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Relationship advertising: How advertising can enhance social bonds☆

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ABSTRACT

Social critics and scholars have disparaged advertising for its role in negatively influencing social relations in American society. This paper suggests the contrary. Advertising can potentially reflect positive social relations among people, enhance social bonds, and ideally, inspire positive value exchange between consumers and producers. To support this argument, the case study presented here offers qualitative research that investigated consumer home use of a prepared soup brand. Ethnographic research led to insights into the creative use of soup among women and the joyful connections it fostered among family members eating prepared meals together. The positive value of consumer–brand relationships discovered by qualitative research, ultimately helped produce a successful advertising campaign that reflected positive social bonds among consumers.

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1. Introduction

Marketing scholars have disparaged advertising for its ill effects on human relationships. Scholars claim brand advertising manipulates social values (Ewen, 1976; McLuhan, 1951; Pollay, 1986; Pollay & Mittal, 1993), or diverts people from healthy relationships by encouraging unnecessary and even harmful desires or "temptations" (Barthes, 1972; Deighton, 1992); advertising is critiqued for its broad effect of manipulating a "constellation of images" across social domains of commodities, popular culture and mass media (Leiss, Kline, Jhally, & Botterill, 2005). Pollay (1986) disparages advertising for its "unintended consequences" of polluting the psychological and social ecology of society (p. 19) and "seducing" people into consumption through a distorted view of romanticized goods (p. 25).

Social critics also denigrate advertising for its dominance in American society (Klein, 2000), and that advertising is a way of "seeing ourselves," but with the intent "to make us feel we are lacking" (Williamson, 1978, p. 8). Advertising discourse, posits Jhally (1987), is about relationships between people and things; however, Jhally believes it is an instrument of manipulation. In discussing advertising in America, Twitchell (1996) warns that, "Deception is the reality of AdCult" (p. 3) in that advertising "colonizes relationships" into "consumption communities" (p. 124).

While it may be true that advertising can stem from negative motives and deceptive practices, which historical evidence would support (Stoeckl & Luedicke, in this issue), the case study presented here suggests that advertising need not victimize consumers and that approaches such as the one presented in this case study can simultaneously benefit consumer, the corporation and also society. Advertising, often vilified for its role in negatively influencing social relations in American society, can reflect positive social relationships among people and, perhaps in its ideal state, even inspire positive value exchange between consumers and producers. While some scholars hold that advertising generally presents an edited, selective view of human nature that tends to distort actual human behavior as a partial representation (Leiss et al., 2005; Pollay, 1986) or misleading "social tableau" (Marchand, 1985), this paper presents the antithesis: that when advertising portrays positive social or familial bonds in its representations, it may *inspire* consumers to reinforce these bonds, and encourage them to enjoy such bonds more fully, thus positively influencing the direction of consumer outcomes.

This idea builds on the notion of consumer agency in media and consumption. Consumers demonstrate creative agency not only in seemingly mundane tasks such as everyday cooking, as this research shows, but also in interpreting advertising and producing their own positive meaning for relevant life situations. Scholars note that consumers actively generate their own positive inferences of brand advertising from exposure to metaphorical advertising messages (McQuarrie & Phillips, 2005); or are adept at interpreting ads, such as selecting or rejecting certain characteristics of celebrity spokespersons, thus forming a "bricolage" of meaning to fit their own life situations (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997, p. 58). Advertising can be a cultural resource for group identity and social affinity (Ritson & Elliott, 1999), or provide consumers with discourses of power to appropriate and produce a range of social perspectives to suit their social needs (Thompson, 2004; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Advertising is also used to construct notions of national identity (O'Donohoe, 1999) or promote positive

messages of healthy foods (Bublitz & Peracchio, in this issue). Just as consumer goods once regarded negatively (Veblen, 1989/2009) are now shown to be central or a contributing factor to fostering social interactions and strengthening bonds (Belk, 1988, 2010; Belk & Cook, 1993; Belk, Sherry, & Wallendorf, 1988a; Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989; Belk, Wallendorf, Sherry, Holbrook, & Roberts, 1988b; Sherry, 1983, 1990; Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991), so the *advertising* of such goods offers consumers a means to engage with goods and other people positively, and thus a way to "apprehend the world" (Sherry, 1987, p. 442).

When research for advertising discovers relevant consumer truths – such as the importance of face-to-face bonds in sharing family meals together (Coupland, 2005; DeVault, 1991), or that women's cooking is a creative act of expressing self-identity (McCabe & Malefyt, 2013) – and accurately portrays these insights, such that they are reflected back to society in compelling advertising campaigns, advertising can function as a form of positive marketing. If advertising depicts a positive way of consumer being, that positive path is more likely to be taken by viewers, and ultimately to diffuse within society. Positive marketing, as defined by the aims of this special issue, seeks to realign marketing with its ideals for the benefit of businesses, individuals, and society at large (Lerman & Shefrin, in this issue). At the heart of this argument lies the notion that marketing can comprise a mutually beneficial exchange, which, in its ideal form, can be a powerful force to inspire the world.

