MPC MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

Why My Dad Is Not Dangerously Regular: Normcore and The Communication of Identity

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ABSTRACT

Background: Using descriptors such as "dangerously regular", K-Hole's style movement has been making waves in the fashion industry for its unique, yet familiar Jerry Seinfeld-esque style. This de rigueur ensemble of the 90's has been revamped into today's *Normcore*. A *Normcore* enthusiast is someone who has mastered the coolness and individuality of fashion and is now interested in blending in.

Purpose: The goal of this research was to understand the cultural relevance of the fashion trend *Normcore*, its subsequent relationship to fashion and identity, as well as what it reveals about contemporary Western culture and the communicative abilities of fashion.

Method: The analysis was qualitative in nature and took an inductive approach combining visual and discourse analyses to understand the dynamic themes and relationships among fashion, communication, identity and culture. These methods provided insight into both the spoken and unspoken beliefs and values of the *Normcore* community.

Results: One's choice of apparel, colour, style and anything else that acts as a "signifier" becomes a medium for fashion to communicate identity. What is signified through fashion allows for communication about individual and collective identities, ranging from personal attributes and attitudes to socioeconomic status and gender identification. Trends and movements in fashion reflect cultural patterns, shifts in the political and social economy, ideological values, beliefs and affordances. They are indicative of society's members, both individually and collectively, and thus are informative of a culture as a whole. This proved true for the relationship between *Normcore* and Western culture

Conclusion: Fashions are not random. They reflect cultural patterns, political ideology and socioeconomic standing. They possess communicative abilities that inform of individual and collective identities. We are able to understand society's beliefs and values through the signifying system that fashion communicates. This holds true for *Normcore*.

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PREFACE

The words "normal" and "hardcore" together may seem like incompatible terms, especially when applied to fashion trends, styles and motifs, yet one of the latest style movements amalgamates these two words into *Normcore* thus giving rise to a fashion movement that was, in fact, first created by the New York-based fashion and trend forecasting company K-Hole. Using descriptors such as "dangerously regular", this style movement has been making waves in the fashion industry for its unique, yet familiar, Jerry Seinfeld-esque style: white t-shirt, sweater vest, Levi jeans, running shoes and a fanny pack. This de rigueur outfit of the 90's has been revamped into today's *Normcore*.

But even with its numerous descriptors, rubrics and adaptations, *Normcore* remains an enigmatic phenomenon. Throughout this research process, I have come across several definitions of *Normcore*, some of which have come from the most renowned, well-respected fashion industry professionals. However, in my opinion, it is the web comic's series *Templar, Arizona's* characterization of the trend that most vividly illustrates what this word truly means:

> Oh, shee-it! You just got gang signed by the worst of 'em! Y'see the slight forward tilt of the chin, and the causal "hey" with the silent H? That means he's NORMCORE. Dangerously regular. Dresses only in T-shirts and jeans, uses slang appropriated from other subcultures, but only 3 years after its first use, an' only after it's been used in a sitcom (Friedman, 2014).

INTRODUCTION

In my third attempt at explaining the concept of my Master's research paper to my family, I began to describe the individual features of *Normcore* as opposed to my usual introduction of, "well, it's basically the conspicuous consumption of something that is not conspicuous". While describing the trend's defining features – Levi jeans and unmarked generic shirts – my mother exclaimed, "so, Dad's Normcore!" That's a weird connection, I initially thought, but then I began to think about it further. Does he wear Levi jeans? Yes. Does he wear unbranded t-shirts? Yes. Does he wear white running shoes? Sometimes. The more I thought about my dad's "uniform", as my mother refers to his style of dressing, it seemed that my own father was, by definition, the subject of my major research paper and so, I replied, "I guess so, kind of … yes?" As research progressed, and with this thought lingering in my mind, I realized that something about my dad did not in sync with *Normcore*. Perhaps it was the middle-aged man fit of the jeans, or the completely oblivious attitude towards any fashion sense, or even the lack of Nike socks, but *something* did not make him *Normcore*.

A *Normcore* enthusiast is someone who has already mastered the coolness and individuality of fashion and is now interested in "blending in". As Sladen writes for *Art Review* (2014), "the most different thing to do is to reject being different altogether…having mastered difference, the truly cool attempt to master sameness" (para.1). For much of the *Normcore* community, this would suffice as an appropriate explanation of the trend. However, *Normcore* is a bewildering movement for the fashion industry and for those choosing to adopt the trend, mainly because its inventors, creators and critics believe that *Normcore* is misunderstood. In its original state, pre-fashion industry's adoption of the trend,

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Gorton (2014) explains that *Normcore* actually had nothing to do with fashion, but rather, it was meant to describe a genre of personalities, namely those people who exhibit empathy and connectivity. In other words, *Normcore* originally had no relation to clothing, but rather was a lifestyle movement, based on a frame of mind. In his article *Everyone's Getting Normcore Wrong, Says its Inventors* (2014), Gorton quotes Glazek by stating that "*Normcore* means you pursue every activity like you're a fanatic of the form. It doesn't really make sense to identify *Normcore* as a fashion trend - the point of Normcore is that you could dress like a *NASCAR* mascot for a big race and then switch to raver ware for a long druggy night at the club. It's about infinitely flexible, sunny appropriation" (para.3). The author attributes the constant revision of K-Hole's *Normcore* document by fashion editors as the explanation for how this lifestyle movement has transformed into a fashion trend. However, while adopters of the trend may be getting it wrong in the sense that they appropriated the movement into a clothing craze, the *core* in *Normcore* nonetheless remains: "Normcore represents a fluidity of identity that's emerging in youth culture: a willingness to forgo a consistent individuality in order to embrace acceptance" (Gorton, 2014, para.7).

While *Normcore's* desire towards sameness and uniformity is defining of the trend and typically not the cornerstone of many passing fads, the idea of conformity in fashion is not unique to *Normcore*. The world of fashion has always maintained a sense of duality: a push for individuality and a pull towards conformity. Simmel (1904) is one of the many theorists who described this dichotomy. In his analysis of Simmel's work, Davis understands his explanation to be at the forefront of studying fashion and writes "fashion, is analyzed by Simmel (1904) as the social by-product of the opposition of processes of conformity and individualism, of unity and differentiation, in society" (Davis, 1992, p.23).

Fashion can be utilized as a vehicle for individuals who wish to be submerged in a sea of similarity, or as an identifier of a specific subgroup or culture. While in some circumstances fashion allows individuals to be noticed, in other situations, people may find comfort by being surrounded by people who appear similar.

In addition to conformity being a defining feature of *Normcore* is irony. Throughout the several publications I have come across in my review of *Normcore*, the words "ironic" and "irony" have been at the forefront of this trend. For instance, in his definition of *Normcore*, Williams (2014) explicates *Normcore* to be "a fashion movement, c.2014, in which scruffy young urbanites swear off the tired street-style clichés of the last decade – skinny jeans, wallet chains, flannel shirts – in favour of a less-ironic (but still pretty ironic) embrace of bland, suburban anti-fashion attire" (para.1). Irony is often used in rhetoric but for the purpose of *Normcore*, it manifests as a visual rhetoric. In short, both as verbal and visual rhetoric, "irony is a trope in which intended meaning is opposite to, or nearly opposite to an apparent meaning as in deliberate understatement and in some kinds of sarcasm" (Gray, 1960, p.220). While the use of irony in fashion, specifically *Normcore*, could constitute an entire paper on its own, this research paper will reveal a small fragment of the use of irony in *Normcore*.

Accompanying these themes of *Normcore*, this paper will look to cultural studies of fashion. Fashion is an undeniable and integral component of contemporary Western society and contributes enormously to society's visual culture and economic growth. The world of fashion is also relevant to the field of communication. Indeed, fashion, dress and clothing communicate tremendous amounts of information about the wearer, from religion to gender to social attitudes. In his book *Fashion as Communication* (1996), Bernard explains the

linkage between fashion, culture and communication. In summarizing his findings, he states that:

> Fashion and clothing are cultural phenomena… Fashion and clothing are cultural in the sense that they are some of the ways in which a group constructs and communicates its identity. They are two of the ways in which the values and identities of groups may be communicated both to other groups and also to members of those groups. It has also been shown how, and in what sense, fashion and clothing are communicative. They are communicative in that they are non-verbal ways in which meanings and values are produced and exchanged (p.23).

Bernard's work references several classical theories related to the study of fashion. *Normcore*, while conventional in many respects and fitting to several of these theories as will be revealed throughout this research paper, does maintain *sui generis* in terms of its communicative qualities. Namely, at its core lies the idea of homogenization, which is often not the case for most fashion trends. Homogeneity, as well as the concepts of uniformity and equivalency in *Normcore,* are what have propelled my research and analysis of this fashion trend. It is these unique features of the clothing movement that sparked my interest in researching *Normcore*. To this end, my paper will explore how *Normcore* fashion is utilized as a communicative vehicle for the individual and collective *Normcore* community to express concepts such as class, individualism, collectivism and gender. Additionally, research will reveal what *Normcore* is communicating about contemporary Western culture. To understand this movement, *Normcore* is used as a comparative model against which traditional theories of fashion trends and movements can be compared.

A literature review of these traditional theories on fashion, visual rhetoric, and semiotics provided the foundation of this research paper. In turn, I was able to begin to understand the relationships between *Normcore* fashion and individual and collective identities, as well as the trend's relevance to contemporary Western culture. As such, the

literature review is presented in three fold: the first section explores *Visual Rhetoric and Fashion Semiotics* and looks to the work of Barthes, Carter and Davis as a means of understanding how communication is achieved through clothing. I began the literature review with this section because it is through visual rhetoric and semiotics that fashion can be understood as a communicative vehicle. The second component, *Fashion, Identity and Conformity* places *Normcore* within the realm of the classical fashion theories put forward by Simmel, Blumer, Goffman and Lurie, and others. This section is further divided into *Communication and Identity through Individual Dress* and *Identity through Collective Conformity* in order to allow for a comprehensive overview of what fashion, clothing and dress are able to convey about the wearer on both individual and societal levels. Lastly, *Cultural Studies of Fashion* explains *Normcore's* influence on contemporary Western culture and how this movement relates to ideological values and contemporary society.

The goal of this research process is to understand the cultural relevance of the fashion trend *Normcore,* its subsequent relationship to fashion and identity, as well as what it can tell us about contemporary Western culture and the communicative abilities of fashion. Thus, in conjunction with the literature review, a visual, narrative and discourse analysis was conducted through the review of social media posts and images, as well as analysis of published articles in fashion magazines and websites. These methods and sources provided insight into both the spoken and unspoken beliefs and values of the *Normcore* community. Findings were analyzed and evaluated, and in turn, informed of the fashion trend's cultural resonance in today's consumer society. While it may seem that *Normcore* is a distinctive fashion movement that challenges established norms and theories of fashion, I will demonstrate that it nonetheless proves to be like any other trend.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How is fashion used to communicate identity

2. Does *Normcore* prescribe a relationship between fashion and identity?

3. What does *Normcore* communicate about individual and collective identities?

4. What is *Normcore* communicating about Western culture?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Visual Rhetoric and Fashion Semiotics

Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols to which Saussure, Locke and Peirce contributed as instrumental theorists. The study of semiotics not only lends itself to language theory, but remains at the heart of current theories of "discourse, interpretation, nonverbal communication, culture and media" (Craig, 1999, p.63). For the purpose of this research paper, the study and ensuing analysis of semiotics will be directly applied to the nonverbal and visual communication of fashion and dress as a semiotic device. The study of dress and fashion can be traced to Barthes, who put forward the notion that "clothing is now about communication rather than expression" (Barthes, 2006, p.33). In his text *The Fashion System* (1967), Barthes considered fashion as a language, one that would not exist without discourse. He alleged that fashion was a semiological system and in order for it to be realized, one must consider the *physical clothes, the image clothing* (the picture of the clothing) and *the written clothing* (the description of the clothing). Only with the coalescence of these elements can meaning through dress be communicated. Similarly, according to Barthes' theory, apparel is composed of *coded units*. He proposed that an individual's dress, clothing and body decorations are reflected to be signs, subject to the interpretation by onlookers (Carter, 2012, p.345). Barthes' work directly references the teachings of Saussure by acknowledging "dressing" as "parole" and "dress" as "language". In short, *dressing* includes the individual dimensions of the clothing item, specifically the degree of wear, the choice of colour and how the wearer chooses to appropriate the clothing. Alternatively, *dress* connotes the ritualized forms and fixed uses of the apparel. Both of

these aspects communicate different ideas and messages through clothing (Barthes, 2006, p.25).

