Brands As Resources in Intergenerational Cultural Transfer

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The qualitative study analyses interviews with women and narrative accounts of their life histories to extend understanding of the role of brands in the intergenerational transfer of culture. Findings illustrate that parents use television brand advertising for teaching, and show that brands contribute to socialization of children into a culture.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1009951/volumes/v39/NA-39

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ABSTRACT
Brands are part of the backdrop in which everyday family life unfolds. Household product names, games and entertainment systems, advertising jingles, distinctive packaging, branded service experiences, and commercials with familiar narratives and imagery form the reality of many young lives. Children experience brands as an integral part of their lives, much of it influenced by their families. The ways that parents choose and use brands, as trust mechanisms, heuristic frames, and symbols acting as “vessels of meaning and sentiment” (Holt 2006a, p.357), surely affects their children. Certainly, parents train their children and it is this type of intergenerational influence on brand equity is reported in the literature (see, for example Moore et al. 2002). Yet, despite understanding that brands play an important role in consumer culture, relatively little research has been done to investigate the ways that parents use brands as resources in their parenting.

Previous research generally has studied the socialization of children as consumers and investigated brands in terms of purchase and usage preferences passed on through families. However, consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005) suggests that consumers not only consume brands in the traditional sense, they also use and experience them through advertisements and other marketing communications, termed ‘mediated experiences’ (Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998). Brand commercials are used by consumers for purposes other than the persuasive and mostly commercial ones intended by brand owners (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998; O’Donohoe 1994; Ritson and Elliott 1999). This paper explores the conceptualization of brands as resources used by parents in the intergenerational transfer of culture. The qualitative study reported analyzes interviews with women brands as resources in the family. Researchers have particularly focused on the globalization of brands as resources in the family.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND
Brands as Resources
Consumer goods and brands play important roles within a cultural setting. There is a well developed body of literature on the symbolic role of consumer goods and the use of brands as resources in adult society (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Belk 1988; Bourdieu 1994; Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981; Elliott and Wattanasuwan 1998). Brands, partly through their advertisements, have a role to play in the expression of self-identity and in fostering community (Cova 1997; Firt and Dholakia 1998; Muñiz and O’Guinn 2005; Schouten and McAlexander 1995). Certainly, there is ample evidence to suggest that advertising is discussed amongst adults in everyday settings, and studies have reported the social uses of advertising amongst teenagers (Ritson and Elliott 1999). However, the literature does not yet provide much insight into parent/child conversations around brands and their advertisements.

There is a two way link between culture and brands—each impacts on the other. McCracken’s (1986) seminal work in cultural anthropology advanced a theoretical account of the structure and movement of cultural meaning, suggesting advertising plays a role in providing representation of the culturally constituted world. More recently, Thompson and Tian (2008) have reported that brands, through their commercial activities, are involved in leveraging culturally rooted identities that provide narrative resources for identity projects. Their study showed that the socio-cultural context affects the way that traditions and particular constructions of the past are mythologized by advertisers and other marketing agents. Brand experiences are also thought to permit and support social connections and the building of community. For example, Cova (1997) argues for the wider, macro-societal and communal ‘linking value’ of products and services (and by default the brands that symbolically represent and emblemize them). Marketers are in no doubt that brands and culture are inextricably intertwined (Holt 2006b) and yet this intersection has not been fully explored in order to conceptualize other dimensions to the relationship between culture and brands.

Cultural Transfer
Socialization during infancy and childhood is understood to be the most intense period of cultural learning (Giddens 2001) when families teach their children the information, codes, skills, attitudes, conceptions, beliefs, systems and values that constitute cultural knowledge. According to Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of cultural capital, a process of domestic education is responsible for the level of cultural knowledge acquired by children, although Bourdieu “does not report how exactly cultural knowledge is transmitted within the families” (Becker 2010, p.19). Some parental activities that impact on children’s cultural knowledge have been identified by education researchers, such as telling stories and reading books to children, playing cards and board games with them, doing jigsaw puzzles, visiting zoos, libraries and museums (Becker 2010). Cultural messages are reportedly embedded in daily parent-child interactions (Dunn and Brown 1991) where cultural knowledge is repeated and re-affirmed, but little is known about exactly how this occurs.

