Special Session Summary    Finding Families: Family Identity in Consumption Venues

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SPECIAL SESSION OVERVIEW

Family remains essential to many core questions in consumer research. The family serves as a consuming, producing, distributing and socializing unit interacting with other elements of society (Netting, Wilk and Arnould 1984). 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). Despite the profound importance of families to consumers and consumption activities, consumer researchers have devoted relatively little attention to understanding them. Moreover, consumer research to date has reflected narrow conceptualizations of the family as a consuming unit (Burns 1993; Commuri and Gentry 2000).

The family, as location, experience, kinship and ideology has undergone dramatic transformation. 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; Smart and Neale 1999). At the same time, many contemporary consumers still want to believe they belong to a family that works and to feel they contribute actively to it (Finch and Mason 2000; Miller 1998; Smart and Neale 1999).

Morgan (1996) challenges the idea of the family as an institution, speaking instead of family practices that are historically and culturally located but at the same time fluid and elective interacting with other practices. Because how and what constitutes a family and the ideological power of the term have changed, the task of finding families has changed. This session introduced new empirical and theoretical approaches to understanding family practices in consumption venues that are responsive to the diversity of family life now common. Each of the papers in the session offered insights into family identity, and the blending of family practices with other practices. Collectively, the papers support the emotional and ideological power of family, but provide fresh perspectives for examining how family identity is constructed between generations, across work roles and spaces, with brands and consumption.

We began our quest for family with a poem by John Schouten who searches for family by tracing emotional signatures. His poem underscored the emotional power of family and set a reflexive tone for the session. The second presentation by Amber Epp and Linda Price introduced a conceptual model linking family identity to its enactment through consumption practices. This paper set the stage for the empirical papers that followed. The third presentation by Robert Kozinets and his co-researchers offered a fascinating account of how grandmothers, mothers and daughters create and reproduce family identity through the American Girl brand. The dolls and stories are used to create, extend and implant memories of themselves, their families and their heritage. The final presentation by Kelly Tian and Russell Belk examined how consumers use material goods to navigate and resolve corporate-family and home-family competitions for commitment and attachment. The ideological power of family is evident in corporate attempts to “become family”. Their study also illustrated the fluid, elective quality of family. Eric Arnould, University of Nebraska, served as discussion leader in the session.

“Observations At My Own Funeral”
John W. Schouten, University of Portland

What is this place?
A sea wall?
People gathered at a pier?
I sense water here, and salt.

In death I have no eyes, no ears.
No fingertips.
Hard matter has turned to shade and smoke.
Emotional contours shape the air:
A granite egg lodged in ancient ice,
The briny scent of unfinished business,
Burrowing worms of fear.

I begin to understand.
This is not the shore.
There is no pier. No boat.
No cry of gulls.
What I imagined to be floating here
Is a box of souring bones.

My flesh and blood,
Are you also in this place?
Which among these huddled shapes are yours?
I shall sift through them and try to trace
Your emotional signatures.

Here a woman
Holds a mental picture
Of me, only younger
And crueler:
Fraying paper, broken glass,
The sand at the heart of a misshapen pearl.

And here a rage of muscle,
A tongue-tied brain,
A flash of sugar in flame.
In him I hear my own voice:
The bass line in a song
Of hope... despair... disdain.
My son. Grow strong.

And you.
I would know you anywhere.
You are my open country.
I know every stream and every wood.
Every blade of grass.
I would inhabit, if I could,
This empty space, this sparrow’s nest
Filling up with snow.
I see you have kept secrets.
Jewels wrapped in papery leaves.
I will let them be.
You have done as much for me.
“Rethinking Family Consumption: An Exploration of Family Identity”
Amber M. Epp, University of Nebraska
Linda L. Price, University of Nebraska

The marketing literature focuses on ways individual identity is reflected and constructed through consumption (Belk 1988; Noble and Walker 1997; Schouten 1991), but largely ignores families in this regard. Yet, the family represents an important unit of consumption. Specifically, families shape individual choices in terms of socialization effects (John 1999) and provide a locus for intergenerational influences (Curasi, Price, and Arnould 2004; Moore, Wilkie, and Lutz 2002). Despite the remarkable influence of family on consumer behavior and the fact that scholars across disciplines acknowledge the value of exploring the concept of family identity, little consumer research addresses this key issue. Marketers would benefit from understanding how a family’s identity patterns its consumption activities and preferences.

First, we explore family identity as a meaningful unit of analysis in family research by defining its components and linking family identity to consumption behavior. Bennett, Wolin and McAvity (1988) offer the most comprehensive definition of family identity in the psychology literature: “Family identity is the family’s subjective sense of its own continuity over time, its present situation, and its character. It is the gestalt of qualities and attributes that make it a particular family and that differentiate it from other families” (p. 212). These authors observe three primary components of family identity: membership, temperamental and generational.

