Do I Belong? Clothing, Group Membership, and Identity During the College Transition

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Clothing is integral to the expression of identity. However, individuals’ expression of identity through clothing is not stable. It adjusts to reflect changes in one’s self-concept. The current study examines college freshmen’s use of clothing to express changing identities during a life transition. Longitudinal depth interviews suggest students engage in reflexive self-evaluation and conform to the college peer culture in an attempt to “fit in.” Implications of this behavior are discussed in regard to the importance of expressing an appropriate “college identity” and group membership in the maintenance of a coherent life-narrative and a stable identity during the college transition.

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Manipulation of Information Uncertainty and Price Negotiation. The market comparison information and the merchant comparison information were administered either as an exact number (low uncertainty) or as a range (high uncertainty). In the “no price negotiation” condition, participants were told that prices in the store were final and consumers could not negotiate prices at the store. In the “price negotiation” condition, participants were told that it was fairly common to negotiate prices at the store and were specifically instructed that the 25 scenarios showed transaction outcomes before any price negotiations had taken place.

Measures. Participants were asked to rate their satisfaction with each of the 25 hypothetical transactions on an eleven-point Likert scale anchored between “do not like at all” and “like very much.” Participants also completed manipulation checks.

The main difference between study 1 and study 2 was that, in study 1, participants saw the difference between the item’s retail price and the merchant and the market price (the market comparison information), and the difference between their outcome from the transaction and the merchant’s outcome from the transaction (the merchant comparison information). In study 2, participants saw the market price, the product’s price, and the merchant’s product cost and were left to infer the differences in outcomes.

Results
Preliminary results indicate some interesting relationships. More specifically, unfavorable market comparisons had a significantly stronger impact on customer satisfaction than unfavorable merchant comparisons in all conditions in both studies. In contrast, in all conditions in both studies, favorable market comparisons were not more impactful than favorable merchant comparisons. Thus, hypothesis 1b received full support, but hypothesis 1a was consistently disconfirmed.

In addition, information uncertainty significantly decreased the impact of comparison information on customer satisfaction for unfavorable merchant comparisons (when the market comparison was favorable) in study 1, and for unfavorable market comparisons in study 2. Hypothesis 2 was not supported for unfavorable market comparisons in study 1 or for any favorable comparison (market or merchant) in either study.

Finally, price negotiation had exactly the same pattern of effects as information uncertainty. Thus, hypothesis 3 was supported for unfavorable merchant comparisons (when the comparison to the market was favorable) in study 1, and for unfavorable market comparisons in study 2.

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Clothing has always been “a rich source of signification” for teenagers (Danesi, 1994, p. 76). Fashion has also been described as “salient markers in [individuals’] narratives of personal history” and as “a repository for dreams of an envisioned good life” (Thompson & Haytko, 1997, p. 35). Unlike individuals’ personal possessions, which can be either private or public markers of identity, clothing by definition is a public marker of identity. That is, in a consumer culture clothing reflects various aspects of individuals’ identity to others, including group identity. Consequently when individuals experience identity uncertainty as they transition from one peer culture to another it is likely that they will actively reevaluate the communicative aspects of their wardrobe and adjust it accordingly in an attempt to create and communicate a socially acceptable identity to members of the new peer culture. Moreover, clothing aids in individuals’ attempts to maintain a coherent self-narrative during this period of identity uncertainty.

This paper, therefore, attempts to investigate what role clothing plays in helping individuals negotiate their changing identity during the high school to college transition. The paper begins by discussing how college freshmen engage in anticipatory consumption and pack clothing they believe is appropriate to communicate a college identity. The paper then examines the process by which informants learn to decipher the college fashion-meta code and adapt their fashion to conform to their perceptions of the group norm. Finally, the influence of the college peer culture on students’ fashion for special occasions, especially when they “go out,” is discussed.

Method
Overview and Rationale
The current study answers the call by Corsaro and Eder (1990) to employ longitudinal research to “chart children’s transitions from one peer culture to another” (p. 216). Longitudinal interviews were conducted with college freshmen at the beginning and end of their first semester to examine fashions’ role in the maintenance and creation of identity over time. A longitudinal approach is superior to cross-sectional (e.g., Karp et al., 1998; Mehta & Belk, 1991) and cohort (e.g., Silver, 1996) analysis because it allows the researcher to observe informants’ use of fashion as it changes in relation to both time and make-up of students’ self-concept and social networks. Previous research confirms qualitative methods such as depth interviews are the preferred means of measurement for this phenomenon for their ability to provide detailed descriptions of informants’ lived experiences (e.g., Hill & Somin, 1996; Mehta & Belk, 1991; Silver, 1996). Thus, the current study employed a semi-structured interview format because it provided informants some structure and direction during the interview while allowing them to discuss any additional topics they viewed as relevant. Further, this approach allowed informants to discuss their experiences in their own terms, accounting for the complexities of their lived experiences.

Informant Recruitment
Informants from a large Midwestern university were recruited via flyers posted in heavily trafficked areas around campus and via announcements made in entry-level English, Sociology, and Journalism courses. This approach resulted in 21 inquiries and 19 students (16 female, 3 male) agreeing to participate in the interview process. As compensation for their participation, informants’ names were entered into two random drawings for $50. One drawing occurred at the completion of each round of interviews. This sample, although limited, is consistent with sample sizes of other studies in this field (e.g., Karp et al., 1998; Silver, 1996) and the goals of qualitative investigation, which values depth of description over breadth and generalizability.
**Interview Schedule**

Initial interviews were conducted during the first four weeks of the school year (September 9-24, 2004). Initial interviews ranged from 35-60 minutes. Second interviews were conducted between November 30, 2004 and December 9, 2004. Of the 19 informants who participated in the first interview, 14 (74%) participated in the second interview. Interviews during this round ranged from 26-54 minutes. Interviews were conducted either in a location of the informant’s choosing (e.g., their dorm lobby) or in the lead author’s office. All interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder for future transcription.

**Interview Structure**

Interviews began with “broad stroke” questions (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989), such as “tell me a little about yourself and your family,” that were intended to put the informants at ease and make them feel comfortable sharing intimate details of their lives with the interviewer. Follow-up questions covered a wide breadth of topics, with the emphasis placed on the role of fashion in the transition process. The first interviews began with a discussion of informants’ high school experience and their preparation for attending college. The interview then transitioned to students’ initial experiences and impressions of college peer culture as well as descriptions of their daily lives. The second interview focused specifically on how students viewed themselves fitting into the college peer culture and whether their life had changed since high school and the beginning of the academic year. At the completion of the interview protocol, 33 individual interviews had been conducted, resulting in just over 26 hours of discussion. Interviews were then transcribed, resulting in a total of 308 single-spaced pages of text. Interviews were printed out and bound and this text served as data for the analysis.

**Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed when all interviews were completed following the hermeneutic method (Thompson, 1997). First, the researchers began with an impressionistic reading and the identification of recurring themes within each individual interview. This initial reading sought to identify instances where informants explicitly discussed the role of media in their lives. Differences in informants’ descriptions of media use across the two interviews were also noted so as to gain a better understanding of how the role of media evolved over time. A second analysis of the data involved cross-informant analysis, the goal of which was to identify “global themes” that emerged from informants’ descriptions of their experiences. Because any qualitative analysis is an iterative process, a third reading of the transcripts sought to identify any emergent themes not previously identified. Emergent themes were analyzed based on their prevalence, their impact on the students’ transition, and whether or not they contradicted any previously identified themes.

**Summary**

In response to the primary research question explored by this paper, what role do clothes play in the negotiation of identity, it appears that students change their personal style to reinforce and communicate changes in their self-concept, both to themselves and to their new peers. Adjusting their wardrobe allows individuals to express their changing internal identity to others. That is, by wearing certain peer culture approved clothes, students believe that they can communicate to their peers, individuals who possess and use a great deal of consumption stereotypes (Belk et al., 1982), and ultimately themselves, that they belong to the peer culture. This belief allows students to bolster their internal conceptions of self while dealing with the uncertainty associated with this period of transition.

