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CONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES AND BOUNDARIES: FASHION AND CLOTHING OF WORKING AND MIDDLE CLASS YOUTH IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

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Clothing and fashion play significant role in the process of ageing, and help put bodily experiences in the context of culture. It is especially important for young people as social subjects, who are starting to become independent but do not have sufficient experience and social competences to do this.

This paper explores how two groups of mainstream youth in Russia use clothing to denote their social identity and construct boundaries.

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Introduction

"Youth" and "fashion" go together in contemporary Russian culture. The media space in contemporary Russia is full of incredible images of young people and their fashions; black leather, rivets, black latex, mohawks, extremely high heels, mini-skirts, low-back pants and sneakers. However, to what extent does this picturesque mosaic that we associate with youth fashion, reflect the everyday experience of young people in Russia in terms of fashion and clothing? Evidently, the media only partially reflects the "real" situation. There are youth groups that are excluded from the media, or whose representations are only partial or biased. One of the most vivid examples is the fashion of the working class youth, which is either never or rarely seen on screen or in glossy magazines. Despite this, this gap has recently begun to be filled in the media, with the series "Real'nye patsany" ("The real dudes"), which provides a glimpse into the lifestyle of the working class youth in Russia and their clothing choices. The middle class youth are represented in the media more often, but in most cases ironically, depicted as the victims of conspicuous consumption wearing branded shirts and using iPhones [Veblen 2005].

Another problem is that fashion studies tend to focus on groups which represent the "vanguard" of fashion. Groups whose consumer patterns are seen as "rearguard" – those from lower social strata or people who are older - are considered less popular subjects and not worthy of attention.

This article aims to begin to fill this gap and to shed light on the fashion of one of these kinds of groups. This paper is focused primarily on analyzing the role played by fashion and clothes in the daily life of two strata from the Russian youth. The main objectives of the article are to identify the contexts and practices of fashion, their role in creating identities such as age, class and gender, and the construction of related boundaries. The article begins with an overview of the theoretical framework, then discusses the method and data, and ends with a presentation of the empirical results and an analysis of the findings.

Subcultures, age, class and gender

Subcultural studies have analyzed youth fashion since the mid-1950s, particularly scholars belonging to the tradition of British Cultural Studies, often associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham (S. Hall, T. Jefferson, D. Hebdige, A. McRobbie, H. Pilkington, et al.). Among the most influential works from the BCS are those by Hall and Jefferson [1977], where they analyzed the first postwar

subcultures which arose within the "parental culture" of the British working class. Another influential work is Dick Hebdige's monograph «Subcultures: The meaning of style». As Hebdige notes, subcultures are often negatively discussed in the press and their appearance is accompanied "moral panics". The subcultural youth is associated with aggressive behavior, propensity towards violence, perverted sexuality and drug abuse. These conclusions were drawn not only from behavior but also from people's style of clothing, particularly as Hebdige notes; subcultural styles destruct the codes of the dominant culture. Interestingly, when subcultures became a subject of analysis at that time, the working class youth and their fashion was the focal point [Hebdige 1979 : 90-92].

Later, in the early 2000s, subcultural studies were replaced by post-subcultural studies. As Muggleton and Weinzierl noted [2003: 4-6], new concepts have appeared to describe youth groups, such as "scenes", "post-subcultures", "neo-tribes" or "lifestyles". Within this framework, youth culture should not be viewed as a ritual of resistance to the dominating class culture. In post-industrial society, classes and class boundaries are more diffuse and it is difficult to determine the dominant culture. There are many youth cultures which are not isolated from one another, as well as local and global (transnational) youth cultures. Consumption is seen as a creative process in the context of youth cultures. This methodological change meant that the analysis shifted from a semiotic analysis of cultural artifacts to ethnographic studies of the youth's daily routine. In post-subcultural studies, the picture of fashions and styles are seen as fractured and complicated because of the introduction of additional national, class-specific, gender and ethnic dimensions.

Age, gender and class should be also included in the analysis of youth cultures. Clothing and fashion play a significant role in the process of ageing and help put bodily experiences in a cultural context [Twigg 2000: 2]. It is especially important for younger people as social subjects who use clothing in order to experiment and therefore to socialize, explore and learn to present their bodies and themselves. In studies of fashion and age in Russia, the main focus tends to be clothing styles within particular subcultures, such as research on goths [Levikova 2006], soviet subsulture «lubera» («любера») [Gromov 2008], hipsters[Novikova 2011], clubbers and «neformaly» («неформалы») [Pilkington, 2002: 101-22].

