Anticonsumer Consumerism
Using Counterculture Case Studies in Design Education
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Introduction

Design research has always been enhanced with ethnographic studies of cultures and needs. Cultures have primarily been categorized into time-based groups or “generations.” Generational design research has brought design to new levels, but an understanding of cultures and generational gaps is just the beginning. The key to developing the pedagogy to the new alternative school of design is to focus on the more specific subcultures and how to market products specifically to them. Success in product design can rarely be attributed to the product alone; some of the most successful products of the past century (the iPod, Wii, KitchenAid mixer, Ford Mustang, etc.) were the result of appealing to a psychological need or desire. These are not just products we buy, they are products that we want, need, dream about, must have. We buy these particular products not just to use, but to fulfill ourselves. The only downside is that each subculture has a different desire, a different psychological need that needs to be met. This is where a background in marketing and branding can provide exponential insight. With this marketing knowledge as our primary tool in product development, we can design cultural experiences, as well as intuitive products.

For every generation there is a counterculture, and for every counterculture, there is a voice, a band, a fashion, an icon, and most importantly, a retailer. Countercultures are simply an extension of style and fashion, and these fashions need to be peddled by someone, somehow. Consumerism is the driving force behind countercultural movements, although very covertly done. The fashion of rebellion has changed from decade to decade, and the marketing plan has continually evolved to meet the demands of the current trends. People view cultural movements as social and political, but rarely recognize them for what they really are: commercial. Joseph Heath (Nation of Rebels) states that counterculture is in a constant state of cyclical motion; (i.e., the movement is born, forms its foundations, becomes mainstream, gives birth to a new movement in response to itself, and finally dies out). For example, hippie culture gave birth to punk culture, which gave birth to mod culture, which gave birth to hip-hop culture, which gave birth to hipster culture. Heath views this process with a very philosophical mindset, implying that our ego and id are responsible for our intact desire to rebel and consume. These patterns are really much simpler than complex philosophy would dictate. The cycle of consumerism is a direct reflection to the cycle of life, from birth, adolescence, maturity (conforming), breeding, and, finally, death. The life cycle of consumerism is an example of biomimicry, simply put. Much like a person is most influenced by what is around them as a teenager, the fashion of a counterculture is most impressionable during its adolescent stage. It is during this adolescent stage that brands can attach themselves to the counterculture with the greatest opportunity for brand association and ultimately, profit. One of the most established examples of the current counterculture is Urban Outfitters. Their successful product distribution, while influenced by the youth-driven design of the product itself, can attribute that success more so to the environment and location of the store itself.

Urban Outfitters as a company has been around longer than most of the current counterculture has even been alive. The company began as Free People (currently a label it sells) in the 1970s, and only later switched to Urban Outfitters. The brand has achieved its greatest expansion in the past five to seven years by linking itself to the hipster counterculture. To better explain the situation, it is first important to profile what it is to be hipster. Of course a countercultural movement is interpreted differently by people of the movement, people affected by the movement, and bipartisan observers of the movement. This generalization aside, there are a few key characteristics of this particular counterculture movement that can be agreed upon. First, the hipster generation is found in urban areas of large cities; more specifically they live in ethnic neighborhoods that have low housing costs and have yet to experience gentrification. (There are no Urban Outfitters in these neighborhoods. Yet.) Hipster culture is associated with indie, independent, DIY, noncommercial, and/or nonprofit choices of consumption in any and all aspects of life. Hipsters tend to associate themselves with liberal, libertarian, and/or anticapitalist political ideology (The Hipster Handbook, 2003). Secondly, this counterculture has specific visual qualities that link them
together. They wear their hair long and unkempt in a very bohemian manner. They wear skinny leg jeans, newsboy caps, canvas sneakers; they ride bikes, carry messenger bags, and have studio apartments adorned with vintage fabrics, record players, and hand-me-down furniture. Most importantly, they are an antibranding culture. They have a psychological need to avoid mass-produced clothes and products. They are a new kind of elitist, and often their brand aversion even extends into what and where they eat and drink. This is a very broad assessment of hipster culture, but it provides an observation that marketing anything to this counterculture from the standpoint of a mass-retailer is an incredibly daunting task. One such retailer, however, was able to solve the mystery and has become a huge success in providing the skinny pants, newsboy caps, vintage-looking furniture, and kitsch housewares to the hipster counterculture, and that retailer was Urban Outfitters.

