13 Staging identity through consumption
Exploring the social uses of sporting goods

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Broadly speaking, sport, and its associated events, stars and commodities, are forms of communication. The interest in, and success of, communication, including advertising, through sport can be explained, in part at least, by its powerful and pervasive symbolic efficacy. However, to date there has been little analysis of the relationship between the representational aspects of sport advertising and the equally important practice of sport consumption; that is, how particular sporting commodities are used within everyday lifestyle. This chapter aims to analyze more precisely the social context and ramifications of the symbolic efficacy of sport by focusing on the consumption and uses of sporting goods. More specifically, using France as a case study, I attempt to provide some rare empirical data. However, although France serves as the site of analysis we cannot ignore the impact of globalization and its role in shaping consumer markets and the meaning of commodities in everyday life. To this extent France is one of many “global locals.”

Using Goffman’s notion of the presentation of self in everyday life, we will see that changes in the nature of our relationships with objects and people are evident in and through a contemporary reading of sport consumption. Moreover, as I hope to demonstrate, differences in cultural patterns of sporting goods consumption reinforce the fact that the same standardized product can be purchased and used by very different people, for different reasons and with resultant different meanings. Clearly, sport consumption is dependent on wider socio-economic changes, especially the expansion of the media industry. Through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu’s analysis of the media field, we can see the increasing influence of the media and its impact on sport consumption. Arguably, sport is both an ideal commodity and a vehicle for media marketing. This is due, in part, to sport being a dynamic, unpredictable, emotionally charged public performance facilitating spectator and fan identification, and, in turn, targeting strategic market segments.

Still, the importance of sport consumption cannot be limited to the effects of the media field. Sport consumption is also embedded in other cultural changes that help to explain a process of “sportivization” of physical appearance emerging in the 1960s, particularly in youth culture. Youth over-consumption and the conspicuous wearing of sporting goods needs to be understood in this cultural...
frame and will be discussed in relation to the quest for identity and the presentation of self (Goffman, 1959). I aim to show that consuming sporting goods contributes to an illusion, one exploited by advertisers, of acceding to an authentic, genuine, and valorized culture. Arguably, the quest for authenticity through consumption is not necessarily juxtaposed with the increasing globalization of markets because, as previously noted, even for standardized sporting goods, their ultimate meaning is rooted within specific contexts and conditions of use. The study of consumption and identity is gaining increasing importance because of the rising tendency to conflate and legitimize “the consumer” as the model of social actors and citizenship.

Sporting goods as sacred

A society cannot create itself or recreate itself without at the same time creating the ideal.

(Durkheim, 1960: 603)

The consumption of sporting goods has to be understood with respect to changes in mainstream society. For example, beyond broader political and economic changes, shifts in belief systems may help to explain the central place that consumption now holds in our everyday lives. Notably, the boundaries between the sacred and the profane are no longer as clearly differentiated as they once were. Our customs, habits, and appearance “crystallize into action sequences of roles, values and communication with an emotional and a strong symbolic responsibility” (Rivière, 1995: 264). Understanding the strong ritualism of sporting goods use and display is one way of approaching the significance of consumption. In Goffman’s (1967) analysis the body is the essential matrix of ritual production, and the rites of interaction provide many opportunities to reaffirm the moral and social order. Thus, the positive rituals expressed by a great respect toward objects are also celebrations of individual and group achievement. Within sport, objects such as trophies and medals are integral parts of rituals of honor and celebration. However, even within everyday life sport commodities such as racquets, skis, kayaks, or cycles are the subject of great deference. Although those practicing sport as a form of leisure are less likely to consider objects as sacred, they still retain meanings beyond simple utility. They are often personalized by an elaborate system of choices related to colors, signatures, or other marks of distinction. The careful handling of sporting objects is a sign of respect for the value of practice and practitioners (Fottorino, 1996). Notably, profane goods of capitalism are often regarded as sacred (Featherstone, 1991: 121) such that the most important objects of consumption, both sport and non-sport, constitute an extension of the person and the collectivity. Moreover, modern forms of animism can be read into our relations with sports objects. Athletes display concentration and emotion as they engage in sporting activity. In many ways attachment to sporting objects is also an attachment to a way of life. Commodities punctuate the sport, the participant, and his/her consuming biog-
raphy. Objects, connected with events, are treasured as the relics of a glorious past. The first pair of sport shoes bearing a brand, the first safety binding with cables for skis, the wooden racquet or the first ski pass constitute a sort of archaeological treasure chest. They are symbolic markers of sporting challenges, victories, and memories of the past. Indeed, our relationship to the consumption of sport commodities reveals a type of social itinerary. Discussions about the origins of the first sailing board, the advent of fiberglass in kayaks, skis or rackets, recall the values of a past life and provide an opportunity to critique the boorish consumer materialism of our times. Likewise, discourses about sport objects are a means of remembering and an important source of information about past conditions of practice (Löfgren, 1996). Unfortunately, the symbolic aspects of consumption are too often neglected because of the dominance of economic approaches that give priority to quantification. Yet, in most cases, the consumer is not a *homo-economicus* purchasing with rationality; even the shopping experience is a social experience (Falk and Campbell, 1997), and there are social uses of goods at stake that involve a variety of cultural patterns.

### Sporting goods use and cultural patterns

The notion of social determinism is still strong if we consider the statistical databases of consumption in each country or at an international level (e.g. INSEE, Statistics Canada, U.S. Census Bureau). Factors such as income, occupation, or educational attainment are strongly correlated with all types of consumption, including leisure and sport. However, the understanding of social practices needs to be analyzed at a micro level. Social reality cannot be limited to a so-called objective statistical analysis, because the subjective aspects are often the most important with respect to understanding behaviors. Furthermore, there are serious problems in trying to reconstruct a particular sport consumer identity from aggregate social or economic statistics. Such a hypothetical consumer is the result of the average of very different and contradictory purchases and uses of goods and services; it is not a real person but rather an artifact. Ethnographic or sociological observations of real behavior, rather than constructed on statistical bases, helps to explain the complexity of consumption. For example, while there is clear evidence of the globalization of fast-food chains and the mass consumption of sporting goods, this should not be interpreted simply as the homogeneity of culture. Thus, in the case of France, eating in a fast-food restaurant once a month doesn’t mean an Americanization of French lifestyles.

