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Elizabeth Hirschman, Rutgers University

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Elizabeth Hirschman, Rutgers University

ABSTRACT

This inquiry examines a long-running retail form - the diner - from multiple perspectives: historical evolution as a commercial response to industrialization, an icon of modernism, a nostalgic symbol of retro-marketing and a site of consumer communalism and personal transition. Historical documentation, popular culture texts, consumer interviews and participant observation are utilized for constructing the analysis.

“Now this golden age is all but gone…. The highways have fallen into disrepair, superceded by freeways with no recognizable character. Many diners have served their last special, and a large number of ma-and-pa hotels have been swallowed up into chains…. Small towns, with the whole of life encapsulated on Main Street, are a far cry from the soulless shopping malls of today. And the cars - oh those glorious, gas-guzzling monsters - have been replaced by sensible, compact, economical models with dull names” (Moss, 2000, p. 7, Diners: American Retro).

INTRODUCTION

In this brief passage, Moss (2000) places the retail form known as the diner in the nostalgic epoch of the Fifties, together with small town shopping streets, state highways (e.g., Route 66) and gas-guzzling, chrome-laden automobiles (Flink 1975, 1988). While it is certainly true that diners evoke that mythic near-past of post-World War II Americana, it is incorrect to view them as a vanished or even fading retail form. Indeed there are currently 5,000 diners in operation in the United States, and they are even being exported to Western and Eastern European countries seeking to patronize this retro retail icon (Baeder 1995; Gutman 1993).

Our present inquiry seeks to serve two agendas. First, we extend the retro-marketing thesis put forward by Brown, Kozinets and Sherry (2003) to a consideration of how retailing forms may also serve as nostalgic icons for consumers. Second, we seek to direct theory construction toward the contemplation of retail forms as carriers of deeply metaphorical cultural meaning, rather than solely as profit-generating business ventures. Investigating the semiotic qualities of the American diner should help us achieve both goals.

FROM WHENCE THEY CAME: DINNER EVOLUTION

In their recent article, Brown, Kozinets and Sherry (2003) present a theory of retro branding and then instantiate it using the Volkswagen Beetle reissue and “Star Wars: Episode One” as exemplars. Drawing upon earlier work by marketing scholars such as Penaloza (2000) and Holbrook and Schindler (1989, 1994, 1996), as well as their own inquiries (Brown 1999, 2001; Sherry 1990), these researchers develop a conceptualization which describes the anchoring of revived or retro brands in consumers’ memories of the past - memories which are almost always tinted with feelings of warmth, security, simplicity and authenticity. As Brown, Kozinets and Sherry propose, brands associated with the past - whether historically grounded (Volkswagen) or mythically imagined (“Star Wars”) - benefit from our personal and cultural tendency to bathe them in a utopian glow (Davis 1979).

Perhaps no retailing form is better positioned by its historic evolution and utilization as a popular culture signifying device to exemplify retro-retailing than the diner. In this section of our inquiry, we present a selective overview of diner history and develop the thesis that diners evolved both functionally and semiotically as icons of modernity. Ironically, or as B-K-S would put it, antimonically, it is postmodern nostalgia for modernity that now serves to enhance the diner’s appeal, both as an actual retail presence and a cultural icon.

Diners are Born

Diners came into being as a direct result of America’s rush into modernity at the turn of the century. Urban manufacturing centers in the Northeast had become electrified, permitting operations to be conducted twenty four hours a day. Night shift workers - offered no food services by their employers - had been bringing boxed meals to the plant. Sensing a marketing opportunity, a man named Walter Scott began selling sandwiches, boiled eggs, pies and coffee to factory workers on the night shift in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1872. His restaurant-on-wheels, termed a night lunch wagon, was the forerunner to the diner (Gutman 1993).

The standardization and mass production of early stage capitalism soon encompassed the late night lunch wagon business. By 1891, Charles Palmer had patented his design for a night lunch wagon that would be manufactured in a factory assembly line procedure; his new model restaurant had a kitchen section and a dining room section containing stools or chairs for patrons (Gutman 1993). Affirming modernity, the production and consumption of meals had been wrested from workers’ homes and relocated at their place of work.

