

## **Aspiring Adventurers in Style**

### **Co-Creation as a Process of Undoing Authenticity**

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*Purpose:* To explore the recent emergence of “authenticity” in fashion in terms of its linking value in the context of tribal brand cultures in conjunction with value co-creation processes in mediated environments.

*Methodology:* This study adopts a qualitative approach in the form of a case study of a young New York-based outdoor fashion firm. The research was divided into a netnographic study to explore the life- and experience worlds of consumers in an online context, supported by secondary research such as online documents, photographic footage, and media reports.

*Findings:* Identifies the socially and emotionally charged process leading to the point of value exchange as a key driver in the relationship between brand and consumers. Social exchange between consumers is where meaning is extracted and symbolic properties are converted into markers of collective identification.

*Originality/value:* While most analyses on co-creation and tribal consumption focus on off- or online contexts separately, the present study seeks to develop an understanding of the intersecting dynamics between offline activities and their shared reverberation and meaning across interactive online contexts.

*Paper type:* Research paper

**Keywords**

brand identity, co-creation, brand community, neo-tribes, consumer engagement, outdoor fashion, authenticity, consumer studies, netnography

## **Introduction**

The notion of consumer tribes has featured prominently in marketing debates for almost two decades now. Starting with Maffesoli's exploration of the concept (Maffesoli, 1996), several scholars have tried to develop an understanding of the phenomenon across different social contexts. While much of the literature to date focuses on either direct, unmediated contact between members (Cova, 1997; Cova and Cova, 2002; Godin, 2008; Moutinho et al., 2007) or formation and exchange online (Brown, 2007; Kozinets, 1999; Kozinets, 2007; Park, 2007), few studies have zoomed in on the interplay between off- and online dynamics, thereby leaving out of consideration how the practices, rituals, and places of collective identification change, interlink, and sometimes cross-pollinate. The present study focuses on the interplay between face-to-face contacts and mediated, interactive environments to explore the changing relationship between producer and consumer and how this change is reflected in the conversations between supply and demand. In doing so, our research seeks to develop an understanding of the dynamics between offline activities and their reverberation and meaning across interactive online contexts.

This paper sets out to investigate new ways of interaction by reference to the case study of young outdoor brand Best Made Co. from New York City and its metropolitan community of 'Adventurers in Style'. The case was selected to explore the recent emergence of authenticity as a lifestyle category, thus allowing for reflections on back-to-basics movements and their entanglement with microstructures of collective consumption. With a mixed-methods approach combining netnographic with extensive secondary research, the study is targeted to explore the experience worlds of consumers across different contexts and assess the linking value of products. The purpose of the research is to study the role of tribal brand cultures in conjunction with value co-creation processes in order to determine their joint influence on the relationship between brand and consumer. Readdressing questions of individual and tribal agency within, and across, mediated environments helps facilitating a better understanding of the co-variants involved in the process of collective value creation.

We argue that it is no longer the object of exchange – but rather the process leading towards that exchange – that demands our attention, as it is during this stage that meaning is extracted and symbolic properties are converted into markers of collective identification. It is not the producer who determines the linking value of products, but the community that negotiates meaning across and beyond branded representations. The research highlights the importance of an accounting for collective value systems in the value-creation chain and critically reflects on the merits of co-

creation as a marketing practice. The interplay between branded entities and collective appropriation of these representations is shown to be a crucial ingredient in the formulation and continued development of brand personae as joint experiential frameworks and collective sites of identification.

We start out by discussing the concepts of neo-tribes and co-creation. Next, we are zooming in on the recent emergence of “authenticity” in a consumption and fashion context. After that, we bring together both these terms in a study on the outdoor fashion firm Best Made Co. to develop an understanding of the firm’s marketing mechanics and the consumption dynamics of its main audience group.

### **Value Creation and Co-Creation**

*‘When in the early 2000s management scholars Prahalad and Ramaswamy (...) began to write a series of essays suggesting that the locus of economic value creation was shifting from the firm’s research and development department to the interaction between the firm and the consumer, they gave birth to an area of research that is now, a decade later, commonly referred to as value co-creation.’ (Cova et al., 2011: 232)*

Based on the notion that fashion is closely intertwined with the political, economical and socio-historical context in which it is being both produced and consumed, different theories exist on the mechanisms of this synergy. Karl Marx (cited in *Hazelrigg*, 2010: 60) famously stated that ‘production mediates consumption, but consumption also mediates production’, implying a mutual dependency. According to Marxist theory, the way society produces its means of existence ultimately determines the political, social, and cultural shape of that very society as well as its future development. Whereas modernity conceived of the object in terms of production, postmodernity conceives of it in terms of consumption (Bauman, 2000; Bauman, 2009). Walter Benjamin (cited in *Storey*, 2001: 93) maintains that ‘culture may have become mass culture, but consumption has not become mass consumption’. Consumption consequently became an act of production in its own right (Sarup, 1996), with the result that creation of meaning is now rooted at the point of consumption: we can bricolage and actively give new interpretations to goods, freely construct and communicate our own identity according to personal objectives (Jameson, 1984).

