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Competently Ordinary: New Middle Class Consumers in the Emerging Markets

Although the new middle classes in emerging markets are a matter of significant interest for marketing scholars and managers, there has been little systematic research on their values and preoccupations. This article focuses on new middle class consumers to identify the new, shared socio-ideological sensibilities informed by the recent neoliberal reforms in emerging markets and examines how these sensibilities are actualized in consumption. Through an ethnographic study of fashion consumption in Turkey, the authors explicate three salient new middle class sensibilities, which implicate the mastery of the ordinary in pursuit of connections with people, institutions, and contexts. These sensibilities crystallize into a particular mode of consumption—"formulaic creativity"—which addresses consumers' desire to align with the middle and helps them reconcile the disjuncture between the promises of neoliberalism and the realities of living in unstable societies. The article provides recommendations on product portfolio management, positioning strategies, and marketing mix adaptation decisions.

Keywords: new middle classes, emerging markets, ordinary, formulaic creativity, fashion

The rise of the new middle classes (NMCs) in emerging markets (EMs) has been the subject of significant media, political, and business attention in recent years. The NMC is a professional-managerial segment that emerged from the global neoliberal reforms of the 1980s (Harvey 2005). Attention to the NMCs is closely tied to the contemporary imperative for growth. It is argued that to maintain the current scale of production, an ever-greater scale of consumption is required, and future demand rests with the NMCs in EMs (Dobbs 2012; Sheth 2011). Thus, much of the interest has been centered on calculating the NMCs' size and purchasing power. Analysts estimate that there are 600 million to 2 billion NMC consumers, with spending power expected to reach US$20 billion by 2025 (Dobbs 2012; Sheth 2011). Although the NMCs do not constitute a statistical majority, commentators observe that for much of the population in EMs, "middle class" has become a powerful category for self-identification and evokes the vision of a comfortable life amid continuing economic flux, political transformation, and social restructuring (Yueh 2013; see also Heiman, Leichty, and Freeman 2012).

Despite the visibility of the NMCs in the debates on the future of business, little work systematically discusses them (e.g., D'Andrea, Marcotte, and Morrison 2010; Gadiesh, Leung, and Vestring 2007; Ustuner and Holt 2010). More-over, there is a lack of focused research on middle classes in marketing (e.g., Cunningham, Moore, and Cunningham 1974; Griffin and Sturdivant 1974). Much of the existing literature intersects in various aspects with the middle classes without explicitly conceptualizing "middle class" as a social category (e.g., Arsel and Bean 2013; Commuri 2009; Moiso, Arnould, and Gentry 2013). Part of the problem is the elusive nature of the category. Historically, it is a social stratum that includes various socioeconomic positions, some of which differ dramatically, such as a farmer and a bureaucrat or an entrepreneur and a professor (e.g., Mills 1951; Schielke 2012). Thus, traditionally, the definitional class boundaries are set around education, income, occupation, culture, and comparisons across strata (e.g., Martineau 1958; Ustuner and Holt 2010). In EMs, the radical economic and sociocultural changes of the past decades have muddled these traditional class descriptors (Leichty 2003; Li 2010). Recent news reports have suggested that the middle stratum in EMs is defined by a haze of contrasting career paths, multifarious income sources, and contradictory consumption patterns (Yueh 2013). Furthermore, current approaches to studying class are premised on socioeconomic developments in the West and do not account for particularities of class formation under the conditions of neoliberal reforms in EMs (Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 2012). Therefore, they fail to capture classed consumption fully (Ustuner and Holt 2010), leaving the complexities of the NMCs' values, ideals, and preoccupations undertheorized.

The difficulties in defining "middle class" notwithstanding, we submit that an analytic focus on the NMCs is necessary to develop greater conceptual and empirical insight in relation to marketing in EMs. A careful examina-

tion of the NMCs is required not only because they constitute a sizable percentage of the consuming population but also because they are influential in shaping consumer demand through their strong representation in media and dominance of the public sphere. They are said to represent and promote the definitions and shifts in what constitutes "proper," "normal," "a must have," and "the good life" (e.g., Brosius 2010; Fernandes 2006). In this research, we study NMC consumers to identify the new, shared socio-ideological sensibilities informed by the recent neoliberal reforms in EMs and examine how these sensibilities are actualized through consumption. In doing so, we contribute to the existing literature on classed consumption and EMs in three ways. First, we shed much-needed light on what is "new" in the NMCs by relating the demands of neoliberal markets to traditional middle class values. We explicate three salient sensibilities: "Best Self Inc.," "i-Average," and "(Un)Confident Cosmopolitan." Defining these sensibilities enables us to examine what the NMCs are like, as opposed to what they lack and aspire to in consumption. Second, we identify an overlooked consumption pattern among the NMCs: the alignment with the "middle." Existing studies on EMs focus on status consumption and emulation patterns (e.g., D'Andrea, Marcotte, and Morrison 2010; Ustuner and Holt 2010). We advance this research by describing how consumers assimilate one another into "people like us" and imagine the middle as a site of normality and comfort. Third, by focusing on how alignment is achieved, we identify a particular NMC mode of consumption—"formulaic creativity"—which entails working with a standard set of products and rules to produce individualized and competent, yet ordinary, outcomes. Formulaic creativity helps reconcile the disjuncture between the promises of neoliberalism and the realities of living in unstable societies. We contend that this mode has been largely unexplored in the existing literature on creative and resistive approaches to consumption (e.g., Arsel and Thompson 2011; Holt 2002; McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013) because it is rooted in EMs' histories and experiences of structural transformation.

The article is organized as follows. First, we review the work in history and sociology of middle classes in the West and discuss the prevailing conceptualizations of middle class consumption in marketing. We also offer a review of the anthropological research of the middle classes in EMs. The juxtaposition of two literature streams is an effective way to highlight different perspectives in studying middle classes and provides an expansive view of the complex issues around conceptualizing middle classes. In the next section, we outline the research setting, method, and analytic procedures employed in the study. Then, we provide a detailed account of the findings and discuss the theoretical contributions and managerial implications of our study. In the final section, we consider the limitations and point to further research directions.

Conceptual Background

Middle Class and Consumption in the West

The term "new middle class" was first used in the 1950s to draw attention to the emergence of a new stratum, distinct from the middle class traditionally represented by shopkeepers, small entrepreneurs, and farmers (López and Weinstein 2012). In his seminal *White Collar: The American Middle Classes*, Mills (1951) conceptualizes nonmanual, wage-earning technical and managerial workers as representatives of the new postwar, more-egalitarian American society. For Mills, the emergence of this stratum was rooted in three shifts: the transformation of occupational structure associated with the rise of corporate capitalism, the adoption of state policies aimed to democratize prosperity, and the growth of mass consumption (see also L. Cohen 2004). Importantly, what defined this new class was not only employment but also a distinct "social character" (Riesman 1950; Whyte 1956). In his classic text, *The Lonely Crowd*, Riesman (1950) observes a development of a new "other-directed" character, defined by orientation toward peers as opposed to family and church; a flexible approach to work, play, and politics; and compliance with social expectations. Although these sensibilities were indispensable to the bureaucratized corporations that came to dominate postwar America, the increasing "entrapment" in hierarchies of work meant that people sought fulfillment and upward mobility outside the job, primarily in consumption (Riesman 1950). As L. Cohen (2004, p. 295) explains, ownership of a suburban house, household equipment, and an automobile enabled Americans of varying economic circumstances to claim the middle status. The set of goods, along with access to education and leisure activities, constituted a definitive "standard" of a middle class life (López and Weinstein 2012). Marketers and mass media were viewed as primary agents in promoting middle-ness as attainment of this material standard rather than a genuine social, political, and cultural parity and equality of opportunities (L. Cohen 2004; Galbraith 1958). For critics, proselytizing such an idea of middle-ness amounted to programming people to buy into superfluous desires and turning them into cultural dupes (Packard 1957; see also Holt 2002). Yet the majority of Americans not only self-identified as middle class but also subscribed to values rooted in middle class history, such as individualism and hard work, rationalism and technological progress, and initiative and free enterprise (L. Cohen 2004). These values stood for an opportunity to move up, thus entailing material gain, satisfaction in life, and self-improvement.

