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Using Childhood Memories to Gain Insight into Brand Meaning

In this article, the authors introduce the concept that people's earliest and defining product memories can be used as a projective tool to help managers more fully understand consumers' relationships to their products. The authors use a study on three generations of automobile consumers to illustrate how these memories symbolize the consumer-brand relationship and how they can be used to gain insights into brand meaning. The findings indicate that people's earliest and defining experiences have an important influence on current and future preferences in predictable ways across the consumer life cycle. These memory experiences are symbolic to the consumer and represent a new lens for viewing brand meaning, which complements the toolbox of extant research methods. The authors provide details about this technique for managers who are searching for methods that recognize that consumers coproduce brand meanings.

Managers are always trying to find new ways to ask about what their brand means to consumers. An alternative way of phrasing this question is the focus of this investigation: What can consumers (and their memories) reveal about brand meaning? By identifying the development of the consumer self in relation to a given product or brand, marketers can uncover a powerful, emotional means of connecting (or reconnecting) their brand to consumers. Probing earliest memories (EMs) and defining memories (DMs) to understand personality and relationship issues is not new to either psychotherapists (e.g., Adler 1931; Bruhn 1985, 1990, 1992; Mosak and DiPietro 2006) or social psychologists (e.g., Bruner 2003; McAdams 1988, 2001; Singer 2001; Singer and Salovey 1993, 1996). Most theorists, from Freud to Jung to Piaget to Erikson (Csikzentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981), have recognized the importance of childhood in establishing relationships and "imprinting" preferences. In the academic marketing literature, however, the attention given to this topic has been relatively sparse, with only one study (that we are aware of) using a Freudian analysis of childhood experi-

ences to provide insights into a present-day animalistic art collection (Holbrook 1988).

Within the consulting world, however, G. Clotaire Rapaille, the French-born anthropologist who studied under childhood development specialist Jean Piaget, has successfully marketed the importance of probing childhood memories. Rapaille has gained a reputation for his high-profile (and high-priced) studies that probe EMs. He does not publish his results in refereed journals and does not provide clients with documented analyses from interview sessions. His methods remain somewhat of a "secret," even though more than half of the *Fortune* 100 companies have sought his expertise at one time or another. Some may consider his theories somewhat dated and focus group sessions leading (Zaltman 2003). Nonetheless, Rapaille claims a series of successes (e.g., linking the importance of childhood associations to "Mom" and the smell of coffee brewing). It is reported that Procter & Gamble used, and continues to use, such information in its advertising campaign for Folger's (Hitt 2000). Rapaille's work with Chrysler resulted in the firm's strategy to bring back the original "essence" of the brand while incorporating new technology to design the popular PT Cruiser.

Some academics have been vocal in their opposition to Rapaille, claiming that his promises are too grand and his insights too simplistic (Sacks 2006). This article is not meant to be a treatise either in support of or in opposition to Rapaille. Rather, this article is motivated by a general interest in understanding how marketers can use consumer memories as a projective tool to understand what their product or brand means to consumers. The purpose of this article is to review the logic, development, and market uses for early memory elicitation and to demonstrate how EMs and DMs add insights into brand/product meaning for three generations of automobile consumers. The elicited memories can be interpreted on both literal and symbolic levels and can help marketers develop their own brand myths. Marketers who recognize that consumers coproduce brand

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meanings will find this method useful for their brand positioning and communication strategies.

Background

Methods and Meanings

When trying to understand the “whys” of consumer behavior, projective tools have been a popular choice of marketing researchers (for an extensive review, see Rook 2001). Projective methods represent a significant intersection of psychoanalytic theory, clinical psychology, social psychology, and cultural anthropology (Rook 1988).

As the name suggests, projective tools are tasks in which participants attribute to others what they cannot or will not see in themselves (McGrath, Sherry, and Levy 1993). The general belief is that people are neither able nor willing to provide data about themselves in a self-report fashion because of an ego-defensive reaction. A common feature of projective tasks is that they are relatively unstructured and lack transparency in that the participant cannot immediately determine the purpose of the test. The most well-known projective tests that have been applied in marketing are the Rorschach ink-blot test and the thematic apperception test (TAT; Rook 1988, 2001).