The class approach still dominates fashion studies in Russia and the works of Veblen [2005], Simmel [1905] and Bourdieu [1984] offer popular concepts. However, as shown by researchers recently [Katz-Gerro 2002], belonging to a class does not fully explain consumption, as it is influenced by national and local characteristics, age, gender and ethnicity. Gurova applied the class concept, exploring how the middle class draw boundaries between themselves and the "masses" through particular clothing consumption practices [Gurova 2012 : 163-164]. This idea

was also examined by several other researchers [Klingseis 2012]. However, the lens of class is not a particularly common approach in youth studies on fashion and clothing in Russia, and there are not many studies which cover this topic [see Kuleva 2013].

In the remainder of this article I use the following approach: As we have seen, in subcultural and post-subcultural studies the focus tends to be on separate groups of young people who identify themselves and are identified with certain lifestyles, where clothing is a part of it. In this study, the mass youth are examined, as those who do not identify themselves with any subculture and lifestyle. Since the age approach cannot be considered to be exhaustive, other characteristics such as class and gender are also significant. The class-related approach, especially in Russia, where the middle class is a politicized notion [Gurova 2012], also requires a more precise definition and empirical justification. This paper is an attempt to at least partially fill this research gap.

Methodology

The dataset consists of two series' of interviews. First, the research group conducted 61 in-depth interviews with vocational education students living in St. Petersburg (29 female and 32 male students, aged from 15 to 22). The future professions of the interviewees are likely to be in engineering and technology (29), tourism and hotel management (10), medicine and nursing (7), cooking and restaurant management (11), sewing and design (2), the beauty industry (2) and finance (2). Then, as part of the continuation of the project, another 20 interviews were collected, this time with young representatives of the middle class (10 males and 10 females, aged from 16 to 20). Most of them (13) are students from St. Petersburg universities, another two participants were passing their entrance exams when they were interviewed and the rest of the interviewees are high school students. As mentioned in the interviews, these high schools were quite prestigious institutions.

The sampling was conducted mainly on the basis of the interviewee's education. Conventionally, students at vocational institutions (professional'no-tehnicheskoe uchiliscshe) were related to the Russian working class in terms of their education, whereas representatives of the middle or higher classes and the intelligentsia associated themselves with higher education (Walker 2000, Zaslavskaya 1997, Belenkii 2005). However, additional criteria were applied to the middle class representatives; the interviewee's parents' professions ought to be identified as a highly skilled professional or a manager, and the parents should have higher education.

The interviewees from the two groups were asked questions about everyday experiences such as clothing and fashion, sports, sexuality, health and food. The average length of the interview was about 1.5 -2 hours. The interviewees were found through the interviewers' social network, as they were the younger members of the research team. The lower social status of the interviewers and small age gap between research participants and interviewers meant that the interviews were in many cases more akin to relaxed conversations between friends or classmates.

Clothing consumption, practices and boundaries

One of the central practices related to clothing and fashion in both groups of interviewees was shopping in shopping malls. This practice usually takes a long time and often includes other types of leisure activity (visiting a food court, going to movies). The mall is defined by young people as "the popular" space of an urban environment: *«Well, I buy clothes in those stores that are popular now, in places like Capitol, Mercury, Mega Mall, the most popular ones»* (f., 18 years old, vocational training college student).

Most of the interviewees prefer to shop for new clothes with their friends or their boyfriends or girlfriends. The participants give advice to each other and «approve» or «disapprove» their choices. The importance of the peer-group is crucial, perhaps because the group helps to identify and socially confirm conformal and safe choices.

Moreover, new digital technologies allow young people to maintain their connection with peers even if they go shopping alone:

«Well, sometimes my friend Olya and I go shopping separately. In this case we often take selfies [fotkaemsya v zerkalo], send the shots to each other and ask, is it nice, should I buy these clothes?» (f., 19 years old, university student).

