

Brand Clans: Consumption and Rituals Among Low-income Young People in the City of Porto Alegre

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Abstract: This article aims to analyze the Brazilian phenomenon of ‘brand clans’ or ‘brand communities’, which means a group of young people who spend all their money buying branded clothes. The research is based on an ethnography carried out about the youngsters, mostly male, from Morro da Cruz – the largest lower class community in Porto Alegre, Brazil. On the one hand, we discuss the tension between poverty and brand consumption and on the other hand, we aim to make an inventory of subjectivities, emotions, logic and meaning of these young people coming from lower class who make great sacrifices in order to become ‘fashionable’ and thus feel socially included. The article is divided into five sections. In the first three, we discuss more theoretical topics, such as consumption, class, youth, totems and rituals. In the last two, we enter more thoroughly in the empirical universe, showing the results obtained through an ethnographic study. We argue that brands play a vital role in the life of the informants. Brands are not only a source of prestige, but also of vitality, power, and citizenship.

Keywords: *brands, poverty, youth, Brazil.*

*Oakley, oakley, oakley, oakley oakley
Teeth, Air Strip, Flack Low or Flack Jack
The printed shorts and shirt
titanium in half, Jack Flack in your feet
Gascan with the additional cap of 2 with transition lens is Juliet
Romeo 2 X Metal, Juliet with ruby lens, Double Shox from Ecko or
Oakley Muleke Zika*

*He only walks like that
And I'm wearing the kit / And I'm wearing the kit
Sneakers, shorts, shirt and cap,
We wear only Oakley, It's Oakley from head to toe
(Clan of Oakley Junior Mc)*

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Introduction

In the funk above – which has over two million hits on Youtube – a woman's voice wryly comments: 'they like to parade around with shoes that cost more than R\$500 (approximately USD 280), glasses that cost R\$1500 (around USD 840) and chains of 18k gold'. After that, a male voice says in an accusatory tone: 'They are shameless, that's a slap in society's face!'

This article is part of a research study on the consumption of lower class in Porto Alegre. We observed a form of consumption that is linked to the so-called 'brand clans' – a new type of juvenile sociability that resembles the urban gangs. Their members identify and differentiate themselves in a totemic way through global symbols, which are incorporated in a particular way so as to mark territory, power and belonging. In this lower class, the use of original brands, overvalued by its members, prevails.

The research is based on an ethnography carried out on the youngsters, mostly male, from Morro da Cruz – the largest lower class community in Porto Alegre. Our study carries a double challenge. On one hand, we discuss the tension between poverty and brand consumption and on the other hand, we aim to make an inventory of subjectivities, emotions, logic and meaning of these young people coming from lower class who make great sacrifices in order to achieve 'being fashionable' and thus feel socially included.

The article is divided into five sections. In the first three, we discuss more theoretical topics, such as consumption, class, youth, totems and

rituals. In the last two, we enter more thoroughly in the empirical universe, showing the results obtained through an ethnographic study conducted among young men from Morro da Cruz.

Theory and research on consumption and lower classes

You're nobody without a brand – the clothes that you are wearing show who you are – in life you only are what you have. (An informant, on the importance of clothes)

Currently, the theme of 'mass consumption' has great visibility, and it is approached as a true national phenomenon, since it is directly related to the public policies for income distribution and increased credit lines, whose most immediate effect is the extension of purchasing power of a large portion of the Brazilian society. Although not specifically focused on the study of consumption, the Brazilian anthropology has a significant tradition in research on the working and lower classes (Duarte, 1986; Fonseca, 2000; Sarti, 1996). In this line of thought, scarcity, the necessity and logic of survival were disproved as categories that explain the behavior of this portion of the Brazilian population. It has been emphasized the possibility of perceiving it as unique analytical sphere (without this implying its isolation), in which the holism, honor and the family solidarity would be prevailing aspects in one (or more) lower classes. Following another academic tradition, but sharing some

similar arguments, the anthropology of consumption has emerged, as disciplinary field, drawing attention to the symbolic dimension underlying the choice and use of objects, thus breaking the neoclassical economist bias, in which necessity is the explanatory variable of the demand. (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979 ; Sahlins, 1976).

However, despite the four decades of both traditions' existence, the academic discourse has not reached beyond its own borders. This is because, on times that point to a true national euphoria about the participation of low-income sectors in the national market, one of the problems related to this issue is how practical reason (Sahlins, 1976) is still imperative in the vision that the media and common sense create upon popular consumption. In this sense, having or not having money would be the guiding principle of purchase. The pragmatism and formalism of such a premise concerning poverty imply that consumption is (or it should be) guided by utility, necessity and survival. Whatever spending made otherwise is superfluous and therefore, irrational. The ramifications of the principle the poor-must-spend-less provide few possibilities to the low-income consumer. In this sense, the ostentatious consumption of expensive brands, stolen goods or long installments on credit plans become alternatives that are morally or rationally incorrect. There are not many solutions for the consumer classes: it should only feed their offspring. The substantialism of the consumption's symbolic reason, based on hedonism and distinction, would therefore be a luxury that only middle and upper classes – supposedly holding economic capital exceeding

their needs – could enjoy.

