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# Dress, transformation and conformity in the heavy rock subculture

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## Dress, transformation and conformity in the heavy rock subculture

### 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.

**Keywords:** transformation; dress; identity; ritual; extraordinary consumption; rock festivals

## Introduction

The symbolic role of products is a major topic in the consumer behavior literature (e.g. Elliot, 1997; Han, Nunes and Drèze, 2010; McCracken, 1986). Symbolic products are not necessarily purchased for functional benefits, but can be used to express relationships with reference groups (Banister and Hogg, 2004), indicate status, age or gender (O’Cass and 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 and Rabolt, 2004). As a visible form of consumption, clothing is particularly important to consumers and helps define, construct and express identity (Banister and Hogg, 2004; Crane, 2012; Goulding and Saren, 2009; Newholm and 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 and Sumberg, 1995; Roach-Higgins and 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 and Price, 1993), as a means to escape the mundane (Arnould and Price, 1993; Shoham, Rose and Kahle, 2010; Addis and Holbrook 2010). Extraordinary consumption in this sense creates a break with routine habits and may take the form of ritual (Tumbat and Belk, 2011), and a temporary suspension, or shift, in everyday identity (Szokolczai, 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 and 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 (Gray, 1980; Falassi, 1987; Getz, 2010). Here, consumers experience an alternative style that translates into a chaotic mix of visual and sonic codes (Seiler, 2010). 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 and 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 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.

### 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 and Godart, 2013). According to Crane (2012), fashion and dress relates 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 and 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 and 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 (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 (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 and 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 and Roth, 1989) and be able to perceive the social information presented in dress as representative of their personalities (Feinberg, Mataro and Burroughs, 1992). Consumers use dress both to differentiate themselves from others and to mark their membership of reference groups (Eicher and Sumberg, 1995; Nash, 1989; Solomon and 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 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 and 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.

### 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 and 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 and Holbrook, 2010). Examples of this include climbing

Everest (Tumbat and Belk, 2011), attending festivals (Kozinets, 2002) or engaging in high risk sports (Shoham et al., 2010). In essence, consumers invest and create significant meanings through extraordinary consumption which are highly symbolic and ritualistic giving rise to a channeling of emotions (Kertzer, 1988; Goulding, Shankar, Elliott and Canniford, 2009; Tumbat and 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" (Szokolczai, 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" (Szokolczai, 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 and Price, 1993; Shoham et al., 2010). 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 and Saren, 2011).

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 and 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 and Belk, 2005). Goulding, Shankar and Elliott (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 and 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 and Raymond, 2014). This uncertainty is often reflected in radical changes in dress. For instance, Goulding and Shankar (2011) suggest that dress plays a key role in the transformation of individuals as they pass from the world of work to the world of play and in doing so look for cues and confirmation from peers as to their place in this alternative sphere. By studying movies, Choi, Ko and Megehee (2014) also show the role of dress in revealing and visualizing physical and psychological transformations. However, the specific role of this visual transformation in extraordinary consumption remains largely unexplored.

Consequently, the following research question was posed: what role does dress play in consumers' temporary shift of identity through ritual and extraordinary consumption?

## Methodology

To answer the research question music festivals were investigated as a site of ritual and extraordinary consumption. Festivals are exceptional and popular events that celebrate one or more art forms in a unique context and for a limited period (Getz, 2010). More specifically, we focus on rock music festivals (Bowen and Daniels, 2005). This choice is predicated on the notion that festivals take place in a time out of time (Falassi, 1987; Gray, 1980) and inspire leisure, social, and cultural experiences (Getz, 2010). According to Greenhill (2001), the festival is special while the non-festival is ordinary. They are unique consumption experiences in which consumers invest heavily (Getz, 2010) and where a "festival look" defines participation (Halnon, 2004; Snell and Hodgetts, 2007).

## *Data collection*

We employed a qualitative methodology to collect data with the aim of focusing on the lived experience of participants (Miles and Huberman, 1994) and on the constraints of their everyday lives (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). The data collection process consisted of two main stages.

