The Production and Consumption of Retro Brands Beyond Meaning Revival

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ABSTRACT

While past research articulates retro branding predominantly as brand meaning revival, our findings from a historical analysis of the production and consumption of retro brands in Germany reveal how these commercialized representations of the past operate also via brand meaning inversion (retroversion) and brand meaning invention (retrovention).
INTRODUCTION AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Previous consumer research highlights the ideological functions served by commercialized representations of the past, how consumers and producers frequently expropriate them for competitive or ideological gains, and the moral conflicts that are variously negotiated through them (e.g., Brunk, Giesler, and Hartmann 2018; Brown, Hirschman, and Maclaran 2000; Brown, McDonagh, and Shultz 2013; Luedicke, Thompson, and Giesler 2010; Penaloza 2000; Press and Arnould 2011; Thompson and Tian 2008). One vital market resource for the negotiation of commercialized representations of the past is given by retro brands, or “relaunched historical brands with updated features” (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003).

However, while recent research highlights the importance of politicized memory-making that undergird the negotiation of commercialized representations of a past (Brunk et al. 2018), existing research on retrobranding still frames this process purely in terms of revival of past meaning (Brown et al. 2003; Cattaneo and Guerini 2012). Consequently, important cultural, historical, political, and ideological dimensions are currently not sufficiently considered in Western retro-branding processes.

In this article, we explore the production and consumption of retro brands, which we call brand retrofication, as a cultural branding practice orchestrated by consumers, commercial actors, and other important cultural actors. When we analyzed retro brands in Germany over time, we found evidence for Brown et al.’s (2003) brand meaning revival. However, our longitudinal approach with emphasis on popular memory dynamics and conflicts also revealed that retro brands are much more politicized than previously acknowledged. Once the political dimension is considered, it becomes evident that retrofication can go beyond reviving prior brand meanings (i.e. retrorevival). Instead, it is a more complex cultural process, whereby commercialized representations of the past also are negotiated and enacted through retroversion (retro brand meaning inversion) and retrovention (retro brand meaning invention).

To conceptualize these types of retrofication strategies alongside Brown et al.’s (2003) meaning revival operating via ‘aura’, ‘allegory’, ‘arcadia’, and ‘antinomy’, we bring to bear a cultural branding perspective (Holt 2002; 2004; 2005) on the negotiation of commercialized representations of a past via retro brands. Consequently, we suggest that retrofication operates through allegorizing, articulating, assembling, and antinomizing. Allegorizing refers to reconstructing the past by rendering a brand as a locus of virtuous feelings and traditions that can serve as a powerful anodyne for the cultural anxieties facing consumers who are ambivalent about their position in the present. Articulating denotes the enunciation of compelling historical identity dramas and narratives presented to enact and verify the narrative claim of revitalized utopian past (community). The brand articulates a specific ideological memory conflict and gains meaning only through politicized popular memory-countermemory dynamics. Assembling describes how brand owners assemble and animate their brands and its core values in such a way as to offer a (unique) aura instrumental to resolving a moral contradiction highlighted by a given popular memory tension. Through assembling, a brand can act as an authentic identity salve by offering an indexical and/or iconic link to an (imagined) past. Antinomizing entails the systematic contradiction of the proposed past to old products’ concrete material qualities and attributes such as form, function, or flavor by negotiating how a brand builds its enchanting paradox that manifests at consumption-level.
METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Analytical approach. Our research approach was two-fold. Following calls for the increasing need to historicize (Brown, Hirschman, and Maclaran 2001) and to attend to the context of context (Askegaard and Linnet 2011), our first analytical step zooms out from our research phenomenon to contextualize the nature of retro brand emergence. Here we take advantage of the power of unique contexts to generate theoretical insights (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Arnould, Price, and Moiso 2006) and contextualize retro brand emergence in East Germany against the backdrop of the socio-historic and cultural changes surrounding the German reunification. In our second analytical step we then zoom into our research phenomenon to analyze two cases of negotiating a commercialized representation of a past via retro brands previously left untouched (Brown et al. 2003). In doing so, our approach leverages macro, micro and individual levels of observations to expose the production and consumption of retro brands beyond meaning revival, whereby contributing to existing literatures on retro branding.

Data collection. We explore the meaning making process central to retrofication in its empirical context and collected a combination of qualitative empirical material: (1) historical data including statistics, documentaries and other culturally relevant material from mass media; (2) 15 one-on-one interviews with consumers; (3) visits to and observations in retailscapes; (4) netnography including consumer and interactive brand sites (Brown et al. 2003; Kozinets 2002; 2010).