For Barthes, "clothing and appearance are a system of elements threaded together by a series of structural relationships" (Carter, 2012, p.346). For example, there are clothing items that are coded specifically for males, while others are specifically coded for females. Not only is meaning gained by the mere act of a male wearing said clothing item, but understanding can also be generated simply due to the fact that the clothing item is not being worn by a female. According to Barthes, this idea relates to the institutional side of fashion semiotics. Barthes' work on fashion continues with his belief that clothing positions individuals to communicate their social institutions, status, class distinction and values. These themes will be addressed in the following section.

There are many critics of Barthes' analyses. Davis argues that if dress is meant as a means of communication, individuals should be wearing apparel with "signalers", rather than clothing that does not explicitly communicate the message that the wearer is trying to convey (Davis, 1992, p.15). Though Davis does maintain some criticism of Barthes, he subscribes to the idea of dress as a semiotic device and encourages the field of semiotics to address issues of communication through clothing. More specifically, he discusses the coded units of apparel and differentiates the signified from the signifiers. For the author, a code in relation to dress constitutes the varying styles of clothing and their respective influence on fashion trends (Davis, 1992, p. 5). Influencing the codes of fashion are texture, fabric, colour, volume, pattern, style, silhouette, the occasion for which one chooses to wear the item and the "associative linkages to form design (e.g.: angularity= masculine; curvilinear= feminine) and the historical frames of reference (e.g.: bindings, stays, and

corseting= Victorian, pre-female emancipation, loose fit, reduced garment volume, exposed skin= the post- World War I modern era)" (Davis, 1992, p. 6).

With the establishment of codes within fashion, Davis elaborates on his semiological analysis by explaining the three features of what he calls the *clothing-fashion code*. The first component is context dependency, which indicates that the combination of clothing or styles that one is appropriating will communicate varying messages depending on the wearer (or even the wearer's mood), the occasion, the setting and/ or the company that surrounds the attire. Davis provides the example of black gauze, which when sewn into a nightgown will noticeably connote a different meaning than when the black gauze is worn on a mourner's hat at a funeral (Davis, 1992, p.8). The second critical component of his argument lies in the relationship between the signifier and the signified. The signifiers of fashion include style, appearance, trends and other material aspects of clothing. The signified is what is "connoted, understood, evoked, alluded to, or expressed" (Davis, 1992, p.8). For Davis, what is understood through the semiotics of dress varies among individuals, social groups and societies; each is entitled to a different perception of what is being communicated. He states, "in short, while certainly not rigidly caste-like in its configuration, the universe of meanings attach[ed] to clothes, cosmetics, hairstyles, and jewelry- right down to the very shape and bearing of the body itself- is highly differentiated in terms of taste, social identity, and the persons' access to the symbolic wares of society" (Davis, 1992, p.9). As such, Davis considers this relationship to be unstable as it has the ability to fluctuate and change rather easily. The final element of his code is the idea of *undercoding*, where he references the work of Eco: "undercoding occurs when in the absence of reliable interpretative rules persons presume or infer often unwittingly, on the basis of such hard-to-specify cues as

gesture, inflection, pace, facial expression, context, and setting, certain molar meanings in a text, score, performance, or other communication" (Davis, 1992, p.11). Undercoding is particularly prevalent in the aesthetic expression of fashion and thus serves as an integral component to Davis' system of *Fashion and the Clothing Code*.

Carter takes a similarly critical stance to Davis in his critique of Barthes' fashion and communication theories. His article *Stuff and Nonsense: The Limits of the Linguistic Model of Clothing* (2012) reflects the general consensus of many scholars who have addressed this topic since Barthes originally put forward his ideas by stating:

> Ever since the late 1950s and early 1960s when Roland Barthes revolutionized our conceptions of dress, most scholars have worked with an idea of dress as being a system of social communication, one that was structured like a language. Over time this conception of dress has attained such prominence that alternative ways of comprehending costume have been completely absent (Carter, 2012, p.343).

Carter agrees that clothing is a communication tool but asserts that it is not fashioned "within communication". He asks, "if sending social messages were their only aim then why do we not wear monochrome, body stockings with badges emitting social messages about our position within the social order?" (Carter, 2012, p.348). In other words, for clothing to be a purely communicative tool, one would not need specific styles and designs. Instead, clothing would be plain, simple and standardized, with insignias indicating one's social information.

Carter's critique focuses on Barthes' use of definitions and his placement of the clothing in definitional boxes, such as protection, modesty, and communication. Carter believes that this rarely works, since the category and the garment are not congruent with one another. He states (2010), "only very rarely will clothing assume a form that is congruent with its designated use. For instance, defining dress as a form of communication

raises the problem that there always appears to be more 'stuff' available than is required by the message. The utilitarian role of an object never completely justifies its mode of being" (p.347). Furthermore, he argues that "excess" components of clothing and fashion are items that serve no utilitarian or communicative purpose. Carter then asks why spend money on "excess stuff" to communicate when communication is possible simply through speaking and alleges that Barthes' ideas failed to account for such details. Furthermore, Carter argues that Barthes was "dismissive" and "vague" of other critical components of fashion within the world of semiotics, such as origin and important psychological notions (Carter, 2010, p.346).

This section of the literature review provided an understanding of the relationship between the fashion trend *Normcore* and semiotics and in turn informs of the first research question, "How is fashion used to communicate identity?" To review, while there are undoubtedly many critics of Barthes' work, of which two are mentioned above, his notions and ideas are integral to this research paper. His work will serve as a point of reference throughout this research project, as will the work of his critics and contemporaries. Davis' understanding of the semiotics of fashion, including the three components of a fashion code, is imperative to the study and examination of fashion communication. Carter's thorough analysis of Barthes' work provided a deeper comprehension of facts and details that he accuses Barthes of ignoring. Not only will the literature review in this section be useful when examining *Normcore* in relation to contemporary culture, but more specifically, the theories and ideas put forward by Barthes, Carter and Davis beg the question, "Does *Normcore* prescribe a relationship between fashion and identity?" While the next section outlines the relationship between fashion, identity and conformity, the semiotics of fashion

and dress are the vehicles and means by which we can understand the multi-layered

relationship of *Normcore* and communication.

Fashion, Identity and Conformity

The fashion trend *Normcore* is distinctive and multi-faceted in so far as it fosters the

ability to communicate, blur, question and convey ideological positions of gender, age and

social status. Davis (2012) refers to this as the "standardized meanings about [the] wearer"

(p.27). *Normcore* subscribes to the notion of constructing one's self through things, in which

an individual negotiates his or her identity via the products he or she consumes.

Correspondingly, *Normcore,* like many other fashion trends, manifests through impression

management, which is the attempt to control or influence other's perceptions of oneself.

Goffman's seminal sociology text, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959),

examines how individuals exhibit control in face-to-face situations, as people attempt to

influence other's perceptions of themselves through their setting, appearance and character.

Regardless of the wearer's attempt (or lack thereof) to control these situations, viewers

create their own opinions, attitudes and beliefs of the wearer, which can be individually or

collectively produced.

Simmel's iconic 1904 essay entitled *Fashion* proposed the idea that fashion

manifests on two divergent notions: the first is human nature's inclination to imitate others

and the second is the tendency for people to try to distinguish themselves from one another.

He states (1957):

> There seem to be two tendencies in the individual soul as well as in society. All
> designations for this most general form of dualism within us undoubtedly emanate from
> a more or less individual example… This type of duality applied to our spiritual nature
> causes the latter to be guided by the striving towards generalization on the one hand,

and on the other by the desire to describe the single, special element…. The vital conditions of fashion as a universal phenomenon in the history of race are circumscribed by these conceptions. Fashion is the imitation of a given example and satisfies the demand for social adaption. [At] the same time it satisfies in no less degree the need of differentiation, the tendency toward dissimilarity, the desire for change and contrast (p.542-543).

Because there is a duality to fashion and identity, ideological values exhibited through clothing can be revealed through individual dress as well as through collective dress. One of *Normcore's* central tenets is conformity. William's (2014) describes this feature of *Normcore* by explaining "the basic idea is that young alternative types had devoted so much energy to trying to define themselves as individuals, [that] they had lost the joy of belonging that comes with being part of the group" (para.10). As fashion identity can and does occur on both the individual as well as collective level, this section of the literature review is divided into two sections - *Communication and Identity through Individual Dress* and *Identity through Collective Conformity*. Overall, *Fashion, Identity and Conformity* will examine various theories and theorists in order to understand fashion as an identity extension of both individuals and social groupings.

Communication and Identity through Individual Dress

Many theorists, including Davis, Barthes and Carter, have conducted extensive research and analysis on the relationship between fashion and identity. Fashion, clothing and dress act as individual communicative tools to express characteristics, traits, values and beliefs. As Lurie (1981) notes, "by the time we meet and converse we have already spoken to each other in an older and more universal tongue" (p. 5). Lurie's work in *The Language of Clothes* (1981) expands on the writings of Saussure and other theorists by chronicling how clothing communicates various characteristics of individual identity, as well as contributes to the semiological argument of fashion. Lurie surmised that certain apparel

communicates specific words, forms of expression, and emotion. For example, she states, "casual dress, like casual speech, tends to be loose, relaxed and colourful. It often contains what might be called 'slang words': blue jeans, sneakers, baseball caps" (p. 8). While *Normcore* had not been established at the time of her work, her 1981 descriptions are easily applicable to contemporary fashion culture. Her arguments directly contribute to understanding what *Normcore* conveys about individual identity. As such, according to Lurie one can interpret *Normcore,* with its blue jeans, relaxed t-shirts and running shoes as communicating a sense of informality and casualness about the individual wearer.

Lurie coins the term *Conspicuous Division* to explain the relationship between status and apparel. She explains that traditionally the varying clothes and outfits that an individual wore, the higher their status and wealth appeared to be (Lurie, 1981, p.121). Bernard (1996) contributes to this discussion by explaining that "clothing and fashion are often used to indicate social worth or status, and people often make judgments concerning other people's social worth or status on the basis of what those people are wearing" (p.58). Status and wealth in fashion contributes to either bridging or dividing power in society. Historically, those in power in hierarchical societies wore fabrics and materials not accessible to the lower classes in order to distinguish themselves as the upper echelon of society. Fabrics were used as individual markers to rank people based on their economic value. When cotton became available to all classes, the elite abandoned the use of plain cotton in favor of the more expensive printed cotton. Communicating power, status and wealth is demonstrated on an individual level, however, it also manifests on a collective scale due to its ability to segregate classes (Bernard, 1996, p. 40). This notion of class division will be discussed in the following section.

In contemporary culture, specifically in the *Normcore* trend, the ideas of exhibiting wealth and class through clothing choice are somewhat conflicting in a traditional sense. In review, fashion scholars and theorists explain that historically, wealth in fashion was demonstrated by wearing expensive fabrics, alternating styles in one's wardrobe, the ability to change attire for each occasion and wearing items unobtainable to the masses. In essence, these characteristics are displayed through the individual's conspicuous consumption and the purchase of goods and services in order to flaunt wealth and social status. According to Veblen (2009), conspicuous consumption can be further heightened by a positional good; the more expensive and scarce a product, the more consumer demand it will generate. In turn, an individual owning and displaying said item will increase their status, wealth and social standing (Veblen, 2009). These classical understandings of the expression of wealth in fashion conflict with the *Normcore* trend. Firstly, blue jeans, generic t-shirts and white running shoes "speak" *Normcore* no matter what the occasion and therefore the idea of displaying wealth through attire and multiple outfits is no longer applicable to the trend. Similarly, the individual clothing items that symbolize the trend are also accessible to those of different classes and incomes, though it is wrong to assume that these items are always priced similarly. A pair of blue jeans can retail from $15.00 to $500.00. Vintage t-shirts are also representative of the outfit that communicates *Normcore* and this only further reaffirms *Normcore's* irrelevance to displaying wealth. The same applies for all other aspects of *Normcore*. To be *Normcore* does not require one-or-the-other, as *Normcore* items of any price are considered part of the trend. Indeed, arguably the most critical component of *Normcore* is that it is the conspicuous consumption of something that is not conspicuous.

