

HOW TO HAVE STYLE: STYLE DISCOURSE IN A MAKEOVER SHOW  
AND FASHION CONSUMPTION

by

Hyun Jeong Min

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## STATEMENT OF DISSERTATION APPROVAL

The dissertation of Hyun Jeong Min  
has been approved by the following supervisory committee members:

|                       |          |                                       |
|-----------------------|----------|---------------------------------------|
| <u>Debra Scammon</u>  | , Chair  | <u>June 9, 2011</u><br>Date Approved  |
| <u>Teresa Pavia</u>   | , Member | <u>June 13, 2011</u><br>Date Approved |
| <u>Arul Mishra</u>    | , Member | <u>June 9, 2011</u><br>Date Approved  |
| <u>Kristin Cloyes</u> | , Member | _____<br>Date Approved                |
| <u>Jeff Murray</u>    | , Member | _____<br>Date Approved                |

and by William Hesterly, Associate  
Dean of the David Eccles School of Business

and by Charles A. Wight, Dean of The Graduate School.

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation is composed of three essays about style discourse in fashion consumption. For the first chapter I developed a conceptual model to unravel the political process of meaning making between marketers and consumers. In particular, I draw on the concepts in the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe to develop the conceptual model to analyze the data of Chapter 2 and 3.

The second chapter explores the mainstream discourse of having personal style with respect to fashion. For this second study, data have been collected from the TLC TV series *What Not to Wear*, an American reality television show that is based on a British Show of the same name. I chose episodes selected in *What Not to Wear: Best of DVD* with run time of 10 hours and 45 minutes. Transcripts of these episodes were produced and I analyzed how the notions of self, fashion, and style are intertwined in the discourse of the program. In this program the conflicts between the nominee and fashion consultants are prevalent components and there is some extent of negotiation between the two parties. Therefore, I also focus on this negotiation process and reveal how the hosts of the show win over the nominees.

For the third chapter, I turn to the fans of the show *What Not to Wear*. Using postings on the web forum of the program I examined the ways fans integrate the cultural discourse of fashion on the program into their lives. Since there was an ample amount of data on the web forum, I sampled only the postings that were related to the episodes used in the second study. The focus of analysis is on the identification process of audience members: who do audience members identify with and how does such identification lead to specific ways of incorporating the fashion knowledge of the program? This study is expected to contribute to

better understanding of how fashion reality shows have influence on consumption behaviors of audience members.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION TO THREE STUDIES

More and more consumers are having a deeper involvement of individual subjectivity in their consumption and this has led to the consequence that the essential and major function of products has decreased, while their role as embodiment of symbolic meaning has increased (Addis and Holbrook 2001). Research has shown not only that people do consume to cater to already existing needs but that the symbolic meanings embedded in goods and services play an important role in consumption decision making and people's identity construction in contemporary society (Belk 1988; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). Among various commodities, fashion has been one of the most visible and accessible commodities for consumers to show who they are (Thompson and Haytko 1997; Murray 2002). Through fashion, people distinguish themselves from others and also satisfy the individual need for social adaptation and imitation.

Reflecting the importance of fashion in consumers' identity construction, fashion has attracted the attention of many scholars. Many of them were interested in why the phenomenon of fashion was happening. For example, Veblen (1994) and Simmel (1957) claimed that emulation among classes was a motivating factor of fashion. Class emulation might have had some explanatory power in the pre-modern era. However, modernity opened up new possibilities for the creation of identity. It unfixed individuals from traditional communities, where everybody knew who she or he was. In addition, more and more people

came to have the purchasing power to acquire various commodities, and such commodities worked as raw material for the creation of new identities. As the nineteenth and twentieth centuries progressed, one's identity depended less and less on a fixed place in a stable social order. One's group affiliations could be 'elected' and one's identity 'invented' in the modern world (Entwistle 2000).

Besides the emphasis on individual choices of group affiliations, today's fashion discourse encourages consumers to create their own style in fashion. Advice for how to have style is prominent in mass media. Having style is more than wearing up-to-date fashionable clothes. A fashion guru and a host of TLC's show *What Not to Wear*, Clinton Kelly (2008) says, "Fashion is what designers create and sell. You know, clothes, shoes, bags and other accessories. Style is your usage and interpretation of what is available to you" (p.4). Isaac Mizrahi (2008), a famous fashion designer, emphasizes, "There's no way to unearth your personal style without first knowing who you are" (p.10). What these statements about having style emphasize is that having style is not just about wearing up-to-date fashionable clothes but about expressing who we really are through concrete practices of combining fashion items. In order to have style, you have to have some extent of aesthetic knowledge such as rules about colors, patterns and proportions appropriate for your body and situation. In other words, the notions of the self and fashion are entangled with in the notion of style and therefore examining style discourse provides consumer researchers with a window through which to see the way that the fashion industry promotes its interests by conceptualizing style in particular ways.

Another notable thing is that today's style discourse does not encourage women "to change everything about themselves from their lips to their bust sizes." Rather it says that having style is about "reinforcing everything about you that is already beautiful" (Mizrahi 2008, p.9). This is very different from what many feminists have argued, that is the fashion

industry is imposing an unrealistic thin body ideal on women. In fact, as Thompson and Haytko (1997) argue, in recent years, the popular press and a significant amount of scholarly work have implicated the fashion industry, through its models, advertising campaigns, and thin-oriented clothing designs, in a plethora of societal problems such as eating disorders, reduced self-esteem, body image distortions, and increased predilections for cosmetic surgery interventions (Bordo 1993; Joy and Venkatesh 1994). It is uncertain whether the new trend might have resulted from the fashion industry's acceptance of feminists' critique. Although the fashion industry does not impose a monolithic beauty ideal explicitly, the industry might not be innocent with regard to the social problems mentioned above. Nevertheless it seems to be obvious that today's fashion and style discourse is more complex, or at least the fashion industry's influence works in subtler way than what has been suggested in prior research on fashion. This gap, therefore, calls for the examination of the configuration of today's discourse of fashion and style.

To examine how the fashion industry conceptualizes the notion of style in terms of fashion and self and what the effects of such configuration are for consumers' every day fashion consumption, I pay attention to the discourse of style. Today's style discourse draws a very clear line between fashion and style. According to Clinton Kelly (2008) a fashion guru and a host of TLC's show *What Not to Wear*, style refers to an individual's usage and interpretation of what is available to her or him while fashion is what designers create and sell. Therefore, in order for a consumer to have style, she has to know herself and make her inner self visible to others by engaging in semiotic practices of wearing clothes. I believe that these semiotic practices in the field of fashion are worth investigating and can contribute to better understanding everyday fashion consumption behaviors.

This dissertation is composed of three studies about style discourse in fashion consumption. For the first study I develop a conceptual model arguing that fashion is a form

of discourse. I draw on a Foucauldian definition of discourse, which is much broader than just language in use, and includes many other elements of practice and institutional regulation (Hall 1997). In particular, I focus on the concepts in the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) to develop the conceptual model to analyze style discourse in fashion and consumers' everyday practices produced in the discourse. I also discuss the benefits of using Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discourse theoretical concepts in consumer research.

The second study explores the mainstream discourse of having personal style with respect to fashion through the analysis of episodes of a fashion makeover show, *What Not to Wear*. The program provides an appropriate empirical setting to look into how mainstream fashion discourse establishes relations among fashion, the self and style to promote the interests of the fashion industry for several reasons. First of all, the program reflects the current mantra of "create your own style" used in the fashion industry because the main purpose of the program is to teach the nominees and audience members how to create personal style by using fashion products available in the current market. Second, the program contains numerous confrontations between fashion experts and the nominees as ordinary consumers, and these confrontations provide consumer researchers with a window through which to observe the ongoing struggle in the process of constructing consumption meanings. The popularity of the program also provides a good empirical setting for researchers to examine the influence of the makeover show on everyday consumption practices.

Mainstream fashion discourse has been quite a popular topic in academia, and many scholars have criticized the ideological influence of mainstream fashion discourse and practices on an unrealistically thin body as the ideal, low self esteem of obese people, and the prevalence of various eating disorders (Bordo 1993; Evans 1991; Hesse-Biber 1996; Wolf 1991). The problem is, although these criticisms are reasonable, in these discussions the way

that mainstream fashion industry works has been over-simplified, and therefore its influence on consumers has been described as dictatorial and all powerful. However, today's fashion style discourse does not encourage women to change everything about themselves to conform to an unrealistic beauty ideal. Rather, the discourse suggests that having style is about reinforcing everything about you that is already beautiful (Mizrahi 2008).

The quotes from Mizrahi (2008) suggest that the mainstream style discourse is not dictating what to do or what not to do despite the criticism by many feminists that the fashion industry is imposing an unrealistically thin body ideal on women. In addition, the assumption that consumers are directly influenced by unrealistic fashion images does not seem to be well founded considering research findings that consumers appropriate various fashion discourses to generate personalized fashion narratives and to express resistance to dominant fashion norms in their social setting (Murray 2002; Thompson and Haytko 1997). The lack of consensus about the influence of the fashion industry suggests that it would be worthwhile to explore the ways in which mainstream fashion style discourse works and the ways in which constructs such as self, body, and fashion are intertwined in the mainstream style discourse.

For the third study, I turn to the fans of the show *What Not to Wear*. I examine the ways they integrate the cultural discourse of fashion on the program into their lives using web forum data of the program. How are the fans of the show personalizing cultural meaning? How do they take the cultural discourse and do something with it? Does the show actually teach consumers the discourse of fashion? Do they change their consumption behaviors? In consumer research structural analysis of semiotics (McQuarrie et al. 2003; Mick 1986) has revealed the hidden meanings of media text, and research based on reader-response theory (Hirschman 1999; McQuarrie and Mick 1999; Stern 1992) has illustrated consumer's active role in interpreting media texts. Despite their contribution to media text related consumption behaviors, these studies did not extend their findings to consumers' everyday consumption

practices. This essay intends to overcome this limitation by focusing on the way consumers react to fashion knowledge being delivered through mass media and how they incorporate, negotiate, or reject such knowledge in their fashion consumption behaviors. Considering the increasing popularity of reality TV, in particular lifestyle TV, in the U.S. and other parts of world, examining the influence of these media texts on everyday consumption behavior seems to be an urgent matter.



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## CHAPTER 2

### LACLAU AND MOUFFE'S DISCOURSE THEORY FOR FASHION CONSUMPTION RESEARCH

#### Introduction

Scholars of consumer culture theory have explored the political aspects of consumption meaning and practice (Arnould and Thompson 2005), and demonstrated how socio-political factors, such as gender (Thompson 2002; 1996; Thompson and Haytko 1997; Thompson and Hirschman 1995), age (Price et al. 2000), class (Holt 1998), race (Burton 2009), sexuality (Kates 2004; Kates 2002), globalization (Askegaard et al. 2005; Gentry et al. 1995; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006; Penalzoza 1994; Thompson and Arsel 2004; Wallendorf and Reilly 1983; Wamwara-Mbugua et al. 2008; Ü StüNer and Holt 2007) and ideology (Arnould 2007; Henry 2010; Hirschman 1993; Hirschman 1990; Hirschman 1988; Holt and Thompson 2004; Kozinets 2008; Thompson 2003; Thompson and Hirschman 1995; Zhao and Belk 2008) structure consumption meaning and practice in contemporary society. Despite the emphasis on the political aspect of constructing consumption practices and consumption meanings, the political signification process itself has not gotten much attention. How are particular signifieds articulated into a signifying sequence in the field of discursivity? Which signifiers work as a center in the signification process? What different understandings of reality are at stake? What are the consequences of these discursive configurations? These important questions need to be answered in order to better understand the politics of

consumption, but have not gotten much attention from researchers. One obstacle to such investigation may be the lack of a methodology to look into the construction process itself. Discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe may provide a very useful tool for investigating the political process of creating consumption meaning and practice. Concepts like antagonism, hegemony, articulation and identification and discursive strategies, such as the logic of equivalence and logic of difference, provide consumer researchers with ways to analyze the political meaning construction process.

In this essay, I will first discuss the ambiguous nature of the meaning of fashion. Fashion is an area of consumption inundated with a variety of consumption meanings, and therefore is a great field in which to explicate the politics of consumption meaning construction. I then present the basics of discourse theory and discourse analysis. Finally I move on to Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory and explicate their concepts and theorization in detail.

### Fashion as Ambiguous Semiotic Practice

#### Ambiguity of Fashion

People communicate aspects of their persons, such as gender, social status, personal tastes, values, and individuality through their clothing, one of the most visible forms of consumption (Crane 2000; Davis 1992; Lipovetsky 1994; Lurie 1983; McCracken 1988; Wilson 2003). A body of literature on fashion has examined its communicative abilities and its role in modern or postmodern society (Giddens 1991; Sennett 1977; Simmel 1957; Wilson 2003). Prior work focuses on the nature of identity under postmodern conditions and the role of clothing in the presentation of self as a resource for constructing one's identity (Entwistle 2000). In semiotics, clothes are often considered to be signifiers, and in contemporary consumer culture, particular kinds or combinations of clothing are associated with certain

concepts or signifieds, such as elegance, formality, casualness or romance (Hall 1997).

Consumer research has examined the communicative aspect of fashion consumption, showing that consumers use fashion to differentiate, express social affiliation and maintain or subvert gender boundaries (Murray 2002; Thompson 1997).

Previous research on fashion clearly shows that clothing is an expressive medium and it communicates something about the person who wears it. One example of the approach to fashion as communication draws analogies between fashion and language (Entwistle 2000). In one extreme argument, Lurie (1983) suggests that our clothes can communicate facts about ourselves such as class status, age, family origin, personal opinion, taste and current mood. She even discusses clothing's rules of grammar and its 'dialects' from diverse cultures. However, research also suggests that the meaning of clothing is very ambiguous and imprecise (Campbell 1995; Davis 1992; McCracken 1988). For instance, McCracken (1988) empirically examined the concept of clothing as language and concluded that the clothing-as-language metaphor can be useful in studying the cultural process of fashion. However, one should be cautious in equating the clothing with language because there are no fixed, rule-governed formulas for employing and juxtaposing fashion elements, and therefore clothing does not possess a combinatorial freedom like language (McCracken 1988). Davis (1992) also points out that meaningful differences among clothing signifiers are not nearly as sharply drawn and standardized as are the spoken sounds employed in a speech community.

Besides the ambiguous nature of clothing, clothing styles have different meanings for different social groups and in different contexts (Crane 2000). While the signifiers constituting a style or a certain fashion trend can be considered to be the same for everyone in a material sense, what is signified can be very different for a community of clothes-wearers (Davis 1992). This aspect of clothing meaning is well exemplified in Hebdige's (1991) analysis of British youth subcultures. In his analysis, Hebdige (1991) examines how the

fashion elements adopted by the subcultures create meaning within the group. In the conspicuous consumption cultures of subculture groups, such as the skinheads and the punks, certain types of consumption are conspicuously rejected, and it is through this distinctive style that the subculture reveals its secret identity and communicates its forbidden meanings (Hebdige 1991). In other words, it is not the material differences that distinguish subcultures from the mainstream cultural formation but the different meanings attached to the same material commodities. For instance, the baggy pants worn by teen agers to express their individuality are considered to be offensive by many people and some towns have created ordinances — some with fines and jail time. Some argue that the criticisms of baggy pants are unfairly targeting African Americans. This debate on the baggy pants style clearly demonstrates the different meanings articulated to the same style of pants, according to the observers' ethnicities, ages, and social classes.

The context-dependent characteristics of clothing also result in ambiguous consumption meanings (Davis 1992). Most individuals do not wear the same clothes on all occasions. They adapt their dress for the particular social context. Different situations impose different ways of dressing by imposing rules or codes of dress. Even when individuals choose to ignore such rules of dress, they are likely to be aware of the social pressure to conform (Entwistle 2000). This is why clothes that are very much appropriate in one situation might be inappropriate in another situation, and have different meanings.

Another reason for the ambiguity of clothing is that what it says varies over time (Campbell 1995). Those who would attempt to ascribe precise meanings to clothing should be cautious, because the very same outfit that said one thing last year will very likely say something quite different today (Davis 1992). In the everyday practice of getting dressed, individuals cannot avoid the temporal constraints of fashion. Fashion is by definition temporal, and time in the fashion system is socially constructed through the circle of

collections, shows and seasons that serve to stop the flow of the present by means of projections into the future (Entwistle 2000). Fashion imagery reveals how our idea of beauty changes over time (Steele 1988). The clothes that were once thought to be beautiful go out of fashion and people do not think they are beautiful anymore. Therefore, as Steele (1988) puts it, every style is beautiful in its own time. People tend to dismiss the clothing of the recent past as amusing at best and ludicrous at worst (Steele 1988).

Moreover, clothing has ambiguous meanings because it is unable to be read effectively. What it says is critically dependent on who is doing the decoding (Campbell 1995). It is well established that consumers convey specific meanings about their identity to others through their possessions and their consumption behaviors (Ahuvia 2005; Belk 1988; Holt 1998; Holt and Thompson 2004; Murray 2002; Price et al. 2000; Schouten 1991; Thompson 1996; Thompson and Haytko 1997; Velliquette et al. 2006). As Featherstone (1991) suggests, in contemporary society, consumption is usually employed to connote individuality, and one's body, clothes, speech, leisure pastimes, eating and drinking preferences, home, car, choice of holidays and so on are all considered to be indicators of personal taste and sense of style. However, as Campbell (1995) points out, the fact that actions are intelligible does not guarantee that they have an mutually-agreed-upon meaning. In addition, receiving and interpreting a message and intending to send one are separate activities. Although one individual may be able to perceive some identity message in the consumption activities of another, this does not imply that other observers discern similar meanings in that activity. Also, the discerned meanings do not necessarily correspond to those that the consumer intended to convey through their conduct (Campbell 1995). Therefore it is very likely that individuals will perceive different meanings from the clothing choices and appearance of another person, and that the interpreted meanings can be different from what the wearer originally intended to convey.

### Politics of Fashion Meaning

Fashion styles are always intertwined with social forces external to clothing itself, such as a wearer's body, gender, class, race, ethnicity, age, occupation, income etc., making the meanings of clothing more complicated and fluid. Clothing is always mediated by the individual body, because the body must be dressed in almost every social encounter (Calefato 2004; Entwistle 2000; Wilson 2003). In fashion, gender boundaries are constantly maintained and challenged through fashion production and consumption (Crane 2000; Entwistle 2000; Wilson 2003). Gender cannot be considered as a separate category from class, race, ethnicity, age, occupation and income level because the concept of gender is constituted differently by each category, and is also constituted differently according to the social context. Class also has a material bearing on clothing choices, and class is highly correlated to income level, which needs to be considered as an important factor in fashion consumption (Entwistle 2000). For instance, only a small number of women in the world have the income to purchase haute couture. Class also tends to structure fashion consumption decisions through taste, which is formed in interaction with the individual's class position and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). Meanings projected onto fashion brands and particular styles of clothes by fashion advertising and marketing efforts also make already ambiguous and complex fashion meanings more convoluted.