Postmodernity did not only see a shift in power relations between producer and consumer, but also experienced the emergence of new networks as a backlash against extreme individualism and social dissolution. Instead of family, church or political party, people today tend to identify with more dynamic communities that share the same sentiments and mindsets, representing a hyper-individualist phenomenon we have come to understand as “neo-tribes” (Maffesoli, 1996). These liquid micro-networks can be described as shifting gatherings of emotionally bonded people that temporarily form a tribal symbiosis based on the linking value of products and services, rendering the modernist creed of use value obsolete (Cova, 1997). This then can be said to be the leitmotif of postmodernity: through our consumption choices we symbolically manifest our belonging to different tribal groupings. In these non-hierarchical groups identification is largely based on visual signs as markers of identification since their collective structures are ‘preferably [...] expressed through lifestyles that favour appearance and form’ (Maffesoli, 1996: 98). The meaning of products thus bridges the gap between the symbolic and the material world, and takes on a double role by constructing both social-symbolism and self-symbolism (Elliott, 1997).

Today, it is the emotional, social, and cultural contexts that shape consumer experiences. The postmodern individual is on a never-ending identity quest, leading to an aestheticisation of everyday life and thus to an aestheticisation of consumption (Featherstone, 1991). Brands and products are no longer just possessions, but play a crucial role in symbolic interaction between peers, thereby fostering a sense of belonging. The shared meanings produced by consumer collectives rely on shared interpretative strategies, which in turn leads to the creation of interpretative communities (Scott, 1994). Due to their effervescent nature, neo-tribes are hard to identify and their ever-changing practices are by nature difficult to anticipate by marketers. Postmodernity has seen a shift in marketing approaches, moving from static structures to liquid flow, from quantitative to qualitative analysis, from segmentation to tribal marketing. In turn, this led to a fundamental shift from a company-centric view to a consumer-centric view, bringing with it the notion that brands are social entities, created both by consumer and marketer, and giving rise to the much-debated concept of co-creation.

Theoretically speaking, co-creation describes a collaborative process between producers and consumers. This process is navigated by the brand with the intent to manage the value chain from the customer’s point of view and reinforce the linking value of products and services (Piller et al., 2010). Ideally, the two agents work together to create an environment for brand experiences, whereby it is important that these are not standardised experiences, but of unique value to the

individual customer (Foster, 2011). By gaining authority to co-create value, symbolic meaning, and cultural codes of consumption, brand and consumers jointly take ownership of the creative process (Pongsakornrungrungsilp and Schroeder, 2011).

In recent years, these more evangelical perspectives on co-creation have taken flak, primarily so because co-creation has come to inherit many different – and sometimes conflicting – meanings (Lehrer et al., 2012). According to Grönroos and Ravald (2009), the problem has to do with the fact that the roles of consumer and producer have become increasingly blurred, which leads to questions about intellectual ownership and economic resources. Cova et al. (2011: 231) take a similar stance arguing that ‘economic concepts of value, ownership, consumption, and production need to be redefined, and political ideas of the relationship between the social and the economic require addressing in the age of cognitive, or as we call it, collaborative capitalism’. As it appears, co-creation represents a tool for companies to tap into the life- and experience worlds of consumers but is not without its difficulties when it comes to managing the behaviour and expectations of consumers once the point of value creation has reached beyond the material qualities of products and services (Elliot and Wattanasuwan, 1998).

### **The Quest for Authenticity... In Fashion and Beyond**

*‘Authenticity has become a central concern for consumers in today’s commodity culture, and the recent consumer behavior literature demonstrates this concern. (...) Industrialization and the resulting mass production brought on the multiplication of almost every product, destroying the most basic premise of authenticity, rarity, individuality, and uniqueness.’* (Fisher and Smith, 2011: 329)

During the past few years concepts like “authenticity” and “craftsmanship” have started to surface rather prominently, as evidenced, for instance, by the plethora of back-to-basics paraphernalia that have entered the market on a grander scale. Raw food has made a comeback just like Palaeolithic and vegan diets, “honest” products and services – whatever these may be – spring up like mushrooms in gentrified metropolitan areas. We are exposed to this raft of new developments – sometimes with awe and a sense of wonder because they seem to be the antithesis of the ritzy world of fashion proper – and cannot help but detect that, seemingly, there is an urge to go “back to basics”; that consumers want so-called “real”, tangible, and individual products. Surprisingly, while we all seem to be in unquestioning agreement that the vocabulary of consumption as a process of identity construction has changed, not much research has been done

to develop an actual understanding of those new positions (Kreber et al., 2007; Smelik, 2011). And although we can only speculate what drivers have put the authenticity concept so prominently on the map, we would like to argue that in a fashion context two developments have chiefly contributed to its coming of age: the ascent of fast fashion as an influential, if not predominant, economic model and the financial crisis of 2007-2008.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines authenticity as ‘the quality of being authentic, or entitled to acceptance; 1. as being authoritative; 2. as being in accordance with fact; 3. as being genuine; 4. as being real.’<sup>1</sup> From this definition it is fairly obvious that any attempt to define the terminology will by default remain pluriform and ambiguous, to a certain extent. And yet, an (oft-cited) example may help to bring some clarity. Walter Benjamin (2007 [1935]) famously referred to the concept of authenticity in his seminal work “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”. With reference to photography and the changes the technology had brought about, Benjamin analyses art in the context of reproducibility and asserts that reproductions, whose very existence creates the dichotomy between authenticity and its inverse in the first place, are inauthentic. As he argues, ‘the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity’, and concludes that ‘the whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical (...) reproducibility’ (Benjamin, 2007: 220). In other words, for Benjamin authenticity is a property that cannot be separated from its genesis. Inauthentic works of art therefore fail to create what he calls “aura”; i.e. a ‘presence in time and space, (...) its unique existence at the place where it happens to be’ (ibid.). It appears, then, that on Benjamin’s account, authenticity is intimately connected to unique creation.

