Dress, transformation, and conformity in the heavy rock subculture

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ABSTRACT

While the relationship between clothing and the construction of identity has received considerable attention, less attention has been given to identity shifts through acts of consumption. This paper explores the role of dress in a ritual experience during which consumers temporarily shift from one identity mode to another. The qualitative study conducted at two heavy rock music festivals shows that consumers use dress to transform themselves physically which in turn facilitates escape from everyday life. Through this transformation participants gradually enter the ritual community where a leveling process occurs based on difference from the mainstream, but paradoxically, strict conformity and adherence to the codes of dress and behavior of the festival group. This uniformity acts as a collective 'disguise' which breaks down barriers and allows individuals to participate in expressive, more primal behaviors which act as a temporary release before a return to the mundane.

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1. Introduction

The symbolic role of products is a major topic in the consumer behavior literature (e.g. Elliott, 1997; Han, Nunes, & Drèze, 2010; McCracken, 1986). Symbolic products are not necessarily purchased for functional benefits, but can be used to express relationships with reference groups (Banister & Hogg, 2004), indicate status, age or gender (O'Cass & McEwen, 2004), and ethnicity and culture (Peñaloza, 1994). Among symbolic products, clothing is considered to be a product category full of meaning (McCracken, 1986; Solomon & Rabolt, 2004). As a visible form of consumption, clothing is particularly important to consumers and helps define, construct and express identity (Banister & Hogg, 2004; Crane, 2012; Goulding & Saren, 2009; Newholm & Hopkinson, 2009). However, while the literature has clearly established the role of clothing in the construction of consumer's identity, less is known about the role of dress in situations where consumers shift from one identity to another. In this paper we use the term "dress" to incorporate not only clothing, but the complete assemblage, including garments, jewelry, and accessories as well as other adornments such as tattoos, piercings and changes to the texture of the body (Eicher & Sumberg, 1995; Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992).

Prior research suggests that contemporary society inhibits the release of negative feelings and the expression of true desires (e.g. Thoits, 1989).

As such consumers look to extraordinary consumption, or experiences characterized as being more intense, positive and enjoyable (Arnould & Price, 1993), as a means to escape the mundane (Addis & Holbrook, 2010; Arnould & Price, 1993; Shoham, Rose and Kahle, 2000). Extraordinary consumption in this sense creates a break with routine habits and may take the form of ritual (Tumbat & Belk, 2011), and a temporary suspension, or shift, in everyday identity (Szakolczai, 2009). Van Gennep (1909) conceptualizes ritual as a tripartite process involving separation (from the everyday), transition (as an intermediate stage between two worlds, or liminal stage (Turner, 1969) and incorporation (back into the mundane). This process may, in some cases be combined with a visual transformation through an exchange of everyday dress in favor of the unusual or spectacular (Goulding & Shankar, 2011).

This research assesses the role of dress in ritual and extraordinary consumption. Rock music festivals are investigated as a form of ritual in which dress is meaningful (Falassi, 1987; Getz, 2010; Gray, 1980). Here, consumers experience an alternative style that translates into a chaotic mix of visual and sonic codes (Seiler, 2000). This style involves "the appropriation and reinterpretation of signs and commodities as a sort of semiotic guerrilla warfare, in which deliberately transgressive marking of bodies with leather and spikes, […], mohawked and spiked hair, garish makeup and clothing" (Seiler, 2000, p. 217) is the order of the day. In the context of the festival, participants use "strategies of stylization such as the adorning of studded belts and bracelets, tattoos and black clothing" (Snell & Hodgetts, 2007, p. 440). This combination of black and outwardly aggressive looking clothing creates a visual, material break with the style of everyday life and enables membership and adherence to the values of the festival and its community (Halnon, 2004). In what follows we explore this issue of breaking with the

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everyday or identity shifting, through an examination of the literature on dress and identity and dress and ritual. We then present details of a longitudinal, qualitative study of dress and behavior at two European rock festivals before discussing the key findings. We conclude by reflecting on these findings in terms of theory and also managerial implications.

2. Dress and identity

Clothes (garments), fashion (that which tends to adhere to predominantly Western clothing trends) and style (a unique sense of flair) have been culturally and economically significant since the dawn of modernity (and arguably well before), increasing in importance with the emergence of mass markets (Aspers & Godart, 2013). According to Crane (2012), fashion and dress relate to four components in the social science literature: (1) they are a form of material cultural related to the body; (2) they can be considered a language; (3) they are a global system in which consumers play key roles; and (4), they are used to express and shape social identities. Dress can be defined as the tangible objects connected to the human body (Kaiser, 1997), and as collection of material objects which reflect the tastes and values of consumers, dress is considered to be highly symbolic (Banister & Hogg, 2004). In other words dress represents something else rather than something in its own right (Hansen, 2004). Dress may also be used symbolically as an identity device which suggests high involvement on the part of consumers (Newholm & Hopkinson, 2009; O'Cass, 2004; Vieira, 2009). On a performative level dress may be viewed as "costume" given its ability to transform the wearer and enable them to act or perform various identities across the diverse gamut of social situations. Dress, in effect can be an encyclopedia of existence (Peterson, 1988). According to Batty (2014) we live in a storied world in which we constantly act out life narratives, from dressing in the morning, to unwinding at night, to "hitting the town". As such costume enables performance of these life narratives and offers a strong emotional subtext, filled with meaning that alters as it travels through and beyond such narratives. Or, as Bruzzi (1997 p. xv) notes, costume can represent "the liberation and performative potential of clothes and the fluidity of identity". Indeed, costume has the ability to become "a stage in itself" (Stutesman, 2005 p. 37). The analogy of the individual as actor is beautifully exemplified in the influential writings of Erving Goffman. In his dramaturgical account of the theatrical performances and props that individuals use, including appearance, dress, gestures and symbolic cues, he illustrates the performative strategies employed to foster and develop positive self-concepts (Goffman, 1959). Taken into the arena of "total institutions" he further demonstrates the role that such props play in the construction and maintenance of identity and the negative effect the stripping away of such props and enforced uniformity has on the individual's identity (Goffman, 1961).

