Looking *vanlig*; neither too much nor too little
A study of consumption of clothing among mainstream youth in a Swedish small town

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Abstract
This thesis studies consumption among young people who identify as mainstreamers in a Swedish small town. In order to map patterns of clothing consumption and to understand what was central in the young people’s self-identification, the research was conducted using a mix of ethnographic methods and wardrobe studies. This is an inverted study of the subcultural, that problematizes the assumption that the majority (the mainstream) and the minority (the countercultural) are opposites when it comes to identity creation. The central concepts used here are ordinary (*vanlig*), mainstream, and subculture. One of the main findings is that the youth studied self-identify as ordinary. This finding is used to problematize not only the traditional markers of masculinity and femininity as they present themselves in this context, but also what is characterized as new patterns of consumption. There are two main conclusions. First, being mainstream and ordinary was not a static identity position, as the literature would have it; instead, being an ordinary mainstreamer required constant work in order to stay within certain culturally negotiated boundaries. Second, the ethnographic findings contribute in the field of subcultural studies by questioning the convention of portraying the mainstream and the subcultural as polar opposites: contrary to the literature, it is argued that neither is so very different from the other, making it an unhelpful dichotomy in understanding young people today.

Keywords: Consumption, Denim, Mainstream, Subculture, Ordinary, Youth.

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A study of consumption of clothing among mainstream youth in a Swedish small town

Emma Lindblad
To my mother
Christina Lindblad
(1954–2016)
Editor’s introduction


The Centre, from the very start a research institute at the Humanities Faculty of Stockholm University, has a Ph.D. programme and an international MA programme. The MA programme was launched in 2006, and the first Ph.D. students were admitted in 2008. The sheer demand for undergraduate courses in fashion studies prompted the Centre to offer an introductory course in 2006 and 2007, which in 2008 was expanded into a one-year introductory programme with a BA dissertation module. Each year some 160 students are admitted to the undergraduate level as well as the BA and MA programmes, following a highly competitive process.

The Centre for Fashion Studies has established fashion studies as an interdisciplinary field in Scandinavia, recruiting faculty members, teaching staff, and visiting researchers from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds, including economic history, film studies, literature, art history, marketing, and semiotics. Equally, the Centre has sought to develop a distinct intellectual profile by integrating theory with material culture, pursuing a close interest in fabrics, garments, and visual representations through critical analysis and theory. The Centre is almost unique in being part of a university rather than a design school.

Since its inception the Centre for Fashion Studies has been home to many different fields of research and teaching in both the humanities and the social sciences, attracting scholars and students from across the world. Its community outreach is also exemplary, while besides its agreements with universities and fashion schools abroad, the Centre has participated in several collaborative projects with museums both in Sweden and abroad.

Professor Klas Nyberg
The Centre for Fashion Studies, Stockholm
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This thesis is dedicated to my father Ulf Lindblad, my mother Christina Lindblad, my sister Johanna Lindblad Ó Duinnín, my brother Erik Lindblad, my brother-in-law Máirtín Ó Duinnín, and my nephew Oscar Lindblad Ó Duinnín. You are my support system in life, my everything. Mom and Dad, my gratitude for your never-ending love and support cannot be expressed in words; you are my heroes. Johanna and Erik, without you I am half a person. At my side during my journey has been a group of handsome men: thank you Söderkillarna, you are the best. Jonas Elmqvist, you mean the world to me. I would also like to thank Judith Wolst for believing in me and constantly pushing me forward.

Last, but definitely not least, I wish to thank my informants. This thesis is about you and your stories, seen through my ethnographic eyes. I hope I have done you justice.

Emma
Stockholm, March 2017
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Prologue

14 February 2010

I’m a 17-year-old girl. I live in Midway with my mum, who’s 55.¹ I’m in the second-last year of high school doing social sciences. I own about 6 pairs of jeans. To me, jeans are a pair of rugged trousers in denim fabric (of course). They can come in all sorts of styles, different colors, distressed, baggy, tight, and so on. However, I think there are certain limits. A pair of jeans can only have a limited number of pockets, otherwise you look like a lumberjack. I only buy vanliga jeans, not jeans with a lot of tat on them. The only thing that can stand out are a few worn-through bits here and there, but otherwise regular blue jeans. Light or dark. Not baggy! For me it’s all about skinny jeans, which are the only kind I have. The brands vary, but I find Lee and Miss Sixty last well. Since those brands are a bit more expensive, I don’t buy them that often. So more often than not I buy a pair for less than SEK 500 at H&M or something. I would definitely not pay more than SEK 2,000 for a pair of jeans; between SEK 300–1,000 is a good price. I don’t wear jeans that often because I find it difficult to feel comfortable in jeans. They often feel hard and heavy. However, I often use jeggings. Look like jeans, but fit better and don’t cost as much. There isn’t really any occasion when I wouldn’t wear jeans, or in my case jeggings. If the rest looks good, they go with everything. The important thing is to make them look good together. I don’t remember what my first pair of jeans looked like, but I remember a pair I had when I was very young. They were unimaginably wide and decorated with sequins at the bottom of the leg. Ha ha, yikes! For a while jeans from Cheap Monday were the thing, everyone wanted to wear them, preferably black and tight. I still have a pair of those, but they’re not the oldest ones I have. My oldest pair are about 5 years, but they still fit me well! When my jeans get too old and worn out, I either give them away or cut them down to denim shorts. Tanned legs and cut-off denim shorts in the summer is a great look! I get my inspiration from friends, especially one friend who has really great style! She and I are quite similar, but she manages to get much better outfits than me ☺. I buy clothes for maybe SEK 500–700 a month, but it varies. I mostly buy sweaters and jewellery.

¹ All the material quoted in the prologue is taken from emails or Facebook messages to me from the informants. Unless otherwise stated, all translations throughout the thesis are my own. Midway is a pseudonym.
Mum often pays for my clothes, but I pay for the impulse buys. My mum also wears jeans, but it’s kind of hard to borrow hers as I have very skinny legs. My friends and I never swap jeans. We might borrow each other’s sweaters now and then, but never jeans. I don’t wash my jeans that often, mostly because I don’t want to wear them out. I can’t say than I’m an expert on taking care of my jeans, I wash them when they need it and let them dry normally. No ironing and stuff. Most people in my circle of friends wear jeans, tights/leggings, or jeggings to school and in the evening when we aren’t doing anything special, maybe just chilling at someone’s house. If we’re going to a party almost everyone wears tights and a skirt, or a long sweater with high heels. It’s very rare for someone to wear jeans! As well as my jeans I also have 2 denim jackets, one black and one blue, and of course a couple of pairs of cut-off jeans shorts☺.

Girl, aged 17

11 March 2010

I don’t know if I have any particular style. I mix items a lot. Vanlig, I guess? When I was younger my style was more skate-influenced, but I think that’s a bit childish now. My two favorite brands are Whyred and Filippa K. I think they’re clean, and they often carry classics. I don’t want my style to stick out too much; I could never be like a punk rocker. I want to look like my friends…

Boy, aged 22

15 December 2010

I wouldn’t say that I have any style, not a particular one at any rate, but if I do have one I guess it’s seen as rather schizophrenic. I like second-hand, old clothes, especially when it comes to bags. I shop for a lot of my clothes online, at ASOS.com and other websites. Most of the clothes in my wardrobe come from Topshop, H&M, second hand, and Urban Outfitters, and then I’m including shoes, coats, and bags. My style often depends on the occasion. Going to lectures or if I’m in class I always wear a shirt with a cardigan over. When I meet people outside school, in bars or clubs they are often surprised that I look so different, funny but true. I don’t know where my style comes from… I think you dress differently depending on what time you’re living in, that’s what it’s been like for me. Perhaps you follow the fashion subconsciously when it comes to certain things, and less when it comes to others. I definitely dressed differently previously in life, when I was younger, but I believe your clothing is determined by a combination of the time you live in and your age… Right now I dress according to what I fancy, comfort and practicality often come second. I don’t really have any favorite brands, but, like, I mentioned I
shop quite a lot at Topshop and H&M. I think they carry lots of different, fun styles and creative models at Topshop, rather vintage-inspired at times. H&M is cheap, but still modern and nice clothes. I don’t really know if there’s any style I’d never wear, although I’m sure there is… but there are things I’d never put on! For me it’s not important to stick out. For some people I’m sure it is. My criterion is to feel that the clothes I wear look good on me. I’m sure other people find my style overambitious at times or even tasteless, but most of all schizophrenic since I can’t make up my mind… but that’s up to them to judge! When I feel comfortable and feel that something looks good, my style is where I want it to be.

Girl, aged 22

20 January 2011

I’m a 20-year-old dude, living on my own. The style I’m wearing right now is… like everyone else I know, but even so I stick out a bit in the crowd. Nicely ripped trousers from Rare, Paladium shoes, low-cut T-shirt with a grey hoodie. Before I’d wear a lot of vintage the time I was working in a clothing shop, a lot of denim fashion. Now it’s not quite the same. Nice and trendy jeans, relaxed T-shirts worn with comfy hoodies, long necklaces, and shoes like a boss! When it comes to denim I’m currently wearing Rare, Italian, and they deliver quality! It’s mostly when it comes to denim that I pay attention to the brand, when it comes to tops most things are OK. My favorite right now is Marc Jacobs. Awesome! One look I will never wear again is the emo style. Awful! Been there once and I’m embarrassed to admit it. I believe one’s style reflects one’s personality.

Boy, aged 20
1 Young Swedes and denim: An introduction

The idea that the majority of young people identify as mainstream follows a cultural logic that is generally taken for granted in studies of consumption, clothing, and identity. Rarely, though, is the mainstream problematized in terms of what the concept actually means, as it often plays the part of a silent backdrop against which studies of subcultural minorities play out. What is the clothing consumption of young people from the dominant cultural majority, and how is it related to identity? In this thesis I study clothing consumption in a Swedish small town in the late 2000s, focusing on young people aged 17–23 who self-identify as mainstream, in order to understand their patterns of consumption and what drove them to dress the way they did. In order to chart the lifeworlds of those participating in the study, the key element is the documentation of their denim jeans as part of an ethnographic study designed to capture how the group themselves reasoned about their consumption practices. Hence, consumption has been used as a lens through which to examine identity.

In tracing young mainstreamers’ consumption, the Swedish term vanlighet, materialized as a cultural logic, guiding their self-identification and thus their clothing consumption. Hence, the cultural logic of vanlighet is used throughout the thesis both to explain the contents of their wardrobes and to discuss both their personal and social identities. The Swedish word for ordinary—vanlig—is used throughout when referring to the empirical material and the ways in which the informants identified themselves. Vanlighet represents an

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2 The loanword ‘mainstream’ is used in Swedish too.
3 ‘Lifeworld’ as defined by the founder of phenomenology Edmund Husserl is ‘the unquestioned, practical, historically conditioned, pre-theoretical, and familiar world of people’s everyday lives’ (see Robert Desjarlais & C. Jason Throop, ‘Phenomenological approaches in anthropology’, Annual Review of Anthropology, 40 (2011), 91) and has been appropriated by the social sciences. I use it to refer to everything about the informants’ lived self-experiences of the world.
4 Note that vanlig has little to do with the concept of normcore, a term coined by the American trend-forecasting bureau K-HOLE in the report ‘Youth Mode: a report on freedom’ (New York: K-HOLE, 2013). For a brief time, normcore was picked up by hip young people around the world as an anti-fashion fashion trend, turning Jerry Seinfeld and Steve Jobs into unlikely fashion icons. Although K-HOLE argued that normcore is not about fashion, but about loving and embracing the norm, it still embraces some norms more than others, almost parodizing those young people for whom being vanlig is not a trend but an integral part of their cultural identity.
emic category used by the informants as a point of reference in their self-identification. For some informants this was expressed in words, saying that they wanted to be vanliga, whereas others framed their efforts to be vanliga as a constant negotiation with themselves to measure up to local norms and hence vanlighet. This should not to be confused with ordinariness as a theoretical and analytical concept—why I have chosen to use the term when referring to the literature on the ordinary and when discussing ordinariness on an analytical level.

Identifying oneself as vanlig is understood here as an active process, challenging the idea that the conforming majority of the mainstream and the rebellious minority of the countercultural are opposites in terms of identity creation. Further, it problematizes the treatment of the mainstream as a vague backdrop onto which studies of more spectacular stylistic groups are projected. In so doing, I question the sharp polarization between the mainstream and the countercultural, a reoccurring idea in youth studies. Going against convention, I have chosen to present the findings of my study as early as possible in the thesis, in the belief that it is not only the findings in themselves that are of main value, but also the implications of the results and the questions they raise, which are then addressed in detail in the thesis proper.

An ethnographic study has been carried out in the town of Midway among a group of young men and women in the ages of 17–23, documenting this group’s way of acquiring and wearing jeans, among other things. In addition to participant observations and interviews, 20 individual wardrobe studies and 1 done in pair have been conducted. Of these, 9 were with male participants and 11 were with female participants. Of the 20 individual studies, two men and three women were followed more closely. The majority of the research took place in the informants’ homes, and alternatively in my home and at locations around Midway. It was these encounters in a Swedish small-town context that led up to the overarching result of the dissertation: vanlighet as a desirable point of self-reference and as determining the clothing consumption practices that inform the way the informants dress.

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7 Midway is a pseudonym. The choice of town (and pseudonym) for the fieldwork is discussed in detail below, see p. 86. Throughout the dissertation denim and jeans are used interchangeably, mirroring the informants’ emic usage. If other denim items are referred to, this is indicated.

8 A total of 21 wardrobe studies were done as part of the study. However, one wardrobe study was of a male–female couple who were already included elsewhere in the material as individuals, making the total number of individuals participating in this study, 20.
The main research question of the thesis is why the young people consumed clothing the way they did and what informed their choice of dress, with the result that vanlighet is their main point of identification and desirable cultural identity. The dissertation then asks what it means to perceive oneself as vanlig relative to how this understanding impacts on clothing consumption. Apart from providing an ethnography of clothing consumption, my purpose has been to contribute to body of literature that addresses the so-called mainstream. A good deal is known about marginal groups who define themselves in opposition to the mainstream; far less about the undefined mass who are in the majority. My contribution is to show that for a group of mainstreamers at least, the ideal of vanlighet entailed quite specific ideas of how and what to consume and how to dress and look—quite contrary to the idea so common in the literature that the mainstream lacks in specifics.

There are excellent reasons for doing an ethnographic study using denim as a point of entry. Ethnographic research has the potential to reach deep, complex understandings of consumer behavior, while denim is a basic garment—fundamental, even—in the wardrobes of both men and women in the study. There are several alternative methods that could have been used in a study of young, small-town mainstreamers and their consumption. The key choice is to use a qualitative method in preference to a quantitative method. It is only a qualitative ethnographic study of a small number of individuals in one place that offers the chance to reach beneath the surface. A method devoted to open-ended research offers a unique insight into what really matters, as people tend to share things in layers in many conversations over time. It also escapes the issue of defining what is important to people before meeting them, so narrowing the research too early. Hence, a qualitative method was the most suitable for the aims of this study, especially when tracing the mechanisms of the relationship between the mainstream and the subcultural. This does not rule out that a quantitative study could have added something to this understanding.9

The reasons to study young people’s identities and consumption practices have been both theoretically and empirically informed. The theoretical aspect lies in my questioning the fact that style has so often been analyzed within the parameters of subcultures.10 In the literature, style has been long established as a key marker of subcultures, and my purpose is not to reject this, but to

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9 A statistical analysis of markers established in literature, such as gender, class, or ethnicity, could have been applied. Another alternative could have been to use a quantitative method such as using questionnaires to reach a higher percentage of the young people in Midway. A cross-cultural study collecting material outside of Sweden could have been a way of addressing what is uniquely Swedish or not in the study.

open up for a larger understanding of youth, style, fashion, and consumption by including young people who do not belong to a subculture.\footnote{Ken Gelder, ‘Introduction to part five: Style, fashion, signature’, in id. (ed.), \textit{The Subcultures Reader} (London: Routledge, 2005), 271.} If one recognizes that subcultures are defined in terms of the broader social system, where does this leave the young people who belong to the majority?\footnote{Ken Gelder, ‘The field of subcultural studies’ in Gelder 2005, 1.} As the social anthropologist Ulf Hannerz has it, ‘We often seem to think that subcultures need explanation, while “mainstream” culture does not’.\footnote{Ulf Hannerz, \textit{Cultural complexity. Studies in the social organization of meaning} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 81.} I wish to problematize the accepted notion of young people’s consumption as being driven by a desire to object to the social system in general, and would argue that identifying as \textit{vanlig} as a positive point of self-reference is more common than one might gather from the academic literature on the young.\footnote{Gelder 2005.} My findings also say something about identity as driving consumption, compared to factors such as price mechanisms, desire, conspicuous consumption, and so on. The inclusion of both boys and girls reflects my interest in studying young mainstreamers—not mainstream men or mainstream women. There is no question of assuming there must be similarities or differences between the two. My empirical motivation lies in an ambition to contribute to a subject that is woefully underrepresented in academic research—the dominant cultural majority.

\textbf{Denim as method}

Initially this Ph.D. project was planned as a study of the consumption of ethical denim in Sweden from a consumer perspective. In my Ph.D. application I proposed studying the ethical consumption of fashion, an area poorly researched in comparison to food, for example, and in need of scholarly interest. I wanted to look at how young consumers understand and apply these kinds of ideologies when consuming fashion in their daily lives. However, when I started my fieldwork it became clear that ethical concerns of the political or ideological types I was interested in would not be readily forthcoming without constructing a space for it in my project. I came to realize that it was not part of the informants’ lived experience, and not something they spontaneously brought up when talking about clothing. It dawned on me that if I wanted to understand a set of ethics among this specific group of people, while avoiding creating a study based on illustrations (however apt) of what I had decided would be needed, I would have to broaden my perspective. I shifted to the open question of why the young Swedish mainstreamers wear jeans, and the nature of their relationship with the flourishing domestic denim market. In the
early stages of the project I was thus careful to avoid positing the outcome of the study regarding specific topics coming out of the material, or indeed what theoretical issues would emerge.

The use of denim as my chosen method has been informed by both an appreciation of its role in the contemporary world and a historical understanding of the garment. The choice reflects its close to omnipresent status as a staple in wardrobes not only in Sweden but across the globe, making it a garment that would be easy to cross-compare between individuals. Denim’s ubiquity makes it suitable for a study of consumption, as it is likely to be found both in number and variety in young people’s wardrobe, and was certainly something that all the informants in the present study possessed.\(^\text{15}\) Further, denim no longer has the same symbolic meanings of novelty, youth, and rebellion as when it started making its way into mainstream youth culture in the 1950s. The fact that today’s young view denim as a wardrobe staple makes it suitable for pinning down the blindingly obvious when it comes to the mechanisms of consumption. In this sense, denim serves as a method that can unlock deeper understandings of the patterns of consumption among young people.

Over the space of 140 years, blue jeans have been transformed from workwear to fashion, and are now one of the most common garments in the world. Yet, despite its universality, each geographical region has its own denim history. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Swedish fashion scene was very much centered on brands that specialized in denim, making knowledge of denim highly valued in young Swedes’ cultural landscape. Yet, studies of denim in a contemporary and cultural perspective were, and still are, basically non-existent in Sweden. A key aim with this thesis is to move beyond the most visible, by focusing on everyday attire such as denim, and its place in the wardrobes of a group of young mainstreamers. Denim is quite rightly referred to as ordinary attire based on its ubiquity, being a basic wardrobe staple among these young people. In the thesis, I ask what it means to perceive oneself as mainstream, and how that understanding affects clothing consumption. Fashion and youth studies have a common history of focusing on what is deviant and marginal, sometimes at the expense of the cultural lives of the majority. The tendency to concentrate on deviance in youth studies is noticeable, and dates back to the very earliest academic interest. Twentieth-century sociology includes several prominent works on this topic.\(^\text{16}\) Many of these works are

\(^{15}\) The average number of jeans per female participant was 12.8 pairs; the average for male participants was 8.1 pairs (see Appendix 2 Table 2). The total number of pairs of jeans documented in the wardrobe studies was 240 pairs.

\(^{16}\) Among the leading publications are *Street Corner Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943), the sociologist William Foot Whyte’s ethnographic work on street gangs in Boston’s north end in the late 1930s; *The Drugtakers. The Social Meaning of Drug Use* (London: Paladin, 1971), an ethnography of drug use in London’s Notting Hill in the late sixties by the criminologist and sociologist Jock Young; *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), the criminologist and sociologist Stanley Cohen’s study of the UK media and social
based on detailed ethnographic descriptions, in which fashion is described alongside other cultural elements in the lives of different youth formations. In the second half of the twentieth century, when fashion increasingly became a topic of academic study in its own right, it was fashion among marginal groups that was in vogue.\textsuperscript{17}

In retrospect, it might appear a logical trajectory that an investigation of consumption among young mainstreamers, unlocked using ordinary attire such as denim, would find \textit{vanlighet} to be the structuring ideal; however, based on my extensive survey of the existing literature on youth, fashion, and consumption, I had not anticipated the concept of \textit{vanlighet} to present itself as one of the main results of the study, nor as a positive point of self-reference among my informants in the way it did, nor indeed the impact it had on consumption. To better understand why this proved to be the case, it is worth looking more closely at the literature on denim and the place of jeans in a Swedish cultural context.

Denim in the literature

As stated, it was for its ubiquity that denim was chosen as a method of researching consumption in this thesis. Before the publication of ‘A Manifesto for the Study of Denim’ by the anthropologists Daniel Miller and Sophie Woodward in 2007, there was virtually no academic work on the history of denim and the meaning of denim jeans in the present. Other than an aside by the semiotician Umberto Eco in 1985 in a short essay on ‘Lumbar Thought’,\textsuperscript{18} reactions to the sixties’ mods and rockers; \textit{Subculture. The Meaning of Style} (London: Routledge, 1979), the sociologist Dick Hebdige’s work on youth subcultures in post-war Britain; \textit{Resistance Through Rituals. Youth-Subcultures in Post-War Britain} (London: Hutchinson for the University of Birmingham, 1977), also on the topic of youth subcultures in post-war Britain written by the cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall and the criminologist and sociologist Tony Jefferson; \textit{Learning to Labor. How working-class kids get working-class jobs} (Farnborough: Saxon House, 1977), the cultural theorist and sociologist Paul Willis’s study of British, male, working-class youth in the seventies; and \textit{Jackie. An ideology of adolescent femininity} (Birmingham: CCCS, 1978), the feminist and cultural theorist Angela McRobbie’s work on working-class femininity.

\textsuperscript{17} The literature is discussed in detail in Chapter 2, but it should be noted here that the publications by Cohen, Hebdige, Hall, Jefferson, and McRobbie in n.16 all touch on marginal fashion. Other studies include the anthropologist Ted Polhemu’s \textit{Street style. From sidewalk to catwalk} (London: Thames & Hudson, 1996); the sociologist Sarah Thornton’s \textit{Club Cultures. Music, media and subcultural capital} (London: Polity, 1995), dealing with the youth culture associated with dance clubs and raves; the sociologist Michel Maffesoli’s \textit{The Time of the Tribes} (London: SAGE, 1996), in which he argues that mass culture is no more and that we organize our social existence as fragmented tribes. For an overview of subculture and fashion up to 1997, see Caroline Evans, ‘Dreams that only money can buy… or, the shy tribe in flight from discourse’, \textit{Fashion Theory}, 1/2 (1997), 169–88.

the philosophical and theoretical discourse on the topic was nil. In their denim manifesto, Miller and Woodward pointed to this gap, calling on academics to engage in the topic. What they believed anthropology had to offer was philosophical insight based on ethnographic work observing the experiences of ordinary people.\footnote{19} Simultaneously with this publication, a network of research projects about denim called the Global Denim Project was initiated. The aim of these initiatives was to produce a collective mapping of the denim commodity chain and a comparative ethnography of denim consumption and wearing, which ultimately would form a shared base for a comparative anthropology of denim.\footnote{20} The present thesis falls into the latter category, as I have set out to contribute to the ethnographic research on consumption. To date the Global Denim Project (Global Denim 2012) comprises over twenty denim research projects, the present one included, with a wide global geographical spread—from Hungary to Japan. In addition, the project has resulted in two publications by Miller and Woodward: *Blue Jeans: The Art of the Ordinary* (2012) and the edited volume *Global Denim* (2011a), as well as some related articles authored by Miller.\footnote{21} The duo also edited a special issue on denim in *Textile* in 2011, in which researchers connected to the Global Denim Project presented research projects focusing on the textile itself.\footnote{22}

Miller and Woodward broach the topic of denim jeans by claiming that on any given day a majority of the people in the world are wearing blue jeans.\footnote{23} This makes denim jeans one of the most ubiquitous garments in the world, indicating that denim strongly affects the everyday experience of contemporary life for a large part of the human population. It is not only the wearing of jeans that is global; so is denim’s production, design, and trade. By using the phrase ‘the blindingly obvious’, Miller and Woodward suggest that it is perhaps because denim jeans are such a global and omnipresent phenomenon that their presence and importance is taken for granted. Denim, and more pertinent the question ‘Why denim?’—why people wear jeans to the extent that

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\footnote{20} Miller & Woodward 2007.


\footnote{23} See Daniel Miller & Sophie Woodward (eds.), *Global Denim* (Oxford: Berg, 2011a), who claims that aside from the major populations of rural South Asia and China, denim is worn everywhere in the world. Against this, Cyril Merle, ‘In a wor(l)d?’*, *Antidote, The Denim Issue* (2010/2011), 105–107, writing in fashion magazine, claims that the only places where people do not wear jeans are North Korea, where jeans are forbidden for being counter-revolutionary, and Afghanistan, where they have failed to become fashion.
they do—has become so glaringly self-evident that we cannot see it.\textsuperscript{24} The textile itself has plenty of detailed historical narrative; it is an explanation of its widespread presence around the world that is lacking. Describing a chain of events is not necessarily the same as explaining them.\textsuperscript{25}

The largest body of literature on denim is historical in nature: popular histories of how blue jeans became an American icon, acquiring its specific generational values and place in popular culture along the way.\textsuperscript{26} Modernity, Americanization, and mass consumption make up the permanent backdrop in this genre. Perhaps the most thorough work is Sullivan’s book \textit{Jeans: A cultural history of an American icon} (2006), with its detailed account of how denim went from workwear to fashion item, interwoven with its cultural and political connotations. The history of specific brands has also been documented, as is the case with Levi Strauss for example.\textsuperscript{27} There is also the research into denim in the field of marketing and branding, dealing with how consumers perceive denim and certain brands.\textsuperscript{28} A third area of research deals with its textile chemistry and technology, analyzing the material qualities of the fabric, and how it is processed, dyed, and recycled.\textsuperscript{29} The history of denim’s blue color, indigo, which is ascribed with magical qualities in many cultures, has also been charted.\textsuperscript{30} Fourthly, there is literature tackling denim’s reputation as one of the most toxic garments there is to produce, addressing

\textsuperscript{25} Miller & Woodward 2011a, 336; Miller & Woodward 2007, 337.
\textsuperscript{27} Lynn Downey, Jill Novack Lynch & Kathleen McDonough, \textit{This Is a Pair of Levi’s Jeans. The Official History of the Levi’s Brand} (San Francisco: Levi Strauss, 1995).
labor and production conditions. Lastly, and unusually, there is the forensic and crime-related denim research.

All the literature describes how blue jeans went from functional workwear in California to conquering the US, and from there most of the world. What Miller and Woodward have been calling for is a social science perspective and work of a qualitative ethnographic nature, both of which are notable by their absence. Ethnographic material collected in different parts of the world has the potential to establish whether denim the global phenomenon actually can say something about the age we live in. By now, such ethnographies will most likely tell rather different stories, with far less of capitalism and Americanization about them. In each particular context, people will be found wearing denim for their own specific reasons, whether local or global. Hence, one of the aims of the Global Denim Project is to set aside the historiography of jeans as an American icon, and make use of denim as a marker for how the global and the local help account for each other.

Miller and Woodward have pursued a thesis in several publications that anxiety is the strongest determinant in what people actually wear on a daily basis. Based on ethnographic material collected among British women, this theory suggests that women tend to experience social pressure, expressed as anxiety at potential social embarrassment, when choosing what to wear. By pursuing this idea when studying how and why women make their daily clothing choices, Woodward concludes that women tend to divide their wardrobes into habitual and non-habitual clothing—clothing they know works and that they feel safe in, and clothing that is more experimental and used to explore new looks and the possibilities of their personalities. Woodward finds that jeans appear to resolve the tension between following the social rules while


33 Miller & Woodward 2007, 336–9, 343, 345.

34 This thesis was first put forward by Alison Clarke & Daniel Miller, ‘Fashion and Anxiety’, *Fashion Theory*, 6/2 (2002).

35 Clarke & Miller 2002, 192.
remaining true to oneself.\textsuperscript{36} By moving from the details of ethnography to grander philosophical ideas, Miller and Woodward theorize that denim therefore can be seen as an expression of how people try to resolve the tension between the universal and the individual.\textsuperscript{37} Given what they have observed in their ethnographic material, they raise the question of whether the global spread of denim says something about the contradictions of living in the modern world, of the tension between homogenization and heterogeneity.\textsuperscript{38}

In their latest publication on denim, Miller and Woodward nuance this understanding of denim, arguing that many people instead seem to wear denim as a way of expressing ordinariness. Ethnographic material on denim collected in London concurrently with my fieldwork showed that the ordinary was something that many people wished to identify with, shying away from the extraordinary. Further, the London study showed that most informants had quite specific ideas about which kinds of jeans they preferred.\textsuperscript{39} This goes against the treatment of jeans in earlier publications as a broadly uniform category, and the idea that ‘you may not be especially right, but you can’t go far wrong with denim jeans’.\textsuperscript{40}

These findings agree with the findings in my material—a desire to identify as \textit{vanlig} and highly specific ideas about what that entails. The text submitted by the 17-year-old girl quoted in the prologue speaks to this, as she writes about buying jeans of a \textit{vanlig} kind, while at the same time being very specific about their design, color, and fit. However, there are also differences between my findings and those of the London study: Miller and Woodward associate ordinariness with unmarked and unbranded garments, as most of their informants neither knew the brand of their jeans nor where they came from, whereas my Swedish ethnography tells a very different story, confirming earlier findings in studies of youth culture and style that there is a high degree of awareness and reflexivity among young people about the structural relationships between different styles, and which styles and brands it is acceptable to adopt.\textsuperscript{41}

The differences can presumably be explained by the fact that the London study includes a wider range of representation, but it also suggests that the understanding of ordinariness differs between London and Midway.

**Denim in Sweden**

Most popular accounts treat denim as part of American iconography, but denim is just as much a Swedish icon, or indeed an icon of any other country

\textsuperscript{37} Clarke & Miller 2002, 211; Miller & Woodward 2007.
\textsuperscript{38} Miller & Woodward 2007, 335, 348.
\textsuperscript{39} Miller & Woodward 2012, 8, 63, 99.
\textsuperscript{40} Miller & Woodward 2007, 348.
\textsuperscript{41} Miller & Woodward 2012, 100; Kjeldgaard 2009, 80.
where people wear jeans.\textsuperscript{42} The main elements in the American historical narrative—how denim went from men’s workwear in the days of the Californian gold rush, to becoming the standard uniform of American cowboys embodied in the figure of the Marlboro Man, and later worn by the rebellious young—is well-known cultural history to many people.\textsuperscript{43} However, despite the fact that denim on one level is impossible to separate from its American heritage, the fact that it originates from America has today become secondary in most places where people wear denim. Blue jeans possess an identity-building potential, and as such have successfully found a symbolic place in Sweden’s cultural and historical context.

The notions of functionalism, equality, and democracy that are associated with denim are also commonly used when describing Swedish fashion and design in general. Yet, writings on Swedish denim are very scarce. What does exist is almost exclusively fashion journalism in fashion magazines and daily newspapers.\textsuperscript{44} The ethnologist and curator Inga Wintzell collected the only existing ethnographic material of any size—interviews with schoolchildren and adults in various Swedish regions—in the late 1970s and early 1980s.\textsuperscript{45} Although Wintzell was diligent in her gathering and documentation of denim, over thirty years have now passed and remain unaccounted for.

The background to my project is a number of Swedish labels that have been established in the last two decades, in what the Swedish media have called ‘det svenska jeansundret’ (the Swedish denim miracle) in an expression of pride and a celebration of brands whose core business is denim, selling well in the domestic market as well as abroad.\textsuperscript{46} This ‘denim miracle’ comprises now firmly established brands such as Acne, Cheap Monday, Filippa K, Indigoferra, J. Lindeberg, Nudie, and Whyred, but also smaller brands such as D.brand, Denim Demon, Dr. Denim, Julian Red, Pace, The Local Firm, and Uncut Version. Depending on one’s definition of what constitutes a denim

\textsuperscript{42} Miller & Woodward 2007, 5.
\textsuperscript{43} See Finlayson 1990; Marsh & Trynka 2002; Sullivan 2006.
\textsuperscript{44} For fashion journalism’s views on Swedish denim, see, for example, Susanna Strömquist, ‘Unisex, Anti-fashion and Denim’, Swedish Fashion: Exploring a New Identity (Stockholm: Swedish Institute, 2008); for a lengthier account, see Tanya Lloyd Kyi & Anna-Stina Lindén Ivarsson, Ålskade Jeans: Jeansens historia synad i sömmarna (Stockholm: Alfabet, 2006).
\textsuperscript{46} See, for example, Anna-Stina Lindén Ivarsson, ‘Det svenska jeansundret’, Dagens Nyheter, 16 December 2007. This expression is used interchangeably with ‘det svenska modeundret’ (the Swedish fashion miracle), which encompasses not only denim but all clothing, dealt with by Karin Falk, Det Svenska Modeundret (Stockholm: Norstedts, 2011). There have been controversies, with critics saying that there is nothing particularly innovative about Swedish fashion and that its export success is highly exaggerated, but these disagreements need not detain us.
label the list could be even longer.\textsuperscript{47} Today, most Swedish fashion brands carry denim; however, it is rarely considered the brands’ core business, and it would serve no purpose here to compile a complete list of all denim labels with a Swedish connection.

It is difficult to define something that is typically Swedish about the denim brands listed above, be it in terms of an ethnic or a national aesthetic character. However, they are all the product of a domestic market that has run parallel to the import of mainly American jeans such as Lee, Levis, and Wrangler. The first boom came in the late 1960s and 1970s with Swedish brands such as Bergis, Crocker, Dobber, Gul & Blå, Kilroy, Petroff, and Puss & Kram. The denim entrepreneurs aspired to move away from tradition in all its forms, whether dress codes or societal norms. After a slowdown in the 1980s with the birth of the Yuppies, the 1990s gave Sweden a second denim boom that laid the foundation for the brands on the market today. Two brands in particular influenced the market and served as training-grounds for several big names in Swedish fashion today: the Swedish brand JC, founded in 1962 as Junior Center, later Jeans and Clothes, and today the JC Jeans Company; and the Italian brand Diesel with the Swedish designer Johan Lindeberg. Lindeberg was Diesel’s Swedish distributor and later its marketing director, when he was behind the advertising campaign ‘For a successful living’ that gained considerable international attention in its day.\textsuperscript{48}

The local narrative of Sweden’s relationship with denim is constructed around certain key values, where ideas of functional, wearable, modern, egalitarian, and democratic fashion available to all have been central from the start. Functional design is deeply rooted in Swedish society, both from a practical perspective and as an ideal. In contrast to many other European countries, Sweden has had less marked economic differences, and shared consumption patterns and lifestyles have tended to blur class differences, at least on a superficial level.\textsuperscript{49} In comparison with North America and other parts of Europe, Sweden industrialized relatively late. There was no tradition of the consumption of luxury goods outside the royal family and the nobility, and the notion of Sweden as a fashion nation is a recent one, being an identity that has sprung up in recent years.\textsuperscript{50} In the past, forestry, farming, and the engineering industry were the main motors of the economy, leaving festive clothing a very insignificant part of fashion culture for the majority of the population.\textsuperscript{51} Democratic and practical design has been associated with visions of a freer society with

\textsuperscript{47}Some of these brands are no longer on the market at time of writing.
\textsuperscript{48}Lloyd Kyi & Ivarsson 2006, 83–6.
\textsuperscript{50}Referring to fashion as a cultural identity, but not to say that Sweden lacks a history of a domestic textile and clothing industry.
better quality of life, with views on democracy and equality that have brought about a fashion culture in which practical and rational design is highly valued. There exists what can be described as a common cultural agenda in which gender equality and a middle-class life-style have been cherished norms. However, it would be wrong to think that the importance of staging and embodying gender in the correct way would be of less importance in the Swedish context, despite the highly valued norm of gender equality.

The aesthetics of Swedish modernity long served to define what was perceived as ‘normal’. For instance, for decades the colors brown and grey were associated with rationality, functionality, and practicality, whereas flashy clothing and bright colors were perceived as falling outside the accepted norms of Swedish modernity. For a long time the middle class took on the role of safeguarding the aesthetics of Swedish modernity, dismissing ostentation in dress, as in all else, as self-absorbed and a desperate cry for attention, and beyond the pale of what was considered normal. Swedish designers who achieved international success in the 1900s such as Katja of Sweden, Rohdi Heintz, and Sighsten Herrgård all shared the idea that fashion should be close to people’s everyday lives, and their work cemented the impression of Swedish fashion as functional.

During a home visit when I was conducting a wardrobe study, the mother of one of the informants cast her mind back to her youth. She was born in 1954 and was 57 when I documented the story. She had grown up in a small city south of Stockholm, but had lived in Midway for years. By the time she told this story, Stockholm was synonymous with modernity and city bustle, not only for her, but for most people living in provincial towns across Sweden. She recalls the first time she saw a girl wearing jeans with a fly.

The summer of 1962 was warm as I recall. I spent the second part of the summer holiday in Midsommarkransen. We swam in a large fountain and played outside in the way you can only do when you’re 8 years old. […] My sister had just had a baby and was at home, 22 years old, which was why it was convenient to send me there. She lived in a two-roomed flat with her husband, the baby, and a cat. I think I slept in the living room. It was semi-modern, meaning it had running water and a toilet. My sister was probably happy to get me out of the flat during the day, so I made some friends who were a year older than me, real suburban chicks at the age of 9. One of the girls had an older sister who was about 20 who smoked. She used to send us to the corner shop to buy cigarettes one at a time, which we were allowed to if we said whom they were for. We probably got a few pennies for our trouble, which we used to buy an extra fag that we smoked in secret in a backyard and felt really sick. One day we were to deliver the cigarettes to a flat where the older sister was working as a maid. It was a large, gloomy apartment with an enormous hall. When we entered the

52 O’Dell 2007.
53 Strömquist 2008.
54 A city district in Stockholm, the Swedish capital.
apartment she appeared from the pantry dragging the vacuum cleaner behind her, dressed in a pair of blue jeans with a fly! We were completely overcome. It was the most exciting thing that had happened all week, and it felt very edgy. As if we had caught her in the middle of doing something she wasn’t supposed to. It was probably mostly the fly that was so unfeminine and dangerous. She was standing there in her jeans with a cigarette between her teeth and a big vacuum cleaner in her hand like a female cowboy. I also recall that there was real rock music on in the background, it might have been Tommy Steele.

What this illustrates is the importance of how the symbolic meaning of clothes in the past is always interpreted through the prism of one’s own time. Swedish fashion today has become closely associated with the concepts of functionalism and democracy. These ideals are so entrenched that the woman’s shocked reaction to seeing a girl in blue jeans with a fly appears almost alien to the narrative of Swedish fashion. Her memory is framed by the experience of hearing rock and roll music, still a youngish genre then, represented by the toothily wholesome British teen idol, Tommy Steele. That a unisex garment could seem forbidden, unfeminine, and dangerous to a young girl in the early sixties does not sit comfortably with what usually comes to mind when looking back on this decade today. Typically, Swedish fashion in the sixties is associated with women’s lib and sexual liberation, but seen through the eyes of an 8-year-old girl at the start of the decade all of this was yet to happen.

