"My Nana, My Mom and I Went to American Girl": Brand Experience in the Construction of Family Mythology

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The processes by which family identities are constructed develop in different ways. Gendered family histories and memories, cultural heritage, and shared gendered experiences are typical ways women perpetuate models of femininity and prepare a new generation for roles of female kinship and motherhood. In our ethnography of the American Girl brand, we find brand stories being used and reinterpreted to construct different types of gendered family identities. Girls, mothers, and grandmothers play not only with dolls, but with brand stories. These brand stories serve as foundations for them to build new stories, family identities, and memories.

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SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY
Creating and Enacting Family through Consumption
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SPECIAL SESSION OVERVIEW
The family serves as a consuming, producing, distributing and socializing unit (Netting, Wilk and Arnold 1984). While family practices are historically and culturally located, they are at the same time fluid and elective, interacting with other practices and elements of society (Morgan 1996). Thus, families are at the center of how people learn to be consumers, the meanings ascribed to consumption activities, and consumption itself (Miller 1998; Moore, Wilke and Lutz 2002). As location, experience, kinship and ideology, the family has undergone dramatic transformation, and families in post-modernity are far more subject to re-evaluation, individualized and contingent than in past periods of history (Giddens 1992). Great diversity of experience of family life is now common and several sets of potential kin link a growing proportion of children and adults (Finch and Mason 2000). Despite these changes and the profound importance of families to consumers and consumption activities, consumer researchers to date have relied on narrow conceptualizations of the family as a consuming unit (Burns and Mason 1990). Instead, families are at the center of how identity is constructed at home and at play, between generations, with brands and consumption. The papers drew from a variety of disciplinary and methodological approaches that made the session lively and enlightening, providing impetus for future research on the enactment of family identity.

We began our exploration of family with a presentation by Amber Epp, co-authored with Linda Price, focused on how families enact their individual and collective identities through the bricolage of furnishings that make up their collective home. This paper highlighted how individual and family identities are negotiated, blended and partitioned in home furnishings and also how possession, care and arrangement of objects in the home reflect changing conceptions of family identity. The second presentation took us to the world of play. Stefania Borghini presented work with her co-authors Kozinets, Sherry, McGrath, Diamond and Muniz that offered a fascinating account of how grandmothers, mothers and daughters create and reproduce family identity through the vehicle of the American Girl brand. The dolls and stories are used to create, extend and implant memories of themselves, their families and their heritage. The complex branded stories facilitate family differentiation as they become mythologized and blended with the families’ own stories. The third papers, presented by Tandy Chalmers, and co-authored by Kennedy and Kahle, moved us to the soccer field to further explore the dynamics of family identity, particularly the interplay of parents’ and children’s enactment. This research provided insights into how enactment in one domain interacts and even conflicts with enactment in other domains. Eric Arnould, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, served as discussion leader in the session. Drawing on his knowledge and research on families and households, Eric underlined the importance of this session in representing families as both self-reflective and active in managing paradoxical identity enactment processes.

“Reflecting Family: Home Furnishings as Consumption Symbols of Family Identity”
Amber Epp, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Linda Price, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Consumer researchers argue that individual identity is reflected and constructed through consumption (Belk 1988; Noble and Walker 1997; Schouten 1991), but these studies largely ignore family identity. Like individuals, families are likely to embrace objects as extensions of their core identities (Belk 1988) that may complement, conflict, or co-exist with the individual identities of family members. Understanding family identity aids researchers in exploring how a family’s “collective sense of itself” patterns its consumption preferences. As the home is central to a family’s sense of self, it is also linked to individual identity, it serves as a rich context for this study (McCcraken 1989). Despite the centrality of the home to family consumption behavior, little research has sought to explore how this site is constructed and used by families.

Drawing on theories of symbolic interaction and impression management, we addressed the following research questions: 1) how are objects in the home selected and consumed by families to enact their collective, as compared to individual, identities? and 2) how do these consumption symbols, both individually and in relation to each other, relate to various forms (e.g. rituals, stories, and intergenerational transfers) of enactment? As homes represent a vast collection of objects, we focus attention primarily on the acquisition, modification, arrangement and use of furniture in the home. Our paper is based on depth interviews with family members in their homes. The data set consisted of 20 interviews, representing 10 intergenerational family dyads. Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 2 hours in length. Individual family members were interviewed separately, and the transcripts were grouped by family and compared during analysis. Children ranged in age from 8 to 22 years, and parents ranged in age from late 20s to early 60s. The interviews were designed to uncover and discriminate between aspects of self and family identity as enacted in the home.