Given this social context, it means that refuting the logic of utility and valuing the symbolic dimension of consumption is a task that anthropology should not neglect. However, it is necessary to go beyond this; producing research that takes seriously the possibility of ethnography of the native categories, for only through this perspective is it possible to put an end to the moralizing discourse surrounding the issue. Theoretically and methodologically, we agree with the assumptions of Appadurai (1986), which say that in order to understand the value and use, we must follow the trajectories of things and, through this motion, we can interpret the human transactions and calculations that give life to things, hence the importance of intensive fieldwork on the spot.

To understand the mass consumption, first of all, it is necessary to discuss the category of 'poor' and 'low-income class'. If we take into account the rating classes accordingly to their purchase power or by their income range, it is possible to say that our research base is in class 'D', with informants who move within the limits that encompass the 'E' and begin with the 'C'¹. However, both from the emic ethnographic point of view and the theoretical and anthropological point of view, such quantification is not very representative, to the extent that we adopt a broader perspective – that of low-income culture(s) – which is not defined only by economical capital (purchase power or minimum wage), but also by symbolic and social capital (ethos, habits and lifestyle), according to Bourdieu's categories. (Bourdieu, 1984; 2001)

The informants do not consider themselves poor at all times, but they certainly admit having a low-income lifestyle, recognizing themselves as belonging to what they playfully call 'common people': they listen to country music, *pagode* (a variant of Brazilian *samba*), *gaúcho* and funk; they go to drumbeat houses and dances in parishes; they ride the bus on a daily basis; they borrow money from friends or relatives to recharge their phone cards; they frequent Internet cafes and they apply to the Unified Health System (SUS) in order to receive medical care. In addition to this, they all have a certain tolerance and flexibility toward practices that are socially classified as criminal. Smuggling goods, buying stolen goods, having relatives in the central prison or having been arrested: all these belong to the realm of the informants' *field of possibilities* (Velho, 1999). However, they do not regard themselves as part of the crime universe – this, always related, associated to drug trafficking, with which one needs to have close contact.

The indigenous dissociation between the poor and low-income categories is directly related to consumption. Buying a television in 24 installments does not equal being poor, but not having the means to achieve in doing so, is. This means that being poor equals being deprived of access to goods. Thus, as Douglas and Isherwood (1979) define that the right measure of poverty is not goods, but the social involvement. Consumption, in this sense, is responsible for reversing scarcity into material wealth. Owning socially valued goods means negotiating the class condition.

We choose a broad ethnography

in various beads of social life. We went to the homes of informants, the cafeterias; we accompanied the youngsters to their favorite stores in malls. These meetings with our informants turned out to be particularly fruitful for discussing on the place and operating space of the individual, since we can see these people choosing, making decisions and taking their actions. This is because we understand the consumption practice as an act that begins prior to the purchase and does not end with the final disposal of the goods, that is, as a 'cultural grammar that connects to other parts and dimensions of human life' (Barbosa, 2003: 100).

Youth, consumption and brands

The term youth can be used both as a definition of chronological age and as a cultural position, marking the beginning of a long period. It becomes more and more fuzzy nominating, recognizing and distinguishing who is young in contemporary Western society, because youth has become an elastic category, represented as a 'state of mind, a bodily way, a sign of health and disposition, it is a consumer profile, a market share' (Kehl, 2005: 89). Regardless of the social class, young people identify themselves with the ideal attached in advertising, which builds the image of the good looking, sensual and free young man/woman. Reinforcing the idea of consumption as the main clue for understanding the behavior pattern of the youth, Debert (2010) points out that 'the transformation of youth into a value that can be achieved at

any stage of life through the adoption of appropriate forms of consumption and lifestyles.’ (Debret, 2010: 49). Costa (2005), searching for what she calls ‘unleashed consumption of youth’, notes that this new way of life - characterized by the continuous need of purchasing new products and taking care of physical appearance can be called ‘pleasure of the senses’ and it is part of the so-called ‘coercive consumption’. This behavior, however, cannot be explained only by the power that exists in advertising, but rather by what the author called ‘the moral of pleasures’, which is fundamental in building youth identities. These identities and even their cultural practices are increasingly influenced by the so-called ‘globalization of culture’, which ingeniously combines elements of capitalism and global culture. As Ortiz says:

Sneakers, jeans, internet, these are references without territory that are part of a lexicon of the international-low income youthful memory, bonding people of different nationalities, ethnicities and social classes. These young people’s moral is more and more woven in the global sphere. In order to create their identities, they choose symbols, signs that are present in the globalization process. (Ortiz, 1994:123)

These theories are necessary to situate the context in which young people are included. Anthropology, however - who sees youth as socially constructed - indicates that the categories related to youth as teenager or young adult, offer a greater degree of specificity related to age; nonetheless these classifications vary in their applications within different

contexts. Examples such as child soldiers and teenage mothers are socially significant, authorizing the interpretation of biological chronology (in social terms) to vary according to socio-political circumstances (Bulcholtz, 2002).

