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Transportation to World of Fantasy: Consumer Experiences of Fictional Brands Becoming Real

This paper explores the relatively new and understudied area of reverse product placement. It focuses on the experiences of consumers who purchase and use fictional brands and products – those that first appear in fiction and are later produced and sold for actual consumption. Phenomenological interviews were used to capture what individuals experience when they purchase, use and own fictional brands. Three themes related to the notion of connection emerged. Fictional brands and products connect individuals to a different world, allowing them to experience and indulge in their fantasies through a tangible object. The objects also connect individuals to memories and emotions, acting as a portal to other aspects of their lives, and fictional brands and products also connect to the self and to others. The findings help us to explore issues of fantasy and reality within consumption, noting particularly how fictional products and brands can provide tangible links between the two realms, and sheds further light on the role of fantasy within everyday life.

Keywords: Reverse Product Placement, Fictional Brands, Fantasy, Imagination, Narrative Transportation, Consumption

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INTRODUCTION

Willy Wonka Chocolate, Duff Beer, Dunder Mifflin Paper and the Bubba Gump Shrimp Company are examples of some of the most successful reverse product placements of all time (Sauer 2011), but what is it and what effect does it have on the consumer?

Product Placement is a well-known, well-documented and well-studied practice in advertising, having been defined over 14 times in the last 20 years (Chin et al. 2013). Whereas product placement is about placing real products and brands into fictional worlds, reverse product placement is exactly the opposite; 'creating a fictional brand in a fictional environment and then placing it into the real world (Muzellec et al. 2012, p819). One of the main differences between traditional product placement and reverse product

placement is that fictional products are already part of a storyline, and when they gain in popularity there exists an opportunity to exploit this in real life (O'Donnell, 2013). Reverse product placement then, has the potential to overcome some of the problems associated with traditional product placement such as consumer awareness that brands in films seek to persuade (DeLorme and Ried 1999) and poor integration or 'shoehorning' of brands into the media text, which disrupts the entertainment narrative (Barn 2005).

Although a seemingly bizarre concept, creating a brand out of essentially nothing, the practice of reverse product placement is not new to the entertainment industry. *Omni Consumer Products Corporation*, founded in 2006, focuses purely on 'licensing, defictionalization, and reverse-branding' (Omni Consumer Products, 2014). Responsible for products such as *Fight Club Caffeinated Soap* and *Anchorman's Sex Panther Cologne*, the company specialises in making 'real', that which is fictional. Although still a niche industry, where TV shows, films and fictional products within them become popular, there are marketplace opportunities. More than this though, fictional brands offer consumers the opportunity to experience fictional worlds and ways of being in reality, tying this form of consumption to a body of work in consumer research on imagination, daydreaming and bridging the fantasy-reality gap (see for example, Campbell, 1987, McCracken, 1989, d'Astous and Deschenes, 2005; Jenkins, Nixon and Molesworth, 2011).

Fictional brands offer consumers a connection to a game, film or TV show, allowing them to experience something that characters in those fictional worlds would also experience (Hosea 2007). The concept of fictional products has been approached in the past; Lancaster (1996) investigated 'Forbidden Planet', the world's largest science fiction retailer, and described science fiction commodities as allowing us to branch out into other worlds of fantasy. The potential for marketplace offerings to transport consumers to a different reality is very powerful and given the prevalence of fantasy and the imagination in everyday life (Jenkins and Molesworth, 2013) and consumers' desire to actualise their daydreams (Campbell, 1987) the making 'real' of fictional products offers a new context to explore the relationship between reality and fantasy, which is still somewhat overlooked in academia. Better understanding consumer experiences of and desire for reverse product placement also offers advantages for business, not only does it include lowering market entry costs and a reduction in competition for mindshare (Edery 2006); awareness and attitudes towards these products exists in the minds of the consumers as they are already part of popular culture (Vranica 2011).

Although there has been a good deal of non-academic attention and intrigue into the topic of reverse product placement, it is in its infancy in terms of academic research. At present, research on the topic has focussed on developing a basic understanding of the concept and assessing its potential marketplace viability (Muzellec et al, 2012; 2013), however, there is a lack of research focusing on the consumer perspective and experience. Due to its nature relating to fantasy and imagination, much interaction with fictional brands occurs at a personal level and therefore talking to people about their experiences on an individual basis will offer new insights from a consumer perspective. Using a phenomenological approach, this paper aims to identify and understand what consumers experience when they interact (desire, purchase, use) with fictional products and brands in order to develop our understanding of the phenomenon from a consumer perspective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to position and conceptualise reverse-product placement, we begin by outlining different forms of product placement and types of fictional brands. We then consider broader issues that relate to reverse product placement and the consumer experience, regarding how people engage with brands in fictional or virtual worlds, specifically the notion of narrative transportation; the ways consumers connect with objects and what this may mean for fictional products and brands, and; the relationship between reality and fantasy, considering how fictional brands may offer new insight to this area of consumer research.

