

Smells Like Teen Spirit: Channelling Subcultural traditions in contemporary Dr Martens branding

In 2012, the Dr Martens footwear company announced profits of £22 million with a 230% rise in sales from 2011-2012 (Jones, 2012). In the light of this achievement, this paper will investigate the ideologies behind recent marketing campaigns - 'First and Forever' (A/W 2011 and S/S 2012) and 'Individual Style. United Spirit' (A/W2012) and will consider the specific branding strategies that have encouraged such consumer attention during this period.

A textual analytical approach to promotional materials including website resources and product catalogue, will specifically identify the role that the brand's heritage plays within the contemporary campaign. This paper will argue that youth subcultural appropriations of the brand during the 20th century are specifically channelled in the 21st century and provide an essential framework that positions the current identity of the brand in relation to its historical antecedents. It is argued that the Dr Martens' company consciously promote the "cultural biography" (Kopytoff, 2001: 66) of their product and subsequently utilise subcultural tropes to attract the contemporary consumer.

Keywords: subculture; style; branding; identity; advertising campaign

Fashion's preoccupation with previous decades' styles and accessories dominates contemporary retailers' consumer apparel. The Autumn/Winter 2012 season was particularly noteworthy in the prevalence of footwear that was once the sartorial domain of youth scenes known in academic circles as subcultures. During the last decade, having witnessed the rise of the Converse baseball boot, Adidas retro-style trainers and Dunlop 'Green Flash', the more mature consumer will recognise the presence of other styles being resurrected from bygone eras. The 'brothel creeper' favoured by the Teds of the 50s and 70s is gracing the shelves of high street shops alongside tasselled loafers of the Ska boys of the late 70s and 80s; whilst Kurt Geiger stores have presented a 'Pretty in Punk' range comprising of studded biker boots, 60s style chelsea boots and winkle-picker monochrome patent flats synonymous with the Two Tone girls. It is no surprise therefore, given this retro-fuelled context, that the Dr Martens company witnessed a 230% rise in sales from 2011-2012 with profits of £22 million announced in March 2012 (Jones, 2012) and this paper will consider the strategies employed by the brand to successfully generate such consumer attention. Dr Martens footwear has had a significant presence in youth street styles since the 1960's and is subsequently synonymous with subcultural sartorial traditions (Polhemus, 2010). The implications of this affiliation and the use of heritage narratives within 21st century constructions of the brand will

be investigated within this paper, with a consideration of how historical antecedents provide a representative framework positioning the brand within a contemporary context.

Whilst high street retailers recycle apparel and accessories that were once essential items within sixties, seventies and eighties youth scenes, there is a sense that such footwear is decontextualised from its original subcultural traditions. This is a familiar gripe within academic studies on the role that subcultural style plays within a post-millennial mainstream milieu (Polhemus, 1995; Clark; 2003, Woodward, 2007). This paper will highlight how Dr Martens' 2011-2012 advertising campaign foregrounds rather than erases a historical subcultural context within the contemporary terrain, investigating how subcultural traditions embedded within the brand's 20th century incarnations are highlighted. Focussing specifically on the 2011/2012 campaigns, 'First and Forever' and 'Individual Style, United Spirit' (Dr Martens, 2012) the promotion of the brand and commodity beyond the functional aspects of the product's design will be considered. The campaign highlights material culture and sartorial styles' symbolic function drawing primarily on the cultural significance of commodities and brands. In keeping with the notion of objects possessing "life histories" (Appadurai, 2001: 17) in which a "cultural biography" (Kopytoff, 2001: 66) can be traced, this paper will suggest that contemporary Dr Martens marketing specifically positions the brand as a "culturally constructed entity" (Kopytoff, 2001: 68). This is possible through a process of framing the product in relation to its previous "destinations" (Appadurai, 2001: 17), notably its consumer usage of the past. Subcultural antecedents provide convincing evidence of the role that style cultures play in the projection of individual narratives and emotional investment (Wilson, 2009, 1985; McRobbie, 1989; Davis, 1992; Barnard 1992; Craik 1993; Brydon, 1998; Steele, 1998; Margolies, 2003; ; Riello and McNeil, 2006; Lynch, Strauss, 2007). It is these characteristics that this paper will suggest, are consciously embedded within the branding strategies of this product.

Roberts (2012) study on the construction of brand heritage within Dior's contemporary advertising, proposes that companies "are increasingly looking backwards to write the unique histories of their specific brands" (Roberts, 2012: 81). Utilising a similar methodology to

Roberts', a textual analytical approach will be adopted that deconstructs particular features of the 2011/2012 promotional campaign including product range, catalogue imagery, promotional films and official website. The aim of this textual deconstruction will be to ascertain how the brand's subcultural heritage evokes a set of symbolic associations (Aaker, 1996) that generate brand essence (Kapferer, 1997).