Sidney Levy (2003) and his colleagues at Social Research Inc. were among the first marketing researchers to embrace projective techniques. Among the many techniques Levy pioneered, the most relevant to this research is his work on storytelling and mythmaking (Levy 1981). Levy (1981) describes how consumer stories can be analyzed as projective, and he interprets such stories to explain consumption choices.

Although projective techniques (e.g., Levy 1981; Rook 2001) contribute important insights about consumer motivations, they tend to be static, telling where a person is now but nothing or little about the past or the intended future. Reed and Forehand (2003) propose that research is needed to understand the processes by which symbolic links between a brand and the consumer self are formed, and Aaker (1997) calls for greater understanding of how brand personalities develop. As Belk (1990, p. 674) notes, “self extends not only to the present material environment, but extends backward and forward in time.” Thus, a technique that can capture the dynamics of the self has great promise for understanding consumer behavior.

The system that holds such information about the self and identity is called autobiographical memory (Conway and Rubin 1993), and it is the glue that provides consumers with a sense of continuity about the past, present, and future. Memory is a reconstructive process (Braun 1999; Schacter 1996) that never brings to mind an exact reproduction of the past but rather a recollection that is part fact and part fiction. “Autobiographical recollections do, indeed, enable us to bring to the present that which is past (memoria), but never the thing itself, only its reconstructed image in personal terms (fantasia), and always in the context of our continuously evolving systems of self-constructions (ingegno). In this way it is clear that constructive cognition spans the entire spectrum of the self, from the furthest reaches of our future anticipations and back as well into the

deepest recesses of our recollections” (Neimeyer and Metzler 1994, p. 130).

We propose that consumers’ autobiographies can provide marketers with memory stories that can be a projective tool for understanding consumers’ thoughts and feelings about a product or brand. The logic for this method is based on the following ideas: First, autobiographical memory is the center of identity and contains memories of experiences that are the foundation for the self-concept (Baddeley 1988; Bruner 2003; Neisser 1981). Second, although autobiographical memory is self-centered, it also indirectly contains information about brands/products and the meanings they have added to consumers’ lives (Hebride 1988; Olsen 1995). Third, despite a lifetime of experiences, only a fraction are retained, so those that are remembered hold meaning (Bruhn 1985; Cohen 1989). Fourth, the more distant (i.e., “earliest”; Bruhn 1990, 1992) and more repeated (i.e., “defining”; Singer and Salovey 1993) experiences are more likely to become myths and reveal important symbolic meanings about the product/brand. According to Zaltman (2003, p. 213), “Many consumer memories are archetypes, defined as images that capture essential, universal commonalities across a variety of experiences.”

There are two streams of systematic research that focus on autobiographical memories as projective techniques that parallel the developing consumer self. One stream, which originates in Alfred Adler’s individual psychology, explores how EMs provide the stories that guide people’s lives and become part of people’s identities. These memories, which are rooted in early childhood, contain emotional and symbolic meaning. The other stream emerges from sociocultural and narrative practice theories. This research explores the role of DMs in the development of personality, particularly during adolescence. The current research is situated in the confluence of both these streams.

EMs

The EM method is one of the first projective techniques used by psychoanalysts, and it predates the Rorschach and TAT by many years (Mosak and DiPietro 2006). This technique was pioneered by psychologist Alfred Adler, who viewed his patients’ EMs as important because they represent a person’s subjective starting point in his or her autobiography and reveal the first symbol of the self (Adler 1931). To Adler, these memories provided a blueprint as to what sort of person one becomes and also forecasted the types of experiences a person might be likely to encounter later in life. The EM a person recalls is important because it sets the stage for what happens next—a string of associations linked by the larger theme of “what is important to me right now.” Psychotherapists have been using the EM procedure for more than 80 years, and Bruhn (1992, p. 13) posits that “we recall incidents that mirror and substantiate our current perceptions and beliefs and ‘overlook’ or ‘forget’ incidents that are inconsistent with present beliefs.”

