

Am I What I Wear? An Exploratory Study of Symbolic Meanings Associated with Secondhand Clothing

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INTRODUCTION

Second-order or alternative marketing systems have received increased attention in recent years. Factors such as concern about the environment, reduction in household consumption costs and the attraction exerted by the experiential nature of exchange venues like swap meets, flea markets and garage sales combine to increase interest in used-product buying behaviors (Soiffer and Hermann, 1987; Belk, Sherry and Wallendorf 1988; Sherry, 1990a, 1990b; Rucker et al., 1995). Solomon and Rabolt (2004) have recently reported that “the number of used-merchandise retail establishments has grown at about ten times the rate of other stores”.

Among the wide range of goods for sale, clothing appears to be an important commodity in second-order marketing systems (O’Reilly et al., 1984). Such research as exists on this topic has revealed factors that can increase or decrease the willingness to acquire used clothing. Economic constraints have been pointed out as a critical factor in the purchase decision for secondhand goods (Yavas et al., 1982; O’Reilly et al., 1984). Conversely, concern about contamination has proven to impede the transfer of certain type of items, especially those worn next to the skin (O’Reilly et al., 1984; Belk, 1988). 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. Moreover, psychological approaches have especially and narrowly focused on contamination, disgust and negative meanings, while positive motives have received only scant attention. As suggested by Rucker et al. (1995), it is here proposed that a broader investigation of the various aspects of positive and negative meanings associated with the exchange and resale of secondhand clothing will offer insights into the relationships between ideological visions of the consumption world, values attached to possessions, and appropriation processes where contamination plays a significant role in shaping attitudes and perceptions.

This paper will conceptualize and explore the symbolic and psychological aspects of both acceptance and rejection toward used clothing. In-depth interviews and mini group discussions have been used to elicit qualitative data. The findings reveal, firstly, clear-cut attitudes of acceptance or rejection toward used clothing. Secondly, these attitudes seem basically deep-rooted in a system of symbolic meanings that is strongly dependent on the affectively charged power some consumers attribute to such possessions in providing a sense of self. In particular, when they view clothing as an intimate part of their self, they are unlikely to exchange, sell or buy it, especially from strangers. Conversely, when possessions are less a part of their extended self, they are able to perceive clothes as autonomous objects, free of any associations with their previous owner. Such consumers evaluate used items for their intrinsic properties and buy them according to their perceived value and appeal without reference to their past use. In such cases, we examine more specifically the different symbolic meanings and consumption patterns exhibited by those informants who feel concerned by such reappropriation processes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous studies of second-hand clothing markets have mainly focused on factors affecting consumers’ willingness to purchase used items and their choice criteria. Winakor and Martin (1963) noted that the salability of clothing items was related to how worn

they were and to their fashionableness. O’Reilly et al. (1984) confirmed that low price alone was not sufficient to prompt purchases and that the sizes available, the newness and the quality of the merchandise affected their resale to a greater extent.

