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Material Presence and the Detox Delusion: Insights from Social Nudism

Tous à Poil! (Everybody Gets Naked!), a book for children, aimed at countering images of the ideal body, often undressed, elicited austere reactions. This study considers the mythic elements of the clothed body as explicative of such austerity. An analysis of clothing absence in the context of social nudism reveals that the myth of the clothed body cannot easily be remythologized or adapted to suit individual preferences. Rather, social interactions in contemporary societies remain largely locked in material presence. This study calls for public policymakers and social marketers to consider dominating myths as possible constraints to anticonsumption and consumer well-being.

The book *Tous à Poil! (Everybody Gets Naked!)*, first published in 2011 and written by authors Claire Franek and Marc Daniau, depicts a baby, the babysitter, the neighbors, the teacher, the policeman, and all of us undressing to swim naked in the sea. According to the publisher, Melville House Books, the aim of *Tous à Poil!* was to promote an uninhibited view of nudity and to counter the many images in the media of the “ideal” body, often undressed and manipulated by Photoshop or altered by cosmetic surgery. However, recommending *Tous à Poil!* to primary schools elicited austere reactions. During an appearance on the French cable news channel LCI on February 9, 2014, Jean-François Copé, who at the time was leader of the political party Union pour un Mouvement Populaire (Union for a Popular Movement), questioned whether teachers could be respected as figures of authority if they were depicted naked in the book: “A naked teacher ... isn’t that great for teachers’ authority! We don’t know whether or not to smile, but as it is for our children, we don’t feel like smiling.” Langner, Robinson, and Moran (1991) expressed a similar point of view, explaining that nudity robs human beings of the dignity and authority imparted to them by their clothes.

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Although Copé's comments backfired, sending the book to the top of the best-seller lists in France, his attempt to censor the "nude" children's book indicated that one of the most pervasive and undisputed of all myths is that the inner self is revealed in the material presence of clothing and that exposing the naked body has moral implications. Although images of nakedness often appear in advertisements and movies, researchers note that the naked body continues to be perceived as a catalyst for impure thoughts (Andriotis 2010; Barcan 2001; Daley 2005). The naked body exposed to public gaze is often discussed as indicative of animalism, criminality, debauchery, chaos, transgression, deviance, hypersexual perversion, erotic oases, or incivility (Andriotis 2010; Barcan 2001; Cover 2003; Daley 2005). The body is thus embedded in a myth of covering; even during swimming or sunbathing activities, social pressure compels us to wear at least minimal clothing.

Yet, the myth of the covered body has not always dominated all of our actions and human interactions. Cover (2003) reminds us that Adam and Eve were neither hiding nor ashamed of the naked body. During the Golden Age of Greece, athletic contests were often performed in the nude. The word "gymnasium" comes from the Ancient Greek *gymnós* meaning "naked," and the word "gymnastics" signified "unclothed exercising" (Warren 1933, 161). Nakedness was also appreciated by the Romans, who emphasized nudity in art, a trend revived during the Renaissance when painters and sculptors thought of the human naked body as something to be respected and cherished. Along with unclothed figures of adults, Renaissance artists developed depictions of the naked Christ Child in his mother's arms, his genitals prominently exposed. Descartes' *cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am), which connects human self-consciousness with the mind as opposed to the body, also points to the body as a pure and simple embodiment. For Descartes, ghosts and automatons wear hats and clothes for it is their garments that render their constitution, not their minds, souls, and thoughts (Warminski 1992). From this perspective, the self is understood as the inner self, with the capacity for reflection and knowledge, while the body is understood as its natural state—naked, not obscured by garments. Thoreau's (1971) attack on clothing fashion makes it clear that material presence is not only superfluous but immoral in that it forces us to consider the opinions and authority of others. Yet, today, from the Fuegians living in the subantarctic region to tribes living in Africa, at least a small part of the body needs to be covered in general social interactions (Warren 1933). In contemporary Western culture, there are very few laws specifically prohibiting simple public nudity (Friedman and Grossman 2013), and yet we are encouraged to think of covering the body

as an obligatory requirement for social interactions. The act of covering the body is part of “impression management, style, panache, and careful bodily representation” (Featherstone 1991 as cited in Thompson and Hirschman 1998, 403). In this dominant discourse, garments and accessories are an expression of our identity and group affiliations.

This study aims to analyze the myth, or mythical elements, of the clothed body. In myths, we perpetuate our existence as a shared identity (James 2005). However, a myth is also fictive or fictional and is “in effect nothing other than the thought of a founding fiction, or of a foundation by fiction” (Nancy 1991 cited in James 2005, 340). What are the mythic elements of the clothed body that perpetuate its dominating presence? What I focus on here is the critical dismantling of the myth that structures humanity’s collective consciousness of the need to cover in public.

This article draws upon narratives of social nudism to unpack the mythic construction of the clothed body. Participation in social nudism offers a personal space for reflexivity on the myth of the clothed body. As Cherrier and Gurrieri’s (2014) analysis of temporal alcohol abstinence indicates, reflexivity takes place when an individual’s everyday acts and routinized patterns of behavior are interrupted. After a brief description of social nudism, I examine the mythic traditions in marketing studies and explain the methodology of my study. The findings situate the myth of the clothed body as constructed around prescribed beauty ideals, “just look and know,” public gaze, material performance, and modernity. The concluding remarks question the capacity of consumers to contest or temporarily interrupt the dominating myths, and consider the implications for marketing and public policy.