The premise is that EMs operate as a projective technique based on the errors that are inherent in the memory and retrieval process. The focus is on patients’ recollections of specific incidents that occur before the age of ten. To keep their memory stories coherent, people fill in the miss-

ing parts of the stories that their memories cannot finish. They project themselves—personality and lifestyle preferences—into their EMs. Therefore, there is a mythic element to the EMs, which enables them to be interpreted not only at a literal level but also at a symbolic level. Myths are prose narratives that are considered truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past. The people telling the memory story may not be aware of how their memory has been shaped by their own personality, needs, biases, and so forth. As a result, EMs are not transparent, similar to the projective methods that marketers traditionally use. Nonetheless, participants reveal more about themselves through their memories than they might initially think, partly because they are not aware of how such memories have been shaped (see Mosak and DiPietro 2006).

Although most psychoanalysts use childhood memories as part of their therapy, Bruhn (1990) laments that there has been a lack of leadership and systematic follow-through in the development of EMs and their usage beyond that setting. The cognitive psychologist Ulric Neisser (1982) cites EMs as a promising but virtually unexplored area. The Adlerian view of the importance and usage of EMs has been limited primarily to psychotherapists, who use them as an important tool for understanding patients' present-day concerns. They have been used to predict future events, such as the success/failure of a marriage and vocational choices, and they have been used retrospectively to understand the differences in childhood between delinquents and nondelinquents (Mosak and DiPietro 2006).

Autobiographical Memory, Narrative Development, and Childhood Attachment

One of my discoveries was that in order to create the first imprint of a word—when you learn a word, whatever it is, “coffee,” “love,” “mother,” there is always a first time. There’s a first time to learn everything. The first time you understand you imprint the meaning of this word; you create a mental connection that you’re going to keep using the rest of your life. And to create this mental connection, you need some emotions. Without emotion, there is no production of neurotransmitters in the brain, and you don’t create the connection. So actually every word has a mental highway. I call that a code, an unconscious code in the brain. (Rapaille 2004)

It is not clear that Rapaille “discovered” childhood imprinting, but he has a valid point with regard to the importance of early exposure. Bowlby (1982) and other psychological researchers argue that there seems to be a “sensitive” period during which mother–child attachment forms. “Attachment” is an inborn system in the brain that evolves in ways that influence motivational, emotional, and memory processes with respect to significant others (Pillemer 1998). This system motivates a child to seek closeness with his or her parents and to communicate with them. These experiences with others become encoded into implicit memory and serve as expectations that help children find their “secure base.” During the developmental period in which most EMs occur, children actively seek out attachment relationships. Research suggests that these attachment patterns affect interpersonal relationships later in life (Harzan and Shaver 1987) and even influence the

nature of the type of relationship a person has, for example, with a car dealer (Fournier and Paulssen 2005).

What may be more relevant to autobiographical memory is the relationship between the brain and storytelling. According to Damasio (1999, p. 30), “Consciousness begins when brains are given the power, the simple power I must add, of telling a story.” Young children learn how to develop a life narrative from their parents. Social cognitive psychologists have proposed that autobiographical memory emerges after the appearance of language (Nelson 1993). Children begin to talk about past events at around two years of age, and their ability to engage in memory talk about past events develops rapidly during the third and fourth years.

Psychologists have come to realize that the complex mixtures of personal knowledge that are woven together to form autobiographies and personal myths are a function not only of individuals but also of their culture. Throughout the school years, children’s memories are shaped by the narrative style their culture espouses. Their experiences are grafted onto the meanings and markers of that culture. “[T]he culture a person grows up in strongly influences his or her brain’s ‘wiring,’ or neural pathways, in the early years of life. The stories we hear starting in early childhood become important frames of reference or mental models that later influence the products and brands we buy, especially if stories about those brands resonate with deep cultural meanings embedded in our memories” (Zaltman 2003, p. 192).

DMs

There are other important points in the development of the consumer self that are likely to influence consumption behavior. Erikson (1968) points to adolescence as an important period of identity development during which questions such as “Who am I?” and “How do I fit in?” are typically raised. For visible products, such as automobiles, social influences may be more important than familial or personal factors in determining choice. Historically, cars have eclipsed most other objects as a means of self-awareness and of knowing about others (Marsh and Collett 1986). Cars can mediate social relationships indirectly, through symbols, and directly, through the capacity to serve as a common focal point of attention (Collins 2000). As the self becomes more unified during adolescence (Erikson 1968), social networks become broader and offer many opportunities to communicate the self through conspicuous consumption activities. As Belk, Bahn, and Mayer (1982, p. 10) note, “This may suggest that age and sociability inferences based on consumption cues are strongest during adolescence.” Researchers on nostalgia (Holbrook and Schindler 1991, 1996) find that adolescence is the period when consumers learn their preferences for culturally observable products (e.g., films).

