“Grandma’S Fridge Is Cool” – the Meaning of Retro Brands For Young Consumers
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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the question why young consumers favor retro brands although they had no consumption experience with the original counterpart. Interviews with young consumers revealed that retro brands are perceived to be special possessions which help young consumers coping with ambiguities in their search for identity. Retro brands are perceived as nostalgic and authentic objects reflecting continuity and discontinuity; retro brands help negotiating young consumers’ individual identity and search for belongingness and are used as fashion icons that reflect young consumers’ aspiration for social acceptance and non-conformism.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Literature has brought forward an abundance of explanations for the consumption of retro brand. Nostalgia has been the most prominent, so far. Holbrook and Schindler’s view of nostalgia is closely related to what Davis (1979) was one of the first to distinguish among personal and communal nostalgia, where ‘personal nostalgia’ depicts a nostalgic feeling towards object-related experiences that have somehow been lost. Communal nostalgia occurs at the societal level and is often related to social turmoil, great depressions and other discontinuing moments in history.

Turner (1987) provided some additional thoughts on nostalgia that go beyond personal and communal nostalgia. He claims that nostalgia involves a sense of loss and decline, a melancholic vision of the contemporary world based on a perceived crisis in our civilization, a sense of loss of individual freedom and autonomy; and the idea of a loss of simplicity, authenticity and emotional spontaneity in a mass consumption culture. Similarly, Brown, Kozinets and Sherry (2003) found that retro brands allow referring to a particular past time and its ethos. Consumers, therefore, use retro brands to return to an imagined era of moral certainty.

As young consumers’ lives are strongly determined by a search for identity and a period of conscious reflections on issues related to one’s identity (Adamson, Hartman and Lyxell, 1999), identity formation and how individual and social identity go together in this critical period might provide another explanation for young consumers’ liking of retro brands (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Erikson, 1968; Kroger, 1989; Mittal, 2006). It is our aim to find out how these quintessential questions are related to the meaning of retro brands for young consumers.

Our empirical work followed a 2-step process. First we identified young consumers who owned and liked retro brands using theoretical sampling (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In a second step we conducted narrative interviews (Schütze, 1987). A constant comparative method was applied for analysis (Charmaz, 2006).

FINDINGS

Young consumers are also nostalgic. Although some of these feelings reflect derivative experiences with things owned by their grandparents or parents, young consumers do report about personal nostalgia through memories from their childhood, and meaningful moments, early experiences and habits that they had come to love. Retro brands are favored because they symbolize deep relationships but also when they help standing for one’s own opinion and taste. Therefore, young consumers also alter traditional rituals that come with nostalgic brands and re-interpret its meaning for their own communal purposes. Retro brands also reflect communal nostalgia, romanticizing the past and old values but not in order to bring back the good old days but rather to set a counterpart to current societal developments that young consumers dislike. Retro brands help in this respect by their inherent stability and authenticity.

Our findings show that retro brands help overcome tensions between the defined inner self and the social roles that young consumers are beginning to take over (Mittal, 2006). Retro brands seem to work particularly well in expressing personal values and attitude towards life and the social self-concept (Sirgy, 1982), as they are considered as authentic, credible and expressive. Young consumers put particular emphasis on the differentiating elements of their favorite brands in order to underline their individuality and personality and at the same time draw a coherent picture of a young consumer’s personality for others to mirror. Retro brands help communicate these values and also convey a particular aesthetic component.

Retro consumers commonly describe themselves as fashion-conscious and non-conformist, which marks retro brands as a symbol for fashion and style. Young consumers consider themselves as real non-conformists as all others go with the masses. Young consumers express this attitude by drawing a clear distinction among ‘retros’ and ‘fashion victims’ thus also strongly relating to his peer group and a certain communal spirit of like-minded consumers in search of autonomy. This way, retro brands allow young consumers to overcome the tension between non-conformity and social acceptance.

