- Master's thesis -

Catering to the contradictive:

a post-subcultural perspective on brand-consumer alignment through self-congruity

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Abstract

A widely acknowledged feature of contemporary consumption is that consumers imbue brands with cultural and social meaning, which has put the marketplace at the center of their identity formation. By extension, brands have become imperative means of identifying with certain groups, as well as demarcating against unappealing cultural movements. Yet, as previous research has seen, the value-expressive function of brands is at risk of being diluted by conventional business motives. This becomes particularly apparent when consumers are pursuing a subversive identity. However, the standards of such subcultural expressions are being subject to a fundamental reevaluation in light of postmodernism and the ubiquitous commodification of cultural items. Given the emergence of new understandings of how value-expressive consumption manifests, we found it meaningful to examine how they concern central subversive concepts, such as refusing the mainstream and in turn, brand-consumer alignment. In this paper, we have looked at developments within postmodern consumer culture through the lens of self-congruity theory, centered around hipsters - a contemporary consumer group that encapsulates relevant cultural phenomena. Within the research field of identity projects in consumer culture theory, we conducted a qualitative case study on the Swedish fashion brand 'Eytys', whose recent collaboration with fashion giant Hennes & Mauritz provided relevant insights into brand meaning in relation to commercial pursuits. Based on in-depth interviews with ten young adults living in urban areas, our findings suggest that post-subcultural consumers use individuality as an expression of authenticity to guide their identity formation, and that it leaves little tolerance for commercial pursuits, as the mainstream connotations they entail are inherently incongruent with what they want to be. We propose that hipsters, as an emblematic representation of a postmodern subculture, for pragmatic reasons frame their identity goals around the rejection of mainstream, rather than the enactment of their individuality. We also find that subversive consumers value consistency in brands, seeing that it facilitates their function as cultural resources in their style. In view of this, we see that management philosophies with high brand centrality, such as the brand-identity based management model, are especially adept to meet the self-congruity needs of subversive consumers. Finally, we emphasize the importance of aesthetics in upholding symbolic value and introduce the notion of incorporating blatantly outlandish designs as 'incongruity buffers'.

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1 Introduction

In contemporary society, consumption in relation to brands has become an extensively researched field of academia (e.g. Belk, 1988; Keller, 1993; Levy, 1959; Louro & Cunha, 2001; Park et al., 1986). Keller (2001, p.3) suggests that "*...the power of a brand resides in the minds of customers*", a reality that has not gone unnoticed by commercial interests. Businesses across all industries have realized the importance of being able to unlock the symbolic meaning behind what they sell, and leverage insights in positioning exercises. In this regard, brands are no longer simply trademarks, but rather ways for consumers to express themselves, and tools for companies to exploit such pursuits.

The multifaceted needs of consumers assert that consumption is not confined to a utilitarian function (Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015, p.205), nor inherently centered around functional needs (Belk, 1988; Levy, 1959; Malhotra, 1988; Park et al., 1986). In contrast, research suggests that consumption can be closely linked to "*...internally generated needs for self-enhancement, role position, group member, or ego-identification*" (Park et al., 1986, p.136). McCracken (1986) argues that consumer goods are imbedded with meaning that stems from the 'culturally constituted world', which in large refers to the sum of an individual's experiences that guide information processing and coding, as well as behavior. Meaning is ultimately transferred to, or made available for, consumers through various consumption rituals (McCracken, 1986). This conceptual stance helps to elevate the idea of consumption as a multifaceted phenomenon that goes beyond functional needs.

Levy (1959) and Belk (1988, p.145) were early advocates of the notion that possessions can be used to construct, extend, and display meaning in relation to identity, "*...as when a uniform or trophy allows us to convince ourselves (and perhaps others) that we can be a different person than we would be without them*." People are thought to be capable of embedding objects with symbolic qualities originating from the culturally constituted world (McCracken, 1986), and using their perceived meaning to express themselves (Belk, 1988; Levy, 1959). For example, social class identification is a recurring theme in relation to symbolic consumption and is often linked to a value-expressive function (Szmigin & Piacentini, 2015, p.207). Levy (1959) discusses how people leverage the meaning of products to showcase their social position, and Sørensen (1997) further exemplifies this by explaining that even during the Bronze Age, people used various types of clothing to produce cues about who they were, often in terms of wealth.

However, symbolic consumption extends beyond social class participation and tangible objects.

Intangible objects such as brands are also receptive to the 'transferral' of meaning by consumers (Aaker, 1997, 1999; Keller, 1993; Park et al., 1986), which often manifests as brand image (Kapferer, 2008, p.174-175). Keller (1993, p.2) defines brand image as "*...the set of associations linked to the brand that consumers hold in memory*", and conceptualizes how different types of associations, collectively, can help to facilitate information about how consumers perceive brands. For instance, if one wants to feel or be perceived as upper class, it is more sensible to shop clothes at Saks Fifth Avenue (i.e. expensive), rather than Kmart (i.e. cheap) (Aaker, 1997), seeing that pricing schemes can produce symbolic associations (Keller, 1993). As such, brand image allows for a self-expressive function that consumers can leverage to construct and signify cues about themselves, as well as their ideal selves (Malhotra, 1988). In essence, the perceived meaning of brands can take various forms in the minds of consumers, which ultimately help them to find the ones that suit their individual needs the best.

Insights regarding consumers' innate tendency to imbue brands with meaning have resulted in substantial research into how they can be used in relation to expressive consumption (e.g. Aaker, 1996; Gardner & Levy, 1955; Graeff, 1996; Kapferer, 2008; Keller, 1993; Levy, 1959; Park et al., 1986; Sirgy, 1982). Here, attention has in part been directed towards the relationship between consumers' self-concept and brand image (e.g. Graeff, 1996; Hong & Zinkhan, 1995; Malhotra, 1988; Parker, 2009; Sirgy, 1982, 2018), which encapsulates the core of self-congruity theory. In essence, the theory looks at the relationship, or relative alignment, between the self-concept of consumers and brand image, and stipulates that brand attitude is partly contingent on the perceived similarity between the two 'constructs' (Graeff, 1996). However, self-congruity theory encompasses a diverse set of self-concept perspectives that have to be put in relation to brand image, which in turn means that brands have to assess what 'really' motivates consumers in reference to self-expressive endeavors. For instance, the alignment between consumers and brands does not have to be based solely on how consumers perceive themselves but can instead depart in how they want to perceive themselves (Graeff, 1996; Malhotra, 1988; Sirgy, 1982, 2018). Social aspects of 'the self' are also in play when consumers determine the relative alignment between themselves and brands (Sirgy, 1982, 2018). As such, self-congruity phenomena become important considerations in relation to brand-consumer alignment.

The importance of managing brand image in relation to the self-concept of consumers partly stem from 'overdeveloped markets', where functional product attributes have become increasingly akin (Burmann et al., 2009; Graeff, 1996; Kapferer, 2008, p.178). For example, Graeff (1996) and Lee et al. (2000) argue that the rudimentary nature of fashion, in terms of functional features, makes it an emblematic 'image product'. This in turn makes it important for fashion labels to project an image that consumers can leverage in relation to their self-concept. More so, the high conspicuousness of such public expressions makes it strongly connected to 'impression management' (Sirgy & Su, 2000), in which a brand's symbolic value is imperative as it helps consumers to reflect a desired identity (Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

Several previous studies have found that when a consumer's identity is conditional on a set of perceived symbolic values, a brand catering to said audience can quickly lose its appeal if these perceptions are diluted (e.g. Johnson et al., 2015; Pace, 2015; Weijo & Rintamäki, 2014). Ways in which brands can be symbolically diluted include collaborations with other brands (Kim et al., 2014), disappointing products (Weijo & Rintamäki, 2014), brand extensions (Sjödin, 2007), acts of transgression (Aaker et al., 2004), audience expansion (Pace, 2015), incohesive narratives (Johnson et al., 2015), and being swallowed by the mainstream (Van den Bergh & Behrer, 2016, p.152). While some of these 'developments' speak of blatant 'errors' (i.e. acts of transgression or disappointing products), the other 'diluters' of symbolic meaning are rather an intrinsic consequence of trying to adhere to conventional business motives (e.g. larger profits, wider business scope, more customers). This encapsulates a recurring paradox for brands: trying to expand your business scope may alter your brand image and, in turn, distort congruence with existing customers. While Yakimova and Beverland (2005, p.458) address this inherent contradiction between business objectives and brand image, their study deals primarily with marketing programs and calls for a greater use of "*...in-depth qualitative market research...*" to allow for a better understanding of the customer.

From a consumer's point of view, the symbolic aftermath of a commercial transition of a brand speaks of a 'selling out' of sorts; an infringement on its cultural capital. As such, a brand can lose its expressive function all together as it "*...may not communicate specific associations about the person who uses it*" (Escalas & Bettman, 2005, p.380). Thus, pursuing commercial interests becomes especially harmful when a person's identity descends from a rejection of 'the mainstream', where the very purpose of consumption is to demarcate against more generic,

orthodox cultural manifestations. This type of subversive consumer behavior commonly holds a key function in identity formation (Sassatelli, 2007, p.81-82), not least in youth culture (Hebdige, 1979, p.17-18). A broad range of studies have looked specifically into consumption-related subcultures, for instance hip-hop (Arthur, 2006; Blair, 1993), skating (Beverland et al., 2010), surfing (Burgh-Woodman & Brace-Govan, 2007), goths (Goulding & Saren, 2009), and ravers (Goulding et al., 2002). Albeit taking a vast array of expressions, subcultures share a common aspiration to deviate from mainstream society through the specific means of their respective group (Närvänen, 2013).

A common way of associating with a certain subcultural manifestation is through style and fashion (Muggleton, 2000, p.22). Such subcultural expressions are often appropriated by brands as they attempt to capitalize on consumers' desire to stay away from the stigmatized mainstream culture. However, for subcultural members, such developments are highly problematic as, once again, "*...commercialism is a sure sign of 'selling out', a threat to one's sense of exclusivity, esotericism and cultural capital*" (Muggleton, 2000, p.143). This elevates the notion that subcultural manifestations have clear directives in terms of what is 'real' and, more specifically, authentic. Authenticity is in this regard imperative for the consumer as it validates the minority group's claims of demarcation against the dominant culture (Thornton, 1995, p.18) and, in turn, their own identity (Beverland, 2009, p.21). Then, when a subversive style or brand is commercialized, authenticity is 'liquidated' and what is lost is not only its ability to express coveted symbolic meaning, but also its congruence with the consumers' self-concept (Schiele & Venkatesh, 2016).

1.1 Problem field

An important development within the understanding of subcultures, in the wake of contemporary settings, is that 'members' are not necessarily confined to a single coherent group identity (Muggleton, 2000, p.6). Fragmented subcultural formations can be seen as symptomatic for the consumerist, globalized, and interconnected nature of postmodern society and capitalism. In essence, this pertains to a post-subcultural perspective, in which the lack of a coherent dominant culture to rebel against have rendered subcultures fundamentally questioned (Muggleton, 2000, p.48). Specifically, the commodification and commercialization of subcultural items have blurred the distinction between subcultures and the mass culture (Moore, 2004; Thornton, 1995, p.152-153). As such, counter-cultural behavior and independent styles are no longer means of social estrangement, but rather components in a

conformist lifestyle (Clark, 2003). Parallel to such developments is a change in the trajectory of subcultural representation from resistance, cultural commitment, and shared identities to pleasure, surface, and consumerism (Bennett, 1999). In essence, this condition speaks to what Moore (2004, p.305) refers to as "*...the crisis of meaning caused by the commodification of everyday life*."

In this new kaleidoscopic reality, even subversive consumer styles have no ideological commitment, but constitute only "*...a stylistic game to be played*" (Muggleton 2000, p.47). Meanwhile, because the lines between subcultural identities and 'the mainstream' have become increasingly blurred, authenticity is being challenged, seeing that the construct no longer can rely on clear cultural distinctions. As such, consumers have to employ elusive and dynamic measures of self-authentication (Rose & Wood, 2005). Accordingly, individualistic, personal appearances have become the primary way of expressing authenticity (Polhemus, 1996, p.17), making it reasonable to assume that identity expressions are enacted through a diverse set of means. Given brands' ambition to create mental associations between them and things that matter to individuals (Napoli et al., 2014), this puts into question if brands should reconceptualize how they look to reach such alignments. Specifically, understanding these dynamics, and what influence they have on self-congruity, can provide new insights about how the 'stigmatization of mainstream' concerns commercial objectives. In other words, it becomes highly relevant for brands to understand how the commodification of everyday life will reflect upon on central subversive formation positions, such as refusing the mainstream.

A movement that is acknowledged as a product of the crisis of meaning, and thus encapsulates this wave of postmodern identity formation, is the segment of "*...young urban middle-class people whose lifestyles are oriented towards authentic experiences and formed in rejection of mainstream forms of consumption*" (le Grand, 2018, p.2), or what is commonly referred to as 'hipsters'. The 'hipster subculture' has raised significant interest and received extensive attention from both practitioners (e.g. Greif, 2010; Van den Bergh & Behrer, 2016) and academia (e.g. Henke, 2013; le Grand, 2018; Maly & Varis, 2016; Michael, 2015; Schiermer, 2014; Scott, 2017). Essentially, the hipster can be described as a "*...non-concerted emergent collective phenomenon of looking alike trying to look different*" (Touboul, 2014, p.1), which lacks a consistent dichotomy against the mass culture. Then, while hipsters' stylistic motives remain defiantly anti-mainstream, their anti-commercial and anti-conformist attitudes makeup for identifiable consumption patterns. Being real, genuine, or authentic stem from being

something that others are not, but that in itself speaks to an inherent contradiction when such behavior takes uniform, collective forms (Touboul, 2014). In this sense, the hipster can be seen as a representation of postmodern society in general, and a post-subcultural style in particular (Henke, 2013).

1.2 Problem statement

Given the importance of establishing congruence between consumer' self-concept and brand image, in tandem with postmodern consumers' apparent tendency to neglect stylistic commitments in order to emphasize their individuality, we find it meaningful to examine if brands are given similar leeway in regard to their identities. Bearing consumers' quest for individuality in mind, mainstream connotations in brands are particularly interesting to examine as they contrast notions of originality. The research area becomes important due to the fluid nature of meaning in relation to postmodern consumers, where seemingly contradictory actions taken by brands, in terms of identity and image, might not interfere with consumers' attempts to achieve authenticity. Perspectives pertaining to such brand-consumer alignment developments could allow for greater brand management freedom. Specifically, while previous literature acknowledges that 'going mainstream' can dilute authenticity and in turn deteriorate the symbolic meaning associated with a brand, the postmodern consumer may offer alternative perspectives on how commercial interests can coexist with consumer-based brand authenticity. Provided that such conflicts come to a head when consumption is used in subversive fashion consumption (i.e. post-subcultural style), we intend to look at the hipster as a representation of the postmodern consumer, as it tellingly encapsulates demarcating consumption and individuality-seeking needs that are at odds with commercialization. We seek to do so from an outset in the following question: *How are subversive consumers' self-congruity affected by the crisis of meaning?*

1.2.1 Sub-questions

1. How are hipsters' self-concept evoked when making evaluations about brands?

Lacking a clear cultural commitment, the hipster's anti-conformist aspirations ultimately lead to conformist behavior. Such a contradictory relationship to individuality and 'the mainstream' highlights the hollow 'stylistic game' that Muggleton (2000, p.47) claims is at the center of the post-subculturalist's style. More so, not having to adhere to rules or cultural ties allow for a new-found, prodigious mobility in terms of expressive and symbolic markers. Building on

previous cases looking at for instance surfers (Burgh-Woodman & Brace-Govan, 2007), ravers (Goulding et al., 2002), and goths (Goulding & Saren, 2009), the hipster can then expand the theoretical perspective on how identity formation is manifested in a postmodern setting. Specifically, the understanding of the hipster's self-concept dimensions, which constitute the backdrop to which evaluations about the relative attractiveness of brands are made, become essential when looking at how postmodern settings influence subversive consumption.

2. Do subversive consumers attach specific conditions when evaluating value-expressive brands in a postmodern setting?

After having assessed various areas of the hipster's self-concept, and which role postmodern society plays, it becomes relevant to examine what subversive consumers expect of value-expressive brands. While previous research has provided substantial ground for the imperative role of self-congruity in relation to value-expressive brands (Graeff, 1996; Sirgy, 1982, 2018), the behavioral characteristics of post-subcultural consumers call for additional inquiries into what facilitates symbolic meaning in objects. Specifically, the postmodern crisis of meaning brings the formation of concepts underlying value-expressive functions, such as individuality and authenticity, into question. For instance, post-subcultural consumers seem more prone to ascribe meaning and authenticity to widely accessible objects, such as mass-produced items. In continuum with the theoretical understanding of the hipster consumer then, 'general criteria' of how consumers seek to capitalize on brands' symbolic value needs to be reevaluated.

3. Can subversive consumers allow nonconformist brands to leverage the same fluid ways in which they themselves achieve authenticity?

For post-subcultural consumers, the desired function of value-expressive brands is to reflect their self-concept, which often comes down to resistance and nonconformity. Nevertheless, both nonconformist and mainstream brands have to succumb to capitalist principles and find ways of sustaining their business models. This situation is obviously not ideal, as suggested by the 'brand paradox' (e.g. Holt, 2002; Pace, 2015; Yakimova & Beverland, 2005), seeing that the commercial ways of nonconformist brands are at odds with what their target segments value. From this perspective, it becomes relevant to examine if the fluid behavior of post-subcultural consumers**,** captured in how their self-concept is evoked, might make said individuals less rigid in their skeptical outlook on commercial endeavors of brands.

Specifically, we find it interesting to examine how phenomena like 'going mainstream' take form in the minds of subversive brand users and how it affects held brand image.

4. How can a better understanding of how commercialization affects subversive consumers' self-congruity build on existing brand management literature?

Insights about how post-subcultural consumers perceive commercial transitions of value-expressive brands, in relation self-concept elements, can potentially enable practitioners to better adapt their influence over brand management practices. Here, one apparent dimension becomes the degree of managerial autonomy. For instance, a higher tolerance for dynamic brand expressions could suggest that brands can construct their own identity without having to extensively negotiate the underlying meaning of certain decisions and actions. Such an outcome could in turn mean that brands, in a postmodern context, can be less attentive to external surroundings, and focus more on internal construction of meaning. Opposite tendencies would stipulate the use of alternative strategies that leverage brand value co-creation to a higher extent.

1.3 Delimitations

This paper will primarily address consumption phenomena and theories that relate to the symbolic nature of it, and nuance findings in relation to brand strategy. When looking at symbolic consumption, both individualistic and social dynamics in relation to a specific case setting will be examined to shed light on attitudes and behavior of post-subcultural consumers, in accordance with the stipulated 'elusiveness' that surrounds the subcultural belonging of hipsters (e.g. Touboul, 2014). However, special attention will be directed towards individual experiences, viewpoints, and interpretations, rather than collective or shared understandings of certain contexts. We are more interested in understanding the motivations of individuals, as opposed to subcultures' own tendencies, which have already been defined (e.g. Michael, 2015; Schiermer, 2014; Touboul, 2014).

Additionally, the ambiguous composition of the 'hipster subculture' as a group, makes it somewhat problematic to apply assumptions, principles, and theories derived from other areas of collective consumption. Therefore, literature relating to collective consumption will primarily be used to unlock motivational forces behind attitudes, feelings, and behavior on an individual level, and wholly disregard intra-group and inter-group relationships facilitated

through explicit means of communication, such as verbal interaction. This limitation is imperative both for the understanding of our purpose and the structure of our method, as a focus on members' socialization measures would diverge from the intended aim of understanding the individual consumer's means of expression. It is also important to note that, while the study hopes to provide a better understanding of hipsters as a postmodern consumer segment, the purpose is not to demarcate hipsters. Emphasis will therefore not be on identifying individuals that fulfill stereotypical hipster descriptions, but rather reviewing their function as a post-subcultural consumption group to understand attitudes and behavioral characteristics that can influence brands.

Furthermore, accounting for that this study is concerned with style, and by extension fashion, concepts should not be applied uniformly to consumption as a single entity. As has been identified before, fashion consumption holds a set of specific characteristics whereas other areas of consumption can influence attitudes, motives, and behavior in alternative ways (e.g. Edwards, 2011; Kawamura, 2005). Therefore, although we hope to add to broader understandings of consumer behavior, this study should be seen in light of the specific characteristics that underpin fashion consumption. Seeing that fashion is widely regarded as the peak of symbolic consumption (Maly & Varis, 2016), it is however reasonable to assume that similar motivations can be in play when dealing with expressive consumption in 'less' symbolically charged commodities as well (e.g. Escalas & Bettman, 2005). The scope of this study is thus not limited to fashion per se, but rather conditional on understanding that consumption provides a vast array of social functions, cultural values, and behavioral motives that will influence individuals differently and vary across product categories. Furthermore, we acknowledge the conceptual definition provided by Kawamura (2005, p.2) in that "*...trying to define a particular item of clothing as fashion is futile because fashion is not a material product but a symbolic product which as no content substance by/in itself*", and do accordingly make no further distinction on fashion within the research area. Instead, we look to explore the cultural values that cultivate fashion in order to understand how consumers ascribe meaning and produce culturally 'acceptable' behavior (i.e. styles).

Lastly, the study does not seek to investigate the emergence of brand management strategies in relation to consumer perception. Specifically, we are not looking to discuss brand strategy on the basis of what consumers believe to be 'true', or conducting thorough inquiries into brands' formal strategic intents (i.e. first-hand data). Instead, relevant case settings, where subversive

consumers use value-expressive, nonconformist brands, will be evaluated on the basis of publicly communicated values. Our ambition, again, is to understand the consumer's perspective by ask probing questions about how specific brand actions might affect attitudes and behavior, and ultimately purchase intention. As such, brand management literature is merely used to contextualize the 'brand side' of self-congruity theory, and translate consumer insights into managerial implications, such as the state of autonomy in postmodern society.

1.4 Philosophy of science

In the following section, we seek to present how we look upon the very nature of reality and knowledge (i.e. ontology), as well as how knowledge claims should be evaluated (i.e. epistemology). Both ontological and epistemological understandings depart in context of postmodernism, later to arrive at the underpinnings of moderate constructionism, which was ultimately seen as most adept for our research inquiry. Lastly, we problematize some of the assumptions imbedded in moderate constructionism, but also philosophical commitments in general.

1.4.1 Ontological perspective

The decision to focus on consumption related phenomena, and its relationship to postmodern consumers and subcultures, creates implications for the paper's philosophical stance on science. At the outset, we adhere to Audi's (1999, p.725) description of postmodernism, which existential underpinnings starkly contrast realism's. The ontology of realism, which "*...refers to assumptions about the nature of reality*" (Saunders et al., 2019, p.127), stems from the belief system of positivism, where researchers are concerned with eliciting the objective, true nature of reality and its inner workings (Guba, 1990, p.19). Instead, postmodernism promotes a perspectival stance on knowledge (Barker, 2004, p.158) and emphasizes the socially constructed nature of it (Moisander et al., 2009). Specifically, postmodern thinkers stipulate that knowledge does not manifest as metaphysical or universal truths, but is instead dependent on particular circumstances (Barker, 2004, p.158). Barker (2004, p.157) exemplifies this by describing postmodernism as a philosophical "*...movement that rejects 'grand-narratives' (that is, universal explanations of human history and activity) in favor of irony and forms of local knowledge.*" As such, 'reality' from a postmodern understanding is ultimately prone to be contingent on the perspectives in which it is observed.

This highly contextualized nature of knowledge and 'reality' resonates with the ontology of constructivism, or relativism. Here, reality exists "*...only in the context of a mental framework (construct) for thinking about it*" (Guba, 1990, p.25). Berger and Luckmann (1966, p.78,83) look at constructivism from a social perspective and propose that 'reality' is merely 'institutionalized truths' in social contexts. This line of reasoning asserts that knowledge is a function of social interaction and subjected to constant, explicit and implicit, negotiation of meaning, which corresponds with the postmodern outlook on ontology. The decision to approach our research inquiry from the ontological perspective of constructivism rests on the premise that it deals with personal (i.e. subjective) accounts of various consumption related phenomena. More specifically, social constructionism, within the overarching constructivism paradigm, is the definitive scientific philosophy adopted. The decision between social constructionism and social constructivism comes down to how the study perceives that knowledge is constructed and emitted (Hackley, 2007, p.59).