Although marketers welcomed the mass aspirations for upward mobility, they regarded overidentification with the middle as problematic, raising concerns about the viability of selling to all. As early as 1956, in a *Journal of Marketing* article, Smith highlighted the risks of head-on competition that mass marketing entailed and called for recognizing individual differences. In 1958, Martineau further challenged the existence of one market and an "average consumer" by arguing for persistence of social hierarchy in consumption. Using the Warnerian stratification system,

Martineau identifies classed purchase preferences and attitudes. Subsequent research has examined differences between groups to segment the market and predict demand (e.g., Coleman, Rainwater, and McClelland 1978; Mathews and Slocum 1969). Scholars note that middle classes emulate upper-class consumption styles to distinguish themselves from the lower classes. In the 1970s, countercultural movements, fragmentation of labor, and economic recession pushed marketers to pursue segmentation beyond class (Coleman 1983). To secure growth, marketers aimed to take advantage of flexible manufacturing and differentiate their offerings through customization. Lifestyle, age, gender, and ethnicity became key categories through which to partition the market (Coleman 1983; Plummer 1974). A dynamic approach to market along with the development of sophisticated analytic techniques rendered class-based segmentation static, cumbersome, and nondescriptive (Coleman 1983). Catchall use of the term "middle class" as synonymous with American society became hollow; various lifestyle clusters superseded this once-dominant identity category.

Research in classed consumption was reinvigorated by the introduction of Bourdieu's (1984) cultural class analysis. Holt (1997, 1998) argues that blurring of systematic distinctions under the advanced capitalism did not mean disappearance of class divisions; instead, as class structures become relatively settled, distinctions become subtler. Drawing on Bourdieu, Holt posits that in the United States, distinctions play out in consumption practices. Such practices are guided by taste, an embodied aesthetic disposition arising from one's social origin and education (Bourdieu 1984). In consumer research, several studies examine taste dynamics and show how taste is implicated in reproduction of class, serves as an agent for social mobility, and structures consumption (e.g., Arsel and Bean 2013; Holt and Thompson 2004; McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013; Moisio, Arnould, and Gentry 2013). This research offers a nuanced understanding of differences in consumption by emphasizing culture as a key domain in which class hierarchies are reflected, asserted, and contested. In doing so, these studies tend to underemphasize the political-economic ideologies and changes thereof that shape taste. The analytic focus rests on taste dynamics within one middle class faction or between upper and lower factions, thus leaving "middle class," as a social category, undertheorized.

Undertheorization notwithstanding, the "middle" is a critical notion in studies of consumer identity projects and consumption communities (Arnould and Thompson 2005). First, the consumer quest for a sense of self is often set within a middle class milieu. For example, Thompson and Haytko (1997) examine how consumers use market resources to negotiate personal sovereignty and construct identities while navigating countervailing cultural narratives from dream to practicality, from autonomy to belonging, and from resistance to conformity. In his re-inquiry, Murray (2002) points out that such pursuit and the cultural tensions therein invoke middle class sensibilities. The emphasis on creative autonomy, eclecticism, and stylistic flexibility is bound to the middle class preoccupation with

uniqueness, pragmatism, and adaptability. Similarly, other studies have indicated that identity narratives are grounded in middle class ideas about individuality as authentic self, success through personal choice, and self-actualization by following one's dreams (e.g., Holt and Thompson 2004; Moisio, Arnould, and Gentry 2013). Second, research on consumption communities has shown that consumers forge affiliations by defining themselves in reaction to the dominant middle class sensibilities (Arnould and Thompson 2005). For example, in their study of hipster subculture, Arsel and Thompson (2011, p. 794) reveal that members are driven by the urgency to escape the "middle class, suburbanite lifestyles" and maintain reflexive distance from the masses. This sense of urgency and desire to escape are rooted in the cultural history of American middle classes: the idea of middle-ness, framed by the enduring myths of organization men, monochromic culture of suburbia, and docile consumerism (L. Cohen 2004; Hale 2011). In consumption community research, a vision of the middle as masses of people whose tastes are largely unreflexive, unremarkable, and driven by an anxiety to keep up appearances is pivotal to conceptualizing subcultures and exploring consumer resistance (see Arnould and Thompson 2005).

Overall, social historians have posited that understanding of class structure, specifically the middle classes, is embedded in political-economic ideologies and historical sociocultural conditions. A slew of marketing studies have demonstrated that middle class consumption implicates the local history of the middle stratum. Thus, as Ustuner and Holt (2010) note, the existing conceptualizations of classed consumption might not capture the particularities of taste dynamics in EMs. In their study of consumption across factions of upper-middle class Turkish women, Ustuner and Holt (2010) find two localized patterns of emulation: orientation to the West or to the lifestyles of Turkish elites. Although these findings confirm emulation as a central aspect of middle class consumption, they also highlight that cultural context shapes emulation patterns. However, Ustuner and Holt's (2010) study relies on the prevailing understanding of the middle that assumes a relatively stabilized social structure and fairly defined class boundaries. Sandikci and Ger's (2010) analysis throws this assumption into relief. Their examination of fashion practices of urban Turkish covered women reveals two competing taste structures, Islamist and secular. The existence of multiple taste structures suggests that social boundaries are in flux and being negotiated. If indeed this is the case in Turkey and other EMs, understanding what the "middle" is and what defines EM middle classes becomes crucial for marketing in these countries. Recent research in anthropology of class in EMs provides some pertinent insights.

NMCs in EMs

In anthropology, the NMCs have been a subject of sustained scholarly interest since the mid-1990s, in the wake of ethnographic examinations of globalization processes and concomitant sociocultural transformations (Appadurai 1996). Scholars have studied the making of the NMCs by focusing on different aspects of modernization and global

influences, including urbanization (e.g., Zhang 2010), consumption (e.g., O'Dougherty 2002), education (e.g., Rutz and Balkan 2009), and identity politics (e.g., Fernandes 2006). The studies find that with reforms, social fault lines and processes of exclusion have become salient and overtly implicated in the narratives about urbanization, material wealth, and everyday lives. Geographically, this research spans from Brazil to Turkey, Eastern Europe, India, and China. Although there are variations in the NMCs across EMs, studies have indicated similarities in a representational profile: a typical member of an NMC is a well-educated urbanite employed by a private enterprise in the services sector. In addition, members of the NMC share views about society that are different from other groups in their countries. They are said to believe in meritocracy, champion self-reliance, and express confidence with regard to the West (Brosius 2010; S. Cohen 2004; De Koning 2009; Saavala 2010).

Scholars explain the striking resonances among the NMCs with reference to the common socioeconomic and historical conditions of their formation (Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 2012). Specifically, the NMC formation is defined by the neoliberal reforms under way in many EMs since the 1980s. The core of the reforms was broad-scale privatization and removal of trade barriers, which set the conditions for private business growth and promoted accumulation of wealth as a desired outcome. The images of entrepreneurs, their lifestyles, and their consumption became the visual embodiment of promises and success of the reforms (Fernandes 2006). However, it is the growth of new opportunities for corporate employment rather than entrepreneurship that became a constitutive factor in the formation of the NMCs (Fehervary 2013; Fernandes 2006; Li 2010). The transition from a largely state-run to a market economy created jobs that demanded educated workers. In many EMs, early reform years saw an exodus of labor force from state enterprises and government institutions, a shift in skill sets, and job mobility between industries (Patico 2008; Schielke 2012). Scholars emphasize that the "new" of the NMCs does not solely refer to upward mobility. Rather, it denotes a process of formation of a distinct group within the existing middle stratum who benefited from and identifies with the success of economic restructuring and, as such, shares a set of values and interests (De Koning 2009; Fernandes 2006). Market reforms facilitated access to goods that were previously restricted by the state in many EMs. This newfound access, coupled with increased exposure to Western lifestyles, translated into a shift in social identification within the professional-managerial segment from occupation to ownership of goods and property (e.g., Brosius 2010; O'Dougherty 2002; Patico 2008).

To be sure, the rise of middle classes always derives from macroeconomic changes (Mills 1951; see also López and Weinstein 2012). For example, the postwar turn to industrial capitalism in Turkey implicated a shift in the core of the middle from technocrats to public sector employees and merchants. The latter were then replaced by a new cohort of business professionals formed amid the 1980s neoliberal restructuring (Keyder 1987). What is notable about the recent macroeconomic transformation in Turkey and other EMs is the unique nature of the reforms. The neoliberal restructuring in EMs is characterized by unprecedented speed and scale and differs from the reforms in the West in both degree and nature of state intervention in the market (Harvey 2005; Ong 2006). Recognition of the historicity of the NMCs has two implications. First, the unique formation conditions impart correspondingly unique socio-ideological sensibilities on the NMCs while shaping class-specific practices across EMs in similar ways (Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 2012). The NMCs embrace consumerism, relate to the key premises of neoliberalism—competitiveness, individualism, and global integration—and adopt an explicitly global frame with which to evaluate individual and societal changes. The NMC subjectivity—dreams, projects, expectations, and values—revolves around the ethos of autonomy and accomplishment, adaptability to life circumstances, and participation in the world (S. Cohen 2004; De Koning 2009; Leichty 2003; O'Dougherty 2002; Ren 2013). Second, the prevalent (Western-centric) models of class provide a limited understanding of the NMCs because such models assume particular trajectories of development and patterns of class formation (Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 2012). Compared with the gradual evolution of social classes in the West, the formation of the NMCs has taken place on a fast track in dramatically restructuring political-economic environments (López and Weinstein 2012). Given the formative discrepancies, Western models seem ill-fitted to account for the NMCs. The description of a typical NMC member as a well-educated, professionally employed urbanite, while accurate, glosses over the heterogeneity of the NMCs and their differences from traditional middle classes.