As they mature, children are impacted by other socializing influences in the social environment, particularly schools, peer groups and mass media. Media and cultural studies researchers have shown clear links between television, children and cultural identity—for example, Barker (1997) suggests that television programs become a site for discussion (about relationships and cultural taboos) amongst children and a point of contact between children and adults. Researchers have particularly focused on the globalization of mass media impacting on the world of the child, as young people develop an increasingly cosmopolitan identity (Barker 1999). Much less has been written about the impact of advertising and brand stories on incidental conversations and opportunistic teaching occasions that contribute to cultural transfer and ultimately play a part in parents’ attempts to acculturate and socialize their children.

CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE
Cultural knowledge takes many different forms and impacts on all processes of life. At one level culture is concerned with refined and sophisticated society and the visible, overt creative expressions of literature, art, music and architecture. Cultural knowledge in these spheres is necessarily predicated on more fundamental socio-cultural knowledge that is essential for the most basic and mundane operations of society. Within a culture there are ideas which define the things that are “considered important, worthwhile and desirable” (Giddens 2001, p.22). These values are enshrined in the cultural norms of behavior, both of which are actively learned rather than inherited or passively acquired. Social roles, social identities and self-
identity are negotiated by individuals as they interact with others in society and use cultural knowledge as a framework to guide their social interactions. Thus, cultural knowledge is required for both micro and macro aspects of life as individuals negotiate and link their personal and public worlds.

Having a shared sense of the past and a common interpretation of history is one dimension of cultural knowledge. Halbwachs (1992) proposed that social groups actively construct and sustain a sense of unity and cohesion by reproducing collective and cultural memories. Collective forgetting and remembering involves reconstructing histories that serve to unite society and emphasize defining moments of the past, thus creating a ‘usable past’ (Brooks 1915). Advertisers evoke the shared past using archival materials and recreations of easily recognized scenes, relying on the audience’s imagination to complete the story. The way that an individual evaluates the past impacts on how they evaluate the way they are and the way they were. Personal nostalgia (Stern 1992), the content of an individual’s memories, what they remember about their personal past and their point of view/perspective on the past, has implications for how the past affects the present (Wilson and Ross 2003) and colors the transmission of cultural knowledge to younger generations.

Cultural knowledge enables familiarity with myths, symbols, codes and meanings that confer insider status within a cultural group. There are many place based myths that are considered foundational in a culture. Desire for attachment to place is evident in the powerful myth New Zealanders tell the outside world, of a kind of unspoiled Garden of Eden at the bottom of the world. The propagators of this myth consider it a great blessing to live in harmony with the wild and sacred natural world of New Zealand (Bell 1996). Scenic representations, buildings, signage, statues and symbolic artifacts link members of society. Thus, distinctive, quintessential cultural knowledge is passed on so that new generations are acculturated and socialized into their own society.

Another specialized form of cultural knowledge is persuasion knowledge (Friestad and Wright 1994, 1995). Part of being socialized into a culture means learning how to negotiate everyday life in places of commerce, to make sense of the media and communications technology, and to cope with commercial/persuasive messages. The behaviors and skills required are based on particular cultural knowledge that very young children start to learn while accompanying family members as they shop. The literature points to programs in schools that aim to develop what is termed media literacy, knowledge and skills needed to function in contemporary media culture (Potter 2011). Parents also actively teach their children about advertising and marketing, passing on cultural knowledge about how consumers are influenced by commercial messages, how to identify and resist persuasion attempts, and how to perform the role of a wise consumer.

**METHOD**

The findings reported in our paper are drawn from a study of brands and national identity. Themes of intergenerational national identity transfer were identified in this study. However, other unexpected connections between brands and intergenerational cultural transfer (unrelated to national identity) emerged, and these are discussed in the following section. In summary, the study employed narrative analysis, and utilized a two part interview method using life history and narrative techniques in conjunction with the use of a selection of actual television brand advertisements. Interviews were conducted with middle aged women in a major New Zealand city. Snowball sampling was used to recruit friendship pair participants—ten pairs of friends (twenty individual informants) participated in the study. The interviews were digitally audio-taped and transcribed, using pseudonyms to preserve participant anonymity. Subsequent thematic analysis and coding was facilitated using NVivo qualitative data management software. The entire study utilized a discourse analysis methodology.