This paper suggests that when an advertisement depicts a relevant and compelling consumer truth – such as felicitous family relations with which people can identify – consumers are more likely to perceive the ad positively, which may then have an uplifting effect in their lives. Indeed, the potential for advertising to generate positive value in consumers' lives reveals an aspect of essentialism, which informs a role of advertising beyond information dissemination and brand recognition. Essentialism posits the notion that phenomena experienced in the world are believed to have an underlying reality or "true nature" (Bloom, 2010). When depicting a deep-seated consumer truth, such as strong social bonds, advertising can have a positive effect on consumers' perception of the world and their social relations because viewers believe it expresses a hidden truth that really matters, thus enhancing their lives.

To exemplify the positive effects of advertising, this paper presents qualitative research along the lines of Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), which investigates consumers' home use of a prepared soup brand. Anthropological researchers using ethnographic research methods discovered insights into the creative use of soup among women and the joyful connections it fosters among family members eating prepared meals together. These insights led to the subsequent development of advertised messages about consumers' relationship to a brand of soup, which then was reflected back to audiences in a successful advertising campaign. In this case, positive marketing can be achieved through developing these kinds of interactive and reciprocal relations between producers and consumers of goods. This process is initiated using qualitative research methodologies and culminated in reflexive advertising campaigns.

As such, a CCT approach to consumer–brand relationships that focuses on experiential, contextual and sociocultural dimensions of consumption can demonstrate considerable potential for uncovering positive social bonds in consumer research. In the spirit of CCT, this research investigates context, consumer agency and social and personal identity formation in relation to consumption, to inform how commercial messages in advertisements can inspire consumer directions and positive outcomes (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Sherry, 1991). For consumer–brand relationships to succeed as a positive marketing effort, this paper claims that appropriate "discovery" tools are essential. Qualitative methods, such as ethnography (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994; Belk, Sherry, et al., 1988; Belk, Wallendorf, 1988; Belk et al., 1989; Ritson & Elliott, 1999; Sherry, 1983, 1990; Sherry & Kozinets, 2001; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991), existential-phenomenology and

hermeneutic approaches (Thompson, 1990; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989; Thompson, Pollio, & Locander, 1994), are distinctly suited for this purpose. The paper demonstrates the steps taken in the qualitative research method of consumer ethnography to achieve these ends.

2. Advertising, dialogues and reflexive relationships

A major change is occurring today in the ways that corporations are becoming more responsive to consumers. Corporations recognize the importance of forming deep consumer relationships in marketing practices and grant consumers a stronger role in making meaning for themselves and for the brands they use (Gobé, 2009; Lindstrom, 2010; Roberts, 2005). Research informs us when firms embrace loyalty among their customer base they also increase individual customer happiness and promote social well being (Aksoy et al., in this issue). Manufacturing companies are expected not only to be more honest and transparent in their operations, claim Kotler and Caslione (Craven, 2009), but also to reciprocate with consumers by engaging new forms of media that create more interactive relations. New media formats are based on customized models of communication using social media, event marketing, direct-to-consumer mailings, product placements and other engaging means, beyond television advertising (Kozinets, 2009; Malefyt, 2009). Likewise, consumers are gathering more information about brands and companies from a range of sources and touch points beyond television, including internet content, cell phones, on-line chat rooms, blogs and post-purchase discussions with other consumers who use a brand. New research on the consumer decision-making path to purchase shows the former funnel model of systematically narrowing choice is replaced by a journey of extended evaluation. Post-purchase activities are more significant for consumers who now enter open-ended relationships with brands and share their experience with others online (Edleman, 2010). This concept of forging relationships that extend over time and across multiple touch points suggests a new way of viewing advertising today, which can also foster new types of brand communities and develop strong loyalties with customers for positive outcomes (Aksoy et al., in this issue).

The model of communication with consumers is now motivated to be more of a dialogue for "earning trust" than a monologue of control (Stoeckl & Luedicke, in this issue, p. 12). The recent focus in advertising on forming engaged relationships with consumers corresponds to the larger trend among corporations of moving brand communication from one-way messages that merely "sell" products, to forming interactive on-going exchanges with consumers (Arviddson, 2006; Lury, 2004; Malefyt, 2009). Advertising account planner, Jon Steel (1998), posits that the most effective advertising involves consumer interaction, both in the communication of messages and subsequent development of marketing campaigns. He asserts that, "Advertising works better when it does not tell people what to think, but rather allows them to make up their own minds about its meaning. They participate by figuring it out for themselves" (p. 6). In other words, advertising enlists audience participation when it does not "push" cultural meaning of products and human situations that an advertiser or corporation prefers, but instead, builds and expresses both consumer derived and manufacturer intended meaning.

Advertisers and consumers thus co-produce cultural meaning in ads – advertisers interpret "culture" to write an ad, which consumers then interpret in their terms – imparting new meaning for advertisers to then observe and re-interpret again, in an on-going iterative feedback loop (Olsen, 2009; Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). This kind of interaction helps corporations develop more positive and lasting relationships with consumers by accurately representing target users or relevant situations that consumers can identify with in concert with communication of a brand benefit (McCabe & Malefyt, 2010).