By the early 1900’s industrialization had spread to such an extent that three companies came into existence whose sole purpose was to mass produce lunch wagons - now termed diners: the Tierney Company, the Worcester Lunch Car Company and the O’Mahoney Company (Witzel 1999). Reflecting the modern ethos of standardization and efficiency, these mass produced diners had a stereotypical appearance:

Within this category one finds the classic diner structures exemplified by respected industry manufacturers…. Of course, all these came to life as distinct, self-contained units in a factory. Workers assembled the majority of their interiors, exteriors, and structures ahead of time. A truck or a train hauled them to their intended site of business, where owners connected them to plumbing and utility lines and opened for business. All the proprietor had to do was add the utensils and foodstuffs…. These portable eateries feature at least one or more of the standard interior and exterior components characteristic of the diner stereotype. One of the most important elements is that the overall design and layout of the dining building follows the lead of a train car (short or stretched). Regarding the roof, only a barrel-style cover or monitor treatment qualifies. At the same time, it’s important that the building feature a preponderance of windows and a generous application of stainless steel or porcelain-clad panel. Preferred details include a Formica counter, private dining booths, pedestal-style stools, table-top jukeboxes, and a dramatic application of neon lights (Witzel, p. 6).
And yet, despite their standardized structure, individual units could be, and were, made distinctive by their proprietors using exterior signage and decorative motifs and offering unique “house specialty” menu items; a feature we term *standardized authenticity*. In Brown, Kozinets and Sherry’s (2003) *retro* terminology, this phenomenon of distinctiveness within conformity would serve as an example of antimony.

By the 1920s and the emergence of middle-stage capitalism, the diner had come to signify not only standardization but also the embrace of technological innovation; it was an icon of modernism. As Gutman (1993, pp. 62-63) reports: “In interior appointments, innovation was the rule. A new emphasis on cleanliness and ease of operation was touted... White tile floors were predominant. Countertops were often of white marble or white opalite, an opaque glass. Some... even had white metal ceilings. Behind the counter, all manufacturers offered a built-in refrigerator, steam table, gas stove, grill, dessert display cases, coffee urn and exhaust hoods fabricated of gleaming German silver, an alloy that was the precursor to stainless steel.”

The 1920s - perhaps the core decade of American modernism - also witnessed the widespread adoption of the automobile and the construction of coast-to-coast and border-to-border road systems. The new national highway system was accompanied by motels, service stations and diners, all of which were intended to assist the modernist rush to personal mobility: social, geographic, and economic. Diners served “home cooked food” hundreds, or even thousands, of miles from one’s home (Gutman 1993).

The 1930s witnessed the introduction of aerodynamics into both popular culture and national ideology. Futuristic designs inspired by the possibility of space travel (e.g., Buck Rogers) and the reality of intercontinental air carriers and diesel locomotives led to widespread design mimicry in automobiles and, ultimately, diners. “By the end of the thirties, surfaces and textures were brushed, polished, rounded or wrapped (Gutman 1993, p. 113.)”

Materials generated by advances in technology and chemistry were quickly incorporated in diner design to further signify their status as icons of modernism; most important among these were Formica and stainless steel. The aesthetic effect was one of ultimate smoothness and glistening functionality. Art Deco was celebrated in many diner interiors as a series of stripes and circles of complementary colors; surfaces were sleek, unadorned and contoured.

By the 1950s, economic prosperity enabled families to dine out more frequently and to travel great distances on annual family vacations (Jewell 1966). Diners actively sought out family patronage by featuring “children’s menus” and offering more women and child-friendly interiors. Indirect lighting was used, Naugahyde cushioned booths were introduced, mirrors along the walls created a greater sense of spaciousness, and terrazzo floors replaced the tile floors of a decade earlier. Pastel color schemes softened and feminized the interiors, creating a more “family friendly” aesthetic. Wood-grain Formica was used to create table and counter accents (Gutman 1993).

**The Death of the Diner and Rebirth as Retro-Chic**

By the close of the 1950s, however, the era of Aerodynamic Moderne with its commercial beacon, the diner, was coming to a close. Two intertwined events led to this demise. The first was the birth of fast food, carryout restaurants; the second was the institution of the interstate highway system. McDonalds served as the fulcrum of this retailing transformation (Love 1986). Mac and Maurice McDonald had been operating a successful drive-in restaurant on Route 66 in Arcadia, California. Following consumer preference for faster, more efficient forms of retailing, such as the emerging use of self-service gasoline stations and express checkout grocery lanes, the McDonald brothers created a novel restaurant format which they termed the “Speedy Service System” (Luxenberg 1985). This was premised upon the same assembly line manufacturing process, emphasizing standardization and uniformity, that had birthed the industrial revolution and brought diners into being. Yet now, ironically, diners were made obsolescent by the ultimate expression of industrialization in the food service business. Further, unlike the individually owned and operated diners, fast food restaurants such as McDonalds and its competitors Burger King, Hardees and, later, Wendy’s, were corporate chains, able to expand their assembly-line, standardized units nationally (Luxenberg 1985).