Forms of Product Placement and Fictional Brands

Product placement has been a popular method of non-traditional advertising due to its ability to demonstrate brand usage in a naturalistic setting (Loro et al. 1990), enhance movie realism (Sapolsky & Kinney 1994) and reach captive audiences (Hulin-Salkin 1989) amongst many other benefits. Much research in the area tends to be quantitative in nature and focuses on consumer attitudes, purchase intent and brand recall (e.g. Nelson, 2002; McKechnie and Thou, 2003; Karrh et al, 2001), concentrating on evaluating the success of product placements. However, DeLorme and Ried (1999) studied interpretation of brand props in films using a phenomenological approach and uncovered themes of consumption specific relevance including brands as tools for identity and aspirations, along with belonging and security. These are of particular interest as they suggest ways in which consumers use and engage with brands that are placed in TV and film. Informing this study it suggests that individuals may also use and experience fictional products as part of how they view themselves, and indeed, potentially actualising who and what they desire to be. Related to this, Hackley and Tiwsakul (2006) studied the quality of engagement that product placement has on the consumer. The authors state that the presence of brands in exciting and aspirational worlds allows consumers to connect with that world in their daily life after their experience has ended. In terms of reverse product placement, we can see that fictional brands from fictional environments have the potential to offer this same connection to consumers by entering the real world, extending their experience of a media text after it has ended. In this way it may bridge the fantasy-reality gap, bringing elements of fantasy into everyday life – potentially in a more meaningful or nuanced way than traditional product placement.

Reverse product placement was first labelled as ‘Brand Precession’ (Muzellec and Lynn, 2010), as the virtual brands precede the real, suggesting fictional brands have the potential for commercial purposes through:

“...fomenting a brand aura entirely in the abstract and the virtual, but capturing the imagination and emotional attachment of real consumers.”
(Muzellec & Lynn 2010, p.3).

Muzellec et al. (2012) investigated the potential that fictional brands possess and proposed a typology in order to understand the different variations of these fictional brands – understanding how reverse product placement sits in relation to other forms of product placement and fictional brands is important to fully grasp the concept we are concerned with (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Source: Muzellec et al 2012, p. 816

Virtual World / Real World	Real brands in computer-synthesized or fictional worlds (Product Placement) A	Virtual brands in computer-synthesized or fictional worlds (Proto-Brands) B
	Real brands in the real world (Most brands as we experience them) C	Virtual brands in the real worlds (Reverse Brand Placement) D
	Real Brands	Virtual Brands

Muzellec et al’s (2012) typology categorises brands based on the type of brand (real or virtual) and the type of world in which brands are featured (real or virtual). In quadrant A is traditional product placement, categorised as real brands in virtual or fictional worlds, such as *Aston Martin* in a *James Bond* movie, and Quadrant C categorises brands as we encounter them in everyday life: ‘real brands in the real world’. Brands in quadrant B on the other hand are virtual across both axes – virtual (or fictional) brands in virtual (or fictional) worlds, for instance *Grand Theft Auto’s ‘Pegassi’* brand of car – existing only in the virtual world of the videogame. Quadrant D categorises reverse product placement as virtual (fictional) brands that have become real, also coined ‘HyperReal’, as these brands intersect the real and the virtual. An example here, and one used in Muzellec et al’s (2012) study, is *Duff Beer* from *The Simpsons*. *Duff* was initially a ‘proto brand’ (see quadrant B - virtual brand in a virtual world), first appearing in the TV programme in 1990, it has since been leveraged and is now a virtual brand in the real world, sold in a variety of countries (though not with the consent of *The Simpsons’* creators). It is these types of brands that we are concerned with for the purpose of this study.

Taking these themes further, Muzellec et al. (2013) investigated whether fictional brands had the power to drive purchase intent with services that consumers had never experienced before. Of particular relevance for this research is the focus on attitude towards the television program in which the fictional product is placed. The television show becomes the master brand on which to base perceptions. Therefore, an individual’s perception of a particular media text is an important factor when it comes to the effect that fictional brands can have on them and how they experience them. It is therefore important, and of particular relevance to this study, to consider how fictional brands transport individuals, enabling them to experience the fantasy worlds they come from and represent.

Narrative Transportation – Bringing Fantasy to Life

Research tells us that good integration into a storyline is important for successful product placement (Barn, 2005). When it comes to fictional brands in fictional worlds, this seems to be less of an issue because the correct 'fit' between real and virtual does not need to be found. The potential power that fictional brands have to transport their users to another world is, however, particularly important and warrants exploration.

