

# Teaching Old Brands New Tricks: Retro Branding and the Revival of Brand Meaning

Retro brands are relaunched historical brands with updated features. The authors conduct a “netnographic” analysis of two prominent retro brands, the Volkswagen New Beetle and *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace*, that reveals the importance of Allegory (brand story), Aura (brand essence), Arcadia (idealized community), and Antinomy (brand paradox). Retro brand meanings are predicated on a utopian communal element and an enlivening paradoxical essence. Retro brand management involves an uneasy, cocreative, and occasionally clamorous alliance between producers and consumers.

America has no now.... Our culture is composed of sequels, reruns, remakes, revivals, reissues, re-releases, recreations, re-enactments, adaptations, anniversaries, memorabilia, oldies radio, and nostalgia record collections.

—George Carlin, *Brain Droppings*, 1998

**B**rand extension, the use of an existing brand name to introduce a new product or service (Keller 1993, 1998), is an important marketing tactic that has attracted considerable academic interest (e.g., Desai and Keller 2002; John, Loken, and Joiner 1998). However, another form of brand extension strategy is gaining prominence and requires urgent research attention. Many long-abandoned brands have recently been revived and successfully relaunched (Franklin 2002; Mitchell 1999; Wansink 1997), so much so that marketers appear in the midst of a “retro revolution” in which revivals of old brands and their images are a powerful management option (Brown 2001).

The rise of retro brands places marketing in an interesting conceptual quandary. On the one hand, marketers are continually reminded of the need for product differentiation, that today’s marketing environment demands strong brand identities and decries imitation (Aaker 1996). On the other hand, contemporary markets are suffused with updated imitations, such as retro brands, many of which are proving enormously popular (Franklin 2002; Naughton and Vlasic 1998; Wansink 1997).

How can marketing academics and practitioners make sense of this conceptual conundrum? What are the causes of retro brand proliferation? How do retro brands help improve understanding of the management of brand meanings? What do retro brands reveal about such important issues as brand

personality, person–brand relationships, and brand communities? We investigate retro brands to develop practical theory that contributes to marketing principles and practice, particularly brand management. Akin to Keller (1993), we aim to inform managers and researchers interested in the strategic aspects of brand equity. We study retro brands from the perspective of consumers and conceptualize the implications of this information for marketing practitioners.

We animate and illustrate our investigation of retro brand marketing through an empirical analysis of two prominent exemplars. After briefly examining the background literature on three interdependent concepts—brand revival, brand heritage, and nostalgia—we develop our conceptualization of retromarketing and retro brands. We then describe our methodology, which is followed by a detailed analysis of two retromarketing exemplars, and we conclude with a consideration of our findings’ implications for practicing brand managers.

## Theoretical Foundations

### *Nostalgia and Heritage*

As the epigraph exemplifies, the late twentieth century was characterized by an astonishing “nostalgia boom” (Naughton and Vlasic 1998, p. 58), and many marketing scholars have examined that phenomenon (see also Harris 2000; Leadbeater 2002; Redhead 2000). Stern (1992), for example, attributes the latter-day advent of nostalgic advertising to the fin de siècle effect, or humankind’s propensity to retrospect as centuries draw to a close. Belk (1991) contends that personal possessions, such as souvenirs, photographs, heirlooms, antiques, and gifts, serve as materializations of memory and evoke a powerful sense of the past. Holbrook and Schindler (1989, 1994, 1996) have developed a “nostalgia proneness scale” and have tested it in various memory-rich domains (e.g., music, movies, fashion models, classic cars) and among different demographic cohorts. Peñaloza (2000, p. 105) notes the importance of expanding the conception of history as “a source of market value” and a cultural marker of legitimacy and authenticity. Thompson,

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Pollio, and Locander (1994) report that classic brands not only embody the moral values of craftsmanship and lasting value but also hark back to a time when the world seemed safer, more comprehensible, and much less commercial. There are also numerous conference papers and analogous academic analyses of the recent retrospective propensity (Baker and Kennedy 1994; Baumgartner 1992; Goulding 1999, 2000; Havlena and Holak 1991, 1996; Hirsch 1992; Holak and Havlena 1992; Rindfleisch and Sprott 2000; Romanyshyn 1989; Stevens, Brown, and Maclaran 1998).

Although there is a rich marketing literature on the mainsprings of today's nostalgia boom, the scholarly touchstone remains Davis's (1979) much-cited distinction between *personal* and *communal* nostalgia. The former is associated with individual life cycles; as people age, they are wont to reflect on the palmy days of their youth. The latter, conversely, occurs at a societal level in the wake of epochal changes precipitated by wars, revolutions, invasions, economic dislocations, or environmental catastrophes. Thus, the Great Depression of the 1930s was accompanied by a profoundly retrospective perspective (Lears 1994); the social turmoil of the late 1960s triggered the nostalgia outbreak of the 1970s (Schulman 2001); and the post-Communist, new world order of the early 1990s created conditions conducive to the subsequent rise of retro (Leadbeater 2002).

Personal and communal nostalgia are closely intertwined, nowhere more so than in marketing. Long-established brands evoke not only former epochs but also former selves. Old brands serve to bind consumers to their pasts and to the communities that shared those brands. According to McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002), brands link people into communities with common interests (see also Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). A temporal component can readily be added to this (Bergadaa 1990), whereby old brands evoke past events. Because brands can be linked with events (Keller 1993), the associations of the event become associated with the brand.

Indeed, old brands may link people together even more powerfully, because they strongly evoke a sense of a utopian past and because of the close-knit "caring and sharing" communities that are associated with it (Kozinets 2002a, p. 21). Therefore, it might be expected that in times of threat or of sociocultural and economic turbulence, nostalgia would provide a sense of comfort and close-knit community, a safe haven in an unsafe world. Conceptualizing brands in this manner combines the individual nostalgia that Belk (1991) explores and Holbrook and Schindler (1989, 1994, 1996) psychometrize with the communal nostalgia that Stern (1992) cogently theorizes. In this conception, old brands are rich with both personal and communal associations. They can be invested with the same legitimizing, authenticating, market value of history that Peñaloza (2000) finds in entire industries and that Thompson, Pollio, and Locander (1994) uncover among contemporary consumers.

The scholarly implications of this personal-communal melding are clear. Conventional marketing wisdom suggests that repositioning is one method of revitalizing a brand (Aaker 1991) and that the royal road to rejuvenation lies in the skillful exploitation of the associations linked to a brand's heritage (Aaker 1996). Brand heritage is perceived as using marketing-mix variables that invoke the history of

a particular brand, including all its personal and cultural associations. An example is the rich historical associations of the Coca-Cola brand with Americana, patriotism, globalization, Santa Claus, and Christmas. However, because cultures are complex and individuals heterogeneous, heritage is often an ambivalent legacy. In launching new, improved, or cutting-edge products, aspects of heritage might prove a liability. Heritage, moreover, might need to be created and managed, as the literature on "invented traditions" attests (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Although conceptions of brand heritage provide one route to an understanding of the process of brand renewal, they do not holistically capture the intriguing dynamics of retromarketing in general and brand revival in particular.

### **Brand Revival and Retromarketing**

There is considerable overlap among nostalgia, brand heritage, and brand revival. Revived or retro goods and services (we use *retro* synonymously with revived brands) trade on consumers' nostalgic leanings. Familiar slogans and packages, for example, invoke brand heritage and evoke consumers' memories of better days, both personal and communal. The success of the Museum Store, Past Times, Restoration Hardware, and similar retailers of "exact" reproductions and the continuing popularity of heritage-based campaigns for brands such as Budweiser, John Hancock, and Ivory indicate that demand exists for allegedly authentic reproductions of past brands.

The problem with exact reproductions, however, is that they do not meet today's exacting performance standards. Retro products, by contrast, combine old-fashioned forms with cutting-edge functions and thereby harmonize the past with the present (Brown 1999, 2001). In this regard, consider the Chrysler PT Cruiser, which amalgamates the shape of a 1940s sedan with the latest automotive technology to produce a futuristic car with anachronistic styling. Another striking example is Nike's Michael Jordan XI Retro Sneakers. These shoes may look like a monument to 1950s hoop dreams, yet their cushioned soles, aerated uppers, and recommended retail prices are state of the marketing art. Denny's retro diner is an homage to eateries of the 1950s, but its registers are computerized, the kitchen equipment is cutting edge, smoking is prohibited in the dining area, and vegetarian dishes are available for those unwilling to revert to carnivorous habits of yore.

