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Tweens' Expression of Self-Concept through the Symbolic Consumption of Brands

Introduction

Children have long been considered as consumers with considerable buying power. While previous research has investigated the self concept, symbolic consumption and brands in relation to children, these studies have tended to look at the issues in isolation, or at most in relation to two of these concepts. By successfully accessing this ethically sensitive consumer group, the current works moves the debate forward by providing an analysis which acknowledges the importance of all three concepts when investigating the tween consumer. Therefore, this paper explores how 'tweens', between the ages of 11-14, express their self concept through the symbolic consumption of brands. Adopting an integrative multi-method approach, this work reports findings from an online questionnaire and projective techniques from small friendship groups. As such, the methods employed aim to provide an understanding of the child's constructed world and how they express their self concept through their consumption of brands.

The paper begins with a review of pertinent literature on the child, the child consumer, consumer socialisation and consumption symbolism before exploring extant work on the child/adolescent and brands. The methodology section details the methods adopted as well as addressing the important ethical issues that must be considered when researching this particular group of consumers. Findings are subsequently presented and discussed before the conclusion details the contribution of the work and potential areas for future research. It is to a review of the literature that the paper next turns.

Literature Review

The Child

Tweens have been identified clearly as a distinct segment of consumers (Anderson, Tufte, Rasmussen, & Chan, 2008; Lindstrom & Seybold, 2003; Siegel, Coffey, & Livingston, 2004) who are defined by age. The etymology of the term is clear: it is short for 'tweenager' (Oxford Dictionaries, 2011) although the actual age-range varies from 8 – 14 (Lindstrom, 2004) to as limited an age as 11 – 12 (Dibley & Baker, 2001). The term 'tween' is used interchangeably in the literature with "pre-teen", "tweenage" and "tweenie" (Anderson et al., 2008; Cook & Kaiser, 2004; Dibley & Baker, 2001; Grant & Stephen, 2005; Lindstrom, 2004; Siegel et al., 2004).

The 11-14 year old subjects for this particular study fall into the category of 'early adolescents' and also 'tweens' and this age group exhibits certain traits: a move from parental, rational influence to peer-based, irrational influence (McDougall & Chantrey, 2004), a more in-depth understanding of the concept of brands (Chaplin & Roedder John, 2005b) and an obsession with appearance (Ellkind & Bowen, 1979).

The importance of peer groups is highlighted as being the most significant influence on children (Elliott & Leonard, 2004; MacNeal, 1987; Nairn, 2008; Pilgrim & Lawrence, 2001) and is of special significance for those who are in the early adolescent stage of development.

Such peer group influence, is seen to manifest itself particularly with choices relating to fashion items and clothing which have high symbolism (Brittain, 1963; Elliott & Leonard, 2004; Mielke, 1983; Valkenburg & Cantor, 2001). The influence on high-symbolism choices for young people is most likely to be related to luxury items such as branded fashion items (Childers & Rao, 1992; Elliott & Leonard, 2004). The development of individual identity is affected significantly by music and fashion consumption, and through engagement with sport and also lifestyle (Livingstone, 2004).

The Child Consumer

The child has long been recognised as a consumer with considerable buying power, although it is acknowledged widely that little research has been carried out on the importance of this group as potential customers (Darian, 1998; Hogg, Bruce, & Hill, 1998; Ross & Harradine, 2004). Increasingly, we see marketers targeting the child consumer directly with messages containing child-orientated content such as characters that represent fun (Dotson & Hyatt, 2005; Wechsler, 1997), although the attraction of adult-orientated advertising messages to children is well-documented with specific mention of favourite advertising messages for 5-16 year olds being related to adult, alcoholic products and cars (Duff, 2004). It appears that humour, in particular, is effective in communicating with children, irrespective of the relevance of the product itself (Duff, 2004). The early bonding of the child to adult brands, by way of interception of messages aimed at adult consumers is stated by McDougall and Chantrey (2004) as being significant if new consumer-brand relationships are to be forged with those who do not have preconceptions about the brand.