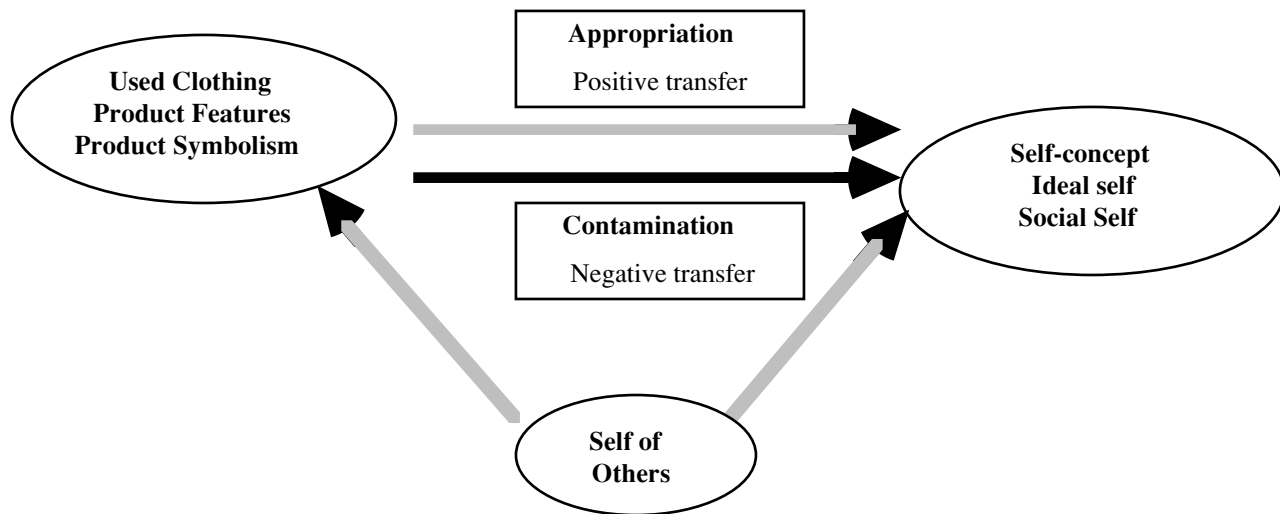
Furthermore, the rejection of certain types of clothing appeared to increase with the increase in proximity to the body, thus confirming concerns about contamination. Goffman (1971) describes contamination as a violation by others of one’s personal space through talking, glancing, touching, bodily contact and excreta. Real or imagined body markings on used clothes, such as perspiration stains or odor, can be felt as a territorial encroachment of the previous owner and therefore a taboo against their re-use. Perspectives on disgust stress the apparent offensive and contaminating nature of contact with other people’s possessions such as clothing and silverware (Rozin, Haidt and McCauley, 2000). While these authors report that aversion to strangeness persists despite laundering or sterilization, Ginsburg (1980) argues on the other hand that concerns toward contamination may have disappeared as a result of public health and cleanliness. Likewise, O’Reilly et al. (1984) and Ostergaard, Fitchett and Jantzen (1999) suggest that appropriation processes can depend on the type of clothes. For example, because of their closeness with the body, underwear are not likely to be transformed, even if washed or laundered, into reusable clothing. With reference to Sartre’s general model of appropriation (1943/1956), objects *are* a part of their owner. The same perspective is supported by the research on the extended self, defined as the self plus possessions (Belk, 1988; Sirgy, 1982; Kleine, Kleine and Kernan 1993). Clothes, perhaps more than any other goods, are supposed to be buried or destroyed when their owner dies, since they represent an intimate aspect of his or her existence. Moreover, destruction, divestment and grooming rituals are also depicted by McCracken (1986) as a means by which individuals void goods of previous symbolic meanings and take possession of the product.

Close relations between physical contamination and moral taint have been explored by Douglas (1966). She suggests that prescriptions concerning purity may derive from increased medical knowledge, but above all from the need to preserve socio-moral rules within the society. Appadurai (1981) found that interpersonal disgust serves the purpose of maintaining social distinctiveness and social hierarchies. Such an outlook is reflected by the literature on ‘aversive’ aspects of consumer choices described by Bourdieu (1984) as the ‘refusal of taste’, especially research conducted on the undesired self and the consumption anti-constellations (Ogilvie, 1987; Englis and Solomon, 1996, 1997; Hogg, 1998; Banister and Hogg, 2001).

However, contact with pre-owned clothing does not always trigger aversion (Belk, 1988). Positive contamination can occur when the clothes are acquired from relatives, parents, friends or loved ones (Lurie, 1981). The magical laws of contagion and similarity (Frazer, 1950/1922; Mauss, 1902/1972) that play a part in transferring negative meanings from strangers or undesirable persons exert symmetric positive influence when other people are part of the extended self (Belk, 1988). Whereas inherited clothes can be cherished as the continuation of loved ones, ancient or rare items of clothing can represent artifacts of a golden age (Baudrillard, 1975) or serve as social markers (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979).