A measure of whether an advertising campaign promotes positive value exchange as defined here is how well it interprets and then projects a favorable idea of consumer relationships in a mutually

enhancing or reflexive manner. Concepts of reflexivity, identity and the self's relation to society inform the myriad social changes today. A feature of the modern reflexive self is the interconnection between an individual's day-to-day social life and vast globalizing influences. In this, traditional face-to-face social relations are replaced by rapid forms of communication and instant images, whereby individuals increasingly monitor themselves through reflexive interaction between global and local choices (Amin & Thrift, 2004; Giddens, 1991; Lash & Urry, 1994; Thrift, 2000). Modern institutions and social mechanisms, such as marketing, branding, media and technology, embody this interconnection. Reflexivity discussed here informs the way individuals are critical self-aware agents who "continually revise and reconfigure their identity to keep up with extensive choices among the shifting modalities of brands, media and technology" (Malefyt, 2009, p. 203). Reflexivity thus infuses new relations between producers and consumers in continually interactive and dialogic ways.

From the manufacturer and advertising side, reflexivity questions how accurately the parties responsible for creating the advertisement represent the consumer experience in brand communications. Does the content of an advertised message capture an insightful truth about the product and human relationships? Is the media relevant to the time and place of interaction? On the consumer side, reflexivity questions how the consumer interprets brand imagery offered in advertising. Is the brand only talking about itself or does it also speak to the life of the consumer? Does what the company advertises about its brand make sense to consumers in terms of their own beliefs, practices and values? Does the consumer recognize his or her own voice and life in brand communications?

This paper argues that positive value exchange is produced in advertising when corporations understand and represent an accurate portrayal of the lived experience of consumers through interactive relationships. This means representing who consumers are and how they live, in meaningful imagery and advertising messages. In the commercial context of branding, accurate representation of human relationships plays an important role through which producers and consumers apprehend each other. Through ethnographic, hermeneutic and other qualitative methodologies, companies learn first-hand how consumers generate meaning with brand use in their everyday lives. What brand use reveals about identity and social relationships becomes "cultural knowledge" and part of a company's store of data about customers, gained from multiple exposures over time. A company then attempts to accurately reflect this learned cultural knowledge in creating a brand identity and developing advertising with which consumers can identify value and compel them toward brand purchase and affinity. Ultimately, this leads to positive exchanges in an on-going relationship between producers and consumers that are mutually beneficial. As this research demonstrates, reflexive interactivity requires consumer input to produce meaning for advertisers, and for advertisers to represent situations that are relevant to consumers (see also Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Mick & Buhl, 1992; O'Donohoe, 1999; Olsen, 2009).

3. Examining consumer bonds with brands

As advertisers create more interactive brand messages and media formats with their audiences, they also seek concomitant research methods that engage consumers more deeply and personally, and at various levels of interactivity (Arnould & Price, 2006; Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994; Malefyt & Moeran, 2003; Malefyt & Morais, 2012). The greater use of interactive media and messages that tap into a broader range of consumer experiences – from sensory approaches to emotional relations with brands – require more accurate representations of the consumer's lived experience with brands (Gobé, 2009; Lindstrom, 2010; Roberts, 2005; Schmitt, 1999). This shift in marketing messages and media outlets reflects a reprioritization of research approaches that seek to understand consumer–brand relationships

more deeply, along symbolic, contextual and socially constructed lines, and over multiple points of interaction.

A fundamental assumption that drives qualitative analysis is that symbolic and socially constructed meanings are inherent to human life (Sunderland & Denny, 2007). This makes qualitative types of research that investigate symbolic and social meaning especially valuable for advertising agencies and public relations firms. Indeed, the very currency of advertising, design and media is predicated on the symbolic saturation of brands, products and services and their effects in the everyday lives of people (Sherry, 1987; Sunderland & Denny, 2007). Qualitative research importantly accesses symbolic and socially constructed meanings through an in-depth investigation of the categories and relationships that consumers create themselves. The range of qualitative methods in CCT (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), such as cultural analysis or market-oriented ethnography (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994; Belk, Sherry, et al., 1988; Belk, Wallendorf, 1988; Belk et al., 1989; Malefyt, 2009; McCracken, 1988a, 1988b; Olsen, 1995, 2009; Ritson & Elliott, 1999; Sherry, 1983, 1990, 1991; Sherry & Kozinets, 2001; Sunderland & Denny, 2007; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991), semiotic analysis (Cefkin, 2009) hermeneutic and existential-phenomenology (Thompson, 1990; Thompson et al., 1989, 1994) inform more precise representations of the consumer's lived experience and relationships they develop with brands.