DISCUSSION

Our research contributes to theory in many ways. First and most important, our findings show that retro brands do have deep meaning for young consumers. They provide meaning from a time perspective in that they embody history, childhood memory, nostalgia, and timelessness. At the same time, the discontinuities young consumers are facing in their lives, their striving for autonomy, their idealism that clashes with in-authenticities in contemporary political and market systems contributes to their choice of retro brands.

Retro brands are not just nostalgic objects for young consumers. They are consumed so as to define young consumers’ self-concept at the crossroads of individual and social identity. Retro brands are identity-building in that they provide strong historical value systems to identify with. They have a high differentiating potential in that they are not marketed to the masses and embody authenticity and originality.

In a similar vein, retro brands are used to negotiate the distance-proximity tension in young consumers’ lives (Adamson, Hartman and Lyxell, 1999). Young consumers’ identity seeking processes are strongly related to processes of autonomy-seeking, which means distancing from particular values and societal developments, and social acceptance, which is necessary for any individual’s psychological well-being. By successfully demonstrating autonomy, they fight established consumption patterns and gain acceptance among their peers as non-conformist consumption heroes.
“Grandma’s Fridge is Cool” – The Meaning of Retro Brands for Young Consumers

'Wow, this green grandma fridge is absolutely cool, Mum! Would be perfect for my new little apartment.' Mum agrees and smiles. This is quite common scenery, except that it seems quite counter-intuitive that mothers and their daughters are delighted by the same new, old-fashioned styles. As for mothers we can imagine that it would remind them of their childhood but what about their daughters?

Retro branding has become quite popular before and after the turn of the century and researchers recognized this (Brown, 2001). Most researchers base their assumptions and empirical accounts of retro brand consumption on feelings of nostalgia (Holbrook 1993; Holbrook and Schindler, 1989; 2003; Brown, Kozinets and Sherry, 2003). Some studies have related nostalgia to age and developmental changes that occur at a particular age. Davis (1979) was probably first to state that nostalgic feelings typically relate to times of adolescence and early adulthood in Western societies. Holbrook and Schindler (1989) and Schumann and Scott (1989) concordantly concluded from their studies that memories are structured by age whereby preferences typically peaked for things that were popular when individuals are in their early 20s. In stressing the role of experiences associated with objects that were common when one was younger, Holbrook and Schindler (1991) primarily provide explanations for the baby boom generation who have grown old enough to have something to be nostalgic about. However, the question why their children or young consumers in general favor retro brands over others is yet to be studied. We define young adults as children of the baby boomer generation of Generation Y, who are between 20 and 30 years of age, the age group that Holbrook and Schindler (1991) have studied, and exactly the formative period (Erikson, 1968) where first important independent life-changing choices are made.

As consumers of a younger age cohort have no experience with the original counterpart of a retro brand, nostalgia as an explanation for retro brand consumption seems counterintuitive. Yet, young consumers might be nostalgia prone, have childhood memories or derivative experiences stemming from their older relatives' stories and narratives. Furthermore, Davis (1979) contended that discontinuities in life, which are very common at the respective age, influence individuals' sense for continuity and the past.

In this article we try to go beyond obvious explanations of nostalgia and derivative experiences. We aim to research and theorize about the deeper meaning of retro brands for young consumers who had no consumption experience with the original brands. To this end we review the literature on retro branding and nostalgia. We introduce additional explanations for retro brand consumption and young consumers' identity development as a search field for explanation, and provide empirical insights into young consumers' narratives about their retro brands. In the discussion section we carve out the meaning of retro brands for young consumers' coping strategies with tensions in their identity search.

Retro Brands and Nostalgia

Brown et al. (2003) defined Retro Branding as “the revival or relaunch of a product or service brand from a prior historical period, which is usually but not always updated to contemporary standards of performance, functioning, or taste” (Brown et al. 2003, 20). Retro brands combine designs from a prior period with innovative functionality thus creating a harmonious offer that unites the contemporary with the past. Usually marketers emphasize the nostalgic elements of retro brands, which are valuable sources of meaning for consumers. Retro brands include various forms of relation to the past, ranging from exact reproductions of former brands (e.g.; Converse sneakers) to so called ‘nostalgic’ or ‘vintage brands’ that use designs from past times to technologically upgraded products with nostalgic designs (e.g.: the PT Cruiser and the VW New Beetle).