Due to *Normcore's* general style of the white t-shirt, blue jeans and running shoes, the fashion trend blurs age distinctions as the apparel that constitutes this trend is accessible, age appropriate and relevant across several generations. However, with regards to fashion trends and clothing, collective associations have been formed around what constitutes age appropriate dress. For instance, in today's fashion culture, the crop top has been revived by the young, female demographic. A general assumption of a middle-aged woman wearing this top is that she is dressing inappropriately for her age. As Klepp and Storm-Mathisen (2005) write, "what is considered natural or unnatural for a certain age group, and what is acceptable or must be sanctioned, can be related to generational, gender or class- related ideologies of dress" (p.324). While the woman wearing a crop top has potentially failed at appearing younger, she nonetheless was attempting to communicate age through her choice of clothing.

Lurie also contributes to the discussion of age appropriate dress by raising the idea of societal expectations. She states that society places certain expectations upon people as to how to act and dress appropriately for their age. At the same time, our culture imposes sanctions against not meeting these societal requirements. She attributes sexuality as the reason for age- appropriate dress. Lurie (1981) explains, "what may be considered acceptable sexual connotations expressed by clothing vary not only according to class and gender, but are also dependent on both the era and the age of the person wearing the clothes" (p.57). *Normcore* presents a perplexing component to the usual age-specific realm of fashion trends. Without identifying the face of wearer, Duncan (2014) explains that she was unable to identify the ages of the *Normcore* enthusiasts; "I could no longer tell if my

fellow Soho pedestrians were art kids or middle-aged, middle-American tourists" (Duncan, 2014, para.1).

In addition to the aforementioned characteristics that are communicated through fashion is the role of gender in fashion communications. Gender is a salient aspect of individual identity that is easily communicated through dress, fashion and clothing. Androgynous dressing, cross-dressing and costume dressing are only a few of the fashion subcultures that experiment with bending societal norms with regards to gender "appropriate" dress. While these topics are relevant to the study of fashion, they will not be discussed, as the focus will remain on gendered fashion solely in regards to *Normcore*. Several of the aforesaid scholars have contributed to gender and fashion discussion, however due to the scope of this research, only some of the work put forward by these theorists will be explored. Bernard's text, *Fashion as Communication* (1996), not only enlightens readers on his stance with regards to gender in fashion communications, but also provides a comprehensive overview of this analysis among several scholars. Bernard (1996) explains:

> Fashion and clothing are instrumental in the process of socialization into sexual and gender roles; they help shape people's ideas of how men and women should look. It is not the case that fashion and clothing simply reflect an already existing sex and gender identity, but that they are 'part of the process by which attitudes to and images of both men and women are created and reproduced (p.111).

His discussion continues by acknowledging that not only do gender and sex play a defining role in fashion, but gender and sex are also dissimilar in many regards and may in fact communicate different messages. Thus, the study of these characteristics should be considered separately. For example, sex differences in dress can be communicated by the presence or absence of certain clothing features. For instance, a bust line is a clothing

feature for a woman, whereas cufflinks are a clothing feature for men. Blue signifies boy, whereas pink denotes girl. Alternatively, the gender differences in dress lie in the meaning created by society when a clothing feature is present or absent. To conclude his discussion of sex and gender, Bernard refers to the semiological discussion of what clothing signifies by stating, "while what a culture considers as masculine or feminine dress may change, sex and gender distinctions may be made by means of the wearing or not wearing of a particular garment, colour, texture, size or style of garment" (Bernard, 1996, p.112). In short, the messages, whether intentional or unintentional, that an individual is communicating through their dress will be communicated through what they choose to wear, as well as what they choose *not* to wear.

Not only does fashion and *Normcore* communicate societal conventions, such as an individual's class, gender and age, but also, as Davis would observe, "any aspect of the self about which individuals can, through symbolic means, communicate with others" (Davis, 1992, p.16). In other words, fashion's communicability stems not only from ideological values, but also from personal attributes and attitudes. An extensive literature review revealed how these conventions are communicated in a classical sense (for example communication is displayed through luxurious fabrics, expensive brands and age appropriate attire), however, research is limited on how everyday conventional dress, such as *Normcore*, is also able to convey these messages. Similarly, research into what fashion projects about one's age and gender when the clothing is deemed socially acceptable to all ages and genders, appears to be minimal in comparison to what has been revealed hitherto in the literature review.

Simmel (1904) contributes greatly to the dialogue of fashion and its subsequent connection to class, specifically on a collective level. He believed that fashion developed in an open class society as a means to differentiate various status groups from each other. As such, elites would create clothing as distinctive markers and the lower classes would eventually adopt and adapt these fashions, thus beginning the fashion cycle. According to Blumer (1969), "this, for Simmel, was the nature of fashion and the mechanism of its operation. Fashion was thought to arise in the form of styles which demarcate an elite group" (p.278). Many fashion adoption theories still hold this to be true.

In his analysis of Simmel's work, Blumer (1963) addresses the concept of conformity in fashion: "fashion introduces a conspicuous measure of unanimity and uniformity in what would otherwise be a markedly fragmented arrangement" (Blumer, 1963, p. 289). Without a sense of cohesion and conformity in people's choice of styles, fashion would live in complete confusion and disorder. Fashion designers create clothing for public tastes to ensure success. Hence, culture, society and individuals all influence perceptions of taste and in turn fashion is derived from a process that is collective in nature as communities implement a "collective taste". In contemporary culture, the same can said for fashion buyers, who, as Blumer states, developed a common "apperception mass" in which they tend to buy similar items for their stores. Blumer (1963) identifies this process as mysterious due to a lack of understanding, but nonetheless explains that "[these changes] shift fashion from the fields of class differentiation to the area of collective selection and center its mechanism in the process of such selection. This process of collective selection represents an effort to choose from among competing styles or models those which match

developing tastes" (p.282). While this is a more classical theory of uniformity and conformity in fashion, it will nonetheless serve as an integral point of reference while positioning *Normcore* within the arena of conformity while remaining applicable to contemporary design and buying processes.

In her book, *Fashion-ology,* Kawamura (2005) elaborates on apparel and conformity to explain the process in which an individual clothing item becomes fashion, which is accomplished through a shared set of norms and agreement among several individuals. She explains that in many societies there is general consensus about which clothing is deemed as fashion. If only one person follows a trend or begins a particular trend but has no following and acceptance, it is not deemed as consumer behaviour or as "fashionable". She continues by explaining that not only is fashion production a collective activity, but fashion consumption is as well (Kawamura, 2005). Kawamura relates her discussion of fashion consumption back to semiology and the discussion of signs. She believes that through fashion consumption, individuals are also able to communicate specific signals to each other, such as shared norms (Kawamura, 2005). Certain people adopt particular fashions and in turn, trends, sub-cultures and fashion tribes are created. Certain fashion trends are adopted through social interaction, the process by which people act and react in relation to each other.

Contributing to the formation of collective tastes and consumption is the grouping of individuals by geographical locations, interests or shared beliefs (among other linkages). Communities and subcultures can powerfully influence individual behaviour. Whether a community, subculture or group is composed of people of shared ethnicities, religions, or even general tastes, they have tremendous influence on the adoption of certain fashion trends. Kawamura (2005) describes the aspects of a community that are necessary in order

for fashion to be realized. She states (2005) that "fashion implies a certain fluidity of the social structure of the community, and it requires a particular type of society, that is the modern world where the social stratification system is open and flexible" (para.3). Kawamura argues that fashion is unachievable in societies with a rigid hierarchy, as well as in communities that do not foster any differences in social positions.

Within society, mainstream communities form alongside subcultures, countercultures, tribes and groups. Groupings are formed for several reasons, one of which is fashion. For example, after World War II, youth subcultures were recognized in the fashion industry as their own social category due to their distinctive, yet collective tastes (Anderson, 2005, p.79). Anderson (2005) explains, "since the 1950s, a host of different youth subcultures have emerged such as teddy boys, mods, skinheads, punks and skaters. These have been characterized by the formation of specific group identities, based not merely on age, but also on sets of values" (p.79). This remains true in the contemporary fashion world, which has seen a resurgence of various groupings of societal members. Distinctive dress can be worn to demonstrate group membership of a certain style tribe, while a taste for similar apparel can influence the formation of a group of individuals. Not only does fashion, then, influence the formation of communities that display a trend or fad, but additionally, fashion influences that community's attitudes, values and experiences. In the case of *Normcore*, several authors attribute a rebellion to the cause and formation of this fashion movement. In her discussion of *Normcore's* formation, Cochrane (2014) remarks, "those in the inner circle are rebelling against a 'fashion' look, and instead, are adopting a uniform, one that is a blank canvas without easy-to-read semaphores" (para.4). However, not all fashion journalists are in agreement with this idea. *Normcore* has presented the

fashion community with a rather enigmatic trend, perhaps due to the shared opinion by some industry professionals that the trend is not actually based on fashion whatsoever. Gorton (2014), of *Dazed Magazine*, argues that *Normcore* followers are not representing the movement accurately. He believes that "everybody's got Normcore totally wrong… Basically, Normcore in its original form has nothing to do with clothes and more to do with personalities: it's the idea that an individual adapts to a situation at hand and embraces the normalcy of where they are and who they're with" (Gorton, 2014, para.6). *Normcore* exemplifies the formation of a fashion community that originated not because of a shared interest in a clothing item, but rather through a collective outlook on life, though this is debatable depending on which *Normcore* enthusiast is asked.

Overall, it is evident that clothing, dress and fashion flourish on both the individual and collective levels. However, for clothing to become fashionable, there must be a degree of conformity and unanimity among individuals. Fashionable dress allows for individual expression. However, individuals cannot make fashion; rather a collective grouping of individuals decides what is in fashion. Through the individual, fashion communicates personal traits, values and beliefs, however, it is also the collective consumption of fashion that is not only telling of a group of people, but of the individual as well. While fashion communities, trends and groups may form according to shared tastes of certain clothing and styles, they can nonetheless originate from mutual values, opinions and circumstances. Thus, this section of the literature review focuses on what *Normcore* is communicating about both the individual and collective identities. The topic of fashion and identity is one that is complex in nature, with multiple factors to take into consideration. The fashion trend of

Normcore highlights this because the trend's origination, acceptance and dissemination are often debated among journalists and other professionals within the fashion industry.

Cultural Studies of Fashion

Normcore, as a fashion trend, can be leveraged to represent certain cultural and ideological values, beliefs and affordances. Throughout the study of fashion, ideological values and systems have been at the forefront of understanding fashion as a phenomenon. Fashion and ideology maintain a multifarious relationship, one that shifts with each passing trend:.

> Perpetually self-referential, fashion's "ideological stance" is trapped in a tautological sign system of commodity-nostalgia, and yet is derivative of the social ideals imprinted upon it... The model bears the signs of ideology fashions attempt to convey. Fashion broadcasts its "message" in its relay, as a caricature of the real and as an expression of deeper anxieties about shifts in the political and social economy (Faucher, 2007).

Understanding what *Normcore* is communicating and its ensuing relationship to Western ideology has been critical for this research. In short, ideology is a cultural belief system. Ideology is ideas and practices that define, organize and interpret reality and creates hegemony within the society. For the purpose of this research paper, the term ideology will be defined as "a 'theory of reality' that motivates the ordering of reality into good and bad, right and wrong, them and us, and provides the members of society with basic tenets of mentality about and how life ought to be lived" (Mikkoene et al., 2014, p.255). Not only can a fashion trend reflect style and taste, but it can also represent an ironic lifestyle that potentially communicates a great deal about Western culture and ideology. As Horn and Gurel (1975) are quoted saying in Kawamura's book *Fashion-ology* (2005), "fashions in any area of life, especially fashions in clothing, are not random and purposeless. They reflect the cultural patterns of the times" (para.5). This next section of the literature review

will look to other fashion trends, theories and knowledge to better understand *Normcore's* position within contemporary Western culture.