Similarly, although 90 percent of people buy sport goods at least once a year, they are using them in very different ways. The uses of sporting commodities are so diverse that they cannot be easily compared. Indeed, the persistence of cultural patterns in consumption remains strong, linked to the social context and the identity of particular social groups (Usunier, 1996). Consumption involving strong cultural habits, like food, are not changing very fast even if we can observe an important growth of fast-food chains; on the contrary, products are
redesigned to respond to the demand of traditional and so-called authentic food. Consumption that involves cultural patterns, or habitus in Bourdieu’s axiomatic, are more linked to local culture and local difference, although goods such as clothes can be used in different ways and contexts not directly linked with habitus. Notably, habitus is also at stake in sport practice, uses of the body, sexuality, or language. It is also important in the presentation of self; but goods are very arbitrary social signs that change relatively quickly, and objects and brands are not necessarily linked to a particular social category. People from different countries, classes, and cultures are increasingly practicing the same sports and using the same commodities. For example, sport shoes are mass consumed in Western countries; an underprivileged teenager as well as a businessman can buy the same pair of Nike’s. However, the “meaning” of the commodity and its use may vary widely. The meaning of goods depends on their use. Some previous research suggests that the upper classes generally use them for sports while the lower classes often use them in everyday life as part of their ongoing participation in a valorized culture (Desbordes et al., 1999). Significantly, the use of a commodity does not imply the involvement of fundamental properties of the habitus. Wearing Reebok or Adidas clothes is not, of course, a question of habitus, even if the goods used are nonetheless signs of social conditions. Thus, although French and American consumers are buying the same sport shoe, the use and meaning may be vastly different. In the U.S.A. you will often meet women wearing sport shoes with a suit as they travel to the office but you will rarely see such a practice in France or in Italy. That is why comparisons must be made relative to both uses and purchases. It is definitely not the same practice to use sporting goods while training, shopping, working, dining out, or going to the cinema; the signification of consumption depends on cultural patterns and social interactions inscribed and expressed in a diversity of places. For example, although 80 percent of Adidas advertising for youth is the same all over the world, it does not translate into the same uses and meanings of sporting goods (Tribou and Madec, 1999). The appropriation of sport clothing and symbols by U.S. inner city gangs – or by many European youth living in the poorest suburban peripheries – to express their identity have little or nothing in common with the sporting use of older people from completely different backgrounds and positions. While both may use the sporting commodities to demarcate particular identities and social standing, the latter group has a greater opportunity to actually use the goods in everyday life, though they may not choose to do so.

The significance of consumption is also concerned with its relationship to other goods and with the specificity of context in which it is used. Wearing a Lacoste polo shirt under a suit to play tennis, to go to school or to go to a disco are not the same forms of consumption. It is a mistake to think that habitus is able to explain all behaviors without taking into account the context and the system of roles inscribed in social spaces and institutions. As a consequence, there could not be a direct, clear, and systematic relationship between the consumption of athletic goods and social patterns. That is why, despite an undeniable homogenization within the process of supply, the consumption of goods
and services is still rooted in local culture and local struggles (Jackson and Andrews, 1999).

Nevertheless, despite local resistance, the impact of powerful global forces on societies cannot be ignored. The media in particular are transforming the social context of local cultures and local struggles. Arguably, the media are decreasing the autonomy of many other social fields (Bourdieu, 1996), including sport, and having an increasing influence on youth culture, consumption, and social representations. In many ways the media frame the way in which most behaviors, including sport consumption, occur and must be understood.

The increasing influence of media on sport consumption

There is an increasing influence of media, particularly television, on the symbolic organization of society. As a consequence, the autonomy of other social fields (e.g. intellectual, political or sport) is decreasing (Bourdieu, 1994, 1996). That is why the value of commodities often depends on their place on television (marketers often attach the label “Seen on TV” to increase the credibility of their products). The influence of television is quite significant to particular categories of people because their access to other forms of culture is often limited, and television holds quite a dominant position. Indeed, some argue that this is why their cultural autonomy against television is lower. Young people often find heroes and role models for identification in the media (Duret, 1993). Sport stars have now taken their place among movie and music celebrities because sport has become a powerful vehicle in the media business (Andrews and Jackson, 2001). Thus, it is not surprising that identity confirming sport consumption by youth is valorized by the dominance of television.

The transformation of the media field and its main social role, added to the specific characteristics of sport events, feeds the symbolic efficacy of sporting goods (explaining its high level of consumption). Sport events make for good television because of their entertainment value, ease of scheduling, and, at least in relative terms, lower cost of production. But their economic efficiency is also linked to a symbolic one. The interest in sport comes from its capacity to put on stage action situations, or in Goffman’s terms, “fateful situations” (Goffman, 1967; Birrell, 1981). Sport is one of the few remaining real social contexts in which character can be demonstrated as well as social and moral assessments conducted. Even if it is obvious that the conditions of ordinary life don’t imply such clear competitive action situations, the sport narrative gives sense to everyday life during a period in which the meta-narratives of Western modernity (science, humanism, socialism) are unable to provide it (Lyotard, 1979). It affords the opportunity to compare and express its own values and behavior (Ohl, 2000). The sport narrative is also often a description of ways of acting and interacting, and refers to established social codes of behavior. Similar to a guide of savoir-vivre (Picard, 1995), discussions of sport behavior recall and update the social codes of everyday life including those linked to gender, race, sexuality, and class divisions.
Sports embody numerous characteristics that turn them into events capable of generating stories, and the resulting analyses and comments contribute to the spread of sport consumption. For example, the simplicity of sport events and the uncertainty of the result help to generate intrigue and excitement. Sport provides a context, like a theater, within which people from different cultural backgrounds meet and interact. The engagement of body and values linked to action accentuates the possibility for a spectator to feel the intensity and emotions. In an era revealing a relative pacification of society, sports provide symbolic “fateful situations” which contribute to the regulation of emotions (Elias and Dunning, 1986). Sport events put heroic people on stage (Ehrenberg, 1991; Duret, 1993), and it is probably because sportspersons are from different social classes, but often from lower classes, that the interest in events is so intense (Leite, Lopes and Maresca, 1989).