We define retro branding, therefore, 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. Retro brands are distinguishable from nostalgic brands by the element of updating. They are brand new, old-fashioned offerings.

### **Reconceptualizing Nostalgia**

To begin to understand the elements of retro brands and their implications for brand management, we employ a more nuanced idea of nostalgia than the notion that "things were better back then" (e.g., Holbrook 1995). For example, in his monumental history of Western culture from 1500 to the present, Jacques Barzun (2000) describes the alternation and coexistence of two powerful antithetical themes, *progress* and *primitivism*. The former is characterized by a secular,

scientific, technological, and future-looking worldview; the latter is dominated by a profound sense of loss, a feeling that there is a price to be paid for progress and that price is the destruction of community, solidarity, empathy, and closeness to nature, which are markers of the past (see also Gombrich 2002).

Boym's (2001) recent reflections on the future of nostalgia further develop this notion of an uneasy balance between past and future. Moved by the post-Communist nostalgia sweeping Eastern Europe, Boym asserts that people live in a world where progress and primitivism combine, where the latest technological and scientific advances increasingly are used to re-create visions of the past, whether of the sinking of the *Titanic*, the gladiatorial contests of ancient Rome, or the scientifically cloned dinosaurs of *Jurassic Park*. Progress and primitivism, Boym argues, are like Jekyll and Hyde—two contrasting personalities simultaneously occupying the same body.

Boym's (2001) bittersweet yearning for what is gone but not forgotten is counterpointed by the theories of the leading literary critic Fredric Jameson (1991), who contends that today's "neo-nostalgia" has nothing to do with the deep emotional disturbance that afflicted nostalgia sufferers of times past. To the contrary, Jameson argues that contemporary nostalgia is essentially emotionless, an aesthetic response to evocations of the past. Another prominent literary critic, Walter Benjamin (1973, 1985, 1999) has proposed theories that are rich with references to marketing, consumer behavior, and advertising. Although he was affiliated with the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, who abhorred commercial life, Benjamin was fascinated by marketing, obsolete objects, abandoned possessions, superseded technologies, long-forgotten fads, and the remarkable fact that new ideas often come wrapped in old packaging.

We discern four themes relevant to our investigation of retromarketing and to contemporary brand management from Benjamin's interwar writings. These themes relate to and usefully synthesize extant conceptual elements of brand management and marketing. These elements are Allegory (brand story), Arcadia (idealized brand community), Aura (brand essence), and Antinomy (brand paradox). Together, these themes constitute the 4As of retro branding.

*Allegory.* Brand allegories are essentially symbolic stories, narratives, or extended metaphors. As Stern (1988) notes, allegory is frequently used in advertising. Allegories successfully convey didactic messages that invoke and then offer resolutions for consumer states of moral conflict. In addition, allegories are dynamic; they alter and change in response to popular tastes and trends (Stern 1988). We examine allegorical brand stories from the perspective of consumers (as Keller [1993] suggests; see also Stern 1995, 1998; Thompson 1997). We use the reception and discourse surrounding retro-marketed products, or those products that combine qualities of old and new, to study the links among brand meanings, brand heritage, and the morality tales that consumers tell one another.

*Arcadia.* For Benjamin, arcadia relates both to his own (unfinished) study of Parisian shopping arcades and to the golden age of the ancient Greeks. In arcadia, an almost utopian sense of past worlds and communities is evoked. This sense of the past as a special, magical place is an inte-

gral part of retromarketing's appeal, insofar as an idealized past is festooned with the latest technological magic. The presence of this utopian communal ideal has only barely been hinted at by scholars who have examined various manifestations of brand community (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). In this article, we attempt to explore further the conceptual links among brand meaning, idealized place, consumer community, and times past.

*Aura.* In Benjamin's most celebrated conception, aura pertains to the presence of a powerful sense of "authenticity" that original works of art exude. As many scholars note (e.g., Belk and Costa 1998; Holt 1997; Kozinets 2001, 2002a, b; Peñaloza 2000; Thompson and Tambyah 1999), consumers' search for authenticity is one of the cornerstones of contemporary marketing, notwithstanding the "inauthenticity" of today's consumer culture (Hartman 2002). Authenticity is also vitally important to brands; uniqueness is an important aspect of brand identity (see, e.g., Aaker 1986; Keller 1993). Kelly (1998) considers "brand essence" the core values for which a brand stands, which he compares to its "marketing DNA." Brand essence is thus highly related to authenticity; it is composed of the brand elements that consumers perceive as unique. In this study, we explore aura-based relationships among the authentic, the past, and brand essence in the context of consumer dialogue about retro brands.

*Antinomy.* Irresolvable paradox lies at the heart of Benjamin's philosophy. For example, he considers scientific and technological progress both as unstoppable, and almost overpowering, and as the root cause of people's desire to return to simpler, slower, less stressful times. In the marketing field, paradoxes are a central theme that explains how technology products are consumed (Fournier and Mick 1999; Mick and Fournier 1998). The paradox premise also offers a rich departure point for investigations of the complexity and open-endedness of brand meaning management.

In this regard, the novelist Alex Shakar (2001, p. 61) postulates that every product has "two opposing desires that it can promise to satisfy simultaneously. The job of a marketer is to cultivate this schismatic soul, this broken soul, at the center of every product." Shakar suggests that this paradoxical essence, or "paradessence," is the crux of consumer motivation. Literary theorists likewise maintain that ambiguity and paradox offer places for readers to insert their hopes and dreams into texts (e.g., Derrida 1985). Analogously, it is arguable that this paradoxical "soul" of brands offers an opening for consumers to invest themselves emotionally into mass-produced goods and services and thereby form the elusive connections that result in lasting loyalty. Through the inherent paradoxes of retro brands, we consider consumers' responses to the simultaneous presence of old and new, tradition and technology, primitivism and progress, same and different.

## Method

To develop our conceptualization of retromarketing, we explore it in its empirical context, as realized in the interactions of relevant consumers. We focus on two prominent, much-lauded retromarketing exemplars, both of which are

cult brands with high levels of customer commitment and strong ties to popular culture. The first is Volkswagen's New Beetle, a modern brand that builds on a famous and indeed infamous brand heritage. The second is *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace*, a long-awaited brand revival of George Lucas's celebrated cinematic trilogy of the 1970s and 1980s.

In keeping with the study's retrospective spirit, the empirical investigation uses a brand new, old-fashioned research technique called "netnography." As Kozinets (2002b) explains, netnography involves the transplantation of ethnography, one of the most venerable marketing research procedures, to cyberspace, the latest marketing milieu. As in the case of its offline counterpart, netnography necessitates in-depth immersion in and prolonged engagement with the many consumer cultures that populate the World Wide Web (Kozinets 1999, 2002b). According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), the Web is a place where abundant information on online consumer groups' belief systems, buying behaviors, and object relations is readily available.

We began our investigation with an overview of the relevant topical news groups and the Web pages related to them that were available from our local server (see the Appendix). We chose sites both for the quantity and for the directed focus of their Web postings (e.g., alt.fan.starwars holds Google's highest activity rating, at approximately 130 messages posted per day). Recent statistics are difficult to find, but Arbitron ranked rec.arts.sf.starwars 294th of all news groups and estimated that it was read by 118,545 people worldwide (in 1995). Similarly, Arbitron ranked rec.auto.vw 599th and estimated that it had 82,315 worldwide readers (Reid 1995).

As part of an ongoing research project on popular brands, media fans, and virtual communities of consumption, we followed the aforementioned news groups and downloaded noteworthy messages during three months beginning in spring 2001 (we performed follow-up data collection and member checking in spring 2002). In this regard, it should be noted that using carefully chosen message threads in netnography is akin to purposive sampling in market-oriented ethnography (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994). Because findings are interpreted in terms of a particular sample, it is not necessary that the sample be representative of other populations (Kozinets 2002b). Although we attempted to find diverse message types and message postings in our data set, we intended our sampling strategy not to offer representativeness or transferability, but to focus on analytic depth and the provision of realistic examples of retro brands and their receptions.