Bernard (1996) highlights one way in which fashion contributes to Western ideology by explaining "fashion and clothing are ideological in that they are also part of the process by which social groups establish, sustain and reproduce positions of power, relations of dominance and subservience" (p.39). His argument corroborates the work of many other theorists, such as Simmel, Lurie and Veblen, who all contribute to the fashion dialogue and its subsequent connection to ideas of status, class and positions of power. Though these ideas are only somewhat applicable to *Normcore*, the intent to communicate class differentiation is often the case for many other fashion trends. Bernard's argument about the relationship between fashion and ideology continues with his reference to semiotics and rhetoric in which he discusses the notions of denotation and connotation. He (1996) writes, "the account of denotation and connotation found in Barthes' work is also relevant to the understanding of ideology. As Volosinov writes, 'the domain of ideology coincides with the domain of signs… whenever a sign is present, ideology is present too'" (p. 90). Thus, according to Bernard, what one communicates, both verbally and visually, are not neutral or singular activities, but rather they subliminally reinforce ideological positions and the hegemony of power relations in contemporary society. What is connoted through fashion is often ideological. The denotative aspect, according to Barthes', makes the connotative messages seem natural and therefore widely accepted (Bernard, 1996, p.91).

The fashion process also contributes to the ideology of Western society. As Kawamura (2005) stated, fashion is not random. There are elements, factors and influences that contribute greatly to fashion in contemporary culture. The means by which any fashion

trends become accepted, disseminated, rejected and/or forgotten is widely debated among

theorists. Understanding *Normcore's* process is particularly challenging due to its diverse

adaptions, the misunderstandings among industry professionals of what constitutes' the

fashion trend, how to define it and its relevance in today's culture. *Normcore* does not

conform to Simmel's (1957) classic fashion dissemination idea, the *Trickle-Down Theory,*

which posits that in an open class society, the classes differentiate themselves through

distinctive markers, while the elite set themselves apart through fashion with the masses

following through imitation. Contemporary theorists oppose Simmel's view of fashion as

they argue that his theory explains fashion as a product of class differentiation, but in fact, it

is a response from individuals and groups that wish to be current, modern and expressive of

different tastes and styles (Kawamura, 2005). This holds particularly true for *Normcore*

since no aspect of the trend reinforces a desire for class markers or distinctions. In fact, it

does the opposite by making components of the fashion trend accessible to individuals of all

income levels.

Additionally, *Normcore* does not coincide with the conventions of the *Bubble-Up*

Theory put forward by Polhemus (1994) in which he credits *street style* as innovative and

adopted by cultural leaders. Because style leaders, industry professionals and everyday

wearers cannot seem to agree on a single definition or global understanding of the trend,

placing *Normcore* within the realm of classic adoption theories is puzzling (Benson, 2014)[1].

Gaps in the literature reveal a lack of alternative methods and theories for analyzing the

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[1] One of K-Hole's founders' comments "we didn't know whether to explain that what they were talking about wasn't actually what we meant, or whether to just go with it" (Benson, 2014, para.9).

formation and adoption of fashion trends such as *Normcore* where it is difficult to understand its formation, dissemination and acceptance.

As academic research on *Normcore* has resulted in few findings, this project will reference other fashion trends and clothing fads to explain various facets of *Normcore* as they relate to cultural beliefs or values. For example, Touboul's model *The Minority Game* is a guiding framework. Touboul began his investigation after he noted that members of the hipster movement, in their effort to look different, all looked the same: "Hipsters avoid labels and being labeled. However, they all dress the same and act the same and conform in their non-conformity" (Touboul, 2014, p.1). He explains that whenever there is a group of "interacting individuals" who collectively decide to go against mainstream society and the general movement of the times, all the individuals involved will ultimately "do the same things at the same time" (Touboul, 2014, p.1). In essence, an individual is either following the mainstream current or following the alternative, both of which are considered movements, fads or trends. As previously stated, some fashion journalists cite fashion rebellion as the cause of this fashion trend and thus consider *Normcore* to be a counterculture movement. Yet, one of *Normcore's* central tenets is conformity and the desire to blend in with everyone else. People within the *Normcore* community consist of those who are actively trying to look the part, as well as those who are seemingly unaware that their unmarked t-shirts and Levi jeans are suddenly in style.

Jeans, while no longer considered a fashion trend of its own, were once seen as such. Blue jeans are an often-researched topic within the realm of fashion due to their continued relevance and acceptance as a fashionable clothing item. Jeans are a staple within the *Normcore* trend and this article of clothing has the potential to explain critical information

about the individual or group wearing them. In his book *Fashion as Communication*, Bernard (1996) quotes Davis' understanding of jeans as follows: "[Jeans] express profoundly democratic values. There are no distinctions of wealth or status; people confront one another shorn of these distinctions" (p. 127). Bernard himself comments on Davis' statement by affirming that jeans can symbolize an individual's attempt to either reject or cross the boundaries of class identification (Bernard, 1996, p.127). Throughout his text, it becomes apparent that blue jeans represent many of the values and ideas that *Normcore* is attempting to put forward as a fashion movement, such as having no distinction between individuals of different classes and ages. The specific details of *Normcore's* attire, such as blue jeans, white t-shirts and *normal clothing* prove to reinforce the existing theories of fashion put forward by Bernard, Lurie and Davis.

The last topic of this literature review will focus on visual culture, namely its connection to fashion. Fashion and its accompanying trends contribute to visual culture and visual culture is abundant in Western society. Indeed, Rampley (2005) goes so far as to say that "Western society has become a predominantly visual culture" (p.15). As such, Western society is bombarded and overloaded with graphic and visual stimulation and our understanding of visual communication and culture is vital to our comprehension and appreciation of our societal values and ideologies (Brightman, 2014, p.1) Carson and Pajaczkowska (2001) believe that visual culture manifests on both a societal and an individual level when analyzing fashion: "the term visual culture includes all manifestations of cultural life that are significantly expressed through visual aspects and interpreted through individual and shared experiences" (p.19) While anthropological, sociological and cultural studies remain the cornerstones of research in regards to understanding visual

communication, fashion studies nonetheless reference visual culture. Anderson (2005) declares that "fashion is one the fastest changing sources of new ideas in contemporary visual culture" (p.67). Throughout Rampley's chapter in *Exploring Visual Culture,* she relates her argument to many of the aforementioned theorists, including Barthes' semiological work, Davis' beliefs on gender identity within the fashion world and Simmel's fashion process. Anderson (2005) argues that all of the elements within the realm of fashion contribute significantly to contemporary Western culture (p.71).

Various facets of Western culture and ideology, from traditional theories to visual culture, are applicable to the research on *Normcore.* In summary, *Normcore* is a new fashion trend and thus can be examined using traditional understandings of fashion, such as Simmel's *Trickle Up Down* theory or Polhemus' *Bubble Up* model. As it stands, *Normcore's* formation, causation and raison d'etre is hotly debated among fashion industry professionals; therefore it is difficult to summarize the trend using a single theory. However, by examining complementary trends and fashions, understanding *Normcore* and what is communicating about Western culture is achievable.

METHODOLGY

 The research for this paper was comprised of visual, narrative and discourse analyses in order to understand the dynamic themes and relationships among fashion, communication, identity and culture. This paper is qualitative in nature and takes an inductive approach to the research. As this was an iterative process, data collection was followed by reflection, analysis and interpretation of the current findings, and continued with further research development. The goal of this research process was to understand the cultural relevance of the fashion trend *Normcore*, its relationship to fashion and identity, as well as what the trend is communicating about contemporary Western culture. Thus, the research was interpretivist.

 A thematic analysis was employed to allow a comprehensive understanding of the visual social media discussion of the trend. This type of analysis was particularly useful in understanding what is being said about *Normcore*, rather than how it is being said as this was not a point of reference throughout the research process. These methods provided insight into both the spoken and unspoken beliefs and values of the *Normcore* community, which in turn allowed this research project to present *Normcore* as the typical fashion trend that it is.

 The data collection for this research paper was divided into primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include images from *Instagram* that featured the fashion trend *Normcore*. Visual semiotics and semiological analyses were utilized to decode the images, for both their connotative and denotative meanings. When text and image were paired, a visual and linguistic social semiotic approach was applied. As Harrison (2003) states, "visual social semiotics [is] an effective tool for understanding many conventions found in

Western imagery" (58). Secondary sources were comprised of the textual and discourse

analyses of fashion publications, specifically, *W Magazine, Vogue* and *InStyle*. The data

collection was conducted online in order to gain access to past issues and posts.

Data collection was conducted manually. Using the hashtag #Normcore, as well as

just the word *Normcore* to yield results, I looked at the fashion trend since its inception in

February 2014. After the initial data collection, I began coding the information using *open*

coding which is "the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and

categorizing data. This process stays very close to the data and yields the concepts that are

later grouped together to form categories" (Bryman et al., 2012, p.259). The content on

Instagram was originally coded based on the following three categories of the subjects:

individuals that identify as or with *Normcore*, individuals that identify other individuals or

items as *Normcore* and identification to a *Normcore* community. However, the original

coding predictions were revealed to be somewhat problematic during the trial research

period. Because the social media site used in this study is a platform that mainly utilizes

visual imagery as opposed to textual descriptions, deciphering these categories on Instagram

proved difficult. Additionally, during my quick scan of the hashtagged images, there was no

mention of the word *community*. Though I realized it is possible to come across an aspect of

the *Normcore* community in social media images as my research progressed, *Normcore*

community did not serve as a coded source. Therefore, the coding was adapted to better suit

the research and data collection by dividing it into two categories: images and posts of

people that are self-identifying as *Normcore* and images and posts from people identifying

other items and individuals as *Normcore*. Within these codes, subcategories were formed: I

labelled the concept of individuals on Instagram identifying with *Normcore* characteristics

as "agent-driven perception", whereas images and posts published by organizations, businesses and fashion industry professionals were labelled "organizational identification".

I applied theoretical sampling as I simultaneously collected and analyzed the data and then decided which data was important to collect next and where to find it. During this process, various theories, findings and results emerged. Similarly, content analysis sampling was applied in order to examine the representation of *Normcore* in the mass media. Defined as "theory that was derived from data, systematically gathered and analyzed through the research process", grounded theory is the most widely used and is a popular framework for evaluating qualitative data, and thus I applied this practice to my research project (Bryman et al., 2012, p.258).

The frequency of posts and the quantity of photographs in fashion- related publications all contribute to the discussion of *Normcore* and thus served as data analysis for this research. These findings were analyzed and evaluated, and in turn were informative of the fashion trend's cultural resonance in today's consumer society, revealing what *Normcore* is communicating about individual and collective identities, as well as Western culture.

**ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

Normcore On Instagram

Instagram was the sole social media platform chosen for this research paper for several reasons. Primarily, it is mainly a visual medium. Users share their experiences, styles, memories and journeys through the posting of images, which are usually accompanied by a brief description and the use of hashtags. Also, by searching a hashtag such as #normcore, anyone with an Instagram account can view the images that correspond to the tag. This search allowed me to access numerous images among varied users in order to gain a comprehensive visual analysis of the trend on social media. On the platform, users are able to apply creative manipulation to the images through the use of filters. This is reminiscent of fashion publications in that consumers are acting as editors and creative directors of their posts, thereby highlighting the similarities between the social media platform and fashion publications, while simultaneously reinforcing the idea that Instagram is a popular platform for individuals to communicate their fashion identity. In the article *How Instagram Changed Fashion*, The Pretoria News (2015) explains that "Instagram is part of the great democratisation of fashion, helping to create an entire class of fashion professionals who did not hone their chops as junior editors or assistants. They are untethered to specific publications. Their message is wholly visual and it is personal" (para.14).