The first stage involved one of the authors engaging in participant observation at two annual rock music festivals in order to gain a deeper understanding of the research context. These were the Hellfest Festival in Clisson, France, and the Rock Altitude Festival in Le Locle, Switzerland. Both festivals are international events and specialize in hard rock and heavy metal. But while Hellfest attracts more than 100,000 participants over three days with famous heavy rock bands such as Iron Maiden, Slayer, Kiss and Korn, Rock Altitude attracts

about 2,000 festival-goers over four days with smaller artists such Neurosis, Converge, Napalm Death and Cult of Luna. These observations took place over a five year period with 5 consecutive visits to Hellfest and 2 visits to Rock Altitude. Regular attendance at these events provided not only firsthand experience, but also the opportunity to build strong relationships with a number of festival-goers. As a consequence, the author had the opportunity to attend festivals with a number of participants and have long informal discussions with them. The initial goal of this participant observation was to become acculturated into the festival scene and to gain insights into the nature of the experience and the dress adopted by festival-goers. As part of the observational stage photographs were taken of participants, bands and the various events at the festival in order to visually capture the experience as it happened (Harper, 2002).

The second stage consisted of a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted just after the participant observation phase using the knowledge gained from the field to construct the interview guide (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Interviews explored the role played by dress in the rock music festival experience, and more precisely, questions about the dichotomy surrounding meanings associated with everyday clothing and style at rock music festivals. Following the principles of in-depth qualitative research, participants were free to guide the flow of the discussion. Regarding the sample, convenience, snowball and purposive sampling were utilized as each one led to further contacts which helped refine the questions and focus on the key aspect of the research (Patton, 2002). To begin with, the sample was limited to individuals in the workplace because the aim of the paper was to observe how they escape from the routine of everyday life (Addis and Holbrook, 2010). Based on the relationships built during the long term participant observation, the author approached ten acquaintances chosen because they were fans of heavy rock music festivals and invited them to take part in the research by discussing their choice of

clothes, their meaning and the role they played in the overall experience. Each of these was then asked if they would select at least one person from their own circle who attends music festivals. The sample size was determined by the principle of saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Patton, 2002). Data collection ceased after 23 interviews when no new themes were seen to merge from the data. The final sample comprised of a diverse group of participants in terms of sex, age and education levels (13 men, 10 women, with ages ranging from 19 to 37).

### *Data analysis*

The interviews lasted about one hour on average. They were recorded and fully transcribed and accounted for more than 23 hours of conversation. Data were analyzed manually, using an iterative process to identify central themes in the narratives (Miles et Huberman, 1994). As suggested by Le Ny (1979), we focused on the couple argument/predicate. While the argument is about the object of the discourse (“what do we talk about”), the predicate specifies the argument (“what is said about the argument”). The analysis was conducted following Spiggle’s (1994) framework of categorisation, abstraction, comparison and integration.

Three levels of coding were performed. First, through reading and re-reading, open coding was used to capture all of the themes addressed during the interviews. Second, axial coding was performed to connect the data. During the process of open and axial coding, a continuous comparison process was conducted between the data and the emerging theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Finally, based on the dimensions of the theoretical construct, a final phase of abstraction was performed in order to move towards the production of meaning. The different categories were used to construct a stable theoretical framework (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Spiggle, 1994). This process allowed for the highlighting of three categories of analysis that we describe in the next section.

## Findings

### Dress, escape and identity shifting

The findings support earlier research which demonstrates that extraordinary consumption experiences such as music festivals enable consumers to quit their ordinary life for a short time (Arnould and Price, 1993; Goulding et al., 2002; 2009; Shoham et al., 2010; Tumbat and Belk, 2011). Consumers of music festivals participate in this kind of event to create a break with their everyday life and all the concerns associated with it. As Anna a 21 year old administrator comments:

Some of it's about escape. It's one outlet. You have to put up with the pressures of work, life, family, friends with their troubles as well as your own, but when you go to festivals you forget all about that. Nobody wants to know what's wrong, nobody wants to tell you their problems. I'm not interested and neither are they. This is about enjoying yourself and forgetting all that, mixing with friends you know and making new friends. You're all here, listening to the same bands, so at least you have common ground with people.