Urban Outfitters was able to achieve what so many other retailers were not by putting a very unique advertising campaign into action that allows them to be a chain retailer with mass-produced products, while still coming across as a true outfitter for urbanites. Their most successful tactic and an all-around successful tactic for counterculture marketing was viral advertising. Viral advertising is the newest tactic in brand awareness, and it goes much further beyond the traditional print and television advertisements. Viral advertising is an extension of social networking that involves primarily word of mouth, but secondly, the Internet, trendy magazines, and brand placement and exposure. Urban Outfitters presented a full-frontal viral assault, from their Web blog, all the way to their association with Nylon magazine. Urban Outfitters spent their entire marketing budget proving how cool they were, and the results agreed. Rather than invest money in mainstream advertising like television, Urban Outfitters used their advertising budget to associate with Nylon (a fashion magazine) and to publish their own quarterly fashion publication. These methods helped develop the brand with the right consumer market and alerted the masses to their abundance of countercultural products, fashion, and the like; however, the real advertising came from the word of mouth. The best marketing tactic Urban Outfitters employed is location, or more importantly, lack thereof. Urban Outfitters are specifically placed in metropolitan areas, and are rarely adjacent to or in the vicinity of shopping malls (i.e., the iconic symbol of consumerism). Rather than make their stores and products readily accessible to the masses, they present themselves as an elite retailer. Up front, this decision eliminates potential business brought from the shopping mall consumer group. In the long run, however, this disassociation with the shopping mall allowed them to fulfill the needs of certain anticonsumerism niche markets; for example, the hipsters. They are able to buy their skinny jeans and replica vintage furniture without feeling the guilt or loss of conviction that comes from shopping at international chain retailers like The Gap, Kohl’s, and Target. Urban Outfitters is able to dominate the alternative market, and supply culture-specific products to the masses while still slyly operating as an international chain retailer (much like Gap, Kohl’s, and Target).

Their domination of the counterculture market started slowly at first but quickly gained notoriety from word of mouth. They were located in the trendiest up and coming neighborhoods. They employed fellow edgy young fashion icons to help show off the products and to create stylish decors for the interior of the store, as well as the ever changing window displays. They would even go so far as to allow street artists perform in front of the stores (to help develop their counterculture credibility). All of these elements quickly escalated Urban Outfitters to become a style icon for the current counterculture.

The one downside to becoming a countercultural icon is the eventual fall from grace. Much like the countercultures continually revolving through a life cycle, so does the physical landscape around

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2 Viral marketing and viral advertising refer to marketing techniques that use preexisting social networks to produce increases in brand awareness or to achieve other marketing objectives (such as product sales) through self-replicating viral processes, analogous to the spread of pathological and computer viruses. It can be word-of-mouth delivered or enhanced by the network effects of the Internet. *USA Today*: Viral advertising spreads through marketing plans. June 23, 2005.
them. Countercultural movements traditionally spring up in poor neighborhoods, fueled by poverty, discontent, and a need for some sort of status. These neighborhoods give birth to a counterculture, and as this counterculture grows and reaches adolescence it becomes associated with specific brands. Retailers slowly creep into these neighborhoods to provide a greater accessibility to their products and to secure the brand loyalty. This process, however, becomes counterproductive to both parties. The retailers become more accessible and increase their sales potential but, at the same time, they raise the cost of living by gentrifying these neighborhoods. It’s not long before the people who began this counterculture movement are forced to move to poorer and poorer neighborhoods and eventually this urban sprawl pushes all the way out of the city and into suburbia. To summarize, once Urban Outfitters is brought to the neighborhood, it actually pushes the hipsters right out of it.

While Urban Outfitters has found the right balance of viral marketing, covert branding, and location association, this balance is a delicate and precarious one. The tactics that create a successful brand are actually the same ones that can ruin its position in the market. Their brand identity is based on deceiving that market into thinking of them as an independent retailer, when they are actually the complete opposite. While this cover could easily be uncovered by misrepresenting the brand, or choosing poor store locations, for the time being Urban Outfitters is benefiting from the hipsters buying their skinny jeans and replica vintage furniture, and the hipsters have found a source that sells the skinny jeans and replica vintage furniture that makes them so uniquely them.