Concurrent with the advent of the fast food restaurant chain was a second key event - the Interstate Highway Program which was formalized in 1956 and called for “40,000 miles of widened, four-lane routes that would link together 90 percent of major US cities (Wirtzel 1999).” By their primary completion in the late 1960s, the interstate highway system had effectively created retail conformity from coast to coast, as interstates led travelers around downtown areas and toward the standardized off-ramp offerings of fast food restaurants, filling stations and regional shopping malls (Lewis 1980; Luxenberg 1985; Marling 1984).

In decline as a retail form during the 1970s, the diner re-emerged as a symbol of nostalgia for, of all things, *modernism*, during the 1980s and beyond. As one observer (Genovese 2002) noted, the 1950s became imbued with the “golden glow of yesteryear,” for despite their Cold War, atomic bomb, mass conformity dimensions, they were an era “when we lived in blissful ignorance; we just didn’t know any better....”

Diners, because of their close association with modernism and its utopian sense of the perfectability of the world, “came to signify something unique in the twentieth century. Through their unusual form and distinctive appearance, they had earned a special place in the hearts of the public. When you drove up to a diner, you knew what to expect: good, home-cooked food and plenty of it at a good price. Though a stranger, you immediately felt at home when seated at the counter alongside one of the regulars. Diners could bear a strong resemblance to each other and at the same time possess personalities of their own. The families that operated them... invariably put their own imprints on the food, the décor and the conversation (Gutman 1993, p. 170).” Or as Moss (2000) put it, diners meant “good and wholesome food, always (p. 23).... “and the *whole* of society can be found in a small town diner (p. 50),” implying that the *soul* of society could be found in a small town diner, as well.

Even minute aspects of diner furnishings became imbued with a comforting, protective, home-like ambience. Kittel (1998, p. 5) writes: “The sense of comfort and cheer that any good diner radiates is an amalgam of the actualities of the diner itself - the blunt faces of the salt and pepper shakers, the menus above the grill with their square, white capital letters, the steam rising from the coffee urn, the clunk of cheap, solid china being slapped down on Formica - and of memory.” The melancholy, luminous and utterly precise vision of Americana that only a diner can signify.

**DINERS AS POPULAR CULTURE SIGNS**

The second part of our inquiry deals specifically with diners as signs. We have argued that this retail form evolved to signify a certain epoch of American history; that of Twentieth Century modernism with its ethos of mechanized progress. Yet, with an ironic turn of meaning, it was the bypassing of diner modernism, with its small town and highway trappings, by the turbocharged innovations of fast food restaurants and interstate superhighways
that triggered the recasting of diners as a nostalgic relic of a ‘bygone’ (for thirty years) imagined age of innocence and simplicity. ‘Diners came to signify the time when apple pie - no longer home cooked by Mom, but baked even more deliciously at the local diner - could be had in the company of friends and companions, while lingering over a second, or even third, cup of percolated coffee (Kittel 1998, p. 32).’ It was the place which was always safe, warm and inviting; where personal-favorite omelettes could be ordered twenty four hours a day; where the booth seats were comfortable and snug and there was no pressing urgency to be on one’s way to somewhere else (Everett 2002).

This retro view of the diner - so at odds with diner origins and evolution as a modern retailing form - was (and is) encoded in multiple popular culture representations (Everett 2002). From television shows such as ‘Happy Days’ to ‘NYPD Blue’ to ‘The Sopranos’, diners are cast in key roles as cultural anchors and emotional touchstones (Everett 2002). Advertisers, as Genovese (2002) comments, have been quick to incorporate diners as contextualizers in commercials ranging from heartbeat remedies to health insurance. But it is perhaps in motion pictures that their essence has been used most evocatively. For example, organized-crime films from ‘Good Fellas’ to ‘Donnie Brasco’ to ‘Pulp Fiction’ have called upon diners to create a blue-collar, urban ambience in which violence can be planned and even enacted.