The volume of downloaded text amounted to 560 double-spaced, ten-point type size pages, which represents 432 postings containing 131 distinct e-mail addresses and user names (likely related to the number of distinct message posters). There were 76 unique message-poster identifiers within the downloaded New Beetle messages and 55 unique poster identifiers included with the downloaded *Star Wars* messages. The messages we downloaded were posted between 1999 and 2002. We classified the 432 postings (before downloading) into topics either relevant or not relevant to the brand management topics of interest. We each manually coded the data and analyzed it in an initial step to identify themes relevant to our hypotheses (on data analysis,

see Spiggle 1994). Through group comparison and in-person discussion, we then allowed a more impressionistic, hermeneutic, and grounded interpretation to emerge from the data. We identified recurrent social and cultural tendencies within the data and constantly compared these emergent themes with our preconceptions derived from Benjamin's work. In this step, unexpected findings led us to stretch the boundaries of our original definitions (e.g., to place more emphasis on community and its influence) and to devise new notions (i.e., antinomy, or brand paradox). Our overall approach is in keeping with the precepts of mainstream qualitative inquiry (e.g., Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Sherry and Kozinets 2001; Thompson 1997).

All told, we examined several thousand news-group messages and dozens of Web sites and Web rings representing the perspectives of several hundred consumers of New Beetles and *Star Wars* prequels.

## Findings

### *The New Beetle*

The original Volkswagen Beetle was the stuff of motor-enthusiast legend. Created by the pioneering automotive designer Ferdinand Porsche, with a past grounded in the common classes of Third Reich Germany, the car proved wildly popular across postwar Europe and North America. The Volkswagen Beetle was globally cherished for its durability, economy, user-friendliness, and idiosyncratic design. At the time, it was considered an exemplary vehicle of the people. Everyone from commune-bound hippies and middle-class couples with children to eccentric multimillionaires drove Beetles. The Beetle even begot a series of live-action Disney movies starring the "Love Bug" as "Herbie," the sentient vehicle with a heart of gold.

The same enthusiasm coalesced around the New Beetle, which Volkswagen launched in 1998 at the Detroit Motor Show. A happy combination of the traditional bubble shape and state-of-the-art automotive technology, the New Beetle rapidly attained cult status. With their totemizing and fetishizing of the retro auto's shape and flower-power history, New Beetle enthusiasts are analogous to the ardent fans of Beatlemania. The result is a retromarketing exemplar that potentially extends our understanding of brand meaning management.

*Allegory: The Beetle's brand stories.* To understand the brand management implications of the New Beetle, it is necessary to be attuned to the narratives surrounding it, which includes attending to the heritage stories circulated by producers and cultural intermediaries such as the media and advertisers. In this consumer-oriented study of brand meaning, this attention also includes consumers. We therefore pay particular attention, as Stern (1988) does in her study of advertising allegories, to the moral overtones present in the narratives that consumers tell one another about the brand. These "morallegorical" qualities are captured in the narrative of "Adam," a news-group poster who sought to encapsulate the perceived significance of the Beetle's history as follows:

The VW [Beetle] was designed at a time when only big businessmen and other wealthy individuals were able to have an automobile. The VW [Beetle] was designed

specifically to and did bestow on the working man, who could otherwise never afford it, the feasibility of obtaining the freedom that comes with automobile ownership. The noble thoughts that went into the production of this machine included considerations of economy of operation and ease of repair. (posted by "Adam," rec.autos.makers.vw.aircooled news group, June 21, 1996)

Adam's posting recapitulates Adolph Hitler's propagandist use of Porsche's design for the Volkswagen Beetle; it is also notable for overlooking this historical fact. The original Beetle was grounded in Nazi Germany's narrative of egalitarian totalitarianism, which in turn is related to the Volkswagen brand's genealogy as car of the people. As historical commentators have often noted, Hitler's regime was nothing if not utopian for the German people, and it seems that populist brand meanings are inextricably intertwined with the reliable design and do-it-yourself qualities of the original Volkswagen Beetle. However, Adam's narrative also reworks the populist Nazi-utopian narrative in terms of an American discourse of self-reliance, autonomy, and a can-do attitude. Slotkin (1992), for example, makes a compelling case that these mythic values are central to the construction of American identity.

It is easy to find moral standing, even moral brand meaning, in Adam's recounting of the Beetle brand's Americanesque egalitarianism. An honest, brand-of-the-people ethos was also articulated in the groundbreaking advertising campaign of DDB Needham for the Volkswagen Beetle in the 1960s. Using copy such as "Lemon" and "Ugly is only skin deep," the campaign used ironic, reflexive, self-deprecating humor, which helped make Volkswagen the best-selling foreign automaker of its time (see Kiley 2002). Given that honesty has intrinsic moral overtones, the campaign creatively counterpointed the infamous puffery of advertising with a healthy dose of truthfulness, albeit marketing-mediated truthfulness.

In an important extension of this history, online consumers create tales of their own that build on the brand, emphasize its uniqueness, personalize it, and demonstrate to others how they can individualize the brand. For example, the following story of singularity, personality, and idiosyncrasy is typical of the types of postings of many Beetle enthusiasts as they carefully recount their brand experiences for other news-group members:

I inspected it in the driveway of our mom's home, where my brother and I were visiting, and then drove it around for half an hour on her neighborhood's streets, with light to no traffic, in a suburban area with no traffic signals, and in light rain and mist.... The overall impression of the exterior styling is "extremely cute." Almost huggable. The front of the car presents an almost literal face that appears to smile. The old running boards are just hinted at in the new design, which is nothing but round, sensual curves from stem to stern. The seats are VERY comfortable and firm, although they're equipped with perhaps the most bizarre set of adjustment controls I've ever used.... The strange looking, wide stereo system is in the middle of the dash. Now comes one of the weirder parts of the styling—the huge, steeply sloped windshield must have been almost three feet from the steering wheel. It's the most unusual windshield placement I've ever experienced.... The windshield is SO far away from your face as you sit in the seats, it's almost like you've turned around and are looking out

the back window! This makes the top surface of the dash absolutely huge. The dashtop is so big and deep, in fact, you could probably set up an entire model train track on it. :) You could put a good sized dog on it. Or your entire collection of Star Wars action figures. You could plant a lawn on it. It's simply the strangest looking and feeling dash-top/windshield design I've ever seen in any car. Period. (posted by "Larabee," alt.volkswagen.beetle news group, April 12, 1998)

Larabee's posting is seeded with autobiographical detail and structured as a story. It has all the hallmarks of personal narrative, which folklorists recognize as a genre. At points, Larabee's evaluation reads less like a dispassionate, deliberative analysis than an emotional family saga chronicling an adoption. In the multifaceted narrative, Larabee reveals not only his anthropomorphization of the product and the brand, but also that he is not seeking a perfect copy of a classic Beetle. He emphasizes the brand's individuality and filters this through his own idiosyncrasies. It becomes clear from the way Larabee negotiates the changes between old and new—judging some of them positively, some of them negatively—that consumers like him consider retro brands not reproductions of namesake brands, but radical redefinitions of them. Larabee considers the New Beetle brand a restyling that updates and transcends. The allegory of the New Beetle reflects this because it tells a tale of thrift. It is thus a brand story with moral overtones. Old Beetle and New Beetle share personalities, origins, names, and values, forming a brand allegory that is moral, functional, and yet prone to individualization through consumer storytelling.

*Arcadia: The Beetle brand's idealized communities.* We previously mentioned the original 1960s advertising campaign for the Volkswagen Beetle in relation to the moral qualities of allegory. These moral qualities are extended and romanticized into a type of utopian brandscape by Arnold Communications's more recent, award-winning marketing campaign for the New Beetle. The campaign references both Sixties nostalgia and the cheap-and-cheerful brand associations of the original Beetle. Arnold's campaign uses lines such as "Less flower, more power" and "Comes with wonderful new features, like heat." The reference to flower power intends to evoke more than the old vehicle itself, but also a romanticized, upbeat, optimistic, times-are-a-changin' attitude associated with the Sixties. However, just as Adam's allegory overlooked the Volkswagen Beetle's Nazi propaganda past, so too today's happy-hippie marketing campaign suppresses much of the turmoil of the Sixties. By stressing superficial symbols such as flower power, Arnold Communications co-opts and converts the tempestuous Sixties into a marketable golden age.