Since different factors intervene in different interpretation situations, meanings become more ambiguous in that it is hard to get people in general to interpret the same clothing symbols in the same way (Davis 1992). The fashion system provides the raw materials or resources from which consumers can make choices (Crane 1999; Entwistle 2000). But these are adapted within the context of the lived experience of their gender, class, race, age, occupation and so on, and therefore the meaning of the same clothes can never be finally fixed. As Hall (1997) puts it, taking the meaning must involve an active process of



interpretation. Meaning has to be actively interpreted by individual consumers. There is a constant slippage of meaning in all interpretation, something in excess of intended meaning. In this way other meanings overshadow intended meaning and other associations are evoked, giving our expressions a different twist (Hall 1997). In other words, the dynamic process of signification, the process in which signifiers are linked to signifieds by social agents to relations that more or less fix their meaning within a given social context (Cloyes 2006; Cloyes 2007). This activity promotes particular versions of meanings, while, at the same time, excluding other possible meanings (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002), making the meaning-making process a very political one.

Discourse analysis acknowledges this political aspect of the signification process and concentrates on revealing the way contingent relations become fixed in one way although they could have been fixed in many other ways (Andersen 2003). For this reason discourse analysis can be an effective way to examine how certain meanings of style are promoted while other interpretations are discouraged in the context of fashion consumption.

### Overview of Discourse Analysis

#### Language as Constitutive of Social Reality

Discourse analysis is a set of methods and theories for studying language in use, which have developed from different theoretical traditions and diverse disciplinary locations (Finlayson 1999; Gill 2000; Taylor 2001; Wetherell et al. 2001). There is no single version of 'discourse analysis,' but many different styles of analysis, for instance, from critical linguistics, ethnomethodology, conversation analysis and discourse analysis associated with poststructuralism, all lay claim to the name. What unites these different styles and approaches is a rejection of the notion of language as a simple, neutral information-carrying vehicle reflecting the world and a conviction in the central importance of language in constructing

social reality as we experience it (Gill 2000; Taylor 2001). In other words, without language there can be no meaning and we cannot apprehend reality (O'Sullivan 2007).

Language is constitutive of social life. These representations are never mere reflections of pre-existing reality, but rather contribute to constructing reality (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002; Wetherell 2001b). Words are about the world, but they also form the world through representation. As accounts become available and widely shared, they become social realities to be dealt with (Wetherell 2001b). This does not, however, mean that material reality itself does not exist beyond our consciousness. Indeed, physical things and actions exist, but they only take on meaning and become the objects of knowledge through language. And this is at the heart of the social constructionist idea, an epistemological basis of discourse analysis (Gill 2000; Hall 1997).

### Language as Action

Another important premise that underpins all contemporary discourse research is that language is a medium oriented towards social action, although different traditions of discourse research understand social action in different ways (Potter 2001; Potter and Wetherell 1990; Wetherell 2001a). These are the most obvious in the linguistic philosophy of Wittgenstein (1968; 1961) and Austin's (1962) speech act theory. Scholars in these traditions stress that language is oriented towards action. For instance, utterances ask questions, make accusations and justify oversight (Potter and Wetherell 1990).

Wittgenstein mainly criticized the treatments of language as an abstract system of concepts whose principal role was to refer to objects in the world. Wittgenstein's aim was to counterpoise this notion of language as a set of names for objects in the world with a picture that stresses its practicality and heterogeneity. For Wittgenstein, language is not one unified system, but a whole set of different parts with different roles like tools in a tool box (Potter

2001), in which “there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws-the functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects”

(Wittgenstein 1968, para. 11). Wittgenstein problematized the overwhelming consideration of issues of reference and logical connections in linguistic philosophy, because this idea was not able to capture the complexity of language and caused a major source of confusion in philosophy. He believed the philosophical problems resulted from abstracting words like ‘belief’, ‘certainty’ and ‘knowledge’ from their natural contexts of use. To solve this problem, he claimed that philosophers should start with a consideration of meaning that springs from inspecting the actual use of language (Potter 2001).

Wittgenstein’s view of language is condensed into the metaphor of a ‘language game.’ He sees language as comprising multitudes of different games, each with their own aims and rules. Using language is therefore playing a role in these different games, such as giving orders and obeying them, describing the appearance of an object, reporting or speculating about an event, making up a story and guessing riddles (Potter 2001; Wittgenstein 1968). The metaphor of the language game supports the assumption, common to a variety of discourse analytic approaches, that people’s practices are organized around the use of particular discourses or interpretative repertoires. It also cautions against an account of language as an abstract system and stresses the relationship between specific practices and language tied to occasions and settings (Potter 2001).

In the same vein, John Austin (1962) developed the speech act theory, based on the belief that language is used to perform actions and focused on how meaning and action are related to language (Schiffrin 1994). As did Wittgenstein, Austin also problematized the treatment of language as an abstract reference system and emphasized the practical, active use of language (Potter 2001). Austin’s speech act theory provided the discourse researcher with the insight to investigate issues such as how an utterance can perform more than one

speech act at a time and the relationship between context and illocutionary force (Schiffrin 1994). He demonstrated that all utterances are performative, meaning that to say something is to do something. By ‘issuing an utterance,’ Austin claimed, a speaker can perform three acts simultaneously: a *locutionary* act, which is the act of saying something; an *illocutionary* act, which is an act performed in saying something; and a *perlocutionary* act, which is performed by or as a result of saying (Coulthard 1977). He also suggested six rules that utterances must satisfy in order to be performative, and called them felicity conditions. From a discourse analytic perspective, felicity conditions lock utterances into psychological and sociological concerns by showing that the utterances only work with the right beliefs, conventions, participants, circumstances, intentions, and so on (Potter 2001). If you “put language, action, interaction, values, beliefs, symbols, objects, tools, and places together in such a way that others recognize you as a particular type of identity in a particular type of activity,” as Gee (1999) says, “then you have pulled off a discourse” (p.18).

### Discourse as Language and Practice

Normally the term ‘discourse’ is used as a linguistic concept, and is often defined in two ways. One refers to a particular unit of language, simply meaning passages of connected writing or speech (Hall 1997; Schiffrin 1994). Therefore, the narrowest description of discourse refers to a continuous stretch of language larger than the sentence (Crystal 1985). The other definition refers to *language in use*, taking account of actually occurring texts in a genuine communicative context. This focus on actual language use leads to concern for the meaning of the utterance rather than the sentence (Outhwaite and Bottomore 1993). By saying that utterance is the smaller unit, of which discourse is comprised, discourse refuses to be a collection of decontextualized units of language structure and becomes a collection of inherently contextualized units of language use (Schiffrin 1994).

However, in order to make theories of language more generally applicable to the social and political world, it is necessary to broaden the definition of discourse (Hardin 2001) and Foucault's theorization of constitutive power of language represents the broad definition of discourse. Foucault did not study language per se, but discourse as a system of representation (Hall 1997). By discourse Foucault meant a group of statements which structure the way a thing is thought and talked about in a particular historical moment. That is, discourses shape how the world is understood and how things are done in it (Rose 2001). In this way, discourse becomes more than a collection of linguistic repertoires that people use. Discourse refers to the processes through which meaning is constructed in historically and locally specific contexts (Cloyes 2004). Discourses are always embedded in a myriad of social institutions, and often involve various props like books, magazines, laboratories, classrooms, technologies and other objects (Gee 1999). In other words, each discourse systematically organizes objects and practices as well as linguistic repertoires in a particular way, while repressing alternative forms of organization through dominance in power relations (Cloyes 2004; Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000; Outhwaite and Bottomore 1993).

By establishing a system of relations between various concepts, objects, and practices, discourse becomes the issue of knowledge production through language. However, since all social practices involve meaning and meanings shape and influence the actions of social agents, it is possible to say that all practices have a discursive aspect. In this respect the concept of discourse ceases to remain purely a linguistic concept. It entails language and practice. Foucault claims that discourse constitutes the topic. It defines, produces the object of our knowledge, and governs the way that a topic is meaningfully talked about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the actions of others. By promoting a particular way of talking and acting, at the same time it also rules out other ways of talking and conducting ourselves in relation to the topic (Hall 1997). The very possibility

of perception, thought and action, therefore, depends on the structuring of a certain meaningful field or discourse that pre-dates any factual immediacy (Laclau 1993).

Language allows for multiple versions of accounts and creates an argumentative and rhetorical context (Billig 1991; Wetherell 2001b). In this respect, rhetoric has an important resonance for the discourse researcher. The rhetorical aspect of discourse suggests that discourse is designed to be persuasive. This is why there is always a struggle over how things are to be understood, so it makes sense to speak of the politics of representation and power issues. Individuals, groups, and institutions mobilize meanings (Wetherell 2001b) to accomplish their purposes. Particular interpretations of meanings may become dominant and serve the interests of a particular status quo by reconfirming and re-enacting existing social relationships and patterns of behavior. Since meanings are fluid and can be mobilized and re-worked, however, discourse also can renegotiate social relationships and introduce new meanings and new behavior. Hence, control over discourse is recognized as a vital source of power (Lemke 1995; Wetherell 2001b).

### Productive Power

Discourse is powerful because it is productive. In discourse theory, power is not necessarily defined in negative terms, as it represses what it seeks to control. It traverses and produces things such as pleasure, forms of knowledge, and discourse. Foucault claims that power does not belong to particular agents such as particular individuals, the state, or groups with particular interests (Foucault 1980). Power is spread across different social practices (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). It circulates and is never monopolized by one center. Therefore power needs to be thought of as a productive network which runs through the whole social body (Foucault 1980).

Discourse disciplines individuals into certain ways of thinking and acting (Foucault

1979). The subject becomes the bearer of the knowledge that discourse produces (Hall 1997) and our sense of self is created through the operation of discourse (Rose 2001). However, it does not coerce people into rules for thought and behavior. Language positions people (Wetherell 2001b) in a certain point in the web of various relations. Within the produced discourse lie a variety of subject positions with which people can identify (Cloyes 2007; Cloyes 2004; Laclau 1994). In other words, subject positions provide people with a way of making sense of themselves, their motives, experiences and reactions (Wetherell 2001b). For instance, style discourse in a fashion makeover program produces, among other subject positions, fashion illiterates, significant others of fashion illiterates, fashion gurus, and favorable or critical audience members. Indeed, the interpretations of the program's contents and the ways of using the knowledge received from the program depend on the subject positions that people might choose while they are watching it, rather than one particular interpretation being imposed on the audience of the program.

In the next section, I introduce the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe. The theory of Laclau and Mouffe shares epistemological premises of poststructuralism with other versions of discourse analysis. Their theory focuses on the political process of signification similar to critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2001). However their theory does not separate the discursive aspect from material and behavioral aspects of social reality as Fairclough (2001) differentiates discursive elements with nondiscursive ones in his theory. This holistic approach to discourse is the most promising for consumer researchers to investigate the political process of creating consumption meanings and practices because consumption involves material and behavioral elements as well as linguistic ones.

### Discourse Theory of Laclau and Mouffe

In their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) constituted their theory around a discourse-analytical reconstruction of the concept of hegemony (Andersen 2003), privileging the moment of *political articulation* (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). They suggested that sedimented social realities, such as theoretical categories and established social orders, are those which conceal the acts of their original institution. In their theory, therefore, they tried to reactivate the moment to make visible the original contingency of the synthesis (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). At the same time, they reconstructed Foucault's discourse analysis by removing the distinction of the linguistic (discursive)/extralinguistic (nondiscursive) oppositions in conceptualizing social reality (Laclau and Mouffe 1987).

To explain the theory of Laclau and Mouffe I will start with the concept of hegemony. Then I will proceed to explicate other theoretical concepts of overdetermination, articulation, discourse, subject position and identification, antagonism, and equivalence/difference.

#### Hegemony and Privileging the Political

The concept of hegemony was Gramsci's main contribution to political theory, and it was derived from his revision of orthodox Marxism (Bellamy 1994). The concept emphasizes forms of power which are dependent upon consent rather than coercion. Hence the hegemony of the dominant social group depends on winning the consent of the majority to existing social arrangements (Fairclough 2001). For Gramsci, political subjects are not classes but complex collective wills. The ideological elements articulated by a hegemonic class also do not have a necessary class to which they belong, and the collective will is a result of the politico-ideological articulation of dispersed and fragmented historical forces. To attain hegemony, dominant social groups need to achieve intellectual and moral leadership as well as political leadership. Whereas political leadership can be grounded on a conjunctural



coincidence of interests, moral and intellectual leadership requires that an ensemble of ideas and values be shared by a number of sectors, which traverse a number of class sectors.

Intellectual and moral leadership constitutes a higher synthesis of collective will, and through ideology, this collective will becomes the organic cement unifying a historic bloc (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

Laclau and Mouffe suggest that structural undecidability is the very condition for the existence of hegemony. If social objectivity determined whatever structural arrangement exists through its internal laws, there would be no room for politics as an autonomous activity. In order to have hegemony, therefore, it is required that the nature of elements does not predetermine them to enter into one particular type of arrangement rather than another (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). According to Derrida (1977), this undecidability calls for an ethico-political decision, and this contingent intervention is conceived of as a hegemonic intervention by Laclau and Mouffe (Torfing 1999). For this reason, the concept of hegemony emerges in a context dominated by the experience of fragmentation and by the indeterminacy of the articulations between different struggles and subject positions (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

Along with structural undecidability, the presence of empty signifiers is another condition of hegemony. Strictly speaking, an empty signifier is a signifier without a signified. This does not mean that the same signifier can be attached to different signifieds in different contexts, or that the signifier is ambiguous (Laclau 1996). An empty signifier is that which signifies the indifferent and the cancellation of difference (Andersen 2003). An empty signifier emerges as all differences collapse into equivalential chains (Laclau 1996). Therefore all differences must be equally different in relation to it, while also being different from each other (Andersen 2003). The focal point of hegemonic struggle is an empty signifier, which is a central link in converging and competing signifying chains used to construct social

antagonisms and representations. Through the working of hegemony, social antagonisms and representations appear natural and necessary, rather than contingent (Cloyes 2004).

### Overdetermination and Articulation

Privileging the moment of political articulation through the concept of hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe question what a relation between entities must be like in order for a hegemonic relation to become possible. For them, this relationship occurs when a particular social force assumes the representation of a totality or hegemonic universality that is radically incommensurable with it. The fact that a relation of hegemonic representation is possible indicates that the society as a closed totality is impossible. The society as totality does not exist; hence the social is a discursive space (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). However, we continuously produce society and act as if it exists as a totality (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). For instance, in the fashion makeover reality program “*What Not To Wear*,” fashion gurus use words like ‘fashion,’ ‘style,’ and ‘self’ in their accounts of their subjects’ transformation, and they try to ascribe their own interpretation of the term and teach the nominees what fashion and style are. However what we actually observe in the program is ongoing struggles, contestations, and negotiation of meanings between fashion gurus and nominees for transformation. Such struggles and contestations clearly indicate that these ascribed meanings are only temporary and partial fixations of meaning in a fundamentally undecidable terrain (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002).

To better understand the struggles over meaning, we need to focus on the notion of overdetermination, which refers to the overflowing of the signifier by the signified. Originally the term overdetermination came from Freud, and it refers to a type of fusion, entailing a symbolic dimension and a plurality of meanings. Therefore the concept of overdetermination is constituted in the field of the symbolic and has no meaning outside of

the symbolic realm. As a result, when Althusser (1972) stated that everything existing in the social is overdetermined, what he meant was that the social constitutes itself as a symbolic order. The symbolically overdetermined character of social relations therefore implies that they lack an ultimate literality which would reduce them to necessary moments of an inherent law. For this reason, society and social agents lack any objective essence and their regularities are the relative and precarious forms of fixation that accompany the establishment of a certain order (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

The overdetermined character of social relations opens up the possibility of elaborating the concept of articulation. In this respect, the growing complexity and fragmentation of advanced industrial societies can be explained. It does not result from its inherent complexity, as compared to earlier societies. Instead, this complexity and fragmentation are constituted around a fundamental asymmetry between a growing proliferation of difference or a surplus of meaning of the social, and the difficulties encountered by any discourse attempting to fix those differences as moments of a stable articulatory structure (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

The notion of overdetermination criticizes every type of fixity through an affirmation of the incomplete, open and politically negotiable character of every identity. Every identity is overdetermined inasmuch as all literality appears as constitutively subverted and exceeded. The presence of some objects in the others prevents any of their identities from being fixed. Objects do not appear articulated like pieces in a clockwork mechanism because the presence of some in the others hinders the suturing of any of their identities (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). The subject is positioned by several conflicting social relations, among which a conflict arises (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). For this reason the working class had difficulty in constituting itself as a historical subject, due to the dispersion and fragmentation of its positionalities (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Taking up different, and sometimes conflicting, subject positions

can have decisive influence on consumption decisions. For instance, an individual is ascribed with multiple subject positions, such as a feminist, an office worker, a mother, or a customer of fashion goods, and those positions point in different directions when it comes to making decisions about fashion consumption (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). In summary, we are in the field of overdetermination of some entities by others, and this is the specific logic of articulation (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

### Articulation and Discourse

Laclau and Mouffe (1985) call articulation “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice (p.105).” They call the structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice ‘discourse.’ The differential positions, insofar as they appear articulated within a discourse, are called moments. On the other hand, element refers to any difference that is not articulated into a discourse (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). However this differential ensemble of signifying sequences fails to invoke a complete closure because there is no fixed center in the discourse. The absence of a fixed center extends the process of signification within the structure infinitely. Hence there will always be something that escapes the seemingly infinite process of signification within the discourse. The multiplicity of mutually substituting centers only achieves a precarious order and manages to produce a partially fixed meaning. This partial fixation of meaning produces a surplus of meaning, which escapes the differential logic of discourse (Torfing 1999). Inherent in every discursive situation, this surplus is the necessary terrain for the constitution of every social practice and is called the field of discursivity. The field of discursivity determines the necessarily discursive character of any object and the impossibility for any given discourse to implement a final suture at the same time (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). The field of surplus is termed the field of discursivity because what is not

fixed as a differential identity within a concrete discourse is not nondiscursive, but is discursively constructed within a terrain of unfixity (Torfing 1999). For this reason, anti-fashion styles and an attitude of indifference to current fashion are not external to the mainstream fashion discourse, because they exist as elements within it although they did not become moments of contemporary mainstream fashion discourse at the moment. They exist in the field of discursivity and might be able to become a moment of discourse. Very often the antifashion styles from outside of mainstream culture have been appropriated by the mainstream fashion industry (Crane 1999), and this fact also clearly indicates that the signifying relations among moments and elements are very fluid.