The present ubiquity of denim cannot only be explained pointing to capitalism or Americanization, as we have seen. In the same way, although functionalism, democratic fashion, gender equality, anti-fashion, and unisex design are central ideals in both the historical and the contemporary narrative of fashion in Sweden, and all of them marry well with denim, the meaning of these concepts is constantly renegotiated and filled with new content. History can only explain so much of the contemporary.

The mainstream, like the ordinary, is commonly said to deal in generalities and to lack a clear identity. This thesis argues that being mainstream and ordinary is not a lack of identity, but the opposite—it is a distinct identity that needs to be carefully crafted and distinguished from other potential identities. The material analyzed here demonstrates how concepts such as the mainstream and ordinariness have highly specific meanings that can be used to unlock understandings of conceptions, images, ideals, experiences, and motives that affect consumption practices. This is the key to explaining how someone without an income might spend over SEK 3,000 on a pair of jeans, or why groups or individuals perceived as deviating from what was vanligt might

55 See, for example, Lotta Lewenhaupt, Modeboken: 1900–2000 (Stockholm: Prisma, 2001); or Cay Bond, New Fashion in Sweden (Stockholm: Swedish Institute, 2003).
56 Wintzell 1985, 106.
57 If the memory is correctly dated, it confirms that it was still very unusual for young people in Sweden to wear jeans. The big breakthrough came towards the end of the sixties.
58 Miller & Woodward 2007, 9.
meet with expressions of annoyance and distaste. This was the case with the Partille-Johnnys (aka PJs, lit. Partille Johnnies), a peripheral group of young people encountered during fieldwork who was ascribed as Other by my informants. Their upset reactions, projected onto the PJs, say a good deal about being mainstreamers under those circumstances, and about their understanding of what and how to consume.

The mainstream opposing the marginal

In order to understand how being mainstream affected patterns of consumption among the informants, their reaction towards transgressions of vanlighet is one place to start. During fieldwork, I was introduced to the PJ style, a local expression of a style that had an ephemeral existence during my research. The group, which was in decline when I collected my material, filled the role of the Other as viewed from the structural level of the relationship between the mainstream and the non-mainstream. A detailed account of the PJ style and the responses to it voiced by my informants, sheds light on the significance of being mainstream and its impact on consumption choices.

The first clue to the importance of looking vanlig and of self-identifying as vanlig among my informants came after a few weeks of fieldwork. I was hanging out in my kitchen with some of my male informants, cooking that Swedish standby macaroni and ready-made meatballs, when Alexander, a tall, slender 19-year-old suddenly announced, ‘Well, you don’t want to look like a failed Partille Johnny, God how I hate them!’ Already accustomed to feeling confused when trying to keep up with fragmentary conversations about people I had never met or events I had not been part of, I had no idea what a Partille Johnny was, and mumbled something along the lines ‘Johnny who?’ Alexander resolutely grabbed my laptop from the kitchen counter and said ‘This might actually interest you, I’ll show you’. Logging on to Facebook he proceeded to show me a photo album of men and women his own age or slightly younger, displaying a style he referred to as Partille Johnny (posted on one of several Facebook groups dedicated to the type). What I saw were young people, mostly men, dressed in baggy designer jeans with big prints on the back and sides, styled with colorful hair ribbons or elastic bands worn on top of their jeans below the knee down to the ankle, combined with other elaborate styling and accessories.59

The PJs’ local and ephemeral existence, and my informants’ heated opinions, serve as a first step in getting to know some of the characteristics of the

59 See Emma Lindblad & Jacob Ostberg, ‘The cultural role of stigmatized groups: The case of the Partille Johnny’s of Sweden’, in W. Belk Russell et al. (eds.), Research in Consumer Behavior (Bingley: Emerald, 2011) for the first, and to date only, academic documentation of this phenomenon.
mainstream at the specific time and place this thesis is set. The PJs appeared on the cultural map in around 2006, perhaps earlier, and were in decline by the time of my fieldwork in 2009–2011. Although an ephemeral group in the Swedish youth landscape, the style kept popping up as a reference—mainly among my male informants—of what they considered themselves not to be. I later learned that PJ style, or Täbb style, originated in Partille (a suburb of Gothenburg on the west coast, Sweden’s second city) and Täby (a suburb of the capital, Stockholm). These suburbs can be described as typical middle-class residential areas. Even though the style was named for these two locations, it was geographically spread around Sweden for a period of time in the late 2000s. My informants, living closer to Gothenburg than to Stockholm, thus identified the style as Partille Johnny. According to Internet mythology, one particular person named Johnny living in Partille created the style, although this remains contested.60

The female version of the style was known as Partille Jonna or Partille Johanna, but it was primarily its male devotees who attracted attention at the time. The style, practiced mainly by adolescent boys, fell under the more general category of ‘fjortis-stil’ (lit. fourteenish style, teenybopper style), a slightly derogatory term for the style and behavior of someone who is 14 years old, which has become slang for any young, immature person, regardless of their age. When I asked a female informant what she associated the PJ style with, she answered ‘I think of fjortisar, mostly guys with bleached hair and hair ribbons on their jeans’. The PJs were described as being in their early teens up to 30 years old. ‘After that it becomes something else’, as one male informant told me.

My extensive immersion in the field showed that obsession with one’s appearance, extensive sessions in front of the mirror, or occupying the family bathroom with lengthy grooming routines were considered common teenage behavior for both men and women in the studied context.61 In this sense, the PJs in many ways displayed what is considered the typical features of being fjortisar or teenagers: life mainly revolves around their appearance, clothes, friends, drinking, going out, romantic love, and sex.62 However, it was made clear to me that the PJs were a distinct collective in a way that made them

60 ‘Flashback Partille Johnny’ (Flashback 2009); Natalia Kazmierska, ‘“Johnny” hetast på nätet’, Expressen, 29 July 2009.
61 To my knowledge there have been no other consumption studies of Midway, or indeed of the wider regional or national context, that describe this. Parallels can be drawn with Elodie Gentina et al., ‘The practice of using makeup: A consumption ritual of adolescent girls’, Journal of Consumer Behaviour, 11/2 (2012), 115 in which teenage girls’ practices and the cultural acceptance thereof was interpreted as a rite of passage, which would equate with an acceptance of teenagers being preoccupied with their appearance in the present context.
62 I am not saying that all teenagers share these interests or lack other interests or preoccupations, but this serves as a general cultural understanding of typical preoccupations of this age group.

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easily recognized, setting them apart from my informants. This was not so much about a common lifestyle, activity, hobby, or involvement in a specific music scene, but was rather found in the group’s fashion or style.

When I later tried to encapsulate the PJ style, I found it intriguing that it was based on typical features found in the mainstream such as denim jeans and designer clothing, but highly exaggerated and subject to extremes of styling when compared to how my informants dressed. Although all of these elements were not necessarily displayed at once, some were recurrent.\(^63\) There was a preference for designer jeans from specific labels such as the Japanese brand Evisu, Dutch G-Star (the 96 model), Italian Replay, or equivalent labels, although chinos could be used as a substitute for denim. Prices for these brands were quite expensive and ranged from around SEK 1,500–3,000 at the time. The preferred models from Evisu and G-Star were baggy and had big prints on the backs and sides of the jeans. Worn on top of the jeans below the knee down to the ankle were hair ribbons or elastic bands; typically between 3–20 on each leg, in any available color. The use of the elastic bands created the effect of skinny jeans on the lower legs, while remaining baggy over the bottom.

In addition to these two themes, a generous use of hair wax from the brands d:fi or daxvax was central. One popular hairstyle for boys was to bleach their hair and style it into spikes in a so-called *igelkottsfrisyr* (hedgehog hairstyle). The elaborate and often lengthy styling routines demanded the use of a hair-dryer or straightening tongs to get the desired result. There was also a unisex fondness for make-up that is typically connected to femininity in a Swedish context. This included a preference for particular types of make-up such as tanning products, foundation, and white lip gloss. The ideal look was a tanned face combined with Idomin brand ointment on the lips—a heavy cream used to treat dry skin that goes on and remains white or slightly purplish. Although a central characteristic, not all PJs used make-up on a daily basis, and some preferred not to use cosmetics at all.

As the consumption specialist and sociologist Roberta Sassatelli points out, all cultures have different strategies for dealing with sexual matters, in which a body can be sexualized using a number of social practices such as beauty treatments and clothing.\(^64\) Many of the photographs of the PJs circulating online, such as in the Facebook albums shown to me by my informants, showed groups of boys and girls carefully posing and dressed in similar outfits. Characteristic poses in these photos included pulling the shirt up over the

\(^63\) This description is based on the vast numbers of pictures and videos in which the PJs featured online, online comments on the style, and conversations and interviews with informants during fieldwork. I never encountered the style in real life when meeting with my informants. The process of collecting this material is described below in Chapter 3.

chin and mouth or making a serious face while pouting. The habit of posing with pouting lips, like the make-up associated with the PJ style, was interpreted by my informants as feminine: in men, it transgressed cultural norms for what a so-called real man was supposed to look like. This may explain why the PJ style was more of a concern to the boys among my informants than to the girls.

Heavy accessorizing was also prevalent. PJs often dressed in highly visible white tube socks, either from Intersport or from another equivalent sports chain that displayed its logo on its sports socks. They also sported other attire such as sunglasses, fake diamond earrings from the DC brand, a so-called Thailand necklace (a white shell necklace typically purchased while on charter holiday in Thailand—a popular Swedish holiday destination at the time), bandanas worn around the head or alternatively around the leg, white trainers, and a gym bag slung over a shoulder with a floorball stick prominently featured. As summed up by Alexander, the same male informant as earlier:

A Partille Johnny has bleached hair that is styled into a very pointy hairstyle. They wear sneakers, preferably Puma, and jeans that they put hair ribbons on top of. They often wear hoodies. It feels like they often accessorize as well, with necklaces and stuff. They often hang out around town in big groups.

Although none of the informants in my empirical material considered themselves PJs, it begs the question of why this and other spectacular styles epitomized everything that Alexander and the other informants wished to dissociate themselves from. There was more to it than simple dislike of the style, dismissing it as something they would not wear themselves for purely aesthetic reasons. At the same time, neither did it entail distaste over a common activity or political agenda. The overwhelming sentiment among my informants when introducing me to the PJ style, which even at its peak was peripheral and local, was strong annoyance. Some of them found the style so unattractive and irritating that they talked of hating and despising it, as in Alexander’s comment ‘Well, you don’t want to look like a failed Partille Johnny, God how I hate them!’ testifies to. As another male informant said:

A PJ is a dude who has a tendency to be a bit too assertive in many social situations… It becomes a bit tiring to communicate with PJs sometimes… Their attitude is probably rather cold towards people they don’t know, in order to play hard to get and appear as a person you should be ‘worthy’ to hang out with. Again, in groups I think a PJ has a strong desire to be assertive and appear as the ‘leader’.

These reactions appear to be based on a combination of what the PJs looked like and a perception that they were not all they aspired to. Similar to what the consumer researcher Jacob Ostberg has described concerning the ‘Swedish

65 Lindblad & Ostberg 2011.
Brat’, 66 as a subcultural style the PJs were not opposed to the market, but on the contrary were dependent on the market for their existence.67 The same was true of my informants, making the two groups interesting to compare. Their relatively young age means that most of them have to rely on their parents to finance their consumption of clothing, hair products, and cosmetics. However, contrary to the Brats, the general rule that they should effortlessly look the part did not apply.68 Further, the PJs were perceived as being overly confident in a way they had not earned, making my informants question their authenticity. A female informant told me:

I think most PJs are very particular about how they look, have good self-esteem, and build their networks behind all that. Some probably have attitude problems since they have difficulties being themselves because of all the hardcore decorations. Perhaps not sure of who they are behind the façade and so they act according to the feelings that their style signals.

I would argue that the PJ style provides a good mirror for reflecting transgressions of what was considered vanligt, perhaps not so much in terms of what they consumed as how they consumed it. My informants and the PJs that they resisted participated in the same market and consumed the same goods in terms of denim jeans, designer clothing, and beauty products. There were no real conflicts of interest separating them in terms of political ideals or other interests. However, the consumption of these products found different expressions, resulting in what my informants experienced as a fundamental difference between themselves and the PJs. It is not just what you wear—it is how you wear it. This underlines the importance of using qualitative methods in order to understand consumption from within, as this difference would not be especially remarkable to an outside observer. It also problematizes our understanding of the mainstream as a conformist majority, uncovering the expressions of active resistance that are apparently integral to the process of identifying as vanlig.

The disposition

The overarching aim of the thesis is to understand what motivates consumption among a group of young men and women in the Swedish small town of

66 Young men and women given to conspicuous consumption and typically described as spoiled youngsters; see Jacob Ostberg, ‘The linking value of subcultural capital: constructing the Stockholm Brat enclave’, in Bernard Cova et al. (eds.), Consumer Tribes (Amsterdam: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2007), 103.
68 Ostberg 2007, 102.
Midway, all of whom belong to the so-called mainstream. In order to understand practices of consumption from within the group, an ethnographic study has been conducted. Denim was chosen as the method based on its ubiquity on a geographical and an individual level. It is found in quantity in all the mainstreamers’ wardrobes, and was an item that all of the informants consumed, making it suitable to cross-compare between individuals. There are few ethnographic studies of denim in print, and most of the literature addresses denim as an American icon and as part of the narrative of the cultural Americanization of the world. Contemporary, local explanations of denim are important too, however, if we are to understand people’s relationship to and consumption of denim today. A Swedish cultural history of a democratic, functional, and practical fashion is of importance in order to understand the ethnographic material in the dissertation.

Based on the documentation of the contents of the participant’s wardrobes, the study looks for explanations for the patterns of consumption that led them to dress as they did. The main result of the qualitative study is that vanlighet drives consumption, and explains much of the contents of the young people’s wardrobes. Self-identification as vanlig was a governing factor in their consumption choices, as it structured understandings of what one was and what one meant both for oneself and for others. This was illustrated by the example of the PJs, and the reactions concerning this group voiced by my informants, who expressed annoyance at what they perceive as a deviant style. The PJ case is an example of how vanlighet constituted an active process of identity creation, a central topic that will run through the dissertation.

The second chapter sets out the theories that have inspired the thesis, and especially those that deal with young people and identity in anthropology, youth cultural studies, and subcultural theory. Central terms and concepts such as ordinary, mainstream, and subculture are defined. The chapter surveys the literature on youth and subculture, discussing how it relates to the growing field of fashion studies, and continues on to consumption, fashion, and identity, all of which concepts are used in the analysis of the empirical material.

The third chapter presents the methods employed for the collection of the data and the ethnographic material, including what the data consist of and how they were collected and analyzed. The informants and the setting of the study are presented and various aspects of conducting anthropology in Sweden and in Midway discussed.

The fourth chapter presents the empirical material and its analysis. The chapter is structured around portraits of the five key informants—Alexander, Josefine, Anna, Gustaf, and Lily—considered in a group perspective. It asks where they considered themselves to be in life, what they articulated as important and what they aspired to, how they viewed their own consumption and that of others, and the cultural patterns that encouraged them to consume and
dress in the way they did. The findings are compared and contrasted, and dis-
cussed in terms of how all the mainstreamers interacted on a group level. The
chapter ends with a discussion of the meaning of looking vanlig.

Finally, the fifth chapter summarizes the main findings of the study and its
contribution to the theoretical ideas of identity and consumption. It discusses
the role of vanlighet in people’s everyday lives, and suggests how future stud-
ies can deepen our understanding of the mainstream and the ordinary.
2 Theoretical perspectives on fashion and identity

The aims, methods, and main results of the dissertation were presented in the first chapter. This, then, will account for the theoretical influences of the dissertation, focusing on understandings of youth, fashion, identity, and consumption. These topics presuppose the existence of a rich body of literature that addresses consumption specifically in terms of self-identity and age, and not only the larger matrix of social identity. In studying the impact of identity on clothing consumption among the young, the research on consumption, identity, and youth are necessarily the main sources of theoretical inspiration. These fields contain all the key concepts used in the thesis, with analytical understandings of consumption, identity, youth, culture, subculture, the mainstream, the ordinary, modernity, and sex and gender.69

The present chapter consists of two parts with different objectives. The first section addresses some of the academic research traditions that inform the broader topics of the dissertation. The aim of the thesis to add to the body of literature addressing young mainstreamers and fashion necessitates a discussion of previous understandings in these academic fields. The purpose is to position my work in relation to the literature, rather than outline a theoretical framework to be explicitly used in the analysis of the empirical material. The second, briefer section concentrates on a number of studies that have a direct bearing on the analysis in the fourth chapter.

The first of the academic research traditions to be examined is the field of youth cultural studies. Well-represented in the academic literature, I have had most recourse to the literature on the anthropology and sociology of the young. The understanding of youth in the field of youth culture is not always coherent, and different theoretical orientations tend to favor some concepts while rejecting others. In many ways, it is a highly politicized field, and the choice of how to use field-related terms is itself a theoretical choice, informed by different methodological and ideological understandings. The history of youth cultural studies is discussed, as is the theoretical reading of gender that informs the thesis.

69 A comprehensive survey of the literature on consumption, identity, and youth is beyond the scope of this thesis.
This is followed by a juxtaposition of the conforming majority of the mainstream and the rebellious minority of the subcultures as opposites in terms of identity creation. In contemporary, Western, popular culture—the media, literature, and social sciences—the mainstream is frequently treated as having a set course, moving in one direction as a cohesive clump drifting on the principal current of time. Subcultures, on the other hand, are understood to constantly expand and diminish in size, varying their course of direction. Without the singularity and passivity of the majority, subcultures struggle to move against the stream, whether alone or in the plural. This dichotomy might appear natural enough with expected boundaries. However, it is problematic in the sense that not only are the boundaries between different notions of identity porous and constantly fluctuating—they also leave the mainstream rather undefined.

The relationship between the subcultural and the mainstream is then expanded on to set up a framework for understanding why the informants reasoned about themselves and others as they did, why they choose to identify as mainstream and vanliga, and the effects of this on their patterns of consumption. This problematizes the idea of the mainstream as simply a question of buying goods available on the market, and widens the perspective on how different consumers act in the market.

In recent decades, youth subcultures have been one of the most prevalent themes in research on youth. The result has been a wealth of literature on subcultural theory, describing and theorizing cultures and groups marked as different from the nominal mainstream. Understandings of subcultures have been discussed from every possible angle, to a point where the thorough dissection of the term for a time rendered it unusable. However, in the last few years, critiques of subcultural theory have called for research that identifies the mainstream more thoroughly than merely as a dominant order that subcultures react against. Researching the mainstream is valuable both in itself, and in order to gain greater insight into the subcultural. By the same logic, given what has been written about the creation of subcultural identity, perhaps it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the mainstream as more than just a life lived according to cultural rules and societal norms. It also raises the issue of the specifics that define the ordinary in one place compared to the next.

This tension runs throughout the chapter, and ties into how this thesis positions itself in the field of fashion studies, and its contribution to this growing field. An only recently independent multidisciplinary academic field, fashion studies covers a wide range of methodologies and theories. By making use of clothing—and specifically denim—as a way of examining people’s lives, it

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70 Andy Bennett & Keith Kahn-Harris (eds.), After Subculture. Critical Studies in Contemporary Youth Culture (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) is one of many to note that the term subculture was wearing thin in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

71 Williams 2011, 8–9.
contributes to fashion studies in the sense that it addresses a central issue for the field, namely what motivates people to consume the way they do.

The chapter ends with a discussion of a number of studies of fashion, consumption, and identity using what people do not identify with as the starting point in how to understand consumption. These studies provide an analytical framework to be used in the analysis of my empirical material where the correlation between dress and identity is seen as a sliding scale, where one adjusts to stay within the parameters of what is rendered acceptable and not. This section is partial in the sense that focuses on studies relevant to the research problem at issue here, not on all the different perspectives on identity in general.

Youth cultural studies

The general topic of this thesis—identity formation among young people in relation to consumption practices—partly falls within the research tradition of youth culture, the term currently preferred by most researchers.72 Research about youth culture has many academic roots, bringing together fields such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, criminology, and media and communication studies to name a few. The vast mixture of academic traditions it brings together has introduced some very different perspectives to the field. Nevertheless, there are some overarching themes such as issues of youth, culture, modernity, identity, gender, class, ethnicity, and globalization that stand out.73 I consider the key areas and concepts as part of a critique of the literature, largely in order to judge where this thesis can best contribute.

Academic roots

The study of youth culture is a matter of relating to and defining youth and culture in equal measure. Definitions of culture have in anthropological circles been numerous and subject to a great deal of controversy, some researchers choosing to abstain from using the concept altogether. Critiques typically raise the problems with accounting for human variation and change, demarcation, and the lack of precision in its definitions. I acknowledge these issues, yet the concept remains very useful when studying people who come from and/or are

living in different lifeworlds. I would define culture in accordance with the symbolic anthropologist Clifford Geertz:

it denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes of life.

The concept of youth culture can be traced back to the early twentieth century, when it appeared in debate about German youth movements. First used by German theologian and writer Gustav Wyneken in 1914, it was intended as an expression for a cultural revolution and utopian vision of an autonomous youth society. It appeared in an on-going discourse concerning generational differences between the young and adults in ways of living. According to Wyneken, youth culture was an expression of a desire to break free from the older generations’ structured ways of life, stuck in the artificial life patterns shaped by industrial, capitalist society. However, the concept did not become recognized in public debate or academe until decades later.

There are two sociological schools particularly associated with the first generations of academic work in the field: the Chicago School, which focused on an examination of the concept of deviance, and later the British Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham (CCCS), which centered on the concept of resistance. A wider appreciation of youth as a social category of interest was first established in the American social sciences and sociology. The Chicago School is often credited with introducing the concept to academe. The earliest studies in the twenties and thirties did not yet come under the label of subcultural studies. The Chicago School continued to elaborate on youth culture, and went on to establish the concept in the research community between the forties and the early sixties. Youth was at this time mostly perceived as a problem of integration, emphasizing its non-normative collective behavior. Focusing on urban sociology and social deviance, the Chicago School looked at the young people’s own stories, placing great value on ethnographic research.

The cultural researcher Erling Bjurström identifies four main phases in the development of youth cultural studies. The period up to the sixties constituted

75 Geertz 2000, 89.
77 Bucholtz 2002, 526, 532.
78 Williams 2011, 17.
the first. From the late sixties to the late seventies, a second wave emerged in the UK, radically different from the American approach. With the CCCS in the van, it focused on contemporary youth revolutions and youth movements, and emphasized social class and ideology.\textsuperscript{81} Youth as a subculture was no longer to be read as delinquency, and thus the field moved away from the psychological explanations of the Chicago School.\textsuperscript{82} A third period ran from the late seventies to the early eighties. This period was marked by the influence of the CCCS’s critique of earlier research, aiming to move the field in more cross-disciplinary directions.\textsuperscript{83} The fourth period can be said to have started in the early eighties, when the field began to be concerned with overarching theories of modernity.\textsuperscript{84} In Ungdomskultur, stil och smak from 2005, Bjurström presents an overview of the development of the field, and categorizes the fourth phase as still on-going. However, given the development of the field in the past decade, I believe it is possible to sketch out a fifth period, one where there were calls for a less polarized debate on youth culture, yet the field is still divided between critiques of the subcultural concept and defense of its continued relevance.

The impact of the Chicago School and the CCCS is still felt today, and subsequent generations of researchers continue to define themselves in terms of the two schools. In order to broaden the field of study, contemporary researchers have moved away from the concentration on resistance and delinquency among Western, urban, white males found in early studies.\textsuperscript{85} Although the anthropology and sociology of youth are closely related, there is a slightly different focus both in terms of questions asked and interpretations and conclusions.\textsuperscript{86} Research has become particularly concerned with portraying young people as active agents, rather than merely existing in a liminal phase between childhood and adulthood.\textsuperscript{87} At the same time, the cultural-anthropological approach is based on an understanding of youth as a societal stage organized around age, and is part of a liminal process whereby youth transitions into adulthood. Viewing youth as part of a liminal situation can be helpful in understanding how identity regulates consumption.

\textsuperscript{81} Williams 2011, 26.  
\textsuperscript{82} Blackman 2005, 5.  
\textsuperscript{83} Bjurström 2005, 26; Williams 2011, 30.  
\textsuperscript{84} Bjurström 2005, 25, 26, 31; Williams 2011, 32, 36.  
\textsuperscript{86} Wulff 1995, 2.  
\textsuperscript{87} Bucholtz 2002, 529; Wulff 1995, 1.
Liminality is used to describe the transition phase between two stages of life. It can be used in reference to individuals, as well as groups, whole societies, and in some circumstances even civilizations. An individual in the liminal phase no longer occupies the previous phase, but has not yet achieved the next phase in life. The phase can also be viewed as a fusion of different social categories. Puberty or the teenage years in contemporary Western societies are often regarded as a critical phase, transporting the individual from childhood to adulthood. The liminal phase is commonly associated with rites of passage or rituals, something the individual has to go through in order to land in the next phase. The liminality of the phase can vary. In the anthropological literature there are many examples of rites of passages that are connected to ritual, but the concept has broadened in recent times to include less subtle changes in life. Liminality has both spatial and temporal dimensions, and involves a social change for those concerned. Liminal periods can be destructive, in the sense that one leaves something behind, and constructive, as one gains something new.

Anthropological studies of tribal societies tend to stress that the transition between puberty and social maturity is relatively small, making the transition into adulthood relatively stress-free. This can be compared to an entire country such as Sweden, where the gap is much larger. There young people are categorized according to biological understandings of age, such as being a teenager between ages 13 to 20; at the same time, if individuals are not able to meet the social expectations of entering adulthood when the time comes, the liminal phase becomes fixed. Liminality can affect an entire society—hence the global economic recession that my fieldwork coincided with. In such liminal periods there is no known end point, and the experience can be very stressful for the individual. Many of the young people in this study experienced unemployment—expanding the liminal phase of youth to a more permanent of fixed period than they had anticipated. The consequence of not having a job can lead to extended liminality, since steps such as moving away from home or starting a family are put on hold.

At the same time, the Western characterization of youth as a dramatic, stressful, and liminal phase has been challenged. When studying youth in a contemporary society, as I have done here, this is important to bear in mind in order not to be tempted to take a shortcut in the analysis. Tracing the cultural constructions of a phase in life enables other understandings to surface. The

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anthropologists Bronislaw Malinowski and Margaret Mead were early adopters of the idea that youth is not an ahistorical or static time in life. Having studied populations of the Trobriand Islands, New Guinea, and Samoa, they both argued against biological understandings of adolescence and for the importance of culture in shaping behavior in the young.92 The choice to limit their research to island populations was not a coincidence, but a consequence of the common belief among anthropologists that it was critical to study so-called primitive and isolated peoples before they ‘disappeared’. The opposite poles of nature versus nurture inform most scientific research intent on investigating the world. Nature, understood as shared by the entire population with some variations, is ascribed to what and who we are as beings; nature and biology are closely associated with this, for they both relate to parts of us that we are born with and are beyond our control. Nurture, on the other hand, refers to everything that happens after we are born. It takes into account our social and cultural upbringing, as well as our individual experiences in life.

Mead’s ethnography Coming of age in Samoa (1928) put anthropology on the map for much of the American population, and spurred young people to believe that they had the power to change their own societies and hence their own lives. At the instigation of her supervisors, Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict, Mead travelled to Samoa with the hypothesis that the issues then associated with adolescence in Western societies were not universal. The idea was to contribute to Boas’s broader agenda by disputing biological determinism as the main factor shaping human behavior. Mead’s study in Samoa focused on adolescent girls, whom she found to live casual lives with relaxed attitudes towards multiple sexual partners and premarital sex. A system of extended family and careers for children made Samoan youth more safe and grounded, argued Mead, as they were not left out only to rely on the parents as in the western nuclear family.93 Stress and anxiety, she argued, were not to be seen as innate biological aspects of adolescence, but as cultural constructs of American and European societies.94

The 1920s were a time when sexual norms were changing in America, especially young women’s sexual behavior. Mead’s nurture-oriented perspective on youth and sexuality sat well with many Americans. It has played a part in sexual revolutions ever since, used to refute understandings of sexuality as a fixed category.95 Coming of age in Samoa was never an uncontroversial book in academic circles. The stiffest criticism came a few years after Mead’s death in 1978, in a book written by the New Zeeland anthropologist Derek Freeman. Freeman argued that Mead’s reading of Samoan society was completely

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92 Bjurström 2005, 32.
94 Margaret Mead, Coming of Age in Samoa ([New York]: William Morrow, 1961), xii.
wrong, and that free female sexuality in the way Mead had described it among
the Samoans never existed. Having spent several years in Samoa himself,
Freedman believed Mead to have imposed her own ideas of sexuality on her
Samoan informants. Freeman is not the only colleague to have critiqued Mead,
the common objections being that she spent only a limited time in the field,
her lack of data, that fieldwork done on only one Samoan island, that she ar-
rived in Samoa with a predetermined moral and academic agenda, and that her
work compounded the stereotypes of sexual promiscuity among South Seas
islanders.96

The Mead–Freeman controversy still divides the anthropological commu-
nity, as Freedman’s critique in turn has not been without controversy and was
interpreted by many as a personal vendetta. The debate continues to engage
because of its broad issues of context, rhetoric, ideology, and ethnographic
authority. Mead and Freedman can both be said to have represented a truth,
but not the truth.97 On a metaphysical level, this is the case in any research,
and the story is more about ethnography than about Samoa in itself. Boas’s
plans to refute the theory of biological determinism were neither victorious
nor defeated. As patterns of life change over the generations, discussions of
nature and nurture receive a new relevance. Anthropological knowledge of
non-Western societies has the potential to contribute to a problematization of
assumptions about the cultural structures and patterns that shape lives in our
own societies—structures which are often taken for granted.98 In the same
manner, the opposite is true. The point where the emphasis on nature and nur-
ture lands tends to shift over time, and ethnographic studies retain their value
as the interpretation of this knowledge also changes over to time.

Anthropologists, interested in cross-cultural comparisons and the social
context of meaning, often point to the fact that youth is a flexible and debata-
ble social category. Youth is not a universal constant, although this is starting
to change because of economic and cultural shifts across the globe; nor is it a
significant stage of life in all cultures.99 Moreover, the category of youth is
often defined in relation to the adjacent categories of childhood and adulthood,
which also lack clear definitions and for the most part are defined by how they
are used in a particular cultural context. For methodological reasons, I set the
age for inclusion in the present study between 17 and 23 (see pp. 92-93). The
same individuals might be thought teenagers in some respects, for example
when targeted as potential consumers, or adults when looking for work.100 In
modern society, participation in youth cultural practices has been stretched

96 Lutkehaus 2008, 1, 79, 97, 98, 103; Paul Shankman, ‘The history of Samoan sexual conduct
97 Skankman 1996, 555, 564.
100 Bucholtz 2002, 527.
both downwards towards late childhood and upwards towards the mid- to late-thirties, prolonging the phase and fitting less well with a linear model of the transition to adulthood.\footnote{Pam Nilan & Carles Feixa, ‘Introduction. Youth hybridity and plural worlds’, in eid. (eds.), \textit{Global Youth? Hybrid identities, plural worlds} (London: Routledge, 2006), 7.} Yet, it is important to bear in mind that shared cultural interest spanning different age groups does not equate to shared experiences of what a certain activity entails.

On the one hand, youth is not a cultural free zone, disconnected from the rest of society. The negotiation of such issues as gender roles or identity creation are no more specific to young people than they are to people of any age, a claim that is often made in public debate.\footnote{Fanny Ambjörnsson, \textit{I en klass för sig: Genus, klass och sexualitet bland gymnasietjejer} (Stockholm: Ordfront, 2003), 30; Bucholtz 2002, 532.} On the other hand, youth is associated with transience and impermanence,\footnote{Verde Amit-Talai, ‘The waltz of sociability. Intimacy, dislocation and friendship in a Quebec high school’, in Amit-Talai & Wulff 1995, 144.} and from a Western perspective it comes hand in hand with themes or ideals such as experimentation and liberation. However, life at this age is also highly structured by implicit rules that strictly define the boundaries of appearance and behavior. This is of great importance for this dissertation, as being ordinary is closely related to what is or is not considered normal. However, I am reluctant to say that the findings in this study are solely related to young people. A comparative study using different sources would be required to confirm or dismiss this correlation.

There are different reasons for researching youth, whether one identifies it as a physical phase of development, a psychological phase of life, or a social and cultural category. Some researchers take youth to be a problem that has to be managed in order to make society function better; some are worried about the problems young people face, looking for answers while at the same time casting about for solutions to the adult community’s problems by looking at the lives of the young.\footnote{Fornäs 1994, 14, 19.} These issues exist in the shadowland between methodology and theory, and I raise them here in order to motivate my choice of theoretical standpoints. While I was working on this thesis, the Swedish public debate about young people’s lives typically focused on problems associated with the transition from youth to adulthood.\footnote{During my fieldwork, public debate (especially in the media) centred on young people falling victim to adult perpetrators. Take, for example, the weekly primetime television show on contemporary social issues, \textit{Debatt} (‘Debate’), shown on Swedish Television (SVT). During my time in the field, topics such as whether the names of convicted paedophiles should be made public, the cementing of stereotypical gender roles in tabloid papers and youth magazines, the rise of child poverty in Sweden, the deterioration of the Swedish educational system, the exploitation of young people working in the service sector, and whether young bloggers were promoting dangerous body ideals were all topics discussed on the show (www.svtplay.se, accessed 3 June 2011). The exploitation of young people by employers and the lack of the employment security enjoyed by older generations was a particular lively debate, problematized during my fieldwork.}
and an unwelcoming labor market, the supposed collapse of the Swedish school system, and reports of a steady rise in mental health issues among young people were causes of great concern. Without a steady income, young people are forced to live at home with their parents well into their twenties. This is problematic inasmuch as it flies in the face of the cultural norm of leaving the nest after completing school. In other words, at the time of my fieldwork young Swedes might not have been able to attain adulthood in the way they and society expect. Because of the contextual and cultural specifics framing the experience of youth in different parts of the world, I focus on Swedish youth culture by consulting the work the youth cultural researchers Lalander and Johansson (see Chapter 4).

Youth and gender

One of the themes unifying the various twists and turns in youth research is gender, and, before leaving this discussion, sex and gender as understood on an analytical basis demand a definition. These concepts are inescapable in a joint study of men and women, and affect both how the informants understood themselves from an emic point of view, and how I have interpreted the material. Analytical definitions of the concepts are legion—and contradictory, being bogged down in the usual nature versus nurture and reality versus representation arguments. According to the historian Thomas Laqueur, sex as the biological foundation of what it is to be male and female is not a historical constant for humankind, but was carved out at the time of the Enlightenment. This was a consequence of society changing, in that it became politically important to have two distinct sexes. Laqueur emphasizes that there is nothing natural about sex: it is always situational, and explicable only if contextualized in relation to battles over power and gender.

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106 See, for example, the 2009 report by Socialstyrelsen (National Board of Health and Welfare) on public health, which calls attention to the fact that the proportion of young people (defined by the report as those aged 16–24) who experience worry and anxiety has been steadily rising ever since measurements began in the late eighties (http://www.socialstyrelsen.se/publikationer2009/2009-126-71).


The concept of gender makes it easier to discuss men and women and masculinity and femininity on a systematic level, without having to refer to biological differences. In this sense it can be understood as a tool with which to discuss similarities and differences between the genders on an analytical level, without having to refer to biological or individual differences. This notion of gender is based on a separation of biology from culture, underscoring that the relations between the sexes should be viewed primarily as socially and culturally constructed. In part, gender serves to stress the changeability of the cultural process: one is not born a man or a woman, it is something one becomes, as Simone de Beauvoir was already arguing in the mid twentieth century. Equally important is the idea that relations between the sexes constitute a primary part of the social order.

There is no exact consensus among theorists about the division between sex and gender, and how far the idea of sex as a cultural construct should be taken. However, most gender theorists today understand masculinity and femininity as culturally and socially created, rather than unproblematic biological categories. Like Laqueur, my understanding of sex is not based on a denial of its reality or of sexual dimorphism as an evolutionary process. However, the notions of masculinity and femininity have been imposed on what are supposed to be objective biological observations. To quote Laqueur: ‘powerful prior notions of difference or of sameness determine what one sees and reports about the body’. In this sense, sex—and gender according to some theorists such as gender theorist Judith Butler—is not a natural or biological constant, but cultural preconception that determines how we understand sex as a biological category.

It is not only sex and gender that can never be separated from the time and place in which they are made. The same is true of sexuality as well. Sexuality here refers to certain practices that are ascribed to particular categories of men and women. For many modern gender theorists, the power dimension of the differences between the sexes and genders is inseparable from the norm of heterosexuality. From this perspective, sexuality is more than relations between individuals: it is a social structure in which heterosexuality is believed to institutionalize male sexual dominance and female sexual submission, attaching value to sexual activities. Further, it comes with norms such as monogamy and ideals of living in a nuclear family, affecting society’s ideas of

109 Ambjörnsson 2003, 12.
110 Ambjörnsson 2003, 12.
111 Ambjörnsson 2003, 11, 12.
112 Laqueur 1990, 11.
113 Laqueur 1990, 21.
115 Laqueur 1990, 11, 13, 16.
what constitutes ‘normal’ men and women.\textsuperscript{116} This analytical framework is essential when charting what determines consumption, for in order to be vanlig one has to have the cultural map of how to be a man or a woman in Midway. Being vanlig does not always mean the same thing to the same people in the present study.

It should be said that in Sweden, unlike many countries, gender has been comparatively successfully incorporated into the language. Most Swedes not only recognize the word and concept, but more importantly it has had an impact in all walks of life. On an official, structural level, it has been incorporated into everything from the education system to the structure of the police and the army. Swedish gender politics has a special history of emphasizing the equality of the sexes, incorporated in the legal system and reflected in practices of how to act and how to look.\textsuperscript{117} However, as will be demonstrated in the empirical material, there is a discrepancy between the academic and structural understanding of sex and gender and the common understanding of the concepts.

In this section, the general topic of the dissertation—identity formation among young people in relation to consumption practices—has been contextualized by the research tradition of youth cultural studies. This has included academic approaches to understanding both youth and culture, and the theoretical implications of researching youth. Central to this study is an understanding of youth as a culturally constructed phase of life, and not a biological one. The academic and societal understandings of youth both fluctuate over time; at the time of my fieldwork, the national debate in Sweden tended to focus on the problems that threatened to hinder my informants’ expected transition into adulthood. Academic and emic understandings of sex and gender are a priority, as is the fact that academic approaches to sex and gender as non-fixed categories are not mirrored in the course of events on an empirical level. There are evident tensions between the mainstream and the subcultural, as will be dealt with next.

Resisting the other

In examining young mainstreamers’ denim consumption, the treatment of the mainstream in the literature in comparison to the subcultural will be key. The recognition that vanlig het was central to how this group of young people understood themselves and others should not be thought a general category, but


rather as specific to the context of Midway in 2009–2011. It could be argued that comparing and contrasting the mainstream with the subcultural, as here, merely adds to the polarization of the concepts. Many subcultures feed into mainstream culture, and what is considered subcultural or mainstream varies according to context and situation. Further, members of a subculture do not necessarily resist everything about mainstream culture, and vice versa. The complete separation between subcultures and the mainstream, as romanticized by Hebdige, rarely exists. However, my reasons for this separation are two-fold. First, the division existed in the minds of my informants, as implicit and explicit images of themselves and others. These concepts are not technical terms reserved for academics; they are used by people in everyday life. Second, much of the academic literature on youth has been cavalier in its use of the concept of the mainstream. In the words of sociologist Patrick Williams:

Perhaps the idea of a mainstream or dominant culture has become tenable only as a straw man that subculturalists use as a comparison by which to mark themselves as special.

Whether studying the mainstream or a subculture, it is necessary to identify its imagined counterpart. Furthermore, without extensive ethnographic material, there is always the risk of assuming that the mainstream is broadly in consensus with the values of the parent culture. The semiotic claim to reading of style then becomes nothing more than equating the spectacular with resistance and the mainstream with conformity.