Our findings uncovered the bricolage of objects imbued with self and family identity that constitute a collective home and helped to expose how differences among individual, relational, and family identities are negotiated, blended and partitioned in the enactment of each. Families in our study typically described at least one room in their homes as illustrative of the character of their families. Participants explained how they constructed and arranged spaces (frequently the living room or kitchen) in a manner conducive to family gathering and interaction, enabling family identity enactment. This was a strategy used to hold the family together by pulling family members into common spaces through strategic use of symbols and to combat the risks of division among family members associated with not constructing spaces where collective interaction could occur. Participants also described ways identities are partitioned within the household, creating spaces where different levels of identity are enacted.

In addition, our research revealed the morphology of family identity through adjustments in the possession, care and arrange-
enactment of objects in the home. As compared with previous research that examines heirlooms (Curasi, Price and Arnold 2004) or household disposition behaviors (Lastovicka and Fernandez 2005), we focused on a broader array of objects and how modifications, arrangements, acquisitions, dispositions and use reflect changing conceptions of family identity. We documented mundane, myriad ways that modifications in furniture collections and arrangements reflect shifting conceptions of family often triggered by marked transitions such as birth of a child or grandchild, or an empty nest, but frequently reflecting more subtle shifts in family resolve to reassert or maintain identity elements (Epp and Price 2004). By examining family identity enactment as a process and adopting Kopytoff’s (1986) view that we can trace an object’s biography through time, we explored how the biography of an object intersects with the biography of a family. At a cross-section in time, families in our sample had some objects that were active in the process of family identity enactment and other objects that were inactive in everyday enactment.

Inactive objects tended to be less salient to everyday family identity enactment and demonstrated ambiguity in object meanings across family members. However, family members did acknowledge a shared sense of the importance of these objects, and the potential for inactive objects to become active in the everyday family identity enactment process was explicit and anticipated. A primary function of inactive objects was to ensure continuity of the family over time. As might be expected, among our participants, household furnishings linked family members to both past generations (e.g. a curio cabinet that houses treasures from a special relative) and future generations of family (e.g. saving a bedroom set to pass on to a future grandson).

For objects that were active in the process of family identity enactment, meanings varied, but were more often shared across the family. Also, objects that were actively involved in everyday family identity enactment tended to serve multiple functions and represented multiple levels of identity enactment. As a result, the malleability of objects for conveying both individual and family identity through differentiated forms of enactment was also explored. For instance, one informant inherited a large, solid-wood kitchen table from her mother that her family used while she was growing up. The table is meaningful to this informant partly because it functions as a symbol of the kind of mother she wants to be, but the table also serves as the place where her own family gathers to create memories that resemble the experiences she had as a child. This example demonstrated the polysemic quality of furnishings, representing both individual and family identity simultaneously, that emerged from our data. It also revealed the complex relationships among symbols and forms of enactment. In this case, the table acquired meanings through both intergenerational references and everyday family interaction. Finally, for active objects that are symbolic of the collectivity, family members resisted individual attempts to modify the function or symbolic properties of the object.

Our results help to distinguish both similarities and differences in the enactment of individual and family identity through the temporal unfolding of symbolic household objects with important implications for future research on family identity. For example, our research illustrates that families try on possible collective identities through their acquisition and arrangement of objects in the home and also partition public and private aspects of family identity in their arrangement of objects within the home.

"My Nana, My Mom and I Went to American Girl: Brand Experience in the Construction of Family Mythology"

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John F. Sherry, Jr., Northwestern University
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Nina Diamond, DePaul University
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This presentation explores consumers’ in-store and in-home use of the American Girl brand and its family of products to build and extend family life stories. Girls, mothers, and grandmothers use the brand (and the pilgrimage experience) to create, extend, and implant memories of themselves, their families, and their heritage.