Autobiographical narratives, in the form of life histories illustrating national identity, were elicited from each individual participant. These in-depth interview sessions were designed to focus on issues in terms of the implications and experiences of individual consumers, so that important findings would flow from detailed analyses of particular life histories (Firkin 2004). In the second part of the fieldwork protocol, interviews were conducted with friendship pairs, as reported in studies by Banister and Hogg (2004). Two people, who had related consumption characteristics and similar world views, were interviewed together, providing “an effective means through which to ensure a more natural setting within which to negotiate identity talk” (Banister and Hogg 2004, p.857). During the interviews participants were shown six well known television brand communications. This was used to set the scene for discussing experiences of brands and identity. As the discussion evolved, conversation moved on from the selected brands’ advertisements to other occasions of consuming brand narratives and the subsequent experiences of identity. It was during this time that intergenerational themes were revealed.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

**Beliefs, Values and Norms**

Generally talking to their children about advertising was a theme common amongst the participants. However, it was not just the overarching concept of advertising that people talked about; parents used specific, branded stories as a resource in passing on cultural knowledge to their children. Sensitive issues (possibly including relationships, puberty and death) could be introduced (by parent or child) into a discussion as a result of shared ad viewing. Participant comments relating to the U by Kotex Beaver tampon ad indicated this. During the interviews both Tess and Belinda noted their relief at not having to answer questions arising from the U by Kotex commercial but were aware of the potential for such parent child discussions.

I have seen the beaver one time. (Tess)

**You had to explain it to your [seven year old] daughter? (laughter) (Sharon)**

No, God no! (Tess)

... you’d take an interest in it, like the beaver ad because it relates to you because you know your daughter [a teenager] didn’t pick up on that [vulgar terminology]. (Belinda)

Lana, who had young school-aged children, commented in general:

... if there was something that had a bit of an adult theme about it and I wanted to give the kids a kind of bare level thing on it I might say, “Oh yes well,” you know, kind of disguise the adult theme in something that’s a bit more appropriate for them. (Lana)

While the brand itself (U by Kotex) might not have been discussed, the interviews clearly illustrated the ways that the narratives embedded in brand advertisements act as resources for parents as they interact with their children and transfer cultural knowledge of taboos, socially appropriate language and sexual mores onto the next generation. This occurrence almost certainly was not intended or explicitly considered by the brand owners and their advertising agents, highlighting the polysemy in advertising (Phillips 1997; Puntoni,
Social Memories

The findings in this study clearly demonstrate the facility of brands to embed collective memories and a shared sense of the past in their narratives. The women in this study used the social memories and the usable past provided by brand stories as conversational resources for use in object lessons re-creating the past. In the following text units, Belinda refers to a famous local soda brand advertisement. The brand narrative tells of a group of carefree children who are enjoying a small community swimming pool during the summer vacation. Cinematographically, it evokes the feel of the 1970s and the advertisement is edited to simulate a nostalgic documentary.

I saw that on TV and my daughter was with me and I said, “That was what it was like when we were kids.” And she just went, (gagging noise made). (Belinda)

Yeah, yeah, saying they’re gonna build a wall and they ask the Aussie guy and he says, “Oh you’re dreaming mate,” when they asked if he would come over and help. (Georgina)

Yeah? (Researcher)

You know, yeah. (Marcia)

And their ads are the same, they’re really, they’re very immature and just stupid. You sort of look at them and think, “What?” You know, yeah. (Marcia)

So you talked to your kids about those when you were there? (Researcher)

And when we’re here because if we see them here we know they’re Australian because of the tone, yeah. (Marcia)

Ways of Talking About Place

Findings from this study clearly showed that parents used brand advertising to socialize their children into the accepted ways of talking about the land and important symbolic places valued by society.

Now you already said the kids ... Did you say you talked about the scenery with them? (Researcher)

Yeah, like when I saw that Air New Zealand ad for the first time.
Persuasion Knowledge

The findings of this study showed that at the most basic level, ads provided an opportunity to educate children about the ways of the world. For example, the techniques used in making ads were sometimes a point of discussion between parents and children.

So what would you say if it was your kids and they, if you were having a discussion, what would be the nature of the discussion that you’d have with them? (Researcher)

Just, “How do you think they worked out, how do you think they’ve done that?” Like the latest Gorilla [she then realizes her mistake—she does not mean the Gorilla ad]. Cadbury ad has got, they’re playing, they’re doing a song with their eyebrows, they’re raising their eyebrows up and stuff so it’s all computer generated. (Georgia)

In this case above, the brand provided resources and the parents of pre-teens used shared viewing occasions as an opportunity to develop knowledge about how ads are made. This form of cultural knowledge is part of what Friestad and Wright (1994, 1995) termed persuasion knowledge—culturally relevant knowledge about advertisers’ goals and tactics. Georgia used Cadbury resources and the Socratic Method to stimulate critical thinking and illuminate particular ideas that she deemed important for her children to know.