An inherent dimension of a post-subculturalist, and any other demarcating cultural effort, is that perceptions and behavior descend from what oneself is, or aspires to be, in relation to others. Therefore, their identity, even their existence, is a form of 'social juxtapose'; a structure of reality that goes beyond the scope of what internal, cognitive constructs can explain. In turn, a subversive identity cannot be formed, and a demarcating expression cannot take place, if there is no alternative social entity to repel. The referents of constructs do by those means diverge from the inner, private world of cognition. Similarly, brands, as a means of expression in this 'reality', are contingent on the outer, social world of interaction and "*...cannot be conceived as a private cognitive thing at all*" (Hackley, 2007, p.60). Then, although the study centers around personal experiences, where one could argue that knowledge is in fact produced internally, we acknowledge that subjects and their beliefs do not exist in a vacuum, spared from external influences. Social constructivism differs in this sense, as reality is thought to originate from internal, individual interpretations of the world. Therefore, we assume that even highly personal accounts of reviewed topics are products of meaning that has been 'socially constructed' in relation to externalities. This fundamental proposition corresponds to an understanding of reality in accordance with that of a social constructionist ontology (Hackley, 2007, p.59-60). While 'realities' thus remain subjective in nature, we also acknowledge that local 'realities' nonetheless may actually exist. Contrasting a naive relativistic stance then, we see that there might be a reality beyond subjects but that such realities are socially constructed and reproduced (Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010).

1.4.2 Epistemological perspective

The adoption of a certain ontological perspective raises questions about how knowledge is finally looked upon. Packer and Goicoechea (2000, p.227) define epistemology as "*...the systematic consideration, in philosophy and elsewhere, of knowing: when knowledge is valid, what counts as truth, and so on.*" As such, the considerations applied in this study are fundamental in understanding the status of its 'conclusions', or "*...what constitutes acceptable, valid and legitimate knowledge…*" (Saunders et al., 2019, p.127). At the outset, Guba (1990, p.27) argues that within constructivism, the distinction between ontology and epistemology is decimated. This assertion stems in part from inquirers' intertwined relationship with the world that they try to understand (Guba, 1990, p.25-26). If social interaction is the definitive producer of knowledge, the interaction between inquirers and the inquired is simply another element of the negotiation of 'reality', which is the premise for constructivism as a whole. In this sense, findings are merely the "*...residue of a process that literally creates them*" (Guba, 1990, p.26).

The tendency of consumers attaching symbolic meaning to brands and consumption speaks to a postmodern inclination to categorically disregard objective truths. Specifically, symbolism is dynamic, arbitrary, and relative, which suggests that it cannot emanate from impartial and uniform knowledge but is rather formed in accordance with our subjective understandings of the world. Our epistemological understanding, then, follows Gergen's (2001, p.807) perspective of postmodern constructionism, which "*...makes no claims for the truth, objectivity, universality, or moral superiority of its own position.*" We do however see merit in previous research's (e.g. Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010; Närvänen, 2013; Schwandt, 2000, p.197-200) questioning of the 'extreme' relativism position that all knowledge and truth claims are equally good. An important distinction is therefore that, while we acknowledge that contributions are relative and subjective, there can be contextual, personal, and communal instances of truth, which largely corresponds with Berger's and Luckmann' (1966, p.78,83) notion of 'institutionalized knowledge'. In other words, knowledge is bound by subjectivity but can render understandings of community-based, local 'truths'. Such a stance pertains to a moderate constructionist orientation, which denounce both strong constructionism's view of all knowledge as relative and equally 'good', but also critical to realism's quest to move closer to universal truths (Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010). The underlying premise, that knowledge is subjective but open for local consensus, is essential in understanding both the limitations and potential contributions of our research (Crotty, 1998, p.2).

1.4.3 Reflection on research philosophy

The philosophical demarcation above suggests both an ontological and epistemological basis in line with a moderate constructionist view. As Järvensivu and Törnroos (2010) remark, such an approach is also subject to critique. For one, if we assume that there are local and community-based forms of knowledge, what are the contingencies for reaching said status and what 'authorial' entity makes such a judgement? More so, given that consensus is constantly being subject to change, for how long does 'knowledge claims' stay valid? While Järvensivu and Törnroos (2010) cannot offer any answers to such predicaments, they emphasize that the moderate constructionist researcher's assignment is to look at these realities one viewpoint at a time. Bearing this in mind, we believe that the moderate constructionist approach provides the necessary means for this study to make sense of reality and explain how the observed knowledge claims should be evaluated.

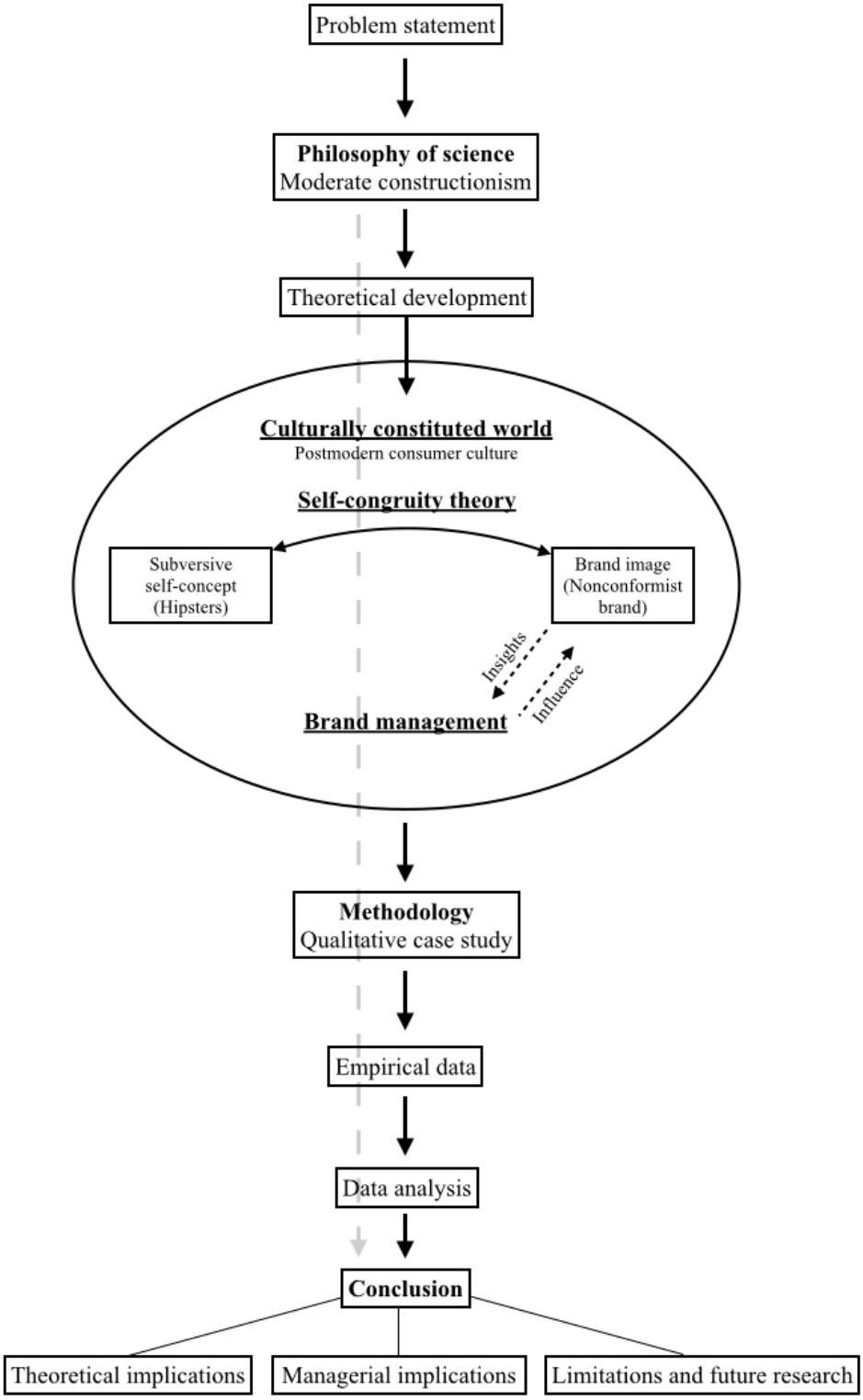
Nevertheless, given the extensive confusion and inconsistency in research literature terminology, as well as its varying and sometimes contradictory conceptual usage (Crotty, 1998, p.1-2), our primary concern diverges from philosophical 'commitments', similar to what have been discussed by for instance Hackley (2007) and Schwandt (2000). That is, although the presented philosophical underpinnings provide a better understanding of the overall rationale of this research, the recurring practice among constructionist to remain epistemological and ontological 'agnostic' could provide sufficient means as to treat research objects as socially constructed but "*...without being drawn into a metaphysical debate about reality*" (Hackley, 2007, p.60). Specifically, we concede to such agnosticism in the sense that "*...rather than focusing on the question of whether or not an external reality exists*" we "*...are interested in how things are made to appear real, stable, and factual*" (Närvänen, 2013, p.72).

1.5 Disposition

The figure below illustrates the disposition of our study. The first part of the paper, our problem statement with related delimitations, is fundamental in the sense that it guides our conceptual approach. The next box, philosophy of science, relates to these theoretical ambitions and considerations. While it is important to recognize that all boxes work in continuum with each other, the dotted arrow going through all steps, from our philosophy of science to the conclusion, emphasizes that our moderate constructionist outlook on reality and knowledge claims permeates our research as a whole. After having clarified our philosophy of science, we present our theoretical framework as derived from our theoretical development. As highlighted

under theoretical development, the paper has three overarching themes that are applied to gain an understanding of our conceptual approach, and work as a backdrop against which to put empirical findings, namely: the culturally constituted world, self-congruity theory, and how brands reach consumers (i.e. brand management). Given that our level of analysis concerns individuals in the capacity of consumers (i.e. consumer research), brand management strategies are not be studied empirically. However, seeing that brand management influences brand image, it follows that, in the opposite direction, findings regarding how consumers reason about consumption and brand image work as valuable insights in relation to how brands should adapt said influence.

After the theoretical framework has been clarified, we introduce our qualitative case method. It sheds light on the study's design, procedure, and analysis method, including the identified case (i.e. the Swedish fashion brand 'Eytys') and our selection of research participants (i.e. hipsters). The subsequent box refers to our empirical findings, in which we present our collected data in a 'narrative structure'. Drawing on the theoretical framework, we then analyze our empirical data. The analysis also follows a 'narrative structure', in which findings and insights regarding the study's research questions are highlighted and discussed. Finally, we make some concluding remarks and discuss the theoretical implications of our findings, before ultimately providing suggestions on what managerial implications said findings hold, as well as relevant limitations and potential future research directions.



'Graphic illustration of disposition'

2 Theoretical framework

With a starting point in self-congruity theory, which draws on perceived similarities between the self-concept of consumers, brands, and brand users, the following theoretical framework distinguishes three interlaced, overarching themes. Neither the forming of a self-concept or the symbolic value attached to a brand occurs in a vacuum but is rather a product of their current surroundings - that is the contemporary cultural dynamics. Specifically then, in order to look into how individuals find and lose congruity between their self-concept and the symbolic value of brands, we need to understand how meaning is configured (i.e. the culturally constituted world), how individuals form their self-concept (i.e. self-congruity theory), and how brands can position themselves to match consumers self-concept (i.e. brands reaching consumers).

2.1 Culturally constituted world

The culturally constituted world is the backdrop in which consumption adds and manifests cultural meaning. It is accordingly a highly contextual and dynamic concept, as what is culturally charged in one setting may not be so in another. Nevertheless, this capacity of ascribing cultural meaning places the marketplace and its related symbolic components at the center of consumers' identities. In the following section, we look to examine the fundamentals of how social and cultural meaning originate through consumption and more so, how these conditions set the scene for subversive styles in a postmodern setting. In doing so, we introduce the theoretical lens of identity projects in consumer culture theory, which clarifies the study's outlook on, and potential contribution within, consumer behavior.

2.1.1 Perspective on consumer behavior

For long, perspectives on consumption tended to focus solely on the purchase process rather than the full cycle of consumption; from acquisition to use, and ultimately disposal (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). A growing interest in consumption culture, and the behavioral mechanisms underlying it, has however rendered more holistic views on consumer behavior (Østergaard & Jantzen, 2000, p.18-23). Contemporary research has also seen a stronger emphasis on the symbolic function and meaning embedded in consumption (e.g. Belk, 1988; Levy, 1959; McCracken, 1986). Specifically, consumption studies, which emanate from the conception that "*...people buy goods not only for what they are, but for what they mean*" (Levy, 1959, p.118), incorporate a broader perspective on symbolic consumption in which meaning has to be viewed in social contexts (Østergaard & Jantzen, 2000, p.22-23). Consumption is in

view of this not only concerned with ascribing meaning to oneself, but also in relation to others. As a result, consumption serves as a means of defining ourselves and reflecting our identities (Belk, 1988). Drawing from sociological and anthropological research, consumption can thus be seen as a product "*...of sociocultural frames of reference and institutional structures*" (Østergaard & Jantzen, 2000, p.22)

Early sociological perspectives suggested that consumption was strongly connected to social status and social class participation (Närvänen, 2013). In particular, consumption served the function of distinguishing higher classes, and could thus act as a direct antecedent of status formation (Veblen, 1899/2000). Veblen's (1899/2000) theory suggests that items over time 'trickle down' to lower social classes, making them unattractive for the higher classes that originally consumed them. Similarly, Bourdieu (1984, p.128-129) argues that consumption can be used to uphold social hierarchies. By these means, consumption can carry status messages and function as a means of social distinction (Kawamura, 2005, p.98). It is these features, which Veblen (1899/2000) refers to as 'conspicuous consumption', that lay the foundation for the dynamics of consumption, not least in fashion (Kawamura, 2005, p.97). However, these notions have since been problematized for resting on the flawed premise that trends are confined to one social class and that meaning is static (Närvänen, 2013). There is also reason to believe that consumption patterns, such as imitation, are not exclusively based on copying those of higher status (Kawamura, 2005, p.97). Nevertheless, recent research on consumption seems to suggest that classification and status enforcement still provide a fundamental motivation (Cătălin & Andreea, 2014; Michael, 2015; le Grand, 2018), although not necessarily in a hierarchical logic with the purpose of distinguishing between higher and lower classes (Närvänen, 2013; Thornton, 1995, p.28).

With its foundation in anthropological studies (Østergaard & Jantzen, 2000, p.18-23), more recent research has highlighted that, beyond its status function, consumption is also important in upholding and establishing social relations (Närvänen, 2013). From this point of view, consumption helps people to make sense of the world and relate to each other by providing a tool to distinguish or, to put it bluntly, 'mark' people (Østergaard & Jantzen, 2000, p.23). Such a conception is contingent on goods being part of a system where meaning is derived from goods' relative position to each other (Närvänen, 2013). Consumption is therefore not only a measure for individual expression, but also holds a central function in cultural reproduction through its related, disperse set of activities (Slater, 1999, p.7,210). In more direct terms,

consumption can then be understood as an endeavor that, among other things, evolves, contests, or sustains culturally meaningful ways of life. In line with this reasoning, McCracken (1986) introduced the concepts of meaning transferral and the culturally constituted world. While McCracken (1986) stipulates that cultural meaning is embedded in goods, he recognizes, similar to Slater (1999), the duality of this function, namely that "*...goods are both the creations and creators of the culturally constituted world*" (McCracken, 1986, p.74). Specifically, McCracken's (1986) model suggests that meaning is transferred from the culturally constituted world to goods through the means of advertising, the fashion system, as well as reference groups (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). When consumers subsequently buy and use goods, meaning can be modified and rearranged through different types of rituals (McCracken, 1986).

McCracken's (1986) theory of meaning movement has since been subject to some negotiation, particularly with a reconceptualization of goods' function as carriers of meaning and rituals as means of assimilating said meaning. Instead, meaning is proposed to have a more fluid nature that descends from social dynamics rather than the mere goods themselves (Närvänen, 2013). More recent studies have also added a stronger emphasis on the role of reference groups in regard to the movement of meaning (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Reference groups are used as a source of information when making evaluations in the marketplace, in which a desired or perceived group membership is likely to enhance the purchase probability. For instance, when looking at how consumers form connections with a brand, Escalas and Bettman (2005, p.379) find that "*Consumers form associations between reference groups and the brands they use and transfer these meanings from brand to self by selecting brands with meanings relevant to an aspect of their current self-concept or possible self.*"

In view of this, a consumer can use brands to associate themselves with ingroup members and differentiate themselves from outgroup members. It also follows that a consumer is likely to avoid using brands that are consistent with the image of the outgroup, given that "*...when outgroup members use a brand, consumers may form associations about the brand that they would not like to have transferred to themselves*" (Escalas & Bettman 2005, p.379). Instead, the rejection of said brand can add symbolic meaning to a consumers identity. Beverland (2009, p.21) presents similar ideas, but also connect such behavior to how consumers imbue authenticity to certain brands, but not to others. Accordingly, "*When consumers want to identify with a particular community…*" they can capitalize on these authentic brands "*...that will mark them out to other members...*" (Beverland, 2009, p.21).

In light of these cultural and social consumption dynamics, Sassatelli (2007, p.81-82) suggests that consumption can be used in a subversive way, or as a means of popular resistance. Specifically, the symbolic meanings attached to goods can aid the exploration of one's identity and function as "*...vehicles of expression of innovation and counterculture*" (Sassatelli, 2007, p.81). In essence, goods are appropriated by a group and, in said process, made equivalent to their existence and self-concept. Here, the notion of conspicuous consumption, once again, comes into play. Looking at youth culture for instance, Hebdige (1979, p.17-18) posits that groups conspicuously use commodities to distinguish themselves from other, more orthodox cultural formations. It is by these means commercial items are ascribed different meanings, which then can be used by subcultures to manifest their identities and mark off against the mass culture (Sassatelli, 2007, p.82).

Altogether, sociological and anthropological perspectives on consumption reinforce the conception of how symbolic and cultural values are embedded in, and transmitted through, goods and consumption. Albeit being subject to ongoing revisions, the many explanations provide key understandings about, among other things, how consumption influences behavior (Østergaard & Jantzen, 2000, p.18-23), asserts status (Bourdieu, 1984, p.128-129; Kawamura, 2005; Veblen, 1899/2000), creates belonging (Hebdige, 1979, p.17-18); Østergaard & Jantzen, 2000, p.23), transfers meaning (McCracken, 1986), and helps individuals to express their identity (Sassatelli, 2007, p.81-82). In view of these findings, it also becomes clear that consumption holds a central role in social relations (Närvänen, 2013) and, more so, that it constitutes a significant factor in cultural subversiveness (Sassatelli, 2007, p.81), cultural reproduction (McCracken, 1986; Slater, 1999, p.7), and the creation of a culturally meaningful life (Slater, 1999, p.210). Thus, consumption may be used both to meet psychological needs (e.g. self-fulfillment, asserting individuality, constructing self-concept), but also to fulfill social aspirations such as reflecting ties to a reference group (Escalas & Bettman, 2005), including subcultures (Sassatelli, 2007, p.81). Moreover, as demonstrated by the recurring theme in criticism of early findings, contemporary consumption has developed towards an increasingly dynamic, socially oriented, and fast-paced identity building process (Närvänen, 2013; Østergaard & Jantzen, 2000, p.23).

2.1.1.1 Consumer culture theory

The accumulated findings within sociological and anthropological studies can be seen as 'culminating' into the concept of 'consumer culture theory', or 'CCT'. Rather than a specific, uniform theory, CCT offers a 'family' of perspectives that address the social and cultural underpinnings of consumption (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). By doing so, CCT provides a framework that links individual meanings to cultural settings in marketplace contexts. Then, while the individual is still largely in focus, he or she can be interpreted in light of his or hers sociocultural surroundings (Närvänen, 2013). Accordingly, CCT acknowledges that people's identities, and in turn their consumer behavior, are products of culture, social relationships, and power structures. From this foundation, CCT can be divided into four overarching fields of study that attempt to fuel the understanding of consumer behavior in different ways, namely: consumer identity projects, marketplace cultures, the sociohistoric patterning of consumption, and mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). While these perspectives are far from mutually exclusive, it can hold value in regard to "*...analytical exposition…*" (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p.871) to distinguish which area one's research attends to. Given this paper's underlying premise to study how contemporary marketplace dynamics influence self-congruity, it is useful to bring the theoretical field of consumer identity projects to the foreground.

The attention directed towards consumer identity projects emanates from a desire to understand how consumers make use of the structuring influence that the marketplace hold in the formation of their identities (Holt, 2002). Specifically, the market provides certain consumer positions that consumers can inhabit and leverage in their enactment of an identity, or alignment with coveted cultural or social positions (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). This relationship is underpinned by that consumption is a symbolic resource that can be used to construct and sustain an identity. It therefore also follows that this field of study treats consumers as identity seekers and makers.

As prior research has shown, consumers' identities projects are goal-driven yet characterized by contradictions, ambivalence, and problematic ideals (e.g. Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Holt, 2002). More so, while being concerned with "*...the cultural meanings, sociohistoric influences, and social dynamics that shape consumer experiences and identities in the myriad messy contexts of everyday life*" (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p.875), CCT emphasizes that cultural

meaning is neither uniform nor static. In light of this, CCT stipulates that researchers also need to account for the elusive, subjective, and polylithic way of structuring reality. Not the least, this becomes important in consumer identity projects, as consumption can be viewed as a means to experience these alternating realities and draw meaning therefrom. These multiple and fragmented understandings of the world reflect a contemporary paradigm of cultural reality, that is: postmodern society (Holt, 2002).

2.1.2 Postmodernism and consumer culture

Before looking at postmodernism in the context of our study's research area, it is relevant to examine the fundamental characteristics of the movement itself. At the outset, the notion of postmodernism pertains to questions about culture and knowledge, and is often described as "*A cultural style marked by intertextuality, irony, pastiche, genre blurring and bricolage*" (Barker, 2004, p.156). Self-conscious intertextuality is an emblematic feature of postmodernism, which refers to people's tendency to make explicit allusions "*...to particular cultural products and oblique references to other genre conventions and styles*" (Barker, 2004, p.157). The phenomenon is in large a consequence of a greater cultural self-consciousness about the meaning of various objects. However, what makes postmodernism interesting in relation to our study is the movement's contextual relationship to knowledge and its democratization of culture.

Barker (2004, p.157-158) explains that postmodernism is "*...is marked by an ironic knowingness that explores the limitations and conditions of its own knowing*", which means that meaning and truths are personal and relative concepts. This trait of postmodernism does not only affect culture as a whole, but also more narrow phenomena such as consumption. Looking at consumer culture within the context of postmodernism, consumers are thought of as "*...self-conscious bricoleurs selecting and arranging elements of material commodities and meaningful signs into a personal style*" (Barker, 2004, p.157). Yet, Holt (2002, p.83) argues that the logic of establishing individuality and personal styles through consumption is flawed as people still behave in the same way, and that individualistic pursuits are in fact shared with "*...thousands of like-minded others*."

In postmodern consumer culture, brands "*...have become the preeminent site through which people experience and express the social world, even as the worlds that move through brands are less orchestrated by managers than before*" (Holt, 2002, p.83). The postmodern branding

paradigm can help to explain why brands have managed to gain influence even as consumers have begun to question capitalist ideas to a greater extent, such as the commodification of meaning. Here, Holt (2002, p.83) emphasizes that "*...brands will be more valuable if they are offered not as cultural blueprints but as cultural resources, as useful ingredients to produce the self as one chooses.*" This line of reasoning follows the overall description of postmodernism as a movement where knowledge and meaning are merely subjective beliefs, and that as long as brands can present themselves as sound means for reaching 'personal sovereignty' they will not be disregarded (Holt, 2002). However, in order to function as a legitimate 'building block' for identity formation, brands' cultural underpinnings have to be perceived as authentic (Holt, 2002). In turn, authenticity has been the most challenging aspect for brands to get around, as modern branding efforts are synonymous with capitalist practices and commercial intent. As such, projecting authenticity has become a matter of displaying disinterest, which shows that brands are "*...invented and disseminated by parties without an instrumental economic agenda, by people who are intrinsically motivated by their inherent value*" (Holt, 2002, p.83).

Thus, postmodern consumer culture encapsulates individualistic pursuits centered around authentic expressions, while at the same time being part of a collective phenomenon, as "*...even sovereign identities require the interpretive support of others to give them ballast*" (Holt, 2002, p.83). Accordingly, the focus on personal accounts of meaning, and authenticity in general, has also affected demarcating cultural expressions, where the symbolic alignment with significant others is imperative.

2.1.3 The post-subculturalist

A postmodern development within demarcating cultural expressions, such as subcultures, is that beyond the lines of the things that unite them, they may also differ (Närvänen, 2013). It is for this reason that subcultural association can take fragmented forms, in which people are able to construct and express their identity in the non-linear and pluralized postmodern way of 'being'. For instance, Goulding's et al. (2002) study on ravers who live conventional, 'mainstream' lives during the week, only to spend their weekends dancing at 'obscure' and drug-filled rave clubs, points to this dichotomy within the lives of 'subculturalists'. More so, when looking at subcultural 'performance', post-subcultural theory posits that consumers will reject the collective conformity connotations inherent to group identification, in an effort to enhance their individuality (Muggleton, 2000, p.49).