Subcultural theory

A subculture can be used to refer to a group of individuals who deviate from what is considered the cultural norm or praxis. It can also be applied to a group of individuals who are not considered to deviate, but are connected by some other denominator, such as age. If defining subculture as ‘a subset or social group that is distinct from but related to the dominant culture,’ youth can be viewed as a subculture both in the relation to its parent culture, but also because it differentiates between different groups of young people. The application of the concept, whether one’s stance is rejection or acceptance, has developed into a deep and long-running academic debate. Interwoven into the relationship between understandings of the subcultural and the mainstream is a political ideology that the individual is able to freely choose from the goods available on the market. A considerable amount of the literature on consumer

118 Williams 2011, 12.
119 Williams 2011, 9.
120 Blackman 2005, 2.
culture concentrates on marketization and on choice as a core value. These debates tend to emanate from political and ideological discussions of related concepts, such as globalization or the stages of modernity.

In order to understand identity construction and consumption patterns among the young, the conditions that shape contemporary consumer society must be addressed. The modern movement is the origin of all contemporary theories of identity construction, and thus frames every body of work cited in this dissertation. How modernity and its various movements are understood varies from field to fields, but within sociology and anthropology they are usually dated back to the Enlightenment. Treated as a product of scientific rationality and logical reason, modernity is associated with a positivist view of the world. During the Enlightenment, it was driven by the idea that myth and religion should be overthrown in favor of natural science: out there was a world, governed by laws that only science could give a true and objective account of. Modernity also conveys an idea of a new social order, where traditional markers such as religion and class no longer govern people’s identities.

The sociologist Anthony Giddens defines modernity in a general sense as:

> the institutions and modes of behavior established first of all in post-feudal Europe, but which in the twentieth century increasingly have become world-historical in their impact. ‘Modernity’ can be understood as roughly equivalent to ‘the industrialized world’, so long as it be recognized that industrialism is not its only institutional dimension.

For Giddens, it is modern institutions, which have altered everyone’s experience of life, that now govern. He uses the terms ‘high’ or ‘late’ modernity rather than postmodernity to describe the present, being hesitant to talk about a break with modernity in the same way as the postmodernists do, as he sees current developments as a radicalization, and not an abandonment, of modernity. The difference between understanding the present stage of modernity as ‘high’ or ‘late’ the way Giddens does, or as ‘post’ the way postmodernists do, affects how one views self-identity among young people. The alternatives used by subculturalists, in an attempt to move away from the very concept of

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122 See, for example, the exchanges in the *Journal of Youth Studies* about subcultural theory and terminology, in particular Andy Bennett, ‘In defense of Neo-Tribes: A Response to Blackman and Hesmondhalgh’, 8/2 (2005); Blackman (2005); David Hesmondhalgh, ‘Subcultures, Scenes or Tribes? None of the Above’, 8/1 (2005); and Tracy Shildrick & Robert MacDonald, ‘In Defense of Subculture: Young People, Leisure and Social Divisions’, 9/2 (2006).

subculture, typically assume that the markers of modernity are no longer the main principles that govern identity.\(^\text{124}\)

Sociologists and cultural theorists, attempting to rethink subculture, have suggested several alternatives in its stead. Among the first were counterculture (Roberts 1978) and contraculture (Yinger 1960).\(^\text{125}\) Later suggestions, stemming from the body of work broadly referred to as postmodernity and post-subcultural studies\(^\text{126}\) have included clubcultures (Thornton 1995), tribes (Clark 1997), neotribes (Bennett 1999), lifestyles (Miles 2000), post-subcultures (Muggleton & Weinzierl 2003), scenes (Hesmondhalgh 2005), and cybercultures (Nilan & Feixa 2006) to name but a few. At its heart, the rejection of the concept of subculture is a repudiation of the significance of class-based subcultures, a focus on predominantly white masculinities, the model of resistance, and the neglect of consumption as found in the work of the CCCS.\(^\text{127}\)

As the sociologist Shane Blackman concludes in a detailed survey of youth subcultural theory, the concepts tend to change according to the dominant academic paradigm.\(^\text{128}\) In the past decade, a growing body of literature has questioned whether the theoretical insights coming out of post-subcultural studies are truly applicable to youth cultural identities and experiences.\(^\text{129}\) For these researchers, the subculturalists’ preoccupation with what comes after subculture has been replaced with an interest in returning to the concept.

Theorists suspicious of the postmodern turn tend to subject postmodern and post-subcultural studies to the same criticism that those theorists have directed at the CCCS a generation before, namely that there is a gap between academic theory and empirical work.\(^\text{130}\) Discussions tend to focus on what is ultimately perceived as an elitist focus on accounts of young people’s lives and the music, dance cultures, and style of the few, empirically isolating postmodern and post-subcultural studies from the realities of the less privileged. Among them I would add not only the less privileged, but also everyone not sharing a certain scene. The second part of the critique has dealt with a theoretical disregard for the potential significance of class and other social inequalities facing youth today.\(^\text{131}\) One of the central ideas in this paradigm is that postmodern consumers of late modernity has replaced traditional sources of identity such as class

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\(^\text{124}\) Gelder 2005, 12, 13, 14.

\(^\text{125}\) Williams 2011, 12.

\(^\text{126}\) Bennett 2005, 255; David Muggleton, ‘From classlessness to clubculture. A genealogy of post-war British youth cultural analysis’, Young, 13/2 (2005), 214.


\(^\text{128}\) Blackman 2005, 2.


\(^\text{130}\) See, for example, Blackman 2005; Hesmondhalgh 2005; Shildrick & MacDonald 2006.

\(^\text{131}\) Shildrick & MacDonald 2006, 126.
by freely picking and choosing from commodities available on the market. One consequence of a lifestyle-oriented approach to consumption is an explicit emphasis on the symbolic aspects of consumption, while neglecting other values. The concepts suggested as substitutes for subculture have been criticized out of concerns about framing the condition of the young under the heading of postmodernity. The focus on social divisions such as class was abandoned in order to concentrate on individual lifestyle and consumption choices. Celebrating the fragmented, fleeting, and free-floating nature of youth cultural identities downplays the collective in favor of the individual.\textsuperscript{132}

At the time when the body of work referred to as postmodern or post-subcultural studies started to grow, the significance of consumption presented itself as an increasingly pressing issue to be dealt with. Postmodernists have stressed the idea that ‘youths from different social backgrounds can hold similar values and find their expression in shared membership of a particular subculture’.\textsuperscript{133} In a highly globalized world, this input is not without relevance. However, the problem according to its critics is that there is a lack of empirical evidence to support the thesis that youth culture has become classless and is unaffected by social and economic restraints. The stages of life before and after adolescence continue to be highly socially stratified—there are risks involved with regarding youth as a cultural free zone disconnected from the rest of society.\textsuperscript{134} The interest in youth alienation evident at the time of my fieldwork, with the young unable to participate as adequate members of society because of economic, social, and political injustice, strongly refutes this idea. The non-comittal supermarket of style model advocated in the nineties by the likes of Ted Polhemus, who argued that the young were living in an age when both history and geography were no longer contextual, is passé.\textsuperscript{135} Yet, although most research today dismisses this understanding of youth culture as reflecting a utopian vision rather than the actual data, it is a reminder of how politicized and ideological the study of youth can be. Yet of course, seen from our own day, we have to ask whether the idea was indeed utopian.

Despite the vast literature on subculture and the growing body of literature that is critical of the various theoretically informed concepts introduced by postmodern and post-subcultural writers, few provide constructive suggestions on what term to use instead. I have chosen to use the term subculture ‘in a reflexive recognition that youth formations are fluid discursive clusters forever in the process of being and becoming’.\textsuperscript{136} Although it is possible to adopt and abandon styles, not everything goes, and there are constraints on complete

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Schildrick & MacDonald 2006, 126, 127.
\item Schildrick & MacDonald 2006, 129.
\item Nayak 2003, 307.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
free agency through clothing. Family history, gender, place, region, and locality never stop being closely intertwined with the cultural identities of youth in this setting or any other. A problem with youth culture research, as I see it, is the tendency to force a relativist perspective onto the concepts discussed above, to the point where it becomes counterproductive. Many of the terms are so overused that their academic definitions have become trite. Ethnographic research on youth cultural practices is acknowledged to be rare, with academics themselves calling for renewed efforts on that front, and it appears that wobbly theoretical standpoints, however politically and theoretically correct, are something of an obstacle.

Contextualizing the mainstream

With any study of the notion of the mainstream comes the task of trying to pinpoint something that is commonly perceived as everything and nothing at the same time. It is difficult to get a handle on the term in the same way that it is difficult to pin down exactly what identity is: most people sort-of know, but struggle to give a precise definition. At times the mainstream is depicted as a feeble remnant devoid of agency, only to be contradicted by the image of something that threatens to take over whatever is unique, creative, and original.

The key to the relationship between the mainstream and its supposed counterpart, the subcultural, concerns both size and force. Subcultural studies have shown that many young subcultural members use an anti-establishment rhetoric, fixed on fighting the system or what is understood as normal, ‘square’ society. As a consequence, young mainstreamers have often been characterized as concurring with the parent culture rather than resisting it, and therefore as not being rebellious. However, as was stressed in the introduction to this chapter, the understanding of the mainstream as a singular entity is misinformed. In all that is mainstream, and by extension everyday, normative, and ordinary, one finds the cultural context, time, and group belonging to be of particular importance. These are thus not universal categories, because patterns of culture differ from place to place wherever one is in the world.

A cultural relativist would argue that discussing a cultural context is only relevant when speaking of a specific time and place. Nevertheless, the world is more than a series of small, separate units, especially so in the digital age we are living in. There are certain similarities in the experience of life that

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138 Nayak 2003, 320.
139 Bucholtz 2002, 526.
140 Williams 2011, 8, 11.
unite people, whether they live in Sweden or New Guinea, even as the Swedish cultural context still generates a typical Swedishness (national characteristics not being a focus of this thesis, of course). Meanwhile, most would find it understandable that a Swede is much more like most Scandinavians than most people living in New Guinea. In other words, the present thesis is firmly placed in the tradition of Nordic studies, which seeks out the common ground in social democracies and welfare states that is necessary if one is to understand the cultural contexts of the Nordic societies today.

The Nordic countries’ shared values, famously enumerated in the works of the Norwegian anthropologist Marianne Gullestad, include equality, solidarity, security, peace, and quiet. Gullestad and others have argued that three-class societies are prevalent in Nordic societies, with class largely a category of thought and not an economic reality. In the model, most people place themselves in the middle together with other so-called ordinary people, whereas the upper and lower classes serve as others to identify against. There has been a tradition in the Nordic countries of working together for the common good. In Sweden this even found aesthetic expression in the idea of the *folkhem* (lit. the people’s home), which held that everyone had the right to the same material standard. At the same time, the old Nordic ideals have been challenged in recent decades by the increased emphasis on efficiency, expressivity, and self-realization.

In the academic literature, changing attitudes towards concepts such as the mainstream, the everyday, the normative, and the ordinary are plain in what has been published on those topics in recent decades. I will limit my remarks to Sweden, since the presence, development, or absence of scientific fields varies so much in different parts of the world. The interest in all things national was particularly strong in Sweden, leading to an earlier establishment of ethnology than of related disciplines such as anthropology and ethnography, which had a greater foreign orientation at the time those fields were established. The result was that research fell into one of two areas: general and mainly non-European anthropology; and European ethnology with stronger historical perspectives. Ethnology and anthropology are still separate at Swedish universities, although the boundaries between the two are often fluid.

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141 Miller & Woodward 2012, 123.
142 Scandinavia comprises Denmark, Norway, and Sweden; the Nordic countries include Finland and Iceland as well. There are many similarities in their ways of life and social structure, but the Scandinavian countries are also linked by a linguistic continuum that neither Finland nor Iceland share.
However, in Sweden it is still within ethnology that most work on ordinariness is to be found.145

A strong focus on peasant peoples’ traditions laid the foundation of the discipline of ethnology in its early days, with a focus on collecting and organizing cultural trace elements, often seemingly small and trivial objects. At the turn of the twentieth century, national romanticism was at its zenith. Museums of cultural history were built, the world’s first open air museum opened in Stockholm in 1892, and local history societies popped up all over the country. One explanation for the passion for national and peasant culture in Europe can be found in the enduring notion that states were held together not only by royal power or political tradition, but also by shared history, custom, cultural heritage, and a common language.146 According to Ehn and Löfgren, to generalize one can say that the major colonial powers of the nineteenth century such as France and the UK developed the field of anthropology by studying non-European people in the colonies. European states with few or no colonies, such as Sweden and most Nordic countries, instead focused on studies of communities at home, and hence developed the field of ethnology.147

For a long time, Swedish ethnology has been keenly interested in everyday life in different social environments. It remains so to this day, but as in all disciplines, interest waxes and wanes as new generations and paradigms succeed one another. In Sweden, discussions about ordinariness and everyday life were the core business of ethnology from the sixties to the nineties. However, these discussions appear to have slowly faded, and ethnologists and other social scientists now focus on other issues. In the sixties, when the discipline underwent a massive expansion and, simultaneously, radical change, there was a resurgence in curiosity about contemporary, everyday life among a new generation of students and researchers. Anthropology became something to do at home in the national arena. Studies of local realities were driven by a desire to capture the large-scale by looking at life in local communities, small towns, and rural areas.148

145 See, for example, Åke Daun, Svensk mentalitet (Stockholm: Rabén Prisma, 1998); Annette Rosengren, Två barn och eget hus. Om kvinnors och mäns världar i småsamhället: En etnologisk studie (Ph.D. diss., Stockholm: Carlsson, 1991); Kerstin Gunnemark & Magnus Mörck (eds.), Vardagslivets fronter (Gothenburg: Arkipelago, 2006); Sven Ek & Håkan Andrénsson (eds.), Vardag som vetenskap (Gothenburg: Etnologiska institutionen, 1996).
146 In contrast, the US is founded on the idea of a common morality, rather than a common heritage or language. America’s self-image has always been of a nation built around certain ideals rather than the shared nationality of the population. The absolute certainties of the American’s Creed, with shared roots in a common Anglo-Protestant culture in which individuals have equal rights, have long determined the image and goals of the US; see Todd Gitling, The Intellectuals and the Flag (New York: Colombia University Press, 2006); or Samuel P. Huntington, Who are we? (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).
The shift away from this started in the eighties and nineties with the introduction of concepts such as cultural identity, modernity, and postmodernity and doubts as to whether everyday life really was closer to reality than, for example, how people were represented in the media or how they spoke about their lives.\textsuperscript{149} By the end of the seventies, the topic of discovering Sweden seemed to have been exhausted. There was a growing sense that the everyday was not exclusive to so-called ordinary people, but always present everywhere, and this led ethnologists in the eighties and nineties to change course and start looking at other markers of belonging—gender, ethnicity, profession, and business life.\textsuperscript{150} The overlooked and the everyday never vanished completely from ethnology, but fieldwork about the majority in the Swedish countryside and small towns did.

Apart from contextualizing the everyday in a Swedish research context, the normative and the ordinary also demand definition. I have chosen not to include theorists such as Michel de Certeau (2002) or Ben Highmore (2002, 2011) in my theoretical framework because their approach is fundamentally different to mine. They treat everyday life as just that, the repetitive acts that constitute life for all of us, whereas I am concerned with the ordinariness of the mainstream—what is the most prevalent among the actions that comprise everyday life—but also what departs from this.

Acknowledging the mainstream and the subcultural to be diametric opposites in identity creation affects how market behavior is interpreted. Here I have attempted to nuance the idea of the subcultural as actively deviating from the cultural praxis and the mainstream as passively representing the dominant norms of the parent culture, if only because the theoretical discussions of these concepts, reflecting debates about modernity, tend to lose touch with the ethnographic evidence. I lean towards cultural and social explanations of behavior and identity construction, drawing on notions of what it means to live in a Scandinavian democracy, and a Swedish cultural context in particular, in order to understand the ethical standpoints of my informants. Researching the ordinary and the everyday in Sweden has largely been the business of ethnology, and it is that ethnological ideal which informs my ambition here to capture the large by looking at the small. However, my focus is not on the ordinary as repetitive practices in everyday life, but on the ordinary as an aspect of identity. This leads me to the field of fashion studies and the contribution to be made to this growing field.

\textsuperscript{149} Ehn & Löfgren 1996, 63, 64, 65, 72, 74.
\textsuperscript{150} Ehn & Löfgren 1996, 55, 78, 79.
Fashion studies

The present thesis falls within the multidisciplinary field of fashion studies. With its first academic journal *Fashion Theory*, established in 1997, the idea that fashion is worthy of serious academic attention has gained considerable ground in the last couple of decades. With roots in a numerous disciplines—anthropology, ethnology, film studies, gender studies, the history of art and design, marketing, material culture studies, and sociology to name a few—fashion studies covers a wide range of methodologies and theories.

Like all academic disciplines and fields, fashion studies has to grapple with what constitutes its defining characteristics, negotiating its identity against those of neighboring fields—and it is a process that never lets up. Such issues are perhaps especially common in the social sciences, where the borrowing of materials, approaches, and theories between disciplines and fields are particularly frequent. The trajectory of fashion studies at Stockholm University, where it started out as a sub-department of art history and is now one of four fields under the aegis of media studies, bears witness to this. One of the advantages of a young discipline is that, unlike the older, more established ones, it is free of fixed boundaries. My point here is not to trace the development of fashion studies by invoking the history and philosophy of social science, nor is it to establish the parameters of what fashion studies is or is not. Instead, my question is where to place the questions, aims, methodologies, and theories of this thesis relative to fashion studies’ growing body of contemporary work.

Giving fashion the attention that it deserves, and the importance of taking it seriously, is a story constantly told and retold. This endless need for justification is at odds with the close attention paid to fashion in contemporary cultural debate, and indeed in society at large, and with the burst of academic studies on fashion history and theory. One likely explanation for this is that the specter of fashion as a subordinate, feminine interest still haunts the field. In the past, fashion was thought feminine and dismissed as belonging to the world of women and therefore an irrelevancy. In the story of the growth of modernity, women’s lives tend to be told through the lens of consumption, framed by seduction, dreams, and desires. If men have been taken to represent

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151 A number of journals have been launched that address fashion from more theoretically informed angles and bridge the gap between fashion as an academic discipline and fashion as an industry.
153 I make a distinction between a discipline and a field. In Sweden a discipline by tradition is an established area clearly separated from others, whereas a field is a sub-discipline of an existing discipline.
rationality, women have represented hedonism and impulsivity. In *Ladies’ Paradise* (first published in 1883), the French naturalist author Émile Zola describes the advent of the modern department store in late nineteenth-century Paris. At one point in the book, the supposed secret of big modern business is explained:

It was Woman the shops were competing for so fiercely, it was Woman they were continually snaring with their bargains, after dazing her with their displays. They had awoken new desires in her weak flesh; they were an immense temptation to which she inevitably yielded, succumbing in the first place to purchases for the house, then seduced by coquetry, finally consumed by desire.

Zola captures the spirit of his time: the idea that women were born with an innate *faiblesse* for consumption, irresistible to a mind that was as weak as her flesh. Those few early scholars and writers who cared to comment on the subject were almost exclusively men, and their writing on fashion reflected their view of women as subordinate. One of the early British dress historians of the twentieth-century, Cecil Willett Cunnington, famously wrote about women as one of the pleasures of life, and shared the view of his contemporary James Laver that women’s clothing choices were motivated by their sexual drive, directed towards attracting men. The topic of the present thesis naturally relates to the past, but like all contemporary studies of fashion it is not based on a biological pre-understanding that men and women are different, nor does it differentiate between men’s and women’s consumption or hold that women are more prone to clothing consumption. The theoretical frameworks used to explain my informants’ consumption practices do not distinguish between female and male participants.

However, the nineteenth-century notions we recognize from scholarly writing and fiction of the day can nevertheless be found in contemporary thinking about fashion. Women, along with black people, gay men, and other groups, have long been regarded as more superficial and less profound than white heterosexual men. This idea of a gender divide in fashion, along with the fact that the majority of those who study dress and textile history have tended to be women or gay men, has cast a suspicion of femininity on the men involved in fashion studies. Of late, the heterosexual, male-oriented approaches to fashion analysis have been subject to sharp feminist critiques, much as the feminist

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movement has strongly objected towards fashion the industry, prompted by a
slew of issues: poor working conditions for the mostly female work force in
the clothing and textile industry; the spread of unhealthy body ideals; the ob-
jectification of women; the focus on making women pleasurable for men; the
connection between femininity and consumption; the sexualization of girls’
bodies when young models are required to pose as adults. The relationship
between fashion and feminism has often been defined by the tension between
morality and hedonism, either understanding fashion as oppression or as
something pleasurable to be enjoyed without need for justification. 160

Many of those who push for fashion to be taken seriously intellectually
have tried to erase the equivalence between surface and superficiality; how-
ever, the idea of clothing as something superficial is not that easy to shake, at
least not in a Western perspective. Both in Western philosophy and everyday
practices, it is commonly understood that the real or true self lies deep within
a person. 161 The British anthropologist Daniel Miller connects this treatment
of clothing as superficial to the widespread presumption of a certain relation-
ship between the interior and the exterior that he calls ‘depth ontology’. 162
This depth ontology, he argues, ultimately stems from the Western history of
ideas, according to which the authentic person lies deep inside, leaving the
surface as something superficial, shallow, and less real. It finds clothing char-
acterized as intrinsically superficial because it is used as a cover or as a sur-
facte. This is reflected in how we speak and structure our thoughts—hence, for
example, common expressions such as ‘Don’t judge a book by its cover’. The
depth ontology also affects how we deal with defeat. It is not uncommon for
someone going through, say, a personal crisis, to be given the advice to look
inside themselves and do some soul-searching in order to get back to whom
they truly are. A commonly used metaphor to describe this is the onion: for
every layer that is peeled off, the closer one gets to the heart of the matter. As
will be shown, this understanding has definitely informed my informants’
thinking about identity in relation to clothes consumption.

Armed with ethnographic evidence from Trinidad, Miller demonstrates that
the depth ontology or ‘onion theory’ of identity is a cultural construct, specific
to a Western way of thinking. 163 The Trinidadians, by contrast, operate with a
rather different construct—a surface ontology. They consider the real person
to be on the surface, where others can easily see it. What is deep inside is said
to be false, since this is where dishonest people keep lies. Further, the time,
money, and effort a person devotes to creating a look is telling: it shows the

160 Wilson 2003, 232; for a survey of the different feminist debates about fashion, see ibid. ch.
11.
161 Miller, introduction in Küchler & Miller 2005, 3.
163 Daniel Miller, ‘Style and Ontology’, in Jonathan Friedman (ed.), Consumption and Identity
(Chur: Harwood, 1994).
nature of the person and is a mark of the time spent on their appearance. It follows that it is through dress that we show who we really are—we are what we look like—compared to a Western understanding of clothing as a representation of self. People tend to hold it a universal truth that who we truly are is located far inside us, and that to find ourselves we have to look deep inside. Rarely do we reflect on the fact that these are metaphors. If clothes truly do represent the human subject, what then is the authentic self that clothing represents, and where does it reside? If our answer is the same as Miller’s, when we look deep inside ourselves we will find blood and tissue, and not a soul or a true inner self.\textsuperscript{164}

What Miller sets out to illustrate is that a comparative analysis of clothing can help us admit to our own assumptions about the relationship between the concepts of the self, the person, and clothing. Whether we believe that the authentic self is found inside us or on the surface of the body is a matter of metaphor, where none is more right or wrong than the next.\textsuperscript{165} Here, consumption researchers Banim, Green, and Guy make two important points about women’s clothing choices and the association of women with fashion and trivia. First, conforming to the market and the dominant fashions should not be thought a compromise or an attempt to hide one’s true self, since there is no stable meaning to clothing, be it internally or externally. Second, identity is not a fixed state. It constantly evolves, making it irrelevant to theorize about identity as authentic or inauthentic.\textsuperscript{166} This is not to say that it is incurious to analyze the empirical finding that people operate with an emic ‘onion theory’ understanding of identity.

In this sense, anthropology’s comparative project—to move between the particular and the universal—has a great deal to offer fashion studies as it stands today. In order to say something general about what it means to be human in this world, one must first look to the ethnographic details of the experience of everyday life.\textsuperscript{167} Whether by looking at different lifeworlds today or by looking to the past, a comparative perspective can help us see that the concept of the person, the sense of the self, the experience of being an individual, are radically different at different times and in different places, partly in relation to differences in clothing.

This is a sweeping aspiration, of course, and could be said to be true for many disciplines, but the field of fashion studies lacks a body of work based on detailed and lengthy studies among people alive today, and it is therefore an aspiration worth pursuing.

\textsuperscript{164} Miller 2010b, 13, 16–18, 20–1; Miller 2005, 2, 3.
\textsuperscript{165} Miller 2010b, 18, 38.
\textsuperscript{166} Banim et al. 2001.
\textsuperscript{167} For a concise definition of social anthropology, see Hylland Eriksen, 2005, 19.
\textsuperscript{168} Miller 2010b, 40.
In recent years, a growing number of disciplines have turned to studies of material culture, believing that the study of materiality is an ideal way to gain a better understanding of who and what we are. In many ways material culture studies extends to the study of fashion. The present thesis draws on anthropological methods and theories and the area of anthropological work specializing in material culture. Just as researchers studying the past use artefacts as important clues to the history of human lives and behavior, so researchers of the contemporary turn to today’s material culture in order to understand the present. The Swedish ethnologist Gunilla Kjellman exhorted scholars to ‘Dig where you stand’, convinced of the importance of understanding materiality in order to understand human culture. For the archaeologist, searching for remnants of the past, ‘Dig where you stand’ has a literal meaning. Archaeological finds are like pieces of a puzzle, waiting to be put together to reconstruct human history. Although calling for a different methodology, ‘Dig where you stand’ can also inspire research of the present-day, with excavations of the rich materiality of consumer society in the search for the salient traits of coetaneous culture.

Unfortunately, the development of material culture studies, like fashion studies, has been marked by a longstanding split between an object-based approach, mainly represented by museums, and a more theoretically informed approach as practiced in academe. There has been an enduring hostility between those who hold fashion’s material qualities to be the kernel of their research and those who emphasize fashion’s economic, political, and social meanings. By tradition as much as necessity, those studying the history of dress at specialist institutions such as museums focus on the examination of the details of clothing and fabrics, which requires a series of specialized skills to do so—and the object plays a central role in the creation of knowledge.

Academics, meanwhile, tend to favor the theoretical in the creation of knowledge, asking different types of questions and looking for different types of answers than are possible when working with the materialities. The mutual lack of respect between the two groups seems outdated in contemporary studies of fashion, regardless.

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169 For example, for a material culture and design studies perspective, see Judy Attfield, *Wild Things: The material culture of everyday life* (Oxford: Berg, 2000); Victor Buchli (ed.), *The material culture reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2002); for anthropological perspectives, see Küchler & Miller 2005; and for material culture and history, see Karen Harvey (ed.), *History and Material Culture. A student's guide to approaching alternative sources* (London: Routledge, 2009).


172 Miller 2005, 1.

As Miller has it, an attention to material qualities does not preclude studying the social life of clothing, rather it is an essential part of it. If we do not bother to understand the tactile and emotional experience of wearing certain clothing, how can we move on to make broader generalizations and theorize about the meaning of fashion in a given context? Faced with the dichotomizing of these two perspectives in fashion studies as it has evolved, I would argue that the methodologies of anthropology have more to offer this thesis.

Contribution to fashion studies

Given the many research traditions, fields, and disciplines that come together under the umbrella of fashion studies, it is hardly surprising that it does not offer a single definition of what fashion is. Of the three theses to come out of the Centre for Fashion Studies at Stockholm University thus far, one uses fashion to investigate the intersections of style, sexuality, and gender, one uses fashion ephemera to investigate the construction of knowledge about contemporary fashion, its practices, and its actors, and one uses fashion to study digital images and the role of women in social media. Hence, as an academic field, fashion is not limited one specific thing.

Most fashion scholars, although not all, differentiate between fashion and clothing. Roughly speaking, fashion tends to be treated as an idea or aesthetic—a symbolic product of a cultural and economic system. Clothing, on the other hand, is viewed as concrete objects, although it can function as the physical manifestation of fashion too. In order to gauge clothing consumption in the present study, it is necessary to recognize items of clothing in the informants’ wardrobes as being part of a system. When my informants act as consumers, they do so within the economic and cultural restraints of a fashion system that dictates which clothing is available in the shops. Hence, clothing choices are necessarily structured by the ideologies of the market, such as capitalism for the Western consumer. Both men and women are constantly bombarded with images of the idealized body in media and advertising, all of which present consumption as the way to attain these ideals.

I have chosen to focus on the lived experiences and practices of the informants, focusing on their agency and moving away from the fashion system as such. With academics preoccupied with the details of oppositional dress, the mainstream has been carelessly lumped together as a blurry backdrop. Yet the

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174 Miller 2005, 1.
175 Miller 2010b, 41.
176 Cecilia Fredriksson, Mode (Malmö: Liber, 2012), 22.
177 For a mapping of the structural nature of the fashion system, see, for example, Yuniya Kawamura, Fashion-ology: An introduction to fashion studies (Oxford: Berg, 2005); or Patrik Aspers, Orderly Fashion. A sociology of markets (Princeton: PUP, 2010).
178 Banim et al. 2001 make this argument about women, but it can surely be said to apply to both men and women today.
quotidian is far from dull and unworthy of attention, and is an ideal starting point if we want to learn more about our relationship with the world we live in.

One of the main contributions of the present study to the field of fashion studies is its problematization of conforming majority versus rebellious minority—the idea that the mainstream and the countercultural are diametric opposites in the identities created among young people in Midway in 2009–2011. This is where the academic debate is in need of an injection of energy. My main finding—that vanlig is an element in young people’s self-identification, and the centrality of this norm to their clothing consumption—is just such a boost. Further, the ethnographic material on the young people of Midway speaks directly to a central question in fashion studies—why people consume clothes the way that they do.

The traditional focus on stylistic minorities has in a sense come at the expense of portraying the cultural lives of the ordinary majority. 179 There is plainly a gap to be filled in studies of clothing and fashion. Concerns about definitions of terms such as ‘average’, ‘ordinary’, ‘typical’, or ‘normal’ seem to motivate researchers to study clothing of minorities, using the majority as a safe and comfortable backdrop. The comparative perspective of anthropology necessitates generalizations, 180 so that in this case the ethnographic details of my fieldwork contribute to a general understanding of what it means to belong to the so-called mainstream and to look vanlig.

There is a growing body of literature that questions whether the theoretical insights coming out of post-subcultural studies of the young are applicable to youth cultural identities and experiences. 181 Those theorists who have expressed concern about the postmodern turn tend to dwell on the gap between academic theory and empirical work. 182 There are two strands to this criticism, the one regarding the underprivileged young, and the other regarding the privileged: worried by the concentration on marginal groups in society rather than on the mainstream, the first calls for balance in the research, applied to all groups; the focus centers on what is ultimately perceived as an elitist focus on accounts of young people’s lives concerning music, dance culture, and the styles of a few, empirically placing postmodern/post-subcultural studies far removed from the realities of the less advantaged. This critique has also dealt with a theoretical disregard of the potential significance of class, 183 arguing that studies of these privileged groups have had disproportionate attention in the field. Thus, there is a difference between marginalization in relation to the

179 Shildrick & MacDonald 2006, 128.
180 Miller 2010b, 33.
181 Shildrick 2006, 61.
182 See, for example, Blackman 2005; Hesmondhalgh 2005; Shildrick & MacDonald 2006.
183 Shildrick & MacDonald 2006, 126.
mainstream and deviance in relation to the mainstream. Although time-consuming, there is a need for researchers, regardless of their field, to take the time to collect ethnographic material from which theoretical analyses can be made. Below I will discuss a few such studies.

Studies of fashion and identity

I would suggest challenging the assumption that the majority of the mainstream and the minority of the countercultural are opposites in terms of identity creation. As part of this, I have noted that the social sciences have produced a vast number of studies that hold subcultures to exist in opposition to ordinary or ‘normal’ society, whereas the mainstream has been largely ignored as being conformist. However, in the same way as the mainstream appears to exist as a symbolic Other with which subcultures define themselves and are defined, mainstreamers instead define themselves in terms of the subcultural, as was the case with the PJs in the first chapter. Mechanisms of avoidance, rejection, and resistance are present in all identity formation, although not always quite so explicitly. Lack of material evidence makes rejection difficult to study in general—perhaps even more so for the mainstream. A study of denim cannot achieve this unaided, and will remain silent unless fully contextualized culturally, as done here.

It has been suggested that identity construction is as much about who we are not, as about whom we are. This is a recurrent topic in my study, as my informants many times appeared to find it easier to verbalize who they considered themselves not to be rather than who they were. The idea of studying identity construction by starting with who we are not has been used in studies that hold identity to be largely formed by delimitations of what one does not identify with. Freitas et al. call this process identity not, although stressing that the point is not to view identity and identity not as binary opposites.

In an American study based on nearly 300 in-depth interviews, Freitas et al. wanted to move away from what clothes mean or do not mean, to focus instead on how clothes are used to negotiate border spaces between such markers as age–temporality, gender–sexuality and ethnicity–intersecting cultural identities. Everyday engagement with clothes and appearance was chosen as the locus of the study because of the arena it offers individuals to actively


negotiate their preferred identities, while opting to move away from more discrediting labels. The study covered five groupings: students, African Americans, Koreans, Asian Americans, gays and lesbians (the ratios between the different groups and between men and women were not given). The outcomes of the Freitas study point to the fact that the borderlines that define who we are and who we are not are under constant construction and maintenance, resulting in fragility between who we are versus who we are not. The boundary work between different social identities both draws people together and pushes them apart.

The data in the Freitas et al. study showed that many of the master statuses at the heart of people’s identities tended to blur into one another. For instance, most male respondents identified what they would not wear in relation to femininity, hence defining masculinity as ‘femininity not’. At the same time, distancing themselves from the feminine often also included distancing themselves from being thought homosexual. Hence, gender and sexuality became intertwined in creating masculinity. Yet, these expressions of identity not were not necessarily a sign that they were embracing heterosexuality. Both gay men and lesbian women in the study expressed a desire to distance themselves from the norms of gender and sexuality as a strategy to avoid being seen as cultural stereotypes.186 The example of the PJs illustrates this. What was experienced as distaste towards the PJ style one day, based on certain items of clothing in combination with a specific type of appearance and behavior, would perhaps be perceived differently in another constellation the next day.

The mechanisms of identity not and the difficulties of distinguishing between the boundaries of the self and others has been addressed in other youth research as well. Banister and Hogg (2004) refers to the process as negative symbolic consumption. In an interview study of young British people, the role of investing products and brands with negative symbolic meaning was investigated. By studying the potential relationship between rejected goods, and hence the rejected aspects of consumers’ identities, Banister and Hogg found that the majority of their respondents were mostly governed by anticipated responses from their surroundings when choosing what to wear. By addressing negotiations between desirable possible selves and the avoidance of undesirable ones, the study showed that conformity to one’s social context appeared to override the desire to express individuality for most participants in the study.

Further, most respondents seemed to consume clothing with an emphasis on ensuring that they did not dress in a way that could be interpreted negatively, rather than being motivated by a positive drive. Wearing something wrong was perceived as having greater social consequences than wearing something considered right. Although the in-depth empirical study by Banis-

ter and Hogg was based on a small sample of 30 individuals aged 18–30 divided equally between the sexes, the results show many similarities with the American study by Freitas et al. In both studies, participants constantly negotiated with themselves over the boundaries of how to be right but without overdoing it. Who one used to be and who one was in the current was related to undesired selves and undesired end states. 187

I opened this thesis by acknowledging that looking vanlig was the main explanation for consumption in my study. Based on the dominant paradigm in the sociology of clothing, consumption, and the young that for decades has stressed individuality at the core of youth identity construction, I had not anticipated this. As discussed in the beginning of this chapter this paradigm has been, and currently is questioned. In a study published in 2013, Van der Laan and Velthuis presented what they choose to call the construction-through-consumption paradigm. Van de Laan and Velthuis’s study was based on a sample of 20 heterosexual men between 20 to 30 years. Their home districts were spread out between the three largest cities in the Netherlands, each with a population of half a million to a million. What Van der Laan and Velthuis found was that, in contrast to the dominant paradigm in the sociology of clothing and consumption, respondents did not pick out outfits based on a selection of different identities—they did not seek to construct and reconstruct their personal identity by doing consumption. Rather, their choice came down to the clothes themselves, what the weather was like, what was clean, and what they had worn the day before. 188

What is especially interesting is that Van de Laan and Velthuis’s respondents were not in the least concerned about separating themselves from their group or constructing individual identities: apart from two informants who made a thing of having a distinct style, the rest described their style as mainstream or as resembling that of others. It was not the case that the young men in the study always dressed the same, as they were familiar with changing according to the situation. Yet this was not experienced as playing with new identities, but rather as adapting to different situations, while still constructing a stable and coherent identity. 189

In short, like the other studies mentioned earlier, informants in the Dutch study were not particularly concerned about constructing individual identities or distinguishing themselves from others; rather, they set out to construct an accurate image of themselves. Van de Laan & Velthuis place this in a wider

189 Van de Laan & Velthuis 2013, 5–9, 11–12.
discourse of authenticity, in which changing style from day to day is interpreted as superficial, artificial, and inauthentic. Consumption here serves as a way of anchoring one’s identity:

Their negotiation of uniqueness and individualism does not imply that they engage in an empathetic form of sociality centered around shared, fleeting lifestyles or tastes. When our respondents state—without remorse—that they are aware that their clothing style is shared by a wider group of young urban men, they do not express wishes to be members of a tribal collectivity or express affects with those other men. Clothing is deployed by them not so much as symbolic gesture but as an authenticating act that anchors the self.

What all these studies suggest, then, is that for many people the correlation between dress and identity lies not in expressing different identities, but of a balancing act to stay within what is thought acceptable or not.

In charting the intersections of behavior and appearance in my empirical material (see Chapter 4) I have adapted a schematic/figure (see Fig. 1) from the marketing scholar Diego Rinallo’s work on the negotiation of men’s legitimate consumption in order to gauge why my informants, all of whom are middle-of-the-road mainstreamers, found some things acceptable but rejected others.

