

Moving up, down, or sideways? Exploring Consumer Experience of Identity and Status Incongruence

In late capitalist economies the social status and economic power of the growing middle classes are becoming increasingly volatile (see e.g. US Census Bureau 2010). As a result social status transitions ought to become more common in contemporary consumer culture, and it is therefore imperative that marketing researchers understand how this is experienced and managed by consumers. In essence, we need to know; how do people consume when their changing social status positions are in conflict with their new identities?

Up to now consumer researchers in marketing have demonstrated convincingly that people use consumption to resolve conflicts when gaining a new identity (Ahuvia 2005; Mick and Fournier 1998; Thompson and Hirschman 1995; Belk 1988) or social status position (Coskuner-Balli & Thompson 2013; Üstüner & Holt 2010; Bernthal, Crocket, and Rose 2005), especially during times of specific life transitions (Cody 2012; Hogg, Curasi, Maclaran 2004; Otnes, Lowrey and Shrum 1997; Schouten 1991). In this article we will argue that consumers experience conflict not only when in identity transitions or social status transitions, but also in-between these two, and that the relationship between these two is becoming increasingly important to address. First we do this by identifying how status transitions overlap but differ in some important respects from identity transitions, and second we demonstrate the consumption strategies people use when these movements lead to an experience of conflict between one's (new/old) identity and (new/old) status position.

We base our argument on the assumption that we live in the social condition that Bauman (2000) calls *liquid modernity*: a state of loose social structures and constant social change in late

capitalism where new complex rules of domination force consumers to, despite uncertainty, compete for status positions on a global arena. It is a state of constant movement where *becoming* someone, rather than just being someone, turns into a dominant and mandatory orientation, not only for global nomads (see Bardhi, Eckhardt and Arnould 2012), but also for average middle-class consumers. Although the so called “liminal condition” of being “betwixt and in-between” status positions (Turner 1969, p.95) occurs seemingly more haphazardly now than in archaic societies where status positions were much more strictly controlled by rituals (Van Gennep ([1908]1969; Turner 1969), the lived experience of social liquidity can be just as much a vacuum-like struggle when identity and status begin to disharmonise (Ochberg and Comeau 2001). One may then wonder what characterises this new kind of disharmony in terms of consumption. How are identity and status transformations separate on one hand but entangled on the other, and how do consumers in an increasingly liquid society *experience* identity and status incongruence?

The purpose of this article is first to theoretically disentangle status from identity transitions by comparing key points from the identity consumption literature with those of the status consumption literature. Second, we will use this framework to empirically explore peoples’ experience of identity and status incongruence and the concrete strategies they use to handle this.

CONSUMPTION IN LIQUID MODERNITY

In this section we make a brief overview of the two bodies of literature we wish to compare in order to theoretically separate status transitions from identity transitions

Consumption in Identity Transitions; Horizontal Movements

Identity as a concept has attracted definitions in abundance from many different disciplinary directions and there are of course also variations in the definitions used within consumer research. But in sociocultural consumer research, which is our departure in this article, ideas stem largely from social constructionist philosophy where individual identity has been seen as dialectically negotiated with society, forever changing, relational and highly contextual. Emphasis is placed on the consumer's relational and negotiable concept of *self* (Belk 1988) bound up in cultural categories manifested as themes in consumer culture (McCracken 1988a). Thus research on identity *transitions* has typically focused on consumers' identity negotiations during concrete life changes such as being a child but becoming a woman (Cody 2012), getting married (Otnes et al. 1997), becoming a mother (Hogg et al. 2004; Thomsen and Sørensen 2006; the VOICE group 2010), changing schools (Noble and Walker 1997), family disruptions (Gentry et. al 1995), and retirement (Schau, Gilly and Wolfinbarger 2009). Some researchers have found that transitions leads to enhanced sensitivity to marketing and intensified consumption (e.g., Schouten 1991; Andreason 1984; Solomon 1983). Belk (1988, p.143) saw losses as the "fountainhead of creativity" where enhanced consumption as a creative act helped to manage these losses. Noble and Walker (1997) showed how people in transition increasingly consumed objects that symbolised the past and the new role of the future, and as an example of *compensatory symbolism*, the more insecure one was in this role transition the more stereotypically one consumed in order to succeed with the role socialisation (Solomon 1983).

Whereas some of the aforementioned researchers argue that consumption remedies the anxiety by completing the passage to desired key roles (Cody 2012; Schouten 1991; Noble and Walker, *ibid*; Solomon 1983) others contend that consumption, in fact, can make transitions worse (the VOICE group 2010; Thomsen and Sørensen 2006). For instance, Thomsen and Sørensen (2006) found that new mothers at times were so insecure in their new role that they had to get rid of certain baby-related products in order to not be decoded as a kind of mother they did not want to be—something the authors called *consumption-caused liminality*. The VOICE group (2010) supported these findings and showed how consumers felt uncertain and how they thus feared and actively resisted baby-related products because of their ambivalence toward their transition into motherhood. As a result these researchers claim that consumer research ought to give more attention to the negative effects of consumption during transitional periods.

