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The Appeal of Copycats When the Horizon is Wide

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published in

Advances in Consumer Research Proceedings
2020

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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citation for published version (APA)

Van Horen, F., & Estes, Z. (2020). The Appeal of Copycats When the Horizon is Wide. In J. Argo, T. M. Lowrey, & H. Jensen Schau (Eds.), *Advances in Consumer Research Proceedings* (pp. 47-51). (NA - Advances in Consumer Research; Vol. 48). ACR. <https://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/2661297/volumes/v48/NA-48>

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The Appeal of Copycats When the Horizon Is Wide: How Broad Versus Narrow Mindset Influences Evaluation of Product Imitations

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Four studies demonstrate that consumers' information processing mindsets affect evaluations of copycat brands. We show this effect with both stable traits and experimentally-induced states. A broad (versus narrow) mindset improves copycat evaluation via positive associations with the imitated brand, rather than by increasing its perceived similarity to that brand.

[to cite]:

Femke van Horen and Zachary Estes (2020) , "The Appeal of Copycats When the Horizon Is Wide: How Broad Versus Narrow Mindset Influences Evaluation of Product Imitations", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 48, eds. Jennifer Argo, Tina M. Lowrey, and Hope Jensen Schau, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 47-51.

[url]:

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/2661297/volumes/v48/NA-48>

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The Aestheticization of Past-Themed Consumption

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INTRODUCTION AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Previous consumer research literature highlights the role of aesthetics in the consumption of fashion, the arts, visual images, but also its role for branding (Buschgens, Figueiredo, and Rahman 2019; Charters 2006; Hewer and Brownlie 2007; Joy and Sherry 2003; Macclaran and Brown 2005; Mazzalovo 2012; Peñaloza 1998; Schroeder 2002; Schroeder, Borgerson, and Wu 2015). From this perspective, aesthetics is predominantly about how consumers are motivated to experience beauty, sublime, and sensory stimulation through consuming art and art-like objects in everyday life (Charters 2006; Venkatesh and Meamber 2008).

By contrast, the contextual processes that undergird the valorisation of aesthetics in and through consumption have so far received relatively little attention. Following the idea that a focus on aesthetics is “the study of the feelings, concepts, and judgments arising from our appreciation of the arts or of the wider class of objects considered moving, or beautiful, or sublime” (Blackburn 2016, 8), aesthetic consumption consequently must involve a collective process of valorising the aesthetic: how is ‘a wider class of objects’ rendered into something ‘moving, or beautiful, or sublime’? A shared understanding of an object or concept to be considered aesthetic must build on an underlying process that aestheticizes that element. In other words, a focus on such a process of aestheticization re-orientates the discussion from the aesthetic as an essentialist quality inherent to an object (an object is aesthetic) towards a constructivist perspective that zooms in into the development of an object or concept becoming aesthetic (is made aesthetic). Consequently, rather than taking the aesthetic object as a starting point for investigating consumption (Charters 2006), we argue that also the underlying processes which render something into being aesthetic must be explored if we are to understand the role of aesthetics in and for consumption.

In this article, we explore and illustrate such aestheticization processes. Following Hartmann and Brunk’s (2019) study of nostalgia marketing, we focus specifically on the theoretical context of ‘the past’. The past, here manifested in past-themed brands, products, and consumption practices, provides a rich and powerful facilitating consumption context for such an exploration, primarily for two reasons. First, aesthetic representations of the past permeate nearly all contemporary markets (Brown 1999, 2018) and have become a guiding theme for numerous past-themed brands including retro brands and nostalgia-framed brands in a wide array of industries such as entertainment, technology, film, music, food, fashion, and tourism over the last decades. Second, in such a consumer culture infused and seemingly obsessed with the past, marketers and consumers alike seem to be united in the valorisation of the past as a meaningful frame for branding and consumption activities, whereby such activities are profoundly mobilizing aesthetics in order to allure to the past.

Consider for example the distinct looks of retro brands (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003), the enchantment (here understood as moments of romance, wonder, magic, and special) created partly through past-themed aesthetics in nostalgia marketing (Bach 2002; Hartmann and Brunk 2019), or the distinct revived aesthetics of re-launched brands marketers use to aid authenticating their brand (Hartmann and Ostberg 2013). From this perspective, the valorization of a past-themed brand or practice as being aesthetic becomes an

important ingredient for the creation of enchantment of those brands or practices. In other words, if a past-themed brand or practice is not experienced as being aesthetic, the creation of enchantment is significantly hindered or impeded. To create enchantment, such brands and practices must involve a rendering and valorization of something into something moving, beautiful, and sublime, i.e. aesthetic. Consequently, this aestheticization is conceptually linked to such larger enchantment processes.