Anna, talks about leaving the mundane behind and entering a space of sociality and mutual taste and enjoyment. This is part of the process of shifting the self from one state of being to another. During the festival, consumers temporarily let go of their usual identity to experience an alternative one through the adoption of different dress, usually composed of black clothes and gruesomely decorated tee-shirts, gothic makeup, studded belts and bracelets (Seiler, 2000; Snell and Hodgetts, 2007). For example Ludovic, who works in an office and normally has to dress conservatively, talks about getting in the 'festival mood' almost as a transformation of himself to the point that he would not be recognized by those who know him well.

When I put myself in the festival mood, I look different. It is clear *that I am someone else*. My office colleagues, neighbors and even some of my friends would never recognize me. They would be very surprised to see me I guess (Ludovic, age 37).

The important point here is that people leave their everyday identity via a visual transformation that happens symbolically through dress. This transformation enables them not only to look different but to think of themselves as a different person – “I am someone else” (Ludovic). The abandonment of work-related clothes in favor of “subcultural” dress carries distinct metaphorical meanings of release and separation (Tian and Belk, 2005); a point reinforced in the narratives of many we spoke to:

When I go to a festival for three or four days, I don't want to spend a single second thinking about my job and all the worries that go with it. There's the rest of the year to think about that. The festival is precisely about disconnecting. So it's not about wearing your everyday clothes (Olivier, age 35).

The adoption of dress that is in stark opposition to everyday work clothes not only allows consumers to create a break with ordinary life, but also acts as the first step in the extraordinary experience. The visual transformation is experienced by informants as a way to enter the festival. As such festival dress facilitates immersion, and the more consumers attune, the more they experience the festival as a means of escape. In order to do this, carefully rehearsed preparations must serve as the first step on the ritual journey as Kevin a 21 year old business school student suggests:

When I choose my clothes for a festival, I'm already a little bit 'in the festival'. This is a first step towards the festival. So, I choose them carefully, I don't take just any old clothes. (Kevin, age 21).

This careful planning helps to stir the imagination and create a sense of anticipation. Compilations and combinations of clothes and accessories are carefully selected as part of an

overall package - a package that enables free play, dressing up and transformation into a “different person”.

It's really a week to completely let go. At all levels: mentally, physically, visually. I forget myself, I let my hair down. It feels good to break away from daily life. It allows me to unwind, to recharge my batteries. It is such a change for a few days that as a result, when I go home, I'm firing on all cylinders again (Bastien, age 32).

### Release through anonymity and conformity

The festival is an intense emotional experience that enables participants to engage in eccentric behaviors of which dress plays an important role. Indeed, through their dress, participants may experiment in ways they normally could not. As Wilson (2003) suggests, dress can be used as a means for exploring new ideas and to express our more daring aspirations. This freedom is perceived by participants as an important source of hedonic gratification. For example, Greg is an intelligent 23 year old who defines himself as a heavy metal enthusiast who regularly attends rock festivals. He works in a call center during the week, a job he finds less than fulfilling and one that leaves little opportunity to indulge his love of rock fashion. As he explains:

Work is ok, it pays the bills, but I certainly don't live to work, I work to live as they say. The job's monotonous and there's no room to deviate from the scripts and endless calls to people who just don't want to know. It gets you down after a while, being told to piss off and worse. Great way to make a living! Music is what fires me up, either listening to it alone, going to a gig or spending time at festivals with like-minded people who know where you're at.... At festivals you can really let yourself go and express yourself without someone checking on you to make sure you're not wearing studs or piercings or anything

inappropriate. I mean who's going to see you in an office at the end of a phone? But I know where the tattoos are, I know that I have a skull and cross bones tee-shirt on under my nice 'smart boy' collared shirt...I've tried to get away with some discreet piercings before but it didn't work so I just accept that and conform to their rules; have to if I want to keep my job. But festivals give me a chance to really be myself, wear black eyeliner if I want to, show off my tattoos, dress in black from head to toe if I want and leave all that shit of being told how to look behind.