The following quotation demonstrates that shopping with friends gives young consumers a unique experimental and performative experience. At the shopping mall, young people have a chance to «safely» experiment and explore unusual styles and atypical clothes: *«My friends and I love to hang around there ... to have a laugh or something ... Well, just try [something] on… I don't know, some ridiculous outfit. Take a picture [of me in it] and share it online on a social network [VKontakte]. And then, once we've finished laughing about it, I a choose normal, well, serious outfit. That's it»* (m., 15 years old, vocational training college student).

The majority of the young people who took part in the research live with their parents or share finances with them, but only few of them indicated that they buy new clothes or spend time at the mall with their parents. Parents in most cases are not welcome in the process of clothing

selection and other activities at the mall. There is evidently a clear boundary linked to age in both working- and middle class youth consumption.

Both the working and middle class youth think that the shopping mall is the most common and useful place for clothing consumption and in many cases select precise shopping malls for this purpose, such as the «Galereya», a large mall in the historical center of the city. However, there actually are several differences in the routes that they follow once inside the mall; how they select concrete shops and clothing in it, and most importantly, what meaning they give to their practices. In particular, shopping at a mall (or at brand-name stores) is significant for the working class youth because the mall «marks» their clothes as «fashionable» as opposed to clothes bought at open-air markets or in second-hand stores. The mall as a legitimate space for clothing consumption guarantees that all purchases are in fashion, so the customer will not make a mistake and can buy whatever they want:

«Interviewer: How do you keep up with fashion trends?
Interviewee: In general, I don't. I go to the mall, where usually all the stuff is already in fashion.
So I just buy what I like» (m., 16 years old, vocational training college student).

The working class youth's clothing consumption distinguishes them from the middle class and, at the same time, allows them to get symbolically closer to the middle class [Zhelnina 2011]. Shopping in malls is considered to be rather prestigious. Buying clothes from a certain brand is not especially important, whereas the place where the item was bought is significant. In comparison to the middle class, working class consumers are not "omnivorous consumers" [Gurova 2012], and for them clothing from second hand stores cannot be "in fashion".

Conversely, middle class youth tend to choose a concrete brand. This group of classified consumers not only mentioned brands, but described their style and its dynamic. In the following quote, a university student also describes the possible social purposes of certain branded clothes, which characterize him as very reflexive consumer: «*First, I'd say Nike…it's quite expensive, but they sell normal things. Well, I haven't been there lately, Nike became worse [stuh], it's not really interesting anymore. Second, I would go to Marks & Spencer, I have few whole looks by M&S, I wear it quite often. It's ok for university, for going out somewhere* » (m., 19 years old, university student).

Some of the middle class research participants were also reflexive to class targeting of the brand, not only because of the prices, but because of other features of the shop. For example, one of the interviewees draws a distinction between two brands because of «the quality» of the service workers there:

«There are the shops like Camper where I feel pleased to use the shopping assistants [mne priyatno ispolzovat konsultantov], but not in shops like H&M. Because Camper is associated with more expensive service, I have a prejudice about the fact that the people who work there are more civilized [bolee civilizovany], than those who work in H&M. Because there are really unpleasant people there, sometimes I listen to their conversations and I really don't want to ask them for any advice» (m, 19 years old, university student).

This quote also refers to the statement that young consumers from the middle class dot see the social space of the mall as homogeneous in class terms, as the students of the vocational training colleges do, but instead describe numerous differences which reproduce social inequalities and segregation. Other differences in consumption patterns are associated with a large number of legitimate consumption spaces for the middle class. If the second-hands were not mentioned very often in the interviews, then buying clothes on the internet was quite popular (*«I also use E-bay often. I put in an order along with my class-mates– I bought two t-shirts and some converse from the USA»*, 19 years old, university student).

In conclusion, the mall is the central space of clothing consumption for both groups of young people. In spending a lot of time there they postulate their symbolic independence from their parents and strengthen their ties with boyfriends and girlfriends and other peers. However, consumption in the mall is endowed with different meanings for the two groups. If for the working class mall is a homogeneous space of social prestige, the middle class decodes it by depicting and reproducing numerous inequalities.

Identifying style repertoires

As we have seen, the most significant differences between the youth of the two classes are not associated with a difference in practices, but the difference in their interpretations. An attempt to describe the stylistic continuum of two groups of young people encountered the same situation. It appears that, by using different language opportunities, the interviewees try to represent similar style configurations.