In contrast, Schouten (1991) did not interpret similar rejections as signs of consumption being negative for the completion of role transition. In his investigation of plastic surgery patients, he found that individuals who have entered a liminal state or have become trapped in one “face the task of reconstructing congruous, integrated self-concepts” (Schouten 1991, 421) and must formulate a possible self either before or after the separation phase—or during the liminal phase. The three ways for consumers to respond to possible selves are according to Schouten: (1) *inaction*, (2) *active rejection*, and (3) the *actualisation and incorporation of the possible self into a revised self-concept*. In turn, the chance that the new role will be actualised depends on whether the individual has elaborated sufficiently, if she is decisive and imaginative enough, how desirable the change is, and how much risk is involved. *If* someone decides to actualise a possible self, she can take herself out of a liminal state through *incorporation* (Sartre

in Belk 1988). In a similar way Cody (2012) showed how tween girls crafted an “emphasised” version of femininity in order to complete the transition from child to woman. But if the incorporation is not successful—and here Schouten (1991) brings up the example of a fictional plastic surgery patient who does not accept her new body part—the desire for self-congruity will backfire and the liminal state and anxiety will persist. But despite this risk, Schouten (1991) sees these states of anxiety as *liminoid* (Turner 1974) which refers to enhanced consumption as ritual and freedom to play around with new categories of meanings in secular, industrialised societies. However, even if the play dimension of the liminoid concept indeed has been emphasised in tourism, leisure, and consumer research (e.g., Belk 2000; Kozinets et. al 2004), Turner also saw it as a state characterised by isolation and loneliness as opposed to the state of collective support (*communitas*) that archaic societies provided during the liminal phase.

In sum, the marketing and consumer research presented above looks at experiences associated with *horisontal* rather than vertical change. They conceptualise these as *stage-structured* identity transformations where consumer *agency* is central for decisions on the preferred *cultural category* for the consumer’s new self-concept. The consumer does not first-hand experience a competitive change in social power relative someone else, but more a change in a more or less preferred concept of self presented as a theme (e.g. as a “good mother” or “a man of action”). Although these contributions are utterly helpful and provide nuanced understandings of the concrete life and identity changes of socially mobile consumers, they do not distinguish these from the less perceptible experiences of social *status* transition; vertical movements in hierarchies organised by the control and power over social and cultural resources resulting in more or less privileges and higher or lower life chances (Giddens 2006; Turner 1988;

Bourdieu 1984). Now we will go on to look at this more competitive, vertical dimension of social relations; status.

Consumption in Status Transitions; Vertical Movements

The concept of *status consumption* is here treated as consumers' extant status positions and their unconscious and conscious consumption to keep, or at best, improve their positions through consumption. In these cases the notion of status, but not the notion of identity, is foremost characterised by hierarchical rankings that give unequally distributed privileges (Giddens 2006; Turner 1988). The grand theorist in sociocultural research on status consumption is undoubtedly Pierre Bourdieu (1984) whose theory on social class distinction has formed the basis for many a consumer study. In Bourdieu's view social class dispositions are embodied through the habitus, a "structuring structure" through which the individual sees—and acts in—the world. The habitus deterministically imprisons people in their social classes, as they cannot see that they act accordingly, and thereby makes transitions harder (or even impossible)—at least upward. In Bourdieu's framework taste is one of the most important embodied and revealing class dimensions, and is regarded as the sociohistorical result of one's composition of subcapitals—cultural, economic, and social. These, in turn, make up the totality of symbolic capital, that is, status.

In consumer culture theory (CCT) (Arnould and Thompson 2005) status consumption has been treated in mainly three ways; first, as one of many equally important meanings in identity projects (e.g., Belk, Bahn and Mayer 1982; Belk 1988; Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989; Thompson and Haytko 1997); second, as making visible the internal structures and competition for very specific subcultural capital in consumer microcultures (e.g., Schouten and McAlexander

1995; Muniz and O’Guinn 2001; Ostberg 2007); and third as the major structure-maker of consumption (e.g., Bernthal, Crockett and Rose 2005; Coskuner-Balli & Thompson 2013; Henry 2005; Holt 1998; Holt and Thompson 2004; Thompson and Tambyah 1999; Üstüner and Holt 2010). Inspired by Bourdieu, Holt (1998) investigated the structuring power of cultural capital and taste among contemporary U.S. consumers who possessed either high culture capital (HCC) or low culture capital (LCC). He concluded that aspiring for higher status in consumption is predominantly done through materialist practices among the lower classes and through anti-materialist and decommodified practices in the higher classes. Later Üstüner and Holt (2010) set out to extend Holt’s (1998) study in relation to less industrialised countries and found similar patterns among their Turkish economic middle-class consumers who used different achievement strategies to move vertically in the world. The LCC consumers’ national status games were defined by economical capital, whereas the more cosmopolitan HCC consumers pursued cultural capital in a script-like manner through international consumer practices.

In a similar vein of verticality Bernthal, Crockett, and Rose (2005) found that consumers tried to attain “the good life” through embodied cultural capital in credit card practices, and Belk (1986) and LaBarbera (1988) illustrated how the *nouveaux riches* typically try to offset their lack of cultural and social capital with an abundance of economic capital. On the opposite end of the spectrum, downshifters with high cultural capital could afford to sacrifice their economic capital (McDonald, Oates, Young and Hwang 2006) and seeing such sacrifice as having a “conversion rate.” Coskuner-Balli and Thompson (2013) leant upon Bourdieu’s view on heterological conditions (*heterodoxy*) and emphasised the relationships between class-based cultural capital on one hand and consumption field dependent cultural capital on the other. They managed to

illustrate empirically how there is a distinction between dominant and subordinate forms of cultural capital where the latter affords a comparatively lower rate. This result, however, glosses over the entanglement of identity and status transformations addressed in the present study. When the middle-class men in Coskuner-Balli and Thompson's study (2013) step into their new roles as at-home fathers they don't just seek to enhance the overall conversion rate of their new subordinate cultural capital (the vertical dimension, status), as this historically marginalised domesticated gender identity now is gaining in social status. These men probably also make a horizontal movement (identity) where the position itself is not readily tradable on the vertical status axis. If we were to interpret the nature of experience accompanying the transition in-between various masculine identities available in consumer culture—for example becoming an at-home-father as in a “new kind of man” (Ostberg 2012) or as in a “man-of-action hero” (Holt and Thompson 2004)—we would be able to say something about how the hierarchies in terms of dominant cultural capital actually are experienced by those inside the particular status system. It is only through such close interpretations that we can find out whether the movement is foremost horizontal (identity) or vertical (status), where the latter would be a more competitive and therefore emotionally risky movement. It is precisely this we aim to show in this article, where we will illustrate how the vertical and horizontal are always entangled but nevertheless managed differently in terms of consumption strategies and accompanied with different emotions.