[Insert photo 1 here]

Similar themes were found in other accounts:

At festivals I can clearly afford to wear outfits that I would not wear every day. Because it's another world, another context. Nobody is going to give me funny looks, nobody is going to judge me. I wish it could be the same in real life. But unfortunately it doesn't work that way. So I really make the most of these few days (Alice, age 20).

And:

It's a bit like a disguise. We put it on and bingo, we're hidden behind it [...]. We don't know who we are anymore, nobody recognizes us and we can let go completely: dance, scream, jump, drink (Karine, age 25).

[Insert photo 2 here]

During the festival, dress provides a certain degree of anonymity for participants (Kozinets, 2002) as they immerse themselves in the crowd. At the same time a leveling process places everyone on an equal footing. This involves a disintegration of social distinctions and social status (Kozinets, 2002) to the point that individuals cannot be distinguished from one another, which in turn offers a degree of anonymity. This opens the



door not only for a shift in identity, but also gives sanction to hedonistic and quasi aggressive behavior normally frowned upon by society. But, this phenomenon is performed without external consequence. Karine uses the term “disguise” and Crumrine (1983), suggests that disguise represents the liminal phase of rituals and plays a key role in transforming both individuals and the social context. This “masking” or “disguise” and subsequent merging with the crowd resonates with historical accounts of carnival and masquerade. For example, Bahktin's (1941) analysis of medieval carnivalesque and the 'Feast of Fools', as a celebration involving all participants in a world turned upside down. During carnival, social hierarchies are dissolved, truths are questioned, a beggar becomes a king and a king a beggar, and opposites intermingle. According to Bahktin, four categories define the carnivalesque - 1) The familiar and free interaction between people; 2) Eccentric behavior where behavior usually considered unacceptable is welcome and accepted; 3) Carnivalesque misalliances - or a disintegration of categories of distinction as people from across the social spectrum mix in an atmosphere of equality and; 4) The sacrilegious - where profanities are excused and forgiven. At these festivals we observed elements of all of these. The free interaction of people who may have little in common outside of the festival was evident as people engaged in communal actions that transcended normal social boundaries and behavior cues. As both Alice and Karine note, nobody judges them or gives them funny looks. Certainly, with regard to eccentric behavior, behavior that would normally be frowned upon in the 'real' world is considered par for the course. Whether it is aggressive 'mosh' dancing, drinking, jumping or swearing, this hedonistic release is not only acceptable, it is expected. With regard to the third category misalliances, the uniform of black, homogenous clothes, the common appreciation of a certain type of music, the subcultural capital used to demonstrate key codes of dancing, drinking, shouting, all represent a form of subcultural language. This in turn results in a leveling process that allows for a blurring of boundaries between people of different social

class, educational background and age who would not normally mix. Finally, the sacrilegious is not uncommon at rock festivals with tee-shirts adorned with skulls, inverted crosses, pagan symbols and occult like paraphernalia serve as a common uniform.

[Insert photo 3 here]

All of these would seem to suggest rebellion and “anti-fashion” (Polhemus and Proctor, 1978). Yet, the homogeneity of the look points more to a subcultural conformity that could be considered just an extension of the expectations to conform encountered in the mundane world. Greg talks about his tattoos and wearing his skull and bones tee-shirt under his collared shirt at work, and as such the satisfaction he feels in surreptitiously subverting the organizational system. For Greg clothes are a form of sabotage and hidden, or silent rebellion (Lentz, 1995), yet they remain personal, intimate and masked; a hidden reminder of his desired subcultural identity (Park, 2014). And when away from the world of work - at festival, instead of displaying true creativity and individualism he, like so many that we spoke to merely swap one form of conformity for another.