As such, post-subculturalists are more concerned with individual desires, self-expression, and surface than adhering to an ideology or committing to one particular cultural scene (Polhemus, 1996, p.17). It also follows that the mutual opposition against other cultural manifestations, that helped to define traditional subcultures, has in part been dissolved. Accordingly, the post-subculturalist identity is not as contingent on belonging and socialization with other 'members', as the very concept of subcultural 'membership' is becoming less applicable (Muggleton, 2000, p.48). This does by no means infer that identity formation is an internal or stable process, but suggests that the prevalence of a joint ideology is somewhat lost. Nevertheless, association with significant others is still imperative, only that it rather takes the form of a symbolic reference point than a shared identity.

2.1.4 The post-subcultural style

The postmodern style is characterized by these conditions, in which underlying ideologies are widely neglected for the sake of individuality, not the least when attempting to be subversive (Muggleton, 2000, p.48). This aspiration is likely facilitated by that consumers often know what constitutes mainstream (Saulo et al., 2013). Nevertheless, due to the absence of rules to adhere to, consumers are allowed a vastly expanded freedom in terms of stylistic usage and commitment. Polhemus' (1996, p.17) concept of 'style surfing' captures the essence of this freedom. Style surfing describes the postmodern way of mixing styles and expressions in a confusing, sometimes even contradictory, way. This also pertains to the individualistic nature of postmodernity in which consumers, by all means necessary, try to escape categorization and falling in with a certain stereotype (Polhemus, 1996, p.17). Being confusing and contradictory mean being unexpected, which allow consumers to circumvent such classifications. Then, while style surfing may appear shallow, 'fake', or inauthentic on the surface, it is in many ways a postmodern expression for the opposite, as it can enhance individuality and personal authenticity.

Michael (2015) expands on this subject and introduces Bourdieu's (1984) concept of naturalness as a way of understanding individuality as an expression for authenticity. Essentially, naturalness describes the concept of being at ease with one's cultural surrounding and having an unstrained relationship to style. Appearing natural conveys that a style has grown organically and is therefore a manifestation of one's true individual expression. On the contrary, being perceived as strained, uncomfortable, or forced dilutes sincerity features of

one's true self and can thus "*...be seen as lacking the naturalness that is so much part of unconscious socially distinctive practices or, more generally, social and cultural boundary drawing*" (Michael, 2015, p.177). Individuals rich in cultural capital can therefore hold an advantage seeing that they are better equipped to quickly understand and adopt new cultural movements and dynamics.

Another prominent, yet somewhat stigmatized, feature of post-subcultural style is trendiness. With an outset in Taylor's (2009) reasoning, Michael (2015) suggest that 'logic of trendiness' descends from the symbolic capital associated with discovering and adopting new cultural items. The quest for novelty also corresponds with the post-subculturalist's attachment to items with shock value and the ability to provoke critical reactions (Muggleton, 2000, p.142). Previous research has found that consumers accordingly put a lot of effort into being up to date and making new discoveries (e.g. le Grand, 2018; Michael, 2015). Michael (2015) does however, in regard to Taylor's (2009) reasoning, make a modification of trendiness as an ideology, in the sense that what matters is 'being in the know'. Specifically, being in the know of new developments in cultural contexts holds significant social prestige and symbolic value, but has not replaced traditional status markers all together. More so, trendiness often comes at the expense of being authentic, seeing that the search for novelty triumphs one's own true expression (Michael, 2015). Michael's (2015, p.178) findings reinforce this notion but adds that "*...as cultural taste is only appreciated when conceived as an individual characteristic, authenticity seems the ultimate criterion of evaluation.*" In turn, trendiness in itself is not a coveted attribute. Instead, following trends is often dismissed for being boring or shallow, and as a desperate attempt to catch up with reference groups to which one does not belong. Trendiness can thus be thought of as contingent on being authentic, which in turn involves individuality.

2.1.5 Finding authenticity

Authenticity is, at its core, the concept of being real and genuine which, for individuals, translates to an "*...enactment of the true self*" (Franzese, 2009, p.98). It has become an increasingly studied phenomenon, seeing that it constitutes a pivotal criterion for cultural products (Michael, 2015). Authenticity comes from being actively attributed to things or people through cultural practices, and is thus not intrinsically embedded in cultural products, such as objects or individuals. Accordingly, authenticity is not a permanent attribute that is distinguished against a universal set of standards (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010), but rather open

for a myriad of interpretations. The socio-psychological view on consumer-based authenticity emanates from self-fulfillment, and has been used to study brands by for instance Schallehn et al. (2014) and Manthiou et al. (2018). In essence, this means that authenticity descends from behaving in accordance with one's personal identity. Given the strong impact of social dynamics however, individuals are repeatedly being subject to corrupting external pressures. In turn, trying to fit in and concede to such pressures from the outside world is, in regard to authenticity, problematic as it dilutes from one's own identity (Schallehn et al., 2014).

2.1.5.1 The post-subculturalist and authenticity

With the rise of postmodern capitalism, and accompanying dilution of both subcultures (Muggleton, 2000, p.47) and meaning in general (Moore, 2004), authenticity has become an increasingly contested concept. Muggleton (2000, p.47), for instance, goes as far as to suggest that subcultural style holds no authenticity at all. These findings are somewhat contradicted, or at least appear problematic, by postmodern consumers' strong emphasis on authenticity (Michael, 2015). More so, the concept of 'hyperauthenticity', as first suggested by Rose and Wood (2005), also indicates that rather than a loss of authenticity, individuals employ creative and adept measures to self-authenticate. This enables consumers to adopt authenticity to changing surroundings through different strategies, measurements, and cues. It also follows that authenticity can be found in a much wider scope of entities, such as mainstream items and mass fashion (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010).

This type of self-authentication points to how postmodern consumers have evaded issues pertaining to "*...distinguish real from fake (hyperreality) or suffering identity crises from declines in traditional markers of authenticity*" by "*...creating the genuine through selective use of cues*" (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010, p.854). Muggleton's (2000, p.47) notion of diminishing authenticity in style may therefore not be mutually exclusive with Rose and Wood's (2005) hyperauthenticity; rather, self-authentication as such appears to be an 'alleviation technique' adopted to meet an existence that is lacking 'realness' and authenticity. More specifically then, this type of socially constructed interpretation highlights that in a contemporary setting "*...authenticity in the consumption process is linked to consumers' desire to achieve mastery over their environment*" (Schiele & Venkatesh, 2016, p.431).

While looking at post-subcultural authenticity in regard to fashion and commercialism, Muggleton (2000, p.141) finds that his informants embrace a similar form of mitigation. For

instance, when their style is being subject to imitation by cultural groups that they do not ascribe to, they emphasize that these individuals are unversed and, unlike themselves, superficial. Specifically, they argue that they themselves have been growing their style gradually over a long period of time, whereas the 'outsiders' are 'followers' who are only appropriating on them. Doing so enables them to make the claim that their style originated from an alternative, individualized stylistic statement in opposition to the mainstream fashion and mass culture. As a result, the followers are perceived as merely copying an image in contrast to 'the innovators', whose style is a genuine expression of internally held values.

This encapsulates an imperative tool in self-authentication, namely, to establish a negatively connoted comparative entity of 'others'. After the point of which the superficial and pretentious 'others' have embraced a style, original 'innovators' will likely refuse to continue using the style, in order to "*...differentiate her individual self from this inauthentic collective*" (Muggleton, 2000, p.142). The comparative function imbedded in demarcating against 'others' is consequently central, both when embracing and dismissing styles. It also follows that another important tool in the making of the post-subculturalist identity, is the rejection of certain consumption since it generates a symbolic expression. Specifically, this corresponds to that "*...distastes represent an important mirroring of tastes and [...] the undesired self represents the co-ordinates for the real self*" (Hogg et al., 2009, p.156).

As Muggleton (2000, p.144) discusses, the distinction between 'followers' and 'innovators' is however not as binary as it may perceptually appear, rather, there seems to be little actual difference between adopters and adapters of style. In terms of subcultural association, this is encapsulated by Cagle's (1995, p.45) concept of 'out-there subcultures'. Essentially, out-there subcultures describe the concept of taking styles from mass culture, only to appropriate them in a subcultural fashion. By these means, out-there subculture is not 'pure', seeing that it may embrace commercial items that have incorporated connotations and aesthetics of subcultural style. However, as Cagle (1995, p.45) notes, out-there subcultures "*...may engage in the recontextualization of an already commercialized (incorporated) style, but in so doing, they also engage in an act that symbolically resists the supremacy of dominant/mainstream culture.*"

Muggleton (2000, p.144) expands on this subject and suggests that the concept of out-there subcultures allows individuals to, not only uphold the sense of otherness through recontextualizing the symbolically charged items, but also engage in a form of stylistic

*'*bricolage*'*. Bricolage, in this context, refers to the process of taking the meaning associated with a commercial or mass culture item and give it a new, subversive meaning. The use of incorporated styles is therefore no obstacle in achieving authenticity, rather, the individualistic innovations and adaptations of style grant consumers a perception of authenticity, regardless of subcultural involvement (Andes, 1998, p.213). Nevertheless, this points to that authenticity remains contingent on a comparative function where consumers "*...always construct themselves as originals relative to an 'Other' who, it is claimed, merely follows in their wake, adopting mass versions of subcultural fashions*" (Muggleton, 2000, p.145).

In light of this tendency to make use of stylistic appropriation and recontextualization of culturally charged items, and the more fluid ways of achieving authenticity it is symptomatic for, it is possible to purchase clothes from commercial stores without distorting authenticity (Michael, 2015; Muggleton, 2000, p.146). While an authentic style probably cannot rely solely on items from a commercial brands, it can be created through the incorporation of mainstream items to a person's own, individual style, and originality (Michael, 2015). That is, an authentic subcultural style emanates from the process of reordering conventional items and taking symbolic ownership over them. What is important, then, "*...is not what you wear or even where you buy it from, but what you wear it with or what you do to it*" (Muggleton 2000, p.146), for as Michael (2015) finds, consumers pick things from the mainstream and make them their own. As such, a piece of clothing in itself is likely not inherently bound to an authentic or inauthentic expression, but needs to be viewed in light of how it is included in the wearer's overarching style. Nevertheless, a stylistic approach following such doctrines may still be interpreted as a mere 'fashion sensibility' or a purchase of 'ready-made' subcultural outfit (Muggleton, 2000, p.147). This kind of trend following is then instead perceived as inauthentic and dismissed as 'trying to hard' (Michael, 2015). The distinction between 'real' and 'fake' is therefore still a meaningful cultural criterion, but as Muggleton (2000, p.147) recognizes, in a postmodern setting, such a dichotomy seems to have "*...no objective basis or temporal logic...*", and more than anything appears to concern evading categorization.

2.1.6 The hipster as a post-subcultural style

While the subjective and fluid postmodern setting makes it hard to identify one uniform, subversive style, hipsters conceptually capture the essence of these contemporary conditions (Henke, 2013). In theory, hipsters, like traditional subcultures, can be characterized as subversive and driven by a desire to demarcate against the dominant culture (le Grand, 2018).

However, unlike punkers, ravers, or skaters, hipsters have no temporal basis and make no deeper cultural commitment, which give them greater leeway for inconsistencies and modifications. The interfusion of counter-culture and mass culture further contributes to the understanding of the hipster who, while exuding some form of a greater subcultural belonging, more than anything is a product of a search for a fitting lifestyle and unique identity (Henke, 2013).

For this reason, hipsters are subversive and nonconformist in thought only. More so, as Touboul (2014) notes, these shared anti-conformity aspirations often end up causing them all to look the same, and constitute an inherent contradiction in their existence (i.e. the 'hipster effect'). This tendency strongly corresponds to Holt's (2002) view on postmodern consumers' flawed pursuits of individuality. However, it is exactly for these very reasons it holds significance as a post-subcultural expression. That is, given that they are incoherent and culturally uncommitted, hipsters can be seen as both a reflection and product of the non-binary, individualistic, and contradictory postmodern society (Henke, 2013).

These characteristics permeate the hipster's identify formation, which result in marketplace evaluations and behavioral motives resembling the ones described earlier as post-subcultural style. For instance, the hipster encapsulates the fast-paced dynamics associated with 'trendy people' as they tend to embrace cultural discoveries before "*...quickly dismissing them when they get widely known*" (Michael, 2015, p.164). However, as both Michael (2015) and Maly and Varis (2016) note, for trendiness to hold value it needs to resonate with one's individuality and natural expression. Taken together, it follows that 'being hipster' is neither a uniform or a consistent identity, nor can it be considered a voluntary affiliation (Maly & Varis, 2016).

2.2 Self-congruity theory

Areas pertaining to self-congruity are essential to our research as it ultimately concerns how consumers view brands in relation to their own self-concept. We initially look at the different dimensions of consumers' self-concept, which help to determine the level of congruity (i.e. the 'match' or 'mismatch' between consumers and brands). Later, various self-concept motives are reviewed to better understand what actually drive consumers in relation to each dimension. Finally, we assess previous studies on fashion self-congruity, as well as motives connected to conspicuous consumption.

2.2.1 Fundamentals of congruity

The concept of brands 'striking a chord' with audiences relates to self-congruity theory, which in large stipulates that "*...favorable brand attitudes are partially a function of the image congruence phenomenon, a mental comparison that consumers make in regard to the similarity or dissimilarity of a brand's image and their own self-image*" (Parker, 2009, p.175). As such, congruence within consumption looks at the level of 'match' or 'mismatch' between the self-concept of consumers and a brand's image (Sirgy, 1982, 2018). Essentially, self-congruity theory reflects to which extent consumers identify with brands and, more specifically, the users of them (Sirgy, 2018). The importance of aligning brands with consumers on a mental level can be attributed to research that shows that they tend to have more favorable attitudes towards a brand image that corresponds with the different dimensions of their self-concept (e.g. Graeff, 1996; Parker, 2009; Sirgy, 1982, 2018). 'Congruity management' thus becomes a relevant consideration when brands try to reach and connect with desirable segments.

2.2.2 Self-concept dimensions

While an individual's self-concept is generally considered to be 'unique' in the sense that it is distinct from other people's self-concept, recent evidence indicates that cultural and social aspects can influence mental representations (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). This have for instance been used to distinguish self-concept as according to Western and Eastern culture (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Although no such comparative distinction is necessary in this study, it suggests that social and cultural surroundings are likely to influence an individual's self-concept to an extent where it becomes interesting to draw broader demarcations. In view of this, self-concept can be studied in 'collective' terms under distinguished cultural and social circumstances (i.e. the hipster), in regard to how such circumstances will influence self-concept. The hipster can thus be thought of as a starting point of consumers' self-concept, that is, as a shared "*...standard of comparison or referent point in evaluating the relative attractiveness of a brand-user image or brand personality*" (Sirgy, 2018, p.199).

Moreover, self-concept in the context of self-congruity is not an absolute term and has to be contextualized according to different self-image perspectives. Like before, symbolic consumption can pertain to both actual self-image features of one's personality, as well as ideal self-image aspects (Graeff, 1996; Hollenbeck & Kaitaki, 2012; Malhotra, 1988; Parker, 2009; Sirgy, 1982, 2018). Sirgy (1982, 2018) discusses four concepts of 'the self' in relation to congruity, and Anand and Kaur (2018, p.158) emphasize that "*In different situations, a person*

may wish to express a different aspect of self to create a desired impression." Rather than just looking at actual self-image (i.e. how one perceives oneself) and ideal self-image (i.e. how one would like to perceive oneself), Sirgy (1982, 2018) adds social dimensions that examine how one believes that others perceive oneself (i.e. social self-image), as well as how one wants to be perceived by others (i.e. ideal social self-image). Onkvisit and Shaw (1987) stress however that the different dimensions are not mutually exclusive to a particular situation, but can exist simultaneously and to varying degrees.

2.2.3 Self-concept motives

The four dimensions of self-congruity descend from different personal needs, namely: the need for self-consistency (i.e. actual self-image), the need for self-esteem (i.e. ideal self-image), the need for social consistency (i.e. social self-image), and the need for social approval (i.e. ideal social self-image) (Sirgy, 2018). These different needs entail different purchase motives and their relative prevalence are likely to influence a consumer's purchase intention. To begin with, the need for social consistency drives consumers' desire to match products and behave in accordance with their actual self-image, as it reinforces and validates their personal identity. Being inconsistent in one's actual self-image can lead to cognitive dissonance, which puts the consumer's identity in imbalance (Sirgy, 2018).

The need of self-consistency becomes especially important when individuals have clear and strong beliefs about their own identity. This largely pertains to a self-verification logic, which stipulates that confirmation of one's currently held self-views is an important motivation for people (Sirgy, 2018). Secondly, ideal self-image is motivated by people's desire to enhance their self-esteem, and thus becomes especially strong for people who look to present themselves in a more positive manner. In essence, this can be derived from that "*...consumers purchase and consume goods and services to help them realize their ideal self – the person they desire to become, and doing so serves to boost their self-esteem*" (Sirgy, 2018, p.201). This tendency is for instance common in clothing, as consumers often look to dress in a way that is consistent with their ideal self (Ericksen & Sirgy, 1992).

Thirdly, social self-image descends from a social consistency motive, that is, the desire to maintain one's self-image in the eyes of others. Brands can tap into this motive as the "*Reinforcement of social identity through the purchase of a product increases consumer's sense of identification with specific groups*" (Sirgy, 2018, p.202). It also follows that this

dynamic is highly contingent on the assumed views of others and the expected behavior of oneself that it corresponds to. Specifically, diverging from these perceptions may cause a dissonance in regard to others' expectations, which may interfere with one's social identity. It is for this reason that "*...consumers feel uncomfortable taking actions inconsistent with how they believe others see them*" (Sirgy, 2018, p.202). Much like with self-consistency then, social consistency revolves around the verification and confirmation of one's actual self-image. Finally, ideal social self-image pertains to a social approval motive, in which consumers strive to do things that enhance their image in the eyes of others. Approval from others is assumed to be contingent on the realization of such perceptions. By extension, given that the ideal social self can be thought of as how consumers would like to be seen, brands can capitalize on this motive by positioning themselves as a mean to gain such approval.

2.2.4 Congruity and fashion

Within the scope of consumption, fashion as a transmitter of style represents a primary carrier of symbolism and cultural meaning (Maly & Varis, 2016). Accordingly, fashion holds a strong social significance as a reflection of an individual's personal identity (Chang, 2017). Conceptually, this can be attributed to that fashion "*...is the result of the acceptance of certain cultural values, all of which are open to relatively rapid influences of change*" (Kawamura, 2005, p.4). Fashion is however not only a means of individual differentiation, but is also highly motivated by social equalization and can thus be regarded as an interplay between fitting in and standing out (Chang, 2017). For these reasons, fashion functions as an imperative, expressive tool in relation to people's self-concept, not the least in youth and subcultures.

Previous research into self-congruity in the context of fashion has looked at the same underlying self-concept perspectives and has come to similar conclusions (i.e. a positive correlation between image similarity and attitude) (e.g. Anand & Kaur, 2018; Casidy et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2012; Willems et al., 2011). However, it is important to acknowledge that most studies have looked at either high-tier fashion labels (Liu et al., 2012) or prestige brands (Casidy et al., 2015). Additionally, Anand and Kaur (2018, p.169) stress that Casidy's et al. (2015) research only examines fashion self-congruity from an 'actual viewpoint', whereas they propose a more holistic 'self-image approach', considering both ideal and social dimensions of congruence, and see "*...that the ideal social self is also an important driver of a person's fashion choices*." Furthermore, Liu et al. (2012) conclude that brand user image congruence is influential in regard to both attitude and purchase intention in the context of fashion. The term

refers to the "*...degree of perceived similarity a potential buyer sees of the typical user of a brand with himself or herself*" (Liu et al., 2012, p.923), which ascribes that other people's fashion choices take part in shaping either a congruent or incongruent brand image (Piacentini & Mailer, 2006). As such, it becomes necessary to consider how people evaluate and interpret the opinions of others (i.e. social dimensions of congruity).

Graeff (1996) adds to the discussion about adopting a more holistic 'self-image approach' and that it might be more important to manage the effects of ideal congruence, as opposed to actual congruence when dealing with conspicuous items. That is, it could be more valuable to shape a brand image that consumers can aspire to identify with, rather than an image that they already feel 'on par' with. This follows the logic that publicly consumed products are more exposed to the effects of ideal congruence, where items are prone to be judged and evaluated by others (Hong & Zinkhan, 1995; Sirgy, 1982, 2018), and that it then becomes more important to convey a 'polished exterior'. Products and services that are consumed privately, at home for example, will inevitably not draw the same amount of scrutiny, which means that consumers can 'settle' for things that are 'more' representative of who they 'actually' are.

2.3 Brands reaching consumers

In order to translate findings pertaining to self-congruity phenomena into managerial tools, it is important to review strategies that can be used to project certain coveted traits. In large, the degree of managerial autonomy in a postmodern setting holds no significant value in itself, but must rather be combined with appropriate strategies. Moreover, following Schallehn's et al. (2014) notion of the close relationship between brand authenticity and the identity-based brand management model, we find it meaningful to bring forth the relative importance of the construct according to different management philosophies. In essence, this section seeks to assess what determines brand meaning and strategic perspectives that can nuance the context in which brands construct meaning and authenticity in relation to their identity and image, which ultimately determine their relative 'attractiveness' in the eyes of subversive consumers.

2.3.1 What determines brand meaning?

At the opposite spectrum of self-congruity is the gathered impression of a brand's image and user image (Sirgy, 2018), which can be understood in light of how consumers ascribe meaning. Brand meaning is often conceptualized as the accumulated product of the firm, its consumers, and social and cultural forces (Beverland, 2009, p.18). Then, while brand meaning is highly

subjective and contextual, one critical dimension of what consumers read into brands is the ability to manifest their authenticity (Beverland, 2009, p.27-28). To do so, it is important that the brand itself is perceived as authentic (Napoli et al., 2014). Accordingly, authenticity is central in determining brand meaning and in turn, suitability to function as a reflection of a consumer's identity, not least in a postmodern setting (Holt, 2002).

The challenges associated with upholding brand authenticity have been studied extensively, not least in regard to commercialization (Beverland, 2009, p.190; Pace, 2015). For instance, Pace (2015) finds that commercially oriented brands can be perceived as authentic, as long as their consumers hold a generally positive attitude towards business in general. Likewise, Beverland (2009, p.190) suggests that there is no reason to believe that authenticity could not apply to a variety of contexts, including overtly commercial brands. In order to successfully commercialize, then, authentic brands must espouse enduring values and rich stories rather than mere positioning statements. Schallehn et al. (2014, p.197) expand on how to remain authentic over time and adds that "*Although a certain loss of perceived brand continuity might be inevitable, a slow and careful implementation of changes can reduce the negative consequences, as consumers have enough time to get accustomed to the new, hence reducing the cognitive dissonance between past and present brand behavior.*"

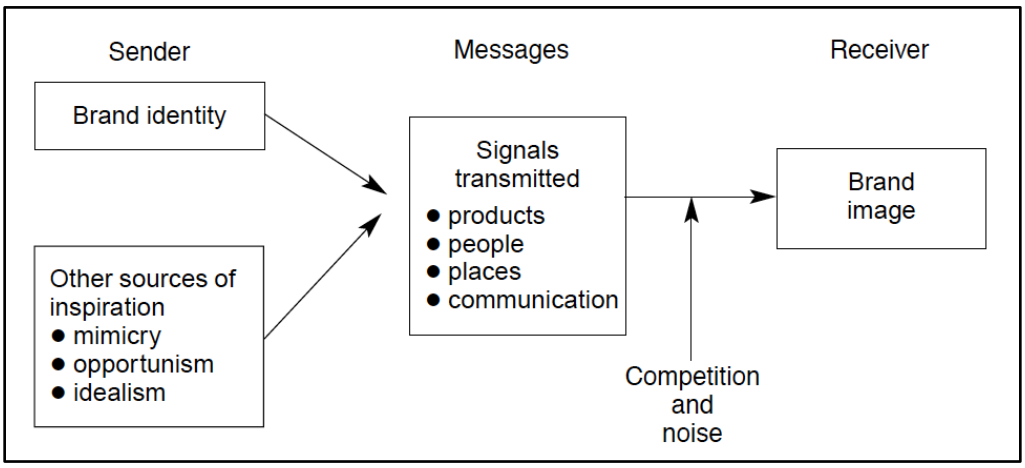
In addition, Napoli et al. (2014) posit that, as consumers in a postmodern society experience a lack of realness and authenticity, brands need to capitalize on a renewed desire for authenticity. Accordingly, it is imperative for brands that "*...authenticity claims capture the experiences, expectations and desires of the proposed target and reflect their prevailing values and beliefs*" (Napoli et al., 2014, p.1096). Similarly, as time progresses, Holt (2002) predicts that when all brands are understood and seen for what they really are (i.e. commercial entities), authenticity will no longer be based on brands' relationship to capitalist metrics such as profit motive and growth, but instead be evaluated on the basis of their function as cultural resources. In this postmodern reality, brands that can aid consumers in their identity related pursuits, without 'free riding' on other cultural expressions, will be seen in a more favorable light.