Although accounting for the most commonly recognized psychological variable in purchasing or exchanging used clothing, contamination does not explain the whole significance of this

FIGURE 1
 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE TRANSFERS BETWEEN USED CLOTHING AND CONSUMER SELF CONCEPT



consumption practice. Beyond the monetary or economic benefits that are commonly presented as key factors accounting for the growth of lateral cycling and re-use of secondhand clothing, other motives can be involved in this trend. Thompson and Haytko (1997) showed how consumers resist dominant fashion discourses and create personalized consumption meanings. They stress that some consumers exhibit creative clothing choices—sometimes including second-hand items—in order to stand out and feel unique. Dobscha (1998) has also explored the way some consumers rebel against the marketplace. Among other choices, purchasing secondhand allows them to avoid stimulating the overall demand for new products. Environmental concerns and love of the natural world fuel their motivation in undertaking resistance behaviors such as recycling. Similar anti-consumption attitudes as the result of ethical concerns have been reported by Zavestoski (2002) and Shaw and Newholm (2002). Wearing secondhand clothes *by choice* can thus be regarded as a sign of opposition to consumerism, associated with voluntary simplicity and various reducing behaviors. Murray (2002) has analyzed this recent trend as a response to the materialist culture that focuses on superficial meanings. Controversial elements of the consumerist way of life may lead to a form of detachment from symbolic aspects of the self (Goffman, 1971) and to an increase in re-using and recycling behaviors. Consumers involved in such resistance create new selves that appear to be more “socially conscious” than merely preoccupied with appearance.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In summary, the review of the literature on secondhand clothing has dealt principally, on the one hand, with functional values of used clothes—price, quality, condition, fashionability—and on the other, with the perceived effects of previous ownership and psychological issues relating to contamination. The conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 is based on Sartre’s (1943/1956) view on having and being. He posits that the fundamental intention of desire is to appropriate, in and through the possession of a certain product, some kind of being we lack. «The desire for a particular object is not the simple desire for this object; it is the desire to be united with the object in an internal relation, in the mode of

constituting with it the unity ‘possessor-possessed’ « (Sartre, 1943/1956). Products become significant not in themselves, but rather with respect to their place within the world of the consumer, or, more specifically, as a result of their role in enabling the consumer to appropriate the world of his or her desires. If “I am what I have” (Fromm, 1976, p. 76), to what extent then does the object of desire (here used clothes) contribute to the ideal of desire? Can it be reduced to the fanciful idea of being someone else, the one who preceded me? Or can it support, by its own features, the project of being me? If so, contamination turns out to be simply one of several potentialities carried by the object. But the appropriation of a previously worn item could express the desire to incorporate other symbolic meanings as well. As pointed out by Sartre (1943/1956), it constitutes a creative process shaping the sense of the exchange between the self and the object. Our intent is then to explore the different symbolic functions that such re-appropriation processes can serve for some consumers.

METHODOLOGY

As the overall aim of the research was to investigate the meanings associated with wearing or rejecting secondhand clothes, as well as the psychological and social perceptions embedded therein, a qualitative methodology was considered the most appropriate. In-depth interviews, each of which lasted from half an hour to two hours, were conducted with 43 informants—26 of them female and 17 male—over an 18-month period. A combination of purposive and convenience sampling was used, aimed at selecting informants who would maximally enrich or challenge the interpretations as they emerged and provide what Patton (1990) terms «information rich cases». A snowballing technique was used to identify second-hand clothing consumers *and* non-consumers, using the researcher’s professional and personal network. Variety and contrast were taken into account for recruitment, with respondents chosen sequentially and selectively according to issues and questions that arose as the research unfolded (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The informants ranged in age from 22 to 62 with an average of 38. In order to reflect various symbolic meanings, informants were purposefully selected to represent a mix of different types of

occupation and/or levels of education. The specific nature of the topic led to an over-representation of female respondents, so reflecting their particular interest in fashion and their greater involvement in secondhand purchases, as has been pointed out by O'Reilly et al. (1984). Diversity in sampling also sought to maximize individual differences, taking into consideration familiarity or unfamiliarity with clothing exchange practices and general attitudes toward second-hand consumption. As well as the long interviews, 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 shared values and patterns of consumption.