Particularly for older consumers, special possessions serve as materializations of memory and evoke a powerful sense of the past (Belk, 1991). Holbrook and Schindler (1989, 1994, 1996, 2003) intensely researched nostalgia and nostalgia proneness in various consumption contexts and related it to particular age cohorts. The authors define nostalgia as “A preference […] towards experiences associated with objects […] that were more common […] when one was younger…” (Holbrook and Schindler, 1991, 330). Via a process called bonding, a consumer’s history of consumption of particular brands during a critical period of preference formation can create a lifelong preference for those brands. Holbrook and Schindler (2003) were particularly interested in the baby boom generation and how they collectively memorize and celebrate their common history when they were in their early 20s (Holbrook and Schindler, 1989, 1993, 1994, 1996). Holbrook and Schindler’s view of nostalgia is closely related to what Davis (1979) and Stern (1992) have described as ‘personal nostalgia’, a nostalgic feeling towards object-related experiences that have somehow been lost.

Relating these observations to young consumers in their early 20s, we can state that they are currently forming their preferences and nostalgic bonds with particular objects, rather than being nostalgic for preferred brands of their youth. However, Holbrook and Schindler (1993) found that some individuals are more nostalgia prone than others, where nostalgia proneness is independent from age-determined preferences. Furthermore, young consumers might refer to their childhood memories (Belk et al. 2003; Brown-La Tour, La Tour and Zinkhan, 2007) with brands that are preferred due to a sheer familiarity effect (Chaplin and Roedder John, 2005).

A second common facet of nostalgia refers to the collective memory of historical periods and styles that are commonly described as ‘communal nostalgia’ (Davis, 1979). Communal nostalgia occurs at the societal level and is often related to social turmoil, great depressions and other discontinuing moments in history. Stern (1992) has diagnosed a fin de siècle effect, which describes the tendency to retrospect as the turn of the century comes close. Communal or ‘historical nostalgia’, as depicted by Stern (1992), “expresses the desire to retreat from contemporary life by returning to a time in the past viewed as superior to the present.” (Stern 1992, 13). In view of contemporary postmodern fragmentation, young consumers might well experience their upcoming life as adults as challenging and use retro brand consumption experiences as escape from unwanted societal developments and market hegemony and dive into the myths of past times. Movies and songs from the past are especially suited to serve this kind of temporary escapism from the disenchanting everyday life (Holbrook and Schindler, 1989, 1996).

Beyond Personal and Communal Nostalgia

Turner (1987) provided some additional thoughts on nostalgia. He claims that nostalgia involves a sense of loss and decline, a melancholic vision of the contemporary world based on a perceived crisis in our civilization, a sense of loss of individual freedom and autonomy; and the idea of a loss of simplicity, authenticity and emotional spontaneity in a mass consumption culture. In an attempt to summarize and differentiate Turner’s writings, Kessous and Roux (2008) develop a semiotic square that describes different qualities and triggers of nostalgia, which could be long-lasting or just one significant event, reflecting two dimensions: ‘continuity’ and ‘dis-
continuity’. Based on these dimensions they describe continuity as everyday past childhood memories as opposed to non-continuity which reflects transitional periods of ambiguity and unanchored identity. Discontinuity, on the other hand relates back to unique moments in life whereas non-continuity is related to traditional brand use for ritual occasions.

Brown, Kozinets and Sherry (2003) present yet another explanation for the success of retro brands, which is communal in its approach. Based on the philosophical concepts of allegory (symbolic stories), arcadia (a utopian sense of past worlds), aura (brand essence) and antimony (brand paradox), the authors found that retro brands allow referring to a particular past time and its ethos. The retro brand concretizes important symbolic elements of the past. Consumers, therefore, use retro brands to return to an imagined era of moral certainty. Retro brand consumers also emphasize the utopian and moral character of its fan communities. Retro brands which still exist as a brand story; that have a vital essence; are able to mobilize a utopian vision for a consumer cohort; and positively address opposing desires, are likely to constitute strong sources for consumer identity search.

