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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.

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Brands as Resources in Intergenerational Cultural Transfer

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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 daughters and sons which brands to buy, and 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 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. Such an exploration is needed to extend our understanding of the ways brands impact on children over and above purchase and usage preferences imparted by parents.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Brands as Resources

Consumer goods and brands play important roles within a cultural setting. There is a well developed 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; Firat 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) has argued 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 globalizing forces 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 how 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 NVivo8 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 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 once. (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,

Schroeder, and Ritson 2010).

Other types of cultural beliefs and stereotypes were also passed on by parents in this study. Brand advertising provided the script for parents to illustrate strongly held beliefs about being culturally distinct, to a new generation—for example, children were told about the much talked about trans-Tasman (Australia-New Zealand) rivalry, as illustrated in the Mitre 10 *Sandpit* ad.

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)
Spoke to my kids about that. Oh they were laughing, thought it was hilarious. (Helen)
Yeah? (Researcher)
Yeah, they thought it was really funny. (Helen)
"No surprises there!" (Georgina)

The children in the example above were already aware of the practice of making Australians the butt of local New Zealand humor which highlights Australian cultural stereotypes: laziness, stupidity, brashness and boorishness. Both their mothers reinforced this stereotypical belief when the opportunity presented itself, thanks to the Mitre 10 home handyman brand narrative. Furthermore, due to the mothers' singular commentary and discussion about the advertisement they culturally heightened the issue in their children's consciousness and affirmed the cultural lensing the brand advertisement provided. Similarly, Marcia highlighted that she made a point of talking to her children about ads which exemplified beliefs about Australians. A recent trip to Australia with her children had provided much brand advertising material to feed conversations comparing Australians and New Zealanders.

Do you ever talk about ads with your kids? (Researcher)
Oh only the Australian stupid dickhead ones, eh? They're so bad. You know, they think they've got a sense of humor but they don't match us at all, have you noticed that? They're bloody shocking. You know they're Australian even if they don't have an accent you think, "That was made in Australia." (Marcia)
After denigrating Australian people for a while, Marcia continued;
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)

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)
So there, you do. You do talk to people. You talk to your kids. (Researcher)
Yeah, I did say, "Oh that's exactly what it was like when we were kids," and I said, "Me and Meredith used to do that," and I told, she knows Meredith. And I told her and she goes, "Uh. Oh yeah." (Belinda)
She looked really bored? (Researcher)
She looked like I was saying we went to school on a horse and cart basically. Like when we were kids we used to get all about the war and I used to think, "Oh God, here he goes." So, yeah. (Belinda)
So why did you mention it to your daughter? (Researcher)
I think I did say something to her because I just sometimes think that we're just too PC nowadays. Everything has to, you know, the kids are just so molly coddled, now they can't walk the streets, they can't, everything. You know, it's just not the same for safety or, I'm not saying that there was safety in those days 'cause we still had people that were a bit peculiar, if not very peculiar, but you didn't worry about it like you do now, do you? (Belinda)

Belinda used the famous brand soda advertisement to illustrate the simple pleasures of her girlhood, a "golden age" where earlier generations of children were independent, never bored and did not have to worry about contemporary issues such as 24/7 parental supervision, sun protection and swimming pool safety protocols.

But they'd be thinking, "Where's the lifeguard? Where's the sun screen? Where's the parents?" (Belinda)
"And can I plug my iPod in somewhere?" (Ann)
Yeah. (Belinda)
"And where can I put my [hair] straightener for afterwards?" (Ann)
Yeah. Yeah. "And where's the shower block 'cause I don't want to get chlorine in my hair?" You know, it's, they couldn't relate to that at all, no. (Belinda)

As Ann later mentioned:

I think we're just trying to make that generational point that this is how life used to be and everybody was happy with it, you know? (Ann)

It was important to the women in the study to teach their children about the past, because collective reaffirmations of identity help individuals within a society to maintain a sense of self-identity and connectedness to others. The patterns of leisure, dress and family life that represent a culture at a certain time were evocatively captured in the commercial brand narrative. These brand nostalgic stories provided an opportunity for parents to teach their children how identities continue to evolve as individuals, as socially constructed concepts of the family and as a culture. These consumers of such historical constructions used them to locate themselves within a long term context by comparing then and now, who we were and who we are now.

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.

(Donna)

So what did you say ...? (Researcher)

I just said to them that, "Look how beautiful our country is, you know. That's what our country looks like out of Auckland."

(Donna)

In general, the findings showed that brand ads provided commonly available representations of places in the heart (such as holiday homes) and, as such, constitute a widely available conversational resource, as noted by Virginia and Waverley.

[My husband] *might have said* "You know that ad? Well that's like the bach [holiday home] that we used to go to and we'd, like that, we used to do that too." We'd often use ads as a point of reference when talking about a story, of recreating a story from our childhood or something because everyone knows ads. (Virginia)

I do the same. (Waverley)

The study provided evidence that brand commercials for products and services ranging from airlines, banks and paint to cheese employed the cultural codes and conventions for representing, visualizing and telling stories about place. This meant that even if families were unable to visit such places, brands put resources at their disposal to facilitate the intergenerational flow of cultural knowledge relating to place, as the previous text units show.

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. (Georgina)

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. Georgina 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, I'm from the perspective of how they're manipulating your mind, we often talk about things like that. (Waverley)

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 reaffirm 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.

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