Thus, in the United States for example, preadolescent children, accused of committing violent crimes can be categorized as mature and can be held responsible for their crimes by the American legal system; however, individuals of the same age range are considered children as related to child labor. In other words, youth is a relational category, and divisions between ages are arbitrary and although we can characterize adolescence as a biological fact, it is a social category defined based on data that can be socially manipulative and manipulated. Accordingly, it is worth Bourdieu’s alert, which in its text – Youth is just a word – shows that being young or old always implies another person – for we are always young or old for someone else (Bourdieu, 1993). Likewise, in classic anthropological analysis, adolescence has always been a crucial topic for understanding the so-called primitive societies, for this stage of life was marked in them by rites of passage, initiation ceremonies, sexual practices, marriage customs and generational relationships. Later on, in the first half of the twentieth century, a cultural approach to the development of adolescence as a stage of life emerges. The best examples are the studies of anthropologist Margaret Mead (1935) who attributed the adolescent behavior to the culture in which the young person is inserted.

However, these reviews, about

adolescence as a biological and psychological stage of human development - continued to be perceived from the adult perspective, disregarding the youth interaction and its cultural production. Bulcholtz (2002) cites the influence of the Sociology of Youth's studies and its two main schools that examine the theme: the American school and the British school. The first focuses on the concept of deviation and its consequences, from this approach deriving the interpretation of youth as a group of risky behavior, the young man as a problem that needs to be framed and shaped. And the second one, the British school, examines and prioritizes youth identities using Marxist theories and understanding the local youth as a place of class-based resistance.

Therefore, today's Youth Anthropology - which is a result of both internal changes occurring in the discipline and changes in world cultures - is concerned with the practices through which these cultures are formed. That is, its focus is on the agency of these young people and on their cultural practices. We therefore consider that 'youth' is a meanings producer notion and contributes to the establishment of agreements and dominant social representations. Before going into the issue of consumption, we would like to stress that, no matter what youth fashion or brand consumption can refer to a modern lifestyle, its logic can be analyzed and understood through classical and fundamental themes to anthropology – such as totemism, ritual and sacrifice.

Brands under the viewpoint of totemism and rituals

The urban clans are structured in two urban principles. The first is territoriality: the street, the neighborhood, the favela or the city area. The second are the symbols that represent them, namely, global brands. Both aspects are appropriated by a group and thus placed in opposition to another. Therefore we have, for example, the Adidas clan in the Northern area, which is a rival of the Nike clan in the Southern area. The boundaries between clans are publicly ritualized in many ways, from their appearance at funk parties where they sing their own songs, to the direct and violent confrontation between the clans.

The boys literally dress 'from head to toe' with designer clothes, shoes, socks, shorts, shirts, silver chains (or which simulate silver), jackets and caps. Formally dressed, the clans meet to fight in a previously chosen place mentioned on the social networking site Orkut. The fights imply firearms, knives and physical combat. Another ritual expression of the clans, which takes place in a peaceful manner, takes place at the funk parties, in which also formally dressed, young people come together to the party, perform dance steps previously rehearsed and proclaim slogans.

Given these characteristics, we remonstrate that the formation of brand clans are examples of new clothing of the totemism phenomenon, which is publicly expressed through rituals. This symbolic practice has fascinated and intrigued anthropologists for a long time. The most remarkable work in

classic anthropology was that of Levi-Strauss (1963), who has deepened in the understanding of the phenomenon, saying that totemism is a code, a symbolic language, whose purpose is to point out social differences. It is a tool used by so-called primitive people and its role is to classify social groups by a system that operates through marking the differences. The groups identify themselves with symbols related to nature, thus humanizing elements of the natural world. This practice, inherent to the human symbolic capacity, is a logical tool for conceptualizing the relationships between groups and between individuals of the group.

Sahlins (1976) criticized the approach of Levi-Strauss, pointing out that totemism is a phenomenon that is not restricted to 'primitive societies'. What happens in complex societies, he said, is a change in the totemic operator, namely, the elements that are to be humanized are no longer natural, but goods. Consumption then becomes understood as a totemic expression by performing a demarcation and social classification of individuals. Thus, the clothing system, in particular, repeats in the Western society the functions of the named totemism. A sumptuous materialization of the main coordinates of people and occasion becomes a vast scheme of communication.

Rocha (1985), rescuing the findings of Sahlins used this same argument to analyze advertising. According to him, this has the power to recreate the image of each product, giving it identity, content and representations through the brands. This way, this 'totemic operator' has the key function of nomination, individualization. It is through its name that the product is customized and

becomes part of a relationship network composed of other products'. (Rocha, 1985: 69) This way, the anonymous goods produced in a series leave the factories to gain meaning when they are personalized.