The above factors outline why narratives and images of sport provide a set of social codes and figures useful for the construction of “self.” The success of sporting goods is embedded in ordinary people, the emergence of heroes, symbols of nation, success and wealth. In this symbolic system, commodities refer to sacred heroes with valorized identities and buying and owning these goods is, more often for young consumers, a means to accede to a recognized culture. In the abundant comments on sport events and heroes – on television or in newspapers – there are descriptions of social frames (Goffman, 1974), on how people interact, and on the relations between identity and behavior (Ohl, 2000). The success and understanding of sporting rhetoric can be explained by its capacity to represent our behavior in various circumstances. Identification with sporting heroes provides newspapers, magazines, and television with a role in the construction of identity. Comments are important because they give a description of heroes with which people can identify; furthermore the emotional dimension of sport events accentuates the probability of affective affiliation. Another advantage is that, unlike more fixed aspects of identity such as gender, race, or nationality, sport provides heroes that are continually changing and thus each generation can have its own role models. The transformation of media contributes to the spreading of sporting appearances, but the trend is at first inscribed in wider social changes related to the question of appearance. In other words, mediated sport offers an external resource to validate identities in the process “of the internal–external dialectic of identification” (Jenkins, 1996: 20).

The sportivization of appearances

Fundamental changes in the organization and regulation of the global economy have contributed to the emergence of new social categories, new definitions of identity, and changes in belief systems. And, while economic forces certainly play an important role, they cannot be isolated from other parameters. Beliefs, for example, also play a major role in the economy (Weber, 1958), as do other factors such as technology and science. Moreover, these combined transforma-
tions have facilitated the development of a mass market creating a culture of consumption. Among the effects of these developments is the popularity and expansion of sport. This trend is not the sole result of the increasing number of people practicing sport. In fact, the majority of sports commodities are not used for the practice of sport per se. Indeed, for sporting goods retailers, for every purchase by a serious sportsperson there are an equal number of purchases made by consumers who don’t actually practice sport. In France, like most countries, clothes (66 percent), accessories (58 percent), shoes (54 percent) and equipment (24 percent) are not necessarily, and indeed rarely, used to practice a sport (Pouquet, 1994). Furthermore, people interested in many types of sport commodities are more sensitive to the sport labels and brands than to their actual function. Often they are interested in large or at the very least “authentic” logos. Conversely, many “real athletes” prefer inconspicuous sporting signs (though their sponsorship deals may require their display). Their legitimate position in the sport field and the opposition to people’s conspicuous use of sporting goods explains their apparent distance to the material signs of sport identity (Desbordes et al., 1999).

The importance of the need to display sporting goods can be explained by their symbolic function. The concern for the sign, the sporting and relaxed appearance is often more important than the performance or the technical merit of the products. At the same time we should consider some of the wider social changes in the relationship between fashion and various cultural practices. Since the 1960s, there has been a decline in the need for formal clothing partly because of price but also because of the reduction in the number of formal ceremonious occasions that demanded their specific use. Sport clothing, among others, emerged to fill the gap in the market. For example, from 1953 to 1984, the consumption of men’s suits dropped from 26 percent to 7.7 percent and women’s suits from 12.7 percent to 6.4 percent, whereas sport clothes consumption increased from 0.9 percent to 12.8 percent for men and 0.9 percent to 11.8 percent for women (Herpin, 1986).

However, the decline of ceremonial clothing doesn’t mean the end of social ceremonies; they are not disappearing, rather they are changing. With adults often making different choices, young people are creating new ceremonies that replace, and, in some cases, oppose traditional ones. For example, there are new fast-food and casual dining styles and practices (using hands versus cutlery) that are challenging traditional patterns. Notably, although these are often less formal, they are still very ritualized and affirm new social codes.

Arguably, the popularity of sport helped inspire today’s “sporting style” of fashion. This style has been further popularized by movie and music stars wearing, and thus legitimizing, sport fashion. For example, during the 1980s, the hip-hop movement spread the sporting style in specific music cultures. Many sport brands benefited from this tendency without any specific marketing plan (e.g. Helly Hansen, Fila, Nike, Fubu). Today, sporting brands exploit this trend by producing specific goods and developing strategic partnerships with musicians (e.g. the Reebok “team rap”).
The image of sports people and their diverse ways of expressing their identities are increasingly being exploited by modeling agencies. For example, the Marylin agency created a department whose job it was to recruit athletes for advertising campaigns. Athletes from football (R. Pires, D. Trezeguet), rugby (R. Ibanez), athletics (J. Galfione), and boxing (E. Holyfield) were recruited because of “the positive image he (the sportsman) gives and his attitude as well during competitions and in daily life” (chief of Marylin agency quoted in La Lettre de l’économie du Sport, 4 March 1998: 4). This ad agency comment suggests that athletes are not only models of behavior when competing; they are also considered as models of projection and identification for everyday life. It is their human qualities, as much as their physical ability, which are at stake.

Sporting brands also influence a wider clothing style with other brands often inspired by sport innovations. Sporting brands offer the most readable and recognizable logos, clothes, and shoes. Lacoste placed his first crocodile on an item of clothing in 1933, at a time when labels were only discreetly fixed under the dress or inside the shoes. Other sporting brands, notably Adidas and Puma, contributed to the spread of this tendency. Today, many brands put their logo on clothes (e.g. Billabong, Chevignon, Paraboot, Benetton). In addition, technical materials, like Gore-Tex, which was first used in the sport industry, is now being adopted for other clothes and shoes. The increasing consumption of sport clothes has also contributed to a blurring of the relations between clothing and social status. The rigid boundaries that once existed have given way to more complex avenues for expressing identities associated with age, gender, and status. These changes help to explain why sporting goods figure so prominently in the process of self-presentation in youth culture, as will be illustrated in the case study of France.