Blumer (1933) discussed the impact motion pictures have on audiences including daydreaming, emotional experiences and being transported to a different dimension. Green and Brock (2000) put forward their theory of narrative transportation, a mental process in which people become absorbed in a story and thus transported into a narrative world where they temporarily lose access to real world facts, cognitive responding, realism of experience and strong affective responses. This has been shown to affect the persuasion of product placement and may explain what individuals experience when consuming fictional brands. Bhatnager and Fang (2011) suggest that we enter the story through our connection to the characters. In relation to real brands, there is evidence to suggest that persuasion through self-character similarity works best when we are dissimilar to the characters we see, as this leads to higher cognitive elaboration (Bhatnager and Fang, 2011) and a desire to become more like them through the products we own. This may suggest an element of aspiration towards a character, or character trait, which is particularly interesting when thinking about fantasy media texts, as many of them involve characters that cannot exist in the real world (e.g. Harry Potter, Zombies, Superheroes, etc.). If something is unfamiliar or different, we use up more cognitive resources to process the information.

Related to this is the concept of mental simulation, put forward by Escalas (2007), which has strong links to narrative transportation theory as these simulations are usually in the form of stories. It is an imitative mental representation of an event, which can involve enacting a potential behaviour, like using a product seen in a media text. This also includes fantasizing about unlikely events.

Relating this more directly to consumer research, consumption visions are an important form of mental simulation, in which consumers project themselves into 'simulated consumption situations and observe the imaginary actions of the possible self in this context' (Phillips et al. 1995, p.281). This includes imagining what a product would be like if we were to own it, and our ideal selves. For reverse product placement – or indeed any fictional object or attribute – this suggests that consumers can imagine using a product, what it would be like and what it would mean for them including what they desire to be like, revealing their fantasies and compensating for reality, where such fantasies cannot be actualised (Fournier and Guiry, 1993). This is particularly relevant for brands and products that do not exist yet as these can only be experienced in the mind.

The notion of transportation is particularly applicable to the realm of fictional goods, which potentially offer a connection between reality and the world from which they came. Owning these goods may create a feeling of being part of that world or, by bringing aspects of fantasy to life, may provide a momentary escape from reality. Coupled with this are the emotional connections to the material being consumed and the characters involved, merging fantasy with reality. Consuming these products may reflect not only worlds we desire to experience but also who we are and who we want to be.

The Meaning of Fictional Brands

It is well documented that consumption is considered the main source of identity formation (e.g. Baudrillard, 2004; Campbell, 2005; Belk, 1990). This can become even more pertinent when consumption (in this case reverse product placement) relates to a fan culture we identify with. Hills (2002) explains the existence for media tie-in memorabilia and collectables using the “dialectic of value”, described as objects intensely subjectively valued by fans redefining their exchange value. The meaning of these objects is placed onto them through fandoms’ ‘lived experiences’. This idea of subjective value has also been used to define fans as individuals who identify with and engage with mass media images, objects and texts in an emotionally involved and invested way (e.g. Gray et al. 2007; Kozinets 2001), which could apply to individuals who consume fictional brands and may help explain what these products mean to them as they are connected with the media that we consume.

Holt’s (1995) metaphors for consuming identified ‘integration’ whereby consumers ‘enhance the perception that a valued consumption object is a constitutive element of their identity’ (p.6), which then facilitates the symbolic use of an object. With specific reference to fantasy consumption of Disney products, Dholakia & Schroeder (2001) explain that we create within ourselves a part of us that belongs to the TV show or film. This emotional connection can occur through characters, or even nostalgia. Reverse product placement could therefore facilitate this connection to those characters through a tangible object. To understand what we experience using fictional brands, it is important to consider what they represent to individuals. They may possess a nostalgic element, connecting us to past emotions and memories. Possessions are used to maintain the past, and the nostalgic qualities of sacred possessions lead to multiple memories, associations, moods and thoughts (Belk 1990). For McCracken (1988), the past can be used as a ‘golden age’ onto which we may displace our ideals. These may reflect a time when “life conformed to [our] fondest expectations” (ibid, p.108) such as childhood, which many brands, but specifically fictional brands can tap into, as they can connect us to our childhood interests or another preferred time from our past.

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) write about the way in which we see objects that have special meaning to us using the term ‘cultivation’ to describe the transactions that occur between us and these possessions, stating, “...they provide a provisional sense of purpose around which to shape one’s life course” (p.188). Fictional brands may connect us to what is significant to our lives and what represents us as people, making them difficult to discard. Kozinets (2001) suggests that entertainment consumption may offer quintessential sacralisation due to the meaning we place on these objects symbolising what matters to us in life. This enables us to create an alternate world of experience, allowing us to be transported somewhere completely different through these products – not just via the narrative of a film or TV show. As fictional products are often linked to a favourite TV show or film, it follows that there must be a level of emotional attachment placed onto these brands. There is then a possibility that fictional brands mean more to us than real brands for their transportational capacity. When thinking about what these goods mean to us, their qualities of fantasy and imagination cannot be overlooked, as this is what makes them particularly unique.

