# Symbolic Consumption by Teenagers: A Discussion through the Optics of Appearance and Identity

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## Abstract

This research focus on a particular segment of consumers: the teenagers. Given that teenagers try to build their identity by showing their preference to fashion's objects, this research investigate the interaction of the duality appearance-identity, which allows apprehending the behaviour of the adolescent consumer. This article present then, a literature review showing how the teenagers express their relation to the world by producing their appearance through symbolic consumption. Considering the cognitive approach would be unsuited to explain this behavior of consumption, we present the semiotic approach which could contribute to clarify the symbolic aspects of consumption, by looking for the meaning of the objects for these specific consumers.

**Key words:** teenagers, symbolic consumption, semiotics.

## *1. Introduction*

Appearance or "look" of individuals is not luck, because the act of dressing goes beyond practicality, comfort or protection and distinguishes less and less people by their gender or age. In fact, the look gives style and a genre to individuals. However, in the era of globalization and religious pluralism, it becomes increasingly difficult to decode the symbolic language of appearance. Sometimes, it symbolizes belonging to a group, and sometimes it reflects a quest for identity, values and ideals.

Teenagers are the group who are primarily concerned with their "look." In fact, teens, not kids but not yet adults, are growing up in a world of signs, symbols and logos. They have their own language and codes. In addition, they produce their look by their consumption in order to express their value systems and cultural references. In this delicate stage of his life ,a teenager tries to build his identity by drawing from his relations with his family, by locating its place in a membership group and even by showing his preferences to fashion's objects. This brings us to express the following problem: How could the interaction of the couple appearance-identity, allow apprehending the behavior of the adolescent consumer towards the fashion's objects?

In this paper, we propose an exhaustive synthesis of the literature on how teenagers express their relationship with the world by producing their appearance through consuming fashion items. This symbolic consumption mode contributes to building their identity. We present in the second section current research on the identity of adolescents and young people's relationships with fashion in the third section. In so far as the cognitive model would be inadequate to explain this consumption behaviour, we present in the fourth section, a semiotic approach, which would be more appropriate to deal with the symbolic aspect of consumption.

## *2. Teenagers and Identity*

A teenager is the last stage of childhood and the first stage of adulthood. However, the accurate definition of teenhood raises questions of dimension and limits, whether they be biological, psychological or social dimensions.

Indeed, teenhood is perceived as an intermediary stage during which the person is neither a kid nor an adult. It has no social responsibility, but it may explore act and experience roles (Cloutier, 1982). It is about a standby moment that society allows for youths to choose their path, a personality, and even an identity.

## *2.1. Identity Construction*

In psychology, a large number of research is based on input of Erikson's identity model (1986). According to this perspective, self-identity is a sense of unity and continuity over time and despite the changes. Erikson proposes a life cycle consisting of eight cycles, each marked by a crisis. The most important of which is an identity crisis during teen years. By the end of teenhood, identity construction is complete and becomes more solid with the growth of individual knowledge. This enables the teen to organise his experiences and to fathom the world and its realities as well. According to Erikson, identity development is not only a psychological process, but is also a process that considers any form of social interaction with others. Indeed, experience accumulation enables to enlighten the image we have of "others" and the roles they play. Similar to Erikson (1968), Blasi's theory of identity development supports the effect of the individual's cognitive level on identity development.

Blasi (1988) describes three identity development stages. At first, perception of the "I" or "I am" is limited to the person's external sphere, i.e. physical appearance (e.g. "I am thin, I am happy"). In this context, neither experience nor subjective perception is involved. In the first identity development stage (observation stage), people go beyond simple description to appraise facts after thinking. At this stage, people start to express their internal feelings in a profound manner. For instance, people start to express their psychological traits like "I am a confident person" or "I am emotional". In the second stage, (identity management), people choose "paths" and set objectives and targets to reach. People become more flexible and "efficient" and show some ability of "self management". For instance, they express attitudes like "I am flexible" or "I am trying to reach my objective".