French youth culture and sporting goods

In France, the post-war period was accompanied by significant economic growth with the emergence of a “new bourgeoisie” of professional managers (Boltanski, 1982). The rise of new social groups explains, in part, the quest for new symbols of status. Opposed to the established bourgeoisie in terms of age and social origins, they demanded recognition of their identity. During the 1960s, this demand was expressed not only in social conflicts associated with work or education but also symbolically through consumption.

The image of success represented by the American way of life, including blue jeans, Coke, chewing-gum, music, sport, and Hollywood movie stars, was embedded in these struggles. In a changing social and economic context, particularly with the creation of many new jobs and the arrival of a new generation of baby boomers, commodities became symbols used to stage new social status. During 1960s France and particularly the events of May 1968, cultural consumption and, paradoxically, the distrust of consumption, were among the most visible expressions of opposition to traditional culture. The presentation of self was also used to express political opposition to capitalism. But these cultural
changes were not limited to France. In numerous countries, the consequences of economic development, like the transformation of the labor force (decline of agriculture and industry) including the rise of female employment, had relatively similar consequences. Commodities were used to affirm new styles as opposed to established ones. This helps explain the focus on appearance, including that inspired by sport, as well as the development of values related to comfort and leisure versus traditional, rigid codes of savoir-vivre and self-control. This is not to suggest that class-based consumption disappeared; however, new global forces were emerging to influence both what and how people consumed.

Without neglecting the diversity of uses and meanings still strongly linked to social class, we cannot underestimate the homogenizing effects on youth in the more economically developed countries. Transnational corporations like McDonald’s, Disney, Sony, EMI, Coca-Cola, and Nike strongly contributed to the development of a global youth market. In part, this was achieved by trying to cultivate youth consumerism among the wealthiest groups. This does not suggest a universal consumer given that there is not a common youth culture; however, in some cases there are enough common references to use the same, or similar, ads when selling particular products. Some have argued that the globalization process is the background of a homogenization of some aspects of culture and social conditions. Considering culture, particularly youth culture, each generation seems to seek its own autonomy and identity while expressing its own values and behavior. The 1960s sacred values of peace and love were rejected by the 1970s preference for hate and outrage (e.g. the anarchy of the Sex Pistols). The political conservatism and consumer conformism of the 1980s served as a deliberate distancing from the rebellious punk attitudes. Even dominant images of the body can be contrasted across eras: the pale and sickly look of the punk period versus the shaped and muscled body of the 1980s. Later eras of youth consumption continued to demonstrate elements of contradiction. For example, hip-hop and rap music are based around identity politics and a critique of society, yet are often closely linked to the values of consumption (e.g. wearing of sport brand clothing) and the display of wealth.

Moreover, social changes often impact on young people first because they have to adapt more than other people. New technologies, new job categories, increased education, and a new focus on the body through exercise, sport, and diet are all enabling and constraining factors influencing the current generation. Moreover, in the new social context, this generation, often acceding to the middle or upper classes (social mobility was high in France during the post-war period because of central changes in employment structure), does not want to reproduce the established bourgeois codes. The new lifestyles included all sorts of cultural elements from underground culture in music, theater and art, to the consumption of jeans, cigarettes, and/or the emergence of new sports. The rising sale of sporting goods is partly inscribed in this cultural transgression. In this context global sport companies such as Adidas and Nike were strategizing with respect to the new markets. Adidas focused on formally instituted sports, whereas Nike was responding to the new physical pursuits beyond the
boundaries of traditional sports. In part, Nike’s success was due to its innovative advertising and its sponsored athletes. In addition to star athletes and idealized role models, such as Michael Jordan, Nike also engaged in a strategy of transgression by using “athletes with an edge,” for example, Eric Cantona. Nevertheless, transgression must not be overestimated. Transgression in advertising is symbolic, and in many cases reproduces rather than challenges the social and moral order. As a consequence there is often no opposition to the consumption process and market forces. As Goldman and Papson (1998: 54) note, Nike intentionally garners “media attention when it occasionally transgresses bourgeois moral boundaries.” Even the recent success of Adidas can be explained by a “transgressive” use of clothes and shoes both within new sports (snowboarding, skateboarding), and within other realms of popular culture including music (e.g. Madonna and various rap stars). Despite a great diversity of uses, sport heroes or stars often create a global reference point opposed to the established order. In many cases the reference to sport and its associated heroes, heroines, and events provides a source of identification with particular movements of resistance. This opposition is very different from those during the 1960s; it has very few political or ideological connotations and has more to do with generation struggles and the creation of a specific culture that mixes sport, music, and other cultural practices.

The rise of the school-leaving age, the difficulties associated with finding and securing a job, and the challenges of gaining financial autonomy, have all increased the emergence of specific values that oppose adults and dominant representations of the establishment. It helps explain why young people are very receptive, and sometimes involved in, the creation of new fashions and new practices. The wish to affirm their own values explains their desire to consume and, as a consequence, they are a major target of sport companies. Sport is a culture of youth, and sport consumption depends on structuring youth experiences. That is why sporting goods are linked to youth biography. Sport and sport commodities function in important ways with respect to youth experiences including: achievement and awards, learning experiences, gifts and memorabilia (Desbordes et al., 1999). Thus, it is not surprising that sporting goods consumption is used by many as a way of affirming and staging identity.

Consequently, sporting goods are not only commodities, they are identity markers used to affirm autonomy. Because financial independence is rarely available before age 20, young people struggle, in different ways, for a symbolic autonomy. The use of sport clothes also contributes to the creation of symbolic barriers, which help to delimit a culture through appearance. Nonconformist and provocative appearance is also a way to limit contact with adults. Face-to-face rituals are more difficult when sharing little common references and behaviors.

Rules, attitudes, self-presentation, language or images are often opposed to what is supposed to be the established social order. The functions of sporting goods are relatively similar to the role of language or music. Goods create differences between members of the group and others. It is a kind of coding, to affirm
one's own culture against an inaccessible or non-desired culture. Sport is a more valorized culture, particularly in the media, than traditional cultures of public institutions (school or cultural centers). Pleasure derives, in part, from playing with the commodities; young people combine colors, materials, and logos, and often make jokes about themselves. In the construction and the affirmation of identity, sporting goods are one of the elements of a wider system of hybrid social identities. Language is also a key element; it is often used to define insiders and outsiders. However, while linguistic interactions are important, youth culture is centered around the visual and imagery, and that is why the presentation of self is so important. It requires clothes defining both similarities and differences, it confirms that the visibility of brands is essential, and in some cases it is complemented by particular music. In sum, sporting commodities provide a powerful, expressive, and accessible vehicle for youth to define themselves.