American Girl Place (AGP) is the epicenter of an experiential brand-based project that can also be understood as a commercial reformation of family, cultural, and gender identities. AGP is designed to harness play in the service of learning, to interpret, transmute, and transmit traditional cultural and familial values to contemporary girls living in a plural postmodern society. How a template for successful socialization can be devised and delivered for (and internalized by) tweens negotiating the broken terrain of girlhood in a multicultural milieu is one of the central problems of our investigation. The performance and contestation of that template, manifested both on-site at AGP and in the homes of consumers, are the principal foci of our research. Our findings illuminate the powerful cultural role of brands and brand narratives in what may be the quintessential small social group: the family.

To date, our methodology has been principally ethnographic in nature. We have conducted extensive participant observation at American Girl Place, including some photography and videography. We have conducted numerous interviews both on- and off-site, with store management, consumers (purchasers, influencers and end-users) and other stakeholders. We have immersed ourselves in company literature (press kits, American Girl magazine, several book series and self-care/personal growth genres, direct mail catalogs and website pages) to understand the corporate archival presence of the brand. Our research team was assembled to ensure a deep and holistic account of the focal phenomena. The team is composed of males and females of disparate age, marital status and nest composition. Several nationalities and ethnicities are represented on the team. While the team is comprised principally of seasoned ethnographers, several disciplines (anthropology, cultural studies, psychology, semiotics and marketing) are represented as well.

We find that complex brand narratives are used by girls, their mothers and grandmothers as elements in the co-construction of personal mythologies, family mythologies, and cultural connections. Girls, mothers, and grandmothers play not only with dolls, but with the diverse and diversity-celebrating, deeply involving stories surrounding the American Girl brand. Families use them as the foundation to construct their own stories, and they synthesize new stories from the combination of commercial and personal tales.

The customer domain, that of young girls who were enjoying their experience with a variety of dolls, led to a web of connections that reinforced their kinship with mothers, aunts and grandmothers, their shared experience with female friends and an idealized and controllable sense of themselves. Through their use of dolls, clothing, accessories and alternative historical contexts, we witnessed girls vacillating between imaginative play and preparation for their lives as adult women. The material accretions of domestication involve the arrangement, rearrangement and interplay of the objects that make up the contents of rooms, closets, and wardrobes. Girls
who had technically outgrown their dolls or put them aside, have squirreled their dolls and accessories away in closets and claimed that this experience was “still in them.”

Mothers and grandmothers approve of these lessons, but also enjoy the ability to give their young female offspring experiences similar to those of their own childhood. The older women feel a sense of nostalgia and connection with the doll-stories’ tales of yore, but they also enjoy the reproduction of the forms of their upbringing that may have become passé. In the current casual world of denim jeans and t-shirts, playing dress-up with both the doll and the doll’s owner (who may not favor wearing a dress ever, but will comply in order to look like her doll) reproduces what may have been a routine experience in the adult’s childhood. This is “stuff”—ideological and touchingly concrete—that mothers want their girls to want.

Through the consumption of AG dolls and their accessories by girls and adults, the brand itself is constructed by consumers in multiple ways; its meanings and values are shaped and re-shaped by the intertwining of family histories and personal identities with the marketers’ project. As a result, the brand becomes a multifaceted icon that can be approached from alternative positions and through diverging processes of appropriation. Like America itself, the American Girl brand is startlingly multivalent.

The net result of this consumption of branded stories is the construction of a gendered family history that connects the women and girls through history, nation, ethnicity, and gender, and that helps to clarify and educate girls, their mothers, and their families about who they are and what matters to them. These findings of family/togetherness/cultural sameness are of course set off against notions of difference. Yet this distinction raises the fascinating dynamic at work both in commercial and contemporary popular culture: the exoticization and appropriation of cultural difference as a vehicle for family differentiation (a form of co-branding, perhaps?) and neo tribal affiliation. In an effort to ennoble play and harness the ludic in the service of personal development, American Girl marketers and American girl parents collude in the enduring co-creation of models of femininity, identity, and family.

“Soccer Moms and Dads: Family Values Enacted Through Sports”

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This study explores children’s sports as a domain for the enactment of family values. Children’s sports are a growing and important segment of the sports industry. According to the Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, for example, 6.1 million children from ages six to 17 played soccer more than 25 days a year in 2003 (Cary 2004). The soccer activity is described as an activity that children choose to participate in because it is fun, while their parents support the endeavor, despite the considerable time pressures, because it serves as a foreground for the attainment of valuable life skills, such as team work (Kinney, Dunn, and Hofferth 2000; Cary 2004, Verggengia 2005). Moreover, sports are an important domain for the enactment of personal values (Sagie and Elizur 1996). Nevertheless, we know little about how individual and family values are molded by and linked to children’s sports participation and how related aspects of consumption are patterned around these activities.