Hence, in these different research cases social status was seen as organising consumption choices, and vice versa; consumption was either compatible or incompatible with consumers' already naturalised status positions and consumption was used in order to move vertically. But, like in the literature on identity transitions, the status consumption literature does not make an

explicit distinction between experiences coming from a status or an identity change, or how these relate when in conflict with each other. We will therefore go on to explore how consumers experience such identity and status incongruences and how they handle these through concrete consumption practices.

METHOD

The data for this study was collected over a four-year period that started in the United States in 2005 and ended in Sweden in 2008. Phenomenological (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989), long (McCracken 1988b), and ethnographic (Holt 1998) interviews, as well as ethnographic observation (Elliott and Elliott 2003) served as models for the data collection procedure.

Participant observations and interviews were conducted inside people's homes and during activities chosen by the consumers.

The fieldwork took place with 35 participants in three cities (Malmö, Istanbul, and Philadelphia) in three different countries (Sweden, Turkey, and the United States). The choice of the three different countries drew from the idea of different cultural-historical forms (see Douglas and Isherwood's [1979] cultural map) in order to create a sufficiently "glocal" (see e.g., Robertson 1992) variation among the participants and to get a workable tension in the material. The choice of countries was motivated by the nations' cultural histories that were regarded as sufficiently diverse in terms of historical political events and dominant cultural orientation—America's "can-do spirit" (Holt & Thompson 2004), Sweden's ideal of being *the* egalitarian welfare state (Friedman 2005) and Turkey's polarisation of Western and Islamist consumer

culture (Sandikci and Ger 2005)—to create the wanted tension, but still similar enough in terms of a free market and global middle-class consumer culture. Our aim was never to do a comparative analysis of “different cultures”; we were inspired instead by multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995; see also Kjeldgaard, Csaba, and Ger 2006). Doing fieldwork in three diverse sites, even if we did not capture every nuance of globalised liquid modernity, in all likelihood provides a richer interpretive framework than fieldwork at one site would.

The first author conducted the fieldwork. She recruited the respondents by engaging contacts from various societal fields (business, university, private affiliations etc.) at each site and asking them to provide her with names of people who were acquaintances. These “strangers” needed to be mixed in terms of age and sex but they all belonged to a broad urban middle class: they lived in cities, had attended college, and earned middle and upper middle-class wages (in terms of national standards) (see participants’ profiles, table 2) and represented a mix of lifestyles and backgrounds.. The principle of redundancy (Kvale 1996) was used in order to decide when the number of respondents was sufficient at each site—that is, when similar themes started repeating themselves during interviews. From the long lists of people (40 in Sweden, 45 in the United States, and 30 in Turkey), eleven (Sweden), eleven (US) and thirteen (Turkey) people were finally chosen in each country. The two hour long interviews were conducted in Swedish in Sweden, and in English in the United States and Turkey—where the respondents were all close to fluent in English with only one exception. The interviews were recorded digitally and later transcribed verbatim in the interview language and, for the Swedish interviews, subsequently translated into English. This rendered approximately 950 pages of text. This data was supplemented by photographs and field notes.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Participants were told that the study concerned lifestyle and consumption, with an emphasis on life at home. The resulting narratives concerned life changes that related to symbolic consumption practices in general and home aesthetics in particular. The pragmatic reason for the emphasis on home was that this study originally was part of a larger research project that examined symbolic consumption of home decoration. However, when the status transformation themes emerged during the analytical phase, the home still proved to be significant, but the more general consumption stories were just as important.

Sometimes respondents told stories of transition in a straightforward way and at other times in an “unspoken” way (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1994). In order to see the difference between experiences relating to identity and status in our respondents’ narratives we operationalised these two concepts following the principles accounted for in the previous section. Consequently, those transitions following a horizontal axis were seen as identity transitions and those following a vertical axis as status transitions. Both identity and status transitions are conceptualised as relational, but we have aimed to disentangle when the change in social relation had a non-hierarchical (horizontal) or more competitively evaluating (vertical) character. The differences are many times subtle and hints in either direction sometimes first appeared as emotions where verbal or bodily language communicated a sense of social shame and embarrassment (vertical downhill), sorrow for “losing oneself” (horizontal rupture), a proud sense of “victory” (vertical upwards), or a joy at self-recognition (horizontal turn).

The emerged patterns were themed according to how the consumers dealt with incongruences between their perception of self and their status. All respondents except for five who did not witness any experiences of incongruence, could be categorised into these themes. In table 1 this categorisation can be found in the last column. However, for the focus of illustration we let only one respondent represent each distinct theme in the following analysis section.

MANAGING LIQUIDITY

During the analysis we found three distinctive strategies for how participants managed identity and status incongruence on a general level. Under each main strategy we also present a subtheme concerning the way consumers tried to reintegrate their identity with their status position or vice versa through consumption. Below we illustrate each of these three strategies with one life narrative from our respondent pool that we found especially comprehensive in representing this.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Radical Distinction: Status and Identity in Dialectic Transition

Many of the participants experiencing incoherency tried to manage their changing identity and status positions simultaneously, putting none above the other, by innovating a whole new status game and creating a *nonclassifiable* social position through a distinct identity theme in consumer culture. With the decisiveness and imagination needed they aimed to fully actualise their possible selves (Schouten 1991) and at the same time manipulate their status in creative ways by

changing their social context in order to increase/decrease the impact of the most favouring/damaging subcapital in that specific context. This resembles what the stay-at-home dads in Coskuner-Balli & Thompson's (2013) article did, but we argue here that the aesthetic themes picked by the respondents remain outside a possible status game and are thus not up for trade outside the "identity market". They have no legitimacy as status currency and can therefore neither raise nor sink them.