Data analysis. To analyze our data, we opted for a hermeneutic approach (Thompson 1997), including coding and recoding, constant comparison, and iterative inter-researcher discussions. Coding and analysis became increasingly specific as the analysis progressed. We started with a general focus on the meaning making processes surrounding retro brands in East Germany against the backdrop of our socio-historic context data. This was followed by comparing and contrasting these emerging processes with those identified by Brown et. al (2003).

HISTORICIZING RETRO BRAND EMERGENCE IN EAST GERMANY

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 finally opened the gates to Western prosperity and a consumer society of material wellbeing that had always served as a contrasting point of comparison to the East (Landsman 2005; Merkel 2006). Continuous exposure to—although forbidden—West German TV and advertising as well as social contacts with relatives and their care packages sent from the West established a perception of Western brands as echt (the real thing) and East German products as ersatz (inferior surrogate) (Bach 2002; Veenis 1999). Because of their poor quality and inferiority, frequently reaffirmed by West German market research and corporate discourse, East German products were ridiculed as symbols of antiquated socialist economies, inefficiency, and backwardness (Berdahl 1999; Boyer 2001; Merkel 2006). The overall aesthetics, packaging, and product design was highly simplistic and reflected the GDR’s struggle with production. Due to a lack of access to Western currency and the subsequent challenges to import the necessary raw materials and resources for production, essential product ingredients had to be replaced with low-grade substitutes, impairing product quality and taste. For example, chocolates were filled with a mixture of peas, sugar and aroma; candied lemon peel was replaced by green tomato; and the national car Trabant was manufactured out of recycled cotton waste (Der Spiegel 1991).

While in the West the range of shiny and attractive brands promising a happy life in prosperity was continuously increasing, East German consumers became progressively
frustrated with their own reality of empty shelves and subordinate brands and products. Thus, when the German reunification finally facilitated the long-desired access to Western brands, instantly discarding the ersatz for the echt was the norm for East Germans. In the years that followed, East Germans engaged in historically unparalleled hyper-consumption of Western brands. Not only did East Germans no longer purchase East German products, they moreover purged their houses and exchanged entire interiors to rid themselves of any reminders of their previous supposedly primitive life (Berdahl 1999; Merkel 2006; Veenis 1999).

Given their historically rooted aura of inferiority and related consumer rejection of anything East German, East German products were destined for the necropolis and entirely disappeared from the retail landscape. Yet, contrary to conventional retro-branding wisdom (Brown et al. 2003), which implies that reviving such negative brand meanings is destined for failure, we witness the emergence of previously disliked and discarded East German retro brands not as revivals, but as inversions of their former selves (retroversion) and newly invented ‘past’ East German brands that never existed as brands back then (retrovention). How do these types of retrofication work and why?

**RETOFICATION ANALYSIS**

Our retrofication analysis reveals how commercialized representations of the past are negotiated and enacted through retroversion and retrovention using two illustrative cases (see table 1).

*Retroversion and the relaunch of the ‘Simson Schwalbe’*. One prominent relaunched historical brand of East German origin that has undergone an inversion of original brand meaning is the recently relaunched moped brand ‘Simson Schwalbe’. While ‘Simson’ began making bicycles in 1896, it became a household name for mopeds made in the GDR. To respond to increasing mobility needs, the GDR regime introduced the moped ‘Schwalbe’ (German for swallow) in 1964 and sold over a million exemplars until its termination in 1986 (VDI 2015). Consumers in the GDR valorized the Schwalbe as an old-fashioned, raw, smelly, loud, unpretentious, simple, aesthetically displeasing, and purely functional, easy-to-repair, inexpensive, and ordinary means of transportation—a prototypical socialist, standardized, and rationalized ersatz mass-product.

