All the Fun of the Fan: Consuming Burlesque in an Era of Retromania

Marie-Cécile Cervellon, EDHEC Business School, France
Stephen Brown, University of Ulster, UK

Retro is often associated with a cozy, cupcaked, rose-tinted worldview. Some consumers, however, resist the comforts of capitalist commodification through retro-sexual activities. This paper studies one such community of fun-loving, fan-wielding Burlesque dancers in France, revealing their retrospective lifestyles and resistant pursuits.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1017068/volumes/v42/NA-42

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
ABSTRACT
Retro is often associated with a cosy, cupcake, rose-tinted worldview. Some consumers, however, resist the comforts of capitalist commodification through retro-sexual activities. This paper studies one such community of fun-loving, fan-wielding Burlesque dancers in France, revealing their retrospective lifestyles and resistant pursuits.

The most important element in burlesque is fun. If you’re having fun, the audience will feel it.
—Jo Weldon (2010: 18)

INTRODUCTION
According to Cova and Cova (2014), retromarketing is one of only four strands of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) that have made the leap from academic contemplation to management practice. This may or may not be fair comment, but what is incontestable is that we live in a retroactive age, where throwback branding is burgeoning and newstalgia is all around (Kozinets 2013). Although there is considerable disagreement on the causes of today’s yester-yearning – some attribute it to the ageing of Baby Boomers, others to the overpowering pace of technological change, yet others to consumer cocooning in an increasingly threatening world – most commentators concur that contemporary consumption is being “inundated with images of the past” (Wilson 2005, p.161).

Within marketing and consumer research, retro has had a fairly easy ride (Cova and Cova 2014). It is viewed in a positive light. Not only is it recommended as a viable branding strategy for hard-pressed marketing managers (Brown, Kozinets and Sherry, 2003), but the nostalgic feelings retro evokes are considered healthful, nothing less than rose-tinted salves that transform occasionally unpleasant memories into uniformly enjoyable reveries (Zhou, et al. 2012). The past is a palliative (Lindstrom 2011). It makes the present palatable. Whose heart doesn’t lift a little when the cute, cuddly, cartoonish, child-like VW Bug cruises by? Who isn’t looking forward to J.J. Abrams’ reboot of Star Wars with most of the original cast in place?

Reading the above, it is easy to infer that retro is a soft option, the lazy response of unimaginative brand managers who rummage in their archives for languishing logos and molding brand mascots (Walker 2008). It is cheap, it is cheesy, it is egregious, it is exploitative (Harris 2000). It is reactionary, basically (Reynolds 2011). Retro, however, can also be a site of resistance, a sequestered space where anti-commercial activities are enacted and a cheeky, counter-capitalist ethos is articulated. Drawing upon a detailed, three-year ethnographic study of Burlesque dancers, we show that, far from being dewy-eyed yester-yearnerers, the Burlesque dancing community regards their retro-inflected activities to be a carnivalesque challenge to commodification and consumerism. Our paper commences with an overview of latter-day retromania and its marketing manifestations, continues with a stripped-down account of the Burlesque art-form and our data gathering activities, culminates in a compact results section, which reveals the retro and resistant components of dancers’ fun-filled, fan-handling pursuits, and concludes with a few words on the retro-equals-reactorionary stereotype.

RETRO HO!
Way back in the dim and distant days of the mid 1990s, the provocative French philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1994) proclaimed that history had been thrown into reverse. Sensing the then-imminent millennium, when the capitalist west’s “progress” would be weighed in the balance and found wanting, he announced that an age of reflection, of reminiscence, of retrospection was upon us. The overall aim of these collective recollective activities, he further averred, was to settle the score and wipe the slate clean before starting from scratch in the 21st century.

Twenty years on from Baudrillard’s undeniably brilliant hindsight, the philosopher himself is dead and gone, but the retrospective epoch he anticipated is still going strong. Nostalgia is everywhere. Yestermania is rampant. The past is more present than ever in popular culture. Whether it be blockbuster movies (Noah, Dawn of the Planet of the Apes, X-Men: Days of Future Past), bestselling novels (Bring Up The Bodies, Life After Life, Stoner), Broadway musicals (Wicked, Jersey Boys, Rock of Ages), must-see TV (Mad Men, Downton Abbey, Dallas, alas) or indeed the ongoing financial scandals, with their unsettling echoes of the 1930s, we live at a time when the shock of the new has given way to the schlock of the old.