This investigation will firstly consider how the contemporary campaign utilises its subcultural history, addressing how the brand's "cultural biography" (Kopytoff, 2001: 66) provides ideological currency. It will then identify how the subcultural consumer base of the past is directly utilised on the website in an interactive facility that encourages nostalgic recollections of the brand's function within identity formation. Subcultural tropes thereby become a portal in which to promote consumer experiences, generating a Dr Martens' wearing community in the process. Finally, the paper will focus on how the consumer profile within subcultural discourses of the past nurtures contemporary consumer appeal by foregrounding the ideology of individual expression and non-conformity. The implications of channelling a brand's subcultural heritage in the 21st century are then considered.

All the Young Dudes: Revisiting subcultural heritage

A key component of subcultural style is the appropriation of clothing and objects that differentiate each tribal attire (Cohen, 1972; Hall, Jefferson et al, 1975; Hebdige, 1979; Thornton, 1996; Gelder and Thornton, 1997). Research has illustrated that youth cultures adopt and adapt material products as self-conscious expressions of identity (Hebdige, 1979, 1988; Miller, 1987; Featherstone, 1991; Lury, 1996; Miles, 1998; Holt, 2004; Woodward, 2007). It is within this terrain that Dr Martens' products assumed a central role, as numerous youth tribes during the last fifty years adopted the brand and modified it to suit their own group affiliations. In a list of characteristics that are historical signifiers of many subcultural styles, Polhemus (2010) identifies the recurring presence of "leather jackets, jeans...DMs" (Polhemus, 2010: 6). Throughout his collection of street styles both historical and contemporary (2010), images of DMs appear on the inhabitants of sections devoted to New

Age travellers, Punks, Grunge and Indie kids. Gelder (2007) suggests that “most common narrative about subcultures is one that casts them as non-conformist...different, dissenting” (Gelder, 2007: 3) and it is these qualities that have preoccupied academic research on youth cultural identity (Cohen, 1972; Hall, Jefferson et al, 1975; Hebdige, 1979; McRobbie, 1989; Gelder and Thornton, 1997) . These studies have equated youth ideologies of anti-establishment and individual identity statements within visual signifiers, suggesting that youth ‘scenes’ consciously performed group affiliations in ritualistic attention to apparel and accessories. The Dr Martens brand featured prominently within this process.

Drawing upon its subcultural traditions, the contemporary campaign constructs connotations of youth creativity, authenticity and sartorial rebellion. In order to suggest that a pair of “Dr Martens opens the floodgates of individuality” (Dr Martens, 2011) it successfully channels its subcultural consumers “the original tribes – Skins, Goths, Punks, Two Tone, Scooter boys and their like” (Dr Martens, 2011) in the product catalogue, establishing an authentic positioning for the brand within youth cultures of the past. The brand’s role within these stylistic traditions substantiates claims of individual expression and anti-mainstream sartorial statement. This is evident within the ‘First and Forever’ campaign’s purpose of educating a current consumer in youth traditions by including a detailed history of subcultural usage on its website accompanied by photographs of these on the walls of its high-street stores.

A historical trajectory outlined on the website offers a guided tour through British subcultural style from the 1960s onwards, with a ‘Timeline’ section that charts the adoption of the brand from Skinheads in the sixties, to Britpop in the nineties. This approach legitimises campaign’s claims at being at the forefront of youth style, anchoring the brand to connotations of individuality and the suggestion that as previous youth cultural styles have illustrated, the Dr Martens wearer, “refuses to accept the establishment and strive[s] to break new ground” (Dr Martens, 2011).

Both website and Facebook link include a short film documenting the brand’s heritage. ‘50 years of Dr Martens The History’ (2011) profiles the cultural implications of the product,

photographs of skinheads (Watson, 2008) for example are intercut with footage of punk gigs. Interviews reiterate street-style appropriations of the brand and anti-conformity connotations are reinforced as a recurring trope. Dr Martens boots are substantiated as a necessary sartorial contributor to the ideology of rebellion and 'otherness'.

Dr Martens' initial function as workwear highlighting comfort and durability with its cushioned sole has certainly diminished within the brand's consumer profile. The public service workers who were the original core market for the product (Roach 1998, 2011, McDowell 1989, Brydon, 1998, Sims, 2011) are no longer identified as the 'typical' DM's consumer, as subcultural youth scenes dominate perceptions of the brand's consumer base. The original workwear sensibility that implicitly advocates anti-fashionable style was an important quality attracting those wishing to construct a sartorial statement that contrasts with mainstream apparel. Youth street scenes from the mid 60s onwards readily adopted the Dr Martens boot precisely because of its anti-fashionable connotations.