If we apply this knowledge to a lifestyle context<sup>2</sup>, there is something puzzling here – in general as well as, perhaps even more so, in a fashion context. Clearly, the implementations of Benjamin’s argument do not completely match, because genuinely new and unique creations are exceptional and, if anything, confined to select haute couture pieces. Still, the ruling force behind the fashion diktat remains the promise of the new. Every season we are alerted to the fact that there are new trends, new colours, new must-haves, new it-pieces. As early (or late) as 1987 Gilles Lipovetsky discussed the trouble with that condition in his book “L’empire de l’éphémère” where he posits

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<sup>1</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. “authenticity”.

<sup>2</sup> No doubt, this is a daring and slightly insolent proposition, but it might be a fruitful exercise to understand the inherent dynamics of authenticity’s conceptual emergence in recent years in contexts far less rarefied than art or even photography.

that ultimately there is no such thing as newness in fashion. Quite the contrary: more often than not it is sameness in disguise. Lipovetsky calls that phenomenon “marginal differentiation” – a correct, albeit rather unsurprising, observation since fashion, by default, is not so much about the unseen, but simply about change.

In some way it seems that differentiation is more important than ever, partly so because the ascent of fast fashion in particular has led not only to a problem of authenticity and intellectual ownership, but also to a maelstrom of products that look surprisingly undistinguishable. According to Cachon and Swinney (2011), fast fashion’s emergence and swift spread can be attributed to two aspects. On the one hand, the rise of the internet has been instrumental in shaping consumers’ sensibilities for emerging and fast-changing trends. On the other hand, socio-cultural changes in the lifestyles of consumers have led them to rapidly adapt to the reality around them in an affordable, dynamic manner (Gabrielli et al., 2013). Both these aspects have required larger parts of the industry to refocus their energies and shift the nucleus of activities towards quick response mechanisms (Bruce and Daly, 2006) and the translation of newly-emerging fashion trends into an array of easily adaptable styles (Bhardwaj and Fairhurst, 2010; Hoffman, 2007).

One look at the annual profit growth of about 10% of Spanish Inditex flagship brand Zara makes clear how increasingly dominant the firm’s model has become (BBC News, 2012). In the 1960s, Inditex was a local, privately-held company with annual sales of 30 million dollars. In 2005, the company had ascended to running an operation of 2,700 stores in over sixty countries, annual sales of 8 billion dollars and an estimated value of 24 billion dollars (Crofton and Dopico, 2007: 41). In 2012, Inditex reported sales of 20.7 billion dollars from its 5,527 stores and web shop, making it the largest clothing retailer worldwide (Loeb, 2013). While all of this sounds like an almost otherworldly fairy-tale success, there is one catch: with the rise of such industry heavyweights, many smaller outfits are driven out of the market, leading to increased uniformity and generic offers, particularly, but not exclusively, on the high street (Rohwedder and Johnson, 2008; Stockert, 2004).

In view of this development, it is probably not all that surprising that terms like “authenticity”, “craftsmanship”, or even “vintage” have carried so much weight in recent years. Although essentially vacuous, they seem born out a desire to feel, to touch base with something “real”. Cultural theorist Anneke Smelik (2011) refers to the staged performances and stylisation of

virtually all cultural processes as a main conduit to the paradoxical situation we find ourselves in today. As she writes,

The more unreal and unoriginal the society (...) becomes, the more we demand realness and originality. If everything has become a performance, even our own sense of self, we react by yearning for something authentic. We desperately want life to be 'really real' - including the way we perform our identities by dressing up. (Smelik, 2011: 82)

As her argument makes clear, it is largely unquestionable that much of the terminology around authenticity is a discursive construction. At the same time, it is not explained how its emergence relates to the present state of affairs, because stylisation of society is an essentially postmodern phenomenon that started more than thirty years ago (Firat, 1991; Firat et al., 1995; Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Jameson, 1984). It is our contention therefore that, partly at least, the emergence of authenticity in fashion has been fuelled and fostered by the upheaval and economic uncertainty following the financial crisis of 2007-2008. Following Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (1991: 68), the human demand for authenticity is traditionally the result of a state where 'we understand our situation as one of high tragedy, alone in a silent universe, without intrinsic meaning, condemned to create value'. Allowing for the obvious hyperbole, the argument describes a process where new meaning is produced by a state of crisis. Put another way, Taylor's argument asserts that the impulse of making sense of the world in new ways comes as a natural response to moments of social and economic debris. It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that the fashion industry has produced new positions since the late noughties whose focus is not so much about newness and continuous change, but takes on a subtler and increasingly earthy register. This study seeks to explore this phenomenon in a fashion in context to develop an understanding of the drivers governing brand involvement and consumer behaviour.