This association of the brand with a time and place is no less evident in the multiplicity of books dedicated to people's affectionate memories of their original Beetles (see, e.g., Jacobs and Klebahn 1999; Rosen 1999). In these recollections, the car evokes the rose-tinted interlude of peace, music, and love that was the 1960s. The New Beetle represents an eternal return to such utopian dreams and associated attempts to better the material and spiritual condition of humankind. Among online community members, the hippie associations of the Beetle brand are a common topic of con-

versation. In one large message thread (41 postings) titled "Hippies and Volkswagens," "Frank" and "Richard" describe the relationship as they see it:

Hippies wanted to be different and defy society. They did it by driving a car that at that time went against every other car on the road—If you drive an older VW you are no different than the '60s hippies—and as history shows the hippies were right because the Japanese took off where VW left off and filled the gap of what people really wanted. (posted by "Frank," rec.autos.makers.vw.aircooled news group, June 21, 1997)

I think that the interest that the hippies have in VW ownership has a lot to do with the unity of owner and vehicle. With a Volkswagen, you attain a certain self-sufficiency when you can do most of the work on your car yourself. This fits in a lot better with the ideals of less participation in the horrifically wasteful commercial/industrial process, where half of all employed people waste time and resources quarreling, in one form or another, over what belongs to whom, instead of doing anything productive and beneficial to society as a whole. Hippies like to feel a direct connection with the things in the world that support them, and a Volkswagen is conducive to that, both in the way the owner should communicate with it frequently through maintenance and in the way it feels to drive one. (posted by "Richard," rec.autos.makers.vw.aircooled news group, June 23, 1997)

Frank casts the brand in quasi-moral terms of Sixties rebellion and revolution, mixing that with a striking economic vindication. For Richard, the brand takes on many meritorious characteristics. It is associated with independence, environmentalism, anticommercialism, social participation, and a sense of the mechanic's mindfulness that recalls Pirsig's (1974) New Age classic *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

Frank's and Richard's brand meanings both hint at the way old Volkswagen cars allowed the expression of nonconformity, of individuality, similar to the meanings ascribed to other cult brands such as Macintosh computers (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001) and the *Star Trek* franchise (Kozinets 2001). All three are inimitable brands that have attracted enormous consumer loyalty among their customer bases. Three aspects—low market share and struggling brand (Volkswagen in the United States, *Star Trek*, Macintosh), an idealized time (the Sixties in each of these examples), and a somewhat marginalized yet cohesive social group (hippies, television nerds, computer geeks)—seem to have become associated with a strong sense of affiliation and belonging in these brand communities. For example, "Trevor" celebrates another new member coming into the fold of Volkswagen ownership. The new owner inquired about the presence of a Beetle owners' club (common for Beetles). Trevor welcomed him with these words: "Trust me, buying a Beetle causes you to be part of a club whether you realize it or not. If nothing else, you have to wave 'hi' to the other Beetle drivers, because they're waving 'hi' to you" (posted by "Trevor," alt.volkswagen.beetle news group, April 3, 2000). Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) term this type of identification through brand community "consciousness of kind" and the type of welcoming behavior "shared ritual." Yet unlike the brand communities McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig

(2002) study, the arcadian ethos of the retro brand seems to be strongly associated with the upstanding individuals and caring-sharing society of a dear departed golden age.

*Aura: Authenticating the Beetle brand.* Aside from historical and trademarked continuity, the challenge to Volkswagen's managers was animating the New Beetle with the same brand essence as the original. As the Sixties references and advertising examples indicate, brand managers attempted to rebuild the Beetle's brand essence and the physical vehicle by piecing it together from pop culture and retro references. They tried to make the car an "original" again, refashioning it to read as both old-fashioned and new-fangled, simultaneously retro and techno. Readapting the vehicle to a new social and historical context refreshes the brand meaning that has been denuded through time and by repeated reproduction, just as Benjamin asserted that aesthetic aura was wont to do. In conceptualizing design in the broadest, most culturally significant sense possible, the product's creators sought to reanimate the brand's mojo, so to speak.

Our study of consumer reception to the New Beetle, however, reveals bitter skeptics and true believers. Consumers demonstrate that they are sophisticated interpreters of marketing cues about a brand's authenticity. "Jane" posted a simple, one sentence statement that precipitated a heated debate: "In my view, the 'new' Beetle is a Beetle in name only" (alt.volkswagen.beetle news group, February 17, 1998). Jane's comment and its polarizing effect on the news group were profound. In an immediate response, "Matthew" expressed his agreement: "I agree. It's nothing but a smart trick. Add a bit [of] old shapes and there you are. Let's hope the commerce will fail. The end of the so-called beetle." As with Jane, Matthew expresses his outrage at marketers and refuses to equate the shared brand name with a shared authenticity. He is searching for other, less superficial cues.

Another emotional debate about supporters of the old versus the new unfolded on the alt.volkswagen.beetle news group in mid-September 1998.

"Jaco": Does the term "New Beetle" in this news group refer to a "new" Air Cooled, Rear Engined, Beetle or the Front Engined, Water Cooled, Marketing Con Trick vehicle? ... I see no direct lineage between the "old" Beetle and the "new" Beetle in terms of engineering. And lets face it, the old Beetle was pure engineering.... The bottom line is that ANY automotive company could have produced a modern car with a couple of styling cues suggesting it "looked" liked a Beetle.

"Orrin": It's by VW, it has the styling cues you mentioned, and people love the car for the car itself. What would it take for you to call it a New Beetle? To have a rear engine that's air-cooled? To be prone to fire? To be uncomfortable? To be unsafe? Obviously, they wouldn't release that. It's 1998, things have changed. As beautiful as the old v-dubs are, people want something that has more power stock, has all the creature comforts of a '90s automobile, doesn't require someone to be mechanically inclined to maintain, and has that intangible charm the old one did for so many. (exchange posted between "Jaco" and "Orrin," alt.volkswagen.beetle news group, September 15, 1998)

This debate between Beetle fans revolves around definitions of authenticity. Jaco equates certain physical charac-

teristics, particularly engine-related ones, of the old Beetle with the brand's values and thus its brand essence. Orrin, conversely, is looking beyond these physical characteristics for definitions of Beetle brand essence. He is more concerned with design and ineffable atmospherics; he references the brand associations that are more closely related to advertising and marketing than to automotive assembly lines. Jaco lashes out at Beetle brand managers in terms similar to Matthew, suggesting that the brand managers are devious tricksters. The debates among consumers raise important points about the management of brand essence. Part of the challenge for the New Beetle's marketers is to shift the terms of comparison so that the core values of the brand are maintained while the physical properties of the car are radically altered.

*Antinomy: Brand paradox in the Beetle brand.* Recall that we have conceptualized brand paradox as an irresolvable contradiction that manifests itself at the level of brand consumption. The New Beetle brand, as with retro brands per se, exhibits many such irresolvable tensions. For example, we have illustrated how the car juxtaposes a Third Reich history with a worker's utopia, the rebellious American Sixties, flower-power hippies, and the middle-class ethos of contemporary American consumers. We have also demonstrated the anthropomorphization of the patently mechanical automobile, expressed perhaps best in Disney's cartoonlike "Love Bug," Herbie (for an argument that this human sense of relationship building obtains in all brand relationships, see Fournier 1998).

The New Beetle also expresses the central retro brand paradox between old and new, then and now, past and future. In the case of the Beetle brand, a tension between past and present is made manifest in a debate between supporters of old Beetles and new Beetles. In a heated exchange in the [rec.autos.makers.vw.watercooled](#) news group in May 2002, "James" contends that the old Beetle is inferior:

In this era of the Cadillac Escalade, Lincoln Navigator, and even the modern crashworthy Passat, it astounds me that anyone would dream of venturing out into regular traffic in one of these 1930s-era death traps. Even in moderate collisions (that wouldn't even trigger an airbag in today's cars) old Beetles collapse like beer cans at a frat party.... Old Beetles are nostalgia pieces, no doubt. Romantic even. But safe in today's driving conditions? No more than a Model A. I say preserve a few old Beetles as trailer queens, Sunday drivers, and museum pieces, and let the rest of 'em rot. (posted by "James," [rec.autos.makers.vw.watercooled](#) news group, May 23, 2002)

James's advice demonstrates that he believes the Beetle brand must be updated. The reason for this is straightforward, as James explains in a later, follow-up e-mail: "The old Beetle's 70-year-old technology incorporates NO modern safety design" ([rec.autos.makers.vw.watercooled](#) news group, May 24, 2002). There is a strong progressive undercurrent here: James considers the Beetle brand part of the entire progressive project of modern society. As technology is brought to bear on product categories, brands become more sophisticated, more reliable, and more advanced. Although the Beetle brand of the past may have rich symbolic meanings (as evidenced by James's references to nostalgia, romanticism, and museum worthiness), the brand can

and must be updated if it is to be used rather than merely admired.