Dr Martens are therefore historically synonymous with a self-fashioning procedure that is resolutely anti-fashion in its disavowal of trend-setting high-street style usually consumed by a teenage market (Polhemus, 2010). This recalls Ewen's (1999) observations on skinhead apparel that is historically synonymous with the re-appropriation of Dr Marten boots from its original workwear. He highlights the relationship between the brand and individuality when early eighties skinheads are interviewed. The wearing of DMs is described as a contributory factor in "rejecting the power structure...to get rid of as many fashionable things as possible" (Ewen, 1999: 252). Ewen suggests that the commodity is embedded with "oppositional cultural politics" (ibid), and these connotations from previous subcultural traditions provide a useful representational context for contemporary configurations of the brand.

Promotional materials for the A/W 2011 and S/S 2012 campaign including website documentation and product catalogue, equate the brand with youth individuality described as the "first expression of style and identity" (Dr Martens, 2011). The S/S 2012 campaign

catalogue for example, situates the range within discourses of empowerment, suggesting that the consumer could “strive to break new ground” (Dr Martens, 2011).

A preoccupation with previous consumers is apparent in the current range of shoes and boots entitled ‘Subculture’. This retro strand comprises of Brogues and Tassel Loafers reminiscent of Ska and Two Tone styles of the past and the Ramsey creeper shoe, recalling fifties footwear. These styles evoking subcultural statements of the past are displayed on vintage car seats or modelled alongside narrow-legged ‘sta-prest’ trousers with turn-ups once adorned by the Ska and Rude Boy display of bygone days. Recreating this specific looks was particularly apparent in the campaign images promoting the A/W 2011 range, featuring models wearing pork-pie hats and tasselled loafers with white socks akin to Ska styles. The A/W 2012 product range revisits traditional subcultural footwear with its “originals’ range comprising of the ‘classic three-eyelet 1461 ‘Smooth’ shoe and 1460 eight eyelet boot. The “Rugged’ collection offers “worn” and “broken in” shoes and boots that recall the skinheads customisation rituals of ageing the boots. The “reinvented” collection is described as an “ever-evolving collection which is true to our heritage” (Dr Martens, 2012). This collection’s nostalgic evocation of subcultural brand traditions is anchored in the S/S 2012 campaign imagery in the product catalogue, print advertising and website. Photographs of androgynous models hanging out at a seaside locale, recall summer rituals of bygone days. A nostalgic British summer scene is evoked, documented in muted tones of slightly faded seventies photographs. There is a retrospective sensibility that reiterates a halcyon period of mid to late 20th century behaviour.

Positioning a contemporary brand identity in relation to subcultural lineage enables Dr Martens to resurrect an integral trope synonymous with street-style traditions. Subcultural tribes adopted the brand and famously adapted the product in the process according to their own tribal affiliations. The preoccupation with gang demarcation that distinguished one affiliation from another was inscribed sartorially in the modifications made to the boots. The skinheads for example “preferred them in brown, with black polish smeared into the creases to ‘antique’ them, often oversized, with laces passed through the Airwair heel tag and tied

around the leg” (Sims, 2011: 84). Thornton’s (1996) concept of subcultural capital is particularly pertinent here as whilst many contrasting subcultural gangs have adopted Dr Martens, their own tribal affiliations are branded on the footwear, utilising subcultural ‘rules’ regarding colour, laces and so forth. As the brand’s heritage online documents reiterate, the boots were “worn with quarters flapping open, deliberately unpolished and scuffed or perhaps laced rigidly with a military sheen” (Roach, 2011).

Subcultural ideologies manifested in style were therefore defined in the act of customising an existing brand and reconfiguring it as a symbolic act of identity performance. The contemporary campaign acknowledges this tradition within the product catalogue. The boots are highlighted as a “blank canvas” onto which subcultural identity is inscribed, and we are informed of how the usual suspects “mutated, customised...and freaked out..the eight-eye boot” (Dr Martens, 2011). The brand is therefore positioned as a primary site of subcultural affiliation, foregrounding the relationship between tribal modifications and creative expression. By drawing upon historical evidence of this process, an authenticity is embedded within the campaign’s assertions, “each generation to paint its own personality on to those humble uppers” (Roach, 2011). This is reinforced on the website’s home page that channels customisation and individuality by encouraging the uploading of photographs of customers’ personal modifications of their DMs, consumers are invited to “share your style” (Dr Martens, 2011).

This is evidence that brand heritage shapes the contemporary campaign and that customisation is an integral trope within the brand’s essence (Kapferer, 1997), substantiating brand equity (Keller, 1997). The tradition of customising the product as not only a self-fashioning document but also an anti-mainstream statement encapsulates the brand’s preoccupation with creative expression. Of course, Dr Martens are not the only brand to seize on its subcultural traditions, Fred Perry for example also position their current ranges in relation to subcultural usage of the past. Their website similarly features short films documenting British youth sartorial developments and the presence of the brand within street styles from the last fifty years. However, unlike Dr Martens, Fred Perry cannot accentuate the

trope of customisation in the manner that the footwear brand can. Their clothing brand had a presence in relation to different sartorial ensembles constructed by the Mods, Skins and Two Tone preoccupations but there was less evidence of actually modifying the clothes themselves as was apparent in the alterations made to Dr Martens' products. Nevertheless, Fred Perry are a reminder that subcultural discourses of the past are being utilised as a marketable strategy within contemporary branding.