Figure 1: The cultural production of young people’s consumptionscapes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Panoptical gaze</th>
<th>Narcissistic gaze</th>
<th>Panoptical gaze</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Danger zone</td>
<td>Safe zone</td>
<td>Danger zone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegitimate</td>
<td>Legitimate</td>
<td>Illegitimate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No care of self and appearance</td>
<td>Vanlig appearance</td>
<td>Exaggerated care of self and appearance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is a longstanding history in the West of associating fashion with women and suspecting men who are interested in fashion of being effeminate or homosexual. Rinallo’s response to this is to problematize the stereotypical understandings of men and masculinity, matched with a critique of the logic of the subcultural theory that the adoption of subcultural elements into the mainstream is problematic, leading to the rejection of the subculture in question, which then abandons the commodified elements and moves on to something new. Rinallo’s study looked at readings of media representations, comparing how his informants (eight straight and eight gay Italian men) reacted to the

190 Van der Laan & Velthuis 2013, 9, 12, 15, 16.
192 Van der Laan & Velthuis 2013, 15.
commodification of the gay aesthetic, concluding that not only did the gay respondents resist the heterosexual appropriation of their consumption practices, but the heterosexual respondents refused to buy into it without constructing rules to legitimize any consumption that deviated from a heterosexual norm.\footnote{Rinallo 2007.}

It is the heterosexual men’s strategies for managing the consumptionscape of media representations that is relevant here. Rinallo describes how straight men handled market commodification by resisting the practices they considered suspicious and embracing others that were rendered safe.\footnote{Rinallo 2007, 80, 89.} Rinallo refers to these practices as safety zones and danger zones, which essentially are the do’s and don’ts for the straight men in his study, and it is this figure that I have appropriated for both my male and female informants: the \textit{panoptical gaze}, the gaze of others amounting to the surveillance of how the young people judge themselves and others, defines the danger zones, which can involve either too little care of self or an exaggerated care of self; the \textit{narcissistic gaze}, what one would like to become and what is legitimate in terms of appearance, defines the safe zones where consumption and appearance are rarely questioned. As Rinallo notes:

\begin{quote}
Consumption practices may be stigmatized for being untidy, sloppy, not refined, old-fashioned. Other practices may on the other hand be too refined or fashionable […] Most of the time the barriers between legitimate and illegitimate consumption are invisible, as they are deeply embedded in consumption habits and illegitimate products are normally avoided.\footnote{Rinallo 2007, 86.}
\end{quote}

All the studies accounted for above raise questions about patterns of consumption. How can such patterns be explained in relation to my informants’ identities? One can ask, for example, which categories supersede others when it comes to identity-driven consumption. All humans operate with a number of identities simultaneously, and while the young people in question were ‘\textit{vanliga}’ they were also men, women, sons, daughters, siblings, friends, consumers, students, Swedes, white, and so on. Were the informants driven by an urge to fit in or to stand out, and was their consumption driven by positive or negative reinforcement? In sifting through these issues I have turned to the sociologist Steph Lawler and her work on identity (see Chapter 4).\footnote{Steph Lawler, \textit{Identity: Sociological Perspectives} (2$^{nd}$ edn, Cambridge: Polity, 2014).}

This chapter sets out the theoretical inspiration of the dissertation and the key theories drawn from anthropology, youth cultural studies, and subcultural theory, while considering definitions of the central terms and concepts such as

\begin{flushright}
\footnote{For the original figure, see Rinallo 2007, 86.}
\end{flushright}
ordinariness, mainstream, and subculture. The field of fashion studies and its bearing on the thesis are mapped out, as are a selection of relevant studies on fashion and identity and the contribution the thesis can make to the field in turn. Before turning the analysis of my findings, however, in the next chapter I will address the method employed and the ethnographic material in detail, along with a presentation of the informants and the fieldwork.
3 Methodology and material

Thus far I have positioned my study in relation to the literature on youth and fashion and have discussed studies of fashion, consumption, and identity that share research questions with the present study. In this chapter I present the ethnographic method used in my research and the raw material resulting from the study. The aim during fieldwork was to listen to the voices of the young people and to document the denim they wore. The methods employed to collect the material serve a number of purposes: to map patterns of clothing consumption; to understand what was central to the young people’s self-identification; and to decipher any correlations between the two. The main steps were to document the denim they owned and to collect accounts of how they dressed and how they viewed their own clothing choices relative to others’. Another element in the fieldwork was designed to gauge what mattered to the informants in their lives, and thus who they considered themselves to be. These self-insights could then be set against their actual consumption practices.

The fieldwork took place over 24 months between 2009 and 2011, of which the first year was most intensive and the second year consisted of more sporadic meetings. The material is made up of five different categories: approximately 20 participant observations, 6 semi-structured interviews, 12 written clothing stories, 20 wardrobe studies, and 600 photos.199 The participant observations constitute the largest part of the material in terms of time taken and

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199 Apart from these five categories, a sixth category concerns the material on the PJs and was collected with ‘netnography’, or online ethnography; see R. V. Kozinets, *Netnography: Redefined* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2015). The idea to collect this material came from my informants telling me of the PJs’ existence. It is not part of the primary material as it is based on secondary information provided by my informants. The aim was not primarily to document the PJs, but rather to document how my informants described and understood them. The material is based on visual and textual sources in the popular media and online forums where young people interacted, following the informants’ suggestions as to where to look: primarily video-sharing website YouTube, the social networking site Facebook, and the Swedish Internet communities Flashback and Hamsterpaj, along with personal blogs and web communities where members posted photos (such as Efterfesten, or ‘The after-party’, and Bilddagboken, lit. ‘The picture diary’). These online data were collected by so-called lurking, without announcing my presence and without direct online contact, participant observations, or interviews with PJs in real life. I conducted a thorough search of the press and traced the groups’ online whereabouts: my focus was the comments on anything posted publicly online by members of the PJ community. This data is textual in the broadest sense, and includes text-based exchanges as well as
detail. In order for me to get to know my informants and reach a degree of 
acceptance, it was necessary for me to participate in social situations. Obser-
vation was also key, giving me access to aspects that cannot be captured by 
interviewing or counting and documenting items of clothing. The participant 
observations included taking part in social activities such as eating together, 
going to parties, hanging out at home or in town, going shopping, fika (fika is 
something of a social institution in Sweden, a form of socializing over a hot 
drink and a bite to eat, usually coffee and a sweet pastry), and other activities 
in a similar vein. The duration varied from one to several hours. These en-
counters were documented in a field diary and in photographs.

Further documentation tools include recorded interviews and written com-
munication with the informants. The conversations that were recorded were 
six semi-structured interviews on the topic of ethical consumption, three with 
female informants and three with male informants. However, the majority 
of conversations with the informants were not structured dialogues and were 
not recorded. Apart from communicating by text message and Facebook mes-
 sage as part of their everyday communication—to arrange meeting up, for ex-
ample—some of the informants sent in written accounts of their ideas and 
thoughts on their relationship to denim and style. This part of the material 
consists of six texts on denim and six texts on style, written by different indi-
viduals.

The total number of individuals encountered during the fieldwork is diffi-
cult to specify exactly, since many of the occasions such as going to parties or 
hanging out in town involved a number of people whom I had little or no direct 
interaction with. However, the twenty individuals who participated in the 
wardrobe study can be said to form the core of the material. Out of these 20 
individuals (9 men, 11 women), I followed 2 men and 3 women more closely. 
The majority of the research was done in the homes of the informants, in my 
home at the time of fieldwork, and in various places around Midway.

A number of factors called for the use of an ethnographic method to re-
search this group of young people. Fundamental to ethnography is an under-
standing of people as part of a cultural context, where nothing is objective or 
neutral. What people say or do has to be contextualized by the general morals 
of a society: the cultural, economic, political and religious climate. When peo-
ple talk about their clothing consumption, they are also saying something else. 
In this study I have set out to uncover some of the subtexts about what people

pictures and video clips. Of greatest relevance here are the informants’ attitudes towards the 
PJs as documented during participant observations and in the six informants’ written texts about 
sty le.

See Appendix 3 for the open-ended questionnaire used during the interviews on ethical con-
sumption.

See Appendix 3 for the questions for informants who were going to submit written texts. I 
was not present when the texts were written, and instructed the informants to answer only the 
questions they felt like answering and to add to them where necessary.
wear and how they talk about it, and the implications for their consumption practices. In order to identify the subtexts it has been necessary to participate close up, listening to what people say as observing what they actually do. Ethnography, which is not a single method but rather a collective name for a range of strategies, makes it possible to reach more profound and complex understandings of the human experience than most other scientific methods. The research design for this study was thus oriented towards understanding why young people wore what they did.

As a researcher, being in the field comes with the advantage that you learn of events in everyday life that take on major proportions one day—something that happened at a party, failing a school exam, an argument over supper—but might be forgotten the next. The small moments and events that constitute life, yet are rarely recounted in a situation constructed around a researcher asking a respondent questions, are ethnographic gold. Participation and observation requires the researcher to be able to see and hear both what is there and what is not there; however, these are not the only important senses at work, as smell, taste, and touch are also central when using this methodology. Each group, culture, and generation has their own soundtrack, their own rhythm, pace, scent, flavor, aesthetic—their own unique frequency of experiencing their existence. Clothing consumption must be viewed in relation to these specific circumstances which shape their lives. Ethnography’s long-term perspective helped me understand references to music, movies, celebrities, and other cultural expressions that might have an impact on the studied group’s consumption practices.

Certain things found in people’s lifeworlds demand more uninterrupted face-to-face contact if they are to come to light, which was something I aimed to achieve during the 24 months of fieldwork. Since fieldwork procedures are so fundamental to all ethnographic projects, I believe this process should be as visible as possible. I have chosen to present my methodology in a separate chapter, along with a detailed description of the source material, although it should be pointed out that is an organizational decision, not an assertion that methodology and theory are separate entities. Hence, in this chapter I set out my research process and address a number of issues affecting the study in as transparent a manner as possible. I discuss what it meant to conduct anthropology at home in Sweden, in the small-town setting of Midway, and at the various ethnographic field sites. I also describe the informants, how they were selected, how we worked together, and some of the ethical implications of the study, and round off by detailing the organization and analysis of the material. First, though, to the question of ethnographic knowledge production and the pitfalls of working in Swedish but communicating my findings in English.
Producing and translating ethnographic knowledge

The research methods used in this study can be labelled ethnography, which the anthropologists Marcus and Fischer define as

a research process in which the anthropologist closely observes, records, and engages in the daily life of another culture—an experience labeled as the fieldwork method—and then writes accounts of this culture, emphasizing descriptive detail.202

In ethnographic texts, the research process is often portrayed as a linear process, in which the formulation of a research problem or question is followed by fieldwork, which is followed by analysis and conclusions (the reverse of this thesis, which opens with its conclusions). However, as Marcus and Fisher or anyone with fieldwork experience will testify, ethnography entails an improvisational aspect—a continuous moving back forth between new and old understandings that affects the way methodology and theory make each other. Because of this movement, it is not always easy to tell from a finished text how the ethnographic research was done.203 Many times, what really happened in the field is mulled over in conversation with colleagues, while it is the duly sanitized conclusions that find their way into print.

In reality, the research process is far from as neat and tidy as it might appear in presentations. The present project certainly did not follow a linear process; rather, I had to continuously evaluate the path I was exploring, while my informants had their own ideas and agendas during our time together. The element of surprise and improvisation in ethnographic fieldwork can make knowledge production appear veiled in mystery. The tradition of writing monographs can also make it hard for an outsider to break down the research process into the smaller units that would make the process of knowledge production visible in more detail.204

Another aspect of knowledge production relevant to this thesis is the question of the translations from Swedish, the working language, into English. Generally speaking the process has been friction-free. All ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in Swedish and was documented by me in a combination of the two languages. The thesis has been written in English from the first. The source material—conversations and interviews—has not been translated in toto, only those passages quoted in the text, of which some are translated and others are paraphrased. Where necessary, the cultural contextualization is given for specific words. Of course, it should be noted that the fieldwork also

204 Cerwonka & Malkki 2007, 162–186.
saw the participants educating me in their language and culture: in this sense all ethnographies are translations, even between people who share the same cultural landscape.

In any translation, meanings and nuances are inevitably renegotiated. I regard this as an extra layer to add to the issues of representation, but one that would have been present even if the text were written in Swedish. However, all research is a long process of inclusion and omission, with countless choices that impact the meaning of things. The effect of all these choices on the story that is ultimately told is something I have tried to treat with respect. At the same time, ethnography is not positivist, and does not aspire to uncover an authentic reality or some sort of unbiased truth. In the words of the late American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, ‘anthropological writings are themselves interpretations’. What this means in practice is that the topic of the dissertation has pointed me in certain directions in the field, such as conducting the wardrobe studies, and that the material presented here has been processed not only through a language filter but also a comprehension filter, which asks what will contribute to an understanding of consumption among young people and duly omits the things that do not serve that purpose.

Researching Sweden

Studying one’s own society, as I have done, remains controversial within anthropology. Although things have changed a great deal due to globalization and changes in the job market for anthropologists, it still has certain methodological implications. Gupta and Ferguson write that ‘some “fields” are more equal than others—specifically, those that are understood to be distant, exotic or strange’, referring to an old conception of anthropology as a field science, where the anthropologist went away to study authentic and isolated areas, with the emphasis on away. Even though the idea of natural states has now been abandoned, some places still appear to be considered more ‘anthropological’ than others. The tradition of polarizing so-called ‘real’ or ‘regular’ anthropology and ‘native’ or ‘indigenous’ anthropology—what I have been doing here—is still discussed with some heat in the literature, and is therefore difficult to overlook. This is perhaps especially so for the anthropologist at home, who runs the risk of being put in a situation of defending one’s objectivity.

206 Geertz 2000, 15.
Traditionally, it was thought that the ‘real’ anthropologist was the one who studies Others from an outsider perspective, whereas the ‘native’ operates with an insider perspective—a dichotomy that has consequences for the way the anthropologist is considered to relate to the people who are being studied.\textsuperscript{209} The term ‘real’ anthropologist implies that studying people from an outside perspective by addressing a foreign culture is not only what anthropology is supposed to be about, but also that it involves harder work and is in the end thus more reliable; anthropology at home in a familiar milieu risks taking too much for granted, not questioning things enough, and ultimately being less reliable.\textsuperscript{210} The distinction also implies that the ‘native’ anthropologist brings an authentic insider’s point of view to bear.\textsuperscript{211} Techniques commonly used to get away such home-blindness include adopting a cross-cultural perspective or making historical comparisons.

Much of the tension between ‘real’ versus ‘native’, ‘outsider’ versus ‘insider’ appears somewhat outdated given the nature of modern fieldwork. Not only are anthropologists these days much more given to studying their own societies, but the selection of field sites based on geography has also expanded. Doing anthropology at home can be a place of sameness, but it can also be a place of difference.\textsuperscript{212} My chosen field is an environment where I have felt myself to be an insider and an outsider. The fieldwork was conducted in the small Swedish town where I was born, and so I entered the field with a certain pre-understanding both in terms of space and cultural practices. At the same time, a place is not a fixed entity but a process that is continuously redefined: I had left Midway to go to school in another city at the age of fifteen, and have spent only short periods of time there since, and in the time since I left, the city has changed considerably. In addition, the group of young people I have studied came of age at a time that was very different from when I was growing up there. Technical advances and the digitalization of society are the single largest factors that separate my own generation from this one: the Internet revolution, mobile phones, digital cameras, mp3-players, DVD’s, laptops, tablets, smartphones, social media—these are all things that first reached the market when I was in my teens and twenties, but have always been part of my informants’ lifeworlds.

I would argue I have learned as much from this environment and its people as I would have done if my fieldwork had been somewhere else, far away. It is the ethnography, not my personal, generalized understanding of Swedish culture, that in the end is subject to analysis. One way of eliminating this risk is to constantly ask questions, even about things that appear obvious or are

\textsuperscript{209} Kirin Narayan, ‘How Native is a “Native” Anthropologist?’, \textit{American Anthropologist}, 95/3 (1993), 671, 672.


\textsuperscript{211} Narayan 1993, 676.

\textsuperscript{212} Gupta & Ferguson 1997, 33.
taken for granted. Rudimentary questions about who people are, what they are doing, and what they want have helped me get away from generalizations about Sweden, and instead have directed my focus towards this particular group of people. As anthropologist Bawa Yamba remarks, there are no shortcuts to knowledge, whether you are studying your own society or an alien one.213 At the same time there is a balancing act between fitting in and missing out. Fit in too well and you run the risk of missing things by passing on the opportunity to have them explained to you. Another way of eliminating this risk is to consult the literature. Detailed ethnographic studies in the Midway area are as good as non-existent; however, the work of Annette Rosengren and her ethnography of people’s ordinary lives in a neighboring town has provided me with a sense of the dialogue between past and present in the area.214 Others include the work of the Swedish ethnologist Bo Nilsson on masculinity and how it is created between heteronormativity and homosociality—a central theme in my analysis of how the informants related to appearance and gender identity.215

Further, it is not only your cultural background that affects the fieldwork process. Your whole social personhood can to varying degrees affect the work and social relations that are developed in the field.216 From this perspective, fieldwork is always contentious in some way. I believe that my status as a young, single woman without children affected how the young people and the older adults I came in contact with perceived me. I was somewhere in the middle, not part of the young people’s peer group but still not a proper adult in their eyes since I did not have a family or a real job during the fieldwork. The emic understanding of a real job was largely tied to fixed working hours and a specific place: you should start and finish at set points, not spend your days hanging out with people. In hindsight, the most challenging part of doing fieldwork at home was the sense of fragmentation. Part of the advantage of doing fieldwork far away is the possibility to submerge oneself in the work and forget one’s real life for a while. When researching close to home, family and personal concerns and university work have a tendency to make themselves felt, stealing focus away from the field. Hence, it was not only my informants who considered my time in the field to be a state of limbo—I did too.

216 Cerwonka & Malkki 2007, 177.
Midway

There were numerous towns across Sweden that could have been selected to study young people’s clothing consumption and identity formation. In the end my choice fell on to the small town of Midway in the south of Sweden.217 The pseudonymous name of Midway has been used to keep the identity of the field site anonymous;218 more importantly, it is not the specific town itself that is important, but rather what it represents in the lifeworlds of the informants. However, its general location in the south of the country and the names of the larger Swedish cities do correspond with reality. All the names of the informants, businesses, and places have been altered in order to preserve the anonymity of those who participated in the research; however, data such as birth year, sex, occupation, and housing have been left unchanged, since they are relevant to the analysis of the material.

There is something of a contradiction between making generalized statements about a place and its inhabitants, and at the same time describing and explaining the behavior of people in terms of the specifics of the place where they live. My aim, though, is to say something about the relationship between identity and consumption practices among young people living outside the three major conurbations—Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö—like most of the population.219 However, that is not to say that I think Midway is representative of the majority of Swedes. Furthermore, the demographic spread, rates of employment, household incomes, and levels of education match the statistics for the total population with little deviation.220 The data is taken from Statistics Sweden, a government agency responsible for official and government statistics. Supporting qualitative claims with quantitative data, here from a government body, is not unproblematic; however, possible misrepresentations in the statistical data cannot detract from the aim of researching Sweden’s young.

All this requires methodological and theoretical explanation. By stating that Midway was selected mainly because it can be characterized as average, I wish to make the same reservation as made in the first chapter as regards the ordinariness of my informants. In no way do I consider Midway to be ‘more average’ than any other Swedish town—rather, the selection is based on a statistical representation. The desire to study a place based on such criteria agrees

217 See Image 2, the photograph of Midway shot from the hill.
218 The pseudonym was chosen from a search of the US Board of Geographic Names (http://gnis.usgs.gov/index.html, accessed 15 January 2014) and has no scientific bearing: it is merely a common name from an English-speaking part of the world that fits the bill semantically.
219 According to SCB, the total population of Sweden in 2009 was 9,340,682. The population in 2009 excluding the three main conurbations of Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö was 5,756,224 (see SCB 2009).
220 This is based on a comparison of SCB statistics that compare Sweden as a whole and the municipality of Midway, http://www.scb.se, accessed 4 November 2015.
with Miller’s use of London’s streets as ethnographic field sites, the idea being to study a location that has no special characteristics.\(^\text{221}\) However, in the same way that an average London street is likely to include a great diversity of people as far as age, class, ethnicity, occupation, relationship status, religious belief, or sexual orientation goes, a Swedish town can claim to represent the average because of its similarities.\(^\text{222}\) Yes, variations in the categories just mentioned certainly exist, but on the surface it stands out more for its homogeneity that its pulsating diversity. A comparison between Midway and a large cosmopolitan city such as London, or for that matter between a street and a town, does perhaps come across as a poor, but there is still a point to be made in emphasizing the dominating force of homogeneity and similarity as a Swedish cultural and aesthetic ideal.\(^\text{223}\)

Midway is the main town in a municipality of around 50,000 inhabitants, in county that has a population of around 1.6 million.\(^\text{224}\) Population statistics show that migration into and out of the municipality tends to even out, leaving the total population largely unchanged from year to year. In the 2000s, the population increased by a little more than 1,000 people—a fairly stable if slow positive growth. Around 33,000 people live in the town, with the rest of the municipal population spread out in the countryside and in small villages. In the town center there is a mix of privately owned houses and flats and rented accommodation, whereas the majority of rural population live in privately owned houses. The main sources of employment in the area are two manufacturing industries, two building material industries, a regional hospital, a military base, a college, and the local authority, while many people work in education and training in the public and private sectors.\(^\text{225}\)

Situated on the main train line, thousands of people pass through the town everyday, but unless there is a specific reason to visit few people stop there other than to change trains. Like most places in Sweden, the great outdoors is a central element in people’s lives. A nearby hill is a popular spot for the locals, but is too modest to attract tourists. Hence, it appears that both in terms of culture and geography, this particular town comes close to filling the criteria for a location that is averagely Swedish in terms of both its statistics and its geography.


\(^{222}\) See O’Dell 1997.


\(^{224}\) Sweden is divided into twenty-one counties, or *län*.

Ethnographic field sites

In Midway there were a number of places that my informants frequented. The commonest places where both men and women aged about 20 spent their time were at home (either in their parents’ homes or in a flat where they lived alone or together with friends or a partner), at a friend’s or a boy- or girlfriend’s house, at work, in school, at the gym or other sports facility, in cars, in bars, or in the town center, this last being known as ‘gå på stan’, or ‘going into town’. Associated with activities that take place in the town center, ‘gå på stan’ is typically a small-town expression since it is there the shops tend to be clustered together in one place. Mostly it refers to going shopping for things that one does not buy every day, such as clothing or shoes or other items only found in town-center shops. Grocery shopping, for example, would not count, since for the most part people shop at the larger supermarkets, several of which are situated outside the town center. To ‘gå på stan’ can also involve running errands, going to the town market or the chemist, or buying alcohol at the state-owned off-licence. Apart from shopping, ‘gå på stan’ also refers to using local services such as cafés, restaurants, or the hairdresser, all of which function as social meeting places. However, it does not include going to bars or nightclubs, since this is something usually done in the evenings: ‘gå på stan’ is something done in daylight hours, if not business hours.

Bars and nightclubs were places visited by informants, but that was referred to as ‘gå ut’, ‘going out’. In addition, the informants were also ‘ute’, or outside—a central Swedish cultural concept that children are fostered into, based on the idea that it is healthy to play outside. In Sweden’s large cities with their higher levels of anonymity it is not common for children to be left unattended, but in most small towns there is a high level of trust in letting relatively small children play outside without the company of a guardian. Although it is mainly used when talking about younger children who are playing in the street, a local park, or in the woods, many of my informants would bike, skateboard, and longboard, or go for a walk or a drink in a park, and were therefore also ’outside’ in the same sense.

A large part of their social activity took place on the Internet, via messaging services or virtual communities such as Facebook, Bilddagboken (now Dayviews, a photo-sharing service), and MySpace, or via personal blogs (the fieldwork was conducted just before the breakthrough of smartphones). For this group of individuals it was part of the routine of daily life to engage in social activities on the Internet, and not primarily with people in other places.

226 In Sweden, as in all Nordic countries except mainland Denmark, the government holds the monopoly on selling alcohol over 3.5% alcohol by volume. The main argument for the existence of the monopoly is that it is believed that alcohol-related problems are reduced if it is sold by a non-profit organization (Systembolaget 2014). Whatever else, the alcohol monopoly has created a certain drinking culture—and patterns of social behaviour—seen at the parties attended by informants.
but mostly with people who they saw every day. Photo-sharing on the Internet was a central activity: at the time, photo-sharing sites were gaining in popularity, with nightclubs hiring professional photographers to snap and post photos of guests. Taking selfies (a term that took off at the time of the fieldwork) or photos of one another was a common activity when hanging out, and both boys and girls appeared to have a relaxed and playful attitude towards being photographed. Just like anthropologist Heather Horst’s American teenagers, these young people’s sense of self in the world is closely connected to their assertion of a material presence in the physical and digital worlds. Since taking photos was not restricted to special occasions, but was rather an element of hanging out, it was crucial for their self-image and for how they judged their bodies against the bodies of their peers. I should note that I have handled my online interactions with the informants in the same way as our interactions in ‘real’ life.

Participants

The focus of the study is young men and women in their late teens and early twenties who live in one small Swedish town, all of whom identify themselves as being mainstream. This means that when recruiting participants I looked for people who did not consider themselves to dress in a specific style or belong to a subcultural group. Thus, the research has been carried out in a territorially defined community, Midway, and the selection of informants has been made based on the social category of age among those who dressed in no specific style. Gender influenced the selection of informants in that I wanted to study young people—thus including both men and women—in a way that ensured that the wardrobe studies would be as equally divided as possible. As far as other social categories are concerned, they have not served as factors in the selection of informants for the project.

The first contact with potential informants was made through personal connections with past informants who had been interviewed for my MA in Fashion Studies. Initially, one informant—Alexander—came to fill the role of gatekeeper, and at the onset of fieldwork I often tagged along with him and so established contact with his friends and acquaintances. Using snowball sampling, I was then able to reach a wider network of people. Given the number of personal introductions I was given, many—but not all—informants were connected by ties of friendship. The informants came from different social

228 Note again that identifying as mainstream is not to be equated with the outcome that identifying as vanlig structured how the youth consumed clothing.
backgrounds, but their social and geographic proximity resulted in a homoge-
ous group that can be described broadly as working-class and middle-class
ethnic Swedes. All of them referred to themselves as heterosexual, and none
were married or had children.

After meeting a potential informant in a social situation I would often
search for that person on the social networking site Facebook, or they sought
me out, and from there I would be able to set up individual meetings. The
speed and force with which the landscape of social media is constantly re-
drawn illustrates how contemporary ethnography is ceaseless transformed,
forced to adapt to the conditions of its times. Since I was not a member of
Facebook prior to starting my fieldwork, I signed up and created a personal
account in my name. In 2009, when my fieldwork started, Facebook was rated
the most-used social network worldwide with almost 200 million users. In
the first month of fieldwork I set up a Facebook group for the project in order
to spread the word about my research. In a few weeks the group had over one
hundred members, and the page served to help bring legitimacy to the project.
As one informant said, ‘If it’s not on Facebook it doesn’t exist’. The group’s
profile picture was the same as a flyer I handed out around town. It should be
said, though, that in 2009 the social media had not yet expanded exponentially
as it would in subsequent years, and Facebook was the most impersonal form
of communication. Most of the time if I wanted to make definite plans with
someone, I still needed to telephone them.

One issue I anticipated with restricting the geographical scope of the study,
especially when dealing with young people, is the risk of informants moving
away or leaving to travel during the fieldwork. As it turned out, a few inform-
ants did leave to go backpacking, find work, or study; however, it came to-
wards the end of the fieldwork when I had already collected most of my ma-
terial, and none of them were among the five individuals whom I followed
most closely. It did not seem a reasonable option to simply let these informants
disappear from the material, considering that mobility is such a strong feature
of young people’s lives, so I kept in touch using a variety of strategies. For
those travelling some distance—exchange studies in Australia or backpacking
in South East Asia—I maintained contact via Facebook. For those closer to
home, ‘following the people’ was feasible, and I made occasional visits to

230 The rapid growth of social media has not only changed how researchers relate to informants
and vice versa, but also how researchers relate to one another. The opportunities to communi-
cate in real time, rather than waiting for research to be published, has brought fresh challenges
to ethnography, making its improvisational aspects even more adaptable.
231 In the first quarter of 2009 Facebook had an estimated 197 million users; in the second
quarter, 242 million users; in the third quarter, 305 million users; and the last quarter, 360 mil-
lion users (statista.com http://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-
When carrying out ethnographic fieldwork, the fieldworker is faced with the fact that many activities take place in the context of the home, away from public arenas, and perhaps especially so in the Nordic countries, where the home is very central for reasons of climate and in terms of lifestyle building. Because of the high level of activity that takes place behind closed doors in private households, the home is a key route into understanding contemporary society. Entering informants’ homes has been pivotal to this study, since this is where the development and reproduction of many social relations takes place. For the studied group, a great deal of social interaction with friends took place in the home, as opposed to later in life when social interaction in the home in Sweden usually becomes more restricted. Moreover, the home is the place where most people get dressed, with all that means for negotiations about the body. The idea current in material culture studies that studying the private sphere for insights into the public sphere would seem to be crucial to any study of clothing in contemporary society. Like perhaps no other object, clothing shifts between being part of the materiality of the home in the most private way to existing in the public sphere. Getting dressed is an act of constructing one’s public appearance in the privacy of one’s own home.

As the first step in establishing contact with the informants I conducted wardrobe interviews where I visited the informants in their homes and documented their denim. In order to feel that I was getting somewhere, I decided that I wanted to perform at least twenty wardrobe interviews, divided equally between men and women; in fact, this encouraging strategy turned out to be far more important than I first imagined, because it was an icebreaker for both the informants and me to have a definite task at hand. Whether the informants lived with their parents, with a partner, or alone, my visits to their homes had a certain impact. When visiting informants who lived alone, intrusions into the private lives of other family members were not an issue. On the other hand, being able to meet the informants’ parents and other family members resulted in many interesting conversations, often ending up in discussions of the morality of spending and boundaries to authenticity and shallowness. As with all long-term ethnographic research, the study has required people who were willing to spend considerable amounts of time with me as a researcher. The result was thus a group of informants who can be described as open-minded and interested in talking about fashion and reflecting on themselves. Some of the informants I only met once, whereas I continued to work more intensively

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234 As 65 per cent of the informants lived with their parents (see Appendix I Table 1).
with others. In the end I worked most closely with five informants who will be introduced in detail later (see pp. 102-103).

Ethics and reflexivity

Ethnographic research at all stages, from selecting a topic to writing up, involves countless decisions—as do all varieties of research. Given the open research design that is the essence of the ethnographic method, it is difficult to predict all the moral and ethical issues that might arise, and the method can come to change as part of the research process.235 Solutions to decision making in ethical issues that arise during fieldwork are not always self-evident. Here I will discuss how I have treated the most important issues that were present in the project, focusing on issues relating to informed consent, confidentiality, and textual representation.

The data upon which this dissertation are based comes out of relationships with informants, for the most part initiated by me. There are a number of professional codes of conduct for social scientists to be used when conducting research. I have primarily complied with the codes of ethics of the American Anthropological Association, the AAA, as well as the ethical guidelines for research in the humanities and social sciences by Vetenskapsrådet (the Swedish Research Council).236 The literature and other studies have provided further guidance. Still, all fieldwork involves unique situations that cannot always be answered by looking at other studies. As far as possible, my aim in this project has been to avoid influencing the informants’ actions while not creating any stress or anxiety. Although ethnographic research always involves some measure of interruption in people’s lives, whether positive or negative, I have done my best to avoid any damaging consequences for the people involved.

All participation in the project has been based on informed consent, and informants have been free to withdraw at any time. Upon joining the project, all informants were informed verbally about the purpose of the project. The individuals appearing in the photographs have given written consent for the use of the images in print. The information given to informants follows Vetenskapsrådet’s recommendations, and thus included:

The overall research plan, the aim of the research, the methods to be used, the consequences and risks that the research can entail, who the principal investigator is, the fact that participation is voluntary, and the fact that the subject has the right to cease participation at any time.237

236 For the guidelines, see AAA 2012; VR 2015; CODEX 2017.
237 CODEX 2016a.
Under Sweden’s Act on Ethical Review of Research Involving Humans, children over 15 who can understand what their participation in a project means, should be given the same information and required to give written consent.\(^{238}\) Thus this has been obtained from all informants in the present study.

Although apparently straightforward, there were some issues with informed consent. One difficulty was to present my project in a meaningful way to people in the field, ensuring that they had been given all relevant information necessary for deciding whether or not to participate.\(^{239}\) Most participants had no previous experience or understanding of ethnographic work, and I had to find the middle ground between on the one hand not getting too theoretical about the full purpose of the dissertation, and on the other hand not leading informants to think that I was only interested in their denim. In presenting my project to be about fashion, I sometimes asked myself whether I was perhaps leading people on to think that it was more glamorous and fun than it really was. This was a delicate task, especially as the open design of the research made it difficult to know what the end product would look like. My way of getting around this was to have a continuing dialogue about what I was doing with the informants I met with the most.

Since many of the participants in the project knew one another and frequently hung out, it is possible that they influenced one another’s participation in ways that I am not fully aware of. This is to be accepted in this kind of study, as interrogating people about their private conversations or why they did not wish participate in the study would be unethical. The voluntary aspect of participation is of the greatest importance.

Although informants have the right to be informed that they are being studied, there have been settings in the field where it has not been possible to ensure that everyone present has been fully informed about my project.\(^{240}\) For instance, when attending social gatherings such as parties at someone’s house I was open about my project when asked in conversation, but at the same time I did not inform everyone I came into contact with about my research. These individuals do not feature in any way in the thesis. Another issue relating to informed consent was the fact that the informants occasionally appeared to forget that they were being studied, especially in situations when the activity or topic of conversation was not directly connected to my research, such as watching a film or having a coffee.\(^{241}\)

Informed consent was also a continuous process, not something obtained only once. One way of dealing with this was that I regularly asked people if they wanted to participate, so that if we had met once they did not feel obliged

\(^{238}\) CODEX 2016b.
\(^{239}\) See Davies 1999, 47.
to meet again. Another strategy was to try to make myself readily accessible by always answering my mobile phone or Facebook messages.

At the outset I found it perplexing at times to raise the question with the informants of their right to privacy and ownership. For example, when asking for permission to use a photograph, I was often met with a blank. At first I took this to mean that they had not understood what I was asking; it was only later it dawned that they had their own ethics of privacy and ownership. They had genuinely little interest in the right to control certain information relating to them—as I came to understand, their notions of privacy were different from what I had expected, so that being photographed at a party among other people, perhaps under the influence of alcohol, was generally not perceived as a private situation.

All the informants’ names have been anonymized. Although this was discussed with the informants during fieldwork, they were generally indifferent in this matter too, and it was ultimately my decision to use pseudonyms. My reason is that the aims of the project are not best served by portraying the individuals as such, and I did not want anyone who participated to regret it later. I have felt that it has been possible to grant anonymity to outsiders to a very large extent since the informants did not occupy readily identifiable roles in the community in Midway. Midway may be a small town, but it is not a village where everyone knows everyone and their business. Anonymity was as more of a question of hiding informants from one another, considering that many of them were aware of one another’s participation.  

Even though it might be difficult to distinguish between what is said on and off the record in fieldwork—once you know something it is difficult to forget it—I have respected what has been said in confidence. Further, most things said in confidence have been of a nature that has no real relevance to the project. Any personal matters raised in the text have been discussed with the informants, but in the end it is my words and interpretations that are presented. I take full responsibility for any misinterpretations or misunderstandings. Field notes have been stored in a place accessible only to me, and all lists of participants and transcriptions of interviews were encoded.

Using the terms researcher and informant to describe the fieldwork relationships does not fully reflect my emotional investment in the people I have got to know. I have come to consider many of them friends, and, since I had asked them to help me, it felt natural to help them in return whenever I could. This involved things such as paying for a coffee or a meal, giving people lifts, or letting people stay in my flat in Stockholm during fieldwork—things that many young people were not always able to provide for themselves. There were situations when I was expected to contribute financially, but only in group situations when everyone was expected to chip in, and they were the

result of suggesting activities to do when hanging out, or being active at a party rather than just sitting in a corner: I wanted the participants to accept me in their social life, and part of that was to behave according to the social rules, and that includes contributing to social activities. This is less of an issue and more of a must in this kind of research.

I was in my late twenties during fieldwork, and was thus not in the same peer group as my informants, the age difference being considerable: the early twenties are the years that see some of the greatest changes in a small-town context such as Midway, being the time when people go from living at home to living alone, perhaps do military service, choose to spend some time travelling, attend university, college, or vocational training, or start their careers and embark on working life. By their late twenties many people are established at work and have a steady partner or are married with children. Although neither married nor finished with my studies, I still represented another phase in life for these individuals. Because of the informal nature of the group’s social life, it has been critical for me to maintain a reflective frame of mind about the authority that comes with being a researcher interacting with informants.

Given the topic of the project, the types of questions I asked were designed not to cause the informants any anxiety. The one exception was the six semi-structured interviews I conducted on the topic of ethical consumption, when it became apparent that the informants had not previously thought about some of the questions I raised in any great detail. For example, when I asked what ‘corporate social responsibility’ meant to them, one informant returned to the question later in the interview and asked if she was supposed to know what it meant. It did not strike me until afterwards that perhaps she had interpreted my questions as a sort of test that she could fail if she did not know the answers. People often find it difficult to express their opinions on complicated matters—ethics, for example, or morality—in an interview situation because it makes them feel defensive and confused. The mere fact of being a research subject can create stress that is not always immediately noticeable to the researcher, and I have tried actively to diminish stress factors for the participants.243

Ethnography’s ability to take on a life of its own struck me quite early on in my research, once I had written about the project in a general textbook on fashion studies.244 In my essay I used an illustration that is on the jacket of the present thesis: two informants photographed from behind, not showing their faces.245 A while after the book

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244 Dirk Gindt & Louise Wallenberg (eds.), Mode—En introduktion. En tvärvetenskaplig betraktelse (Stockholm: Raster, 2009).
245 The text was written and published while I was still collecting material.
came out, an informant who did not feature in the photo took a snap of it in the book and uploaded it to Facebook, tagging it with the two informants’ names. A discussion ensued in the photo’s comments between informants and people who were not part of the project. This goes to show that not only do informants read what we write, but they too can shape the material in ways that can be unexpected and beyond the researcher’s control.

On that occasion my attempts to ensure all informants would remain anonymous were in vain. I had discussed anonymity and my use of photos with the informants, but in the end they wanted recognition for being in a book. I pondered long and hard whether to ask the person who uploaded the picture to Facebook to delete it, but in the end I decided I had to respect their right to agency, plus I had not asked the informants not to reveal their participation in the project. This episode is not only relevant for my research, but for ethnographic research in general: many projects are communicated using channels that have not been thoroughly discussed in the literature. To claim expertise about a group of people comes with a responsibility for how that knowledge is used in representations of the group. This is something that has been widely debated in anthropology, Marcus and Fisher’s work being among the most frequently cited, even though it is thirty years old, and is especially true when fieldwork is conducted alone (as was the case here)—ultimately, ethnographic writing is inseparable from the ethnographic fieldwork which the ethnographer claims as authority to represent a group of people. A central issue about modes of representation in ethnography concerns ethnographies as selective truths. Ethnography done in contemporary society inevitably touches questions of audience reception, whether it be the research community, the media, policymakers, or those about whom it is written. Ethnographic texts have a way of taking on a life of their own that can be difficult for the researcher to predict, let alone control.

Most of the informants in this project had not encountered ethnographic or academic work before, and did not know what to expect. As Glazier notes, a dissertation might lead to disappointment from informants who expected a ‘real’ book. My source material has been collected in Swedish, but all the informants speak English and will be able to read whatever the project produces. Issues of representation are always relevant, of course, but they cannot and should not prevent ethnographic fieldwork. In the present thesis, neither the research community, the media, nor policymakers have had any say in the

246 See Brettell 1993.
247 Marcus & Fischer 1986.
249 Brettell 1993, 4.
study. The only people invited into the research are the informants, and in this case their influence has been limited to giving their approval for the images used and to reading certain passages.

In the past few pages I have accounted for my handling of informed consent, confidentiality, and textual representation. I have problematized informed consent as an ongoing process throughout the project, and the challenges of mediating the direction the study would take. It highlights the longevity of the ethnographic method and the repeated conversations that ensue as a way of discussing this issue not once but over a long period. Further, I have discussed the importance of informant anonymity relative to free agency, concluding that my chief responsibility is to ensure the confidentiality of my informants, especially considering I have the upper hand because I know what academic end products are like. Lastly, I have reflected on textual representation and the necessity of inclusion and omission, to underscore why a study such as this should not be thought to serve the reader with objective truths, but rather with possible angles of interpretation.

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Thus far I have discussed the implications of the use of ethnography as a methodological approach. I have accounted for my choices in producing scientific knowledge in this way, and for the improvisational aspects of the process that go hand in hand with being present in the field, with a discussion how ethnography is about translation both on a cultural and on a semantic level. I have outlined the settings and field sites in Swedish Midway, how informants were recruited to the project, and my ethical obligations. I will turn to the nature of the source material and the key informants, ending with a discussion of what the material says about the participants as a group.

The source material

The study’s sources comprise five different categories of material: some 20 participant observations, 6 semi-structured interviews, 12 written texts, 20 wardrobe studies, and 600 photos. As is common in the qualitative research traditions, the finding will be presented and interpreted in an interwoven textual presentation, with the categories of sources forming the basis of the analysis, the participant observations chief among them. Interpretations of the data are combined with descriptions and illustrations, including quotations from the informants.251

As already noted, one of the founding principles of ethnography is the understanding of people as cultural actors, and their feelings, actions, and beliefs

251 Runa Patel & Bo Davidson, Forskningsmetodikens grunder. Att planera, genomföra och rapportera en undersökning (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2011), 133.
as part of a structured cultural system. This is the purpose of thick descriptions—to add commentary and interpretations to descriptions in order to convey meaning.252 My source material has therefore never been neutral, as since day one it has been filtered through my interpretive lens. This process has no clear recipe as ‘data are materials to think with’.253 Yet though it is difficult to determine when the process started, the analysis of the data still involves looking for common themes in the material.