To analyze consumer–brand relationships, this paper adapts an interpretation of Fournier's Relationship Theory (1998), which defines four key dimensions of relationships that consumers have with brands. This assists in determining the positive value and interactive potential of a relationship between an individual and advertised brand. To Fournier, consumer brand relationships are mutually beneficial when they first, involve reflexive or reciprocal exchange between active partners. The brand is not a passive object, but rather an animated, active and contributing "partner" of the relationship (Aaker, 1997; Holt, 2004; Olsen, 1995). Second, relationships between consumers and brands must show purposeful engagement that is meaningful to both partners at its core. Other research concurs that brand meaning shapes the significance of the relationship a person or people have with an object, and adds structure to their lives (Belk, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Douglas & Isherwood, 1979; McCracken, 1988a, 1988b; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991). Third, consumer–brand relationships must encourage exchange across several dimensions of experience, providing a range of benefits over various uses and in different contexts (Arnould & Thompson, 2005; Lindstrom, 2010; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999). Fourth, relationships are most meaningful when they maintain their value over time, that is, they adapt to change across life circumstances (Appadurai, 1986; Holt, 2004; Kopytoff, 1986).

The consumer interviews and observations discussed below demonstrate these dynamic qualities of relationships as applied to a brand of prepared soup and women who cook meals at home for their families. First, they reveal the brand as an active partner in interpersonal relations between people; second, they discover and portray a core consumer truth in relation to cooking and family meal occasions; third, they show that a brand of soup fits within the structure of changing family contexts; fourth, they display how the brand adapts to a variety of eating styles and uses, and is therefore valued over time as family and individual needs change over the life course.

4. Ethnographic interview as method

The ethnographic interview is one of the most important research methods for discovering insights into a brand's social use, contextual relevance and symbolic meaning in a consumer's life. Market-oriented ethnography has particular value as a "systematic process" for conducting consumer research (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994, p. 484). The richness of research in naturalistic settings in a single or multiple markets over time, such as in flea markets, swap meets or personal

collections (Belk, Sherry, et al., 1988; Belk, Wallendorf, et al., 1988; Sherry, 1990) is valuable in probing the positive aspects of relations between consumers and commodities, and how relationship can be developed for advertising along the lines of positive value exchange. This sets ethnographic research apart in design and goals from quantitative approaches.

While a goal of quantitative research is to isolate and define a category as precisely as possible so as to compare and contrast with other categories, the objective of qualitative research is to investigate the nature of the category itself (McCracken, 1988a). The former form of investigation determines the nature of relationships across precise categories and often employs a large sample of respondents to deliver this goal. In contrast, the complexity-capturing, contextual focus and symbolic analysis ability of qualitative research requires much smaller samples, where the socially constructed category is the object of investigation itself (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994; Fournier, 1998; McCracken, 1988a; Sunderland & Denny, 2007).

Ethnographic analysis can reveal the cognitive world and daily situated practices of the individual, and ascertain the categories and logic by which he or she sees the world and conducts his or her daily life. This is especially germane when seeking to locate positive value in relation to a brand. This methodological tool importantly allows researchers to discover the assumed values and practices that relate to a consumer truth, brand usage and attendant meaning, which can enhance the overall relationship between corporation and individual.

5. Research overview

The author has a background in anthropology and was employed as a corporate anthropologist in several major advertising agencies for over fifteen years. His research involved investigating consumer insights for numerous corporate clients through qualitative methodologies, which often led to significant changes in advertising messages. The case study presented here was for a global food company client with a major marketplace presence in the prepared soup category. The client requested qualitative research for insights into developing advertising that would better reflect the ways American women thought about daily meals, planned food shopping trips and prepared everyday meals. The research data was since released to the author for the present analysis.

The project involved an ethnographic approach in which another anthropologist colleague and the author each conducted a series of observations and interviews (along with videographers to film interviews) in the homes of women who prepared meals. Both anthropologist researchers explored the language used by women to describe cooking and meal preparation, their perceptions and attitudes toward food and the resources women turned to for help with meal ideas. The task for the researchers was to translate in-home learning into workable strategies and "cultural knowledge" for advertising messages that would encourage more product use in cooking and for meals at home.

6. Research design

The project involved eighteen interviews with women who regularly carried out cooking responsibilities for their households. Women ranged in cooking abilities and ages, from their mid 20s to their mid 50s. Some women were quite experienced and familiar with making a repertoire of meals. Others were relatively inexperienced. Interviews were conducted in Milwaukee, WI and Raleigh, NC. These two markets represented significant sales volume for the client's brand. Women respondents were first pre-screened through a consumer-recruiting agency, which sent out a brief survey via the Internet in each market. The survey described the type of research involved, inquired about cooking and eating habits, ingredients and brands used in cooking, attitudes toward food, the number of people for whom meals were prepared, the frequency of preparing meals versus eating out, and

asked about researchers visiting their home. In exchange, the women, if selected, were compensated with several hundred dollars for their time and released permission to use their responses.

In addition, respondents were asked to keep an in-depth journal of their daily thoughts and feelings around meal planning over the course of the week prior to the interview. Respondents were also asked to create a visual collage of their favorite meal and depict in the collage what was significant to them. These combined methodologies of participant observation and non-observant data (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994), helped develop a fuller picture of the way American women thought about meal preparation and constructed meals for their families on a daily basis. The research methodology also included a brief shopping excursion with each respondent to determine how women navigated the real world context of consumable goods. The researchers observed how women noticed new items, what items were familiar to them, when something seemed like a good buy and what their regular choices were. Since the food company's brands were located in the canned soup aisle, the researchers also observed how the consumer noticed the company's brand compared to competitors. The store context afforded the richness of a natural setting in which actions of consumers are guided mostly by unconscious and regularized patterns.