The suggestion of the design process being attributed to the consumer rather than the product, evoked in the emphasis on customisation, reiterates the trope of authenticity that is interwoven with discourses of identity 'becoming' (Giddens, 1991; Hall 1996) and the active production of self-image. Gilmore and Pine (2007) highlight this trend within 21st century branding, suggesting that authenticity is substantiated when products are viewed as a "platform rather than a finished product" (Gilmore and Pine, 2007:13). Personal embellishment suggests a vision of a 'brand-as-becoming', "If customers create it themselves, then they will consider it real" (Gilmore and Pine, 2007: 20),

The contemporary campaign positions authenticity as the essence of youth identity and highlights the brand's lack of traditional marketing strategies within its history. The original workwear associations were reconfigured by subcultural youths independently of the company and this is an authentic example of the consumer nurturing the brand's youth identity over time, rather than being a company construct. This is foregrounded in the campaign blurb, identifying the brand as "just a fascinated bystander on a journey that has raced through every crevice of subculture" (Dr Martens, 2011). The company reinforce their lack of premeditated involvement in the subcultural scenes of the past, "swept along on this journey without asking or being able to stop the ride" (ibid) thereby using this lack of manipulative selling strategies in order to successfully seduce the consumer! It is this quality that is synonymous with street-style tradition – 'keeping it real' by eschewing mass-marketed products (Hebdige, 1979; Polhemus 2010).

Subcultural traditions within the campaign are a reminder of the potency of heritage narratives interwoven with consumer products. Roberts (2012) addresses the importance of heritage “an attitude towards the legacy of the past” (Roberts, citing Dyer, 2012: 83). Longevity and a ‘timeless’ essence that reaffirms style rather than fashion (Roberts, 2012) is applicable to Dr Martens whose traditions encourage connotations of authenticity from previous cultural ‘scenes’. As fashion and cultural trends are characterised by incessant change “market-enforced ephemeralisation” (Ewen, 1999: 247), core values of brand heritage, especially synonymous with teenage expression, are a distinctive corporate selling strategy.

However, it is worth noting that an anti-conformity stance, synonymous with previous subcultural traditions is evoked solely as an abstract concept safely contained within the notion of individuality and creativity. After all, many of the original historical narratives of youth expression are interwoven with negative connotations of street and gang violence in which DM’s were metonymic signifiers of thuggery and crime. In the seventies and eighties, police frequently confiscated DMs, particularly outside football grounds (Sims, 2011). McDowell (1989) interprets Dr Martens solely in terms of discourses of violence, “aptly described as a boxing glove for the foot...aggressive boots...destined to be used for violence” (McDowell, 1989: 103). Photographer of the First and Forever campaign Gavin Watson, whose images of the early eighties skinheads (2008) document DM’s dominance within sartorial statements of the scene recalls “those boots were seen as weaponry and you felt safe wearing them” (Watson cited in Manzoor, *The Observer*, 31/10/2010, p12). The brand’s criminal record is not surprisingly erased from the contemporary campaign’s halcyon reconfiguring of the brand’s street origins. The conspicuous absence of these connotations complies with the notion of ‘defusion’ (Clarke, 1993: 188) that dislocates a particular style from its unsavoury context in order to improve its commercial and profitable consumer market.

A preoccupation with earlier consumer profiles is developed further within this campaign in strategies that invite previous’ consumers reflections on the role played by the brand during its subcultural heyday. The following section will highlight how authenticity is generated, by drawing directly on previous consumers’ insights. This process cannily equates catalogue

claims of individuality and identity formation with direct personal *experience* as emotional attributes are inscribed within the brand (deChernatony, 2001).

Teenage Kicks: Commodifying personal experience

By utilising its subcultural heritage, the brand is interwoven with narratives of identity formations. It is this trope that is at the heart of the contemporary branding of the footwear – the ‘First and Forever’ title encapsulates the role that the brand has played in teenage self-discovery. The campaign references youth tribes of the past as cultural evidence of self-fashioning and foregrounds this process through the prominence of the initial stages of ‘finding oneself’. Identity constructions are arguably manifested sartorially and Dr Martens accentuate a direct correlation between wearing (and customising) the footwear and personal expression - “for many people their first pair of Dr Martens is a memorable moment in time, an opening statement of intent” (Dr Martens, 2011). The material object is therefore construed as integral to the self-fashioning process.