What, then, of the data collection? Here I will look first at the participant observations, interviews, and texts on denim and style, and then present the wardrobe studies (found in tabular form in Appendix 1 Tables 1–4). I then describe the database of images, containing the 600 photos taken during my fieldwork, and conclude with a discussion of what the data says about the group as a whole.

Participant observations, interviews, and written accounts

Performing fieldwork in a small town and living in the same place as the informants, it was inevitable that there would be chance meetings, but many of them so brief as not to be categorized as participant observation. If we take the encounters that lasted an hour or more, the total number of participant observations comes to approximately 20. These encounters were documented in a field diary and photographs. The majority of interactions and conversations with the informants took place during these hang-outs.

The recorded encounters, meanwhile, were 6 semi-structured interviews on the topic of ethical consumption, 3 with female informants and 3 with male informants.254 These interviews involved a number of questions that I had prepared and let the informants talk freely about (for the questionnaires, see Appendix 2).255 The questions were open-ended, and were followed up by more questions adapted to each specific interview. All of these interviews were held at my home and lasted between 40 and 120 minutes. Together they amount to over 7 hours of tape and, once transcribed verbatim, a 350-page transcription. As noted, the interviews were conducted with another goal in mind, as I was then working on the idea of a study of ethical consumption among young people, and because of this the interviews are perhaps not as important to the analysis as their quantity might indicate. This is not to say that they are irrelevant, but they are not one of the main categories of reference.

252 Geertz 2000, 5–19.
254 As discussed on page 28, my initial plan was to study the consumption of ethical denim in Sweden from a consumer perspective. As ethical consumption did not come up spontaneously during the participant observations, I specifically conducted interviews on the topic.
255 Steinar Kvale, Den kvalitativa forskningsintervjun (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 1997), 32.
The 12 written texts were submitted by informants at my request. They were the result of very individual responses to my having asked a total of 20 people: some informants did not feel comfortable writing anything, some wrote lengthy descriptions, others just wrote a few lines. When it came to written stories, the women generally wrote longer, more detailed stories.

Wardrobe studies

In the early stages of fieldwork I visited the homes of 20 individuals and documented their wardrobes—that is, where they stored their clothes—and the jeans they owned. Wardrobe studies, done by going through peoples’ wardrobes and talking and documenting the contents, is an ethnographic technique that has gained popularity as fashion studies has become an established subject. As an alternative to academe’s previous interest in the symbolic aspects of fashion, scholars have started to direct their attention at materialities and the body. The anthropologist Emma Tarlo was an early adopter in her work on dress and identity in India in the nineties, since when a number of wardrobe studies have been published. The standard focus of these studies is women’s identities, as in the work of the consumption researchers Alison Guy and Maura Banim, the anthropologist Sophie Woodward, and the ethnologist Karin Lövgren, making the fashion scholar Philip Warkander something of an exception with his study of the queer-orientated club scene in central Stockholm.

Apart from the documentation of the informants’ denim, the wardrobe studies were an opportunity to spend time with the informants and talk about their past and present lives, who they used to be, and their thoughts about their future selves. Letting people talk about their clothes as they look at them is a surprisingly gratifying way of moving beyond the general, hypothetical, and symbolic aspects of fashion. By talking about clothing and style, and what works or not in various situations, people tend naturally to bring up the issue of norms and rules.

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256 Image 3 and image 4 show two of the wardrobes documented during the wardrobe studies; image 5 and image 6, the interior of two of the informants’ bedrooms; image 7 and image 8, two of the informants trying on their jeans during the wardrobe studies.


260 Lövgren 2015, 96.
One of the challenges with such a study is that someone’s wardrobe, their entire collection of clothes, is not a fixed entity, as it is often scattered between different cupboards and drawers—and laundry baskets. Another issue is that there is a risk that people might prepare for the researcher’s visit by putting away any items they do not feel like sharing. If one or two pair of jeans were to escape documentation it would not affect the overall results of my study, but if the number were large it would be problematic. Since access, connected to the bounds of privacy and intimacy, was not a problem in this study, I am confident that if there were jeans that went undocumented it was a matter of a few pairs at most. I used wardrobe studies in combination with other fieldwork methods to provide a useful depth of field, but they also resulted in an important body of source material in its own right.

Each wardrobe study began with me arriving alone at the home of the informants. Our meeting would typically take between one and two hours. All the information—the date of the study, the informant’s year of birth and age at the time of the visit, plus their gender, occupation, and type of residence—is presented in tabular form. On a few occasions, one or more family members were at home during my visit, but during the documentation itself I would always be alone with the informant in his or her bedroom, which was where their clothes were kept (with the exception of one informant who had a walk-in wardrobe separate from her bedroom). The wardrobes, as in the furniture, were mostly typical of the sort found in Ikea at the time, often made of wood or chipboard, and painted white. Two were built-in, the rest were freestanding. Occasionally there was a chest of drawers for the overflow from the wardrobe. Jeans were found on hangers, but more often than not, as they do not wrinkle easily, they would be heaped up in the wardrobe or somewhere in the room. Dirty washing was kept outside the bedroom, usually near the washing machine in a utility room or bathroom.

The informant and I would then go over each pair of jeans. Either the informant had prepared for my visit by taking out the denim in advance and placed it in a pile in the room for me to look at, or they would do it while I was there. I photographed each pair and note down its price, age, and size. The price and age were the informants’ estimates from memory, whereas the information about the size and length was taken from the garment labels. The informants would put on pairs of jeans while explaining how they felt about them, and what they felt and looked like on the body. The brand of each pair

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263 See Image 3 & Image 4.
264 See Image 14.
266 See Appendix 1 Table 2.
267 See Image 7 & Image 8.
of documented jeans was noted. This very deliberate process of documentation resulted in conversations that were less abstract than the interviews, which had not had the benefit of the physical presence of the garments.268

Database of images

Apart from taking notes during the wardrobe studies, both this part of the study and the participant observations were documented by camera. During the fieldwork over 600 photos were taken with a system camera and a mobile phone.269 The photos were not taken with publication in mind, but rather as aides-memoires. When I started fieldwork, I thought the camera would be a useful complement to taking notes, but in the end I incorporated it in a way I had not expected—and that frankly was not always under my control. When I was seeking out informants and conducting wardrobe inventories, the camera served to break the ice, being an object of shared focus. In my experience, the camera never felt intrusive and was a natural element of socializing, thanks in no small part to the age group in question and their habit of using photos on social media. The informants photographed one another, and even me, often using their own cameras. I took most of the photographs in the database, but the informants themselves have taken some of them on their own initiative. This is an example of what the sensory ethnographer Sarah Pink calls the collaborative method, as the informants and I consciously worked together to produce the visual images. I have not undertaken covert research by taking photographs without their knowledge.270

The photo material has not been manipulated, although photos taken by mistake that came out black or blank have been deleted. The images have been organized according to the following six categories: around town; wardrobes and home interiors; girls; boys; hanging out; and denim. Some images fit several categories and thus appear more than once.

**Around town (18 photographs)**
Images from around Midway, photographed when alone and when informants were present.

**Wardrobes and home interiors (30 photographs)**
Images of wardrobes and chests of drawers where the informants kept their clothes, and home interiors. This file contains no images of the informants themselves.

269 The photos are archived and catalogued at the Centre for Fashion Studies in Stockholm.
Girls (92 photographs)
Images of the female informants, their clothes, and homes. It includes all the photos in the ‘Wardrobes and home interior’ category, as well as images of the informants. The photos were mostly being taken when alone with the female informants, for example during the wardrobe studies.

Boys (134 photographs)
The same as for the girls.

Hanging out (186 photographs)
Photos from hanging out at parties, in town, or in someone’s home.

Denim (199 photographs)
Photos of denim and denim-related products. The majority were taken in different Swedish shops, mainly in Midway, Gothenburg, and Stockholm.

Illustrations (see images in the beginning of the thesis)
This section contains 15 illustrations: 4 from the category hanging out; 1 from around town; 4 of wardrobes and home interiors; 1 of girls; and 1 of boys. They have been selected to give an overview of the material, but without giving away the identities of the people represented in the photos. The illustrations were selected with the informants, having mutually agreed the level of anonymity in each photo. I have felt obliged to reject several photos that the informants themselves considered suitable for publication. Note that the people who appear in the images are not necessarily the five individuals who were followed more closely in the study.

Key informants
Finally, it is worth saying something about the material as a whole. I will present the five key informants who participated in the wardrobe study and were particularly important to the analysis.

Josefine (Case 3 in Appendix 1 Tables 1–4)
Josefine joined the project early on, about a month into the fieldwork. Born in 1990, she was 18 years old at that point. She had just started the second term of her last year at gymnasium (high school) and was getting ready to finish school. She and her mum lived in a house not far from the town center. Josefine considered her style to be regular, but acknowledged that her interest in fashion and shopping had resulted in her perhaps having too many clothes.
Alexander (Case 5 in Appendix 1 Tables 1–4)
Alexander was born in 1989 and was 19 years old when he joined the project, which he did on day one of fieldwork. When we first met he was couch-surfing with friends for a short period, after which he moved to a one-roomed flat in the town center where he lived alone. During the fieldwork he was working on a zero-hours contract for a food company, packing dairy products. He was very interested in clothes and especially denim, and described his style as being like everyone else’s; it stood out a little bit, but not too much.

Lily (Case 10 in Appendix 1 Tables 1–4)
The youngest of the informants, Lily was born in 1992 and had just turned 17 when she joined the project, about two months into the fieldwork. Lily was in her first year at high school and lived with her mum in a house outside town when we first met (after a while they moved closer to the town center). Lily saw her style as rather modest, neither too much nor too little. She liked clothes, but found it important not to care too much for fear of being thought shallow.

Anna (Case 12 in Appendix 1 Tables 1–4)
Born in 1988, Anna was 20 years old when she joined the study about three months in. She was living with her boyfriend Gustaf in a three-roomed flat at the time. At first she had a job in a women’s clothes shop, but she quit after a while in order to study to become a store manager. Her line of work and course at college reflected her interest in clothes. In her own words, she liked fashion and new trends, but she also liked to see what other people were wearing as a point of reference for how to dress.

Gustaf (Case 19 in Appendix 1 Tables 1–4)
Gustav, Anna’s boyfriend, joined the project sometime after Anna. He was living with her in their joint flat. Born in 1986, he was then 22 years old. He had recently started his studies in business, and was trying to find out what style would work for him. Gustav described his style as average, and said that he did not have a particular interest in fashion, although he was becoming more and more aware of what he wore.

Discussion of the material
There are certain characteristics and information about the nature of my informants as a group that crystalize if one looks at the data in Appendix 1 of this thesis. They form a rather uniform group, but there are nevertheless some variations in the material. Table 1 shows that the informants were born in the late 1980s to the early 1990s with an age range of 16–24. The total number of female participants in the wardrobe studies was 11, and the number of men
was 9. Of these, 10 were students, 6 were in work, and 4 were unemployed. The majority—12 of them—were living at home with their parents, 4 were living alone, 3 were living with a boyfriend or girlfriend, and 1 was living with a friend. All of those living alone were working to support themselves.

The main interest here is whether they had any denim clothing, and if so, whether their age, gender, occupation, and living situation affected their choices. In the wardrobe studies there were 214 pair of documented jeans. The average number of jeans documented for the female participants was 12.8 pairs and for the male participants it was 8.1 pairs. Students had the highest number of jeans, followed by those in waged work, and last the unemployed. Students living at home had both the cheapest and the most expensive pairs. Apart from making up the majority of the participants, this can be explained by the fact that they were still in high school and provided for by their parents. The cost of their jeans ranged from SEK 50 up to SEK 3,220. Those informants who were older tended to have somewhat more expensive jeans, but with less variation in price. The data offers no information about what each individual pair had cost.

There was a high turnover in the jeans in their possession; the newest pair documented in the group had been bought a fortnight before that particular wardrobe study, the oldest 24 months before. This made the oldest documented pairs 2 years old, indicating that the contents of the groups’ wardrobes were fairly new. As for sizes, the female informants ranged between 24 and 28 inches for the waist and 30 to 34 inches in length. The male informants ranged between 29 and 32 inches for the waist and 32 and 34 inches in length. Each pair of denim jeans was documented and divided into the categories of color: blue, black, grey, red, pink, white, stonewashed, and decorated. The commonest by far were blue jeans—156 pairs—followed by 28 black pairs and 20 grey pairs. The rest of the categories were made up of negligible numbers of pairs. The origins of the documented denim included Sweden, the US, Italy, Japan, Denmark, Norway, the UK, Australia, Spain, and 1 unknown. Out of 40 brands, 18 were Swedish, 8 American, 4 Italian, 2 Japanese, 2 Danish, 1 apiece Norwegian, British, Australian, and Spanish, and 1 unknown. Of 9 identified countries of origin and 1 unknown, almost 50 per cent of the documented jeans were Swedish.

To sum up, the majority of my informants were students living with their parents. On average, each informant possessed 11 pair of jeans, ranging in price from SEK 50 up to SEK 3,220. The documentation indicates a high turnover in denim, as the oldest pair of jeans was only 2 years old. For both genders, their body type can be said to have been tall and skinny. For both boys and girls, blue jeans from the Swedish brands Acne, Cheap Monday, and Nudie were the most popular.

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271 See Appendix 1 Table 3.
This chapter has described how different ethnographic methods have been used to collect material in order to answer the main question of the thesis—how best to understand clothing consumption amongst the young, and what bearing does it have on identity. The main tools in gathering data have been participant observations combined with texts written by the informants, interviews, and wardrobe studies. The purpose has been to uncover some of the subtexts about what people wear and how they talk about it, and the implications of this for their consumption practices. An important way of doing this was to ask the informants what they would wear and when, and then listen to how they talked about their wardrobes and their style in relation to others. An alternative was to watch how this was done in practice.

I have described the implications of basing the study in the Swedish town of Midway, detailing who the informants were and how we worked together to produce the source material. The material has been presented and discussed in terms of organization and analysis to make the research process as transparent as possible, before moving on to the analytical chapter. I have rounded off by looking at the structure of the source material, and what the material says about the participants as a group. Again, I should stress that these sorts of results cannot be extrapolated to the Swedish population as a whole; they are presented here to raise the question as to the meaning of those characteristics.

What does it mean that the 20 individuals in the wardrobe studies together had 214 pairs of jeans? What does this say—what do jeans that cost over SEK 3,000 a pair say—about being vanlig in Midway at the time? What does it say about the young people’s identities and their relationship to the clothes they wore? What can their personal testimonies add to an understanding of their consumption practices, and vice versa? How can denim ownership be used to say something that goes beyond the story of the garments? Can these findings help provide new insights into the mainstream’s supposed lack of specificity? How did these young people use clothing to come to terms with who they were?

I will now turn to an analysis of what documenting and counting 214 pairs of jeans in the wardrobes of 20 individuals can say about consumption practices among young people in Midway in 2009–2011. The questions raised above will be examined in the light of the empirical data, especially from Alexander, Josefine, Anna, Gustaf, and Lily, and the findings will be discussed in terms of how the young people interacted in groups. The function of vanlighet will then be considered in the final chapter, which summarizes the main results of the study and how they relate to the theories of identity and consumption.
Thus far I have dealt with the premise of the study and its methodological and theoretical building blocks. The aim of this fourth chapter is to present the empirical material and to discuss how vanlighet came to be understood as a central element in young people’s self-identification, and how this affected their clothing consumption. What did vanlighet entail for these individuals, how did it affect their clothing consumption, and how best to view it against a wider cultural discourse? One particular moment during fieldwork points to the crux of the matter.

One late afternoon in early March, I was walking down Midway’s main shopping street with Jonas, who had been an informant for one of the twenty wardrobe studies. His neck was bare to the cold air as he had lost his scarf a few days earlier. We were now looking for a new one to fill that uncomfortably empty gap between his chin and the collar of his jacket. Spring was slowly approaching, but the temperature would not creep much above freezing for yet some time. In terms of shopping, the town center is very similar to other Swedish towns, being dominated by different clothing chains. There was a Brothers, a Carling, a Dressman, a Gina Tricot, an H&M, an Indiska, a Jack & Jones, a JC, a KappAhl, a Lindex, an MQ, a Polarn & Pyret, a Twilfit, a Vero Moda, an Åhléns, and a couple of shoe chains. In addition there were about a dozen smaller clothes shops of which fewer than half carried brands or styles my informants would consider buying. Among the informants these shops were typically graded according to imagined age brackets. Some of the shops were labelled ‘tant-affärer’ (old lady’s shops), some were categorized as places where adults—meaning their parents—did their shopping, some were for young adults, and some were for children.

Having left a couple of the smaller shops empty-handed we entered a store that carried Filippa K, a Swedish brand known for its basic, simple designs. This particular shop was otherwise one where parents might shop, but it carried some brands that the informants would consider wearing. Jonas was scanning a rack of Filippa K scarves when a sales assistant came over and asked if she could help. He said he was looking for a scarf, and when asked what style he was after his answer was quick and clear: ‘I’m looking for a vanlig scarf if you have any’. The response from the sales assistant was not to ask what an vanlig scarf was or to make Jonas specify what he was looking for. Instead she picked out a scarf from the rack and turned to Jonas saying ‘Perhaps this
might interest you?’ Jonas considered the plain black, fringed scarf briefly and then decided to buy it. We left the shop together, Jonas one scarf richer, but with SEK 850 less in his pocket.

This straightforward transaction captures the communication of vanlighet on a metaphorical level, projected onto the aesthetic surface of a scarf. The exchange between Jonas and the sales assistant indicates that there was a shared cultural understanding of vanlighet as a concept, making it possible for two people who had never met before to agree on a certain aesthetic without using any further adjectives such as color, size, material, or price to describe the garment in question. Jonas was not shopping with a friend to help him on this occasion and the sales assistant did not know him from Adam, yet they both had an idea of what an vanlig scarf meant for him in the context of his daily life.

This story supports the conclusions of the dissertation, of course, but on the other hand it says very little about what this vanlighet consisted of and why it was the first thing to spring to mind. Why did the sales assistant pick out that particular scarf, and how did she and Jonas silently agree that a black, fringed scarf, in dry-clean only wool mix and going for a price close to SEK 1,000, would match the description of an vanlig scarf? Why that and not a different scarf? Why did Jonas not look for something that felt like ‘him’, or consider trying something new and different? When asking Jonas about this after we had left the shop he just shrugged his shoulders, content to have found what he was looking for. This chapter is devoted to interpreting the meaning of this and similar events, and what it says about the young people in the study and the relationship between cultural identities and the way they dressed.

The focus is the 5 individuals—Alexander, Josefine, Anna, Gustaf, and Lily—who were the key informants. The sketches of these 5 individuals are not intended to serve as full life stories; if anything, they should be categorized as researched life stories, collected by me, the researcher, with social science goals in mind.272 These glimpses tell of everyday activities as well as celebrations and parties. By describing what was important or not, what and who they dreamed of becoming, who they considered themselves to be in the present or who they had been in the past, these presentations show why it was important to be vanlig and how this affected the way the informants dressed.

The chapter is based on the participant observations, notes of the wardrobe studies, and photographs. Hence, the descriptions are to a large extent made up of my reconstruction of events based on my documentation from the field. Quotes are taken from notes and transcriptions, but appear in translation. However, my presentation is summarizing inasmuch as my observations and the informants’ stories together make up the empirical parts of the chapter. When I refer to what was important to the informants or who they considered

themselves to be, this is based on what they told me and my documentation of what we experienced together.

The 5 individuals described in this chapter are their own people, but yet they shared the identification of considering themselves mainstreamers. To study what people wear in relation to representations of values is one way to uncover why they consume what they do. Telling the stories of a few and how they interact with other people testifies both to the unique experience of the individual, but also to what it means to be a member of a collective. Hence, describing an informant’s preferences is one thing, but it is equally important to look at what informed these preferences. Therefore the chapter deals with the personal stories of each individual, as well as the identity of their peer group represented in the material from the wardrobe studies.

These accounts are descriptive and appear without references to the literature—they should be allowed to speak for themselves before they are analyzed as ethnographic findings. However, bearing in mind Clifford Geertz’s rule that ‘anthropological writings are themselves interpretations’, ethnographic writings are never value-free or neutral. The portraits of the 5 informants are organized by the topics that appeared dominant when collating the source material and reveal what was important to these individuals at the time we met. There are many different techniques for content analysis. Its topics can be said to be strategically selected in the sense that they reflect the aims and questions of the thesis; the purpose of organizing the material by topic like this is to arrive at a general picture of how the informants understood their clothing consumption. In this part of the text the analysis is on a manifest level—it is the informant’s stories that are in focus.

The portraits are followed by an analysis looking at conformity to social context, under the subheadings traditional structures and new practices of consumption, providing for oneself, and shopping as cultural ideal. The individual portraits and stories are compared and set in relation to the studies on fashion and identity (see Chapter 2). Here the analysis moves to an implicit level, and the qualitative analysis picks up on the common assumptions found in the individual stories.

Attention then shifts from the individual stories to a group perspective, under the broad heading of coming of age in Midway. Using youth in the making, and specifically a party as a narrative, a similar kind of content analysis shows how the young people interacted as a group, and the points of comparison between the group’s ideals of consumption and the individual narratives, and ultimately the tension between individual identity and social identity. I end by considering vanlighet as the overarching theme of the thesis. First, however,

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273 Geertz 2000, 15.
to Alexander, Josefine, Anna, Gustaf, and Lily, the key informants in the study.

Alexander, Josefine, Anna, Gustaf, and Lily

Alexander, Josefine, Anna, Gustaf, and Lily are 5 unique individuals, but also tightly knit together with their peers. In this sense they function as representatives of the other men and women in the material, and reveal many of the concerns seen in Midway in 2009–2011. It has been said that people will always talk about what matters to them in life, and this is apparent in these portraits.276 My purpose here is to consider their lives and cosmologies in relation to the aims of the research, where the themes overlap.277 However, from my time spent in the field I knew there to be variations in form and content, which is reflected in the material and will be discussed in the analysis.

Prior to starting fieldwork, I had expected that as a woman I would be closer to the girls, but as it turned out I found it easier to get close to the boys who participated in the study. They were open, talking freely and initiating conversations on their own, whereas the girls were more reserved and relied on me to set the agenda, and they did not volunteer information in the way the boys did: the boys initiated contact on their own initiative, while I had to contact the girls if I wanted to meet them. During the wardrobe studies, the boys were generally unembarrassed about having their bodies on display; the girls were the opposite, some of them changing outfits out of sight while I waited in the bedroom. I suspect this was partly because the girls were more self-aware and did not want to appear in the wrong light.

Although I spent time alone with the boys and girls separately, the fieldwork mostly involved hanging out with the boys and girls together. There were some couples in the group, but most relationships were platonic. On most occasions the group set the agenda and I was asked to come along, but there were times when I hosted gatherings. During the first months, I stayed with my parents in the flat where I had partly grown up. As they were often away, ‘my’ place offered a nice space to hang out. It was large and came with such comforts as a well-stocked fridge. Since I was at home in an environment I controlled, it was easier for me to listen in on conversations as I could leave and enter rooms as I pleased. Later, my parents moved away from Midway and I stayed in a small overnight flat that was not home in the same sense. When I lived there, informants would mostly drop in individually for a fika.

277 Anna Maria Desto, ‘Cosmology and Mythology’, in H. James Birx (ed.), 21st Century Anthropology. A Reference Handbook (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2010), 227. The anthropological use of cosmology is closely connected to the empirical study of religious myth, but also to the idea that the universe is an ordered system and people have a certain place in it, as here.
All 5 portraits start by introducing the informants and contextualizing the premises of our meetings. The 5 of them reflect different positions in terms of economic resources, occupation, living situation, and civil status—differences that contribute to the diversity of research outcomes in terms of what it means to be mainstream. Yet, what structured their consumption was very similar, despite their differences. At times I refer to some of the other 15 informants who were involved in the wardrobe studies, as indicated. For all 5 informants, the portraits deal with the documented contents of their wardrobes and asks the question of what made them the consumers they were, thus examining both actual examples of their consumption and how they viewed their own consumption as well as that of others.

Alexander was the participant I met with the most and he was also the person who more than any of the others invited me to group events. The uncertainty of his home life saw him establish himself as an autonomous adult at about the time we met. Alexander dreamt of starting a family of his own and escaping the state of limbo he felt he was in. Josefine was also focused on her future, although in a different way, as she wanted to leave Midway and study abroad after school in order to experience something new. I mainly met Josefine during group activities, although we had a few individual meetings. Anna and Gustaf were a couple living together who I met several times, both together and one on one. They were about to leave Midway together, and were very conscious of how they viewed themselves in relation to others when it came to how they dressed. Lily, one of the female informants whom I met the most, had only recently moved to Midway, which put her in the position of being able to compare Midway to life somewhere else, providing an outsider as well as an insider perspective on life in the town. Alexander, Josefine, Anna, Gustaf, and Lily were all in places of transition in their lives, in which consumption played an important part.

**Alexander**

Alexander, who went by the name Alex, was born and raised in Midway.278 When fieldwork started he was couch-surfing between friends for a short period of time, but soon moved to a flat in the town center where he lived alone. He was then 19 years old and was working packing dairy products at a food company. His parents had divorced a few years earlier, and his father still lived in Midway while his mother had moved to Gothenburg, where he also had an older sister.279

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278 Appendix 1 Tables 1–3, case 5.
279 Appendix 1 Table 1, case 5.
Making a home

Two days before New Year’s Eve 2008, I pulled up outside a block of flat in the center of Midway. Growing up in a small town in Sweden, one generally gets one’s driving license as soon as possible at 18, the national legal age to drive. In the bigger cities public communications are good, but in the rural areas buses do not run often, especially at night, making young people dependent on parents, older siblings, and friends to get around. Being able to drive offers freedom of movement and of action—it opens doors both in terms of independence and as an extra room away from home. The car is a place to listen to one’s favorite music and hang out. During fieldwork, I often found myself driving people, and not only as a means of transporting them and myself, but also because it offered a space for conversations away from inquisitive ears.

Alex, who was waiting for me on the street, immediately noticed all the stuff that was occupying the front seat of my car, and before I had time to move it he opened the nearside back door and got in. Before to saying anything else he announced that his hair was yellow because of a failed attempt at dyeing it the night before, and that on no condition was anyone going to see it. It took him a long time to reluctantly remove his hoodie and cap, revealing a long mane of yellowish-blond hair. He did not take this beauty failure lightly; he was embarrassed and irritated by it. We drove straight to my flat, where I made lunch. As would become a pattern during our meetings, a laptop would always be within reach, playing music and video clips. This was an invaluable source of information, since the influences in my informants’ lives could be demonstrated on the spot in the form of visual and aural media. After lunch we were to ‘gå på stan’, go into town. The main attraction of the day was an old building in the center that had burned to the ground during the night.

This was the first time I picked up Alex from a particular address, and he told me that he was staying there temporarily with a female friend after a bust-up with his dad. Alex’s parents were divorced. His mum lived with a new partner in Gothenburg, only a short journey away by train, and he went there frequently and remained very close to his mum and his stepdad. During holidays he would stay with them, and for a while he had commuted into Gothenburg to a weekend job in a clothing store. Alex’s father lived in Midway, and since Alex was still in school when his mother moved to Gothenburg he had carried on living with his dad to avoid having to move schools. That had been the case until recently, anyway. His relationship with his father had been frosty for a while, largely due to the father’s new partner and her two children from a previous relationship. After a serious argument a few days before Christmas, Alex and his father were not on speaking terms. The fight had got out of control. In Alex’s words, his dad had pushed him, and he in turn had grabbed his stepmom quite hard, which had made his dad even angrier with him. In Alex’s opinion, him grabbing his stepmom had been called for, as he had felt cornered.
by two adults coming at him at the same time. He felt that one of the causes of the fight and his bad relationship with his father was the stepmom, as he felt that he no longer had a place in his father’s new family. Another reason was the dad’s poor financial situation and worries about the mortgage, worries that Alex felt were being taken out on him. A few days after the fight, he and his father stopped talking altogether, and one day when he came home he found all of his belongings packed in bags outside his room. After that he had been staying with various friends while waiting to get his own flat in January.

Up until this point in our conversation that day, Alex had volunteered information and had been very open and keen to talk, but when I asked him if he was upset about what had happened his tone changed. His answer was no, he said that he considered his father to have been inconsistent when bringing him up, and he claimed that he was looking forward to living on his own. He felt that his father had never cared whether he attended school or not, but at the same time he had been overly strict when Alex went to parties with his friends. On our drive into the town center we stopped at Alex’s workplace to look up his work schedule. He was not up-to-date with his hours after he had called in sick before Christmas in order to go skiing with a friend up north. Alex worked in the same place as his dad—a food company packing dairy products. He claimed to hate work, but would remain there until something better turned up.

We continued on to the town center to see where the building had burnt down and to meet up with some older friends of his. The smoke from the fire was thick in the air and the heat still striking when approaching what was left of the old wooden house, built in 1929. According to local media, up to fifty firemen had been called to the fire. No one was injured, but it was the talk of the town. There was a drastic alteration to the townscape, leaving a big black pit with smoking, charred rubble. We continued to the town mall, and I waited with Alex while his friends went to Systembolaget (the state off-licence) to buy alcohol for New Year’s Eve, including for Alex who was still underage. His order was for a bottle of rosé wine, three ciders, and eight beers. I tried to find out more about his family, but after the arrival of his friends, the subject was off limits for the moment.

A few weeks later in January, I found myself attending a party in Alex’s new flat. It was a 32-square-metre one-roomed flat furnished with a bed, a sofa, a coffee table, a wardrobe, a dresser, and a unit with a TV, stereo, and a video game. A Burton Love snowboard decorated with the image of a pin-up girl, with ‘Love 62’ written in gold on her naked bottom, was leaning against one of the walls. The flat had a separate kitchen and a bathroom. Although

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280 In Sweden the minimum age to buy alcohol from the state off-licence is 20; in licensed bars and restaurants, 18.
281 Image 10, Alex at the housewarming party in his new flat.
282 A popular line of snowboards at the time.
he had only just moved in, the place was impressively neat, and all the boxes were unpacked. I tried to ask him if he had seen his dad yet. The party was busy, people were coming and going, and Alex elusively mumbled no.

The weeks went by, and I was commuting to Stockholm for work at the university. One weekend at the beginning of March, Alex and a friend came to stay in my flat in Stockholm before catching an early flight to Paris. The two young men were very excited about France, and talked excitedly about how they would wear similar big black sunglasses, looking cool in the spring weather that had yet not reached Sweden. Alex told me that there were problems with people at work who had been there longer than him, who had ganged up on him and told his boss that he was sloppy. This had reached his father’s ears, whereupon his father had marched into the boss’s office to stand up for his son. The next day, however, things went back to the way they were between them. When they saw each other at work they did not say hello. His father had not tried to reach out to reconcile, and still did not know where Alex was living, even though his new flat was only five minutes away from his dad’s house. He did not say so directly, but he was obviously waiting for his dad to take the first step.

Despite his rocky relationship with his dad and being the child of a broken home, Alex considered starting a family of his own to be an important step in entering adulthood. He saw this as a key part of taking on the role of a grown man and not being a kid anymore. He would often tease me over my lifestyle and the fact that I was single with no children at the age of 27. At such an age, he was sure he would have a family of his own. He was equally certain that he did not want to go to university—there was no point since he already had a paid job. Although he had no plans to stay where he was at the time, he felt that he could advance career-wise without a degree. His social skills made him a good salesman, proven to him by previous jobs as a sales assistant in Gothenburg and at local clothing shop. Alex considered a career secondary to having a family and living a happy life doing stuff that he liked.

My fieldwork coincided with a critical phase in Alex’s life that strongly impacted on how he understood himself and others around him. Examining Alex’s family relationships provides important insights into his understanding of mainstream life, and, crucially, the norms that he ascribed to the transition to adulthood and the realization of what he interpreted as a cultural normality. One manifestation of this was the power struggle between Alex and his dad, whose capacity as head of the family was questioned. This part of the material points to a masculinity that is usually associated with a traditional breadwinner ideal. It had direct consequences for Alex in his effort to realize standard Midway ideals in the material construction of the home he had to build for himself, such as staying in a job where he was clearly unhappy. Alex’s family situation might seem detached from his clothing consumption, irrelevant even. However, it provides an important piece of the puzzle of the masculinity he was
trying to measure up to, which was closely related to his ideas of how to dress and work on his appearance.

**Appearance**

To have his worth as a young man and an individual confirmed by his looks was very important to Alex. He was outspokenly body conscious and very much into fashion and his looks. I repeatedly heard him talk about his weight and his body, and how he bought new clothes all the time but still felt as if he never had anything to wear. Alex was not shy about giving his verdict on other people’s appearance, including mine. At lunch one day I was talking about how I had gained weight during a stay in London just before the fieldwork, and Alex immediately said that it would take me the same amount of time to lose the weight as it had taken me to gain it. This comment was telling about his awareness of how to work on and control his own body. For example, he would tell me about different strategies he used to control his weight, such as walking the four kilometers to work on an empty stomach, saying that he enjoyed the burning sensation.

The day before New Year’s Eve, while the two of us waited for his friends to come back from Systembolaget, we went to a clothes shop in the mall. Alex is tall—six foot four—and very slender. Complaining that he had lost weight he tried on some jeans, saying that he used to be size 31–32, but now was down to a 30; however, even though complaining about having lost weight, his behavior and how he talked about his body in other situations revealed the importance of being slim. The ideal was skinny and hairless, and he chose to wax his already hair-free chest and shave his armpits and pubic hair neatly. When changing he described to me what he had planned to wear the next day when going to a New Year’s Eve party. In his head he envisioned himself in a striped shirt from Filippa K, chinos from Ralph Lauren, and bright green socks from Happy Socks that would show in the gap between the trousers and the shoes. Planning outfits before going out was something he did all the time, building up his expectations for a night out.

For Alex, clothing was a central part of his life. Knowing this, I asked him to keep an ‘outfit-of-the-day journal’ by taking a photo of himself each day, something he did at first but forgot about after a week or two. He had done business studies (handelsprogrammet) in high school, including work experience in a clothes shop in Gothenburg, which resulted in him working there for almost a year after he left school. This was when his interest in clothes, and especially jeans, took off. He had received numerous pairs of jeans from different sponsors while he was working there, and he had a detailed knowledge

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283 In the literature this is described as feminine cultural behavior among Western women (see, for example, Woodward 2007).
of different brands, models, and washes, and the specialized vocabulary used by insiders to talk about different types of denim.\textsuperscript{284}

Although I tried to do the wardrobe inventories with informants very early on, when I first met them, in Alex’s case we had to put it off for a while until he had moved in to his new flat and been able to get all his stuff and clothes from his dad’s. In his flat, he kept his clothes in his one wardrobe, in the hallway, and spread out around the flat. Like most of the men in the study Alex wore jeans almost every day, alternating with cotton chinos when the weather allowed it. Since he was working part-time and had to support himself now that he was living on his own, his budget to spend on clothing was very limited. He had not bought any new jeans for six months, counting from the day we did his wardrobe inventory. The oldest pair he had in his wardrobe was a Japanese brand called Evisu, and they were about four years old.\textsuperscript{285} They had cost as much as SEK 3,200—a lot of money for a high-school student with no income. He did not wear them anymore, but had saved them because they had been so expensive when he bought them.

I remember what a big deal these jeans were for me, I saved money like crazy to be able to buy them. All my birthday and Christmas money went into those jeans. I’ve never even washed them.

In total Alex had 10 pair of jeans, and among them he had another pair that he had never washed since he bought them 18 months before. He was not the only one among the informants not to wash jeans as a way to get the perfect fit, letting the denim adjust to their bodies, and to preserve the color and make them last longer. Out of his 10 pairs, 7 pairs were blue, 1 black, 1 grey, and 1 red.\textsuperscript{286} Now, whenever he was short of money, he sold jeans that he did not wear any longer to friends.

In contrast to the other informants, Alex rarely spoke of himself in explicit terms as looking \textit{vanlig}. However, he constantly drew lines for people who crossed the borders of the mainstream and ended up on the periphery. When we looked at his denim and concluded that he had a pair from the Swedish brand Cheap Monday, he commented that

For a long time I didn’t want to wear Cheap Monday; in the beginning it was so emo, people cutting their arms and stuff. But after a while I guess I came to like them.

\textsuperscript{284} When I posted a photo on Facebook of a pile of jeans from the wardrobe study with Anna and Gustaf, Alex tagged all the brands and models, both the women’s and the men’s, displaying his knowledge of the denim market.
\textsuperscript{285} Appendix 1 Table 2 case 5.
\textsuperscript{286} Appendix 1 Table 3 case 5.
In this way Alex balanced between what he considered mainstream and what fell outside it. However, these boundaries were flexible for both him and others—they were contingent on time and place. The day when he came back from Paris with his friend they stopped by my flat in Stockholm while waiting for the train back to Midway. They were both excited about having spent time in the sun, ‘boozing and chilling’. Two girls who wanted to take his photo had stopped Alex on the street, and he assumed this was because he stood out in his colorful outfit among the otherwise dull Parisian crowd. While showing off a series of photos on his mobile phone of cityscapes and different girls, he exclaimed, ‘Look at this one!’ and ‘See that!’ As Paris was not part of his mainstream, he felt more secure about standing out, although he had not edged too far out of his comfort zone.

Looking at Alex’s construction of his appearance adds a dimension to the masculinity discussed above in relation to his family. Although he tried to measure up to a breadwinner ideal, his way of relating to his appearance and his awareness thereof was much more congruent with market ideologies of the time. He actively controlled his weight and body hair—in other contexts, a traditional marker of masculinity. When it came to how he dressed this was not just a daily activity, but an ongoing project in his head as a way of planning and talking about things that happened to him. All of these things at the heart of Alex’s identity demanded constant work and knowledge, and an active process of staying inside the boundaries of the mainstream. As topics, ‘making a home’ and ‘appearance’ indicate how to be a man in relation to family, of the centrality of meeting a certain material standard in terms of what a home should be like, but also what a wardrobe should be filled with and the effort Alex should put into his appearance and presentation of self.

Josefine

Josefine, like Alex, was born and brought up in Midway.\textsuperscript{287} She lived alone with her mother in a house on the hill just outside the city center. Her older sister had moved to Gothenburg and her father lived in the far south of Sweden since her parents’ divorce several years before. Visiting her dad took almost 5 hours by train, so she mostly went to see him in the holidays. When fieldwork started she was 18 years old and in the last year of high school doing social sciences (\textit{samhällsprogrammet}).\textsuperscript{288}

\textsuperscript{287} Appendix 1 Tables 1–3 case 3.
\textsuperscript{288} Appendix 1 Table 1 case 3.
Shopping as a social activity

It was 9 days into the new year. I had woken early that morning, and before even looking out I sensed it had snowed. There was not a sound coming from outside—the silence that only newly fallen snow can create. While still in bed, I thought about how the weather affects what people wear, and how functionality trumps everything else on a cold January day in Sweden. However, I overestimated the power of the weather in the early morning hour, proven to me a few hours later when I met Josefine for a wardrobe inventory.

When calling Josefine to get directions to her house her voice sounded girlish and a bit anxious. I had met her a few times before under different circumstances, but never spent time with her alone. She and Alex had been high-school sweethearts, but had broken up after he finished school the year before. They were now on good terms, and would occasionally hang out with the same friends who were part of my group of informants. I knew her from other participants and had approached her to ask if she would join in the wardrobe studies. A year younger than Alex, she was going to finish high school in June. She now had a new boyfriend who was in his early twenties and manager of one of the clothes shops in the city center.

Josefine’s body language shouted insecurity as she opened the door, leaning in towards me for a hug but at the same time appearing to hold back as if to see if I would respond. Anxious as I was to get in from the cold, I hugged her while stepping into the hallway. Having just come home from school, she opened the door dressed in a short grey denim skirt and a red-and-pink patterned top with the straps of a red bra showing. Her long blonde hair was pulled back in a bun, styled with grey velvet hairband. She wore no jewelry, and apparently no make-up. In her arms was a Chihuahua, the dog very much part of the femininity of the scene.