As young consumers’ lives are strongly determined by a search for identity and a period of conscious reflections on issues related to one’s identity (Adamson, Hartman and Lyxell, 1999), identity formation in this critical period might provide another explanation for young consumers’ liking of retro brands. Theories of understanding the self can be organized around two major themes: the self as a subject/object and the self in relation to others (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). These major themes roughly reflect theories of individual and social identity, or the ‘I’ and the ‘me’ as depicted in current consumer behavior literature (Mittal, 2006), and how those identities are going together (Kroger, 1989). Erikson (1968) proclaimed the view that identity formation is a reciprocal process between the psychological interior of the individual and her/his socio-cultural environment. Especially in late adolescence and early adulthood, individuals consciously reflect on themselves as subjects and in relation to others. This identity formation process has many facets, one of them being related to existential questions and ideology. Adamson and Lyxell (1996) found that questions about the future, the meaning of life in general, death, and finally questions about one’s own identity are the most crucial questions in late adolescence. It is our aim to find out how these quintessential questions are related to the meaning of retro brands for young consumers.

**METHOD**

Our empirical work followed a 2-step process. First we identified young consumers who owned and liked retro brands using “theoretical sampling” as described in grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). In our questionnaire we first presented a brief definition and examples for retro brands to ensure a shared understanding of retro brands. Participants then indicated on a 7-point-scale whether they owned retro brands and how much they liked them, in general and their own retro brands, in particular. We used snowball sampling to find appropriate informants, most of whom matched our criteria right away. Informants, who possessed retro brands, showed strong liking, and considered retro brands “very cool” or “cool” qualified for the main study. The final sample consisted of 5 female and 5 male respondents with an age range of 20 to 29 with varying professional backgrounds and a set of more or less well-known retro brands in fashion (Adidas and Puma retro fashion), cars (PT Cruiser, BMW Mini), motorbikes (Aprilia), beverages (Afri-Cola), entertainment and furnishing (wallpapers, lamps, and similar). Most of the respondents owned one to five retro or retro style brands.

In the second step we conducted narrative interviews (Schütze, 1987). We chose this qualitative and inductive approach to reveal meaning of retro brands to young consumers which has not yet been researched systematically. The interviewers used an open interview guideline, including photo-elicitation (Banks, 2007; Heisley und Levy 1991) and projective techniques (e.g. projective questioning, story completion, choice ordering, Haire 1950). A few days before the interview, respondents were equipped with a camera and invited to take pictures of their favorite retro brands. These pictures together with pre-selected pictures by the researchers were used during the interview to stimulate narratives and reveal meaning structures. Respondents were first, asked to talk about their relationship to their most favored retro brand, how they ‘met’, what kind of relationship they had, and how important they were for them. A second set of questions related to the personality of the brand. In a subsequent set of questions, we asked respondents about reactions of their peers to their retro brands, before we turned to the respondents’ opinions towards contemporary societal developments to uncover whether retro consumers are critical and past-oriented in that respect. The interviews took place at respondents’ homes to ensure a natural setting. They lasted between 35 and 90 minutes and produced a total of 7h and 50 min. of information.

We tape-recorded the interviews and transcribed them verbatim. An idiographic analysis documented the individual retro-brand meanings based on personal and social backgrounds (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989; 1994). To integrate and systematize themes and experiences in the individual cases we used “constant comparative analysis” (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Charmaz, 2006) and the analysis software MaxQda.

**FINDINGS**

Our interviews with young consumers reveal that the consumption of retro brands definitely entails feelings and experiences of nostalgia. However, nostalgia is not in the foreground but rather symbolizes a common striving among young adults that is related to their search for what is important in their lives. Retro brand consumption actually reflects young consumers’ coping strategies, which helps balance their developing individuality with social attributes, their aspiration for stability and security with their attempts to flee the ordinary, and their aspiration for social acceptance and belongingness with anti-conformism. In the following, we will carve out these contradictions and discuss how retro brands help young consumers negotiating their developing identities within society.