Yet there are others who believe that the old Beetle brand has lasting relevance. They collect the cars; refurbish them; correct their defects with specially engineered new parts; and buy the newer, updated models still produced in Mexico. Another old Beetle detractor, "Alex," did not understand this and asked the news group, "Why would anyone want an old Beetle, especially when they cost thousands of dollars now?" ([rec.autos.makers.vw.watercooled](#) news group, May 24, 2002). The answer he received from "David" illustrates the perspective of an old Beetle supporter:

Because they're the last remnant of when quality meant something—a car not meant to be disposable. They're fun to drive, reliable, and cheap to run. Supers in particular have handling that front-wheel-drive cars can only dream about. Compared to [old] Beetles, Rabbits/Golfs (or any modern car [such as the new Beetle], for that matter) are tinny, plastic, flimsy, overweight pieces of junk where most of the engineering work has gone into making sure you'll need to replace them when the factory wants some more money from you. (posted by "David," [rec.autos.makers.vw.watercooled](#) news group, May 24, 2002)

David's perspective helps provide an understanding of the irresolvable temporal paradox underlying retromarketing. David regards the old brand as a repository of better times. To David, it is physical evidence, a fast-fading signal, that affordable and durable cars once existed. David's narrative is a testament to tradition, conservatism, the enduring quality of times past, and times past of enduring quality. In stark contrast to James, David dismisses the progressive and the modern as cheap marketing gimmicks. Similar to Richard, Jaco, and Matthew, David's anticorporate and anti-marketing comments reveal a popular discomfort with corporate power in contemporary culture, which consumer and marketing scholars have recently begun to explore (see, e.g., Holt 2002; Kozinets 2001, 2002a, b; Thompson and Haytko 1997).

Can this brand paradox be resolved? A posting from "Tony" illustrates a careful negotiation of the consumer ambivalence surrounding the conflicting meanings of retro brands:

There's no way in hell a car could be sold in today's market based on the original. The design is simply obsolete.... The old beetle was designed in the mid-1930s for a nation in economic trouble with few cars, at the request of Hitler. The new beetle was designed in the '90s in the U.S. for mostly the U.S. and Europe, for people with more money, in an utterly different marketplace.... In other words, OF COURSE the new Beetle has very little in common with the old other than the outline. It couldn't realistically be any other way. It's essentially a Golf with a different shell. This is a very good thing.... Is there another car on the market with a design more audacious than the new Beetle? The sixties are long over. So are the thirties, for that matter. I'd thank VW for still making small cars with excellent design and personality. You can always blend in with a Civic, Corolla, Cavalier (yech), etc. if you'd rather. (posted by "Tony," [alt.volkswagen.beetle](#) news group, February 17, 1998)

Tony argues from the perspective of a moderate rationalist laying out a logical argument to ease the tensions between two warring factions. Discounting the intrinsic value of the past, he insists that the old brand must be adjusted for a new time, place, and set of target consumers. Akin to Orrin, he shifts the argument about brand essence to superficial design elements and advertising-laden symbolic associations. The result, for Tony, is an up-to-date vehicle that still shares the enchanting personality of the old Beetle brand. *Enchantment* indeed is the operative word, as many *Star Wars* fans testify.

## Star Wars

The original 1977 *Star Wars* movie attempted to disorient its consumers temporally by offering a faraway future world of spacecraft and intelligent robots subsumed within a fairy tale set in the distant past. *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace* attempted to top this temporal dislocation. Setting the fourth movie three episodes before the first was a stroke of marketing genius that created the neologism *prequel*. This prequel demonstrates retro branding in the realm of connected products and services that characterize today's "entertainment economy" (Wolf 1999). As a retro brand, *The Phantom Menace* stamps an established brand name, *Star Wars*, on a new movie that couples cutting-edge special effects with a cast of contemporary actors. As with the new Beetle, it imaginatively melds a familiar brand name with an all-new, up-to-date product.

*The Phantom Menace* not only contained history but also created history. People waited in lines to sit through the trailers for the movie and then left the theaters before the main feature (Gaslin' 1999). Die-hard fans in 30 U.S. cities camped out on sidewalks for more than a month to be among the first to see the film, which spawned a documentary movie about their rite of endurance (Gaslin 1999). Fans exhumed old *Star Wars* collectibles, new *Star Wars* toys graced toy store shelves, and box office records were broken once more. The buzz surrounding the rerelease was closer to a din. Our analysis of consumer responses to this retro brand reveals additional insights into the management of brand meaning.

*Allegory: Star Wars's brand story.* The movies *Star Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Return of the Jedi*, *The Phantom Menace*, and *Attack of the Clones* are parts of a saga set in a mythical world that blends past and future. The saga is branded by the name *Star Wars*, and its story is a coming-of-age morality tale that segues into a tragic fall from grace. As an entertainment brand, *Star Wars* contains a rich set of associations deriving from the narrative that is its core product. The brand is a universal myth populated with familiar mythic signs and boasting archetypal heroes, sorcerers, sages, demons, fairy princesses, clowns, and elvish entities (for more on consumer myths, see Stern 1995). Each character in the *Star Wars* movies forms a subbrand in a complex, multidimensional brand constellation.

Many of the consumers who discuss *Star Wars* and its sequels, prequels, and even sequels of prequels often refer to the moral aspects of its narrative arc. The heroic quest and its obstacles and overall purpose transcend consumers' ordi-

nary experiences and give them a taste of the philosophical and the sublime previously associated mainly with religion, mysticism, and other spiritual practices. For example, consider the importance of the central brand story and its mythic references in the following news-group postings:

As Yoda said, the Dark Side is always hard to see. Except with someone like Darth Maul, who just reeks of evil. Still, even him, when he's on Coruscant, probably doesn't go anywhere near the Jedi Temple. Especially for (some might say cliché) views on good (heroic and brave) and evil (sneaky and in-Sidious, pun intended), it would be natural for Sidious to be disguised and deceptive. (posted by "Randy," parenthetical comments in original, rec.games.frp.gurps news group, May 22, 1999)

Darth Vader may have ended up becoming a twisted version of Anakin Skywalker but he started out acting with the best intentions. Unfortunately, we all know the road to hell is paved with the best intentions. Sure, Palpatine admits to using the Dark Side of the Force in E6 [*Star Wars: Episode 6—Return of the Jedi*], but that's just [the] name the Jedi have applied to the side they don't use. Palpatine is willing to use it in order to achieve the ordered and peaceful galaxy he doesn't see existing under the Republic and the Senate. Jedi would never use an ends to justify a means and that what separates the dark and light sides. This is why the young Anakin will be willing to follow Palpatine, because of the good he can do, not the evil. (posted by "Cam," rec.arts.sf.starwars.misc news group, July 10, 2002)

"Erik": In *Return of the Jedi* the emperor is not able to detect Luke or seemingly Yoda. In the *Phantom Menace* the Jedi are not able to detect Darth Sidious or Darth Maul even though Darth Sidious was amongst them the whole time. Does this mean if you are totally good and totally evil you can not see one who is your opposite?

"Roseanne": Well, while the Emperor/Sidious is presented as totally evil, who is totally good? I don't think that Luke is meant that way at all. In fact, a good deal of the psychological drama is made out of Luke's struggles against the temptations of evil. (exchange posted between "Erik" and "Roseanne," rec.arts.sf.starwars.misc, January 30, 2001)

These postings powerfully demonstrate two important points about the consumption of the *Star Wars* brand story. First, the archetypal characters and plot elements of *The Phantom Menace* are interpreted allegorically as timeless didactic symbols alluding to a reality that transcends consumers' mundane daily existence. *Star Wars* is a myth of good versus evil. It refers to human universals such as the battles between temptation and resistance, selfishness and generosity, personal and political, means and ends. As consumers decode George Lucas's cosmology—inspired by the archetypal reflections of the comparative religion scholar Joseph Campbell—they inevitably are also defining and processing moral characteristics and the meaning of morals for themselves. For example, it may not be acceptable to favor ends over means, as Darth Vader does, but Cam finds it comprehensible and even honorable. The brand story is deeply implicated in this personal activity of mapping out acceptable definitions and behavior.



Second, the way consumers weave together notions from all five *Star Wars* movies is noteworthy. Interpreting the story as a continuing saga, they treat the brand as one single text rather than five separate texts. By using common characters and motifs in marketing images (such as the giant head of the villain as the looming background for both movie posters), the producers cue consumers to make comparisons. These comparisons between texts suggest that the prequels successfully blend into the same brand story of the first motion picture. Consumers consider the separate products a single narrative, a single brand, a single “morallegory.”