Consumer Socialisation

The way that adolescents learn to become consumers is largely dependent on influence from parents, peer groups and media (Dotson & Hyatt, 2005; Moschis & Moore, 1979). It is also apparent from the extant literature that the child is both a consumer in training and a consumer in its own right, influenced not only by marketing messages aimed at its own age group, but also by adult-focused messages (Jacoby & Kyner, 1973). The increasingly sophisticated nature of the child consumer means that there is a challenge for marketers to communicate with this market segment from an early age (Harradine & Ross, 2007; Ross & Harradine, 2004).

Consumption Symbolism

Consumption symbolism is the understanding of meanings attached to the ownership of brands or products, and is a significant aspect of the consumer socialisation process of children (Bachmann Achenreiner & Roedder John, 2003). During the process of socialisation, consumers (in this case, early adolescents), discover shared significance for certain symbols, but also cultivate their own interpretations (Elliott, 1999). It is well established that certain products are consumed because of the image they portray, rather than their utilitarian benefits (Bachmann Achenreiner & Roedder John, 2003; McCracken, 1988), with Rolex ® watches, for example, denoting a wealthy and successful owner (Bachmann Achenreiner & Roedder John, 2003). The ability to understand the symbolism of consumption is fully developed by the age of 11 or 12 (Bachmann Achenreiner & Roedder John, 2003; Belk, Mayer, & Driscoll, 1984) and at this age, children can form impressions of the owners of such products based upon the image and significance of the product's brand name (Bachmann Achenreiner & Roedder John, 2003).

The projection of 'self' is thus achieved not only by what is consumed, but also by what is not consumed (Hogg & Michell, 1996; Wattanasuwan, 2005). The appropriateness of

investigating consumption symbolism for children aged 11 -14 is justified by Chaplin and Roedder John (2005b) who state that possessions become an increasingly important part of self-concept descriptions for children aged 8 – 16.

The Child/Adolescent and Brands

The use of brands to convey self-image relies on the distinctiveness of the consumer brand images which facilitate this process (Chaplin & Roedder John, 2005b; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Children's continued exposure to brand campaigns gives them an indication of the brand personality, its users and their qualities, which allows the child to develop the ability to consider the brand as matching the personal traits of the user (Chaplin & Roedder John, 2005b). Children are able, by the age of 10-12, to use brands as a cue to form an impression of the people who use them (Aaker, 1996; Bachmann Achenreiner & Roedder John, 2003). The flip-side of that particular coin is that individuals use products and brands in order to establish and communicate their individuality, and this is also evidenced within the literature (Belk, 1988; Dotson & Hyatt, 1994; Kleine, Kleine, & Allen, 1995; Roper & Shah, 2007; Zelizer, 2002).

Therefore, given the various constructs outlined above, this work addresses the following research question:

- RQ1: to explore the expression of self-concept of tweens aged 11 – 14 through the symbolic consumption of branded goods.

Methodology

This study adopts an integrative, multi-method approach to qualitative data collection. The data were gathered through online questionnaires and projective techniques in small friendship groups, with each stage giving direction to the next, and understanding of the phenomena being achieved to a greater extent with each stage.

Stage One: An online questionnaire gathered data on self-concept (both perceived and projected), and favourite brands, with all respondents asked to recall their five favourite brands and list them in order of preference. The brands that emerged from this stage of the research were then collated and used to form the basis for the second-stage, friendship group discussions. The participant sample of 259 respondents was drawn from Years 7, 8 and 9 (typical ages 11 - 12, 12 – 13 and 13 – 14 respectively), of 3 South Wales secondary schools.