SOCIAL NUDISM

Social nudism, also referred to as “public nudity,” “skinny dipping,” “sunning,” and “clothes-free,” promotes the absence of clothing during social interactions (Barcan 2004b; Cooper 2011; Daley 2005; Warren 1933; Woodall 2002). It is often associated with naturism, which is a lifestyle that incorporates respect for oneself, others, and the environment; healthy eating; vegetarianism; and pacifism—as well as nudity. Naturism was introduced in 1778 by a French-speaking Belgian, Jean Baptiste Luc Planchon, who described nakedness as a natural style of life with positive health benefits. Grounded in health benefits and improvements in well-being, nudist practice expanded rapidly in Europe. In 1888, German painter Karl Diefenbach (1851–1913) developed the practice of nudism and created the community Humanitas, with the aim of living healthily, in

harmony with nature, spiritualism, and nudity. In France, Georges Hébert and Dr. Paul Carton established the *méthode naturelle* as a form of exercising in the nude. In Austria, Dr. Fougerat de Lastours discussed the benefits of exposing the nude body to sunlight. The German Association for Free Body Culture, created in 1898 in Essen and a member of the German Olympic Sport Federation, promotes and supports healthy bodies and exercising in the nude. In 1974, the XIV Congress of the International Naturist Federation, held in Agde, France, offered the first official definition of naturism as “a lifestyle in harmony with nature, expressed through social nudity, and characterized by self-respect of people with different opinions and of the environment” (International Naturist Federation 2012). Social nudism is a particular form of naturism in that it is practiced in a social context. Social nudism can be performed in private locations, such as at one’s home with family members and friends, or at dedicated public venues and events, such as clothing-optional beaches, nudist camps, clubs, resorts, cruises, and nude bike rides. Businesses have responded to the growing demand for social-nudism sites and naturist experiences, offering nudist resorts, local naturist clubs, and naturist holiday destinations. Several beaches, resorts, and bed-and-breakfast establishments offer outdoor environments where one can be legally naked among other like-minded individuals (Ableman 1993; Bacher 1996; Barcan 2004a).

However, non-nudists often link social nudism with animalism, criminality, debauchery, chaos, transgression, deviance, hypersexual perversion, erotic oases, incivility, and rustic naivety (Andriotis 2010; Barcan 2001; Daley 2005). Social nudism is strongly stigmatized by the community (Cooper 2011) and by government (Monterrubio and Jaurand 2009); for this reason, the practice of being naked in public spaces remains marginalized (Barcan 2004b). The way in which opposition to nudism is expressed ranges from place-based prohibitions and the imposition of fines or imprisonment for being undressed in sectioned spaces to hostility toward nudist organizations and discrimination by financial providers (Cooper 2011).

MYTHS AND DISCOURSES OF POWER

The word “myth” originates from the Ancient Greek *muthos*, which means to murmur with closed lips. Attempts at a definition of “myth” vary, but all appear to recognize that myths are nonrational (opposite to *Logos*) and represent sacred stories. Although myths are described as stories, they are stories of reality in that they represent the sacred breaking into the world and, therefore, the creation of reality (Eliade 1963). For example, the myth that women are physically weaker than men is a psychic reality, despite

research showing the opposite to be true in many physiological aspects, apart from muscularity. Myths are stories that bring meaning to our lives. In this sense, myths cannot be classified according to the dichotomy between truth and falsity; they cannot be deemed as either true or false, only as living or dead.

According to the structuralist approach, myths represent the structure of the mind and its interpretation of the world and life (Day 1984). They assert the system of signification, oppositions, and relationships between successive concepts. Myths exist at the material, mental, and spiritual levels. Researchers have identified recurring mythic themes discussed as eternal metaphors including creation, origins, animal powers, quests, time, play, place, rhythm, gods and heroes, love, death, and rebirth (Cousineau 2001). These once and future myths (Cousineau 2001) or archetypes constitute humanity's collective consciousness (Campbell 1991). A prominent structuralist approach to myth developed by Levi-Strauss is based on four principles (Day 1984): (1) There is parallelism of mythic plots worldwide, (2) Meanings are revealed in the sum of individual myths, (3) Myths can be analyzed into pairs of opposites, and (4) Conflict is resolved in a reconciliation of the opposites. On this basis, Sidney Levy (1981), who sparked an interest in myth within the field of marketing and consumer behavior, argues that myths help to resolve the contradictions in human existence. For example, consumers resolve existential contradictions in the consumption of events such as Burning Man (Kozinets 2002) and Mountain Man Rendezvous (Belk and Costa 1998) and the myth-imbued brand *Titanic* (Brown, McDonagh, and Shultz 2013).

From a functionalist perspective, myths are created and perpetuated because they function as social stabilizers (Day 1984). French sociologist Emile Durkheim propounded this theory in 1912 and declared that myths fulfill the function of establishing, maintaining, and expressing social solidarity. Myths can provide social groups with identities, bind members of communities, and distinguish a group from others. Thus, myths are the fundamental structures and organizations of society; through myths, society discovers values and meanings. According to Day (1984), myths as a projection of society take many forms, the major being the political, the social, the moral, and the psychological.

In considering the health marketplace, Thompson (2004) introduces the concept of marketplace mythology. Thompson (2004) argues that the health market leverages the Romantic and the Gnostic Mythos to enhance its ideological interests. The Romantic and the Gnostic mythic archetypes are respectively grounded in the historical development of the

Romantic Movement and in the transition period from medieval monasticism to enlightenment (Thompson 2004). Health-marketplace discourses embrace technology on the one hand as a divine tool for curing illness, and nature and its maternal power on the other to protect and preserve. Thompson (2004) considers that because health-marketplace mythologies fuse in contradictory discourses of power, they can be contested. For example, natural-health consumers play on Romantic and Gnostic metaphors to disempower the biomedically based health professions and draconian treatment protocols and to contrast what they perceive as degenerative medicines with the regenerative powers of nature and the immune system. Arsel and Thompson (2011) further discuss the idea of myth contestation by developing a consumer process of demythologizing consumption practices. Brown et al. (2013, 597) further explain that myths enable consumers to see what they want and can “be adapted to consumers’ individual and collective preferences, aspirations, and imaginations.”

However, consumers require agency to contest a myth and to “see what they want” (Brown et al. 2013, 597). Yet, consumers do not always have the power to act autonomously (Arnould 2007). According to Plato, myths can be socially harmful because they impose models or types with which an individual must identify. From this perspective, myth raises the issue of mimetism, which Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy (1990) discuss in relation to the “Nazi myth.” To counter the power of myth, Plato banished theater and tragedy, essentially art, “because myth, like the work of art that exploits it, is an instrument of identification” (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1990, 298).

THE STUDY

To unpack the clothed-body myth, I interviewed self-proclaimed social nudists at length about their experiences and attitudes in relation to being covered vs. being naked in public settings. I advertised in local newspapers for experienced social nudists willing to participate in a research project about social nudism. When potential informants responded to the advertisement, I explained the aim of the study, received their consent to discuss openly their social-nudism experiences, and provided them with an assurance of confidentiality. If a caller agreed to participate in the study, I organized a time to conduct a long, in-depth phone interview. The period between the introductory conversation and the extended phone interview provided informants with time to reflect on their personal experiences and to ensure they were prepared to share details of what social nudism means to them.

Although the use of telephone interviewing is largely neglected in the qualitative-research literature (Sturges and Hanrahan 2004), it benefited the research in two ways. First, the telephone conversation allowed informants to disclose sensitive information without visual cues regarding my thoughts, feelings, and actions. Second, if informants felt fatigued, I was able to call them back to continue the conversation and enrich emerging themes. The selection criteria resulted in ten male informants; they ranged from 28 to 50 years of age. The phone interviews lasted between 38 minutes and 2 hours. Each interview was transcribed verbatim. The interviews did not focus on body taboos or esthetics but on the ways in which individuals participate in social nudism and experience social interactions when naked (Thompson 1997).

The analysis commenced with several close readings of each interview transcript, which had been transcribed verbatim. Levy (1981) recognizes “little myths” that are ways of organizing consumers’ perceptions of reality in accordance with underlying binary oppositions. Patterns of discussion rooted in the perception of the naked body and the clothed body as opposites in social interaction were sought and identified across interviews. Importantly, while this study acknowledges critics of the inclusive, egalitarian, and nonsexualized claim (Cooper 2011) and issues of perfection, objectification, and market structures embedded in social nudism (Woodall 2002), I follow Foucault’s (1982, 785) contention that “maybe the target nowadays is not to discover who we are, but to refuse what we are” and concentrate on what temporary clothing abstinence is rejecting and resisting. This article thus identifies the mythic elements of the clothed body rather than contradictions between the rhetoric and practices of social nudism. The discussion below identified five little myths or “mythemes” associated with covering the body: prescribed beauty ideals, “just look and know,” public gaze, material performance, and modernity.

Findings: Unpacking the Clothed-Body Myth

Participation in social nudism is geographically bounded, and for the most part, it remains private. One informant, Gary, a 33-year-old male who was raised in a conservative family, said of his nudist experiences: “There are heaps of people I won’t tell because people aren’t open to these kinds of things. They’re quite conservative in their thinking, so I won’t.” Soul also keeps his nudist experiences private: “I generally keep it to myself. Like pretty much most of my friends, I’ve never told. I sort of made that decision that I wouldn’t tell them, even the older existing friends, I don’t tell them.” Karl, a 50-year-old man practicing nudism with his wife is also “happy to

keep to ourselves.” For Gary, his decision to “not tell” is a response to “a stigma attached to some people.” Karl explained that nudism deviates from societal norms, “because it’s about society, the way they look at something like that, and see it a little bit as inappropriate, so that’s something, like I say, something that my wife and myself, we’re happy to keep to ourselves.” The privacy and stigma attached to social nudism not only exacerbates the current public anxiety about nakedness (Cover 2003) but also the social difficulties and constraints associated with resisting the predominance of the clothed-body myth in our current consumer culture.

The informants’ narratives show that by opposing material presence in social interactions, social nudists temporarily shelve the myth of the clothed body and in the process become aware of its limitations. This awareness highlights the myth’s existence and domination in contemporary society. From this analysis, it appears that what is absent (clothing) makes present (myth of the clothed body) that which is absent (clothing). In the following discussion, I unpack the myth of the clothed body as a means of collective consciousness constructed around prescribed beauty ideals, “just look and know,” public gaze, material performance, and modernity.

The notion of “myth shelving,” which I develop in this article, reflects my informants’ temporary suspension of a pervasive myth. Myth shelving supports the premise that a myth can shift in terms of its worth, depending on the social and geographical context. It also highlights that social nudists cannot escape the myth of the clothed body; they can only shelve it temporarily. In addition, myth shelving raises doubts about the possibility that consumers may be able to contest, interrupt, or demythologize a dominant myth.

Prescribed Beauty Ideals

Several postmodern writers have argued that the plethora of styles in contemporary consumer culture has eliminated dominant dress codes or hegemonic standards of beauty, allowing liberated consumers the freedom to express their identity and styles (Featherstone 1991). However, for the social nudists interviewed for this study, the multiplicity of possible styles on offer remain trapped in the grip of precoded beauty ideals. The analysis shows that participation in social nudism represents a temporary dismissal of prescribed codes of what/who is and is not beautiful. Although this may appear incongruous considering that social nudism often accommodates ideals of beauty and promotes cosmetic surgery (Woodall 2002), the social nudists interviewed for this study reject the representations of beauty that the media portrays as ideal and desirable. For Ralf, the image of the masculine body as highly trained through exercise regimes and a controlled

diet has been toxic to his life. He explained the impossibility of achieving the masculine beauty idealized and promulgated by the mass media: “It is impossible to have all the musculature they show in the media, and to control what I eat and drink, and have the six packs.” Ralf compared current exercise and diet regimes to the Nazi ideology: “The media give us the idea that we should all be like superman.” Similarly, Peter explained how social hostility toward the “skinny” and “small penis” positioned him as an outcast whose rejection for not “being cool and great” caused him suffering:

Well, I’ve never had a really good body, like how you see in the media, with, like, people in movies, and stuff. Like, I’ve always had, well, growing up I [was] very skinny, but in high school I was probably [a] bit more on the pudgier side. And, well, you get, maybe, like, size of penis—like, I got a small penis. That is seen sort of [as] being not cool or great, and [I] always felt like an outsider, not good enough. But, in a nudist environment, like no one’s ever sort of commented: “Oh, you got a small penis.” Whereas, before that, I was always very conscious about it, always sort of wondering—you know, you always feel that there are people always bigger than you. But, then, once being around other people, yeah, no one ever judged my body. And, yeah, you even realize that everyone’s different and everyone’s got some—they have different shape[s], different size[s] and—yeah, all shapes and sizes, it is OK. And everyone’s sort of happy and comfortable with the way they are.

Non-nudists often assume that social nudists are narcissistic, exhibitionist, or sexually oriented individuals (Barcan 2001), but Peter’s narrative offers a completely different story. For Peter, exposing his naked body among others negates the notions of youthful beauty ideals and aesthetics so highly esteemed in the clothed environment. As he explained: “In the nude, everyone’s sort of happy and comfortable with the way they are. There is no ideal type, just all the same—naked.” Similarly, Marc described how, for him, naked bodies are not differentiable: “What I find on the nude beach is that there’s skinny, there’s this, and there’s that. And everyone, to me, looks the same.” For this reason, the publicly exposed naked body no longer conforms to the dominant notions of the ideal body prescribed by the media and aligned with the beauty and fitness industries. This distancing from the cult of the body beautiful was explicitly portrayed in Brendon’s discussion of body hair (non)removal:

I do not care about how I look when I am naked—like, I don’t shave or anything. I’ve probably got, I got a bit of body hair, like, sort of, say, like the chest, shoulders, and that. I don’t worry about body hair there. I got a bit of hair on my bottom.

According to Brendon, to be naked does not require an adherence to the clean-shaven skin of the ideal body type portrayed in the media. Importantly, social nudists do not align with ideals of beauty, nor do they

reject ugliness. What they do is promote self-acceptance of the body: “When naked, I am not trying to be cool or anything; I am just being myself, and it feels so good. It is hard to explain, but like not feeling any pressure.” In shelving the cult of prescribed bodily perfection and ideal beauty inherent to mainstream consumer culture, Brendon seeks to experience characterizations of postmodernity for which beauty is eclectic, personal, inclusive of diversity in terms of age, shape and size, and presence or absence of hair.

“Just Look and Know”

Consumer culture, with its emphasis on possessions and other symbols of status, defines and situates self-worth according to appearance. The body is thus situated in relation to wide-ranging modes of distinction, including clothing and other adornments to give a collective representation. In contrast, for the social nudists who participated in this study, nakedness eliminates material identity markers. All informants in this study discussed nakedness as opposition to the power of material distinction that dominates the clothed environment. For example, Marc said: “I think wearing clothes that are not looking too good, and people judge them: ‘Oh, they haven’t got much money,’ or ‘Gee, they’ve got a lot of money,’ or ‘He must be a tradesman,’ or ‘She’s probably an accountant,’ or something like that, or you’re stuck up, but here on the beach, we all appear to be the same.” Implied in Marc’s comment is the inevitability that “others” scrutinize the clothed body and that its appearance indicates one’s social status and level of wealth. Featherstone’s (1991) conflation of the inner self and the outer body captures the emphasis on material appearance as an identity marker, that is, when the clothed body is viewed with the assumption that its appearance is a direct representation or expression of the inner self. Serge finds this assumption detrimental to human interactions:

I think a lot of people sort of judge others on what they are wearing. Like clothing gives them something, an idea to ... take a person a certain way by the way they [are] dressed, without actually talking to them. So, kind [of], if people do not even talk, they just look and think they know. Whereas, if you’re not wearing anything, they don’t have that “anything” to go by.

Serge described the clothed environment as a space where people “just look and know” in order to evaluate others. The clothed body thus contributes to the construction and maintenance of consumption-fueled appropriation of distinct selves (Featherstone 1991); it guides how we perform and display in social interactions, a process Judith Butler (2005) refers to as “bounded performativity.” In contrast with the “just look and know” environment, the naked body creates an environment that tames, but

does not eliminate, possibilities for material distinction and boundaries, as explained by Karl:

I guess because, I mean, if you're not wearing clothes, you're not sort of judged, and vice versa, you don't judge anybody. When people wear clothes, you sort of judge people, and people judge people who are wearing clothes, as far as, like, the type of clothes you're wearing, or the way some of these rich people have preconceived ideas of what they do for a job, or sort of, what, their personalities and stuff. But, I guess everybody's sort of back to a neutral sort of playing field, if you like, when everybody's sort of naked.

The removal of material identity markers is crucial for social nudists. Karl expressed this in terms of a "neutral" position: "Everybody's sort of back to a neutral sort of playing field, if you like, when everybody's sort of naked." Jeff distinguishes between the clothed body, which makes and marks social distinctions, and the naked body, which fosters equality and social interaction:

I suppose you don't really notice it, but you judge people for what they wear. So, say, if there was someone, say, if you were someone that couldn't afford expensive clothes, and you dressed real sort of, like, plain. And then there's someone that, you know, wearing two-hundred-dollar jeans and flashy shirts and that, yeah, you see them compared to what you're wearing. And you think, oh, they probably think of themselves as being very, like, they're high up in society. And you think, well, you know, they're looking at me, thinking, "Oh, you're not wearing much. You know, he probably doesn't have much money." Yeah, they don't sort of really take too much notice of you, and you're probably looking and thinking they're probably a bit up themselves, and they probably got this and that and splash the cash, and, I don't know, what you call, "high in society," but they'd probably think of themselves as being a better person than you. And, say, if you met the same person at a nudist resort, like then you just see them—they aren't wearing anything, you're not wearing anything. Like, straight off, you don't have anything to judge them by. Just, that barrier is sort of gone and, well, obviously you go straight up to them and say, well, you guys have something in common because you're both at a nudist resort. And, yeah, they're probably generally nicer to talk to and say hello, and probably you'd say hello back.

For Jeff, the clothed body is unavoidably subject to oppressive conventional classifications. Conversely, the naked body eliminates class distinctions. Although the naked body tames visible markers of social class, it does not eliminate the possibility of visual distinctions based on skin and hair color, tattoos, piercings, manicures, pedicures, and body hair and possible prejudices constructed around gender (Woodall 2002). It should also be noted that my informants who attended international nudist resorts or private nudist clubs have the means to finance international travel and club membership fees. When asked about the nudist clubs that he and his wife attend, Karl responded, "working class or rich people, everyone can

participate in nudism, and, as I said, you just cannot judge people,” yet, traveling costs and membership fees may limit participation and inclusion.

Public Gaze

All informants discussed the clothed body as being imprisoned by the public gaze, as something to be watched and gazed at. Karl described clothed bodies as victims of the public’s gaze: “It’s amazing how the attitude sort of changes when ladies are dressed up, and come up with make-up and all that, it becomes a little bit more sort of sexier or a little more intriguing because the mindset is working to maybe sometimes wonder, ‘I wonder what’s under there, or what it looks like under there.’”

Karl, who is 40 years old, attends social nudism with his wife. Although Karl appreciates his wife’s naked body, he nevertheless finds the covered body “sexier.” When asked to expand on this, Karl explained: “When people wear clothes, we look at them. And, as I said, I would look at a lady wearing a sexy dress, but I do not look at the naked ladies on the beach. Well, I look, but not in the same way.” For Karl, the naked environment makes bodies “uninteresting,” and this enabled “some great conversations with my wife and other people we met, all naked, because we do not judge each other.” In contrast, the clothed environment is one where individuals look and gaze, and one’s sense of self depends on the resultant evaluation. The clothed environment functions with and responds to public scrutiny on what, how, and when one wears clothing (Garland-Thomson 2009). Marc further differentiated between gazing at the clothed body and seeing the naked body:

I would less judge someone on a nude beach than I would when walking past my shop at work. And I think it is because we’re all on the same wavelength. We’re all thinking the same, or we’re all, I suppose, we’re all the same, so you cannot really judge. The naked body, if you’ve got more than one at a time in a public place like that, it’s a completely different feeling once you’re there. And you don’t judge anyone because everyone’s the same, even though they’re different sizes. But yeah, I mean, honestly, you get your good-looking girl or whatever, and a model body walks past, and then the next one might be overweight or whatever, and all bodies end up being all the same. We don’t discriminate. Well, you just don’t discriminate, and everyone’s sort of the same. There’s no feeling of that, you know, probably being judgmental of others and the way they look. When naked, we all look the same—just naked bodies.

When the naked body is widely available and openly exposed to the public gaze, it—perhaps paradoxically—tends to be more private, less scrutinized. As Marc noted, “everyone is the same” when naked. Similarly, Gill commented: “We are all the same [when] naked, and when you are naked you look like everyone else ... bodies are similar, there’s not much of a difference.” The analysis shows that “being stared at,” an act

highly elicited by the clothed environment is, for the social nudist, an act of dehumanization. Pau Obrador-Pons (2007, 132) supports that social nudists “downgrade the eyes” and treat the visual as mostly “a threat or an impediment rather than a source of pleasure.” Similar to Medusa from Greek mythology, the naked body during social-nudist experiences is not a spectacle for the public gaze and therefore remains visually unnoticed. Karl summarized the absence of staring in a nudist environment: “Nobody really cares what you look like.” Social nudism provides a new way of looking that differs from the public gaze of the clothed environment. Informants explained that with this alternative mode of looking, the exposed body is somewhat liberated from the public eye. According to Serge, “it is just the way we are as humans, all the same—with bodies.” Although my informants clearly sought to temporarily shelve the public gaze through their participation in social nudism, I do not argue that social nudism is immune to gazing and voyeurism. Woodall (2002) has raised interesting issues around the ways in which women are represented and objectified within social nudism in the United States. Similarly, I note that Australian social-nudism websites display images of naked bodies that could possibly be used for exploitation.

Material Performance

For social nudists, the consumption of clothes is not a personal expression but a response to societal demands for docile bodies performing prescribed roles that contribute to the fashion industry and respond to social expectations. Performance is here defined as “the act or style of performing a work or role before an audience” (*American Heritage Dictionary*). Marc’s experiences exemplify how the fashion and fitness industries, offering cosmetics, diet plans, exercise machines, self-help books, and gym memberships, dictate the ways in which the self must perform to meet the demands of society:

I used to care so much about my look. I have so many clothes, still now, and all the stuff, so much stuff to look good. I had plastic surgery done ... but now, I accept myself. Maybe it is the age, but, well, just meeting people all naked, and nothing more, was for me an eye opener to just being me and that we physically are really all the same.

Marc was previously a docile consumer in that his feelings of self-worth and his self-concept were linked to the symbolic order of capitalist commodification. At the time, Marc struggled to achieve body-image acceptance, using cosmetic surgery and clothing to feel socially accepted. As noted by Thompson and Hirschman (1998), the male body, like the female body, is heavily targeted in regard to fashion, cosmetics, and skin and hair

care products. The pressure to “look good,” however, was for Marc a constant unsatisfactory struggle in a society in which he never felt complete or accepted: “I never felt I belonged or [was] satisfied with myself, like the way I look, the way I dress.” Marc’s narrative indicates his disbelief in the myth of the clothed body, because only nakedness led Marc to “accept” himself. For the informants, the clothed body dislocates rather than expresses one’s sense of self. For Ralf, “wearing clothes is what we all have to do, at work, on the street, in the car; we all wear clothes but we are not really ourselves inside clothes.” The clothed body is performing roles that are somewhat prescribed by the outside environment. Ralf further explained: “I wear clothes to work, and the clothes I wear are the ones I have to wear. I do not have much choice. Yes, I choose the brand, the color, but really, it is not really me. I like wearing shorts; do I wear them at work? No! The clothes are just like what everyone else is wearing.”

Ralf’s narrative reveals the clothed body as a sociocultural composition. The clothes create the self to satisfy public expectations. As Fromm (1979) would explain, the clothed environment is a matter of having a mode of existence rather than of being. For Ralf, what he chooses to wear to work is not indicative of his sense of self; it is his response to the demands of society. Adopting Derrida’s claim that “there is no outside of text,” clothes and body covering is text defining the self. However, for the social nudists, the self is hidden behind the clothes rather than expressed through them. Dressed, the body conforms to particular roles and identities. Muted by the style of dress, the fabrics, and the accessories, the self no longer needs to communicate. The danger of turning into a muted self when wearing clothes was discussed by Ralf, who said he doesn’t “talk to people much, but yeah, when I am on a nude beach or at a nudist club, it is so much easier to speak to people. People are friendly, and I feel I can just be me and express myself.” Whereas the clothed body mutes and transforms the inner self to bodily appearance, nakedness allows Ralf to express his sense of self beyond the body. Marc explained how, in the naked state, he could express himself “a lot further”: “Well, I just think when you’re naked and you express yourself, you’re going a lot further than if you can express yourself with your clothes, because that’s just the normal, mundane thing that everyone does every day.” Social nudism draws attention away from the material, rendering the body a blank page on which he can write his sense of self “further.” The naked body does not reveal the self; therefore, the self is free to define and redefine itself with and among others. From this perspective, the naked body is not a communicating body. The naked body does not signal, mark, communicate, or indicate one’s identity; therefore, the self does not follow any particular blueprint for social interactions.

Several informants spoke of increased self-confidence as a result of their social-nudist experiences, partly because it brought them closer to their self-concept, which they felt was no longer performing prescribed roles—as in Ralf’s description—and partly because of the way in which they had endured the challenges of being naked in public, as exemplified by Gary:

Well, it’s given me more confidence. Because I think ... initially, I was quite nervous, and it was really hard for me the first time, and it just took me a while to have the strength to do it, and now, even for other things, when I have to do something different, it’s easier for me to take the initiative. It has given me more confidence, much, much more. It was very positive, but definitely a challenge.

Gary’s description of his first nudist experience indicates the vulnerability associated with undressing and thus unveiling the self. In the state of nakedness, the self is exposed, which can cause the nudist to feel “quite nervous.” However, although vulnerable, the naked person is simultaneously empowered to “get into conversation” with strangers. For Paul, the naked body offers possibilities for friendly conversations:

I’m pretty sort of shy and quiet; like, I usually wouldn’t go up and try to sort of, you know, get into conversations with people I’ve never had to, like, yeah, met before ... There’s this resort I go to, everyone’s sort of really friendly and they say hello. Yeah, and always, you know, if you come up to chat, they are always happy to chat to you.

In the naked environment, the body becomes a vehicle for the consciousness of the self and of others. Gary discussed how, in the state of nakedness, the social atmosphere is one of openness to consciousness of the self and others:

People are more friendly and more open to, you know, to talk to other people. Because, if you go to normal nightclubs, it’s just like the atmosphere is different and people only start talking to other people when they’re drunk, and it wasn’t like that at the nude nightclub party. From the start, people were quite welcoming and quite friendly. Yeah, the people at the nude beaches and the nude nightclub, people are just more friendly. And people are, like, happier and just more friendly. People are just more relaxed and enjoying themselves, just talking to other people, you know, interesting stuff.

Gary’s description brings to mind Giddens (1991), who described relationships built on a sense of equal vulnerability as inherently democratic in their dynamics. Marc described how the self is liberated from any social prescription and from everyday life: “Because clothes are part of everyday life, and all the issues and situations you put up with every day involve clothes, but when you’re unclothed, there’s no issues arising from that feeling. It is free, and you can enjoy yourself and the people around [you].”

The informants' narratives are reminiscent of Campbell's (1991) discussion on the body as a vehicle of consciousness. According to Campbell (1991, 88), "the problem in middle life, when the body has reached its climax of power and begins to decline, is to identify yourself not with the body, which is falling anyway, but with its consciousness of which it is the vehicle."

Modernity

All informants were critical of contemporary views on nakedness. They explained that over the course of civilization the naked body has been associated with the sexual, the erotic, the pornographic, and the obscene. They explained that modern representations of the naked body, particularly of adults in the public domain, are rare, and, when they are represented in the media, predominantly denote sexuality. As Jeff commented: "The only time that you would sort of get naked and that is during sex, but [that's because] most of the time on TV and in the media, they sort of portray nudity as being involved with sex." For Karl, "there is that element out there that denotes nudists as perverts." Similarly, Gill explained: "Normally, if one undresses, the aim is to have sex." Ralf commented: "When you get naked, it is usually because you are going to take a shower or have sex, and that is how people see it." According to Marc, "most of the people there, when they think of nude they think of private parts and they think they are just there for only one thing—sex." Cover (2003) supports the pervasive modernist bridging between the sexual and the naked body unless nakedness is performed in solo or in particular legitimate contexts, which include power relations such as parent–child and in medical examinations; lover relations; representations in art, pornography or advertising; or temporal nonsexualized spaces, such as locker-rooms.

The informants in this study hold a view that counters the modern prohibition of exposing the naked adult body to the public eye. The informants experience social nudism by attending nudist nightclubs and nudist beaches and by holidaying in international nudist resorts. They describe such sites as stress-free environments, where feeling and being matter more than seeing and having. For Serge, being naked in a public space offers a relief from the stress associated with the contemporary lifestyle:

When you're there, like when you're not wearing anything, you don't have any worries about anything, just like, say, like you're not worried about paying your bills and that, but you're just sort of enjoying the moment. Whereas, you put clothes back on, then, you know, you're driving back to home. But then, you've got to sort of organize your upcoming week, yeah. And once you spend a lot of time not wearing

anything, once you put it back on, it feels, it sort of feels a bit uncomfortable ... you sort of get too hot, yeah, I just use my clothing, it's good for warmth and protection and that. But, you know, if you are able to go without, and yeah, it feels a lot freer.

Marc also experiences the naked body as liberation from modern stress: "It's just such a nice feeling being free, and you just feel like you haven't got a worry in the world when you're walking around naked." Ralf commented: "I don't associate any stress or worry when I'm at the nude beach. I'm just totally relaxed." In contrast with the clothed body embedded in modernity, the naked body accounts for our natural biological state.

The informants contrasted nakedness with modernity and discussed the naked body as a means to experience and commune with our natural origins and untouched nature. For them, nakedness evokes unspoiled beaches, the sand, the sea, and the air. Marc perceives being naked as a pure connection with nature and its manifestations. When probed on the relationship between nature and nakedness, informants mentioned the spatial dimension of isolated beaches and described the interconnected and harmonious elements of water, sand, sky, and skin. For Karl, the naked body is "in direct relation with different elements. We're talking about the water, the air, the beach, lying on the sand, [and] all that, so you are more connected there." For Gary, being naked places the body in complete harmony with nature: "It makes me feel like a complete part of the nature. Because, when I'm wearing clothes, it's like you put up a barrier between me and the nature. Yeah, so that barrier is not there anymore."

Nakedness connects the body with nature and reconciles the body with its animal origins. As Marc said: "Nature, we all come from nature, and being naked, that is the way it should be." In contrast, the clothed body escapes its animal origins. Parmelee (1941, 31) captured the contrast between nakedness and modernity when he wrote that "the impulse to be nude arising out of man's original nature as an un-clothed animal has been repressed by civilization" and that nudism helps to regain "what mankind has lost through civilization" (Parmelee 1941, 6). For the social nudists interviewed for this study, the naked body connects with a larger organism—i.e., the landscape, the natural world from which we originate.

CONCLUSION

Material absence is embedded in current theoretical debates about anti-consumption. It offers new perspectives and addresses a set of intriguing questions about consumption and nonconsumption. This study examined the absence of clothing during experiences of social nudism. By

considering how material absence is experienced and felt in the temporal experiences of social nudism, this analysis shows that the clothed-body myth encompasses multiple mythic elements that cannot be easily contested. The mythic elements—identified as prescribed beauty ideals, “just look and know,” public gaze, material performance, and modernity—are pervasive in our current material culture, which creates persons in and through their materiality (Featherstone 1991). As Jean-François Copé and other opponents to the book *Tous à Poil!* explained, covering the bodies of people in children’s books is essential to build in our youth a sense of responsibility and respect for authority. If clothing is removed, the suddenly naked people become merely bodies, undifferentiated by external elements, and as such cannot, according to Jean-François Copé, discipline their offspring. Important to the rejection of the book *Tous à Poil!* was the comparison between the images of nakedness as undesirable representations of animalism and the images of the clothed body as desirable representations of authority.

This study contributes a deeper understanding of the principle of authority embedded in the clothed body. The social nudists interviewed for this study explained the act of shelving, which is to temporarily put aside or dismiss the myth of the covered body that dominates our consumer culture. Importantly, because social nudists continue to wear clothes in their daily life, they do not escape the myth; rather, they temporarily and privately shelve the myth associated with the dressed body from one of value to one of little, nil, or negative worth. Although social nudism provides a space of clothing abstinence, it nevertheless remains within the bounds of privacy and temporality. The myth of the clothed body is thus not one that can easily be demythologized or adapted to individual preferences. Social interactions in contemporary societies remain largely “material-locked,” wedded in prescribed beauty ideals, “just look and know,” public gaze, material performance, and modernity. The myth of the clothed body appears to resonate with the consumer-culture cliché that meaningful social interactions take place through consumption. It echoes with the essentialness of material presence, whereby the material arouses consumer desire (Belk, Ger, and Askegaard 2003), and facilitates self-expression (Belk 1988) and cultural integration (Cherrier and Belk 2014). For example, beauty ideals are encoded in marketing images, promoting “a mythical, WASP-oriented world in which no one is ever ugly, overweight, poor, struggling” (Kilbourne 1990, 122). Marketing images link self-expression, authenticity, and self-fulfillment with modes of dress or adornment, “thus well-being is determined by the capacity for self-creation by a society or individual through objects’ appropriation” (Arnould 2007, 102).

The practice of refusing to wear clothes in the company of others accentuates boundaried mythology, which contrasts with the fluidity discussed in health-marketplace mythology (Thompson 2004) and the adaptation or personalization to individual particularities and preferences discussed in the myth of the *Titanic* (Brown et al. 2013). In current studies on consumer mythology, myths are often discussed in relation to consumption texts and consumption practices, which encourage a pragmatic attitude toward myths that makes them highly suitable to a consumer culture, materialism, and consumption practices. The ambiguity that Brown et al. (2013) ascribe to the myth-imbued brand *Titanic* illustrates how mythology is a natural vehicle for the consumption of a brand and its affiliated products and experiences. Such is the conclusion reached by Stern (1995) for whom mythic plots of tragedy, irony, comedy, and romance help us to understand the construction of consumption texts and related consumption practices. However, this study shows that for some consumers certain myths do not allow for practices of demythologization described by Arsel and Thompson (2011). The temporary abstinence from the consumption of clothing incorporates the shelving of a myth that is omnipresent in day-to-day life.

This analysis shows that the myth of the clothed body is bound up with sanctions, with enforced behaviors established by others. This concern with dominating myths is a preoccupation that I would link with Cover's (2003) concern for the escalating prohibition of nakedness in school showers, in lesbian and gay pride parades, and in films and family photo albums, all of which clearly challenge that we can all live Giddens's (1991) reflexive project of the self, where the question "How shall I live?" represents the freedom to choose lifestyles. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy (1990) further articulate the dangers of myth in their discussion of the "Nazi myth." Critical to the power of the Nazi myth was a shared consciousness of a unified perspective about what and who to mimic. This study leaves me wondering whether the myth of the clothed body can be seen as a "total domination" (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1990, 293), and can, as any pervasive dominance, be harmful.