In the third and last stage of identity development, (identity and authenticity), people express contradictory feelings, coming from their inside. Negative feelings reflect an internal conflict like "I am confident, though I wish I am more modest", or "I need to maintain a good relationship with my colleagues, but I do not want to be involved in their social activities". By expressing their positive feelings, people try to bind and link their "self" with reality. They show respect to truth by fear of distorting it. Moreover, studies by Marcia (1966) draw on Erikson's contributions. The author attempts to operationalize Erikson's theory by distinguishing different teen identity thresholds, highlighting thus dynamicity of identity. Moreover, we distinguish two types of identity: subjective and objective identities. This latter refers to objectively determined identity, whereas subjective identity is based on the person's subjective experience (Kossler, 1989; Shneider, 1989).

Nevertheless, we may claim that identity is in itself an elusive concept. Breakwell (1983) claims that the concept of identity depends on its theoretical context, suggesting that the same concept may be used differently by two theoreticians. Furthermore, identity is not just a distinctive personal trait, or even a collection of traits of an individual, but it is the manner with which the person sees himself in relation to his experience and his future vision (Gidden et al., 1995). Wigert (1988) defines identity as the « typical I » that characterizes the individual in a network of social rapports. Markus and wurf (1987) claim that identity is an image of the "self" that we attempt to portray to others and consequently identity would be defined in terms of relationships with others: family members, colleagues, friends and acquaintances (Gough and Mcfadden, 2001). Then, developing an individual's identity is inseparable from his parallel development of social collective identity (Elliot, 1998). Brewer (1991) showed that the individual quest of social identity satisfies both needs for belonging and distinction needs.

From a sociological point of view, human identity is the product of their personal history (Gidden, 1991; kossler, 1989). Then, developing one's identity is made possible with and by interaction with others. Mead (1964) even suggests that the « I » is essentially a social structure that is born of a social experience. It seems then that identity is in a great measure formulated by interacting with one's social environment. In social psychology, the work of Tafjel (1972) shows that through its membership in a group, the individual acquires a social and individual identity. At last, we believe that there are mainly two approaches to address the issue of identity: The psychological approach, which is based on self or the sociological approach which refers to the other. Overall, the majority of current research examined, considers that identity is not mechanically transmitted.

We may claim that identity is a form of apprehending the "self", which refers to the individual's history, past experiences, his roles and his relationships with others in a social context. Finally, we conclude that whatever identity level is considered: the individual, the group or society, researches indicate that it is constructed and activated continuously within interactions.

## 2.2. Identity, Teenhood and Appearance: What Kind of Relationship?

In this paper, we define appearance as the teen's body and the objects he/she carries, mainly clothes. Indeed, the body image is at the heart of research dealing with teens. At this stage of life, identity quest is a result of a dialectic between the very well known kid's body and a body changed through succession of events that took place at puberty, to give birth to a body sexually mature, mysterious and unknown (Birraux, 1990; Gentina, 2008). Stereotypes on male female body images, the most esthetically appreciated by western societies, seem to be "interpreted" and integrated in a very strict manner by most teenagers (koff and Rierdan, 1980). Since childhood, boys express their desire to have a nice, muscled, and geomorphic body (Lerner and al, 1975; Staffieri, 1967). By teenhood, they aspire to reach this ideal and tend to underestimate themselves if their physical appearance fails them (Jovanovic and al, 1972; Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Holt and Thompson, 2004).