A discursive totality never exists in the form of a simply given and delimited positivity, and thus the relational logic will be incomplete and pierced by contingency. The transition from elements to moments is never entirely fulfilled, and hence a no-man's land emerges, making the articulatory practice possible. In this case both the identities and the relations lose their necessary character and there is no identity which can be fully constituted. This incomplete character of every totality leads us to abandon the premise of society as a sutured and self-defined totality. That is, society is not a valid object of discourse because there is no single underlying principle constituting the whole field of differences as a society. The social is constituted in the terrain where neither a total interiority nor a total exteriority is possible. For the same reason that the social cannot be reduced to the interiority of a fixed system of differences, pure exteriority is also impossible (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

According to Laclau and Mouffe, every discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, and to construct a center. These privileged discursive points of this partial fixation are called nodal points. However this center does not have any natural site or fixed locus, but instead has a function (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Around a nodal point, other signs are ordered and these other signs

acquire their meaning from their relationship to the nodal point (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002).

Since all identity is relational and all discourse is subverted by a field of discursivity that overflows it, the transition from elements to moment can never be complete. These elements have the status of floating signifiers, incapable of being wholly articulated to a discursive chain, and this floating character finally penetrates any social identity. Considering the noncomplete character of all discursive fixation and the relational character of every identity, the ambiguous character of the signifier is caused by a proliferation of signifieds, rather than a paucity of them. That is, it is polysemy that disarticulates a discursive structure and that establishes the overdetermined, symbolic dimension of every social identity. Every nodal point is constituted within an intertextuality that overflows it. Therefore the practice of articulation consists in the construction of nodal points, which partially fix the meaning of a signifying chain. This partial character emanates from the openness of the social, which is a result of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

Another interesting theoretical contribution made by Laclau and Mouffe is that they resist any distinction between objectified realities (the nondiscursive) and discourse based on the fact that one effect of discursive activity is to produce objectivity (Laclau 1996). Their analysis affirms that every object is constituted as an object of discourse and that any distinction between what are usually called the linguistic and behavioral aspects of a social practice is an incorrect one (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). So called nondiscursive complexes such as institutions, techniques, productive organization, and so on turn out to be more or less complex forms of differential positions among objects, which do not arise from some objective necessity like God, Nature, or Reason. Seemingly nondiscursive complexes can therefore only be conceived as discursive articulations (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Torfing 1999).

However, it should be noted that the fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse does not necessarily have a connection to the philosophical debate about whether there is a world external to thought. An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists independent of one's will. But depending on the structuring of a discursive field, the same events can be interpreted as natural phenomena or expressions of the wrath of God. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to our consciousness, but that they could constitute themselves as objects of knowledge outside any discursive condition of emergence (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

Rejecting the distinction between the discursive (linguistic) and the nondiscursive (extralinguistic), Laclau and Mouffe insist on the interweaving of the semantic aspects of language with the pragmatic aspects of actions, movements and objects (Torfing 1999). Drawing on the theory of speech acts by Wittgenstein, Laclau and Mouffe stress the material character of every discursive structure. The theory of speech acts emphasizes the performative character of language, and the concept of the language game by Wittgenstein includes both language and the actions within an indissoluble totality, as he declares "I shall also call the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the language game" (Wittgenstein 1968, para.7). It is evident that the very material properties of objects are part of Wittgenstein's language game, which is an example of what Laclau and Mouffe call discourse (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

Since discourse is co-extensive with the social, it cannot be reduced to its semantic or its pragmatic aspects (Torfing 1999). Semantic meaning is compounded from cases of a word's use, so meaning is very much the product of pragmatics. The use of a term is an act, which also forms part of pragmatics. On the other hand the meaning is also constituted in the context of actual use, and in that sense its semantics are entirely dependent upon its pragmatics. Therefore every discursive object or identity is constituted in the context of an

action and every nonlinguistic action also has a meaning. What we find within so called nonlinguistic action is the same entanglement of pragmatics and semantics that we find in the use of language (Laclau and Mouffe 1987).

All actions have meaning, and producing and disseminating meaning is acting (Torfing 1999). As a result, the distinction between linguistic and nonlinguistic elements does not overlap with the distinction between meaningful and not meaningful. The distinction between linguistic and nonlinguistic is a secondary one that takes place within meaningful totalities. This totality, which includes the linguistic and the nonlinguistic, is what Laclau and Mouffe call discourse (Laclau and Mouffe 1987). The consequence of a break with the linguistic (discursive)/nonlinguistic (extra-discursive) dichotomy is to abandon the thought/reality opposition, and therefore a major enlargement of the field of categories that can account for social relations (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

### Subject Positions and Identification

In discourse theoretical terms, the subjects become subject positions (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). When Laclau and Mouffe use the category of subject, they use it in the sense of subject positions within a discursive structure (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). This notion of a subject position represents a particular strength of the poststructuralist research paradigm, on which the theory of Laclau and Mouffe is grounded, because it recognizes both the constitutive force of discourse and of discursive practices and at the same time the fact that an individual is capable of exercising choice in relation to those practices (Davies and Harré 2001). As Althusser (1972) claims, the way that people experience themselves and the world around them is in part a consequence of particular discursive regimes. Through the process of interpellation, people are hailed by a particular discourse as particular kinds of individuals or subjects. The concept of the subject position is powerful because it connects the notion of



discourses to the social construction of particular selves (Edley 2001). By taking up a particular position as one's own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point associated with position, and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, story lines and concepts that are made available and relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned (Davies and Harré 2001). For instance, if a child calls out 'Mom!' and an adult responds, then the adult has become interpellated with a particular identity of a mother, to which particular behavioral expectations are attached (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). However, the interpellation does not necessarily mean that individuals do not have any choice. The possibility of choice is inevitably involved in the process because there are many and contradictory discursive practices in which each individual can engage (Davies and Harré 2001).

Since every subject position is a discursive position, they also take the open character of every discourse. As a result the various positions cannot be totally fixed in a closed system of differences. The affirmation of the discursive character of every subject position is linked to the rejection of the notion of subject as an originary totality. Since every subject position is a discursive position, the category of subject is penetrated by the same ambiguous, incomplete and polysemical character which overdetermination assigns to every discursive identity. For this reason, the moment of closure of a discursive totality cannot be established at the level of a 'meaning-giving subject.' Because of this very absence of a final suture, none of the subject positions manages to stabilize itself as a separate subject position. There is a game of overdetermination among them that reintroduces the horizon of an impossible totality, and it is this game that makes hegemonic articulation possible (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

If individuals were to always have readily defined locations in the social structure, the problem of their identity would not arise, or, at most, would be a matter of people discovering

or recognizing their identity, rather than of constructing it. In this case the problems of social dislocation could be understood in terms of the contradictory locations of the social agents. However, the basic question of the social is posed at this identity level. All social conflict would have to be considered not only in terms of the contradictory claims, but also from the viewpoint of the deconstruction of the social identities that the conflict would create. If a conflict-free situation were incompatible with any form of society, any social identity would necessarily entail construction as one of its dimensions (Laclau 1994).

Laclau calls this the process of constructing identity identification. The identification, which has originated from psychoanalysis, asserts a lack of any essential foundation for any identity. Thus one needs to identify with something because there is an originary and insurmountable lack of fixed identity (Laclau 1994). Confronted with the undecidability of the social and the absence of any essence for identity, a person makes a decision to act regarding her or his self, and this move constructs a particular representation of self-identity (Cloyes 2004). That is, the subject is not merely hailed in a purely passive manner, but reflexively recognizes and invests in the position (Benwell and Stokoe 2006; Hall 2000). However, considering incompleteness and indeterminacy of every discursive relation, whatever identity the social agents have can only arise from precarious and transient forms of identification (Laclau 1994).

### Antagonism and Objectivity

People confront the social world primarily as a sedimented ensemble of social practices, accepting them without questioning their contingency (Laclau 1994). Sometimes the degree of sedimentation is so high that the element of conflict and antagonism tends to fade (Torfing 1999) and then the sedimented ensemble seems natural and relatively uncontested. The concept of objectivity refers to this phenomenon (Jørgensen and Phillips

2002). However, the social world is not entirely defined in terms of the repetition of sedimented practices, because the social always overflows the institutionalized frameworks of 'society.' In addition, social antagonism, which has a form of discursive presence as the experience of the limit of all objectivity, shows the inherent contingency of those frameworks (Laclau 1994; Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

In a situation of social antagonism, the presence of an 'Other' within the social field prevents one from being totally oneself (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Antagonism can be found where discourses collide, and this antagonism can be dissolved through hegemonic interventions, which are contingent interventions taking place in an undecidable terrain by ethico-political decisions (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002; Laclau 1996; Torfing 1999).

Hegemonic articulation ultimately involves the negation of identity because some element of force and repression is involved in the process. What is negated in the process is not only alternative meanings and actions but also those who identify themselves with these meanings and actions. The negation of identity tends to give rise to social antagonism (Torfing 1999). In a social antagonistic situation, different identities mutually exclude each other (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). In this situation, hegemonic force, which is responsible for the negation of individual or collective identity, tends to construct the excluded identity as a threatening obstacle to the fulfillment of chosen meanings and actions (Torfing 1999). In this way the contingency of sedimented reality and the identities it constitutes become visible (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002).

Before discussing the specificity of social antagonism, we need to understand real opposition and dialectic contradiction, although neither real opposition nor dialectical contradiction can account for the specific relation of social antagonism. Real opposition responds to the formula 'A-B' in which each of its terms has its own positivity, independent of its relation with the other. Obviously an antagonism cannot be a real opposition. There is

nothing antagonistic in a crash between two vehicles. It is only a material fact obeying positive physical laws. Dialectical contradiction, on the other hand, responds to the formula ‘A-not A,’ in which the relation of each term with the other exhausts the reality of both. People participate in a variety of mutually contradictory belief systems, but antagonism does not necessarily emerge from these contradictions. Therefore contradictions do not necessarily imply an antagonistic relationship (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

Despite their differences, what these two relations share is that they are objective relations, between real objects in the real opposition and between conceptual objects in the contradiction. In both cases we are concerned with full identities. In contradiction, it is because A is fully A that being-not-A is a contradiction. In the case of real opposition, it is because A is also fully A that its relation with B produces an objectively determinable effect. In the case of antagonism, however, we are confronted with the presence of the ‘Other’ that prevents me from being totally myself, and therefore the relation does not arise from full totalities. The presence of the Other is not a logical impossibility, so it is not a contradiction. Antagonisms are not objective relations, but relations that show off the limits of all objectivity, which are revealed as partial and precarious objectification (Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

### Equivalence and Difference

The first condition for subverting the social or preventing closure is that the specificity of each position should be dissolved, and at this point the relation of equivalence is relevant (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). For instance, when makeover nominees meet with fashion gurus in the fashion makeover reality show, *What Not to Wear*, nominees express their fashion style through contents such as various clothes, hair-dos, and different make-up styles. However, the fashion gurus consider the different styles to be equivalently unstylish

and their wearers equally fashion illiterate. Since each of these contents is equivalent to the fashion gurus, in terms of the nominees being unstylish, the objects lose the condition of differential moments, and acquire the floating character of elements. The differences cancel one another out insofar as they are used to express something identical underlying them all, which is being unstylish. If all the differential features of an object have become equivalent, it is impossible to express anything positive concerning that object, and this implies that through the equivalence something is expressed which the object is not (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). A relation of equivalence absorbs all the positive determinations of the nominees in opposition to the fashion gurus' conception of style. Thus a system of positive differential positions is not created between the two because it dissolves all positivity: the nominees are discursively constructed as antifashion.

To be equivalent, two terms must be different. Otherwise there would be a simple identity. On the other hand, the equivalence exists only through the act of subverting the differential character of those terms. Hence the ambiguity penetrates every relation of equivalence and the relation between difference and equivalence is undecidable (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). The discursive identities are inscribed both in differential signifying chains and equivalent signifying chains, and thus the tension between differential and equivalential aspects of discursive identities is unresolvable. This undecidability between difference and equivalence indicates that all social identities are intersecting points between the logic of equivalence and logic of difference (Torfing 1999).

Although Laclau and Mouffe are primarily interested in more abstract discourses, the idea that these discourses are created, maintained and changed in diverse everyday practices is implied in their theory (Jorgensen and Philips 2002). Especially their concepts including nodal points and articulation have potential to be used effectively in detailed empirical analysis to answer questions such as how each discourse constitutes knowledge and reality,

identities and social relations. Laclau and Mouffe's theory can be used as a useful framework to examine the political process of creating meanings in the phenomena of fashion because their concepts, such as overdetermination and articulation, are oriented toward mapping out how different concepts and ideas are intermingled in a certain discourse and have certain effects on social reality. In particular, the concepts of nodal points and logic of equivalence and difference have much to offer for consumer researchers to reveal the contingent relations among various concepts and practices.

### The Implications of Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Theory for Consumer Research

#### Guiding the Analysis by Focusing on the Signification Process

The overall goal of discourse analysis is to explain what is being done in the discourse and how it is accomplished. That is, the role of discourse researchers is to reveal how discourse is structured to perform a variety of functions and achieve various effects (Potter and Wetherell 1987). In the respect that it provides researchers with a way to unpack the construction of social reality, discourse analysis complements traditional qualitative methods.

Traditional qualitative methods provide insight into the meaning of social reality and often reify categories from the data (Phillips and Hardy 2002). For instance phenomenology is most interested in examining the lived experience of consumers and the research usually results in descriptions of the essential structure of consumer experience. Ethnography is concerned about how certain consumption behaviors are understood and managed in different social contexts and therefore the research product usually includes a typology of interpretations, relations, and variations within certain consumption practices (Thorne 2000).

On the contrary, discourse analysis is interested in revealing how social realities and identities are built and what the consequences of such configurations are. It provides the tools

to investigate the dynamics of social construction that produce these categories (Phillips and Hardy 2002). In discourse analysis, therefore, decisions about the truth and falsity of descriptions are typically suspended. Researchers using discourse analysis are much more interested in examining the process of construction itself. They strive to answer questions such as how 'truths' emerge, how social realities and identities are built and what their consequences are. Working out what 'really happened' is of less interest (Wetherell 2001b). For this reason, analysis must attend to the local geography of contexts and practices, and to the mechanisms through which the discourses are effectively realized (Potter and Wetherell 1990).

In spite of its usefulness for investigating the process of the construction of social reality, similar to other qualitative methods, there is no standardized recipe for successful discourse analysis (Phillips and Hardy 2002). Moreover, to be too systematic and mechanical undermines the very basis of discourse analysis, inducing the reification of concepts and objects, which discourse analysis seeks to avoid (Burman and Parker 1993). When the analysis heads towards the reification of concepts and objects, it risks being a thematic analysis, the interest of which is to identify overarching themes in order to summarize data. On the other hand, the purpose of discourse analysis is to reveal the contingent configuration of various concepts and practices in cultural discourses. Therefore the nature of the analysis should be relatively open-ended and iterative (Taylor 2001).

Despite its open-endedness, having analytical concepts to guide the analysis will help researchers to navigate through the data, because analytical concepts suggest what to look for and how to interpret what we see (Wood and Kroger 2000). In this respect, the theory and concepts of Laclau and Mouffe help researchers focus on the process of production of meaning and practice within and through discourse, avoiding the risk of doing thematic analysis.

In fact, Laclau and Mouffe did not provide any detailed analysis of empirical materials themselves, and were more interested in discourses as abstract phenomena (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). However this does not mean their concepts cannot be used in empirical analyses. Their theoretical concepts of nodal points, antagonism and hegemony, logic of equivalence and difference, and subject positions and identification can be very useful and promising for analyzing the construction process of fashion meaning and practice.

The concept of nodal points, which refer to key signifiers in the discursive organization of meaning, can be identified in specific empirical material, and the researcher can proceed to identify how nodal points organize the discursive and symbolic fields by producing privileged points of signification. Antagonism and hegemony can also guide the researcher to detect how antagonistic relations are configured in the field of fashion discourse and how such tensions are resolved through hegemonic intervention. Through the logic of equivalence and difference, researchers can examine how different elements are articulated into signifying chains in the field of discursivity. Subject positions and identification also provide a useful tool for the researcher to investigate how a consumer's adoption of certain subject positions in the discourse leads to the production of certain consumption meanings and practice in their everyday lives (Cloyes 2004; Jørgensen and Phillips 2002; Torfing 1999).

### Consumption as Discourse

One of the potential applications of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory to consumer research comes from their abandonment of the distinction between linguistic and nonlinguistic elements in constructing signifying chains (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; 1987). According to Laclau and Mouffe, nonlinguistic practices and objects are also part of discourses (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). This aspect of their theory has immense significance for consumer researchers because consumption involves material objects



(products) and actual consumption behaviors, apart from linguistic elements.

In their everyday life consumers engage in the signification process by using particular products in particular situations. For instance, if a researcher examines the discourse around baggy pants, she will find out that what people say about the pants is tightly intertwined with the object itself (pants) and wearers' behaviors, such as the style in which they wear the pants and where they go in those pants. For the sake of analysis, a researcher can single out linguistic elements from the totality of the signification process. With only linguistic elements, however, the whole process of signification in the discourse of baggy pants cannot be shown in full, because linguistic elements are interwoven with consumption objects and consumers' behaviors to produce meaning. As Laclau and Mouffe stressed in their theory, if the totality of consumption practice includes both linguistic and nonlinguistic elements, it cannot itself be either linguistic or extralinguistic (Laclau and Mouffe 1987).

Consumption behaviors usually involve both linguistic and nonlinguistic elements because most consumption situations involve consumption objects, concrete consumption behaviors as well as consumption meanings attached to such behaviors and objects. Moreover, the meanings and concrete practices of consumption are not just individual constructions. Rather they are socially constructed through ongoing political struggles among various meanings and different practices as explained in discourse theory. For this reason, Laclau and Mouffe's theory can be very promising for consumer researchers who want to examine how certain consumption meanings and practices take a dominant position in current social and cultural reality without dismissing material and behavioral aspects of consumption discourse in understanding the signification of consumption meaning production.

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## CHAPTER 3

### CONSTRUCTING FASHION AS ORDINARY PRACTICE:

#### DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF *WHAT NOT TO WEAR*

##### Introduction

Fashion has generally been conceptualized as a form of hegemonic oppression, obliging women to conform to the beauty ideal of the society (Wolf 1991). As Crane (1999) suggests, however, recent changes in the nature of fashion make it possible for a variety of styles to coexist, rather than enforcing the concept of one style dominating in a season. Moreover, Crane (1999) notes changes in the ways women perceive fashion. These changes raise questions concerning the above conceptualization as having a direct and automatic impact on consumers. Although the power of fashion to structure has been preserved, the power of fashion on consumers and the mechanisms by which that is achieved have experienced some changes.