### Community integration

The experience lived in the festival is strongly influenced by others. Social links and sharing with other festival-goers are central dimensions for all participants. Once consumers pass the entrance doors of the festival, they instinctively integrate with the group to form a *communitas*. Turner (1969) proposed the concept of *communitas* as a spontaneous and unstructured community of people experiencing emotions together (Turner, 1969). According to Bowen and Daniels (2005), when creating the right kind of atmosphere at rock festivals the opportunity to socialize is as important as the artists playing at the festival. And, social relationships are facilitated because of the disintegration of social distinctions:

We're all here to live the same festival. And it is the fact that there are so many people that makes it so special. Everyone talks to everyone. There is no barrier as there may be in normal life. Everything is simpler (Olivier, age 35).

There is no one type of person here. You get all walks of life, rich poor, professional, young and old. It's not a youth culture thing in fact you don't see that many teenagers (John, age 36).

Of course, an important aspect of the experience apart from clothes is the music performed at these festivals. This, after all, is the foundation of the experience. Take this away and all that remains is a collection of people in a field with nothing but their common look to connect them. Music is the backbone and the backdrop to the communal experience. As Jules observes "It has a sort of power that just brings everyone together".

It's the whole package, the place, the scene, the people and of course the music. Everyone's into it, it's the reason we're here, it has a sort of power that just brings everyone together....it's noise like you can never experience even on the loudest of decks...there's something about really loud music that gets into you physically and mentally (Jules age 30).

And as John explains:

.....but this music is not new, it's been around for years in one form or another.....it has a long, long history that goes back to the blues...it's a subversive genre, just like rock festivals are..... and as for the look, that has just evolved as well, it's informal, it's comfortable, but it's expressive as well, it says something about the dark primitive side of nature that we all need to get in touch with from time to time ....(John, age 36).

[Insert photo 4 here]

[Insert photo 5 here]

Lynch (2006) discusses the decline of organized religion and the search for alternative spiritual experiences through such forms as music. De Nora (1999) looks to music as a source or medium of social agency, heightened energy, ongoing identity work and a scaffold for self-construction. She goes on to argue that music can organize subjects into real time, and the first way music does this is through the body. At festivals such as those described here, the music is so loud and intense it vibrates through the ground into the body creating a mental, physical and aesthetic experience. As she says, (and as Jules concurs) music has power and can influence how people compose their bodies, conduct themselves, how they feel in terms of energy, emotion, about themselves, about others and about situations (De Nora, 2000). In the festival context music and dance give way to a kind of identity performance focused on the body. Dress on its own is merely a collection of inanimate objects without a body to give them agency. Music and dance facilitates its own kind of performativity through movement, layering and styling (Cohen, 1998). Accordingly, the festival is a social and collective experience in which music and dress act as symbols of identification and affiliation. The fact that festival-goers have unique clothes (from the mainstream) but generally similar to those of other members of the group (Muggleton, 2000), is one of the foundations of this particular communitas. Interestingly, this also extends to the performance of gender (Butler, 1990) where “male” and “female” distinctions in attire are not defined. Men can wear make-up as well as women, both wear black, beads, silver jewelry, heavy boots, studded belts and tattoos. But, rock festivals have a distinct macho element to them whereby men tend to take center stage as performers through “moshing” (aggressive jumping, shoving, knocking into other, kicking out).

[Insert photo 6 here]

There is little evidence of the “feminine” at heavy rock festivals, unlike other music festivals such as Glastonbury, where the festival look tends to be more “boho”, vintage and bricolage. At rock festivals and particularly heavy metal venues, women are expected to move their gender position to a greater extent than men. In doing so they are forced to adhere to the male values of the heavy metal culture (Nordstrom, 2013), but little resistance to this was observed, as Linda notes:

What I wear during the festival, if I wore it in everyday life would probably shock some people. But in the context of a festival, nobody’s shocked. If I wore my everyday clothes at a festival then other festival-goers would single me out. Here we are all on the same trip. So somehow it brings us closer together (Linda, age 32).

