

Swapping Styles: An Exploration of Fashion Leadership,  
Brands, and Group Membership in the Context of Clothing Swaps

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Keywords: Fashion leadership, group identification, brands, clothing swaps

Past research on fashion consumer groups indicates that fashion leaders have a high need for uniqueness that motivates them to choose more novel offerings within the apparel product category (Tian, Bearden, & Hunter, 2001; Workman & Kidd, 2000). For these consumers, certain brands can signify specific meanings important to group identity and membership (Liu & Wang, 2008). The purpose of this study was to explore how consumers use clothing to identify themselves as fashion leaders and the role of brands in this process. To address this purpose, consumption behaviors of fashion leaders were examined within the clothing swap environment.

An emerging consumption phenomenon, clothing swaps involve the exchange of clothing items between two consumers to acquire “new-to-them” clothing without spending money (Straaten, 2010). An increasingly popular means of acquiring clothing, swaps occur both in person at swap parties and online through swap websites. Although swaps have become popular among consumers, very little academic research exists on swaps as a particular consumption environment (Albinson & Perera, 2009). Thus, this study addresses a gap that exists in the literature as it sheds light on the clothing swap phenomenon and provides a foundation for understanding consumption behavior—specifically among fashion leaders—within the swap context.

Using an ethnographic approach to research, three methods of data collection were employed: participant observation, in-depth interviews, and netnographic observation (Kozinets, 2010). Upon Institutional Review Board approval from the researchers’ university, a total of five in-person swap parties were observed. Interviews were conducted with sixteen female clothing swappers, aged 19 – 37, who self-identified as fashion leaders. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were audio-recorded with participants’ consent. In addition to the in-depth interviews and in light of the prevalence of online clothing swap websites, five clothing swap sites were observed in order to investigate the behaviors and interactions among online swappers over a one-month period. The Internet data were used to augment findings from the interviews and participant observation, and combined, the three forms of data allow for a deeper understanding of swap consumption behaviors among fashion leaders.

Interview responses were compared with participant observation and netnographic data and then categorized by common issues that emerged across the data. The categories were then compared and contrasted, and themes used to explain each category were identified (Spiggle, 1994). Three topical areas are used to structure the themes within the interpretation: *The Fashion Leadership Experience*, *Fashion Leaders and Group Membership*, and *The Clothing Exchange Experience*.

Interpretation of the data revealed that brands were not a primary motivation for apparel consumption among fashion leaders in the context of the clothing swap. However, through swaps, brands were found to be important to the expression of fashion leadership. That is, participants reference brands as part of their overall fashion knowledge, and use them as indication of this knowledge as they engage in the swap process. The idea that both in-person and online swaps permit interaction with other fashion leaders was found to be one of the primary reasons for swapping. That is, swappers are able to exchange relatively new styles that they have grown tired of for different styles without spending money and to exchange these styles with other fashion leaders, thereby allowing them to maintain their group membership. While the results of this study confirm findings from previous studies indicating that fashion leadership is established and maintained not only through an enduring interest in fashion but through social interaction with others who share this interest (Workman & Kidd, 2000), the present study reveals the extent to which the shared experience of fashion leadership is facilitated by clothing swaps.

Results of this study shed light on the role of swapping relative to fashion leadership in both real and virtual consumption contexts. Findings suggest that swaps have become new social locations for forging consumer group membership and specifically for maintaining fashion leadership identity. As one of the first academic studies to explore the clothing swap phenomenon, it also points to the pressing need for further research on the topic. Further research could examine the diverse motivations of consumers relative to clothing swaps and the extent to which these motivations differ within the online and in-person swap environment.

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