*Arcadia: Star Wars's idealized community.* The first *Star Wars* movie begins with a trumpet flourish and the words, “A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away.” With this resonant phrase, the creator George Lucas marks the imaginary realm of *Star Wars* as a “liminal,” or borderland, state that exists beyond ordinary life (Turner 1967). It is in the openness that accompanies this displacement that consumers find their sense of connection and meaning. Consumers have roamed for almost three decades in the wild, if imaginary, frontier that *Star Wars* founded. Anthropologists report that liminal places and states contribute to altered states of consciousness, assist people in escaping from everyday routines, and hold out the possibility of self-transformation. Like sidewalk squatters outside movie theaters, consumers occupy the space created by *Star Wars's* brand story and use elements of it to construct their own utopian domains.

This process is encouraged, and even accelerated, by *Star Wars's* setting in a bygone age of adventure, imagination, and magic. As a brand, *Star Wars* represents a timeless tale of liberating empowerment. In addition, for many *Star Wars* consumers, the sense of nostalgia they derive from the brand also derives from their personal experiences with the brand during childhood (see also Holbrook and Schindler 1989, 1994, 1996; Moore, Wilkie, and Lutz 2002). By turning the inner sanctum of a darkened theater into a summoning space for viewers' inner child, the saga combines the nostalgic with the paradisiacal. “Allan” said that seeing *The Phantom Menace's* opening title, with its direct evocations of *Star Wars* symbolism, “took me back to when I was 11, and me and my brother got to see *Star Wars* in my grandfather's theater. Front-row center when the blockade runner and Star Destroyer wooshed right over my head” (rec.games.frp.gurps news group, May 25, 1999). Allan's recollections precipitate a para-Proustian return to the past by commingling family ties, privileged viewing positions, and preteen fantasies. His wonderment mixes fantasy with reality; the demarcation between being part of an audience in a theater and floating suspended in outer space has become one. Many other message posters echoed Allan in exhibitionistic displays of childhood dreams and nostalgia:

Having seen the original *Star Wars* films more times than I can count (more times than any adult cares to admit), I so wanted to love this movie. I was mentally prepared to be swept back into a world I haven't seen anew since I was 17. With the imagination behind the first trilogy reinvigorated by a long rest, and equipped with technology not even imagined in 1977, I expected an unequalled triumph of the imagination.... I have to admit that I did not mind the character of Jar Jar Binks, Qui-Gon Jinn's reluctant comic sidekick. So much negative hype about how annoying this

character was going to be had spread like wildfire though the *Star Wars* fan community that it was impossible for Jar Jar to live down to it. (posted by “Peter,” rec.arts.sf.star-wars.misc news group, May 23, 1999)

Peter's posting also reinforces the close connection between *Star Wars's* retro brand and childhood or adolescence. It is as if the brand has magical powers to transport consumers back in time, to thrill them in a way they have not been thrilled since they were children. In his detailed review (most of which is cut here for brevity's sake), Peter's narrative also shows that he sees himself as a spokesperson for an enormous *Star Wars* fan community of which he is a member. The brand community had been anticipating the film for a long time, and its word-of-mouth connections, especially over the Internet, were formidable (see Kozinets 1999, 2001; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Peter must defend his own opinion of the character Jar Jar Binks against the extant strong negative consensus of the community, which demonstrates how the brand community influences consumer opinion.

In this vein, some community members contend that the revived *Star Wars* film was not sufficiently distant from the present—a necessary condition for it to enable suspension of disbelief and evoke a wondrous place set apart. A common news-group complaint was that the film contained too much contemporary vernacular, such as “that's gotta hurt.” “Calvin,” for example, unequivocally stated: “Look. I'm a fan here. I'm willing to really work to suspend disbelief. I'm willing to go out of my way to try to get into the mood. But, c'mon, George Lucas—meet me halfway!” (rec.games.frp.gurps news group, May 22, 1999). Calvin's comments suggest that though he is highly motivated to believe in the movie, the text must also conform to accepted conventions. Even before the release of *Star Wars: Episode II—Attack of the Clones*, there was a major fan outcry reported in the news and shared on the news groups. The outcry pertained to the cameo roles given to the pop-music boy band N'Sync:

The online response from the huge *Star Wars* fan community was immediate and condemnatory; many felt that the independent, fly-in-the-face-of-convention sci-fi franchise was become [sic] just another pop culture marketing gimmick, and that N'Sync's involvement was another nail in its coffin. This week, however, LucasFilm proved that it does listen to its fans. Because of the outcry and dismay expressed on various fan Web sites (notably TheForce.net), they made the decision to cut N'Sync's parts from the film. (news release posted by “Anthony,” rec.music.artists.kings-x news group, January 14, 2002)

This posting reinforces the existence, power, and peril of an active, involved brand community. The inference from these complaints is that if the film is too contemporary it shatters the illusion of iconic events unfolding in a place set apart from today. Ironically, the original *Star Wars* films (not least, the notorious *Star Wars Holiday Special*) were as much a part of their own era, the Seventies and Eighties, as the retro prequels are a part of theirs. In addition, there is concern, as there is for the New Beetle, that the retro brand is merely a marketing gimmick. For the *Star Wars* brand, its idealized community is composed of not only the famous fan base but also the communities associated with at least

two other idealized past times partially evoked by the story, which are held in high esteem by community members. These are, first, the brand story's close-knit community of rebels and sorcerers and, second, the rich associations of childhood delight evoked by the original *Star Wars* brand.

*Aura: Star Wars wanes.* As Peter's aforementioned posting attests, when the new *Star Wars* movie was released, many Internet news groups were awash in rankings, ratings, interpretations, and autopsies of the movie. The majority of these messages assessed the extent of the movie's authenticity, that is, the presence of the original *Star Wars* brand essence in the prequel. There was considerable commentary on the precious, incomparable, singular, and sacred qualities of the original, which is analogous to Benjamin's conception of the almost holy aura of original artworks. Consumers complained that the movie's representation of "medichlorians," an essentially biological explanation for the hitherto ineffable Force, was "lame," "anti-mystical," and generally ran against the grain of the original movies (see various postings at [rec.games.frp.gurps](http://rec.games.frp.gurps) news group, May 22, 1999). Consumers' concerns are captured in a more general sense in the following news-group message:

Seriously. People who think *Phantom Menace* and *Jedi* are in any way close to the quality of the first two movies just did not get what was special about those two movies in the first place. *Phantom Menace* and *Jedi* are JUST MOVIES. *Star Wars* and *Empire* seemed something more. (posted by "Todd," alt.fan.starwars news group, August 18, 1999)

Todd's comments, which must resort to emotional generalities, suggest that consumers can only struggle to describe precisely their judgments of brand essence—whether the reproduction has the core values and authentic identity of the original brand. In Todd's posting, these qualities seem beyond rational terms; they are only recognized when viscerally grasped. Consumers appreciate the ineffable, mystical nature of their attachment to the brand in frequent self-deprecating jokes about their own obsessions. After one message poster stated that *The Phantom Menace* is just a movie and people need to get on with their lives (apparently a reference to the extreme sidewalk-sitting behavior preceding the prequel's release), "Chandler" replies:

Foolish Heretic. The Archangel Gabriel descended from heaven and instructed the prophet Lucas with the Fourth Testament. He is in the process of filming the more dramatic parts. This is authentic Holy Scripture you pass off with "it's just a movie." Do you accuse the Bible of just being a book? The Tablets of Gold and the Ruby Spectacles of just being jewelry? The Ark of the Covenant of just being a bug lamp?" ([rec.games.frp.gurps](http://rec.games.frp.gurps) news group, June 10, 1999)

Although Chandler is clearly being playful with his use of religious language, many Judeo-Christian believers might consider his comparisons blasphemous. His comparisons are founded on the assertion that *The Phantom Menace* possesses vivid brand authenticity and powerful authority. They also suggest that the *Star Wars* brand is a deeply meaningful creation affecting some people's lives profoundly. As with the New Beetle, however, consumers are divided on the

authenticity issue and cannot agree on the criteria that should be used to judge it. Although the concepts of brand identity and brand essence seem relatively straightforward, this analysis of the *Star Wars* brand suggests that they are much more complex from the consumer standpoint. Consumers cocreate the brand meaning by carefully reading and interpreting brand-related communications, adding their own personal histories, and continually delving into definitions of the brand's authenticity.

*Antinomy: Star Wars's brand paradox.* The stewardship of *Star Wars's* commercial cosmos offers important insights into brand meaning management. The series creator George Lucas and his creative team have spent more than a quarter of a century carefully managing their brand extensions. To do this, they have had to control the antinomy, or the paradoxical essence, the "paradessence" (Shakar 2001), of their brand. One of the key challenges Lucas and his marketing team have faced is consistency. In the dynamic deal-making and almost embarrassingly merchandized world of successful entertainment opportunities, could they bolster brand essence and avoid brand dilution? If one story maintained that the Force was all-powerful and another maintained that it had limits, what would the effects be on the extended brand story?