Affirmation of identity and the quest for authenticity

The consumption of objects is in many ways a “laboratory of identity games” (Lögfren, 1996). Sporting goods, unlike traditional ceremonial clothes or shoes, enable people to engage in new forms of behavior as distinct and original experiences. In France, reference to American culture is important because it includes heroic anti-establishment figures such as Muhammad Ali (Fantasia, 1994: 70). The links with its ancient colonies and the process of migration explain some unique features of the French situation compared to other countries such as Germany, the U.S.A. or Australia. There is an important segment of the French youth population that is of North African descent. This group tends to be from lower socio-economic categories and to experience difficulties in trying to affirm a positive identity. As racial/ethnic “others” within France, their strong need for recognition may explain their highly visible affirmation of identity. This process is very similar to the one that prompts minorities to use consumption, especially that of valuable brands, to shape their collective identity (Lamont and Molnàr, 2001). For young people in general, this period of uncertainty demands that they also express a strong identity through their use of particular clothing styles, language (slang), and attitudes. Thus, for a lot of French youth, American culture is reconstructed and appreciated in opposition to the established tradition, although it doesn't have the same meaning, habitus or behavior. Reference to the imagined American way of life is used as a kind of symbolic struggle linked to age and values. The highly publicized destruction of a McDonald's restaurant in 1999 by French farmers fighting globalization is, conversely, a fight against what is supposed to destroy French cultural diversity and identity. The valorization or the stigmatization of the dominant culture has both to do with the domination of an international culture standardized by marketing processes and with the social struggles between groups. The threat to the diversity of cultural practices is real but complex. In many cases, the symbolic aspects of culture are more at stake than its reality: “in terms of the
consumption of culture, fast-food represents no threat to *haute cuisine*, any more than blue jeans are a threat to *haute couture* or Tupperware a challenge to Limoges porcelain" (Fantasia, 1994: 80). Furthermore, French restaurants and *haute cuisine* are often exported all over the world.

The construction and display of identity around sport can be explained by the fairly wide spectrum of uses, styles, heroic figures, and champions with whom to identify. It may be a key reason why teenagers with uncertain identities appreciate sporting cultures. The relative autonomy of adolescent culture explains their propensity to transform objects from their original purpose and to react to corporate strategies. Hence, as previously mentioned, sport items are often used for purposes other than the practice of sport. Nevertheless, the “game” of identity is complex, and even within sport the established codes can be rejected (Catani, 1996). For example, marketing that is too conspicuous can disturb and produce negative reactions from young people or sportsmen (Desbordes *et al.*, 1999). Consider the case of D. Vincent, organizer of the “Big Mountain Snowboard Contest” who warned that: “the main danger is the men wearing suits and ties, the ads in sport.” As a result he made a deal with Rusty (a Californian surf brand) because he felt that a different, less commercial sponsor relationship was preferable (quoted in Desbordes *et al.*, 1999).

The quest for identity is expressed through the recurrent question of authenticity associated with sport commodities. This question is important on at least two levels. First, sport brands help organize youth to position themselves against casual brands within the vast clothing market. Second, it operates as an internal reference in the competition between sporting goods corporates. Youth sensitivity to the question of identity explains their demand for authentic and genuine values (versus those of the establishment). The success of sporting goods is linked to their ability to provide identity through perceived authenticity. Corporate discourses take into account this youth demand by promoting themselves through recognized champions. For sporting brands, the question is not only to respond to the demand, they also have to defend and define their own identity within the competitive marketplace. The consumption of these goods is clearly related to fashion; thus, their competitors are not only other sport brands but casual fashion as well. Consequently, sport brands need to maintain a strong identity that is highly recognizable, which helps to sell the product at a high price, and which preserves a space for consumption for the highly fluctuating youth market. The rhetoric around authenticity and genuine values corresponds to a demand for references. Moreover, it helps to mask the contradiction between the sport brands as fashion and sport brands associated with top-level athletes. The opposition between authentic and casual fashion is reflected in the symbolic struggles of corporations. For example, former CEO of Adidas, Robert Luis Dreyfus, declared that: “Swank is finished. Nike-type show off is no longer the trend: young people want authenticity” (*L’Essentiel du Management*, January 1995: 48).

The new leitmotiv of fashion specialists is authenticity. According to T. Cornet from “Who’s Next,” “Street tendency is an authentic movement” (in
Sport Première Magazine, 163, 1997: 45). Likewise, the title of a recent article in Sport Première Magazine, a French professional review for sport producers, was “Authenticity to survive.” Thus sport consumers and sport corporations are forced to negotiate a paradox. On the one hand, consumers seemingly seek authenticity, and corporations therefore need to signify and market their brand through the creation of “authentic” sport products. On the other hand, the reality is that most consumers are using sport commodities for fashion and display, and this further propels the fashion element of sport commodities rather than sport performance use per se.

For small retailers, authenticity is one of the best ways to survive. To fight against the concentration of retailers, small shop owners are resisting with “authenticity above all” (Sport Première Magazine, 179, 1998: 10). The search for history, patrimony, and authenticity is a strategy to compete within the sporting goods market. Market standardization is a problem for brand identity; affirming authenticity is both a response to the demand and a way to dominate new competitors in the market and to set off the sporting goods market. A 1998 Adidas advertisement illustrates these strategies well. The advertisement states: “Do you remember your studs? In 1954 we created the first ‘screw-on studs,’ then, everybody else did too. Today, we have created Traxion … Soon, everybody else will do the same.” Reference to history through advertising is a marketing strategy to challenge Nike and other brands. The strategy of staging history may also be observed in smaller markets like the surf-wear market. Harry Hodge, Quiksilver and Na Pali co-founder, argues that “what makes us different from other brands is our long history in sport and in surf … many brands in this sector don’t have the heritage and the authenticity of Quiksilver” (Sport Première Magazine, 179, 1998: 35). In some cases, transgression can bring authenticity: for example, R. Harnie-Cousseau, organizer of Glissexpo (a big sport show specializing in snowboard, surf, skate, roller, and so on) declared that to succeed, the show must “create an authentic atmosphere” and recover “the touch of madness that made it a past success” (Sport Première Magazine, 189, 1999: 20).