Informed by Holt (1995), we approach aestheticization as an instrumental and collective process in everyday consumption domains involving both, objects and practices. Previous research on aesthetic consumption specifically concerning nostalgia suggests that aesthetic consumption can involve romantic inclinations towards the past, but also discontent towards the present such as a temporary coping mechanism and a form of escape from a society (Goulding 2001; 2002). However, while such previous accounts look into the various forms of nostalgia involved in aesthetic consumption, they do not explicitly focus on the processes involved in the aestheticization as such.

METHODOLOGY

Choice of research context: Building on Hartmann and Brunk’s (2019) study of the different paths through which past-themed market resources can create consumer enchantment, and because aesthetics play a facilitating role in creating enchantment—i.e., experiencing something as beautiful, sublime, special and magic—we selected two empirical contexts:

1. Viking role-play, which represents the re-instantiation route to enchantment, whereby consumers travel back in time to create and experience a Viking life-world.
2. The retro-designed Govecs E-scooter, which represents the re-appropriation route to enchantment. Formerly an unattractive and uncool East German scooter called Simson Schwalbe, it has now been reinvented as an urban hipsterian lifestyle brand exclusively used and associated with the scooter-sharing company Emmy.

The selection of these two contexts was motivated by our purpose to understand the underlying processes of mobilizing aesthetics in the creation of enchantment aspired by past-themed consumption and production. These two contexts of past-themed consumption help us compare and contrast the aestheticization processes of different enchantment routes—re-instantiation and re-appropriation (Hartmann and Brunk 2019). In this article, these two contexts facilitate our process theorization. The viking context reveals the collaborative and productive mobilization of consumption experiences as an authentic rendition of the past and how the aestheticization process is shaped by consumers as aesthetic agents, particularly when consumers anchor aesthetics in a participatory way and utilize aesthetics for authenticating acts (Arnould and Price 2000). The retro brand context reveals the negotiation of commercially aestheticized past-themed objects.

Data collection: In order to investigate how consumers valorize aesthetics of past-themed retro products and consumption practices, a qualitative methodology was considered most appropriate. We explore the meaning-making processes central to aesthetic valorization of the past with the help of empirical material generated by fifteen in-

depth interviews (McCracken 1988) with consumers who are aware of and experienced aestheticized objects and practices: nine consumers for the Emmy scooter and six consumers for Viking role-play. We pair this interview material with online and onsite observations. Within our particular context-driven sampling frame, we aimed at generating data from diverse consumer profiles, e.g., different age, gender, education, cultural background and income.

Data analysis: All fifteen interviews were recorded and transcribed at full length. We analyzed all empirical material by taking a hermeneutic approach (Thompson 1997), starting with reading and re-reading the data. In order to arrive at the final analytical categories emerging from our data, we engaged in an iterative process that included coding and recoding, constant comparison, as well as regular inter-researcher reflections (Spiggle 1994; Thompson 1997), whereby triangulating across data sources.

In our analysis, we compared and contrasted our two empirical contexts as cases of re-appropriation and re-instantiation routes of enchantment (Hartmann and Brunk 2019). We explored how the aesthetic formation of the past is elaborated through the hybridity of the past and present and across different agents. The identified aestheticization processes succeed in making consumers and communities mobilize the consumption object and experiences as a tasteful rendition of the past. If not, as in the case of commercial reactivation of the past, the formation of aesthetic appropriation would only be limited to the genre (i.e., GDR retro), yet cannot transport itself into a particular form of object/brand. As the process unfolds, the past-themed consumption aesthetics work as integrative commemorating templates where consumers act as aesthetic agents.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Our findings and analysis suggest *three processes that render aesthetics in past-themed consumption, i) differentiation, ii) interrelation, and iii) integration of the past (see table 1 in the appendix for empirical material).*

Differentiation through a degree of reminiscence

Differentiation refers to emphasizing the dissimilarity, divergence, and discrepancy between the prior and the aestheticized version of the objects and practices to establish an authentication claim. This process is used to contest the aestheticized version of the objects or practices when a commercial re-appropriation of the past is a mismatch with the demanded past form. As illustrated by the different routes to enchantment by nostalgia marketing and consumption (Hartmann and Brunk 2019), seemingly ludic re-appropriation can also be triggered by dislocation. Likewise, differentiation through reminiscence as a process follows a reflective valorization of the aesthetic performance that can stand in stark contrast to settled historical facts (Brunk, Hartmann and Giesler 2018; Hartmann and Brunk 2019). This dislocation is noticeable when there is a discontent towards the reification of the past for commercial aims. We observed that consumers valorize aesthetic qualities through their own connection to the past to render a past version of the object as (more) tasteful compared to (re-)designed versions. In this process, a past is aestheticized through the mythological rendering of ‘good old days’, and a utopian portrayal of (bygone) honest material qualities (Barthes 1972) and craftsmanship. The aesthetic gestalt of retro, therefore, can create a symbolic dislocation and negative valorization of the commercial offering and, instead, celebrate only the aesthetic bonds of the genre (i.e., GDR retro) as such.