Fictional Brands Bridging the Fantasy-Reality Gap

A variety of scholars discuss the significance of the imagination in consumption, noting that it offers greater pleasure than reality and therefore often performs a compensatory function – when we can't experience something in reality, we can turn to the imagination and daydream or fantasise to experience pleasure. Reality, in comparison, is generally disappointing (e.g. Campbell, 1987; McCracken, 1988; Belk et al, 2003; Cohen and Taylor, 1991).

McCracken (1988) suggests that consumer goods act as bridges between the real and the ideal. As consumers, we imagine that obtaining a certain object will make our lives better in some way or that we will be closer to a dream life. These bridges, however, burn down upon acquisition of the desired object as the ideal is not actualised and so we must displace them elsewhere and hook them onto new objects that hold the promise of realisation: 'We must always have new goods to make our bridges if hope is to spring eternal' (McCracken, 1988, p.116).

For reverse product placement this becomes more complex, because the ideals from many television shows and films are known to the consumer to be completely unobtainable (e.g. witchcraft & vampires). If we know the fantasies that these goods represent are purely fictional, it follows that the function of these bridges must differ from that of 'ordinary' consumer goods. Fictional products have a direct link to the films and shows from which they come and therefore have the potential to enable a longer lasting connection to an ideal. d'Astous and Deschênes (2005) suggest that through daydreaming about objects, we deploy approaching strategies like making smaller related purchases that bring us closer to that reality. They state that daydreaming 'can help to bridge the gap between real life and an ideal life' (ibid, p.22). In the same way, fictional brands could potentially bridge the gap between reality and fantasy, offering something more tangible than the imagination and something traditional brands would not be able to do in the same way. Fictional goods have the potential to offer individuals a tangibilized piece of fantasy (Muzellec et al. 2012) that connects them to another reality. Because it is fantasy, experiencing fictional products may be less about realising that a dream is unobtainable and more about feeling like you are closer to it, or experiencing a piece of it rather than not being able to experience outside the realm of imagination – similar to d'Astous and Deschênes' (2005) work, the purchase of fictional products brings the fantasy closer. As with all objects and experiences that are purchased in an attempt to actualise a dream or fantasy, there is the possibility that a fictional brand may not live up to the imagined pleasures (Campbell, 1987) and the fantasy world they represent may be damaged as a result. The same fantasy may not be so easily 'hooked' onto other objects as Campbell's (1987) modern autonomous imaginative hedonist does with traditional brands or goods simply because there are fewer options available to the individual. In light of this, purchasing fictional brands could be potentially dangerous for the consumer, or might fantasy (as something impossible in reality) be thought of differently to traditional goods, which hold the promise of transformation?

It is evident that brands may connect fantasies to individuals' everyday experiences (Molesworth, 2006). By exploring people's experiences with reverse product placement and fictional brands, this study seeks to explore how fictional brands may connect individuals to these fantasies in their everyday lives. From the areas of literature we have reviewed, it has become apparent that fictional brands may connect with and

satisfy individuals' wants and desires differently to that of a traditional brand, not least because of the potentially stronger connections to fantasy and their ability to tangibilize fantasy in reality, not just in the imagination.

METHODOLOGY

Due to a lack of study into consumer experiences with reverse product placement, existential phenomenology is regarded as an appropriate approach for this study in order to better understand how individuals experience fictional brands and products. Phenomenology seeks to collect first person experiences and relate these descriptions to each other and to the overall context of an individual's 'life-world', giving a thematic description of experience (Thompson et al. 1989). Because it is unlike traditional product placement, it is useful to learn about what makes these brands desirable to consumers. Phenomenology is able to gain deep insights into people's motivations and actions, cutting through the clutter of taken-for-granted assumptions and conventional wisdom (Lester 1999).

The sample for this research comprised individuals who purchase or have purchased fictional products, a population that was difficult to locate. The sample could be described as a 'hidden population', defined by Wiebel (1990, p.1) as "those we are all aware of to one degree or another, yet know so little about". To overcome this, snowball sampling was used to find participants, using referrals made within a circle of people who know one another (Berg 2006). Noy (2008) notes snowball sampling as being particularly advantageous when trying to access 'hidden populations'. This helped find other people who partook in similar activities and allowed us to interview a wider variety of people, offering a broad range of experiences to draw on. Referrals made by peers can develop a sense of trust between the researcher and the participant (Atkinson & Flint 2001), which makes the interviewing process more comfortable, as they are not talking to a complete stranger. In-depth interviews using a phenomenological approach were conducted with eight people who purchased or had purchased fictional brands (see table 1). The age range of participants is relatively narrow, however, the sample was selected on the basis of individuals who engaged in purchasing fictional brands rather than a specific age range, though a broader range of people would have been preferred.

