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Using Childhood Memory Elicitation to Gain Insights into a Brand at a Crossroads: The In-N-Out Burger Situation

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Abstract

The regional In-N-Out burger chain is at a crossroads. With the passing of its matriarch, a new generation of owners is considering speeding up the company's growth, franchising the company, and expanding its product to a national audience. The question is, How will existing customers respond to the chain's expansion? In this context, the childhood memory elicitation method allows researchers to understand how consumers initially formed their relationships with a brand (or product). The age at which consumers formed a relationship with In-N-Out affects their view of the prospective expansion. Those who formed an early attachment were comfortable with expansion plans, but those who became attached as adolescents considered the expansion to be a violation of their view of the company as their trendy, exclusive club. The authors discuss the results specifically for the In-N-Out situation and more generally for other companies looking for methods or measurements to augment their research toolkit.

Keywords
memory elicitation, qualitative research methods, restaurant marketing, In-N-Out Burger

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Using Childhood Memory Elicitation to Gain Insights into a Brand at a Crossroads

The In-N-Out Burger Situation

by KATHRYN A. BRAUN-LATOUR and MICHAEL S. LATOUR

The regional In-N-Out burger chain is at a crossroads. With the passing of its matriarch, a new generation of owners is considering speeding up the company's growth, franchising the company, and expanding its product to a national audience. The question is, How will existing customers respond to the chain's expansion? In this context, the childhood memory elicitation method allows researchers to understand how consumers initially formed their relationships with a brand (or product). The age at which consumers formed a relationship with In-N-Out affects their view of the prospective expansion. Those who formed an early attachment were comfortable with expansion plans, but those who became attached as adolescents considered the expansion to be a violation of their view of the company as their trendy, exclusive club. The authors discuss the results specifically for the In-N-Out situation and more generally for other companies looking for methods or measurements to augment their research toolkit.

Keywords: memory elicitation; qualitative research methods; restaurant marketing; In-N-Out Burger

In-N-Out Burger was started in 1948 by the husband and wife team of Harry and Esther Snyder, in Baldwin Park, California. That same year the McDonald brothers started their own fast-service burger chain just forty-three miles away, in San Bernardino, California. That is where the similarity between the two burger chains, ends, however. Privately owned, In-N-Out has followed a slow-growth model, while McDonald's became a publicly owned franchise organization with explosive growth. In-N-Out did not open its second restaurant until three years after its first unit opened, and it was only in 1992 that the founders' son introduced the first outlet outside California, in Las Vegas, Nevada. By contrast, after Ray Kroc purchased the McDonald's chain, he immediately opened units as far away as Des Plaines, Illinois. As of 2006, In-N-Out operates 202 outlets in just three states, Arizona, California, and Nevada. McDonald's, on the other hand, has 31,000 outlets in 118 countries, at this writing. In 2005, sales for In-N-Out were estimated to be $350 million, compared to $20.4 billion for McDonald's.[1]

Perhaps because of the regional aspect of the brand and its scarcity, In-N-Out has developed an almost cultlike following.[2] Even in the markets that have In-N-Out restaurants, customers report driving past several McDonald's to reach the In-N-Out restaurant, and those without In-N-Out in their hometown often drive more than an hour for their burgers. Once there, customers average fifteen-minute waits for their meal—a wait time that is unheard of in other quick-service restaurants. It is common to see tourists taking pictures in front of the In-N-Out arrow sign, indicating that a visit to In-N-Out is part of the symbolic southwestern travel experience. At the time this study was conducted, there were thousands of blogs discussing In-N-Out and the brand's mythic status. Julia Child, Bob Hope, Tom Cruise, and Angelina Jolie are among the celebrities who have been reported to be In-N-Out fans.[3] In-N-Out was purportedly the inspiration for chef Thomas Keller (proprietor of Per Se) to start his own hamburger restaurant, Burgers and Bottles, and Eric Schlosser, author of the book *Fast Food Nation*, is a fan: "It isn't health food, but it's food with integrity. It's the real deal" (see McNichol 2002; Jennings 2006a).

The company's future became uncertain when cofounder Esther Snyder died in August 2006. The Snyder family has historically avoided the media, choosing to keep the operations of In-N-Out to themselves. However, Lynsi Martinez, the 24-year-old heir to the company, has indicated that she wants to increase growth, potentially going public with stock options and franchising opportunities (Pomfet 2006; Grover 2006). In-N-Out is being run by Martinez's brother-in-law, Mark Taylor, who ousted Richard Boyd, a former vice president who managed the slow growth model for the Snyders (Jennings 2006b). Amid coverage of the war in Iraq, government spying on Americans, and other momentous matters, the turmoil of In-N-Out burger attracted the attention of the *Los Angeles Times*, which fretted about the chain's prospects in its editorial opinion column.[4] Other media, such as *Fast Company*, have speculated on what a change in ownership will do to the brand, saying: "Here's hoping that Taylor doesn't lose sight of the

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1. Background information on both In-N-Out and McDonald's can be found on their company web sites. Revenue estimates appeared in Miller (2006).
2. Some of the cultish qualities of In-N-Out were discussed in Wilkens (2006).
3. Information about the celebrity component and a background can be found at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In-N-Out_Burger.
4. Christiano (2006). Also, speculation that the company may be for sale, posted at the California Restaurant Association site soon after Esther's death, www.calrest.org/newsclips/default.asp.

value of In-N-Out's mystery and its devotion to customers."[5]

Thus far the company has assured customers that nothing will change in the short term.[6] Martinez will not take full control of the company until her thirtieth birthday (unless her legal action to wrest control of the company is successful; Martin 2006). On face value, it might seem intuitive to expand the company, but the challenge in that growth would be to maintain the company's mystique, a feat that few companies have accomplished. Because the brand has a regional following and status, such expansion may potentially harm the relationship of loyalists and the brand. Moreover, the chain may not be accepted in other parts of the country that already have their own regional quick-service restaurant brands (such as White Castle, Whattaburger, Krystal, and Burgerville).

With the expectation that In-N-Out's new owners will almost certainly expand the company, we introduce a mechanism for assessing the potential reaction to that expansion. This qualitative method is known as the childhood memory elicitation method. Qualitative methods are generally used to understand the "whys" of consumer behavior, and there has been a call within both practical and theoretical hospitality journals for more use of these methodologies (see Walsh 2003; Kwortnik, 2003; Okumus, Altinay, and Roper 2007; Riley and Love 2000). Typically, when one thinks of qualitative research, focus groups and depth interviews come to mind. The childhood memory elicitation method is different because it guides participants to conjure up their earliest and defining memories of a brand (or product). Examination of these memories results in consumer stories that can be interpreted at both literal and symbolic levels. We felt that childhood memory elicitation would be particularly insightful for the In-N-Out situation because it allows us to determine when (and how) consumers formed a relationship with the brand. We posit that the age at which the consumer's relationship was formed with In-N-Out (early childhood, adolescence, or later) will result in different relationship types that will influence how they feel about the brand and its proposed expansion. We augment our qualitative results with survey data. The implications of our results for In-N-Out's situation are discussed specifically, and more generally we discuss how the childhood memory elicitation method could be used by hospitality researchers.

Changing Brand Status from Regional to National

Local brands generally have a limited area of distribution, and oftentimes a local or regional brand is developed to appeal to the idiosyncratic tastes of the region.[7] This has been particularly true with regional brands of colas, such as Big Red, Cheerwine, and Moxie. Much of the attraction of regional brands stems from their ability to evoke nostalgia and a sense of regional pride (akin to the country-of-origin effects found in early marketing research; Frank 1996; Beckman

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5. Martin (2006). See also daily.stanford.edu/article/2006/9/25/rumorsSwirlAroundInnout and blog.fastcompany.com/archives/2006/08/07/farewell_esther_snyder_founder_of_innout_burger.html.

6. Upon visiting the company's store location at Tropicana and I-15 in Las Vegas, when asked about the future of the company, the cashier–manager said, "Oh, nothing will change. The media is just trying to make something out of nothing." It was apparent we were not the first people to ask her about the expansion, and her response seemed rather rehearsed and probably fed by upper management. That expansion will continue at the same slow pace has been asserted as well in the media, though In-N-Out has been very secretive of their operations in the past. Lynsi Martinez (2006) sent a response to the *Los Angeles Times* editorial, saying that the media was wrong and she has no intention of changing.