In this expression of totemism, the symbol of differentiation is no longer an element of nature and becomes an icon of global capitalism. The brands are therefore symbolic elements that approach the goods to human life, classifying groups and individuals through distinctive signs. This social segmentation carries with it a series of inclusive and exclusive rules: who can wear such clothes? This leads us to a second point we wish to discuss: the ritualized character of consumption. In fact, the ritual and totemism practices are closely linked. That is, besides producing differences, it is necessary to mark them publicly. There are many definitions of the ritual, which can basically be understood as a general form of expression of society and culture (Rivière, 1995) or as reaffirming social links and agents in the production of meaning. (Segalen, 1998). Over the centuries, the ritual has been linked to religion. Durkheim (1965) considered it a rule for social conduct that prescribed how a man should behave in relation to sacred things. For the author, the ritual's function was to define boundaries between the divine and the profane, guiding the individual how to behave in regard to the sacred. In classical anthropology, other fundamental contributions were those of Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969), who described numerous rituals of passage (initiation, marriage, death, etc.) and divided them into three stages: separation (rupture with the

profane world), marginalization and symbolic resurrection. In addition to describing the rituals, they associated their operation with their social role, since the efficiency of the ritual cannot be measured by what it expresses or means, but by the manner in which it operates changes.

Little by little, the rituals were desecrated, and the social sciences began to realize that there are many rituals that are not religious, but operate similarly to the sacred ones. These are called profane rituals, even without having connections to a myth, but only with important values, they have logic and satisfy themselves with the emotional intensity, for example, going to a football match, a rock concert or even a funk party. An important characteristic of these profane rituals is that they 'put the subject in relation to the collectivity and release him/her of their isolation' (Riviere, 1995: 80).

Therefore, we believe that clans are structured on principles that resemble the totemic logic. In this process, the rituals serve to add a new member, to publicly display the clan, to strengthen ties and the feeling of belonging to the group. Brands are symbolic elements, redeemed in order to produce social classification, providing identity and outlines for the groups.

The trail of clans: global peripheries

Devotion to the expensive and/or luxury brands amongst popular groups is not a phenomenon restricted to the outskirts of Porto Alegre, nor to the Brazilian reality. More than ten years ago, Friedman (1990) was already drawing attention on the importance of taking

seriously the understanding of such phenomenon. The author analyzed at LA SAPE *Societe des Ambianceurs et Personnes Elegantes*, (Society of Élegant People and Surroundings), which is a movement that recruits its members among the poorest of Congo and is characterized by the worship of European luxury clothing. The display of such clothing is made in a ritual known as 'the dance of the griffes', in which the famous labels are camouflaged by the coats lapels and appropriately paraded, as part of the status ritual (Friedman, 1990). For the Congolese people, appearance and being are identical: you are what you wear. As the author mentions, this does not occur because 'the clothes make the man', but because 'clothing is the immediate expression of the degree of vital force that the person carries within him, and the vital force is always and everywhere exterior' (Friedman, 1990: 316). The consumption of clothing, to Friedman, is surrounded by a global strategy linked to the strength it provides, which is not only wealth but also health and political power. Therefore, it is an essential act in the process of negotiation of identity. Leading a miserable life, lacking everything, all these individuals' resources are directed towards purchase in the long run men's wear, from shirts and socks to pants, suits and shoes, evoking prestige and a lifestyle that this garment aims to manifest.

According to Lemos (2009), the suburbs are increasingly appropriating the 'chic' and this becomes increasingly visible thanks to the Internet. The phenomenon is present in many places around the world, as in England, where

there's the 'chavs' class, also known as group on the outskirts of London, which took the expensive Burberry brand as their favorite. It became common to see 'chavs', many of them unemployed, walking the streets of London with Burberry jackets, to the despair of the marketing department of the company.

In Brazil, something similar happens in the street and on the Internet. Lacoste, for example, that has a campaign which is clearly directed to an elite audience, has become one of the favorite brands in the peripheries. As Lemos suggests:

Search for the word 'Lacoste' on YouTube. The first video that appears is the MC FB, playing funk 'Bonde da Lacoste.' The lyrics say 'since I knew these people / Lacoste is the symbol of my people.' And numerous other videos follow, all with praise for 'Alligator.' (Lemos, 2009: 01)

The phenomenon of clans originated in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro and has a direct and coercive influence on the gangs in Porto Alegre. The informants themselves admit that they are always alert to what happens there, because they know that later, this trend will be in their area. However, despite this obvious process of imitation, there are important local nuances. The rivalry between Nike and Adidas is a phenomenon exclusive to the reality of Porto Alegre. Already in Rio de Janeiro, other brands are assumed to be set in opposition, such as Lacoste and Ecko, which form the clans of the alligator and the rhinoceros, referring to the logos of the brands. In this regard, the name linked to animals suggests, with even greater emphasis that we are

facing a totemic process.

Initially the term was used to designate the groups of young people - usually of the same community or neighborhood - who went to funk parties together and participated in graffiti. The term referred to a kind of sociability linked to transgressions, crime and drug trafficking, which can be understood also as referred to the well known youth gangs. The term clan, however, is popular, 'fashionable' and now refers to several types of groups of young people. In our research, for example, we find that the term is often used only to designate the crowd, the tribe or group of young people with no direct relationship with the criminal world.