Another company trying to benefit from marketing to the metropolitan counterculture is Crate and Barrel. Crate and Barrel has become the go to place for home furnishings for middle class Gen-Xers. They provide contemporary furniture and housewares that are a step above what you would find at a big box retailer such as Target or Ikea but still provide mass-produced products that are more obtainable in their affordability and their distribution than custom-made or designer products. Generation X was the first generation to really have a wide variety to choose from when it comes to home furnishings. They are also a generation with a greater disposable income and larger homes to fill. Crate and Barrel opened its first store in Illinois in 1962, which was also the beginning of Generation X. This timing allowed the Gen-Xers to grow up with Crate and Barrel and develop a brand loyalty with them that could never be achieved with the baby boomer generation. During the Generation X era, there was also a surge in commerce that allowed people to go further in education, seek better jobs, and become overall much more conscience of the need for status—more than any generation prior.

Crate and Barrel has an appeal that extends beyond the actual products they sell. Crate and Barrel is a power player in the status race. People are always trying to “keep up with Jones” and Crate and Barrel is an important factor in the status quo. Status can be broken down not necessarily by the products we own, but more so where we buy them. For example, you can find a bone white ceramic bowl at Wal-Mart, most likely for a very low price. You can also find a bone white ceramic bowl at Crate and Barrel, for a much higher price. The demand for the Crate and Barrel bowl is much higher, despite its higher price, because it associated with a higher status. People are willing to pay an extra five, ten, even twenty dollars to gain the status that comes with the Crate and Barrel bowl vs. the Wal-Mart bowl. Even beyond Crate and Barrel status are custom-made, designer white ceramic bowls, like the Vera Wang Wedgwood line. At an exorbitant $100+ per piece, they provide the most status of all!

The status quo is directly correlated to generation advancement. The milestones into adulthood can be categorized by the retailers we frequent. Our first jaunt into adulthood, for most the freshman college dorm, is furnished heavily from Target; it is inexpensive, lightweight, disposable, and brightly colored. After college, our first real apartment is furnished by Ikea. Dishes, furniture, and textiles, all compact, flat-packed and color coordinated. Finally, as we complete our transition into successful adults, we purchase our first house (or condo) and furnish it with much finer contemporary pieces from stores like Crate and

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3 is a term used to describe generations in many countries around the world born from 1965 to around 1982. □ ^ http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,963617,00.html
4 Baby boomer is a North American-English term used to describe a person who was born between 1946 and 1964. Gillon, Steve (2004) Boomer Nation: The Largest and Richest Generation Ever, and How It Changed America, Free Press, "Introduction"
Barrel and Pottery Barn. It is at this point in our adult lives that we know we have truly made it; we have achieved status. Or have we? As the gap between lower class and upper middle class widens, new openings are developing for people requiring even more status. As long as wealth continues to increase, so will the need for status.

As the X generation gave way to the millennial\(^5\) generation, the developmental steps transitioning from birth to adulthood changed, thus creating a need for a new interpretation of status, and a new breed of status retailers. The millennials were born into the technology boom of the 1980s and as a result, many 20-something millennials were becoming urban professionals at very young ages. Assuming status was a unit of measurement for sociopolitical power in Generation X, the measure of millennial status is simply economic consuming power. For retailers marketing towards status seekers, this poses a new situation. For Gen-Xers, it was merely coincidence that achieving more political and social power correlated with economic consumption. The millennials’ priority is the economic consuming power, and any social or political gain associated with this is merely a bonus. Simply put, Generation X wanted more stuff, while millennials want the power that more stuff brings. Within the millennial generation, a 25-year-old is easily making the same amount of money as a 45-year-old. They are buying houses and condos at this age, and they are left without a retailer to fit their young and rebellious needs. Their tastes reach towards the fun, colorful, trendy designs of retailers like Target and Ikea, but their status requires the sophistication of a retailer like Crate and Barrel or Pottery Barn. The millennial generation represents more than 70 million consumers in the United States. They earn a total annual income of about $211 billion spend approximately $172 billion per year\(^6\) and considerably influence many adult consumer buying choices. A market this size was too big to be ignored.