Thus, the “economic” competition within the sporting goods market is largely a battle fought out within the symbolic realm because the products are quite similar. Moreover, the notion of authenticity, largely and paradoxically because its meaning is so generic, is used within global marketing strategies to construct particular identities (e.g. age). To reiterate a previously stated point, my intention is not to suggest that youth around the globe are the same because they wear the same goods or listen to the same music. Differences of use are still strong between and within each country, but the processes are very similar because of a trend towards the homogenization of production and supply, and the similarity of social conditions of the middle and upper classes of the wealthier countries.

To increase profit, producers try to be efficient through standardization (of product, communication, production or design); it costs less and allows one to offer more goods in each country. Standardization is accompanied by an
increasing number of goods available in each market. The relative homogenization of purchases can also be explained by the standardization and concentration of retailing. And, while consumer behavior and demand is not standardized, it nevertheless operates within an increasingly standardized context.

**Sport as a means of acceding to a valorized culture**

The development of the media is a primary factor in the success of sport consumption, but it is certainly not the only one. For example, though there is evidence to the contrary, there remains a general perception that sports are more openly available to everyone compared to other cultural forms and practices such as concerts, theater, cinema, and restaurants (Donnat, 1998). The strong economic valorization of sport culture provides a key source of legitimacy in society, and this strengthens the propensity of social actors to justify their identification with it. Wearing particular brands of sport clothes or shoes is a way of taking part in a culture valorized by heroic media figures, and it is also a way of adopting a highly legitimated pursuit of particular styles. For example, following the success of the 1998 soccer World Cup, a lot of French people bought the official jersey of the winning team, and many men shaved their hair to look like Barthez or Zidane.

The success of sport in the media explains the importance of consumption of sporting goods by young people, particularly those from underprivileged environments. For them, the point is to have access to a culture that is not labeled or perceived to be a cheap culture. They shun the less expensive, less exclusive retailers' brands and those not associated with sporting champions (Ohl, 2001). Excluded from most cultural institutions, they over-value the sporting culture, using sporting signs to provide a positive identity. Sport clothes and shoes used outside the arena of actual performance are worn to affirm a specific identity, different from traditional bourgeois identity, but nonetheless valorized by our society.

The image of Nike, a key factor in its economic success, is often based on an anti-establishment position. Undoubtedly creative and unique, Nike advertising campaigns are often cynical and self-mocking, constructed against the traditional brands offering moralized accounts of the social world. For example, in one Nike advertisement, NBA star Charles Barkley is used as an intelligent "bad boy," declaring that: "I am not a role model, I am not paid to be a role model. I am not paid to wreak havoc on the basketball court." In its ads, Nike also uses W. Burroughs who wrote an anti-bourgeois novel (Naked Lunch), and music by the Beatles ("Revolution") and Iggy Pop's "Search and Destroy" which is an anti-middle-class and an antisocial song (Goldman and Papson, 1998). The main cultural and economical changes which started after the Second World War and spread during this period imply difficulties for a part of the new generation to construct its identity in society. Rebelliousness against established values could be explained by the difficulties in acceding to the valorized bourgeois model.
For the French lower classes, difficulties are both economical and cultural. For example, in urban areas, young people from the lower classes are often excluded from shops because they are perceived as social problems: unemployed, delinquent, criminal, and violent. Pinçon and Pinçon-Charlot (1992) noted that it is difficult for the lower classes and lower-middle classes to go into the luxury shops of Paris. Even if they go into different small shops to look at the goods without being willing to buy, they avoid the most expensive shops because they don’t feel at ease. To this extent the commercial doorstep is both objective and symbolic. For these lower-class French youth, shopping in prime retail centers is problematic. Economic factors often relegate them to being window shoppers and, as previously noted, they are often excluded because of their appearance. At the same time their quest for identity propels them to purchase commodities that they cannot afford and which they tend to wear and display in highly visible ways in order to affirm their identity and to differentiate themselves from those bourgeois groups that they resent and resist. Wearing sport clothes in an ostentatious way in conjunction with particular manners of behavior and speaking are signs of their desire to exist in public spaces. As such, public space becomes a contested terrain because for these youth it is an important site of performance. Through the presentation of self, young people seek to meet friends who share the same values, to express an identity, and to participate symbolically in the control of public space (Ohl, 2001).

For many young people, the sporting commodities used in the presentation of self are considered as sacred – they symbolize access to a valorized culture. Yet, although they are sacred, their meaning and value are temporal and fleeting and are continually scrutinized. Sport, and its heroic figures, respond very well to this demand because athletes must perform on a stage (or arena) of uncertainty that represents aspects of the human condition. Sport, more than all other domains, demands that, whoever you are, even if you are a world champion, you must train and fight to stay at the top. From a symbolic point of view, sport is the antithesis of the culture of inheritance and privilege.

Sport brands are using this type of opposition to establish codes and traditions. For example, the advertising agency that handles most of Nike’s campaigns, Wieden and Kennedy, deliberately set out to shock and challenge the status quo. Examples of this transgressive style include ads featuring scenes of athletes vomiting, perpetuating violence, and challenging authority. However, given the nature of sport and the high status of the athletes involved, they reinforce “the belief that success is the consequence of trying harder” (Goldman and Papson, 1998: 157).

The images circulated through Nike and other sport advertising campaigns are seductive, and help to explain the seemingly contradictory consumption patterns of youth. They want to have signs of relative wealth for the purpose of status but need those signs to represent some form of resistance against the established order. Enter brands like Lacoste, Adidas, Fila and Nike that provide a range of images to accommodate various consumers. For many youth in France...
it is a conspicuous use of sport commodities that helps facilitate their affirmation of identity. Their ceremonial use of sporting clothes can be easily replaced as they mature and obtain new social and economic status. One question that remains however, is how these French youth localize and rationalize their use of global sport commodities.