7. For a definition of local brands, see www.marketingpower.com/mg-dictionary.php?SearchFor=local+brand&Searched=1.

1982; Liu and Johnson 2005). Regional brands often pride themselves on the quality of their product offering compared to national competitors, and many such brands scoff at traditional marketing approaches.

Few brands start out as national competitors. Once Ray Kroc had opened his McDonald's in Des Plaines, he began expanding within the region before going national. Likewise, Starbucks was a success in the Northwest before its jump to national and international markets. The McDonald's and Starbucks experience may provide hope for regional brands that want to expand, but not all companies are successful in rolling out nationally.

In this regard, for instance, the experience of Krispy Kreme doughnuts is a cautionary tale. Krispy Kreme is a beloved southeastern brand of glazed doughnut. In 2000, the company went public and fueled its expansion by franchising (O'Keefe 2001). At first, the brand was able to expand in an ingenious way, by trading on its unavailability. With expansion, however, its trendiness quickly wore off. Customers went from spending hours in line after its introduction in New York City, to abandoning the brand. Krispy Kreme claims that its collapse was due to the "low carb craze," but others dispute that, citing the success of Dunkin' Donuts and Dairy Queen within the same time period. According to this perspective, Krispy Kreme lost much of its original cult-like mystique, which had been based on its distinctive in-store experience and limited availability. Saying you drove twenty miles to buy Krispy Kreme doughnuts used to be a badge of honor. After its expansion, though, the brand could be found at almost every truck stop. It needed something more to drive purchases, and that was not in the offing ("BRAND MOT: Krispy Kreme Doughnuts" 2004; Lockyer 2005a, 2005b).

In-N-Out's resistance to fast expansion continued even as its strong customer base and healthy revenue caught the attention of investors. The average per-unit revenue is estimated to be $1.2 million, close to double the industry average (Moon, Cummings, Sampat, Thakarar, and Herman 2003). Displaced West Coasters now living in the East often lament that they would like to have In-N-Out open in their region. In 2006, many of the 183 In-N-Out reviews posted on Epinions.com came from the East and the Midwest, where the closest restaurant was thousands of miles away. One investment manager is noted for saying, "Every investment banker would love to take them public" (Silver 1999).

Not all customer reviews are raves, however, as shown by the following post from awoolcott in December 2000 on Epinions.com, which took into account the hype surrounding the chain's Phoenix expansion:

> Just within the last two months, the Phoenix metropolitan area has been graced by one of the more revered fast-food burger joints in the United States—In-N-Out Burger. The hype surrounding it was enormous, considering the stories that were circulated claiming that In-N-Out was the greatest fast-food chain ever created. Even my uncle, a San Diego native, praised the place—and considering his somewhat of a dislike of fast-food burgers, it's a shock. Therefore my opinion of the restaurant was inflated by all the hype about it.
>
> . . . It turns out that the hype far overshadowed the final result—for In-N-Out burger is just that, a burger joint. The incredibly average food didn't even come close to the overinflated hype, leaving me wondering, "What's the big deal?" afterwards. Don't get me wrong, the burgers are still very good—just nowhere near as good as the hype suggested. In-N-Out Burger is a burger joint—nothing more, nothing less.[8]

8. See www.epinions.com/rest-review-16ED-256B81C2-3A38F51B-prod2.

In-N-Out's Product Offering

We see two issues facing In-N-Out's potential expansion. First, can the company handle expansion at an operational level? Second, what will happen at a perceptual level? Our investigation focuses on the latter issue, although both issues are important.

To touch on the operational issue, co-founder Harry Snyder advocated the slow-growth model primarily because he wanted to maintain product quality. In-N-Out's food is never frozen, for instance. The patties are prepared in its sole meat-packing facility, limiting distribution to roughly five hundred miles. Buns are baked daily and delivered from a company-owned facility. Lettuce, tomatoes, and potatoes are delivered every other day and processed by hand (and rumors have it that they even grow their own potatoes). The milkshakes are made with ice cream rather than a premix. With no heat lamps or microwaves, In-N-Out restaurants prepare each order individually (the reason for the fifteen-minute average wait time). Company representatives have been known to make "surprise" visits to the restaurants to ensure quality is up to standard.[9]

Largely unchanged since 1948, In-N-Out's menu offers five products: hamburgers, cheeseburgers, French fries, milkshakes, and colas. Esther Snyder made big news when she added Dr. Pepper to the menu (Steere 2003). It is noteworthy that the menu at McDonald's initially was similar to that of In-N-Out. Recognizing that growth meant serving a larger set of consumers, McDonald's adapted its menu for different day parts (notably, adding breakfast in the early 1970s), releasing its trademarked Happy Meals and Playplaces in 1979, and more recently venturing into salads and other menu items. In 1998, McDonald's attempted to mimic the freshness offered by smaller counterparts like In-N-Out by adding fresh tomatoes and lettuce, and even customizing the sandwiches and toasting its buns (which is one of In-N-Out's hallmarks), but that customization proved to be too expensive and unwieldy (McNichol 2002). The freshness and quality of In-N-Out's taste is noted by its fans. Even people who do not normally like fast food like In-N-Out for its freshness, though on calorie count, a Double-Double boasts more than 670 calories and 41 grams of fat.

The In-N-Out service has remained largely unchanged as well. The 1950s' décor, with stark white counters and red seats, and dated attire worn by servers, has gone from being out-of-date to being "hip" and "retro." The restaurants' artwork features an image of the original In-N-Out locale with a 1957 Chevy in front. Dancing red palm trees are used throughout the outlets as accents, as well as adorning the paper products, giving In-N-Out a Southern California feel. Most of In-N-Out's advertising budget is directed toward billboards and the occasional radio campaign. John Goodman voiced one of the more famous radio spots with the catchy jingle "In-N-Out, In-N-Out. That's what a hamburger's all about."[10] In-N-Out has a large warehouse of memorabilia, featuring hats, t-shirts, and bumper stickers. Some considered wearing In-N-Out t-shirts to be one of the hallmarks of a true Californian, and when the restaurant expanded to Nevada, the t-shirts became a fad among middle and high school students.[11]

Though In-N-Out's business model is based on simplicity, its customers have operated like a secret society. Over the years, customers have developed a "secret menu," which is a list of popular variations that do not appear on the menu but are passed along

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9. See In-N-Out company background on its web site; and Moon, Cummings, Sampat, Thakarar, and Herman (2003).
10. See Wikipedia.
11. From discussion with consumers that grew up in Las Vegas when In-N-Out was starting out.

via word-of-mouth. Such variations include animal style, which results in the burger (or fries) being doused with mustard, pickles, extra special sauce, and grilled onions. There is the wish burger, an option appealing to vegetarians, which is a burger without meat or cheese. This menu was not created by In-N-Out management and seems to mystify managers (McNichol 2002). The origin of the menu is not clear, with some patrons believing that surfers in the 1960s created their own favorite variations, which were then adopted by management. Such customer involvement and belief in the brand-origin myth have created a community that fosters strong relationships, creating the cult-like atmosphere surrounding the brand. Customers feel they are privy to inside knowledge when ordering from the secret menu, providing them a certain ownership to the brand and the experience. Until recently, such knowledge was passed around via word-of-mouth, but now In-N-Out includes the "secret menu" on its web site.

Beyond the product offering, what makes In-N-Out so distinctive is its devoted fans. Below, we offer two samples from the numerous In-N-Out blogs. One fan discussed In-N-Out's appeal:

> In-N-Out is a cult brand. People talk about their experience eating there. People who used to live in CA (like me) go back to visit and feel re-connected to their west coast roots. In-N-Out has developed a personality and a following—enough that they can reinforce their brand with merchandise. No one is buying Burger King shirts.[12]

The California connection is strong, as in the following (some language omitted):

> 1.12.04: brainwashed for burgers—the cult of california i drove down south to l.a. (or hell-lay, if you will) to see the relatives for the holidays and of course, along the way i did what any self-respecting traveling californian would do: i stopped at in-n-out. . . .

