

Symbolic Consumption:

The Interplay Between Distinction, Distastes and

Degrees of Rejection

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Session overview

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The goal of this session was to examine symbolic consumption (tastes and distastes) by presenting the results from a series of recent studies about different aspects of distinction and the rejection or acceptance of goods, linked to notions of distaste, disgust and contamination.

Interest in the area of negative symbolic consumption behaviour has grown rapidly over the past ten years. This was very much a neglected topic until the presentation of a few papers at ACR in the mid to late 1990s started to rouse interest in the unseen side of symbolic consumption. This relative neglect was despite the fact that, some years previous to this, Bourdieu (1984) had identified the importance of distastes in signalling membership of some groups, and non-membership of other groups; and recognised that distastes were probably more important than tastes in allowing us to indicate distinction, and thus association or disassociation with important social groups.

The papers in this session offered an evolving understanding of this neglected topic: the negative aspects of symbolic consumption; and covered a number of themes including the acquisition of tastes and distastes; social influences on tastes and distastes; and brand knowledge and attitudes. The first paper (Banister and Hogg) specifically examined how minimizing the negative aspects of symbolic consumption of clothing represented a stronger motivating force than maximizing the positive aspects of clothing as a

communication device. The second paper (Decrop) concentrated on the refusal of tastes; and reported results from an extensive naturalistic study into how distastes are used to signal distinction within the context of football fans. The third paper (Roux) examined the underlying symbolic meanings which are associated with used (contaminated) clothing. Each paper had a different methodological focus (in terms of data collection and data analysis). The methodological difficulties which surround examining distastes which often leave no trace (Wilk 1995, 1997) were discussed, including projective techniques (collages) and paired interviews (Banister and Hogg); longitudinal immersion in a subculture (Decrop); semi-structured in-depth interviews and mini family group discussions (Roux). In conclusion, there was some refinement and re-conceptualization of our understanding of the role of negative factors within theories of identity, self and consumption.

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“Approach and avoidance behaviours in the symbolic consumption of clothing”

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Clothing provides an important role in identity creation, and consumers often decide whether to accept or reject products and brands on the basis of symbolic (as opposed to functional) attributes (Belk et al, 1982; Belk et al, 1984; Elliott, 1994; Freitas et al, 1997; Holman, 1981). Despite considerable research into understanding how individuals maintain or enhance their self-esteem by consuming the symbolic meanings of products and brands, rather less attention has been directed towards why consumers reject products or brands for symbolic reasons (i.e. negative symbolic consumption). One reason for this is that negative symbolic consumption leaves very few traces (Wilk, 1995; 1997).

We used qualitative methods, interviewing 30 consumers in ‘friendship pairs’ to explore why consumers reject products and brands. There were approximately equal numbers of men and women in the study; ages were evenly spread within the 18-30 years category; and our participants had a variety of different careers in both the public and the private sector (two of our participants were students). Projective techniques were conducted individually, prior to the interviews, and this provided an opportunity to capture individual thoughts and feelings as well as the more social aspects that emerged from the paired discussions.

Clothing clearly provided an important communicative device for our participants and a means to display their tastes, and via the avoidance of certain brands and styles of clothing, their distastes. Clear support was provided for the ideas of Georg Simmel (1904 cited in Gronrow, 1997:77), who saw two motivating functions for fashion – that of social identification (approach) and distinction (avoidance). A small number of our participants utilized what we have termed a ‘positive drive’. This meant they embraced

the concept of positive possible selves (Markus and Nurius 1986), utilizing clothing as a means to enhance their self-image and realize their ideal self (or a range of ideal selves). However, the overwhelming majority of the consumers in our study had a different set of priorities and tended to use a very different strategy in their clothing choice. Rather than seeking to maximize the positive messages that their clothing communicated, the main concern of these participants was with an effort to minimize possible negative communication on the basis of their clothing. This entailed a very different mindset signifying a negative drive.

Participants used consumption stereotypes to illustrate their distastes and the meanings that clothing encompassed. Although the term 'stereotype' suggests universally defined categories, participants acknowledged that different social categories of consumers would interpret clothing in diverse ways (Belk et al, 1982), offering different 'readings' (Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). Some of the 'consumption stereotypes' evoked by consumers were at odds with marketers' images (Ligas and Cotte 1998). This divergent symbolism supported Kaiser et al's (1991) suggestion that varying interpretations of clothing symbols resulted from individuals' diverse social experiences. Symbolism could also be associated with private experiences (or sentimental values) which would be invisible to observers (Campbell, 1996).

Participants who consumed with primary reference to a negative drive sought to avoid censure, played it safe and attempted to remain inconspicuous by avoiding standing out from the crowd or competing for status. These concerns reflected the view that wearing the 'wrong' item was likely to receive a stronger reaction than wearing the latest or the 'best' (Wilk, 1994). Many of our 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.

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***“Anti-Madridista:
Negative symbolic consumption by football fans”***

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Over the past five years we have immersed ourselves in the football fan subculture in order to understand why merchandising has been so successful. Why do fans buy? and how do they consume football-related tangibles (shirts, jerseys, scarves, hats, flags)? An earlier paper by Derbaix, Decrop, and Cabossart (2002) showed that the consumption of football entails a lot of symbolism, which is often related to colours and merchandise. Five major functions have been identified, i.e.: identification, integration, socialization, expression and sacralization. In terms of the first function, the dyad colours-team involves both a pronounced preference for the colours of their own team and an obvious rejection of the colours of rival teams. The focus of this paper is on this second dimension, connected with negative symbolic consumption. We do not focus on hooliganism but on the situations where fans identify against other teams in addition to or rather than identifying with their own teams. In other words, the question why consumers reject products/brands for symbolic reasons is examined here in the context of football consumption.

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/loses, the supporter also feels like s/he wins/loses (Janda and Donovan 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 the 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 fan's 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 teams stems either from extra-sport conflicts or from competition-bound oppositions. It seems that rivalry grows as 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-Athletico* 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 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).

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**“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 critical 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. However, 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. Though 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 coherence 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 re-appropriation. The interviews brought to light different types of motives identified by distinctive symbolic representations 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.

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