### **Introducing 'Adventurers in Style'**

Bearded and tattooed men sporting long-sleeved checkered flannel shirts, vintage denim pants, and sturdy shoes have become a familiar sight in metropolitan cities. Stereotypical though the description may be, there is a bigger issue to explore once we reach beneath the level of perfunctory visual markers. On the one hand, the aesthetics underscoring the look signals not only a return to basic functional clothing but also to a traditional male register and codes of power and dominion (Nixon, 1996; Mort, 1996). On the other hand, there is a distinctly nostalgic edge to this archetype of strength and virility in that it is suggestive of an easy life where everything is in its right place.



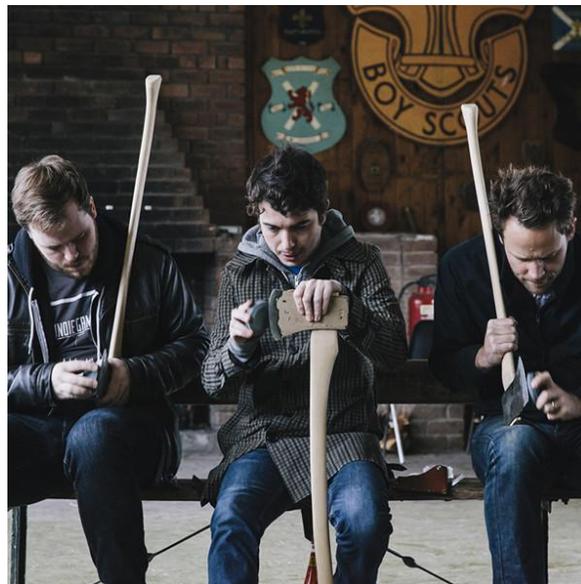
**Picture 1.** Portrait of a Best Made Co. community member

Ironically perhaps, the archetypal in this case becomes a by-product of a newly defined fashion context: pioneer nostalgia is taking a hold among a new group of woodsmen and -women in metropolitan areas. Among a flurry of new outdoor brands that are marketing archive hiking boots, heritage knives and sophisticated camping gear to design-literate adventurers who like to “get away from it all”, is a young brand from New York that specializes in one of the oldest tools known to mankind – the felling axe. Since 2010, Best Made Co. provides outdoor gear, attire and experiences for the high-end sector, their key product being a hand-painted axe that has been acclaimed by the art and design world (Picture 2). By its own account, the inspiration for the company stems from a need to reconnect with nature in the most basic sense, with the axe as a prototypical tool around which the brand has evolved, chosen by the founders deliberately for its symbolic power combining simplicity and virtue. With a growing community centre for fashionable boy scouts and adventurous urbanites alike, Best Made Co. has successfully established the company through continuously shaping brand experiences that fasten on eliciting an emotional connection with its actual products.



**Picture 2.** The Best Made Co. painted axe set

Authenticity and product integrity have become a main focus of consumption practices for this group of consumers, chiefly in reaction to an increasingly commodified marketplace (Fisher and Scott, 2011; Pine and Gilmore, 2007). As our study will demonstrate, Best Made Co. artfully engineers a feeling of authenticity through personalisation, individual experience, and giving consumers the opportunity to become an author in the process of creation. Seeking to bridge the gap between material possessions and the technologically advanced means of production that have shifted the focus of their actual making increasingly further afield, the firm aims to rekindle the relationship between supply and demand by fostering interpersonal relationships and by facilitating dialogue and mutual exchange of knowledge.



**Picture 3.** Best Made Co. axe restoration workshop

With a focus on collective consumption patterns, this paper argues that for Best Made Co.'s consumers the idea of community derives from a set of shared experiences that renders the brand's objects meaningful personal possessions. But which consequences does a brand's immersion in the space of interpersonal relationships have? What does it mean if every activity of cultural and social reproduction is potentially subjected to capitalist appropriation? From this vantage point, we will examine the experiences and relationships that shape the brand culture of 'Adventurers in Style' and investigate their creative engagement with the company in the value creation process.

### **Methodology**

To analyse the value creation process from the vantage point of collective brand cultures, a netnographic study has been conducted. Introduced by Kozinets as a method to analyse behavioural patterns of users online, netnography aims to generate insights from contextualised data in virtual environments (Kozinets, 2002). While the initial focus of the approach was on mediated structures in general, the concept has been refined over the years primarily as a marketing and research application to develop more thoroughgoing insights into consumer behaviour across different online contexts (Kozinets, 2010a).

Just like ethnography, the method is immersive and continuously adaptable and aims at holistic descriptions of the marketplace (Kozinets, 2010b). Rather than focusing on traditional ethnographic methods like in-depth interviews, focus groups, or clustering of observation protocols, however, netnography zooms in on patterns in behaviour and communication, either within a single entity (i.e. consumer to consumer) or between different entities (i.e. brand to consumer and vice versa). With the aim to analyse the life-worlds of consumers, it encompasses an interpretive methodological toolkit that emphasises cultural context and consumer subjectivity. Since interaction and communication within and between consumer communities has shifted to online contexts as well, it is a most suitable method to explore collective marketplace cultures and their role in the value co-creation process.