[Insert photo 7 here]

In this highly charged social context, dress facilitates socialization, social exchange and social cohesion (Fallasi, 1987; Getz, 2010). But, this is based on similarity to each other rather than a celebration of individual style:

We are all alike. When I look around me, I see no difference. I don’t see people with expensive clothes or with cheap clothes. I just see people who love music and who are there to have a good time (Eric, age 29).

We all choose the tee-shirts of our favorite bands for the occasion. It is rare to see so many skulls on clothes in such a small site! It’s nice to see. And you know you’re in the right place at the right time (Diane, age 34).

This intrinsic dress code can sometimes be seen by some festival-goers as an unwritten but binding rule to be followed in order to be part of the community. While Van Gennep (1909) sees these liminal zones and experiences as free of rules, rock festivals require

conformity to a look which adheres to highly structured, codified norms and rules of appearance and behavior (Sinclair and Doan, 2015), as Bastien recognizes:

This is quite funny because even if though we say we are not like the others and claim loudly that we do not follow fashion trends, we are ultimately all the same.

We follow like sheep too: all wearing black clothes! (Bastien, age 32).

Essentially, within the festival confines, a uniform needs to be adopted in order to fit in. Anyone wearing straight clothes would be considered outsiders. This uniform also serves as a “mask” (Halnon, 1979; Lutes, 1983). As Karine noted earlier, the fact that no one recognizes her allows her to indulge in hedonistic behavior, because she can walk away from it and return to her normal routine. Examples of such behavior exist throughout history, not only in Bakhtin's treatise of the carnivalesque, but also in the masked balls and festivals of the Italian Renaissance and their adoption throughout Europe in the eighteenth century. Classic features of these masquerades were sartorial exchange and collective verbal and physical license which hinted at the “Saturnalia of Roman antiquity, the medieval Feast of Fools and the Charivari and similar festivals of misrule” (Castle, 1986 p.11). Essentially, masks, costume and disguise are symbolic means of transcending the everyday. They release the human from his/her humanness giving expression to the inner animal (Halpin, 1979), or the “dark primitive side of nature” described by John. Festivals, like the carnivalesque at face value, appear to be times and place of unrestrained release. Yet, at the same time dress and behavior are confined and constrained by time, space, place and the subcultural norms and expectations of the group. They are both self and group regulated (internally) and controlled (externally) by festival organizers (Goulding et al., 2009) as part of the festival code (Sinclair and Dolan, 2015). Ultimately, however, like carnival, they are bound by time and space and participants recognize that the experience is temporary and that a return to the real world is inevitable:

It's great while it lasts, you meet new people you know you may never see again,  
but that's the way it goes. Come Monday it's back to work (Marie 20).

## Discussion

In view of the findings, this research builds and extends the current literature in the two following ways. First, we contribute to the work that examines the relationship between dress and identity. To date, the literature has shown the key role played by dress in the construction of everyday identity of individuals (e.g. Vieira, 2009). But this study shows that dress also plays a role in situations where consumers temporarily shift their everyday identity. Generally, consumers live in stressful environments in which they have few opportunities for emotional release (Addis and Holbrook, 2010; Thoits, 1989). Consumers therefore engage in extraordinary consumption that allows them to escape the everyday grind through shifting their identity from one mode of expression to another. In this case consumers use dress and alternative style to differentiate themselves from the mainstream and express an altered identity that stands in opposition to normality. But, at the same time, dress very similar across the community of festival attendees. Indeed, to integrate with the community and therefore make the most of the experience, participants have to adhere and conform to a subcultural uniform. On face value, this dark looking collective, garbed in black ripped denim, leather jackets, skull embossed tee-shirts and anti-religious symbols, may appear as the antithesis of conformity - a subculture of rebellion, resistance and creativity. Indeed it is these traits of anti-authority, powerlessness, social class solidarity, resistance, rebellion and expression through style that defined earlier subcultures of consumption (see for example, Hall and Jefferson (1993) and Hebdidge (1979) for accounts of early subcultural resistance through ritual and the meaning of style). Certainly, although social class and youth, as conditions of subcultural membership have diminished, examples of style based communities that adhere to the principle of difference remain. For example, within the Goth subculture at Whitby