> lucky for me, i had my handy dandy in-n-out locator guide on hand. no joke. they make 'em, and i carry it around with me in my purse for just that sort of situation. I stayed hungry all the way to santa maria just to get my burger. that's another hour and 15 minutes of gut wrenching, get-the-###-out-of-the-fast-lane-you're-only-going-80 hunger. it's that good. . . . the in-n-out in tracy and placerville is the stuff of legend for us bay area folk. everyone who's anyone stops at that in-n-out on their way back from weekend snow trips from tahoe. it's got to be a ritual for at least 75% of the bay area-to-tahoe weekenders. . . .[13]

The Childhood Connection

The blog posts point to the importance of nostalgia or memories in sustaining this brand. According to Cornell marketing professor Brian Wansink, "There are a few common characteristics in all cult foods, and one of them is some sort of deeper association, often a childhood association, between the consumer and the product" (quoted in Wilkens 2006). It is interesting that the writer from *Fortune* magazine who had initially predicted a strong success for Krispy Kreme doughnuts admitted to having strong childhood attachment to the brand: "Full disclosure: I go way back with Krispy Kreme—having grown up in Birmingham, Alabama, one of what the company now calls its 'core heritage markets.' In fact, my earliest memory is of my father feeding me bits of the famous Original Glazed while he made Sunday morning coffee" (O'Keefe 2001).

The focus of our investigation is how consumers' childhood memories of In-N-Out

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12. See decker.typepad.com/welcome/2006/02/4_secrets_of_in.html.
13. See www.shadowcentra.net/2004/02/brainwashed_for.html.

exemplify different levels of relationship with the brand that result in perceptual differences in a potential national expansion. This distinction is important because not only will it influence the possible future acceptance of the In-N-Out brand in other regions of the United States, but also it may determine how current brand loyalists feel about the brand once it is no longer associated exclusively with California and the Southwest. We begin by discussing the role of transgressions to relationships, believing that there will be at least some consumers who will see national expansion and franchising as a threat to their relationship with In-N-Out. The literature suggests that brand personality will influence how a potential transgression is perceived, and we propose that the age in which the brand relationship began is a key condition for understanding In-N-Out's meaning to different consumers.

Relationship Strength, Partner Quality, Brand Personality, and Perception of Transgressions

Relationship strength, broadly construed as durability and impact, is one of the most researched relationship characteristics in the interpersonal-relationship domain and the one quality most centrally linked to relationship stability (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004). One means to test the strength of a relationship is to see how a consumer reacts to a transgression. An act of transgression is defined as a "violation of the implicit or explicit rules guiding relationship performance and evaluation" (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel 2004, 2). Some argue that the way people respond to threats to a relationship is more important than how they view the relationship's positive aspects. They argue, furthermore, that the true status of a relationship is evident only under conditions of risk and peril that activate the attachment system. The manner in which the transgression influences relationship strength depends on whether the consumer believes that the brand's managers are looking to do what is best for the customer or whether they appear greedy.

That a brand can have personality traits has become an accepted view in marketing (and it is beginning to be recognized in both hospitality and tourism research as well [Siguaw, Mattila, and Austin 1999; Murase and Bojanc 2004; Ekinci and Hosany 2006]). Jennifer Aaker (1997), for instance, has found "sincere" and "exciting" to be two of the most prominent personality traits for understanding consumer-brand relationships. "Sincere" brands are those that are family oriented and evoke feelings of trust. Examples of this type of brand personality include MetLife, Hallmark, and Coca-Cola. In contrast, "exciting" brands are those that are built around energy, youthfulness, trendiness, such as Yahoo!, Virgin, and MTV. In their research applying personality traits to restaurant brands, Sigauw, Mattila, and Austin (1999) found the McDonald's brand to be more "exciting" and "competent" than either Burger King or Wendy's, but both McDonald's and Wendy's were found to be more "sincere" than Burger King. These researchers attribute the more defined personality of McDonald's to that brand's being the leader in the category, as well as through ad campaigns featuring the Ronald McDonald personality.

We have seen little research examining how a long-term relationship with a brand might react in the face of a potential threat or transgression, such as In-N-Out's prospective franchising and national expansion. Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel's (2004) experimentally controlled study featured a brand of photography lab that was portrayed as either exciting or sincere, as indicated through its web design and communications. The transgression involved losing pictures that had been sent out for online processing. From that study, it

appears that sincerity most influences how a transgression is perceived.

The In-N-Out situation goes beyond that situation in two ways. First, many consumers have had essentially a lifelong relationship with the brand. Second, the transgression of franchising and going national is far exceeds a simple service failure. Instead, this one action may forever change the brand's meaning and the consumer's relationship to the brand. Certainly the outcries from the *Los Angeles Times*, *Fast Company*, and the blogs are indications that some customers would view expansion negatively. However, Aaker's (1997) research does serve as a good starting point for understanding the In-N-Out situation and perceptions of its brand personality.

Developing a brand's personality has been seen as a means to achieve a competitive advantage. Researchers have suggested that to successfully differentiate a brand, its personality must be "distinctive, robust, desirable, and constant" (Murase and Bojanc 2004). The assumption has been that each brand has the potential to have its own distinct personality and that marketing actions should reinforce that singular brand image. However, not all consumers may see the brand in the same way, and there is the possibility that a brand might have different personalities depending on one's relationship to the brand. For example, in studying credit cards, Blackstone (1993) showed that users and nonusers perceived a credit card brand differently. Users described the credit card's personality as being "worthy, powerful, sophisticated, and distinguished," whereas nonusers described the same card as "intimidating, snobbish, and condescending." For these reasons, how consumers view In-N-Out's personality depends on the type of relationship they have with the brand. We suggest that the relationship type is best described by looking at how it was originally formed.

Relationship Theory and Childhood Exposure

Marketers have turned to relationship theory for insights into how consumers develop loyalty. This theory views the consumer and the brand as active relationship partners that work together to either build or destroy a relationship. In her leading research in this area, Susan Fournier (1998) used life-story depth interviews to uncover different types of person–brand relationships. These relationships could be characterized (among other types) as "brief flings," "best friends," or "marriages of convenience." The nature of the relationship is determined by such factors as when the relationship began, who was involved in introducing the consumer to the brand, and the emotional involvement in the relationship. Fournier surmised that relationships that formed early in life, that were introduced by significant others, and that held great emotional significance generally held the strongest bond of consumer and brand. While noteworthy, Fournier's research did not specifically focus on childhood memories and age of exposure (early childhood, adolescence, or later).

When considering a relationship with food or a restaurant, early childhood is a critical time in the development of that relationship. In surveying Australians' early memories of food, for instance, Lupton (1994) found that their earliest memories were closely linked to family relationships and that there was a symbolic aspect of food consumption where the meal is seen as representing home. Food is often linked to one's group membership or kinship. Cultural anthropologist Clotaire Rapaille (2006) posited that Americans likewise associate food with home, primarily represented by the mother or traditional food preparer. Fast food or convenience food has become an important part of American culture, with McDonald's and its competitors

being the beneficiaries. Furthermore, McDonald's has used its Happy Meals and Playplace areas specifically to cater to the younger generations with the hope that such early exposure to McDonald's will be a means for continuing a relationship later in life. Rapaille reported that this was successful with one of his participant's earliest food memories:

> My first memory of food was the first time my father took me to a McDonald's. I swear I got a buzz off the fries. Now that I'm on my own, I go there as often as I can for those fries. I know some people say they're bad for you, but they make me feel great. I heard there was a guy who made a movie about going on an all-McDonald's diet. I could definitely do that. (Rapaille 2006, 145)

Classic research on consumer socialization, notably Guest's (1955, 1964) longitudinal studies, finds that brand loyalty nurtured in childhood extends over a lifetime. Heckler, Childers, and Arunachalam (1989) found that childhood influence from parents can extend to adulthood, especially in the area of convenience goods. Though In-N-Out does not provide kids' meals or even areas to play, In-N-Out may be an important part of some families' ritual. That kind of intergenerational sharing has been linked to brand equity (Moore, Wilkie, and Lutz 2002).

Early brand exposure is important because researchers find that relationships forged early in life become "imprinted" into the consumer's preferences. Bowlby (1982) and other psychological researchers have argued that there is a "sensitive" period in which attachment forms.[14] This in-born system motivates a child to seek closeness with his or her parents and communicate with them. Research suggests that these attachment patterns affect interpersonal relationships later in life (Harzan and Shaver 1987).