Recent research has highlighted that an important dimension of brand authenticity is that brands should be clear about what they stand for, which has connected the concept to an identity-based brand management model (Schallehn et al., 2014). Specifically, this can be understood in the light of brands' tendency to jeopardize their authenticity by expressing values that might be

desired by target groups, but do not reflect their true identities (Manthiou et al., 2018; Schallehn et al., 2014). By extension, a well-adapted brand-identity model can then help to guide a brand's positioning in a way that signals a high degree of brand authenticity. That is, such a strategic approach is likely more adept to evade the inauthentic instance of that "*...the origin of the brand promise is attributed to external forces rather than to brand identity*" (Schallehn et al., 2014, p.194). As a result, it appears that an identity-based brand management model can facilitate the achievement of authenticity exactly because it "*...positions itself from the inside out…*" and does therefore not appear to be pandering "*...to the latest trend…*" (Schallehn et al., 2014, p.194).

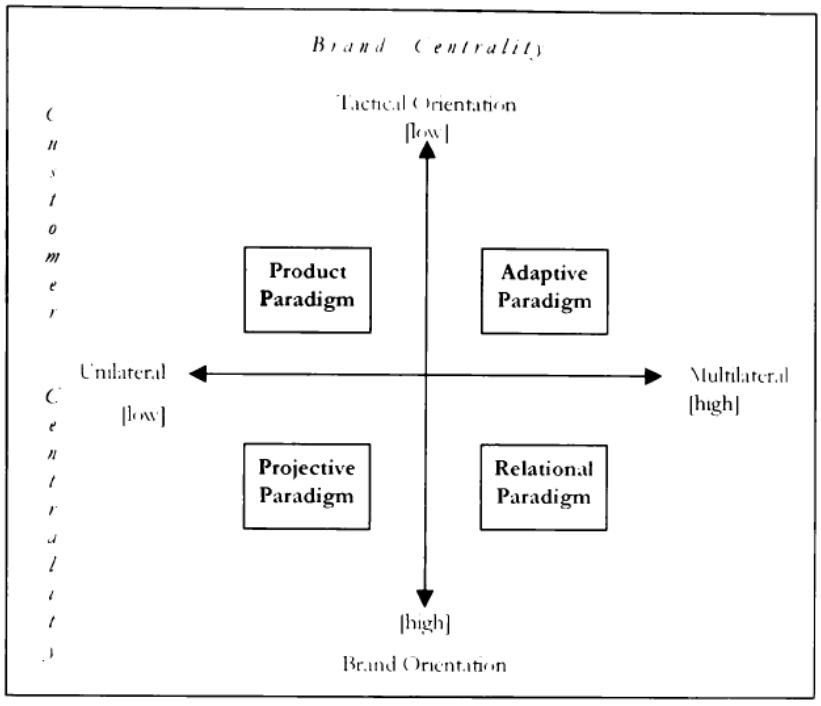
2.3.2 Relative importance and features of brand identity

At the outset, researchers have long recognized brand identity as a powerful means for managing and differentiating brands (e.g. Aaker, 1996; da Silveira et al., 2013; de Chernatony & Dall'Olmo Riley 1998; Kapferer, 2008; Upshaw, 1995). Aaker (1996, p.68) explains that the benefits of managing brand identity stem from the bonds that it can facilitate between consumers and brands, "*...by generating a value proposition involving functional, emotional or self-expressive benefits*." In reference to the highlighted importance authenticity, identity becomes important as it can be used as a means to project internally formulated ideas of what brands stand for (Aaker, 1996, p.71; Kapferer, 2008, p.174). As such, brand image, and by extension brand authenticity, is "*...both the result and the interpretation of brand identity*" (da Silveira et al., 2013, p.31). The figure below illustrates this concept by emphasizing brands as 'senders' (i.e. identity) and consumers as 'receivers' (i.e. image).



'Identity and image', Kapferer, 2008, p.174

In turn, identity-based brand management can be linked to the 'projective paradigm' of brand management (Louro & Cunha, 2001). Louro and Cunha (2001, p.849) present four core brand management paradigms that consolidate various "*...assumptions and processes of conceptualising and managing brands.*" The paradigms showcase different strategic areas of brand management and emphasize brands' roles as multifaceted means of establishing competitive advantage. The paradigms, conceptualized as a "*...deep-seated way of seeing and managing brands and their value, shared by the members of an organizational community marked by a common culture*" (Louro & Cunha, 2001, p.853), are distinguished on the basis of two dimensions: 'brand centrality' and 'customer centrality'. In essence, the first variable looks at to which extent strategy is guided by internal brand elements (i.e. brand identity), whereas the other assesses the degree of consumer influence on value creation (i.e. co-creation). The figure below depicts how the different paradigms are conceptually positioned in relation to each other, on the basis of brand and customer centrality.



'Brand management paradigms', Louro & Cunha, 2001, p.855

When combining brand orientation with a unilateral customer centrality approach, which focuses "*...on the internal characteristics and actions of the organization as the central determinants of value creation*" (Louro & Cunha, 2001, p.855), we reach the projective paradigm. Here, brand identity plays a central role and consumers are merely considered

"*...passive recipients of value created within the organization*" (Louro & Cunha, 2001, p.855). The importance of brand identity is not controversial per se (da Silveira et al., 2013), however, what separates this paradigm's outlook on brand management, in part, is to which extent value emanates from 'within', as well as how to manage 'meaning' over time (e.g. Aaker, 1996; Kapferer, 2008; Louro & Cunha, 2001). Looking at consumer influence on brand meaning (i.e. degree of customer centrality), Aaker (1996, p.70) talks about the 'brand image trap', described as a potentially damaging occurrence where customers get to dictate the meaning of brands. With a too strong focus of brand image, brands run the risk of becoming all about appearance, rather than essence (i.e. central and enduring features of brands) (Kapferer, 2008, p.175), which in turn can harm their authentic appearance (Schallehn et al., 2014).

Such risks can be avoided by working internally with identity (Schallehn et al., 2014), from the standpoint of brands' own visions and what they hope to achieve (Aaker, 1996, p.70). For instance, Kapferer's (2008, p.182-185) 'brand identity prism' helps to capture three internal areas of brand identity that are receptive to managerial influence, namely: physique (i.e. aesthetics and functionality), personality, and culture. Culture, which refers to "*...the basic principles governing the brand in its outward signs (products and communication)*" (Kapferer, 2008, p.184), has an especially important role in reference to identity as it is considered the source of a brand's aspirational power and place from which every product derives (i.e. it influences both physique and personality). Nevertheless, the relative importance between internal and external brand understandings is further highlighted by Aaker (1996, p.70) who means that management must consider enduring brand qualities "*...even if they are not salient in the brand image*", similar to Schallehn's et al. (2014) outlook. Yet, it is important to stress that brand identity is by no means a completely static concept unreceptive to change. Da Silveira's et al. (2013) research on the multifaceted nature of brand identity provides ample evidence of the relevance of value co-creation in regard to brands. Moreover, both Aaker (1996, p.85-92) and Kapferer (2008, p.173) emphasize brands as dynamic systems that have to adapt in accordance with changing market conditions, but that identity in turn aides managers to identify essential and nonessential brand features.

The importance of being able to 'change' is highlighted by the 'adaptive' and 'relational paradigms', where the focus, to a greater extent, centers around brands' abilities to adapt in accordance with consumer needs and preferences (Louro & Cunha, 2001). Their 'multilateral perspective' imply that brand meaning is continuously constructed via organization-consumer

interactions, and that "*Competitive advantage emerges as a systemic outcome resulting from the cyclical actions initiated by both firms and consumers and the reciprocal responses to those actions…*" (Louro & Cunha, 2001, p.856). The adaptive paradigm (i.e. low brand centrality and high customer centrality) pays particular attention to consumers and holds them as "*...central constructors of brand meaning*" (Louro & Cunha, 2001, p.863). In essence, brand image is thought to gradually 'succeed' brand identity and work as the definitive element guiding strategy.

The relational paradigm (i.e. high brand and customer centrality) has on the other hand gained prominence as it thought to provide an alternative that can "*...confront the weaknesses in both the projective and the adaptive paradigm*" (Louro & Cunha, 2001). Brand identity and inside-out capabilities are still considered important, but complemented by "*...the recognition of consumers' active role in co-developing brand meaning and value*" (Louro & Cunha, 2001, p.865). Lastly, the 'product paradigm' starkly contrasts the other paradigms, as it views brands primarily as legal instruments (Louro & Cunha, 2001).

3 Method

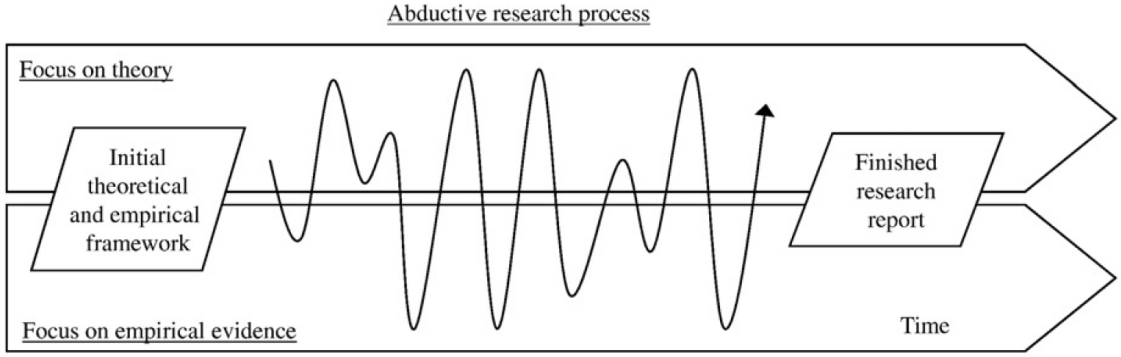
In the following section, we seek to present our research method and its different components. We initially look at research strategies and designs, on the basis of the study's research questions and its philosophical stance on reality and knowledge. The method section then departs in theories and concepts pertaining to qualitative case study research, which centers around the Swedish streetwear brand 'Eytys'. Subsequent parts emanate from this methodological ground.

3.1 Research strategy

The paper's research area, together with previously discussed ontological and epistemological understandings, provided guidance when we assessed different research strategies. At the outset, Bryman (2012, p.35-36) makes a distinction between two broad areas of research strategy: quantitative and qualitative. In the philosophy of science section, we proposed that moderate constructionism corresponds with our ontological outlook on knowledge, which substantiated our decision to adopt a qualitative research method (Bryman, 2012, p.380). Moreover, the research program of consumer identity projects within CCT, which focus on "*...the experiential and sociocultural dimensions of consumption…*", has also been proven highly compatible with qualitative methods, not least regarding product symbolism and brand meaning (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p.870).

Given that our research is concerned with understanding personal accounts that are contingent on the dynamics of the culturally constituted world, we also saw that it would be sensible to leverage methods that are concerned with the function of language and the 'social world' (Bryman, 2012, p.399). In essence, our questions pertaining to self-congruity phenomena are more concerned with 'the how' and 'the why', rather than a narrow set of definitive truths. Qualitative methods, as opposed to quantitative, generally adhere to the notion that "*...social properties are outcomes of interactions between individuals…*" (Bryman, 2012, p.380), a quality which makes them suitable for studies that concern words, rather than numbers (Bryman, 2012, p.380). Moreover, qualitative methods also usually differ in regard to the relationship between theory and research. Instead of engaging in the 'testing of theory', or deductive research, qualitative research processes are characterized by the 'producing of theory'. In large, theory is thought to originate through research (i.e. inductive method) (Bryman, 2012, p.36,380).

However, rather than to 'blindly' follow an inductive research logic, our process incorporated deductive themes as well, which made it similar to that of abduction. Järvensivu and Törnroos (2010) mean that abduction occupies the middle ground between deduction and induction, and that the research logic finds its strength in not having to compromise in relation to either theory or research practice. They mean that unlike induction, abduction "*...accepts existing theory, which might improve the theoretical strength of case analysis*", and that it also "*...allows for a less theory-driven research process than deduction, thereby enabling data-driven theory generation*" (Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010, p.102). Bryman (2012, p.401) adds that "*With abduction the researcher grounds a theoretical understanding of the contexts and people he or she is studying in the language, meanings, and perspectives that form their worldview.*" This notion of abduction largely encapsulates our work, where we have applied existing theory and simultaneously added 'new' while conducting our inquiries. The figure below illustrates this iterative and abductive process, where we have alternated focus between theory and empirical data.



'Case study process with a moderately constructionist orientation', Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010, p.104

3.2 Research design

As our study is not concerned with eliciting definitive conclusions in reference to self-congruity phenomena, but rather produce nuancing discussions, we found it sensible apply case study research, using a single case study. Yin (2003, p.1) explains that case studies are relevant "*...when "how" or "why" questions are being posed…*" and "*...when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context.*" Moreover, Järvensivu and Törnroos (2010) discuss various benefits with case studies when conducting moderate constructionist research, which are essentially centered around the research method's ability to produce contextual insights in relation to certain phenomena. The discussion about whether or not to

use multiple cases or single ones often comes down to thoughts about the generalizability of findings, however, we argue instead that it becomes as matter of if the resulting knowledge can contribute to contextual insights, as emphasized by Järvensivu and Törnroos (2010). In large, Järvensivu and Törnroos (2010, p.104) argue that, from our ontological outlook, the focus should be "*...to generate local and historically context-specific understanding*", rather than establish definitive truths.

Again, our questions are essentially centered around how the crisis of meaning affects post-subcultural consumers' (i.e. hipsters) relationship to brands, through the lens of self-congruity theory, which means that it is advantageous to contextualize the setting of their relationships. We firmly believe that relevant contextual insights can come from having a well-defined case setting with hipsters consuming a value-expressive brand, where said brand also goes through a commercial transition. It is reasonable to assume that a commercial transition provides favorable conditions when trying to analyze subversive consumption dynamics, as such an 'event' can highlight how brand symbolism gets diluted (Escalas & Bettman, 2005), and better nuance how post-subculturalists view their own self-concept in relation to brands. Furthermore, it encapsulates a recurring brand paradox where brands' business objectives (i.e. profit motive) impair their brand image (Yakimova & Beverland, 2005), which in itself holds great conceptual interest. In essence, our design corresponds with that of 'exemplifying' case research (i.e. 'representative' or 'typical'), in which cases are selected because "*...they will provide a suitable context for certain research questions to be answered*" (Bryman, 2012, p.70).

3.2.1 Case description

With an outset in the paper's stipulated research questions, we began investigating various cases that could facilitate fruitful discussions and provide relevant insights about self-congruity phenomena in relation to subversive consumers. The decision ultimately fell on the Swedish fashion brand 'Eytys', founded by Max Schiller and Jonathan Hirschfield in 2013. The company's modest sales, which amounted to approximately SEK 39 million in 2017 (Eytys AB, 2017), together with its anti-mainstream sentiments and sometimes 'unconventional' design features, made the brand an interesting candidate. However, given that we believe that a commercial transition of a brand can help us to nuance self-congruity issues, Eytys' recently initiated collaboration with fashion giant Hennes & Mauritz (H&M) became the decisive factor.

3.2.1.1 Relevance

Before we began to assess various case alternatives, we acknowledged that it can be challenging to determine what constitutes 'nonconformist', and decided, as a consequence, to scrutinize externally communicated brand viewpoints and apply that perspective as basis during the selection process. This is also where Eytys caught our attention, as both the company and the media often speak about the brand in ways that project a nonconformist aura and undermine mainstream connotations, which in turn provides ample conditions for a value-expressive function for subversive consumers. In this section, citations from various sources are used to substantiate and validate our use of Eytys to address our research questions, on the basis of its characteristics as a nonconformist brand.

""Eytys has typically not been for everyone and we have never aimed to be a crowd pleaser, but it feels great to work together with H&M to let more people discover our brand and what we stand for."" (Levander, 2019)

Max Schiller's (Eytys' creative director and co-founder) quote above draws attention to the brand's collaboration with H&M, while it simultaneously sheds light on the company's values. Schiller explains that the brand has never strived to please crowds (i.e. the masses), which in itself is a fundamental difference from the commercial principles guiding mainstream enterprises. Even though it is problematic to dissect what it means to 'not be for everyone', as it can relate to values just as likely as it can pertain to design, it still supports their own notion of not trying to please 'the masses'. Not only does this quote provide evidence that Eytys does not project itself as a mainstream brand, but also that they are self-conscious about how they present themselves (i.e. brand culture and values).

"Since we don't aim for the mainstream we get to go after people that really inspire us." (Slam Jam Socialism, n.a.)

Furthermore, in an interview with both co-founders, we are told explicitly that Eytys does not strive to become mainstream. Since the brand does not aim to go mainstream, it is reasonable to assume that company makes conscious decisions about presenting itself in a certain light and does things that contrast practices of larger fashion labels, such as H&M.

"Eytys, originally a footwear brand, is focused on making products that allow its customers the freedom to build their own style, and in modern fashion, personal expression is king." (Umgås, n.a.)

""I want creative freedom for our customers to visualize a style for themselves..."" (Umgås, n.a.)

"Releasing purely unisex collections that let people express themselves without feeling the need to conform is what Eytys is about." (Umgås, n.a.)

The three quotes above highlight Eytys as a means of personal expression and encourage individualistic interpretations of what can be done with brand in terms of style. The quotes help to further solidify Eytys as a 'contemporary' brand that adheres to postmodern ideas of consumption and opposes mainstream values. Also, their use of unisex collections, which captures their stance on 'not having to conform', is again highly telling with regard to their status as a nonconformist brand.

"Our community are design conscious, so it was a must to create a space [store] they would appreciate." (Morgan, 2018)

"When we think of who we want to like our products we think of personality, of specific traits, aesthetic references and preferences. We're looking for people who are progressive but with a feel for the classic." (Slam Jam Socialism, n.a.)

The quotes above pertain to how Eytys perceives their own target audience. Here, it becomes apparent that the brand actually has a rather well-defined idea of who their ideal user is. They suggest that the brand's community is "design conscious", a term used to demarcate Eytys users against 'conventional' fashion consumers. Also, the brand emphasizes both personality and design preferences when discussing customers, and explains that they are looking for progressive individuals, which again attests to their position as something 'extraordinary', as opposed to something 'ordinary' (i.e. mainstream). All in all, we argue that these quotes help to affirm our stance that Eytys is a nonconformist brand, and that is works as a suitable stepping-stone for our research. Moreover, following self-congruity theory (Sirgy, 1982, 2018), their customers should therefore exhibit similar values (i.e. 'hipsters identity').

3.2.1.2 Brand information

When Eytys entered the market in 2013, they worked exclusively with sneakers and online retailing. Their oldest model, which is also their best-selling shoe, is called 'Mother' (Ahmed, 2017; Levander, 2019; Stanley, 2018) (see appendix A). Since then, the company has added several different shoe models to their collection, as well as clothing lines that include jeans,

sweatshirts, t-shirts, shirts, outerwear, and accessories (Eytys, n.a.), opened two stores (Eytys, n.a.), and, according to various news outlets, reached 'cult status' (Ahmed, 2017; Berrington, 2018; Moran, 2019; Newbold, 2018; Nylon, 2019; Young, 2019). However, Eytys is still usually referred to as a footwear brand (Ahmed, 2017; Moran, 2018; Moran, 2019; Stanley, 2018).

With regard to design and silhouettes, Eytys is often attributed to be working with distinct compositions. Chunky sneakers and thick-soled footwear are two features that permeate the perception of the brand (Ahmed, 2017; Moran, 2019; Stanley, 2018; Umgås, n.a.; Van den Broeke, 2018). 'Angel' is one of Eytys' newer models, and described as a particularly progressive sneaker in terms of design (Stanley, 2018) (see appendix A). Looking at Eytys' general aesthetics, the quote below exemplifies how their design, arguably, differs from that of other companies, such as H&M.

> *""We did a lot of groundwork, convincing people that it wasn't weird, that it wasn't platform shoes, and now that's the most normal silhouette you see.""* (Stanley, 2018)

Schiller's quote is in many ways telling of how the brand's products might be perceived by the general public. Although fashion being a subjective area, it is fair to assume that companies like H&M usually do not work to convince their customers that their products are not weird, which attests to Eytys' status as nonconformist. 'Mother', 'Doja', and 'Wave' leverage more minimalistic design features, whereas the rest work with objectively larger soles and more unusual silhouettes (see appendix A).

Lastly, Eytys' broad adoption of unisex clothing affirms the brand's position as something different from H&M, which has different clothing lines depending on which gender you identify with. These aspects and conditions that include being perceived as a cult brand, working with unfamiliar designs, and not discriminating based on gender, solidify the notion that Eytys differs from H&M in many regards, and that it is possible to separate the two brands based on their relative 'distance' from the mainstream.

3.2.1.3 Collaboration information

In late 2018, it was announced that Eytys and H&M would collaborate on a limited clothing collection that would be sold and distributed through H&M (Berrington, 2018; Spencer, 2018).

The collection, which was launched on the 24th of January 2019, is available in selected stores globally and online (H&M, 2018; Levander, 2019).

> *"With this collaboration, we hope to introduce the H&M customer to our design philosophy of robust and fuss-free design where function triumphs embellishment and styles spans genders. The collection is all about proportions – creating a distinct unisex silhouette by playing around with loose silhouettes and chunky architectural footwear. It's the Eytys idea of a 'generic' look, one that is meant to elevate integrity, attitude and confidence."* (H&M, 2018)

Schiller gave the above comment in connection to the announcement of the collaboration. According to Eytys, they essentially want to introduce their design philosophy to a wider audience at lower prices, without infringing on their own values. The collaboration is not limited to shoes, but includes a broad range of different items (Moran, 2019). H&M's broad audience and wide scope reinforce the notion that the collaboration, for Eytys, constitutes a commercial transition for the brand.

3.2.2 Semi-structured interviews

With the purpose of capturing each consumer's individual perceptions and gaining a deep understanding of how these perceptions are constructed, we decided to collect our data by conducting interviews. This decision was motivated by that interviews allow the researcher to gain insights from the informants' reflections and viewpoints, inherently marked by their own perspective (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p.480). Specifically, given our interest in the underpinnings of behavior, we concluded that we needed not only to hear attitudes and motives be expressed, but also described and explained, for which interviews are adept (Collis & Hussey, 2003, p.168). Interviews' expedience in this regard are rooted in "*...the epistemological tenet that consumers' lived experiences can primarily be understood through their expressed subjective narratives*" (Arsel, 2017, p.939).

In order to enhance the informants' ideas and perceptions within the research area, rather than our own, we conducted the interviews in a semi-structured manner. This also allowed us to hear the informant's narrative, without having to surrender the possibility to make inquiries about specific topics (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p.480). In other words, the semi-structured interviews allowed us to study the specific area of self-congruity in light of commercialization without causing the flexibility in the interviews to slip (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p.481). As Collis

and Hussey (2003, p.168) suggest, semi-structured interviews are also suitable when a study requests personal perceptions and opinions, which corresponds to postmodern subjectivity and the moderate constructionist philosophy of science underlying our study. Specifically, given that meaning and truths under postmodernism are personal and relative concepts (Barker, 2004, p.157-158), our data collection needed to exceed from understanding how the informants see the world (McCracken, 1986). In effect, our interviews largely followed the outline of a 'conversation' as presented by Belk et al. (2013, p.38), in which a relaxed atmosphere fuels the informant's ability to provide "*...deep reflections and thick descriptions.*" In addition, as personal accounts of style and identity often concerns pretentious, uncomfortable, or even reluctant feelings, individuals can have a hard time expressing them. Accordingly, we saw that features which are associated with semi-structured interviews, such as the possibility to probe, clarify concepts, and give the informant space, were necessary (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p.480).

3.2.3 Interview design

Following an abductive research process (Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010), we entered the interviews with research questions guided by prior literature, that were accompanied by a set of subjects to explore dynamically as the interviews progressed. Thus, themes were continuously adopted in accordance with concepts identified during the interviews. This approach corresponds to Arsel's (2017, p.940) framework on how to conduct interviews, which stipulates that since a researcher "*...should challenge existing theories reflexively to reconstruct new knowledge*", prior knowledge hold value to contextualize and guide empirical data (i.e. abductive research process). While Arsel (2017) strongly emphasizes the value of having an open-ended and iterative research process as such, he also provides suggestions on how to structure data collection in form of informal, semi-structured interviews, which we used to guide our research.