So retromaniacal are consumers nowadays, according to popular culture commentator Simon Reynolds (2011), the first ten years of the 21st century should not have been called the “noughties”, as they often were, but nothing less than the “Re-” decade. The 2000s, he rants in an outraged 500-page tirade, were dominated by the re-prefix: revivals, reissues, remakes, re-enactments, re-launches, reformations, restorations, recapitulations and non-stop retrospection, not least in the music industry and its analogous affiliates like fashion and dance.

Numerous scholars, needless to say, have tried to make sense of these developments, both with regard to the nostalgia boom in general and retro-branding in particular. Davis (1979), for instance, draws a distinction between private nostalgia and collective nostalgia; Boyd (2001) contrasts restorative nostalgia with reflective nostalgia; Jameson (1991) separates traditional nostalgia and neo-nostalgia; Brown et al. (2003) maintain that nostalgia brands are not the same as retro brands; Maclaran (2003), de Groot (2008) and dozens of others have plumbed the depths of this retrospective impulse, using a range of qualitative and quantitative methods. For the founding father of this field, though, the most remarkable feature of the 21st century’s preoccupation with the past is “Postmodern Ironic Nostalgia”, which minces the past and mocks the present simultaneously (Lowenthal 2014). Instead of venerating bygone times, PIN makes fun of them and revels in contemporary anachronisms. Thus The Onion satirically declares that, such is the demand for revivals, America is not only running out of heritage but considering rationing what remains in order to preserve stocks of times past for future consumption!

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BURLESQUE
Burlesque, in the words of the Oxford Reference Dictionary, is “a variety show, often incorporating striptease.” This definition, however, hardly does justice to a venerable and valuable cultural form. Burlesque is a multi-disciplinary performance art that, throughout history, has built on different theatrical traditions includ-
METHODS AND FINDINGS

As summarized in Table 1, our three-year ethnographic study of the French burlesque community evolved through three main phases. It began with non-participant-observation of the community, originating from the lead author’s vintage collecting interests. A second phase involved deeper immersion in the subculture, when the lead researcher joined two burlesque associations, Neo Retro and Tassel Tease, and participated in their activities. The third phase necessitated full involvement in the community, though regular attendance at strip-tease classes – once per week for a year – and performing on stage in a group show, Follie Follies (June 30th, 2012, Mas des Escarvaticais, France). This not only offered a unique opportunity to experience the emotions created by the gaze of spectators, but it helped minimize researcher dominance and “otherness” (Madriz 2000) and facilitated the co-creation of meaning. Interviews were also conducted with burlesque art director, performer and historian Lady Flo, famous burlesque performer Cherry Lyly Darling, cabaret performer and professor La Violeta, as well as the make-up and hair-stylist Krystie Red Sugar. In addition, several trainees were interviewed (Lady Strawberry, Lady Pee, Bambi Freckles, Barbie I Doll, etc.), as were spectators at burlesque events and burlesque/vintage store managers. Field notes were taken, furthermore, as were pictures and videos during preparation for the show. In parallel, a second researcher was observing the community as an outsider. He related the analysis to existing theoretical frameworks. He also ensured that the first researcher, by dint of being deeply involved in the community, would not become blinkered by the burlesque community’s beliefs and mores (Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Themes started to emerge early during the second phase of the research and were formalized thereafter, as follows:

Burlesque’s Retro Aesthetic

The burlesque community is rich and varied but its members are as one in their can-do mentality. They consider femininity and beauty to be a production. As Dita von Teese (2006), stresses, wom-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Overview of Methodology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher status and involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher tasks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
en produce their look through exaggerated make-up and feminine attire. Not all women are born beautiful yet every woman can become beautiful with appropriate work involving cosmetics and costumes. In today’s world of “fake naturality,” where women are encouraged to use artificial means to look natural and flawless – French manicure, nude make-up, light cosmetic treatments like Botox – burlesque encourages an artificially constructed appearance that harks back to a golden age of Hollywood glamour. Burlesque women take inspiration from icons like Marilyn Monroe and Mae West, who represent the retro-feminine ideal of constructed voluptuousness. Dita von Teese’s transformation from an ordinary blond girl with freckles to a glamorous, raven-haired reincarnation of pin-ups of yore illustrates both the pull of the past and its production in the present.