Relationships formed at other critical time periods during one's life may hold different significance. Child development expert Erik Erikson (1968) pointed to adolescence as an important period of identity development (see also Csikzentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). For visible products, social influences may be more important than family or personal factors in determining choice. This would describe those who went to In-N-Out to hang out and be seen with friends during their middle and high school years. Belk, Bahn, and Mayer (1982) suggested that "age and sociability inferences based on consumption cues are strongest during adolescence" (p. 10). Researchers on nostalgia find that adolescence is the period when consumers learn their preferences for culturally observable products (e.g., films; Holbrook and Schindler 1991, 1996).

Fournier's (1998) research also points to another phenomenon of consumer brand loyalty, that is, the situation of consumers who have no interest in embarking on a relationship with a brand. Consumers are exposed to thousands of brands during their lifetime. Forming and maintaining a relationship with a brand involves both time and emotional energy, not to mention money (Fournier 1998). Given that consumers are exposed to any number of fast-food brands during their childhood and adolescence, they might not be willing to expend energy toward the development of a relationship with any new brands later on. For example, the Phoenix consumer who posted his unhappiness with In-N-Out on Epinions.com was exposed to the brand as an adult, which may have determined how he felt about it (compared to

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14. "Attachment" is an inborn system in the brain that evolves in ways that influence motivational, emotional, and memory processes with respect to significant others. See Pillemer (1998) and Bowlby (1982).

his uncle who had grown up with the brand in San Diego, and was loyal).

Predictions

We believe that some customers who learn about the potential franchising and national expansion of In-N-Out will see that as a transgression to their relationship. We predict that consumers who formed their relationship with In-N-Out during childhood will have stronger relationships with the brand than those who began their relationships in adolescence or later. We also predict that the time in which the relationship was formed will result in different views of the brand's personality. In-N-Out will be viewed as being more "sincere" to those who formed their relationship early on, but more "exciting" to those who formed their relationship during their adolescence. As a consequence, we suggest that these different views of the brand will influence how the consumers respond to hearing about In-N-Out's expansion. Specifically, those who formed their relationship during early childhood will be more resilient to the idea of In-N-Out's expanding (because of their established trust and long history with the brand). Meanwhile, those who formed their relationship during adolescence, based on its more "exciting" personality, will be more likely to view expansion as a transgression because they have less faith in the brand to do what is right. Finally, those who have formed a relationship with another brand will be less likely to have formed a strong relationship with In-N-Out, and so hearing about the proposed expansion should not affect them.

Finding a methodology that helps determine the inception of the brand relationship and the process by which symbolic links between brand and consumer are formed has been urged by marketing researchers. Reed and Forehand (2003) and Jennifer Aaker (1997) have called for greater understanding of how brand personalities develop. We believe the timing and type of relationship formed with In-N-Out is best assessed through the childhood memory elicitation methodology described below.

Childhood Memory Elicitation Method

With George Zinkhan, we introduced this methodology to marketing (Braun-LaTour, LaTour, and Zinkhan 2007). To our knowledge, this is the first use of the technique in hospitality. The method involves directing participants to take a "memory walk" to their early childhood years, where they are asked to recollect their "earliest" exposure to a product and their most "defining" memory of a product. These particular memories are important because they capture the interconnection of consumer, culture, and brand. Due to the reconstructive nature of memory, the resultant stories are not literal representations of the consumer's past but rather amalgams that contain projections of a consumer's personality and lifestyle preferences. There is a mythic element to the memory stories that allows them to be interpreted not only on a literal level but also a symbolic one.

Psychotherapists have been using earliest memories as part of patient therapy for more than eighty years. The earliest memory is thought to be important because it is the first symbol of the self, one's subjective starting point to his or her autobiography.[15] Earliest memories are usually quite clear and vivid because they are particularly important to an individual. The more clear and emotionally involving the earliest memory, the more likely it is thought to influence present-day situations and attitudes. Positive early memories are thought

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15. Alfred Adler was the first psychotherapist to use the early memory technique. See Adler (1931); also see Bruhn (1992); Mosak and DiPietro (2006).

to reflect wishes. They point to situations where need satisfaction is strong and usually orient the individual toward similar situations later in life. Earliest memories of products represent consumers' imprint to the brand and symbolize how they feel about it on a deep emotional level. Generally these earliest memories come from the consumers' early childhood (under age ten), a time in which attachments are forming and parental involvement is critical. Early memories may not necessarily be defining memories, however. Social psychologists have recently turned to "defining" memories to understand the underpinnings of personality. These memories are ones that are repeated, have high emotional intensity, and are linked to other important memories. Each person carries with him or her a finite set of defining memories. Although memories are constantly changing, the defining ones are those we choose to return to repeatedly. It has been suggested that these remembered scenes in our lives can intensify through partial repetition and internal rehearsal to become overarching schemas for our understanding of interpersonal interactions (Singer 1998; Singer and Salovey 1993). Because of the reminiscence bump (see Schacter 1996), most of these defining memories generally come from one's adolescence, a time when the self is in development. Like earliest memories, defining memories provide a blueprint to understand the consumers' relationship issues. These memory experiences, however, are often focused on external social influences.

The elicited memory stories can be analyzed on a content level and a mythic level. The content level involves coding the memory stories and quantifying them on several dimensions, such as the age at which the experience took place, who was involved in the experience, and the emotions involved.

The mythic level is concerned with understanding how participants project themselves into their memories by their language use, choice of incidents, and emotional tone.[16]

The Study

In our study, we use childhood memory elicitation to identify different consumer relationship types with In-N-Out. To quantify these relationship types, we followed up the memory session for one group with a questionnaire containing items regarding In-N-Out's prospective expansion. The other group received the questionnaire only. (We were able to categorize the second group into relationship types based on what we learned in the memory session.)

Our sample was drawn from a university setting, and though it was a convenience sample, it was also relevant for our issue of study. We selected people who had visited In-N-Out at least once. We also tried to create a "balance" by having about half our sample drawn from the three states that have In-N-Out restaurants and the other half from other regions of the country. The idea of choosing people from Arizona, California, and Nevada was to improve the likelihood of hearing childhood memories of the brand. Therefore, we felt we had a good representation of both consumers who had grown up with the brand (and might favor it solely due to the regional aspect) and consumers who were more recently introduced to the brand.

Forty-four U.S. consumers between the ages of nineteen and sixty-seven (twenty male, twenty-four female) participated in the childhood memory elicitation session. An additional forty-nine participants (twenty-four male, twenty-five female) took the survey online. Both groups were drawn from undergraduates at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. An In-N-Out restaurant is within walking distance of campus, and another is

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16. This approach is similar to the hermeneutical approach to consumer narratives where the stories are seen as reflecting existential themes. See Thompson (1997); Levy (1981).

not far from campus, one of the busiest and most frequented In-N-Out locations (on Tropicana at I-15). In-N-Out has been in this marketplace since 1992. Forty-eight of the participants had grown up in California, Nevada, or Arizona.[17]

The childhood memory elicitation sessions were conducted with groups of fifteen people in a large room with yoga blankets on the floor. Each participant was directed to his or her own blanket and asked to relax and be comfortable. The session began with some yoga relaxation exercises and a focusing meditation, making it easier for childhood memories to emerge. The participants were then asked to close their eyes and to imagine themselves walking down a staircase to an earlier point in their life. The first step down represented where they were yesterday, and they were asked to remember what they were doing, how they felt, and who they were with. With each step down, participants were asked to remember cultural references (i.e., important events or information, such as who was president and references to movies, TV shows, or fads) to help provide context. Participants were directed to earlier times in their lives until they got to their early childhood. At this point they were asked to conjure up a memory of their first experience at In-N-Out (or another fast-food restaurant). They were told, "Now I want you to recall the very first memory of In-N-Out. Choose an event that you actually remember experiencing, not one that you know happened because family members talked about it. Bring that experience to your mind. Imagine how you are feeling, what you see, hear, touch, smell, and taste." They were then instructed to open their eyes and write down their initial thoughts and images regarding the experience. They then were asked to close their eyes and imagine another time in their life: "Imagine a time when you had an experience with In-N-Out that defined that brand for you, you learned what that brand was like through this experience, it portrayed a certain personality to you, and you portrayed a certain personality to the world in this brand, bring that experience to mind." They were allowed several minutes to write down words and images associated with that experience.[18]

After the memory walk, participants were directed to the written questionnaire and asked to write several paragraphs about two experiences, noting who was involved, where it took place, how old they were, and how they felt. Those who took the questionnaire only started at this point. (Their memory stories were used to group them into age-based categories, based primarily on the age they first were exposed to In-N-Out). All participants were asked to report their current attitude toward In-N-Out on scales provided on the questionnaire (see Exhibit 1 for those items).