Yet, more prominently, diners are cast in motion pictures such as “What’s Love Got to Do With It” and “City Hall” as locales in which characters can meet and discuss deeply personal issues. They are used as safe havens and places of social intimacy. Let us briefly consider perhaps the centerpiece of the diner film genre: Diner (1982). Directed by Barry Levinson, Diner featured performances by the (then) unknown actors Kevin Bacon, Mickey Rourke, Steve Guttenberg, Daniel Stern, Timothy Daly and Ellen Barkin (Silverman 1989). The narrative was set at Christmastime 1959 in Baltimore, MD. Pointedly, Levinson placed his story at the close of the modern era, just as America was making its uneasy transition to the Sixties, that semi-mythical time when many social groups - Blacks, women, Gays, Chicanos - so long submerged beneath the Formica-clad surface of Fifties conformity - burst forth with their revolutionary agendas, challenging America’s suddenly quaint and self-deluded view of itself as a ‘fair and open’ society.

Yet here at the fictitious Fells’ Point diner, Levinson shows us a modernist microcosm collected together for the last time before entering the Sixties abyss. A group of five, sometimes six, white guys have graduated from high school and gone on their separate paths to adulthood. Six months have now passed and they have recollected at ‘their’ diner, in ‘their’ booth, and attempt to recapture their teenaged selves over coffee and French fries covered in gravy. Levinson presents the semiotics of diner-dom brilliantly: cigarettes are smoked (smoking was legal then); ketchup bottles are refilled by middle-aged waitresses clad in light green uniforms who write orders in pencil on white pads. The Greek diner owner wears a black suit and skinny necktie, yells at his non-English speaking cooking staff, and rings up customers on a manual cash register.

The interior and exterior features of the diner also are accurately evoked: the red, flickering neon sign, the crunchy gravel parking lot filled with streamlined Fords and Chevys, the brilliantly lit interior with its plastic-clad booths and sleek countertops, refrigerated dessert and salad cases, pale orange Naugahyde benches, thick, sturdy glass sugar pourers and heavy white crockery. Late at night, as the film shows, this was primarily a man’s world. Businessmen and clumps of teenage boys gather in booths and at the counters, “not ready to go home yet,” as one says. The diner was a refuge from responsibility, a haven from home, a place to go when jobs, parents, spouses and children were too demanding. The diner provided a simultaneously communal, yet liminal, space. The characters communicated to us that this was only a temporary respite on their way to adulthood, yet we understood very well why they wanted to tarry there a little longer.

As the film documented, the world outside the diner required a lot: adult sexuality, paying bills, making and then keeping commitments. How much better it was to hang out with one’s pals, discussing which girls in high school were “easy,” handicapping local sports teams, mooching food and reading the newspaper. And as was true for the Fifties, in general not much of note happens in the film - just regular people leading regular lives; life went on.

CURRENT CONSUMER UNDERSTANDINGS OF DINERS

Thus far our inquiry has considered the meaning of diners as seen by historians and creators of popular culture. From these sources we have gained insights regarding the economic and social evolution of the diner as a cultural signifier. Yet we are missing a central voice regarding diner semiotics - that of the consumer. How are diners seen, experienced and remembered by those who patronize them? What roles have diners played in their lives, if any? How do current customers utilize diners vis a vis available competitors such as fast food restaurants? What distinctions are seen as characterizing diners? To learn this, we conducted interviews with seven diner patrons, ranging in age from 11 to 51 and including four men and three women. The interviews were conducted at the informant’s place of residence, audioted and transcribed under conditions of informed consent.

We supplemented these materials with visits to three local diners conducted over a two-week period and including day and evening, weekend and weekday visits. Here is what we gleaned from and as consumers.

The Diner as Cornucopia of ‘Home Cooking’

Perhaps one of the great ironies - or antinomies - of the diner is that it is viewed by customers as a favorite locale for out-of-the-house ‘home cooking.’ This metaphor was expressed by informants in a variety of ways: “It’s like going to grandma’s house to eat, only better,” “It’s like they take normal meals and they make them special somehow.” The home cooking available at the diner, however, was seen as superior to that actually available at home, or even at grandmother’s, for several reasons. First, the normal rules of breakfast, lunch and dinner ‘appropriate’ foods were suspended. One could, for example, have dessert or eggs or waffles or spaghetti “anytime” - often 24 hours a day. So, diners were ideal for assuaging food ‘cravings’ or ‘moods.’ “I guess for breakfast I’ll take a Spanish omelette with cheese usually, maybe a steak sandwich sometimes, whatever I’m in the mood for” (Jason, 22). “I get strawberry pancakes with fresh strawberries” (Ralph, age 51). “For breakfast… I had a cream cheese bagel and a Belgian waffle… for lunch I always have some kind of sandwich and dessert; I just pig out on dessert, ha, ha!” (Tommy, 11).

