate what is considered desirable in terms of clothing, but also other activities such as travels and so on. By targeting a few of these influencers, companies can reach out very effectively, especially if they succeed in associating their product or service with a certain kind of identity and lifestyle, which matches their ambassador as well as the targeted consumers. This also implies that it is crucial to choose the right ambassadors, since consumers are sensitive to which niche they belong to, which age group they are mostly related to, and other such factors that influence who the main target group is. Consumers are likely to read several blogs, but only identify themselves with a few of them. In addition, consumers are likely to distance themselves from those people or groups that they do not belong to. Therefore, it is essential to associate the product to the right people or groups.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that consumers are more likely to experiment with different styles and do impulse buying online, when they are traversing the digital world. Consumers are more likely to buy products that they usually do not buy, or items that do not work well in their everyday lives but have symbolic values for their self-identities. By associating certain products or brands with a particular identity that is desirable, it is more likely that it will spread on social media networks since consumers want to showcase it, and thus it is likely to spread to others as well. In connection to this, marketers can also create associations with certain contexts and social

situations that fit with their product or brand, such as travel, work, feeling good at home and so on.

Lastly, related to the point above, the data suggest that consumers are not too concerned with the brands of the products, but rather which groups or influential people who are connected to the brands. Therefore, the branding of products has to be created in conjunction with the trends in society, benefiting from the personalities of the ambassadors.

## 7. FINAL REMARKS

*In this concluding section, some suggestions for future research will be offered, as well as a short critical review of the study.*

### 7.1 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

In this study, the goal was to specifically investigate a narrow target sample and to reduce the effect of cultural, demographic or other socioeconomical parameters. For future research, it would be interesting to study whether the effects will remain similar throughout different sample groups, or if there are significant differences between different groups based on for example gender, age, or educational level, thus indicating the existence of mediating factors.

Cultural and contextual differences are also likely to exist, given the emphasis on fitting in at different contexts and situations. Research on the self-presenting work at different social media channels, such as niche media as LinkedIn, could reveal new insights into how people reflect and behave in these types of contexts. Future research could conduct comparisons between different groups, cultures and contexts in order to better understand how people are shaped by these factors, or how they adapt or rebel in these various fields.

Furthermore, the concept of trends and fashions were not investigated, although it was touched upon by the interviewees. Future studies could focus on these factors and investigate how fashions affect consumers' consumption behaviors and self-creating work. Another possibility would be to investigate the self-creating work in the digital sphere by younger or older consumers who are active on social media today, as it has disseminated throughout the ages. Lastly, the data suggest that there are different ways for coping with the discrepancy between self-expression in the physical world and in the digital world, thus future research could investigate this topic further.



## 7.2 CRITICAL REVIEW

This study has shed more light into consumption and social media as a phenomenon for presenting the self, mixing the two different but related fields. Although it has contributed to reducing a research gap, there are possibilities for conducting the study in other ways. As mentioned in the suggestions for future research, the sampling could have included larger samples and people from different backgrounds, both socioeconomically and geographically. Lastly, this study investigated the thoughts of individual consumers, and although it is counterbalanced with the data from larger blogs and social media channels, it is difficult to draw broad generalizations from the data. In order to test some of the concepts quantitatively and to draw generalizable conclusions, a quantitative study would be more appropriate.

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## APPENDIX

### 1. INTERVIEW GUIDE

*The interview guide below served as guidance when conducting the interviews, as described in the methodology section. The questions below were not used when conducting the interviews; they only serve as examples. All interviews were tailored for each interviewee, although they generally followed the main structure.*

#### GENERAL INFORMATION

Age, sex, occupation, residential area

#### SOCIAL MEDIA USAGE

- What platforms (Facebook, Google+, Pinterest, Youtube, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and others) do you use?
- How often?
- For what purposes, what do you look for on these social media?

#### SHOPPING BEHAVIOR

- Where do you shop?
- How often do you shop?
- What do you do when shopping, who do you shop with?
- What do you think of shopping and clothing?
- What are your preferences or dislikes, how have you shaped your taste?
- What role does clothing play in your life, how important is it to you?
- How does your clothing consumption connect to your self-identity?

#### SOCIAL MEDIA AND SHOPPING

- What role do you think social media plays in consumption?
- Do you use social media in any way in regards to shopping? If so, how?
- Do social media influence fashion or trends, if so, why?
- How do you decide on what to post on social media?
- How do you want to portray yourself on social media?
- How do you perceive others as on social media?
- Do you think social media has any value in creating and expressing your self-identity?