described by Goulding and Saren (2009), clothes and costume are not only an identity device, they are also a means of signaling subcultural capital and position in the social hierarchy, or a form of moral superiority (Moore, 1986). Goths are not a homogenous group. Many strata within the group can be observed, each of which has a distinctive look, whether it is vampiric, Victorian, cyber or punk. Within these, hierarchy is defined by the authenticity of the costume, extravagance and the ability to stand out in this particular crowd. They are performances, in the full sense of the word, of “extraordinary selves” (Miklas and Arnold, 1999). The festival participants in this study however showed few signs of this and in fact, often, quite the opposite. This is more a culture of conformity through the wearing of a common uniform (Muggleton, 2000; Winge, 2013). As Aspers and Godart (2013) note, despite the fact that subcultural style has been described as “anti-fashion” (Polhemus and Proctor, 1978), it is often an unplanned process of recurrent change against a backdrop of order. These like-minded people all look the same, and there is as much discrimination against someone who does not conform to their aesthetic as there is for someone who defies clothing norms in the office (Chaney and Ben Slimane, 2014). However, dress in this case is a complex device. Dress can be used simply as a means of escape and acceptance, or utilized as surreptitious sabotage and hidden rebellion, (as in the case of Greg who does not lose his identity at work, he simply hides it), or employed as a disguise or a mask that ensures anonymity and enables hedonistic release in an accepting environment. Masks and costumes operate in a setting charged with almost supernatural powers that can dramatically heighten and alter the cognitive and emotional status quo (Lutes, 1983). They may also be used as disguises or false fronts behind which real selves remain hidden and inviolate. They can deceive, mislead or, alternatively they can reveal more than they hide as representations of a transcendent reality (Fogelson and Bell, 1983). But in the festival context this mask is collective and this homogeneity and conformity also offers a sense of security within this



alternative community that provides a stabilizing function. As such dress as artifact exercises a form of cultural agency which influences both social behavior and attitudes. In effect, dress may hold a vast reservoir of meanings that can be manipulated and reconstructed to enhance both individual and collective agency (Crane, 2012).

Second, by studying the relationship between dress and identity, the research also contributes to the literature on materiality (Borgerson, 2013). Drawing on the notion of identity fragmentation (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Strauss, 1997), we argue that consumers have different identities that they enact according to the situations. Consistent with Tian and Belk (2005), this study suggests that objects (here dress) help consumers to deal with this identity fragmentation in terms of how they move from one strand of identity to another. Through the lens of materiality, dress can be seen as the interaction between subjects, objects, time and space contributing to consumer identity projects (Miller, 1987). More specifically, with a new dress code specific to the ritual, participants adopt a different mental identity as well as a different bodily identity: they are re-embodied in all the senses (Handleman, 1997). Visual transformation is therefore an important part of the ritual (Goulding and Shankar, 2011). This study suggests that the transition from ordinary life to extraordinary consumption through ritual and thus to another identity, is both visual and tangible. Here, dress can be considered as a ritual artifact, similar to that of costume (Moore, 1986; Solomon and Anand, 1985). It is a visible form of consumption (Crane, 2012) and an illustration or a metaphor for identity shifting. At heavy rock festivals, dress enables consumers to perform the social identity related to their subculture. Dress further materializes the two main functions of in-group bias (Klein, Spears and Reicher 2007): identity mobilization and identity consolidation. With regard to identity mobilization, dress acts to motivate the group. For participants, dress worn at festivals embodies not only the shift from one strand of identity to another, but also visually engages them to behave like the group. Regarding identity consolidation, dress

visually helps to express the in-group's norms and affirm them symbolically. Because of its materiality, dress is a tool which legitimizes the subculture and its values (Chaney and Ben Slimane, 2014). Like traditional costumes help ethnic groups to claim their uniqueness (Renne, 1995; Nash, 1989), dress worn at heavy rock festivals act like a flag or a banner for the subculture.