Empirical Case: Mathilda, 42, in Baltimore, USA. Mathilda is a former fashion model, a mother and homemaker who works sporadically as an art gallery assistant. After a modeling career in New York, Paris, and Milan (where, according to herself, she and her husband occupied an identity role of intellectuals, compensating for their low economic capital by being well read and toting many books around)—and a lot of temporary jobs held by her husband—the couple reached their forties and finally had their longed-for son. Mathilda's husband took up university studies, worked in a bar in the evenings, at a hotel in the weekends, and Mathilda stayed at home with their toddler. Now, in their mid-forties, their household income is down to subsistence level. During the interview Mathilda often expresses gratitude for the opportunities she and her husband have been presented with along their journey through life. Compared with the tone in which she then describes the way everything has actually turned out, some of this expressed gratitude is interpreted by us as containing a great deal of sorrow but also embarrassment.

Two main points of status transition arise in Mathilda's narrative, and they were actually points where an already established concept of self was challenged by her experience of a new surrounding context. The first occurred when Mathilda was growing up. She says she had always

felt privileged and wealthy compared to the other children in her neighbourhood, and she felt as if her family was slightly different, in a positive way. For example, she and her siblings were able to attend a private school due to her parents' hard work and double shifts. But starting at the private school created a sense of insufficiency. Despite the guilt she felt towards her struggling parents the shame Mathilda experienced when she saw her classmates' houses forced her to reassess her own social position, and her comforting self-concept as "privileged":

Mathilda: There was a positive and a negative effect growing up in [our] house and in [our] neighbourhood. The positive being the feeling of pure cosiness and absolute safety; our parents gave us a very, very safe upbringing and that was absolutely wonderful. But unfortunately when you grow older, and you begin... you recognise things around you... how other people live. We went to rather exclusive schools and when I would go and see the houses in which my friends lived I was just flabbergasted! [...] So of course I took that to mean that we were terribly, terribly poor [...] I felt so guilty that I felt ashamed and I didn't know how to get around it.

Mathilda's second status transition occurred a little later in adolescence. In her own words her parents always "dragged" her and her siblings to all kinds of cultural events, trying to cultivate them. In this way Mathilda's parents resorted to strategic acculturation, as described by Üstüner and Holt (2010) among consumers possessing HCC in the Turkish setting. But when Mathilda—whose self-concept as an intellectual with aesthetic sensibilities frequently comes forward during the interview—wanted to engage directly in cultural production her parents "always laughed" at or harshly condemned her creative excursions and seemed afraid that their daughter's own creative interpretations would somehow reveal the family's class inferiority. Only when reliable

sources (like a global brand) confirmed Mathilda's aesthetic judgment would they dare to change their minds:

Mathilda: So they came home and looked at me with different eyes and they said "Oh! The window in that shop is decorated just like your bedroom ceiling!" And I said "Oh, does that make it okay now, now that you have outside confirmation, that I am not alone?" So, boy, that made me feel so much better; but of course, they could never do enough to make up for the trauma and disapproval that they had caused.

As Mathilda herself points out, there is a contradiction between the cultural values her parents once taught her to appreciate and their condemnation of her own creative use of the same cultural values. In other words, there is incongruence between what Mathilda has come to perceive as her identity and its' fit with the family's embodied social status. There is vertical and horizontal conflict of movement happening simultaneously; the vertical when consideration is made to her parents' social surrounding and the horizontal when the negotiation is made in relation to her own experience of "self".

A Consumption Strategy of Relativity and Untouchability. In terms of managing status and identity incongruence the respondents we characterise as engaged in radical distinction elaborate with the relations in-between the different types of capital, many times claiming one capital as superior to the others. In Mathilda's case cultural capital is favoured over economical capital:

Mathilda: My philosophy for life has always been that poverty is no excuse for bad taste.

Although Mathilda and her husband cannot boast about possessing economic capital, they speak comfortably about their accumulated cultural capital in terms of cultural and aesthetic taste. Our observations of Mathilda's and her husband's lives suggest that they frequently played on the superior position that a lived cosmopolitan identity—and moreover largely European—experience had given them, and that their friends we met willingly accepted an inferior position in regards to European history, symbolism, and aesthetics. By surrounding themselves with people who admire these qualities and avoiding those who do not, Mathilda and her husband have concocted an untouchable image, which, according to them, is comparable to a high status position. By strategically elaborating with the various subgroups in their fragmented social capital, they construct and claim a superior status position through cultural capital and compensate for their lack of economic capital by stigmatising economic capital as being mutually exclusive of cultural capital. Still, Mathilda has occasionally used up her scarce economical capital to buy the things her self concept as style authority craves:

Mathilda: I found this fabric, [it] was terribly expensive but I knew that that was the fabric and I wasn't going to be able to sleep and I didn't want to live without it, and that was it! And I counted my pennies and I paid for it! So three, two years later I'm watching a very high-end decorating show on television, which the program leaders keep repeating "now, this isn't for everyone's budget, but you can always get ideas from things" and they chose my fabric! So that made me feel as though I was completely attached to the universe of decorating, and then, six months ago, in an L.L. Bean catalogue, this fabric was all over the catalogue like a bad rash! So now of course it's time for me to change my fabric.