In 2016, the Schwalbe was re-launched by GOVECS as an e-scooter, a progressive lifestyle brand located in West-German Munich. While back then in the GDR, even its designers had stark reservations about the aesthetics of the original Schwalbe, the brand caters now to individualist urbanist identity myths and hedonic consumption desires with slogans like: “The Schwalbe makes you smile. Not only because she looks good and makes you look good on her. The cult e-scooter also sweeps you away with its outstanding performance [and is] quiet, clean and sustainable” (myschwalbe.com). Statements like these represent an attempt of inverting the Schwalbe’s original brand meanings as an ordinary and ugly ersatz mass-product, now rendering it as an extraordinary and good-looking individualized identity salve in Germany’s post-reunification capitalist consumer culture. This inversion on the level of brand meaning goes beyond the naturalized updating processes retro brands undergo: Brown et al.’s (2003) old and new Beetle share personality, values, and cultural narrative forming a moral and functional allegory. However, the new Schwalbe is the antitheses of the moral qualities, values, and cultural narrative of the original brand. Through this allegorizing, the Schwalbe and its East German heritage are rendered as a locus of virtuous feelings which serves to resolve identity stigma by inversing West-German stereotypes of the East as backwards, displeasing hinterland (Brunk et al. 2018). Through articulating this popular memory conflict, the new Schwalbe brand romanticizes and proclaims an idealized (national) western consumer culture through inverted brand meanings.
which gain their value only from the context of this conflict. Through assembling these (inverted) core values, the new Schwalbe brand presents an iconic-authentic identity salve rather than an indexical-authentic link to a past. Thus, through antinomizing, producers and consumers render the brand into a systematic contradiction in itself, in moral and functional terms, which becomes an enchanting paradox that can manifest on a consumption level.

Retrovention and the launch of the ‘Ampelmann’. One prominent case of a commercialized representation of the past that is negotiated and enacted through retrovention is the Ampelmann brand. Retrovention refers to the invention of retro brand meanings, whereby a cultural, originally non-commercial and public token of the past then becomes commercialized, marketed and consumed as a ‘born retro’brand: while the Ampelmännchen originally referred to the distinctive little man displayed in the pedestrian traffic lights all across the GDR, it was commercialized and launched as a ‘neo-retro’ (Fort-Rioche and Ackermann 2013) design brand by Markus Heckhausen in the mid 1990s. The inception of the Ampelmann brand was built on critiquing the replacement and devaluation of East German Culture by West German Culture, rendering the Ampelmann a symbol of political resistance, endurance and continuity.

Refashioning the Ampelmännchen from an ordinary and public traffic sign to a cult brand universe including flagship stores, cafés, children traffic safety and regular fashion, tech products (speakers, headphones), food (chocolate, coffee) and other accessories (golf balls, umbrellas, bags, home-décor) extends Brown et al.’s (2003) scope of brand meaning revival and updating. Through allegorizing, the brand draws on larger already existing memory narratives of everyday life in GDR’s cityscapes to form an iconic parable that can soothe present-day cultural anxieties of consumers. Here, by articulating a memory conflict in the moralistic nostalgia frame (Brunk et al. 2018), the Ampelmann brand universe presents a compelling identity drama of saving and savoring a cultural icon as a placeholder for many East German life trajectories to enact and verify the narrative claim of a revitalized utopian past (Duckenfield and Callhoun 1997). When it comes to assembling, brand managers can thus not build on existing brand-level aura, core values, brand essence as suggested by Brown et al. (2003). Rather, assembling in the case of retrovention includes a collective effort by various actors in consumer culture who animate the brand and its core values in the light of a given countermemory to act as an iconic-authentic identity salve. Consequently, in the case of Ampelmann, antinomizing refers predominantly to the systematic contradiction of the brand existing simultaneously as both, a public good (traffic light) and a commercialized representation of a past.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

By using a cultural branding perspective on the emergence of retro brands in East Germany, we demonstrate how the production and consumption of commercialized representations of the past via retro brands can only partly be explained with the revival of brand meaning but includes also the inversion of past brand meanings (retroversion) and invention of retro brand meanings of born retro brands (retrovention). Our development of these two types of consumer brand retrofication by tailoring Brown et al.’s (2003) four As of retro brand qualities into processes of allegorizing, articulating, assembling, and antinomizing has the following implications.

Our work is formulaic about the importance of commemorative culture and its various participants as the larger social setting for the production and consumption of retro brands via retrorevival, retroversion, or retrovention. Commercialized tokens of the past produce and reproduce specific commemorative templates that are joined and enacted by
historians, journalists, celebrities, artists, musicians, entrepreneurs, marketers, and consumers who act as co-creators of a specific past, themselves selectively crafting, consuming, and variously interpreting commercialized representations of the past. The marketplace mythology of commemorative culture postulates a balanced image of the GDR past but does not determine where the truth ends and the revisionism begins. Consequently, retro brands are far more political and collective entities than previously acknowledged and should not only be seen primarily as devices for consumer enchantment as past research suggests but must also be understood as market-mediated ideological resources in popular memory conflicts as well as collective and individual identity dramas.