The identified areas of interest were compiled in an interview protocol that was structured to foster understanding of the research question in general, and each sub-question in particular (see appendix B). As such, the interview questions pertained to an intended measurement which, in turn, corresponded to a research sub-question. For clarity, we also connected each intended measurement to our theoretical development and, subsequently, what theoretical reference point the empirical inquiry intended to probe. We saw that the inclusion of our theoretical development guided how our conceptual approach could be 'translated' in relation to the data collection. For instance, it became obvious that, given our point of departure in

consumers' behavior, there was no reason to make explicit inquiries into brand management, but rather that such insights would be a product of intended themes of self-congruity in the culturally constituted world. More so, as the theoretical reference points were broad and intertwined with each other, the interview questions pertaining to one reference point often overlapped with another theme. Nevertheless, we saw that this structure held pragmatic value for conducting the interviews and coding the data.

Following Yin's (2003, p. 89-90) rationale on the duality of a case interview's purpose, we put a lot of emphasis on formulating the interview questions in a relevant yet 'nonthreatening' way, in regard to the research questions. More so, whereas research questions look to map relationships between concepts, "*...interview questions seek to understand lay and subjective articulations of these concepts*" (Arsel, 2017, p.943). Then, as a central purpose for a researcher is to "*...make the connection between the two as rigorously as possible, using people's subjective narratives to thoroughly and ethically substantiate your theoretical claims*" (Arsel, 2017, p.943), we believed this stance and 'translation' to be of paramount importance, both in gathering and analyzing the data. For instance, this meant that rather than asking informants if 'their congruency with the brand user image of Eytys had changed in light of their recent commercialization', we asked if they 'felt that it was problematic that the H&M collaboration had allowed kids and teenagers from the countryside to gain access to Eytys'. Given that most interview questions followed this open-ended and subjective composition, a lot of room was left for probing questions, some of which were prepared and some of which arose during the interviews. Altogether, as a result of this structure, the interview protocol allowed us to derive the empirical data to a theoretical concept, which conceptual interest had been substantiated through prior literature (Arsel, 2017).

3.2.4 Selection of research participants

In essence, our selection of research participants descended from a purposive sampling in which individuals were chosen on the basis "*...of their likely ability to contribute to theoretical understanding...*" (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p.492), and more specifically, the contextual dynamics surrounding the case. As this study concerns subversive consumption in a postmodern setting, we decided to focus on hipsters, given that they reflect the identified characteristics of said research area (Hanke, 2013) and have raised substantial interest, both inside and outside academia (e.g. Greif, 2010; Henke, 2013; le Grand, 2018; Maly & Varis, 2016; Michael, 2015; Schiermer, 2014; Scott, 2017; Van den Bergh & Behrer, 2016). We

believed this combination made them both conceptually adept and of high research relevance. More so, we saw that it held pragmatic value to identify, and thereby limit the scope of, post-subcultural consumers. The purpose of this sampling, then, was to better understand the dynamics of self-congruity among postmodern consumers by providing an outset of consumers' self-concept to which they make evaluations about Eytys in particular, and brands in general. However, we find it important to underline that this stance did not mean that we thought of 'hipsters' as having one, uniform self-concept, but rather that their way of using consumption in identity formation provided a ground for demarcating reference points to which brands are being assessed from.

The decision to investigate hipsters in capacity of postmodern consumers produced dilemmas as the subculture cannot be confined to a homogeneous group or cultural expression, and more importantly, belonging is not contingent on explicit 'adherence' (i.e. not voluntarily per definition) (Maly & Varis, 2016). As such, binary metrics pertaining to belonging could not be applied during our selection process; it is infeasible to ask people who 'identify' as hipsters to participate. Instead, it became a matter of applying subjective criteria that would allow conditions for subjects to shape and express opinions in relation to consumption and 'cultural movements'.

As this study aims to provide understandings within the scope of business research, hipsters were dealt with as consumers more than anything else. The cultural, sociological, and psychological characteristics of hipsters were however by no means uninteresting, but the primary identification tool pertained to consumption habits rather than lifestyles, political beliefs, or areas of residence. We saw that this distinction was imperative given the fluid boundaries, high contextuality, and disperse expressions that surround the hipster. Specifically, to study a consumer culture phenomenon with such ambiguous and dynamic characteristics, ways of identifying 'members' should stem from looking at the unifying function that holds the most relevance in the adopted research area.

This meant that our sampling descended from consumption patterns, together with widely acknowledged demographic variables, but was not contingent on other 'hipster characteristics' such as residence in a gentrified area (le Grand, 2018; Schiermer, 2014), a creative occupation or education (Michael, 2015; Schiermer, 2014), anti-capitalist or left-leaning political sentiments (Henke, 2013; Schiermer, 2014), an underground music preference (le Grand,

2018), or non-conventional leisure activities (e.g. beer brewing) (le Grand, 2018). In essence then, much like previous accounts of modern 'hipsterism' have proclaimed, we saw that the contemporary hipster is simply too elusive, dynamic, and frequent to fit in all of these 'compartments'. Therefore, efforts to adhere to all previously identified hipster markers would have diverged focus from the one characteristic that is most relevant to our study, i.e. post-subcultural fashion consumption.

This strategic sampling allowed us to define the following selection criteria: age (20-30 years), city of residence (urban area), and consumption patterns (having consumed Eytys prior to December 2018, i.e. before the announcement of the H&M collaboration). While the first two selection criterions are widely acknowledged as typical features of hipsters in earlier studies (e.g. le Grand, 2018; Michael, 2015; Schiermer, 2014), the decision to have prior Eytys consumption as a criterion is motivated by that brands are an instrument of expressing one's identity (Cătălin & Andreea, 2014). Given the characteristics of Eytys (see case description above), we concluded that having consumed Eytys prior to their collaboration with H&M was enough to regard consumers as having consumer habits that are in line with a hipster identity, particularly in light of the other variables (i.e. a young person living in an urban milieu). We acknowledge that such a deduction can be subject to critique for being too general, however, all informants could see themselves as hipsters, which retroactively validated this assumption.

In practical terms, we then used our, as well as our friend's and family's, network to get in touch with Eytys consumers, aged 20-30 and living in an urban area. This process was facilitated by that both authors themselves largely correspond to these characteristics (both being 25-years-old, living in Copenhagen, and coming from Stockholm), and thus had a relevant network to begin with. Following this strategy meant that we were familiar with some of the subjects from before. However, we refrained from interviewing any close and 'initiated' acquaintances, such as family or close friends, to limit the influence of bias (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p.492; Yin, 2003, p.86-91). Nevertheless, the sociocultural proximity to the research subjects also held a methodological advantage in the sense that "*Understanding the culture of your context will also help you to determine the proper dress, tone, and vocabulary to manage power distance*" (Arsel, 2017, p.944). In total, we contacted twelve people of whom ten choose to participate in the study. With the purpose to limit the mediating influence of gender, we looked to have an even distribution of men and women, resulting in five male and five female

informants. The table below summarizes the informants and relevant information pertaining to their participation.

Name	**City of residence**	**Age**	**Date of interview**	**Duration of interview**
Malte	Copenhagen	26	27/03/2019	60 min
Sofia	Copenhagen	23	01/04/2019	41 min
Amanda	Copenhagen	23	03/04/2019	35 min
Klara	Stockholm	23	03/04/2019	41 min
Jacob	Stockholm	26	04/04/2019	43 min
Kristoffer	Stockholm	25	04/04/2019	44 min
Karl-Johan	Stockholm	28	08/04/2019	42 min
Louise	Stockholm	23	09/04/2019	36 min
Erik	Stockholm	23	10/04/2019	38 min
Sigrid	Copenhagen	25	16/04/2019	32 min

‘Informant summary’

3.3 Data collection

The interviews took place between the 27th of March and the 19th of April 2019. The duration of the interviews spanned from 32 minutes to 60 minutes, with an average length of 41 minutes. Four of the interviews were held in Copenhagen, one in Lund, and the remaining five were held in Stockholm. Prior to the first interview with a sampled informant, we held a mock-interview with a close friend to test our questions and highlight the potential use of overly theoretical terms and advanced reasoning (Arsel, 2017). This resulted in a total of eleven interviews, of which ten have been used as research material. When possible, the interviews were held in the informants’ native language, to enhance their ability to express themselves. Consequently, nine interviews were held in Swedish and one in English. A majority of the quotes used in the empirical presentation have thus been translated retroactively.

As we had no access to an office or closed off room, we used quiet and calm spots in suitable public places (e.g. closed off spots at Copenhagen Business School, unbusy cafes, a non-occupied student canteen), in proximity to the informants' whereabouts. All the interviews started with that informants had to read, and ultimately sign, a consent form (see appendix C), in which we gained approval to tape the interview. Accordingly, all interviews were recorded with a digital tape recorder. The interviews then started with a short introduction of the informant, after which we started to ask questions with an outset in our interview guide (see appendix B). It should however be noted that the interview guide was used dynamically, in the sense that informants were allowed to resonate freely, resulting in that some questions were answered within the scope of others. After each interview, we had a discussion about its outline; if it advanced our intended research inquiry and if any changes in view of this needed to be made. For instance, we found that our first interview with Malte was lacking somewhat in structure, from both a methodological and conceptual standpoint. Consequently, we made some changes in our interview guide to make the subsequent interviews more succinct.

3.4 Method for analysis

Before analyzing the data, all interviews were transcribed and compiled to one document consisting of 177 pages. With the purpose of "*...reducing data into meaningful segments…*" (Creswell, 2007, p.148), we then assigned codes following Belk's et al. (2013, p.140-141) structure of using both emic and etic codes. In essence then, we applied codes that drew both "*…directly on the language used by the people being studied*" (i.e. emic) and from "*...language and concepts that are not necessarily those of the people we study, but that seem appropriate to us within our scholarly field of interest*" (i.e. etic) (Belk et al., 2013, p.140-141). We saw the inclusion of etic code as imperative given that an inevitable, but nevertheless desired, outcome of in-depth interviews, including ours, is that the collected data will be marked by contradictive, subjective, and confusing narratives (Arsel, 2017). This follows the fundamental logic that "*...ordinary life worlds do not always come in clearly defined stories around academic constructs*" (Arsel, 2017, p.943). For instance, many informants expressed that 'staying true to yourself' was important, which we then, given Franzese's (2009, p.98) theoretical definition, gave the code 'authenticity' (i.e. an emic code).

Our coding followed four overarching themes that identified patterns pertaining to the research questions, guided by the approach presented by Belk et al. (2013, p.143-144). Firstly, we labeled a code 'subversive self-concept', which highlighted the traits that the informants used

to describe different cultural entities related to their identity, such as their view on Eytys, desired personality traits, and relationship to reference groups. Secondly, we added the code 'coping strategies to the crisis of meaning', which captured how the informants adapted to having a cynic sentiment and blurred idea of the very concept of 'authenticity'. Thirdly, we included the code 'rejection of the mainstream', after it became clear that the informants used mainstream with a negative connotation in response to Eytys' commercial transition, or when describing an undesired self-image. Lastly, we added the code 'brand image conditions', which included reflections about what consumers saw as important to create mental associations between themselves and a brand in general, and Eytys in particular.

While all of these codes, to different degrees, overlap with each other, they helped us to demarcate central themes and deduct data in accordance with our theoretical framework. In view of this, we could also create a conceptual 'narrative' of sorts, which helped guideline our empirical findings and analysis, specifically, how postmodernism reflected on subversive consumers (i.e. 'subversive self-concept'), what tactics they employed when making evaluations in the marketplace (i.e. 'coping strategies to the crisis of meaning' and 'rejection of the mainstream'), and ultimately, what this meant for brands catering to said consumers (i.e. 'brand image conditions'). These accumulated findings could then be capitalized on to make suggestions on how to adapt an identity-based brand management model.

3.5 Method reflection

Before discussing the validity, reliability, or generalizability of the study's findings, it is important to note that qualitative research is often criticized for being subjective, difficult to replicate, and hard to generalize (Bryman, 2012, p.405-406). However, in accordance with Järvensivu and Törnroos (2010), we believe that moderate constructionist research requires a somewhat alternative outlook on such constructs, which are closely linked to positivist philosophies (i.e. universal truths). At the outset, qualitative research, through semi-structured interviews, will always entail subjective interpretation, as emphasized by Arsel (2017), which means that it becomes difficult to label findings and methods as objectively 'valid' or 'reliable'. Instead, Kvale (1995) argues that knowledge, from a postmodern perspective, has to be validated through continuous inspections, quality controls, and theoretical interpretations, and that validity is thus mainly contingent on 'research craftsmanship'. This means that attention should be directed away "*…from inspection at the end of the research process to quality control throughout all stages of knowledge production*" (Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010). In our

research, data was repeatedly examined and scrutinized as it was produced in order to substantiate its knowledge findings. Nevertheless, looking at reliability and replicability, the usage of semi-structured interviews makes it inherently difficult to 'repeat' exact findings, as well as replicate the study's procedures. In turn, this means that the state of the study's internal and external validity is also subject to critique, since "*...there can be no validity without reliability, a demonstration of the former is sufficient to establish the latter*" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.316). Moreover, generalizability, or external validity, within the context of case studies, is a widely discussed issue to begin with (Bryman, 2012, p.69-70; Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010).

In essence, the nature of our research, which involves a qualitative case study, makes it difficult to substantiate the validity of its findings, which also means that it becomes problematic to generalize them in relation to other populations. However, in the context of hipsters (i.e. frame for local and contextual insights), the study's findings can be used to nuance current theoretical understandings of the 'consumer group' from a self-congruity perspective, as well as theories pertaining to brand management. Furthermore, it is possible to argue, from a postmodern and moderate constructionist outlook, that the continuous precautions that were taken when outlining, conducting, and documenting the research process helped to elevate its replicability and reliability, and thus also its overall validity. Regardless, the objective of this study is not to produce definitive or transferrable conclusions, but rather to provide alternative perspectives that can improve current understandings of relevant phenomena.

3.6 Principles of research ethics

As previously mentioned, all informants had to sign a consent form to be able to participate in our study (see appendix C). The consent form was formulated with a starting point in a template provided by Taylor and Lindlof (2011, p.121-122), but revised in accordance with the specific characteristics of our study. Besides explaining the reasons for our interest in them as informants, any 'risks' pertaining to our inquiry and the conditions for participation, the form also explicitly asked for consent to tape the interview, to contact the informant afterwards for any additional questions, and to use the informant's real name in the final written version (these three requests were optional, i.e. one could choose not to agree to these conditions and still participate in the study). Information regarding the 'direction' of the study, such as its purpose and background, was put in very generic terms, with the intention of not 'swaying' informants to answer questions in a certain way (Taylor & Lindlof, 2011, p.119-123). To not violate "*...the*

spirit and policy of informed consent" (Taylor & Lindlof, 2011, p.123), all informants had to read and sign the form prior to the interview. All informants who were interviewed agreed to these conditions in full and could thus participate in the study without any limitations. Moreover, all of the information obtained, in association with the interviews, has been dealt with as according to the confidentiality terms stipulated in the consent form.

4 Empirical data

In the following section, we present the findings of the study's semi-structured interviews. The purpose is to show the empirical data as it was communicated during the research process, without distorting its content or meaning. The data is presented as either brief summarizes of accounts or direct quotes (where there are citations marks), and the outline is structured so that it maximizes both context and recurring themes in relation to the informants' answers. The section looks initially at the informants' self-concepts in reference to relevant research topics, and later issues pertaining to expressive consumption, Eytys, and the H&M collaboration.

4.1 Self-concept and fashion

During our interviews, it became clear that the informants use fashion as a means of self-expression. In general, the participants show high awareness in regard to the symbolic function of the product category, and understand that their choices influence their own self-concept, but also how others perceive them. One of the informants, Malte, says the following when asked about how he uses fashion:

"[…] it is a presentation about you in some way. Even when I am not putting a lot of effort into it, it is still sending a message that I am not that guy who puts too much effort into it. So obviously it is a reflection of me and how I feel any given day."

4.1.1 Mixing styles

With regard to actual styles, most of the informants gave different, subjective accounts on what constitutes 'good style'. Some preferer 'ordinary' designs, whereas other enjoy dressing a bit more 'experimental'. Jacob, Kristoffer, Karl-Johan, and Louise were particularly keen on finding aesthetically appealing silhouettes, and argued that it is important to configure whatever it is that you are wearing so that it appears 'neat' together. Looking at how to configure outfits more broadly, thoughts about whether or not to mix fashion styles varied somewhat among the interviewees. They agree that it is acceptable to mix and change between different styles, however, some attach certain 'conditions' when doing so. Sofia, Amanda, and Klara seem to be the most apologetic in reference to mixing styles, and Amanda explains that she interprets it as a marker of authenticity:

"*... yes, but if people mix and you see that they have mixed some styles then it feels more authentic. Then it feels like they have picked what they like, and created a symbiosis of it. It becomes more authentic according to me.*"

4.1.2 'Be in the know'

Malte, Jacob, Kristoffer, Karl-Johan, Louise, Erik, and Sigrid also mix different styles but emphasize that, when doing so, it is important to 'know' what you are actually wearing. For instance, Louise switches back and forth between streetwear and a 'preppy eighties look', but admits to feeling "silly" as she does not know how to skate, which she believes can be "problematic". Jacob also suggests that it looks silly when people "run around" in items that they know nothing about. Malte has the strongest opinions on the matter and says the following when asked about whether or not it is okay to mix styles and, as an example, wear rock t-shirts without knowing the story behind them:

"[...] one of the things that I hate the most about fashion in general and like the trends of it, is the rock-n-roll t-shirt for an example. I think it is so stupid to see like these fashion types and young girls and stuff like, running around with Kurt Cobain [musician] and The Rolling Stones [band] t-shirts. I mean these people [the musicians] would hate you like if they saw you running around [in their merchandize]. Like everyone is running around with the Kurt Cobain glasses, [...] you do not even know this guy and he would have hated you so much. He would have hated everything that you stand for so much. Like this consumerism is completely backwards in relation to what he stood for."

His answer shows that it is highly relevant to understand the meaning of the clothes that you wear, and in this case the mentality of the people on them. The relevance becomes particularly noticeable in a situation like this where the 'motif' depicts the frontman of a movement that, in large, was guided by a rebellious, anti-capitalist agenda. In Malte's mind, Kurt Cobain would have detested the thought of his face appearing on clothes that tap into the thing that he fought to undermine (i.e. commercialism and consumerism). For many, the problematic outlook with regard to not 'knowing' relates to authenticity, which is a treasured 'characteristic'. Karl-Johan gives a lengthy answer that encapsulates the relationship between 'being in the know' and feeling/appearing authentic:

"...if you want to be really authentic, then you have to know what the things you are wearing symbolize and represent. [...] you should maybe be able to explain why you are wearing the brands that you are wearing, rather than just put something on because you have seen it in a newspaper and want to copy the look. Then it will not be authentic in the same way."

Another theme in relation to 'being in the know', is how the informants see that the 'attribute' is influenced by new means of following trends. Jacob explains that the presence of Instagram has fundamentally changed the 'exclusiveness' of knowledge and that it is no longer difficult to be 'updated', which impacts how he views the 'value' of his own knowledge in capacity of a person who enjoys making an effort to find interesting items:

"Now it is not worth anything [knowledge] because everyone can keep track of everything. Finding things is so easy."

In sum, the informants generally believe that it is acceptable to mix different styles, and even encourage it, but that it is dependent on one's knowledge about what they express and ultimately stand for. Furthermore, easier access to knowledge also impacts the value of it. However, to 'be in the know' is a recurring theme in relation to other areas of the informants' self-concept. Jacob was especially outspoken about why it is important to be informed about current events in fashion and that it, for him, works a source of "pride" and expression of authenticity, as well as a means to show that he is "not like everyone else".

4.1.3 Standing out

It is apparent that "being different" and "unique" are coveted traits. However, the informants stress that it is difficult to actually achieve such a status. For instance, Amanda argues that it is inherently difficult as it has, paradoxically, become "trendy to be unique", and Jacob, Kristoffer, Karl-Johan, Louise, and Sigrid stress that most people are not "special" even if they believe so themselves. Nevertheless, when asked if it is important to be unique, Jacob, again, draws parallels between the identity trait and knowledge:

"It is much more fun I would say, to be it [unique]. It is difficult to be unique without being informed. It is pretty hard. Otherwise, you are just lucky. It goes hand in hand. If you are unique, you have probably gathered some information about some trend yourself. You have

seen a trend and like... […]. I think it is much more fun to buy stuff that is not trendy, then I do not look like everyone else, kind of."

Knowledge, in the context of pursuing uniqueness, can be leveraged in different ways according to the interviewees. Malte has a rather pragmatic approach to the issue and uses what he refers to as "standout pieces". They are essentially 'symbolic' and 'eye-catching' clothing items that nuance his otherwise fairly mundane outfits. He means that such clothing constellations can be used to demarcate against other, undesirable groups; in his case students at Copenhagen Business School (CBS). Other participants discuss the notion that uniqueness in large originates from one's personality and that it becomes, as a consequence, a matter of 'staying true to yourself', which also directly relates to being authentic. Karl-Johan says the following when asked if it is preferable to be unique in one's style:

"But unique to the extent that you dress like you want to dress, not like dress accordingly to how someone else wants you to dress. Then if you do it because you think that a trend is fun or less fun, or something like that, I think is less important."

His answer draws attention to the gravity of being yourself, especially as, according to him, uniqueness is an 'elusive' concept to begin with. Malte attests to this notion by saying that when he sees people that he believes wear their styles "for themselves", they become different in their own ways. As such, it seems to be more important to follow your own path than to 'succumb' to trends. Louise also values uniqueness over trendiness, and thinks that being trendy makes it harder to be unique; a belief shared by other participants. She also compares trends to "blueprints", and argues, by extension, that it becomes more difficult to get to know the people 'behind the clothes' if they follow trends, which Erik agrees with. Although harboring such sentiments, the informants acknowledge, as previously mentioned, that they are inherently bound to follow trends anyways. Jacob explains that it is "almost impossible not to be affected by trends" because "everything you buy has been affected by the trend". He blames this in part on the fact that all companies create them. Karl-Johan adds to this by emphasizing that "there are so many trends going on at the same time". Nevertheless, Louise gave the lengthiest answer about what it means to be hipster, and it encompasses insights about the 'subculture's' relationship to phenomena such as uniqueness and collective categorization. When asked about what makes her a hipster, Louise says:

"The quest to be unique, everyone believes that they are special. And you are also very critical of everything that is not like your taste. You look at people who look the same from other styles, and think "Oh...?" [laughs]. And then I look at us [her hipster friends]... even though I think that we look super different, I know that it is just because I know the references within our frames."

Rather than just looking inwards at herself, she evaluates the style choices of others, and often applies a 'critical perspective'. In her eyes, she and her friends are special, as opposed to people with other, more conventional styles. Yet, she understands and acknowledges that everyone believes that they are special and that her own opinions are influenced by her frames of reference. Later, when asked about why it is stigmatized to be called 'hipster', she says:

"[…] because when you describe a hipster you describe a group, and people do not want to be easy to analyze. You want to be complex, and when you clearly belong to a culture you are no that anymore [difficult to analyze]."

This sentiment is repeated by other participants as well. Jacob, for instance, does not want to "end up in a certain camp", instead, he wants to project a style that makes him "hard to pin down". This is also the reason why some of the informants have mixed feelings about trends. Amanda is firm in her belief that trends are irrelevant and that they by definition remove personal features and authenticity from people's styles, which corresponds with Louise's statement about trends as "blueprints". Kristoffer believes that there is no explicit value attached to being trendy, but that he probably succumbs to various trends anyways. He does however suggest that it can be useful in order to avoid "social confrontations", in the sense that style can be used as a means of inclusion, not only demarcation.

4.1.4 Fitting in

Throughout the interviews, the informants discussed how fashion can function as a unifying force, and that it can have different meanings in different contexts. Kristoffer explains that he has frequently used fashion as a tool to fit in, especially in his early youth, and provides an example:

"…I started at Norra Real [posh high school] from a school in Liljeholmen [relatively less posh middle school] and then it became a rather drastic change in regard to the people I

surrounded myself with. And I definitely did not have the same clothes like as anyone there. So then I started buying clothes at the same places as they did [...]. It was a pretty strange combination because I... had a completely different style."

Essentially, Kristoffer saw the need to fit in after having changed school and used fashion as a way to do so. Sigrid also provided examples of similar situations and firmly believes that fashion can be used to 'align socially' with people, and that it should preferable make you 'fit in and stand out' at the same time. When asked about if she uses fashion to stand out, she answered 'yes', but instead provides us with a story about how she has used fashion to identify 'interesting' people (i.e. people that she wants and believes that she can connect with):

"Yes, I think so. […] it probably means more than I would like to admit. On the first day of university, I sat down next to someone I thought had a cool jacket [laughing]. "We can connect". There was actually someone who had Eytys too. But that you go after someone who might have the same style as you have, because then it feels like you have the same values. But it does not have to be the case at all. But that I have often thought that it has gone hand in hand."