Hence, being “attached to the universe” of aesthetic taste doesn’t save Mathilda from being emulated. She wants to be idiosyncratic enough not to be readily positioned in any conventional status hierarchies, so Mathilda, who has experienced status-identity conflicts in her life due to her mobility through different social spaces, normally tries to choose what appears to be a haphazard and unexpected aesthetic decoration style. By strongly propagating this stylistic reference she situates conventional status hierarchies as out of her scope and instead turns untouchable by embracing stylistic genres that few others have thought of:

Mathilda: I’m going straight back to that movie Mary Poppins, because palm trees, zebra skins on the floor, and books... Books everywhere! I really like “early poverty.” Ha ha, I like that expression: “early Victorian poverty.” I feel as though every house in which I have ever lived has always appeared to be clearly a British men’s club.

To Mathilda, Mary Poppins captures the styles of both the upper class (“British men’s club”) and the lower class (“early poverty”) from the Victorian era, which, in her mind, represents the power of high cultural capital authenticity (Holt 1998). Moreover, Mathilda’s attraction to Mary Poppins has gotten even stronger over time as she has managed to incorporate this stylistic element into a larger ensemble of what she refers to as “European sensibility,” much admired in their (new) social surroundings. Hence, she has chosen a highly stylised expression with idiosyncratic elements that makes placing her in conventional status hierarchies difficult; she has developed a strong aesthetic *identity* but hardly anchored a desired status position in terms of economic and social capital. This unique identity seems to bolster her from conventional status games because others do not feel threatened by it. Nourishing the consumption-based identity of a “tasteful European” by imitating an eccentric fictional figure, Mathilda represents the

consumers in our study who cling to specific aesthetic forms, and thereby experience that they control the vertical relativities inherent in a liquid social status structure.

Consumers who react to status and identity incongruence through radical distinction treat status and identity as equally important and resort to a consumption strategy saving them from possible comparisons with other social groups in their surroundings; comparisons often associated with anxiety and shame. As if saying “Try and map me if you can!” their experiences of incongruence are instead managed through the intense focus on cultivating eccentric but stable self-concepts that will distract the outside viewer from further status evaluations and everyday classification.

Assimilated Distinction: Status Transition Organises Identity Transition

Similar to people who approach status conflict through radical distinction, consumers who resort to assimilated distinction actualise their new possible selves (Schouten 1991), but not by creating a unique, untouchable position. Rather, they put status above identity and adapt their perceived self to their new social contexts because they want to blend in with other people’s preset conditions and leave their former status positions behind.

Empirical Case: Göran, 39, in Malmö, Sweden. We have chosen to illustrate this theme with Göran, who from the mainstream sociological perspective of social class mobility has managed to move upward in the hierarchy. Göran grew up in a family with as he calls it “modest means” in a small country village in southern Sweden. He describes a life where the status and identity incongruences is seemingly less complex than for people engaged in radical distinction—whose

identities and status positions are valued as strongly—as for example Mathilda. Görans’ life journey is characterised by trying to fit into groups that he considers better than the one he just came from. As we interpret his narrative, instead of holding equal importance, his lived identity has been inferior to and has had to adapt to a desired status position accordingly. In fact, his lived identity as a small town boy with dynamic big town taste fits perfect with such adaptation. He talks about his conscious mingling and “break-ups” with certain cliques, starting as early as in his childhood:

Göran: [where I grew up] there was not the luxury to choose friends, but you simply played with people in your own age, regardless of social background. This was in the 70s and all parents had jobs, and things were, yeah, socially stable. And then in seventh to ninth grade we were put in school busses to [a bigger town], which was quite nice because then I got to know some new people. Yeah, so I got new friends and quite sharply broke with my old clique, and started hanging out with new people. Well, not exclusively, but quite a lot. Maybe not “broke with” exactly, but yes. I guess that’s the age when one picks friends actively.

Since then he has pursued an international career in consulting, which he feels comfortable with, especially as he has earned quite a lot of money, and Göran often expresses a humble satisfaction in relation to his economic and professional victory. He also emphasises pride that he has understood the importance of constantly adapting socially to new surroundings, and that he has always been encouraged by his parents to do so. Now that he has finally settled in southern Sweden he says he almost exclusively socialises with people who do not have a lot of money but who work within media or culture, since they more often, in his own words, “have good taste.”

A Consumption Strategy of Chameleonisation. Rather than managing to always stand out drastically, like the consumers engaging in radical distinction, people who go through assimilated distinction manage status and identity incongruence by quickly mobilising the right capital for the new situation in order to erase their past identity which is out of synch with their new experienced status position. The latter is anchored in a concept of self as worthy of more than one has been ascribed, and as always ready for adaptation.

To demonstrate his success, Göran now has two vintage sports cars, “cool” clothes, and a spacious penthouse in an expensive area. His home is almost fully furnished with art and expensive modern classics (Arne Jacobsen, Paul Kjaerholm, Eams etc.) and manifests his specialised knowledge in consumer taste. But despite Göran’s—in his own words—“stereotypical consumption” (according to Solomon (1983) a sign of insecurity in the identity role, which here occurs as his status position has changed) of taste-wise “proper” and expensive goods, Göran claims that he has adapted his lifestyle according to his less economically successful friends. To him it has, in line with Holt’s (1998) description of cultivated tastes, been important not to emphasise his economic capital in order to keep up with his friends’ good taste which according to him comes with the ability to identify authenticity, rather than money:

Göran: You know, it’s not so enjoyable to go out and buy a new watch; it is much more fun to go out and search for a neat fine old watch. It demands so much more from the buyer. It demands some knowledge, yeah... I believe that’s the key. If you allow me to be a little bit elitist and confess a thing or two about taste? If you are a group of people

sharing the same interest, then it is always wrong to go and buy things new! This counts for almost all cliques I know.