Each interview lasted over an hour, allowing time for a range of stories to be shared. In total, almost 10 hours of data was collected. The interviews were guided by several key areas of conversation, however, the participants were able to lead the direction of the interview and treated as an expert in their own experiences (Thompson et al. 1989), allowing the researcher to interject during stories of particular interest. Questions such as "can you tell me about a time when...?" were asked to encourage stories of experiences involving fictional products. The use of 'why' was avoided, as this often causes individuals to give rationalised responses to questions (Thompson et al. 1989). Six interviews were conducted at participants' houses, where possible, in order to make the interviewee more comfortable, and create an atmosphere conducive to sharing personal information (Elwood & Martin 2000) and in order to reach a wider range of participants, two interviews were conducted over Skype. When face-to-face interviews aren't possible, videoconferencing provides "multiple nonverbal and verbal cues, the use of natural language, and immediate feedback allow[ing] the participants to express personal feelings and emotions" (Chapman & Uggerslev et al. 2003 cited in Sedgwick & Spiers 2009, p.6). Videoconferencing offered greater flexibility in finding participants for

this study and an experience similar to that of face-to-face interviews when these were not possible.

Table 1- Participant Summary Table

Name	Age	Location	Occupation	Fictional Products Purchased
Imogen	24	London	Recruitment	Dislikes chocolate: Willy Wonka Chocolate
Charlie	21	Bournemouth	Student	Cooking fanatic: Willy Wonka Chocolate, Sopranos Cookbook
Sara	23	Bournemouth	Student	Fictional Gift buyer: Mr. Creosote’s Wafer Thin Mints, Monty Python poster
Charlotte	21	Bournemouth	Student	Harry Potter Fan: Bertie Botts Every Flavour Beans, Butter Beer
Stephen	19	Surrey	Drama School	Fictional Product Collector: Jacket from Drive, Harry Potter products, Batman, fictional products from games
Grace	23	Bournemouth	Student	Roal Dahl & Dr. Seuss Fan: purchased numerous fictional products
George	21	London	Actor	Breaking Bad Fan: Breaking Bad bath salts & Meth Mints
Jessica	22	Wales	Student	Willy Wonka Chocolate

All interviews were transcribed as part of the initial interpretive process. When approaching the data, bracketing was used in order to treat each text as an autonomous body of data, removing any preconceived theoretical notions about the phenomena (Thompson et al. 1989). This was to make sure that interpretation was not imposed onto the text. The next step in the process involved using the hermeneutic circle as a tool to interpret the pool of data whereby “the meaning of the whole of a text is determined from individual elements of a text” (Arnold & Fischer 1994, p.63). Thompson et al. (1989) describe the process of interpretation by starting at the idiographic level, relating separate passages to its overall content, followed by the identification of global themes developed by relating separate interviews to one another, identifying common patterns.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Participants seemed to enjoy recounting their experiences with fictional brands. The stories they told were highly emotive when compared to their experiences with traditional brands and the enthusiasm in telling these stories demonstrated a degree of importance that these brands played in their lives. These fictional items were seen as desirable artefacts that acted as a portal to different dimensions and personal memories. The stories that emerged described the feelings the individuals experienced when these fictional products were used and looked at. What really stood out was a sense of connectedness to the content being spoken about, which could be split into 3 types of connection; 1) connection to another world; 2) emotional connections; and 3) connection to the self and others.

Connection to Another World

It emerged that the fictional products people bought transported their owners to the world from which they came with full knowledge that it was pure fantasy. Grace, a 23-year-old student who is a big *Roal Dahl* & *Dr. Seuss* fan, had previously worked in an American Sweet Shop which stocked lots of sweets from films. She talked a lot about *Wonka Bars* and *Harry Potter* sweets, these being from her favourite films, and described how she was able to experience the fictional world with every use of the product whilst remaining in reality:

“You can enjoy it [the film], and you can enjoy it in reality as well, because I think films are a form of escapism, so I think that if you can still hold onto something in reality whilst you’re enjoying something like that, that’s lovely!”

Here, Grace acknowledges that the feeling of escape that fictional products provide is purely imaginary, but still enjoys having this feeling and having a piece of fantasy in real life. It could be described as the merging between fantasy and reality, escaping her life. Likewise Charlotte, a 21-year-old student and hardcore *Harry Potter* fan described this feeling through owning *Bertie Botts Every Flavour Beans* as “*Making it more real, rather than being not real at all*” which allowed her to feel like she was closer to *Hogwarts* (the film and book’s fantasy school for Wizards). Here, Charlotte is fully aware that *Harry Potter* is purely fictional, but the feeling of being closer to that fantasy world through having something tangible was better than not experiencing it at all. Here, we see that fictional brands and products go beyond simply prompting individuals to imagine, or providing fodder for the imagination, to help make the fantasy world more ‘real’.