In the young people's imaginary studied, being part of a clan is a form of empowerment. In addition, although there are several ways of grouping, brands and graffiti are aspects common to all groups. Crime is also a tangent factor of the clans' routine. Although there are more peaceful clans, in all of them there is at least one member charged of assaults on persons or establishments to the extent that the use of expensive clothing will end up requiring extreme attitudes.

In a study conducted among young people of the working classes in Porto Alegre in 2001, Soares (2004) pointed out that the prevailing model among these individuals was that of 'a violent, arrogant, powerful, and armed male, establishing a perverse magnetism which entails the emulation of armed oppression' (Soares, 2004: 152). It is not difficult to understand the fascination that the trafficking, weapons and the world of crime have on young people; it is also easy to understand why they choose aggressive and violent names for their clans, even though they often

are just illustrative, such as The Clan of the Shrapnel 171, the Clan of the Beasts, the Clan of the Crazy Life, the Clan of the Mob Boys, the Clan of the Gruesome, the Clan Put a Bullet in Them and so on. It is necessary to remind that Fonseca (2004), while conducting his ethnography in the 80s, in Morro da Cruz, he was already noting in his study: that tendency of young people to sublimate the adventure and emphasize the heroism that exists in the 'bandit' life, identifying themselves with the leaders of local traffic. The weapon is therefore a source of power and a symbolic instrument of distinction and value.

Therefore, by having a base in all the issues raised so far, this article considers the brand clans as a cultural expression that, emblematically, travels as a ritual of consumption, combining elements of global capitalism and local culture. Thus, the role of group formation based on consumption, as we shall see below, is multifaceted, and is responsible, at the same time, for the construction of the notions of person, gender and identity. It acts as a central fact in the lives of individuals that includes the role of belonging to a group or territory, status, personal gratification and social affirmation. The next section details the functioning of the clan studied through ethnographic description.

'I'm not the poor young one, the one from the favela, without a future: I can do it'

Most of our informants live in the popular neighborhood called Morro da Cruz, located in the eastern zone of Porto Alegre and considered one

of the poorest neighborhoods of the city. It is named after a cross on top of the hill. Since 1955, during the Easter week, it stages the Passion of Christ, a spectacle that draws thousands of people to the streets of Morro, in a display of vitality and religious force. The statistics on the location reveal a context of exclusion, where more than 40% of the families live on one income which does not exceed two minimum wages. From the point of view of common sense and representation in the media as a territory of the popular classes, Morro is primarily seen under the aspect of crime, as one of the most violent of Porto Alegre, linked to drug trafficking and organized crime.

If the social and economic context in which the research subjects are inserted indicates a world marked by scarcity of resources, as we shall see below, our ethnography reveals the role played by the consumption ritual, capable of reversing this state of things, of bringing out abundance and material wealth, because these kids transform the act of dressing into an action that undermines the established order which points to poverty and discrimination.

The ethnographic study began in late 2009 when, while talking with some young people about the use of piracy, an informant, Janaina, 18, a student, resident of a villa in Morro da Cruz, challenged us, 'I use counterfeit clothing, I do not care, but a cousin, poorer than me, uses only designer clothing, shoes, sunglasses. He and his friends from the clan use those. But you're not studying that.' Immediately, we became interested in knowing these youngsters and asked if she could introduce us to the group. We

scheduled a first meeting to know the boys who were part of the clan called 'The Rebels'.

We went to the villa where they lived, we thought we would talk in their homes, but we realized that they had a different idea. It was on a Sunday, a day to stay at home at ease, to receive visits from relatives and friends and it was not an appropriate day for interviews with two anthropologists. We also noticed certain embarrassment on the informants' part regarding the precarious homes, all very simple, with only one room for the whole family and without any plaster. We quickly changed our plans and invited them to have a snack. An alternative that seemed more practical to us was a conversation in a McDonalds, which was immediately accepted by young people. There were four youngsters, Fininho, Kiko and Bruno, besides Janaina, our informant from another research. The boys were wearing sports clothes but of original brands. Nike Shox sneakers, modern t-shirts, short jeans, in addition to caps and phones - everything that any young person of the wealthiest classes would use.

When we arrived, we had our first surprise. When asked about what they wanted to eat, we noticed that they were nervous because they were not sure who would pay for the snack (which was soon explained to the group because we reported to have a small budget for research expenses.) and they also admitted feeling uncomfortable. 'Look, we love McDonald's, but you can choose. Anything goes, we never came here, we are poor. For us it is very expensive!'

Little by little - between French fries, hamburgers and Cokes - the

conversation started flowing. Bruno, who works as a furniture deliveryman, started the conversation by telling us that on one occasion, in his work, he had to wait a long time to carry out a delivery and as it was lunch time, they decided to go at a rotating steakhouse. He said having paid an expensive bill: R \$ 85.00 split between three colleagues, which was considered by Bruno a fortune, even if he confessed being amazed by that wonderful and plentiful food - it had all kinds of cattle and sheep meat. He showed that he clearly considered that meal something out of his reach as a consumer ... But when it comes to fashion and consumption, the speech changes completely.