To explain, the state's role in the reforms created a politically distributed inequality in employment opportunities. People with more political capital have been enjoying greater privileges in an otherwise market-oriented economy (Zhang 2010). In addition, rapid restructuring of the labor market has created significant income variance within a single occupation (e.g., between teachers of private and public schools), resulting in occupational desegregation (Li 2010). Furthermore, the explosion of private education has led to an inflation of credentials. In EMs, "good education" tends to be measured by years of schooling and command of English and not necessarily by program quality (Rutz and Balkan 2009). Such measures undermine cultural capital categorizations premised on a university degree. Finally, urban migration has been driven by social capital, kinship, and religious and ideological affiliations (e.g., Zhang 2010), in contrast to the West, where educational attainment has been a driver of urbanization (L. Cohen 2004). In addition, historically, cities in EMs are not strictly class-segregated due to the presence of squatters and dependence on the working poor for domestic work. Thus, in EMs, the term "urbanite" exhibits a more diverse sociocultural composition than in the West (Fernandes 2006). In summary, political and social capital–based advantages suggest that the descriptors of the NMCs are not quite aligned with those of a generalized (Western) middle class.

The diversity of the NMCs raises questions regarding the dominant representation of its members as educated, employed professionals who enjoy comfortable consumerist lifestyles (e.g., Yueh 2013). Fernandes (2006) explains that such representation prevails because it provides a normative standard. For governments and proponents of reforms, this image is an ideal, demonstrable result of social restructuring implicated in economic policies. For people in the amorphous middle stratum and the working classes, this image stands for an existing, concrete possibility for social advancement (S. Cohen 2004; Zhang 2010). In light of this reality, anthropologists take the diversity of the NMCs as a point of analytic interest. The research focus shifts from boundaries (i.e., exploring who is middle class and how people in the middle class differ from those in the lower and upper classes) to the center of this new social formation. Scholars aim to understand how shared interests are created and maintained within the transforming social space and what unites people in a locally and transnationally recognizable group (Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 2012).With this focus in mind, several studies have examined how neoliberal ideologies are reproduced and mediated through cultural histories and local social relations (S. Cohen 2004; Li 2010; Ren 2013). Another body of research explores how a sense of middle-ness is formed and what constitutes a normative middle. Specifically, studies investigate sentiments about morality, issues of social recognition, and lay-normative concerns with practices, beliefs, and ways of life (Leichty 2003; O'Dougherty 2002; Saavala 2012; Zhang 2010). The final group of studies traces subjective experiences of middleness within the wider frame of middle classes and provides accounts of the emic preoccupation with middle class lifestyles, spaces, sentiments, careers, and consumption (De Koning 2009; Fehervary 2011; Patico 2008). Anthropological studies regard the NMCs as a social formation that reflects the historically generated political-economic conditions and trace the neoliberal logic in the ways middle class–ness is achieved.

Summary

The review of multidisciplinary research suggests two approaches to studying middle classes. Current research in marketing examines the dynamics of taste-based distinctions and treats the middle as average, in opposition to status- and identity-defining tastes, preferences, and practices. Anthropological research on EMs explores how major political-economic transformations and labor market reforms shape an NMC formation and, in particular, how shifts in social policies, practices of governance, and experiences of professional workers define middle classes. This research tends to conceptualize the middle as a social identification with "people like us" in economic, socio-ideological terms and a location in an imagined social center—a site of normality, comfort, and respectability (Brosius 2010; Fehervary 2013).

In this study, we build on these literature streams to investigate how the NMC-ness plays out in consumption. The anthropological approach has offered a temporally and politically situated understanding of the middle to describe socio-historical experiences of middle-ness, whereas we are interested in examining the new sensibilities of the NMCs. This focus echoes the work of social historians (L. Cohen 2004; Mills 1956; Reisman 1950; Whyte 1956) who related the middle classes' new sensibilities to economic changes and traditional middle class values. Such an analytic move brings similarities into focus, thereby affording a more coherent view of heterogeneous middling sorts (López and Weinstein 2012). We have yet to find a study in marketing that identifies the NMCs' sensibilities, explicates how they are implicated in consumption, and offers marketers an actionable understanding of the middle in EMs.

Context and Methodology

In this study, we focused on the NMC consumers in Turkey, a fast-growing EM. As the world's 17th-largest economy (World Bank 2012), with a population of 75 million, Turkey is an attractive EM. In many respects, it is a typical EM. Until the 1980s, Turkey's development policy was based on the import-substitution model; the economy relied on domestically oriented manufacturing and agricultural businesses. This model failed to provide sustainable growth, and in the 1980s, Turkey's development strategy changed. Market liberalization and increase in international trade and foreign investments stimulated growth (Yeldan 1995). The apparel industry emerged as a key engine of economy. Low labor and material costs helped Turkish firms become major subcontractors of global brands. By 2005, Turkey became the world's second-largest clothing exporter, following China (Tokatli and Kizilgun 2009). The adoption of neoliberal policies has resulted in a rapid expansion of service and consumer goods sectors. In the 1990s, Turkish consumers found themselves bombarded with foreign products they had not heard of before or could have only purchased from the black market. Shopping malls, five-star hotels, gated communities, and foreign cuisine restaurants proliferated in Istanbul and other cities. With the privatization of media, the nature and scope of advertising dramatically changed. An outcome of these events has been the emergence of a group of young urban professionals who view consumption as a measure of success and happiness (Ayata 2002).

Our empirical context is fashion consumption. Considerable scholarship has demonstrated that fashion constitutes a critical field in which social class is both expressed and experienced (for a review, see Wilson 2003). Historically, sumptuary laws regulated attire according to social position (Wilson 2003). In modern times, fashion choices have become a means to signal status (Simmel [1904] 1957; Veblen [1899] 1970). For Simmel ([1904] 1957), "adornment practices" are about distinction and identification. Beyond communicating a class position, fashion practices are constitutive of a middle class (McRobbie 2004; Murray 2002). Weber (1946, p. 188) observes that in the United States, "strict submission to the fashion" was crucial to claims of "belonging to 'society'" and "above all" in determining one's "employment chances, social intercourse, and marriage arrangements." Fashion manifests aspects of middle class–ness and serves as a site where class anxieties, longings, and values are articulated (Murray 2002; Ustuner

and Holt 2010). In Turkey, the importance of fashion in the creation of the NMCs is amplified by the fact that the apparel industry was an early focus of neoliberal restructuring, which in turn facilitated en masse arrival of fashion brands. Thus, fashionable attire not only signals identification with the ethos of the reforms but also casts fashionable people as a vanguard of a fast-changing country.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews conducted from 2011 to 2013 in Ankara. We recruited participants drawing on Fernandes's (2006, p. xxxiv) conceptual definition of NMCs. We purposefully selected young urban professionals who self-identified as middle class, described their income as "comfortable," held a college degree, spoke English, and had (or aspired to) a corporate career. We used personal networks to access the initial group. We had informal conversations about fashion consumption with four lead informants (McCracken 1988). Through these conversations, we aimed to refine the interview guide that we compiled drawing on existing literature and observations of fashion consumption. Through snowball sampling, we interviewed 28 people, ranging in age from 23 to 47 years, the majority of whom were female. For a profile of the informants, see Table 1.

The interviews took place at informants' homes, offices, or cafés and lasted up to two hours. We began the interview with a grand tour question (McCracken 1988), asking informants to tell us about their views of fashion and consumption. We inquired about their fashion and shopping practices and invited them to "walk" us through their wardrobes and favorite items. To probe further, we conducted additional interviews with some informants and asked them to describe their fashion sources and the processes of putting together daily outfits. Throughout the ethnographic engagement, we took systematic field notes, observed informants in different situations, and shared our reflections of the study.

Analysis followed the methodological logic of grounded theory (Glaser 1998). Each researcher independently read interview transcripts and observation notes and identified analytic themes. We then organized the emergent themes into categories and tried to detect the commonalities across the data. Our goal was to determine the salient patterns and relate them to the socio-ideological sensibilities that these patterns articulate. In this process, we moved back and forth between the existing theorizations of middle classes and our data set. This iterative mode of analysis is based on the idea that a culturally shared system of meanings and beliefs is reflected in individual narratives and practices (e.g., Murray 2002). By maintaining theoretical candor, being reflexive about the research processes, and conducting iterative analysis, we aimed to produce findings that can be transferred to similar contexts. Although our study was conducted in a single country setting, we believe that theoretical conclusions can be extended to other EMs with similar historical and socioeconomic conditions.