These different worlds experienced through fictional products were also described as if taking the individual to a completely different culture, somewhere more interesting than the everyday. Being able to own fictional brands seemed to make everyday life better, more fun, providing individuals with a feeling of fantasy and imagination in an uninspiring, mundane daily life. Stephen, a 19-year-old aspiring actor and serious memorabilia collector owns a wide range of fictional products, from *Wonka bars*, to *Harry Potter Wands*, to a leather jacket from the film ‘*Drive*’ and a radioactive coke bottle from the videogame *Fallout 3*. He also had several ideas for launching other kinds of fictional products himself. He describes his fictional products as providing him with a feeling similar to that which others experience when visiting a different country:

“It’s just, I guess it’s just the curiosity of a completely different, I guess some people have that with different cultures, but it just feels like it would be more, a bit more interesting than everyday life”.

Just as travel can offer people escape from daily life, fictional goods provide Stephen with a break from the everyday, the chance to experience something different and explore an alternate world. For most individuals, these products enabled them to be one step closer to a place they imagined to be better and happier than their mundane reality. Participants often described our world as ‘straight-laced’ and ‘worried’, with people not being as happy as they used to be. Connection to a fantasy world seems to alleviate this somewhat, in a way that extends the experience of watching the film, reading a book or simply imagining.

Others experienced this feeling of connection at a different level, being transported in the moment in which the content was being watched – where the fictional product enhances the experience. Eating a *Wonka bar* during the stage show of *Charlie & the Chocolate Factory*, Imogen, a 24-year-old recruiter who says she doesn’t usually feel emotionally attached to films, felt transported, even though she doesn’t like chocolate very much:

“It made me feel like a part of the show! I felt like I was, you know, I understood what they were feeling cause it was just so sweet and amazing and they were like, you know they were, enjoying it and then you kind of experience it with them”.

She admitted to never wanting to buy a chocolate bar or *Wonka bar* in her day-to-day life, yet the transportation into their world radically altered her perception of the product. Being able to experience what the characters were feeling was very special to her at the time of the show; the product had a deep meaning to her, connecting her to the fantasy world of *Willy Wonka*.

In most of the stories told, these fictional products had the power to sustain a constant connection to another world, through being displayed or simply being looked at. No matter how much time had passed, the same items provided their owners with a connection to that world, even if it had been a year since they were last used. Jessica, a 22-year-old student who purchased numerous fictional items but rarely looked at them out of context, said her *Harry Potter* Wand was ‘somewhere’ under her bed, but finding it once again took her to the world of *Harry Potter* and to the memories of selecting her Wand during her holidays; it hadn’t lost any meaning or value to her. This highlights another aspect of connection not only to another world, but also to feelings and associations with the objects themselves, which often relate to particular times in one’s life.

Emotional Connection to Fictional Brands

The participants told highly emotive and reflective stories about their fictional products. Talking about these products opened up an entire story behind what it meant to them as individuals. Often, fictional products connect the individual to particular memories or a certain time in their life, and this means fictional products become very special and may be treated as sacred.

The participants didn’t consider buying fictional products from films, TV shows or games that they hadn’t watched, explaining that they had no meaning to them. For example, Sara, a 23-year-old student who largely purchased fictional products for other people didn’t even consider buying the *Tru-Blood drink*, as she had never seen the programme and the brand therefore meant nothing to her. Whereas eating *Wonka* chocolate, a story that had been a significant part of her childhood, transported Grace, a big *Roal Dahl* fan, to memories and feelings from when she was younger:

“...if you want to feel nostalgic about things and you want to feel sort of whimsical about things you used to enjoy when you were small, then you will buy them and it will make you feel happy. I think that’s the good thing about it, when I eat them I feel good”.

The world to which we are transported is not only depicted as somewhere better than the real world, it is associated with happy memories and ideals. All of the participants expressed how they felt a sense of happiness every time these products were used, often described as symbols of childhood. The products acted as portals to memories of watching the program with every use and individuals seemed to form strong emotional ties to their favourite shows and the characters within them.

A common way to protect this bond was to not use the fictional items, or save them for use on ‘special occasions’, giving them an even greater sense of importance, like George who hadn’t opened his *Breaking Bad* Mints as they were ‘precious’ and he wanted to hold

onto them a bit longer. For many individuals, these products weren't used but displayed in their rooms with pride or kept somewhere safe, out of harm's way. This highlighted their importance in people's lives and the emotional value they attached to them, treated as sacred (Belk et al, 1989). Sara was one of the few who bought fictional products for others, however, she still attached great emotional value to them. Her feelings were hurt when she bought her friend *Mr. Creosote's Wafer Thin Mints* for his birthday but he didn't appreciate their value as he ate all of them straightaway:

"I was just like; 'No! You need to save them', because it's like a piece of memorabilia. It's something you bring out and you show people, you know 'look at what I've got'. Oh it's funny, you know it's from the film, and I got really, really annoyed that he pretty much just ate them all in one go and I think he just threw the box away".

The products she bought were never supposed to be used like normal products, they represented much more than that. Individuals all took care of their fictional goods, and discarding them wasn't an option.