To answer this question, consumers must and do follow sets of rules about what constitutes a "real" or "authentic" *Star Wars* brand story. In fan debates on the alt.startrek.vs.starwars news group, "Pat" (May 23, 2002) told other followers to consult the official guidelines on the *Star Wars* Web site to help determine what constitutes its actual brand story. According to the Web site, the "real story of *Star Wars*" is contained in the films "and *only* the films." It discounts the authority and authenticity of book and comic book novelizations, trading cards, and other subnarratives. On the official Web site and in *Star Wars* fan idiom, the guidelines are called "canon" and generally considered sacrosanct.

However, some *Star Wars* fans resist the edicts of the series' marketers and those telling them that any product bearing the official brand is the genuine article. As is clear from the preceding comments of Calvin and Todd, despite the increased technological sophistication of the prequel, some perceive the newer *Star Wars* film as failing to fit in with the spirit of the past. The retro brand is thus perceived as inauthentic, inadequate, and ultimately unacceptable.

In the fascinating, activist, emotionally charged comments of "Bill," precipitated by the latest *Star Wars* prequel, *Attack of the Clones*, it seems that virtually everything from the retro-branded movie is deemed inferior to the original (see alt.fan.starwars news group, May 10, 2002). In perhaps the ultimate act of consumer resistance, Bill vehemently argues that fans should wrest control of *Star Wars* from its official owners and produce and distribute their own, more authentic version of *The Phantom Menace*:

We the fans need to take *Star Wars* back from its evil creator. I propose that we form a secret, rebel group that will create a REAL EPISODE I, in secret, and release it over the Internet using encrypted e-mails and distributing DVD's. Once it gets out, there will be no stopping it, because people will copy it to each other. It will be illegal, but what will happen, will the F\*\*\*ING THOUGHT

POLICE OF GEORGE LUCAS come and try to take it from us? Nobody owns the characters of Star Wars. That's so much bullshit. You can't own my religion! You can't own the very metaphor I interface reality with! Well, OK, maybe you could if you were going to MAKE A GOD-DAMN GOOD STAR WARS MOVIE, but this crap just won't do. (alt.fan.starwars news group, May 10, 2002)

In a different discussion about the religious responses to the *Star Wars* brand (a message thread titled "Star Wars—A New Religion"), fans reached equally resentful conclusions. "Adam" began by suggesting that Australian *Star Wars* fans write "Jedi" as their religion on the country's census form, because if 10,000 people subscribe to the same sect, it becomes a fully recognized and legal "religion" (see aus.dvd news group, April 3, 2001). The "Jedis" then might even name their own holidays and gain government benefits. To this, "Zack" responded:

There is a downside to this business. Since George Lucas is THE CREATOR, that would make him GOD. It's bad enough in the ancient religions having a God that is either cruel or apathetic but to have one that constantly milks you for money while in return giving you extra Computer Generated muppets as a Special Edition is just ludicrous. (aus.dvd news group, April 4, 2001)

Bill's diatribe offers opposing poles of the profane market and the sacred myth (see Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989). Zack's posting is resentful of the myth- and money-making power manifested in George Lucas as a person. Both message posters demonstrate that though the brand is clearly recognized as a commercial creation, it is also a deeply meaningful part of some consumers' lives—it is enthusiastically represented as a powerful metaphor for living and even for religion. These comments suggest not only that commerce and the sacred are cultural opposites but also that their intermixing in brands such as *Star Wars* has considerable cultural power (see also Kozinets 2001, pp. 76–78). In support of these findings having wider marketing relevance, Peñaloza (2000, p. 105) finds similar tensions between "commerce" and "soul" among ranchers of the American West and concludes that the West is a site for "the production of profound cultural meanings." Bill's and Zack's postings express these important tensions in terms of a brand and the different responses to them. They respond to the brand paradox behind *Star Wars*'s combination of creed and commerce, piety and profanity, mana and money.

## Discussion

### *Implications for Understanding Retro Brands*

Retro brands will have continuing appeal as a marketing strategy for two important reasons. First, technology and imitation quickly eradicate first-mover advantage, yet a competitive edge is gained by tapping into the wellsprings of trust and loyalty that consumers hold toward old brands. Second, consider Davis's (1979) contention that communal nostalgia increases during chaotic times. The tumultuous post–September 11 world is likely to see more rather than less retro branding. Early indicators seem to confirm this trend. Firms such as River West Brands LLC, headquartered in Chicago, are actively acquiring

neglected brands such as DUZ detergent and Aero Shave foam to attempt to relaunch them nationwide (Van Bakel 2002). Our analysis suggests that these two reasons, the rapidity of new product launches and the increasingly unstable cultural environment, are important causes of the rise of retro branding.

Yet despite the evident popularity of old-style products among contemporary consumers, our findings suggest that managing retro brands is a complex affair. It is not simply a matter of rebroadcasting an old advertisement, relaunching a long-delisted brand, or boasting about an organization's illustrious heritage (cf. Aaker 1996). It is more intractable than this because the brand is reanimated jointly by stakeholders. The brand is a milieu where marketing management and consumer commitment coexist. As Fournier (1998) demonstrates, consumers have deep relationships with brands; our data bring to light some of the complex historical, allegorical, and paradoxical qualities of those relationships. Consumers' arguments and agreements about the New Beetle and *Star Wars*, for example, demonstrate that the management of brand meanings can be a jointly told tale or a vicious verbal duel.

In relation to past research, our data especially bring to light the communal elements of brand meaning management in a retro context. Given its mythological status and historical context, retromarketing represents the acme of community-based relationship management. A retro brand is a powerful totem that regathers its loyal users into a contemporary clan. Members of the clan share an affinity that situates them in a common experience of belonging, both to a brand community (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001) and to a particular era and its ethos. The retro brand carries and concretizes these important symbolic elements in perpetuity.

Furthermore, our findings demonstrate that retro brands enable consumers to negotiate the moral geography of their lives. Despite, or perhaps because of, the nomadic character of contemporary social relations, consumers use retro brands to return briefly to an imagined era of moral certainty. This moral element is an important source of a brand's continuing reinvigoration and a singular contribution of this study. It is inscribed, for example, in the *Star Wars* paradox, in which good and faithful consumers are exploited by the evil, moneygrubbing George Lucas. Morality is also at the core of brand essence, which is the central tension driving the Volkswagen Beetle's brand story of idealism, environmentalism, independence, and nonconformity.

In summary, the communities that coalesce around retro brands differ from other brand communities (e.g., McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001) in the moral and utopian character of the "consciousness of kind" (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001, p. 418) to which their members subscribe. The retro brand is a portal to a temporal sanctuary, which admits the community periodically for purposes of renewal and rejuvenation. The retro brand is a creative anachronism, imaginatively employed by the community as a metasocial commentary on the contemporary cultural scene. The preservation and active reconfiguration of collective memory is the lifework of the community. It should come as no surprise, then, that brand managers are increasingly turning to the mythological and

poetic (Randazzo 1993) as well as the archetypal (Mark and Pearson 2001) in their attempts to reinvigorate ailing brands.

Which brands most qualify for revival? Our analysis suggests several salient qualities. Although it may lie dormant in collective memory, the brand must still exist as a brand story, yet it should remain relatively undisturbed by recent marketing attention. The brand must have a vital essence; that is, it must have existed as an important icon during a specific developmental stage for a particular generation or cohort. It must be capable of evoking vivid yet relevant associations for particular consumers. Perhaps most important, the retro brand must be capable of mobilizing a utopian vision, of engendering a longing for an idealized past or community. In this respect, the brand must inspire a solidarity and sense of belonging to a community. Ideally, the brand should be amenable to both technological and symbolic updates so as to ensure its perpetual relevance to consumers, who constantly revise their own identities. In these considerations, we find the central elements of Allegory (brand story), Aura (brand essence), Arcadia (idealized community), and Antinomy (brand paradox) that inform our 4As analysis.