Findings

In this section, we describe three salient socio-ideological sensibilities: Self-Made Inc., i-Average, and (Un)Confident Cosmopolitan. These sensibilities are analytic constructs,

TABLE 1
Informant Profile

No.	Name	Age (Years)	Gender	Education	Occupation
1	Ali	36	Male	M.B.A.	Project manager
2	Arzu	27	Female	B.A.	Export manager
3	Asli	35	Female	B.A.	Lawyer
4	Begum	23	Female	B.A.	Public relations assistant
5	Beril	34	Female	M.B.A.	Brand manager
6	Cem	33	Male	M.B.A.	Civil engineer
7	Ceren	32	Female	B.A.	Accountant
8	Demet	39	Female	B.A.	Housewife
9	Derya	28	Female	B.A.	Project manager
10	Duygu	29	Female	B.A.	Event organizer
11	Elif	35	Female	B.A.	Project manager
12	Filiz	47	Female	High school	Café owner
13	Funda	38	Female	B.A.	Quality control engineer
14	Gozde	29	Female	M.B.A.	Banker
15	Hande	27	Female	B.A.	Auditor
16	Itir	26	Female	B.A.	Banker
17	Lale	36	Female	B.A.	Dietician
18	Nur	37	Female	B.A.	Pharmacist
19	Omer	25	Male	B.A.	Software engineer
20	Oya	39	Female	B.A.	Accountant
21	Pinar	27	Female	B.A.	Dentist
22	Selin	29	Female	B.A.	Banker
23	Serap	31	Female	B.A.	Architect
24	Serdar	29	Male	B.A.	Software engineer
25	Suheyla	42	Female	MMed	Medical doctor
26	Umut	26	Male	B.A.	Banker
27	Yasin	36	Male	B.A.	Lawyer
28	Zehra	43	Female	Ph.D	Instructor

Notes: M.B.A. = Master of Business Administration degree, B.A. = Bachelor of Arts degree, MMed = Master of Medicine degree, Ph.D = Doctorate of Philosophy degree.

abstracted iteratively by drawing on interviews, field notes, and existing literature. Our account relates the "new" of the NMCs to the neoliberal restructuring and foregrounds continuities and discontinuities with regard to traditional middle class values. From the data, the sensibilities emerge as tendencies rather than regularities. This is consistent with the view of structural influences in previous research (e.g., Holt and Thompson 2004; Murray 2002). We contend that, because of their situated-ness within the ongoing reforms, the sensibilities are characterized by contradictions and ambiguities, as our terms imply. In the account, we attempt to stay close to the data to convey what the NMC sensibilities are like. Still, the textual nature of exposition precludes us from reflecting the narratives' emotional tone and mood. To foreground the account, it is necessary to note that the informants talked matter-of-factly and meticulously about their consumption, and their narratives were often concerned with efficiency and referred to common sense.

Best Self Inc.

The neoliberal reforms have implicated a restructuring and even dismantling of traditional state and social institutions

(Harvey 2005). Thus, scholars argue, the reforms have called for a particular subjectivity—that of a reflexive manager of one's abilities and alliances (Gershon 2011; Ong 2006). Such subjectivity is premised on the view of an individual as "a collection of assets that must be continually invested in, nurtured, managed, and developed" (Martin 2000, p. 582, cited in Gershon 2011). This view represents a shift from self as an innate property to self as composed of competencies to be actively regulated to connect to people, institutions, and contexts (Gershon 2011). The life experiences of Arzu—a 27-year-old graduate of a top private university (Bilkent) who works as an export manager at a Turkish olive oil company—are illustrative of this neoliberal subjectivity. A typical graduate with a degree in business administration, she wanted to work for a multinational company and attended many corporate trainee camps and interviews. After trying for a year, Arzu found a position at a midsize local company, which turned out to be highly satisfying. The job provides a lucrative compensation package and the lifestyle she had hoped for. Arzu enjoys eating out, shopping, doing Pilates, and traveling. She regards her lifestyle as a personal accomplishment. The ethos of "self-made" is a traditional basis of middle class self-worth (see López and Weinstein 2011; Mills 1951). What is notable in Arzu's case is that she does not attribute her success to personality traits such as perseverance, intrepidity, or optimism but, instead, to competencies. These include her command of English, communication skills, and "self-respect," stemming from being a "Bilkent-er." For Arzu, "Bilkent" meant an emersion in a culture of fashion, "self-care," and "style." In her words, at Bilkent, everybody "works hard on themselves," learning to craft "who they are." This sentiment resonates with the notion of self-as-enterprise, a pervasive aspect of the neoliberal subjectivity, which entails the conduct of everyday existence in a way that maximizes one's greatest asset—oneself—and ensures one's marketability (Gershon 2011; Ren 2013). Self-as-enterprise is also an educational program that requires continuous investment in learning, inspecting, and revising oneself (Gershon 2011; Ren 2013). A scholarship student herself, Arzu underscores that such self-work is not premised on wealth but requires certain skills and abilities:

> Looking good is not directly related to money. If you have money, you can wear brands, but this does not mean you have style. Most people who wear brands don't have style. If you have style that says who you are, brands are not that important. Sure, people can notice the expensive things you buy. But I know many people who spend a lot of money and still you don't notice them. Because having a style is ability. You need to be able to combine colors and forms, and know your fashion. You have to look at things from an aesthetic perspective.

Echoing Arzu, Yasin, a 36-year-old lawyer, adds that "looking fashionable" is not only a "corporate code" but also an asset that enhances "your strengths." That is, a person's fashion style is a strategic instrument to demonstrate his or her competencies and signal valuable attributes (see Murray 2002). Thus, for Yasin, people "shouldn't just sit and do nothing with fashion" but should be "active" in dressing "to professional standards." Indeed, doing fashion "actively" is a shared sentiment. Consistent with middle class culture, our interviewees emphasize the value of personal development and knowledge as a way to remain successful (Bourdieu 1984; López and Weinstein 2012). Adopting a managerial approach, our informants insist on systematic cultivation of fashion knowledge and building expertise through the efficient use of resources to present one's "best self."

Across the interviews, respondents went to great lengths to convey their knowledge of brands, designers, and models and the effort they put into mastering fashion. Many reported spending hours studying fashion blogs and forums about colors, designs, and ways of styling. They also spoke of regularly reading magazines and media reports about celebrities and trends and watching television series, fashion shows, and advertisements. Beyond a daily engagement, such learning extends to specially organized events, such as a shopping trip:

> Before I go abroad, I always study. I check where I can find the brands I like. I plan how to spend the rest of the day after I get off the plane. And the next days. I plan everything weeks ahead. I decide to which store I go, on which day. Where I'll shop for shoes, where I'll shop for dresses. Everything is planned. For example, when I go to New York, I prefer a downtown hotel. Not so expensive, but centrally located. After check-in, I first visit ... Central Park and then I begin my shopping. I like Macy's. I always go there too.

Much like other informants, Suheyla carries out extensive planning and research to find the best options. This overtly managerial approach to shopping and fashion is further evident in the emphasis on "archiving" all the gathered information either digitally or in file folders. For example, Derya collects store catalogs and fashion advertisements and organizes them into thematic folders, such as "evening dresses," "hair styles," and "designers." These "archives" serve as a learning tool and an "inspiration for nice looks." For our informants, "inspiration" is decidedly not copying a commercial image. Rather, as Gozde points out, it is about collecting ideas and "making [one's] combination" by "adding a personal spin, which can look even better than inspiration."

Indeed, "combining" emerged as a common emic term used to describe how fashion is done "actively." We find that combining is a highly regimented practice, whereby certain rules guide the construction of outfits. Serap explains,

> I buy basics from Zara and Mango or Koton [a Turkish fast-fashion retailer]. Plain T-shirts and tops. I like to combine them with big brands. If I wear flashy pants, I prefer an understated top. Or if I wear a top with décolleté, the rest is plain and covered. For accessories, I don't wear a scarf, a necklace, and earrings. Not all together, just one. When I have a plain style, I like to use a flashy accessory.

Like Serap, many informants work with several rules when combining an ensemble. In our data, we identify four common rules. First, the color wheel works as a guide to eliminate "obviously unsuitable" options, such as brown and black together, and provide heuristics, such as "neutral col-

ors go with more colorful." Second, our informants tend to divide their wardrobes into "basic" and "exclusive"—one-of-a-kind pieces that are either designer-made or not locally available. Another distinction is between "classic" and "trendy"; the latter refers to popular items of the season. Then, the rule is to mix two categories in one ensemble. For example, choose a fast-fashion retailer for trendy pieces and a brand name for classic pieces. We define the third rule as "have a staple." A staple refers to a "versatile" item that "can be combined with anything" and/or an item that can "jazz up" a look or a dressing formula, which enables the wearer to construct a winning look quickly every time. Derya's go-to "always classy" formula is "leggings + long top + scarf." Finally, there is the "balance" rule, which calls for moderation in using brands or expensive and conspicuous items in a single outfit. For Ceren, "wearing a combination of Burberry scarf, Burberry handbag, and Burberry boots" is unacceptable. For Nur, pairing a "1.500 TL BCBG dress" with another expensive item is "loading" an ensemble. In all, the rules are rather specific and prescriptive yet commonsensical. They serve to streamline and manage the work of dressing to perform one's "best self." Such a regimented approach actualizes the middle class values of order, practicality, and moderation (see Bourdieu 1984; Leichty 2003; Moskowitz 2004).