This neo-nostalgic outlook is likewise expressed in the costumes and accoutrements of burlesque members. Footwear and hosiery are central to the community’s sense of self (Belk 2003), stockings, garters and stilettos especially. Lipstick too is integral to burlesque’s retro aesthetic. In many ways, indeed, it is the signature emblem of the subculture. Despite individual differences, all burlesque looks combine bright red lips with pale powdered skin, often framed by appropriately old-fashioned hairstyles, such as the classic Victory Roll of post-war pin-ups (Weldon 2010). The vocabulary of body movement is no less nostalgic (e.g. bump ‘n’ grind), as are key components of stage costumes (fans, fishnets, pasties, nippies, etc.) as are grooming rituals (elaborate application of fresh lipstick) as are annual ceremonies (such as Tease-O-Rama) as are the pseudonyms adopted by burlesque dancers, which often evoke the fun-filled spirit of childhood replete with sweet treats and candy kisses (Sugar da Moore, Bambi Freckles, Lady Strawberry, Barbie I Doll, Mlle. Sweet Candy, Sucre d’Orge).

Another, rather more transgressive, throwback is the tattoo. Almost every woman encountered or interviewed had a tattoo. Their tattoos, however, tend to be the antithesis of those traditionally associated with male virility. Not only are they retro in style and imagery, but frequently depict flowers, fruits and birds as symbols of femininity and freedom. In France, lilies are an especially popular motif, a clear reference to the 15th and 16th centuries when prostitutes associated with male virility. Not only are they retro in style and imagery, but frequently depict flowers, fruits and birds as symbols of femininity and freedom. In France, lilies are an especially popular motif, a clear reference to the 15th and 16th centuries when prostitutes

Burlesque women, by and large, exit mass market consumption through nostalgic acquisitions and the celebration of authenticity (Beverland and Farrelly 2010): that is, genuine products popular in prior historical periods (Cervellon, Carey, and Harms 2012). In the burlesque world, which is regarded by some as superficial and fabricated, the genuine has special status. Community members are educated to choose vintage pieces, or make them by themselves when they are not available. They collect passionately but, unlike the typical collector, they collect in order to use. Products evocative of the “good old days” – including furniture, clothes and accessories – are used every day rather than placed on a pedestal. Women shop for vintage in specialized markets, are loyal to specialized stores, and import vintage pieces from the US through specialized websites. They replicate the look of iconic historical epochs (the 20’s, the 50’s, etc.) down to the finest detail in clothing, make-up and hair-styles.

Another manifestation of yester-yearning is found in the community’s “home-made” or “Do-It-Yourself” ethic. Accessories and attire that cannot be purchased or borrowed from the relevant period of history are handmade, based on original drawings. Real vintage lingerie pieces are very rare because people are reluctant to purchase second-hand underwear. For this reason, lingerie pieces tend to be sown by hand from classic patterns. Other important accessories worn in private are the pasties or nippies which hide the nipples. Again, these items are home-made. Do-it-Yourself approaches also apply to cosmetics, where mixing powders into bespoke shades is commonplace. Burlesque is the DIY of beauty and fashion. Women do their costumes themselves. Traditional crafts such as knitting and weaving are reborn. As Ferreday (2007, p.57) notes “Whereas mainstream femininity is positioned as empty consumption, and as a source of anxiety, burlesque is aligned with recycling, thrift shopping, and the revival of traditional crafts.”

Burlesque’s Resistant Attitude

Ferreday (2007) further notes how burlesque emerged as a subculture that promotes the construction of multiple and elaborate feminine identities. Some performers “show the girl”, by placing glamour and girly attitudes at the center of their performances (e.g. Dita von Teese), meantime many other performers “burlesque the girl”, emphasizing the second degree and the comic in their routines (e.g. Dirty Martini). Whatever approach is adopted, it has to be a personal and individual sense of performing femininity.

Throughout this process of “becoming a woman,” burlesque resists the conventional emphasis on understatement (natural make-up, healthy tan, clothes that do not celebrate the body, et al.). It liberates from normative versions of womanhood which consider shameful the overt and excessive use of feminine artifacts. Women committed to a burlesque lifestyle embrace the glamour of Hollywood stars of the 50’s, many of whom refused to exchange their stockings for new-fangled pantyhose. Burlesque women wear stockings and garters every day, as casual outfits, and set great store by bright red lipstick, noted above.