Since the 1970s, clothes have been selected on the basis of personal tastes rather than conformity to rules set by fashion authorities. The emphasis on individual interpretation of style continues to change the way fashion innovations are developed and presented to the consumers (Crane 1999). In fact, many scholars, industry analysts, and journalists strongly deny the dictating influence of the fashion industry on consumers' acceptance of changing trends (Sproles 1981). Moreover, the increasing level of competition has made it more difficult to implement the top-down model of the past. Elite designers display many ideas in

their biannual fashion shows, from which fashion editors and department store buyers choose items that will be promoted as new trends. To be successful in this environment fashionable clothes have to be synchronized with media cultures as expressed in television, film, and popular music (Crane 1999).

For this reason, mass media has long been identified as an important part of an economic system that sustains the rapid production and consumption of fashion (Crane 1999; König 2004; McRobbie 1998). In particular, fashion journalism plays a crucial role in the dissemination of fashion innovations in contemporary society. The diffusion of fashion innovations, whether the process is downward or upward, has been accelerated by media exposure, which leads to rapid awareness of new styles at all levels of the fashion system (Crane 1999). The influence of TV shows, such as *Sex and the City*, on fashion consumption illustrates the impact that media contents can have on the process of fashion consumption (König 2004; Niblock 2004). Thanks to *Sex and the City*, Manolo Blahnik became a household name although not all can afford to buy these expensive shoes.

Reflecting consumers' increasing interests in fashion and its importance in individuals' identity construction in contemporary society, television is overflowing with reality shows on fashion such as *America's Next Top Model*, *Project Runway*, and *What Not to Wear*. In particular, *What Not to Wear* is a fashion makeover show that teaches ordinary consumers how to dress in such a way as to enhance one's own style. As opposed to feminist criticism of fashion (Bordo 1993; Hesse-Biber 1996; Wolf 1991), the program does not encourage women to change everything about themselves to conform to an unrealistic, oppressing beauty ideal. Instead, the hosts of the show and other style experts claim that having style means reinforcing everything about a person that is already beautiful (Kelly 2008; Mizrahi 2008).

It is also hard to deny the influence of the fashion industry and fashion media discourse on fashion consumption despite the supporting evidence for consumer agency in fashion

consumption studies (Murray 2002; Thompson and Haytko 1997). Still, the fashion industry takes charge of producing available fashion items, and the fashion media play a crucial role in disseminating new fashion trends and knowledge. This indicates the change in the ways that the fashion industry and media work to influence fashion consumption, and the limitations that a dictating model of the fashion industry has in explaining how contemporary mainstream fashion discourses work.

Therefore, it would seem worthwhile to explore the ways in which fashion, the self and style are intertwined in mainstream style discourse, as well as this configuration's effects of on fashion consumption. For this essay's investigation of the ways that mainstream fashion discourses exercise their influence, I turn to a fashion make-over show, *What Not to Wear*. I investigate the following questions: 1) How do fashion experts and nominees conceptualize fashion, style, and the self in the program?; 2) How are these different meanings contested in the program?; and 3) What are the effects of the configuration suggested in the program? Considering the increasing popularity and importance of reality shows in contemporary popular culture, answering these questions will help consumer researchers to better understand the influence of popular culture on fashion consumption.

### Fashion and Style

In the contemporary fashion world, fashion and style have quite different meanings although they are often used interchangeably in everyday language usage. In particular, in their use of language contemporary fashion experts draw a very clear line between fashion and style. Fashion usually indicates what designers create and sell such as clothes, shoes, bags and other accessories. On the other hand, style refers to one's usage and interpretation of what is available for her or him (Kelly 2008; Mizrahi 2008). Therefore it is possible to have lots of clothes without having style (Marano 2008).

## Fashion

The concept of fashion is usually defined in 'change' of styles in clothes (Wilson 2003). Sproles (1979) defines fashion as temporary cyclical phenomena adopted by consumers for a particular time and situation. Fashion as change can be found in any field from clothes to academic research. However, the term fashion is commonly used in reference to clothes. In modern societies no clothes are outside of fashion. Fashion sets the terms of all clothes related behavior. Uniforms have been designed by Paris dressmakers and even nuns have shortened their skirts as fashion has changed (Wilson 2003).

A number of authors have argued that the fashion system provides consumers with the raw material for everyday dress, and this raw material includes discourses and aesthetic ideas around clothes as well as the garments themselves (Wilson 2003). The discourse of fashion serves to present certain clothes as meaningful, beautiful or desirable while endowing certain clothes with the meaning of ugly, bad, or undesirable (Entwistle 2000).

## Style

While the term fashion emphasizes change, style is more related to aesthetic practices of individuals. Indeed, the term style is a central notion in the arts (Meskin 2001). Style is any distinctive, recognizable way in which an act is performed or an artifact made. The wide range of application implied in this definition is reflected in the variety of usages of the term in contemporary English. It may indicate the classification of the ways of doing or making according to the groups or countries or periods and it may denote one individual's manner of doing something (Gombrich 1968). Phrases like Baroque or Renaissance style are examples of the former usage, and the style of Beethoven or Cicero refers to the latter usage.

By virtue of style, therefore, the particularity of individual work is subject to a general law of form that also applies to other works (Simmel 1991). For this reason consumers cannot

have their own style in fashion ignoring current fashion trends because creativity in their own interpretation of fashion is only allowed within the boundaries of fashion discourses and aesthetic norms of the period.

People, however, do speak of Michelangelo's style, or Beethoven's style. In fashion similar things happen. Groundbreaking works of certain fashion geniuses such as Karl Lagerfeld, Alexander McQueen and John Galiano set the terms for other fashion designers. Celebrities, often called fashionistas, create ensembles which ordinary consumers emulate creating their own look. These special figures literally created their own style from their very individual genius. The style of an individual master may be adopted by others so that it ends up being the shared property of many artists (Simmel 1991).

Some might claim that people sometimes refuse to go with the fashion and assert their independence, but this independence is relative. Even a refusal to participate in mainstream fashion is a way of taking up a position toward it (Gombrich 1968). This is why studying seemingly highly individualized ways of creating one's own style opens the window to look into the discursive formation of meanings and practices in fashion consumption.

In common usage of language, people often use the term 'style' with evaluative connotation. While 's/he has style' is commonly used to express positive evaluation, 'he has no style' is commonly understood to be criticism (Meskin 2001). In fact the names for styles used in art history emerged from normative contexts. Sticking to certain stylistic norms is considered desirable while deviation from such norms is sometimes condemned. The adoption of certain style conventions is clearly learned and absorbed by those who carry on the tradition (Gombrich, 1968). These evaluative and learned aspects of style also imply that the social elements play an important role in creating one's own style. However we also criticize people for showing off style without substance. Therefore the mere exhibition of style is not sufficient for overall positive value (Meskin 2001). The criticism of style without

substance actually resonates with the mantra of contemporary style discourse, which is “there’s no way to unearth your personal style without first knowing who you are” (Mizrahi 2008), p.10). In other words, style discourse takes a certain standpoint in relation to fashion and self, and this intertwined relationship among fashion, self and aesthetic interpretation of fashion through creating style seems to be fruitful ground to uncover how mainstream fashion discourse defines the self in relation to fashion and how this definition leads to the hegemony of the fashion industry.

Another pivotal element of style is that there can be no question of style if the speaker or writer does not have the possibility of choosing between alternative ways of doing things (Gombrich 1968). Therefore synonymy lies at the root of the whole problem of style (Ullmann 1964). In order for a consumer to wear an evening dress with style, she has to have choice options to express her individuality. In fact both designers and clothing firms offer a wide range of choices from which the consumer can put together a look that is compatible with his or her identity (Crane 1999). There is an internal paradox of style mixing generality with individuality. Having choices is not necessarily indicative of consumers having certain autonomy in fashion. Consumers’ practices of juxtaposing various discourses should not be directly understood as representation of consumer agency. In addition, by selecting among possible options and putting those things together to create a certain look signifying specific meanings, consumers engage in concrete practices of wearing clothes, and thus researchers can look into the concrete semiotic practices of wearing clothes and creating meanings.

In summary the term ‘style’ is used to describe alternative ways of doing things, while the term ‘fashion’ can be reserved for the fluctuating preferences which carry social prestige in a given period of time. Despite the difference in meanings, the two terms can overlap in their application if a fashionable preference can become so general and lasting that it affects the style of a whole society (Gombrich 1968). These working definitions for fashion and style

will be used for this essay. In the following section, I will overview the paradoxes of individuality versus generality in fashion consumption.

### *What Not to Wear*

*What Not to Wear* is an American reality television show that is based on a British Show of the same name, which was launched by the BBC in 2001. It started airing on January 18th, 2003 and over 10 seasons about 270 episodes have been shown thus far. Most of the episodes feature participants who have been nominated by their significant others such as family members, friends and colleagues. Whenever someone is selected, the nominee is secretly videotaped for two weeks. Afterward, the hosts of the show, the nominee, and nominators meet and watch the secret footage together and criticize the nominee's choice of clothing. Five thousand dollars is then offered to the nominee for purchase of a new wardrobe. However, conditions are imposed. The nominee must turn over her or his entire existing wardrobe to the hosts. The nominee must also shop by the rules which are tailored for the nominee and established by the hosts. If the nominee accepts, she or he is brought to New York City for a week of evaluation, shopping, and hair and makeup styling. In this show, nominees often resist changing their fashion consumption behaviors because they do not care about fashion or want to remain unique in the crowd. As the episode progress, however, nominees become more attuned to the fashion norms suggested by the fashion expert in the program, although there are some variations in the terms of the negotiation between the fashion experts and the nominees.

### People in the Program

Various characters appear in *What Not to Wear*, including the makeover nominee, the nominee's family and friends, fashion experts, a hair stylist, a makeup artist and a narrator.

Their roles in the program are summarized in Table 1. In every episode, a new person is nominated for a fashion makeover head to toe. The person is secretly nominated by her or his family and friends. The reasons for nomination are varied, from outdated fashion to clothes being appropriate for their gender, age, social roles, jobs, and so on. Nominees' characteristics are varied in terms of gender, age, profession, marital status, body shape, and geographical location so that regular viewers will, over the course of time, find someone with whom they can identify.

Besides nomination, a nominee's family and friends help film the secret footage of the nominee's fashion. They express their thoughts about the nominee's fashion choices, removing from the closet and showing the nominee's inappropriate or unfashionable clothes. In fact, their comments on the nominee's fashion represent the gazes of other people whom the nominee may come across in daily life. These testimonies of friends and family are contrasted with the nominee's views on personal fashion choices. This disparity clearly

Table 1: The Characters in *What Not to Wear*

| Characters         |                                | The Role of the Character  |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| Nominee            |                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Being made over in terms of wardrobe, hair, and makeup</li> <li>▪ Being criticized about their poor fashion choices</li> </ul>  |
| Family and Friends |                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Nominating</li> <li>▪ Helping to film secret footage</li> <li>▪ Giving their honest opinions about the nominee's look</li> </ul>  |
| Fashion Expert     | Stacy London and Clinton Kelly | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Fashion stylists</li> <li>▪ Criticizing the fashion choices and style of nominees</li> <li>▪ Suggesting fashion rules and helping with shopping</li> <li>▪ Providing general fashion knowledge</li> </ul> |
|                    | Nick Arrojo                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Hair stylist</li> </ul>   |
|                    | Carmindy                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Makeup artist</li> </ul>  |
| Narrator           |                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Introducing nominees to the audience members</li> <li>▪ Summarizing the progress and anchoring meanings</li> </ul>  |



illustrates that a person's look has a definitely intelligible meaning, but it does not necessarily have a mutually agreed-upon meaning for an encoder and the decoders (Campbell 1995).

Stacy London and Clinton Kelly are the hosts of the show and they play central roles as fashion stylists in the show. They visit a nominee at home, ambush the individual and criticize that person's poor fashion choices while watching secret footage together with the nominee. In this criticism, very straightforward and brutal expressions are commonly used. In particular the cross editing between what a nominee says and what fashion experts think creates a structure in which the fashion experts refute what the nominee argues about personal fashion choices. Besides discussing the nominee's poor fashion choices, they suggest fashion rules for the nominee based on gender, age, job, social roles and physical characteristics. The nominee goes shopping for two days. On the first day, the nominee is usually unaccompanied while Stacy and Clinton observe through a hidden camera whether the nominee is following the shopping rules; their comments on the nominee's choices are inserted through cross editing. On the second day, Stacy and Clinton usually shop with the nominee.

Hair stylist Nick Arrojo and makeup artist Carmindy appear as additional fashion experts. Unlike Stacy and Clinton, they usually do not criticize a nominee's hair and makeup. Instead, they focus on suggesting appropriate hair and makeup styles based on the nominee's outfits, and teach the nominee how to manage hair and do makeup.

Finally, the narrator plays an important role in the program, although the audience cannot see the narrator. The narrator introduces the nominee and briefs the progress of the makeover. The identity of the nominee and the shopping rules are summarized by the narrator. Through this narration, he anchors particular meanings among the multitude of potential meanings.

### The Flow of the Show

In terms of contents, every episode is divided into roughly three sections. Figure 1 shows how the program proceeds in each episode. The first segment focuses on introducing and criticizing the nominee. The narrator introduces the nominee at the beginning of the program. Stacy and Clinton join to watch secret footage, decide that the nominee needs a fashion makeover and ambush the nominee, who has been set up by family and friends. If the nominee accepts the conditions of the makeover, which include surrendering the present wardrobe and following the rules set by Stacy and Clinton, the nominee is eligible to receive \$5,000 for shopping expenses. After the nominee accepts the conditions, the makeover process starts with the hosts joining the nominee to watch the secret footage. The most distinguishing characteristic in this section of the show is the contestation between the nominee and fashion experts. Stacy and Clinton criticize the nominee's fashion very brutally, and the nominee defends her or his choices more or less fiercely. Here audience members observe the striking differences between intended meanings and received meanings. Such a

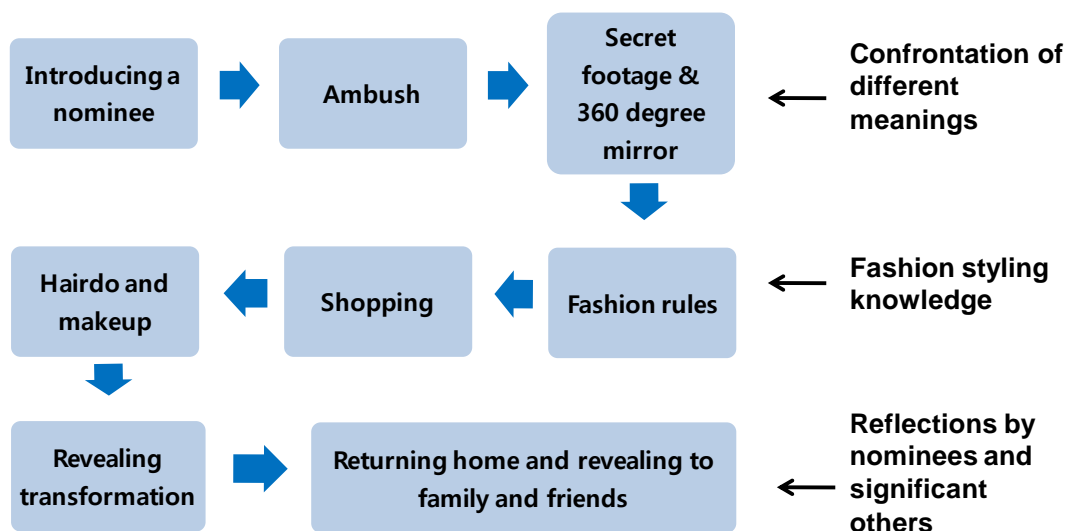


Figure 1: Flow of each episode

contestation continues in the 360-degree mirrors as well. In particular, 360-degree mirror is the mechanism that represents people's gazes. The nominee sees her or his appearance from the different vantage points that have never been available to the nominee. That is, the nominee is confronted with their appearance in terms of what others see.

The second section mainly concerns delivering fashion styling knowledge. Stacy and Clinton suggest fashion rules based on the nominee's unique situation. Customized fashion knowledge in terms of fit, colors, patterns, and cuts that flatter the nominee's strengths while camouflaging weaknesses, are recommended; general rules of fashion are also offered. The ways of managing hair and makeup are also taught by the hair stylist and makeup artist. Product placement, such as exposing the store name and brands of cosmetics for makeup, usually happens in this section.

The third section mainly deals with transformation. At first, the nominee seeks approval of fashion experts before returning home. The fashion experts marvel at the nominee's transformation and reinforce how the nominee looks beautiful or handsome, well put together and sophisticated. The nominee also confesses what she or he has learned through the process. In this section, a striking contrast between the old and the new self is shown. Such a contrast is also reinforced one more time by the testimonies of family and friends expressing their admiration for the transformation. At the last moment, the nominee acknowledges that she likes her changed self and will keep the changed look from now on.

### Methodology

#### Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Theory as an Analytical Framework

Among various approaches of discourse analysis (Finlayson 1999; Gill 2000; Schiffrin 1994), I will use the conceptualization by Laclau and Mouffe (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Laclau and Mouffe 1987) as a guide to analyze the collected data. The discourse theoretical

framework of Laclau and Mouffe is befitting for analyzing *What Not to Wear* because their theory did not distinguish the linguistic and the extralinguistic. Instead, it affirms that every object is constituted as an object of discourse and that any distinction between what are usually called linguistic and behavioral aspects of social practice is an incorrect distinction (Laclau & Mouffe 1985) because the boundary between the linguistic and the nonlinguistic in a certain social practice is not clear (Laclau and Mouffe 1987).

This is a very important aspect in analyzing *What Not to Wear* because the linguistic aspect, what fashion experts and people around them say about a choice of outfit, and the material and behavioral reality, which includes nominees' wardrobes and behaviors, are intermingled in the program's signification process. This legitimates the use of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse analytical tools to analyze all aspects of the signification process in the program including physical reality, such as the body and the material world (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002).

In particular, I focus in this essay on the concepts of antagonism, nodal points and logic of equivalence and difference. Antagonism refers to the situation in which the presence of an 'Other' within the social field prevents one from being totally oneself (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Antagonism can be found when discourses collide, and this antagonism can be dissolved through hegemonic interventions (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002; Laclau 1996; Torfing 1999). In fact, antagonism abounds in *What Not to Wear*. Actually, the conflicts between the fashion experts and the nominee, and the resolution of these conflicts through the transformation are a key to the entertainment value of the program. For this reason, antagonism needs to be a center of analysis for this program.