Normcore on Instagram provided a wealth of information regarding its relationship to individual and collective identities, as well as what it is communicating about Western culture. The sheer abundance of the posts published on the social media platform spoke

volumes about the continued relevance, acceptance and prominence of the year-old fashion trend. As well, it is also indicative of society's interest in fashion and thus has proved to be integral to this research project.

As of June 10, 2015, 65,730 posts had applied the hashtag #normcore on Instagram. However, additional hashtags using the word *Normcore* were also prevalent: #normcorefashion, #normcorekids, #normcoreman and #normcorestyle. While these hashtags could contribute to the discussion and analysis of this research, I narrowed my selection by analyzing the images that only applied the original hashtag of #normcore. During the period of March 11 through June 10, 2015, an average of two images per week were selected for review and only those published by the average Instagram user; those from a fashion publication, website or identified industry professional were not considered. When analyzing the images, I examined the denotative meanings by looking to the subject of the image, the location of the image, the caption under the image and the hashtags used. However, it was not the detail nor the individual features of each image that became the focal point of this research, but rather the compilation of Instagram images and whether there existed similarities, contrasts and patterns that linked the #normcore images together. Ultimately, this would be informative of the connotative meanings and assist in answering the research questions posed in this project.

By the third week of analysis a pattern emerged; the hashtag #normcore was being utilized as a means of identification. Firstly, individuals using this hashtag were identifying themselves as *Normcore* by posting images of their outfits from an aerial view or a reflection of themselves in the mirror.
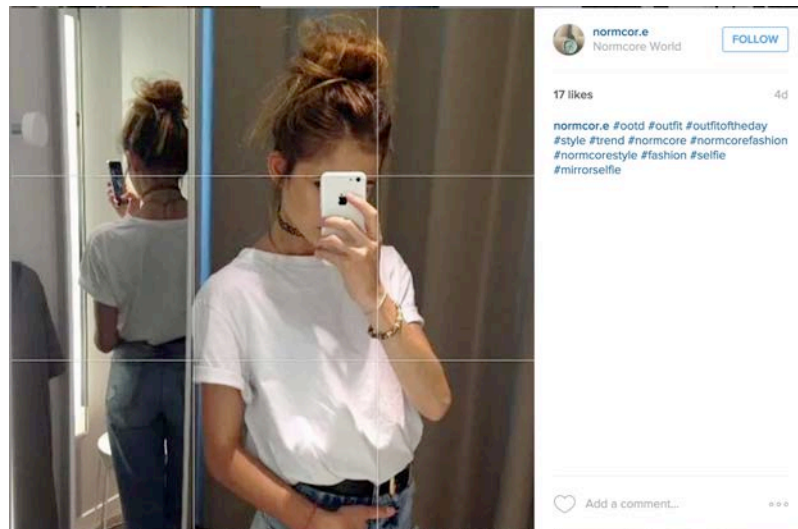
Other #normcore images were those that individuals had posted of mannequins, other people or apparel items that they were identifying as *Normcore.*
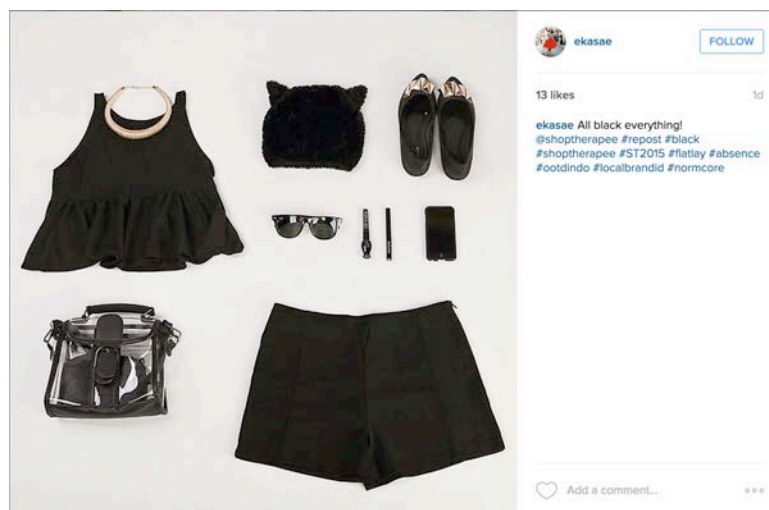
The clothing aspect of *Normcore* which is meant to express sameness amongst the wearers and diminish individuality was highlighted throughout the many images on the platform and became the primary means of identification to the trend. Through the use of self-labelling and the labelling of third parties and objects using the hashtag #normcore, part of the first research question, "Does Normcore prescribe a relationship between fashion and

identity?" was answered. *Normcore* does in fact prescribe a relationship between fashion and identity quite simply because people are either identifying themselves as *Normcore* by categorizing their appearance as this fashion trend, or individuals are identifying other people or fashions they see as *Normcore*. Labelling another individual's attire as *Normcore* or one's own appearance as such is the beginning of a relationship between fashion (*Normcore*) and personal identification.

Additionally, the self-identification and third-party identification images of *Normcore* shared many similarities. While many of the outfits have a similar look that is true to *Normcore* fashion, usually through the incorporation of blue jeans and white running shoes, many of the postings featured a monochromatic ensemble.

This led me to deduce that the "blending in" component of *Normcore* is not solely derived from the type of clothing chosen, but is also largely influenced by colour, or lack thereof. In addition to #normcore, many Instagram users applied other popular hashtags to their posts when describing their outfit choice, such as #monochrome, #minimalism and #90s. Users

felt that these themes and styles were components of the fashion trend. These features, with the exception of the 90s hashtag, reinforce de-individualization and uniformity which are integral components of the *Normcore* trend.

The location of the image also represented a sense of *Normcore* in that there was little emphasis on the setting. Many of the images took place in a bedroom, on the street or against a plain backdrop.

These settings are common and accessible to almost any member of society. Thus, while the backdrop of the images may seem irrelevant largely due to the fact that they are mundane settings, it nonetheless reinforces the monotony and uniformity that *Normcore* enthusiasts try to maintain.

The subject of the image is not posed or positioned in a certain way in many of the Instagram images.
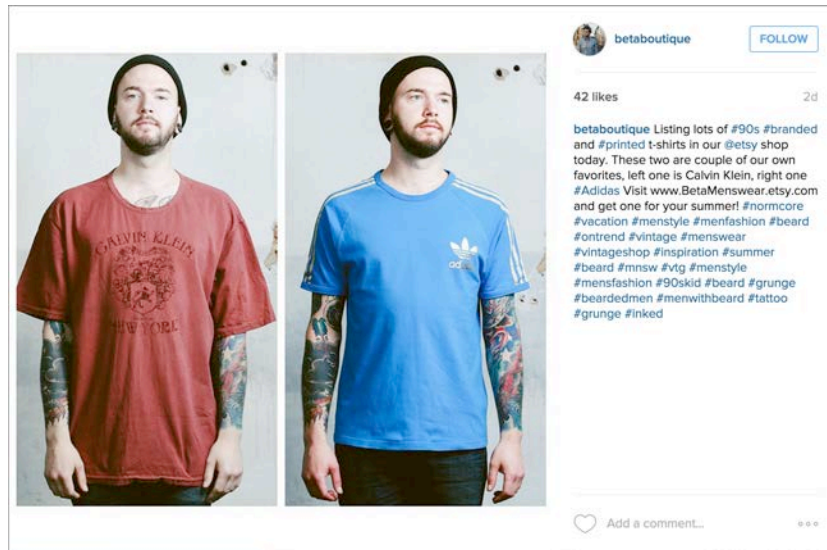
Rather the person is in a standing position with no expression on her or his face. In some cases, the face and head were cropped from the photograph.

As individuals, our facial expressions, postures and our general appearance distinguish us from other individuals. The face is the primary identifier of an individual and thus does not suit the *Normcore* trend of homogeneousness. Whether this was intentional by multiple Instagram users or not, the removal of the face and head from the image removes the

individuality component of the image while reinforcing the notion that *Normcore* can be anyone and *is* the "average" person- whatever "average" means.

Throughout the following weeks of research, similar images emerged: generic poses, monochromic outfits, mundane settings, blue jeans, white running shoes, and basic t-shirts. In the initial phase of my research, these outfits exhibited very few labels or brand identifiers and when they did, they were minimal and not the focal point of the image. As my research progressed, however, this changed significantly. The Nike "swoosh", Adidas' Stan Smith, Calvin Klein's "My Calvin's" and the Levi's logo made frequent, upfront and centre appearances. Not only was it obvious that Instagram users wanted to highlight the appearance of these logos, but also they felt compelled to include them in their image description and/ or use of hashtag.

These brands, all of them popular throughout the 90's, have made a tremendous comeback thanks to people appropriating the *Normcore* movement. In her article *How Fashion Brands are Capitalizing on Normcore*, Bourne acknowledges how Levi's Jeans and Nike have impacted the *Normcore* movement and vice versa. For example, because of *Normcore's*

acceptance of sneakers as a fashionable item, the company reported that its fiscal first-quarter earnings had rocketed to 23 percent due to the proliferation of spending on running shoes (Bourne, 2014, para.10). The author also describes how Levi's recognized that *Normcore* evoked the essence of the company and quoted its Chief Marketing Officer, Jennifer Sey as saying: "Levi's are for everybody who's not just anybody" (Bourne, 2014, para.8).

The popular brands of *Normcore*, those aforementioned, all maintain a similar price point, which is very indicative of the movement. These brands do not carry luxury items and are largely available and affordable to most of Middle America (and "Middle Canada"). They serve the purpose of sporting branded apparel even though they do not entirely align with conspicuous consumption. The brands communicate a sense of collectivism and de-individualization due to their widespread acceptance. Hanlon (2014) refers to the use of the brands within the *Normcore* community as a "brand blender". While describing the trend's identity in relation to brands, he states that "this multi-brand experience neutralizes the brain's ability to index and categorize. Since we have been trained to differentiate people by what they wear- Ivy League bow tie versus leather motorcycle jacket and chains versus Chanel and Jimmy Choos versus bling gangbanger, or whatever- Normcore does not match our indexing. Rather, it is a brand blender that prevents us from knowing who you are" (Hanlon, 2014, para.3).

The brands featured in the *Normcore* images on Instagram are vehicles to communicate identity through fashion, or perhaps, a means to express collectivism. Thus, the brands contribute to the discussion of what *Normcore* is communicating about collective, individual and Western identities. These brands, featured particularly in

Normcore, are able to blur the distinctions between the social and economic classes. To review, traditionally, fashion has been used as status markers, typically separating the wealthy class from lower income individuals. According to Lurie (1981) and Bernard (1996), among other theorists, conspicuous division is accomplished through conspicuous consumption, luxurious fabrics and many styles of apparel. Similarly, Veblen (2009) identified that conspicuous consumption is further enhanced by a positional good; the more expensive and scarce a product, the more consumer demand it will generate and thus owning the product will increase the appearance of status, wealth and social standing. With the acceptance and incorporation of popular, affordable and widely disseminated brands, such as Levi's, *Normcore* on Instagram does not conform to the traditional theories of fashion and class distinctions, and instead attempts to decrease this discrepancy. This aspect of *Normcore* is very telling of what the trend is communicating about collective identities: equivalence of the societal and economic classes. Individual consumers partaking in the trend are willing to relinquish their class markers, and in turn, collectively, consumers are acknowledging a new, economically equal fashion community.

It is important to note that both males and females posted the Instagram images that were analyzed for the purpose of this research project. With the exception of a few modifications to the *Normcore* "uniform", such as the incorporation of a crop top, there were no gender differences in the images and outfits posted. The settings, poses, hashtags, descriptions, themes and dress were the same for both males and females. When the face or head was cropped from the image, it was virtually impossible to identify whether the image was that of a male or female.