A second desirable trait of diner cuisine, according to our informants, was the sense that normal food quantity rules are also suspended. Diners serve very large portions and consumers seem to experience little guilt in eating the entire serving. “I can fill myself up for a max of $15…. [At] a diner you get more of that homey quality meal thing” (Jason, 22).

One informant claimed hyperbolically that diners had “thousands of items on the menu;” she was overstating the matter, but not by much. It is the enormity of the selection combined with an emphasis on ‘comfort foods’ such as cheeseburgers, milkshakes,
pies and starches that contributes to diners’ hedonic appeal. Although some informants reported that the typical diner menu was a prime example of confusing overchoice, most experienced the selection as delightful; an opportunity (like at the proverbial grandmother’s house) to indulge whims, be spoiled and overeat in a guilt-free atmosphere.

Closing out our discussion of this theme is one final point. Not only were mealtime rules suspended, but a lenient, casual attitude toward customer dress and behavior prevailed as well. As 11-year-old Tommy put it, “I don’t have to get dressed up or act stupid and fancy. I can just be myself... people don’t care how I act at a diner. It’s more comfortable.” Emily, 25, elaborated on this same idea, “Employees at a diner are more lenient. At restaurants there seem to be more rules to follow. Like at a library, you have to be quiet. At a diner not every time do people order food. Many times people just go there to hang out and that is accepted. ... Restaurants are more of a business.” Significant here is the distinction that Emily draws between diners - which are accepting, relaxed and indulgent toward customers - versus ‘restaurants’ which she views as more formal, ordered and business-like. As we shall see in the next section, diners are seen to act in loco parentis for adolescents and teens making their transition from childhood-home to adulthood-public life.

Diners as Rite of Passage

As discussed earlier, the motion picture Diner (1982) portrayed the transformation of six self-indulgent ‘boys’ into responsible men; serving as the central set-piece, the eponymous diner of the film acted as the fulcrum for each set of moral challenges confronting the main characters. It was at their regular booth, over piles of food, that each dilemma would be communally addressed and mulled over. Although in the narrative occasional emotional trauma and even violence marred the characters’ lives, within the safe stainless steel walls and beneath the bright fluorescent lights of the diner interior, no ill could befall them. It was a haven, a clubhouse, hideout and launching pad simultaneously.

Similarly, our informants expressed the same sentimentality regarding their favorite diners’ role in their own lives. In essence, they viewed the diner as a home away from home: the indulgent middle-aged waitresses were Mom; the usually-ethnic, middle-aged, always-rushed owner/manager was Dad, and their ‘crew’ or ‘posse’ of friends were siblings.

“So how often do you go out to diners?”

Jason (22), “Well probably I end up there about twice a month now, but back in high school me and my boys would go at least three times a week…. [We] usually go really late at night - when nothing else is open…. The atmosphere is cool ... you can dress however you want, but still get good food.”

Lorraine (50) recalls going to diners with her girlfriends in high school as “an important part of growing up for kids. All kids go to diners to hang out at one point in their lives. ... It’s almost like they [diners] are a part of the culture.... When I go there now, I look at all of the kids and remember when I was 20.”

Often, in part because of these nostalgic recollections, customers would continue to return to “their” diner throughout adulthood:

“Do you ever think you’ll stop going to the diner?”

Ralph (51), “Not unless all my friends stopped. I don’t wanna go there by myself. But I think no matter how old I am, I will always have someone to go to the diner with....”

Diners are sites where intimacy is constructed in a public place. They encode a particular time in a given individual’s life when she or he is venturing into the world, but does not yet want to fly solo. Diners also provide exposure to some of the ills and dangers of the outside world, yet in inoculating doses that strengthen, rather than sicken, the young adventurer.