Before ringing the doorbell, I had spotted a woman through the kitchen window, and seeing the low-cut jeans that showed most of her lace underwear I had half-assumed that Josefine had a friend over. On entering the house it turned out to be her mum, an attractive older version of Josefine. Her mum, who had heard about my project, joined us in the hallway and immediately pulled up her top a bit in order to show the waistline of her dark blue jeans from Guess while laughing;

I have to stop buying all these low-cut jeans. They are so impractical, and not very attractive of me to walk around showing half my bum.

‘Mum!’ an embarrassed Josefine exclaimed, and turned to me asking me to follow her downstairs.

Her bedroom was located in the basement of the house, with a balcony door leading out into the garden. The room was cozy and tidy, furnished with a bed, an armchair, and a bookshelf. A Pilates ball and some dumb-bells were on the otherwise empty bedroom floor. Next to the bedroom was a separate walk-in
wardrobe, overflowing with clothes, shoes, and bags. There was no mistaking her interest in clothes and fashion, although she claimed that she had tried rein herself in and get rid of things. Her mum referred to her as a typical denim girl, something Josefine objected to, saying that she really did not wear that many jeans these days. By her own account she preferred dresses and skirts since she found them more comfortable, but when she did wear jeans she preferred them to be really skinny and decent quality that would not stretch when worn. For boys, on the other hand, jeans were everything since they ‘were the base of their wardrobes’. Their jeans should be anything but skinny—a bit baggy, in fact, although not ‘hip-hop baggy’.

The anxiety I had detected when Josefine opened the front door was gone when she started talking about fashion. She went on to talk readily about what was trendy and not, mentioning that she was considering buying a pair of boot-cut jeans that were coming back into fashion, ‘just to have a pair’. Although she claimed not to be that into jeans at that point, we counted 18 pairs when going through her wardrobe, the majority bought within the past year, and 9 within the last 6 months. Of these, 11 pairs were blue, 2 black, 2 grey, 1 pink, 1 stonewashed, and 1 pair was decorated. When showing off her jeans to me, I noticed that there were several pairs that still had the price tags and clearly had never been worn.

A few days after my visit, having heard that I had visited Josefine, Alex said he was sure she had more pairs of jeans than she had showed me, insinuating that she and her mum were ‘crazy’ about shopping. The interaction between Josefine and her mum when I was around centered a lot on her mum sighing over her daughter’s interest in clothing: ‘Eighteen pairs of jeans, Josefine? My god, we just threw away a whole bunch!’ At the same time, Josefine had no Saturday job or similar, and it was her mother who was paying for most of her shopping. The cheapest pair of jeans in Josefine’s wardrobe had cost SEK 400, while the most expensive ones were from Evisu, the same Japanese brand as Alex’s most expensive pair, and had cost SEK 2,600. She had also saved hers for 4 years, making them her oldest pair, and although she did not wear them any longer she felt guilty about getting rid of them.

Only days before to my visit, Josefine and her mum had been in Gothenburg together at the Christmas sales and visiting her older sister. During a trip like that, her mum paid for the shopping. When Josefine went to see her dad in the south of Sweden he would take her shopping in Malmö or over to Denmark to Copenhagen. Although Josefine stood out a bit when it came to being pampered by her parents, the girls among my informants in general received more money from their parents to go shopping with than the boys did. The boys claimed that they managed on their own, unless it was something really

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289 Appendix 1 Table 2 case 3.
290 Appendix 1 Table 3 case 3.
essential such as a winter jacket or their only pair of trousers. The girls’ turn-over in clothes was on different level. For them, shopping was more of a monthly activity, not based on necessity. As Josefine said:

Well, the thing is that mostly I don’t pay for the clothes that I buy. It’s more when I start impulse shopping, like when I go to the shops after school on a Monday and find a nice top, then I buy it, but otherwise it’s like this, well every time it’s payday for mum we go into town to shop for clothes and stuff. And then, then she pays … well, if there’s something I see that I like.

Just like I welcomed Alex and his friend to my flat in Stockholm, Josefine and a friend came to stay the weekend. I was not there at the time, but in Midway doing wardrobe studies. The girls picked up the key to my flat before taking the train up. The mission of the weekend was to find dresses for the high-school prom. When it came to the prom the perfect dress was everything for Josefine, and finding one in Stockholm would rate higher than getting one at a local shop.

There were 2 high schools in Midway, and the one Josefine attended was often referred to by the girls as a catwalk because of the great importance put on appearance.\textsuperscript{291} Although the boys were part of this environment too, it was generally considered that there was stiff competition among the girls there to be thin and have the most fashionable outfits. The school cafeteria was described as a place where the best-looking, most popular students preened during break. Given Josefine’s interest in fashion, and having heard the boys talk about Josefine as ‘the hottest girl in town’, I assumed that she was part of this crowd. She was very thin—her jeans had a 25-inch waist—but neither she nor the other girls talked about body shape being important in the way that Alex and the other boys did.

When I got back to my Stockholm flat a few days after the girls’ visit, I found a note they had left for me describing their weekend, in their words filled with shopping, nightlife, and fun;

Hi Emma! We have arrived now, or it was a while ago 😊 But we have been out on the town and checked out all the bars and clubs, and we had some food as well. Now we are going to sit here and get cozy and have something good to drink. Hi again! 😊 Now we have been out on the town for a WHOOOLE day! And then we came home and got ourselves ready to go out to eat. Which was very nice! Now we are going to the park to watch some guys skate!!! Hello hello! Now we are back inside in the warmth! Cozy!!! If we are going to sum up the whole day, all we have to say is: BEER and NICE!!! Enjoy your flat without us! Take care! The end.\textsuperscript{292}

\textsuperscript{291} There were actually three high schools in town, but the third one was for those with general learning disabilities, and was not a reference point for informants when they compared themselves to their peers.

\textsuperscript{292} For the original note, see image 12.
As with Alex and his friend’s trip to Paris, it was an adventure for Josefine to be on her own with a friend in a new city. The difference between the capital and a provincial town was far more than the selection of dresses. For my informants, these European capitals epitomized the adventure that Midway was lacking.

Shopping for clothes was an important social activity for Josefine. It happened that she went shopping in town alone after school, but more often she went with her mum or with a girlfriend as a way of spending time together. Owning 18 pairs of jeans, some of them never worn, indicates that it was the shopping that mattered and not the need to find something to wear. When Josefine went to Gothenburg with her mum or to Stockholm with her friend, shopping served as a pretext for doing a number of other things such as having a fika and catching up, seeing her sister, or going out for drinks and meeting new people. It was a way for her to place herself in contexts outside of Midway while being in a safe zone and doing something she felt comfortable with.

Planning for the future

Going shopping was one of several strategies used by Josefine to try out who she was becoming. When discussing her future, Josefine and the other female informants in the study differed from their male peers. The desire to start a family was not there, or at least was not articulated, in the same way. Josefine, who was soon to finish high school, talked about her future in different terms than Alex. Children were definitely not in her plans in the near future. Although she did not have any specific career plans, she talked about going abroad, perhaps to work as an au pair, taking a language class, or going backpacking. Staying in Midway and becoming a mum as soon as possible was not on the horizon. Of course, the difference between Alex and Josefine, or any of the others, can only be discussed on an individual level, as at the time of the fieldwork all these future scenarios were hypothetical.

In her room Josefine kept catalogue about studying abroad. The US, Australia, the UK, France, Ireland, Italy, Japan, China, New Zealand, Switzerland, Spain, South Africa—anything was possible. The US especially was held up as what the future could hold. Josefine talked about it as an absolute: she had to go to America. Or anywhere but Midway, to be honest. Part of the attraction was to speak English. She had looked up courses in English to do ‘the Cambridge exam’, meaning the international certificate in English as a foreign language. It was not that Josefine’s family, friends, and boyfriend did not matter in her decisions about the future—they did—but when it came to family and friends she knew they would still be around when she came back. As for her boyfriend, her reasoning was quite pragmatic: if it was real love their relationship would be able to take a year apart, and if they did end up breaking up it was not meant to be.
In her dreams, she imagined herself breaking free from her small-town ambit to be on her own and discover herself. Josefine would talk about films, television shows, or stories she had read in the media. It was as if there was a romantic, filmic filter attached to her dreams, in which she saw herself riding a bike with a baguette under her arm and a beret on her head somewhere in France, barbecuing on a beach in Australia, or cruising Big Sur in California. Whereas Alex felt that starting a family of his own was an important step into adulthood, Josefine believed going away and experiencing life outside Midway was equally important for her transition into adulthood.

There were glimpses of Josefine experimenting with different possibilities of who to become and how central this was to her at the time we met. However, despite her ‘passion for fashion’ as she put it, she did not really experiment with different styles to find out what could be her. Rather, she experimented with different locations when imagining her future. Shopping as a social activity and her planning for the future point to the duality in her femininity and her transition into adult life. On the one hand, shopping appeared to serve to create and maintain her femininity, a task demanding a certain form of cultural knowledge as well as money. For this she was dependent on her parents for financial support. On the other hand, she appeared free when imagining her future self, including the idea of leaving Midway, and unworried about how she would realize her ideas of the future in practice.

Anna and Gustaf

Anna too was born and raised in Midway, whereas her boyfriend Gustaf came from a small village not far from the town. They were living together in a three-roomed flat at the time of the study. When the fieldwork started Anna was 20 years old and worked in a clothes shop selling women’s fashion, but she quit her job in order to study to become a store manager. Gustaf was 22 years old and had recently started a business course. They both came from big families with parents who were still married living in the houses where they grew up, and with siblings living in different places around Sweden.

Fitting in together

Anna and Gustaf were the only informants that I conducted wardrobe studies with, one year apart in time, with both of them present. As the narrative here I use the second wardrobe study, which I conducted with the two of them. I

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293 Appendix 1 Tables 1–3 case 12 (Anna) and case 19 (Gustaf), which, as the one that was completed, comprises the second wardrobe study.

294 Appendix 1 Table 1 cases 12 and 19.
do recognize them as individuals just like the other informants, but they were very tightly knit and had a habit of describing and defining each other as individuals very clearly, as well as positioning themselves as a couple. The meeting took place on a sparkling cold February day in 2010. The two of them had been together for 5 years, having met when Anna was 16 and Gustaf 18. At the time of my second wardrobe study with the couple, Anna had turned 21, and Gustaf was 23. I had been in their flat once before, over a year earlier, but that time the wardrobe study mostly focused on the contents of Anna’s wardrobe—Gustaf had been at home and had participated in our conversation for about half the time, but had then left, and we never looked at, or really talked about, any of his clothes. This time I wanted them to show me, and talk about, their own and each other’s clothes together.

As Anna and Gustaf answered the door I remembered the feeling of warmth and alertness from my first wardrobe study. I peeled off my layers of winter clothes and stepped inside. Just like last time they asked me if I would like a coffee, and took out a percolator from a cupboard while Gustaf said ‘We don’t drink coffee, but we love it when other people do.’ ‘I don’t know how to make coffee, Gustaf has to make it’, Anna giggled. Gustaf, at six foot four a good foot taller than Anna, smiled at her as he bent down to give her a kiss. They lived in a newly built, open-plan, three-roomed flat. The hallway led to a bathroom and to a combined kitchen–living room. In addition, there was a bedroom and a room used as guitar room for Gustaf and a study for them both. Everything in the flat was bright and clean. Anna was doing a two-year distance-learning course to become a store manager. She liked to spend her money on clothing and described herself as very interested in fashion, something I remembered that Gustaf confirming when we met before. He, on the other hand, said he spent his money on technical gadgets rather than on clothing, although I was told that he had bought some new clothes since meeting Anna, such as a nice shirt for best.

The day of the wardrobe inventory Anna was dressed in denim chinos and a white knitted cardigan with oversized buttons. She wore little make-up, her nails were painted pink, and she had her shoulder-length blonde hair down, apart from some of her fringe which was pulled back from her face. Anna was short and curvaceous in comparison to her tall and athletic-looking boyfriend. Gustaf was wearing blue jeans from the Swedish brand Nudie and a white T-shirt with a striped sweater on top. He had a gold chain around his neck, worn on the outside of his sweater, and was wearing glasses. He was clean-shaven, and his brown hair was cut short at the sides with a little length on top.

They had prepared for my visit by moving piles of jeans from their cupboards into the living room. Anna had made a raspberry pie, and we settled down on the sofa in the living room to *fika*, to look over their jeans, and to

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295 Image 14, the jeans Anna and Gustav had piled up for me.
In total we counted 10 pairs of jeans that were Anna’s and 14 that belonged to Gustaf. In both cases they had bought their newest pairs only the month before, and the oldest were about 3 years old, from around the time when they started dating. Anna’s jeans ranged in price from SEK 300 to SEK 1,500, Gustaf’s from SEK 700 to SEK 1,800. Of Anna’s jeans, 7 were blue, 2 black, and 1 grey. Gustaf had 12 blue pairs, 1 black pair, and 1 grey pair. Considering that Anna had chosen a career working with fashion, her collection of jeans and the money spent on them were perhaps to be expected, but for someone who was not interested in fashion and who preferred to spend his money on other things Gustaf’s 14 pairs costing as much as SEK 1,800 a pair came as something of a surprise. It certainly signals that fitting in and looking and being *vanlig* were partly achieved by accumulating not only a large wardrobe, but also by having many pairs of the same thing.

Anna and Gustaf were both students, and the money they had to spend on clothing was limited. They had chosen not to take extra jobs in order to focus on their studies. In the past Anna had worked for a Swedish clothing chain selling women’s fashion. Then she had always been up to date with the latest trends in the same way Alex was when he worked as a shop assistant. She had had a staff discount, and bought a lot of new clothes at the time, since it was expected of her and the other sales assistants that they would wear the clothes they were selling.

I was put in touch with Anna after she had heard about my project from her older sister and asked if she could be a part. Both she and Gustaf were eager to talk, and were very engaged in the topic. Gustaf had just started his business course at the business school in Gothenburg, and they were looking for a flat in order to move there as they felt like trying something new. They spoke a lot about the differences between Gothenburg, Midway, and the neighboring town of Stevenage where Anna used to be a sales assistant. Since they were about to move from Midway to a larger city, they believed that the rules structuring how they dressed were about to change. This would be the first time Anna would have lived outside Midway—Gustaf had moved once before when his family left the small village where he was born and moved into Midway. He had attended school in the village until he started high school, whereupon he took the bus into central Midway every day, so the transition of moving to Midway had not been that big a step for him. However, moving to Gothenburg was new terrain for both of them.

They reasoned that moving to the city would widen the scope of how to dress, yet they also believed that it would become more difficult to fit in, not knowing what other people might wear when in the new contexts. They concluded that people were bolder about experimenting with their clothing and

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296 Appendix 1 Table 2 cases 12 and 19.
297 Appendix 1 Table 3 cases 12 and 19.
298 Like Midway, Stevenage is a pseudonym.
appearance in Gothenburg, and that the risk of being stared at for wearing something that stood out was not the same as in Midway. The experience of being stared at was described as uncomfortable, and there was a delicate balance to be struck between being trendy and blending in. Since they had started going out more in Gothenburg, Anna was finding it difficult pitch things to her satisfaction. ‘In Midway it’s easier as I know what everyone else will be wearing.’

This dialectic understanding of themselves as individuals but in relation to each other as a couple, of small-town Midway but in relation to a big city, of keeping up with trends and caring about their looks but without sticking out, was central to how Anna and Gustaf dressed and how they perceived themselves. Their clothing norms were questioned by the prospect of moving to a big city. Although both of them knew that Gustaf did not share Anna’s interest in fashion, he had more pairs of jeans than Anna and more expensive ones at that. There appeared to be a gap between how they identified themselves and their actual consumption practices.

An Acne dude and a Filippa K gal

Anna and Gustaf defined both themselves and each other as vanliga. The central factor in the way they dressed was the idea of keeping to the middle ground—showing some awareness of fashion and trends, but not too much. The keyword in organizing their wardrobes was functionality—there was a time and place for everything. However, when discussing what to wear in various situations, the differences were minimal and difficult to detect at first glance. They also drew a clear distinction between their public and domestic selves, although this mainly affected the way Anna dressed. Both identified three main categories of clothing in their wardrobes: home wear, workwear for college and work, and clothes for going out (which excluded sportswear). Apart from relating their clothing choices to other people, real or imagined, they also related to the abstract ideas conjured up by different brands.

While tucking into the pie Anna had made, our conversation started with the importance of being comfortable, especially at home. Around the flat, Anna and Gustaf both change into home wear. This is common in Sweden during the winter months, as many people prefer to take off the layers of thick and sometimes uncomfortable clothes necessary for being outside as soon as they get home. Snow often gets stuck on the lower part of the legs, only to melt and leave clothing damp and chilly once inside. Most Swedes leave their shoes in their front hall to avoid bringing in dirt and gravel and puddles of water from melting snow. Anna and Gustaf both said it would feel strange to remain dressed in the clothes they had worn outside during the day when relaxing on the sofa at home watching a film. Every outfit appeared to have its time and place.
They agreed that it was more accepted for a girl to wear casual clothes when having visitors over than it was for a boy. Gustav said that he liked to wear denim jeans and a T-shirt when they had guests over. He recalled one time when he went to an older classmate’s house, who had answered the door dressed in a shirt and shorts. At first he had thought it was a bit odd, but then decided it was actually rather chilled and relaxed. Anna considered it OK to wear leggings and a washed-out T-shirt at home, even when they had visitors. Jeggings were all the rage then, and Anna said that they had replaced regular denim for her.\footnote{Jeggings are like ordinary leggings. Cotton-mix, tight-fitting, with an elastic waistband, they are made in a fabric that looks like denim.} She found jeggings more comfortable, being more elastic and stretchy compared to the jeans she used to wear.

Both wore the same clothes outside the home, regardless of what they were doing—work, classes, or meeting friends. When it came to going out for the evening, they both dressed up a bit. Anna said that the main difference for her was that she wore more make-up and accessories going out to party than when going to college or work. She thought that so-called party tops, only suitable for going out, would easily lose their charm. They could be fun once but that would be about it; after that, they would be useless since they could not be combined with other items in her everyday wardrobe. Gustaf would wear his jeans when going out, but perhaps put on a nicer shirt.

Anna described her and Gustaf’s style as vanlig. She mostly wore Swedish brands such as Acne and Filippa K. Anna and Gustaf agreed that brands were not important, but emphasized that they liked Swedish brands because they felt that they were clean, simple, and classic. Clean implied something basic and uncluttered, not too bright, patterned, or ornamented. They emphasized that this was not to make themselves seem posh; they simply liked those brands. Gustaf said that he had become more interested in fashion after going to the business school. He said that all guys at some point or other get caught in the hoodie rut, but that he was no longer that guy and now dressed in trousers. He cared more now, especially after meeting Anna and starting business school. He described the men at the college as wearing well-thought-out outfits, based on shirts, cardigans, and denim jeans or chinos. The girls he described as dressing in tight denim jeans, shirts, high heels, and cardigans with Mulberry bags. All the girls had Mac laptops and put their iPhones on display at the table in front of them when sitting in the lecture hall or the library.

The girls who studied law or business were described as having an expensive air about them. Anna was ambivalent about it, as she considered the girls at the business school to be show-offs. High heels were something she considered reserved for going out, and not appropriate in a lecture hall. ‘Those Mulberry bags, are they even real? They might as well be fake, and then what’s the point?’ she remarked. At the same time, she did admit that she would buy the same things if she had the money. ‘In the business school you
dress for others, not for yourself,’ was Gustaf’s comment. ‘Of course there are
vanliga people too—some don’t care at all, but they aren’t noticed as much.’
He said that he had always liked shirts as they made him feel as though he was
blending in. A stylistically pure look was what he was aiming for: classics
such as a checked shirt, denim jeans, and a cardigan would always work. He
did not like to stand out in either a positive or a negative way. Referring to
Anna and himself, he said ‘We just tag along, we don’t stick out, we are van-
liga people on the periphery’.

As I documented the contents of their wardrobes, I noticed that the conver-
sation repeatedly came back how people positioned themselves by what they
wore. Brands were considered closely connected to how you were as a person.
It was Gustaf in particular who stressed that he considered himself to be van-
lig. The couple agreed that it might be unfair, but that people were definitely
categorized by their style of clothing—them included. Gustaf mentioned that
he once saw the Swedish television personality Filip Hammar dressed in green
chinos. He wished that he could pull something like that off, but claimed not
to be bold enough. As a compromise with himself he had recently bought a
pair of burgundy-colored corduroys instead.

I wish I would wear more colored clothes. I have a friend who has a three-
colored sweater that’s known as the peacock.

As we went through their wardrobes, they commented on each other’s
clothes, filling in and confirming each other’s thoughts on what to wear or not.
One look they both mentioned to be undesirable in men was the Ed Hardy
look—an American brand known for its cluttered prints inspired by tattoos—
a glamtrash look they associated with the working class. For Anna and Gustaf,
this was the epitome of everything opposite to the Swedish brands they iden-
tified with. Before looking through his clothes, Gustaf announced that he was
an ‘Acne guy’, but it turned out that he did not have that many items from
Acne in fact:

I might not have that many items from Acne, but that is the kind of guy I feel
like. I prefer Swedish brands. If I feel like wearing a relaxed and casual T-shirt
with holes in it I feel better if it’s Acne. Others might not see the difference, but
I know, and I can tell what other people are wearing.

Anna and Gustaf distinguished between their public selves and their pri-
ivate, domestic selves. Anna always wore home wear in their flat—leggings
and a T-shirt. When going to lectures or work she would put on a pair of jeans,
but had become used to wearing jeggings as a comfortable substitute. When
going out for the evening she would put on some extra make-up, accessorize,
and do her hair and nails. She had some tops that she had bought for going out
in, but felt they were not the best use of her money as they were difficult to
combine with her everyday clothes.
For Gustaf, home wear was jeans and a T-shirt, although not just any jeans or any T-shirt. When going to lectures or out in the evening he would vary things with shirts and cardigans, sometimes changing the denim jeans for chinos. Both Gustaf and Anna claimed not to care about brands, but at the same time were highly aware of the brands people around them were wearing. Even if not always able to afford what they preferred, the idea of those brands filled a symbolic function in how they dressed. Hence, Anna identified herself as a Filippa K girl and Gustaf as an Acne dude, even when not actually wearing anything by those brands.

The questions of fitting in together and being an Acne dude and a Filippa K gal raise point to the possibility that vanlighet is a way of keeping up with fashion trends like everyone else, but of not overdoing it and letting it become too much. The portrait of Anna and Gustaf shows the balancing act involved in caring about fashion without either standing out or letting their interest show. For both of them, brand identification was a guiding principle in how to position themselves in relation to others. It also brought to the surface the issue of functionality as a way of structuring everyday life according to what, where, and when.

Lily
Lily had moved to Midway from the north of Sweden less than a year before I met her. Aged 17 when fieldwork started, she was the youngest informant in the study. She was in the first year of high school, doing social sciences with a special focus on culture. She lived with her mum in a rented house outside town, but in the course of the fieldwork they moved to a new house closer to the city center. Her father and older sister were still living in the town where she had grown up.

Dressing for a new location
Lily’s mum was working for one of the local industries in Midway and had moved there some time before Lily joined her. Lily’s parents had divorced long before, and at first she had remained with her dad and older sister. After a while, however, she wanted to live with her mum and moved south. I went to see her at home quite a few times, and from time to time we met up for a fika in the town center. The first times we met I asked if she had any friends who I could meet, but even though she said she would ask around I noticed that she was reluctant to mediate contact. Given her eagerness to meet up, I suspected that she liked our meetings to be exclusive. She was new in town,

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300 Appendix 1 Tables 1–3 case 10.
301 Appendix 1 Table 1 case 10.
and wanted to talk about her experiences without involving her new friends. Once this dawned on me, I stopped asking to see her friends and always met her alone or with her mum present if she happened to be at home.

Like Josefine, Lily at this point was a high school student without any income and thus very limited resources to spend on herself. Lily explained that she received the state study allowance as well as half the alimony from her father to budget for herself; however, when it came to buying more expensive stuff such as new jeans or shoes, her mum paid. The money Lily had at her disposal was used for impulse shopping, and she estimated that she spent around SEK 500–700 a month in this way. Mostly she bought clothes at the local shops, and each month on her mum’s payday they would go shopping together—just like Josefine and her mum. She also went into Gothenburg with her mum from time to time to go shopping in the big department stores such as Nordiska Kompaniet (NK). This did not happen very often, but when it did it was a mother and daughter activity. Although Lily’s living arrangements were very similar to Josefine’s and they both shared similar shopping patterns, Lily had far less money to spend on herself. Lily’s hometown in the north was a bit larger than Midway, and although the selection there was pretty much the same she still liked to go shopping when she went stay at her father’s during holidays. She explained that she felt safe with the stores she had always shopped at, and that she would stock up at Christmas and other holidays when she was there.

Although Lily missed her old friends and still identified strongly with her hometown, she had easily made new friends in Midway. Most of her time was spent doing schoolwork and participating in social activities such as belly-dancing classes, which she attended together with friends from school. The first times we met she was a bit shy, hiding behind her long blonde hair that almost reached down to her waist. Over time she opened up and showed her curious, talkative, and alert side. Although she was sociable and outgoing, and soon found herself at home in Midway, she also saw things with an outsider’s eyes, helping me notice certain aspects that I might not have seen without her. When we first met, Lily used to talk about the school cafeteria with horror. She attended the same school as Josefine, the one with the ‘catwalk cafeteria’. Some girls, she told me, would be made up to the teeth one day while showing up the next completely bare of make-up. She thought this was fake, and that it was better to keep to the middle ground and remain consistent in how one looked: not changing too much, and not standing out too much. She balanced her own style between keeping it real, being authentic, and dressing according to what she considered to be her social status. Although she never articulated

302 Two department stores in Stockholm and Gothenburg which carry designer clothes.
303 Image 15, one of Gothenburg’s shopping streets where informants occasionally bought clothes.
where she positioned herself, it was clearly somewhere in the middle—not among the ‘it crowd’ and not among ‘the nerds’.

Like Anna and Gustaf, Lily described her style as *vanlig*. She would also refer to herself as ‘alldaglig’ (plain) when she talked about how she looked and dressed. She claimed not to have actively sought out a specific style, but when asked she had detailed ideas of how to combine different garments and accessories, and what silhouettes, cuts, colors, and fabrics she preferred. As Lily was still at high school, her ideas of what to wear and when were mainly tied to what people did at school. When I asked her, Lily described her style like this:

> I would describe my style as rather plain, neither too much nor too little. Some days if I feel like some variation I dress a bit more Indie, hard to describe what that looks like, but Indie is usually looser tops, worn jeans, and a lot of accessories. I haven’t really chosen my style, it has sort of evolved by itself over time. I take inspiration from blogs, friends, magazines, etc. and then I often unconsciously look for the same type of clothing.

Several times Lily repeated that she did not really have a specific style, but at the same time she talked about her look as Indie-inspired or festival chic. Her ideal was to look like she imagined girls to look like during music festivals in the summer: cut-off jeans shorts or tight trousers matched with oversized sweaters or tunics and accessorized with a lot of jewelry such as chunky necklaces and mismatched rings. She stayed away from frilly things and spriggy patterns, preferring more ‘basic stuff’. Although Lily claimed to like going shopping by herself, she admitted that she would not buy something if she knew that some of her friends did not approve, ‘cos you don’t wanna look ugly or something!’ She tried to think long-term about what would go well with items she already had in her wardrobe. Most important, however, was the fit.

> I hate tight sweaters, they’re the worst thing I know. Like tight sweaters, tight jeans, there isn’t anything worse! So I like relaxed sweaters that you sort of fly in! That’s what I like. … In school I don’t want to wear tight clothes; at the weekends I might wear them, I don’t really know, I just feel they’re too narrow and stuff.

This idea obviously conflicted with her hoped-for image of herself, wearing mini cut-offs or tight trousers. Like Anna and Gustaf, she distinguished between home wear, school clothes, and outfits suitable for going out. Just like Anna she was into jeggings, which had increasingly come to replace regular jeans. In Lily’s wardrobe we counted five pairs of jeans, the newest pair bought two months before and the oldest pair bought during a trip to Florida about two years earlier. The Florida jeans were her most expensive, having cost around SEK 1,000, whereas the cheapest ones had been bought in a sale.
for SEK 200. 304 4 pairs were blue, 1 pair was black. 305 She was clearly aware of her body, not wanting to accentuate it when in school. When going out, on the other hand, she and her girlfriends would put on high heels and wear mini dresses that showed off their legs.

Rather than considering her move to Midway an opportunity to experiment with a new look or style and to be a slightly different kind of person in her new setting, Lily mostly stuck with her old style. As she considered herself to be vanlig, she balanced between fitting in to her new context and keeping her old identity. For Lily, being authentic was to bridge the gap between conformity and not losing herself. As she struggled with how to fit in without compromising with herself, this was what she repeatedly came back to when talking about other people.

Why show off?
For Lily it was not important to stand out and wear original clothes, neither for her nor others. She said it depended on the person how to dress, but that people who tried to stand out too much with their style came across as insecure and attention-seeking. One day when I was over at Lily’s for coffee we returned to her experience of starting school in Midway. By then she was in the second year of high school, and we had known each other for about a year. She still took the view that some of the girls at the school tried too hard, and that it was better to keep a consistent level of ambition with one’s outfits. She explained that she believed that there were limits to how much money one should spend on clothing and the extent to which clothing should dominate the social scene; at the same time she believed that clothing was tied to status, where the most popular people at school would wear the nicest clothes, and the less popular ones would try to copy the it crowd. Lily told me that this mimicking did not work, and that these people ended up looking ridiculous, overstepping their mark in the social hierarchy. It was a balancing act between what one should look like on the outside and people’s perception of the inside, of keeping things real according to one’s social status. It was important to Lily to appear authentic to observers who were profound, and yet express her individualism. In many ways she lived with clothes as a background source of self-awareness in relation to imagined and actual others.

A few days later we met again to tape her responses to the questions on ethical consumption (see appendix 2). During the interview, when describing a girl in school who was active in the Moderate Party, Lily returned to the importance of being moderate in one’s individuality. 306 She explained to me

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304 Appendix 1 Table 2 case 10.
305 Appendix 1 Table 3 case 10.
306 The Moderate Party is the centrist-conservative party in Sweden which was in government at the time of the study.
that the girl was ‘like born into the Moderates’, and that she had a rather posh style, wearing expensive brands such as Burberry. When I asked her to pinpoint what it was about the girl that annoyed Lily and her friends so, she answered evasively, starting several sentences with ‘Well, I’m sure she’s really nice, but—’ She told me the girl’s lips were too red, that she had a perm so her hair was really big, and that she was too thin, looking like a boy from behind. However, in the end she concluded:

Lily: She walks around with, on her jacket she has like a huge print of the Moderate Party logo. Yes, oh my god. She puts it out there so much! I don’t get what her thing is.
Me: Do you think she should be more chilled out?
Lily: Yes, like it’s, no one else cares, like what is the thing with proclaiming it like that? Everyone is entitled to their own opinions, but you don’t have to go about it in that way, showing it off.

Lily articulates the constant balancing act involved in expressing her individuality, but within rather confined limits. She relates exclusively to other girls, and perhaps her status as new in town accentuates her position as in the middle. According to Lily, there was a clear connection between one’s outside and one’s perceived inside. To her mind it was safe to play with the role of the Indie girl, a character who already existing in the popular media. The festival chic girl was an apolitical character, and when she felt that other people came to close to expressing political standpoints, she marked her distance by questioning their agenda. She also operationalized a hierarchy of acceptable styles—what Anna and Gustaf referred to as the Ed Hardy look Lily called the Abercrombie and Fitch look, also an American brand. She associated this with short denim skirts, tight tops, and flip-flops, a look she considered unstylish and unattractive.

In her concerns about dressing for a new location and showing off, Lily’s realizes vanlighet in the clothing she wears as well as behavior, attitudes, and socio-material dimensions she attributes to certain aesthetics. The recurring topics in Lily’s interviews were authenticity and being real, dressing according to one’s social status, and balancing the construction and retention of a feminine identity. This speaks of a desire to be accepted by others, of wanting to be seen but not to be considered different or strange.

The first part of this chapter, then, portrays the 5 key informants in the study. First came Alex, who was living on his own and had a part-time job to support himself. Looking at Alex’s family relations provided an insight into the cultural norms he was struggling to measure up to, and the kind of masculinity that informed his views on how to become an adult. In terms of how to live, he related to a rather traditional breadwinner ideal of masculinity; however, when it came to his appearance and how he dressed he followed newer ideals
that allowed him to use his body in order to express himself and to control his cultural position of being a mainstreamer.

After Alex came Josefine, a high school student living with her mum. For Josefine, her fondness for shopping as a social activity and her plans for the future revealed an ambiguous position, for she was tightly knit to her cultural position and social network, but at the same time experienced herself to be free in terms of leaving Midway. One of the dominant themes was the multifaceted role of shopping in her life. Rather than being based on necessity, it was a catalyst for caring in the relationships in her life, for travelling and meeting new people, but also as a means of constructing a feminine identity.

The third portrait was of Anna and Gustaf, two students who were living together. They were constantly trying to balance keeping up with fashion with not standing out, a balancing act that affected how they saw themselves as individuals, but also how they viewed each other and other people. The wardrobe study with them revealed an interesting gap between how they identified themselves and their actual consumption practices in the sense that Anna identified herself as interested in fashion and Gustaf identified himself as having little interest in fashion, yet they both regularly bought new clothes and spent quite a lot of time thinking about clothes.

Lastly, there was Lily, a high school student living with her mum. A key theme for her too was balance—balancing between fitting into her new context, analyzing its dress codes, while retaining her old identity, being willing to change too much to fit in. Lily resolved this issue by using authenticity as the hallmark of where she positioned herself and where she placed other people. This also tied into her desire to hold on to a feminine identity without giving away too much of herself.

These portraits have presented 5 different individuals. I will now turn to how they and others go about conforming to the social context, with both traditional structures and new consumption practices to contend with, the question of providing for oneself, and shopping as a cultural ideal. In all this I will compare and contrast the individual portraits and the literature on similar contexts in order to establish what the stories of these informants ultimately represent.

Conforming to the social context

The specific material on the 5 key informants has, of course, to be related to the material as a whole. In order to conduct this analysis, the Swedish researchers, theoretical concepts, and consumption studies introduced in the discussion of fashion and identity (Chapter 2) will be put to use in order to elucidate the concept of vanlighet. This analysis, while discussing the individual portraits of Alexander, Josefine, Anna, Gustaf and Lily, casts its net wider to include the cultural narratives of vanlighet and coming of age as a man or a
woman in Midway, treating those 5 and the other informants in the study as a
collective by discussing how the young people interacted as a group.

Earlier, I wondered what being vanlig meant for my informants in terms of
their consumption practices, with the underlying question being what ideals,
norms, and demands these young men and women related to. Many times,
unspoken yet strict rules supposedly define everyone’s actions and appear-
ance, as they defined these young people’s. For some groups, the rules are
more manifest—as among punk rockers, with their distinctive fashions and
clear anti-establishment stance. For other groups, such as the young people in
this study, the codes are more subtle and difficult to make out from the out-
side.307

My group of informants constituted a social group: a collectivity of individ-
uals who repeatedly interacted in a set of connected identity relationships.
The peer group and other social groups they related to were in turn connected
to a social structure—the organization of the social system in groups and iden-
tity relationships, seen in terms of structures, positions, and roles. Thus my
analysis is based on an understanding of individuals and their relationships,
placed in relation to their social group, but also in relation to a larger social
structure.308

Thus far this chapter has dealt with relationships, both platonic and roman-
tic, within a peer group. It has also dealt with relationships based on kinship
between parents and extended families. Although peer relationships were the
main focus in everyday life in terms of social activities, kinship constituted a
central part of the understanding of self for these young men and women. The
nature of the relationship between older and younger generations is vital in
any attempt to understand culture.309 All humans acquire culture through a
process referred to by anthropologists as enculturation, meaning ‘the social
process by which culture is learned and transmitted across the generations’.310

Culture is something all people absorb both consciously and unconsciously;
as a result of shared enculturation, people partake in the same experiences,
memories, values and beliefs.311 To establish what meanings people attach to
a category such as vanlighet, it is necessary to look at the wider social structure
and cultural patterns in which meanings are created. In the following discus-
sion of new practices of consumption, the problem of providing for oneself,
and shopping as cultural ideal, identity is treated as a cultural phenomenon.

310 Kottak 2000, 77.
311 Kottak 2001, 76.
Traditional structures, new consumption practices

The logic of the study was to start with a group of individuals who defined themselves as mainstreamers. Based on the documented contents of their wardrobes, especially focusing on their jeans, and using wardrobes as a route into their lifeworlds, the study has looked for explanations for individual patterns of consumption and what led them to dress the way they did. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, the concept of *vanlighet* materialized as a main shared point of identification and a desirable cultural identity for both the men and the women. I have presented material that unlocks some of what *vanlighet* meant for my informants. It is the centrality of this norm that will be analyzed here, starting with the consistency of life patterns in Midway over time and what can be described as relatively new patterns of consumption. I have argued that to study young people of any gender is not to presume any given similarities or differences between the genders; however, the data presented in the tables below point towards certain differences when it comes to gender. While it might be risky to extrapolate too extensively from a small body of material like this, some of these gender differences will be discussed when relevant.

One tendency that can be traced back over time in Midway is the consistency in population.\(^{312}\) Most people living there have a strong connection to the town and have relatives living in the area. Although all of the 5 key informants had a parent or siblings in other parts of the country, most of their relatives apart from Lily’s were born in Midway and had remained there. This tradition of tightly knit networks of close contacts is a source of security and stability for many locals. Compared to larger cities with their high population turnover, the social structure of a small town means that the norms of appearance and behavior are more deeply rooted and less prone to rapid change—larger cities offer greater flexibility, diversity, and even disagreement, whereas small towns are more dependent on cultural consensus.\(^{313}\) The centrality of tightly knit networks has been described in this area before by the Swedish ethnologist Annette Rosengren, in her ethnography of people’s ordinary lives in a town not far from Midway.\(^{314}\) Among my informants this security was sometimes expressed as boredom with small-town life, matched with excitement at travelling to larger cities and temporarily experiencing something new; responses were not uniform, though, for while some dreamt of leaving, others considered staying in Midway as a natural part of life.

Swedish households rarely have three generations or more living under the same roof. In the agrarian past, older people moved out of the main farmhouse when their children took over, and lived in a separate house on the farm. The

\(^{312}\) See the discussion on the section on Midway in Chapter 3 for the town’s relatively unchanging population.


idea of kinship used to be stronger among the upper classes, but spread to the lower classes in the nineteenth century and is today central in all of Swedish society. In the early 1980s, when Sweden was experiencing unprecedented low fertility rates and high divorce rates, public concerns were raised about the future of the nation, with some even interpreting it as a sign of Swedes’ dissatisfaction with modern life, the end of the nuclear family, and a society that was increasingly harsh and unfriendly towards children. The Swedish historian David Gaunt argues that the decline of the family in Sweden has been misconstrued, and that the Swedish family remains a strong institution. What looked like chaos in the 1980s was rather a development of new domestic lifestyles. Rather, it has become common for individuals to work their way through a series of pluralistic family forms—they cohabit, separate, marry, divorce, have children with different partners, and form stepfamilies.315

Alex, Josefine, and Lily all had experience of different family forms with divorced parents, having lived in households where people had joined and left. Alex had left his father’s household to first flatshare with a friend and then to live alone. Even though Alex had issues with his father and problems with the new living arrangements in his father’s household, he had no doubts about starting a family of his own. This was his strategy to conform to the social context, standing with one foot in an extended family but at the same time dreaming of a nuclear family. For Josefine and Lily, adapting to their new situations had been easier since they were living alone with their mothers and had no new individuals entering their households to take into consideration.