In this situation and context, she saw the "cool jacket" as an opportunity to get to meet someone that she felt she could 'level with', someone that she could potentially become friends with. As such, Sigrid suggests that it is possible to assess someone's values based on how they dress, which in turn enables her to identify people that might be relevant to engage with. Louise voices a resembling opinion as she means that style reflects personality, and that clothes can be used to "kind of get the hang of a person". She adds that certain brands can create a bond and help you to "gain approval by a small community". Erik provide a similar example when being asked about what he reads into people wearing his favorite brand Gosha Rubchinskiy (Russian streetwear brand):

"When I have worn Gosha and there has been someone else there who knew about it, we have started talking. And then it usually turns out that we have similar style, often like the same stuff... and suddenly I have a new friend. If I have another t-shirt that does not have a that logo, then it does not lead to such conversation topics. So like, as such, it creates opportunities for me to make new contacts through that brand."

Karl-Johan follows this line of thought and discusses the notion that people sometimes try to "signal the same type of things", so that they can identify 'like-minded people':

"I think that many people choose to signal the same type of things, that is how you try to identify which ones... "Is this person a person I want to start talking to?", or something like that. So it can definitely do that. Then it depends on which product it is, as well as the overall picture."

He says however that it is contingent on what type of product it is, as well as the overall impression. Identification is then a subjective matter, and clothes do not necessarily 'tell the whole picture'. As Sigrid says, entering 'relationships' based on fashion does not always work out, but it can guide initial evaluations about the likelihood of making a connection. Karl-Johan's comments about whether or not someone is 'conversation worthy', largely summarize how the informants see fashion's function as an early indicator of potential compatibility with regard to personality and values.

4.1.5 Relationship to their own style

Questions about what they believe that their style says about them were usually met with either discomfort or confusion. In general, the informants had to think for a while before answering, only later to provide concrete descriptions about their actual looks. Sofia, Amanda, Karl-Johan, Louise, and Sigrid were particularly 'perplexed' by the question. Amanda starts by saying "Oh… shit, that is hard", and continues with:

"Well I would not really say that I have a plan with how I dress or buy clothes, it is more about what I think looks good and feel comfortable in… and then the trends… I do not follow them myself, so I would not really know what I would express, what my style says about me. Well, God I do not know. Maybe giving very mixed signals."

Sofia laughs and says that she "is not really sure" if she "wants to think about" what her style says about her, and later explains what she wants it to project. Kristoffer also says that he "hopes" that he is perceived as "rock-n-roll" and "relaxed", but cannot quite make out himself if he is. Louise means that she does not know for sure and jokingly argues that we "can probably provide a better answer", but "hopes" that her style is perceived as "norm critical". Sigrid shows a distinct discomfort:

"No! Ugh… what… what my style says about me? […] but I have a pretty simple style, I would say. I am most comfortable in t-shirt and jeans. But simple… and I have heard from others that I have a hipster style."

The question makes her very uncomfortable, and later she uses her friends' thoughts to provide an answer. Overall, it seems like the informants have a difficult time to assess what their own styles say about them, and that it is easier to explain what they hope to project.

4.1.6 Authenticity and personality

At the outset, the informants agree that style should come naturally, be comfortable, relate to one's personality, and not be forced. This becomes important when looking at their answers in relation to questions pertaining to authenticity. Although an elusive concept, the informants agree that it is important to be authentic in one's style. It also clear that the informants feel that authenticity is connected to personality and the concept of "staying true to yourself'. As suggested before, Amanda notes that it is impersonal to simply follow trends, and that it affects authenticity in a negative way, which follows her previous statement that authenticity can 'emerge' when people mix different styles. When asked about what it means to be authentic, Sofia says:

"It is like that you are comfortable in what you are wearing, which I think you can usually see. Sometimes you really do not care at all and just pick something. But if you can actually express […] that you feel comfortable in what you are wearing, that it is comfortable, then I can say that it is genuine in some way […]."

Her answer encapsulates a recurring theme, that it is possible to see if a person is comfortable in what they are wearing, and that it projects authenticity. Jacob, for instance, uses the context of work when illustrating the phenomenon. According to him, it is clear that an "Excel guy" does not appreciate wearing suits and that the associated personality traits are not compatible with that style. For Jacob, authenticity then becomes a matter projecting self-confidence and self-esteem, rather than if an outfit is subjectively fitting in relation to 'objective' criteria such as looks. Kristoffer also believes that there is a straight line between authenticity and a person's ability to project self-confidence when wearing a certain outfit:

"It is about how you carry it rather than in what context and so forth... you can get away with a lot if you have confidence behind you, and that it shines through."

Amanda, Kristoffer, Louise, Erik, and Sigrid specifically say that authenticity in style makes it possible to 'see the person behind it', and indicate that authenticity, again, is linked to individual personality features, regardless of what they entail. This is also the reason why the informants believe that it is better for a person's style to grow organically over time, as opposed to submit it to constantly fluctuating fashion trends. Here, Sigrid explains that it becomes easier to follow trends without diluting authenticity and personality if a person has solid "style base" that he or she can return to. Erik goes to great length when discussing the issue of projecting style and personality. He believes that it is "strange" when people all of sudden switch style, and attributes the issue, in part, to "influencers" and "bloggers". From his perspective, these people make 'radical' style changes on a regular basis, going from a distinct "streetwear look" to looking like "architects". By extension, he then makes the point that they may all be great styles and that these people might know a lot about fashion, but that they do not have a style of their own.

4.2 Relationship to the mainstream

The informants express that being mainstream is highly problematic. In particular, this is rooted in a fear of being considered generic, boring, or even "lacking an own will", as Kristoffer puts is. More so, being mainstream is at odds with what the informants believe to be central pillars in their styles and identities, such as authenticity, uniqueness, and 'being in the know'. Sigrid exemplifies this by claiming that symbolic markers, such as signaling that you are up to date through following trends, are in play "up until the point they become mainstream". Jacob puts forward that 'being mainstream' contradicts his desire to be "difficult" and hard to categorize. Kristoffer adds to this view by drawing a parallel to when he is 'DJing', where he experiences that "you want to play stuff that people like but do not know that they like", because it signals a high degree of knowledge. Erik also means that not being mainstream is related to the very origin of having knowledge:

"When I think about mainstream, I just think of a big shack of sheep that just follows a whistle. [...] I feel that we have become so extremely trained in it right from birth, to constantly follow the flock, to not oppose things. And then, every time you see a person that do something that

transgress that, it indicates that this person has courage, he has knowledge. For he knows what it violates - just being able to oppose it, then he has to know about it."

Several informants stress that being mainstream is therefore not only related to their perception of themselves, but also how they are viewed in the eyes of others. Kristoffer illustrates this perception when responding to whether it is important not to be considered mainstream:

"Yes, it is [important not to be considered mainstream], actually. I think it has to do with that I would assume that people would think less of me if I were perceived as mainstream."

While the informants express similar opinions on the connotations of 'mainstream', some put forward that 'being mainstream' is simply a question of one's surroundings, and thus contradictory to deem inherently 'bad'. For instance, Malte, Sofia, Amanda, and Klara indicate that they might feel mainstream in some contexts, but not in others. Another informant, Erik, expands on this social and place-bound contextuality, by providing an example in which he felt unique in his 'all black outfit' in school, but later during a weekend rave felt "super mainstream" while wearing that same outfit. While some see that their 'own degree of mainstream' is contingent on who they surround themselves with, it appears as 'being mainstream' as a brand holds a pervading sense of 'flatness'.

Although providing some variety in explaining why it is problematic for a brand to be 'mainstream', a recurring theme among the informants is that it 'robs' them of their individuality and originality. Klara, for instance, explains that her perception of herself as 'special' is substantiated through her clothes, and when garments become to widely used, they lose such symbolic functions. In a similar manner, Sigrid recalls having purchased Vans (American skate brand) before her significant others and felt "cool" because of it, only to lose that feeling moments later when everyone else also had them. For Kristoffer, the feeling of disappointment takes a more intangible form. Malte, in contrast, explains similar sentiments more explicitly:

"Supreme [American streetwear brand] was like a skater brand, and it was very engaged with their culture and community. But then like the Kanye-wave started [Kanye West], and Kardashian [Kim Kardashian] started wearing them and I was like "Okay, come on". It is not like underground, skater-cool to have it anymore. And it became boring."

Some informants express similar views, but in more broad terms. Amanda, for instance, explains that a mainstream brand simply holds no expressive function, which becomes an issue when that is a desired role of a clothing item. Jacob, likewise, emphasizes that a brand being mainstream can deprive it of its ability to reflect something about himself in general, and a sense of fashionability in particular. In a similar manner, Louise expresses that a mainstream brand "does not say anything" in terms of symbolism. Karl-Johan somewhat contrasts this view, as he claims that a brand can still be "cool" if it wholeheartedly attempts to stand out, even though the common perception might be that it is mainstream. The informants also stress that mainstream brands are not worthless, but have to be used in line with the limited scope of their purpose. This purpose, as the informants made clear, is as a complimentary item in an outfit, but not as an expressive or symbolic one. Sigrid explains this notion when being asked about what role mainstream brands hold in her style:

"I think it is more basic items. The items I wear when I want to stand out are not H&M's. Rather, it is usually Eytys, or other brands that may be a little smaller."

In light of this, the informants explain that a value-expressive brand justifies a higher price than a 'generic' brand. Some informants expand further on this and express that they commonly use mainstream brands or items for this intended purpose, but not without including at least one value-expressive item. For instance, Sofia sees that she can still feel authentic and unique while using mainstream brands, only that she has to be more "selective" in usage and composition of their items. Malte, in turn, demonstrates this when being asked if he uses mainstream brands, like H&M:

"Yes, I can consume from H&M. But I would never like pick a standout piece from H&M. I buy my white t-shirts and sometimes some underwear and socks and stuff like that. [...] I am not projecting myself through H&M you know. […] I am not like aligning myself with [H&M] cause of white t-shirts, because they are pretty much white t-shirts. But then I am buying for an example an Eytys shoe, and kind of have like black pants, the white t-shirt and the Eytys shoes […]. I am kind of okay with the basics as I have got the Eytys shoes. It is kind of the shoes [Eytys] that is the thing [...]."

Several informants concur with this view, and add to the perception that mainstream brands have a useful, but limited role in their wardrobes. Specifically, limited financial resources motivates the usage of complementary items from generic brands as well. They also attribute this to that 'good style' cannot be judged on a sole item, or even several items viewed separately, but has to be based on the overarching composition and mixing of items and brands. Klara encapsulates this, as she expresses that at the end of the day, what really matters is that people can "combine styles" to make them feel authentic. This also entails that a generic brand which makes no attempts to 'not be mainstream', is judged on a different set of standards than a brand that has ambitions to be 'value-expressive', as Kristoffer argues:

"It is not an issue in case you have a Fruit of the Loom [generic clothing brand] t-shirt and someone else has a similar one, because then it is like, this is only a t-shirt and it is pretty basic. But if you buy something that stands out more, and then see that someone else has it… [...]. The reason you have it is that it should stand out, and if someone else then has it [the same thing] all of a sudden, you do not [stand out] anymore."

4.2.1 Importance of brand authenticity

During the interviews, it became clear that the informants, to different degrees, believe that it is important for brands to be authentic. It also emerged that while they have resembling ideas of what brand authenticity is, they are very fragmented in their view on what conditions apply for a brand to stay authentic over time. In terms of their perception of brand authenticity, the informants, to various extents, emphasize coherency, individuality, and consistency. For instance, Erik stresses that he feels that it is "extremely important" that brands stick to their identity and "remain true" to their values. Similarly, Sofia expresses that she can see that both Louis Vuitton (French high-end fashion brand) and Harley Davidson (American motorcycle brand) can be authentic in their own ways, provided that they stay 'true' to what they 'are'. The informants also attribute this to that they need to know what they 'get' when they are dealing with a brand. Malte explains this notion when being asked whether brands are more confined than consumers in their expressive mobility:

"I think it is much harder for brands [to be elusive] actually because we kind of take the bits and pieces from the brands you know. [...] but if all the styles kind of have multiple meanings, then the mixture would not be so nice. [...] I choose the brands that should combine into my

personality. They should have a clear like "This is what we stand for. You can use it how you want". They should not have multiple meanings."

Amanda expresses a similar sentiment when being asked about if it is important that brands are consistent in what style or values they attempt to convey:

"Yes, I think so. Otherwise there not conveying a uniform picture of what they are or what they want to be associated with and then it becomes like [...] it sort of falls flat."

Louise also means that it is important that it is clear what a brand 'is', because when "you buy a brand, you want to have a part of what they have branded themselves like". She adds that clarity is important, as a brand is typically only "making a guest performance" in her more general style. In line with this reasoning, the informants see brands as 'building blocks' in their styles and identities. As a result, they experience that when it becomes unclear what a brand stands for, it becomes harder to use said brand as a 'building block', after which they are likely to shy away from using it. Erik, for example, suggests that diverging from your values makes it harder for the consumer to understand who you are as a brand. Karl-Johan expands on this and argues that a brand always "has to stay true to its vision", otherwise being at risk of having authenticity "eroded" and becoming "just a brand among others". Then, while informants feel that it is okay, often even a good thing, for themselves and other individuals to be fluid and uncommitted in terms of style, they do not feel that the same freedom applies to brands. Rather, brands, to a high extent, need to establish and stick to a narrative, as Jacob contemplates:

"You [a brand] have to have a story and it has to relate to something, "We make clothes for this segment. You who like this, buy this". [...] and then it might be difficult to jump between different worlds without destroying the identity of the brand. I would not recommend any company to do so, because it is really easy to alienate your customer base. […] "They've changed too much, I don't like what they are anymore. When I bought them it was a completely different thing". [...] so most brands are super distinct, because they have to be. They have to have a clear segment on the market."

Sofia adds a similar perspective:

"[...] if you feel that a brand is getting out of hand, that they don't do the same things anymore [...] then you would feel confused and disappointed. So yes, I guess I do think it is important that a brand follow their path."

Another dimension of being perceived as authentic and consistent over time, that some informants point out, is that it validates symbolic and functional claims in a brand's products. For instance, Kristoffer feels that brand authenticity signals that brands are "doing something they are good at". Sigrid adds that authenticity in a brand helps her to feel confident in the symbolic values she tries to proclaim. Some informants however contrast this view, as they are cynical about the very concept of authenticity. As an example, Erik contends that it is hard for any brand to be authentic, or at least "do their own thing", by questioning "how unique can a shoe really be?". Malte reinforces this sentiment as he means that "any idiot can print a white t-shirt with some random things on". Similarly, Klara shows a similar mistrust by declaring the whole fashion industry as inherently inauthentic. Louise, in view of such reasoning, has a more forgiving attitude in regard to brand authenticity, as highlighted when being asked if it is important for brands to be authentic:

"Yes… however, is anyone who tries to sell something ever real? I do not know. [...] I do not think it has to be authentic, cause it feels like nothing ever is."

The informants also connect brand authenticity to mainstream, in the sense that authenticity is lost when a brand goes mainstream; at least if they have an image of said brand as not being, or not trying to be, mainstream. As Malte, Louise and Sigrid all express, this can entail a sort of 'selling out', which robs the brand of its authenticity. However, the informants have different experiences regarding how Eytys' behavior affected the brand's authenticity. For instance, while Malte felt that Eytys lost authenticity and started "watering out their brand" as soon as they started to move away from "doing their thing" (i.e. producing shoes), Sigrid sees the incorporation of new garments into their product range as a good thing and saw a loss of authenticity only when they started seeking broader segments through the H&M collaboration. In line with Sigrid's perception, Jacob adds that he even felt that Eytys enhanced their authenticity by adding other garments than shoes to their range of products:

"*I am happy that they did it [added more garments], because then they have niched themselves even more. They have chosen an aesthetic, "This is us". They were able to deepen their values.*"

What is important here is whether the expansion of a business feels organic or strained, and whether the brand appears to be sticking to its vision or not. In simple terms, as Malte puts it, "it has to make sense". Karl-Johan expands further on this notion:

"It is important that you have an identity as a brand. However, this does not mean that it needs to be constant. After all, it is something that can change over time. But what is important is that one can justify why this is our identity; that there is something behind it."

The informants also stress that the perceived level of brand authenticity, in view of a collaboration, is highly contingent on how good of a 'match' the two brands are. However, while it is clear that a 'match' is imperative, the informants make different judgments on whether different brands match or not. For instance, Sofia, Klara, and Karl-Johan did not see H&M as a bad match for Eytys, whereas Malte, Amanda, Jacob, and Sigrid felt the opposite. This in turn directly tainted their view of Eytys' authenticity, as being unaffected (Sofia, Klara, and Karl-Johan) or impaired (Malte, Amanda, Jacob, and Sigrid) by the collaboration. One informant Erik, shows a more general aversion against commercially-oriented collaborations between brands, when discussing a previous H&M collaboration with the high-end brand Balmain:

"So it was pretty much like Balmain [French high-end fashion brand] had a clearance. And that it becomes a hype - it is problematic, for [...] I see with the whole fashion industry, that a white t-shirt that you put on letters in a certain order [...] can cause people to go crazy and really, really want it. I guess that is something I hope that businesses start to work against."

Jacob brings up another example in which he means that a brand might have to oppose commercial objectives all together to stay authentic over time:

"Acne [Swedish high-end fashion brand] is a typical example. They started by doing these skinny jeans, and at that point it was a jeans company. "We made Swedish jeans [...] and now we have gone over to something super conceptual, anti-Scandinavian fashion". But that

transition made them cut their jeans collection, which constituted the bulk of their money. They took a financial hit to reach that coolness."

There are also several instances where the informants emphasize that different rules apply for different kind of brands. Klara, Kristoffer, and Sigrid all state that this is dependent on how they perceive the brand. In addition, both Klara and Sigrid go into further detail and explain that they put harder requirements on smaller, more underground brands. Klara likens her reasoning in this matter to the music scene, in which bigger artists, such as Justin Bieber, are given greater leeway to act incoherently, have commercial 'features', and embark on new, ill-conceived musical genres, than indie musicians. She attributes this to that she does not put the same level of involvement in these bigger artists, and that she has higher expectations on the indie artist:

"Yes, there is [an inherently higher level of authenticity in the alternative/indie musician]. Because he does not care about the bigger things, the money, or about being number one and getting the most fans, but instead… what matters to him is only to be able to make his music."

Sigrid voice a similar opinion but uses H&M and Eytys as an example instead:

"Yes, I think they [HM] do [have greater leeway]. They have gotten away with so much [...], I think people are judging them more, but forget it faster. While for Eytys, it takes longer time for that kind of consumer to judge them, because you like them so sharply from the beginning. But once you do, they are probably lost."

4.3 Brand image and important features of Eytys

The informants make a distinction between the Eytys they bought (often several years ago), and the Eytys they see now. They describe the 'old Eytys' - that is, the Eytys they bought into - in very positive terms and as being characterized by an alternative and underground sense of 'coolness'. This is put forward as the most significant feature of Eytys, as it held a strong value-expressive function for the informants. The informants also stress that Eytys, at some point in time, held a social value as well, in that it signaled an awareness of sorts; a sense of 'okay, this person knows what is going on, they have got it'. Sigrid, for instance, says that it was this 'coolness' she wanted to tap into by using Eytys. Amanda recalls going back to her hometown, Gothenburg, and feeling that her Eytys enabled her to stand out, as they still had not left the

‘hip’ neighborhoods of Stockholm. Jacob fills in with a similar description of what Eytys ‘is’, or at least ‘was’:

“Eytys is like super-niched, they want to be really reputable and very niche. But now they have become super big. Much of their value lies in the fact that they were very cool, very difficult.”

While the informants have a relatively clear picture of what Eytys stands for, they do not attribute this to what Eytys say about themselves in terms of ‘values’. In their mind, “actions speak louder than words”. Instead then, the origin of this perception among the informants, is primarily stemming from the aesthetics, marketing, and the user image. Specifically, the high white sole of their sneaker ‘Mother’ and ‘Doja’ is repeatedly cited as creating this view. Malte, for instance, says that he strongly associated the high sole with Eytys, to the extent that it ‘became their thing’. Jacob voices a similar sentiment, as he feels that their “bulky” design made it “sort of a statement” and “more daring than a regular Converse”. Sigrid also claims that her assessment of Eytys is more guided by their design, than the company’s key values or ‘mission’. Kristoffer draws similar conclusions:

“They had the trademark of having sort of a Vans-sole that was even a little higher and so they did all their shoes after that. [...] but it feels like they have a product that really describes their brand.”

Several informants claim that, even though not using the sneakers with more ‘unconventional’ designs themselves, such as ‘Jet’ or ‘Angel’, the presence of these models in the product range adds to their perception of the brand. Karl-Johan, for instance, means that these “outlandish” designs help drag the symbolic ‘coolness’ of the more ‘conventional’ models that he wears. Louise adds that she thinks that these models have put Eytys in a “glorified fashion bubble”. Jacob goes as far as to suggest that the ‘Angel’ shoes are actually “what Eytys wants to be”, and that the more commercially viable items are only a means to an end. In effect, they also make a symbolic distinction between different models, especially when it comes to what they read into other ‘wearers’. For instance, Kristoffer sees that the ‘Mother’ model, in recent time, does not express anything as anyone can wear it. Louise fortifies this perception as she believes that the ‘Mother’ shoe has reached mainstream and “does not say anything” in terms of symbolism anymore. She adds that, in light of this, she has “left ‘Mother’ because everyone is wearing it”. Sigrid expands further on this view, by contrasting ‘Mother’ with ‘Jet’:

"No, I do not think so anymore [that 'Mother' holds any symbolic value]. Rather, it is a regular shoe that you have seen many times. While [someone who wears] a 'Jet' [...], I think that is someone with more style. [...] it feels like someone who is more aware of their style, or unique rather."

Once again, 'being mainstream' appears problematic for the informants as Eytys, and in particular their more popular items such as 'Mother', has lost its 'coolness' and expressive function. While some can still attest to that they like Eytys shoes because they still look good or are comfortable, others have a hard time seeing the usefulness of the brand after having lost its symbolic value. The degree of how important an informant feels that the symbolic features of Eytys are, relates to their involvement and perceived prestige in using the brand. Malte, for instance, recalls being a very early adopter of Eytys, even influencing his friends to start using it, and as a result feels that the symbolic expression is central in Eytys' purpose. Amanda, similarly, claims that she no longer can "express herself through Eytys", and that the brand therefore has lost its value. In addition, as Jacob argues, all value pertaining to 'being in the know' through Eytys is lost in light of that "H&M opened their PR-portals and said like "Look at this!"." Sofia, on the other hand, indicates that she bought Eytys more than anything because it was a good-looking shoe, and that it does not change even if they become more popular. Erik and Kristoffer also contrast this view, as they are not that concerned with the symbolic value of Eytys.

Other informants express a more moderate view on the loss of symbolic value. Sigrid, for instance, while experiencing that 'Mother' has lost its symbolic value, still sees that they can hold a purpose in her style. She does however emphasize that, in light of this symbolic transition, the 'Mother' model can be used as a generic brand, but not hold the function as a 'standout' or expressive item in her outfit. For Louise, this entails a conflict between liking an item, but not seeing it as symbolically enhancing, in which the lack of symbolic value, to her own discontent, ultimately prevails:

"The image would become more mainstream [if many people started wearing Eytys]. Yes, absolutely. And then they also lose what we talked about before, that one is feeling unique. It is probably the self-image that would be damaged if you saw that everyone else had it too. But

at the same time, if you like a garment very much it should not decide… but it still does I suppose."

Kristoffer adds another dimension of what he feels is a negative development of Eytys brand authenticity, namely that they have diverged from 'their thing' and started, opportunistically, copying others:

"I see Eytys as the ones who made these high soles - and that is it. The rest have just been cherry-picked from a trend. They followed like Balenciaga [Spanish high-end streetwear brand] who released their dad-shoes... [...]. They [Eytys] just said "Okay, there is a market for chunky shoes. Let's release them here now"."

4.4 Perceived differences between Eytys and H&M

The informants view Eytys and H&M as two fundamentally different brands. For them, Eytys is a "cool" and "alternative" brand, made for the "selected few". Karl-Johan adds that they are "not positioned as a commercial thing", but rather underground and "niched against subcultures". Louise reinforces this notion as she perceives that Eytys does not care about reaching out to everyone, but rather that they want you to be a "special kind of person to buy Eytys". Sigrid also concedes to this view when discussing the typical Eytys consumer:

"It is kind of a younger generation who are aware and likes other Swedish fashion brands. [...] aware in terms of their style, I think. Like someone who has an interest in clothes and maybe Scandinavian fashion."