**Continuity and discontinuity**

Young consumers are also nostalgic. Although some of these feelings reflect derivative experiences with things owned by their grandparents or parents, young consumers do report about personal nostalgia through memories from their childhood, early experiences and habits that they had come to love. Continuity and discontinuity also reflects communal nostalgia, romanticizing the past and old values but not in order to bring back the good old days but rather to set a counterpart to current societal developments that young consumers dislike or protest against. Continuity and discontinuity are not contradictory but rather emanate from the deep desire for stability and security which they experienced in childhood, in times of accelerated pace of life and materialism, which young retro consumers opposed.

**Childhood and Derivative Brand Experience**

Young consumers’ childhood memories are deeply influenced by grandparents, their houses, objects, and stories. These memories are engraved in their brains and provide feelings of warmth,
security and comfort. As young consumers are confronted with more and more opportunities and freedom to construct their own life stories, they are also facing more uncertainties and feelings of insecurity. Retro brands have a history, reflect continuity in times of fast changes and are safely grounded in grandmother’s wealth of experience (Kessous and Roux 2008).

“Yeah, and these old signs, they sure are beautiful […]; over there we have these old Lindt chocolate signs and also Sarotti retro-signs, and this one how grandma cooked, from good old times and so on, […]. Well you know, I mean this feeling of security: grandma is cooking for you and you are the hero in her world and you can wish for anything […]. I somehow that is just cool…”

(Daniel)

Although young consumer never decided to consume these brands themselves, we know from Chaplin and Roedder John (2005) that children at the age 8-9 years connect to brands on a more concrete level related to their familiarity or ownership of the brand. They incorporate brands into their self on an un-reflected, highly affective basis. Young consumers also report about the memories of their parents as if those memories were their own. Through the deep empathic feelings with relatives and their narratives, young consumers seem to incorporate these derivative experiences into their own memory thus enriching brand meaning and its connection to the past.

Meaningful Moments

Even if we consider young consumers’ life times as being quite short, their memories and meaningful moments are by no means less intense. Meaningful moments do not need time to develop into nostalgia; similar to what Kessous and Roux (2008) described as discontinuity, young consumers refer to those unique reference points as a reason to favor retro brands. Our findings corroborate Davis’ (1977) contention that those moments are connected with joyful experiences and mastery of life. Retro brands are favored because they symbolize relationships with good friends, exciting trips and parties, nice little gifts but also when they help standing for one’s own opinion and taste. As young consumers are constantly exposed to social expectations, instances of successful emancipation from others’ opinions mark their lives on their way to self-standing personalities. Retro brands help in this respect by their inherent stability and uncompromising idiosyncrasy.

Re-interpretation of Traditional Objects of Bygone Times

As many contemporary brands have rather short life cycles, retro brands are symbols for continuity, reflecting long-lasting quality and historical heritage. Young consumers who like retro brands use them as stable anchors that reflect tradition and authenticity in a world of many materialistic, fake, and uninspiring objects. Respondents report about the genuine and superior quality and their trustworthy relationship with those brands. Furthermore, many retro brands are used for ritualistic practices among young consumers, which disconnect the brand from the mundane world. By ascribing retro brands the qualities of a genuine, disinterested object purified from persuasive marketing practices, those objects also become cult objects for young consumers. As Belk and Tumbat (2005) reported, cult brands often pass a period of deterioration (satanic myth) and resurrection (myth), which likens the development of many retro brands that gain cult status. Contrary to nostalgia based on non-discontinuity as described by Kessous and Roux (2008), young consumers do not pursue traditional acts and habits like their ancestors but instead interpret those acts differently and use them for community-building rituals among young consumers.

Romanticizing the Past and its Values

Retro brands not just represent tradition and lay the grounds for new interpretations of retro brands as cult objects; they also serve as powerful symbols of collective memory. Retro brands are not only perceived as authentic, they also embody past times and values of those times yet in a quite distorted manner. Even if young consumers are aware of some of their misperceptions, they nevertheless buy into the romantic view of the good old days as described by Davis (1979), in order to contrast it with what they feel is going in the wrong direction in contemporary society. As reported by Stern (1992), those romantic feelings are often based on idealized and imagined views of golden eras in order to transcend one’s discrete existence in time, using retro brands as a sanctuary from contemporary meaninglessness, a transfiguration of the world of everyday consumption.