Stage Two: 30 children from the main sample interacted in small groups to discuss the brands mentioned in Stage One. The groups were formed naturally, and each group was gender-exclusive. Each child had a complete Stage 1 profile, with expressed self-concept, perceived self-concept and favoured brands being detailed, thus giving continuity to the data gathering. Projective techniques were used to gather information on the identity characteristics of the people that the children considered to be consumers of the brands. Friendship groups allowed for less pressure and greater ability to express honest opinion regarding brand affiliation (Hill, 2007; Tinson, 2009). Images of brands collected in Stage 1 were produced on sticky labels. Groups were asked to place the brand logo labels on one of three boards – a board of 'bad taste', a board of 'not very good taste' and a board of 'good taste', emulating research methods by Bannister and Booth (2005). Next, the children wrote on the labels what sort of person they thought would use these brands. This gave the groups opportunity to

discuss and record brands' which hold positive or negative connotations and provided rich data as to why certain brands are acceptable or unacceptable to the children.

In comparing the information from the first stage (favourite brands and self-concept) and the second stage (brand perception and user characteristics), it is possible to demonstrate how the consumption of brands fits with expressed and perceived self-concept.

Ethical Concerns

It is particularly important to observe ethics in research with groups of people who are considered to be vulnerable, and children are considered to be a vulnerable group (Christensen, 1998; Lindsay, 2000; Tinson, 2009). It is also crucial to convince the participant that confidentiality will be observed, sensitivity will be displayed and also to be aware of any effects on the respondents of the research process. All these matters were observed within the confines of this work.

The data-collection process that gave rise to the greatest amount of ethical concern was that relating the group work – the friendship group discussion of brands. Children formed small, gender-specific, friendship groups of three quite naturally and without researcher-intervention. At the outset there was concern about the possibility that some children may have felt excluded, had they not automatically been embraced by friendship groups. If this had been the case, an intervention would have created groups on an ad hoc basis, ensuring that no participating child was aware of the basis of group formation, and would therefore not have felt excluded. However, intervention was not required as groups formed naturally. The decision was taken not to request permission to video or audio-tape the group session, as this would have potentially caused access to be denied. It was for this reason that the children were asked to write on the labels and boards. The greatest limitation of this method of data collection was that it was impossible to observe the group dynamics of all children, as the tasks were being completed simultaneously in a workshop-type environment. Nevertheless, it was felt that the data gathered through the children writing on the boards and labels provided were sufficiently rich to justify the compromise made here.

Although participating children were made aware that they could extricate themselves at any time from participating in the research, no such requests were made. Informal feedback from the children at the end of the sessions indicated that the participants had actually enjoyed taking part in the exercise, with requests to repeat the exercise being voiced very enthusiastically both to the researcher, and to teaching staff within the schools.

Findings and Discussion

Data from were interpreted in a relatively innovative way with the use of Wordle (see figures attached as Appendix). This provided a clear picture of all constructs examined. Findings from stage one on self concept, both perceived and projected, and favourite brands are presented in figures 1-3. In terms of stage two, the good taste boards had 186 labels placed on them in total, whilst the total for the not-so-good taste boards was 96, and bad taste, 59 labels (figures 4-6). Whilst several brands emerged as being held in universally good taste by the group (Adidas, Animal, Brace's, Cadbury, Coca Cola, Dr Pepper, Fanta, Galaxy, Lucozade, Nike and Walkers), none appeared as being considered not-so-good taste, or bad taste across every group.

That the good taste brands relate to sportswear and food bears out previous findings that tweens' greatest expenditure is on food and beverages, entertainment and clothing (Liebek, 1998; Wiley, Krisjanous, & Cavana, 2007) and shows a link to the most prominent descriptor of 'sporty' which appears both on the good taste and the expressed self-concept Wordles. The descriptor 'chavs' appeared upon the good taste board, possibly due to a misunderstanding of the term, a change in meaning due to evolving language, or even a reflection on the participants' own environment where they may consider themselves to be chavs, but see this as a positive characteristic. The fact that *posh* and *rich* also appear as third level characteristics can be interpreted as an indication that brands considered to be good taste are those that are favoured by wealthy consumers.