Bernard's (1996) understanding of how gender is communicated through fashion is not applicable to *Normcore,* in my opinion. As previously mentioned, sexual differences in dress can be communicated by the presence or absence of certain clothing features, for example, a bust line. In *Normcore* fashion, generic t-shirts for females typically do not incorporate a bust line, and correspondingly, cufflinks and various other gender identifiers are not present in the trend. Thus communicating one's gender through the fashion trend does not seem to be of importance to the trend supporters. Additionally, Bernard (1996) believed that what an individual chooses to appropriate for their dress will be communicated through what they choose to wear, as well as what they choose not wear. Historically, this has been one custom in which fashion is used to express identity. As males and females in the *Normcore* community are choosing to wear and not wear the same items for the most part, gender is clearly not a salient topic that individuals fashioning the trend wish to communicate about their individual identities.

Apart from the images with the omission of the face and head, for the most part, #normcore images appearing on Instagram were those posted by younger individuals.

While the fashion and apparel components of the fashion trend are accessible and popular

among all age groups, Instagram findings did not support a wide age range of adopters.

Perhaps *Normcore* is a trend geared towards the younger generation, or perhaps Instagram is

a platform utilized by younger individuals (more than 90% of 150 million Instagram users

are under 35 year of age) or a combination of both factors to explain the limited age

variation among the posts (Smith, 2014, para.3). Thus, I was able to conclude that

Normcore's representation on Instagram promotes a very age-conscious trend. Among the

images posted by Instagram users of other *Normcore* people, fashions and objects, none

included those of a middle-aged man, such as my dad. Perhaps the often identified "dad

look" (i.e. The Jerry Seinfeld style) has not actually been appropriated by *Normcore*

followers, or as Cerulo (2014) believes, is not actually part of the trend. In her article *Is*

Normcore Really a Thing? Cerulo (2014) explains:

> Of course, [Normcore] really only applies to those who consider expressing themselves
> through what they wear in the first place, and sometimes a windbreaker is just a piece of
> weather-proofing outerwear. Just ask the dudes dreaming about spring-training trips or
> studying for college midterms who haven't thought for a second about using their
> clothes to make a statement or a non-statement: these are just the things that their wives

or their moms bought them—perhaps in the 90s, even—that they put on each day after they shower (para.5).

Thus, Instagram findings may reveal that *Normcore* is an ageist trend, like many others trends that have preceded it and will undoubtedly replace it, if, in fact it has not already been replaced.

While the discussion of *Normcore* outside the realm of fashion is beyond the scope of this paper, I nonetheless feel it is worth a quick mention. The analysis of *Normcore* on Instagram also highlighted the non-fashion conventions of the movement. There were several posts of food images that applied the *Normcore* hashtag. For example, images of coffee and donuts were frequently tagged as *Normcore.*

Normcore food is another way in which companies and organizations are capitalizing on the *Normcore* trend. For example, *Bon Appetit Chef* has created a user-friendly guide to eating the most *Normcore* Foods. In the article *The Normcore Diet: 10 Foods for People Who Don't Want to Stand Out,* Korr (2014) explains, "the trend right now, per a bunch of people, is embracing sameness… how does this apply to food? Well, here's the thing. To the

untrained eye, Normcore food is almost indistinguishable from 'normal' food"(para.1).

Under the hashtag #normcore, it became evident that users were concerned with identifying

their food as part of the movement. This is indicative of *Normcore* not only as a fashion

trend, but also as a lifestyle movement in which every aspect of one's life is symbolic of

what they are attempting to communicate about themselves.

It has been established that *Normcore* has precribed a relationship between fashion

and identity through the choice of clothing people appropriate to communicate *Normcore*.

Reasons for such are reminiscent of Davis' understanding of dress as a semiotic device.

According to Davis, the signifiers of fashion include style, appearance, trends and other

material aspects of clothing. As such, *Normcore* can be considered a signifier due to its

specific use of certain apparel items, such as blue jeans, unidentified t-shirts, running shoes

and the general appearance of regularity and monotony. Furthermore, Davis identified the

signified aspect of fashion to include what is "connoted, understood, evoked, alluded to, or

expressed" (Davis, 1992, p.8). Therefore, what is signified from the images posted by the

Normcore community on Instagram is an indifference towards individuality and a desire for

conformity. Additionally signified is the *Normcore* community's attempt at eliminating

class, economic and social distinctions, while simultaneously reinforcing age barriers. The

components and staples of the trend, both stylistically and through branding, are accessible

to a large portion of society that wishes to incorporate *Normcore*.

Posts on Instagram also revealed how the average consumer was appropriating and

understanding the *Normcore* movement and what it was communicating about identity.

People were identifying themselves or other people and objects as *Normcore* and thus

through the analysis of the social media platform Instagram, it is clear that *Normcore* does

prescriebe a relationship between fashion and identity. Furthermore, it became evident through the evaluation of images posted on the social media platform, that fashion brands (as well as associations to these brands), the colour and choice of clothing, as well as the identification to *Normcore,* using the hashtag*,* were all ways in which consumers were communicating identity through this fashion trend. Thus, in the larger sense, this idea is applicable to fashion as whole. Through fashion choices, such as choosing to appropriate a certain trend or identifying with a style tribe, fashion is used to communicate identity.

Normcore in Fashion Publications

Having gained insight into the consumer understanding of *Normcore* and having established that the trend prescribes a relationship between fashion and identity, as well as understanding how fashion is used to communicate identity, the research progressed to the analysis of fashion publications. In March 2014, a marketing analysis was published by *Advertising Age* entitled F*ashion Magazine's March Issues: See the Top Five Titles.* The top five magazines sellers that month included: *Vogue*, *Elle*, *InStyle*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *W Magazine.* I decided to analyze *Normcore* using three of the top five magazines. To gain access to past issues of these publications, I chose to do a *Google* search of "*Normcore* published in Vogue" (and "Normcore published in Elle", etc.). *Elle* and *Harper's Bazaar's* coverage of *Normcore* proved to be less graphic and less abundant than those of *W*, *Vogue* and *InStyle* and therefore I focused my analysis on the latter three publications.

W Magazine

"Normcore in W Magazine" revealed *Banal Plus,* a link to a photo shoot published in the July 2014 edition of *W* Magazine, a reputable high-end fashion publication. The

subtext reads, "Why be normal when you can be normal and then some?" The images are categorized under the heading *Normcore*. The same set of images featured on *W'*s website was revealed in a *Google* image search of the term.

After examining the series of photographs, I chose to focus on the first of the series for the purpose of beginning my analysis.

Numerous similarities emerged between this image and those I have encountered throughout my research on Instagram, such as the white *Nike* socks, generic white running shoes, the classic *Adidas* running shoe and plain monochromatic clothing. Similarly, not only do the models evoke a *Normcore* essence through their apparel, but as well, both models have a strong resemblance to each other and sport the same haircut, makeup and facial expression. The model's close resemblance reinforces *Normcore's* status of "blending in". Additionally, while it was obvious that the models are posed, they nonetheless are positioned in rather generic and mundane stances. The background of the image, including the furniture and general colour palette of the image is also plain and, dare I say it, *normal*. The denotative

messages are obvious and suggest simplicity, regularity and banality. The theme of

Normcore in this photograph extends beyond the fashion and into the mood, setting and

general ambience. This photograph exudes a sense of realness and suggests attainability for

any consumer of the magazine; it presents as *Normcore* - a feature that is not often

showcased in the often outlandish world of fashion.

The other photographs in the series were similar to the first image and true to

Normcore. The models, in their androgynous appearance, exhibited no distinct facial

expressions, except perhaps indifference. The poses remained ordinary and simple with

each model showcasing the same haircut, makeup and styling while the background

continued with muted colours, simplicity in furniture and setting. The clothing remained

monochromatic, simplistic and minimalistic. Nothing about this series of images stood out

as unique and each image resembled the previous image. Please refer to Appendix B for the

other photographs featured in *W's* spread.

One particular feature of the series of photographs, however, did attract attention. On

the right side of the images is a fine print description of the apparel featured in the shoot,

including the designer's name, price of the item and where a consumer can purchase the

clothing.

Stella McCartney jackets $2,095 and $1,450, Stella
McCartney, New York, 212.255.1556; Elsa Peretti
for Tiffany & Co. gold earrings, $1,600, tiffany.com;
Sophie Bille Brahe earring, $800, Dover Street
Market New York, New York, 646.837.7750; Elsa
Peretti for Tiffany & Co. gold and diamond
necklace, $6,000, tiffany.com; Ariel Gordon
necklace, $700, arielgordonjewelry.com; Zoe
Chicco necklace, $655, zoechicco.com; EF
Collection gold and diamond ring, $1,012,

Featured in the first image is a $2,095 Stella McCartney jacket, Elsa Peretti gold earrings costing $1,600 and a David Yurman gold necklace that retails for $1,650. In the second image, a $3,350 Celine sweater, a Celine shirt for $2,300 and a Celine skirt for $2,050 were featured, among many other high priced, designer items. These high cost items were featured in all of the images in the series, with the exception of $22.00 Nike socks, $22.00 Nike sandals, $30.00 Nike t-shirt and Adidas Original Sneakers for $75.00. Apart from these two brands, the rest of the clothing featured contrasts significantly with the *Instagram* images and other photographs I have come across in my research throughout this project. The irony of *Normcore* lies in its conspicuous consumption of something that is not conspicuous. However, these images significantly counter this notion in that they are promoting a form of luxury. The splendour of the apparel contributes to the connotative meaning associated with the photographic series and thus *Normcore,* in fashion publications, may in fact not blur the distinction of class and status identification, but rather conform to the standard models of class identification put forward by Bernard and other theorists. To review, Bernard (1996) surmised that the high priced brands, luxurious fabrics and variation in one's wardrobe are means by which people communicate their social and economic worth through their appearance. Simultaneously, while the wearer attempts to communicate this, people often make judgments concerning other people's social worth or status on the basis of what those people are wearing (Barnard, 1996, p.58).

Social media images of *Normcore* seemingly appear to be defining a relationship between fashion and identity, as well as communicating aspects of individual and collective identity, However, what is being communicated through the social media platform conflicts with what is being communicated through *Normcore* images published by *W Magazine.* On

a societal level, *Normcore* style appears to be muddying the lines of class distinction by making the clothing accessible to individuals of all economic levels, whereas, those in fashion publications are furthering the socio-economic divide.

Vogue Magazine[2]

Research in the fashion arena would not be complete without an analysis of what *Vogue* is contributing, discussing and publishing about this research topic. *Normcore* in *Vogue* proved to be quite extensive, featuring several short articles and images. Unlike *W Magazine, Vogue* did not feature a series of photographs, but the magazine did include some street style images incorporated into some of the feature articles. The first exposé, *Meet Norma Normcore* (2014), describes *Normcore's* origins, its relevance to the fashion industry and its effect on adopters. What is interesting about the article is Farrell's (2014) connection of *Normcore* to what she describes as the "Celine-effect":

> Even before Karl Largerfeld transformed the Chanel catwalk into a super-lux supermarket (how normcore is that?), and sent a trolley-wielding Cara Delevingne tripping down the aisles in distressed joggers and trainers, fashion editors were wearing their own version of the look. Call it the Celine-effect, call it a palate cleanser after the ubiquity of print, but today's serious chic translate (in the *Vogue* office anyways) as a well-considered line of T-shirts, denim or tailored trousers, cashmere sweaters and skate shoes - the plainer the better (para.4).

The author makes several references to high-end fashion brands as part of the *Normcore* movement. Similar to those featured in the *W Magazine* spread, these brands counter *Normcore* culture, as they are unaffordable to the average person. Similarly, as *Normcore's* principal tenet is that *Normcore* is the conspicuous consumption of something that is not conspicuous, these brands are highly conspicuous and align well with Veblen's (2009) idea

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[2]While this article was issued on the Vogue UK website, the magazine and site are popular amongst many Westerners and the article is speaking about New York Fashion and thus I felt it was appropriate to include in this research.

of a "positional good"; the more expensive and scarce a product, the more consumer demand it will generate. In turn, individuals owning and displaying said item would increase their appearance of status, wealth and social standing.