To reveal the configuration of the discourse, nodal points, as well as the logic of equivalence and difference will be utilized for the analysis. According to Laclau and Mouffe, every discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity and to

construct a center. These privileged discursive points within the discourse are called nodal points (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Around a nodal point, other signs are ordered; these other signs acquire their meaning from equivalential or differential relationship to the nodal point (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). For instance, in the discourse that appears in *What Not to Wear*, style as a nodal point plays a central role in connecting different elements such as appropriateness for certain age, job, lifestyle, and situation into the moment of the discourse. On the other hand, wearing clothes according to personal preference and taste is not necessarily considered as having style because their preferred fashion items are inappropriate for their identity and situation. As seen in this example, nodal points, and the logic of equivalence and difference will be very useful concepts because they can show how the multitude of elements is articulated within the discourse.

### Data Set

The data for this study include the episodes of *What Not to Wear: Best of DVD* with a run time of 10 hours and 45 minutes for 15 episodes. The selection of samples from the population of episodes is not based on probability. Instead, I use the best episodes chosen by the producer of the show as texts for analysis. I use these episodes because it is expected that the producer's choice of the best episodes would have high entertainment value for the audience resulting from the most dramatic changes in nominees, which will magnify the effect of mainstream fashion discourse on a consumer's fashion styling.

Although the program is a reality show, the narrative is very tightly structured. Each episode starts with conflicts, but the nominees tend to accept the fashion experts' advice meekly and at the last moment all conflicts between two parties are resolved. This repetitive pattern suggests the possibility that the storyline of each episode might be scripted. For this reason, the episode of Desirée was included in the analysis as a negative case. She was very

resistant throughout the process of makeover, and even resisted Stacy and Clinton at the last moment of revealing. Including this negative case is expected to increase the variability in the data enabling a determination of the extent to which the analysis and results hold even in a seemingly different pattern of interactions between the nominee and the fashion experts. For analysis, each episode was fully transcribed and the screen shots were captured. Table 2 summarizes the episodes that were included in the analysis.

### Data Analysis

I watched the episodes several times with transcripts in hand to become familiar with the characters and situations. I also classified dialogue segments based on who the central character was: nominees, fashion experts, friends and family members, and narrator. The classification process was utilized to allow distance from the director's rhetoric in the show, and therefore to focus more on the logic of each participant in each episode.

In a primary open coding stage, Atlas.ti was used to assist the data analysis. During the analysis, I focused on identifying nodal points and elements that have relations with these nodal points. At first, I identified those signifiers that occur frequently. In particular, to detect nodal points and antagonism in the data, I concentrated on the signifiers that are associated with various meanings because this indicates that the fashion experts and the nominees are trying to attach their own meanings to these privileged signifiers. Centering upon these privileged signifiers, I focused on examining how these nodal points were connected to other elements in the field of discursivity.

In order to identify elements that are established as equivalent, I concentrated on oppositional expressions such as "look like," and "is like." Through this process, I could illustrate how fashion experts fix the meaning of nodal points in a particular way by establishing an equivalent relationship between the nominee and negative identities.

Table 2: Episode summary

| <b>Nominee</b>         | <b>Season /Episode</b> | <b>Original Air Date</b> | <b>Description</b>   |
|------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| <b>Niya Battle</b>     | 2/11                   | 11/7/2003                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A 24-year old mother of two from Nashville, TN</li> <li>- Family and Friends think her clothes are too short, too tight and with three inch heels, always too high.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Misti Mazey</b>     | 2/15                   | 12/12/2003               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A 30-year-old mother of a son from Dallas, TX</li> <li>- Still dresses like the rebellious teenager</li> <li>- A strange mix of punk, vintage, rockabilly, and 50s pin-up queens</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Ann Wallace</b>     | 2/17                   | 12/26/2003               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A 49-year-old rock music journalist from Orlando, FL</li> <li>- She has had the same style since 6<sup>th</sup> grade.</li> <li>- Her wardrobe make her look 20 years older than she actually is.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Mary Fragapane</b>  | 2/4                    | 9/19/2003                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A 34-year-old up and coming artist in New York City, NY</li> <li>- Her out of date hippie clothes and paint stained frocks make her look more like she paints houses.</li> <li>- Her clothes make her look unprofessional and dumpy.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Dave Hank</b>       | 2/6                    | 10/3/2003                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A 30-year-old insurance professional from Philadelphia, PA</li> <li>- He dresses like a shabby frat boy.</li> <li>- His clothes are all worn out and out of date.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Amanda Stallins</b> | 2/10                   | 10/31/2003               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A 24-year-old mother of a five-year-old son from Nashville, TN.</li> <li>- She still wears outfits she had as a child and likes to play dress-up in outdated thrift store clothing.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Will Russell</b>    | 3/2                    | 10/8/2004                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A 26-year-old African American entry level engineer in a construction management company of Charlotte, NC.</li> <li>- He wears super-sized shirts of monochromatic colors and pants that are either too long or high-water short.</li> <li>- His country accent and high-water pants might let people misjudge his intelligence.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Kelly Denhart</b>   | 3/6                    | 11/5/2004                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A stay at home mom from Charlotte, NC.</li> <li>- She has not changed her style in 18 years.</li> <li>- From her mammoth soap star hair to her sequined shoulder pads, she is trapped in 1980s.</li> </ul>  |

Table 2: Continued

| <b>Nominee</b>                 | <b>Season /Episode</b> | <b>Original Air Date</b> | <b>Description</b>   |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| <b>Sohni Singh</b>             | 3/16                   | 1/21/2005                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A 26-year-old from Chicago, IL who works for a security company and wants to go to law school.</li> <li>- She thinks the best way to get noticed is to dress as loudly and as crazily as possible.</li> </ul> |
| <b>Marcy Feinstone</b>         | 4/12                   | 11/11/2005               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A 27-year-old investment bank receptionist in New York City, NY.</li> <li>- Her long, flowing dresses, glittery bag, and clunky shoes don't give her the professional look that she needs.</li> </ul>         |
| <b>Beth Wade</b>               | 4/20                   | 1/20/2006                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A 33-year-old employee of Chicago's cultural affairs department.</li> <li>- She loves black and leopard skin, and her coworkers and friends want her wardrobe to reflect her position.</li> </ul>             |
| <b>Tracy Patterson</b>         | 4/22                   | 2/3/2006                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A bartender and waitress and soon to be bride from Antioch, IL.</li> <li>- Her family wants her to tone down her overtly sexy style.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Rita Mitchell</b>           | 5/15                   | 1/26/2007                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A 34-year-old product manager in a Internet company in Seattle, WA.</li> <li>- She is very fond of fleece and man-tailored clothes.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Bonnie C.</b>               | 5/26                   | 4/27/2007                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A 42-year-old super mom of two kids with two home businesses from Miami, FL.</li> <li>- She runs around town in her pajamas, yoga pants and tie dye tank tops.</li> </ul>                                     |
| <b>Erin</b>                    | 5/28                   | 4/27/2007                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A 28-year-old film archivist from Miami, FL.</li> <li>- She wears tattered polyester and crazy polka dots shoes to rebel against sexy looks of South Beach.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Desirée (negative case)</b> | 5/32                   | 7/13/2007                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A 30 year old assistant manager of a hip hair salon and car mechanic.</li> <li>- She dresses like a 13-year-old skate punk boy.</li> </ul>  |



By linking these findings, I could identify the configuration of fashion, self identity, and style in the discourse of *What Not to Wear*.

### Results

From the analysis, fashion, the self, and style emerged as important nodal points in the style discourse of *What Not to Wear*. Around these privileged signs different signifiers established the relationships of equivalence and difference with one another to promote certain meanings while excluding other possible meanings.

#### Fashion for Ordinary People

Originally, the concept of fashion was generally defined on ‘change’ of styles in clothes (Wilson 2003). Sproles (1979) defines fashion as “temporary cyclical phenomena adopted by consumers for a particular time and situation” (p.116). However, in modern societies no clothes are outside of fashion. Fashion sets the terms of all clothes-related behavior. Even uniforms have been designed by Paris dressmakers and even nuns have shortened their skirts (Wilson 2003). This comprehensive meaning of fashion appears in the program in the form of the absence of explicit definition. Considering that the fashion experts make every effort to define what is considered style and what is not, the absence of a definition of fashion seems unusual. By not specifically defining the meaning of fashion, the hosts were establishing fashion as something that was so natural that a specific explanation was unnecessary. Therefore, the nominees and viewers do not have an opportunity to raise doubts about the definition of fashion provided in the program. Although the meaning of fashion is not specified, however, it is implied in the program. Figure 2 summarizes how the meaning of fashion is implied in *What Not to Wear*.

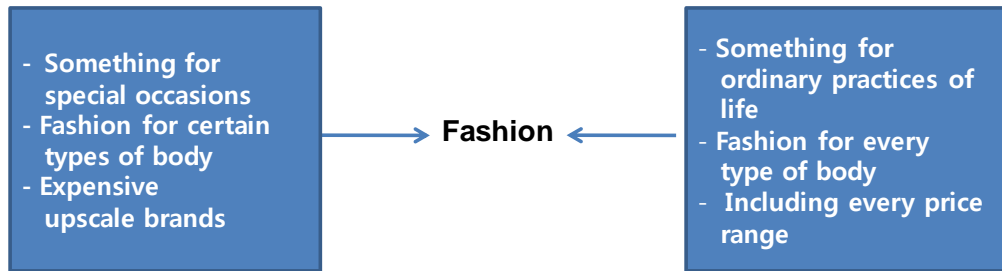


Figure 2: Antagonism over the meaning of fashion

In the program, the term fashion is used interchangeably with clothes or outfits as seen in the examples of fashion guru/tutor/expert, fashion makeover, thrift store fashion and so on. This seems to indicate that the program says that fashion is not a special thing only for certain people. Instead, the program implies that fashion includes ordinary clothes that people wear in their everyday lives.

Through the absence of a definition of fashion, the program implicitly claims that fashion is not something special as many consumers think (Thompson and Haytko 1997), but a banal reality. Thus the need to define what fashion is and what it is not disappears. Therefore, Dave's beer stained t-shirt and pants with holes on the backside; Will's high-water pants at the office; Bonnie's white, pink-flamingo embroidered pants; and Misti's thrift store-bought, worn-out, leopard-printed coat all exist in the terrain of fashion regardless of how bad they are. They just made poor choices among the raw materials that the fashion system provides for consumers' everyday dress (Wilson 2003). This banality of fashion also appears in the definition of fashion in the book by Clinton Kelly (2008), one of the hosts of the show. Kelly explains that fashion is "what designers create and sell" (p.4) and this definition seems to hold in *What Not to Wear* as well. Therefore, fashion includes all the clothes, shoes, and accessories that are available in the market regardless of their brand, price and quality. This conception of fashion is distinctly different from what the nominees usually think: that fashion is something extraordinary. To these nominees, fashion is not something that they

stress over (Amanda) or an important concern (Dave). They are not in fashion because they think fashion is not necessary or not important in their everyday lives. The idea of fashion as something glamorous and extraordinary is widely accepted by the general public. As Thompson and Haytko (1997) showed in their research, people recall the glitter of the runway, thin super models, luxury brands, celebrities, and red carpet when they hear the word fashion.

In the program, however, this preconception of fashion is undermined by various strategies. The program is structured in a way that constructs fashion as an ordinary practice in the nominees' everyday lives. One of the notable strategies for achieving this goal is to let the nominees buy clothes for ordinary practices, such as casual wear for playing with kids and going to the supermarket. Along with their evening going-out wardrobes and work outfits, the nominees are always advised to buy casual clothes for their style makeover. In this way, the show stresses that fashion includes all the clothes people wear in their everyday lives, and therefore they have to consider style when they choose comfortable wear for ordinary practices like playing with the kids, taking the kids to school, and going to the supermarket.

Another strategy for establishing fashion as a banal reality appears in the fact that the fashion experts teach the nominees how to dress in order to flatter their strengths and camouflage their weaknesses in the body. Many people think that fashion is for women who are thin and slender. The program is refuting this preconception about fashion by teaching that fashion is made for all types of bodies and it is matter of shopping wisely rather than changing the body. The following quote by Clinton Kelly to Niya, one of the nominees, clearly shows this idea of fashion for every type of body:

You've got a great body. We've talked about that before. But we've also talked about the fact that your tummy might not be the best part of your body and we want to bring emphasis to those parts of you that are really spectacular like your face, like your upper body, your arms, your legs, that kind of stuff (Clinton).

They emphasize that everyone can find great outfits that suit their unique body if they

look hard enough. If the clothes do not fit in every way, there is always tailoring. What the program implies is that the fashion system provides all types of consumers with the clothes options that go well with them. In this way, fashion is constructed as something for ordinary people who manage a household, raise children, and work at the office, as well as for super models and celebrities.

In terms of fashion brands, upscale luxury brands, a synonym for fashion, rarely appears in the program. Although brands like Diane von Fürstenberg (Mary), Hugo Boss (Will), and Emporio Armani (Dave) appeared in a few episodes, these were not very common in other episodes. When Mary went to Diane von Fürstenberg, she was not following the shopping rules given by Stacy and Clinton. Will and Dave were sent to these upscale stores to buy some investment piece suits. Other than these cases, almost every nominee went to a boutique shop in New York City or less expensive brand shops, such as Club Monaco and Century 21, H&M and New York & Company. In fact, the clothes in these boutique shops are pricy compared to low and midprice brands. However these are not luxury clothes with the price range of a few thousand dollars, of which people are reminded when they think of fashion.

Moreover, in order to replace the whole wardrobe with a \$5,000 limit, the nominees need to stay away from such upscale, expensive designer items. The brands that usually appear on the program and the constraints imposed by the total budget, set the boundary with the prejudice that fashion only concerns very expensive, upscale brands. The program shows that everyone can be fashionable by choosing the right clothes, shoes, and accessories regardless of their price. Therefore, not having enough money to buy fashionable clothes no longer serves as an excuse for being unfashionable.

In summary, *What Not to Wear* does not define what fashion is. Instead, it refutes almost every prejudice about fashion through its makeover process. Fashion is not only for special occasions, not only for someone who has a great body, and not only for people who can

afford to buy expensive, upscale products. By showing what fashion is not, the program defines what fashion is: fashion is for ordinary practices in everyday lives, for every type of body, and for people in all income levels. Through these strategies, the program closes the psychological distance between ordinary people and fashion, and constructs fashion as a banal reality in which people engage during their everyday lives.

### The Self as Matching the Outside with the Inside

In consumer studies, the self has been conceptualized as a mental representation of oneself at the individual level (Epp and Price 2008). This idea of self as an essence of personhood is shared by the nominees in *What Not to Wear*. When they explain who they are, they unfold the story based on what is inside, which includes their personality, ideas, and values. The real self resides inside and their appearance does not matter in terms of who they are.

However, their family, friends, and the fashion experts make different inferences about identity based on appearance. They talk as if there is a ‘real you’ on the ‘inside’, out of sight, contrasted with a public identity display that may or may not correspond with it (Benwell and Stokoe 2006) as expressed in Figure 3. They all acknowledge that the nominees are good-natured people, good friends, mothers, boy friends and colleagues with great potential for being more handsome or beautiful. But they also stress that others do not know what great people the nominees are because nominees have not revealed their good essence, and others judge them based on their appearance before getting to know them. For instance, a friend of Ann’s says that Ann has creative and talented side other than her motherly side but no one

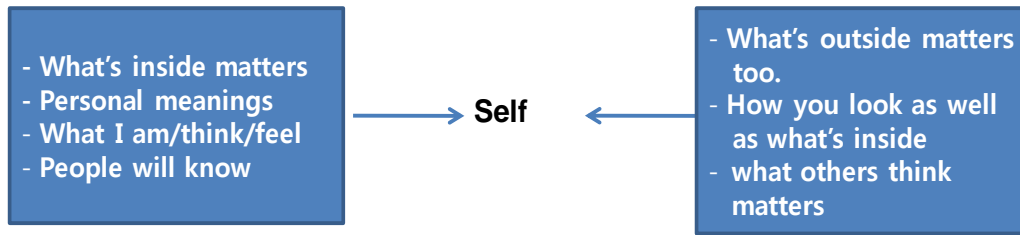


Figure 3: Antagonism over the meaning of the self

ever sees that aspect in her wardrobe and the way she dresses. Mary's sister says that Mary needs to start looking as good as her art does before anyone will become interested in her artwork.

What the nominees realize as the episodes go on is closely related to this aspect of the self. The nominees confess that they want people to focus on what is inside. Through the makeover experience, however, they learn that they can feel better by reflecting their inner self through their appearance as seen in the following two quotes:

The experience that I had is liberating. I have grown as a person and all the things I've felt about myself that I was keeping on the inside, very few people were aware of. It's here, it's an unbelievable feeling (Tracy).

It was never really very important to me for people to look at me on the outside. I wanted them to see what was on the inside, and now I'm starting to realize that you could reflect what's on the inside on the outside without having it have a negative effect on the way that people look at you and the way that you feel about yourself (Desirée).

The fashion experts and the nominee's family and friends also think that the inside matters in constructing a personhood, as the nominees believe. However, opinions about appearance are different between the nominees, and their significant others and fashion experts. In particular, fashion experts emphasize that the outside also matters in terms of personhood because people have to engage in various social activities with other people. The nominees start to accept the importance of appearance while they watch what their family and friends have to say about their outfit and confront what they look like in the 360-degree mirror. The straightforward and brutal accounts of the nominee's appearance add the impact

to the shock of confronting others' evaluations of their outfits. For instance, Clinton asks Erin whether she noticed that people coming from the opposite direction veer out of her way when she walked down the street. Stacy comments on Desiree's outfit that she would drop dead before she let Desiree, a hair dresser, touch her hair. By repeatedly giving these harsh and brutal comments on the nominee's fashion, the program indirectly asks the nominees and audience members an important question about whether they would insist on wearing their unstylish or inappropriate look even after discovering that people judge their personhood based on their appearance without knowing their good personality and character.

In order to persuade the nominees, fashion experts, family, and friends associate the appearance of the nominees with very negative identities. To establish an equivalential relationship between their appearances and negative identities, the phrases "look like" and "is like" play a crucial role. Amanda, who is a 24-year-old single mom, looks like a 12-year-old girl. Desiree, a 30-year-old hair dresser, looks like a 13-year-old skate punk. A 48-year-old rock music journalist, Ann looks like Queen Elizabeth, who is 85 years old. Niya looks like a tart, and Erin's shoes are like space age hooker shoes. While they establish the equivalence between the negative identities and their appearances, at the same time, they emphasize how they are great people on the inside. In this way the contrast between the inside and the outside is maximized.

After learning the hard lesson about their appearances, the observation that they now have the outside that matches their inside is verified in front of fashion experts Stacy and Clinton before they return home. At the revealing, what is emphasized is that now they look like who they really are. They are handsome, beautiful, well put together and sophisticated. They never look like a 12-year-old girl, a skate punk boy, or a college frat boy.

