

# Panic Regression

Jeff Odiorne

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The corner of Bleecker and West 11<sup>th</sup> is a treasure trove for the urban anthropologist analyzing consumer behavior in the aftermath of Sept. 11. On this particularly crisp Thursday afternoon in late December, there's a cross-section of West Village inhabitants waiting in line outside the Magnolia Bakery for their yellow cupcake with chocolate icing and sprinkles fix.

Definitely no victim of this recession, the Bakery's business has never been stronger. Across the street, the Marc Jacobs store is displaying top sellers for the spring season—candy-colored duffel bags at \$400 a pop. Down the road, arty-yet-proper English handbag designer Lulu Guinness has opened a boutique that resembles the interior of a young girl's dream dollhouse. Next door is Boston fragrance phenomenon Fresh's downtown flagship, which features scented products in such kid appeal varieties as chocolate and honey.

People in their 20s and 30s are clamoring for comfort in purchases and products, and sensory experiences that remind them of a happier, more innocent time—childhood. After speaking to young consumers in our panels, we've observed how this desire is affecting what they buy eat, watch and wear. We've labeled this trend Feterpandemonium.

Interest in retro retreats has been growing for some time—note the growing popularity of The Cartoon Network among 18–34 year-olds the past couple of years. But 9/11 is the main catalyst for these comfort-related cravings. The childhoods of today's twentysomethings were relatively idyllic—a period of peace and economic prosperity. It comes as no surprise that revisiting those years serves as the ultimate security blanket.

The desire to reconnect with childhood innocence is reflected in TV ratings and movie ticket sales. Two of the biggest commercial and critical Hollywood hits this year—*Shrek* and *Monsters, Inc.*—were animated, appealing to the child in everyone with messages of acceptance and connection. "I must have gone to the theater to watch *Shrek* five or six times after the events," said Marina, a 32-year-old media executive recalling her post-9/11 salvation. "It was the most reassuring and comforting thing I could do... and I wasn't alone—the theater was crowded."

Adults comprise one-quarter of the audience for Nickelodeon's *SpongeBob Squarepants*, a cartoon characterized by unbridled optimism. "It's the coolest show," said ad executive Paula, age 34. "I record it and have viewing parties. It's the new *Pee Wee's Playhouse*, but less cynical, which is perfect for where I am right now."

Fashion is experiencing a flashback, too. Debbie, a 29-year-old lawyer from New York, recalled a recent shopping trip and how the pair of Nikes she was sporting felt "cold and generic." So she bought a classic pair of Fbnys, which whisked her back to those carefree days at summer camp.

Dave described his former style as conservative, a buttoned-down Banana Republic look. But that all changed after a visit to an East Village vintage store, where he spied a rack of decal T-shirts promoting *Starsky & Hutch* and other old TV shows. "I started wearing them and now I have people coming up to me in the street smiling and high-fiving me," said the 31-year-old Internet sales executive. "I guess I'm trying

to go back into the safety of PS.6, where the biggest challenge was who was going to win at Dungeons & Dragons.”

Tiffany a 28-year-old artist living in San Francisco, happily showed off this year’s favorite Christmas gift. “My friend made all of us charm bracelets with those name beads you had in grade school,” she said. “There was something so sweet and warm about it—this bracelet means more to me than other expensive gifts.”

While it may sound similar to a term coined in the ’80s to describe male boomers in the throes of mid-life crises, the tone and psychographics of Peterpandemonium and Peter Pan Syndrome have marked differences. Peter Pan Syndrome identified a somewhat self-destructive social behavior in which middle-aged men shunned responsibilities and substituted irrational impulses for rational behavior. For the younger generations, Peterpandemonium has no real negative connotations, and the term applies to both social and materialistic actions.

Peterpandemonium is not just about recycling; it is also about innovation, taking an idea from the past and giving it a new spin. The application can be as simple as boutique hotel group Rubell Hotels’ always-open cookie jar at check-in desks, to Crest reinventing the dental care market by offering whimsically designed toothbrushes that make waking up and going to bed an uplifting experience.

Ground zero for this trend: Dylan’s Candy Bar, the new 6,000-square-foot Willy Wonka-inspired candyland where twentysomething Manhattanites can be seen milling around Pez dispensers and a giant lollipop tree.