7. Steps to qualitative research in consumer relationships with brands

There are several phases for developing insights around a brand in the overall process of conducting Market-oriented consumer ethnography (Arnould & Price, 2006; Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994). The first phase requires a thorough review of the client's brand background and also the cultural category under investigation; the second phase involves the actual in-situ interviewing and observations with respondents in the brand's naturalistic setting; the third phase necessitates post interview analysis of the data from the field notes, videographic film and additional stimuli (collage, auto-ethnographic videotapes, recordings, etc.). At each stage of investigation, insights are likely to arise, which consequently shape the flow and development of ideas and questions in successive stages, also called Iterative Emergent Insights (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). This affirms the reflexive nature of qualitative research, a continually folding back on itself (see Thompson et al., 1989, for discussion of the hermeneutical circle).

7.1. Step one: review of brand and consumer category

The first phase is divided into two mutually relevant reviews: the client's materials about the particular product, brand or service under investigation (brand review), and the literature on the attendant cultural categories in which the brand lives (category review). This develops the "experience distant" perspective that a specialist, such as a consumer researcher, needs to employ for analysis (Geertz, 1983, p. 57). The brand review begins with dissecting information gathered by the client. In a typical pre-research meeting, the client often presents previous research on the subject under investigation. Rather than dismiss preexisting data as contaminated, irrelevant or distorted, reviewing this material allows the researcher to familiarize oneself with the "language" of the brand and category, which is used to describe the consumer and brand within the corporation. Rejecting the material also threatens to isolate the researcher from sociability with the client (McCracken, 1988a).

Furthermore, reviewing client literature on the brand and consumer allows the researcher to better define problems and assess what is relevant, what is needed and what is not. It provides a base from which the researcher can "be surprised" by new data (Lazarsfeld, 1972). It also creates a set of expectations from which to compare, and which the data can challenge. As Kuhn (1962) illuminates, challenging assumptions in the category are the means by which innovations are born. Gathering information, for instance, from Usage & Attitude surveys on food

consumption and soup in particular allowed the anthropologist researchers to understand that "taste" and "convenience" are broadly reported qualities when purchasing soup and reasons for liking soup. Yet, precisely these vague quantifiable terms require a situated context for understanding how they are practiced by consumers differently and in various contexts — convenience as ease, stress relief, clarity, mastery and so forth. Such terms need to be unpacked linguistically and contextually.

In the case presented here, the existing language throughout client documentation defined the daily preparation and planning of dinner in terms of "the dinner dilemma," for which women sought "solutions." Assuming dinner preparation as a dilemma presupposes a certain orientation toward research and shapes perceptions of the consumer as well as expectations in the types of data discovered. David Gray (2003) writes that pre-formed knowledge, such as framing dinner-planning as a dilemma, can stand in the way of perceptions, since solved problems tend to stay solved and people seek answers in research for what is already known, expected and safe. Moreover, if a quantitative survey were to be structured around this concept of dilemma, the questions and responses might misrepresent the consumers' actual thoughts and practices in preparing meals, as indeed was discovered. Anthropologists, in contrast, seek out native categories and relationships among people, places and objects, in terms of what is experienced, assumed and shared by informants, or what Geertz (1983) terms "experience near" concepts and practices (p. 57). Asking a different set of questions (Sunderland & Denny, 2007) offers an opportunity to reframe research in terms of what family food means, what is meant by dinner altogether, and the relationships formed with brands that might allow women to prepare and recreate meal experiences in a more positive light.

The second part of the review stage – the literature review of cultural categories – not only prepares the researcher for variations in what consumers say and do, but also highlights the assumptions (and errors) that manufacturers make. For instance, in the category of family meals, a literature review informs us that historically "feeding the family" is a women's activity that both demonstrates a specific household labor and the unpaid work of caring for others (DeVault, 1991, p. 1). For countless generations, caring work at home has sustained family and community life, but also constrained and oppressed women, suppressing other capacities and desires (DeVault, 1991). Women today still assume the brunt of household work at home, such as cleaning, family care and cooking, and their efforts remain largely unrecognized as "women's work" (Fischer & Arnold, 1990; Hochschild, 1989; Oakley, 1974).

However, the increased activity of women in labor markets in recent years has produced a new sense of feminine self-worth (Waring, 1988). Residual cultural assumptions of women caring for families are important to compare against new desires for self-recognition. Knowledge of existing literature on this topic can assist in developing a research design that further explores this tension. First, such informed knowledge recognizes that feeding the family is still an underlying cultural assumption placed on women, regardless of what women do career-wise, how well they succeed in the workplace or how frequently domestic partners are willing to help in this role. Second, it explores cooking and meal preparation as "extra" work foisted on women, who increasingly may attempt to establish their own credentials out of the home. Ways to aid women by offering cooking short-cuts or simple meal ideas may gain value today over a few years ago, and especially help in ways that offer recognition and reward for their work. Third, a literature review might also help reframe the client's idea of meal planning, from a negative outlook, "dinner dilemma," to a more positive outlook, such as the resourceful ways women manage their time and energy, and draw support from other women. Indeed, many women observed in this research creatively managed their meals, and ultimately helped generate positive exchange value by aiding the development of marketing and communication ideas for what the soup brand could deliver to women.