Prior research stresses the connections among personal values, attitudes, and behavior and explores connections between values and consumer activities (Florenthal 2000; Kahle et al. 2001; Kahle and Kennedy 1989; Kennedy, Best, and Kahle 1988). Research also shows that participation in consumption activities can alter personal values (Gillespie, Leffler, and Lerner 2002) and can be important in the development of personal (Donnelly and Young 1988; Roberts 1997) as well as collective identity (e.g. Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993; Schouten and McAlexander 1995; Wheaton 2000). Further, research demonstrates the role of parental values in socializing children into their roles as consumers in general and sports participants in particular (Babkes and Weiss 1999; Green and Chalip 1997; Grossbart, Carlson, and Walsh 1985; John 1999; Jambor 1999; Moschis 1985; Woolger and Power 1993). Interestingly, while children and parents believe they share common goals with respect to sports, parents and children actually report differing goal orientations and preferences in relation to sport participation (Bergin and Habusta 2004; DeFrancesco and Johnson 1997; Martin, Dale, and Jackson 2001). Other research emphasizes the influence of children in consumption activities of families (Beatty and Talpade 1994; Filiatruait and Ritchie 1980; Foxman, Tansuhaj, Ekstrom 1989; Palan and Wilkes 1997). Finally, research examines how rituals and narratives surrounding consumption activities are used to enact family values (Curasi, Price, and Arnould 2004; Moisio, Arnould, and Price 2004; Moore, Wilkie, and Lutz 2002; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). Nevertheless, there is a paucity of research on how other important domains of consumption activity that engage the whole family are used to enact, reconstruct, or maintain values of that collectivity. Such research can contribute to an improved understanding of consumer socialization, as well as an improved understanding of how individual and collective values are enacted in a group activity.

Our research focuses on families’ participation in children’s soccer team activities. We use a combination of participant observation and depth interviews with parents and children from 22 Midwestern United States families to uncover links between individual and family values and participation in soccer team activities. We focus on children participating in both recreational and competitive soccer in order to uncover a range of involvements in the activity on the part of both parents and children. Narrative analysis serves as the methodological framework for linking values to soccer participation. Narrative analysis can be used to uncover how informants impose order and meaning on a flow of experience and use stories to fashion identity (Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992). Consumer researchers have used this method to uncover elements of family identity related to consumption activities (Curasi, Price, and Arnould 2004). Interviews and field notes were transcribed and then coded, first using free coding, and then using QSR NVivo 1.2 using standard data analysis and interpretation procedures (e.g. Glaser and Strauss 1967; Thompson 1997). We employ three types of analyses to uncover important themes and tensions: across families, within families, and within individual informants (Curasi et al 2004).

We demonstrate parents and children link individual and family values to sports participation. In addition to a parallel between family values and sports participation, we uncover interplays between family values and sports participation that create and enhance family values and family identity through a perceived strengthening of family. Despite this perceived strengthening, narratives reveal several paradoxes relating to soccer activity. Specifically, a disjuncture exists between parents’ normative glosses of soccer activity as play and parents’ and children’s narratives of soccer behavior as work. Also, how parents describe themselves as competitors versus how they describe other parents. Further, there is a disjuncture between parents and children in describing decision making authority and decision influences. Narrative analysis also reveals a paradoxical relationship between soccer and the enact-
ment of family values, creating a situation in which soccer ‘tears apart’ the family while still strengthening it as a whole. A notable example is the tension between sports and family meals as time spent eating together is displaced by soccer (tears apart) yet the family asserts that they now spend more time together as a whole (strengthening). Furthermore, conflicts between sport participation and other weekend activities, church going in particular, are frequently noted. Soccer participation, however, is able to transcend the competing tensions created between traditional family activities and soccer participation as it manifests itself as a shared family activity that is perceived as ultimately strengthening family.

Thus, our research illustrates that participation shifts the prominence of articulated family values for both parents and children. Future longitudinal research in conjunction with a process orientation to isolate changes that occur within families as they increase (and decrease) involvement in a particular activity should be employed to further elaborate these findings. Future research should also focus on how family is actually enacted in comparison to the prevailing normative ideology.

REFERENCES