Reluctance to dispose of items was a common theme where individuals didn't want to discard them or let them get damaged. Stephen, the aspiring actor, had a significant collection of memorabilia from TV shows, films and games and would only throw them away in 'extreme' situations. He felt 'distraught' if these items were to get damaged, as the fictional products he owned were personally significant to him. Likewise, Charlie, a 21-year-old student and cooking enthusiast, also experienced this, explaining that he would be upset if his *Sopranos Cookbook* was damaged. He said it was "my copy", going out of his way to get it added personal value to the item. In stark contrast to this, if his favourite pair of *Puma* trainers was damaged, they would still just a pair of trainers to him. Although *Puma* was his favourite brand, the same emotional connection wasn't there. This was common when speaking about traditional brands, for instance, Grace, the *Roal Dahl* fan, described having a limited edition *Coca Cola* bottle, but throwing it away when she moved house as she had "no connection to an empty bottle".

Fictional products are emotionally charged, even when they are 'just a piece of paper' or box; they act as a key to unique sets of experiences and memories, transporting their owners to them. The notion of an emotional element leads on to the final theme, which is a connection to the self and others.

Connection to the Self and Others

Fictional products seemed to resonate very strongly with an individual's identity. The traditional brands they owned didn't define them as individuals in the same way; it was their interests reflected through their fictional purchases that represented their inner selves, and at the same time revealed their desired selves and fantasies. They allowed individuals to feel a part of and identify with a group, like a sub-culture of fans. Jessica, who kept all of her fictional products, but rarely looked at them, described this feeling of belonging:

"Feeling like you're in that community, and it's kind of like self-identity, like belonging. Yeah like being part of the society, it's kind of like you're part of that group of people"

Fictional brands represented something unique, and participants often likened their ownership to being part of an exclusive club. Interestingly, participants were, however, under no illusion that these items were 'rare'. Participants spoke about understanding cultural references that others didn't because they were part of this club. Sara, although

rarely purchasing fictional products for herself, was like many others able to express her identity through these products by knowing what they referenced such as with her *Monty Python* products. It differentiated her from other girls her age and made her part of a sub-culture of people who understood and liked the show:

“I like Monty Python, so you know, which not that many people my age like, so I guess yeah, it’s kind of like saying like ‘look I know what this reference is’”.

Being part of a group meant that owning fictional brands held an expectation that you were passionate about that particular programme, game, book or film, as buying them reinforced your interests. Traditional brands were described as lacking in depth compared to fictional brands and didn’t seem to offer individuals so much to relate to. Stephen, the 19-year-old aspiring actor and collector of memorabilia, speaks about this, describing what he likes about fictional brands:

“They’re not just a piece of clothing or just something that you can buy, it’s a connection with a film that you obviously buy because you like the film and the film makes you happy and you like the character and it just feels nice to have something that relates to them. Because you like a character, because you relate to them in some way usually, and having something like that feels like you’re related to them a bit more and connected to them a bit more”.

For some, owning these products allowed them to become the characters in a film or TV show. Stephen’s *Harry Potter* Wand, *Kick Ass* costume and leather jacket from *Drive* brought him closer to his favourite characters, people he aspired to be like. Charlie’s love of food and experimental cooking was tapped into via the unique qualities of *Wonka* products. He aspired to be like *Willy Wonka* and the added creativity that went into these products instilled an element of fantasy into his passion, taking him closer to that dream, something that he felt traditional brands rarely offered him.

For the individuals involved in this study, the films and programmes they love or are inspired by seem to become part of them; they invest a lot of time and energy in them. Fictional brands now allow these texts to become part of us in a tangible way, reflecting not only our interests but better connecting us to other worlds, characters, and our memories.

DISCUSSION

The stories told were used to identify consumer experiences and act as a starting point for understanding consumer thoughts, feelings and behaviours when it comes to fictional brands and products. What became evident is that fictional brands inherently allowed individuals to experience things that traditional brands were less able to offer.

Fictional products were able to transport the individual to a different world. However, whereas narrative transportation (Green and Brock 2000) focuses on the media text as inducing immersion into a fantasy world, this research finds that fictional products have the ability to transport their users to the fantasy world without the story or text being present. Fictional products provided individuals with a temporary escape from reality and mundane everyday life, just like through ‘mindscaping’ (Cohen and Taylor, 1992). Whilst this can be seen to be similar to the idea that objects in general can prompt individuals to imagine (see for example Klinger, 1990; Stevens and MacLaran, 2005), reverse product placement takes this a step further by creating a tangible link between fantasy and reality, beyond being merely a prompt to engage in a daydream. This tangible aspect means aspects of fantasy can be grasped in reality, allowing individuals

to access what Belk (2001) terms 'hopeless fantasies'; dreams and desires that are 'impossible' to achieve for that individual under normal circumstances. Individuals enjoy the feeling of owning and experiencing something from a fictional world – a small tangible piece of fantasy is regarded as better than it existing only in the media text and imagination.