In addition to resisting oppression, burlesque women learn femininity. At the heart of the burlesque ethos, the dominant idea is that femininity is both produced and performed. Classes teach women how to construct their feminine self: sitting on a chair with elegance, walking on heels with allure, seducing with one eyes, moving one’s hands with grace and, ultimately, undressing in a sensual manner. Femininity is always glamorous and elegant, never vulgar or nondescript. In burlesque, it must be emphasized, the “performance of femininity” is not directed at men. The vast majority of audiences at burlesque shows are female (Ferreday 2007). Attendees also tend to be well educated and independent financially. They are in a process of defining femininity (and sexuality) in a very intimate
way, regardless of male-constructed stereotypes. In this process, they subvert society’s insistence on fitting in and adhering to socially-constructed roles. Implicitly, burlesquers condemn an intolerant and masculine society.

The ironic and parodic style of many burlesque performers is equally empowering. Throughout history, humor has been an instrument of resistance by the oppressed over their oppressors (e.g. Lipman 1991). It is a “survival device” (Caliskan 1995), one of the reasons why women use humor in the workplace (Martin 2004) or when engaging in male activities such as riding a motorbike (Martin, Schouten, and McAlexander, 2006). Such actions invert gender inequalities. Alongside humor, history contains many examples of women resisting forms of oppression through nudity. For instance, young Egyptian and Iranian activists post naked photos on their blogs in the name of freedom of expression. Women are willing to undress in thought-provoking ways. The burlesque community is likewise defined by nakedness, through its stress on strip-tease performance. Stripping is an individual act, going beyond one’s sexual boundaries, as much as a collective defiance against a male constructed discourse of deviance (see Ronai and Cross 1998).

For many women, undressing in front of an audience is an exhibitionist act. All informants mention the thrill of going out of the boundaries of their (ordinary) sexuality through exhibiting their bodies. They consider themselves as having an anti-conformist and liberal perspective on sexuality. That said, the strip in burlesque is about sexiness and sexuality. It is not about sex, as such. During a burlesque show, participants never disrobe totally; they strip down to nippies and G-strings. They stress the tease rather than the strip in striptease. The process is more important than the outcome.

The burlesque community’s resistance isn’t total, however. Recent years have seen the co-option of its imagery by the luxury, fashion, beauty and beverage industries. Several haute couture houses have launched vintage inspired collections (Louis Vuitton, Miu-Miu) or recycled vintage materials and designs (YSL, Dior’s revived New Look). Ralph Lauren sells vintage pieces in his London and Paris flagship stores along with his own creations. NARS lipstick names evoke golden age Hollywood movies (Blonde Venus, Shanghai Express) and Benefit cosmetics uses vintage and pin-up imagery on its packaging. Even Chanel embraced burlesque when Karl Lagerfeld featured Dirty Martini, one of the most famous and overweight new burlesque performers, in a photo-shoot at the iconic entrance to the brand’s flagship store on rue Cambon (Sterzemien 2010). Although some purists within the community are offended by the fashion industry’s exploitation of their subversive subculture – or its imagery at least – most of our informants consider this a tribute to the burlesque community’s creativity and artistic accomplishments. They recognize that it provides a vehicle for conveying their ideas to a much wider public and womanhood as a whole:

_The purists do not accept this usage of the burlesque imagery. For instance, they find insulting that women would ape their style (make-up and hair styling) and that brands would be marketed retro. I consider that we cannot live in isolation. I find positive that our ideas and creations would be put forward and inspire the marketplace (Krystie Red Sugar; 45, Hair and Make Up Artist)_

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Although consumer research studies devoted to the specifics of retro are comparatively few in number, they reveal that the nostalgia-steeped products, services and promotional activities of marketing practitioners often trigger resistance from interested parties (Brown et al. 2003). The new Beetle, for instance, was rejected out of hand by many Love Bug lovers of old. The revived Star Wars franchise was castigated by movie enthusiasts who found it hard to see past the glory days of Carrie Fisher, Mark Hamill and Harrison Ford. The resisters are themselves resisted, admittedly, but just as empirical studies of nostalgia show that the bittersweet emotion is sweet for some yet bitter for others, so too retro is revered to the point of rejoicing and reviled to the point of resistance. Our ethnographic study of the Burlesque community reveals that retro can be a form of resistance in itself. By retreating into an idealized past, like the replica Mountain Men of Colorado (Belk and Costa 1998) or the stressed-out Microserfs at Burning Man (Kozinets 2002) or the old-Americana-minded riders of vintage Harley-Davidsons (Schouten and McAlexander 1995), many consumers resist and reject all that is trite and tawdry about today. Retro, in sum, isn’t always a return to the hidebound past, it’s also a rejection of the reactionary and a potentially revolutionary dance step into a future of postmodern ironic nostalgia.

**REFERENCES**


Jameson, Fredric (1991), _Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism_, London: Verso.