For example, the majority of the interviewees from the working class lacked a rich vocabulary for describing clothing and fashion. For instance, they often used the broad concept «kofta» («a jacket»), which could refer to any cloth for the upper part of the body, from a t-shirt or blouse to a cardigan or pullover.

However, the group of middle class interviewees was sometimes overqualified in terms of their fashion vocabulary. For example, one of the interviewees described the color of a shirt not as just «yellow» but as follows: «*I saw a shirt of a strange tint; it was banana-lemon diluted with milk*» (m., 19 years old, university student).

However, both groups of interviewees had some difficulties with defining styles and their boundaries. Therefore, I prefer to discuss «style repertoires» [Gurova 2013] as a model of sustainable consumerist behavior which represents the stylistic continuum, but not any precise style [Foxall and Schrezenmaier 2004, Kalmus and Kelner 2009].

The most common repertoire of the working class is labeled as «free», «comfortable», «classic», «casual» or «sporty». This repertoire is made up of casual items and a lack of distinctly gendered features in clothing. The garments tend to be unisex and suitable for both men and women. Among the clothing items included in this repertoire are jackets, t-shirts, jeans and a hoodies. Here are several quotations illustrating this style:

(1) « *I know a girl named Nastya. We are classmates. She dresses… you know… ordinary (spokoino). Well, she wears black trousers, a black blouse, something like that. Her style is easy and free (svobodnyi)*» (f., 19 years old, vocational training college student).

(2) «*If we're talking about [style] preferences, I don't know, I like to have a "free" style. A "sporty" style* (m., 16 years old, vocational training college student)

(3) «*[My style is] simple and comfortable, and looks easy: there is no formality, [it's] just casual… I think my clothes are comfortable, I like to wear "classical" (klassicheskii) style clothing*» (m., 18 years old, vocational training college student)

(4) «*Sweatshirts in dark colors, classic jeans … and closer to the classic style of jeans and a jacket*» (f., 15 years old, vocational training college student).

(5) «*A little bit "sporty", a little bit "classic"*» (f., vocational training college student, 16 years old).

(6) «*Sporty and casual, just to get dressed and leave*» (m., 18 years old, vocational training college student).

Along with the "casual", "sporty" and "classic" ways of dressing were mentioned, but the features of one clothing types are too similar with another's to interpret them as different style repertoires or define the exact styles. For example, the interviewees often define «sporty» or «casual» by very similar or even the same pieces of clothing, colors and characteristics. In quotation №6, the interviewee defines his style as classic and sporty at the same time.

This style repertoire has the following characteristics: the importance of the utilitarian function of clothing, the insignificance of gender distinctions, the lack of class distinctions and

age difference. The colors tend to be dark, and black is often mentioned. This kind of style can be interpreted as a desire for conformity. The owners of this repertoire describe their style as an «invisibility cloak», which enables them to hide the social and physical characteristics of their bodies. They are not linked to any particular clothes. The garments mentioned by the interviewees are multifunctional, such as t-shirts, jumpers, knitted cloth and cons. Interestingly, wearing tracksuits in formal situations (for example, at a university) is considered to be in bad taste by many interviewers.

The gender-unified «invisibility cloak» is so well integrated into everyday life that the idea of demonstrating femininity is linked to a specific type of performance - «carnivalized femininity». It supposes performativity, caring about one's appearance and has a vivid feminine tone: «My friend usually wears jeans, but sometimes she looks like a lady, very eye-catching» (f., 19 years, vocational training college student). This repertoire is expressed through garments expressly intended for women, and most people think it is not suitable for men; dresses, skirts, shoes and boots with high heels or makeup. This style is associated with demonstration and is designed for a viewer to observe it:

«*I have friends who dress up in various ways, [but] mostly in jeans ... I've got one girl friend who wears skirts. Well [she is] a fashionista*» (f., 18 years old, vocational training college student).

«[*I dress] elegantly and solemnly ... [in a] low-neck [dress]*» (f., 17 years old, vocational training college student).