The starting point for the netnographic study were Best Made Co.'s online channels: the website, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest and Google+. After a first phase of data collection to gain an overview of the brand and its activities, around 30 members of Best Made Co.'s community were randomly selected to form the focus of the investigation. First, their likes, posts, pictures and comments on the firm's channels were analysed. Based on that knowledge their life-worlds

were further explored by looking into websites, blogs, online magazines and forums each of the users would visit on a regular basis. The main focus of this research was at the crossroads of individual knowledge, exchange of ideas, and the moderating role of the brand in that conversation.

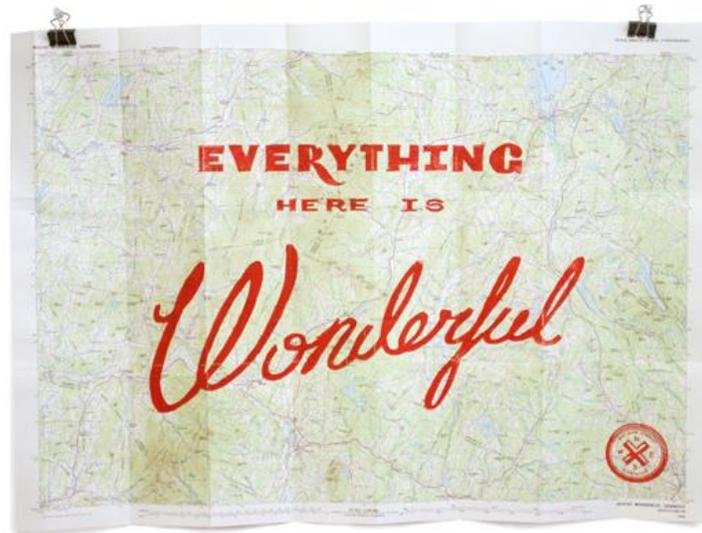
The first step in the research process involved studying collective rituals of consumers in order to develop an understanding of the type of bonds that may lead to cohesive collective structures. After that, the study analysed the communication of those engaging in the conversation to analyse the dynamic interplay with the brand as well as between individual members of the group. Next, we developed a combination of visual analysis of the life-worlds of consumers and textual analysis of their conversations and comments in the brand sphere to paint an image of the structure and identity of the community. Last, the research zoomed in on the integrative function of the brand's initiatives in a real-life setting. With the help of media reports, conversation protocols and visual analysis the study sought to develop an understanding of the marketing strategies and experience worlds provided by the firm and the relays established between the brand and its consumers.

### **Collective Rituals**

According to Muniz and O'Guinn (2001), brand communities – or collective marketplace cultures, as we like to call them – are characterised by three important elements: presence of shared rituals and traditions, a sense of moral responsibility, and consciousness of kind. The latter in particular has featured prominently during the research. Consumers of Best Made Co. do not only feel a connection with the brand, they feel a sentimental connection to other members as well, a sense of “we-ness” that echoes the notion that the product is only the societal support of the link (Bender, 1978). United by Best Made Co.'s motto “camp is home”, the agency of its consumers is stylised and augmented in mediated conversations. Contrary to what the localised organisation of the company might suggest, the firm's consumers are not geographically bound to the New York City area, but spread all over the globe – from Japan to Chile and from Alaska to Spain. Social networks like Facebook or Twitter serve as platforms for mutual affirmation where the linking value is magnified and reaffirmed. It is here that group members give each other advice on where to source certain vintage pieces, how to care for products, but also show appreciation for other members' projects. In the case of Best Made Co. technological innovations are crucial in enabling new ways of engagement for the consumer in the meaning-making process

that unfolds around a product (cf. Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000) in that they alter the flow of ideas and have a decentralizing function.

The same consciousness of kind also shows in the way that nature, tradition, and ancient skills serve as shared focal points around which conversations and engagement of the group unwind. Contemporary representations of nature as reproduced by the tribe on blogs of individual members or through social media mostly hint towards the aesthetic concept of nature as sublime, as fostered by the Romanticist movement in the late nineteenth-century (Picture 4). Nature is abstracted into a utopia of universal beauty and becomes the source of self-fulfilment. Not only are the products laden with meaning, the very goal of their quest, nature, also underlies continuous cultural construction, as it is a mediated experience with a powerful semantic network, heavily shaped by cultural mediators and rhetorical constructs in advertising, pop culture, art and politics. Its meanings are not fixed, but result from a flow of ever-varying representations, (re)produced by a society itself experiencing continuous change. And while wilderness, in its true sense, may no longer exist, we can still buy into its cultivated simulacra, the wilderness experience, which reflects our notion of nature rather than nature per se. The shared practices of the consumer collective, together with the representational initiatives by the brand, are essentially transforming the ways we understand nature as an outside world in the 21st century.