The program emphasizes the importance of appearance even more by showing how appearance changes sometimes lead to changes on the inside too. For instance, Misti

confesses,

I can't believe how much this experience has just changed me. I'm totally motivated to either go home and go to school, or get two jobs so I can go shop and shop and shop! It's totally changed my outlook and my perspective on myself, and the way that I want to be, the things I'm going to do with my life. So I really really really am so happy that I got to do this, it's awesome (Misti).

The program conveys the message that changing the outside plays an important role in constructing one's identity and consumers have to take good care of their appearance.

However it also conveys a message that changing one's appearance has nothing to do with changing who one truly is. The program argues that changing appearance is improving who one is. By using the rhetoric of improvement, the program makes the nominees and viewers less resistant to change and more prone to the makeover.

### Normative Meaning of Style

Style is any distinctive, recognizable way in which an act is performed or an artifact made. The wide range of applications implied in this definition is reflected in the variety of usages of the term in contemporary English as seen in the earlier section of this chapter. It may indicate the classification of the ways of doing or making, according to groups, countries, or periods. It may also denote one individual's manner of doing something (Gombrich 1968). In common usage of language, people also often use the term 'style' with evaluative connotations. While 's/he has style' is commonly used to express positive evaluation, 'he has no style' is commonly understood to be criticism (Meskin 2001). These two related but different connotations of style prevail in *What Not to Wear*.

In the program, the collision is recurrent between the meaning of style as an individual, a unique way of doing something, and the normative and evaluative meaning of style because of the inherent paradox in its meaning. When the individual way is implied, the uniqueness is emphasized. The nominees emphasize the individual aspect in the defense of their style. They



do not care what others think about their fashion because it is their own unique style. Sohni says she has never been one to care too much about what people think. Niya protests that her style is just for her and not really for everybody else. She is tired of everybody criticizing her clothes, and she declares nobody has to wear them except her.

However, the fashion experts argue that the nominees do not have any style because their clothes are not modern, not appropriate for their gender, age, job, and social roles, and not fit well to their own bodies. Whereas the nominees emphasize the individual aspect of style and stick to one style for every occasion, the fashion experts stress the social aspect of style and claim that different situations require different styles. That is why the program makes the nominees buy various styles appropriate to various situations in life.

In order to fix the meaning of style in a more social way, the fashion experts induce the opinions of significant others about nominees' outfits. By making the nominees confront what the people closest to them think about their fashion, the program impresses upon the nominees the social aspect of style. For instance, Misti expresses her feeling after she knew what her family and friends thought about her wardrobe,

It made me realize that I have put up this wall, and I push people away. I want to be more approachable. And I want my family to feel, I guess, not embarrassed by me anymore (Misti).

Bonnie also mentions what her son told her and realizes the personal style is not necessarily personal:

*Stacy:* Yes, let's make sure before your kids get older, that we update that image, before they're really embarrassed for you to take them to school.

*Bonnie:* Funny you should bring that up, because it just so happens that last week, I wear my yoga pants to take my kids to school. And, my son said, "You know mommy, you don't have to wear your pajamas to take me to school anymore. You can wear jeans."

The colleague of Will says that she is afraid that the people who see him are going to judge him by the way he looks and talks before they get to know what an intelligent person he is. Desiree has been nominated by Christy, who is her boss as well as her friend, because

her style is not appropriate for an assistant manager of a hip hair salon. The program continues to emphasize that people should consider their situations when they choose what to wear.

Another conflict regarding style that appears in the program concerns preference. To nominees, style is to wear what they like. Misti likes Hollywood B movies, monsters and 50s pin-up girl Betti Page. So she wears Frankenstein shoes and Betti Page printed t-shirts. Amanda wears polyester hippie dresses because she likes flower prints on the clothes. However Stacy and Clinton claim that style does not mean wearing what the nominees like. They argue that you have to accept certain patterns, colors, cuts, texture and silhouette if they look good on you even though you do not like such characteristics of clothes. Therefore style is not to wear what you like but to wear what looks good on you. The show also claims that we come to like clothes when they look good on us by showing how happy the nominees are by their transformation. The conflicts over the meaning of style are well summarized in Figure 4.

In order to persuade the nominees to follow their rules, the program uses the polysemy and collocation of signs very actively. Playing with polysemy of signs stands out in terms of descriptive adjectives such as comfortable and different. In particular, the adjective “comfortable” takes a very important position in this aspect. In defense of their fashion choices, the nominees very often mention comfort as the most important reason for their

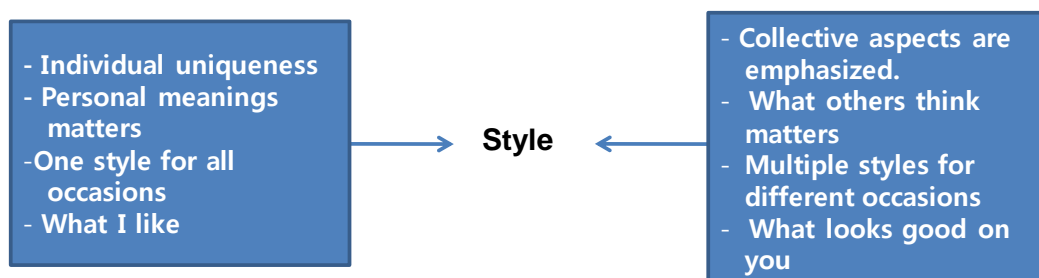


Figure 4: Antagonism over the meaning of style

fashion choices. For instance, Bonnie explains her style:

For me style is comfortable. I mean I roll out of bed. I get my kids ready for school and I just never really have a chance to think about it (Bonnie).

To counter the comfort argument of the nominee, the fashion experts twist the meaning of comfortable by proposing other situations that their comfortable clothes cannot be comfortable. For instance wearing a pajama bottom in public will not be socially comfortable although it might be physically comfortable.

The fashion experts also take advantage of collocation of signs very actively. Usually the nominees defend their ugly clothes because they are comfortable. That is, comfortable and ugly clothes are collocated in their argument. About this the fashion experts simply say that comfortable does not have to be ugly. In other words, the fashion experts say that comfortable and ugly clothes do not have to go together and there are many clothes which are comfortable but at the same time beautiful. In another example, the meaning of youth tends to be associated with the clothes that younger generations wear. For instance, Tracy wore what 18-year-old teenagers would wear so that she might look young. But she looked older than she actually was in those clothes. By wearing clothes made for her own age group, she could look younger than she was.

### Discussion

#### The Configuration of Fashion, Style and the Self in *What Not to Wear*

*What Not to Wear* conceptualizes the meaning of fashion, the self and style in different ways than do the nominees. The relations among these concepts in the program are shown in Figure 6. In the program fashion is conceptualized as something so banal that there is no need to define what it is. Fashion is established as something ordinary rather than something special and exotic. The program implies that clothes for everyday activities, such as going to

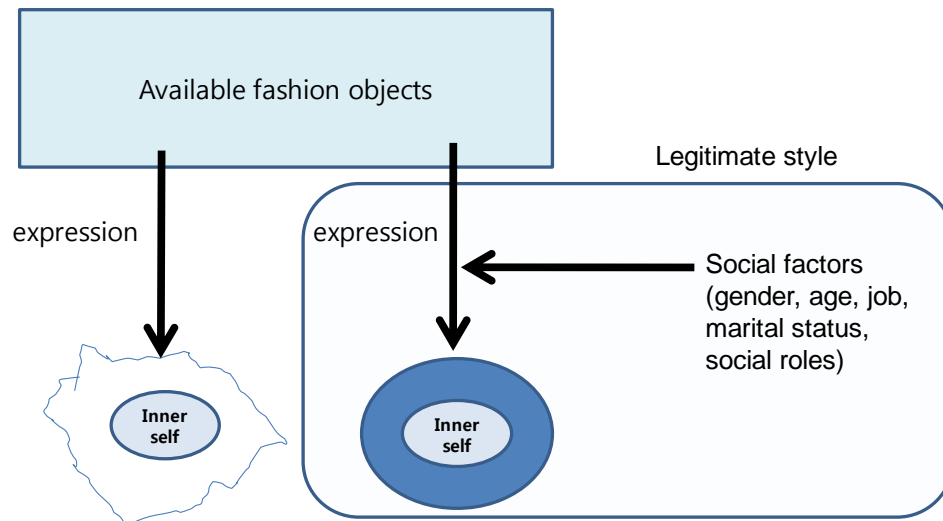


Figure 5: The configuration of fashion, style and the self in *What Not to Wear*

the grocery store, taking kids to school and playing with kids in the park, should be considered as fashion. Even the nominees' inappropriate clothes were included as fashion although they were considered to be bad fashion. To establish the banality of fashion, the association of fashion with luxury brands and the slender bodies of fashion models and celebrities was also repressed in the makeover process.

The program separated the self into two parts: inner self and appearance. Both the nominees and fashion experts considered inner self to be the essence of personhood. However, the fashion experts pointed out that people could not see through their inner self because of their appearances that did not reflect their personalities and characters. As a result the need to match the outside with the inside was introduced.

Based on this conceptualization of fashion and the self, the meaning of style is offered. To have style one has to express their selves by using fashion objects available for them. However it is suggested that style could not be achieved through wearing whatever one likes because one's preferences and tastes do not necessarily reflect one's inner self. In this conceptualization of style, practices such as wearing clothes appropriate for the situations or

one's gender, age, job, and social roles, and matching their outside with inside were regarded as legitimate style, establishing other style choices as illegitimate ones.

### Style as a Nodal Point in Mainstream Fashion Discourse

The concept of style takes a central position in the discourse of *What Not to Wear*. To have style means to create one's own look to accommodate the unique situations in which one is situated. Style is not ubiquitous but rather is an individual's adaptation to their gender, age, job, and social roles into account when creating their own style.

Therefore, in terms of style, knowing oneself is one of the most important elements. Just as showing off style without substance raises a problem in art (Meskin 2001), imitating the style of others without knowing one's self is also considered to be problematic in fashion styling. The criticism on style without substance actually resonates with the mantra of style discourse because there is no way to unearth one's personal style without first knowing who one is (Mizrahi 2008). At this point, the style meets the self. The self is the content and fashion style is the form that contains the content.

In other words, *WNTW* demonstrates that an individual can express a certain view of oneself in a more aesthetic way through fashion items available in the market. The nominee's previous fashion is criticized in terms of formal aspects rather than in terms of what the nominee intends to express. The program focuses on the fit, the cut, the patterns, the colors, and shape of clothes. The fashion experts do not try to understand who nominees are or who they want to be. Instead, they illustrate that nominees do not look like they intended to look, and then teach them how to look as they intend. The issue of style converges into the problem of aesthetics (Featherstone 1991). Contemporary consumers are currently experiencing an aesthetic boom and more and more elements of reality provide an ability to construct aesthetic self (Welsch 1996). Style discourse in *What Not to Wear* is one of many examples of

this aestheticization process. The inherent political aspects of fashion (Murray 2002) are held back in the discussion of what looks beautiful and what does not.

Nonetheless the configuration of discourse centering on style cannot be totally fixed because in order to construct tasteful style, the consideration of the socio-political factors, including gender, age, class, job, and social roles, cannot be detached from the style construction process, revealing the workings of hegemonic forces (Bourdieu 1984).

The Effect of the Configuration of Fashion, the Self, and Style  
in *What Not to Wear*

Increased importance of fashion in everyday lives. The program is structured in ways that refute the stereotypes of fashion, which include fashion for special people who have slender bodies and can afford to buy expensive fashion items, and for special occasions such as the fashion show runway and the red carpet. The program extends the scope of fashion, by emphasizing buying clothes for ordinary activities, such as taking kids to school and going to the supermarket. Casual wear, work outfits, and evening wear are included in the realm of fashion and equated in their status as fashion. In this way, all clothes become fashion and objects of style. The message is that people need to have a well put-together look that varies to suit every occasion. In this way, the program establishes the banality of fashion.

Banality implies trivial and mundane and thus masks questions of value, of value judgment and discrimination in the sense of how we distinguish and evaluate problems, legitimate our priorities, and defend our choices (Morris 1990). The representation of fashion as something ordinary and endowment of the everydayness (Lefebvre 1971) to style practices, presents style discourse as a sedimented ensemble of social practices accepted at face value, without questioning their contingency (Laclau 1994).

*WNTW* also stresses that individuals need to match their inside with their outside

because people would not know if their outside does not reflect what they have inside. The need to match the inside with the outside problematizes people who neglect style practices. The program teaches how to have a coherent self from the inside out. The solution for matching the outside with the inside is found in the realm of fashion rather than regimens of body modification because people can find clothes of a perfect fit with their self identity if only they know how to shop and how to mix and match fashion items. In this way the program elevates the importance of fashion in ordinary consumers' everyday lives again. However, *What Not to Wear* escapes from the criticism of imposing a monolithic beauty ideal because it focuses on creating a look that flatters what is already beautiful in an individual's body and personality rather than recommending certain clothes that do not fit to an individual because they are in vogue.

Creating a similar look by emphasizing individual style. The program emphasizes that although fashion and style are about expressing the self, people should consider what others think about their appearance. The conflicts between individuals' views of their own style and others' views abound in the program, and this conflict shows that the discrepancy between intended fashion meanings by the wearers and received meaning by observers of such fashion combinations. Nominees are confronted by harsh criticism about their fashion through the secret footage and 360-degree mirrors, as well as direct comments by Stacy and Clinton. The program shows that the personal views of the nominees are not conveyed as intended. It suggests people should be more concerned over what others think about their fashion, since others react to individuals based on their outside impression.

By emphasizing the social aspect of style, however, *WNTW* produces a very similar look for nominees, although the program demonstrates how nominees can have individual style. According to an individual's body, job, and situations, there are some variations in terms of fit, cut, color, pattern, and so on. However, almost every nominee is expected to buy casual

wear such as well-fitting jeans, body-flattering tops and jackets, professional-looking suits for work, and sophisticated evening wear for going out and special occasions. As a result, they look more similar and seem to conform to the trend of the contemporary fashion system. This paradoxical outcome of creating similar looks in the process of creating personal looks implies that adaptation to various social contexts is closely related to the conformity to social norms.

Many scholars suggest that in late modern society individual identity has become a project of the self and people are working endlessly to refine their sense of who they are (Askegaard et al. 2002; Featherstone 1991; Giddens 1991). Contemporary consumer culture encourages us to play with various signs or consumer goods, and the mantra of style discourse is an example of such a characteristic of late modern society. Ironically, however, in order to have style with good taste people have to consider the socio-political contexts in which they are situated (Murray 2002), and as a result somewhat similar looks are suggested by the fashion experts. This ambivalence of style clearly suggests that hegemonic social orders are structuring the consumption practices although consumers have certain freedom to construct their own fashion style through selection of stylized fashion items.

Empowerment for individual consumers and reproduction of status quo. In *What Not to Wear*, nominees realize the disparity between their values about their self identity, which refers to the importance of the inner self rather than outer appearance, and reality. In other words, there is a collision between what it should be and what it is. For many nominees it was not very important for people to look at them on the outside, and they wanted people to see what was on the inside. Although many cultures teach people that it is a vice to judge someone based on outer appearance, the reality was opposed to what it ought to be. The program gave outspoken advice that people judge other people based on appearance, which most people do not dare to say in the presence of others. In fact the program provides a wake-



up call for the nominees and the viewers about the harsh reality.

In fact, many scholars have long pointed out that in modern society where one's place is not fixed in the social hierarchy as in pre-modern society, people tend to judge other people based on how they look. In contemporary society, individuals have to decode the appearance of others and similarly they must manage the impression they might give off in the world of strangers. This encourages these people to be conscious about and scrutinize themselves in public life (Featherstone 1982; Sennett 1977), leading consumers to the various body-related consumption behaviors such as diet, exercise, and cosmetic surgery to produce a body consistent with their self-definition (Wainwright and Turner 2004). As Giddens (1991) claims, under conditions of late modernity, one's appearance has become the center of interest in the shaping of individual identity.

*WNTW* shows what reality looks like and asks people to accept reality as it is and to learn how to handle the situation. In this respect, *What Not to Wear* is empowering nominees and the people who watch the program. The program demonstrates strategies for navigating the harsh and brutal reality in which people judge other people based on outside appearances. So the style gurus demystify and democratize the secrets of being distinctive with style (Bell and Hollows 2005). The program explains how to have style with ordinary language. Through this learning, nominees come to know how to feel good about their self and confident in interacting with people. Having style helps people have better relationships and more successful careers.

Despite its empowering aspect, at the same time it is disempowering because *WNTW* helps reproduce the current reality that people are judged based on their appearance. By telling nominees how other people judge them by their appearance, the program also circulates rules for judging our own and others' tastes (Bell and Hollows 2005). In addition to the nominees in the program, consumers at home are also taught the rules by which to judge

both themselves and others, and internalize surveillance (Foucault 1979).

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## CHAPTER 4

### MAKEOVER TV AND CONSUMER IDENTIFICATION: THE INFLUENCE OF *WHAT NOT TO WEAR* ON EVERYDAY FASHION CONSUMPTION PRACTICES

#### Introduction

Reality television has recently emerged as one of the most prominent genres in television programming (Rose and Wood 2005), presenting “ordinary” people on the programs. Today, it encompasses a variety of subgenres, including the gamedoc (*Survivor*, *Big Brother*, *The Apprentice*, *America’s Next Top Model*, *Project Runway*), the dating program (*Joe Millionaire*, *The Bachelor*, *Next*, *Beauty and the Geek*), the docusoap (*The Real World*, *The Real Housewives of Orange County*), talent contest (*American Idol*, *Dancing with the Stars*), popular court programs (*Judge Judy*, *Court TV*) and reality sitcoms (*The Simple Life*, *The Osbournes*, *Family Jewels*) (Murray and Ouellette 2009).

Among these subgenres, there is makeover TV, which includes programs such as *What Not to Wear*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Extreme Makeover*, *The Swan*. The makeover show, a variant of so-called lifestyle TV, specializes in teaching everyday knowledge and skills associated with managing the daily lives of consumers. It conveys knowledge about food and cooking, care of the body, fashion, home maintenance, managing money, looking after pets and so on (Lewis 2008). The proliferation of lifestyle TV illustrates the social reality that television has become an institution that contributes to the “systematic teaching of

selfhood” (p.42), as Hartley (1999) claims, along with the family, the school, the church and the state.

Indeed, television has been acknowledged as a contemporary institution that plays a significant role in consumer socialization. Television is full of representations of consumption, while consumption symbols are used as a means of developing plots and characters in television (Holbrook and Grayson 1986; O’Guinn and Shrum 1997). As seen in cultivation theory (Gerbner et al. 1977), television viewing plays a significant role in constructing a biased view of reality toward the content of television, although there is often a discrepancy between the representations of social reality and so-called objective reality (O’Guinn and Shrum 1997), blurring the boundary of the fictional with the real (Ong 1977).