Rather than blindly making claims for the mythic process of wearing the brand for the first time, the campaign invites nostalgic narratives from consumers of the past. The S/S 2012 catalogue includes supplementary inserts amongst the product ranges of consumers’ recollections of owning their first pair of boots. It is not surprising that these memory slides encapsulate rebellious connotations “got detention after detention as I insisted on wearing them to school...I was 15... 17...” (Dr Martens, 2011) and implicitly locating some recollections during the heyday of subcultural scenes “it was 1978. I bought a pair of 8 hole oxbloods...Gran thought I looked like a skinhead...Putting on my first pair and instantly feeling like a badass” (Dr Martens, 2012)

Returning to bygone eras is notable in the preoccupation with previous consumers’ experiences of the brand. The campaign asserts the experiences of the “original tribes” modifications of their DMs and foregrounds individual recollections of wearing the brand, both in catalogue inserts and on Facebook. This strategy repositions the concept of individuality by

not explicitly locating the interviewee within a specific subcultural scene and yet still retains brand's essence – that of non-conformity and creativity. By focussing on “My first pair of DM's” (Dr Martens, 2012) reflections inevitably interweave narratives of identity formation, expressed as synonymous with the consumption of the brand. This strategy is in keeping with Gilmore and Pine's (2007) observation that the “currency of experiences” (Gilmore and Pine, 2007: 1) is an integral purchasing directive for the 21st century consumer, the desire for “memorable events that engage them in an inherently personal way” (Gilmore and Pine, 2007: 1). They draw attention to Nike's strategy of inviting consumers to upload videos to their website citing their attachments to the company's Converse range - a strategy that elicits authenticity, “trying to blow the barrier between brand and consumer” (Soderstrom, 2006 cited Gilmore and Pine, 2007: 19). The Dr Martens' online postings reiterate an emotional involvement, offering reflections on teenage identity infused with sentimental longing. The construction of “cherished memories” (Gilmore and Pine, 2007: 59) is an appealing marketing strategy within consumer culture that enables a brand to perform the role of “curator of the authentic experiences of bygone days” (Gilmore and Pine, 2007: 59).

The interactive aspects of the current campaign encourage self-reflection that sets the scene for emotional relationships to dominate in relation to the brand (Kapferer, 1997; deChernatony, 2001). Whilst authenticating the brand's claims, this platform nurtures the contemporary consumer who has not necessarily purchased their first pair. Memories and experiences of previous generations therefore function as inspirational narratives of the self for the contemporary consumer seeking a similar authentic experience not replicated in other brands. Cultural traditions whether directly referenced in subcultural scenes or just individual sartorial experimentation, are an incentive for the contemporary youth consumer to themselves purchase a slice of this narrative, inspired to carve out their own place within a tradition of youth identity, expression and belonging.

This strategy also unites contemporary consumers and earlier youth advocates whose recollections position the brand as an essential component of their teenage kicks. By including a multi-generational approach to empirical research of their consumer base, the

brand are foregrounding their tradition and generating an appeal for the 21st century youth consumer. By purchasing their “first pair of DMs” (Dr Martens, 2012) so the contemporary clientele are consuming a slice of youth tradition, subscribing to a historical trajectory of affectionate recollections of individuality and sartorial creativity. They are initiated into a subcultural gang that will only invite those who have the courage and conviction to express difference. These slices of empirical evidence are used to substantiate the brand’s associations with youth cultural expression and construct a mythic role for the footwear within reflections of the self.

This approach also extends the potential 21st century Dr Martens consumer beyond the youth market, online observations use nostalgia to nurture the potential older consumer whose recollections of their first pair evoke the desire to revisit the brand. The campaign’s technique of referencing youth culture reawakens a need to purchase a slice of teenage kicks within adulthood. Bennett and Kahn-Harris (2004) suggest that contemporary popular culture encourages a youth sensibility for the older market through retro products and media, subsequently constructing youth as “an ideological category, a state of mind” (Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004: 10) beyond the parameters of age.

This campaign taps into this audience with its emphasis on reminiscing about the brand’s role within teen identity formations of the past. Whilst the first pair is a milestone of identity reflection that remains with you throughout adulthood, the notion of ‘forever’ can also be attributed to the continued presence of these products within style beyond youth. After all, if the product is synonymous with a sartorial statement that lies beyond transient fashion moments, it can certainly be revisited and reconfigured into whatever style of choosing at any age. Bennett and Hodkinson (2012) suggest that a “multigenerational” (Bennett and Hodkinson, 2012: 2) audience are targeted within contemporary lifestyle resources, identifying a “post-youth cultural territory” (Bennett and Hodkinson, 2012: 6) in which older consumers utilise products and styles from their youth and retain previous cultural signifiers of “distinctiveness” (Bennett and Hodkinson, 2012: 3) in the process.

The online spaces of the 21st century become the domain of older and new consumers of Dr Martens, united in their recognition of the role that the brand has played beyond its practical function. In an era of the post-subculturalist (Muggleton, 2000; Muggleton, Weinzierl, 2003) the DMs “blank canvas” (Dr Martens, 2011) retains its identity as a product that is embedded with creativity and attitude. Research into post-subcultural affiliations, (Hodkinson 2002; Sweetman 2004) has illustrated that despite stylistic diversity and the suggestion of transient group dynamics, there remains a desire to gravitate towards ‘scenes’ providing “individuals with a sense of belonging and identification as *well* as a sense of individual identity or style” (Sweetman, 2004: 79). The individual style statements encouraged by the wearing of Dr Martens do not negate a scene and belonging – the group is now that of the DM brand.