“A whole lot of families visit farms again, because they want to bring their children back to nature, they somehow want to get back to some place, back to something they consider to be better.”

(Carina)

“Yeah, basically I think I was born too late anyway, ...well it is a certain feeling that you… not quite crave for the past, which sounds quite up the pole, because you were not even born then … but you imagine that everything used to be a little more romantic then and they had only good music and fancy cars and that it would just be great to have it this way again. Well sure you don’t want to have back everything, that’s why you have a computer in your room. But at the same time, maybe by creating your own look, you want to get a little bit of that feeling.”

(Emily)

Similar to Brown, Kozinets and Sherry’s (2003) findings, consumers use traditional qualities of retro brands as reference to a past ethos thereby rebelling against contemporary developments. In absence of an own life history, this non-continuity tendency may relate to the current transitional period young consumers are living through, and their respective search for identity.

Individual and social identity

Identity formation processes are full of troubles, uncertainties, but also successes and empowering moments. Our findings show that retro brands help overcome ambiguities between the defined inner self and the social roles that young consumers are beginning to take over (Mittal, 2006). Retro brands seem to work particularly well in expressing specific personality characteristics and the social self-concept (Sirgy, 1982), as they are considered as authentic, credible and expressive. Retro brands ease the task of finding one’s own style as they remain stable, timeless, stay always true to themselves and, therefore, easy to hold on.

Personal Values and the Art of Life

Late adolescence and early adulthood is the time for defining what young consumers want to achieve in life and how they want to live their lives. Early adulthood is a formative period as young adults usually make decisive decisions for their lives and form their attitudes and value systems. Respondents report about the art of living in a particular past period and relate to that in their
descriptions of their attitude towards life and how they want to be seen. Retro brands help communicate these values and also convey a particular aesthetic component.

“I am not a fan of all retro-products, but as it is, I hope that values from former times can be put across. I like most the music of the 6ties and 70ties, and I am super fond of bell-bottoms [...]; they also evoke former times and maybe other priorities that one can identify with, at least I can; and maybe you can also get that across.”

(Finn)

As demonstrated above, retro brands not only help depicting a person’s attitudes and values; they also address and emphasize the differences between the contemporary social value system and that of a past era. Therefore, using retro brands is also a means of criticizing contemporary social values and thus self-definition (Mittal, 2006). Consuming retro brands is also expressive in that they reflect a consumer’s particular way of life. According to the respondents they carry the aura of the respective decade that young consumers ascribe to the retro brand. Although some attributions are not accurate, young consumers favor those brands for the meaning ascribed to the respective time period.

Emphasizing Individuality and Personality

Particularly in times of identity formation and definition, young consumers are keen to act in a congruent manner in order to achieve a positive self-worth and approach their ideal self (Sirgy, 1982). An even stronger motivation to use retro brands for self definition is that they enable to differentiate from the masses. Young retro brand consumers put particular emphasis on the differentiating elements of their favorite brands; the fact that young consumers are usually early adopters of new fashion trends helps retro brand consumers sharpening the difference between themselves as retro style consumers and others, who buy into the persuasive tactics of the fashion industry.

“[……] I am simply a person, who …. I mean I don’t like it if … if everything is more or less the same,… if I cannot stand out with my belongings; not in the sense of standing above it, rather more to personify, to add a bit of character, that I can make a statement. I mean this car, according to my personal opinion, stands for more than a Polo [Volkswagen] and I simply enjoy that it is timeless.”

(Anna)

Paradoxically, and antithetical to typical youth brands, Anna emphasizes the stability and timelessness of her car that supports her need for individuality. Other respondents are creatively mixing and matching retro and more contemporary styles in an attempt to emphasize their creativity and uniqueness. Retro brands are often ascribed stronger personality characteristics than other brands. The historical aura of retro brands adds to this personality and enables young consumers to express a strong personality and to live in between times, a strategy to escape fragmentation and alleviate the boredom of contemporary life.