The not-so-good taste Wordle has less distinction than the good taste Wordle between the emergent words, with first level words being visibly prominent as *sporty*, *chavs*, *men*, *women*, and *never heard of it*. It is important to recognise that this not-so-good taste data contained some contradictions, with labels being designated such, but positive comments being written on them. This may indicate a conflict within the groups, and possibly an element of power implicitly granted to the individuals in possession of the labels, or wielding the pen. The participants lack of favour seems to be attributed to the fact that they think that these brands are not meant for them, but for people either younger (*young*, *younger*, *childish*, *children*) or older (*old*, *older*, *men*, *women*). This somewhat counters the argument that children engage with adult brands (Dotson & Hyatt, 2005; Horgan, 2005; McDougall & Chantrey, 2004; Rushkoff, 2000). The appearance of group member names on all taste boards could be construed as gentle teasing, or even explicitly voiced approval/disapproval of brand favour. This contradicts Ross and Harradine's (2004) findings that individuals may be excluded from groups for not having the 'right' brand.

Regarding the bad taste boards, the only visible words to emerge are *cheap*, *girls*, *women*, *young*, *old* and *like*, although the context of *like* is mostly related to phrases such as *people like Megan*. The meaning that can be drawn from both this, and the not-so-good taste Wordle, is that if a child hasn't heard of a brand, there exists an automatic assumption that it has negative connotations. Brands that are unheard of do not appear on any of the good taste boards. The comparative lack of unfavourable brands may emerge from the fact that the brands were originally put forward as favourites, and therefore, it is only personal dislike or a lack of awareness that has destined a small proportion of brands to the bad taste board.

Conclusions and areas for future research

The prominence of *sporty* on the expressed, perceived self-concept boards, and also the good and not-so-good taste brand boards indicates that there is indeed a connection in the way that tweens use brands to project a self-concept. The emergence of the term *funny* as a self-concept descriptor suggests merit in future research exploring connections between espoused brands and those brands that use humour in their marketing communications. This supports earlier work of Duff (2004) which highlights the importance of humour in marketing to children. Further research on brands that children dislike, rather than like, may well provide indications of why children do not engage with such brands.

This exploratory research provides indications for future projects which may involve in-depth discussions with the child consumer to gain understanding of exactly how they feel the brands that they espouse communicate their self-concept. Other areas for more in-depth

exploration include a comparative examination of expressed and perceived self-concept. Additionally, the impact of the adult use of brands and what sort of self-concept this communicates to the child as part of the process of consumer socialisation is of interest to the researchers.

The innovative method of data gathering has proven to be successful with child respondents and can be used to good effect for further research. The children's positive responses to both the online questionnaire and their volubly expressed enjoyment of the projective research techniques used in Stage 2 gave valuable feedback to the researchers that the participants actually enjoyed the process.

The method of data analysis has provided a novel visual mechanism for interpretation of data that will give a clear picture of emerging themes and can be used to identify themes for future exploration (Dann, 2008). Although Wordle is being used in this instance to illustrate emergent themes, there is also evidence that the tool has been used as a confirmatory device regarding the findings of research and their interpretation (McNaught & Lam, 2010). Wordle's suitability as a mechanism for effective analysis of research data is proposed by Viégas et al (2009). For future research, other qualitative methods of data gathering may be used to substantiate the Wordle interpretations (Dann, 2008; McNaught & Lam, 2010; Ramsden & Bate, 2008).

Research that focuses on children is fraught with the difficulty of dealing with the ethical sensitivities and gaining access to this group of respondents (Tinson, 2009), and in an ideal world, a less homogenous group of respondents would have been the focus for this study. A background in school-related work facilitated access to children through schools and made this research project possible. Pre-existing relationships with schools, a valid Criminal Records Bureau certificate, and an ability to interact effectively with groups of children in an appropriate and productive manner have made possible a valid and much needed contribution to the debate on the child as a consumer. Limitations of this research include the geographical confines of the children studied for the second stage data gathering. An examination of the brand perceptions of children living in more affluent areas may have generated a completely different set of results and provided different insight into the phenomena and is an implication for future research.

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