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Who Are You Calling “Hipster”? Consumers Defy Labels and Stereotypes



Journals Division

What happens when the products you love become labeled as “trendy” or “hipster”? Consumers who identify with these products find creative ways to remain loyal and elude derision, according to a new study in the [*Journal of Consumer Research*](#).

“From the rebellious aura of Harley-Davidson bikes to the utopian ethos of Star Trek, iconic brands and constellations of lifestyle goods exude symbolic meanings that attract consumers in an almost magnet-like fashion,” write authors Zeynep Arsel (Concordia University) and Craig J. Thompson (University of Wisconsin-Madison). But sometimes these mythic meanings reach a cultural tipping point where a marketplace myth degenerates into a cultural cliché—for example yuppies, metrosexuals, urban gangstas, and hipsters.

Prior research shows that some consumers will abandon consumption practices once their associated meanings are no longer positive, but the authors believe this may be an oversimplification. Instead, they found that consumers are able to “demythologize” their consumption practices to distance themselves from unfavorable labels.

The authors investigated the category of “hipster,” which has gained attention from the mass media in recent years. “This iconic category has evolved from its countercultural roots, originally aligned with beat sensibilities, to a trend-seeking über-consumer of the 2000s,” the authors write. They analyze the hipster icon and note how it has become a trivializing label for indie consumption practices.

The authors interviewed individuals who participated in the indie marketplace as consumers or tastemakers (such as DJs and music critics). The researchers did not mention hipsters in the interview. “Interestingly all participants but one wanted to talk about how they were mistaken for, or accused of being a hipster just because they were consuming indie products,” the authors write.

“Our findings suggest how backlash against identity categories such as hipster or metrosexual could generate complex and nuanced identity strategies that enable consumers to retain their tastes and interests while protecting these tastes from trivializing mythologies,” the authors conclude.

Zeynep Arsel and Craig J. Thompson. “Demythologizing Consumption Practices: How Consumers Protect Their Field-Dependent Identity Investments from Devaluing Marketplace Myths.” *Journal of Consumer Research*: February 2011. A preprint of this article (to be officially published online soon) can be found at <http://journals.uchicago.edu/jcr>.

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