Several informants spoke of occasionally seeing “drunks” or “sleazy people” or “sleazy people” at their diner. Especially during late night hours, the flickering red and blue neon signs of the diner seemed to serve as a beacon to transients, cross-country truckers, deadbeats and drunks seeking a place to eat, rest, or sober up. The presence of such persons was seen as undesirable by adult patrons, but provided some sense of tantalizing voyeurism to the clusters of teenagers we observed. Intriguingly, cops and firefighters, coming off duty, would also arrive in the late night hours at the same diner as the vagabonds. Yet no hostilities broke out; it was as if everyone was taking a “time out” from their regular roles. The teenaged groups also engaged in some quasi-nefarious activities of their own. The most common of these was underage cigarette smoking. Stoked by contraband tobacco and legal cups of caffeinated coffee, heavily sugared milkshakes and desserts, the teenagers could linger for hours, their conversations intermittently exploding with loud laughter.

Diner Topography

Our observations of diners and their patrons also led to some insights regarding their topography, or internal space usage patterns. As shown in Diagram One, most modern-day diners have a distinctive layout. First, from the exterior, they face the highway, their large neon signs calling to drivers-by. The door is placed at the center of a long, one-story building that has banks of windows along the front and side walls. A vestige of their origins as wheeled lunch wagons, even contemporary diners have small porches that must be accessed via steps in front of the entry door.

As one enters, generally the right side of the diner has booths and a counter with a row of stools/chairs. The counter service area is nearest the kitchen and generally floored in terrazzo or ceramic tile for easy cleaning. Smoking, if it is allowed, usually occurs in the booth area immediately adjacent to the counter and stools. This high traffic area can be easily cleaned after a night of cigarettes and drinks before the morning breakfast crowd arrives. The counter stools are usually most heavily occupied at night and in the early mornings as truckers, cops and workmen stop in to grab a quick meal. The booths are most heavily used late at night by clusters of teens and college students who arrive en masse, eat large quantities of food and may linger for one or more hours.

Most modern diners are now “double-wide,” providing room for a partition and a carpeted area with tables near the windows. Couples, senior citizens, mothers with children, and empty nesters generally choose to sit here. Perhaps visually the service may seem quicker, since these tables are within eyesight of the kitchen - as well as the dessert and salad display cases.

On the side left of the entry door is a “new” (circa 1970’s) addition to the diner. This is a carpeted, less glaringly lit family area that features small and large tables (some circular) at which family groups can sit and enjoy an away-from-home home-cooked meal. These extended family gatherings usually occurred on weekends. Empty nest couples and business colleagues out for a working lunch would sit in this section, as well. In all the various seating areas,

1 Older, mass-manufactured diners have only a kitchen, counter service and booths.
however, the tables were clad in neutral or wood grain Formica, and
the chairs were deeply cushioned Naugahyde. A distinctly
postmodern addition at one of the diners was a salad bar located in
the aisle separating the family seating area from the booth seating
area. Though clad in ‘diner-correct’ stainless steel, the inclusion of
a salad bar is a competitive response to chain restaurants that
uniformly provide such an offering to consumers.

Yet, despite this nod to conformity, most diners still retain
several of their distinctive features. Those we visited all were
equipped with table-mounted jukeboxes in the booth-and-table
area; available songs ranged from Fifties doo-wop to Billy Joel to
Britney Spears. There were no hip-hop or hard rock offerings; likely
these musical genres were not popular with the clientele. Two of
the three diners visited still prepared soda drinks (e.g., milkshakes) and
egg dishes directly behind the counter, permitting customers to see
their food ‘being made’, especially if they were seated in a booth or
at the counter. This feature adds to the homeliness of the diner, as
it seems to make it more kitchen-like.

A distinct topographical feature of diners is their
placemats. Once seated, each patron, regardless of where s/he is
sitting, is issued a paper placemat. These 1940’s-era accoutrements
usually feature a pen-and-ink or photographic image of the particu-
lar diner in the center and have a border composed of small print
advertisements for other local places of business (e.g., service
stations). At each of the four corners of the placemats are tear-off
coupons for, say, photo processing, dry cleaning, and so forth.
Essentially, these seem to constitute a banding-together of small,
independently owned, personally operated businesses in the area.
Again, this reifies the iconic position of the diner as a hold-over
from an earlier era in which small towns and their local businesses
were seen as the core of American economic life.