In a study of masculinity among young Swedish immigrants, the urban studies specialist Ove Sernhede notes that identity is no longer something that is inherited from one’s parents, but rather something individuals create for themselves by searching for ideals and role models in the complex work of identity creation.316 This echo of postmodernism is not confirmed in my study. When the informants spoke of how to act or handle situations in life they mainly spoke of their parents, families, and friends. All of the informants in the study, regardless of their household—their parents, friends, a partner, or on their own—were strongly influenced by their families and traditional cultural patterns of living.

This might appear at odds with new family forms, but new family constellations do not necessarily mean that traditional patterns of living are completely overthrown. Had I asked my informants direct questions about who their role models were, they might have answered a public figure or a celebrity, but when it came to taking an active part in their lives it was their families who were described as the most influential, regardless of what their relationships were like—whether they thought them positive or negative. Taking

Anna and Gustaf as an example, the prospect of moving to a new city was only discussed in terms of where they came from, not as becoming someone else. This is a point that is rarely discussed in the academic literature: the idea that young people themselves might have no wish to free themselves from where they came from, and that outside influences are not necessarily at odds with identifying with one’s parents.

This confirms the critique of the postmodern emphasis on youth as a cultural free zone disconnected from the rest of society, and the non-committal supermarket of style model of freely picking and choosing whom to be (see p. 61). Further, the connection between identity and kinship typically associated with non-Western societies is perhaps more present in modern life than we like to think. The sociologist Steph Lawler discusses kinship in North American and European societies, commenting that ‘kinship is bound up with issues of identity, although not in any straightforward way’. Like Gaunt, Lawler does not interpret changing family forms as marking the demise of the family; in fact, Lawler argues that there is a discrepancy between the discourse of individualism in the West and how people actually live their lives, as suggested in my material. When it came to Alex, Josefine, and Lily, all 3 had divorced parents, but their families, both old and new, were still a central point of reference. It would be a mistake to think that the end of the nuclear family equates to the end of kinship.

My ethnography tells a story of the specific norms and ideals that were passed on to my informants by the older generation. A central part of the construction of *vanlighet* was to be found in the cultural understandings of family life and an assumed heterosexuality. The discourse of the heterosexual nuclear family impacted on men and women at all levels of society throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first in this context. In the group, Lily was the only single person. Anna and Gustaf were living together in a monogamous heterosexual relationship, and Alex had a girlfriend and Josefine a boyfriend, although they were not living with the person they were dating. During our meetings the idea of living with a spouse and having children at some point in the future was presented as a natural progression in life. At the age of 19, Alex was already expressing his hopes of having children of his own.

317 Lawler 2014, 49.
318 Lawler 2014, 45.
319 Lawler 2014, 47.
320 None of my informants were openly gay, and the conversations were based on an assumed heterosexuality as the cultural norm. Although sexual encounters were a frequent topic of conversation, they always involved experiences with the opposite sex. This is not to say that same-sex experiences did not exist, but they were not openly talked about. There were also different rules for men and women about how to interact physically with people of the same sex. If the men were to kiss each other, it would be considered gay regardless of the context; women, however, could kiss without being considered gay if it was in the context of a party and alcohol was involved, when it was categorized as a fun thing to do.
Measured over a period of forty years, the average age of becoming a first-time father or mother has consistently been lower in Midway than the average for Sweden as a whole. The rate of increase has also been slower in Midway compared to larger cities such as Stockholm. These variations tie into different cultural patterns and ways of life in a small Swedish town compared to larger Swedish cities.

At the same time as being in a monogamous couple was important, this was a sliding scale of serial monogamy, where one relationship could end after another one had started. When it came to their social lives and dating, a clash between faithfulness as an ideal and liberal ideas of sexuality could be detected in the informants’ lives. This observation—that today not only young people, but people in general are less repressed when it comes to sex than was the case for previous generations or centuries—is nothing new. However, theorists such as the French philosopher Michel Foucault have questioned the idea that the present age enjoys sexual freedoms in a way not known before. The academic discourse of sexology is complex and closely intertwined with identity. If turning to current social theory, heterosexuality as a defining social institution is commonly believed to give gender its specific meanings and vice versa. Viewed in this way, the interpretation of openly expressing and talking about one’s sexual behavior becomes more complex.

With Alex, like the other male informants, many of the conversations we had revolved around sex and romantic relationships. For Alex, it was important to realize himself sexually by having several sexual partners, a pattern he considered as part of being young. During fieldwork, Alex was seeing a girl called Rebecca who was three years his junior. Alex’s reason for the relationship was that it was a way for him to have access to sex. He did not like being single and not knowing when he would next hook up with a girl. In his own words, he was never single if he could help it. Being with someone was important, and would sometimes override who that person was.

Returning to the links between gender and sexuality, and heterosexuality in particular, and their relevance to the material of this dissertation, it is difficult to overlook the idea of heterosexuality producing two distinct genders that are constructed around different ideas of how those genders are to be made or

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321 According to SCB statistics (http://www.scb.se, accessed 3 March 2015), the average age to become a first-time parent in Sweden has increased by 5.26 years for men and 4.89 years for women compared to 1970 and 2010. In Midway the average for men in 2010 was 30.3 years and 27.99 years for women, an increase on 1970 of 4.46 years for men and 4.72 years for women. The numbers are even larger when comparing to Stockholm, where the average age for men has gone up by 5.98 years and for women 6.1 years. The figures for smaller towns can differ a good deal from one year to the next, while not necessarily indicating a sustained change in cultural patterns or lifestyles; however, looking a span of forty years gives a reasonable indication of the demographic changes.

322 Lawler 2014, 74–5, 131.
preformed. This sits well with Rinallo’s idea of the panoptic gaze and of danger versus safety zones. At the informants’ stage in life, experience is often equated with sexual experience and drinking, with both of them supposedly being manly traits. While hanging out with Alex and a few of his friends, they informed me that the advantage of seeing younger girls was that they could not get into any of the nightclubs they went to and become a hassle. In this way, drunken quarrels could be avoided. At the same time, there was a hint of embarrassment in seeing younger girls. Having slept with many girls was something to be proud of; however, Alex claimed that when he was known as a ‘bock’ (a stud) for a while, he had felt bothered and uncomfortable, and had tried to shed the label.

Bearing in mind Figure 1 (see p. 76 adapted from Rinallo 1997), which represented legitimate appearance as a safe zone flanked by danger zones on both sides, not having slept with anyone would place one in the danger zone on the left side of the figure, as it was important for the male informants to appear as sexually active. This relates to the discussion above, that in this particular context manhood is made through certain experiences that have to be lived up to, while young adulthood is connected to a sufficient level of sexual experience to show that you have lived. To be sexually active is to fall into the adult category, leaving behind the rules that apply for children and young adults. Another example of this that will be discussed below is drinking excessively, which is also included in the idea of being manly and experienced. At the same time, having slept with ‘too many’ partners would also place oneself in the danger zone (but on the right-hand side of the figure), as it could become a problem if it started to have an adverse effect on one’s reputation. It appears that there is a balance to be struck between doing too little and doing too much.

This understanding of age as a social category that structures behavior was also part of how Alex and his friends related to one another. Friendships were important to all of my informants, not least for Alex after he had left his dad’s house and had no daily contact with others, as he was used to in a shared household. In this respect, the stereotype of men in the Swedish countryside as quiet, uncommunicative, unable to express emotion, and with few close friends finds scant support in my material. Both Alex and Gustaf had a large, close social network of friends, and were very expressive in terms of talking about intimate feelings. Yet, there were clear boundaries as to what was considered acceptable or not in terms of how a friend should act.

323 Lawler 2014, 132, 135.
324 Rinallo 2007, 86.
I soon discovered that the key to gaining their acceptance, as for everyone, was to contribute. Fail to contribute and one’s social role would be questioned. This mostly meant actively participating during social events and not retreating into a corner. Contributing to their group sociability was a way of gaining acceptance, where choosing to remain on the sidelines could lead to being ignored. Even though not spelt out, the informants’ relationships were structured around age as well as a degree of heterosexuality as social and cultural categories. Staying within the boundaries of mainstream masculinity meant balancing multiple sexual encounters with a good reputation, of being in a monogamous couple but not becoming a slacker.

During fieldwork, a close friend of Alex was said to have displayed ‘looser behavior’ in the recent past. He had been spending what was considered too much time with his girlfriend, isolating himself, become boring, gaining weight, and being too laid back. His appearance can be taken to have been illegitimate because of his lack of care of himself (suggested in Figure 1). As Rinallo found in his study, crossing the imaginary boundaries between the safe zone and the danger zones could have consequences such as negative sanctions by friends and acquaintances.328 In Alex’s friend’s case, the consequence was that he was almost shut out of his immediate circle of friends. This kind of social consequence is an effect of the panoptic gaze and the self-regulating practices that come with it. Alex saw what happened to a friend who spent too much time with his girlfriend and took it to heart; he knew how to act and thus keep himself inside the safe zone.

Equally, the balancing act between different cultural ideals applied for the women in the study as well. What was perceived as illegitimate or legitimate behavior in the prevailing norm system tended to be met by self-regulation, where the individual adjusted his or her behavior accordingly. In the case of Josefine and her mum, the fashion dos and don’ts applied not only to what to wear and when, but also to what was in their wardrobes regardless of whether the garments were ever worn or not.329 Here too a clash between old and new consumption practices can be detected. Although shopping for clothes has become a legitimate pastime, having the abundance of clothing, which appears to be a given consequence of this behavior, is not uncomplicated. Having too much, wherever the line was drawn, appeared to fall into the category of exaggerated care of self. Not only was it problematized from the outside—but Alex, for example—but the women regulated it themselves by attempting to scale down the amount of clothing they had. A sheer abundance of clothing did not necessarily equal wealth, success, or social credit—again, it was a question of striking a balance between what was in their wardrobes and in what quantities. This sort of self-regulating or self-disciplinary behavior on

328 Rinallo 2007, 87; see also Jacob Ostberg, ‘Masculinity and fashion’, in C. Otnes & L. Tun-
cay Zayer (eds.), Gender, culture, and consumer behavior (London: Routledge, 2012a), 262.
329 See Rinallo 2007, 85.
the part of the individual connects to a Swedish cultural discourse that cher-
ishes rationality and frugality, and tries to repress the desire for material 
things. 330

However, in terms of looking at continuities and divergences between tra-
ditional gender roles and patterns of consumption it was the men who stood 
out; the women informants’ consumption practices were more aligned with 
the cultural norms of how to practice femininity, and were less apparent or 
obvious. This reflects the wider Western cultural discourse of viewing fashion 
and consumption as a feminine area. The idea of fashion as something belong-
ing to the world of women has a long history in the construction of everyday 
life in the Western world in general, and in the studied context specifically. In 
her ethnography, Rosengren describes how fashion had a given place in the 
women’s lives when she studied men and women in the area in the late 1980s, 
and how it was part of an expected femininity to keep up with the latest trends 
and to take care of not only one’s own appearance, but also one’s children’s 
and husband’s.331 One change since then, however, is the rise of the levels 
of consumption, something that involves both sexes.332 The affluence involved, 
exemplified by Josefine’s jeans with the price tags still on and her attempts to 
weed out her wardrobe, points to a dramatic change in the size of Swedish 
wardrobes. As is evident in my material, the men tended to have more jeans 
the older they got, whereas for women the number of jeans did not rise in the 
same way according to age.333

For the male participants, over time their consumption practices involved 
more of a clash with the discourse of men’s fashion than did the women’s. A 
traditional Swedish masculinity that prioritizes the nuclear family, heterosex-
ual couples relationships, and hard work was the ideal among the informants. 
At the same time, dominant masculine ideals of the breadwinner have been 
increasingly challenged in the last two decades, so widening the scope of the 
new masculinities. An early term used to capture the growing interest in fash-
ion and beauty among Western urban men is metrosexuality—coined in 
around 2000 and applied to men who adopted a certain aesthetic awareness 
that used to be associated with gay men.334 It should be pointed out here that I 
am not assuming that men are naturally uninterested in fashion, as the Western 
myth would have it, operating according to the stereotype that women are nat-

330 Peder Aléx, Konsumera rätt—ett svenskt ideal. Behov, hushållning och konsumtion (Lund: 
Studentlitteratur, 2003).
332 Annica Carlsson et al., Kartläggning av mängder och flöden av textilavfall (SMED Rapport 
333 Appendix 1 Table 1.
334 Rinallo 2007, 77–9. There are several alternative descriptions of this new man; the new lad, 
the metrosexual man, and the übersexual man. In Sweden these discussions have mostly gone 
under the label den nya mannen.

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urally interested in their appearance whereas men are rational and only concerned with the metaphysical aspects of life. However, there are cultural differences in how long these ideas have prevailed, and in the studied context it is only in recent decades that these notions have started to relax their grip.

What can be said of the men in the study is that they were not overly worried about having their sexual orientation misinterpreted—they were not necessarily concerned with what was gay or not in terms of consumption in the same way as previous generations of men had been. It is important to stress, though, that it mattered who was questioning the heterosexual matrix. If it was an older person it was shrugged off as not fitting into modern society; if it was a peer then it was more complicated. There is a dislocation in what counts as acceptable beauty practices for straight men, which now operates along lines that used to be reserved for gay men and women. Examples of this are the use of cosmetics and beauty products such as moisturizers, tanning products, and certain make-up, and attending to perceived issues such as bags under the eyes or unwanted body hair by using commercial products. Thinking about what to wear, planning ahead, and knowing the various fashion brands were all things that the men and the women in the study did.

Having said that, the age of my informants should not go uncommented. Even though the men in my study might differ from men in older generations, one must question whether their behaviors can be interpreted as a new kind of masculinity, a sort of development of the metrosexual one. When my informants entered their teens, the metrosexual male, as one possible identity, had already been established for several years. For them, certain male grooming practices had never been thought feminine or gay. When Alex announced that he shaved his armpits and waxed his chest, he was not balancing on a knife-edge between what could be interpreted as masculine or not. In his world, these were legitimate masculine practices, even though he was aware that others might do things differently. Given the safety zone and the danger zones (Figure 1, p. 76), the general perception from where he was standing was that it was a legitimate, appropriate thing to do. Not tending his body hair would imply he had no care of himself, but removing all body hair would be excessive. It goes to show that these imagined barriers are not fixed, but change over time.

Whereas the women’s interest in fashion described in Rosengren’s study holds good, her description of the men as uninterested in fashion and despising jeans. In addition, gender affects the level of consumption more than other factors such as income or occupation.

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335 The psychoanalyst J. C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (London: Hogarth Press, 1930) labelled the moment at the end of the eighteenth century when men started to dress in less elaborate and more sober styles as the great masculine renunciation.

336 When comparing the men and the women, the female informants have a greater number of jeans. In addition, gender affects the level of consumption more than other factors such as income or occupation.
shopping is no longer relevant.\textsuperscript{337} \textit{Vanlighet} in this perspective is rather a complex concept to understand. The PJs (see Chapter 1) can be of assistance in illuminating the complex course to be navigated between safety and danger zones. In the case of the PJs, they were in the opposite danger zone to Alex’s complacent friend because they cared too much—making them open to the suspicion of being effeminate or gay. In particular, the PJs’ use of make-up pushed them over the line of what was acceptable. This shows that being labelled gay was not an issue if it came from an older generation, but it was less welcome if it came from within one’s own peer-group and was interpreted as feminine to boot. Most of the time, what was acceptable or not is invisible from the outside, determined by each specific cultural circumstance. For example, the fact that Alex experimented with dyeing his hair was not an issue in itself, but not achieving the result he was looking for put him in the danger zone. This further complicates the trading off of danger zones and safe zone, adding the possibility of failure or success as a variable in being able to pull something off. These boundaries were mainly internalized, as any shame was unconnected to what I said in the car that day or what he had heard from someone else, but was something he had felt when he was home alone looking at himself in the mirror.

What was detectable in my material, but not fully discussed in Rinallo’s study, was this balancing act between adhering to new consumption practices while maintaining a traditional masculinity in terms of behavior. This echoes Lawler’s argument that, contrary to what many social theorists suggest, individuals are quite capable of balancing different and competing models of personhood.\textsuperscript{338} In this way, the male participants in my study were practicing patterns of consumption that used to be associated with femininity or being gay, but at the same time upholding other traditional cultural norms such as the breadwinner ideal and providing for oneself. The women, meanwhile, were also balancing traditional ideals and new consumption practices, but not in the same way as the men.

Providing for oneself

When the women in the studied context traditionally cared for the home and domestic life, the men measured their worth in terms of productivity and the ability to provide for their families. The tradition of manual labor and the focus on practically acquired skills has many times been accompanied by a kind of anti-intellectualism and a distanced relationship to people in positions of power. As discussed by the Swedish ethnologist Bo Nilsson in a study of men in the north of Sweden, respectability is a central part of this masculinity. Each

\textsuperscript{337} Rosengren 1991, 49.

\textsuperscript{338} Lawler 2014, 48.
expects to be met with respect, and at the same time they are alert towards injustice and hierarchical relationships.339

Alex was 19 years old when he came home and found his bags packed—not out of his teens, in other words. His stubbornness and pride in dealing with the situation mirrored his father’s behavior. They were both equally determined not to give in, or to be the one who took the first step towards a reconciliation, which would imply an admission of being wrong and taking blame for the situation that had occurred. From then on Alex said he would provide for himself, and therefore he stayed on at the workplace he shared with his dad even though he claimed to hate it. This was something he did in order to support himself. He could have moved to Gothenburg to live with his mother, but that did not constitute a viable option for him at the time.

Each individual responds differently to these kinds of ideals, but turning to the context of Swedish culture as a whole can be instructive when moving beyond the individual level. In Sweden it is not uncommon to regard children as adults once they have finished high school at the age of 18, expecting them to start providing for themselves, either by moving out, or by getting a job and helping to pay the family bills.340 In this sense, Sweden’s young people are often considered adults according to social and economic norms, but not yet fully adult in law. The moral is to teach young adults what it means to be a grown-up. What is rarely mentioned, though, is that the parental and grandparental generations of today’s youth grew up under very different circumstances, when labor was in short supply and unemployment rates among young people were low. According to the social norms, Alex’s father did nothing excessive when he left his son to make his own way. The firm stubbornness they both displayed had its roots in a mutual lack of respect. The father felt that Alex did not respect his house rules, and Alex felt that his father did not respect what was important to him in his life.

By looking at Alex’s family relations, and especially his relationship with his dad, the cultural norm for how to be a man—a traditional, dominant breadwinner ideal—is uncovered. Their power struggle led to Alex moving out to support himself. Alex was quick to get a flat of his own and furnish it to a certain material standard. Acquiring a certain material welfare and having a family were central markers of what he considered to be an adult, and having transitioned properly into a grown man.

The breadwinner ideal was clearly expressed by both Alex and his father. Alex’s father did so when standing up for Alex at work, despite them not being on speaking terms at the time, thereby proving the importance of standing up

340 An example of reports of this cultural practice can be found in Aftonbladet, 16 August 2013, in which an economist advises parents to get adult children to pay their way if living at home. The economist says that even when a child’s income is very low they should still pay rent and for food and other living expenses.
for one’s family. The fact that they did not talk about it afterwards or even said hello at work, even though they were both aware that the other person knew about what had happened, falls into the bracket of this masculinity. This episode confirms the stigma of losing face, since this could be interpreted as childish or even feminine. It was also a challenge to authority, since Alex’s father had to stick his neck out for him with the boss.

Alex’s reaction was to act as if he were happy to be on his own, despite the fact that it meant staying in a job he despised. It was important for him not to owe a debt of gratitude to anyone, not even his own father. The behavior of both parties lived up to the masculine norm of showing power of action and capability. However, when it came to Alex’s father’s new family and the moment when the power struggle between the two became physical, his father chose to side with his new partner. Here, Alex’s father expressed his masculinity by standing up for his woman, just as Alex did by moving out and making his own way. In this respect there was a difference between Alex and Josefine when it came to providing for themselves. Alex felt forced to sell his clothes to friends in order to make money, while Josefine threw away clothes in order to make room for more.

Although this might appear to be tough parenting, it can be traced back to the norm of respect and not losing face. The ideal of the decent man, acting according to a code of honor, being honorable and acting respectfully, as described by Bo Nilsson, is applicable here. The rough treatment of a son might appear difficult to understand, but the other side of the coin was loyalty to a spouse. The final break between Alex and his father came when their argument became physical—and involved Alex’s stepmother. When Alex’s father chose to side with his partner he was doing the right thing by showing respect for her and the family they were trying to build, but it came at Alex’s expense. I have no wish to downplay the effect this had on Alex, since I know he was deeply affected by the turn of events, yet at the same time he accepted what happened, which says much about the norms of masculinity he had internalized.

Although the portraits of the 5 informants reflect different individuals and family situations, they are all representative of the step from adolescence to adulthood. Despite Alex’s tense relationship with his dad, he mimicked his father by expressing a desire to become a dad himself. An alternative route would have been to disassociate himself from parenting altogether. Instead he took on the traditional masculine role of the provider, as he struggled to make it on his own and come to terms with his next step in life.

Josefine and Lily were in a way protected from this. Without the burden of having to provide for themselves, they were freer to dream of a future where

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343 Nilsson 2001, 121.
they only looked to themselves. Dreams of going abroad were far commoner among the girls than the boys: they fantasized, often together, about the different places they dreamt of going. The empirical material asks questions in terms of gendered differences and similarities when it came to providing for oneself. The clash between the traditional roles of masculinity and femininity and consumption practices can partly be explained by this ideal of making one’s own way. If this in fact was a masculine ideal, it is possible to understand why my female informants had greater access to the necessary resources to spend on consumption. To follow this line of thought, it is necessary to look closer at the ideals informing the female participants’ patterns of consumption.

Shopping as cultural ideal

The traditional role of women in the studied area has been one of responsibility for social relations, of focusing on children, the home, clothing, prices and other things concerning the everyday life. An interest in clothing has previously been described as a natural aspect in the lives of the women, an expression of care for the rest of the family whereas the men on the other hand have been described as lacking this interest and being and unaware of everything that concerns clothing and looks.344

My material does not confirm the traditional division between men and women when it comes to an interest in clothing and appearance among the informants. The girls in the study were more prone towards describing themselves as ‘modeintresserade’ (interested in fashion). This was a balancing act though, where having an interest in fashion placed oneself in the safety zone of figure 1 but caring too much was considered as an exaggeration. In the portrait of Lily there are several examples of her describing other people in terms of overdoing the way they looked and caring too much, such as when discussing the catwalk in the high school cafeteria or describing the girl who was engaged in moderaterna.

If looking at the outcome of the wardrobe studies in terms of the number of jeans that were documented, the average number of jeans was consistently higher among the female informants, not only in total but also when comparing variables such as occupation.

Figure 2: Average number of jeans by gender and occupation. Source: Appendix 2 Tables 1 & 2, all twenty wardrobe studies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Whether the female informants were students, working or unemployed barely had any effect on their number of jeans, whereas the male informant’s number of jeans were affected a bit more by their occupation. The male informants who were unemployed, for instance, only had around half the number of jeans if compared to the unemployed female informants. While this indeed shows that the women in the study consumed more jeans than the men, the size of the material and the fact that it was not a random sample chosen to statistically represent a larger population, makes it questionable to draw too far-reaching conclusions based on this. Furthermore, the mere number of garments in a wardrobe is a far too crass measurement to represent the cultural meaning of clothing and fashion. The result of the ethnographic study, which is the key part of this thesis, instead illustrates that both the female and the male informants used clothing, including jeans, in an active way to construct an identity conforming to the cultural template of being vanlig.

Still, the wardrobe study does give us some more detail that sheds light on the intricate interplay between market dynamics and consumers’ lived lives. Table 5 shows that the female informants had a wider selection of brands in their wardrobes. The number one country of origin of brands for both genders was Sweden, followed by America for the men and Italy for the women. The women carried a wider selection of jeans both in terms of different brands and countries of origin. While this can partly be explained by the female informants somewhat more active interest in fashion, it also reflects the options available on the market where women’s clothing is a larger overall segment and where the construction of oneself as vanlig, thus covers more options than for the male informants.

Having said this, Alex, Gustaf, Jonas and the other men in the study were all concerned with their looks and would spend money and time planning for outfits to wear. Gustaf for instance did not describe himself as modeintresserad the way Anna did, but he had more jeans in his wardrobe then her, and spent time thinking and talking about fashion and how to dress. However, there was a difference between the women and the men in how they related to the activity of shopping that signaled a difference between them.

A particularly predominant theme in the relationship between Josefine and Lily and their mothers was shopping. Shopping appeared as an expression of love and an activity of creating femininity as well as upholding normativity. This corresponds with anthropologist Daniel Miller’s theory of shopping as a

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
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<tr>
<td>Working Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Male</td>
<td></td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed Male</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

345 Appendix 1 Table 5.
sign of care of close relationships. Based on fieldwork conducted in London where Miller followed people in the supermarket, he interpreted his ethnographic findings as demonstrations of ‘how shoppers develop and imagine those social relationships which they most care about through the medium of selecting goods’.  

In Sweden there is a history of the woman as responsible for the consumption of a family household, including shopping for clothing for one’s children as well as one’s spouse. The domestic sphere as the sole responsibility of women has changed, and today both sexes tend to have salaried employment and share household chores and child rearing. These cultural patterns change slowly over time though, and the female responsibility of keeping one’s family ren och hel (clean and wholesome) is still part of the nuclear family ideal.

The argument I witnessed between Josefine and her mum concerning her shopping habits almost appeared staged, as though they were playing the roles of mum and daughter. The mum would say what a mum was supposed to say, complaining that her daughter had too much clothing although she was the one who mostly paid for Josefine’s shopping. Josefine on her hand played the part of the daughter who was embarrassed and laughed it off. Yet, a real tension between them was not really there. Even though the mum complained about all the clothes in her daughter’s wardrobe, she shared her daughter’s interest in fashion. Josefine and Lily had the same routine with their mothers of going shopping together as a mother daughter activity. My point is not that they were faking these quarrels, but that they were part of a process of a cultural learning of how to become a woman. I interpret this in relation to the history of associating clothing and shopping with femininity, the superficial and the trivial as opposed to masculinity and rationality. This discourse does not belong to the past, but is constantly reaffirmed in cultural practices and via cultural products in contemporary society.

My understanding of the mother and daughter quarrel is that they were about marking a distance against the stereotype of the fashion and shoppi
crazed woman—risking to place them in the danger zone of caring too much. Often I would hear women say things along the lines ‘I know that it’s not good to shop too much, but I got this sweater because—’. These kinds of arguments were ways to excuse or explain acts of consumption and a reflex of anticipated criticism. Alex expressed these common ideologies when he insinuated that Josefine and her mum were crazy about shopping, as though it was something out of their control, and that they were shopping for the sake of shopping. In a sense they were, but it filled a deeper function that went beyond acquiring things.

It was not just a common interest they shared, but also a sign of care and of socializing. In this sense, going shopping with their moms was part of the process of becoming women for Josefine and Lily. It was also a social activity in terms of doing more than the actual shopping. To go shopping, not only with their moms but also with friends, could involve a number of activities such as visiting someone or be a pretext for meeting new people.

Josefine’s and Lily’s mothers’ behavior of buying clothes for their daughters can be interpreted as a part of motherhood in order for their children to look nice and well kept. This is a way to uphold normativity, by keeping your children representable in relation to other people’s children. In the area it is part of the woman’s traditional role to be aware of prices, places to shop, good quality and knowing how to get value for money. This knowledge was transmitted to Josefine and Lily from their moms when they went shopping together during trips to Gothenburg for example, trying to find bargains at the Christmas sales. Several times during fieldwork the women would show a new item of clothing and proudly reveal the price if it was low. A response to a compliment of a new sweater could be met with ‘oh thanks! Do you like it? I got it yesterday, it was only 100 kronor. A bargain!’ If overspending it was better to respond to the same compliment by saying something like ‘this sweater? I got it quite a while ago but I really haven’t been using it that much’. This discourse of shopping as a cultural competence is also reflected in the portrait of Anna and Gustaf, when Anna questioned the authenticity of the luxury Mulberry bags carried by the girls at the business school. As she could not afford an original Mulberry bag herself, she demonstrated her capability as a consumer by calling the bluff.

My material speaks of how the men are catching up with the women in terms of sharing an interest in fashion and shopping in the studied area. However, there are still differences. Certain things, such as the catwalk in school, confirms that women’s ideals of femininity are still more contingent upon norms of beauty and looks than for the men who were leaning towards other ideals in their masculinity, described above. Above I have problematized the stories of a few, discussing similarities and differences over time and between the sexes. A qualitative material such as this one can never be used as evidence of actual changes in society, but it can be used to problematize structures of society by looking at the story of the individual. The time and place of the study are central in this—a Swedish small town in the late 2000s where a group of youth displays quite modern markers of consumption practices but at the same time are part of a rather traditional cultural context in terms of how to be a man and a woman.

In this section on conforming to the social context, the 5 individual portraits have been compared and contextualized in relation to Midway’s culture and

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the context of Swedish society in order to look closer at *vanlighet* as a main point of identification and desirable cultural identity among the informants. Central in this discussion has been the consistency of Midway’s population over time and the tightly knit networks and the dependency of cultural consensus in the small-town context. Traditional structures and new practices of consumption demonstrate how the discourse of the heterosexual nuclear family and serial monogamy structured the relationships for the town’s inhabitants. There was also a clash between the traditional masculine breadwinner ideal, replicated over time, and new consumption practices, involving a break with how earlier generations of men had consumed fashion and beauty. For the male informants, this required them to balance their adherence to new practices of consumption while maintaining a traditional masculinity in terms of how to act.

The traditional breadwinner ideal also featured in the issue of informants providing for themselves, focusing on the masculine ideal of economic independence and the ability to provide for oneself as a way of entering adulthood and later providing for a family. This was contrasted to the feminine ideal of caring for one’s family via shopping and consumption as cultural ideals. The women informants chose to construct their femininity through shopping to mark a traditional, feminine role as responsible for the household and hence having knowledge of the consumer market.

For these young people, *vanlighet* was located somewhere between traditional gender roles and contemporary patterns of consumption. This extended understanding of *vanlighet* could not have been achieved by only looking at the informant’s wardrobes. An extended understanding of who they were was required. If looking at the levels of consumption among them, there was a clear break with previous generations’ clothing consumption as a necessity. The material interest on fashion and the material affluence of clothing in a small Swedish town might come off as strange. In a historical perspective, clothing did not filled this role among the lower classes; however, if viewed as a way to uphold a certain normativity about being respectable, the material confirms earlier findings in the area.

I will now leave the individual stories for a group focus, and interactions in the group, discussing ideals of consumption among my informants as a group, in particular a party, and relating it to the context of Midway and society at large. The chapter ends with a section on *vanlighet*, which brings together all the disparate elements from this chapter.

**Coming of age in Midway**

Traditional gender roles that emphasized different ideals for men and women were under transformation during fieldwork, expressed differently in terms of consumption practices. As I have argued, one central contribution of this study
is its holistic approach rather than studying men and women separately. Looking at changes connected to one gender only gives half the picture, as different gender identities make each other.  

As discussed above, identification with the same sex and with their parents’ generation was one central aspect of the informants’ lives. However, they related to certain things at certain times, and to other things at other times. If the men and women had instead been studied separately, it might have appeared as if their identification with the same sex or with older generations was central to becoming a man or a woman; however, the construction of gender in relation to their peers and between men and women was also important. Although there were differences in terms of the ideals ascribed to men and women, Midway and Sweden in general are similar for both men and women when compared to other places. Everyday life for these young people included frequent interactions with the opposite sex, and relations that were not of the romantic kind were common—especially so for those who were still in school, as that meant attending a co-educational state school. One way of studying this interaction was the many ‘förfester’ (pre-parties) that took place during fieldwork.

At the party

It was the weekend and I was back in Midway after a short trip to Stockholm. This particular Saturday I had been texting Alex on the train from Stockholm, and later he rang me to invite me to a party in his flat the same night. It was a classic pre-party but with a pajama party theme. Although feeling a bit out of place when getting myself ready to go, I realized I had to go all in. I got into pink-and-white-striped flannel pajamas, put on my overcoat, and left. A group of the guys I knew met me outside Alex’s building and we went in together. One guy was already so drunk that he could hardly stand up. It was his birthday, and he had been challenged to drink ten shots in less than five minutes. The whole thing had been filmed and was already on Facebook.

We were early, and a very proud Alex greeted us at the door. He was excited to show how nicely the place was coming together. His relief at having

349 The recent introduction of the Swedish gender-neutral pronoun ‘hen’ is not included here. It was not mentioned once during fieldwork and was not used as a present category by the informants—neither were the categories of intersex and transgender.

350 My material deals with only a small fraction of how gender identity was created in the studied group, and what I am picturing is a small part of a complex sequence of processes.

351 According to the annual Global Gender Gap Report, first produced in 2006 by the World Economic Forum, which lists 145 countries according to equality in economics, politics, and health, Sweden has been ranked in the top four since the report began. Although not specifically focused on the ideals discussed here, it gives an indication of where Sweden stands globally (see WEF 2015).
his own place was unmistakable: he pulled open drawers, showed off smart compact living solutions and a dimmer to create what he described as ‘just the right porn lighting’ in the living room and bedroom. At first I was alone at the party with a handful of boys. Alex had invited everyone in the address book on his mobile phone along with everyone he knew on Facebook, which amounted to almost a thousand people. The SLR camera I had brought instantly became the center of the party, taken over by the boys while they were posing and dancing in front of the lens. Alex and I happened to be wearing identical socks from Happy Socks, and we played around for a series of photos where we showed off our matching feet.

The television was on, flipping between handball, videogames, and MTV. The music playing on Spotify was turned up to the max, and Alex shouted ‘Great! No one in the building is over 25, so no one will complain!’ Conversations centered on body hair and shaving; Alex shared that he had waxed his chest and shaved his armpits earlier in the day. Other topics that came up were sex, drinking (how much they could handle), and violence. The guys pulled up their shirts to show off their bodies, flexed their muscles and goofed around pulling faces and heaving their trousers right up. Favorite expressions that were repeated over and over were ‘big up’ (as in something being really good) and ‘skönt’ (meaning nice or sweet).

After a while more boys and girls arrived. Fortunately only around a fraction of the people invited showed up, and I counted around thirty people when the party was at its most crowded. The sofa table quickly filled up with beer cans, bottles of wine, and spirits, as more guests arrived bringing their own booze as is the custom at a pre-party. The talking and music got louder, the conversations more fragmentary and interrupted by sudden impulses and changes in focus. The front door was swinging open and shut as people came and left or went outside to have a smoke.

A couple who had arrived together were snogging in a corner. There were quite a few people at the party I had not met before, and I tried to move around and mingle so that I could chat with everyone. What struck me about the girls was that they did not set the agenda in terms of taking charge of the music or the television. Most of them were not that interested in watching the handball game that was on, but none of them made an effort to change channel. Further, the girls who had arrived did not flaunt their bodies in the same way as the boys did, and neither did they grab the camera. It was not that they were shy and passive, though—the girls danced, talked loudly, and where active in different ways.

As people became increasingly drunk I joined the queue for the bathroom. I started to chat with the two girls in front of me, and as it was their turn to enter the bathroom they grabbed me and pulled me inside. Being allowed into the bathroom with the girls was a sign of acceptance, and a cue to bonding.

352 Spotify is a Swedish commercial music streaming service.
Inside the girls tried to involve me in their gossip about others at the party. Some guy at the party was mentioned as hot, some girl was called obnoxious, and so on. The boys and girls mostly knew one another already and mingled as friends, but yet they would gossip about one another even though they were all at the same party. What was striking about this was that it was taken much more lightly if one talked in a negative way about a person if they were of the opposite gender. There appeared to be a common understanding that even though they said unflattering things, it was OK because it concerned what was understood as masculine and feminine traits, and not individual traits, even though they served as examples.

Although it was the girls and not the boys who described themselves as competing with one another in the high school cafeteria, it was the boys who spoke mostly about looks and appearance. After the bathroom break with the girls, I found myself talking to one of Alex’s close friends. He nodded towards Alex’s girlfriend, who was standing alone in a corner looking a bit insecure, saying ‘What does he see in her? She is really way too chubby.’ I also noticed that the boys often talked about the fashion industry in a glamourizing way, either about becoming a model or being shop assistant in a hip clothes shop. At the party I talked to one man who, just like Alex, expressed a desire to become a fashion model. He pointed out to me that his trousers were ‘something else’, as he was proudly posing, pulling up his shirt stating, ‘It’s Dior’. He looked for attention and confirmation around the room, but as he got it he pretended as if it was nothing. However, even though the boys appeared self-confident and judged the girls quite harshly, they also subjected themselves to scrutiny. John, for example, one of the twenty informants from the wardrobe studies, embarrassingly confessed that his older sister had told him off on Facebook, commenting on one his photos with the words ‘Dear brother, get a haircut and get a real job!’

As I zigzagged between the people at the party, I was told more and more stories about how to look and how to act. I sat down with a couple: she was a hairdresser and he worked for Volvo, the Swedish car and truck manufacturer. He was wearing black jeans and a check shirt, and she was dressed in a tight fitting dress and high heels. The guy told me that the culture at Volvo was very traditional in terms of manliness. The language was rough and rather sexist when it came to talking about women, involving dirty jokes and comments about women’s bodies. His older colleagues would interpret anything related to appearance as gay. Wearing a low cut T-shirt or plucking one’s eyebrows would be enough for them to start speculating. He told me that this motivated him to care even more about his looks. The men at work who were responsible for most of the bullying were older, in their forties and up. They were described as being comfortable in their role as men as long as nothing came along to challenge their position. He ignored this, as he and his peers were comfortable as they were. However, he emphasized that there was a clear separation between the different generations underway. He did not feel less of
a man for caring about his looks. His girlfriend filled in to confirm it: ‘It’s so strange that people set so much store by appearances, why can’t we all look as we please?’ She felt that her job as a hairdresser could enable people to change and become themselves. The couple agreed on the importance of feeling free to look like you wanted, and they described older people’s narrow-mindedness when it came to practices of dress and the body. As the party started to break up and people went on into the town center to continue the night’s drinking, I left the couple and stepped out in the cold night air in my pajamas, ready for bed.

What is especially interesting in the narrative of this party is that several parallel strategies of identity and gender-making become visible as they are played out simultaneously. As the men were comparing their bodies and flexing their muscles in front of one another in the kitchen and the women were whispering among themselves in the bathroom, an invisible barrier between how to ‘do’ man and ‘do’ woman was erected. This barrier was not crossed: none of the women joined the men in the kitchen silliness, or bared their bellies for direct comparisons, and none of the men joined the girls in bathroom for a heart to heart while going to the loo. At the same time, the young people interacted as a group, establishing limits but also opening up new ways of how to look and behave, such as the couple who affirmed each other in relation to people who were older than they were. When the girlfriend validated her boyfriend’s appearance she was saying that masculinity (or femininity) is not a static thing but subject to change, as long as it is reframed within the heterosexual cultural norm and the categories of men and women. It is to this dynamic that I will now turn.

Youth in the making

The majority of men and women in the adult population of Midway are in waged work, but the traditional division that connects women to the domestic sphere and men to the public sphere still survives to a large extent. In the last decade, the difference in yearly income between men and women has dropped from 48.0 per cent to 42.6 per cent. Although this is positive progress, men are still earning more than women and are the main providers for their families.353 Rosengren describes a world in which men dominate the public space, but are rarely decision-makers or in the top layer in terms of power in public

353 SCB 2013a gives the percentage of Midway residents in waged work as 80.9 per cent (men) and 76.1 per cent (women) in 2011. This includes those aged 20–64 who use Midway as a dormitory town; SCB 2013b gives the average annual salary for men in Midway in 2000 as SEK 257,939 (Swedish kronor), whereas women earned SEK 174,260. In 2011 men earned SEK 293,587, compared to women who earned SEK 205,767. This gives a difference of 48 per cent in 2000, and 42.6 per cent in 2011. These numbers are based on men and women over 20 years old and registered as residents of Midway on 31 December the year in question.
life. Alex’s father, working on the shop floor of a local dairy company, confirms this as the role of many of the men in the area. It is within the family that men find their driving force.