Taken together, the meticulous fashion knowledge and regimented nature of creating a look indicate a drive to optimize available resources—money, time, or products. Although our respondents claimed to be financially "comfortable," their accounts suggest an ongoing preoccupation with means, which is often expressed in strategies to extend their wardrobes, such as getting tailor-made outfits and purchasing counterfeit items. Demet's experience illustrates how such strategies work. Demet owns a Burberry bag and a counterfeit version of the same bag in a different color. She explains,

> I liked the color for the season. There is very little difference between them, very difficult to spot. Maybe only if you examine inside.... I like them both. They are very functional. And they are Burberry!... I am really into bags. That's my problem! I love bags and shoes. I want something different every day. I want to wear different things depending on my mood and outfit. Of course, that is not possible. You cannot keep up; there is always something [offered]. But some trendy things are so pretty, it's difficult to resist them.

The quote indicates that Demet regards original and counterfeit items as substitutes that fulfill a similar function: to keep her wardrobe varied and fresh. Examples abound in which informants purchased or tailor-made the same item in variations, thereby creating "collections" of designs or product categories. The respondents talked about collecting sweaters, T-shirts, or shoes, either cumulatively over seasons or purchasing a few of the same item at once. Like Demet, they explained that these "collections" helped them construct different fashionable looks every day. "Collections" hold a promise of almost limitless combinations.

To cope with the vast constructive possibilities of their wardrobes, our informants again employ a managerial approach. To present one's "strength" every day without fail, a person needs to plan ahead and work with contingencies. As Cem explains, he always decides what to wear the following day and "visualizes" two alternatives "from head to toe, ties, shoes, and all." Elif not only plans her outfits for the whole week but also puts "the looks" onto hangers:

> I think about everything. Color harmony is really important. I don't care much about brands, but colors should match. I have days-of-[the]-week hangers. The outfits that I will wear on Monday are on a Monday hanger, and so on. I plan these on Sunday. I've been doing this for [a] couple of years. I ask what I can wear with this skirt or which earrings go well with the green dress. On Sunday, I prepare everything from stockings, to jewelry, bags, and outfits. Then it becomes really easy, you just pick up that day's hanger and you are ready. If there is a weather change, I change the order of days and pick something that is okay. I am happy with this arrangement now.

For informants, in addition to weather, mood and work-related changes are contingencies that also figure in planning what to wear. Ultimately, planning saves time and guarantees success during the morning rush. The adherence to planning is a middle class approach to life, which Mills (1951) argues is rooted in the nature of middle class people's occupations and is based on administrative expertise. The approach echoes the neoliberal subjectivity discussed previously, in which all aspects of life, including finance, health, education, child rearing, and homemaking are informed by the logic of management and integrated within a rigid system to minimize waste, save time, and increase efficiency (Gershon 2011; Ong 2006).

Overall, central to the view of the self as an enterprise is a managerial rationality implicated in the middle class ontology of existence within limits, whether real or imagined. Thus, a mentality of rule and order is a dominant way to achieve efficiency of time, materials, choices, and outcomes. "Combining" emerges as a practice to facilitate effective use of resources, increase productivity and possible permutations, and achieve the goal of one's "best self." Instrumental thinking infuses "combining." Although it is consistent with the middle class ethos, such an approach contradicts fashion practice, in which combining is about serendipitous creation (e.g., Wilson 2003). It also contradicts previous studies, in which combining is viewed as imagination and expression of a metaphysical sentiment (e.g., Holt and Thompson 2004; Marion and Nairn 2011). Managerial rationality ensures consistent outcomes but does not guarantee marketability, which, for our respondents, is premised on "stand[ing] out" among peers. Next, we discuss how concerns for individualization play out in fashion consumption.

i-Average

Anxiety over "not being noticed" is a prominent refrain in our interviews. Many informants spoke of retailers offering "uniform outfits" as well as the associated difficulties of dressing to enhance their strengths. The concern with individualization of appearance can be traced back to several factors. First, under neoliberal flexible conditions of employment, job security has become tenuous (O'Dougherty 2002; Ren 2013). Having lived through rapid transformations and

economic crises, our informants know that work skills can quickly become outdated and jobs can easily disappear; thus, cutthroat competition is a permanent reality. Consequently, they must continuously invest in developing and shaping themselves to fit the valued competencies amid the market's ever-changing demands (McRobbie 2005). Second, the transnational influx of images promoting "the good life" casts individual consumption choices as the route to personal happiness and well-being (Brosius 2010). Indeed, given the seeming ease of access and plentitude of products, in Umut's words, people no longer have an excuse for being "dull" or "ugly." That is, informants believe that to succeed in career and life, one must make strategic consumption choices. Third, the local histories of a closed economy conjure up images of scarcity of goods and living supposedly homogenous lives (see S. Cohen 2004; Patico 2008). For the informants, this specter of the past translates into an urge to "do your own thing" within the limits.

Although the imperative for individualization is recognized and welcomed, realizing it in everyday life is not easy. Contrary to predictions that the neoliberal development would break down social institutions such as religion, family, and marriage and throw people into a free-flow life-making (see Ren 2013), in EMs, normative influences of traditional institutions persist (e.g., Leichty 2003; Saavala 2010). For example, in our data, we observe the continued presence of traditional family roles. Female respondents frequently referred to their fathers, brothers, and partners as arbiters of their styles, and male informants reported seeking advice from their partners and mothers when dressing. That is, a social system with culturally designated authority figures seems to mediate the narratives of individual choice.

Another constraint emanates from the proliferation of consumer goods that informants so keenly appreciate. Cognizant of their economic means, the respondents understand that they "cannot have it all." They are realistic about their "purchasing power." Typical for the middle class, pragmatism permeates their approach to fashion (see Bourdieu 1984; Leichty 2003). Informants often told us that they do not want to "throw money away" on plain apparel or "big brand" seasonal designs. Building their wardrobe is then a complex sequence of decision nodes:

> My wardrobe has a lot of variety. My friends know it. I prefer to spend money when purchasing shoes and bags. If you buy something expensive, it lasts longer. I think Zara and the like have lots of new stuff all the time but [it's] not of quality. So, only "appetizer" pieces should be bought there. For example, T-shirts and casual pieces. I don't prefer Zara shoes because they wear out quickly. At Zara, you can find styles of high heels that are sold at Beymen for 1.000 or 2.000 TL. Zara copies and [sells] them for 150–200 TL. Sometimes I buy such high heels from Zara. But Zara keeps changing styles, and what you buy is quickly out of season. This does not happen with things from Beymen or Vakko [local high-end retailers]. For jeans and pants, I go to Massimo Dutti. They last longer. I like Zara for coats. They are of acceptable quality and value priced. At Beymen, Moncler coats cost around 3.000 TL. Instead of paying this, I can buy a similar coat at Zara. I balance cheap pieces with a Burberry scarf or expensive shoes. I own both expensive and cheap brands.

Aside from the middle class pragmatism, Ceren's account illustrates an alternative way to stay fashionable. Instead of buying new fashions, she suggests that she can have new looks by combining expensive classics with fast-fashion "appetizers." Furthermore, respondents are well aware that "some things" are not targeted at them. Many informants stated that they sometimes shop at upscale stores like Burberry, Gucci, and Louis Vuitton but acknowledged that not all merchandise is "suitable" for them. Serap, a 31-year-old architect, provides an example:

> I follow fashion trends. But my finances are of middle level, so I follow fashion in line with my purchasing power. I like haute couture and fashion changes. Of course, haute couture is well beyond my budget. But some of it addresses us as well. Also, some versions get sold in places like Miss Sixty. So I buy those too. I like neutral colors but also use some colorful things. I like shopping at boutiques. My office is on Bagdat Caddesi so I visit boutiques there. Also some [boutiques] in Nisantasi [both are upmarket neighborhoods in Istanbul]. I almost never go to malls.
>
> Interviewer: Why is that?
>
> I don't like wearing clothes that everybody wears. That's why I like boutiques. I like places where I can find more individualized pieces.

Serap works with upper-class clients and is familiar with lifestyles of the rich. Yet she is reflexive about means and possibilities. Her account further exemplifies the managerial approach: she rations her resources to maximize the desired outcome, an individualized look within limits. Notable in her statement is a reference to an imagined community of "us," those who are only partially "addressed" by high fashion. This sentiment conveys a sense of social solidarity and self-identification with others of "middle level."