Adapting to one's surrounding in terms of capital means one has to play down some more important aspects and enhance other less central aspects for that status game (Coskuner-Balli & Thompson 2013). Göran is busy not letting his economic capital get in the way of the cultural capital celebrated in his cultivated social surroundings. He makes sure to have the right style—which he defines as “old, good stuff”—that he has spent his whole life learning about and figuring out how to acquire. He has incorporated his new position by *knowing* it, to use Sartre's (in Belk 1988) understanding of how one incorporate objects. One could also say he has carefully studied the scripts, as did Üstüner and Holt's (2010) Turkish HCC consumers, but instead of strategic acculturation this looks like strategic *assimilation* as he leaves his previous cultures behind. He buys through auctions, garage sales, and other second-hand sources and says he would “never buy something expensive that doesn't keep its' value.” Therefore he can never be accused of wasting money on conspicuous consumption. He wants to radiate a flair of *laissez faire* taste, where the connoisseur composition of classic modern furniture should be experienced as having been chosen without much thought, as if out of an innate sensibility. In this way, he tries hard to embody upper-class tastes. The complexity surrounding this ideal is apparent: On the one hand, Göran despises the contradiction that a certain kind of homogeneity emerges in consumer society at the same time as one is told to be, as he says; “so damn special”. On the other hand he embraces it:

Göran: I guess I always—not always but for quite some time—I've been interested in Danish stuff, like everyone else. I don't know, I am shaped by my surroundings... So,

when I got money I could buy what I wanted. I think most of my friends could have had the same furniture as I do if they had the money, I mean they wouldn't have felt uncomfortable in... In fact, I could have taken anything here and placed it at my friends' and it would have fit in.

Assimilated distinction is adopted by consumers whose identities must not be locked up in specific aesthetic forms as the desired social status positions are seen as ever-changing products of ever-changing ideals in consumer society. The status transition (upward) dictates the identity project if any. Hence, constant status change may make a standing manifestation of identity impossible but in liquid modernity such ever-changing self-concepts become social status manifestations in themselves.

Lingering Distinction: Identity Transition Organises Status Transition

In lingering distinction the status and identity incongruence remains unresolved as long as needed. Instead of actualising a new identity and status position simultaneously, as did Mathilda, or letting a desired status position take the lead for one's identity, a predominantly vertical movement, as did Göran, consumers who engage in lingering distinction actively reject higher status positions to stay true to a perceived self (Schouten 1991) and if anything make a predominantly horizontal movement. In this section we introduce Pelin who has stepped out of insecure waters and is currently abandoning what she perceives to be a status-driven consumption cycle to stay true to her self.

Empirical Case: Pelin, 35, in Istanbul, Turkey. Pelin was, in a similar way to Mathilda, introduced to her first experience of status and identity incongruence at an early age in school. Until she was eleven she lived in a small town near Istanbul with her parents, who were both primary school teachers. After performing exceptionally well during a foreign language test she was offered a scholarship for an elite boarding school in another part of Turkey. She moved away from her parents and lived on campus for the next seven years. In the new school the majority of the students were what Pelin refers to as “rich kids,” children of wealthy, local families. The wealthy students lived with their parents nearby, whereas the small number of scholarship students lived on campus, distantly removed from their parents. This situation created a polarisation at the school— an “us” and “them” division that Pelin returns to often during the interview:

Pelin: You compare what they have and where they go in the summertime, and that kind of thing. It was never like, “Oh, I don’t talk to you because you are a poor boarding student” kind of thing. But you know, without questioning. I mean maybe it’s a very human thing that everybody becomes friends with the people with similar backgrounds, similar social status, that kind of thing...

Pelin says she felt economically and socially inferior to the richer kids, and her father’s socialist conviction that “rich people are not to be trusted” became a self-fulfilling prophecy during the years at the boarding school. After university, where Pelin got degrees in English and communications, she moved to Istanbul, where she works as a public relations and marketing manager for the Turkish franchise of a famous Italian fashion brand. In her job, she meets a lot of rich people, with whom she says she does not identify at all. Pelin’s experience is that she is at a

crossroads where she is squeezed between the ideology of her father—an ideology that she has more or less internalised at this point—and the people around her who earn more money and live a much more materially extravagant life than she does. The following quote illustrates the struggles with mixed emotions regarding the ideologies of her various social contexts:

Pelin: [My father] is kind of a, how to say, not a very, fundamental leftist, but he's a social democrat, so his ideals go towards equality... He passed it on to me so I don't really trust the very rich people... this is the feeling that I have actually. I can't trust them, 'cause, you know, they always think about their priorities and their material gains and their opportunities... Sometimes I think it's due to the boarding school, it's my border to an inferiority complex: "They are rich and I'm not so they have to stay away from me." I came up with the idea that "Okay, I don't want very rich people in my life"... So maybe this is why I am not very comfortable with rich people. And the thing is, I have to work with rich people all the time!

Hence, having survived her first point of status and identity conflict at the boarding school she found herself in a second one when entering working life. At both times she has been obliged to mingle with people toward whom she feels a strong aversion.

A Consumption Strategy of Passive Observation and Invisibility. No matter how uncomfortable a conflict between identity and status may be, the consumers we see here do not try to actualise a higher status position as it contrasts with their self-concept, their lived identity. Pelin, for example, actively rejects higher status based on economical capital and instead thinks about how to get into a social space where cultural capital fitting with her more humanistically informed

identity is favoured. She seeks to adapt status position according to her lived identity. Although Pelin to a large extent is aware of the social codes in her capacity of “curator,” a term McCracken uses to encompass people mingling with higher status groups but only because they offer a certain service (1988a), her rich customers’ lifestyles are still just as alien to her as the rich kids’ were at the boarding school. Rather than attempting to master the codes and join the status game she chooses to ignore them and not partake. Instead she looks at her surroundings with a sense of disgust. She finds it rather meaningless, and dreams of finding another life trajectory where she can make more meaningful—and less materialistic—choices.