Likewise, girls are subject to images influenced by media, of extremely slim female bodies and consequently often react negatively to their bodies' normal mutations at puberty (Brenner and Hinsdale, 1978; Staffieri, 1972; Guiot, 2000). These latter evaluate their bodies'changes according to whether they become more or less physically attractive. They face different social acceptance models: the athletic woman with hard muscles, the seducing woman with a nice slim body, the mother woman with her generous forms (Wiggins, 1973; Musa and Roach, 1973; Garnier and al, 1980; Silverstein and al, 1986; Shaw and Kemeny, 1989). These conflicts lead sometimes to psychosomatic sufferance and a decrease in self-esteem in teenagers (Garrick and al, 1988, Valette-Florence and Pasini, 1997; Pasini, 1998; Thériault and Milkewicz, 2004). Hence, adolescence is a period of life when self-esteem is often low (Guiot, 2000). In addition, it appears that self-esteem in adolescence is closely related to body image, and more specifically related to physical attractiveness (Cash and al., 2004; Valette-Florence and Pasini, 1997). Improving the appearance by the symbolic consumption of some products and brands, aims at enriching the image of the teenager since appearance is important in affirming the "self." These lead us to underline the importance of appearance for teenagers and its influence on identity construction, in as much as these teens would be proud of their appearance and the image they portray to others (Amadieu, 2002).

## 3. Fashion and identity

The  general definition of the term "fashion" in dictionaries shows that it is an individual way to act, to live, to think, but also a collective and individual way dressing. Sproles (1979) defines fashion as a temporary trend and a cyclical collective behavior, specific to a given period and related to the phenomenon of imitation. Literature on the relationship of youths with fashion is not abundant. However, there are two main sets of research.

### 3.1. Youths Relationship with Fashion: The Research Schools

The first point relating to the effect of media on teens is the diffusing of stereotypical models (Richins, 1991). These images imposed by media lead these youths to compare their bodies and generate a feeling of anxiety and a decrease in self-esteem (Lerner, 1974). Moreover, for young people, choosing clothes will be strongly influenced by media (Morrison et al, 2004; Schultz et al; 1991). Indeed, to target its young audience, ads rely on specific axes. For instance the hero: "do you identify yourself with such a personality", for new styles: "don't be old-fashioned" or for pleasure: "have fun". Combination of these vectors gives the rationale for the advertising slogan: "Imitate x star; Be in; Buy brand z". Furthermore, the dressing style or the look may be assimilated with an appearance code of a group. Indeed, to avoid exclusion, the teen looks to melt into a group or belong to a tribe. Belonging to a community seems essential: finding a style is finding a clan.

The second set of research rests on post-modernism, which highlights another historical fashion turn marked by diversity of styles, segmentation of tastes and individuality of expressions. By opposition to the first set, this latter witness an increasing rejection of frontiers imposed on individuals (Yonnet, 1985). Mixing a variety of stylistic fashion elements by combining different styles and fabrics adds more diversity to "post-modernism" fashion.

This phenomenon known as pastiche or mixture fashion (Morgado, 1996), may be as well marked by eclectism and mixing of fashion codes and styles (Kaiser, 1990; Morgado, 1996). The mixing of different styles is very present in fashion magazines. For instance, combing a dance ballerina with a leather jacket is considered by youths as fashion (Kaiser, 1990). Finally, we may conclude that there is no model or style that represents postmodern fashion but a diversity of styles. This line of thinking gave birth to dressing individualism.

Moreover, in contrast to the first set of research which highlights group or class belonging, postmodern fashion seizes the discussion within age (Yonnet, 1985). Indeed, traditional determinants of fashion (status, gender, social class …) are weakened in favour of time and age as well. Furthermore, fashion history through the world goes beyond a dressing behaviour and translates the youth's value systems, cultural references or even transition periods like crises. Indeed, youths express their worries through their looks (dress, hair cut, tattoos, piercing ) and through adopting a music style. Moreover, these groups identify themselves by some specific look. We may mention the 1980's "punk" movement, which expressed through dress and appearance a radical ideology, "No future", "Destroy", which we translate by "destroy the world if we want to save it". Their ruffled fluorescent hair, their blade-punched dresses, their faces pierced with rings, locks and nails, with a white rat on the shoulder, reflected inevitably anti-social attitudes (Yonnet, 1985). These fashion movements and others attract youths for whom belonging to a community seem essential to them.

In this transition period, the teenager questing for identity is sometimes led to give up his identity despite his freedom of choice. He finds himself channelled in some "look" movements and may be assimilated to a group code. In this line of thinking, we may conclude that fashion is a mode of expression, a kind of a mute language but can tell a lot on those who put it on.

