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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.

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

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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