Identity can be defined as the distinctive characteristics belonging to any given individual. Identity is also a dimension of social relationships and dress communicates not just how consumers see themselves, but also how they want to be seen by others (McCracken & Roth, 1989). Previous research has demonstrated the use of dress as a code or a language. But, for this language to be effective, consumers must share the knowledge of the same code (McCracken & Roth, 1989) and be able to perceive the social information presented in dress as representative of their personalities (Feinberg, Mataro, & Burroughs, 1992). Consumers use dress both to differentiate themselves from others and to mark their membership of reference groups (Eicher & Sumberg, 1995; Nash, 1989; Solomon & Rabolt, 2004). For instance, Sandikci and Ger (2001) illustrate the role of clothes as fashion practices used by women in Turkey. They show that clothing can be used as a political and a social tool to defend their identity compared to Westernized Turkish women. This process in turn is influenced by the context, the life goals and the self-conceptions consumers hold as important (Thompson & Haytko, 1997). However, in some specific contexts, particularly those of extraordinary consumption and ritual, consumers do not necessarily seek to construct their identity, rather they look to temporarily transcend or 'shift' it in order to escape from everyday life.

3. Dress, identity and ritual

For some theorists, modernity or as some might have it, postmodernity, has excluded mystery, magic and passion from human experiences (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). In a sanitized world where opportunities to release stress and express emotions are rare and everyday routines appear alienating (Thoits, 1989), consumers may look to engage in extraordinary consumption (Addis & Holbrook, 2010). Examples of this include climbing Everest (Tumbat & Belk, 2011), attending festivals (Kozinets, 2002) or engaging in high risk sports (Shoham et al., 2000). In essence, consumers invest and create significant meanings through extraordinary consumption which are highly symbolic and ritualistic giving rise to a channeling of emotions (Goulding, Shankar, Elliott, & Canniford, 2009; Kertzer, 1988; Tumbat & Belk, 2011).

Drawing on Van Gennep's (1909) tripartite process consumers immerse themselves in extraordinary consumption through three separate sequential phases. The first of which is the separation phase. During the separation phase, individuals temporarily leave behind their mundane identity. This stage involves a metaphorical death for the individual as he/she is forced to leave something behind (Turner, 1969; Van Gennep, 1909). "It supposes some kind of 'clean slate', a break with previous practices and routines" (Szakolczai, 2009, p. 148). Once consumers have broken with their daily life they enter a second phase: the transition (Van Gennep, 1909) or liminal phase (Turner, 1969). During the transition phase, individuals exist between two phases. They have left behind their everyday identity and are ready for the experience that lies ahead. This middle stage "implies an actual passing through the threshold that marks the boundary between two phases" (Szakolczai, 2009, p. 141). Individuals are able to achieve the level of emotional release necessary to escape because they relax the benchmarks that connect them to their everyday, mundane identity. These rituals are experienced as a form of catharsis (Arnould & Price, 1993; Shoham et al., 2000). Finally, the third phase is incorporation. Here individuals are re-incorporated into society and once again adopt or reclaim their everyday identity (Van Gennep, 1909). But individuals are transformed in some way because they have lived through the ritual experience (Goulding & Saren, 2009).

As part of this process, individuals may experience an isolated identity. During the liminal phase of the ritual they disassociate from their everyday identity and enact a different strand of identity which enables them to release tensions. These ritualistic experiences might be considered as examples of the compartmentalized nature of postmodern life (Goulding, Shankar, & Elliott, 2002). According to Firat and Venkatesh (1995, p. 253), "in this world of shifting images there is no single project, or no one lifestyle, no sense of being to which the individual needs to commit". Individuals have different identities that they can enact according to the circumstances (Strauss, 1997; Tian & Belk, 2005). Goulding et al. (2002) show how identity fragmentation on the clubbing scene enables the expression of different identities relating to the working week or rave weekends. This paper suggests that dress helps consumers to deal with this identity fragmentation and symbolically materialize the temporary shift in identity.

Scholars of ritual have emphasized the key role of objects in the process of identity shifting (Turner, 1979; Van Gennep, 1909). Material objects help consumers express, emancipate and transform themselves both physically and mentally (Borgerson, 2013). In extraordinary consumption, objects serve to operationalize rituals (McCracken, 1986; Parsons, 1963), are rich in meaning, and have a ritual value (Turner, 1979). Because they are part of the experience, they might be said to have magical and irrational properties (Munn, 1973; Solomon & Anand, 1985). Essentially, individuals enter an in-between stage in which they shed their everyday identity and in doing so may face uncertainty (Hopkins, Wood, Siemens, & Raymond, 2014). This uncertainty is often reflected in radical changes in dress. For instance, Goulding and