“Look!! I’M Not the Same Person !” the Role of Clothing in Consumers Escapism

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While literature has extensively studied the relationship between clothing and social identity, this paper explores the role of clothing in escapism where consumers lose their identity. Results show that consumers use clothing to lose their identity, to escape from their everyday life and to enter the ritual experience community.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The symbolic role of products is a huge topic in the consumer behavior literature (Solomon 1983). Symbolic products are not necessarily purchased for functional benefits, they are used to express and communicate identity (Escalas and Bettman 2005). Among symbolic products, clothing is considered by the literature as a product particularly full of sense, not just seen as protection. Clothing helps consumers define their identity. Through their fashion style, consumers express not only how they want to be seen, but also how they see themselves (McCrae and Roth 1989; Crane 2012). Thus, the relationship between clothing as a symbolic product and consumer’s identity is relatively well established in the literature. However, we still know no nothing about the role of clothing in situations where the consumers try to lose its identity. Indeed, because modern society does not allow the release of negative feelings, consumers are seeking extraordinary consumption experiences to live strong emotions and to escape from their everyday life (Arnould and Price 1993; Tumbat and Belk 2011). According to Addis and Holbrook (2010), alienating experiences such as work or unpleasant life experiences put people in need of escaping. They try to transcend their normal existence and to live experiences as catharsis (Kozinets 2002). Extraordinary consumption experiences are aimed at creating a break with the habits and daily stress and are experienced by consumers like rituals (Tumbat and Belk 2011). But during rituals, consumers leave their identity to completely surrender to the experience (Van Gennep 1909). Consumers involvement in the experience is combined with a visual transformation (Shankar and Goulding 2011), but the role played by clothing in the loss of their identity remains unexplored.

To answer this question, we investigated rock music festivals as a ritual experience in which clothing are meaningful. We conducted in 23 depth semistructured interviews. The interview guide dealt with the dichotomy between the everyday clothing style and the clothing style at rock music festivals, and the meaning associated with both of them. The resulting sample was comprised of a diverse group of participants in terms of sex, age and education levels. Data were analyzed manually, using an iterative process to identify central themes in the narratives.

First, results show that consumers use clothing to lose their identity. Symbolically, individuals leave their identity through clothing. They leave their everyday clothes that are work or school-related to incorporate new clothes related to other meanings. The fact to wear dress far from the ordinary life acts like a metaphor meaning to leave everyday problems with everyday clothes. Moreover, the adoption of clothing in stark contrast to the daily life, consumers make a break with the stresses and concerns of ordinary reality. They enter a new body. Thus, our article shows that clothing has not only a social function, but also an individual function which is escapism. Second, our research contributes to the literature dealing with consumer immersion in experience. Previous research has shown that consumers immerse themselves completely in consumption experiences (Pine and Gilmore 1999). But we still know little about how consumers access to the immersion. Our research suggests that the consumer accesses gradually to the experience through a separation phase (Van Gennep 1909). This preparation is important because it affects the emotional release that consumers will achieve. We show that the clothes, through the visual transformation it allows, is an important part of the preparation to the consumption ritual.

REFERENCES