Prior to their arrival on campus, students pack the “identity suitcase” with clothing they perceive as representative of college style in anticipation of their new identity. Once on campus, however, students must decipher the meanings communicated through others’ clothing and decide whether to emulate that style, reject it, or use it to reinforce their previous consumption behaviors (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997). Students appear to most often emulate the style they see on campus in an effort to communicate an appropriate college identity to others and reinforce their own conception of self as a mature college student. Despite informants’ assertions to the contrary, communicating a college identity typically involves some level of conformity to the group norm. Data illustrate that informants not only relaxed their personal style to reflect their perceptions of the group norm, but also purchased specific status items, all in an attempt to communicate a college identity typically involves some level of conformity to the group norm, but also purchased specific status items, all in an attempt to conform to the larger peer culture. The context of the situation (Silver, 1996) also has a direct influence on students’ fashion, as both moving to the college campus and “going out” result in changes in students’ prior dress. By adjusting their clothing, students can communicate various social identities to their peers that reflect the appropriate social role; wearing relaxed clothing such as that from The Gap and Abercrombie & Fitch, for instance, signifies the “student” role, whereas, specifically in this instance for women, wearing more upscale brands, “anything with a label,” and dressing in a provocative manner signifies the adventurous “party girl” role. Clothing, therefore, allows informants to express various, and often contradictory, social identities to others and to themselves as they negotiate their new college identity. At this point it is interesting to note that male informants were less likely to adjust their wardrobes drastically to fit in to the college peer culture in comparison to the more pronounced changes female informants discussed. Whereas women felt a desire to dress in a more casual fashion and consume different brands than they did in high school, it appears male informants did not feel a similar desire. Rather, the casual preppy style males adhered to during high school appears to remain socially accepted within the new peer culture, potentially making the transition to college less stressful, at least in regard to the expression of a college fashion identity.

Overall, informants’ descriptions of the high school and college fashion meta-code are extremely similar. Three possible reasons arise as to why this similarity exists: 1) both high school and college students appear to consume similar media and, therefore, become socialized to and emulate the ideal images the media presents depicting youth culture; 2) high school students emulate college fashion in a process that Goffman (1959) calls “anticipatory socialization” where individuals have already been well versed in the “reality” that is just becoming a reality for them; and/or 3) college students simply carry over their fashion from high school and adjust it slightly to distinguish their current identities from their high school identities by incorporating specific items and brands they perceive as being distinct to the college peer culture into their wardrobes. Future research should explore these possible reasons for the similarities between the two peer cultures in more detail. Regardless, clothing and the negotiation of identity during periods of transition seem to be intertwined. As the informants in this sample moved from the high school peer culture to the college peer culture, they purchased and brought clothing with them that they felt best reflected their identity at that point in time. However, as they slowly incorporated their college identity into their self-concept, specifically for female informants, they also adjusted their style to mirror the dominant peer culture, even taking some articles of clothing home with them. Thus, as they gain greater confidence in their ability to use clothing to enact the college identity, informants
became less reliant on their previous high school identity. Thus, they move one step closer to reconciling the identity uncertainty the transition from high school to college initiated.

What do Rats Think While They Run? Goal Distance and Cognitive Effort Acceleration
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Extended Abstract
Recent development in consumer goal research pointed out that goal-achieving effort increases as distance from goal decreases (Kivetz, Urminsky, and Zheng 2006). It was found that consumers accelerate their effort (e.g., making purchase more frequently and in larger quantity) when they approach the reward of a reward program (RP). Looking from the behaviorist perspective, these studies regarded the behavior as a manifestation of rats running toward the food. And the inverse relationship between rate of behavior and goal distance are robustly demonstrated in several studies. This paper argues that changes in the physical efforts are just part of the consequence of goal proximity. Cognitive efforts in processing goal-related information should also increase when one gets closer to the goal. Specifically, we propose that the amount of information people will attend to and the depth of processing should increase with goal proximity.