Interrelation through newness

Interrelation refers to the process of evaluating the aesthetic qualities in present conditions by connecting, linking, and joining an aesthetic re-appropriation with contemporary market-level narratives. Here, aestheticization includes the mythical portrayal of the lifestyle product, and a strong link to authenticating acts (Arnould and Price 2000). This process articulates the counter-narratives of market structures and reduces the influence of particular authoritative rules to operationalize modern social links to the past. As is illustrated by Brown et al. (2003), a retro marketing mind-set involves producing the old anew. This regime of newness follows a reactivation of the past by celebrating the past in the form of a distinct look. We observed that consumers are inclined to decontextualize retro consumption towards an amalgam of lifestyle products. The retrofied object design of the Schwalbe scooter, or a Viking axe for example, receives its appreciation largely from the upgraded modern sensibility around the object, which was deemed functional and ordinary back then. In this process, the past is adapted to fit into the set of contemporary ideals related to consumption aesthetics.

Integration through consumers as aesthetic agents

Integration refers to an instrumental act through which consumers acquire and manipulate object meanings to facilitate the symbolic use of the object (Holt 1995). Likewise, practices promote the integrative dimension of the aesthetic appropriation of the past when consumers significantly participate in their creation (Arnould and Price 2000). In the case of commercial aestheticization, consumers who experienced the past created retrospective valuations of the re-appropriated product. In the case of the Emmy scooter sharing company, consumers valorize an original version of Schwalbe scooters from the GDR—which were once valorized as functional and robust—now as “beautiful” “retro design.” When it comes to the aestheticization of the past in terms of practices, i.e., Viking role-play, consumers valorize the material culture of the past as being aesthetic by integrating its ability to activate the realm of enchantment (Bach 2002). In this way, consumers act as aesthetic agents and derive enchantment from those products and practices by integrating past-present dynamics. As an embodied aesthetic practice, Viking role-play is re-instantiating the past in the here and now, whereby it becomes encapsulated as an authentic representation rather than purely ludic re-appropriation through its integration into the present by consumers.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

This paper has explored the processes of aestheticization in past-themed consumption. The convergence of aesthetics and consumption in the form of retro branding and Viking role-play performances is a part of a wider phenomenon where aesthetic visualization is seemingly being employed in both branding and consumption of the past (Brown et al. 2003; Hartmann and Brunk 2019). Our conceptual starting point is that nothing is inherently aesthetic but rather, is collectively rendered aesthetic, which is, in the theoretical context of the past and past-themed brands and consumption practices, achieved through the mixing of existing codes (Brown 2005).

The aestheticization processes we analyzed suggest that an aesthetic reactivation of the past creates an integrative act if there is congruence between marketers’ symbolic and material re-appropriation of the past and consumers’ valorization of it. However, this act can result in dislocation when the aestheticization of past-themed consumption is perceived to be rendered externally by commercially motivated marketers, as is often the case in retro branding. Meanwhile, when consumers have authoritative voices over the aes-