Combining the review of the brand with the literature review of the cultural category then aids in the development of the interview guide. In sum, the review of brand and category literature establishes the ground on which the project is built, and can help anticipate questions and topics that arise later in the study.

7.2. Step two: the interview guide and interview

The interview guide establishes the domain and scope of questions that the actual interview will explore with the consumer. It specifies categories and relationships, and helps ascertain the list of topics to be considered. These topics are not fixed, but help determine the direction and themes covered which may lead to further insights in the actual interview process.

Two general principles direct the construction of the interview guide. First, it is helpful to allow respondents to tell their own story in their own terms (see also hermeneutic and existential-phenomenology approaches in Thompson et al., 1989; Thompson, 1990; Thompson et al., 1994). Rather than "interrogate" the respondent in a question/answer format, the interview proceeds more interactively when the researcher guides the respondent at certain prompts, to "steer" the flow of the narrative (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). Keeping a "low" profile helps keep the conversation appropriate for the respondent (McCracken, 1988a).

The second principle is to listen for key terms, phrases or words from respondents that launch narrative descriptions of categories and assumptions. Often this is initiated by the researcher leading with a cultural category question such as, "What is food to you?" "What is cooking?" "What is family?" Such open-ended, non-directive prompts are termed "grand-tour" questions (Spradley, 1979, p. 86–7). Specific prompts from the researcher naturally follow along, once conversation begins to flow from respondents. As the interpretation unfolds, responses to prompts begin to reveal consumers' cultural beliefs and meanings implicit in their descriptions (Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Thompson et al., 1994). Another prompt that helps foster narrative production is to repeat back the last phrase of respondents, rather than asking why (Thompson et al., 1989, p. 138), allowing respondents to further detail what they mean without filling in an answer. Rather than answering the reported, "I do it for convenience," with an assumed response, such as "oh, it saves you time." The researcher repeats back, "You do it for convenience?" — where one might hear, instead, "Yes, I get nervous with too many instructions," which then offers a new line of questioning for the meaning of cooking. Another technique asks the respondent to answer in the negative, such as, "When don't you cook?" Further probes might ask respondents to answer in the ideal, such as recalling the best or most memorable time a food was convenient, what happened and when. This inverts the idea of hearing a spoken "gloss" (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994) by encouraging the respondent to creatively narrate a gloss as a positive experience. This type of probe sets brand experience apart from the routine everyday by creating distance from the "expected" and allowing for aspirational outcomes. Together these questioning techniques help access symbolic meaning, actual practices, underlying assumptions and ideals in cooking and the importance of feeding a family.

7.2.1. The interview itself: cooking as creative self-expression

During the interview the researcher is observing and listening for many things. Essentially, he or she is keyed into the respondent's assumptions, the relations of one term to another, and what is freely brought up and what is avoided or not discussed altogether. In respondents' homes the two anthropologist researchers listened for key terms in conversations, but also for the emotional emphasis in *how* terms, phrases and stories were expressed. For instance, over-generalizations, figures-of-speech and highly idiosyncratic language of consumers' speaking styles revealed high emotional involvement, consumer interest and creativity, or contrarily, revealed boredom and non-interest in

a given experience (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994). The "emotional subjectivity" garnered in the respondent's description of a lived experience (Thompson et al., 1989, p. 138) would have been difficult to track in quantitative data, and therefore required the situated presence of the researcher. As women discussed their daily cooking routine, emotional and subjective descriptions such as feelings of boredom, frustration, excitement, or anticipation, signaled to the researcher how to follow the questions, when to probe further or when to move on to another topic. They also framed a category, relative to another, such as family interaction and meal choices.

Moreover, the researchers noted that the emotionality and idea-generating conversations of respondents changed when the interview shifted context from living room or dining room table to the kitchen where the meal was prepared. This technique revealed that conversing about cooking and the actual act of cooking evoked different narratives, cooking ideas and emotional states, depending on the way women viewed cooking as private or public space, entertainment, performing a skill, or everyday drudgery. Observing consumer practices in meaningful contexts, like the kitchen, reveal unarticulated meaning or "tacit knowledge" (Arnould & Price, 2006, p. 251), and also reflect the importance of "doing" an activity, such as cooking, to reveal an extension of the self and a cultural category of knowledge production (Belk, 1988, p. 146).

Several themes emerged when observing women prepare meals in the home setting. The women who embraced cooking for their families discussed it not as a "dilemma," but more as a form of self-expression. These women spoke of "getting inspired" when browsing certain web sites, trying new recipes in magazines or modifying familiar ones. This affirms the concept of "craft consumers" who engage in creative acts of self-expression (Campbell, 2005). According to Campbell, the rise of craft consumption in American society today is a response to over-manufacturing: craft consumption is "an oasis of personal self-expression and authenticity in what is an ever-widening 'desert' of commodification and marketization" (p. 37). For some women, a "craft approach" to cooking redefined the "dinner dilemma" as a personal challenge of designing and creating as well as consuming a meal. They took pleasure in "crafting" dishes that were more healthy, attractive and colorful.