In all cases, a phenomenological approach was adopted to uncover the lived experience of the respondents and their constructed reality of symbolic meanings. Interviews were conducted in a loosely-structured and non-directive manner around several topics including: 1) clothing choices in general; 2) negative and positive attitudes toward secondhand clothing; 3) type of clothing or situational influences that may affect perceptions; 4) meanings and imagery underlying acceptance and rejection patterns. Respondents were encouraged to recall personal memories, since these can throw light on affectively charged situations and enduring influences acquired during childhood (Sujan, Bettman and Baumgartner, 1993). All interview sessions were conducted at the informants' homes, audio-recorded and transcribed. The constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and grounded theory techniques (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) guided data collection and analysis. Each successive interview was used to refine or put into question the information obtained from previous informants (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The qualitative data were analyzed using an iterative process of searching for recurrent patterns and themes (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Every effort was made to ensure the reliability of the research, including a long-period observation, negative case analysis, debriefing by peers and member checks (Wallendorf and Belk, 1989)

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Secondhand clothes purchasing habits

The categorization produced 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. Some informants acknowledged that they buy used clothes rather frequently from swap meets, flea markets, personal sales or used-merchandise retail outlets. Interestingly, the latter category shows positive but heterogeneous behaviors toward second-hand clothing, as described in the following section. Some informants even admitted to re-using clothes that have been thrown away and put in the trash. Surprisingly, they also acknowledged that they are materially well-off and that such behavior is not dictated by necessity.

Between extreme positions, situational factors are also likely to influence perceptions about used items. For example, acquiring second hand evening dresses or suits for a special event or a fancy dress ball do not seem to elicit either strong feelings of appropriation or fears of contamination. Another perspective is offered by those informants who do not buy used clothes, but do not object to wearing clothes given to them by friends or acquaintances.

This key differentiation between acceptance or rejection related to secondhand consumption substantiates the theoretical model insofar as positive or negative emotions underlie symbolic meanings associated with consumers' choices. To clarify the presentation of the findings, we follow these two main schemata as they emerged from examination of the qualitative data.

Favorable attitudes and symbolic meanings: when reusing worn clothes extends positively the sense of self

Knowledge of the origin of worn clothes and their previous ownership by close friends or relatives transforms perceptions into a positive contagion (Lurie, 1981). These re-appropriations are likely to provoke an increased feeling of identity because they enhance the value or the confidence of the subject by identification with freely chosen, accepted or desired references. Certain respondents testify to this phenomenon through their attachment to special possessions that belonged to their relatives or through the exchange of clothes between friends during their adolescence.

“When I was younger, I sometimes wore clothes of certain friends that I found cute. So it operated itself as a sort of appropriation of their beauty” (Nadia, 30, Medical Secretary).

“I don't believe I've ever bought used clothes, but in the '70s, we'd meet up between girlfriends to exchange our clothes. I really loved this. It was enjoyable and fun. In general, it was the cute things that one would no longer want to wear. It was nice to wear a friend's clothes. It allowed us to change our style by thinking of one another” (Sylvia, 48, Commercial Manager).

On the other hand, the purchase of clothes from unknown individuals, and their recovery from a variety of questionable outlets, poses a more complex problem in conceptualizing the notion of evoked contamination both in the literature and when observed empirically. However, some respondents do not conform to the law of contagion which underlies a part of the sympathetic magic at work in contamination (Frazer, 1950/1922; Mauss, 1902/1972). To express this in another way, for these consumers, clothes can be dissociated from their previous owner and freed from his or her imprint. In contrast to what Rozin, Haidt and McCauley (2000) argue, cleaning does seem to be an effective and sufficient ritual of purification (though it may not always be necessary).

“Yes, I very often wear used clothes that I buy at flea markets and even those that I find in the trashcan. No, that doesn't bother me. Why would that bother me elsewhere? They have been washed. If the clothes please me, I take them, that's all! I do not think about the previous owner at all.” (John, 45, Telecom Engineer).

The lower the investment of self in the possession of clothing and the more the distinction between subject and object is verbalized by consumers, the more likely they are to invest the same types of relationships with worn clothes as with new clothes. In addition, certain characteristics of these clothes and/or of their state of use seem to create for some informants a particular desire for re-appropriation. Four types of motives characterized by distinctive symbolic representations and ideological arguments emerged from the interviews.