Moreover, Brown et al. (2003) argue that retro brands reanimate a powerful sense of authenticity. From this perspective, retro brands such as Star Wars sequels or Volkswagen’s “New Beetle” draw on a fundamental brand essence from an earlier epoch that is revitalized by marketers by “piecing it together from pop culture and retro references.” In contrast, we propose that, if a brand’s allegory or quality of resolving a specific moral contradiction is never a given, neither can be its authenticity in doing so (Brown, McDonagh, and Shultz 2013). While this applies also to retrorevival and retroversion, it is particularly pertinent in the case of retrovention where no commercial track record of the brand’s past exists, because it never existed as a brand. Instead, its meanings are entirely culture-based. Commercializing tokens of a culture’s past might ultimately be seen as a consumer-cultural mechanism of the survival of culture (Firat 1995).
Table 1: Summary of illustrative empirical material for **Retroversion** (Simson Schwalbe) and **Retrovention** (Ampelmann) strategies*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustrative Data</th>
<th>Analytical category</th>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;I remember the old Schwalbe well. My grandpa drove one. Every day, rain, snow, no matter what weather, he drove it 20 km to work, sometimes breaking down because the spark plug got soaked or other issues. I remember mostly older people driving them. We (younger people) actually looked at this thing and made fun of it. It just looked so old-fashioned and primitive, like from another time, the shape (leg protection!), the horrible colors, the clunky shape. We all wanted to drive something more sportive and most of us actually got a S51, which in comparison to western mopeds still looked bad but not as bad as the Schwalbe. I remember my best friend was forced to drive a Schwalbe, because her father considered it more safe, I felt so sorry for her. She was so embarrassed! We were even joking that she would never find a boyfriend driving around in this thing! So she would try to ride with me whenever there was a chance in order to not be labelled as backwards and old-fashioned.&quot; (Interview)</td>
<td>Historicization (inferiority; negative brand meanings)</td>
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<td>&quot;The Simson bird series and especially the swallow I associate very much with my father and my grandfathers. They all drove Schwalbe. This makes it part of my own family history. The Schwalbe also fascinates me as a strong relic of the Iron Curtain and because of its presence in the present as a vehicle with a high degree of customization on our roads. [...] In times of global merchandise trade and completely anonymous products, a large group of people is growing up, consciously seeking clear contrasts. In addition, I am personally always pleased when a discarded object is transformed by my work into a desirable object.&quot; (netnography)</td>
<td>Articulating Allegorizing Assembling Antimonizing</td>
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<td>&quot;AMPELMANN products are reminders of their varied history and their triumphal procession from the eastern part of the city through the whole of Berlin. The Ampelmännchen are one of the very few relics of the former GDR to have survived, with our help!&quot; (Ampelmann website)</td>
<td>Allegorizing</td>
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<td>&quot;To some, the lamp man is a symbol of a simpler, happier past. He is a relic from an inhumane regime that in retrospect seems in some ways more human than the capitalist regime East Germans have joined.&quot; &quot;The Ampelmännchen [...] are an example of Berliners’ ability to recognize the good parts of their past—amid all of the atrocities—and to preserve them.&quot; (popular media)</td>
<td>Articulating</td>
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<td>Heckhausen holds the copyright to the iconic Ampelmann design alongside its original creator, Karl Peglau, who was sceptical of Heckhausen’s project at first. But after getting to know the artist he was soon on-board, becoming not only a shareholder, but also a father figure in the company until his death in 2009. Together they (...) made the Ampelmann into something East Germans could be proud of. Ossi, a term for people living in the GDR, &quot;was such an insult. But the Ampelmann started to change that as it was something more positive,&quot; the father-of-three said. As interest grew, Heckhausen said that he began to realize the green man was &quot;a symbol that the GDR was more than just the Stasi.&quot; (popular media)</td>
<td>Assembling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;(The Ampelmann) Brings out a unique part of East Berlin that is both historic and current. A great shop for souvenirs.&quot; (netnography) &quot;The conflict between Euro and regional is part of the wider conflict between global and local. The lamp man alternately blinks &quot;stop&quot; and &quot;go,&quot; and thus may be a modern symbol of our ambivalence about progress.&quot; (popular media)</td>
<td>Antimonizing</td>
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* Due to the length restriction for the data table, we were unable to represent all types of empirical data. Hence, space-consuming examples such as netnography conversations and visuals are therefore omitted from this table but would be provided during the presentation.
REFERENCES


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