While older children may learn to be media savvy through personal interactions with peer groups and at school, parents still play a part in intergenerational cultural transfer and developing persuasion knowledge. Waverley and Virginia revealed that their teenage daughters, who are friends, have had parental discussions and compared notes about ads.

Do you talk with your daughter about it? (Researcher)

Imogen knows the tunes to all the ads and I say, “My God, you know that song off by heart,” but we don’t really have a conversation about it. (Waverley)

You haven’t talked about how they’re trying to get you to do something because of the ad? (Virginia)

Oh yeah, we do talk about things like that. (Waverley)

Yeah, yeah, yeah I knew Waverley would. (Virginia)

Yeah, ‘cause I knew you would. That’s because, yeah, because Waverley, sorry Imogen and Jody have talked about that ad so our children have talked about stuff about what it’s doing or its suggestiveness. Yeah. (Virginia)

From a persuasiveness marketing angle. We do talk about things like that. (Waverley)

In the previous example a more critical, media studies approach has been used by the mothers in discussing the influence and social impact of ads. Again, the mothers responded to specific brand communications, using them as a launching pad for discussions with their children about commercial motivations, persuasion and how to be an informed consumer, all based on essential cultural knowledge.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings provide support for Elliott and Wattanasuwan’s (1998, p.135) claims that mediated experiences of brands can provide resources that, “interlaced with lived experience,” are used in imagining the self within a particular socio-cultural and historical context. The intergenerational processes facilitated by brands are an extension of Ritson and Elliott’s (1999) concept of the social uses aspect of advertising. With respect to brand narratives, these findings confirm Thompson and Tian’s (2008) claim that commercial activities offer views of the past and provide narrative resources for cultural identity projects.

Evidence from this study provides insights into the intergenerational transfer of cultural knowledge. The mothers who participated in our study provided unexpected narratives which demonstrated the process of domestic education referred to by Bourdieu (1986). Usage of television brand advertising for teaching and learning during unscheduled occasions was for them, an unremarkable, everyday type of parenting experience. However, evidence of this has not been reported previously in the consumer research and marketing literature.

Particular forms of cultural knowledge, embedded in brand narratives, were utilized during the ongoing process of socialization. Beliefs, values and norms relating to taboos, socially appropriate language and sexual mores were recognized by the adults as being available in brand ads for use in acculturation. Culturally based stereotypes were provided by advertisements and acted as a resource for affirming cultural beliefs and reinforcing appropriate responses to culturally referenced humor. Collective memories and a shared sense of the past was made available in nostalgic advertisements, assisting parents to reestablish the connections between society, parents and their children and to maintain a sense of self-identity in relation to others. Cultural knowledge relating to accepted ways of talking about the land and important symbolic places was utilized by parents in response to certain brand narratives. Finally, cultural knowledge pertaining to the role of wise consumer was leveraged by parents as a result of shared consumption of particular brand narratives.

This study enlarges what is known about what consumers do with brand advertisements. Even though society may have a slight sense that brands should not be part of the cultural land-
scape (Bengtsson and Ostberg 2006), the evidence is clear that, in the New Zealand setting at least, brands are significant cultural markers. A key message for brand owners from this study is that consumers can derive value from brands in ways that were previously unknown, that is, as resources in intergenerational cultural transfer. The findings underscore the important role and significance of brand marcoms as a widely accessible cultural resource used by parents in socializing their children.

We are suggesting that brand experiences and brand resources such as advertisements, play a broader socially contributive role in establishing and reinforcing elements of culture at the macro level within society in general and within families at the micro level. Brand commercials could function as one of the ties that bind generations together, enabling intergenerational knowledge transfer and memorial reconstruction at the national, the familial and individual levels. Brand advertisements are, by their ubiquity and their emotionally and symbolically infused brand narratives, pervasive meaning vessels which encapsulate cultural attitudes and values, deploying myths, popular memory and culturally relevant icons, and act as creators of nostalgic reverie. The nature of advertising scheduling on television generates serendipitous occasions for young and old to consume together, creating opportunities for cultural teaching and learning. In essence, the transfer of cultural knowledge that contributes to the socialization of children into a culture might be facilitated by brands.

REFERENCES