In contrast, H&M is a more stigmatized brand, for some "representing the worst of the fashion industry". They are also widely regarded as being typically mainstream, in the sense that anyone can buy from H&M. Malte becomes descriptive and uses terms such as "dull", "square", and "lacking juice" when describing them. Others are a bit more moderate, but it becomes clear that H&M stands in stark contrast to Eytys. Kristoffer adds to this notion, by connecting Eytys to a person that puts effort into how he or she looks and likes, whereas the H&M person is basically a "basic bitch". Erik makes a similar comparison, by describing Eytys as someone who sits by themselves and make up their own ideas, whereas H&M is merely looking at what others are doing and then copying that in an inferior manner. Jacob goes as far

to describe them as “total opposites of each other”, and expands on what he views as their respective audiences:

“They [HM] want everyone. They really want Maria from Norrköping [small town in Sweden], 80 years, and they want like Timmy, 5 years, from Zimbabwe. [...] and then it is sort of like, they have no customer - they have all the customers. And Eytys wants a very small scope of customers. So really, they are super different in every way.”

In light of this, several feel that Eytys and H&M are a bad match and that Eytys’ brand has been diluted because of it. Malte, for instance, means that “of course your allowed to expand”, but that you have to do it in a way that “aligns with your brand”. Jacob adds that he thought Eytys could have achieved similar business goals ‘organically’, “if they only had some more patience”, which would have been much better. However, some feel that their difference does not necessarily mean that they are incompatible with each other. This is attributed to that, while being considered generic, H&M still makes attempts to be fashionable and have had similar collaborations with other ‘niche brands’ before. The informants also express, in generally negative sentiments, that over time, Eytys has become much more like H&M. This becomes apparent as informants, in regard to their self-concept, could identify with Eytys previously, but not today. Amanda for instance, sees that while Eytys at one point even expressed something she hoped to become, today it stands for something she almost refrains from being associated with. Jacob expands on how he perceives this new direction of Eytys:

“Eytys has now become mainstream, like they made this collaboration with H&M, which I do not like very much. They have shown to me that "We want to belong to this group. We want everyone to know us, everyone should be able to wear our shoes”. Which in my head does not reflect their values. That is not how I perceive that they see themselves.”

4.4.1 Brand user image

In reference to Eytys’ brand user image, as mentioned before, the participants see users as “aware”, “niche”, “difficult”, and “cool”. In light of this, some informants have used Eytys aspirationally, in the sense that they bought it to ‘become’ someone else: a cooler, more difficult person. One informant, Kristoffer, even claims that the sole reason he bought Eytys in the first place, was to align his identity with a coworker whose style he looked up to. However,

the brand's overall expansion together with their collaboration with H&M, have not only begun to affect how the informants perceive 'brand users', but also the brand itself.

It is apparent that Eytys' brand user image is highly influential with regard to the overall 'brand impression'. Malte, Amanda, Klara, Jacob, Kristoffer, Karl-Johan, Louise, and Sigrid managed to produce specific groups of people, or personality types, that would damage their perception of the brand if they started wearing it. Malte, Kristoffer, Karl-Johan, and Louise 'fear' groups that have unhealthy relationships to either 'obedience', 'sloppiness', or 'expenditure'. Both Kristoffer and Louise believe that it would be problematic if 'flashy' people started wearing Eytys, whereas Malte and Karl-Johan, albeit having different outlooks, see 'degree of seriousness' as potentially damning. Regardless of perspective, the informants 'fear' that people who do not 'understand' the symbolic value of the brand start using it. Karl-Johan means that "Paradise Hotel people" [reality TV show] are all about "surface" and thus would not understand what the brand stands for. Louise shares this sentiment but uses 'flashy' people instead, and argues that they do not know about Eytys' "values". For Malte, having his style questioned by such people even confirms that he is "getting it". Jacob adds to this view by exemplifying how a rejection from someone who he did not stylistically align with, on the contrary, functioned as a confirmation that Eytys was cool:

"When I first walked around in my Doja [Eytys shoe], which is that big model, my mother was like "What the fuck are you wearing? What are you doing, you look like a clown." Then I was just like: "I love them, they are so cool"."

Some informants began to reflect on why they believe that it an issue that certain groups start to use Eytys. Kristoffer adds one perspective while reasoning about seeing a 12-year-old with the same garment as himself:

"It becomes a confirmation that you yourself are following a stream, rather than being able to deviate from it. It may be, just that you are disappointed with... your choice or yourself."

Sigrid provides a different explanation, as accentuated when she reflects about why she does not like seeing her younger nephews wearing Eytys:

"It is probably because we do not have the same style to begin with. When I had Eytys, I do not think that they thought they were so nice to begin with. And then as Eytys got bigger and they had a collaboration with H&M, they also started to reconcile with the idea of a thick sole. And then when the entire family comes home with Eytys, I do not feel unique anymore, and then it is not as fun."

As indicated before, the informants' negative perception of 'going mainstream' is also strongly related to the new brand users, which such developments induce. Specifically, they see this increased availability and presence of a brand as 'opening the gates' to some of the previously mentioned negative reference groups. In effect, Sofia experiences that it is harder to use the brand to claim a belonging to "this kind of aware, inner-city person", if teenagers from the countryside are wearing the same brand.

For Sigrid, this often entails "having to find a new brand" when people who she does not consider to have the same style or can identify with, wear the same clothes as she does. Amanda adds that she is somewhat conflicted by the fact that the garments are still as good looking, but if she wants to express something with her style, it becomes highly problematic if she is wearing the same brands as 12-year-olds. She even, somewhat jokingly, argues that the best way for a brand to stay cool over time is to have "an age limit". Erik, in contrast, indicates a more forgiving view given that brands hold little actual power over who buys them, as highlighted in his view of Eytys' audience:

"[...] Eytys is big enough of a brand, that they can no longer control who buys them. Rather, some people who have poor style will use them and some who have better style will use them."

5 Data analysis

In the following section, we seek to analyze and nuance the findings of our research, in the form of a narrative that descends from the paper's theoretical framework. Initially, we discuss the general state of meaning in the culturally constituted world (i.e. postmodern society), as well as how hipsters can be viewed from a post-subcultural perspective. We then look at how the hipster's self-concept is evoked by assessing identity objectives, how subversive consumers choose to frame their pursuit of authentic expressions, and which tools are used for reaching identified objectives. Self-concept motives are then used as a stepping-stone to facilitate the discussion about what conditions subversive consumers put on value-expressive brands. Here, we look at the role of authenticity and how it should be looked upon in the context of hipsters, and ultimately how contradictory behavior of nonconformist brands (i.e. Eytys' commercial transition) is evaluated. Insights are consolidated in the conclusion, under theoretical and managerial implications.

5.1 Crisis of meaning in the culturally constituted world

As presented in the literature review, postmodern society is in part 'plagued' by the crisis of meaning, as suggested by Moore (2004). We find clear traces of this in our data and in how consumers sometimes struggle to comprehend the state of certain value-expressive items and concepts such as authenticity in relation to consumption. Our findings also show that knowledge is contextual, which corresponds with the postmodern outlook (Barker, 2004, p.158), and that it influences how expressive consumption manifests. When looking at these insights through McCracken's (1986) theories pertaining to how meanings is transferred from the culturally constituted world to consumer goods, we see that the crisis of meaning affects how individuals ultimately view the meaning of commercial products, which in our study relates to Eytys items. Consumers are attentive to consumer trends and reference groups, and try to make sense of what they mean in relation to the value-expressive function of goods, where authenticity holds a prominent role, as discussed before (e.g. Athwal & Harris, 2018; Beverland, 2009; Holt, 2002; Napoli et al., 2014; Schallehn et al., 2014).

In essence, the commodification of meaning in the value-expressive product category of fashion, which in this case centers around authenticity, has made consumers start to question what the construct actually means and how it can be leveraged in terms of identity construction. In our research, informants discuss whether or not it is even possible to be 'real' or 'special' nowadays, and that commercialism and consumerism undermine people's ability to achieve

authenticity in their identities. The meaning of authenticity in the culturally constituted world is then very much similar to how it is described in relation to postmodernism as a whole (Holt, 2002). It is both highly subjective and context-based (Barker, 2004, p.157-158), as well as contingent on changes in consumer trends (Michael, 2015). Thus, the crisis of meaning becomes a fundamental consideration in our study when assessing identity-related objectives and 'tools' that consumers use to achieve them.

5.2 Hipsters as a postmodern subculture

If a subcultural expression loses its meaning once commodified (Schiele & Venkatesh, 2016), what happens to subcultures in a reality where 'everything' is subject to commodification? One apparent development is the emergence of the hipster. In many ways, the hipster captures how subcultures are inclined to become movements without 'meaning', largely resembling the dominant culture. The desire to stand out from mainstream society is nevertheless still prevalent, and cultural capital is assigned and gathered according to certain standards. However, much like Muggleton (2000, p.147) contested about the post-subculturalist, there seems to be no temporal logic or consistent reference points. In a true postmodern fashion then, subcultural association can be made equivalent to a more shallow and individualistic form of 'subversive style'. Because as it appears, subversive aspirations still permeate youth culture, but more so as a stylistic means to achieve an individual expression. The hipster, as a representation of a postmodern subculture, thus reflect the contradictory measures adopted to manage a confusing and contradictory reality.

Accordingly, our findings clearly suggest that the crisis of meaning have rendered subcultural identity formation primarily concerned with self-expression and individual desires. Similar to previous findings then (e.g. Bennett, 1999; Clark, 2003; Muggleton, 2000), collective subcultural group formations appear to be inherently at odds with the postmodern emphasis on individuality, making the very concept of subcultures less applicable. In light of this, we see that the hipster's subversive consumption can rather be thought of as a reference group association than an adherence to a 'hipster subculture'; 'being hipster' is not an identity that is actively communicated, as opposed to ravers, skaters, or punkers. This distinction is further reinforced by that our informants' significant others, or ingroup members, are not cited as 'hipsters', but only other 'esoteric' individuals. More so, this 'esotericism' is highly elusive and do not follow a rigid set of subcultural 'hipster rules'. There is in other words no sense of a joint ideology or shared identity, instead, association is merely a means to an end to transfer

symbolism. Nevertheless, much like previous notions of meaning transfer (e.g. Beverland, 2009; Escalas & Bettman, 2005; McCracken, 1986), these 'esoteric others' hold great influence over how the informants perceive style in general, and brands in particular. Specifically, it becomes important to differentiate themselves from uninitiated outgroup members (i.e. the mainstream) by refusing styles, and sometimes brands, that are associated with said consumers. For this reason, brand user image becomes highly influential for the hipster when making evaluations in the marketplace.

5.3 Understanding the hipster's ambitions

5.3.1 Identity objectives

The empirical data pertaining to expressive consumption objectives largely corresponds with previous findings (e.g. Holt, 2002; Michael, 2015; Muggleton, 2000; Polhemus, 1996), in that postmodern consumers seem to value individuality as an expression of authenticity above all else, and tend to behave in such a way that makes it possible to 'achieve' such identity attributes. Specifically, it appears as that not being like everyone else is, through various mediating tools and expressions, strongly related to conveying an 'enactment of one's true self' (i.e. authenticity) (Franzese, 2009, p.98), as it signals that one eschews external 'corrupting' pressures (e.g. Manthiou et al., 2018; Michael, 2015; Schallehn et al., 2014). The findings also expose a more nuanced outlook on what role other desirable personality traits, such as 'esoteric', 'alternative', and 'cool', actually play in relation to post-subcultural consumers' identity construction, and hipsters especially. Looking at our data, these characteristics primarily seem to be used as ways of fueling individuality and, by extension, authenticity.

Moreover, the endless and emblematic pursuit of authenticity is just that: endless. The reason that it is endless, and often manifests as inconsistent and contradictory behavior, as proposed by both Holt (2002) and Michael (2015), is due to the fact that meaning is neither static nor objective (Barker, 2004, p.158; Moore, 2004). In view of this, it becomes clear that there might be a contradiction in the feelings and attitudes of post-subcultural consumers on a broader level. Indeed, how can authenticity be their foremost identity related objective when 'staying true to oneself', according to them, entails remaining relatively static in one's taste, mentality, and appearance? The issue arises from the fact the pursuit of the authenticity is such in nature (i.e. dynamic) that it requires consumers to 'adjust' their behavior (i.e. inconsistency). This insight lays the foundation for how consumers then frame their identity objectives to make them as plausible as possible.

5.3.1.1 Framing of identity objectives

At the outset, the findings above largely correspond to earlier understandings of how post-subcultural identity objectives are enacted through individuality (Michael, 2015), making this the utmost cultural criterion (Muggleton, 2000, p.47). In light of this however, we also find that such dynamics bring forth a deeper understanding of what 'strategic' options the post-subcultural consumers seem to have at their disposal. At its core, what can successfully guide consumers in the formation of their identities is either using inner truths to construct their 'individuality', and by extension authenticity, or simply shying away from being like everyone else (i.e. not being mainstream). This follows the intuitive logic that 'being mainstream' is fundamentally opposed to any form of idiosyncrasy and thus authenticity.

5.3.1.1.1 Chasing authenticity versus escaping mainstream

Previous research has emphasized self-authentication as a central endeavor and 'coping mechanism' of postmodern consumers (e.g. Beverland, 2009; Beverland & Farrelly 2010; Rose & Wood, 2005). Although finding substantial evidence of this in our own research, we would argue that it is important not to underestimate the influence of 'mainstream' in the 'behavioral equation' of postmodern consumer culture. As discussed before, the mainstream is an important reference point for post-subcultural consumers, such as hipsters, when evaluating different consumption alternatives (e.g. Cagle, 1995; le Grand, 2018; Saulo et al., 2013). However, this does not 'merit', on its own, that the 'fear' of mainstream triumphs the 'longing' for authenticity, as the concepts, albeit being polar opposites, are very much interdependent. The empirical data shows that post-subculturalists often use mainstream to describe what is not authentic, which means that both concepts can guide 'nonconformist behavior', i.e. chasing authenticity and escaping mainstream ultimately lead to the same thing. However, what makes mainstream interesting as a determinant behavioral factor is that it seems much easier for consumers to define, which also makes it much easier to use as a 'directory measurement' in consumption.

In comparison to authenticity 'stemming' from the 'enactment of one's 'true self', it appears that the mainstream does not have to be negotiated to the same extent. In our data, there is evidence that consumers have a clear picture of what 'constitutes' mainstream. Even though it

is problematic to exactly pinpoint why this is, again looking at the data, one can argue that the relative ease in which the informants talk about how items have become visibly more common, also creates conditions to put 'brand developments' in relation to static concepts such as time and quantity. In essence, one can argue that it is easier to quantify 'mainstream tendencies' than 'inner authenticity measurements'. As such, post-subcultural consumers may be more inclined to change styles in tandem with mainstream developments, as opposed to seeing what is authentic on the basis of individual preferences.

The fragmentation of postmodern subcultures also helps to understand why rejecting the mainstream, rather than finding individuality, is the most sensible way for the hipster to frame their identity objectives. When fulfilling a subversive identity, authenticity is contingent on 'others' in form of the dominant culture (Cagle, 1995, p.45; Muggleton, 2000, p.145). A demarcation against such an entity can either take form of embracing what is not mass culture (i.e. one's subculture), or rejecting what is. More specifically, Hogg et al. (2009, p.156) emphasize that "*...the undesired self represents the co-ordinates for the real self...*", which means that the rejection of culturally charged consumption can be as effective as the endorsement of said consumption. For the hipster, since there is no clear or stable understanding of what makes up the features, commitments, or activities of their 'subculture', it is much easier to substantiate their subversive identity by having a starting point in steering clear of mass culture. Even more so, if there is anything that ultimately unites the hipster, it is merely an aspiration not be mainstream, making this the basis of their existence and hence the only way to be sure that one is 'real' or more so: authentic. In other words, if the very foundation of authenticity is self-fulfillment and one's personal identity descends from not being mainstream, it naturally follows that authenticity is achieved by not being mainstream.

In view of this, the imperative 'enactment of one's true self' will, for pragmatic reasons, be directly guided by refusing the mainstream. Essentially, much like Muggleton (2000, p.147) stipulates, authenticity seems to have no "*...objective basis or temporal logic….*" In contrast, the concept of mainstream, to a substantially greater extent, holds clear points of reference and standards for comparison in consumers' minds at any given time. This can likely be attributed to that, as previously established (Saulo et al., 2013), consumers have an intuitive perception of mainstream. As a result, mainstream works as a distinct, almost binary state that becomes highly relevant in a reality where nothing is coherent or emphatic. Needless to say, mainstream is also highly contextual, but unlike the process of constructing individuality, it becomes clear

what they need to do to feel authentic (i.e. refrain from it). Specifically, this correspond to how consumers feel a need to achieve mastery over their environment (Schiele & Venkatesh, 2016). Our findings thus suggest that their relationship to 'the mainstream' might provide a better picture of what drives expressive consumption of contemporary consumers. It also follows that, as evident by our data, the degree to which consumers are at odds with the mainstream largely corresponds to how 'subversive' they want to be perceived.

5.3.2 Identity tools

Achieving authenticity, regardless of if it departs in the 'enactment of one's true self' or staying clear of the mainstream, is connected to knowledge, and more specifically how it is leveraged. It seems that cultural capital, which originates from knowing the meaning behind consumer goods, can stem from specific symbolic items, as opposed to 'complete' subcultural expressions that previously helped to explain concepts such as 'being in the know' (Michael, 2015). This is also a reason why post-subculturalists have a certain degree of autonomy with regard to their fashion styles. As long as items, such as an Eytys sneaker, allow for personal, symbolic, and expressive meaning to be constructed, they can be used together with other, less 'symbolically charged' goods to project authenticity in one's identity, which corresponds with statements by Muggleton (2000, p.146) and Michael (2015). The 'mixing of styles' is a testament to this to this phenomenon, where post-subculturalists value personified looks that incorporate 'personally significant' items. In essence, individuals leverage their knowledge to mix styles that can project authenticity, which in turn corresponds with 'style surfing' (Polhemus, 1996, p.17).

Returning to the discussion about the role of mainstream in the pursuit of authenticity, we find it meaningful, again, to look at knowledge in relation to the commodification of goods (i.e. mainstream). Specifically, Michael's (2015) description of why it is problematic, from an authenticity perspective, to adhere to trends largely corresponds with the findings of our research. However, where Michael (2015) talks about trendiness and the search for novelty overshadowing people's true expression, it is also relevant to look at the issue on the basis of contextual knowledge. In our data, the value of knowledge, which can ultimately be used to project authenticity, is contingent on what other people know. This is where contextual knowledge, which in essence describes 'being in the know', and trends come to an 'existential head'. When the meaning of a cultural expression begins to 'trend', it goes from being

contextual, and esoteric, (i.e. relatively subjective) to mainstream (i.e. relatively objective), and thus defaults on what makes it relevant to begin with.

From this perspective, contextual knowledge, as a tool for achieving identity objectives, is greatly influenced by new means of gathering information about style. The presence of social media, as noted in our empirical data, has changed the conditions of contextual knowledge. Today, people have better access to information, which in turn means that it is more difficult for subversive consumers' knowledge to remain contextual, and thus useful in reference to identity creation. Thus, although working in tandem, the quest for contextual knowledge and symbolically meaningful goods might depart in the realization of emerging mainstream tendencies within 'currently' consumed products, instead of 'impulsive explorations' for meaning.

5.3.3 The hipster's search for ideals

The case of Eytys highlights how self-congruity motives can help to understand consumers' relative liking of a brand, similar to that of prior research (e.g. Graeff, 1996; Sirgy, 1982, 2018). In essence, the post-subcultural consumer uses 'not being mainstream', disguised as authenticity, as a way to evolve and validate their self-image, both on a private and social level. As a result, the stigmatization of mainstream permeates both their actual and ideal self-image, which directly influence their purchase motives and, in turn, brand selection. Specifically, it becomes clear that consumers at some point in time have used Eytys, then perceived as 'alternative' and 'cool', to verify or evoke similar traits in themselves. This reinforces previous notions stipulating that, in regard to fashion, all dimensions of self-congruity are in play (Anand & Kaur, 2018; Liu et al., 2012)

Following a self-congruity logic (Sirgy, 2018), this entails that a brand perceived as mainstream cannot substantiate any dimension of the hipster's self-concept, and is thus unlikely to be used for that purpose. However, stylistic trajectories appear to elusive, and cultural surrounding too fast paced for 'mainstream' to be used as a consistent benchmark over time. Rather, as the cultural constitutions that form 'mainstream' are in constant flux, the hipster's self-concept dimensions are as well. This poses a significant challenge for brands as, while the need for self-congruity remains imperative, what might verify or enhance the subversive consumers self-concept today likely will not do so tomorrow.

Our informants intuitive tendency to answer questions on the basis of how they want to be perceived, rather than what they 'are', suggests that the crisis of meaning influences the relative prevalence of their self-concept dimensions as well. Essentially, we believe that this attests to that the consumers are perplexed both by how to view themselves, and how others see them, as the very foundation of such 'actual' constructs are arbitrary and enigmatic given their postmodern environment. Basically then, as the actual self (actual self-image and actual social self-image) descends from 'this is who I am', their identity objectives appear to be less attached to such dimensions of self-congruity. However, the post-subcultural consumers can visualize what they want to be and how they want to appear in the eyes of others (i.e. ideal self-image and ideal social self-image), that is, not mainstream. We suggest that this is likely to influence the hipster's relative enactment of self-congruity motives, following the rationale that certain factors can serve to induce different dimensions of self-congruity, to varying degrees (Onkvisit & Shaw, 1987; Sirgy & Su, 2000). Specifically, this instinct to turn to ideals when talking about oneself, indicates that self-esteem and social approval motives are especially prevalent for the hipster. This also corresponds to that consumption characterized by high conspicuousness, such as the hipster's primary identity tool (i.e. style), will make ideal congruence more influential (Graeff, 1996).

5.4 Matchmaking conditions between hipsters and brands

Following these attitudinal and behavioral characteristics, it appears fundamentally hard to inhabit brand image positions that the post-subcultural consumer will deem congruent, at least over time. That is, their postmodern cynicism, fluid identities, and nonconformist aspirations add up to highly contradictory and elusive standards and ideals of what a brand should be. However, these findings contribute to the understanding of how post-subcultural consumers conceptualize symbolism in their identity formation and, by extension, develop brand image preferences (i.e. matchmaking conditions). Specifically, we see that, much like Napoli et al. (2014) suggest, consumers, in view of this cultural reality, nevertheless have a strong thirst for authenticity in brands. From the perspective of the post-subculturalist, albeit lacking a completely uniform definition, a brand appears authentic when it 'feels' consistent in its endeavor of capturing and reflecting desired traits such as nonconformity.

Similar to previous accounts then (e.g. Athwal & Harris, 2018; Beverland, 2009; Napoli et al., 2014; Schallehn et al., 2014), hipsters deem authenticity highly important when assessing both the functional and symbolic value of a brand. More so, our findings largely correspond to

Schallehn's et al. (2014) statements, in the sense that authenticity, as seen from the perspective of consumers, stems from a coherent brand identity that evades corrupting pressures, such as pandering to the latest trends. In light of this, brand authenticity also seems to hold a pragmatic value for the consumer as it becomes easier to arrive at a desired 'style-mix' with consistent 'ingredients', rather than elusive ones.

5.4.1 Negotiating brand usage

Another important insight regarding the hipster's relationship to viable brand matches, is that their fundamental reversion against being mainstream does not mean that their consumption is confined to items that they do not consider mainstream. This distinction is imperative, because it draws a clear line between the different functions of a 'generic brand' and a value-expressive brand, and adds to previous notions on how subversive consumers recontextualize items (Cagle, 1995, p.45), successfully incorporate different styles (Andes, 1998, p.213; Muggleton, 2000, p.146), and rationalize usage of commercial brands (Michael, 2015; Muggleton, 2000, p.147). Specifically, even though generic brands cannot satisfy value-expressive needs on their own (Escalas & Bettman, 2005), it becomes clear that post-subculturalists consume them anyways. This seems to descend from the fact that consumers take symbolic ownership over conventional items by incorporating them in, holistically seen, individual appearances (Michael, 2015; Muggleton, 2000, p.147). However, we see that the use of mainstream brands pertains a to more tangible dimension as well, namely, limited financial resources.

From a financial perspective, mainstream brands can have a complementary, yet significant, purpose in the post-subculturalist's style, given that they are considered relatively cheap. In contrast, as value-expression is of the utmost importance when addressing identity needs, brands with such functions are given greater resources. However, if a brand loses its value-expressive function of not being mainstream, it loses its ability to cater to such needs. The brand can then still be used as a complementary item, but consumers will have a hard time justifying its price premium, rendering the motivation to purchase said brand substantially weakened. In other words, if a value-expressive brand loses its value-expressive function, the incentives to consume it are more or less annihilated, as it cannot adhere to the financial reasons of using mainstream brands, nor can it be used to reflect or sustain one's identity.

5.4.2 When brands ask for trouble

Our study on Eytys clearly suggests that a commercial transition of a value-expressive brand is not looked upon favorably by those who consume it to project an image of nonconformity and authenticity. Negative attitudes can be linked to the perception that the brand 'sells out' to mainstream interests; a 'state' that is at odds with central pillars of their identity and style. Essentially, Eytys' nonconformist, and thus authentic, brand image, which has facilitated congruence, is impaired by the brand's newly found commercial setting. As suggested by the informants, this became particularly problematic as the means of Eytys 'commercial transition' were not coherent with the brand's identity, and thus appeared as strained and opportunistic. This situation, where the 'mental alignment' between consumers and brands goes from being congruent to incongruent, provides rich insights about how post-subcultural consumers view the role of authenticity in brands and, by extension, brand image.