Sporting goods, local identity and globalization

In France, Nike, Adidas, and Reebok are the favorite brands of 11 to 17-year-olds and now supersede brands like Hollywood, Coca-Cola, and McDonald’s; other sporting brands like Quicksilver and Oxbow also hold a high rank (Inquiry by Teen Generation 1997, quoted in Sport Première Magazine, March to April 1998: 113). The international reputation of sport brands is very strong, so they are particularly visible and important consumption items from a symbolic point of view. Notably, there is a vast difference between the real economic impact of the sporting goods industry compared to others and its public visibility. This is partially explained by the capacity of sporting events to become very desirable media commodities. The overestimation of sporting brands with respect to their economic turnover is also associated with powerful positive social representations that are, while increasingly more difficult to accomplish, distanced from the unpleasant side of commercialization. Clearly, top sportspeople earn a lot of money but their effort and ability are visible, and as such they can be differentiated from the establishment and those who inherit privilege and position.

The expansion of world trade and global markets, professional uncertainty, imaginary social mobility, growth of media, extended longevity, and the increasing number of years spent at school, are all contributing factors to young people using sport commodities (and others) as new markers of identity. Numerous sporting goods operate as identity markers, including those developed by various sport clubs and associations. These contribute, in various ways, to the maintenance of social bonds between their members. The visible display of sporting emblems and logos demonstrates loyalty and commitment, and symbolically separates out the true supporters from the casual fans. In a more systematic way, European professional football and basketball clubs have developed the sale of identity-related sporting goods. For example, the Naples’ Football Club sold more than a million souvenirs in 1990 (Bromberger, 1994); in 1997, Manchester United offered 1,500 items in its catalogue and earned $33 million profit; and the Bayern Munich Club has sold 350,000 jerseys per year. From this point of view, France is relatively different, since the supply of accessories is more limited. The organization and history of strong state centralization in France accounts for why football clubs are less likely to function as the agent of local identity than other European clubs.

Thus, the consumption of sporting commodities enables the affirmation of local and national identities. However, the increasing globalization of the
market does not spare any field of modern societies. As various local sports seek to survive, they are increasingly dependent on global television and corporate sponsorship. As a consequence, they are commodified, and local control is either lost or greatly reduced.

Today, most sport brands have a global strategy. Sport, as noted throughout this chapter, is used as a common culture through which to unify consumption. Consider the following extract from an Adidas document distributed to its employees in 1997:

The consumers Adidas is targeting are the athletes. These consumers care about their sports. They care about performance. They are physical. They are competitive. They expect the best for themselves and their athletic products. There is no difference anywhere in the world. This is our core message . . . and the message must be the same anywhere in the world. If it is not the same, it is not Adidas.

(Adidas Corporate Objectives and Mission, 1997: 9)

Several European clubs also partly changed their identity from a status club full of references to a local identity to a make, source of benefit in an internationalized market. Sport pictures have turned into products negotiated in an international market in which local differences diminish. The spreading of consumption and the rationalization of the supply involve the standardization of goods and, to a lesser degree, of services. Within the process of globalization the search for identity is not necessarily connected to a town or a region. In many cases local identities are not directly at stake. Objects don’t necessarily emphasize the individual or national identity, and the created bonds have no affirmed historic dimensions. Social bonds appear to be organized around the emotion and the passion for a sporting activity and are often short-lived and superficial. For instance millions of people buy jerseys, sashes, and so on of the (football) World Cup. The French, winners of the World Cup or the New Zealand All Blacks rugby team are related to a nation but as well often work as a brand. When young Americans or Brazilians are buying the World Cup winner T-shirt, they don’t purchase the French tradition and history but the winning brand.

Paradoxically, there seems to be a contradiction between the embeddedness of goods in local or national culture for some consumers and the simple use of goods as commodities for others. Even if contradictions exist, the roots are not so different. Consumers buy sporting goods because they have a visible and readable identity whether it is national, local or a brand. The global and the local are interacting in social uses of supply. French consumers appreciate global brands because of their international, particularly “American,” image. Nonetheless, the success of local brands like “64” in the Southwest of France, of ethnic clothes or retro fashion are rooted in the opposition to the mass market (64 is also the number of Pyrénées-Atlantiques, a French administrative local territory called “département.” The combination of goods, global or local, ethnic or
retro, conspicuously or discreetly used, gives the impression of attempts to build a singular presentation of self.

Styles, as systems of difference, have to be analyzed in relation to the diversity of social positions and conditions. But, if we consider the uses of objects, the point is no longer just a matter of explaining consumption by socio-demographic parameters alone. The postmodernist approach helps us to understand the genesis of these new social bonds established around the aesthetic dimension of social life (Maffesoli, 1990). These bonds seem to develop thanks to new forms of grouping around hedonistic, aesthetic, and consumer needs. Sport consumption finds its logic in the creation of social bonds and in the visibility of new identities. To simplify, one could say that individuals give the impression of belonging to a great football family rather than to the working class. This simplifying vision corresponds to social representations that are spread and in which socio-political stakes are more structured around consumption than around class struggles. The sporting ideology is spreading, and imposes sport and its events as a social conquest. For example, the Spanish conservatives (The Aznar political party) referred to the football show on TV in the following words: “this social conquest football is for the Spanish consumer” (quoted in M.C. Decamps, Le Monde, 1997: 33). It signifies that consumption, particularly sport events on media, has a central place in society and can be compared to other social issues such as democracy, human and child rights, abortion, and so on. Considering these social changes, particularly in consumption, some sociologists like Maffesoli made a break with traditional deterministic explanations. The idea is that sport or other types of consumption are not only reflections of social class but form the basis of new groupings (Maffesoli, 1990). Sports, clothes, and music are sufficient to define a style and to bring together people through the ephemeral bond of appearance (Maffesoli, 1998). Consumption is changing our society, particularly through the deconstruction of the social (e.g. classes, work, conflicts). But it seems that, even if these sporting groups work in a relatively autonomous way, the billions of TV viewers watching the World Cup or wearing sports gear share few interests apart from television or goods. Furthermore, this sharing is limited to the objective dimension of behavior, and fails to take into account the subjective aspects of use. The cultural diversity which explains the various uses of sport goods, practices or events also helps explain the symbolic efficacy of sport advertising or advertising through sport.