The desire for uniqueness

The worn clothing itself, sometimes unique or peculiar, acts as a vector of privileged expression of one's identity and of its wearer. It fulfils the need for uniqueness that certain consumers seek through choices of counter-conformist consumption—a creative expression or a refusal to be submerged in uniformity (Snyder and Fromkin, 1980; Tian and McKenzie, 2001; Tian, Bearden and Hunter, 2001). Worried about being dressed 'like everyone else' and losing their identity, certain respondents acquire worn clothing for the purpose of distinguishing themselves from the mass. De-

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picted as risk-oriented consumers by Jensen and Ostergaard (1998), they emphasize differentiation, personal style and originality more than the pursuit of standards of 'good taste' and social norms.

Two young respondents perfectly expressed this need to be different in their clothing choices, to assert their personality and to create a distance between themselves and mass sartorial conventions.

"From my point of view, buying clothes at flea markets is far more original. I look for something unique, something that not everyone already has. And even if other people seek something similar, it will never be the same. It's also a way to feel different, a means to avoid following the rest of the world. What most people consume doesn't interest me" (Mary, 23, Medical Student).

"I buy used clothes about twice a year, always at the same shop. I love the clothes I see there and I hope that each time I will find something that will match my personality. In general, these clothes are very original and express my personal style" (Ellen, 24, Artist).

Smart shopping and social ruse

In contrast to the preceding profiles that incorporate the characteristics of used clothes to their ideal self in order to assert distinctiveness from others, some informants stress the role that branded used clothing can play within the social comparison process (Festinger, 1954). They express strong feelings of concern both about the image they project to others and about the price to pay to reflect a desirable standard of living. Insofar as they seem particularly sensitive to the impression they make on others through their appearance, second-hand purchases allow them to acquire luxurious and branded clothing, but without paying the full price. For bargain hunters and smart shoppers (Mano and Elliott, 1997), price savings may be a source of pride and accomplishment as much as their desire to escape their 'class habitus' and to acquire the appearance of certain upper social strata by what Bourdieu (1984) calls a strategy of distinction.

The overlap between the financial and psycho-social benefits of such shopping behaviors is attested by the repeated associations of satisfaction derived from pride in being able to buy items of high social value at a very low price.

"I wear used clothes that I generally buy in luxury secondhand shops, branded clothes—Chanel, Yves Saint-Laurent—often slightly worn, at a very reasonable price. What makes me really feel excited is finding nice clothes and accessories that I couldn't have afforded at their full price and that represent a very good deal under those conditions! And for my job, it's a real plus. I really look nice, and I'm all the more pleased in that everyone thinks I bought my stuff in an expensive shop" (Ann, 32, Directional Secretary).

The symbolic interactionist perspective (Solomon, 1983) has previously emphasized the importance of relevant product cues and reliance on material values in meeting role demands. The look created by having up-market clothing, even if second-hand and previously worn, enables consumers to manifest the signs of respectability that protect them against the risk of negative evaluation in public contexts. However, for some informants, this type of appropriation sometimes seems to betray a tension or conflict between an original identity and a borrowed appearance. Some try to keep at a distance the conspicuous display they apparently favor and despise at the same time, while deriving a certain cynical

pleasure in deceiving others. This paradoxical position appears to be what could be termed social ruse. One possible interpretation may be that their rationalization could be dictated by a high sensitivity toward appearances.

"I don't like branded fashion products in general. I find them expensive and not very original. Yet I have discovered that I can buy myself clothes in flea markets that I would have never bought new. Some of them are well-known brands. I laugh at women who have paid a fortune for items that I buy for two euros, and I think they're stupid to have spent so much money. But I am quite happy even so to advantage of it" (Valerie, 38, Medical Visitor).

Nostalgia

Whereas for some consumers the previous history of their clothes is a matter of indifference, others precisely seek a trace of the past, a symbol of a style, epoch, culture or forgotten know-how. This process of historical and cultural identification is often underlined by the perpetuation of myths related to this particular period or that particular group, and for which the clothes constitute one of the visible narrators. Such clothing permits some individuals to perpetuate his or her memory and maintain some temporal continuity, and others to engage in vicarious nostalgia for periods outside of their living memory (Goulding, 2002):

"I often bought old embroidered sweaters and old garments at flea markets. I am also found of lace baptism dresses. They remind me of my childhood, when my grandmother was a laundry washer in the country... I get flashes of memory that come back to me when I see these clothes" (Esther, 54, Hair Stylist)

This nostalgic experience functions like a therapy in terms of memory against the uniformity and banality of mass production, and against a gradual depersonalization of the individual.