This tells us something about the role of these fictional products in everyday life and their differences to traditional consumer goods. McCracken (1988) suggests that we must keep purchasing new products in order to sustain hope, as the bridges to ideals that those goods represent burn down upon ownership. Fictional products seemed to remain permanently able to transport their owners to different worlds and ideals every time they were used or looked at. Therefore, it may be the case that fictional products as bridges to fantasies may not operate in the same way as consumer goods as bridges to more transformative ideals. This draws us to consider the differences between fantasy and ideal daydreams and what this means for reality. That fictional goods (in reality) don't seem to disappoint individuals is quite different from literature that regards reality as disappointing in relation to the imagination (e.g. Campbell, 1987, Belk et al, 2003). What seems significant here is the difference between fantasy and ideal daydreams. The defining feature of fantasy is that it cannot be experienced in reality (Campbell, 1987) whereas ideal daydreams are what motivate consumers to purchase goods in the hope that they will transform everyday life, and be as pleasurable as the daydream constructed around them (Campbell, 1987; McCracken, 1988). If we know that we cannot actualise a fantasy, such as becoming a wizard who can fly on a broomstick, we are not going to be disappointed when an object associated with this fantasy is experienced – fantasy may better manage our expectations compared to ideal 'possible' daydreams. Indeed, unlike traditional brands and goods, fictional brands don't claim to sell a 'perfect' or better life, so are less likely to be disappointing in reality.

Fictional products do not only transport people to a place that is better than the real world, they also able to connect people to other aspects of their lives. The goods also allowed individuals to maintain a sense of past and present, representing memories and associations (Belk 1990), ranging from a happy childhood, to fond memories of watching a particular text and to moments in our past deemed significant to us. These goods acted as bridges or conduits to other parts of our lives allowing individuals to re-experience these emotions, making them feel happy.

The stories told also speak to our understanding of the role and importance of consumption in identity. Fictional products acted like a portal into individuals' lives and were a reflection of who they were, their past and their interests. Because of the nature of reverse product placement, it became clear that the notion of fan culture was significant. By owning these products, it demonstrated their affiliation with a particular media text, engaging with it emotionally, feeling like they were part of a community of people just like them. It seems apparent that, much like Dholakia & Schroeder (2001) suggested, individuals created a part of themselves that belonged to the media text. Their favourite traditional brands didn't define who they were as people; this was a quality that fictional brands seem to hold more.

Individuals described very different relationships with fictional brands compared to traditional brands and goods that they owned. Fictional goods had a higher status, reflected in their cultivation (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). Individuals

preserved them and were reluctant to discard items, often feeling distressed when they got damaged, something not comparably experienced with their favourite 'real' possessions like trainers or iPods as these were seen as replaceable and were not cherished in the same way.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has identified a number of consumer-felt experiences that occur when using fictional products as a result of reverse product placement. However, it has only scratched the surface of what there is to be studied in relation to consumer experiences of fictional brands. Unlike previous research into this area, this paper highlights the importance of these products to consumers, and what they mean to individuals, which we note as being different to, and more than, that of traditional brands. They appear to possess the ability to transport their owners to different worlds and fantasies whilst the bridge to that ideal remains intact. This function identifies a unique quality of these products that traditional brands, by nature, seem unable to offer.

The data collected showed that these products have an intensely personal connection with individuals, representing their past and present, as well as their fantasies. The power of these fictional goods and value that they hold is highly dependent on the bond between the individual and the media text. If this is not present, the goods mean very little, which can be identified as one of the key differences between purchasing a fictional brand and a traditional brand. Overall, this study demonstrates the powerful effect that fictional brands have on consumers, and offers reflections on the relationship between fantasy and reality and the role of goods in bridging these two domains.

Given the power of fictional brands to transport individuals and the value that individuals place on them, understanding desire for and experiences of fictional brands may be useful to practitioners of traditional or 'real' brands in developing stronger and more meaningful connections with consumers. Indeed, some companies are trying to gain a piece of mindshare that fictional products currently own in campaigns such as Walker's Pop Snacks and McCains Oven Chips by attaching a story to the product, adding a magical quality and creating connotations of fantasy just like the established stories and characters that fictional brands have.

Recommendations

The sample for this study was limited in both size and range. Further studies are needed in order to collect a wider range of stories and experiences. Due to many of the licensing laws, a number of fictional products that exist elsewhere are not available in the UK, meaning that a lot of the stories shared were about similar products, including many FMCG's. A broader range of product types may elicit different types of experiences. Future studies might focus on the role of fictional products bridging the fantasy reality gap and the nature of fantasy based desires. This would contribute to work on digital virtual consumption, which focuses more on videogames and digital platforms rather than film and television (e.g. Denegri-Knott and Molesworth, 2010). Further research into the similarities and differences between fictional brands (as discussed here) and fictional experiences (such as Harry Potter World at Universal Studios) and film or TV memorabilia (as opposed to fictional brands) may also offer valuable insights in this emerging field.

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