Second, we introduce a model of family identity enactment. We begin with the notion that families have collective identities contingent upon the social context of family life. We next introduce the enactment of family identity through the interaction of various communication forms and symbols. Forms refer to the communication mechanisms families use in enacting their identities, including the performance of family rituals, narratives, social dramas, everyday interactions, and intergenerational transfers. Consumer activities including the purchase, consumption and disposal of products, brands, possessions, services, and places serve as symbols of family identity enactment. Further, family psychology research suggests families vary in their level of adaptability of these forms and symbols. Finally, our model includes possible outcomes for family identity. Over time and through transitions, families’ identities develop and change, leading to many possible outcomes including reconstruction, maintenance, reinforcement, and weakening.

In addition, we introduce factors that moderate the relationship between families’ identities and enactment. These include the extent that a family has a shared sense of collective identity, the extent that the shared identity is aligned with the individual family members’ identities, and the level of commitment family members have to maintaining that shared identity.

Similarly, disruptions impact the relationship between families’ identities and the enactment of identities. Boele (2000) recognizes that families’ identities are challenged during disruptions, making them more salient. In marketing, research suggests that one’s identity is challenged during transitions (Noble and Walker 1997) and transitions lead to disruptions in consumption (Andreasen 1984; Fellersman and Debevee 1993). We describe disruptions as both the traditional family life cycle trajectory (marriage, birth of a child, empty nest) and less recognized transitions (sudden loss of a job, relocation, serious illness).

Our third objective was to specify possible research questions delineating the relationships between family identity and consumption behavior in three domains of family life: transitions, everyday interaction, and intergenerational influence. Below, we highlight important aspects of these three domains.

Traditionally, consumer researchers rely on family life cycle (FLC) models to examine the consumption behavior of families in transition. While these models contribute to understanding how structural changes in family composition alter consumption behaviors, this paper critiques FLC models and advances the family identity construct to broaden our understanding of family transitions beyond purely structural components of family. This perspective provides a more malleable view of families, overcoming constraints imposed by the structural household boundaries evident in FLC categorizations and helping capture the overwhelming diversity of families.

Families also must find a way to manage everyday interactions such as making decisions, eating meals together, shopping and saving behaviors, roles of family members, and receptivity to outside influences such as media and peers (c.f. Carlson and Grossbart 1988; Moschis 1987; Churchill and Moschis 1979; Moschis and Moore 1982). In a similar vein, identifying how families use brands to construct identity and acknowledging that families construct identity in different ways should be of interest to consumer researchers. The family identity construct brings a holistic perspective to the examination of how family influence mediates the effect of media and peers on adolescent behavior by considering the structural, temperamental and generational components of family. For instance, consumer researchers are studying issues regarding alcohol and cigarette use among young people, specifically addressing the role of advertising and peer influences on these important consumption issues (cf. Pechmann et al. 2003; Pechman and Knight 2002). However, these issues are being examined without reference to the particular families in which they are embedded. Family identity may play an influential role in determining how young people respond to consumption issues such as alcohol and cigarettes. In particular, the “relative rigidity/flexibility” aspect of the temperamental component of family identity may determine how susceptible young people emerging from within these families are to outside influences.

In addition to experiencing transitions and managing everyday interaction, families act as a locus for social reproduction. Consumer researchers focus on various topics within this domain including intergenerational influence as a source of brand equity (Moore et al. 2002) inalienable wealth (Curasi et al. 2004) and rituals (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989; McCracken 1986; Rook 1985; Wallendorf and Arnould 1991). However, studies in the marketing literature do not specifically address issues of family identity, and its role in intergenerational transfer. Family identity offers valuable explanations for why intergenerational influences occur in some families but not in others. As well as examining intergenerational questions of brand transfer, the generational component of family identity also has implications for the extent to which services and places are constructed into a family’s identity and transferred across generations. Furthermore, this paper recognizes the role of consumption rituals in constructing and transmitting family identity across generations of family.

“American Girl: The Family Brand”
Robert Kozinets, University of Wisconsin-Madison
John Sherry, Northwestern University
Mary Ann McGrath, Loyola University
Stefania Borghini, Bocconi University
Nina Diamond, DePaul University
Albert Muniz, DePaul University

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 memories. 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. That a template for successful comportment can be devised and delivered for (and internalized by) tweens negotiates 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 which have become, 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, 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” that mothers want their girls to want.

Therefore, we suggest that 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 itself 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 a model of femininity, identity, and family.