In the end, Peterpandemonium is all about creating comfort in troubled times. This year will be a time of rebuilding, during which consumers will continue to seek out badges of support and reassurance. Now’s the time to reintroduce classic old brands, from Puma to Fbny from *Press Your Luck* to Pac Man. Companies that can tap into this innocence are poised for growth.

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*Jeff Odiorne is the founder of San Francisco-based advertising agency Odiorne Wilde Narraway & Fhrtners (.www.otvnp.com), which specializes in the 18-34-year-old consumer market. Caught between the boomer and Gen X demographic groups, Odiorne started the agency in 1994 at age 28. He describes his OWN Panels as “an entertaining approach to research with content that is presented in a refreshing manner, leading to more honest responses and a greater understanding of the category.” Odiorne can be contacted at jeff\_odiorne@ownp.com.*

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## **Peter Pan-O-Rama**

“The best way to understand Fteterpan- demonium is by analyzing the current marketplace,” says Jeff Odióme. “It’s an inclusion of brands that connect with consumers by appealing to their recollections of childhood” Below a few market examples that Odiorne sees as indicative of the trend.

- **Building:** It’s time to play hide and seek. The new adult accessory in the garden isn’t a serene waterfall or infinity pool, it’s a tree house or mini-cabin. The dean of tree house design, Peter Nelson, just released a coffee table book, *Tree Houses 2002*, and has been commissioned to construct a \$300,000 nest for one client. For those afraid of heights, Lincoln Log dwellings are going full scale in everything from *The New York Times* and *Esquire* fashion spreads to coffee table book *The Cabin* (Taunton Press).
- **Eating:** Playing with one’s food is now chic. The new dessert trend at urban boltes? Make your own s’mores, which have become top sellers at New York restaurant First and San Francisco’s Luna Park. The D.I.Y attitude has spread to other food groups: fondue has made a resurgence, and has even become the centerpiece at Artisanal in New York. For those with more plebian tastes, childhood rec room recollections are resurfacing at East Milage bistro Ike, which serves actual TV dinners that can be washed down with Glaceau Fruit Water.
- **Dressing:** This year marks the return of the classic sneaker, models created before concepts like aerodynamicism and energy return systems entered the lexicon of footwear designers. Stripped down and reinterpreted, brands such as Converse, Puma, Fbny and even Keds are making a comeback reflecting the schoolyard styling of the 70s and ’80s. Hip lifestyle brands Paul Frank, Yumpop and Oopsy Daisy incorporate kiddie character decals and elementary-styled graphics with the pop color sensibility of childhood designs. The perfect accessory? Pantone’s leather and rubber wallets and datebooks in an array of Fhntone process colors.
- **Viewing:** The TV industry received a wake-up call when the ratings came in for the *Carol Burnett & Friends* reunion special that aired during November sweeps. Not only was it the week’s most watched program (30 million viewers), it scored a ratings knockout against the coveted 18–34 and 1849 year old demos, proving once again that 20- and 30-somethings crave familiar childhood icons. Classic TV content providers TVLand and The Game Show Network—two of the fastest growing cable nets—saw a 74% and 25% rise in viewership respectively over 2001.
- **Driving:** BMW picked the perfect time to relaunch its classic Mod-era model, the Mini. Debuting with much fanfare in March, the Mini is being marketed as the ultimate toy a true expression of the joy of living. Its colorful frame paired with black and white top and matching wheels conveys a proud, childlike posture.

- **Designing:** A shrine to the principle of Raterpandemonium could be found in Neiman Marcus *'Holiday Home Furnishings* catalog. The centerpiece wasn't filled with traditional mahogany pieces, but rather a plctyful color- and texture-based spread that included "Disco Girl Bedding," multicolored pom-pom diaper bags and mirror- ball table lamps resting on 70sstyle Plexiglas end tables. This energetic wake-up call is also invading restaurant design, where bubblegum pink lighting has replaced Asian minimalism as the element of choice, from the seductive glow of Pearl in Miami Beach to the cubicles of Fbd in Philadelphia. Hotels are following suit: Hotel/Seattle offers Ftez-stocked minibars, and the Townhouse in Miami Beach places red and white inflated beach balls on top of guests' pillows.

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