In addition to the references of high-end fashion brands is a *Miu Miu* advertisement to the right of the article.
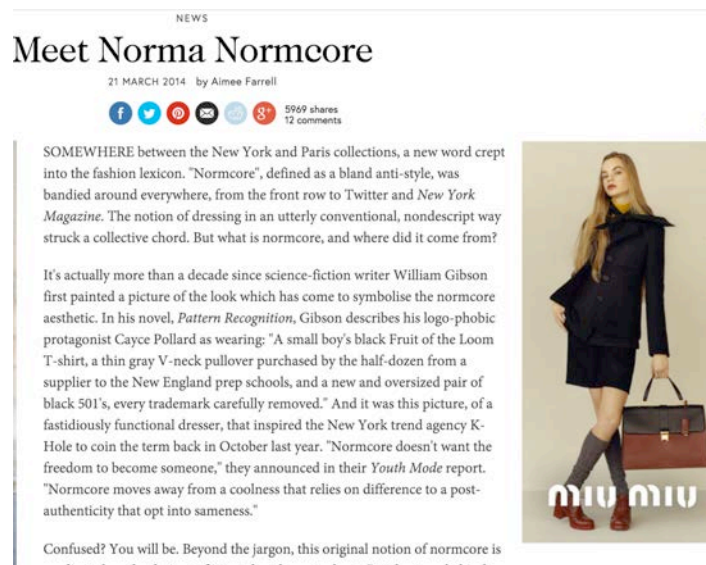
While the image does not overly promote *Normcore* (and may in fact have nothing to do with the trend), it nonetheless exhibits *Normcore* aesthetics, such as the absence of labels, monochromic and minimalist clothing, plain setting and a seemingly regular pose and disposition by the model. To an unknowing consumer reading this article, *Miu Miu* could constitute *Normcore*, again reinforcing economic status through fashion.

Meet Norma Norman featured a gallery of street-style images that *Vogue* editors deemed *Normcore*. It is my opinion that these images were more representational of the trend than the images featured in the *W Magazine* layout. The series is comprised solely of females on the street, between the ages of roughly twenty to thirty years. This reinforces the

findings on Instagram that *Normcore* is highly adapted by younger generations, as opposed to more middle- aged people. Thus in a traditional sense and according to Davis (1992), *Normcore* is a code to express age. Furthermore, the fashions were analogous to those on Instagram and in the *W Magazin*e spread: monochromatic, limited signs of brandings (with the exception of Nike) and white running shoes. However, the images in *Vogue* were somewhat more eclectic in terms of outfit choice as they featured slightly more colour, design and unique pairings of items.

Overall, research into *Vogue's* representation of *Normcore* confirmed similar positions to those on Instagram, as well as other fashion publications. *Vogue's* definition of the trend includes the incorporation of high-end brands, which in turn supports theories put forward by Lurie (1981) and Bernard (1996). However, their photo gallery of street style

Normcore enthusiasts aligns with Instagram user's representation of limited visibility of high-end brands, monochromic attire and a young demographic. Thus, *Normcore* does communicate age as an aspect of identity, as does the many other trends that have preceded it.

In her article *Everything You Need to Know About The Latest Fashion (Non) Trend #Normcore*, Cheng (2014) crowns Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen as the poster children for the *Normcore* movement. This is particularly ironic, mainly due to the fact that in the image featured in the article, Ashley Olsen is carrying a $5,000 *The Row* purse.

While Cheng (2014) may have selected the Olsen twins as *Normcore* icons because "both were recently spotted in dark shapeless layers with matching gray socks (yes, socks) paired

with black Birkenstocks" (para.2), it is difficult to tell whether the sandals are actually the $100 Birkenstock brand or perhaps the $900 Givenchy look a-likes[3]. Furthermore, her article makes reference to high-end fashion brands that prominently display the *Normcore* trend. For instance, Cheng (2014) declares "Phoebe Philo surprised all when she unexpectedly teamed her fluid, elegant pieces with furry Birkenstock-esque flats for her Celine spring/summer 2013 collection. The same goes for Marc Jacobs who gravitated towards Tevas-inspired sandals for spring/summer 2014" (para.3). Similar to the *Vogue* and *W Magazine* articles, *InStyle's* consistent reference to expensive fashion brands reinforces the fashion industry's perception of *Normcore*. However, it does make reference to the trend's similarities with the 90's era[4]. This connection was consistently reinforced on Instagram.

Discussion

Normcore is everywhere. It is on Instagram, in every major fashion publication, on Wikipedia, in the newspaper and on everyone's blog. *Normcore* is a word that seems to have rocked the fashion industry. People are not sure whether to love or hate it, accept or reject it, and for the most part, no one truly understands it (I am still unsure if I have done it justice). Not only does *Normcore* lend itself to the study of fashion, but it is highly influential on culture as has been revealed by its prominence in several magazines and newspapers. Ideally, I would have liked to have conducted a content analysis on *Normcore*,

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[3] As a Mary-Kate and Ashley fan since their *Full House* days, my vote is for the latter.
[4] As my research progressed into this fashion trend, it became very clear that the fashions of *Normcore* relied heavily on nineties clothing, such as fleeces, Tevas and turtlenecks. From articles written in *The New York Times* to *Vanity Fair*, many authors explicitly state that *Normcore* takes its style cues from that era, but each article fails to mention why. Why is *Normcore* so heavily reliant on the 90s?

examining all of the aforementioned publications, as well as a wider social media analysis, but that is beyond the scope of this paper. Research into the trend was limited to the social media platform Instagram and the analysis of three articles in a cross section of prominent fashion magazines. These sources, however, proved fruitful, informative and helpful when answering the research questions.

From the research conducted for the purpose of this paper, I was able to conclude that through one's choice of apparel, colour, style and anything that constitutes as a signifier, according to Davis (1992), is a vehicle by which fashion is able to communicate identity. What is signified through fashion allows for communication about individual and collective identities, ranging from personal attributes and attitudes to socioeconomic status and gender identification to style tribe and community connection. With regards to *Normcore*, the fashion trend does prescribe a relationship between fashion and identity by merely labelling someone or something as the trend. On Instagram, people upload images of themselves, other people or clothing items and label the image #normcore. Through fashion publications including street style images, "Normcore poster children" or "style guides to becoming Normcore", the fashion industry is also utilizing this trend as a means for identification through labelling.

The organizational (fashion industry) understanding of this trend conflicts with that of the agent (Instagram) perception to some extent. To summarize, agent and self-identified images of *Normcore*, those featured on personal social media accounts and organizational identified images of *Normcore* conflict in terms of socioeconomic projection. While in reality *Normcore* is a fashion trend accessible to many groups of people, the fashion industry restricts this accessibility to some degree by promoting the trend as a means of

displaying wealth. In this regard, the consumer vision of the trend may in fact be different from the fashion industry's concept of *Normcore*. On an organizational level, the fashion industry presents and perceives *Normcore* to be like many other fashion trends, brands and styles that reinforce ideological positions of power and economic and class distinctions. Yet, on the other hand, what is connoted through *Normcore* on Instagram is blurring these positions.

Both the agent and organizational *Normcore* feature only young individuals (between the ages of roughly 18 to 30). While Instagram acknowledges the unisex feature of the trend, there is no mention of males in the *Normcore* community on the organizational level.

Both research areas present *Normcore* as a means of assimilation, integration and uniformity. Thus, while Simmel (1957) hypothesized the duality of fashion in that individuals will simultaneously utilize their dress as a means for social adoption and differentiation, *Normcore*, in both fields of research, presents as a means for conformity. Research proved fruitless in terms of determining whether adopters of the *Normcore* trend embrace a community and find solace, acceptance and relationships with others who have adopted the trend.

On a larger scale, research demonstrated that Western culture has been influenced by the *Normcore* trend and vice versa. However, this is typically the case for most fashion movements. As Kawamura (2005) stated, "fashions in any area of life, especially fashions in clothing, are not random and purposeless. They reflect the cultural patterns of the times". Overall, on both the organizational and agent level, the inclusion of blue jeans, white

running shoes and t-shirts (despite the brand) does in fact communicate a sense of casualness, informality and ease about Western society. What was once sanctioned as professional attire, such as the high heel, is now being replaced (in some fields) with the running shoe. In a different article published in *Vogue* entitled *What Comes After Normcore* (2014), the author, Bernard, acknowledges that this relaxed tendency in fashion is here to stay: "So here's the exit strategy: Keep the sneakers and your ability to walk, wearing them with anything – even couture dresses… or hold on to the track pants, but trade the hoodie for a plush Altuzarra shearling" (para.2). Reinforcing this idea of Western culture's shift towards a more causal and "basic" lifestyle is Rosen's discussion of *Normcore* and Western culture in her article *The Real Meaning of 'Normcore' and The Rise of The Trendless Life* (2014). She too believes that the trend is reverting back to appreciating what we already have and being less concerned with the "latest and greatest." "No, what I'm describing here is a trendless life. Being unselfconscious in a society that's gone uber-conscious… what I want is to not line up for everything new. And it's not just about food or fashion, either. There are so many great things to see and do that we cast aside during the chase for the latest and greatest" (Rosen, 2014, para.6).

CONCLUSION

Upon completing research for this paper, *Normcore* has since been replaced with several trends, fads and crazes such as *Health Goth*[5], *Soft Grunge*[6] and *Vaporwave*[7], proving to be like any other passing fad. While at first glance it may appear that anyone, from my dad to the over zealous tourist, can be *Normcore*, in reality, it takes a very conscious effort to really be a part of the trend. Hence, *Normcore* is purposeful. It extends beyond one's apparel and appearance, into one's sociological attitude, or rather, as industry professionals believe, the other way around. Whether this trend began as a massive inside joke among the prominent fashion elites, as the *New York Times* states, the impact, attention and notoriety *Normcore* has had on Western culture is irrefutable (Williams, 2014). *Normcore* was the most googled fashion trend of 2014, revealing over 559,000 results on the site, including publications in *The New York Times, Vogue, New York Magazine, The Guardian, Elle, The Toronto Post, The Globe and Mail, The Observer, The Huffington Post and Forbes,* to name just a few (Williams, 2014). Additionally, *Normcore* has contributed to the economic growth and rise of sales of major clothing companies, such as *Nike*, as well as influenced an entire marketing campaign, like *Gap's* "Dress Normal". The movement has challenged societal norms, such as fashion and its relationship to gender, as well as having conformed

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[5]Health Goth: "a very modern mix of gothic and punk sensibilities (think dark colours, figure-hugging silhouettes and heavy statement accessories) and futuristic sport-luxe" (De Gallier, 2014).
[6]Soft grunge: "a term used to describe modern day teenagers, typically girls between the ages of 14-18, who like to create a "hardcore" persona on Tumblr by reblogging pictures of inverted crosses, dip-dyed hair, ying-yang symbols and toilets. They like to pretend that they listen to grunge music by wearing stylish Nirvana tees that match their $200 pair of Doc Martens" (Rebel Circus, 2014).
[7]Vaporware:"is soft/ hardware that exists in a cloud of hype, never to be released. Vaporwave is like that, but as a music/ fashion phenomenon. As much as an internet aesthetic can be an anti-capitalist statement, that's what vapor wave is…The main twist here is an inundation of corporate branding to the point where logos lose their meaning….Throw in some Matrix-style shades and you've got Vaporwave" (Koi, 2014).

to classical theories of communication through dress. This paper has revealed that though this trend may have garnered more hype than the average fashion craze, my research and analysis has proved it to be like all other, long forgotten fashions.

The writings and teaching of classical theorists such as Barthes (1967), Davis (1992), Lurie (1981), and Simmel (1904) provided a comprehensive literature review in order to assist in answering the research questions posed in this project. Through Barthes' text *The Fashion System*, as well as the papers and books of his critics, such as Davis and Carter, *Visual Rhetoric and Fashion Semiotics* were informative of how fashion is used to communicate identity and prescribe a relationship between fashion and identity. In conjunction with this section of the literature review, primary research of the social media discussion of the trend *Normcore* on Instagram, as well the analysis of *Normcore* in fashion publications, I was able to conclude that through visual rhetoric and fashion semiotics, such as signifiers, signs and symbols (or, in other words, colour, texture, pattern, style, silhouette, etc.), fashion is utilized as a vehicle for communication and expression. Cultural codes and ideologies, connotative and denotative messages are received and thus allow for visual communication. To further understand visual communication through rhetoric and semiotics, Barnard (1996) explains the teachings of Douglas by asserting, "[Douglas] implies, first, that fashion and clothing may be used to make sense of the world and things and people in it, that they are communicative phenomena. She implies, second, that the structured systems of meanings, a culture, enables individuals to construct an identity by means of communication" (p.29). On the social media platform Instagram, users were labeling themselves, other people and objects as *Normcore*, which in turn informed that the trend does prescribe a relationship between fashion and identity.