Those in the memory session were interviewed individually on camera. During the five- to ten-minute interview, the researcher asked about their recollections, prompting for details such as when, where, and with whom the experience took place to help them develop a richer narrative. When appropriate, the interviewer asked whether those experiences affected their current choices or decision making at other times in their lives. Finally, they asked for their initial impression of In-N-Out's prospective expansion, and then they filled out another questionnaire about In-N-Out's potential expansion.

17. We had originally thought there might be a halo effect, where people who grew up in a region with In-N-Out would rate it higher overall just because of the regional connection, but that was not the case.

18. This method and rationale are described in more detail in Braun-LaTour, LaTour, and Zinkhan (2007). Clotaire Rapaille purportedly uses a similar method.

Exhibit 1:
Key Construct Measures

Construct	Items	Alpha
Initial attitude	10-point semantic differential scales anchored by *unfavorable/favorable*; *bad/good*; *unpleasant/pleasant*; *negative/positive* taken early in the survey.	.968
Brand personality	How much would you agree/disagree on a 10-point scale that the following traits describe In-N-Out:	
Sincere	Sincere, wholesome, family-oriented	.860
Exciting	Exciting, unique, young, trendy	.801
Perception of motives for expansion	Generally there are two main motivators for going public and expanding: one is that the company is "greedy" and trying to make a quick profit; the other is more altruistic, in that the company can now fulfill the needs of customers in other parts of the country (many people who grew up in California but now live in New York have cravings for In-N-Out and have to travel across the country to get a burger). State how much you agree/disagree with the motivation for In-N-Out's expansion efforts: greed, better suit customer's needs.	NA
Attitude after expansion	Same four 10-point attitude scales measured after the participant had been informed about In-N-Out's intention to expand.	.974
Self-connection to In-N-Out after expansion	Rate on a 10-point scale how much the following statements represent how you feel about In-N-Out (anchored by 1 = *strongly disagree*, 10 = *strongly agree*). The In-N-Out brand connects with the part of me that really makes me tick. The In-N-Out brand fits well with my current stage of life. The In-N-Out brand says a lot about the kind of person I'd like to be. Going to In-N-Out lets me be part of a shared community of like-minded consumers. The In-N-Out brand makes a statement about what is important to me in life.	.907
Relationship quality	Rate how much you agree/disagree with how you think In-N-Out will handle the national expansion (1 = *strongly disagree*, 10 = *strongly agree*). I can always count on In-N-Out to do what's best. If In-N-Out makes a mistake, it will try its best to make up for it. I know I can hold In-N-Out accountable for its actions. In-N-Out is reliable. Given my image of In-N-Out, letting me down would surprise me. A brand failure would be inconsistent with my expectations.	.915
Commitment to In-N-Out after expansion	Assuming again that In-N-Out expands nationally, use the scales below to indicate your future commitment to In-N-Out (1 = *strongly disagree*, 10 = *strongly agree*). I will continue to be very loyal to In-N-Out. I would be willing to make small sacrifices in order to keep going to In-N-Out. I would continue to stick with In-N-Out even if it let me down once or twice.	.887

Exhibit 1
(continued)

Construct	Items	Alpha
	I am so happy with In-N-Out I have no interest in trying other brands of fast food. I am likely to be going to In-N-Out a year from now after they have expanded.	
Perceived service quality after expansion	Please state how strongly you agree/disagree with the following statements regarding expansion (1 = *strongly disagree*, 10 = *strongly agree*). A national expansion of In-N-Out will result in lower-quality products. A national expansion of In-N-Out will result in lower-quality service. A national expansion of In-N-Out will compromise the brand's value. A national expansion of In-N-Out will result in the brand losing its "mystique." One of the things that makes In-N-Out unique is that you can't get it everywhere; if In-N-Out were available nationally, it would become a commodity.	.835
Personal intimacy	Assuming In-N-Out will be going public and expanding nationally, state how you would feel regarding your relationship with the company (1 = *strongly disagree*, 10 = *strongly agree*). I would feel comfortable sharing detailed personal information about myself with In-N-Out. I'd feel comfortable describing In-N-Out to someone who was not familiar with it. I would feel familiar with the range of products that In-N-Out offers. I would feel very knowledgeable about In-N-Out.	.816

Participants who took only the survey filled out this questionnaire after writing their memory stories.

Measures

The earliest and defining memory stories written and discussed by participants in the memory session were the focus of the qualitative aspect of the study. The measures assessed on the questionnaire were the quantitative focus (see Exhibit 1). In addition to reporting their current attitudes toward In-N-Out, participants were also asked to rate In-N-Out on the personality scales developed by Aaker (1997) (to determine whether the brand was "sincere" or "exciting"). They were then informed about In-N-Out's expansion, in which we exaggerated the likelihood

that Lynsi Martinez will expand the company nationally via franchising.

Participants were asked to report what they felt was In-N-Out's motivation for expansion (e.g., greed, better suit customer needs). They were asked to report their attitude toward In-N-Out given the expansion. They also rated what they thought In-N-Out's service quality would be after the proposed expansion, the quality of their relationship with In-N-Out, their commitment to the brand, their personal intimacy with the brand, and their self-connectedness to In-N-Out.[19]

Qualitative Analysis Procedure

The forty-four total earliest memories and forty-four defining memories elicited during

19. The Brand Personality trait items, Brand Commitment scale items, Relationship Quality items, and Self-Connection scale items were all adapted from Aaker, Fournier, and Brasel (2004).

the main childhood memory session were used for the analysis. Nineteen of the earliest memories involved In-N-Out, seventeen involved McDonald's, and eight involved other regional brands of fast food. Twenty-six of the defining memories involved In-N-Out, ten involved McDonald's, and eight involved other brands of fast food.

The interpretation of the memory stories was discovery oriented. Two coders trained extensively in qualitative data interpretation were used for the qualitative analysis. An extensive and structured process was used to identify key themes. The coders found no regional effect, meaning that where participants grew up did not influence childhood memories of In-N-Out. What proved to be an effective differentiating criterion was the age at which the consumer was first exposed to In-N-Out (see Exhibit 2).

Childhood Exposure to In-N-Out

Nineteen participants reported that their earliest memory of fast food involved In-N-Out. The average age of these recollections was five, an age which child development expert Jean Piaget (1952) classified as the early preoperational period. Symbolic meaning and brand status have already been learned by this time in life (Piaget 1952; Hite and Hite 1995). The memory walk proved to be effective in conjuring up such early memories. Said Tom (note that all names have been changed),

> The memories seemed to rush back to me so quickly. I felt I was experiencing them again. I haven't thought of these experiences for years and years. I can't believe they came back to me so easily.

The earliest memories featured family and intergenerational sharing of the In-N-Out experience, as expressed here by Katrina:

> I was six and had just gotten out of kindergarten for the summer. My little brother and I were spending the day with our grandparents. We had some time before our movie started so we went for lunch at In-N-Out. I remember Grandma said that they have the best burgers in the world, but she didn't like their fries, so she sent Grandpa to McD's to get french fries while we waited in line for burgers. I remember really liking the fact that it was set up as a traditional burger stand—no indoor dining room; you ordered at the counter and ate at outdoor tables. It was fun for me. Grandma let me get a chocolate shake, and that was a big deal to me. The only bad thing was that my three-year-old brother spilled his lemonade and got my jeans wet.

Katrina noted in her interview that her grandmother is now in a retirement home, and Katrina brings her In-N-Out food whenever she visits her grandmother. Katrina now enjoys the fries (though her grandmother does not). When asked about In-N-Out's expansion, Katrina seemed rather defensive of the brand, indicating that, if anything, her relationship would only get stronger over time.

For Susan, the special connection to In-N-Out was through her mother:

> I was about 8, just moved to Vegas. My mom told me it was her favorite fast-food restaurant because their burgers were so fresh. When I went to In-N-Out for the first time I was surprised at the limited menu. I was expecting things like chicken fingers on the menu as well. I got a plain cheeseburger and a shake (vanilla). We were at the one off the 15 freeway.