Generally speaking, people are more likely to engage in systematic and thorough cognitive processing when their involvement in a purchase decision is high than when their involvement is low (Bettman, Luce, and Rayne 1998). For people who are far from the goal of an RP (i.e., at the early stage of an RP), their involvement in the purchase decision is probably low because the subjective value of a distant future reward is minimal (Kirby 1997; Kirby and Herrnstein 1995). One consequence of low involvement is the tendency to use heuristics rather than effortful information processing when making decisions. This is consistent with previous findings that decision to join an RP is influenced by heuristics. Kivetz and Simonson (2003) showed that the perception of one’s own effort relative to that of other consumers influences RP joining decisions. This heuristic may even lead to preference for RPs with greater effort requirement. Their findings suggest that, when the RP goal is far away, consumers tend to base their decisions on effort heuristics (e.g., how achievable is the RP goal?) and may overlook the reward implications of a decision. Such type of information will then make little impact on their decisions.

On the contrary, for individuals who are close to the goal in an RP (i.e., at the late stage of an RP), the subjective value of the RP reward is augmented by the short temporal distance (Kirby, 1997; Kirby & Herrnstein, 1995). The increased subjective value of the reward would lead to high involvement in purchase decisions, in turns, individuals are more likely to attend to and subject information to thorough and systematic processing. Thus, we expect consumers will make more effortful decisions rather than using heuristics. Taken together, we predict that information pertaining to reward value should have a greater impact on purchase decisions when the RP goal is near than far away.

As an initial attempt, we tested this idea by assessing the differential influences of unit value of RP reward on people’s purchase decisions across goal proximity. Unit value of RP reward refers to the equivalent reward value earned per purchase. Consider an RP in which participants will be given a $150 cash coupon for every 10 stamps collected. The unit value of the RP reward is $15, which equals to $150 reward value divided by the total number of purchases (i.e., 10). This information informs people the reward implications (i.e., monetary implication of each purchase in terms of the RP reward). In the example, unit value highlights the chance to get $15 in return for each purchase. Our basic tenet is that the unit value information of an RP should have a greater likelihood in altering purchase decisions when people subject incoming information to deliberate and thorough processing, but not so when the processing appears to be heuristics based (unit value does not have implications on effort heuristic). In short, we predict an interaction between unit value of RP reward and goal proximity that the availability of unit value information will have strong impacts on individuals’ purchase decisions only when they are close to the goal but not when they are far from the goal.

The above prediction was supported in a study using the RP described above. Participants (180 undergraduate students) were asked to imagine that they joined the reward program of Supermarket A. In the reward program, they would obtain one stamp for every certain amount of purchase at Supermarket A, and would receive HK$150 cash coupon once they accumulated ten such stamps. Goal proximity was manipulated by the number of stamps (one vs. eight stamps) participants got. Unit value information was manipulated by the information printed on the stamps—“$15 reward” in the unit value conditions whereas “reward” in the control conditions. Also, a statement “Each stamp is equivalent to $15 in cash reward” was included on the stamp cards in the unit value conditions. Participants had to decide whether to do their purchases at Supermarket A or Supermarket B. While Supermarket B did not have any promotional offers, it is more accessible than Supermarket A.

Consistent with our predictions, unit value information influenced repurchase intention only when participants were at the late stage of the RP. We also found that perceived ability to complete the RP (i.e., effort heuristic) influenced purchase decisions only at early stage but not at late stage. One interesting finding of this study is that effort acceleration (Kivetz et al. 2006) is actually reduced by the presence of certain reward information (lower purchase intention when unit value information is available during late stage). It suggests a possible boundary condition of the goal-gradient effect. While physical efforts to attain a goal increase with goal proximity, this study highlights that cognitive efforts increase in a similar fashion. Increased cognitive effort leads to processing of more information and more effortful decision-making.

References