Clothes Make the Man: Symbolic Consumption and Second Hand Clothing

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Wearing second-hand clothes has often been regarded as an economic-oriented practice dealing somehow with a controlled fear of contamination. In this paper, we examine the underlying symbolic meanings individuals associate with used clothing. We report the findings of an exploratory study which show firstly that attitudes of acceptance or rejection toward used clothing derive from the degree to which individuals imbue such possessions with their sense of self; and secondly, that various positive meanings can be associated with worn clothes insofar as they become mentally detached from their previous owner and evaluated for their intrinsic properties.

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exuberant fans. In some stadiums, anti-items are used to produce sophisticated provocative shows or “tifos”. Based on the classical literature on group antagonism, we suggest three interrelated but distinguishable levels in the negative symbolic consumption of football: stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination (Fiske 1998). Stereotypes refer to the beliefs held by the members of one group (called the “in-group”) about the typical characteristics of the members of another group (the “out-group”). Prejudices pertain to negative attitudes toward the out-group whereas discrimination involves overt behaviour against it. At the stereotypical level, our data contain a lot of negative beliefs about the rival teams, such as illustrated by this quote: “The Real Madrid supporter is a bad supporter: he only loves football when his team wins”. On game days, fans tend to classify other supporters of the same team as rivals when they incidentally wear colours of the opponent. At the prejudice level, distinction may lead some fans to an unwillingness or refusal to wear clothes in particular colours, even in everyday life. Moreover, our data include a lot of affective statements against the rival teams (“I hate them”); on one banner, Marseille fans have written “Pedo Sado Gay” to disqualify the PSG (Paris Saint Germain) supporters. Finally, at the discrimination level, a lot of overt behaviours could be observed. Some fans used to burn the colours of hated teams and to wear anti-items. The hostility against other teams stems either from extra-sport conflicts or from competition-bound oppositions. It seems that rivalry grows as a far as the opponent is geographically closer or/and threatens sport supremacy. In Madrid, a Rayo Vallecano supporter typically told us: “I don’t have any anti-Athletic item because I don’t have anything against them, but I do have anti-Madridista: I have one anti-Madridista scarf and one ultra flag which claims Real’s death. I love those items”.

There are two major interpretations to those anti-items. First, they help to express the hatred of the opponent in other ways (actually in a very theatrical and grotesque way) rather than through acts of violence and direct aggression (Bromberger 1995). However, most often those symbols are used in a cathartic way rather than to affirm belongingness or socio-political opinions. In that sense, anti-items should not be confused with anti-brands. To some extent, anti-items serve as a safety valve for bottled up emotions, especially in our post-modern societies which give little room for the expression of male warlike drives. The concept of negative self (Wilk 1997) can also be used to interpret the previous findings. Supporters may reject other teams in order to maintain or enhance a sense of self, they are unlikely to exchange, sell or buy it, especially from strangers.

The findings showed clear differential attitudes between respondents, ranging from those rejecting even the idea of wearing something previously used to those expressing attitudes of acceptance toward secondhand clothing. These attitudes appeared to depend on the importance attached by some consumers to their possessions in providing a sense of self (Belk, 1988). In particular, when they view clothing as an essential means for constructing and nurturing their sense of self, they are unlikely to exchange, sell or buy it, especially from strangers.

Negative perceptions confirmed that contamination is an important factor in rejection behaviors toward used clothes. How-
ever, this study goes further than prior research by showing that rejection is triggered less by a fear of germ contamination than by a specific concern about incorporating a degraded image of the previous owner (Rozin and Fallon, 1987). Death, disease or misfortune are often associated with the former wearer—generally unknown—and “bad vibes” are imagined to transfer through his or her possessions to the new buyer.

In most of these cases, wearing used clothes is thus perceived as a territorial encroachment of a previous identity (Goffman, 1971), leading to feelings of dispossession. This point is particularly well illustrated by those informants who had to wear clothes passed down from their brothers or sisters who had outgrown them. Through knowing by whom the clothes were transmitted, they felt condemned to assume their elders’ identities and to leave their own behind. When dictated by necessity, wearing something that belonged to others tends to threaten the feeling of difference, unity and coherency which nurtures the sense of self (Erikson, 1968).

Conversely, the findings suggested also that the concern with unwanted contamination is not as general as it is sometimes thought to be. Positive symbolic contagion can be involved in exchanging clothing between friends or parents (Lurie, 1981). Moreover, fear of contamination may not play any part in buying or wearing second-hand clothes, even from strangers, when done by choice. What clearly differentiated acceptance from rejection behaviours was the ability of individuals to detach clothing from their extended self. When these possessions are not too closely associated with their wearer, they can be appraised for their own values instead of being reduced to the incorporated intimacy with another person.

In addition, certain characteristics of these clothes or of their state of use do create for some informants a particular desire for reappraisal and ideological arguments. First, the desire for uniqueness can be pursued through used clothes for their capacity to differentiate an individual from the mass and express his or her choices of counter-conformity (Fiske, 1989; Thompson and Haytko, 1997; Tian, Bearden and Hunter, 2001). Conversely, but within the same social comparison perspective, conspicuous behaviors can be achieved by purchasing branded luxury used clothes without paying the full price. In both cases, individuals use worn clothes—as they do new ones—as psychosocial markers. A third, more personal motive applies to retro clothing items, which tend to promote nostalgic imagery, thereby sustaining the revival of a mythical golden age or a shared past culture (Goulding, 2002). The final motive leading to secondhand consumption involves ethical concerns about the environmental and social impact of (over-)consumption and a desire for voluntary simplicity. In such cases, purchasing used clothes is viewed as a sign of opposition to consumerism and specifically as a response to waste. These four types of representations support some of the various functions performed by clothing as described by Holman (1981)—utilitarian, aesthetic, mnemonic and emblematic.

References
Fiske, John (1989), Understanding the Popular Culture, Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman.