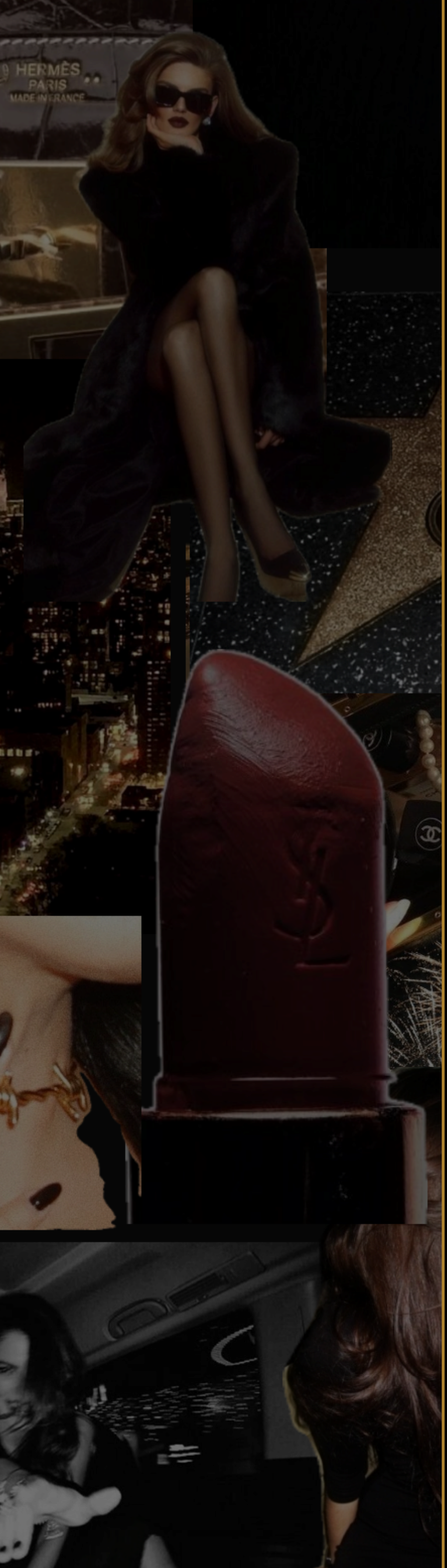

CASE STUDY NO. 02 · LUXURY CONSUMER PSYCHOLOGY

Dressed As Someone Else

What Happens to Consumer Behavior When Clothing Constructs a Temporary Identity

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I · THE QUESTION

What This Case Study Is Trying to Find Out

The central question in this case study is not why people dress up. That's too broad to be useful. The question is more specific: if clothing can temporarily shift the internal experience of self — the way a person moves, decides, and behaves — then can that shift be deliberately engineered? And if it can, what does that mean for how brands, environments, and consumer contexts should be designed?

Case Study No. 01 established that consumer behavior is driven not just by product quality or price, but by which version of self is active at the moment of purchase. The Motive × Context framework introduced there argued that the same person carries different motivations in different situations — and that the right signal, delivered in the right context, activates a specific version of identity that then drives specific behavior.

This case study is an attempt to test that idea from the inside. Not in a store. Not in front of a product. But through a full day — in Toronto, in a Shein jumpsuit — where I deliberately constructed a version of myself before the context existed to support it. What happened next is the data.

II · THE MOMENT

Toronto, and the Self That Arrived First

There is a version of yourself you have met only in passing.

Not in a fantasy. In a specific moment — a lobby, a mirror, a photo where something just aligned — where you caught a glimpse of a self that seemed more settled than the one you usually are. More deliberate. Like someone who had already decided, quietly, that she belonged wherever she happened to be standing.

I'd been paying attention to the gap between looking composed and actually feeling it. Between assembling an outfit and inhabiting one. So one morning, before leaving for Toronto, I decided to close that gap on purpose — not to perform a version of myself, but to see what would happen if I constructed the internal state first, before the day gave me a reason to.

The inventory: a white wide-leg jumpsuit from Shein — structured enough to hold without trying. A cropped houndstooth jacket inherited from my aunt: black and white check, gold buttons. Oversized tinted sunglasses that had been my mother's, tucked into the neckline. A quilted white shoulder bag. Heeled ankle boots. Gold jewellery — bracelet, ring, a thin chain at the throat. Before leaving, I sprayed oud.

Deliberately, not as an afterthought.

None of it was expensive. That's not a footnote — it's the point.

My friends were with me when we stopped at my old high school first. I wanted to visit former teachers — people who had known me in a less certain version of myself. They looked at me and said I looked good. Simple, unprompted. Whatever I'd assembled that morning was already legible to people who had no reason to perform a reaction.

On the GO train into the city, everyone else was in jeans and puffer jackets, easy and unhurried. And then there was me. My friends kept looking over. One of them said I looked like a CEO — corporate-coded, like I had a board meeting. Someone used the word *expensive*. I sat with that word for a moment, because nothing I was wearing actually was.

We came out of Union Station and into the underground corridor toward Eaton Centre. Something happened that I hadn't anticipated: the people around me looked like me. Or I looked like them — put-together strangers moving through the city with somewhere specific to be. When we surfaced into the Eaton Centre — that vaulted glass ceiling, floors of people moving with intention — I didn't feel like a visitor. The gap between who I was and where I appeared to be going had, for a moment, closed.

The heels were doing something specific. They made carelessness physically impossible. Every step had to be placed. My posture adjusted without instruction. Movements slowed. There was a discipline being imposed by what I was wearing, and that discipline translated inward — not as performance, just as the natural state of someone wearing those shoes. I wasn't performing composure. I was composed

When we got hungry, my friends suggested Subway. Tim Hortons, maybe. I searched my phone and found Scaddabush Italian Kitchen & Bar. I suggested it without much thought — I just felt like I wanted to *dine*. That was the word that fit the version of me who had shown up that day.

Worth noting: my friends have more money than I do. That's not a complaint, just context. But that afternoon, they were the ones hesitating, and I was the one leading. The financial logic of the situation had quietly inverted, and neither of us named it.

At the entrance to the restaurant, my friends paused. Not because they didn't want to go in — but because the door felt like it required a certain kind of presence to walk through first. They looked at me. *You go. You look like you belong here.*

I walked to the receptionist, gave my name and number, spoke as if this was familiar. Sat down first — jacket on, hands folded on the table, sunglasses pushed up into my hair — in the way people sit in places they consider theirs.

My friends looked at the drinks menu, saw everything cost seven dollars, and quietly decided against ordering anything. I ordered a mojito without checking the price. Not because I had more money. Because the version of me at that table was not the version who checks.

When the bill came, the server extended the payment terminal to me. Not to anyone else. Without asking. She had made a silent assessment of the table and concluded that I was the person who would handle it. I tapped my card without changing my expression.

After that, my friends left. I went to the Canadian Auto Show alone. The version of me the outfit had built didn't dissolve when the group did. I moved through the show the same way I'd moved through the whole day — unhurried, like I was exactly where I was supposed to be. I stopped in front of a Maybach — red, roped off, the kind of car that expects to be looked at a certain way — and I looked at it that way.

Nothing about my circumstances had changed. Not my income, not the labels in my clothes. What had changed was the internal experience of myself — and that experience had redirected everything: what I suggested, what I ordered, how I occupied space, how I was read by strangers.

"The clothes weren't expensive. The shift was real anyway. Which raises a more useful question than 'why did I feel different.' It raises the question of whether that shift can be deliberately produced — in a consumer, in a space, at a specific moment."

III · THE FRAMEWORK

Why Clothing Does What It Does

Three bodies of research that explain the mechanism

What happened that day wasn't confidence in the motivational-poster sense. It was a measurable behavioral shift produced by a specific set of conditions. Three bodies of research explain why.

Enclothed Cognition — Adam & Galinsky (2012)

Adam and Galinsky introduced the term *enclothed cognition* to describe the systematic influence clothing has on its wearer's psychological processes. Their core finding: clothing affects behavior through two factors that must occur simultaneously — the symbolic meaning of the garment, and the physical experience of wearing it.[1] Both are required. A garment you see but don't wear produces no effect. A garment you wear without understanding its meaning produces no effect either.

In their experiment, participants wearing a lab coat described as a *doctor's* coat performed significantly better on attention tasks than those wearing the identical coat described as a *painter's* coat.[1] Same physical object. Completely different psychological outcome. The variable was meaning.

This is what the houndstooth jacket was doing. Not because the fabric has inherent authority, but because to me — and visibly to everyone around me — it signaled something: structured, intentional, the kind of person who dines rather than just eats. Once I put it on and moved in it, that meaning became embodied. It stopped being a jacket I was wearing and became part of how I was thinking.

The Extended Self — Belk (1988)

Russell Belk's argument is that the self is not confined to the body. We extend ourselves into what we own, wear, and carry — and those objects don't just reflect identity, they help constitute it.[2] Belk noted that "only a complete ensemble of consumption objects may be able to represent the diverse and possibly incongruous aspects of the total self."

This is why individual pieces weren't enough. The jacket alone wouldn't have done it. Neither would the heels. The ensemble — the whole deliberate construction — was what produced the effect. And critically, Belk's theory doesn't require the objects to be expensive. The inherited jacket, the hand-me-down glasses, the cheap bag — what they carried was meaning, not price. That was sufficient.

The Presentation of Self — Goffman (1959)
Goffman's framework treats social life as performance: people manage the impressions they give through appearance, manner, and comportment.[3] The "front stage" is any space where an audience is present and the performance is active.

What happened at the Scaddabush entrance was a Goffman scenario made unusually visible. My friends couldn't perform the role the front stage required. I could — not because my reality matched the environment, but because my presentation did. Goffman's key insight is that the performance doesn't need to be authentic to be effective. It needs to be coherent. When costume, manner, and setting align, the audience responds as if the character is real. The server giving me the payment terminal was not a mistake. It was a social reading, based entirely on visible cues, that placed me as the most credible person at the table.

IV · THE MECHANISM

What Was Actually Happening

The three frameworks are describing the same event from different angles.

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Enclothed cognition explains the internal shift: putting on a garment with specific symbolic meaning — and physically wearing it, not just owning it — changes how the wearer thinks and behaves. Belk explains why the ensemble mattered more than any single piece: the self extended into the full construction, which then fed back into identity. Goffman explains the social consequence: a coherent front-stage performance produces real social responses, regardless of what's true backstage.

Together, they describe a loop. Internal state shapes presentation. Presentation shapes how others respond. How others respond reinforces the internal state. By the time I was sitting at Scaddabush, that loop had been running for hours — since the high school visit, since the GO train, since the first mirror I passed in the underground corridor. Each confirmation made the identity more stable.

The financial inversion is the clearest evidence of how completely the loop had closed. My friends — who have more money than I do — were the ones watching drink prices. I was the one ordering without looking. The variable was not income. It was which version of self each of us had activated that morning. They hadn't activated one. I had. Deliberately.

“The identity wasn’t fake. It was temporarily real. And temporary reality is sufficient to redirect behavior — what someone orders, how they move, how strangers read and respond to them.”

This is the mechanism this case study is documenting: deliberate identity construction, prior to context, produces a self that then interacts with context differently than the default self would. The context didn’t create the version of me that walked into Scaddabush. I brought her in. The context just confirmed her.

V · THE APPLICATION

Engineering the Shift

What brands currently do, what most get wrong, and what should change

In Case Study No. 01, the Motive × Context framework argued that the same consumer carries different motivations in different situations — and that brands can’t just identify a motive and message toward it universally. They have to ask: which motive is active *right now*, in which context, and what signal style will reach it at that specific intersection?

This case study adds a layer to that framework. The evidence from Toronto suggests that context doesn’t just determine which motive is active — it determines which *version of self* is active. And that version of self is what actually makes the purchase decision. Which means brands aren’t just competing for attention or affinity. They’re competing to activate the right self.

The implication is significant: if the self that makes the decision can be constructed in advance — through clothing, environment, physical experience — then the goal of brand design is not just to present a compelling product. It’s to engineer the conditions under which the right version of the consumer shows up before the decision point arrives.

Most brands are not doing this deliberately. Some are doing it accidentally. Here is the breakdown of what currently exists, what’s being missed, and what should change.

1. Dress Codes: Used as Gatekeeping. Should Be Used as Activation.

What brands do now: Dress codes are treated as filters — a way to ensure the environment looks a certain way. Upscale restaurants, members' clubs, and certain retail environments set implicit or explicit standards for how guests should present themselves. The reasoning is usually aesthetic or reputational.

What's actually happening: A dress code forces the guest to make a deliberate sartorial decision before arriving. That decision is the first act of enclothed cognition. The guest who dresses intentionally for a reservation has already begun activating an elevated self — one that is more likely to order freely, spend without hesitation, and treat the experience as an extension of who they are rather than somewhere they've wandered into.

What should change: Brands should communicate dress expectations not as rules but as context-setting. The framing matters. "Smart casual" is a filter. "Dress for the evening you want" is an activation prompt. The first tells the guest what's allowed. The second tells the guest which version of themselves to bring. Reservations and booking confirmations are an underused surface for this kind of pre-arrival identity priming. Most brands send logistical details. A well-designed brand should be sending a cue.

2. Brand Environments: Designed for Atmosphere. Should Be Designed for Identity Confirmation.

What brands do now: Luxury and elevated environments invest heavily in aesthetics — lighting, materials, spacing, music, staff manner. The goal is to create an atmosphere that signals quality. The assumption is that the environment impresses the consumer and that impression drives purchase.

What's actually happening: The environment is a front stage. When it's designed well, it doesn't impress the consumer — it *reflects* them. Scaddabush wasn't luxury. But it was coherent enough to confirm the version of me I'd constructed. The candlelit ceiling, the weighted menus, the manner of the staff — these didn't intimidate. They matched. And when an environment matches the identity the consumer has activated, behavior shifts: hesitation drops, spending increases, the experience feels natural rather than aspirational.

What should change: Brand environments should be designed around the question: *what version of our customer do we want to confirm?* Not "what impression do we want to make?" The distinction changes the design brief. A space designed to impress keeps the customer slightly on the back foot. A space designed to confirm lets the customer settle into the elevated version of themselves they brought through the door. Staff training should reflect this: the goal is not to signal exclusivity but to treat the customer as if the elevated version of them is the default one. That treatment reinforces the identity loop — the same way the server's payment terminal assumption did.

3. Try-On and Touch Moments: Used for Evaluation. Should Be Used for Embodiment.

What brands do now: Try-on fittings are designed primarily to help the customer assess the product — does it fit, does it look right, is it the correct size. The fitting room is a decision support tool. In e-commerce, virtual try-on features are emerging as a functional equivalent.

What's actually happening: Adam and Galinsky's research is unambiguous on this: physically wearing a garment produces a psychological shift that neither seeing it nor intellectually identifying with it can replicate.[1] The fitting room is not just decision support. It is the moment the customer briefly inhabits the version of themselves wearing the item. Once that version has been lived — even for three minutes — the question is no longer *do I want this*. It becomes *do I want to go back to not having it*.

What should change: Fitting room design should be optimized for identity activation, not product evaluation. This means: lighting and mirrors that present the customer well (so the identity feels plausible), styling support that completes an ensemble rather than showing a single item in isolation (because, per Belk, the ensemble is the self — not the individual piece), and enough time and privacy that the customer can actually settle into how they feel rather than rushing a judgment. Virtual try-on tools, meanwhile, are currently built for accuracy. They should be built for aspiration — showing the customer not just how the item fits but how they look in it, in a context that matches the version of self the brand is trying to activate.

4. The Gap Most Brands Are Missing: Pre-Context Identity Priming

The most underused insight from this case study is not about the store or the fitting room or the environment. It's about what happened on the GO train.

The version of me that walked into Scaddabush was constructed hours before I arrived. The high school visit, the train, the underground corridor — each moment of social confirmation built the identity incrementally, so that by the time I reached the restaurant, it was stable. I didn't need the environment to create the self. I brought it with me.

Brands almost entirely ignore the pre-arrival window. The consumer's state when they walk through the door is treated as a given — something the brand has to work with, not something it can shape. But that state is not fixed. It can be influenced through what a brand sends before the visit: the reservation confirmation, the email, the push notification, the packaging of a delivery. Each of these is a pre-arrival touchpoint. Most treat them as logistics. They could be treating them as the first act of identity activation.

Concretely: a reservation confirmation that says *"We're looking forward to having you"* is logistics. One that says *"Your table is set. Dress for the evening."* is an identity prompt. It tells the customer which self to bring. And based on everything this case study documents, the self they bring is the one that makes the decisions once they arrive.

The Motive × Context framework from Case Study No. 0[1] argued that context determines which motive is active. This case study argues something adjacent but distinct: context also determines which self is active — and that self is not just a passive product of context. It can be constructed before the context exists. Brands that understand this stop waiting for the consumer to arrive in the right state. They engineer the conditions that produce that state, starting before the consumer reaches the door.

> *"The question is not what the consumer wants. It's which version of the consumer shows up — and whether that version was left to chance or deliberately activated."*

That day in Toronto, I activated it myself. A houndstooth jacket that cost nothing. Inherited glasses. A bottle of oud. One decision made before the day had given me any reason to make it. The result was a self that ordered differently, moved differently, and was read differently by every person who encountered her.

The mechanism is not mysterious. It's just underused.

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