What Is a Millennial to Do?
Crate and Barrel was quick to see this gap in the market, and struck while the iron was hot. In 2000, the first CB2 store opened in Chicago. It was intended to be a hipper, trendier, edgier, more inviting version of Crate and Barrel that would strike a chord with the millennials and countercultural urbanites. The entire presentation of the store and products was a far cry from the traditional Crate and Barrel, which was really the marketing goal. CB2 was a marketing success. With only three locations currently (two in Chicago, one in New York) and a fourth on the way (San Francisco) they are able to do most of their business via Internet (a huge resource towards marketing towards millennials). The existing three locations are in the trendiest neighborhoods (Chicago’s Lincoln Park and New York’s SoHo) as a means to promote their urban style. The products sold at Crate and Barrel and CB2 are surprisingly similar, but the marketing of these products is completely different. The most striking difference is in the storefronts. Crate and Barrel has a very high-end, architectural appearance. With


\(^6\) Harris Interactive 2003 Youth Pulse survey.
multiple levels and a barrage of 10-foot windows, its exterior appeals to the contemporary, yet refined, Generation X. CB2 on the other hand, has a very minimal appearance, only one story, with a simple boxy architecture that references the modern city lofts it outfits. Its sign is designed with bold colorful typography that appeals to the fun-loving, trendy millennials.

Crate and Barrel, as it approaches almost 50 years of marketing status, and coincidentally housewares, is a good example of successfully growing with cultural trends as they form. By branching out to the millennial generation with a separate identity, they have managed to keep their existing consumer market while expanding into the newest, and now largest, generation of status-seeking consumers.

The idea of covert rebranding was not unique to Crate and Barrel. A few years ago when BMW decided to reintroduce the Mini Cooper into the U.S. automotive market, they had to consider whether or not the BMW brand would have a positive or negative effect on the launch. In the end, on the advice of their advertising firms, they chose to market the Mini as a separate and unique identity from BMW, as a means to appeal to the alternative, or countercultural, market that they felt the Mini would be most attractive to. The Mini launch was one of the most well-calculated attempts to infiltrate the U.S. auto market. Their unorthodox low-budget advertising campaign revolutionized the future of auto marketing, depending on print ads and viral marketing rather than traditional TV commercials. However, as with any alternative branding venture, there is always the question of, “Did we get it right?” and, “Is this the right target market?” The question to be asked is does an unorthodox advertising campaign attract unorthodox buyers?

The primary goal of the Mini launch was to not allow them to become oversaturated in the U.S. auto market. In order to generate sales without becoming just a fad in auto trends and also to generate a brand loyalty to a brand that previously has not existed in the market, the team should have explored other successful British imports. Unfortunately, those imports have never been autos; they have primarily been music and fashion. For example, while the original Mini was taking Britain by storm, the Beatles were taking the U.S. by storm. Connections could be made between the two instances that could be very impactful in the Mini campaign. The idea of associating an automobile brand with rock and roll or counterculture is definitely off the beaten marketing path, but could have potentially provided a greater pay off than just viral marketing alone. Mini was very concerned about oversaturating the market too close to the release date causing the market to burn out early, much like the PT Cruiser. However, the fad response is almost an integral part of a product launch. The Beatles’ invasion was supposed to be a fad movement; however, the Beatles are just as popular today in the United States as they were when they first came. How were the Beatles successfully launched without becoming overplayed? Mini could have followed some of the same trends as the Beatles in order to ensure a long-lasting impact on the market.