## 2. EXAMPLES FROM BLOGS

### BLONDINBELLA

Sharing her lifestyle, including clothing consumption, by referring to brands below the picture:  
“Jacket and blouse Lindex, jeans Zara” (Löwengrip 2015).

## TORSDAG? LÖRDAG?

14 Maj, 2015 @ 18:40

Idag var Gillis på sitt första "kompiskalas". Vi hade själv inget när han fyllde ett år, jag var gravid och det kändes lite omständigt allting, de är ju ändå så små. Men idag var vi på ett och det var jättetrevligt och vi kunde vara utomhus på gården i solen (Sally är inte förkyld idag och tänkte att hon inte smittar om hon är i vagnen utomhus). Gillis var äldst med sina 1,5 år så det blev mer som en vuxenlunch vilket jag uppskattade, jag är socialt utsvulten just nu så det var härligt att få småsacka med nya människor. Jag är alltid nyfiken på andra och måste påminna mig själv att "ta det lite lugnt" annars blir jag så påflugen med alla frågor jag vill ställa. Raoul och Elina har nyss köpt sitt drömhäus i det område vi gärna vill bo i och har inflyttning i sommar. Det vore kul att få fortsätta vara grannar, inte bara här på Kungsholmen utan där också. Imorgon ska vi ännu på en visning i närheten.. Huset är inte helt perfekt men vi går på så mycket som vi orkar, jag tror att det är klokt.

Nu blir det pasta bolognese och sedan ska vi påbörja en ny serie som heter The Americans när Gillis sover. Det känns verkligen som lördagskväll!

Translate my blog

Select Language


Facebook

Hitta oss på Facebook

Blondinbella

590 880 personer gillar Blondinbella.

Facebooks sociala insticksprogram



Jacka och blus Lindex, jeans Zara

---

## KENZA

Representing her own brand; *“I thought I could show you my dinner look! Ofc [abbr. for ‘of course’] I’m representing my own brand haha”, (Zouiten 2015).*



*Playsuit from [IvyRevel](#) (I'm wearing size 36) // earrings from H&M // bag from Thailand*

Before I give you photos from the Nelly dinner on Ibiza, I thought I could show you my dinner look! Ofc I'm representing my own brand haha.. ;- ) Always! I think this playsuit is so pretty! It's perfect for graduation or other summer parties. We also have it in a bright pink color and they are both perfect for Midsummer's Eve with a big flower crown. Oh!

I've been around like hell today (on the scooter!! haha so much fun!!!) and now I'm gonna go one last meeting before I can go home. I'll update later! Hugs ♥

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## LISA OHLSSON

Giving advice on clothing consumption; *"I have totally fallen in love with the pants"*, as she writes below the picture, (Ohlsson 2015).



*Pants, top ([here!](#)), shoes, bag & jewelry – River Island*

Så här såg jag ut under kvällen igår! Kärat ner mig i byxorna totalt. Vi startade som sagt med middag på Sushi Samba som var REN jänkla magi (uppdaterar er med bilder därifrån senare!) innan vi tog oss vidare mot Madison Rooftop där River Island höll sin River Island x Pacha fest. Nu ska vi alldeles strax bege oss ut på stan här i London en stund innan vi rör oss mot flygplatsen i eftermiddag – då vi flyger vidare till Monaco för några dagars häng där. Ska bli så galet skönt att få koppla av lite där för att bli av med både förkylning och stress som tryckt på konstant senaste tiden. Talk soon favoriter!



## KISSIES

Giving advice on clothing consumption “*They are from Gina Tricot and costs 399 kr*”, and being influenced by readers; “*I was criticized for my ugly toenails by the way (haha) så before the event I plan to repaint them so they become more ‘blog-friendly’*”, (Nilsson 2015).

## Nya favoritbyxorna

maj 12, 2015 - 5:12 e m | 20 kommentarer | KLÄDER OCH MODE, VARDAG

Några undrade om mina nya svarta byxor som jag hade på någon bild, och det är dessa som jag har på mig 😊 Hur snygga?? Älskar dom! Och dom kommer faktiskt från Gina tricot och kostar 399 kr om jag inte minns helt fel.. Dock var dom jättelånga, så långa så jag sopade golvet med dom haha.. Men nu är dom uppsydda, mamma fick hjälpa mig. Men ett par svarta, vida byxor känns nästan som ett måste i garderoben för dom är så lätta att matcha + just dom här är så sjukt sköna.

Jag fick kritik för min fula tår föresten (haha) så innan eventet tänkte jag måla om tånaglarna så dom blir mer “bloggvänliga”, borde egentligen boka in en pedikyrtyd men jag hinner verkligen inte med det just nu.. Får ta det när det lugnar sig igen.