Pelin: My job is all about luxury goods so it does not fulfil me like another profession, like helping people, or being in direct touch and making a difference, that kind of thing. It really disturbs me now, ’cause I kind of feel stuck at this stage in my life... I have to make some decisions about my professional life, my private life, and I’m just postponing those decisions. I just feel I’m not moving, I’m just staying and trying to figure out and decide which way to consider, which way to go.

Like the participants who were engaged in radical distinction, people who are engaged in lingering distinction relate to the liquid social structures by being untouchable. However, they do not do this by constructing their own, highly stylised, idiosyncratic identity space in negotiation with a brand new status position. This is not because they are disinterested in aesthetics or symbolic goods, but because they feel the need to be left alone while awaiting a status position suitable for their identity. This seems to take more time and contemplation than the other way around. For example, while Pelin is waiting to make a conclusive decision about her future, she has made herself more socially invisible, still pointing out that she is not quite a hermit. Ever

since she moved to her apartment she says she “hides for days” and has kept the consumption of fashion, food, travel, and home aesthetics at a minimum. Pelin has the economic possibilities but she cannot procure the items that she feels represent her. The incongruence between status and identity has made her uncertain when it comes to consumption; instead of solving the conflict with enhanced consumption she seems to be afraid consumption will enhance the conflict in line with the findings of the VOICE group (2010) and Thompsen and Sørensen (2006). Therefore she is actively limiting herself at this point in her life:

Pelin: I kind of live quite a modest life. I mean I don't have big expectations but maybe I'm just limiting myself because of this thought. I mean it is possible that I could have a more comfortable life, make much more money but you know, I have this belief, so I just try to stop it from happening. I think I'm doing this subconsciously, [...] I'm just limiting myself here actually.

Pelin's story tells us that she wishes to arrive at a point where her life changes completely so she can start from scratch. She could, potentially start her new life here and now—she has the economic means—but she has not yet figured out what path to take and feels that her past decisions are hindering her self-fulfilment, also materially:

Pelin: When you already have furniture it's difficult to buy big stuff. You have to get rid of them first and you have to redecorate... If it's empty you could just go and buy according to your *actual* taste at the moment. Because some of the stuff is from periods of time you don't enjoy that much anymore. But they are there so you don't think about it; you keep on living with them.

Summary: Lingering distinction means that decisions regarding future distinction have not taken form. These people are trying to find out what status position(s) fit with “who they are” before they make choices about how to leverage their capital. Their status-identity conflict is tightly interwoven with ambivalence regarding identity positions related to values and ideologies *about* status hierarchies. In this state, people generally do not yet seek to engage a strong stylistic theme of symbolic consumption, like the consumers engaging in radical or assimilated distinction. Instead, they handle the conflict by *not* consuming, by *not* making a choice.

DISCUSSION

Our first main insight is that consumption strategies as a response to mainly vertical movements are different from the ones resulting from horizontal movements. Vertical movement requires a more carefully contemplated consumption strategy than a horizontal movement. In other words, among consumers that let their status dictate their identity, focus on consumption is more intense than among consumers that come to change their status according to a preferred identity. Depending on how important one’s identity or status position is, during a life transition the resulting incongruence will be solved by focusing on trying to move either vertically or horizontally, or both at the same time—in any case leading to an experience of incongruence between the two. Sometimes, like in ‘lingering distinction’ an identity is so strong that the social status position will have to adapt in order for the conflict to do least harm. Other times, like in ‘assimilated distinction’, a social status position is so attractive that the cultural categories defining an identity better adapt to the requirements of the social status position. And sometimes both the identity and the status position have fallen victims to intense liquidity, like in ‘radical

distinction'. Our conceptualisation of radical distinction resembles Cody's (2012) conclusion about children becoming teens; that this identity transition, "slipping between the cracks of sociocultural organisation" (p.58), leads to preparatory and mediating consumption practices and not solely is about an identity transition but that the girls at the same time are "acutely attuned to the dynamics of social comparison" (p.57) which in turn intensifies the importance of consumption. This conflict-laden state forces the consumer to *create* both a unique identity, *and* an available social position by elaborating on the capital available in their surroundings in order to become untouchable and superior.

The proposition that status-related movements would lead to more intense focus on consumption than identity-related movements, has neither been opposed nor advocated in prior marketing research (e.g. Cody 2012; Schouten 2010; Belk 1988; Solomon 1983) but this is probably because the distinction between the two movements has not been as emphasised as we argue it ought to be. The social-hierarchical dimension of a status transition includes a reconfiguration of capital, which translates more directly into taste consumption (Bourdieu 1984) than a horizontal movement in-between two conflicting identities (see Ahuvia 2005). Outer-directed social status is connected to life chances and perhaps therefore experienced as more urgent than one's inner-directed experience of identity. Also, there seems to be more malign emotions (for example shame) at play in status movements at least when downhill. Important to note; this suggestion does in no way imply that one consumes quantitatively *more*—it can rather be in line with trends of downshifting and lead to *less* consumption as shown by McDonald, Oates, Young and Hwang (2006)—but the engagement in how to consume seems to be more intense.