Mini had already identified music enthusiasts as a staple in their target market, but their advertising campaign doesn’t seem to speak to them directly. Were ads run in Rolling Stone? Could music, lyrics, or musical icons have been incorporated into the campaign? The original Mini gained some of its momentum because of celebrity music icons all driving customized Minis that reflected their work and style. By choosing the right music icon to endorse the new Mini in the U.S., it could have provided the cool factor in the viral advertising campaign. Mini, despite its best efforts, had a target market that was too large to be considered “unorthodox users.” By proxy, either the advertising should have been focused into a narrower spectrum, or BMW should have prepared for the initial onslaught of “fad” demand for the new Mini. The high demand for a car is not a bad thing; the struggle is in keeping that demand high and regulating the people demanding it. (The “me-too” fad.) So Mini is faced with a marketing Catch-22: Mini needs to sell enough cars to establish a brand, but remain elusive enough to be an unorthodox “niche” market; all the while building a brand reputation in a foreign market. The key problem is that the “unorthodox” drivers being marketed to are not usually BMW fanatics, so for the sake of developing brand loyalty, the Mini had to completely disassociate itself with BMW and become a “separate identity,” much like Chipotle is to McDonald’s, and Old Navy is to Banana Republic. Minis ideally would be sold at separate facilities away from BMW as a means of developing an independent representation.
Mini made the right move with their strong, memorable print campaign of billboards and unique interactive magazine advertisements. However, print campaigns, while very impactful “in the moment,” tend to be more of a disposable message. Once the magazine is read, it is thrown away and the message tends to be forgotten rather quickly. Mini made a mistake in not having additional advertising that was more lasting (aside from the few billboards). The Mini, being somewhat of a novelty car, might have benefited from trend-setter representatives, much like how the Beatles all drove them; music or Hollywood icons driving a Mini would be an excellent way to advertise the brand in a more long-lasting manner.

Overall, the launch of the Mini through its revolutionary print campaign designed by Crispin, Porter, and Bogusky was successful in its innovation. Despite the excellence in print advertising, there were some mistakes in the target market. Primarily, the Mini brand should have been treated as a completely separate entity, and not been marketed even slightly close with BMW. Secondly, the target market was a little too broad to fit into the “unorthodox” category. Had the Mini taken a more “rock and roll” approach to marketing they might have found a more lasting brand identity in the U.S. Magazines were the primary channel of distribution, but it was not fully explored. Rather than advertise in traditional magazines like Time and the New Yorker, the ads would have been more impactful in magazines like Rolling Stone, or even independent periodicals.

Mini as a product is well-suited for the counterculture because of the customizability. The ability to customize, or create something unique to each user, is a desirable trait in counterculture markets. When the market is dominated by the need to stand out and be recognized as an individual, it is important for any products targeted to the market to appeal to that need.

Despite some of the overlooked aspects of the Mini brand awareness campaign, it revolutionized the concept of brand identity, especially because it was a car being marketed in this manner. The launch brought a new awareness to brand identity, brand association, and brand strategy.

Each of these corporations has been fashion forward enough to explore potential profits in alternative and countercultural markets. They have successfully analyzed cultural trends, countercultural trends, generation gaps and transitions, brand identity, and sociological, political, and economic concerns as the main factors contributing to product need and production. When this huge network of factors is finally funneled down into an actual physical product, it is easy to see that to design products relevant to the current market, it is vital to understand how this network of factors also leads to the success or failure of any single product. A product designed with no purpose or relevance is soon realized and rejected.

Counterculture and its diatribes have always been associated with youth culture. Whether it is being celebrated, glorified, or denounced is hard to say. Regardless of the way we as individuals view the counterculture, history dictates that counterculture will always be an extension of rebellious, idealistic youth. Even in eighteenth-century London, there were movements of rebellion and unrest that would
come in waves, and eventually die out into conformity. The difference between this countercultural movement and all the others is that these current generations are the first to be categorized and identified by our possessions rather than our age, education, world events, and political beliefs. We are now in a time when brand identity becomes individual identity. We are not seeking the brand, we are the brand. This is the reason that intuitive product design now depends on a precise understanding of brand identity and the consumer culture (in these case studies, the counterculture).

There is a synergy in product design that we as designers are only now beginning to understand. The designed product is a single element in a web of branding, cultural and anthropological studies, socio-political and economic factors, and most importantly, cultural trends. By reviewing existing techniques and trials and errors, we as students and educators of design can generate a much deeper insight into the market we are designing for, their emotional and psychological needs and desires, and developments that might occur in future markets.

Resources

*Harvard Business Review.* Launching the new Mini.
www.nytonmag.com Nylon Magazine
www.adbusters.org Adbusters Magazine
http://blog.urbanoutfitters.com/ Urban Outfitters Media