In addition to revealing important insights into the first two research questions of this project, the analysis of *Normcore* on both *Instagram* and in fashion publications confirmed what the trend is communicating about individual and collective identities. In theory, through the incorporation of blue jeans, running shoes, mass distributed brands, and generic shirts, *Normcore* should blur ideological positions of age, gender, sex, status and wealth. This proved to be true on *Instagram*, where it was often difficult to recognize the age or gender of the user. While overall, the platform exposed a relatively young demographic supporting the trend, this may be due to the fact that most *Instagram* users are under the age of 35 (Smith, 2014). Thus through my analysis of the social media platform, I was able to conclude that *Normcore* participants are not concerned with expressing social status or wealth, but rather they are more concerned with the blending of various economic groups. Additionally, Instagram revealed that the type of clothing in *Normcore,* as previously stated, communicates a sense of casualness and informality about the wearer(s), which directly supports the literature put forth by Lurie (1981).

Contrasting the findings derived from Instagram were those found in my analysis of the fashion industry's publication of the trend in magazines. It appears that the fashion industry uses this trend to reinforce the existing barriers between the classes, as *Normcore* styles and items reference high-end designers, such as *Celine*, *Givenchy* and *Chanel*. Again, what makes *Normcore* an interesting movement is its central tenet: the conspicuous consumption of something that is not conspicuous. Indeed, this core idea is lost on the fashion industry. Furthermore, fashion magazines consistently revealed an age and gender conscious trend, one geared towards the young female adult. There were no pictures or mention of anyone roughly above the age of 30, or of anyone gendered male. Thus, while

the agent driven perception of *Normcore* truly is uniformity, conformity, equivalency and assimilation, an idea reinforced by theorists such as Simmel (1904), Blumer (1963), Kwamura (2005) and Anderson (2005), to some extent the organizational understanding of *Normcore* communicates an alternative and somewhat conflicting message in that *Normcore* actually does represent a traditional fashion trend of conspicuous consumption. Theorists such as Veblen (2009), Lurie (1981) and Bernard (1996) contribute the analysis, dialogue and research of this aspect of the fashion trend.

Trends and movements in fashion reflect cultural patterns, shifts in the political and social economy, ideological values, beliefs and affordances. They are indicative of a society's members, both individually and collectively, and thus are informative of a culture as a whole. This proved true for the relationship between *Normcore* and Western culture. The fact that *Normcore* is literally everywhere, from the fashion industry to the food industry, from print magazines to television commercials and with celebrities to tourists, spoke volumes about its relationship to Western culture. Understanding the other research questions incorporated in the paper in turn supported the final question of "What is *Normcore* communicating about Western culture?" As previously stated, the styles of *Normcore*, both on the agent and organizational levels, communicated a sense of casualness, informality and ease about Western society, which has not always been the case for fashions. Primary research into posts on Instagram and publications in fashion magazines revealed information regarding this relationship that supported the research presented in the literature review. Theorists such as Simmel (1904), Polhemus (1994), Kawamura (1995) and Toubul (2014), paved the way through the literature review in order for me to understand Western culture's relationship not only to *Normcore*, but to fashion as a whole.

Through the development of my major research paper, I came to realize that each of the research questions informed and assisted with the others. The literature review and data analysis were able to support all four questions, and each provided a deeper analysis than otherwise would been accomplished had this not been the case. Through specific analysis and research into each question, I was able to synthesize a general comprehension of this area of research, which proved to be very helpful throughout this process. For example, understanding what *Normcore* is communicating about Western culture involved understanding the semiological argument of fashion semiotics and visual rhetoric, which in turn supported the first research question of "How is fashion used to communicate identity?" To quote Davis (1992) again, "clothing and fashion, as communication, are cultural phenomena in that culture may itself be understood as a signifying system, as the ways in which a society's beliefs, values, ideas and experiences are communicated through practices, artifacts and institutions" (p.36)

While *Normcore* may have come and gone in the time it has taken me to conduct the research for this paper, it is the macro understanding and its implications that this research presents that is of importance. As has been said numerous times throughout this paper, fashions are not random. They are informative of cultural patterns and times and thus *Normcore* has proven to inform, to a degree, of what contemporary Western culture represents and who is representing it. For example, in a sense, *Normcore* represents a more relaxed and casual outlook to fashion that has not been seen before. While studying ever-changing fashion trends had several limitations, mainly because academic research on a topic such as *Normcore* cannot be produced and published in such a short time span, references to other fashions and research proved very valuable.

Lastly, I would like to note a final area of research that would have contributed greatly to this research topic but due to limitations was not able to be included. In short, I cannot help wonder, would *Normcore* have come into existence had social media not been a factor? This fashion movement exploded on blogging websites and social media platforms from Instagram to Pinterest, podcasts and webcasts. It is my understanding that only after *Normcore* had been established by agent driven perceptions on these platforms, did the fashion industry, K-Hole included, begin the industry discussion of the movement. As such, social media played a tremendous role in the development and popularization of this movement. Further research into this topic may prove useful and beneficial in order to contribute to our understanding of the relationship between fashion and communications.
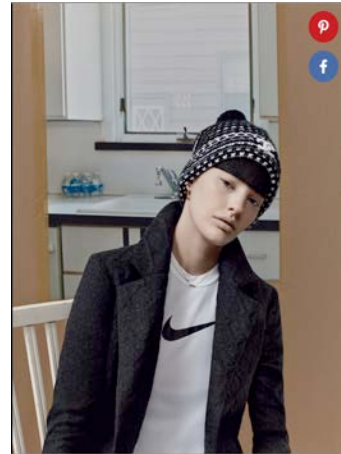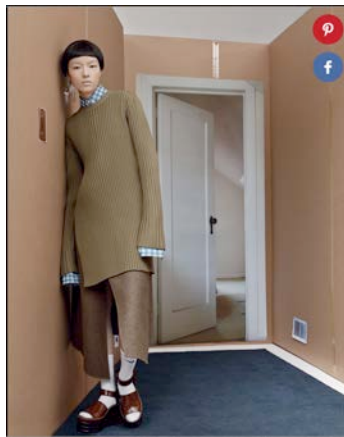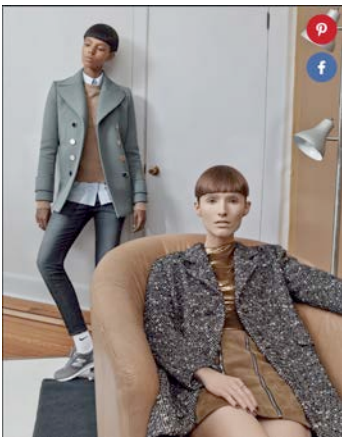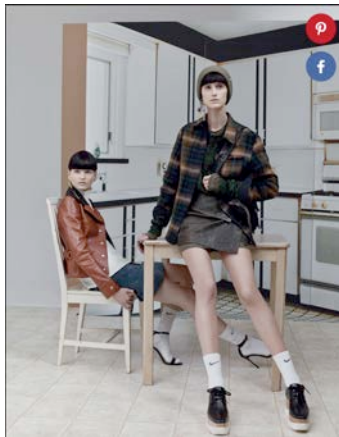
APPENDICES

Appendix A
Sample of Instagram posts used for analysis.
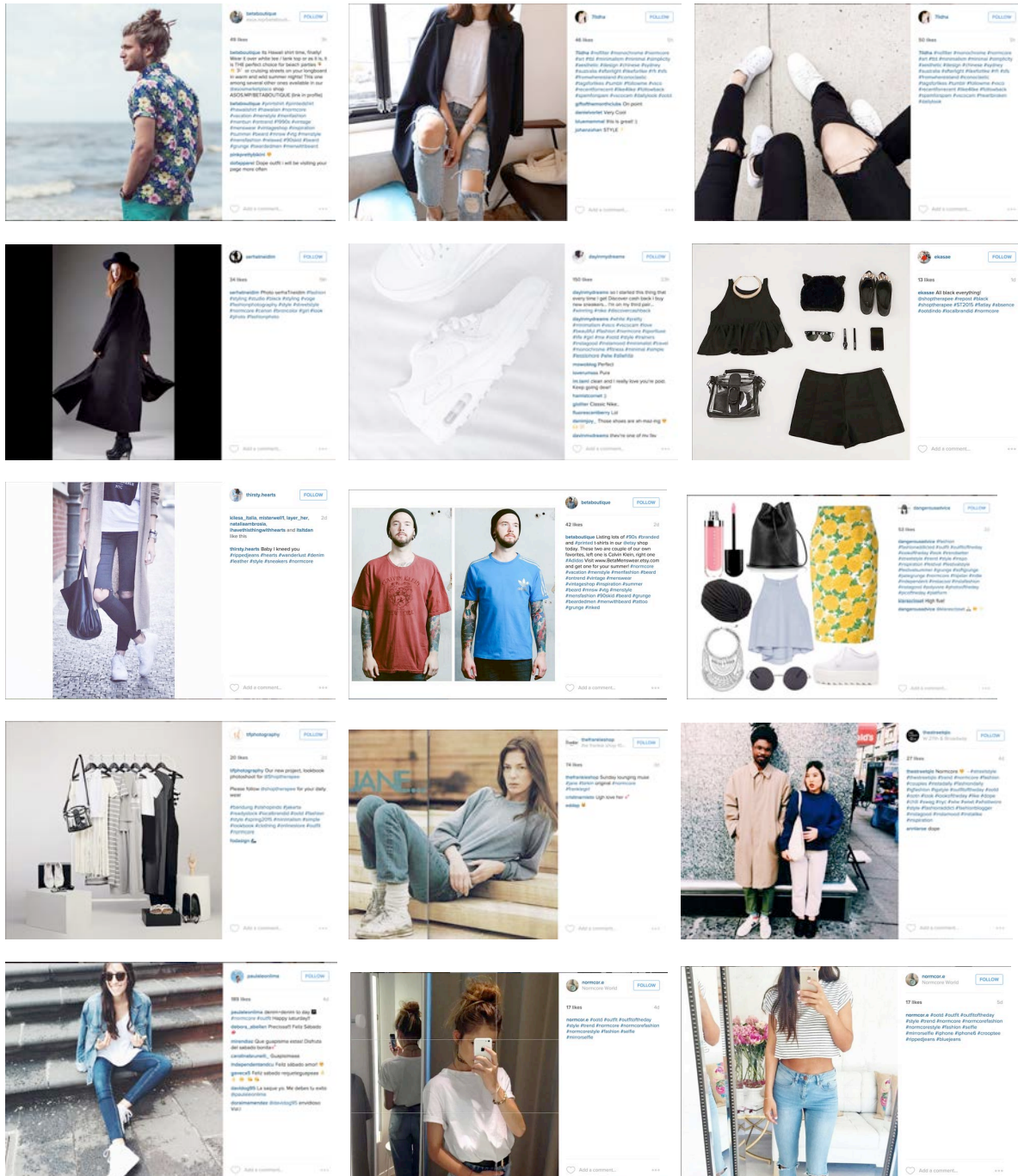
Appendix B
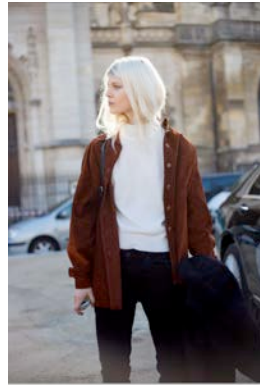Images featured in *W's Banal Plus* series

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