Clothing and status

According to Friedman, the clothing consumption

is not a cheap imitation of reality, but consumption of the highest status order. (for low-income individuals) It is a matter of prestige. Thus, it is possible that the satisfaction gained does not reside in experimenting the lifestyle, but in the constitution of your own self in front of others [...], a rational manipulation of appearances [...]. And clothing is the immediate expression of the degree of vital force carried by that person within herself. The consumption of clothing is not only the power of wealth, but health and political power. (Friedman, 1990: 315).

In the direction of Friedman's notes, the importance of clothing, for the informants, is central during their youth, period in which being and having

tend to merge. When questioning them about the importance of clothes and how much they pay for them, Bruno said, 'it is very expensive, but worth it. It is different from food, which you just eat and then it's finished. Clothing is not like that. Clothing is important, appearance is everything. It shows who you are.'

We then specifically asked about the clothes he was wearing, that is an authentic striped polo shirt, signed Tommy Hilfiger. Our informant adds: I bought it in installments, I paid R\$ 150.00. It wasn't on sold, but it had a good price. In most stores it costs more than 200 contos... (...) If you're wearing something expensive, quality clothes, people respect you...

Fininho (whose name is Francisco, but he hates it for being 'a poor man's name') added:

What matters is the price; the more expensive is what matters. No one else has it if it's expensive. A guy has a blouse worth 300, and another one wears a blouse worth 250... it is obvious that the 300 blouse is better. If I see someone wearing a blouse of 300 I know that he can do more than the one who has a 250 blouse. He's the one who the chicks will like. He's the one who will pick up girls... We need to be well dressed to look good at the parties.

What is clear in this discourse is a sort of *valuation* of social relations. This became even clearer during the visit we had with the youngsters, while going middle-class shopping, when we asked them to show us their favorite stores, their most cherished brands and how they chose their clothes. The aim was to understand on the spot their tastes and preferences. The youngsters were quite

comfortable with this task and told us that they like to go window shopping, to choose wisely and research.

They said they did not care about the price at the time of the survey. What guide their purchases are the brands and not the low price. In fact, the more expensive the better. They look for and choose clothes and accessories of famous brands, especially brands known by the internet surfers. Fininho summed up their purchases like this: 'It turns out that the coolest brand is the most expensive. Billabong is better because it is more expensive than Adidas. Therefore you show that you can do more if you have Billabong'.

This way, the low price does not influence the purchase, since it is the high price the one that prevails in this universe. Fininho describes his shopping: 'I don't look at the price, looking at the price is for the poor. I do not choose the price; I choose the piece of clothing. If I like the shirt, its color, if it's worth it, then yes, you can then negotiate and paying cash can always get you a discount.' Although young people say that the important thing is the price - 'you are as important as the value of your sneakers' - the pricing is only relevant in a very unique repertoire of brands known and recognized by the clans of Porto Alegre. For example, young people recognize the Lacoste brand is important, they know and admire the famous Lacoste Clan, of Rio de Janeiro. However when they see in the display window of a Lacoste watch, they ignore it, saying they prefer Adidas, which costs three times less.

There are multiple shopping strategies. They said that their devotion to certain brands is something positive

in their lives; it encourages them to work in order to become consumers. In addition to their salary, young people sell older clothes [which are from the past season] to the poorest of Morro, as well as buy expensive clothes from the wealthiest people in their area, which are the traffickers. Furthermore, there are burglars who specialize in stealing from window displays of shoe shops and surf shops, process which facilitates the purchase of brands while seeing it. This payment can also be performed through an exchange, where new clothes are exchanged for favors and other objects. The last resort is the direct theft of sneakers from middle-class youngsters, although the informants have sheepishly confessed this practice. Kiko, when saying what he did in order to buy, he also stressed this out: ‘anything goes, meat, cash from my grandmother, from my mother, borrowed money, selling what I’ve already used... there are a thousand ways to achieve what you want...’

In reality, this speech saying ‘the more expensive the better’ seemed strange to us, since we knew the extremely poor houses where they lived and the misery which often plagued their families. There was a tension under our eyes, forming a moral circuit of middle-classes that ranked what we considered to be a consumption priority to the low-income classes. It was clear to us that for them the priority was not merely dressing up, but simply existing: being seen, being recognized and having prestige. That is, instead of a contradiction between misery and ostentation, we were faced with two complementary categories, in which the second was the result of the first.

During this meeting in which they

were showing a taste for expensive things, they proved to be extremely critical and strict about the clothes of other bystanders, who they were analyzing and classifying at first sight. Fininho said: ‘we can tell if you are a tough guy, if you’re hairless, if you’re wearing an R\$80 shirt, if you use counterfeit designer clothes, like Adidas, or if you’re wearing a worn [old] shirt only by looking at your way of walking.’ Another clothing item, much appreciated in the male universe, is the cap, which can never be counterfeited. They believe that they can immediately identify a counterfeited and an original cap. We asked them how they managed such prowess and Bruno said: ‘The good ones cost 200. We learn by going in stores, asking to see, by examining. Then you go and examine in a flea market and you learn to feel the difference. There is no comparison ...’