What Diners Are Not

Finally, from our interviews and observations we gained some
notions of what diners are not; or more pointedly, how they are
believed to differ from other types of restaurants. For example, as
one informant put it: “A diner is not Burger King,” when pressed on
this, he added, “cause a diner has waitresses… people come, they
get their coffee; they have plates and silverware. The feeling is just
different…. I love its (the diner’s) variety and the way it smells…
the coffee, the kitchen. Diners are diners.”

A second informant characterized fast food restaurants, such as
Burger King and McDonalds, as “shitty food that’s dirt cheap;
whereas at a diner you get more of a homey quality meal…. ”
However, this same informant also made it clear that he did often
eat fast food: “It’s still food, and my ultimate goal is not to be
hungry.”

This same informant also contrasted diners with corporate
chain restaurants, saying “[diners have] that community feeling;
people I guess like the purity aspect - you know, it’s not some big
chain like Applebees or Bennigens…. It’s more like going to
someone’s house for dinner, only you have a full menu to choose
from…. You go to a diner for the experience, the chill feeling you
get there.”

Still, diners were often contrasted negatively to what infor-
mants termed “real” or “good” restaurants, i.e., those that were
privately-owned and served excellent specialty foods. Though
requiring more formality and adherence to stricter rules of behavior
and dress, “good” restaurants were those chosen for special events,
such as anniversaries, birthday parties and graduations. Diners
were deemed inappropriate for such exalted occasions because they
were, in fact, too home-like and therefore mundane.

DISCUSSION

Sherry’s (1990) article on flea markets proposes a retail
marketplace structure made manifest along two continua: formal/
informal and economic/festive. He locates flea markets in the
festive/informal area of this structure. Diners would be positioned
within this same structural locale, as they are seen as casual and
communal gathering places. What is also striking is that some of
Sherry’s (1990) informants voiced descriptions of the flea market
that echo sentiments expressed by our informants about diners. One
said, “The flea market is not as sterile as a mall. You don’t get the
same franchises over and over again. There’s lots of different
people around the flea market - it’s more of a social atmosphere…
(Sherry 1990, p. 17).” And also echoing our informants’ percep-
tions, Sherry’s interviewees found some customers of the flea market
to be “a sleazy element… people on the shady side (p. 17).”

In essence, both diners and flea markets appear more representative
of ‘real life’ with its oddities, authenticities, risks and rewards. The
sterilized monotony and predictability of the shopping mall and fast
food restaurant - with all their standardized perfection - offer only
cookie-cutter experiences.

In keeping with Arnold and Reynolds’ (2003) article on
edonomic shopping, diners also seem to provide “enter-tailing” to
consumers. That is, they provide “higher levels of service, highly-
trained staff and an entertaining and fun retailing environment (p.
77).” With regard to the hedonic motivations identified by Arnold
and Reynolds (2003),
2 diners would appear to be capable of
satisfying the desire for socializing (spending time with friends
and family members) and also for self-gratification (to relieve stress,
improve a bad mood, treat oneself).

But perhaps most profoundly, the diner represents retro-
retailing. Likely the longest running exemplar of modernism in
retailing, the diner has now - in the era of postmodernism - become
a simultaneously iconic and ironic statement of commercialized
homeliness, of replicated authenticity, of multiplied uniqueness.
Each diner is idiosyncratic, individually owned, personailly named
and carries a (somewhat) distinctive lineup of foodstuffs; yet
because of their mass-manufactured format, their standardized
aesthetic and their uniform meaning in the minds of consumers,
each diner signifies “the” diner. As Brown, Kozinets and Sherry
(2003) remind us, diners are among that select group of commercial
entities that have a “vital essence” and “have existed as an important
icon during a specific developmental stage for a particular genera-
tion or cohort (p. 30).” Diners have served as places of passage for
generations of American consumers since the early 1900’s; they
will likely continue to carry on this role as long as there are
teenagers to claim them, and adults to reminisce.

REFERENCES

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Batra, Rajeev and Ollie Ahtola (1991), Measuring the Hedonic
and Utilitarian Sources of Consumer Attitudes, Marketing
Letters, 2 (April), 159-170.

2 And see also Babin, Darden and Griddi (1994); Batra and Ahtola
(1991); Berlyne 1969; Bloch, Ridgway and Dawson (1994);
Dawson, Bloch and Ridgway (1990); Hirshman and Holbrook
(1982); Holbrook and Hirschman (1982); Tauber (1972).