Susan associates In-N-Out with special times she spent with her mom. The only family members who share a fascination with In-N-Out, they still spend special times together, sharing their affinity for In-N-Out burgers. She was less enthusiastic about the expansion than Katrina, but said

Exhibit 2:
Summary of Qualitative Memory Results

Type of Memory	Characteristics	Themes	Current Relationship
Early childhood	Average age five, involves close family members (usually a parent or grandparent)		
In-N-Out (n = 19)	Same	Family, intergenerational sharing Home, part of the journey back Comfort, ritual Sharing the specialness of the food, better quality experience	Those whose relationship began with In-N-Out during their early childhood have a strong relationship with the brand and were more open to the idea of expansion. These consumers viewed In-N-Out as an extension of their family because the brand has been an important component of family rituals.
McDonald's (n = 17)	Same	Less connection, more focus on Happy Meals, Playplaces Not about food, about convenience For some loyalists, seen as a "special treat"	About half of those whose earliest memories involved McDs defected to In-N-Out during their adolescence because of the "coolness" of that brand (and their earliest experience at In-N-Out occurred during their adolescence and was a "defining" memory).
Other (n = 8)	Same	Strong emotional connection to family, sharing, comfort, familiarity	These individuals formed a strong bond with a regional chain (like White Castle) and showed similar characteristics to the In-N-Out earliest memories. These consumers liked In-N-Out but upon visiting home, always make it a point of revisiting their childhood favorite and don't have room for a relationship with another brand of fast food.
Defining memory	Average age thirteen, involves friends, extended social group	Freedom, independence from parents, socialization	
In-N-Out (n = 26)		In-N-Out as a "cool" place to hang out, facilitator of social interactions	Those whose relationship began with their first exposure in adolescence have a more externally focused relationship with In-N-Out, based on its trendiness. These individuals were much more threatened by the national expansion, fearing it would no longer be "cool" if available everywhere.
Other (n = 18)		Associated with growing up, independence	If In-N-Out had not caught consumers by this time, very hard to convert them later.

she understood it from a "business perspective" and would give the company the "benefit of the doubt" when it came to expansion.

For Zoe, the In-N-Out experience was something she shared with her father, a ritual that took place every month during her elementary school years:

> First Friday every month we had a half-day at school. My dad would take my brother and me to In-N-Out usually on those days. Since it was a twenty-minute drive to Auburn, CA, it seemed like forever when you are young. I remember looking out windows; once you passed the gold bridge you were almost there. Just remembered I liked the taste so much better than McDonald's.

For some, this special time was used by the parent (or grandparent) to share their own history with the child, as occurred with Tom:

> It was the drive thru with my father, and he was telling me how good the In-N-Out hamburgers were and how my dad would remember things he and his friends used to do (pickle wars) and the price of hamburgers "back in the day."

Tom's recollections are noteworthy because he grew up in New York. He spent his summers in California, however, and exemplifies why a consumer with strong attachment to a brand does not necessarily need to grow up in that brand's region. For those who grew up in the region, like Sara, eating at In-N-Out became an important aspect of coming home. Both her memories involved returning home from a trip and visiting In-N-Out as part of the homecoming ritual. This aspect of "home" was mentioned by several people. Noah discussed how his family visited In-N-Out as part of their late-night return from Hawaii trips that left them famished. On additional questioning, Tom expressed In-N-Out as being part of his "second home" in

California, and he associates that area with spending fun, free times with his father.

Our participants' earliest memories of In-N-Out featured close family members. These memories held a ritual component in which In-N-Out was seen as a "safe" or comforting place to go. As discussed above, children are actively seeking attachments during this time. It is not surprising, then, that the early memories were primarily concerned with the need for attachment—seeking to be with a family member to share and relate experiences together. Participants whose earliest memories involved In-N-Out had strong convictions and feelings about the brand, even if they were not currently frequent consumers (some indicated they cut back for health reasons, not because they had found another fast-food brand). These consumers indicated that they were open to the idea of expansion, saying things like, "Why shouldn't everyone be able to enjoy the In-N-Out experience?"

Childhood Exposure to McDonald's

The recollections of the seventeen participants whose earliest memories of fast food involved McDonald's also went back to age five, on average. In contrast to the family-bonding nature of the In-N-Out recollections, the earliest memories of McDonald's focused more on restaurant attributes, such as Happy Meals or Playplaces. Mike recalled, for instance,

> I am sure that I have been to McDonald's before, but the first time I remember is about 1985. I became happy within the first five minutes I was there. It was the first place I'd ever been that had a meal specifically made for children, including a toy. The Playland was great. It gave me something to do while my father would read the newspaper for hours while he drank coffee.

Michelle recounted the importance of the Happy Meal:

I just remember that my mom would always get me and my brother Happy Meals when we were younger; I would always get Barbie, and he would get Hot Wheels toys. I don't know why, but we would always get so excited about them.

McDonald's was effective in getting consumers to their restaurants as children, and that resulted in some loyalty, as with Teresa, who said McDonald's has always been a "special treat" for her:

I remember going to McDonald's in particular when Teenie Beenies were the prize in the Happy Meals. I was about nine or ten, and my older sister was with me. When we walked into McDonald's you could barely move because all the people fighting for a place in line. All I wanted was a Happy Meal so I could get a Teenie Beenie and eat my hamburger and fries. The French fries were my favorite. I dipped mine in honey—sounds gross but it was so good (still is to me). Going to McDonald's during this time of unexplainable frenziness and chaos made the experience of going so much more exciting and memorable.

Teresa also wrote her defining memory about McDonald's, where she recalled going there after school, hanging out with friends.

Exposure to In-N-Out during Adolescence

About half of those whose earliest memories involved McDonald's formed a strong relationship with In-N-Out during their adolescence. For instance, while Brad said that he associates McDonald's with his childhood, he formed a strong relationship with In-N-Out based on a friend's recommendation (to try the burger "animal style"). Matt's earliest memories were of also of McDonald's, but his relationship with In-N-Out started when he was roughly twelve years old, after his family moved from Texas to Las Vegas. His memories of In-N-Out revolve around

the travel, the journey, and ultimately the scarcity of the brand. Lorraine wrote about her childhood memories of a birthday party at McDonald's and getting a Happy Meal. When she was sixteen, though, she first went to In-N-Out, about which she wrote the following:

I was in dance practice in a studio across from In-N-Out. I was never a fan of hamburgers since all the hamburgers I ate were from McD's or BK—that is, they were bland. I took a bite [at In-N-Out], and it was not just good—it was delicious. It kept me craving more; maybe it was the secret sauce or the fact that the meat didn't taste like it was microwaved. Then came the fries; they were extra well done so fresh, so good, not to mention crispy.

For those who formed their relationship with In-N-Out during their adolescence, the "defining" memories, on average from age thirteen, provide insights into their relationship with the brand. While the early memory experiences centered on families, the defining memories showed the influence of external members of the participant's social circle. Consumers at this age are classified by Piaget (1952) as being in the formal stage of operations, capable of thinking logically and abstractly.

Jeff offered a series of defining memories from his high school years:

The next experience is not just one moment. It is an extended period of time. I was in high school, and my hometown got an In-N-Out burger. Before this, I was only able to get the burgers in California when we traveled. Once we got In-N-Out, my friends and I would practically eat at the restaurant daily. We would go get food and go to the beach. This was also a time in my life when I was going through many changes. I was connected with my friends more than ever and even began to start companionship with the opposite sex. Now that I look back, I really miss those times in my life.

Simone also associated In-N-Out with her high school years, so much so that she visited In-N-Out on her last day of high school to say good bye.

> I was in Henderson, NV, sophomore year of high school. I was with my friends. We would go to In-N-Out during our lunch break at school. It was a short break. So we were always rushed, hungry, and excited to eat. This was always fun for us because it was a break from school and a time for us to talk and enjoy our food. I was always very involved in the conversations and interested to see which one of my friends would order the biggest burger.

Christy's memory focused on In-N-Out's being a "cool" place to hang out with friends:

> My first memory occurred when I was just in high school and my oldest friend got her driver's license. The coolest thing to do then was to just drive around, free of parents, and enjoy the ability to go wherever we wanted. The coolest place to stop for us was In-N-Out. It was busy at dinner time and full of young kids. We went, hoping to run into fellow schoolmates or cute boys. :) The french fries and milk shakes were the best we've ever had.