## 3.2. Fashion and Identity: Decoding Symbolic Consumption

In what preceded, we showed that fashion represents an expression mode for teenagers. Their personal abilities being less mature in this period, teenagers look for fashion to "express themselves", and even identify themselves. Indeed, teenagers launch themselves to endorse attributes that would make them feel accomplished. In this regard, the look operates as a recognition signal and group identification. Moreover, choice of dress and accessories dependent to the look is not an innocent manoeuvre, since it portrays a teen image and tells a lot about him. Accordingly, dress is part of the teen's identity construction.

Feathersone (1991) assumes that postmodern consumers show their individuality and style through the collection of dresses, practices and experiences that they design into a peculiar style. Then, the adoption of a style or fashion through a peculiar "look" allows for forming and tailoring their "self" and creating their identity. Consumers learn to agree on the significance of few symbols and develop a symbolic interpretation of their own identities through a socialising process. Particular fashion styles represent or emphasize personal qualities cultivated in different cultural contexts and through symbolism. In this regard, these consumers use fashion models in terms of dresses, accessories, brands and trade labels as symbols (woodurfee, 1998). They use these symbols to construct, maintain and express a multiplicity of identities (woodruffle and Elliot, 1998).

In addition, Douglas and Isherwood (1978) claim that "goods are neutral, their uses are social". This quote highlights as well the symbolic consumption of goods and their significance for consumers. Indeed, an essential aspect of symbolic consumption is the role played by products as clear indicators of a social structure. Possession of specific products or brands as well as their way of using may have different connotations: political or religious affiliation, a stage in our life, a social category (Solomon and Douglas, 1987). Moreover, consumers are motivated to buy in order to consume the symbolic aspect of the product and not the product itself, which is true for fashion consumption.

## 4. Symbolic Consumption

We can distinguish two levels of symbolic significance; public and private (Richins, 1994). These two levels interact in dialectically with the individual and society (Ritson et al., 1996). Then, the symbolic consumption functions twofold: to the "outside" to construct "the social world" and to the "inside" to construct "individual identity" (Elliot, 1994).

In this paper, we develop the second level of symbolic consumption. Indeed, the private aspect of symbolic significance relates to the whole of subjective significance of what an object represents to an individual and further determines what this latter feels about his possessions. This form of symbolism which includes the individual's lived experiences, past and souvenirs enables to extract significance through consumption. Furthermore, this consumption becomes a determinant of our personal identity which is called also "narrative identity". The consumer perceives the product as an element that is part of him/her and tells about a life episode.

Products with symbolic connotations become a part of us or of what Belk (1988) calls « the extended self ». Belk claims also that our identity is structured as a story with a logical chronological order. These stories are structured around conflicts and their ultimate relationships. These conflicts define this story, its theme and the questions it raises. The concept of narrative identity was also treated by Ricoeur (1990) who claimed that "it is the identity of the story that makes up the identity of the individual", suggesting that episodes in our life are related in memory and are bound together in a way they form a story. This claim allows representing identity as related to a past converging to the present and if possible linked to an imaginary future. Thompson (1997) emphasized also that interpretation of fashion consumption experiences the way they are reported by consumers consists of analysing them like a story, i.e. like a narrative model.

Aaron (2005) relied on the works of Blek (1988) to report an empirical study that shows the position of "liked" objects in the construction of a narrative identity where activities or objects allow for resolving identity conflicts. Narrative identity theory has become the dominant conceptualisation of the self. Then, consumption seems like a social and a cultural process full of cultural signs and symbols. Consumption plays a particular central role in teenagers' lives in as much as they use consumption scenarios and models to define their identity, achieve the self and their belonging to groups (Blek et al., 1989; Belk, 1996; Featherstone, 1991; Firat, 1991; Gidens, 1992). We should note that the relationship between symbols and objects has taken a central stage within the postmodern era (Barnard, 1996).