Contrasting the “I” and the “Me”

Young retro consumers like to contrast what they consider their individual personality with their social roles. Individuals steadily define themselves according to their own self-definition and their social roles, which often creates tensions (Mittal, 2006). Retro brands help bridge this gap in that they communicate continuity, authenticity, originality, expressivity, and aesthetic design. As indicated above, they help the “I” to differentiate from the masses and at the same time draw a coherent picture of a young consumer’s personality for others to mirror. For retro consumers early adulthood is also the time to emancipate from peer pressure and rather engage in constructing a reflected “I” that is mirrored in a social self-concept “Me”, constructed with the help of favored retro brands.

“Well, I think it heavily depends on age, let’s say, if you are younger, you are completely dependent on your “peer group” … [...] ... you had to go by the group just to be cool, no matter if you yourself considered it cool. But very soon after you enter a stage where you realize, ok, they can tell me lots of sh…, they are not quite that awesome, now I make my own style, and then you start…. then I started to consider what do I want.”

(Daniel)

Mittal (2006) proposes three broad approaches to resolving the tension between self and social identity, namely switching reference group, educating others, or modifying consumption. Usually these strategies are adopting strategies to the social ‘Me’. In the case of retro brands, consumers rather educate the others to bring the core self more to the forefront.

Social acceptance and non-conformism

Retro consumers commonly describe themselves as fashion-conscious and non-conformist, which marks retro brands as a symbol for fashion and style. Anna describes them as balanced and ‘laid back’ personalities, rather than whimsical early adopters of the various hype youth brands. By describing retro consumers as being different, young consumers do not want to portray themselves as conservative; on the contrary. They consider themselves as the real non-conformists as all others go with the masses but by consuming retro brands they act against hegemonic norms of consumption. As depicted above, retro brands shall help them adjusting the social self-concept to the reflected self identity. Yet social acceptance is still crucial. Without being accepted at some point, a non-conformist strategy would not work. Retro brand consumption is not to be thought of as resistive consumer behavior but rather as a successful attempt to resist conformity of fashion trends and taste.

Non-Conformism

Non-conformity through retro brand consumption has many facets. Non-conformity is demonstrated best by fashion and other conspicuous objects of consumption. Some young consumers report that they are bored by particular social norms in social arenas, such as professional life, and similar social situations. They simply like being different, a little provocative, and introduce a more casual look. Others emphasize the slightly anti-commercial meaning that comes with retro consumption as retro is ‘recycled’ design which is longer lasting. Julian expresses this unconventional attitude by drawing a clear distinction among ‘retros’ and ‘fashion victims’ thus also strongly relating to his peer group and a certain communal spirit of like-minded consumers in search of autonomy.

“[……] with some products I sure have the feeling that you are sick of it after putting it on twice; you see it another ten times in the subway and then you are finally done with it; there is nothing individual left in it. This also happens to my friends, they are also rather relaxed people who do not bow to clichés, there is like no Polo-shirt-carrier with collars up or like the absolute “Mega-Fashion-Victim”, well I’d
say just normal people and not–even if it might sound a bit exaggerated–total victims of consumerism.”
(Julian)

Non-conformism is also strongly connected to the mix and match style of retro brand consumers. Mixing and matching is actually a strategy to get the best out of both in that young consumers avoid being trendy and mainstream but aspire to be authentic, bring the ‘old charm’ of retro brands to the foreground.

Social Acceptance and Coolness

The ‘old charm’ of retro brands often creates retro brand cults. The dramatic change of society in Germany, for instance, has brought forward a strong wave of ‘Ostalgie’, a nostalgic cult related to the bygone times of Eastern Germany (Eigler, 2004). Even if retro brands do not achieve cult status, they have the ingredients of being cool. As coolness is defined by the in-group, coolness cannot be created but is rather defined by young consumers. In the case of retro brands, our respondents emphasized that retro brands are cool but they would lose this attribute if they go mainstream. Thus, what is considered as cool in a younger age cohort that extensively consumes trendy retro brands is un-cool and unacceptable for young adults.