It is clear therefore that the brand’s subcultural heritage provides a representative framework that not only evokes connotations of longevity, authenticity and individuality but also serves as a catalyst to equate the brand with personal experiences and emotional affiliations. By utilising 21st century online communication pathways, the brand succeeds in nurturing a further subcultural trope in the form of a demarcated ‘us and them’ gang sensibility. There is a prevalent construction of a Dr Martens community of like-minded individuals, past and present, evident in the collective reminiscing of ‘my first pair’. This recalls discriminatory taste cultures that are incorporated within style and consumer products that Thornton (1996) suggested was a significant feature of subcultures. Dr Martens actively encourage “objectified subcultural capital” (Thornton, 1996: 114) in relation to their product, suggesting an informed ‘knowingness’ amongst the chosen few who have embraced individuality over conformity, both sartorially and ideologically.

Subsequently, nostalgic reflections from the product’s earlier incarnations promote a dual consumer market, connecting the originals with the ‘newbies’ in a shared sartorial ideology. Identity narratives located in the past are recycled in the campaign as a strategy to invigorate new consumers, an approach that is integral to the development of the brand, maintaining core values to “revive for each generation an appreciation of their brand’s appeal to previous generations” (Gilmore and Pine, 2007: 22)

Acceptable in the eighties: Approaching the contemporary consumer

In order to develop the audience for the product, it is essential for the campaign to position a contemporary relevance for the 21st century consumer who did not experience the product in those halcyon days. The Dr Martens campaign avoids directly replicating specific cultural scenes in campaign imagery (there is no stereotypical goth, punk or skins look for example). Rather than privileging subcultural style over ideology, the campaign seeks to enforce, rather than diminish ideologies of previous subcultural expression beyond the limits of specific sartorial groupings.

Whilst the campaign documentation has its feet planted firmly in the past, it attempts to channel a retro ambience without succumbing to a direct revival of bygone days. The brand are targeting a post-millennial consumer and the campaign catalogue recognises a youth culture that has emerged from the ashes of past sartorial styles. A postmodern “supermarket of style” (Polhemus, 2010) is recognised as a 21st century response to the “original tribes” (Dr Martens, 2011) mentioned in the catalogue as contemporary generations seemingly approach sartorial style from a less clearly-defined subcultural uniform and sensibility (Muggleton, 2000; Bennett, Kahn-Harris, 2004; Huq, 2006). This is addressed in the product catalogue as current youth culture comprises “limitless stylistic vandals...an ever-expanding collection of tribes and lifestyles” (Dr Martens, 2011). Whilst foregrounding the brand’s subcultural origins in the forms of Skins, Goths, Punks and so forth with their ritualistic modifications of their DM’s, the campaign avoids alienating contemporary youth consumers whose self-fashioning is far less definable within a scene or specific ‘look’.

In the campaign documentation, a 21st century consumer whose cultural terrain is synonymous with plurality and flexibility is profiled. The promotional film available on the official website for example recognises the brand’s contribution to contemporary youth culture characterised by less definable subcultural scenes. Despite being the footwear of choice for an eclectic mix of youth styles “vampires wearing them in Twilight...Rihanna wearing them”

(*Fifty Years of Dr.Martens The History*, 2011), the ideology of individuality continues to be embedded within perceptions of the brand as consumers interviewed situate the brand as a “symbol of freedom” (*Fifty Years of Dr.Martens The History*, 2011).

The product range clearly addresses a plurality of sartorial styles aimed at the contemporary consumer. Accompanying the subculture range are those previously unavailable in the earlier periods comprising of an array of colours and patterns. The boot style has not been altered, only the range of fabric utilised. By adapting features but retaining original design features, contemporary incarnations of the brand offer a reconfiguration that will appeal to those who are not aiming for an accurate sartorial revival.

The campaign and its products thereby attract those interested in channelling a retro sensibility but without directly replicating any specific subcultural tradition. The wide range of available colours and patterned 8 holers for example suggest this. Bennett and Kahn-Harris (2004) suggest that contemporary youth display “new sensibilities of style” (Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004: 11) that have emerged from the traditions of the past. The more heterogeneous style statement that Bennett and Kahn-Harris argue is at the heart of contemporary youth culture is described as “DM’s and a Chanel handbag” (Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004: 11) and has ramifications for the marketing of the brand. Traditional youth styles are therefore referenced in the campaign and are revitalised in one of the design ranges available, but do not dominate the range or shroud the campaign imagery completely.