The commercial transition has substantially diluted the brand's symbolic value, at least in the studied consumer group. This attests to previous findings of the paradoxical nature of running a commercial business operation while attempting to carry a certain symbolism (Pace, 2015; Yakimova & Beverland, 2005). As became apparent in our study, this is especially problematic for alternative, value-expressive brands that, to a greater extent, are expected to be unconcerned with 'popularity' and 'greedy' financial incentives. However, our informants ultimately indicated an understanding, even a somewhat reluctant acceptance, of that commercial businesses need to adhere to commercial objectives.

They did however make it clear that such 'acceptance' is contingent on that brands thoughtfully and gradually implement changes so that it feels coherent and thus, 'organic'. Much like what Schallehn et al. (2014) found, such an approach seems to reduce the cognitive dissonance between the brand's past and present behavior. This also follows from that, much like Holt (2002) contested, in a postmodern reality, consumers have had to come to terms with that everything is under capitalism's supreme rule. If brands then instead are viewed as inherently commercial entities, what seems to matter to the consumer is that they at least appear idiosyncratic and coherent, thereby facilitating their applicability as cultural resources. Once again, this corresponds to Holt's (2002) notion that what remains within the disposal of consumers' authenticity requirements, is that a brand projects an unstrained 'evolution' and intrinsic interest in their products.

Another issue that surfaces, in light of a commercial transition, is the reconfiguration of brand users it entails. This dimension of what consumers read into brands is arguably even harder to control, given that it is an external development, yet, as Sirgy (2018) stipulates, it may hold a greater influence on if consumers deem a brand a 'match'. As became apparent in Eytys collaboration with H&M, the substantial enhancement of 'outgroup' consumers' accessibility made several consumers discredit Eytys' symbolic value all together. Specifically, seeing Eytys items worn by uninitiated reference groups, such as older family members or teenagers, robbed our informants of their sense of esoterism and more so, authenticity. That is, they knew that they did not want to be mainstream and, in effect, when they saw Eytys on what they perceived as typical 'mainstream reference points' (e.g. teenagers, parents, business students) they instinctively felt that they no longer wanted to associate with their symbolism (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). As a result of said development, it also became substantially harder for them to envision a match between their self-concept and Eytys. For the subversive consumer then, a commercial collaboration is detrimental as it reflects that a brand is accepting, even encouraging, the incorporation of unappealing brand users, thus diluting its sense of exclusiveness (e.g. Muggleton, 2000; Schiele & Venkatesh, 2016; Thornton, 1995).

5.4.3 Aesthetics as an 'olive branch'

It is apparent that subversive consumers use commercial activities as a condition when evaluating value-expressive brands, and that such endeavors are not looked upon favorably. There are however other conditions that can help to maintain congruence in times of consumer 'skepticism'. In our study, Eytys was generally perceived as 'alternative', 'cool', and 'hipster', traits that all help the brand to project an 'authentic aura'. These terms were also used to describe (at least before the collaboration with H&M) the people who use the brand and thus, just by looking at statements by the company from our case description, it seems like their brand user image corresponds with what Eytys wants to convey, which is that their users are alternative and that consumers can achieve similar attributes by using the brand.

What is interesting is that most attributed these characteristics to the brand's aesthetics more than anything else. The informants liked to talk about the brand's more 'outlandish' items, such as the 'Angel' and 'Jet' sneakers (see appendix A), even though they do not use them themselves, and agreed that the brand would lose much of its authentic appeal without them. The popularity of models like 'Mother' (see appendix A) and the negative impact that is has on the brand's image, is partially thwarted by the its overall aesthetics, which stem from its less

popular models. Specifically then, it seems like the brand's more 'experiential' designs provide 'solitude' for its users as it becomes more common (i.e. mainstream); something that reassures subversive consumers that the brand is still alternative and suitable for their identity needs.

The 'conditional status' of other areas of value-expressive brands are by no means uninteresting to discuss, but they are more difficult to assess. Not only because we have limited insight into our case brand's actual strategies, but also because people seem to have relatively vague ideas about concepts such as brand values in general. For example, none of the informants had a clear idea of what Eytys' stand for, on the basis of explicitly communicated cultural beliefs. This suggests that nonconformist values (i.e. condition for value-expressive function) alone cannot facilitate anti-mainstream perceptions to the same extent as aesthetics. To put it differently, a fashion brand that only sells products with 'conventional' designs will still have a hard time shaping favorable perceptions, even if it actively communicates the 'right ideals'.

Nonetheless, the case brand's aesthetics are in the end a consequence of its internal culture and values (Kapferer, 2008, p.184). Moreover, these findings are by no stretch of the imagination universal. We would argue that fashion, yet again, poses distinctly different conditions than other types of goods. The mere fact that fashion today primarily concerns visuals, means that physique, on the basis of aesthetics, becomes inherently important. Value-expressive brands that seek to leverage other attributes would arguably provide alternative conditions.

5.4.4 Nothing lasts forever, especially today

As highlighted by informants' descriptions of some models' symbolic evolution, such as 'Mother', culturally charged items are also struggling with general temporal logics. In this example, informants described that 'Mother' had, at its arrival a couple of years ago, both felt and appeared normbreaking and alternative with its high sole and experimental design. However, as more people got used to them, other brands started appropriating the design and it made its way into the 'wrong crowds', 'Mother' began to feel mundane, which to some degree deteriorated the sneaker's value-expressive function. In other words, items that at some point hold 'subversive authenticity' and an alternative expression, can over time lose such capabilities in tandem with that the dominant culture starts 'accepting', commodifying, and ultimately, incorporating them into their own styles (e.g. Moore, 2004; Muggleton, 2000; Schiele & Venkatesh, 2016; Thornton, 1995). As it appears then, all fashion items are being

subject to this inevitable cultural reality, regardless of how authentic, original, or nonconformist they initially appeared.

These logics are by no means new; similar dynamics could be spotted even in Veblen's (1899/2000) ‘trickle down’ reasoning. However, in postmodern times, it seems as these developments have embarked on a new path, which entails significant challenges for both the subversive consumer and the nonconformist brand. Specifically, the pace of transformation from resistance to convention happens at an unprecedented speed, which likely can be attributed to the commodification of everyday life together with the globalization, digitalization, and the democratization of knowledge. That is, the ubiquitous availability of knowledge in tandem with capitalist interest make it hard to keep ‘secrets’ intact, even for a short period of time. Subversive, and in turn ‘authentic’, behavior is thus substantially aggravated because it relies on that these demarcating functions is just that: unavailable for ‘uninitiated’ others.

6 Conclusion

In this study, we have looked at how contemporary subcultural consumers view and use brands in the formation of their identities. With a starting point in postmodernism, we posited that subversive expressions remain essential for present-day youth culture, even though being more difficult to embody due to the crisis of meaning. This does in turn create both opportunities and challenges for brands when trying to maintain congruence between themselves and the self-concept of consumers. Drawing on previous findings about subcultural expressions under a postmodern setting, we centered our study on the hipster consumer, as the 'group' encapsulates these contemporary, post-subcultural tendencies. In view of this, our findings provided several relevant understandings within the adopted research area.

Firstly, much like our initial notion, we found that the post-subcultural struggles are well captured by hipster consumers. However, given the reluctance to adhere to a hipster-identity and commit to any form of collective rules, we saw that the hipster rather should be looked upon as a 'subcultural', or esoteric, reference group. Secondly, our study added to previous notions (e.g. Holt, 2002; Moore, 2004; Muggleton, 2000) on that the crisis of meaning does affect how consumers view and engage in symbolic consumption, which in turn influence how they form connections with brands given a self-congruity outlook. We suggested that the adherence to desired identities, made ideal dimensions of self-congruity likely to be especially prevalent for the hipster. Thirdly, we found that the subversive consumers in view of these conditions use 'mainstream' as a lodestar when looking for symbolic ideals, making it (i.e. the mainstream) a useful guidance for brands when positioning themselves in the marketplace. This also provided an understanding for on what grounds the contemporary subversive consumer ultimately rejects brands following a commercial transition.

6.1 Theoretical implications

In our early conceptual stages we were inclined to believe that, given the elusiveness and subjectivity that surround consumers under postmodern standards, should not brands be given similar expressive leeway? As it turns out, our study clearly suggests the opposite. Because consumers want to escape this confusing reality; they want to achieve mastery over their environment, through lucid and binary cultural measurements. Brands are thus best equipped to appeal to consumers if their positions are clear. For the post-subcultural consumer specifically, this position should be, more or less, anything but mainstream. Beyond that, it

appears hard to distinguish certain recommendable traits, since their meaning today will likely not be the same tomorrow. The hipster is simply to tainted by the fast-paced, dynamic, and kaleidoscopic nature of our contemporary society.

This logic corresponds to how the hipster forms its identity goals by looking for individuality and, by extension, authenticity. We believe that the added theoretical perspective of how consumers choose to frame their endless pursuit of authenticity widens the understanding of how consumers make evaluations in the marketplace. Specifically, the construction of an identity around authenticity, framed as anti-mainstream, holds pragmatic value for subversive consumers. For one, they have an intuitive feeling about mainstream, whereas individuality requires a substantially more deliberate cognitive process. Secondly, it becomes clear what to do, which is an appreciated anomaly as they are used to that nothing ever is really 'clear'. Lastly, it fulfills their desire to associate with ideals and avoid categorization. On a broader level then, the rejection of mainstream functions as sort of escapism from this inauthentic and enigmatic reality. Subversive consumers nevertheless remain highly inquisitorial in their pursuit of meaning, always open to rearrange the standards of 'the mainstream'. The hipster is a very postmodern being in this sense, adopting several ostensible narratives without ever allowing one of them to become dominant.

From a conceptual standpoint then, we find it important to acknowledge that catering to post-subcultural consumers as a value-expressive brand is by default difficult. This primarily stems from that the thing brands first and foremost are being judged on (i.e. the degree of mainstream), is highly dependent on external variables, such as the amount and type of brand users. It also appears as being nonconformist is in an inherent struggle with cultural temporal logics, as even the most 'obscure' items over time become 'conventional' due to appropriation, commodification, and ultimately, embracement by the dominant culture. What seems to distinguish the postmodern society in this matter, thus making it particularly problematic for the contemporary nonconformist brand, is the fast pace of this transformation from 'resistance' to 'convention'. In effect, one can also understand why a commercial transition, as exemplified in the Eytys case, is especially troublesome for a nonconformist brand's cultural capital. For, as consumers to a certain degree can overlook the popularity of 'their' brand, actively pursuing such commercial interests is seen as giving in to mainstream principles. Specifically, while hipsters can accept that the issues with remaining nonconformist is due to a larger cultural

reality and thus out of the brand's control, overtly commercial tactics appear opportunistic and hollow, that is: like adding fuel to an already inauthentic, postmodern fire.

6.2 Managerial implications

In our introduction, we posed questions about managerial autonomy in a postmodern reality and if value-expressive brands are exposed to specific managerial conditions. Looking at the findings and subsequent discussions about how the crisis of meaning affects post-subcultural consumers' self-concept and accompanying motives, it seems like brands have to use caution in regard to their behavior, as well as speak to certain ideals. It does not seem like the hipster's elusive ways provide leeway in terms of brand management. In fact, our research suggests that crisis of meaning might have had the opposite effect on what brands can and cannot do.

In our study, the informants had issues with value-expressive brands that do not 'follow' a coherent path, which stem from the fact that post-subcultural consumers use them as 'building blocks' in their pursuit for authentic styles (i.e. 'style mixing'). It becomes inherently problematic for brands to be inconsistent in their identities when the 'building block status' is contingent on the consumer's knowledge about what they stand for (i.e. contextual knowledge, 'be in the know'). Brand identity has to remain constant to a degree where post-subcultural consumers can still identify relevant meaning and feel like they are 'in the know' when using said brands. From our perspective, this reality poses both challenges and opportunities for the different brand management paradigms.

Even though brand management paradigms with high customer centrality orientations allow for coherent brand identities, to a varying degree, consistency is arguably easier to maintain if one practices projective management. The reason is that the management philosophy has an internal focus, whereas both adaptive and relational management are more dependent on consumer influence (Louro & Cunha, 2001). In a reality where trends come and go quickly, one can argue that it is risky to simply adhere to what consumers want, which largely encapsulates what Aaker (1996, p.70) talks about in regard to the 'brand image trap', as well as Schallehn' et al. (2014) comments on the negative relationship between 'trend pandering' and authenticity.

It very much seems like the crisis of meaning together with fast-moving consumer trends put brands that are too attentive to 'what is in style' at risk. If one applies the motto 'the customer

is always right', management philosophies with high customer centrality orientations will rule supreme, however, does such a sentiment hold much truth or value in a society where consumers are confused about how to achieve identity aspirations? This is where brand management strategies with adept capabilities of shaping identity, and thus image, come into play. We suggest that the internal focus of projective management, in some instances, might be more well-suited to take advantage of a society where consumers struggle to understand the meaning of things and yearn for authentic expressions (Napoli et al., 2014).

However, it is important to acknowledge that being consistent in one's identity is by no means enough for brands to facilitate congruence between themselves and the self-concept of consumers. If brands cannot produce a brand image that can be leveraged to address consumers' self-congruity motives, they will ultimately be disregarded, regardless of strategy. Consequently, it is imperative that brands manage their identities so that they project an image that corresponds with identity ideals. In reality, this means that brands can only be consistent to a point where they are not perceived as mainstream (i.e. authentic), and then 'change' when that is no longer the case, much like what Schallehn et al. (2014) discuss. As such, brands still need to innovate and manage the parts of their identities that do not fall under what is considered 'enduring qualities' (Aaker, 1996, p.70). From this perspective, the relational paradigm seems to hold much relevance.

Another finding is that it can be problematic for brands to be too explicit in their nonconformist appearance when catering to subversive consumers. Returning to what Holt (2002) talks about regarding brands as cultural resources versus cultural blueprints, it seems that even brands with anti-mainstream sentiments, that emphasize the role of their products as means for 'expressing nonconformity', can be viewed as blueprints. We see evidence of this in how Eytys' brand identity is perceived as almost 'too aware', which 'turns off' some people. In sum, being too consistent or categorical in one's 'authentic brand expression' can produce the same sensation of a 'shared reference point of knowledge' (which by default contrasts contextual knowledge and meaning) as brands that do not make an effort to position themselves as cultural resources.

Lastly, our findings suggest that it is important not to underestimate the influence of aesthetics when catering to subversive consumers. It seems like fashion labels can use experimental designs to create 'incongruity buffers' against the negative impact of commercial developments within separate areas of their product portfolios, even if they are too extreme to actually

generate substantial revenue on their own. As such, fashion brands' strategic intents are arguably most easily realized through physique (Kapferer, 2008, p.182). This offers a very tangible directive for value-expressive brands, because it signals that the mere incorporation of 'outlandish' designs can salvage or enhance symbolic value, not least in times of 'congruity distress'.

6.3 Limitations and future research

As discussed during the various stages of the report, our findings should be scrutinized on the basis of both their validity and generalizability. First and foremost, our sampling is confined to Scandinavia, and Sweden in particular, and insights must therefore be seen as local and contextual, much like the outlook on case studies in general (Järvensivu & Törnroos, 2010). As such, it becomes impossible to draw conclusions about their relevance in other geographical areas, as well as cultural settings. Even when disregarding reliability aspects of our research design, the validity of our conclusions is still subject to critique. Although we made continuous efforts to enhance our research process (i.e. our research craftsmanship), we cannot know for sure that our empirical data, or our assessment of it, corresponds with our subjects' 'actual' viewpoints. Moreover, the use of a fashion brand widely limits our findings applicability in other areas of expressive consumption. The product category's unique role as a means of projecting identity creates relatively narrow theoretical and managerial uses.

As presented above, we found that hipsters motivated a reconceptualization of the subculture concept, which in turn facilitated the 'pragmatic' framing of their identity objectives around mainstream. However, whether this logic applies to other post-subcultural expressions as well falls outside the scope of our study, but could constitute an interesting directive for future research. Specifically, from a commercial point of view, such insights could add to the understanding about if other post-subcultural groups can adapt a similar form of practical framing of identity objectives, and what their equivalent to 'anti-mainstream' would be. This pertains to a wider perspective of to what extent postmodernism has entrenched subcultural expressions, and begs the question if the commodification of everyday life have robbed such movements of their meaning all together?

Our insights regarding the relative activation of self-congruity dimensions are largely conjectural, as the reasoning originated from gathered implicit tendencies among our informants. We thus believe that the suggested prevalence of an ideal congruity dimension

requires wider quantitative testing to verify its applicability. Furthermore, we also see that the contemporary branding trend of ‘unbranding’ would be interesting to examine in view of hipster’s apparent cynicism about the very concept of authenticity, and consequent tendency to employ self-authentication. For one, such unbranded items could go well with the hipster’s inclination to take symbolic ownership over items and recontextualize them in accordance with their ‘needs’. More so, there is also reason to believe that overtly ‘un-elaborated’ branding schemes could minimize the commercial connotations with a brand, and thus concur with hipsters’ anti-mainstream sentiments.

Lastly, we believe that, given the paper’s perspective of commercial transitions from the consumer’s side of things, an interesting future research directive would be to look into how said phenomena take form on an organizational analytical level. Specifically, having established that consumers often associate commercialization with symbolic dilution, can organizations negotiate such issues in relation to financial gains? Is there a tradeoff between brand symbolism and business motives and if so, how do one account for its long-term implications? A better understanding of these areas would complement the picture of how contemporary brand management adhere to brand-consumer alignment in view of conflicts between consumer wants and commercial objectives.

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Appendices

Appendix A - Selection of Eytys shoe sortiment

Eytys shoe model 'Mother'

Eytys. (n.a.). 'Mother canvas', Retrieved from
https://eytys.com/shop/footwear/sneakers/mother/mother-canvas-black

Eytys shoe model 'Angel'

Eytys. (n.a.). ‘Angel canvas’, Retrieved from https://eytys.com/shop/footwear/sneakers/angel/angel-canvas-black

Eytys shoe model ‘Jet’

Eytys. (n.a.). ‘Jet combo’, Retrieved from https://eytys.com/shop/footwear/sneakers/jet/jet-combo-dune

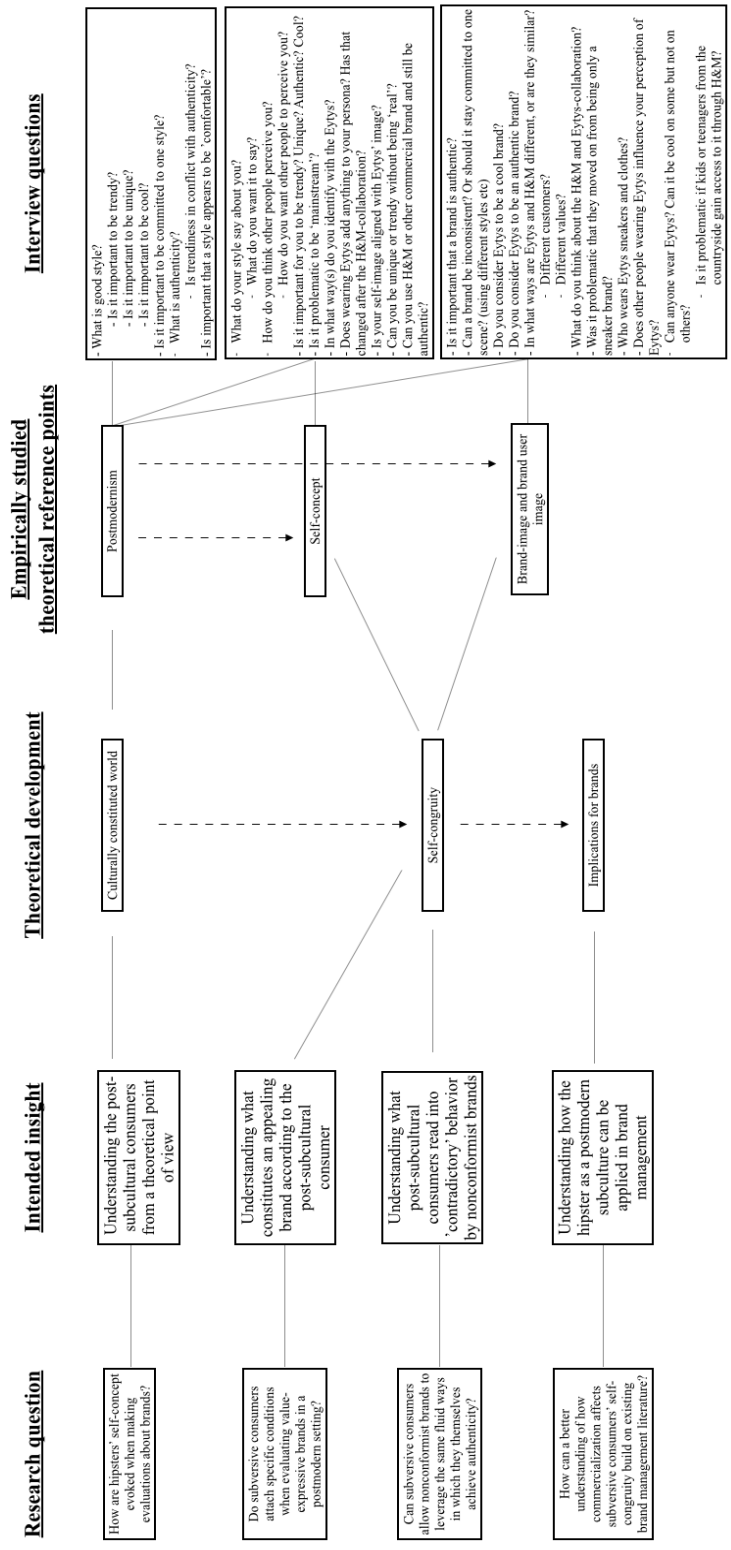
Eytys shoe model ‘Wave’

Eytys. (n.a.). ‘Wave suede’, Retrieved from https://eytys.com/shop/footwear/sneakers/wave/wave-suede-black

Eytys shoe model ‘Doja’

Eytys. (n.a.). ‘Doja s-o suede’, Retrieved from
https://eytys.com/shop/footwear/sneakers/doja/doja-so-suede-black

Appendix B - Interview protocol



Appendix C - Consent form

Content structure taken from Taylor and Lindlof (2011, p.121-122).

Why are you taking part in this research?
You are being invited to take part in a research study investigating how consumers view brands in relation to their self-image. You are being included in this study because you're a consumer of the study's case brand Eytys prior to December 2018 and are aware of their 2019-collaboration with H&M.

Who is doing this study?
We, Adam Nilsson and Vincent Janér, are graduate students at Copenhagen Business School. We are being guided in this research by professor Allan Grutt Hansen.

What is the purpose of this study?
We are conducting this study to inform research that will constitute our master's thesis. The purpose of this study is to add to the understanding of how consumers form their identities and how that reflects on brand preferences.

What will you be asked to do?
Your involvement in this study will consist of a face-to-face interview, which will include open-ended questions and will last approximately 30 to 60 minutes. The interview will be recorded with a digital voice recorder to aid the accuracy of the study.

What are the possible risks and discomforts?
All interview questions are related to consumption, especially in regard to the case-brand Eytys. Some questions might inquire about 'inner truths' but will likely not pose any emotional or psychological risks.

Do you have to take part in the study?
All involvement is completely voluntary, and you do not have to answer any questions with which you are uncomfortable. Moreover, you may choose to end the interview at any time and for any reason.

What will it cost to participate?
There are no costs associated with participating in the study.

Will you receive any rewards for taking part in this study?
There is no tangible reward offered in association with participation in this study, however all subjects will be offered a beverage of their choice (e.g. coffee, tea, soda) in relation to the interview. More so, your time and effort in contributing to the study are greatly appreciated.

Who will see the information that you give?
In order to provide more credibility and utility to the study, we as your permission to use your actual name and other defining characteristics in the subsequent report. I you agree that we use your actual name and other identifying information, please check the box below. If not, we will use a pseudonym instead.

☐

What else do you need to know?
In addition to the initial interview, we may wish to contact you with follow-up questions and or/concerns that arise as the study progresses. If you agree that we may contact you in the future with follow-up questions/concerns, please check the box below.

☐

What if you have questions, concerns or complaints?
If you have any questions, concerns, suggestions or complaints about the study, you can contact us at adni17ac@student.cbs.dk.

Please indicate your agreement to participate in this study as explained above by signing the below:

_____ _____
Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study Date

_____
Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

_____Vincent Janér & Adam Nilsson_____ _____
Names of authorized persons obtaining informed consent Date