"Personal Possessions in the Workplace: The Influence of the ‘Alternate Family’ of the Corporation on Consumption”
Kelly Tian, New Mexico State University
Russell Belk, University of Utah

When a work organization is small, its members share space, material resources, and everyday life much like a family (Thorne and Hochschild 1997). Prior research recognizes that organizational members share in the making of a corporate family via developing personal relationships, taking on family roles (e.g., the “head of the family,” “nurturing parent,” “dependent child”), and participating in struggles over resources like those encountered in the home (Czarniawska 1999; Thorne and Hochschild 1997). Prior work also suggests that in dealing with the competition between a corporate family and their home-based families, workers may rather unconsciously use possessions like keys and calendars to avoid home-work conflicts, and to negotiate the physical and psychological boundaries between home and work (Nippert-Eng 1996). The present work contributes to this knowledge by investigating the ways in which consumption behavior plays a role in the formation of the corporate family and its defining values. It further suggests the conscious ways in which workers make use of a variety of material goods that they keep at work to navigate or resolve corporate-family and home-family competitions for their commitment and psychological attachment.

Textual data for our study was provided by auto-driven interviews conducted with seventeen employees, who prior to the interviews, photographed their twelve most valued workplace possessions. Typical of innovative post modern organizations, the corporation from which the sample was selected employed a small number of workers (65) and exhibited a culture in which values of individual expression, teamwork, and a “family-orientation” were dominant.

The corporation established its acceptance and valuation of its role as an alternative family through gift-giving practices, company-sponsored social events, and open policies with respect to possession displays. Gift-giving practices included exchange rituals such as the company’s annual “Junk Sale” in which individuals bid for the used goods donated by their coworkers in order raise money for a social cause, and a Christmas gift exchange.

However, gift-giving practices also included corporate gifts given to either celebrate organizational successes or to acknowledge and render tangible an individual’s role in the overall team effort (e.g., logo-bearing gifts). Gifts of stock options were also received by all employees, such that members benefited more like family members do from the pooled resources and economic success of the household. Parallel to the social activities of family, the company hosted ritualized sit-down luncheons attended by all members, as well as, bowling parties, golf tournaments, and pic-
nics. Further, the firm, like the home family, was open to workers' expressions of individuality through their possession displays.

These consumption behaviors facilitated development of familial-like relationships among coworkers, emotional attachment to the organization, and creation of a "homey" atmosphere. Familial relationships were initiated with personal disclosures that ensued from gift exchanges. The Junk Auction prompted winning bidders to talk with donors about their history with the object; whereas, the Christmas gift exchange encouraged disclosures about present hobbies and interests that might form the basis for gifts. These company-sponsored gift exchanges modeled the usefulness of gifts in building personal relationships, seemingly giving rise to more ad hoc individually-initiated acts of gift giving. The continued display of gift objects in the workplace following exchanges served to elicit additional personal disclosures, as did personally selected possession displays brought to work to convey individuality.

Workers' emotional attachments to the company were rendered tangible in photographs and other souvenirs of participation in company-sponsored social events, as well as, corporate gifts which marked successes or acknowledged individual contributions to the group. Such objects served to ground and stabilize attachments to the company by facilitating the retelling of organizational stories. In illustration, one salesperson, who deemed the company's survival dependent on his ability to bring in revenues, photographed a champagne bottle given to all employees when he secured the company's largest contract. His retelling of the celebration emphasized his success in his family role as "bread winner."

A "homey" environment was created in the workplace by the collective display of personal possessions, inclusive of gifts and expressive objects. Such an environment not only added to the feeling that individual expression was valued, but also that the company was "a home away from home," where the support provided by personal relationships (normally sought at home), was also accessible at work. Further, the gift of stock options, which most employees held, led to a family-sense of being needed by other members, to "make it happen" for the organization (i.e., achieving liquidity via a "buy out").

The corporate family created through these consumption practices emerged as one that created expectations among members that they should shoulder considerable responsibility and work extended hours if necessary to fulfill it. Thus, for many workers, the corporate family competed with a home-based family, leading individuals to negotiate home-work boundary through their workplace possession displays of pictures, creations, and gifts associated with home family.

Possession-guided strategies for managing home-work boundaries varied across individuals both in terms of how much of the home-aspect of the self concept was extended into the workplace through possession displays, and how these displays were used. Strategies included use of personal possessions at work to represent and compensate for sacrifices of home-based families, to shift to thoughts of home-based families during times of stress (e.g., by viewing family photographs), and to complement work-identities with those traditionally enacted in the home (e.g., using humorous objects to conjure a more playful aspect of the self concept). Our interpretation of these practices shows that the balancing of these two families through possessions is a way to see a balance between home and work selves.

REFERENCES