Feminine styles can to a certain extent be seen as an opposition to a «casual» style. If the casual style denies gender boundaries, then this opposite style emphasizes them. Feminine clothes try to be visible. This feminine style repertoire reminds the glamorous style of the upper classes trickled down to the working class. Some traces of glamour are still visible in the middle class interviews:

«*Some of my friends are glamorous girls. They wear dresses and high-heeled shoes all the time. They are like those Hollywood stars*» (female, 19 years old, university student).

Yet for the working class, this sort of glamour is paradoxically «plain». It's not festive; the interviewees do not mention any decorations or bright details on clothing, expensive luxury items or brands. The interviews show that what makes the apparel glamorous is its emphasis on femininity and the female body. Hence, glamour is featured through low-neck blouses and dresses, short skirts and tight outfits. For the middle class, feminine styles are more integrated into the everyday and do not require a specific performance: «*If I show up to a date in a dress, he*

would not comment on it saying, «Oh, you are wearing a dress, you look so pretty!» - he would never say something like that» (f., 19 years old, university student).

«I try to buy clothes that are not tight, not tight-fitting. If it is some kind of dress, it will always have a waist and a hem with volume » (female, 17 years old, university student).

The last quote indicates how a feminine style can easily be integrated with «free style» for the middle class.

Boundaries through style repertoires

Along with style repertoires, the interviewees pointed out style repertoires that they considered to be «alien», clearly making distinction between their group and others. One of the examples was the styles of subcultures. In particular, my interviewees mentioned young men's practices of transgressing gender boundaries through clothing:

«Guys who wear skinny jeans, tight t-shirts, and long bangs - they drive me mad.

Interviewer: Why?

Respondent: I do not know, they look like, kind of, women».

Another example:

«Interviewer: ...When [do you] look at a person and think: "What you are wearing?!"

Interviewee: Well, let's say ... Long hair and a scarf for guys.

Interviewer: What kind of scarf?

Respondent: Well, just any kind of thin scarf twisted around the neck.

Interviewer: And long hair, do you mean that [he has] bangs like this (shows)?

Respondent: - Yes….

Interviewer: - Ah! Like an emo?

Respondent: - Like a queer [pedik]» (m., 18 years old, vocational training college student).

This quotation above illustrates a young man's negatively marked style repertoire, who wears tight-fitting clothing and has certain hairdo, and is perceived as effeminate or homosexual. The quotation illustrates a clear denial of alternative masculinities used by those who belong to subcultural styles and «do not look like a man». The interviewees justify this attitude by a symbolic threat to the dominant gender order. The most unacceptable subcultural styles are emos and goths and aggressive styles such as skinheads. Subcultural styles and bright clothing in general, which is not associated with any subculture, annoys the interviewees because the working class clothing culture supposes conformity.

The most common criticism directed at women was of overly sexualized femininity, which is to be «vulgar». Criticism was often aimed at women's skirt length («mini-mini-mini-

skirt», as one of the interviewees called it (f., 17 years old, vocational training college student) and an extremely low neckline. The border line between socially acceptable and «vulgar» femininity seems to be quite elusive and even in cases where a feminine style and «vulgarity» were defined by the same interviewee, it was difficult to determine the precise criteria for it. Perhaps the criteria go beyond style and must include other characteristics, such as (inappropriate) context or (sexually aggressive) behavior. Behavior and clothing which is tolerated at rock concerts or at nightclubs is not accepted in other contexts.

Conclusion

The main objective of this paper was to investigate the role of fashion and clothing consumption in the everyday life of the mainstream working and middle class youth in Russia, given that they are the groups for which fashion is not typically the subject of particular attention.

Nevertheless, clothing does have some important functions, such as distinguishing between age groups – the "parents" from the "children"- and constructing their class and gender identity. Age identity is constructed through style repertoires and practices. Peer groups are more important for working class youth, and so they prefer to go shopping with their peers to have their opinion on style and legitimate their taste. Class identity is delineated both through style repertoires – the working class youth does not accept middle class subcultural styles - and through places for shopping, where the working class youth try to eliminate the differences between themselves and the middle class by shopping at malls where clothes are considered fashionable. Gender identity is of special interest. The middle class youth support dominant gender roles and do not accept alternative masculinities and femininities.

Several style repertoires were described in this paper, which demonstrate that both groups of young people follow similar values (just as they have many consumption practices in common), but have different resources to explicit this, mainly their cultural and financial capital.

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