The A/W 2012 promotional film promotes a youth ‘scene’ hanging out and socialising. A youth sensibility that references the past dominates aesthetically as all hair and clothing featured evokes retro-styling – quiffs, shaved cropped hair, buttoned checked shirts, fishnet tights are all reminiscent of eighties sartorial uniforms but without a cohesive subcultural style dominating. The campaign’s ideology of “Individual style, United spirit” (Dr Martens, 2012) is anchored in the combination of styles worn by the contemporary DMs consumer without diminishing the recurring trope of a ‘collective DMs wearing’ scene. As Roach’s study on the

brand's historical trajectory asserts, "you can wear your grunge shorts, your Emo hair, your punk tats...there are no limits...no pigeon-holes to fit into" (Roach, 2011)

The interactive online recollections that evoked a Dr Martens-wearing community are further substantiated in campaign imagery of 21st century teenagers getting their kicks hanging out together. A sartorial 'scene' is generated in this promotional film, through each individual expressing an identity constructed from remnants of previous subcultural apparel that are then customised in different stylistic combinations. The ideology of sartorial expression emerges that succeeds in generating an image of a youth tribe united in their brand affiliation, who have affectionately plundered the past. The "statement of intent" (Dr Martens, 2011) that anchors the product and consumer is a reminder that an *ideology* of subcultural heritage is enforced. According to Polhemus (2010) subcultural traditions have a legacy within the 21st century, materialising in a punk ethos of do-it-yourself expression of non-conformity rather than in any specific subcultural style. He also perceives this ideology as multi-generational as we "throw away the rule book...to produce a unique personal style statement which functions as a visual advertisement of who we are and where we are at" (Polhemus, 2010: 125). This is the key to the contemporary Dr Martens campaign target audience, one whose purchase of the brand is an act of 'sampling' with the scale of retro statement at the disposal of the individual.

Children of the Revolution: Dr Martens' branding implications

This paper has illustrated street discourses of the past can be absorbed by a brand and repackaged to entice contemporary consumer appeal in the present. Subcultural affiliations provide the brand with "cultural markers" (Kopytoff, 2001: 67) that evoke a set of marketable characteristics. Brand heritage, in this instance is significant as a strategy within 21st century advertising because it chimes with current preoccupations within consumer culture that references retro products and apparel, whilst also nurturing another contemporary trend of privileging consumer interaction.

In a retro-fuelled consumer culture, many companies are assuming the role of subculture vultures by seizing the commercial potential of previous street-styles. The AW2013 season continues to utilise styles that were once the domain of subcultural tribes in the early 80s. In a feature entitled “Born Again 90s rebel” (Curtis, 2013), Elle magazine predict AW2013 sartorial trends and urge readers to “lace up those DMs...grunge is back” (Curtis, 2013). Readers are also informed, “punk is in the air” (Eldridge, 2013) with details on fulfilling this style in the wake of New York’s Metropolitan Museum exhibition ‘Punk: Chaos to Couture’. This apparel is predictably visible in high street retailers. Primark are currently channelling tartan drainpipe trousers reminiscent of punk attire alongside the obligatory street icon of a leather jacket and replica Dr Martens’ patent boots. Similarly, online clothing retailer ‘Very’ offer guidance on recreating the on-trend 90s grunge ensemble complete with black Dr Martens.

This trend of plundering previous youth modifications is useful to brands like Dr Martens who can lay claim to a legitimate presence within the original incarnations of the stylistic ensembles being peddled within mainstream commercial outlets. Both Primark and Very acknowledge the presence of Dr Martens when recreating a retro context. By framing current perceptions of their products in relation to their subcultural heritage, Dr Martens evoke a distinctiveness and authenticity from having been integral to youth street apparel that is now resurfacing on the high street.

In 2013, the marketing of sportswear giant Adidas trainers utilises a similar strategy to that of the DMs brand. In the mid 80s, the footwear was seized beyond corporate consumer profiling and reconfigured by American hip-hop street culture – a biographical detail that is currently providing the essence of the current advertising campaign. The appeal of the revisited range is generated by hip-hop artists, Run DMC appearing in campaign imagery. Like Dr Martens, Adidas are consciously positioning their product in relation to previous consumer activity and are equally eager to prevent the whiff of corporate hijacking by advocating the personal embellishment of their retro range. A simple click of the customise icon online offers this potential – suggesting that consumer activity is being guided by the corporation. Seducing the 21st century consumer with its ‘old-skool’ hip-hop styles is in keeping with an 80s revival

within popular culture, whilst commodifying the essence of subcultural ideology that is encapsulated in the trope of restyling and personal inscription of the object - "designed by you. Made by Adidas" (Adidas, 2013). The advertising tagline "Unite All Originals" (Adidas, 2013) illustrates this, fusing hip-hop groundbreaking artists and the ideology behind customisation processes.

