Anti-Madridista: Negative Symbolic Consumption By Football Fans

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The consumption of football entails a considerable amount of symbolism, which is often related to the colours and merchandise paraded by the fans. This paper focuses on anti-items, i.e. team-related tangibles (e.g. shirts, jerseys, scarves, hats, flags) that identify the fan in opposition to other teams. As an example of negative symbolic consumption, anti-items are presented in the framework of distinction and interpreted according to catharsis and self-expression theories. These findings are based on extensive naturalistic research in the football fan subculture.

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participants interpreted what they termed “trying too hard” negatively, and this links with Wilk’s (1995) participants who criticised products that were too ‘flash’ or exclusive.

For many of the consumers in our study, clothing selection entailed a delicate balancing act. The safest option was often to avoid projecting a negative image (employing a negative drive) thus ensuring the maintenance of self-esteem. We would argue that if marketers are able to understand how consumers invest products and brands with negative meanings; and also how consumers associate these negative meanings with their rejected selves, they will be much nearer to understanding and managing the impact of negative symbolic consumption in the market place.

The following findings are based on in-depth interviews with more than 30 fans of the most popular Belgian, French and Spanish teams. These fans were also observed on match days and during other football-related activities such as bus journeys to the stadium, meetings, dinners or visits to their fan club. In addition, we attended about 50 matches in the Belgian, French and Spanish national competitions. Finally, we interviewed experts and fan shop managers and we collected documents such as brochures, press articles, and web sites. All these data were analysed through inductive thematic analysis.

All informants in this study constructed a large portion of their identities around being a football fan. Part of this identification is evident in the colours they displayed, the clothes they wore and the decoration of their daily environment (house, vehicles, pets). Four objects of identification may be distinguished: the team, the fan club, the player and the city. This paper focuses on the team, which is by far the most prevalent in the negative consumption of football merchandise. Two major identification dimensions emerge from the analysis and interpretation process: social imitation and the expression of self. To some extent, these may be connected with the two classical functions of fashion consumption, i.e., social identification and distinction (Gronrow 1997; Banister and Hogg 2004). Fans first and foremost buy and consume scarves and shirts to show others the team to which they belong. Fans incorporate football into their selves to the point that there often is an overlap between fan and team identity: when the team wins/lose, the supporter also feels like s/he wins/loses (Janda and Donavan 2004). Moreover, many fans want to be perceived as different from the others. In the context of football consumption, distinction may be understood both in a positive and a negative way.

On the one hand, some fans try to outdo the other supporters in their own community by their external appearance and paraphernalia. They make their own items such as flashy clothes, banners, badges or flags in order to be seen as the team’s greatest enthusiast: “I am unique, I am the best, I am only one wearing these clothes … people will look at me”. This may be interpreted as a way to enhance self-esteem and be compared with Holt’s (1995) concept of individualization or Belk’s (1988) extended self. It is now widely accepted that consumers often want to differentiate themselves and to express their personality through their clothes (Banister and Hogg 2004).

The fans’ paraphernalia also entails negative aspects. Our observation data show that “anti-items” are widespread in the stadiums we visited and in other settings (e.g., on the Internet) both in Belgium, France and Spain. These range from “official” t-shirts, scarves or embroidered badges to self-made banners or documents. Most of the time, these items show extremist symbols and negative messages addressed to the opponents using a warlike, sexual, or religious rhetoric. They are usually worn by younger and more
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 behaviours could be observed. Some fans used to burn the colours of hated teams and to wear anti-items. The hostility against other supporters may reject other teams in order to maintain or enhance their self-esteem. Banister and Hogg (2004) have recently documented how consumers may invest (i.e. fashion) products and brands with negative symbolic meanings and how this leads them to reject products and brands. More broadly, this study confirms the importance of clothing as an expressive medium and as a code in its own right that helps consumers to construct and communicate socio-cultural meanings (McCracken 1988).

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 some negative aspects of their self-esteem. Banister and Hogg (2004) have recently documented how consumers may invest (i.e. fashion) products and brands with negative symbolic meanings and how this leads them to reject products and brands. More broadly, this study confirms the importance of clothing as an expressive medium and as a code in its own right that helps consumers to construct and communicate socio-cultural meanings (McCracken 1988).

References


“Clothes Maketh the Man: Symbolic Consumption and Second-hand Clothing”
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Second-order marketing systems have received increasing attention in recent years. Clothing purchased through second hand shops, flea markets and web sites accounts for a significant part of this new trend of exchange, despite socio-psychological risks related to such purchases (O’Reilly et al., 1984). Among factors that can increase or decrease the willingness to acquire used clothing, economic constraints have often been pointed out as a crucial aspect of the purchase decision. Conversely, concern about contamination are supposed to impede the transfer of certain types of items, especially those worn next to the skin (O’Reilly et al., 1984; Belk, 1988; Ostergaard, Fitchett and Jantzen, 1999). However, symbolic meanings associated with such consumption decisions have received less attention in comparison with demographic and behavioral variables related to products or purchase situations. By exploring the psychological and symbolic meanings associated with the exchange and resale of secondhand clothing, this paper aims at providing a broader understanding of what is at stake in both rejection and acceptance behaviours.

The aim of this exploratory, qualitative study was to explore first the reasons for buying, wearing or rejecting second-hand clothes, and secondly the psychological and social perceptions embedded therein. Forty-three semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted, each of which lasted from half an hour to two hours. Additionally, a series of twelve mini-group discussions were held with several members of the same family–husband and wife, parents and children—which provided an opportunity to explore family shared values and patterns of consumption.

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-