

# Narratives of Rebellion: A Psychological Analysis of Anti-Mainstream Fashion and Youth Identity Construction

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## Abstract

Under the influence of contemporary society characterized by the coexistence of digitalization and emotional regulation, the youth (Gen Z) has increasingly turned self-expression into symbolic systems facing the highly homogenized cultural environment and mounting psychological stress. This research focuses specifically on the rapid spread of the trend “Anti-Fashionism” recently—a visual system evolved from the concepts of anti-authoritarian, anti-structural, nihilistic, absurd, and affectively detached narratives, exemplified by brands such as Vetements and Enfants Riches Déprimés (ERD). The results indicate that Anti-Fashion isn’t just a style preference for teenagers, but a controllable and safe containment for their endless emotions—it carries their deep and unspeakable complex emotions. Through anti-mainstream narratives, Gen Z teenagers restore symbolic autonomy, achieve identity positioning, and realize emotional identification in consumption. This study also contains an action research chapter on my personal brand, Evasive Attachment, as an example of developing an integrated model that combines real-market dynamics with psychological mechanisms in future research.

## Keywords

Anti-mainstream fashion; psychological reactance; narrative identity; symbolic consumption; youth psychology; emotional identification.

## 1. Introduction

In an era defined by emotional suppression, aesthetic homogeneity, and social-media-driven self-presentation norms, young people increasingly rely on symbolic consumption to articulate psychological states that cannot be directly verbalized. Fashion, once primarily a material object, has evolved into a semiotic and affective medium that communicates identity, values, and emotional narratives [1,2].

Under this type of influence, anti-mainstream fashion has turned into an extreme emotional outlet for the youth. Vetements, ERD, and other upcoming underground anti-mainstream fashion did not rely on the traditional “Beauty Standard” for styling; instead, they built a unique symbolic fashion system reflecting cynicism, emotional fragmentation, autonomy-seeking behaviors, and resistance to normative expectations. For many youth, this type of emotional outlet articulates their deep psychological state that they cannot express directly: loneliness, fear, anger, anxiety, detachment, and contradictions in identity.

Despite strong cultural interest, academic research has not adequately explained the psychological mechanisms behind this phenomenon. Existing research tends to focus on aesthetic rebellion or subcultural meaning, yet rarely addresses why fragmented, cynical, or emotionally detached narratives evoke strong emotional identification; how anti-mainstream fashion redeems youth’s sense of individuality through psychological reactance; or how

symbolic fashion items become a tool of emotional self-regulation. These gaps reveal a need for an integrative model that combines psychological reactance, narrative identity, social identity, and symbolic consumption theories to understand youth engagement with anti-mainstream fashion.

This research aims to address how the youth (Gen Z) reclaim symbolic individualism and reconstruct self-narratives. Using a mixed-method design—including corpus-based semiotic analysis and a three-condition narrative-strength experiment—this research provides empirical evidence for the psychological mechanisms through which anti-mainstream fashion operates. Additionally, an action research section of my personal brand Evasive Attachment is presented for future integration, offering a foundation for connecting real-market dynamics with psychological processes.

Overall, this study positions anti-mainstream fashion not as a stylistic trend but as a psychological strategy that reflects contemporary youth's emotional struggles, identity negotiations, and symbolic attempts to express what language cannot.

## 2. Literature Review

Research on youth culture, emotional expression, and symbolic consumption provides several theoretical foundations for understanding why anti-mainstream fashion resonates so strongly with Gen Z. While prior studies in cultural sociology describe anti-fashion movements as resistant, ironic, or subcultural, psychological mechanisms underlying youth engagement remain undertheorized [3,4]. This section synthesizes four major theoretical perspectives—Psychological Reactance Theory, Narrative Identity Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Symbolic Consumption—to build an integrated framework for analyzing anti-mainstream fashion as a psychological and emotional system rather than merely an aesthetic trend.

### 2.1. Psychological Reactance and the Restoration of Autonomy

Psychological Reactance Theory describes the motivational state that arises when individuals perceive their behavioral freedom as threatened [5]. Modern youth often experience these limitations from the expectations of academic achievements, constant positivities, emotional stabilities from the society. These “expectations” often turn into invisible restrictions, although not mandatory but highly encouraged, forming internal pressure within young people's subconscious mind.

Anti-mainstream fashion accepts this challenge. Whether it's blunt typography (“I hate everything you love”), nihilistic/anti-authoritarian slogans, or literally “anti-fashion” silhouettes, there is a symbolic rejection of aesthetic and affectational expectations. Wearing the fashion item is a micro-protest, with the younger consumer metaphorically regaining autonomy. Past research shows that reactance can be manifested through consumption behavior that is conspicuously counter-norm; we believe anti-mainstream fashion to be a psychological balm of teens so they can reclaim their freedom from all the pressure [6,7].

For youth navigating identity instability, this symbolic reactance is not merely rebellious self-styling, but a method of asserting agency in environments that regulate emotion, appearance, and behavior. Thus, reactance provides the first mechanism explaining the appeal of anti-mainstream narratives.

### 2.2. Narrative Identity: Emotional Representation Through Fragmented Aesthetics

Narrative Identity Theory posits that people construct coherent identities by integrating experiences into self-defining stories [8]. However, many youths are experiencing internal conflicts: Mood swings, existential anxiety and linguistic insufficiency... These factors all challenge the formation of coherent narrative structures. Anti Fashion often reflects on these

internal conditions through fractures of languages, blur emotional expressed sentences and destructive visionary.

Such narratives operate as externalized emotional metaphors. When ERD uses statements like “Love me to death” or “I think about dying every day,” youths do not interpret these literally; instead, they recognize them as symbolic approximations of emotional ambiguity. These narratives create a mirroring effect: they visually express forms of anxiety, emptiness, or frustration that young people struggle to articulate through socially acceptable language.

Furthermore, Anti-mainstream narratives function like narrative prosthesis, augmenting representational power beyond our current capacities. Young people often describe these designs in terms of being “honest,” “raw,” and “real,” implying they see them not as aesthetic expressions, but rather as psychologically transcribing emotional states. This understanding suggests that emotionally muted narratives foster greater emotional identification than visually beautiful designs.

### **2.3. Social Identity Theory: Anti-Mainstream Fashion as a Group Boundary Marker**

Social Identity Theory asserts that individuals derive part of their identity through group membership, which requires clear boundaries between in-group and out-group [9]. For Gen Z, Anti-Fashionism represents rejecting the already-structured traditional beauty standard. These symbols allow gen z to separate themselves from mainstream fashion consumer, high-end “minimalist style” consumer, social-media-driven lifestyle performance and normative emotional regulation.

These functional signals are crucial: Anti-mainstream fashion stands for “I don’t belong to the rest of them” “I’m not in that system” type of message. Through visual codes of irony, absurdity, and emotional detachment, wearers construct an identity rooted in differentiation and resistance. Formal studies pointed out that when facing cultural dissatisfaction, aesthetic deviance can be strengthened among the youth, supporting the idea of anti-mainstream fashion acts as a group boundary mechanism [10].

### **2.4. Symbolic Consumption: Emotional Meaning as the Primary Value**

Symbolic Consumption Theory states that consumption objects acquire meaning far beyond their physical properties [11,12]. Anti-mainstream fashion is particularly dense in symbolic meaning, functioning as:

- A container for negative affect
- A badge of emotional complexity
- A performative stance against beauty norms
- A communication tool for subcultural identity
- A way to signal emotional ambiguity without explicit disclosure

The emotion and symbolistic value often exceeds the aesthetic value, the reason why the youth is embracing anti-mainstream fashion is not simply because of how it looks ‘cool’, but because of how accurately it can represent their emotions. This explains why designs that appear intentionally distressed, uncomfortable, or “ugly” can still attract high symbolic adoption.

Such symbolic density also differentiates anti-mainstream fashion from general streetwear or luxury fashion: one stands for social status and personal taste while the other is for emotional accuracy and psychology. This difference is crucial to realize why anti-mainstream fashion has received countless favoritism from the younger generation.