Yet, many men are not as active in the home in terms of cooking or putting children to bed. They are active for the home, which differs from the daily care that women tend to provide. To work for the home includes securing a certain material living standard. This understanding of the gendered division of labor might appear as outdated, given that Sweden is often referred to as a poster country in terms of gender equality. Men and women share the workload in the home, along with parental leave and childcare.

The society Rosengren describes has indeed undergone many changes in terms of the division of labor. Today most women work outside the home, and most men are aware of the everyday activities of taking care of a family. However, the statistics and the ethnographic material speak of more traditional roles than the political ideal would otherwise lead us to believe. There is a strong local understanding that men and women are naturally different, as the relationship between Alex and his father indicates. For the women it was important not to be extravagant, which was why bargain-hunting at the sales was something to be proud of in front of others.

When observing and interacting with the boys and girls together, it was obvious that they participated in constructing the cultural roles of gender for one another. One of the most recurrent themes in the material when dealing with gender roles was ringing in the other sex. One example is found in the interaction between the couples in the material. Anna and Gustaf both commented on each other’s way of dressing, defining what the other gender was and was not. Both of them claimed to accept people no matter how they dressed, but at the same time they defined themselves in terms of the other. There were clear boundaries between Gustaf’s and Anna’s ways of dressing. These boundaries appeared to set themselves, but nevertheless they mirrored the social norms. It tells of how the boys and girls created one another as they defined themselves in terms of what they were not: ‘femininity not’ and ‘masculinity not’.

In this sense, the categories of masculinity and femininity accompany each other, as ideals connected to gender goes through changes as time passes by and are transformed according to the zeitgeist. However, these changes are not necessarily relational; for example, new trends in fashion and bodily practices do not necessarily equate to changes in how to act and vice versa. Ideals of

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355 Global Gender Gap Report tends to place Sweden high in the global rankings of gender equality. This can be questioned, and depends on how certain statistics are used; however, when it comes to parental leave, and especially paternity leave, Sweden occupies a unique place (see https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/08/these-10-countries-have-the-best-parental-leave-policies-in-the-world, accessed 6 January 2017).
what are considered masculine and feminine in behavior and appearance are not part of men’s and women’s so-called natures, although they are often perceived as such. This is cemented above all by the spoken language. Both English and Swedish use references to clothing as a way to identify sexual differences. A skirt can be used to signify a woman, and trousers to signify a man, leaving out the body. To say that someone ‘bär byxorna i familjen’ (wears the trousers in the family) is based on the assumption that men are traditionally head of the family, with the implication that it is embarrassing if the woman wears the trousers. In the same way ‘kjoltyg’ (piece of skirt) can be slang for a woman, implying that she is not much more than her body and her looks. These expressions are outdated among young people today, but very few of them question the fact that clothes shops invariably have men’s and women’s departments. Most people feel this is a given; it is not merely a matter of men and women wearing different sizes, but they are also considered to prefer different garments and styles.

The process of enculturation demands a closer look here. As a way of learning culture, a process all human beings go through, enculturation sees values and ideals transmitted from one generation to the next. Yet this is not a static process, as new generations interpret, react, and adopt cultural practices according to their understandings of the world. My material confirmed many findings from Rosengren’s ethnography in 1991; however, there was one thing that in particular appeared to have changed dramatically, and that was the image of men fending off anything to do with clothing. Rosengren’s ethnography describes an existence in which men disliked shopping for clothes and entering shops, and showed no interest in what they wore. The men would rarely shop for themselves, as this role was thought to fall to the women. Although Rosengren’s ethnography appears to be based on heterosexual, nuclear families (which are still the norm), my male informants did not confirm this picture. The fact that my informants were younger and had not yet started a family should be taken into account. Yet, the men in my material showed great interest in their appearance and happily shopped for themselves.

As we have seen, men and women have a history of being ascribed different natures in their consumption practices. Historically, consumption has been connected to femininity, whereas production has been connected to masculinity. Men as rational consumers and women as emotional consumers were thus constructed. As Ostberg has noted, these divisions are more than neutral designators, since production is perceived as something that adds value, and consumption as something that depletes value. Given the pace of the growth of consumer society, men’s roles are believed to have become more and more

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356 Entwistle 2000, 141.
357 Rosengren 1991, 49.
unstable. When the traditional role of men as breadwinners and patresfamilias was challenged, this was interpreted as a crisis of masculinity.

Ever since, the established idea among the general public in Western countries has been that men prove their manhood through compensatory consumption, making up for the loss of their previous role as breadwinners. As Douglas Holt and Craig Thompson argue, a man riding a Harley Davidson motorcycle will never shake every last suspicion that he is trying to compensate for insecurities about his masculinity. This line of reasoning sees major socioeconomic change as having threatened many men’s masculinity, with the consequence that they have turned to consumption practices for symbolic reaffirmation. Anxieties about men’s masculinity, in this line of thought, are not allayed by the fact that women have entered the workforce and the job market is becoming more insecure, among other factors.359

In their study of American masculine ideals, consumer researchers Holt and Thompson discuss how new conditions for the breadwinner role and atavistic ideals of masculinity have left men with an identity crisis that they attempt to resolve by consumption. The interpretation among gender theorists of this kind of consumption practice are obvious: a man riding a Harley or buying a sports car is trying to compensate for the loss of masculinity markers in other areas of life, such as at work.360 Holt and Thompson question whether mass culture discourses are determinative, and stress the importance of socially situated consumption practices in order to understand how men interpret and act on mass culture discourses in their consumption.361 Holt and Thompson describe how American men mediate the ideals of the breadwinner and the rebel, resulting in the category of the man-of-action hero. In the breadwinning model, one becomes a man by the act of achieving—by working hard in order to climb the socioeconomic ladder to a position of status.362 The rebel, on the other hand, celebrates the man who stands apart from powerful institutions; he is an individual who walks his own independent path in life, regardless of the rules of society.363 Holt and Thompson’s idea of the man-of-action hero draws on the best of these two ideals—as an ideal, it is successful and responsible at the same time. He is adventurous and youthful, while still contributing to the good of society and fulfilling the duties of a mature patriarch.364

Holt and Thompson’s analysis, like mine, concerns straight, white men.365 My male informants did tread the fine line between traditional and new ideals of how to be men; however, unlike Holt and Thompson, I do not read it as

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360 Holt & Thompson 2004, 426.
361 Holt & Thompson 2004, 427.
363 Holt & Thompson 2004, 428.
364 Holt & Thompson 2004, 429.
365 Holt & Thompson 2004, 429.
them being emasculated and trying to resolve it through everyday consumption. Part of this can perhaps be explained by the time that has elapsed since the publication of Holt and Thompson’s study in 2004: the discourse of consumer culture is developing at a rapid pace, meaning that the lead time for academic publications can impact the currency of the results. The present study is no exception, as the patterns of consumption have changed a fair bit since the fieldwork was conducted in 2009–2011—not least with the exponential rise of e-commerce and m-commerce. My male informants were not trying to compensate for a perceived loss of masculinity via their consumption—they were rather trying to achieve the traditional ideals of masculinity in their particular context.

I wish to add another angle here, viewing the question of masculinity in relation to women. As we have seen, meaning is created by difference. It is impossible to understand the meaning of changes to appearance norms without looking at ideals of behavior and appearance that concerns both genders. When my informants reached their teens, the metrosexual ideal had already been established for several years, so that in their peer group male grooming was no longer interpreted as feminine or gay. This shift has been described by Ostberg, who points to the ideal in the media of portraying real men as uninterested in shopping and homemaking, and the discrepancy with men’s actual consumption.366

Adopting a grooming practice traditionally framed as feminine—such as the removal of body hair—as a masculine ideal should not be understood as a feminization of men. Grooming practices are not masculine or feminine per se, but are perceived as such according to the norms and ideals of the day. Take Judith Butler’s idea of the heterosexual matrix: with it, it is possible to understand the feelings of the couple at the party and equally the reactions of the boyfriend’s co-workers at the car plant towards subtle changes in appearance.367 In order to sustain the heterosexual matrix, body, gender, and sexuality need to be congruent, so that you look and act according to your own gender and desire the opposite sex. A change in appearance then puts the heteronormative order in jeopardy and becomes a reason to question someone’s sexuality. By this logic, a man wearing a low-cut T-shirt could find his sexuality questioned since showing cleavage is associated with the female body in the Midway context, as described by the man at the party. In my informants’ view this was very old-fashioned, as they did not perceive a low cut T-shirt to be reserved only for women; however, had the boyfriend been wearing a tight dress and high heels like his partner that would not have been acceptable.

It bears repeating that this is an example of how a set of rules, in effect at a particular point in time, is constantly tested in social situations where young

366 Ostberg 2012b, 129, 132.
men and women assess whether the people around them are interpreting them in the intended way. It would be wrong to interpret this as a new era in which no rules apply, for it is in fact a continuation, with the rules of legitimate behavior—the safe zone, flanked by carefully delineated danger zones—constantly under negotiation. Returning to the passage about subcultural theories by the likes of Polhemus, and his idea of a non-committal supermarket of style, this serves as a reminder that utopian ideas and empirical reality are two separate things.

* In this chapter the empirical material of the study has been presented in the shape of the personal stories of 5 key individuals and the wider group of 20 informants in order discuss how vanlighet came to be a central element in young people’s self-identification. What then did vanlighet entail for my informants, and how did it affect their modes of consumption?

Looking vanlig

The starting point of my thesis was the claim that looking and being vanlig were central to how the young people studied here understood themselves. This chapter has problematized this understanding by presenting the empirical material in different steps. The personal stories of Alex, Josefine, Anna, Gustaf, and Lily set out the different categories of the material, and their wardrobe studies were discussed in relation to who they were as individuals and what they were doing at that point in their lives, after which the perspective of the whole group of informants was introduced, as was the question of placing the participants in different social categories.

One approach to the material was gender. When looking at the outcome of the wardrobe studies, they point towards a gender divide, where the women had more pairs of jeans and a wider variety of different brands than the men did. That women have a history of consuming more fashion than men is a truism in the academic literature on fashion368 and indeed in the geographical area of Midway.369 However, what the ethnography reveals is that it is not as simple as a straight continuation of masculine and feminine roles. In some respects, my informants did relate to traditional gender roles—the idea that men are providers370 or that women bear most of the responsibility for the household, including the shopping371—yet fashion also played an important

role in how the men identified that clear break with previous generations, the point where a new masculinity took form.372

The results of the wardrobe studies also highlight several similarities among the 20 people involved. Without stretching the point too far, owning an average of 11 pairs of jeans, preferably a Swedish brand and blue, that cost around SEK 1,000 a pair, does say a few things about being vanlig in Midway. Above all, it signals a break with previous patterns of consumption in Swedish society, one aspect of which is the increased awareness of fashion in Swedes’ everyday lives. The size of people’s wardrobes and the money and time invested in fashion have steadily risen in the last couple of decades.373

Attitudes towards consumption are not static, but are in a state of constant flux. Fashion scholar Paula von Wachenfeldt emphasizes this in her research about the history of luxury consumption in Sweden. According to von Wachenfeldt, luxury consumption has made something of a comeback in Swedish society in the twenty-first century, having been viewed as undemocratic for much of the twentieth century. Having introduced the political ideal of Folkhemmet (lit. the people’s home) in the 1930s, the Social Democratic Party placed great importance on consumption being available to all on equal grounds. This ideal held good for Swedish culture for a long time, and still lingers to a degree. Nevertheless, Sweden’s sociocultural heritage has now collided with burgeoning luxury consumption, and with a largely liberal government in 2006–2014 attitudes towards consumption changed considerably. Von Wachenfeldt’s research points to changes in consumption practices that are evident in my material too.374 Part of the increased interest in fashion involves a knowledge of brands and their cachet. The dominance of Swedish jeans labels in the informant’s wardrobes underscores the importance of brands and brand culture in the identity work done by consumers.375

The qualitative material in this study is not intended to represent a larger population statistically. Rather, it has been designed to give a new lease of life to the debate about what it means to be vanlig. Vanlighet is found to be a mixture of established cultural patterns of masculinity and femininity and new practices of consumption. Rosengren has described the informants in her study dressing in contemporary fashions, but at the same time avoiding anything deviant or unique.376 This was the story repeatedly retold by my informants—theyir ideal too was to keep up with the trends without standing out. Yet this

373 According to Naturvårdsverket (the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency), the consumption of clothing and home textiles went up by 40 per cent in Sweden in 2000–2009 (Carlsson et al. 2011, 6).
376 Rosengren 1991, 50.
was never a fixed norm, for it changed according to the circumstances. To be *vanlig* was to know their own context very well—a familiarity that made it possible for them to recognize small, subtle details that they could adapt to. *Vanlighet* also meant functionality and comfort. They stressed the importance of adapting to the situation, yet at the same time the differences between how they dressed at home, at school, at work, or when going out were in reality not that great.

It is clear that being a mainstreamer is an active process, demanding both work and cultural knowledge of what to eat, how to train, and what to wear. Being *vanlig* was not a static cultural norm for my informants: it was in a state of flux, even within a small geographical area such as one small town. The young did not identify themselves according to strict ideas of who they were, but instead related to who they were not.77 Not that this was experienced as playing with new identities, though. Rather, it was thought of as adapting to different situations, while retaining a stable and coherent core identity.78

It is here that Jonas’s request for a *vanlig* scarf, described at the start of this chapter, begins to make sense. Jonas was not looking for something to signal what he was, nor was he looking for something to express a new side of himself. This is not to say that trying new things and keeping up with the latest trends was not part of being *vanlig*—the opposite, in fact, as my informants were up to date with the latest fashions and renewed their wardrobes regularly—but, regardless, it was not problematized as wanting change or even as an active identity process. Once Jonas had established the brand was a safe choice he knew that black scarf would not stand out, but the fringes added enough interest to prevent it being plain—it was not too much, but neither was it too little.

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78 See Banister and Hogg 2004; Van deur Laan and Velthius 2013.
5 The function of vanlighet

Summary and findings

This thesis is about consumption among young people who identify as mainstreamers. In order to map patterns of clothing consumption and to understand what was central to the young people’s self-identification, the research was conducted using an ethnographic method. The study has been constructed as an inverted study of subculture, problematizing the assumption that the mainstream majority and countercultural minority are opposites in terms of identity creation.

The introductory chapter sets out aim of the study: to find what motivated consumption among a group of young men and women who identified as mainstreamers in the Swedish small town of Midway, narrowed down to the period 2009–2011. The results of the qualitative study are presented from the very first. In essence, vanlighet was seen as a cultural logic that determined the consumption patterns of these young mainstreamers. Since they identified as vanliga, their clothing consumption, and hence their overall orchestration of a particular stylistic expression, was guided by this cultural logic, which entailed a careful consideration of the exact amount of care to be shown in personal display, without exaggeration or sloppiness. The decision to disclose the key results immediately came in response to the notion that the main value of this dissertation lies not in its results per se, but rather in its elaboration of the empirical detail of what vanlighet means, the implications of the results, and the questions they give rise to.

The use of denim as a method of research is argued, based on its ubiquity on a geographical and an individual level (denim jeans were found in both number and variety in all my informants’ wardrobes). In addition to the methodological and ethnographic aims, the thesis also sets out to contribute to the theory by problematizing the treatment of the mainstream as an undefined backdrop, against which studies of more spectacular stylistic groups are set. This means challenging the idea of a conformist majority or mainstream and a rebellious minority or counterculture as opposites in terms of identity creation. This is illustrated by the example of the ephemeral grouping of Partille Johnnies, or PJs, and the mainstream reactions to the group as voiced by my informants expressing annoyance and distancing themselves from what they saw as deviant. The PJ case is an example of how the cultural logic of van-
lichet played out among my informants, for they considered the PJs to overstep the mark of what was acceptable. This empirical example points to vanliget as part of an active process of identity, hence challenging the standard notion of mainstream versus counterculture driving identity creation.

The second chapter addresses the theories of consumption, identity, and youth that are central to the thesis, looking at anthropology, sociology, youth cultural studies, and subcultural theory. Central terms and concepts—‘ordinary’, ‘mainstream’, and ‘subculture’—are defined, and the research question is related to what people do not identify with as the best place to start when analyzing consumption. It is shown that understanding the mainstream as active and dynamic rather than passive can deepen our understanding of the relationship between the mainstream and the oppositional.

The third chapter presents the methods and the collection of the ethnographic material. The key method is participant observations, combined with interviews and wardrobe studies. The informants and the setting of the study are detailed and various factors when conducting anthropology in Sweden and in Midway are discussed. The material is summed up in 5 different categories: some 20 participant observations, 6 semi-structured interviews, 12 written clothing stories, 20 wardrobe studies, and 600 photographs.

The fourth chapter details the empirical material and its analysis. It is structured around portraits of the 5 key informants—Alexander, Josefine, Anna, Gustaf, and Lily—looking at where they considered themselves to be in life at the time of the study, what they said was important and what they aspired to, how they viewed their own and other’s consumption, and the cultural patterns that informed their consumption and style choices. These understandings were then compared and contrasted, and discussed in terms of how the youth interacted on the group level. The main categories of analysis concerned intersection of traditional patterns of doing masculinity and femininity with the new patterns of consumption identified in the thesis.

The chapter concludes with a discussion of what vanliget meant for my informants, and how it affected their clothing consumption. The empirical material showed that they displayed a noticeable homogeneity in terms of their jeans: the effort, money, and time invested in their consumption were high both among both women and men. They owned many pairs of jeans, the majority being unadorned, regular blue jeans by Swedish denim brands. It was not only money that was invested in these trousers, but also cultural competence about different brands, denim care, and fit. As much as buying the right clothes was important, though, what mattered was what happened afterwards in terms of when to wear them and how. There was a great deal more to looking vanlig than just putting on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt: it involved an appreciation of fine details, which can be very obscure to the unpracticed eye. When studying the ethnographic material in its totality, and not just looking at the jeans, it became apparent that being vanlig and a mainstreamer required constant boundary work. Being mainstream was not in the least static, neither
was it a passive identity, but rather something you could succeed or fail at (see Figure 1, p. 76). By deviating too much from the safe zone you could drop out of the mainstream and risk social consequences, either by caring too little or too much about your appearance. The use of an ethnographic method was vital in understanding why young people’s consumption was the way it was. Not only did it provide a certain security of belonging, but it was also a way of being masculine and feminine.

The women informants had to relate to an existing cultural ideal of women as responsible for their household consumption, demanding a certain knowledge of where to shop, and prices and quality. This started long before they had families of their own to manage. However, the interest in fashion in Swedes’ everyday lives has been on the rise in the last couple of decades, affecting the size of people’s wardrobes and the money and time they invest in fashion.379 Here my informants, and especially the men, deviated from previous patterns of consumption in Swedish society. One aspect of this was the increased scope for men to express themselves using fashion and beauty practices, as was apparent in the material. The traditional breadwinner ideal, which the men in the study tended to evoke, paid little heed to fashion and grooming. This final chapter brings together the main theoretical and empirical points to look more closely at the role played by vanlighet, and why vanlighet is such an important cultural logic for so many people. The thesis concludes by enumerating its main contributions to the field along with possible topics for further research.

The function of vanlighet

The general objective of the study is to investigate how the mainstream was experienced on both the individual and the collective level, and what this means in terms of the theories of identity, youth, fashion, and consumption, with their typical explorations of ‘uniqueness’ and ‘difference’. The thesis, which belongs to the field of fashion studies, operates with an understanding of fashion as something more than garments that clothe the body. Rather, clothing is understood to be invested with cultural values and concepts such as age, beauty ideals, gender, sexuality, and understandings of modernity. These multifaceted aspects of fashion are part of the very fabric of the clothing through patterns of culture. In this study, denim serves as a reminder of this, as does the fact that one garment has very different meanings depending on time and place.

It is also important to stress that identity is a complex and multilayered process, and the cultural logic of vanlighet was one, but not the only, point of

379 Carlsson et al. 2011, 6.
identification for my informants. All humans operate with a number of identities simultaneously—these young people were vanliga, but they were also men, women, sons, daughters, boyfriends, girlfriends, siblings, friends, consumers, students, Swedes.

My informants lived in a Swedish town where by tradition homogeneity and similarity were the dominant cultural and aesthetic ideal. This setting presented a contrast to the literature on fashion, which typically focuses on ‘fashion capitals’ that have an impact on the international fashion scene in terms of business, finance, and culture. Midway is far from being the sort of urban environment with gentrification processes that challenge the norms of gender, sexuality, or finance; rather, it represents conventional lifestyles and a process of slow cultural change, at least on the surface.

In the specific context of vanliga young people in Midway and their desire to be authentic and balance their appearance fashion-wise so as to be neither too much nor too little. Striking the balance of being just right in order to be fashionable could be argued to be a fashion constant, but in fact it is not the same everywhere. The dissertation has shown how consumption practices were used as strategies to stay within the mainstream, and to maintain one’s cultural position towards other young people. Here I do not agree with the usual line on marginality in fashion studies, which assumes that subcultural identities are always on the move but mainstream identities are always static. To quote the sociologist and subcultural theorist Sarah Thornton, ‘It is precisely because the social connotations of the mainstream are rarely examined that the term is so useful.’ In looking at club culture and young clubbers’ use of the mainstream as an imagined Other, Thornton points to the same problem that I have underscored throughout the thesis—the lack of a definition for this imagined Other. However, in the same text, Thornton describes club culture as ‘faddish, fragmented and heavily dependent on people being in the know—on being hip, cool or happening.’ This might be so, and the job of penetrating the mainstream is not Thornton’s concern, but while the clubbers are described as happening, the mainstream is still stuck with being a mirror. The problem is seeing the mainstream for what it is—the blindingly

obvious notwithstanding—and not just gesturing towards the issue. One obstacle appears to be the intimate link between studies of fashion and studies of subcultural youth. In sociologist Yuniya Kawamura’s study of Japanese street fashion in Tokyo’s Harajuku and Shibuya districts, the production of fashion by subcultural teens is described as independent of any mainstream fashion system and goes beyond the conventional model of fashion business with different marketing strategies and occupational categories.384

Kawamura argues that it is no longer the industry that produces fashion, but rather groups such as the fashionable subcultural teens who dress in unique and original ways, and he concludes that ‘Fashion in postmodern times emerges out of youth culture and is then commercialized by the industry.’385 Simplifying the fashion system in this way ignores young people like those in Midway, who, far removed from the trendy areas Tokyo, are relegated to the role of passive buyers of the industry’s commercialized products.

I, on the contrary, would argue that the mainstream should be understood as active and dynamic rather than passive. This offers a far deeper understanding of how different consumers relate to and act on the market. The converging relationship between consumption and identity is a well-researched field; however, ethnographic research on the mainstream and on fashion consumption is not. In this study I have looked at consumption and identity by focusing on the mainstream and vanlighet. The results of the study open up for a discussion of how ordinariness is imagined and experienced differently according to time and place, which in turn suggests certain things about the mainstream and the subcultural. Crucially, the mainstream, just like the subcultural, can be self-ascribed and experienced, but also attributed by others.

Understandings of ordinariness are both fluid and fixed at one and the same time, as ordinary means very different things to different people according to the social context. Identifying as vanlig is here understood as an active process, challenging the idea of a passively conformist majority. Further, it problematizes the treatment of the mainstream as an undefined backdrop onto which studies of more spectacular stylistic groups are projected.386 This is not only understood in relation to those occasions when specific garments are worn, but also considers the contents of a wardrobe as such, even when the

386 The list of subcultural studies that lack a definition of the mainstream is long, as we have seen. There are various publications on music scenes that exemplify this point, for example, David Bell, ‘Meat and Metal’, in Ruth Holliday & John Hassard (eds.), Contested Bodies (London: Routledge, 2001); or Paul Hodkinson, ‘Communicating Goth’, in Gelder 2005.
garments it contains remain untouched. For the informants, this meant knowing about fashion and brands as part of maintaining their vanlighet, not only in terms of what they would find acceptable to wear, but also what not to wear. Mechanisms of avoidance, rejection, and resistance are present in all identity formation, if not always at first glance. I have chosen to use the terms mainstream and subculture, in keeping with the other studies in this field. However, at this point I could wish some of the academic energy used to dissect subcultures were redirected towards the mainstream. The mainstream, including its great diversity of cultures and subcultures, is constantly changing to suit the time and place, which ultimately makes for a rather poor backdrop. In scholarly studies of cultural lives where the detail is all, it seems odd to leave the mainstream—used to refer to the majority in question—open to free interpretation and speculation.

The ethnographic material accounted for in the preceding chapter offers a detailed and carefully monitored understanding of how to act and what to wear, when. The material illuminates how the mainstream is confined by numerous codes for how to dress, and how to act as a group by abiding by a set dress code. A common objection when material objects are picked up by the mainstream market is their loss of authenticity and meaning in the process of mass consumption. This view can be exemplified by a few lines from a subcultural study of new bikers:

Marketers may make a marginal more accessible to mainstream consumers, thus increasing the size of their market; however, to do so indiscriminately runs the risk of alienating hard-core members, corrupting the subculture, and diluting its original appeal.387

Denim jeans did not originate from a new biker culture anymore than they did so from the young mainstreamers studied in this thesis. This claim of ownership of elements of style in the appropriation literature adds to the myth of subcultures as authentic and the mainstream as capitalized and empty, but does little to help us fathom the links between consumption and identity. It is important to point out that not all acts of appropriation are equal—cultural exchange and the exploitative colonization of subordinate cultures are two very different things.388 However, in order to question a static, essentialist concept of culture it must be recognized that all culture is evolving. A permanent boundary between the binary relationship of the normative and the transgressive can never last—when the subordinate is embraced by the mainstream, one struggle is won while another one is lost.

This study demonstrates that meaning is both contextual and specific in the extreme. For the informants, vanlighet was a way of upholding social stability, of putting everyday life in order. When the informants voiced their irritation towards the people they perceived as too much, too difficult, or too annoying, this spoke of a desire to live in a culture without friction.

Concluding remarks

This thesis is a contribution not only to the growing field of fashion studies, but also consumer culture and ethnographic research. I have chosen to focus on the lived experiences and practices of young Swedes, focusing on their agency, and deliberately moving away from the questions of fashion design, production, and retail. However, in future research it would be interesting to take into account the market ideologies that structure how people dress, if only to understand the economic and cultural boundaries of the fashion system which generates the clothing bought by my informants—and really all of us. In this dissertation the cultural ideals of young women and men are discussed, but a further analysis of the market and images of the idealized body in media and advertising would contribute to the understanding of mainstream culture, especially in terms of consumption.

Another aspect that warrants further investigation is the comparative element in this sort of project. Although I have used literary images in my study, full comparative material taking into account the different geographical locations, other age groups, cultures, sexualities, and different garments would offer even greater insights into materiality and ordinariness. It would be worthwhile considering how other people experience ordinariness, and the changes the body goes over a lifetime and how this affects what is considered appropriate or not in terms of dress. Any such study would also need to problematize the issue of class. Although Midway is homogenous when compared to Sweden’s larger cities, there are of course differences between its young people in terms of their economic resources and cultural capital that could have been further explored.

The principal contributions of the thesis fall into three distinct areas—one methodological, one empirical, and one theoretical. There is a need for studies by those who, regardless of disciplinary background and departmental affiliation, take the time to collect ethnographic material from which theoretical analyses can be made. For ethnographic research is time-consuming, though this is also how unsought findings are made.\(^{389}\) We can never know the world

\(^{389}\) Ulf Hannerz, ‘Studying down, up, sideways, through, backwards, forwards, away and at home. Reflections of the field worries of an expansive discipline’, in Simon Coleman & Peter Collins (eds.), Locating the field: Space, place and the context in anthropology (Oxford: Berg, 2006).
unless we take the time to discover it. Observing and describing the world is part of the anthropological project, preserving things that would otherwise be lost. This is the methodological contribution of the study—for the researcher to stay long enough for things to stop appearing as merely accidental and instead see the underlying cultural principles.

The empirical contribution is the heart of the study—the glimpses of the young of Midway and their cosmologies that the material offers. It is a contribution to a question that goes to the heart of fashion studies: why people consume clothes the way that they do? The notion that there is such a thing as an ordinary person has a profound effect on how people think about one another and themselves. The proximity between being ordinary and being normal not only illuminates the context in question here, but in other contexts as well. I have shown here that being a mainstreamer is not a passive identity, but one that demands constant work to stay within the boundaries of normalcy that are so often invisible, even from the inside. It calls into question the idea of the mainstream as simply a matter of buying items available on the market, offering a new view on how different consumers act in the market. Without an in-depth study such as this, there is always the risk of assuming that the mainstream is largely in agreement with the values of the parent or majority culture.

Finally, the theoretical contribution of the thesis concerns the polarization between the mainstream and the subcultural. While academics have been preoccupied with the details of oppositional dress, the mainstream has been carelessly used as a sweeping, blurrily indistinguishable backdrop. I have shed light on the difficulties with this polarization, arguing that the mainstream does indeed demand explanation, and that it is a mistake to dismiss it as a mere conglomeration of people who do not belong to a subculture and identifies with normative ideas of what constitutes normalcy. To identify the mainstream as a group of people where the most common denominator is they do not consider themselves to belong to a subculture is indeed problematic.

I chose to focus on the mainstream, the everyday, and ordinariness in order to explore the academic distinction between the mainstream and the subcultural. At a time when theories about youth speak of the individuality of our time, I believe I contribute to an understanding of youth as moving in another direction—one where belonging and fitting in are more important than expressing oneself as a unique individual, and where consumption of clothing is a means of upholding the ordinary. The system of rules that determine what is considered cultural normality and what is deviance from the norm is a complex work of negotiation and renegotiation between members of a culture. The mainstream consists of individuals who go through life sometimes as insiders and sometimes as outsiders in whatever context they find themselves in. I would suggest it is high time to revisit the notion of a cultural logic of fashion.

390 Hannerz 1992, 81.
and style inseparable from time, place, and affiliation. In the words of Ken Gelder:

Style and territory are connected, of course: one’s subcultural distinctions can flourish in one place and go utterly unnoticed in another. 391

In the same way, the mainstream changes shape and form. This is what I believe to be kernel of any study of human life in a cultural and comparative perspective. Despite the spread of vast, global clothing chains in the wake of globalization, despite the shift to standardized markets and consumer cultures around the world, all places and peoples have their own way of appropriating the global fashion industry into their own lives. This study explains how this was done by a group of young people living in Midway in the late 2000s.

To conclude, we all have our own ideas of what ordinariness might be. The cultural status of the ordinary in Sweden is often one of delightful fascination with what ordinary people do, an ambivalent thrill of self-identification as we like to pass our time watching reality shows featuring ordinary people doing mad things. To quote late Swedish singer-songwriter Olle Ljungström, in a song about acting ordinary—however easy it appears from the outside, it is still a work of construction.

Jag spelar vanlig
Precis så vanlig som folk är mest
Jag spelar vanlig
Men hur är det nu människor gör
Vad är det dom gör
Vad gör ni

(Olle Ljungström, 1993)

Sammanfattning på svenska

**Att se vanlig ut: varken för mycket eller för lite**

*En studie av klädkonsumtion bland mainstream ungdomar i en svensk småstad*


Utöver studiens etnografiska bidrag så syftar den även till att bidra till teoribildningen kring ungdomskultur och synen på mainstream som en fond gentemot vilken andra mer stilistiskt spektakulära grupper tar sitt avstamp. Detta problematiseras i studiens andra kapitel, där teorier om konsumtion,
identitet och ungdom diskuteras. Vanlighet, mainstream och subkultur – centrala begrepp i avhandlingen – definieras och studiens syfte relateras till förståelsen av vad människor inte definierar sig som, som centralt i att förstå identitetsskapande.

I det tredje kapitlet presenteras studiens metoder och en överblick av det etnografiska materialet ges. De centrala metoderna har varit deltagande observation, kombinerat med intervjuer och garderobsstudier. Studiens informanter presenteras, och betydelsen av den svenska konteksten och Midway diskuteras. Materialet sammanfattas i fem huvudkategorier: 20 deltagande observationer, 6 semi-strukturerade intervjuer, 12 klädberättelser, 20 garderobsstudier och 600 fotografier.

I kapitel 4, som tar sitt avstamp i studiens fem huvudinformanter, så presenteras och analyseras det empiriska materialet i detalj. Via personporträtt av Alexander, Josefine, Anna, Gustaf, and Lily så ges en inblick i hur vanlighet konstruerades genom ungdomarnas konsumtion, vilket diskuteras och kontrasteras i relation till gruppen som helhet. Huvudfokus i analysen utgörs av traditionella mönster av manlighet och kvinnlighet satta i relation till nya konsumtionsmönster. Kapitlet avslutas med en diskussion av vad vanlighet innebar för ungdomarna, och hur det påverkade deras konsumtion.


De kvinnliga informanterna relaterade till kulturella ideal av kvinnor som ansvariga för inte bara sin egen utan även familjemedlemmars klädkonsumtion, något som började långt innan de bildade egna familjer. Intresset för mode är något som har ökat bland svenskar under de senaste årtiondena, med resultat i växande garderober och ökad tid och pengar som investeras i mode. Här avvek informanterna, och särskilt männen, från traditionella kulturella konsumtionsmönster. Detta märktes bland annat i det ökade intresset bland män att uttrycka sig via mode och skönhetspraktiker, vilket framgår tydligt i materialet. Ett traditionellt manligt försörjningsideal var visserligen centralt i hur männen såg på sig själva, men återspeglades inte i hur de relaterade till mode och utseende.
I avhandlingens avslutande femte kapitel förs dess empiriska och teoretiska bidrag samman, för att diskutera betydelsen av vanlighet och varför vanlighet är så centrat för många människor. Studiens bidrag till modevetenskap sammanfattas och förslag på fortsatta studier ges.
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Appendix 1 Tables

Table 1 The informants

The characteristics of each informant in the study. Each individual in the wardrobe study corresponds to a case number, arranged in chronological order according to the date of his or her wardrobe study. Source: Field notes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Date of study</th>
<th>Birth</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Housing</th>
</tr>
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<td>1988</td>
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<td>1987</td>
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<td>Student</td>
<td>Living with friend(s)</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>1990</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Living with parent(s)</td>
</tr>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>1989</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Living with parent(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Unemployed</td>
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1 Case 1 is the first wardrobe study in early 2009, Case 20 indicates the last wardrobe study in early 2010.
2 Age of participants at the time of the wardrobe study.
3 Occupation of participants at the time of the wardrobe study.
Residence at the time of the wardrobe study. For individuals living at home with their parents it is not indicated whether only one or both parents is present, or whether there are additional family members in the household such as new partners or siblings.

The five key informants are Case 3, Josefine; Case 5, Alexander; Case 10, Lily; Case 12, Anna; and Case 19, Gustaf.
Table 2 The jeans

Description of denim jeans as documented in the wardrobe studies. Source: Field notes.

<table>
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<th>Case</th>
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<th>Lowest price (SEK)</th>
<th>Highest price (SEK)</th>
<th>Newest (months)</th>
<th>Oldest (months)</th>
<th>Waist (inches)</th>
<th>Length (inches)</th>
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<td>34</td>
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</table>

1 Number of jeans documented for each participant in the wardrobe study.
2 The cost of each participants’ cheapest and most expensive pairs of jean in Swedish kronor (SEK).
3 The number of months since purchase of each informant’s newest and oldest pair of jeans.
4 Sizes owned by each individual, measured in inches.
Table 3 Type of denim

Sorts of denim found in the study. The table specifies color, wash, and decoration as documented in the wardrobe studies, and the number of pairs each individual possessed. Source: Field notes.

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<th>Red</th>
<th>Pink</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Stone-washed ¹</th>
<th>Decoration ²</th>
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</table>

¹ Jeans treated by the manufacturer to have a worn and faded appearance.
² All types of decoration and appliqués, including as sequins, prints, ribbon, etc.
Table 4 The brands

All the denim brands documented in the wardrobe studies, listed in alphabetical order.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Brand</th>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Total pairs</th>
<th>Pairs /men</th>
<th>Pairs /women</th>
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1 The brand’s country of origin.
2 Total number of jeans of each brand documented in the wardrobe studies.
3 The distribution of pairs of jeans for male informants.
4 The distribution of pairs of jeans for female informants.
Table 5 Distribution of denim brands
The distribution by gender of the denim brand’s country origins. Source Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Total pairs of jeans</th>
<th>Jeans/men</th>
<th>Jeans/women</th>
<th>Men %</th>
<th>Women %</th>
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Appendix 2 Questionnaires

Ethical consumption questionnaire

The main categories of these interviews concern:
- General information about the individual
- General relationship to fashion and clothing
- Engagement in the surrounding world
- Thoughts about consumption in general
- Understanding of on-going debates about ethical and environmental concerns in relation to consumption
- Understanding of ethical consumption as it relates to the fashion industry

Open-ended questions:
- What is your relationship to fashion and to clothing? How much money do you estimate you spend on clothing each month? Where do you get the money you spend on clothes? Where do you shop? What do you value most in a garment when in a purchasing situation?
- What words would you use to describe the style you are wearing today? Do you have any favorite brands, and if so, what do you associate them with?
- What is a typical situation when you go shopping for clothes? What do you look for in a garment?
- What do you do in your spare time? Are you involved in any volunteering activities? Would you say that you read newspapers on a regular basis and discuss contemporary issues with your friends? Is it important for you to be politically active? When you think about people who are politically active, what impression do you have?
- Would you agree that there is an on-going debate about the downside of consumption in society, about ethical guidelines and respect for the environment? If so, are there circumstances in your life when these kinds of discussions are held? What are your thoughts about this? How does this affect you? How do you perceive the threat of climate change? How are your shopping habits affected by these debates?
- Do you ever feel that you over-consume, and if so, how?
- What comes to mind if I say the word ‘boycott’? If I say ‘corporate social responsibility’, what do you associate with that? What is your stance on concepts such as ethical consumption?
- What are your thoughts about the fashion industry? Do you ever think about the clothing industry? Who in your mind should be responsible for issuing
information about working and environmental conditions and consumer hazards?
What are your thoughts on second-hand clothing?

Denim questionnaire

Please state you gender, age, place of residence, and occupation. Who else is part of your household, and what age are your family members?

Do you wear jeans? If so, on what occasions? Are there occasions when jeans are a no-go?

Approximately how many pairs of jeans do you have?

What does the concepts of jeans mean to you? Can you describe the fabric, look, color, pockets, etc.? In your mind, can jeans be made of other fabrics than denim?

What denim brands do you like? What kind of design do you prefer? What qualities are most important when you buy denim—fit, color, brand, price, etc.?

If you remember, can you describe your first pair of jeans? What different styles of jeans have you worn over the years? Can you recall any special brands that have been popular at different points in your life? How old is your oldest pair? What do you do with pairs that you have outgrown, worn out, or tired of?

Would you say that you are interested in fashion? Where do you find inspiration for how you dress—fashion magazines, movies/TV, blogs, friends, or other? Where do you usually shop for clothes? Approximately how much money do you spend on clothing each month? Where do you get the money you spend on clothing? Where do you buy your jeans? How much is the most you would consider spending on one pair?

Do other members of your family wear jeans? Do you ever borrow jeans from family members or friends?

Who does the washing in your household?

What do you and your peers usually wear to school, at home, or when going out?

What kind of trousers other than denim jeans do you wear?

Do you have any other denim clothes, such as a jacket, waistcoat, shirt, dress, or skirt? Do you have any other items made out of denim? Anything like cushions, bags, shoes, or similar?

Are there any specific denim brands that you associate with a specific style?

If you are a woman, do you prefer wearing jaggings, and if so, why?
Style questionnaire

How would you describe your style in terms of your appearance and clothes? How has your style developed into what it is today? How did you end up with the style you have today? Do you have any favorite brands (not just denim brands)? If so, why do you prefer those specific brands? Is there any style you could never see yourself in? If so, why? Do you find it important to stand out and be unique with your style? What is a Partille Johnny? (If you are not familiar with the concept, skip the following questions) What comes to mind when you hear the term Partille Johnny? Who are the Partille Johnnies? How would you describe a Partille Johnny in terms of look, style, attitude, music, lifestyle, etc.? If you compare the Partille Johnny style to your own style, how is it similar and how does it differ?