These prior findings about the influence of fictional contents on the constructing of consumers’ reality suggest profound implications for the current media consumption situation, in which the number of reality-based programs is rapidly increasing. The majority of reality-based programs depict “ordinary people” engaging in various tasks, such as wilderness survival, dating, home decorating, and fashion styling, giving the impression of authenticity to their experiences in the program (Rose and Wood 2005). While watching the program, viewers are offered an opportunity to compare or contrast their own lives with those of people in the show. Since the people in the program are not celebrities but ordinary people like average audience members, the viewers are more likely to feel stronger identification with the characters in the program, and therefore the reality shows is expected to have an increasingly powerful influence.

Lifestyle shows are mainly made for entertainment purposes but they also reflect great knowledge of various consumption practices. They teach ordinary consumers useful strategies for managing their daily lives. Despite the close connection between lifestyle television and everyday consumption practices, there is as yet little academic attention to the

impact of lifestyle television by consumer researchers. This lack of attention might be caused by the assumption that lifestyle genres are transparent and therefore do not merit closer academic examination (Palmer 2004). However, the straightforwardness and transparency of the program contents do not guarantee their direct and automatic impact on viewers as prior studies on consumer behavior have shown (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Murray 2002; Thompson 1997; Thompson and Haytko 1997). For this reason, it would be worthwhile to examine the ways consumers use the knowledge of consumption that they get from the lifestyle shows, and to better understand the influence of lifestyle TV on everyday consumption practices.

#### Lifestyle Makeover Shows and Consumption Practices

Lifestyle is a term that provides one of the dominant frameworks through which people understand the consumption in contemporary society (Lewis 2008). Marketers have long used lifestyle as a tool for determining categories of market segmentation, which are usually based on personality and value approaches. By using this method, consumption patterns are conceived as regularities in consumer behaviors, and hence lifestyles are conceptualized as shared consumption patterns spanning various consumer categories (Holt 1997; Wells 1975).

In terms of consumer culture, lifestyles are considered to be an important factor in understanding an individual's identity construction through consumption behaviors. As Featherstone (1987) puts it, "lifestyle connotes individuality, self expression, and a stylistic self-consciousness. One's body, clothes, speech, leisure pastimes, eating and drinking preferences, home, car, choice of holidays, etc. are to be regarded as indicators of the individuality of taste and sense of style of the owner/consumer" (p.55). This concern with lifestyle suggests that the practices of consumption, as well as the planning, purchase and display of consumer goods and experiences, cannot be understood merely through their



instrumental values (Featherstone 1987). The expressive dimension (Belk 1988) should be regarded as an important factor in consumption as well, and therefore the self become a project for contemporary consumers to express who they are (Giddens 1991).

This notion of lifestyle identity has been actively appropriated by lifestyle television. The advice about consumer goods provided by these programs to ordinary consumers is based on the idea of freedom of choice in terms of identity construction (Bell and Hollows 2005). Reflecting the social environment to emphasize the continual enterprise of self improvement, the number of lifestyle programs has increased rapidly since 1990s. One of the prominent forms of these programs is 'makeover television', which refers to shows in which ordinary participants become beneficiaries of expert advices and guidance (Giles 2002). Actually, the concept of the makeover has been very popular in women's magazines for many years (Ringrose and Walkerdine 2008), and the makeover programs borrow this concept to formulate program contents. The programs usually contrast the "before" of these beneficiaries with the "after" of them through the intervention of experts (Smith 2010), focusing on interrogations of consumer self (Wood and Skeggs 2004).

Through this process of intervention, lifestyle television offers recurrent lessons through different episodes and advice for the effective stylistic management and transformation of the body, health, fashion, cookery, gardening, and house and home (O'Sullivan 2005). Generally, makeover programs have an entertainment element, and their entertainment value mainly originates from the narrative, encouraging viewers to watch and see if the transformation will be successful (Smith 2010). However, the program usually has elements of informing, and educating, while entertainment is the viewers' primary motivation for watching makeover shows. For this reason, there is a substantial informative element in these shows, and therefore they play a pivotal role in producing, circulating, and promoting ideas about taste and lifestyle.

In this dissemination of lifestyle knowledge, the expert and the discourse of expertise play a central role (Bell and Hollows 2005). Usually a charismatic TV personality, the makeover guru, provides advice and guidance to the show's participants and the viewers. It should be noted, however, that these experts are associated with the soft, entertainment-oriented end of the media spectrum, and their expertise is intimately related to the 'ordinary.' In the past the term expert tended to refer to remote figures associated with a distant realm of rational objective inquiry, such as scientists, doctors and lawyers, and their credentialed knowledge was regarded as far removed from knowledge of the ordinary realm. However in contemporary popular media oriented toward lifestyle advice, domestic goddesses and style gurus are increasingly placed in the same discursive category as other experts with credentials (Lewis 2008).

Along with the soft, ordinary expertise provided by expert figures in the program, another key to the popularity of makeover shows is based on the belief that the participants are ordinary members of the public who are behaving naturally, rather than actors following a script. When a member of general public appears on television, the ordinary viewers are invited to recognize themselves on screen. For this reason, identification becomes an important component of the connection that occurs between the programs and the viewers (Giles 2002), and it is expected that identification will play a pivotal role in consumers' integration of lifestyle knowledge from the program into their everyday consumption practices.

To examine the influence of lifestyle television on consumers' everyday practices, *What Not to Wear* (hereafter *WNTW*), which is a fashion makeover show on TLC, was chosen as the basis for this study. In this show, two experts scrutinize the participant's wardrobe choices and provide strategic or tactical knowledge of fashion consumption including how to shop, what to look for, what colors and cuts would suit, and so on (McRobbie 2004). By

analyzing the web forum postings done by the viewers of the program, I will examine the ways that the program viewers integrate the knowledge obtained from the program into their fashion consumption practices.

### Discourse and Practice

Often the term discourse refers to 'language in use,' taking account of actually occurring texts in a genuine communicative context (Outewaite & Bottomore 1993). In this respect, discourse is basically a linguistic concept. However, in the social and political world, discourse is not confined to the realm of linguistics because fundamentally discourse concerns the production of knowledge through language, which works as a foundation for producing certain ways of talking and acting while excluding other ways of talking and acting in relation to the topic (Hall 1997). For instance, there may always have been what is now called homosexual behaviors. However 'the homosexual' as a specific kind of person was produced, or could emerge within the moral, legal, medical and psychiatric discourses, practices and institutional apparatuses of the late nineteenth century with particular theories of sexual perversity of that era (Foucault 1978; Hall 1997). In this context, discourse refers both to the way language systematically organizes concepts, knowledge and experience and to the way in which it represses alternative forms of organization through the dominance in power relations. (Outewaite & Bottomore 1993; Hardin 2001).

This Foucauldian definition of discourse is, therefore, much broader than language. It includes many other elements of practices and institutional regulations. Foucault (1979; 1980) thought that various social practices and institutions are both constituted by and situated within forms of discourse, that is, ways of speaking about the world of social experience. Thus a discourse is a means of both producing and organizing meaning within a social context and language becomes a key notion within this view, for it is language which

embodies discourses (Edgar & Sedgwick 1999)

Inseparability of the linguistic and the nonlinguistic is also very apparent in the example of bricklayers in Laclau and Mouffe (1987). They explain this inseparability through the example that two people build a wall together. A asks B to pass him a brick and A adds it to the wall. The first act asking for the brick is linguistic and the second act of adding the brick to the wall is extra linguistic. To explain the totality of building a wall, one should not draw the distinction between them in terms of the linguistic and extra linguistic opposition because two actions share the fact that they are both part of a total operation which is the building of the wall. If this totality includes both linguistic and non-linguistic elements, it cannot itself be either linguistic or extra linguistic (Laclau & Mouffe 1987).

Social life is made up of practices, which are constituted throughout social life in domains such as economy, politics, and culture in everyday life (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999). As Foucault showed in his works, these practices are produced within particular discourses about the topic (Hall 1997). This does not mean that nothing but text and talk exist. On the contrary it means that discourse itself is material and that entities such as the economy, the infrastructure and institutions are also part of discourse (Jørgensen and Philips 2002). For this reason, discourse analysis that is not integrated into practice is rather like ‘empty words.’

### Methodology

#### Laclau and Mouffe’s Discourse Theory as the Framework of Analysis

Elements of Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory will be used to develop the framework of analysis (Laclau 1996; Laclau 1994; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Laclau and Mouffe 1987). Scholars have pointed to Laclau and Mouffe’s work as a rich resource for discourse analysis despite the lack of guidance for empirical utilization (Andersen 2003; Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999; Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000; Jørgensen and Phillips

2002). By concentrating on the process of the discursive construction of the social and the identity, their theory can provide a very useful analytical framework for investigating how the viewers of *WNTW* incorporate the knowledge of fashion styling or style discourse into their consumption practices. In particular, I focus in this essay on the concepts of subject position and identification as processes that guide analysis. The notion of a subject position represents a particular strength of the poststructuralist research paradigm, on which the theory of Laclau and Mouffe is grounded, because it recognizes both the constitutive force of discourse and of discursive practices. At the same time, it recognizes the fact that an individual is capable of exercising choice in relation to those practices (Davies and Harré 2001).

Discourse disciplines individuals into certain ways of thinking and acting (Foucault 1979). In this way, the subject becomes the bearer of the knowledge that discourse produces (Hall 1997) and our sense of self is created through this operation of discourse (Rose 2001). In this process, discourse positions people (Wetherell 2001) at a certain point in the web of various relations. Within the produced discourse lies a variety of subject positions with which people can identify (Cloyes 2007; Laclau 1994). In other words, subject positions provide people with a way of making sense of themselves, their motives, experiences and reactions (Wetherell 2001). Unlike the concept of role highlight's static, formal and ritualistic aspects, the concept of subject position helps focus on dynamic ways in which the individual's subjectivity is generated through the learning and use of discursive practices (Davies and Harré 2001).

According to Davis and Harré (2001), the constitutive force of each discursive practice lies in its provision of subject position. By taking up a particular position as one's own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point associated with position, and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, story lines and concepts that are made available and relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned. The

development of one's own sense of self, and of how the world is to be interpreted from the perspective of who one takes oneself to be, involves the processes of 1) learning of the categories which include some and exclude others; 2) participating in the discursive practices, such as story lines, through which the meanings of the categories are allocated; 3) positioning of the self in terms of categories and story lines; and 4) recognizing oneself as having characteristics that locate oneself as a member of various subclasses dichotomous categories and not of others (p.263).

Although the concept of subject position is largely based on conversation as a form of social interaction (Davies and Harré 2001), this framework can be stretched into a broader application of concept by means of a mass communication environment, wherein ordinary consumers encounter a variety of discourses through ordinary experiences. The discourse produces places for the viewers from which its particular knowledge and meaning most makes sense (Hall 1997). For instance, the discourse in *WNTW* produces subject positions such as fashion illiterates, fashion experts, observers of fashion illiterate, and viewers of entertainment programming. According to subject positions that the viewers choose to identify while watching the program, their reaction to the show and their way of incorporating the discursive knowledge from the program into their fashion consumption practices are bound to be different.

The constitution of identity, therefore, is based on the act of identification with a particular subject position (Laclau 1994). The subject is not merely hailed in a purely passive sense, but reflexively recognizes and invests in the subject position (Benwell and Stokoe 2006). In this vein, identification can be understood as a kind of affiliation and expression of emotional tie with an idealized object or normative ideal (Barker and Galasiński 2001). Identities are therefore points of temporary attachment to particular subject positions which discursive practices construct for us (Hall 2000). Successive acts of identification will sustain,

modify, resist or reject the concrete social order, making every identity a precarious and transient one (Laclau 1994).

To sum up, in this essay the concept of identification and subject positions as theoretical concept are employed to guide the analysis. It is expected that subject positions and identification will provide a useful tool to investigate how a consumer's adoption of certain subject positions in the discourse leads to the production of certain consumption meanings and practice in their everyday lives (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002; Torfing 1999)

### Data Collection and Analysis

To examine the ways the viewers of the show incorporate the discursive knowledge of style into their consumption practices, data were collected from the web forum of *WNTW*. This public forum has three subsections, which are 'show feedback', 'fashion tips and advice', and 'in the know.' The postings from this forum seem to be appropriate data for examining the influence of the program on fashion consumption practices because "naturally occurring" texts are considered a better source of data in discourse analysis because they are actual examples of language in use in the context of research (Barker and Galasiński 2001; Phillips and Hardy 2002).

Because of the sheer amount of data, the sampled postings are related to the episodes analyzed in the second chapter. When the related posting was searched, the entire thread was sampled to see the interactions among members of forum. The data were collected in April 2010 and included the postings from November 2003 to April 2010, which amounted to 808 pages in font size 11 with 267 threads and 2906 postings. In a primary open-coding stage, Atlas.ti was used for data analysis. During the in-depth analysis, the focus was on identifying the subject positions in each posting while tracking how the identification of a particular subject position leads to certain reactions to discursive knowledge of the program and hence

to consumption practices.

## Results

### The Viewers as Consumers Who Experience Difficulty in Fashion Consumption

It is well established that the success of reality program results from the identification of the viewers with the ordinary participants of the programs. While watching reality shows, the viewers are invited to recognize themselves on screen (Giles 2002; Rose and Wood 2005). This identification with the ordinary participants on screen also happens in the makeover shows. The audience members recognize that the problems that they encounter in their consumption experiences are very similar to the problems that the participants in the makeover program experience. Through this recognition, the viewers take the position of nominees who have difficulty in finding an appropriate style for themselves and lifestyle while they are watching *WNTW*.

Recognition of the need for a fashion makeover. One of the immediate practices led by the identification with the nominee is to reflect upon fashion style based on the fashion rules and criteria provided by the program. They observe what fashion experts have to say about the fashion choices of the nominees, either those who have very eccentric ideas of style, or those who do not know how to put together fashion items despite their recognition of the need for a fashion makeover. While watching participants who have body image issues and therefore give up being stylish, or who are too busy to take care of their self, the viewers feel some kind of empathy to the participants of the program and this leads to recognition of the need for a fashion makeover as described in the following quotes from *WNTW*'s online forum:

I love the show, the hosts, and the premise of providing some basic fashion tips through illustration. I have learned much by watching, and even if I don't love 100%



of the results, the show encourages me to take better care of myself and to project a more polished image~~something really beginning to pay off in my career as a jewelry designer (sasshay, posted June 3, 2007).

My daughter turned me onto *WNTW* (because I was wearing tapered jeans - YIKES!). When I was EDUCATED as to what looks better and why, I went shopping! I'm slowly building a classic wardrobe, but I'd love to be on the show! (smj, posted on October 20, 2009).

These examples show how the viewers integrate the discursive style knowledge in the program into their consumption practices. Through watching the program, these women recognized that they needed a fashion makeover, and this recognition made them buy new clothes, take better care of themselves and create a more polished look. In other words, the program has the effect of encouraging viewers to purchase more clothes for their own makeover.

There are viewers who recognize the need for a style makeover but still have a hard time applying the fashion rules in the program to their fashion consumption. They do not have enough resources, including both money and fashion knowledge. These viewers are positioned in a situation similar to that of participants who do not have enough money to buy fashionable clothes or sufficient knowledge to create a sophisticated, put-together look. To overcome such difficulties with having their own style makeover, some viewers nominate themselves for the makeover. These people stress that they are in more dire need of help than the nominees seen in the episodes and express their hurt feelings.

Recognition of themselves as people who need a fashion makeover but who lack sufficient knowledge leads to the practice of asking help from the other viewers on the web forum. They provide forum members with their personal characteristics such as height, weight, age, body shape, and job, and then ask style advice to fit their situation. This is exemplified by the following question from a 25-year-old man who seeks fashion advice:

I am 25 years old. I would consider myself an average dresser. I guess my body type is more pear-shaped, though I'm only slightly overweight. I am 5'11". I need help in

figuring out what type of clothes I should be looking for. I am a school teacher, and spend free time at coffee houses, higher end pubs, etc. (lordkovacs, posted on June 3, 2004).

These posted questions are quite concrete and very closely related to clothes shopping. It is not an easy task for consumers to find the right kind of clothes considering body type and age, as well as the job they hold. The answering of these questions is usually accomplished by the collective efforts of forum members, numerous members contributing the bits and bytes of their own fashion knowledge, although some senior members, who have been active in the forum for a long time, take the initiative and provide more comprehensive fashion knowledge.

Difficulty in shopping. The teaching of what to and how to shop takes a very crucial position in *WNTW* along with the criticism on the nominees' fashion choices because having good style is dependent on successful shopping for the right fashion items to stress the strengths and camouflage the weakness of their body. Even if they know what the right designs, colors, patterns are for them, finding the right products in the market is not an easy task. For this reason, the majority of questions in the forum concern seeking information about the brands and the stores that appeared on the show. While watching the program, viewers notice the clothes, shoes, accessories, hair styles, and makeup products that they have long wanted but could not find or that they like. They ask where they can buy Stacy's (one of the hosts) green sweater and the patterned ballerina flats (khughes5679, Posted May 25, 2007), a good hair thickening cream similar to what Nick, the hair stylist, used on Dave's hair (iamtripp, posted on May 31, 2004), or an animal print shirt-like dress that Erin was wearing in her final reveal (csmenke, posted on May 25, 2007).

These questions are not answered by the production team, who would obviously know the brands and the stores, but are answered by other members in the forum. As exemplified by the stirring of interest in the brands and stores, the program works as a showcase of

fashionable products. In a way the entire show is constructed with product placements. Sometimes, nominees register as members of the forum and provide the exact brand information of their purchase.

Although the viewers can learn the brands and the stores where they can buy those products, purchase of the products is very often out of reach in terms of their budget. Since the program provides \$5,000 for the makeover, the fashion items that are shown on the program are quite expensive and this limitation begs a different approach for the audience members who want to buy similar items. For instance, Erin, a nominee who was vegan and resist wearing shoes made with leather, bought vegan designer shoes on the show. These shoes attracted much attention; viewers who were interested in buying vegan designer shoes posted questions seeking the brand name and stores for the shoes:

I just joined this board specifically to ask this: Does ANYONE know where Erin got her vegan shoes, and who the designer was that Stacy and Clinton were talking about that doesn't use leather?? The store she went to get her faux leather gear was Moo Shoes, which I have been to a few times, but I have never seen anything like that there. I don't have \$535 to blow on shoes, but it would be great to know for future reference because it's sooo hard to find vegan shoes that aren't cheaply made and ugly as sin. (alizareen, Posted September 15, 2007)

A senior member answers her question by revealing that the brand of the shoes was Stella McCartney and provides the information about outlets for these shoes. However, as seen in the question of alizareen, the price of the products is not in a very affordable range for most consumers. Another member adds information explaining where she can buy more affordable vegan shoes than the luxury vegan shoe brand.