"Through objects, I appropriate fragments of history, moments of the past. Today, everything is focused on mass consumption, and the ideal is 'to buy buy buy'—but always something new, of course. Even so, certain products may have a soul or a spirit, because manufacturers reproduce what was made in the past. But it's not the same, because people clearly see it's new. It has no soul in fact. It lacks authenticity" (Alice, 22, Literature Student)

Rejection of squandering

Certain respondents express great concern about the proliferation of consumer goods. Faced with unequal distribution and scarcity of resources, they see the anarchistic depletion of such resources as part of the overall production of waste, and which is especially scandalous if dictated by mood or fashion. Closely aligned to the ethical concerns and attitudes of voluntary simplicity (Dobscha, 1998; Zavetoski, 2002; Shaw and Newholm, 2002), they reject inducements to consume, despise ads and mock all forms of conspicuous consumption. They frequently purchase worn clothing by choice, because it conforms to their logic of personal and collective economy and contributes to the conservation of resources.

"Very often I wear clothes that I buy in secondhand shops, but I also wear clothes I find thrown out in trashcans. And it doesn't bother me, actually! It's the fact that people throw out too many things that really bothers me. Most of the time, they are in good condition. These clothes are rejected and un-

wanted, but they're quite reusable. Why should I leave them?"
(Paul, 47, Primary School Teacher)

For such consumers, articles of clothing rejected as result of the arbitrary whim of fashion re-acquire some of their original desirability, in a process that resembles anthropomorphic attachment to abandoned objects.

"I feel no kind of repulsion toward clothes that have already been worn. Obviously, these clothes have a history that appeals me. They have been chosen by another woman, they had been loved, and now that they no longer please her, I give them a second chance" (Susan, 52, designer)

Attitudes of rejection: When wearing used clothes degrades the sense of self.

Unlike the previous informants for whom perceptions of waste are associated with an endless cycle of buying and disposal, other consumers perceive used clothing essentially as rubbish. They hold that an item of clothing can only be worn by a sole owner, in the same way that food can only be eaten by one mouth. According to Thompson's (1979) assumptions, usage of such products makes them change from the 'Transient' to the 'Rubbish-category'. Appropriation is perceived as a marking of the product, which becomes indissociable from its owner and thereby unfit for subsequent use. A used item of clothing cannot be seen other than as highly contaminating, because it is experienced as an extension of the body of another person. Grooming and purification rituals do not suffice to eradicate the fantasy of bodily impregnation.

"I will never buy secondhand clothes. This is due to the problem of hygiene. I can't stop myself from thinking that the previous owner could have been dirty and never have washed"
(Michael, 28, Export Executive)

These representations underline the existence of possible symbolic transfers between two identities, that of the other and that of the self, mediated by the object. For some respondents, fear of the unknown and of strangeness engenders a degraded image of the former wearer, which is projected onto the clothing. This then becomes a physical or symbolic vehicle of contamination by unwanted characteristics of others. Such intimate corporeal proximity can represent a kind of auto-violation of the territory of the self, according to Goffman (1971), or pollution, as proposed by Douglas (1966). Disease, death, and social misfortune are often associated in fantasy with used clothing:

"...I don't see myself ever buying these types of items, in any case. It is the idea of imagining the previous owner which puts me off. The idea of not knowing, I imagine it in a negative manner. Maybe the clothes carry diseases. The worst thing would be to imagine that I was wearing clothes of a dead person" (Laura, 24, Doctoral Student)

"Yes, I would be embarrassed to wear secondhand clothing. To me they seem tainted and associated with an image of failure. It would mean that I can't afford to buy new clothes and that I have gone down on the social scale." (Alex, 38, Lawyer)

Beside the fear of contamination, other interesting motives were revealed by the interviews. The intimate and unique link that some owners have with their clothes lead them to project this exclusive vision onto possessions in general. What is at stake here is less a concern about contamination with germs than the refusal of

a shared narrative with someone else through his or her possessions. Wearing something that belonged to others threatens the feeling of difference, unity and coherence which nurtures the sense of self (Allport, 1955; Erikson, 1968). As expressed by one of the young women participants:

"Clothes already have a history and a life before me. Purchasing them doesn't take away their previous life, and in some way they could never completely belong to me and be part of my intimacy." (Sandra, 22, Student).