Overall, those who had formed a relationship with In-N-Out during their adolescent years were more focused on the "exciting" aspect of the brand's personality. It was seen as a trendy place to hang with friends. This group was most adamantly against the expansion, saying that "it wouldn't be the same," and it was definitely "not a good idea." Some seemed shocked by the expansion prospect and genuinely hurt by the idea.

No-Relationship Group

As mentioned earlier, all participants had visited In-N-Out at some point, and most felt the brand offered a good quality burger. However, some were reluctant to form a relationship with the brand. These people indicated that they had already formed a relationship with another brand during their childhood or adolescence. These consumers were often not exposed to the In-N-Out experience until the average age of nineteen. They seemed unalarmed by the expansion prospect for In-N-Out, not caring too deeply one way or the other.

Quantitative Results

For the quantitative analysis, we combined the online survey data with the memory-elicitation questionnaire results for the three groups as above (i.e., childhood exposure, adolescent exposure, and young adult exposure with no relationship). We analyzed that combined data set.[20] The results (see Exhibit 3) largely corroborate the findings from the qualitative analysis.

The adolescent and childhood groups did not differ in their initially expressed attitudes toward In-N-Out (in fact, all groups were pretty positive toward the brand), but the groups reacted differently to the prospective expansion. Again, the childhood group, whose members rated In-N-Out more "sincere" than "exciting," were much more accepting of In-N-Out's proposed expansion, resulting in more favorable attitudes after learning about the expansion; attributing the expansion more to meeting customers' needs than company greed; and overall rating higher than the other groups on relationship quality, brand commitment, intimacy, and connection to the brand. The adolescent group, which rated In-N-Out "exciting," seemed more hurt by the proposed expansion, attributing it more to greed than to meeting customers' needs; rating their attitude toward In-N-Out lower; and scoring lower than the childhood group on measures of self-connection, relationship

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20. An initial analysis found that the main memory session data did not differ significantly from that of the online group. The reported analysis used generalized least means (GLM) with the type of relationship group as the independent variable. Post hoc tests on mean differences were set at $p = .05$ using the Tukey procedure.

Exhibit 3:
Mean Differences

Construct	Early Childhood (n = 35)	Adolescent (n = 37)	No Relationship (n = 21)	Statistics
Initial attitude toward In-N-Out	8.8	8.8	7.5	$F = 5.3$, $p = .001$; post hoc tests found the no-relationship group significantly lower than the other two groups.
Perception of motives for expansion				
Greed	4.2	6.1	5.3	$F = 5.7$, $p = .005$, post hoc tests found childhood group significantly lower than the adolescent group; no other differences significant.
Customer best interest	7.4	5.1	6.4	$F = 11.07$, $p < .001$, post hoc tests found childhood group significantly higher than the adolescent group; no other differences significant.
Brand personality				
Sincere	8.3	7.2	6.3	$F = 10.13$, $p < .0001$; post hoc tests found the childhood group significantly higher than both the adolescent and no relationship groups; the adolescent group was significantly higher than the no-relationship group.
Exciting	7.3	8.1	5.8	$F = 17.07$, $p < .0001$; post hoc tests found the adolescent group significantly higher than both the childhood and no-relationship group; the childhood group was significantly higher than the no relationship group.
Attitude after learning about expansion	7.0	5.6	6.1	$F = 3.4$, $p = .03$; post hoc tests found the childhood group significantly higher than both the adolescent and no-relationship groups; the adolescent and no relationship groups were not significantly different from each other.
Self-connection In-N-Out	5.5	4.3	2.9	$F = 13.0$, $p < .0001$; post hoc tests found the childhood group significantly higher than both the adolescent and no-relationship groups; the adolescent group was significantly higher than the no-relationship group.
Relationship quality	7.3	6.6	6.2	$F = 3.4$, $p = .03$; post hoc tests found the childhood group significantly higher than both the adolescent and no-relationship groups; the adolescent and no-relationship groups were not significantly different from each other.

(continued)

Exhibit 3
(continued)

Construct	Early Childhood (n = 35)	Adolescent (n = 37)	No Relationship (n = 21)	Statistics
Commitment to In-N-Out after expansion	6.8	5.8	4.3	$F = 12.5$, $p = .000$; post hoc tests found the childhood group significantly higher than both the adolescent and no-relationship groups; the adolescent group was significantly higher than the no-relationship group.
Perceived service quality after expansion	6.4	6.9	5.7	$F = 2.96$, $p = .05$; note higher = more negative; post hoc tests found that the adolescent group was significantly higher than both the childhood and no-relationship groups; the childhood group was significantly higher than the no-relationship group.
Personal intimacy	7.1	6.0	5.7	$F = 4.5$, $p = .01$; post hoc tests found the childhood group significantly higher than both the adolescent and no-relationship groups; the adolescent group was significantly higher than the no-relationship group.

quality, commitment, and personal intimacy. The no-relationship group's attitude toward the brand did not change after hearing about the proposed expansion. This group rated the brand lower on both types of personality traits, indicating it had not formed a strong image to them. Overall, this group reported lower connection to the brand, lower commitment, lower relationship quality, and lower intimacy than the other groups.

Discussion

This research found that there are two distinct paths to forming a relationship with In-N-Out. The "lower" path is based on habit, ritual, and introduction by close family members during their early childhood, which has resulted in a strong relationship to the brand. In contrast, the "upper" route is based on personal choice, social influence, and "coolness" during adolescence, which

has resulted in a relationship that is more of a "fair weather friend" than a deep partner. The manner in which the relationship was formed translated into distinct views about the brand's personality. The childhood group viewed In-N-Out as family-oriented and sincere, whereas the adolescent group saw the brand as exciting and trendy. We note that prior research has focused on developing a singular brand personality, and that in many cases, such as with In-N-Out, different consumers may have different views of a brand's personality and meaning. So seeking a singular brand personality may be unrealistic at best or, at worst, potentially alienating to those who have built in their mind a distinctly different brand. Recognizing these differences results in different marketing actions. For instance, it is noteworthy that both the childhood and adolescent groups described In-N-Out as a place to

take visiting out-of-towners, but for different reasons. For those who grew up with In-N-Out, sharing In-N-Out was a means to renew or establish bonds. On the other hand, for those who established their relationship with In-N-Out later, the sharing was based on the "cool" or uniqueness of going to In-N-Out. Even travelers to Las Vegas, who have a wide variety of restaurants to choose from (including many celebrity chefs) mention In-N-Out's importance to their visit, as with this traveler's experience found on a travel web site:

> [Las Vegas is a] great place to vacation . . . food, entertainment, scenery, everything is fantastic!
>
> Best time to visit is when it's cooler so you can enjoy the desert activities without roasting. Rio is the best place to eat with their Buffet. It can't be beat!!
>
> And what can I say about In-N-Out burgers. The absolute best!

So depending upon the nature of the relationship with In-N-Out, different actions might be suggested to facilitate their visits. With the childhood group, marketing communications could focus on the sharing or ritual of visiting In-N-Out when seeing family in the Southwest. With the adolescent group, the message should highlight the celebrities who "hang out" at In-N-Out and focus on the excitement factor. Segmenting consumers by the nature of their relationship with the brand (including when the relationship started, and who introduced the brand to them) is a new way of thinking about approaching consumers and is consistent with views of developing lifetime consumers (rather than focusing on a series of individual transactions).

Based on these data, it seems like the following would happen if In-N-Out should choose to expand. The fact of expansion will not immediately influence those who grew up with and were exposed to In-N-Out during their childhood, because they have a strong relationship with the brand. As long as the expansion does not interfere with existing operations, this group will continue their relationship (or even strengthen it). For these people, In-N-Out is part of their family experience, and that will not change with a national rollout unless the quality falters. Consumers who associate the brand with adolescence or moved to an area and adopted that brand later and became converts will be more disappointed with a national expansion. What drew these consumers to the In-N-Out brand was its mystique and scarcity and that it embodied California; consequently, if the chain's restaurants were everywhere, that appeal would be gone. For potential new customers, some mystique might be associated with the first opening in their town, but the chances of building loyalty based on mystique are slender given that they already have established relationships with other fast food brands.