Symbolic efficacy of advertising and ideology of consumption

Advertising and the discourses of sport brands are developed around the sporting uses of commodities. Despite the reality of consumer (mis)use, sport brands wish to associate their goods with a very athletic use. The following extract from a document distributed by Adidas to its personnel in 1997 gives us an illustration:

> Our brand strategy is to be associated with any activity that is Physical and Competitive. In short, if it is not physical and competitive, it is not sport.
And if it is not sport, it cannot be representative of the Adidas brand. The Adidas brand must not appear on or be associated with any product or competitive activity that does not have its roots in a physical or competitive activity.

The consumers Adidas is targeting are the athletes. These consumers care about their sports. They care about performance. They are physical. They are competitive. They expect the best for themselves and their athletic products. This is not different anywhere in the world. This is our core message . . . and the message must be the same anywhere in the world. If it is not the same, it is not Adidas.

(Adidas Corporate Objectives and Mission, 1997: 6–7)

Sporting brands are merging with top-level sport to differentiate their identity from the fashion brands, which are too dependent on changes in young consumers’ tastes.

There are social roots of sporting goods brand efficacy. They depend not only on the work of sharp communicators or marketers, but are above all based on central cultural changes within societies. Discourses around mass consumption, the role of emotion or age in the explanation of behavior contribute to the understanding of the changes. But it also appears that the question of symbolic social struggles is at stake. Sport consumption provides social markers that help to transform and euphemize social struggles (Bourdieu, 1979).

The socio-demographic data and the various uses of goods show that the mass consumption of sporting goods is not a democratic access to sport (Desbordes et al., 1999). The lower classes are using sporting goods as a symbol of social integration and participation in a valorized culture, while the upper classes are more often using them for sport.

Goods may also be used to delimit a territory or to recall symbolic domination in a practice. For example, during the diffusion of golf in France, old players were buying new and more expensive goods to differentiate themselves from the new players (Ohl, 1991). Moreover, their very participation in golf may have been stimulated by the rising popularity of another sport: tennis. In response to the democratization of tennis during the 1980s, many, in their quest for symbolic distinction, either shifted to or reinvested in golf, a more expensive and exclusive sport.

Moreover, key social questions like those linked to politics, equality, education or economics seemed to be worn away by the less essential questions concerning fashion and sport culture (winners, cheaters, scandal). Through its contribution to the pacification and transformation of social struggles, the important communication and advertising processes around sport culture fit very well within the ideological processes of a consumer society and served to maintain the symbolic order. The emerging messages reinforce the mythical belief that everyone can be a winner in the consumer society (Miles, 1998).

As consumption becomes the main reference of citizenship, ads help global companies to spread the idea that social changes are less linked to political
choices than to consumer choices. Consequently, political projects seem to be limited to abstract ideological struggles often with little relevance to society. Effectively, there has been an objective and symbolic victory of the economical field over the political field, which has become too disconnected from real life. Sport consumption, arguably, plays a role in this process; sport victories are celebrated though they are devoid of politics, while the purchase and display of sporting goods provides people with rather fleeting notions of access to a valorized culture.

Thus, international advertising campaigns developed by global companies to standardize their image and to achieve economies of scale can be analyzed as a way to reify the consumer as a specific asocial, ahistoric figure. But this idea of a new consumer, far removed from traditional patterns, does not resist analysis. The social construction of an uprooted consumer gives support to a liberal neo-classical analysis of society (Ohl, 2002). The main struggles, which are not limited to class struggles, are still expressed in social spaces through consumption. What looks like a question of fashion or even of self-identity is at first a sociological question. Despite the complexity of uses and meanings of consumption, marketing communication on the global mass market provides a sense of the substitution of social actors or citizens for consumers. Thanks to the increasing role of the media, this stereotypical discourse has emerged as the privileged rhetoric of late capitalism. However, despite the reality of today’s “consumer culture,” it does not mean that social actors can be reduced to a kind of homo-economicus.

The increasing place of consumption brings important changes in society, but the inflation of discourses around a new consumer culture should not incite one to abandon all social determination perspectives. Thus, the struggles around appearance and identity affirmation dissimulate other important social struggles. Class or generation conflicts are euphemized in fashion discussions and in debate around the legitimate way to use clothes. Even with the diffusion of consumption, the bourgeois uses of sport clothes are still opposed to the more popular uses as ceremonial clothing. Social positions and conditions are integral to the genesis of tastes (Bourdieu, 1979). The diffusion of sporting goods, as mass commodities, does not fit with the idea of equal uses and significance of sporting goods (the old idea of sport without inequalities, barriers, and so on) because even if people of different social categories are buying the same commodities and are sensitive to the same advertisements, the way and the place they use the commodities are often contradictory. In many areas of social life oppressed social classes are more sensitive to the social codes of success. This helps to explain why sporting goods for men and fashion for women are very often considered by particular social groups as important signs through which to differentiate themselves from the very group to which they belong. People for whom integration or success is less recognized have to make consumption visible. For them the importance of clothes, for example, often has more to do with social relations: the normality of appearances is a kind of necessity. The harmony of style recalls the social bonds and thus maintains what Bourdieu calls the “social capital” (1979: 225).
Economic or marketing approaches that only take into account the actual purchases can be efficient, but are far removed from the signification of consumption. Finally, the analysis of sport allows us to grasp the contradictions of our societies and to understand the complexity of consumption. Sport concentrates numerous characteristics, altering our relations to objects and to services. Based on the different approaches outlined above, it is difficult to justify the use of the term “consumer” with respect to all actions of purchasing or using commodities. The behaviors of consumption alone do not reveal any distinctive characteristics, values or ethics; nonetheless, sport consumers are, first and foremost, social actors.

References