While caps are important, there is no doubt that the most important object is sneakers. Kiko explains: ‘Everything starts with the sneakers. Sneakers are the most important and the best, without a doubt are the Nike Shox sneakers’. One of the lines that most caught our attention was that they never ‘looked’ at a ‘chick’ who was not wearing shoes from Nike: ‘I prefer an ugly chick to a pretty one wearing ‘chuleta’ [ugly sneakers, not branded] – said Kiko. The informant continued his reasoning, saying that if the ‘chick were perfect,’ it was possible to invest in the girl and sponsor her in order for her to achieve his status, in terms of clothing.

Fininho finished the thought:

I would not be with a chick who wears Fila sneakers. If we

see a chick with Boots in her feet [sneakers advertized in the Programa Domingão do Faustão], we tell her: what's with the slippers! I also prefer an ugly girl wearing branded sneakers to a pretty girl with unbranded clogs. But if she were perfect, we would invest in her, the poor thing.

Just as they say they don't look at a girl who doesn't have Nike sneakers, they believe no one looks at them at the funk parties if they are not properly dressed. According to Bruno:

The stars are the chicks that follow the clans, those who want the guy because the guy can do it, the guy who is showing his power. There's a lot of chick who like ugly guys who wear designers' clothes than instead of handsome guys wearing common clothes. The guys that use brands sponsor the chicks. They are powerful. But those chicks are not to marry, no. Those are with you and in a little while they are with your friend, who uses a more expensive brand.

Notably, we face a context of male domination, in which the man plays the role of provider. Followers of the clans, called 'chicks' or 'stars' are of paramount importance in the gear of the shopping system. They act as a kind of measuring instrument, able to tell who has more power - which eventually triggers an ongoing process of disposal of clothing and the acquisition of new pieces.

Thus, as we noticed, to sustain this purchase cycle it is necessary to make use of various resources, such as salary, trade, and perhaps thefts. At that time, we supposed that the acquisition of some counterfeit pieces of clothing could be driven as a strategy of

acquiring more brands. But when questioning the young people about it, they laughed a long time at our naive question: 'nooo! The brands have to be original. Just by looking we know it is original, the consistency of the fabric... outworn fabric doesn't do either. Old stuff neither. Bark cloth?! No way...!' So, laughing, Bruno continued:

Bark cloth clothes are for playing football or sleeping in them. It's not worth it, cheap things come out expensive because they lack quality. Take a shirt, a cap, any piece of clothing. It is very easy to discover what is not original, the fake has the logo bent, it's worth spending more. Not half. Or else it easily breaks. We look at everything, we do an x-ray, and soon we discover whether it is genuine - we keep looking until we find out. There are many people on the hill that use piracy, but hey, I'm not a dead-beat ... [*emic term for poor*], I only buy original.

It is important to highlight that these lines make up the representations' repertoire of the informants. In many cases, we noticed that there was great difference between what they said and what they did. For example, the same informants, at other times, admitted that their wives were neither perfect nor brand consumers, but only 'common' girls who they knew at some point in their lives. Besides, this form of consumption is linked to a phase of life in particular. Bruno dropped his purchases since he had a daughter with his wife of 15 years. Before his daughter was born, all his salary was used to buy clothes. At the time of the interview, he was wearing a shirt of the past season, which he was not very

proud of. But he insisted on the quality of the product, 'it last only because it's a good thing ...'

In reality the participation in clans is directly related to the juvenile life. After having a daughter, Bruno's consumption had to reduce. All other activities related to the group also lost strength. After turning eighteen, for example, many stop making graffiti, as they become adults, and can be arrested. Likewise, going to parties is no longer as frequent. Entering as part of a 'clan' at a party is something that makes sense especially to the unmarried men, because this is a demonstration of power in the universe of emotional exchanges.

Dance and graffiti

Besides the consumption and showing off of the brands they wear in everyday life and at parties, other aspects are structural for the clans as is the case of graffiti, which has the function to mark the group's identity by printing its power. As the youngsters related in our first approach, the risk is what stimulates this activity. The higher you draw, the more power is shown. The Clan of the Rebels reached 70 members who were responsible for different stages of graffiti, from the purchase of spray to painting itself. The brands scattered on high places and/or public establishments give prestige to the clan. The youngsters are initiated in the style of graffiti and therefore, the one in charge of printing the brand has to be the one who has the ability to beautifully write and climb the highest buildings at the same time.

The graffiti is an important mile-

stone in the group, but as Kiko explained us - 'it is not enough to paint; you have to paint and to dress well, what's the use in showing power if power does not read in the appearance of the guy, if the guy is not dressed as a Brother? [emic expression from Porto Alegre to describe a rich boy]. Thus, graffiti and clothing are two complementary expressions of power and status as well as a demarcation of boundaries of *self* and of the group.