APPENDIX

Table 1: Summary of Illustrative Data

Aestheticization process	Illustrative Data
Differentiation through reminiscence	<p>I don't know. But it certainly has other manufacturing things today and is easier, cheaper to produce if it is in one piece. I assume that the plastic fender is in front ... I don't know, you can't say that. Because the quality ... so they will have built reasonable ball bearings or such reasonable shock absorbers or something, but I don't like it ... It's ajar, you can tell where it comes from, but I don't like the design, I'm a little bit retro there. Interview (retro-themed consumption)</p> <p>I think it's fancy, I don't find it more beautiful because I prefer the old design, because it is totally authentic to me, but they are fancy, they remind me of it, they look cool and I think they are because of it to be so popular with people. I: You think about, because of the looks above all? Because of the design? R: Yeah, this vintage look that is totally in vogue and exactly, I think that's why, yes, people try it out because it looks chic. Interview (retro-themed consumption)</p> <p>I probably say something is not polite to say, but... I tried to watch series Vikings. And after about ten minutes I was almost on my way to kill the TV. I know I have to try to watch because so much fantasy, but they are doing it so good, so close, for example, let's say I just have taken an example out of there, they are making someone having perfect outfits with all the dresses and everything but having blue hair. It is so close. They go to a different place they go to Haithabu, which is a very historical correct museum they have shows every year in Germany, but there was in Viking time it was in Denmark but now in Northern Germany. And Haithabu is a really flat part of Germany. They went to Haithabu but climbed up these huge mountains. No mountains in Haithabu, you go oh my god. It's small silly things, and I know I should try a bit other but rather I watch documentaries so I take out all the documentaries. It is so hard for me to see those Viking pop cultures where I am just waiting for them to pick up the big horn helmet and fur things on their clothes. Oh no, I cannot see it. Interview (Viking role-play)</p>
Interrelation through newness	<p>“you have linen, the wool, so they only allowed tents made linen and wool. And I understand in a way, but for visitors, it's not visible the difference, and the linen was also not a fabric not easy to make it is quite expensive in Viking age, so why would you make a tent out of that (laugh)? It is really silly, and you come back to the modern problem to us because we want to do everything as authentic as possible we would like to have a linen tent, but if linen gets wet, it gets really really heavy and then you take your tent car would break. Because we have really a big tent, we have quite a big shop (laugh)...” Interview (Viking role-play)</p> <p>“But what me, you know, what I don't like is retro design just to make it retro. If so, you have to somehow connect it with today's zeitgeist. At Emmy, for example, I have a retro design, but I make an electric scooter out of it. Then for me it is a thing that somehow fits together and then you can sort of add an old design to the present day. What I personally don't like so much is when you just use old things as they are with the negative qualities that they had. If you ask now with the Simson. I mean, she stank. It was certainly not very environmentally friendly, then I would find it nonsense if you start again to launch a Simson 2, which may look like the Simson 1, but with a petrol engine. If you start to trim a Simson on an electric scooter again, it would have its appeal again and that's how I generally see it when it comes to retro design.” Interview (retro-themed consumption)</p>
Integration through consumers as aesthetic agents	<p>So everything you can cover is ok if you can go as, I think, you should try to do a bit better next season then you were in the last season. So, for example, if you just started maybe have linen tunic, its machine sewed the next time you make it hand-sewed. And the next time you make a new shirt plant-dyed, for example. So you try to upgrade yourself and everything you have. So and then you make, get a tent and then you may get a bed, then you might get a chest. You might get plates, cups, glasses.... Interview (Viking role-play)</p> <p>Here in Ribe, they have the archaeological depot. I do leatherwork I make shoes and bags, and all kinds of other leatherwork from Viking age and we got a chance to see all the Viking leather found find they got in Ribe. There was one piece of leather, a description that stood that was the upper part of shoes, this part of the shoes that outside. Looking at how the holes were in the leather, I said this is, can never be the upper part because it turns to round way around. So for me, it was a sole and not the upper part. Interview (Viking role-play)</p>

theticized performances in the form of authenticating acts (Arnould and Price 2000), the overall practices facilitate the enchanting dimension of the object, which in turn allows consumers to become aesthetic agents and valorize the aesthetics of object or practice in terms of enchantment. Retro aesthetics, in the case of retro-themed consumption, mobilize both positive and negative aspects of nostalgic approaches towards the aesthetic formation of the past. When consumers who are particularly nostalgic towards the past valorize a past-themed branded object as a bad copy, they celebrate the retro era instead. Conversely, if the past-themed branded object is valorized as a lifestyle brand, then it is celebrated by that aestheticized version of the brand. In the case of Viking role-play, the act of material production of the most desirable images about the past create an integration to that aesthetic of the past. The aestheticization process renders object qualities into aesthetic qualities through the aesthetic agency of consumers.

The aestheticization of the past has different modalities, forms, functions, content, and contexts. Our analysis of Viking role-play and Emmy retro-themed consumption reveals that the co-creation of this aesthetic-formation of the past includes the processes of differentiation, interrelation, and integration. These processes are particularly helpful for marketing managers to understand the details of co-creation inherent in the aestheticization of the past in order to create enchantment strategies that embrace consumer-generated resources in the rendering of aesthetics. The co-presence of consumer and material resources in aestheticization processes facilitates the creation of enchantment in past-themed market and consumption contexts. Viking role-play consumption differs from the commercial retro-themed consumption in terms of the “spirit of do it yourself” (Barthes 1972), which indicates that the very development of past-themed material production often relies on the most desirable images of the past and its hyper-real objects (Baudrillard 1993). This research contributes to previous accounts on aesthetics in consumption and retro practices by broadening the theoretical scope of extant research, which focused mainly on an essentialist approach to aesthetic consumption. Contrary to prior research on aesthetics in consumption, this article illuminates the collective processes involved in the creation of a shared understanding of an object or concept to be considered aesthetic. In doing so, our study highlights the conceptual link between aestheticization and enchantment, thereby suggesting that underlying aestheticization processes are a vital ingredient in the creation of enchantment aspired by past-themed brands and practices.

We would like to thank Sophia Blankenstein for providing us part of the interview data.

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