### **2.5. Integrative Perspective: Why These Mechanisms Converge in Gen Z**

Taken together, these theories suggest that anti-mainstream fashion resonates with youth because it aligns with key psychological needs:

- (1) Autonomy (reactance-driven)
- (2) Emotional representation (narrative identity)
- (3) Community differentiation (social identity)
- (4) Meaning-seeking consumption (symbolic consumption)

Gen z uses fashion as a language to persuade their complex emotions, anti-mainstream narratives thus operate as a multi-layer psychological technology—restoring autonomy, externalizing emotional ambiguity, securing identity boundaries, and providing symbolic meaning.

This framework sets the foundation for the empirical methodology and model development in the next section.

### 3. Method

This study adopted a concise mixed-method design combining corpus-based semiotic analysis with an experimental manipulation of narrative strength. First, a corpus of 312 anti-mainstream fashion images (Vetements, ERD, Rick Owens, underground labels) was compiled and coded using Barthesian semiotic categories, focusing on:

- (1) anti-authority language,
- (2) fragmented text structures,
- (3) emotional detachment,
- (4) absurdity/irony, and
- (5) existential themes.

Intercoder reliability reached  $\kappa = .82$ .

Second, a three-condition between-subjects experiment was conducted with 168 participants (17–25) randomly assigned to one of three narrative-strength conditions:

- A: Pure Visual (no text)
- B: Anti-mainstream slogans
- C: Emotional-psychological narratives

Participants evaluated stimuli using validated 7-point Likert scales assessing emotional arousal, narrative identification, autonomy restoration, symbolic adoption intention, and purchase inclination.

Data were analyzed using one-way ANOVA with Tukey post-hoc tests, and linear regression was used to test predictors of autonomy restoration and symbolic adoption. This design allowed the study to measure both semiotic characteristics and psychological effects of anti-mainstream narratives.

### 4. Results

A one-way ANOVA indicated a significant effect of narrative strength on all emotional identification,  $F(2,165) = 19.82, p < .001$ . Participants in the emotional-psychological narratives (Condition C) have the highest emotional identification, followed by anti-mainstream slogans (Condition B), and lastly pure visual stimuli (Condition A). Tukey post-hoc tests revealed  $C > B$  ( $p < .001$ ) and  $B > A$  ( $p < .01$ ) followed. Symbolic adoption intention follows a similar pattern ( $C = 5.41, B = 4.28, A = 3.12$ ). Narrative identification is a strong predictor of symbolic adoption ( $\beta = .47, p < .001$ ), suggesting that meaningoriented consumption—not aesthetic preference—is propelling this consumption.

Autonomy restoration was significantly predicted by exposure to anti-mainstream messaging ( $\beta = .42, p < .001$ ), supporting the proposed reactance mechanism. No significant effects of gender or age were observed.

Overall, these results and data indicate that narrative depth is the biggest factor to drive the youth to take emotional participation in anti-mainstream fashion and generate the sense of belonging.

## 5. Conclusion

The result of the study strongly suggested that anti-mainstream fashion mainly functions as a psychological mechanism instead of just a simple aesthetic choice. The extreme impact of narrative strength reveals that the deep participation of the youth came from complicated emotions and resonance of their psychological stage, validating the central role of Narrative Identity Theory. These narratives reflect on gen z's deep cognitive internal conflicts, emotional ambiguity, and the linguistic insufficiency, allowing individuals to externalize and express their deep emotions within this strongly patterned and regulated society.

The strong predictive effect of narrative identification on symbolic adoption suggests that consumption in this domain is fundamentally meaning-driven. Youth crave not visual deviance alone, but symbolic systems that express emotional tension and render meaning relevant to their identities. Further evidence of the potency of Symbolic Consumption Theory: value lies not in what looks good, but in what is symbolically dense.

The restoration of autonomy supports the proposed reactance-based mechanism, showing that the anti-mainstream fashion symbols and messages allow the youth to gain motivation under the influence of self-presentation being required by the environment and one's emotional stage. The lack of demographic moderation implies that these dynamics reflect broader generational experiences.

Finally, anti-mainstream fashion can be understood as a multi-layer psychological tool that can help the youth to regain self-autonomy, emotional ambiguity expression and identity structure's built.

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