“Especially those “Emos”, all of them carrying Chucks, they are all Chucks-zealot; or like these “tapered pants-zealots” and the like. I mean there are some bands or famous idols, who create certain styles that are readily adopted by Teenies with maybe lower self esteem and they think that is really cool. They jump on the bandwagon and the industry is right there to seduce them ‘hey, give us your pocket money’ […]”
(Daniel)

Young consumers’ coolness is inextricably interwoven with their striving for independence. This is exactly what unites them with other members of their age cohort. Gaining social acceptance means being non-conform, fighting mainstream. Hence, these findings point to the importance to discriminate among groups with different definitions of ‘coolness’ as being cool means belonging to a particular social group. This way, retro brands allow young consumers to overcome the tension between non-conformity and social acceptance.

DISCUSSION

Our research contributes to theory in many ways. First and most important, our findings show that retro brands do have deep meaning for young consumers. They provide meaning from a time perspective in that they embody history, memory, nostalgia, and timelessness. Although young consumers often do not know the original counterparts of their favorite retro brands, they borrow from the collective memory, or gain derivative experience from parents’ and grandparents’ consumption habits. Contrary to their parents, young consumers experience retro brands in childhood rather than in their 20s, which is by no means less impactful on their emotional bonding with retro brands. The close-knit bonds with their families and the brands young consumers associate with family life strongly connect young consumers to original brands that later become their favorite retro brands. In connecting them with the ‘safe haven’ of family life they provide continuity in young consumers’ lives. At the same time, the discontinuities young consumers are facing in their lives, their striving for autonomy, their idealism that clashes with in-authenticities in contemporary political and market systems contributes to their choice of retro brands.

Hence, retro brands, on the other hand, are not just nostalgic objects for young consumers. They are consumed so as to define young consumers’ self-concept at the crossroads of individual and social identity. Retro brands are identity-building in that they provide strong historical value systems to, at least partly, identify with. They have a high differentiating potential in that they are not marketed to the masses and embody authenticity and originality. Therefore, retro brands enable young consumers to clearly communicate their identity for others to mirror. By defining retro brands as cool within the peer group, retro brands help coping with the ambiguity between ‘the self’ and ‘the other’ (Adamson, Hartman and Lyxell, 1999).

In a similar vein, retro brands are used to negotiate the distance-proximity tension in young consumers’ lives (Adamson, Hartman and Lyxell, 1999). Young consumers’ identity seeking processes are strongly related to processes of autonomy-seeking, which means distancing from particular values and societal developments, and social acceptance, which is necessary for any individual’s psychological well-being. Combining new and old is a strong antidote to contemporary fashion dictates, used by young consumers to demonstrate autonomy. By successfully demonstrating autonomy, they fight established consumption patterns and gain acceptance among their peers as non-conformist consumption heroes.

Figure 1 summarizes how retro brands are consumed as expressive objects used for coping with tensions that are related to young consumers’ life statuses.

Figure 1: Retro Brands as Coping Strategy

Particularly in times of market turbulences and political promises of “change”, retro brands constitute materializations of idealized forms of consumption for a particular young age cohort. Retro brands are pastiche forms of authentic, historical, value-laden objects that enchant contemporary technologically engineered and marketed objects. Retro brands are no less engineered and marketed than any other brand but they successfully serve young consumers’ aspiration for continuity and stability in an age-related period of discontinuities and insecurity but also freedom to choose. At the same time and similarly paradox as Benjamin’s antinomy (Brown, Kozinets and Sherry, 2003), retro brands are subject to the same fashion cycles as other fashion brands. They are perceived as highly individual and fashionable yet–contrary to new fashion brands—with retro brands individualized styles are created by young consumers, not just bought. It is the mix and match quality, the malleable historical context of retro brands that serves as a means of creating unique, fashionable artwork-like styles among young consumers.
REFERENCES


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