In their relationship with the soup brand, the researchers observed various ways that women employed their craft skill in adapting soup, according to contexts, time and people. At lunch, soup might be used as a simple quick meal in itself, whereas for dinner occasions it was used as a more complex ingredient to be combined with other ingredients. This also varied with the people present: an intimate meal for couples at lunch verses a more formal family dinner. When a woman selected and adapted the soup brand for a meal according to various situations, she formed a relationship with the brand. The brand "reciprocated" as a nurturing "partner" (Fournier, 1998) by modifying or adapting its dynamic qualities to suit her needs and those of her family. Such resourcefulness takes the cultural form of expressing a cook's identity and pride (Moisio, Arnould, & Price, 2004). Adapting recipes within a variable framework of pleasing people at different times and situations is both grounds for creative expression and a mark of personal identification and pride, and expresses an active relationship with the brand.

7.2.2. Recipes and social exchange

A second discovery in the interview process revealed that for both experienced and novice cooks, efforts and idea generation for meals are not experienced in isolation. The world of personal connections for women is highly intertwined socially with the subject of food and meals (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991). While professional cooks, scientists and nutritionists may speak of food in terms of sustenance and nutritional benefits, food in the daily context of women who cook is often a form of social exchange that identifies the self, relative to others (Harris, 1985).

In conversations about meal creation, it was noted that women often received meal inspiration from other women. Meals were integral to personal exchange among some women in certain social contexts. For example, one woman spoke of attending a church function where she sampled a range of meals prepared by church members, discussed with other women the process of meal preparation and then wrote personal notes to adapt it for her family at home. On other occasions, a woman might strongly recommend a meal idea or recipe to a colleague at work or a friend, and this will prompt her to try it at home.

These insights later helped develop a range of strategic and tactical marketing solutions to assist women in planning weekly meals, beyond just using recipes from the client's website and magazine. Insights were developed from the idea of relationships, of receiving aid from other women, which helped shape an interactive corporate–consumer response for the brand on its website. For instance, this led to remaking pictures on the website depicting food among real families enjoying meals together, rather than depicting food alone, as was previously shown by the company. This fostered the appearance of meals as more social, and therefore would resonate more with women searching for ideas. Another change made to the client's website as a result of the research involved enlarging and expanding the meal star-rating system, since it identified real women who modified a recipe to suit their family. It furthered the idea of a network of relationships that could assist women in their cooking.

7.3. Step three: comparative analysis of research findings

After the interview, the intent of analysis is to determine the consumer categories, the sets of relationships, the basic assumptions that inform respondents' worldview, and their practices that orient behavior toward the brand. This task involves joining what is known from the category literature and brand review, what was experienced by the researcher going into the interviews, and what took place in the actual interviews themselves (McCracken, 1988a). From reviewing the brand and category literature, the transcripts of the discussions, notes from observations (and video recordings), and thoughts that arose during and after the interview, the researcher moves back and forth from particular points that stood out, to more generalized thoughts, or from emic to etic categories; and from brand facts and features, to how they were incorporated in consumer practices. This method of "tacking back and forth" from "experience distant" to "experience near" perspectives (Geertz, 1983, p. 57), is also detailed in the hermeneutic circle, moving from particular to whole in researching consumer experience (Thompson, 1990; Thompson et al., 1989, 1994). This process can also be stated and explored as contrasting structural and functional features of a setting (Arnould & Wallendorf, 1994; Sherry, 1990; Thompson & Haytko, 1997). As the researcher works through the data using these comparative contrasts, certain directions that illuminate the issues raised will emerge as patterns in experience (Thompson et al., 1989, p. 141).

Insights from this research on home cooking revealed the brand's value in a series of relationships with the consumer that included consumer self-identity in cooking, creative meal ideas that pleased the family and changing meal contexts. As outlined by Fournier (1998), the soup brand was shown to form a series of interactive relationships with consumers. Soup served a dynamic role in the relationship with women in how it adapted to multiple purposes for various styles of living. Women served soup by itself as a quick simple meal; they used it as an ingredient for more involved meals; they used it as a single meal or for larger gatherings. The soup brand also responded to changing contingencies in family tastes over time. Some Empty-Nester boomer women revisited soups they had once abandoned when their children were young, re-experiencing old favorites such as spicy tomato soup in new ways.

Another insight came from the notion of food choice, adaptation and preference, which identified the individuality of the cook and her

family. Literature shows that the family meal, along with food and food brands, is highly significant of relationships, identity and tradition (Ashley, Hollows, Jones, & Taylor, 2004; Bublitz & Peracchio, in this issue; Sutton, 2001). Sharing a home-cooked meal "reproduces the family" and can dissolve interpersonal boundaries and tensions within the family formed through materialism and object possession of material culture, such as "my computer," "your clothes" (Belk, 2010). Meals enjoyed together incorporate the taste preferences of everyone in the household. The family dinner then expresses a metonym for the family itself through which people recognize themselves as families (Ashley et al., 2004). Meals reflect family identity, and brands of soup that contribute to the meal embody these relational values.