Social solidarity extends beyond mere awareness to mediation of fashion choices and practices. Our informants' accounts are peppered with references to "proper," from aesthetic propriety (e.g., "properly tailored," "matching colors") to social norms (e.g., "proper coverage," "appropriate hemline") and social typification (e.g., "age-appropriate," "proper business look"). That is, in daily life, social solidarity is expressed through a notion of propriety, a shared standard of how people want to live, which anchors the middleness of a middle class (Leichty 2003; Moskowitz 2004). As Moskowitz (2004, p. 3) explains, this standard is a qualitative rather than quantitative measure that is "felt or perceived" and socio-historically situated. A slippery entity, the standard emerges at the nexus of cultural ideals and market and is gauged through comparison and association with others of equal standing. As our informant Begum notes, "What is improper today can be trendy tomorrow." The precariousness of "proper" seems to force our informants to become preoccupied with appraising and aligning themselves to their social milieu (cf. Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010; Ustuner and Holt 2010). In their fashion practices, they refrain from wearing "exaggerated designs," "brands head to toe," and "bombshell skirts." However, propriety is not only about choice of products or brands but also about proper conduct—knowing how to "carry" one's clothes and

dressing according to the occasion (see also Leichty 2003). We find that even counterfeit items can be considered proper, if carried well. Finally, propriety is affirmed through peer validation. Our informants systematically consult and seek feedback on their looks. Duygu, who frequently exchanges fashion-related e-mails with her female friends, describes her practice:

> Every morning we exchange [e-mails]. We share ideas. Like if there is a new boutique or something is on sale. Or [if] somebody got something new. Because our styles are similar, it is useful. It is six to seven of us and we have been close friends since high school. We also criticize each other a lot. When somebody sends a picture of a combination, we say "yes," it looks good or not. [Or] we say, "No, don't wear these together."

More commonly, the informants seek validation by sharing their outfits and "looks [they] like" through social media such as Facebook, Pinterest, and Instagram. They also use commercial platforms that enable them to create virtual combinations. As Gozde explains:

> There are new sites, Bukombin.com [and] Mecra.com. I always check them. Bukombin lists outfits, shoes, [and] bags. You can pick any and make your combination. I do. Then share [them] on Facebook. My friends also. It is like, you can try this with this, and then it says where you can buy [the items] and at what price. It is really cool, many people use it.

It seems that social media technologies make access to others' opinions easier and faster (Kozinets et al. 2010). As we noted previously, the opinions of closely related others, such as partners or parents, continue to matter. Recent research has shown that with social media, consumers also seek approval from a wider network of social equals (McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013; Scarabato and Fischer 2013). We observe that technologies enable our informants to receive timely, specific feedback on a given fashion inquiry. However, the immediacy and ease of access to others' opinions might become an affective burden. For example, Beliz and Itir regularly post pictures of their outfits on Facebook or Instagram and dare not leave home without getting a "like" for the ensemble. That said, such self-consciousness is not only—as Simmel ([1904] 1957, p. 551) puts it—about "transfer[ring] responsibility for one's taste" to another or fear of "stand[ing] alone in one's action" and becoming "the center of the social spectacle" (Thompson and Haytko 1997, p. 22) but also about an awareness of a necessity to seem like a "team player." In a neoliberal corporate world, employees' marketability rests on their flexibility—the ability to form alliances with and "connect to other people, institutions and contexts" (Gershon 2011, p. 540). For our informants, being able to cooperate with others means not standing out, maintaining parity with peers, and avoiding idiosyncrasies; that is, being "ordinary." Derya's account is illustrative of this consideration:

> I actually just changed jobs. To the first interview, I had to wear a dark gray suit with a cream top and nude low-heeled shoes. The jacket is a bit trendy, so I felt I should tone it down with natural colors.
>
> Interviewer: Why did you feel you had to?

> I wanted to be comfortable and put together. You don't want to look too different, like, [for] people [to] say, "Oh God, what is she wearing," or "She cannot put together an outfit," or "How weird she dresses." It's a midsize company. You want to look attractive but not too exaggerated. You definitely should not be frumpy.... [You should] look proper to the others. Like you know what you are doing. Clean look and harmonious things that fit well together. I don't like flashy; [I like] ordinary things. I add soft touches to be modern, not too formal. I want to say to them, I am competent but not like, "my way or no way."

Although the occasion of a job interview certainly heightens the fear of being a spectacle, throughout the interviews, informants continually referred to "soft touches," "clean lines," "ordinary," "natural colors," "not too exaggerated," "comfortable," and "appropriate." The emphasis on such aesthetic preferences seems to convey not only a desire to fit in with peers but also an alignment with the assumed demands of the corporate world; that is, conforming to a context takes priority over staking a claim to a stylistic distinction (cf. Arsel and Bean 2013).

In addition to the constraining effects of traditional institutions, financial circumstances, and orientation to social equals and work demands, the informants cited the mass-produced nature of goods as a hindrance to individualization. In Turkey, as a result of the neoliberal reforms, a few local and global fast-fashion producers came to dominate the apparel market (Tokatli and Kizilgun 2009). Our informants resent that "all [people] shop from the same places" and complain that although there is "lots of stuff in Zara, Mango, and Koton," it is all the same:

> Ankara is a small city. There are only certain brands. People who are at [a] similar level shop at the same places. Because variety is limited, they end up buying the same outfits. Then, you think, how [can I] make it look different? We need to avoid looking the same while wearing the same [clothes]. So, let's say it is a top. You can wear it with a scarf and it looks different. Or combine it with a piece of jewelry. So you can make the same thing look different. You can easily play with your clothes as if you were playing with Play-Doh.

Selin acknowledges the imperative for individualization, the reality of the mass market notwithstanding. The abundance of choice our informants embrace turns out to be false insofar as the choices are "more of the same." Then, despite the belief that there is no excuse for being "dull" or "ugly," in practice, showing one's "best self" is subject to several constraints. From the perspective of constraints on individualization, the managerial approach to fashion is about not only achieving efficiency but also balancing "stand[ing] out" with being competently "ordinary"—put differently, mastering sameness without giving up individuality. Per Selin, combination rules are means to escape the homogeneity of the market. Likewise, collections of items within one product category help break the "uniformity" of a season's fashion. For example, Derya owns approximately 50 pairs of shoes bought on different occasions. She believes that by "rotating" shoes, she can create a distinct look with the same outfit. Encountering our informants' belief in the power of minor adjustments to differentiate, we cannot help but wonder from where this belief originates

and why such a small change is sufficient. More generally, where does a standard of "proper" in these fashion practices come from? As we discuss next, for the NMCs, a shared sense of acceptability is a refraction of an imagined "global middle" (see S. Cohen 2004; De Koning 2009; Fehervary 2011; Leichty 2003).

(Un)Confident Cosmopolitan

The liberalization policies of EMs have created a path to development that centers on the idea of global integration. The integration is manifested in the flows of capital, people, resources, and goods (Appadurai 1996). This path represents a shift from the previous era, characterized by investment in heavy industries and closed markets. For people living in conditions of austerity and product scarcity, Western brands signified a remote and desired destination yet to be reached (see Brosius 2010; Leichty 2003; Patico 2008). These stories of scarcity are still on our informants' minds, even if they never personally experienced such conditions, and define a baseline for assessing the success of reforms. A case in point is Filiz, who discussed her childhood memory of Converse sneakers. She remembers how she longed for them and the exhilarating joy she felt when a relative brought a pair from abroad. In contrast, today, Converse is as ubiquitous and accessible as "cheese and bread." Materialized in the landscapes of global brands and media, for our informants, "abroad" is now at home (see Brosius 2010; Fernandes 2006). Scholars have noted that as primary beneficiaries of neoliberal reforms, NMCs adopt a cosmopolitan way of viewing the world and assert themselves as a part of it (Brosius 2010; De Koning 2009; Fernandes 2006). With their well-paid corporate jobs, language skills, and spatial mobility, they feel that they are part of a global middle class and connect through metropolitan tastes and lifestyles (Schielke 2012).

For our informants, "global" neither is located in a particular country nor excludes "local." Their sentiments about "global" are consistent with observations in the literature that NMCs view the West as one part of the "global middle," and when they evoke "world standards," they do not refer to a specific place but to a wider imagination (see Brosius 2010; cf. Ustuner and Holt 2010). This imagination implicates the United States, Europe, the Gulf States and Asia, the local elites and expatriates, metropolitan centers and holiday resorts in Turkey, and popular culture and social media. As Schielke (2012, p. 42) states, the "global middle" is a "conglomerate of places and possibilities that surround and influences people's daily life." Indeed, our informants referred to a variety of sources when describing fashion consumption. Commonly cited sources were television shows (e.g., *Sex & the City*, *Yalan Dunya*, *The King of Dramas*, *Avenida Brasil*) and celebrities (e.g., Blake Lively, Beren Saat, Irina Shayk, Haifa Wehbe, Gerard Piqué, Kenan Imirzalioglu). They also follow a variety of personal fashion blogs, such as Kendy Everyday, Blond Salat, Wendy's Lookbook, Ferhan Salih, and Stockholm Streetstyle. Notably, these names and sources culminate into a shared set, constituting a common vernacular and points of reference in daily conversations about fashion, trends,

brands, and rules of dressing. In addition to the feeling that "abroad" is now at home, the sense of a globalized Turkey informs our respondents' cosmopolitan view (see also De Koning 2009; Fernandes 2006). This sense radiates from global success of Turkish designers, writers, sports teams, and companies, as well as events staged in Turkey, such as the World Basketball Championship, the Mercedes-Benz FashionWeek Istanbul, and the World Golf Finals.