### ***Implications for Brand Meaning Management***

Marketing scholars from Alderson (1957) to Zaltman (1997) have recognized the importance of the experiential nature of the brand, but perhaps not since the heyday of motivation research (e.g., Dichter 1960) has there been such a resurgence of interest in brand phenomenology. The most succinct if overstated justification for this interest is the contention that some conceptualize a product as “no more than an artifact around which customers have experiences” (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2000, p. 83). From the pioneering work of Levy (1999) and Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) through the current wave of postpositivist inquiry (e.g., Brown 1995; Fournier 1998; Fournier and Mick 1999; Holt 2002; Kozinets 2001; Peñaloza 2000; Sherry 1998; Thompson 1997), the tendency to regard brands as symbolic creations has led to the conclusion that the management of meaning must underlie marketing strategy. That marketers are quintessentially meaning managers, shaping the experience of consumers, is intuitively plausible. That meaning management involves attending to the creative activity of consumers, or that consumers might justly be regarded as the cocreators of brand essence, is equally plausible, if less fully appreciated.

Strategic brand management models, both comprehensive (Keller 1998) and circumscribed (Aaker 1991, 1996), tend to downplay the complex, heterogeneous, and experiential nature of consumer–brand relations. These models generally adopt a more cognitive or structural view of the brand and overlook much of the emotional complexity that endows the brand with texture, nuance, and dimensionality. Furthermore, although customer-based approaches to brand equity allow for the existence of idiosyncratic consumer response, they encourage managers to view this experience as a passive or reactive result of marketing intervention. For example, recent studies on brand extensions conceptualize brand meanings as well-developed networks of associated beliefs and feelings (e.g., Desai and Keller 2002; John,

Loken, and Joiner 1998). A study of the process element of brand meanings is valuable, but it does not and should not substitute for a sophisticated knowledge of the cultural contents of those meanings. By seeking singular, aggregate brand meanings among populations, these association-based network approaches tend to underplay the complexity and difference among consumers—let alone consumers’ own active making of meaning—that our approach brings to the fore.

In this article, we show consumers to be partners in the cocreation of brand essence and importers of meaning from beyond the marketplace. Consumers draw holistically from their lived experiences with products, history, mass media, and one another, as well as marketing sources, for the meanings they ascribe to brands. Whereas Stern (1988) recommends that advertising be considered intrinsically allegorical, our research suggests a broadening and extension of this perspective. Summarized by the 4As abbreviation, we believe that brands themselves can be usefully considered complex stories and that the most successful brands have “morallegorical” qualities.

Brand stories are partly composed of the meanings and associations emanating from advertisers and marketers; however, they are also constructed by the mass media, press releases, news stories, and related celebrities. Most important for retro brands, they are redolent of historical periods; temporal connections; and their attendant national, regional, and political associations (e.g., the Beetle’s vestigial links to Nazi Germany). Consumers construct their own brand stories using the raw material of producer and cultural intermediary stories and adding their own idiosyncratic viewpoints, needs, goals, and experiences. As our data set demonstrates, networked information technology has made the widespread sharing of these brand stories among interested consumers much easier and much more global than it has been previously. These consumer communities play an important role in cocreating brand stories. They can also serve as settings in which those stories take place. As Meredith and Schewe (2002) note, cohorts of consumers are nostalgic together and can idealize similar versions of utopia. Consumers use idealized times and places—those of Seventies childhood innocence and Sixties flower power, for example—as settings that lend depth and vitality to brand meanings. The result of this animation is a brand with core values, a brand animated by its story and containing a moral character and identity. Our study thus suggests that Aura (brand essence), Allegory (brand stories), and Arcadia (idealized community) are the character, plot, and setting, respectively, of brand meaning.

Antinomy, the final element of our 4As abbreviation, is perhaps most important of all, for brand paradox brings the cultural complexity necessary to animate each of the other dimensions. The brand is both alive and not alive, a thing and a personality, a subject and an object: This is the paradoxical kernel of brand meaning. The story is both truth and fiction, composed of clever persuasions and facts, devised by distant copywriters and real users. This is the central conundrum of brand story and consumer–marketer dependence. The idealized community is both a real community and a pseudocommunity, moral and amoral, in thrall to a commercial creation and a rebellious uprising, depen-

dent and independent, a gathering of both angry activists and covetous consumers. For a retro brand, the tension between past and present—and even, as in our two examples, the future—also vivifies brand meanings. Retro products seem custom-made to address a core paradox at the heart of brand management. Retro combines the benefits of uniqueness, newness, and exclusivity (with its hints of higher functionality, class, styling, and premium prices) with oldness, familiarity, recognition, trust, and loyalty. These intrinsic paradoxes underpin a product's *élan vital*, the creative life force at the heart of the retro brand's extraordinary appeal.

## Conclusion

According to the acerbic comedian George Carlin (1998, p. 110), contemporary consumer culture is beset by “yestermania,” an inordinate fondness for revivals, reenactments, remakes, reruns, and re-creations. Certainly, the merest glance across today's marketing landscape reveals that retro goods and services are all around. Long-abandoned brands, such as Airstream (trailers), Brylcreem (pomade), and Charlie (cologne), have been adroitly reanimated and successfully relaunched. Ostensibly extinct trade characters, such as Mr. Whipple, Morris the Cat, and Ms. Chiquita Banana, are standing sentinel on the supermarket shelves once more. Ancient commercials are being rebroadcast (e.g., Ovaltine, Alka-Seltzer); timeworn slogans are being resuscitated (e.g., “Good to the last drop,” “Look, Mom, no cavities”); and long-established products are being repackaged in their original eye-catching liveries (e.g., Necco wafers, Sun-Maid raisins).

We have examined the rise of retro brands in an attempt to develop tractable theory that contributes to marketing principles and practice. We have reviewed the pertinent literature on nostalgia and, using an appropriately retro research method, have empirically investigated two exemplars of retro branding, the Volkswagen New Beetle and *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace*. We found that the meaning of retro brands inheres in four key characteristics: Allegory, Arcadia, Aura, and Antinomy. These characteristics indicate that the social and cultural forces that animate brand meaning are considerably more complex than prior conceptualizations suggest. Brands mean more than relatively fixed arrangements of associative nodes and attributes. Complexity, heterogeneity, dynamism, and paradox are integral aspects of the consumer-brand relationship. Not only are brands fixed cognitive associations of meanings; they are also dynamic, expanding social universes composed of stories. They are social entities experienced, shaped, and changed in communities. Therefore, although brand meanings might be ascribed and communicated to consumers by

marketers, consumers in turn uncover and activate their own brand meanings, which are communicated back to marketers and the associated brand community. This is not to say that brand management is impossible in a world of consumer-mediated meanings, but only that it is more complex than before and cocreated rather than imposed by managerial dictate.

Our analysis of brand stories and their managerial significance complements the increasingly accepted view that brands are no longer expected to be reassuring to consumers; they must inspire consumers to take risks (Kapferer 2001). Fournier and Mick (1999) note that consumer satisfaction with technological products should be built on surprise, the unexpected, a challenge. To create this challenge, brand managers must take risks and boldly go where managers have been reluctant to go before. Nike's championing of global labor standards in response to a boycott of its brands is a perfect example of this propensity. Brand meanings, moreover, must be managed as community brands, as brands that belong to and are created in concert with groups of communities (Kozinets 1999, 2001, 2002b; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). These communities exist in local and technologically mediated arenas. They are ambivalent, dynamic, and contested cultural spaces. In brand-building efforts, marketers must locate relevant gatherings of these groups and address them collectively as well as continue to address solitary consumers. The effect of undertaking these new strategies will be an enlivening of our evolving understanding of brands and their cultural meanings.

## Appendix Internet Data Sources Used in Data Set

The news groups we examined include the following: rec.autos.makers.vw.watercooled; rec.autos.makers.vw.aircooled; rec.autos.marketplace; alt.volkswagen.beetle; rec.games.frp.gurps; alt.fan.starwars; rec.arts.sf.starwars.collecting.misc; rec.arts.sf.starwars.collecting.vintage; rec.arts.sf.starwars.games; rec.arts.sf.starwars.misc; and rec.arts.movies.current-films.

The Web sites we investigated include Peter's New Beetle Experience at [http://broca.aecom.yu.edu/beetle/new\\_beetle.shtml](http://broca.aecom.yu.edu/beetle/new_beetle.shtml); <http://www.newbeetle.org>; Retro New Beetle Headquarters at [http://homepage.mac.com/retro\\_nb](http://homepage.mac.com/retro_nb); Countdown to *Star Wars* at <http://www.countingdown.com/movies/episode-ii>; TheForce.Net at <http://www.theforce.net/prequels/>; and a range of online fan *Star Wars* movie reviews (e.g., [http://www.mindspring.com/~sejohnson/mag/reviews/Ep1\\_review.html](http://www.mindspring.com/~sejohnson/mag/reviews/Ep1_review.html)).

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