Given that liquid modernity (Bauman 2001) and its loose social structures forces the middle-class to become increasingly socially mobile, matches and mismatches between identity and status positions ought to become more common and the resulting consumption strategies more sophisticated. This in turn calls for further research and theorisation, not least for consumer policy making aiming to protect vulnerable consumers who are struggling with identity and status incongruence due to shifting economic conditions. The three themes of distinction we put forward here partly overlap with, but are still different from, the various themes we have seen in prior consumer identity or status consumption research. For example, our framework of hierarchy integrated with non-hierarchy is not readily corresponding with Coskuner-Balli and Thompson's (2013) "structural mismatches". Instead, our investigation takes departure in both vertical and horizontal frameworks where consumers are influenced by both the non-hierarchical *and* the hierarchical dimension of social life. For future academic research it would then be of utmost interest to further explore and identify the difference in consumption resulting from status or identity change. Could, for example, the consumer's configuration of Bourdieu's forms of capital have a meddling influence in experiences of incongruence? What about the nature of the social fields consumers leave and enter? We welcome more research that explores these issues in detail.

For marketing practitioners our findings bear consequences for analyses of consumption patterns and market communication. In a society where status hierarchies are increasingly dynamic and complex, consumers will continuously struggle with understanding and navigating both existing status hierarchies and available identity positions. Marketers then need to understand these social dimensions as they directly influence consumers' consumption strategies,

and hence what market offerings they might respond to. What is up, down, and sideways to the consumers and how does the brand best communicate with each position? Answers to such questions may make out a key to unlocking both the intensifying and the diminishing consumer engagement in this confusing liquid modernity we allegedly are privileged (or doomed?) to live in.

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FIGURE 1

Type of Distinction →	Radical	Assimilated	Lingering
Characteristic ↓			
Main movement in Status-Identity Incongruence.	Vertical and Horizontal: Adapting status and identity dialectically	Vertical: Adapting identity to desired status position	Horizontal: Adapting status position to lived identity
How identity-status incongruence in liquidity is managed	Elaboration with relativity of capital by creating a <i>nonclassifiable</i> social position	Gathering capital in social surrounding to fit into preset social status conditions	Letting social surroundings pass by until fit with perception of self
Type of Consumption strategy	Intense focus on consumption; <i>untouchability</i> through a distinct identity theme in consumer culture	Intense focus on consumption: <i>chameleonization</i>	Subdued focus on consumption: <i>invisibility</i>
Defining characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conspicuous uniqueness in style to be non-comparable with potential competitors - Selection of social surrounding inferior in certain capital and enhancing certain forms of capital to stay superior 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Consumer assimilation to blend into new social context - Downplaying certain forms of capital, and enhancing others, in order to fit in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Postponing symbolic consumption - Surveying opportunities for entering potential social spheres matching identity

TABLE 1
PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Site	Occupation	Education	Family Status	Type of Distinction
Anders	36	M	Swe	Creative director	BA	Living with girlfriend	Radical
Anna	38	F	Swe	Project manager	BA	Married, two children	Not liminal
Betina	30	F	Swe	Practicing physician, temporarily home with children	Medical doctor	Married, two children	Not liminal
Cathryn	31	F	US	Personal assistant, home with kids	MS	Married, two children	Lingering
Cecilia	39	F	Swe	Communication consultant, home with kids	MS	Married, two children	Assimilated
Christine	40	F	US	Teacher	MS	Single	Assimilated
Didem	31	F	Tr	Marketer, home with kids	BA	Married, two children	Assimilated
Ebru	32	F	Tr	Research assistant	PhD	Single	Lingering
Elizabeth	37	F	US	Media producer	BA	Single	Radical
Fatma	47	F	Tr	Assistant Professor	PhD	Married, one teenager	Radical
Göran	39	M	Swe	IT consultant	MS	Girlfriend (not living together)	Assimilated
Helen	29	F	Swe	Pre-school teacher, temporarily home with baby	BA	Married, one child	Not liminal
John	59	M	US	Bartender and marketer	MBA	Single	Assimilated
Kaniye	52	F	Tr	Retired chemist	BA	Married, empty nester	Assimilated
Kajsa	38	F	Swe	Student and practitioner within HR	BA	Single, one child	Lingering
Kemal	30	M	Tr	IT consultant	MS	Single	Assimilated
Korhan	24	M	Tr	Banker	MBA	Married	Assimilated
Liv	33	F	US	City planner	MS	Single	Radical
Louise	47	F	Swe	Professor	MS	Married, two children	Radical
Majken	41	F	Swe	Researcher, natural sciences	PhD	Married, two children	Assimilated
Mathilda	42	F	US	Personal assistant and home with kid	MS	Married, one child	Radical
Margareta	51	F	Swe	Teacher	BA	Married, empty nester	Lingering
Mary	60	F	US	Singer, taking care of handicapped son	MS	Single, empty nester	Radical/ Lingering

Mert	30	M	Tr	Artist	BA	Single	Lingering
Mustafa	55	M	Tr	Family business owner	High school+ college courses	Married, empty nester	Assimilated
Pelin	36	F	Tr	Marketing manager	BA	Single	Lingering
Richard	24	M	US	Student and translator	MS (in progress)	Girlfriend (not living together)	Assimilated
Robert	31	M	US	Salesman and artist	BA	Married	Radical
Sandra	28	F	Swe	Business consultant	BA	Living with boyfriend	Assimilated
Selin	38	F	Tr	Engineer specialist	BA	Married, two children	Assimilated
Serdar	39	M	Tr	Restaurant owner	MBA	Single	Radical
Umut	30	M	Tr	Designer	BA	Living with girlfriend	Lingering
Utku	32	M	Tr	Industrial engineer	MS	Single	Not Liminal
Vickie	35	M	US	Writer and housewife	MS	Married, two children	Not Liminal
William	40	M	US	Teacher	MS	Single, living with roommate	Radical