However, at times, the sense of a globalized Turkey falls apart. Examples abound in which our informants do not feel like a part of the "global middle" in their daily lives. For example, feelings of exclusion come from a perceived price and product difference. By traveling overseas and being Internet savvy, our informants are knowledgeable of prices and thus report feeling "ripped off" and "stupid" when charged well above the "abroad prices" in local stores. Similarly, they believe that global brands tend to "send poorer quality products to Turkey" and sell last seasons' items. Consider Oya's account:

> They [H&M products] always come later. Designs they sell in Europe are always different. Like spiky boots are popular here now. They were in fashion in London two years ago. Turkey follows at least a year behind. They are last season's products and [are] much more expensive. People who know fashion well don't buy them here. They shop abroad. The rest don't have any idea and pay lots of money.
>
> Interviewer: So people go abroad to shop?
>
> Yes, my friends too. We follow the sales. We get a few days off and go to London. Generally, people know when there are sales. It is sometime in January or May. So you can even book early and get a cheap airline ticket. I'll go next month [January], already booked my flight to London.

This example is not an exception but an instance of a tactic to escape the "less developed" world and the injustices associated with it. Like Oya and Suheyla, many respondents undergo a "humiliating" visa acquisition process to make regular trips to the United States, Europe, United Arab Emirates, Hong Kong, and China. In a way, this tactic is an enactment of the neoliberal reforms' promise that participating in the modern world is possible on an individual basis (Harvey 2005). That is, although our informants travel to join the world in London, Dubai, or Shanghai, "the rest" of Turkey is left behind. Furthermore, this tactic can be interpreted as actualization of a neoliberal subjectivity that calls for adaptability to life circumstances (Gershon 2011; McRobbie 2005). In addition to trips abroad, e-commerce and counterfeit items are common means with which to address Turkey's fashion time lag and keep pace with the world. Some reported purchasing counterfeit items in lieu of new arrivals and argued that counterfeits are available before originals and are of similar quality because originals are submanufactured in Turkey. At the same time, however, informants questioned the status of submanufactured products and told tales of global conspiracy around brands sold in Turkey. Illustrative of such conspiracy is Beril's experience with the Timberland brand:

> Do you think that products sold here for hundreds or thousands of liras are original? The Timberland store in

Ankara, for example, is definitely not selling originals! My friend had a pair of Timberlands she bought in the States, never used. She wanted to exchange [them] for a smaller size. So we went to the store. They [sales people] said, "Sorry, we can't take [them]." We said, "But here ... is the receipt, [the] original box, everything." They said, "We can't exchange [them] because the color of the logo on the sole is orange. If we accept [these], we can't sell them. Our shoes are produced in Turkey and they do not have an orange logo."

Interviewer: Do you think that it is the orange logo that makes a pair of shoes original?

Yes. That's the one that is produced in the U.S.A. That is definitely original. Timberland is an American company and that's the original. But the ones sold here? Like I said, the Timberland shop in Ankara does not sell originals. They are not originals!

Across the interviews, we heard several variations of Beril's story. For example, Cem insisted that his Lacoste T-shirts bought in Turkey fade more quickly than the ones from France, and Oya claimed that brands limit the quantities they sell in Turkey to artificially increase the prices. Indeed, researchers have found similar suspicions of conspiracies in other EMs and link the sense of inferiority implied in such tales to the local histories of closed economies, an ongoing instability, and a deep distrust in local institutions (see Leichty 2003; O'Dougherty 2002; Patico 2008). Thus, the cosmopolitan view of the world that the NMCs strive to embody seems precarious. Because they are able to travel, our informants are acutely aware that despite the rhetoric of global flows, real and imagined boundaries persist (cf. Bardhi, Eckhardt, and Arnould 2012). Within the current geopolitical reality, inclusion in the "global middle" seems to be possible mainly through consumption. Yet for our informants, this possibility seems to be stunted by sociocultural factors and the workings of a global market that is still largely conceived in geographical terms.

Discussion

Despite the interest in the NMCs, little systematic research has extended beyond profiling and describing NMC consumption choices. Our study contributes to this research by unpacking what the "new" in NMCs embodies. We examine the NMCs' socio-ideological sensibilities as related to the neoliberal market and discuss how these sensibilities are actualized in consumption. We describe three salient orientations: Best Self Inc., i-Average, and (Un)Confident Cosmopolitan. Best Self Inc. translates into an overtly managerial approach to fashion that involves planning, rationalizing, and maximizing outcomes in every aspect. I-Average pertains to concerns regarding balancing an imperative for individualization and alignment with the middle. (Un)Confident Cosmopolitan is about a feeling of being part of a global middle while facing a not-quite global reality and the ghosts of the past. Importantly, these sensibilities crystallize into a particular NMC mode of consumption that could be described as formulaic creativity—working with a standard set of products and rules to achieve individualized and com-

petent, yet ordinary outcomes. This mode has been largely unexplored in the existing literature on creative approaches to consumption (e.g., Holt 2002; Holt and Thompson 2004; Marion and Nairn 2011).

The distinctiveness of formulaic creativity may be best illuminated when contrasted with bricolage, a creative consumption mode among middle class consumers in the West (e.g., Arsel and Thompson 2011; McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013; Thompson and Haytko 1997). Bricolage positions consumers as active subjects who engage with heterogeneous and finite resources to assert their individuality and personal sovereignty. The creative process is intuitive, opportunistic, and contingent, often resulting in idiosyncratic outcomes. We find that NMC consumers also actively engage with limited resources; however, they not only seek self-expression and autonomy but also highlight competencies perceived to be in demand in the labor market and signal their alignment with the middle. Their creative process is rational, planned, and regimented. In contrast to making do with ad hoc resources, our informants purposely and methodically build "collections" to efficiently "combine" items in many ways to create novel yet "proper" ensembles. Unlike in bricolage, novelty is more a variation on a theme than a unique creation. To produce variations, informants "rotate" certain items while strictly following rules. They divide their wardrobes into two functional categories: (1) basic, classic staples versus (2) exclusive, trendy statement pieces. The former represents generic building blocks, and the latter is used to finish off the "best self" (i.e., an individualized look). Given such orientation, informants tend to acquire products with a function in mind. A formulaic approach allows for the creation of distinct combinations that can be assembled and reassembled easily, quickly, and consistently. The emphasis on efficiency stands in opposition to the improvisational, inventive, and expressive nature of bricolage (McQuarrie, Miller, and Phillips 2013). Whereas bricoleurs take risks, rework the rules, and subvert products' uses to create nonconformist, expressive, and distinguished looks (Arsel and Thompson 2011), our informants embrace the rules to create individualized looks that signal not only their personal qualities but also their ability to cooperate with others. Bricoleurs find pleasure in mixing and matching a wide array of resources and relish uniqueness of outcomes (Marion and Nairn 2011); in contrast, our informants seem to value the safety of a regimented construction and find comfort in outcomes that are ordinary yet competent. Their repeated references to clothes that are "proper," "comfortable," "normal," "unexaggerated," and "not sticking out" exhibit a preoccupation with the "average."