The language of historical subcultural affiliations, the "us and them" discourses that demarcated street individuality from corporate fashion, remain applicable in this context. It is imperative for brands whose heritage is synonymous with subcultural appropriations to repackage street authenticity and preserve connotations of originality without compromising these tropes with corporate flavouring that would fail to differentiate Dr Martens from commercial counterparts jumping on the a subcultural bandwagon. This is achieved because subcultural ideologies are adhered to by emphasising the trope of personal modification that lies at the heart of this earlier consumer profile, in contrast to brands who are promoting a pre-packaged subcultural ensemble. Subcultural capital (Thornton, 1996), being 'in the know' is generated from brand heritage - 'we were present in street styles of the past' – implying that Dr Martens and Adidas are not 'subculture vultures' like other retailers responding to a retro fashion trend. In reality of course, they are still plundering previous subcultural affiliations within the guise of having a legitimate claim at this domain.

By encouraging consumer modifications, these brands are referencing previous subcultural behaviour that subsequently evokes a unique identity for the Adidas/Dr Martens consumer. By foregrounding their historical trajectory, these brands generate "cultural authenticity" (Taylor and Barker, 2007: 10). Subcultural origins therefore provide value, a "badge of integrity" (Taylor and Barker, 2007: 186), distinguishing the brand from those who simply weren't selected by youth tribes in the past. As companies use heritage to claim ownership of subcultural discourses, so these qualities of authenticity and originality are transposed to the consumer who not only selects these brands above others on the high street, but also possesses the understanding that individuality is inscribed within personal modifications to these products. The irony of course is that these once-autonomous street processes are now

directed by the marketing department, 'tribal knowledge' becomes the underlying marketing strategy, highlighting how far corporate activity can successfully masquerade as "consumer-controlled production" (Gilmore and Pine, 2007: 13). Dr Martens are selling their own lack of corporate-induced values, attributing these instead to the consumers who seemingly continue to shape the brand's essence of individual expression - a brand identity that is dictated *by* not *for* the consumer.

Subcultural biographies in this instance construct brand equity (Keller, 2003) providing cultural currency in a 21st century context. Consumers of the past have independently engineered symbolic associations (Aaker, 1996) that subsequently have ramifications on how the brand chooses to position itself within contemporary contexts. The Nokia Windows phone captures the essence of consumer culture today with their slogan "reinvented around you" (Windows Phone, 2013). Bank cards can now be personalised by uploading images onto our plastic companions alongside customised computer, phone and car accessories. Consumer activity lies at the core of many current branding techniques, evoking a perception of non-corporate production and consumer autonomy. This emphasis on consumer participation is assisted by brands' use of online spaces. Social networking platforms are routinely adopted by brands constructing an ideology that consumers are actively shaping a product's meanings. The Vanish brand's "Tip Exchange" on Facebook is a case in point. Television advertising incorporates consumers' own uploaded footage expressing their personal usage of the product. This focus on consumer experience peddles an authenticity and reinforces a product's viability in a competitive market. Social networking tropes are significant within consumer marketing because they enable products and brands to transcend their status as objects and instead, become conduits of experience and identity.

By drawing upon consumer reflections, brands are successfully authenticating an emotional investment and lineage with their products, as consumer experiences generate brand equity (Kapferer, 1997; Keller, 1997; deChernatony, 2001) and this is forming the foundation of marketing strategies in the 21st century. By encouraging a social networking style forum for consumer 'feedback' that prioritises an emotional connection to the brand, many

contemporary campaigns successfully market “the meaningfulness of objects” (Woodward, 2007: 107) thereby eschewing connotations of brand manipulation.

The context of a subcultural discourse thereby restores the original symbolic function of the Dr Martens brand as a ‘non-brand’. The concept of street apparel being absorbed by mainstream fashion (encapsulated in the title of the exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum) is clearly apparent in 2013. This sartorial transition from subculture to mass culture known as “the bubble-up approach” (Polhemus, 1995) evokes an ideological binary that Polhemus distinguishes between the “genuine article” (Polhemus, 1995) that originated within the subcultural domain, and its “chic reinterpretation” (Polhemus, 1995). Dr Martens successfully constructs brand equity from asserting its “genuine article” credentials and commodifies sartorial innovation for mass consumption in the process. Identity ‘becoming’, emotional investment and autonomy that are attributed to the product throughout every facet of the campaign, shroud any notion that Dr Martens’ footwear are a corporate consumer product. As recent sales figures illustrate, the representation of a product as an object through which individuals negotiate their own narratives is a particularly effective branding technique. As the website reminds us “ the problem with brands is that they dictate...they design it, shape it, form it and sell it. You have no say...” (Roach, 2011). This paper has highlighted how corporate branding generates the impression of consumer autonomy - ‘having your say’ after all. It would appear that the company are remaining true to their heritage by encouraging contemporary consumers to view their brand as a platform on which identity is inscribed, reinvented and reconfigured. This lies at the heart of subcultural tradition and is arguably, even more pertinent and commercially lucrative in a contemporary terrain than ever before.

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