The limitation of budget for ordinary viewers requires a more creative application of brand information provided by the program. The ending credit provides the names of stores and brands for some products that appeared in the show. However, this type of information is not sufficient for the viewers to incorporate the fashion knowledge obtained from the program into their fashion consumption.

You know, anyone can find anything in New York City. There are a million department stores, shops, boutiques, etc. to find a million sizes, colors and styles of clothing. We all don't have access to such a bountiful selection of goods in our own hometowns & certainly can't fly to NYC to get a fashionable pair of jeans that actually FIT properly! Wouldn't it be great if *WNTW*'s style experts showed us how to shop in places where we actually LIVE? Smaller cities & towns across the country where you've got the local Wal-Mart & Dillard's is the "nice store" in town. Just a thought. Sure, part of the magic of the show is the excitement of a \$5,000 shopping spree on the streets of Manhattan where the participant can easily pick up a \$600 pair of Stacy-approved shoes! (mattran, posted 05-04-08)

I often wonder about where to shop when you can't afford to spend \$100-\$200 on every item of clothing. Especially when there are no stores like that within a 200 mile range. I'm not sure if this show is really for everyone, maybe just the "working class". Definitely not for the working just to pay the bills class (justdoanything, posted on May 4, 2008)

As seen in the above, first of all, the program does not show all the brands and stores the nominees have visited. It only lists a part of the shopping spree. The fact that the shooting of the show takes place in New York City also works as limitation for ordinary viewers who live in other parts of the country. The boutique shops or certain brands shops appearing on the show might not exist near some of the viewers. Moreover, the ordinary viewers do not have \$5,000 in extra cash to replace their wardrobes. For this reason, knowing the brands does not necessarily lead to buying the brands. What is more often induced is the exchange of opinions and information to help viewers find something similar to what they watch on screen. This is way the stores like Wal-Mart and Target are mentioned very often in the web forum, although these stores never appeared in the program.

Lack of diversity and filling the gap through active interpretation. The premise of *WNTW* is to provide fashion advice and tips from various cases to which program viewers can refer for their fashion styling. However, the complaints of web forum members about difficulty in interpreting fashion rules from the program imply that there is a huge discrepancy between what the show provides and what the viewers want. For instance, forum members complain that the types of participants in the program are not diverse enough to

encompass the diversity of audience members, and this insufficient representation of diversity induces complaints from the viewers:

I truly enjoy the show. However, there seems to be an ongoing trend...Caucasian women. I can no longer watch one more episode or another marathon without having my say with the hope that change is made. I feel that television programming in general lacks American diversity and this issue needs to be addressed and corrected with a sense of urgency! After all, this is America and everyone, without a doubt, deserves to be equally represented. It's never too late- in fiction or in life- to revise. (geefam3 Posted 09-01-07)

I agree with everybody's posts. I would like to see people from different cultures and races on the show. It would be nice to see somebody in their 40's or 50's on the show. Lately, it seems like all the MO's (acronym of makeover, and the person who is made over) are successful and have well paying careers. The people in charge of choosing who gets on the show should choose nominees from lower paying careers a chance to improve their wardrobe so maybe they can move up in their companies. (moonbeam74 Senior Member, Posted 09-01-07)

As seen in the examples above, the viewers criticize that the show does not represent the population of viewers. The nominees are usually from the age group of the 20s and 30s; therefore, older viewers in their 40s and 50s are alienated. The program does not show how to dress women and men who are heavier than average. This lack of diversity in the makeover nominees connects to the lack of fashion knowledge for viewers. Because this limited provision of fashion knowledge, viewers are required to engage in active interpretation of the fashion advice so that they can use this advice for their fashion consumption. Such interpretation is not confined to the terrain of substituting more affordable brands for expensive ones. The following example shows the difficulty that results from the lack of diversity in the program's nominees.

I've watched the show religiously but the rules are different for every personality/body type. Does anyone know what my rules would be? I'm 5'4, petite and curvy (C breasts but they look somewhat large in proportion to my small torso) and somewhat wide hips. My biggest asset is my tiny waist and I would say I'm between hourglass and pear shaped. I want my style to be a mix between understated and fashion forward, feminine and modern. What are my rules??? Anyone? (orange crushgirl, posted on August 21, 2005)

To this question, a member of the forum answers as follows:

When you watch the show, don't wait for someone with your exact body type to come on, that won't really happen. Instead, pay attention when they talk to someone who's 5'2", OR is pear shaped, OR has a large chest for their proportions. Then put it all together. (genissimo, posted on August 21, 2005)

This excerpt indicates that, in order to have style, people have to engage in an active process through interpretation of rules because any makeover shows cannot see all possible cases. The forum members often mention that the BBC version of *WNTW* has more diversity, including various age groups and body types, compared to American version. However, a number of scholars have criticized that the British version of *WNTW* imposes the tastes of middle class aesthetics (Clifford Rosenberg 2008; Deery 2004; McRobbie 2004; Murray and Ouellette 2009; Palmer 2004). Therefore, in order to apply the fashion rules to their actual fashion consumption, the viewers have to combine diverse fashion rules based on different situations to fit their own unique characteristics.

Another notable thing is that ordinary consumers acknowledge the limitations in the fashion knowledge provided in the program. They know there is a lack of diversity in the show that does not reflect viewers' unique situations. They are very well aware that the fashion advice and tips from the show promote middle class tastes to the general public. However, the viewers who participate in the web forum try to overcome such limitations through critical interpretation of the rules provided by the fashion experts. This active interpretation process is very well illustrated by a discussion of the concept of layering. One of the viewers raises a question of the effectiveness of layering in warm climates:

Stacy and Clinton have a fetish for layering. However, I sometimes think they don't really take where the MO lives into account when they suggest layering. I'd really love to hear from some previous MOs who post here regularly, who live in hot areas like Miami, Phoenix, etc. How comfortable have S&C's layering suggestions worked for you? Did they work, or did you have to abandon those ideas? We'd love to know. (matthelm, Posted 06-27-07)

The excerpt above points out that the advice of layering might not work for some viewers who are situated in a different geographical, social and cultural context. In other

words, the forum provides suggestions for modification, adaptation, and improvisation of the fashion rules in the program. Through the active exchanges of opinions and experiences, the fashion rules become relevant to people's everyday fashion consumption situations and more meaningful for them.

The forum data showed that many viewers of the program identify with the nominees who have difficulty in attaining appropriate fashion style. The viewers recognize the nominees' lack of understanding and inability to enact in practice because of various constraints such as lack of shopping opportunity and sufficient income level. Their understanding of fashion knowledge from the program and their fashion consumption practices are based on this identification. Drawing from fashion rules and advice in the program, the viewers scrutinized their fashion consumption, recognized the need for a fashion makeover and make diverse efforts to actualize their own makeovers. When they spot the products and brands to fit their situation, they seek the information to acquire the products. When they cannot find fashion advice that exactly suits their unique situation, they engage in the active process of rule interpretation. The interpretation concerned results from searching for substitute brands and combining different rules to fit one's own situation. In other words, even when they identify with the nominees who are recipients of a fashion makeover, the viewers do not accept the fashion rules imposed on them by the program as they are. They construct their own rules through the active interpretation process.

#### Identifying with the Fashion Experts

As prior research has shown (Giles 2002; Rose and Wood 2005), the main attraction of reality shows comes from the identification of viewers with the ordinary participants. However, as a makeover show, *WNTW* produces another subject position with which the viewers can identify: someone who has expertise in styling. As the viewing experiences of

the program increase and styling knowledge from the program is internalized, ordinary viewers take the expert's position while watching the show. As fashion experts, Stacy and Clinton advise fashion-illiterate participants how to dress themselves in order to have style, experienced viewers provide their expertise to novices of fashion styling in the web forum. In addition, these viewers evaluate the competency and style of the program's fashion experts.

Giving fashion advice to other viewers. Junior members, in particular, express their difficulty to find the style that fits their body and lifestyle. Senior members who are usually equipped with more fashion knowledge, which has been acquired from their declared professions or accumulated knowledge from repetitive viewing, give answers to their questions. The answers provided by these senior members are more customized to the needs of the question posters. For instance, one of the viewers asks how to buy a shirt with the right fit for his thin body:

I just saw the Dave show, and one thing that rang true with my clothes, was problems with proper fitting. I'm a thin build, and in particular, dress shirts, even if the proper sleeve length, and collar, have too much material in the mid section, and end up flopping around. When Stacy and Clinton were holding back parts of his shirt to show what the 'correct' fit would be...that's the type of problem I'm talking about. So my question is, how do I find a shirt that will fit me properly? Do higher quality clothing stores offer different cuts for shirts? I'd love to buy shirts that were better fitting, but don't know where to look (mckookey, Posted January 3, 2004).

To this question, one of the senior members, pomomojo03 provides very detailed fashion tips for shopping for well fitting shirts:

A) I'm built like a stick. Sticks wearing big shirts makes a person appear like a tent. Thus, thin people need to stick with slim fitting shirts ... B) Keeping Point A in mind, avoid most American brands (e.g. Brooks Brothers, Hickey-Freeman, etc.). British shirts also tend to cut a bit fuller... As a result, skinny people are pretty much left to the Italians and other European oddments.  
C) Hugo Boss has a modern line of slim fit dress this season. They begin at \$95 a pop. Pay no more than 2/3-1/2 price for these shirts and you're good to go. ... D) My favorite shirt company for skinny people: European cut shirts (aka slim fit) from Ascot Chang. AC only has two US stores (NYC and Beverly Hills), but have probably the best quality shirt in terms of fit, construction, prices, and fabric. Their MTM shirts are also a relative steal at \$150-175. Their shirts are a best buy at \$75 at the end of the season. (pomomojo03, posted January 4, 2004)



The above example illustrates that experienced viewers with an ample amount of fashion knowledge play the similar role as fashion experts in the program. In fact, the answers from this forum user are more detailed and customized to the needs of the question poster.

Forum participants also utilize the existing episodes of the show to give advice to fashion novices. They, as loyal viewers of the program, are more experienced at watching the program, and have more knowledge about previous episodes. When someone asks fashion advice, these people draw on the nominees of the previous episodes who have problems similar to those of the person who posted the question. That is, existing episodes work as references for people who are giving fashion advice and tips.

Questioning experts' competency. As the viewers internalize the fashion knowledge and identify with the position of fashion experts, they tend to evaluate the competency and style of the show's fashion experts. Since the fashion advice that the program conveys is not credentialed knowledge but rather belongs to the ordinary realm of everyday life, a little knowledge tends to give viewers license to criticize the hosts. For instance, viewers who have watched the program for a long time often point out the repetitive style suggestions and raise doubts about the hosts' expertise:

It's amazing that every makeover subject gets styled in a fitted jacket-- has anyone told Stacey that there is more to having personal style than wearing a fitted jacket? Come to think of it, why doesn't Stacey ever wear the same looks she styles everyone in? A breathe of fresh air, please..... (notafashionvictim, Posted on April 7, 2007)

Could you please list all the things that Clinton has taught you about men's style? After all, since he worked for a men's fashion [m]ag, this is where he should be the strongest in. Even assuming the editor cuts out any info, we've still seen Clinton choose outfits for the MO that don't really fit too well- the sleeves are too long and basics like that. Alright, let's have Pomo decide this: Is Clinton truly a men's style expert or not? Pomo seems to be the resident genius on men's fashion. (nawanda, Posted on January 28, 2005)

The viewers also point out the incongruence of experts' fashion advice and their own

fashion choices:

It was nice to see some clothes on the MO that were fashion-forward and fun, something besides the structured jacket and A-line skirt. Love those short mod-inspired dresses for a shapely woman with great knees! But Stacy's teal dress (and her green sweater), which are just the thing for fashion editors in Manhattan this year, were the kind of boxy, drapery shapes that she and Clinton have been railing against since the show began. (garment, Posted on May 26, 2007)

In particular, doubts about the competency of the hair stylist, Nick Arrojo, are prominent in the discussion of experts' competency. The viewers keep raising questions about the expertise of Nick based on the recurrent style of bobbed hair:

The hairdresser is absolutely mediocre. He has no idea what type of hair style is good for each woman on *What Not to Wear*. He cuts the same style every single time. He cuts long beautiful hair to short blunt, bobs that most of the time do not compliment the customer. The majority of the women leaves in tears and are not satisfied with their new do. However, I will say both Clint and Stacey are quite knowledgeable about fashion and what the fashion crisis victims need. You need to replace the current hairdresser with someone who knows more than one hair cut. (Natpaulam, Posted June 18, 2008)

The bashing of Nick appeared very often in the forum and whenever the topic was raised, it tended to be one of the longest threads in the forum. Although the reasons were not clear, Nick Arrojo was replaced in the middle of the 2009 season by Ted Gibson, who is famous as a stylist of Anne Hathaway.

To sum up, the viewers' identification with the fashion experts' discursive position leads to evaluation of the show hosts' expertise. As the audience members are educated through watching the program, fashion experts are in turn evaluated by the same rules that experts applied to criticize the nominees' fashion choices. The viewers' becoming experts results from the fact that fashion knowledge is ordinary expertise, which is very different from the tradition that expertise is provided by the professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and dieticians.

### Identification with the Outsider of Mainstream Style

Besides the discursive positions of the nominees and the experts, *WNTW* produces another discursive position that exists outside of mainstream style discourse. This position of the outsider is mainly represented through the ‘before’ look of the nominees. The criticisms on the “before” look often provoke antagonistic feelings from some regular viewers toward those who try to make the nominees conform to the social norms of appropriate fashion:

This girl Erin has definitely made it into the Top 10 Most Annoying Makeovers! She's a silly obnoxious woman that is still acting like a little child. I don't even enjoy these episodes. People like her who try so hard to be different, that after the age of 19 they become totally generic. (blakonyx78, Posted on May 26, 2007)

O.k. kids, I watched my first episode of this hack show and I must say that I was pulling for the guest, Erin, as she fought against the two hosts as they tried to strip her of her individuality. Erin was completely cool in the way she kept her independence. She looked hot because she wore her weird clothes with confidence and that is all that it has ever taken to be fashionable. She is a trend setter while the hosts would have us all look like a bunch of houses in a kitsch subdivision. I never finished the episode it was too terrible. Go Erin, go (pickle846, Posted September 15, 2007)

The show not only conveys fashion knowledge to the viewers, but it primes inherent antagonistic conflicts over the style of fashion. Apparent in the above excerpts is the paradox of having a style that must achieve individuality while conforming to the norms of the age. Because of this inherent conflict, an antagonistic frontline is formed between the viewers who identified with the position of outsiders of the mainstream style discourse and avid viewers who conform to the program’s format. Therefore, while the program tries to fix the meaning of style as something socially appropriate as well as individual, at the same time it exposes the loose end of incomplete suture through the antagonistic confrontation between two parties. That is, these conflicts show that the judgment for appropriate style is rather the outcome of contingent articulation of various elements in the discourse than something objective.

The problem of class relation also emerges in the conflict with the outsider and the

insider of main stream style discourse. Fashion experts' criticism about the nominees' fashion choices often offends viewers who have identified with the "before" look of the nominees because their criticism is targeting the fashion choices that they might make in their everyday fashion consumption:

I guess I should rephrase what I was really trying to say. I was irate about the way they treated her before and after. It was degrading, At first they start hammering on her about the way she CHOOSES to dress and then at the end they treat her like a human being. ...I wear a lot of what S wears, Lots of pinks, lots of color. I just do NOT in any way agree with the way she treats people before they look like her. It's wrong and very Vein of her, You should judge the person, not the clothes they wear, after all not all of us can go out and spend 5000\$ a month on a new wardrobe. ...I have a job at 7-11 that I only work 2 days a week at 8\$ an hour. I own 3 pairs of pants and 3 Shirts. I live in a small industrial town with only one way in and out. ...I'm sorry that my words offended half of you but living in the conditions I live in and seeing that happen day after day after day, having some rich lady knock the way someone dresses. That hits home, that's like people discriminating against me for not having money. ... (Randabear, Posted March 16, 2005)

What should be stressed from this excerpt is that, although the show tries to concentrate on the aesthetic issues in terms of fashion and style, the inherent characteristics of being political surfaces in the reactions of the viewers who identify themselves with the position of being outside mainstream style discourse.

### Discussion

Roughly speaking, *WNTW* produces three subject positions with which the viewers of the program can identify: the positions of people who experience difficulty in their fashion choices, fashion experts, and the outsiders of style discourse of the program. While watching the program, the viewers tend to identify with the participants of the program who are chosen from ordinary people like themselves because of their fashion faux pas, and integrate the discursive knowledge of fashion into their fashion consumption. Besides producing the subject position that is equivalent to that of the nominee, the program also produces the subject position of fashion experts.

As they are taught the knowledge of fashion styling from the program, viewers are also equipped with so-called expertise in the fashion. Through this identification practice, the fashion knowledge of the program differs greatly from the original subject position as it is received by viewers. They provide other novice viewers with fashion advice and tips customized to their situation, while evaluating the expertise of the fashion experts in the program.

The last subject position exists outside the style discourse of the program. These viewers are very critical about the manners and fashion tastes promoted by the program. These fashion outsiders, or those who have the attitude of anti-fashion, tend to use the style knowledge in the program as a catalyst to provoke the discussion on political issues of fashion.

#### Representations and Consumption Practices

As Hirschman and Thompson (1997) illustrated in their study, representations in mass media such as television programs, magazines, and motion pictures play a significant role in shaping the frame of reference by which consumers interpret advertisements. O'Guinn and Shrum (1997) also showed that even fictional media representations have influence on the construction of consumers' reality perception. Despite the importance of mass media in terms of shaping consumption practices, as seen in these prior works, not much attention was given to the impact of media representation on the shaping of the concrete practices of everyday consumption.

With consciousness of the important role of mass media in defining consumption practices, the present study has illustrated how this mass media representation of style discourse influences the shaping of concrete practices of everyday fashion consumption. The style discourse in *WNTW* as media representation conveyed particular meanings in terms of

fashion consumption. These meanings are, in turn, the basis of constructing concrete fashion consumption practices.

As seen in the results of the present study, the reality TV, in particular lifestyle makeover TV such as *WNTW* has done much to deepen the symbiotic relationship among advertising, entertainment and consumer education (Deery 2004). In *WNTW*, information for shopping and various fashion brands played a central role in the construction of program content. This new tendency that entertainment, advertising, and information converge into one form of media content will be strengthened with the increasing popularity of lifestyle shows, calling for more attention of consumer researchers.

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