This relational finding of family identity in meals also highlighted the network of help shared by women. Many women in this study resolved cooking frustrations and bored feelings toward cooking by gathering and sharing recipe information and meal ideas for "bringing the family together." The message and brands used to distinguish and identify "our family" is enacted daily and can be passed on, shared and adapted by other women for their families. Meal ideas are a "currency" among some women that creates a sense of belonging, satisfaction and well-being among members of the household. This idea of "reproducing the family" through meals that please family members reflected a consumer–brand truth, and was subsequently used in advertising communication.

These research insights ultimately helped the advertising agency develop an advertising campaign for the client that communicated a "happier place" with the celebrity voice of Tim Allen as spokesperson for the brand. To great success, the campaign celebrated the variety of soup uses, types of meals in which soup was an ingredient and its adaptability to various settings, with the premise that if people eat healthier foods together, they enjoy life more at any stage of their life (see also Bublitz & Peracchio, in this issue). The advertising presented a range of scenarios of family members enjoying happy moments together in outdoor activities (Business Wire, 9/7/2010). This was a major shift in advertising from the previous campaign that focused on communicating only a few top selling soup varieties. A year later, the soup company announced that it was expanding the advertising campaign, with over one hundred million dollars in new media spending because of the positive consumer reaction they were receiving (Business Wire, 9/7/2011).

8. Conclusion

Most corporations base their advertising strategies and executions, marketing plans and new product advancements on what they know about their consumers. This paper has argued that a qualitative perspective on consumers' lives, particularly one that offers ethnographic insight into the interactive relationships that extend beyond the individual rewards of using a brand, can inform more authentic advertising strategies and help generate positive exchange value for consumers and companies. The research presented here explored the social and relational world of women who cook meals for their families, the sense of self-identity formed in cooking, and how interconnections with other women informed meal decisions, as well as inspired new recipes, feelings of confidence and a desire to expand their cooking repertoires. Additional research corroborates this finding to suggest that other corporations such as Bolthouse Farms can successfully advertise and promote healthy foods to create positive marketing outcomes among consumers (Bublitz & Peracchio, in this issue).

When consumer categories and relationships with brands are discovered in qualitative research, the insights can contribute to richer consumer meaning-making that the corporation can then reflect back in advertising. The women as cooks defined, extended and enriched their social networks in constructive relationships with other women through extended relationships with the brand. Corporations seeking to answer questions about how target audiences relate to brands will benefit their sales and exchange value by discovering and capitalizing on ways consumers can and do relate to each other through their brands.

These insights opened avenues for positive social interactions between consumers and the corporation in what could be termed positive marketing value (Lerman & Shefrin, in this issue). This paper suggests these kinds of advertising approaches and reflexive interactions can benefit consumers, corporations and society. Such positive inferences of consumers from brand advertising can also work for greater social value by actually strengthening social bonds.

The reflexive view of this paper, which joins iterative qualitative research, consumer interaction with brands and dialogic communications approaches, contributes to a richer understanding of advertising and consumer agency. As this paper has argued, consumers actively process and co-produce advertising for its meaning, rather than just for information (Hirschman & Thompson, 1997; McCracken, 1988b; Sherry, 1987). Consumers co-produce meaning interactively from advertising to assist in developing life strategies, personal, social and national identities as well as enhancing positive social bonds (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Mick & Buhl, 1992; O'Donohoe, 1999; Olsen, 2009). As such, advertising can be viewed as the reflexive mediation of positive cultural meaning when it accurately interprets culture and resonates positively with consumers, through ongoing iterative research that cultivates such meaning in the presentation of thoughtful advertising campaigns. This process, when carried off properly, offers marketers a continuous dialogic exchange of positive value creation with consumers.

9. Further research

Additional research is needed to better understand the effects of the essentialist notion on influencing social interaction between consumer, corporation and advertising, and the ways in which that interaction may assist in producing positive value exchange. When advertising messages are properly constructed such that they reflect an identifiable consumer truth, consumers may be more likely to see in the advertised message what they aspire to be true (Bloom, 2010). Advertisements in general seek to be aspirational (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; O'Donohoe, 1999; Ritson & Elliott, 1999), whether improving social relations, informing social identities or showing a brand in the positive light; and conversely if an advertised message is unrealistic or interpreted negatively by a consumer then the advertisement fails to inspire the consumer. Subsequent research could explore the possible alignments between various advertising approaches that use similar or other methodologies, reflexive interactions with consumers and essentialist perspectives. Other approaches from CCT (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) may explore additional dimensions of co-production in consumer–brand relationships through experiential, contextual and sociocultural dimensions of consumption, which might then delve into the very issue of authenticity of experience itself. Additional research is therefore needed to discover other possible roles for the positive use of advertising in consumer culture.

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