Our informants' concern with ordinariness seems at odds with their sociodemographic profile and cultural orientation afforded by their relatively privileged position. They are educated, financially comfortable, and well-traveled; they possess sophisticated knowledge of fashion and brands and are reflexive about the market; yet they do not seem too eclectic and/or subversive in their consumption. They are not particularly interested in mixing genres (e.g., McQuarrie, Miller, and Philips 2013), deconstructing social typifi-

cations (e.g., Thompson and Haytko 1997), or engaging in oppositional consumption practices (e.g., Arsel and Thompson 2011). Rather, they work diligently within the shared rules and standard sets of products and are conscious about propriety and alignment with the "middle." We contend that this difference stems from the distinct political-economic, social-cultural conditions and historical experiences that characterize EMs. Specifically, the rapidly and continuously transforming social structure and general upheaval seem to hinder creative-resistive consumption practices as exercised by the middle classes in the West. First, status claims through eclecticism and/or subversion require the existence of clear boundaries and norms. As Bellezza, Gino, and Keinan (2013) demonstrate, dressing against conventions enhances status and competence only when the wearer is viewed as breaking rules deliberately, which in turn entails the existence of established and recognized norms. When boundaries and norms are ambiguous, trespassing becomes not only futile but also risky. Under such conditions, as informants' accounts indicate, to gain status and signal competence, people need to individualize within rules. Second, creatively challenging market-determined meanings and product uses is key to claiming personal sovereignty (e.g., Holt 2002). However, as S. Cohen (2004) and Fehervary (2013) state, in times of socioeconomic changes, adherence to a definitive (normative) set of goods is critical because it serves to cultivate a sense of unity with social peers and mark oneself as a successful participant in a transforming society. Our informants seek a secure place in a new society by embracing the shared standard, which includes a higher education, a corporate career, a command of English, a modern apartment, and a set of goods (e.g., a Volkswagen car, an iPhone, a Louis Vuitton bag, a Samsung television). The standard signals social position; yet it is not merely a status prop but a refraction of socio-ideological sensibilities and indicative of personal qualities demanded by the market (Fehervary 2013; Moskowitz 2004). Furthermore, against tensions between the neoliberal promises of an open world and the realities of continued restrictions on the movement of people and goods, the standard—which may seem restrictive, deterministic, and provincial to an outsider—represents concrete evidence of being part of the "global middle." For our informants, the stakes for not aligning with the global middle are personal and consequential: they could be dismissed as backward, lacking in competence, and unmarketable. Third, creative-resistive consumption is often fueled by a desire to challenge "deadening conformity" and escape the ordinary (Holt 2002, p. 82). However, as Henry (2010) notes, the meaning of "ordinary" depends on local histories; for example, for some Australians, "ordinary" is not a burden or lack but a realistic appraisal of possibilities that uphold the idea of "fair go." Moreover, as Fehervary (2013) and Sandikci and Ger (2010) show, "ordinary" can be positive and even desirable for people who live in a state of "not normal" due to political and socioeconomic turmoil or social stigma. Similarly, for our informants, aspiration to "ordinary," "average," "proper," and ultimately the "middle" seems to be a way to

navigate the never-ending, cataclysmic, and perilous transition "moment" in EMs.

In this study, we show that NMC consumers adopt a distinct mode of consumption—formulaic creativity—to highlight their personal qualities while locating themselves in the middle of a transforming society. What constitutes the average shifts, but the socio-ideological sensibilities that inform it tend to persist (Fehervary 2013; Saavala 2010). Studies of the middle classes in various contexts have emphasized that sensibilities are rooted in specific political-economic conditions and become implicit and even normative within a culture when a social formation is momentarily stabilized (Fehervary 2013; Leichty 2003; Moskowitz 2004; Saavala 2010). Then, the analytic focus in studying middle class consumption moves to either mapping status markers and taste dynamics or patterning along lifestyle, age, gender, and ethnicity. However, major transformations, as observed in the 1950s in the United States (e.g., Mills 1951) and in Eastern Europe in the 1990s (e.g., Fehervary 2013) make the new sensibilities salient. By focusing on the NMCs' sensibilities and relating them to the neoliberal market, our study offers a fresh understanding of the middle as well as novel insights into how the "new" of the NMCs plays out in consumption. Such analytic focus suggests that the sensibilities are not unique to Turkey but could be observed in other EM contexts that share similar historical and socioeconomic conditions.

Managerial Implications

Our study offers several suggestions for marketers trying to enter or continue operating in EMs. First, consumers' emphasis on efficiency, functionality, and rules to achieve a competently ordinary "best self" has implications for product portfolio management. In view of consumers' categorization, we suggest that managers organize their product lines into "basic" and "appetizer"—special, often premium pieces that complement and individualize an ensemble. For example, after near bankruptcy in the mid-2000s, LEGO moved away from a pursuit of specialized, innovative designs and breakout products to focus on developing "basic kits" that could be individualized with supplementary packs consisting of a few specialized pieces. Such a product strategy might enable companies to offer consumers safe, quick, and efficient choices that still meet the demand for individualization. In the fashion industry, managers might consider adopting a kit approach, offering basic building-block products and "collections" along with standout seasonal items. In promoting building-block fashions, utilitarian appeals that emphasize combinations and rules might be as effective as aspirational ones.

Second, the NMC consumers' desire to be a part of the global middle has implications for positioning strategies. Whereas EM companies might prefer to dislodge their brands from a country context, situating them in an imagined transnational space (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008), when marketing in EMs, Western companies might opt for an "average" position in a category. In contrast to the prevailing wisdom, which calls for highlighting differences from competition, the average position would call for an empha-

sis on typicality. Such emphasis tends to cast a sense of trust and comfort onto a brand and signal reliability. A case in point is Foster's Lager, a brand known to hold a secure midmarket position in EMs by standing for a reliable, even default, choice. The NMCs' preference for such heritage brands and trusted manufacturers is often linked to their relative lack of knowledge and market savviness (e.g., D'Andrea, Marcotte, and Morrison 2010). Our study shows that a desire to align with the middle also encourages consumers to opt for the typical choice within a category. We find that even luxury brands such as Louis Vuitton can be regarded as typical. Thus, in EMs, the typical or average might not mean mediocre; brands marketed as average might evoke and benefit from an association with an imagined global middle standard. Indeed, beyond EMs, there seems to be an emerging interest in "ardently ordinary," "blank," and "blendable" aesthetic (K-Hole and Box 1824 2013). Observers have noted that the appeal of this aesthetic speaks to a desire for belonging and "letting go of the need to look distinctive" and signals a new relevance for the "mall brands" such as Adidas, J.C. Penney, Patagonia, Gap, and Levi's (e.g., Duncan 2014). Such a trend suggests that for some brands, positioning as average might be a viable and timely strategy in markets across the world.

Third, our findings add a contingency to the decision to adapt marketing strategy in EMs. The key argument for adaptation is sensitivity to the local context (Jain 1989). However, we find that given the EMs' histories of being located at the periphery and their experiences of ongoing instability, sensitivity to the local context might be misconstrued. Despite the ubiquity of foreign goods, a perceived price or product discrepancy may trigger feelings of discrimination and exclusion. Thus, we encourage marketers to assess the extent to which their target consumers are influenced by memories and prone to read specific instances of adaptation negatively. Although NMC consumers are unlikely to avoid products that appear discriminatory, their negative feelings might jeopardize brands' reputation and performance in the long run. Therefore, marketers should be vigilant about unintended interpretations of the adapted components of the marketing mix.

Moreover, the historical experiences have implications for international new product introduction. Currently, companies use a sequential rollout and typically begin from the West and proceed to the rest of the world. However, global media and access to social media mean that consumers are now exposed to information about new products instantly, regardless of the launch location. We find that the time lag between the information about a new product and its physical availability is interpreted as an instance of discrimination and prompts a series of tactics to overcome the sense of exclusion. Managers should recognize the symbolic reading of the time lag by consumers in EMs and address their concerns by being explicit about the reasons for a delay and communicating a timetable. Furthermore, to curtail counterfeits and pirated products, companies should invest in minimizing the time lag in international product rollout.

Limitations and Further Research

This work is an effort to develop a theoretically grounded and empirically informed understanding of NMC consumers. Because our study is set in one EM, Turkey, more work is needed to understand the complexities of the NMCs. To build a more comprehensive description of NMC sensibilities, researchers should explore the similarities and differences between Turkey and other EMs. Due to the specificities of the empirical context (fashion), the sample is skewed toward women. Future studies should consider other consumption domains, such as food, electronics, housing, and leisure, to direct the analytic focus to a wider population of consumers. Similarly, additional investigations are needed to establish if and how formulaic creativity, as a mode of consumption, is present in other spheres. Furthermore, our research indicates liberal use of counterfeit items. Although the use of counterfeits in EMs is not surprising, it is notable that informants do not necessarily perceive innate differences between originals and counterfeits and treat them as substitutes in certain conditions. Unpacking these conditions can provide novel insights into the phenomenon of counterfeit usage in EMs. Moreover, our findings suggest that informants draw on both global and local brands while aligning themselves with the global middle. Further research is needed to explore why and how certain global and local brands are perceived as constitutive of a definitive "standard" of a middle class life.

An understanding of class is central to comprehending the workings of the markets and consumption across the world. Yet there is a dearth of studies that focus on the middle on its own terms. In the 1950s, Mills (1951) pointed out that the middle stands for the average and "the masses"; thus, as a social category, it remains absent or used as a foil. However, the economic crises of previous years have thrust the Western middle classes into the political, economic, and social limelight and made them a matter of a public concern (Peck 2011). Under the current circumstances, investigations into the middle classes in developed economies would also benefit from a focused approach to the middle. We hope that a temporally and politically situated understanding of the middle generates research into the effects of political-economic changes on the middle class sensibilities and provides new insights into the middle class consumption in the West.

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