**Picture 4.** Best Made Co. map romanticising nature's sublime wonders

One of Durkheim's major arguments focuses on how symbols relate to society and real world experiences (Durkheim, 1965). The rituals of tribes or consumer collectives are expressions of shared beliefs and social belonging that (re)produce meaning for the community. Traditionally, these shared rituals are supported by cult objects, sacred places, and idols and evolve around consumption experiences with the brand (Cova, 1997). In the case of 'Adventurers in Style' these experiences evolve around stylised representations of camp life and a vast array of outdoor activities, such as sitting around the campfire, brushing your teeth in a creek, producing things from nature, gathering food in the woods, or mountain climbing. They can be created around objects in circumstances of both functional and aesthetic use. Certain role-model practices – from carrying your axe in a fashionable axe sling when you are on the move to the raw sensation of sipping whiskey from an original enamel cup – are introduced through the brand's various physical and virtual touch points and consequently adopted individually by members of the collective. This way, Best Made Co. supplies ritual artefacts and teaches the performance of these rituals to their consumers at the same time through powerful representations and provided experiences. The axe in this context becomes a visual totem, a cult object sold in a cult place. It is a signifier for wilderness experience and the semantic and emotional connections that come with it.

*"@BestMadeCo thanks for making a built toolbox for me to stuff full of family legacy tools for my son."*

*"Bagged another Christmas tree. Two years with my beautiful @bestmade axe."*

*"Got to airport this morning at 5:30am and realized I had my @Best Made pocket knife on me. Throw out or check luggage. Luggage checked."*

All these descriptions, as different as they are, suggest a profound emotional involvement with the product. Not only have consumers developed a strong sense of identification, but also a specific, emotionally charged vocabulary to refer to products and services. Best Made Co. both facilitates and functions as a symbolic pool of group identification with products that authenticate a shared desire for honest, well-made, "real" products. 'You can see substantial transformations in someone who picks up an axe and starts chopping wood', says Peter Buchanan-Smith, founder of Best Made Co (cited in *Thenorthernpost.com*, 2012). Although there is no reason to doubt the sincerity behind his words, we can identify a divergence between consumers who value the axe for its use value, and those for whom it fulfils a mere symbolic function. In fact, according to the company, only half of their consumers do actually put the axe to use, the rest rather uses it to

hang it on their wall as a “window into wilderness”. For them, they are objets d’art rather than survival tools that evoke a sentiment of simple life away from the drill of the workplace and the fast-paced cities they live in. Whether used for hunting and cutting up deer, felling trees or as mere decoration on a windowsill, the products are clearly individually appropriated by their users. The value attached to products can be said to rely on personal experiences, memories and imagined life projects.

### **Co-Creating Meaningful Experiences**

At conceptual level, what makes co-creation a typical child of postmodernity is that it resists centralising tendencies and instead is subject to continuous flow, redefining the meaning of value and the process of value creation (Fisher and Smith, 2011). In the Kotlerian age, the consumer was seen as outside the domain of the value chain, it was the company that produced value in a unilateral way with a single point of exchange where value was extracted from the consumer (Kotler, 2002). Today, the challenge is this to create environments in which co-creation experiences, dialogue and personalised offerings can take place. Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2002: 1) famously proclaimed that ‘companies spent the 20th century managing efficiencies. They must spend the 21st century managing experiences.’ Stripping away the ballyhooing tone, their idea in essence boils down to a situation where consumers and brands create value in a joint experiential framework. Brand experiences not only entail the physical or social touch points, but an embodied experience.

Following Muniz and O’Guinn (2001: 423), ‘[s]haring brand stories is an important process as it reinforces consciousness of kind between brand members and contributes to imagined community.’ Stories based on common experiences serve to give meaning to a brand and connect community members. The practices and concepts shaping Best Made Co.’s marketing can be adequately framed in such a context. Best Made Co. assists in the creation of rituals by constructing materials and methods for community socialisation: from an elaborated brand narrative (or myth, perhaps?), to small stories behind every product, presented on well-designed product sheets and hangtags, to lookbooks exuding cowboy romanticism, to behind-the-scenes short films and personal adventures shared in an online journal. In all these instances it is apparent that the firm goes to great lengths to carefully design experiential frameworks around the products and services it offers.

‘We seek to empower people to get outside, use their hands and in doing so embark on a life of fulfilling projects and lasting experiences.’ The firm’s mission statement reflects the core values around which the brand is established and tells us a lot about the symbolic value they attach to their products. Best Made Co. intends to ritualise the camping and outdoor experience by “empowering” the consumer to face the fundamental challenges posed by the “wild” with iconically designed functional goods. If only we stand still for a moment to reflect on that concept, it is remarkable how generic that mission actually is. In fact, it could apply to virtually any product or service. Since felling trees, sitting around camp fires, and mountain climbing probably do not feature prominently on the daily agenda of most consumers, their profound emotional involvement is probably best explained by the fact that the brand’s well-designed brand narrative, which centres around the simulation of an authentic, idealised reality, tends to overpower the use value of the physical products.