The informants' narratives prompt us to consider the problems associated with social interactions "locked in materiality" and issues of material presence vs. material absence in current debates in public policy and health identity. Authors have long suggested that excessive material presence—the having mode of existence (Fromm 1979)—may not lead to satisfaction (Baker et al. 2013; Cherrier and Munoz 2007; Cherrier and Murray 2007). This study shows that mythic elements of the clothed environment are tamed, but not eliminated, in the naked environment. Absence and abstinence can temporally tame the power of presence.

An understanding of the power of absence and its effect on consumer well-being has been developed from studies on meditation, esotericism, and the complete absence of the mind and appearance (Wallace 1999). During meditation, an awareness, clarity, and joy of the mind arise without the intrusion of any sensory objects. From an esoteric mythos, possession and material presence serve only to distract from finding balance and harmony within the power of the inner being and from the cells of the body realigning. Absence is positioned as pivotal to experiences of well-being and discoveries of the self. The creation of material absence and its link to well-being is also discussed in studies of anticonsumption (Cherrier 2009b), decluttering (Belk, Seo, and Li 2007), and disposal (Cherrier 2009a), which locate getting rid of things as an integral part of identity construction, self-cleansing, and communion with the sacred. Most connected to this study on social nudism is the Burning Man festival, during which participants are encouraged to burn material possessions and participate in naked displays as a form of radical self-expression (Kozinets 2002). Yet, absence in the material as a path to consumer well-being and self-discovery remains “in absence” in public policy debates. Social-marketing interventions or new public policies aimed at consumers’ well-being should unpack current and pervasive myths that dominate and hinder social change. To think this way is to be critical of the culturally codified significations of material presence in our day-to-day social interactions. For example, alcohol consumption may well be founded on pervasive myths of material presence as essential to social gathering, which includes not only the alcohol but also other material items such as the vessel that holds the alcohol, the clothes worn, and the lighting in the establishment. This should include unpacking pervasive myths that inform the content of social programs as well as their design and delivery.

The social nudists who participated in this study framed social nudism as opposite to the clothed-body environment and its mythic elements. However, Thompson (2004) explains that myths are appropriated by the marketplace to serve its ideological purpose. If mythologies permeate consumer culture, it is highly possible that the mythic elements identified as prescribed beauty ideals, “just look and know,” public gaze, material performance, and modernity may be so pervasive as to penetrate social nudism. Scholars have contested the rhetoric that social nudism promotes bodily acceptance, equality, and inclusion, resulting in a more socially just society. Notably, Woodall’s (2002) study on the American nudist movement over the last decade notes the movement’s shift from a practice advocating social equality and closeness to nature to a business-oriented activity constructed around profit-making, elitism, the exploitation of images of women, and

body consciousness. Similarly, Cooper (2011) raises issues of racism and class distinctions around social nudism. Although this study did not unpack the mythic elements of nakedness revealed in experiences of social nudism, in line with Cooper (2011) and Woodall (2002) we can extrapolate that mythic elements embedded in the clothed environment also pervade the naked environment. For example, bodily performances and visual cues such as tattoos, jewelry, cosmetic surgery, and skin color may be used for social distinction and classification. Other scholars have emphasized the spatial dimension of bushland social nudism (Daley 2005). Likewise, the informants who participated in this study mainly discussed the purity and innocence of being naked when alone on unspoiled beaches. Further studies may question the relationship between nakedness and nature in the particular context of social nudism performed in private social-nudist camps, clubs, and holiday resorts. As Woodall (2002) argues, what the naked body can do in these commercially legitimized “naked” spaces is highly coded and ritualized.

This study calls for further research on the dangers of pervasive myths in constraining us or in blinding us to other ways of living and interacting. Jean-François Copé’s opposition to *Tous à Poil* is a powerful example of the ways in which responsibility to and for others is embedded in dominant myths of material presence. To continue the debate, I call for research focusing on consumer experiences associated with material absence, but not with the absence of myths. By resisting dominant myths, are new myths created—myths that exhibit a modernist resistance against the dominance of material presence, and what is the process? Or does participation in abstinence and anticonsumption nourish or amplify dominant myths about consumer culture and material presence? Such a perspective hints on Cover’s (2003) argument in which the increasing accusations that naked family pictures of children are sexual is seen to feed the hysteria around pornographic depictions of children. Another avenue for research is, based on a Foucauldian perspective, to question power structures and how the way in which they operate within social nudism can contribute to our current understanding of resistance and consumer empowerment (Shankar, Cherrier, and Canniford 2006). Furthermore, authors have discussed that genitals can be nonsexual (Cover 2003). By contrast, the clothed body, with its garments and ornamentation, is often a sexualized performing body and a representation of sexuality. This point of view collapses the notion of a polarity between nakedness as a representation of sexuality on the one hand and covering as representation of authority on the other and calls for further research on contemporary perceptions of sexuality and how sexuality is expressed in consumer culture. Finally, the context of

social nudism has contributed to an improved understanding of the mythic elements of covering in public. However, social nudism is a particular form of temporary anticonsumption practice. Other forms of nudism, nudist expressions, and nudist performances, and notably the domain of activism and consumer resistance can help refine our understanding of clothed vs. naked in contemporary societies.

A limitation of this study is its focus on white male social nudists. Associating the practice of social nudism with white males tends to veil issues of gender, skin color, and the racialization of the body. As some authors have mentioned, nudists report discrimination and marginalization (Cooper 2011), and women nudists experience issues of surveillance, such as sexualized and judgmental forms of observation (Barcan 2001). Such issues need further exploration and unpacking, and thus call for interviews with non-white and mixed-gendered nudists. Issues of accepted gender norms and gendered identities should be considered in studies on social nudism and nakedness.

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