Implications for In-N-Out

We are certain that the new generation of In-N-Out owners is set on rapid expansion, regardless of what we have found in our study. Moreover, if In-N-Out were to replicate our study near their home base of Irvine, California, they would probably reach a large sample of those who had childhood exposure to the brand and who therefore would be loyal despite the prospects of expansion, thereby confirming the owners' own biases. One particular limitation of this study is that the proportions of the childhood-exposure group and the adolescent-exposure group are not clear. If the childhood-exposure group represents the majority of In-N-Out's customers, then expansion might proceed without alienating the company's original base. If the majority of new customers are similar to the adolescent group identified here, on the other hand, then the chain risks damaging itself at home by expanding nationally, for it risks losing its brand essence and mystique.

Regardless of the nature of existing customer loyalties, expansion will be a challenging proposition for the company, as it will have to drastically change its marketing strategy to compete more directly with McDonald's, Burger King, and Wendy's, among others. All of these companies have considerable capital and expertise in mass marketing. As a final point, if anything, our sample was probably skewed positively toward In-N-Out given its location on campus. In the general population, one might suspect more occurrences of the "no-relationship group" in the general population (though it is interesting even in this relatively homogeneous population that we were able to find differences).

Coors (and Molson): A Cautionary Tale

Coors Brewing learned the lessons of national expansion the hard way. Coors was a popular brand of beer in Colorado, with a cultish following and high brand awareness. Its distinctive selling point is its cold-filtered brewing process, which results in a beer that is clearer than water but is neither inexpensive nor easy. National expansion created logistical challenges (chiefly, keeping the beer cold) and subjected Coors to punishing competition from Budweiser and Miller. Even after a merger with Canada's Molson Brewing (which had its own regional following), Coors remains a distant third nationally, with about 11 percent of the market. The firm faces the unwanted prospect of competing on price to gain market share (Lubove 1998).

While one cannot say that the outcome would be the same, the parallels of Coors to In-N-Out are striking. In-N-Out prides itself in a quality product and is well managed through strict operational control. A national franchise would result in less managerial control, particularly if franchisees seek to cut corners as a way to increase or sustain their margins. Even our loyal participants indicated a national expansion or franchising

might harm product quality. If this potential problem is averted through a tight logistics system, the perceptual problem remains. In-N-Out would have to embark on a costly and intensive educational promotional strategy to introduce new customers to its product offering. This might be best done by focusing not only on its product quality but also on the intergenerational sharing and the ritual of family experiences revolving around In-N-Out.

Implications beyond In-N-Out

If childhood attachment is so critical to brand acceptance, how can one explain the success of Starbucks and McDonald's, neither of which seems to have childhood-based loyalty? First, both companies have run into problems with expansion that has caused them to adjust their marketing strategies. But what may underlie the success of both of these companies is the fact that they were carving out a new category in response to a cultural shift in the marketplace. Clotaire Rapaille, the cultural anthropologist whom we mentioned earlier, is also marketing consultant who uses the childhood memory technique and finds that when a brand imprint does not already exist in the marketplace, it can be created through marketing efforts. He cited his work with Nestlé in Japan as such an example. In the 1970s, he was approached by the company because it was having difficulty marketing coffee in Japan as a replacement for tea. Rapaille found that there was no childhood imprint for coffee in Japan, and so he worked with the company to create one. Nestlé began by introducing coffee-flavored candy and desserts to children and followed those children into their teen years with a coffee-flavored milk product. This was followed by the introduction of coffee to this group when they became young adults, where they could then embrace the childhood-nostalgia attachment to coffee (and, by extension, the Nestlé brand). According to some estimates,

the company went from no coffee sales in Japan to $500 million annually (Rapaille 2006).

Starbucks may have benefited from Nestlé's work in Asia. Beyond that, Starbucks is beginning to embrace the importance of youth throughout its system, by offering juices, Frappuccinos, and cookies. To help launch a line of sweet, creamy banana Frappuccinos in 2006, Starbucks sponsored a family-oriented community event—a free day at the Phoenix Zoo (Adamy 2006). The company set out samples that the kids flocked to: tiny cups of Bananas & Crème Frappuccinos made with banana purée and whipped cream, but no coffee (that might come later!).

Regional brands considering expansion should consider whether an imprint of their product already exists. If consumers already have an imprint for their product offering, they might be successful in tapping into those dimensions (providing existing brands are not meeting those needs). A potentially limiting factor for a regional brand might be the "home" aspect of the brand's meaning. If the regional brand could redefine "home" as revolving around family and make efforts to build communities (rather than the geographic region), the brand may be adopted in the new regions. For instance, In-N-Out could try, "California meets Chicago. Finally, the mythic burger makes it to our home, so we Chicagoans can call it our own." Then the company could build community relations around opening its first restaurant and build a brand community in the region. Carvel, an ice cream brand that started in the Northeast, has recently expanded westward. It has adopted some "location intelligence" software that allows it to identify regions where transplanted northeasterners are living. These regions are the marked as potential areas for new franchises, and the expatriate East Coast consumers identified as future "brand leaders." Carvel is using nostalgic advertising to appeal to the family orientation of their brand ("Briefly . . ." 2006). Should In-N-Out follow the strategy of building on the "sincere" or family-oriented personality trait, it would lose those loyalists who built their relationship based on the brand's trendiness and mystique (but such strategy may be appropriate for other brands that might not have such a dual personality).

Use of the Childhood Memory Elicitation Method

Though Rapaille has been using a similar childhood memory elicitation method for more than thirty years with his clients, he has remained secretive about the methodology. We lift that veil with this article, which shows how the method can be used to add insights into hospitality issues. We compare memory elicitation with other consumer qualitative methods in Exhibit 4. One can imagine the breadth of potential applications of memory elicitation, from restaurants to hotels to destination marketing. Heritage tourism, for instance, would greatly benefit from the types of memories and childhood associations both locals and tourists have with their particular city or country. We learned that gaining attention from customers at an early age is important, as many marketers believe, but it is also possible that consumers will defect as they grow up. This suggests that a deeper connection than mere patronage is needed to maintain customer loyalty over time. We propose childhood memory elicitation as one way in which to uncover these deeply held associations.

Exhibit 4:
Comparison of Qualitative Methods of Obtaining Consumer Data

	Childhood Memory Elicitation	Ethnographic (Observational)	Depth (or Life History) Interview	Focus Group
Length of interview session and sample considerations	90 minutes (with 3 video cameras), 20 participants per session, depending on research issue, 1-3 groups recommended	Days or weeks, depending on the research topic, can focus on an individual family or larger store/hotel context, so sampling issues vary	3-5 hours (or more), per participant, generally need 8-10 participants	90 minutes, generally 8-10 participants per session (and usually run 3-4 sessions)
Cost factors	Economical use of moderator and facility time, video equipment and transcription costs in addition	Generally no overhead because "out in the field" but large participant fees, may need video/audio equipment and transcription service	Extensive use of moderator and facility time, more expensive per interview, large transcription costs	Economical use of moderator and facility time, some transcription costs
Time factors	Economical use of time for interviewing because can be run in groups of 20, moderate time for analysis since focus on earliest and defining memories rather than whole life span	Extensive time for observation, substantial volume of data produced making analysis longer	Extensive time for interviewing and substantial volume of data produced making analysis longer	Economical use of time for interview and analysis
Stimuli involved in session	Relaxation and memory walk, usually run in a facility with mats, blankets, etc., available	Idea is to observe in natural setting, so nothing special needed	Depends, can take place in home or place of purchase, flexible	Flexible, ads or other marketing materials can be shown
Output	Video montage of consumer earliest and defining memory stories, identification of key themes, sometimes an "archetype" or code identified, also can identify social and cultural events associated with product, interpretation of the memories for insight into brand meaning	Analysis quality dependent on the training/experience of the researcher, large amounts of data to sort through, so practical implications may not be readily apparent	Life history of consumer, can track how tastes and preferences have evolved over a lifetime	Top-of-mind reactions, report summarizing what people say about product or service

Strengths	Uncovers important memories that consumers may have forgotten, focuses on specific childhood events, the elicited memories serve as a summary for representing how culture, personal and social factors interact in the creation of the memory story	Observation takes place on-site or where the product is consumed, so factors associated with layout, design, etc., can easily be addressed	Great depth in interpreting brand or product usage within a given consumer
Weaknesses	May need to follow up main session with more depth interviews to get a larger perspective of how memory experiences "fit" into the consumers' life, researcher needs to understand nuances of memory	Not getting to the deeper "whys" about what people do	Because of the great depth, sample usually is small, marketing connections very dependent on strength and interpretation of the researcher
			Social desirability bias, quality much determined by strength of moderator, lack of depth

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