According to Arvidsson and Malossi (2011), the value of goods increasingly depends on their ability to sustain “affective communions”, i.e. the experiential value deciding upon truth, beauty and utility. It is in these three areas that Best Made Co. set out to differentiate its products: highly designed functionality from skilled craftsmen, made from original American materials in a sustainable way. People perceive these features as meaningful and deduct value from the material manifestations of these symbols.

*“Best Made Company... you inspire me to live a simpler life that focuses on all the basic qualities of the world we live in.”*

*“Thank you for being an honest company! It is appreciated that there are people out there like you who would take the time to reunite a knife with its owner.”*

Individuals extract value not so much from the functional qualities of products, but mostly from the idealised sentiment they connect with the brand and its narrative. Authenticity and product integrity are properties that are stimulated and artfully engineered by Best Made Co. in that the firm does not produce just any type of axe or knife or archive hiking boot, but diligently inscribes them with a paradoxical blend of fashion cachet and rustic chic. The brand operationalises its knowledge of the consumer community by tapping into the life-worlds of its audience and designing tailored experiences that resonate with their sense of self. Best Made Co.’s consumers display a distinct sense of nostalgia for pioneer life and authentic, basic products that come with it. The firm has strategically developed a brand narrative around the value connections of its main

audience group: geared towards a community of design-literate consumers, Best Made Co. marries basic, down-to-earth product propositions and cutting-edge design and contemporary aesthetics.



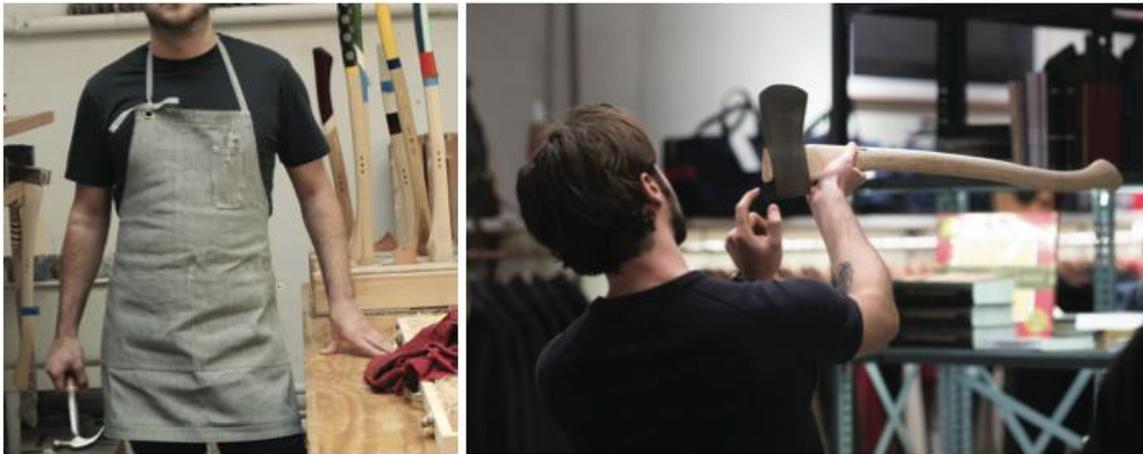
**Picture 5.** Signifying practices as displayed by Best Made Co.'s consumers

The brand thrives on the need of consumers to create an emotionally charged connection with product and brand narrative alike, and actively fosters a community spirit around a series of workshops and outdoor adventures. These workshops teach ancient skills with contemporarily designed high-end products: axe restoration, knife sharpening, field medicine, foraging, pickling and preservation, or sausage making are some examples of community activity. They are set at their headquarter and concept store in New York City and meanwhile are held on a weekly basis. A description of the atmospheric setting of this brand experience by a journalist from the Wall Street Journal (Shapiro Jr., 2014) who participated in an axe restoration workshop reads as follows:

Participants brought axes in a wide range of sizes and shapes, from modest hatchets to double-bladed leviathans, and worked while drinking cups of whiskey and eating barbecue. They were surrounded by walls lined with camping gear; axe care kits that looked nearly identical to first aid kits; \$72 half-gallon growlers of Best Made Maple Syrup; heritage chic camping apparel; and Best Made brand axes so elegantly crafted as to arouse primeval desires (to chop wood). Blues music that sounded like it was recorded

around a campfire played softly, and curious shoppers pulled back a curtain separating the store from the workspace and peered in.

Best Made Co.'s workshops, which in October 2014 have gone international with stints all over the world, clearly foster the creation of rituals around the products and serve to create unique experiences. Added to that, the experience contains a high degree of personalisation as personal items of individual value are being restored under the supervision of skilled craftsmen who engage in dialogues and devise unique solutions for the individual. The way the workshop setting is further described in the article – small groups of enthusiasts, the expert as the idol, ritualistic behaviour surrounding the actual process of making – readily evokes associations with a cult site or even a place of worship where disciples gather.



**Picture 6.** Axe restoration workshop at Best Made Co. HQ

Ritual in this context provides the opportunity to create linking value by means of interaction, actively supporting the construction and possessions of meanings and thus helping in the mobilisation of collective competencies. The transfer of knowledge, however, does not only flow from the brand to the consumer, as the social media channels reveal. People bring in their specific knowledge and actively engage in a dialogue, as visible in an example where consumers restored old cast iron pans. An illustrative example of this knowledge and idea exchange is painted below with extracts from a discussion between the brand and two dozen community members, who commented on a Facebook post by Best Made Co. (BM) about restoring old cast iron pans.