### 4.1. The Semiotic Approach

Above we came to know that consumers' daily life is full of typical consumption experiences, rich with symbols and signs. At the beginning of the 1980's, the work of Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) emphasized the need to complete or go beyond conventional analysis which claimed rationality of individuals and their consumption habits by considering experiential aspects of consumption. In addition to being functional, consumption may be symbolic, hedonic and aesthetic. Consequently, consumption, far from looking uniquely for satisfying objectives – purchases- and looking for and maximising utility, may be a source of emotions, pleasure, hedonic self-gratification by and for itself. Nevertheless, the consumption experience cannot be assimilated with hedonic consumption (Benavent and Evrard, 2002). It is necessary to distinguish first experiential aspects of consumption which cover feelings and emotions felt by individuals and induced by their consumption of goods or services, and the consumption experience that represents a contextual interaction between the individual and the object of consumption.

Moreover, the multi-attributes model represents consumption as a kind of information-processing machine of costs and advantages of a product without taking into account their relationship with the self and others. This quantitative model turns out to be then irrelevant in the context of consumption experiences. To mend this limitation, the semiotic approach seems more appropriate. Indeed, we may locate the semiotic studies on objects of consumption within the focus of sign exchanges. Semiotics studies the significance process that gives meaning to objects (Eco, 1988). This approach offers an analytical framework based on exchanging significance that allows us to understand better the consumption behaviour and equally the relevant conceptual tools and methodology to describe and analyse consumers' expectations of products.

### 4. 2. Semiotics and Language of Products

Semiotics-based studies in marketing are numerous and not easy to structure either in terms of time or content. Using few references (Pasquier, 1999), we notice coexistence between two research traditions largely inspired by the works of Saussure and Pierce (Pasquier, 1999). Structural semiotics, of which Saussure is the pioneer, focused greatly on firms discourse and particularly advertising, whereas Pierce's semiotics focused on consumers, symbolic purchasing and consumption.

Furthermore, goods may be considered as very complex signs consisting of tangible and intangible values. On the one hand, tangible components are not deprived from significance because, following the form, colours, materials, graphics or even other used signs, products will be more or less accessible to consumers. On the other hand, most products incorporate symbolic values that often go beyond the strict material value (fashion objects). These symbolic values are important both for the person himself (self image, personal value) and the person as a social entity (social status, image for others). The set of signs driven by products may be described, even explained by means of tools developed by semiotics.

Indeed, Floch (1989, 1990) proposes a classification of values looked for by consumers. These may be identified thanks to recognising within discourse an opposition between two important values: utilitarian values and existential values. These semantic mechanisms have been defined by Floch (1990), as opposing narration utilitarian values (characterized by their concrete and utilitarian accomplishment; the product is appreciated and researched for its practicality, functionality, comfort, performance and ease of use), with existential values (corresponding to "higher" expectations of individuals, like accomplishing or achieving the self; the product enables the consumer to express his/her identity and life projects). Moreover, whether in terms of their use value or symbolic value, products carry significance. This is considered both at the level of the product itself and the relationships carried by products (Pasquier, 1999). Hoshino (1987) focused on studying signs of products to understand better the set of significance simultaneously driven by a set of different codes. The author studied different objects through their significance. Then, by reconstructing the set of signified systems linked to a product, we may contribute to its development or to its improvement as suggested by Hoshino (1987).

## 5. Conclusion

Through a literature review, we set the goal to show the place of symbolic consumption in the construction of identity among teenagers. Indeed, in a first step we showed how adolescence is viewed as a period of crisis and turmoil in which many parameters are revised. Teens have to manage better the changes they undergo, mainly research and affirmation of identity. Second, we deduced that appearance was a decisive factor for the construction of teenage identity and therefore teenager seek to "speak" through fashion consumption. In addition, teens look forward to consuming the symbolic aspect of the fashion object, not the object itself. This "dialogue" of teens with fashion objects involves marketers and pushes them to raise some questions: "Who is my interlocutor? »; What is his identity? What is the place of my brand in his dialogue? In a future work, a semiotic analysis with teens will enable us to answer these questions.

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