### Managerial implications

This paper also suggests managerial implications for both fashion producers and event managers. For fashion producers, the most important point is to identify what motivates consumers to buy certain clothes. If consumers buy the clothes of a brand mainly to wear them at festivals, then marketing campaigns of the fashion brand should promote values of escape and sociality. The fashion brand should present itself as a brand that stands in contrast to daily life. Brand personality must also be in line with the role consumers attribute to these symbolic products and the ritual process (Ko and Megehee, 2012). In addition, in terms of distribution, fashion brands should find retailers or develop their own outlets in places where ritual consumption occurs. For example, in the case of rock festivals, fashion brands (particularly those seen as “indie” or “edgy”) can develop partnerships with larger festivals in order to have their own stalls during festivals. The brand would thus have the opportunity to meet its consumers and target them with appropriate clothing for the festival. In addition, the values of the fashion brand need to be associated with the values of the festival: those of fun, escape, freedom, hedonism, *communitas* and rebellion. The partnership between the fashion brand and the organizer of the event may also take the form of sponsorship. In the case of festivals, sponsorship is an important source of financing. Opportunities to partner with large, highly visible festivals may be a unique opportunity for subcultural fashion brands to raise awareness.

For festival and events managers, our study of the role played by dress suggests a first strategy which is to offer a range of by-products, including clothing and accessories. By using its image to produce its own clothes, the experience provider may find new sources of income. Similarly, by offering its own range of clothing, the experience provider facilitates the formation of a community which is an important part of the experience. Because consumers feel empathy and identify with other members of the ritual, and the *communitas* created during the ritual is a key element of the experience, the experience producers that offer their own clothes may maximize impact at the point of sale. More generally, in terms of organizing and promoting events, the provider should promote a specific atmosphere that encourages participants to shed their everyday roles and physical trappings and adopt a form of dress they would not normally wear. By creating an atmosphere in opposition to the rigid rules of everyday life, event managers can reinforce the positioning of its offer and facilitate the immersion of the consumer in the experience. To do this, the provider must dramatize and thematize the experience space (Kozinets, 2002) by making it timeless, unique and exceptional.

#### Limitations and directions for future research

This research was conducted in a single context, namely rock music festivals. But to have a better understanding of the role of dress in ritual experiences, the investigation of other contexts may prove fruitful, and more specifically contexts in which dress and appearance play an important role. The case of sport fans is a promising avenue because this experience is usually lived weekly by fans as a means of escape, and also because of the standardization of clothing within the group dimension, inasmuch as supporters of the same team wear the same clothes with the colors of their favorite club. However, another dimension appears to be rivalry between opposing fans who have similar identities but different “uniforms” or

costumes”. In the case of supporters of a football club, there is opposition in the context of ritual with fans of the opposing team, symbolized by the same dress code but with different colors. The investigation of this opposition could enrich our understanding of the structural elements of this type of experience.

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**Photo 1**

The festival collective and the festival “look”



**Photo 2**

Anonymity through dress



**Photo 3**

Demonic backdrop to the band reinforcing the dark oppositional side to the festival



**Photo 4**

Cult bands encourage crowd unity and hedonistic release



**Photo 5**

The crowd engages in collective ritualized dancing





**Photo 6**

Moshing - ritualized physical aggression is part of festival ritual



**Photo 7**

The feminine merges with the masculine as participant's gender identities are “masked”