*BM: "A new project we just picked up. Most likely chrome plated, but maybe nickel. There's got to be some other cast iron fans out there? We love the stuff!"*

*“(...) What you have here is a nickel plated cast iron #3 ‘small logo’ made between 1939 and 1957. (...) There are some great sources out there for restoration and general knowledge. I use castironcollector.com a lot!”*

*“Griswold is amazing... though it's always just iron – no plating – with a bright patina after cleaning/reconditioning until you season it properly to make it black. The best are pre-WWII (higher iron content).”*

*BM: “Thanks for all the info! More cast iron goodness is on the way!”*

*“LOVE Cast Iron! Here's a recent resto I did on a Wagner. Before & After, Thanks Best Made Company for helping bring these things back!”*

Earlier we established that the consumer collective around Best Made Co. is split into two main departments as far as their performative practices are concerned. One group has established a relationship with the brand based on the products' use value as a survival tool, while the other conceive of them as objets d'art that symbolise an idea, or perhaps even a simulation, of outdoor life and wilderness. Best Made Co. actively constructs a broad network of experiences in order to satisfy a broad variety of interests. The ones who really want to use their tools are given the chance to improve them, personalise them, or learn the skills involved in their making in the brand's workshop series under the guidance of skilled craftsmen. Or they can join one of the adventure getaways they organise on their own playground “Lumberland” near the Delaware River, a secret fort in the forest where camp life can be celebrated. It is at this outpost without running water or electricity that products can be tested in the field, atmospheric images for the brand journal are shot and stories around the products evolve under the stars. For those who identify with the products as art or beautiful sculptural objects, Best Made Co. exhibits special axe models in galleries around the world. Positive reviews by such renowned institutions as the Museum of Modern Art in New York or Paper Magazine show that they have successfully established their trademark painted axe at the top end of contemporary art and design culture.

Arguably, we may want to ask why consumers so readily and unquestioningly buy into an overpriced design tool whose use value is surely limited in urban contexts. The answer is twofold. First, as we have shown, the products and brand narrative represent canvases for consumers to project their sometimes imaginary, sometimes very real phantasies upon. Best Made Co. facilitates an escape from the efficiency-driven reality of urban life and seeks to resuscitate an idea of the “good old days” when life was simple and concerned with survival rather than sales. Second, the social glue created through interaction with the brand as well as with fellow brand

enthusiasts establishes a common platform, a feeling of “we-ness”, that others do not have access to. The linking value is largely established by a sentiment that is shared by all members of the community. It is doubtful that the tools themselves actually establish that social link, because we cannot identify comparable cohesive structures among people who purchase their tools at a local hardware store. Authenticity, the idea to have something real and tangible to hold on to, represents a temporary exit from an otherwise unpredictable social and economic reality. The superstructure that unites Best Made Co.’s consumers is a shared emotion all members of the group subscribe to: rekindling life with a sense of purpose.

### **Conclusion**

This research shows the continued need to study consumption under functional, social, emotional and aesthetic aspects. It is no longer the thing exchanged, but rather the process of exchange that demands our attention, as this is the point at which meaning is extracted. It is not the producer who determines the linking value of a product, it is the consumer collective that negotiates its meaning beyond branded representations. Moreover, as meaning is free floating, there is a multitude of individual meanings and signifying practices constantly emerging.

Best Made Co.’s marketing approach is infested with community-building mechanisms. From romanticised representations of nature that tie in with latent collective desires, to the manner posts across different social media platforms are strategically used to stimulate engagement and forge bonds beyond branded representations, to the workshop series that establishes a real-life community around the hands-on materiality of the product – all these instances are but efforts to build and stimulate collective value connections around specific brand-specific artefacts. By actively seeking dialogue with individuals, Best Made Co. involves consumers in the value creation process, making them authors in the personal commodification of meaning. Value co-creation takes place in an experience environment that involves all touch points between the brand and the consumer community.

Best Made Co. strategically employs notions of nostalgia and authenticity in its marketing, communication, and product proposition, imbuing the products with an aura of “old-world” charm. The linking value between the brand and the consumer collective is a shared sensation that centres around authenticity and pioneer nostalgia. The product is a means to an end rather than an end in itself: a practical tool is turned into a high-end design symbol that is meaningful, and that is deliberately chosen for its archaic identifying purpose rather than its actual function. Our

analysis demonstrates that networked structures foster the re-contextualisation of objects and how emerging brands are relying on the identity quest of consumers to spin stylised experiences into commercial value. At the same time, Best Made Co. presents convincing approaches to value co-creation, by constructing a multifaceted brand sphere with many story-telling elements. Within the framework of workshops and getaways a personal relationship is established, rituals are (re)produced and unique experiences can be created. Mutual dialogue also can be observed through social media channels and is dominated by knowledge exchange. The collective brand culture of 'Adventurers in Style' has clearly a role in the ways in which value is produced for them, which might be just another indication that we are on the brink of a new relationship between producer and consumer.

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