Thus in certain cases, wearing used clothes is expressed figuratively as a feeling of dispossession. Individuals feel condemned to assume other people's identities and to leave their own behind. 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, and whose feeling of dispossession seems to derive from an involuntary encroachment of their older siblings' personalities on their identity, threatening their perception of their own value.

"When I was a little boy, I always wore used clothes. That is to say, clothes from my brother. I have never had anything of my own. Therefore I think that it comes from that, not wanting to buy secondhand clothes" (Joseph, 56, Professor).

All these aspects show the high degree of attachment some individuals invest in their clothing. Clothing plays a great part in reflecting their identity, and they cannot tolerate any kind of transfer or infringement from others. An exception can be made when others are incorporated in the individual's extended self.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

A review of the literature stressed the importance of contamination in appropriation processes concerning secondhand clothing. The findings confirmed that contamination is an important factor in rejection behaviors toward used clothes. In particular, our research showed that rejection is based on the specific fear of incorporating a degraded image of the previous owner. Death, disease or misfortune are often associated with the former wearer, and 'bad vibes' are imagined to transfer through his or her possessions to the new owner. But the findings suggested also that the concern with unwanted contamination is not as general as it is thought. Positive symbolic appropriation can be involved in exchanging clothing between friends or parents. Moreover, fear of contamination does not necessarily play any part in buying or wearing secondhand clothes, even when the previous owner is unknown.

What clearly differentiated acceptance from rejection behaviors was the ability of individuals to view clothing as mere objects rather than as part of their or someone else's extended self. When used clothes are not too closely associated with their former wearer, they can be appraised for their own values instead of being reduced to the incorporated intimacy of another person. In this case, other motives guide and explain purchasing and recycling behaviors in relation to used clothes. Four types of symbolic representations were extracted from the interviews. The first two refer to the social comparison process. The desire to be unique and smart shopping behaviors are two opposing facets of a way one presents oneself to others. This indicates that there is an integration of the imagined appraisals of oneself by others in the construction of one's ideal social self. While counterconformity expresses self-assertion, risk-taking and differentiation, social ruse orientations are grounded on conformity to and imitation of perceived social superiors.

Two other categories of representation are related to ideal self and self-esteem, namely nostalgia and responsibility. Because of their connection with the past, either of fashion or of a bygone age, used clothes may express a singularity, a difference or an authenticity for certain respondents. Possession allows them to differentiate themselves, express their personality, or maintain a tie with the past, history, and personal or collective memory. The refusal to squander combines an ethical dimension with the intense feelings of collective responsibility induced by acts of consumption. The ideal self does not express itself in clothing and appearance, but rather in the social implications of consuming less and reinvesting discarded objects with a value deriving from their function.

CONCLUSION

This examination of symbolic meanings associated with secondhand clothing stands in marked contrast to earlier studies which have generally focused on negative perceptions triggered only by a fear of contamination. The present study has sought to extend and challenge a traditional view of the appropriation processes by exploring other positive motives likely to promote the transfer and re-use of used clothing. It is hoped that the study, despite the small sample size, contributes to a deeper understanding of consumer-object relations and of the complex processes of incorporation of objects in constructing a sense of self. The illumination of such partially hidden consumption choices can illustrate how consumers exercise their freedom to create new meanings far from conventional consumption practices.

Based on the results of this exploratory research, the next step of this project could be to test on a larger sample the degree to which disgust sensitivity plays a part in differentiating attitudes toward used clothes. In addition, further research may test the propositions set forth in this paper concerning secondhand buyers' orientations such as the desire to be unique, the tendency to engage in nostalgic feelings, prestige sensitivity associated to smart shopping behaviors or anti-consumption attitudes.

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