In addition to graffiti and brand clothing that characterize the group, the Clan of the Rebels also has their own music. It is sung when the group enters the party and it must have the ability to stop the dancing.

S of STRENGTH

U of UNION

R of REBELS, THE FACTION IS
ALREADY FORMED

A of FRIENDSHIP

H of HEART

I AM A REBEL, I AM A REBEL.

In those moments, the young people make a 'wave' – characteristic step of the funk dance - and clap. The culminating point of all these efforts is the attention they manage to draw at a party, whether that of the general public, or that of the most desirable girls. This attention drawn by the graffiti, the clothes and the public performance are a driving force of conflict between clans. If one begins to stand out in the neighborhood, another one immediately challenges him to a fight. It is clear, therefore, that this process is based on a competition for power and visibility.

Kiko plays an important leadership role in the clan. In addition to painting, his activity is linked more to robberies,

to the extent that, in his capacity as leader, he has to be the most feared and the best dressed. According to his words:

In the past months, I slowed down the pace. But I was living on the street, preparing myself, I dropped out of school, I was painting a lot, I would go to parties, I would fight a lot - I hit and got beaten every day. Besides the guys on the hill, from our clan, I started hanging out with some guys more hard core, who stole motorcycles and then dismantled and sold them. So these guys, one day gave me a credit card and I went to the center trying to use the card, buy with it... it did not work. I was arrested in a store for trying to buy a pair of brand sneakers with a credit card. I was arrested under Article 171 - embezzlement - but I wouldn't stay long behind bars, because at the time I was a minor. My mother was there, the judge, it was hell, but now I'm fine... I'm already nineteen and I know that is it cool to be arrested. I'm in love, looking for a job and I'm going to finish school. I want all this...

As already mentioned, for the young people interviewed, 18 years is a paradigm milestone age. First of all, it is the age when they can start being held in Central Prison. But in addition to this, it is a stage in life when they start falling in love and having children, which creates a visible change in behavior and priorities. At the age of 19, our informants already talk a little in the past and project their future differently, thinking about supporting their families and finishing their studies. As Kiko summarized it: 'We become men and we have to stop doing certain things.'

What we notice in the field work is that youth sociability itself is already losing a bit of its intensity: they spend more time with the girlfriends they met and with their children, while going to parties become rarer and rarer. Therefore, we can conclude that the brand clans are a form of social classification of groups, as well as an individual status differentiation, whose meaning is tied to a particular phase of life: youth.

Final thoughts

When faced with young people who wear original brands from head to toe, but whose families are starving, there is a reductionist tendency to classify this act as irrational and superfluous. Through anthropological discourse, however, we know that the symbolic dimensions of consumption overlap the practices of consumption, since a socially valued symbol is as vital to human existence as vitamins, proteins and carbohydrates. Therefore, in the case studied, dressing designer clothes presented itself as a fundamental expression of humanity, which can be summarized in the following paraphrase: 'I wear, therefore I am.' This ostentatious consumption found in the field of clothing, shoes and caps of famous brands is not just a source of pride and personal gratification. Obviously, keeping in mind the dimensions of prestige and power, there is a clear strategy to exercise the right of being able to move and feel like the other young people of the same age who can be found in malls and in middle class neighborhoods. These empirical findings point to the

importance of originality as a value of citizenship and identity - value that for the informants, serves as a counterpoint to the stigmatizing narratives that revolve around the universe of Morro da Cruz, stuck to the informal market, crime and drug trafficking.

However, this emphasis on the dress code does not occur in an isolated form or individualized but within enclosed groups (which are identified as clans) - which generates a process of social classification whose boundaries are publicly marked at parties or in fights. As a consequence, to understand this phenomenon that occurs amongst the youth of the suburbs, we turn to classical theories of totemism and ritual, that illuminate the understanding of the ways that various groups find to differentiate between them in the societies in which they find themselves. We are aware, however, that this article failed to exhaust all the possibilities of interpretation of the case presented, it is an empirical theoretical approach which aims at providing a first step in understanding the importance of brands and luxury among the poorer classes.

Generally speaking, there is still a long way to go in studies about popular consumption in Brazil today, but we believe this article provides a

contribution to the field, especially by emphasizing an emic perspective, which seeks to give visibility to the informants in their micro-everyday choices. In this field of study, we draw attention to the need for an ethnography of native categories, which fulfills the role of the anthropological aim: to give voice to the informants.

Note

¹ To contextualize the research universe, we will exemplify it using the existing classifications: respectively A, B,C, D and E. In Brazil there are two types of criteria to define the social class to which a certain person belongs. For the Associação Brasileira de Pesquisa (ABEP) [Brazilian Research Association], whose indexes are used as a standard for market research – the consumption power of individuals is verified through their possession of consumer goods. The Brazilian census agency, the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE) [Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics] defines classes within income ranges that are multiples of the minimum wage (which is approximately US\$ 322). Within both criteria, we can locate the subjects in the study in class ‘D’, with some informants at the limits of ‘E’.

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