Social psychologists have begun to investigate DMs as a means to uncover personality traits (McAdams 1988, 2001; Singer and Salovey 1993). Their focus has not been on the age of memories but rather on memories that share the characteristics of affective intensity, vividness, repetitiveness, and linkage to other memories (Singer and Salovey 1993). The more memories are repeated and shared with others,

the more opportunities there are for reconstructions and alterations (Bartlett 1932), which makes DMs also likely to contain mythic elements. For automobiles, we expect that most DMs come from participants' adolescence because that is the time people typically remember more information about their lives (called the "reminiscence bump"; Schacter 1996). Indeed, Belk (2004) finds that many of his participants' fond recollections of automobiles came from this period.

As with EMs, DMs can serve as important symbolic experiences that can be used as a projective device. For example, Singer and Salovey (1996) find that life goals and motivations are revealed through DMs. As an example, Singer (2001) uses DMs to provide insight into the motivations of a heroin addict. In general, these memories are linked to the present emotional state of the person. Moffitt and colleagues (1994) find that depressives have more negative DMs than nondepressives. McAdams (1988) finds that personality traits, such as power and intimacy, are reflected in certain types of DMs. As with EMs, DMs have been used by clinical psychologists as a focus of intervention in both individual and couples psychotherapy. In addition, they provide important opportunities for lesson learning and meaning making that contribute to a person's sense of purpose and identity.

Childhood Memory Elicitation Method

As do other projective techniques (i.e., the TAT; Rook 1988), the methods used in psychotherapy and counseling need to be adapted for the consumer-market situation. For example, although EMs and DMs may provide much insight about an individual in a counseling session, marketers are interested in what the product means to the consumer. There are issues regarding whether the childhood memories revolve around brands, products, or product types. Whereas psychotherapists might have years to probe and understand patients' childhood memories, marketers need results much quicker.

We began the development of a consumer EM and DM projective technique based on two very different approaches: (1) the EM and the DM questionnaires (see Bruhn 1990; Singer and Salovey 1993, respectively) and (2) Rapaille's focus group-type setting. The latter (according to a PBS *Frontline* interview in "The Persuaders" miniseries; see Rapaille 2004) consists of a four-hour group session that is divided into three parts. The first part is a typical focus group that allows participants to rationalize and discuss their thoughts about a brand. The information from this part is usually discarded. After a break, during which participants reportedly "feel good" about their intellectual contribution, they come back for a second session and are asked to tell emotional childhood fairy tales to Rapaille about the product (according to Rapaille, this is to confuse them). In the third session, after another break, participants come back to a dimly lit room in which their chairs have been replaced by pillows and blankets; they are asked to lie down on the floor in a fetal position and relax. Some memory cues are provided, and participants are asked to either write down or discuss their EM of the product. According to Rapaille (2006), people regularly report that during these

sessions, memories come back to them that they had forgotten for years.

The questionnaire method asks people to write down their EM ("a specific happening or event from your childhood, an event that you actually remember, and a one-time specific incident occurring under the age of 10") or DM ("has to be at least one year old, something that you remember very clearly, a memory you would tell someone else if you wanted that person to understand you in a profound way"). Next, participants are asked to write down when it occurred, what was the clearest part of the memory, what was the strongest feeling in the memory, and what thought or action is connected to that memory.

Because of the importance of surfacing a singular representation for the EM before the age of ten (Bruhn 1990) and the difficulty some people have recalling EMs (Mosak and Pietro 2006), we combined aspects of both techniques in our development of the memory elicitation procedure. Participants are told beforehand that they will be participating in a memory exercise about their childhood and to feel free to prepare by looking at pictures or talking to family members before the study. At the time of the study, they are directed to sit on the floor on a comfortable blanket. The researcher begins with several yoga warm-ups both to "break the ice" and to get participants in a more relaxed physical state. Autobiographical memories are more likely to be accessed in a calmer, less active state of mind (LeDoux 1996). Next, the researcher leads the group through some breathing and visualization exercises and then takes them through a "memory walk," in which he or she provides some landmark cues and leads them back in time to their childhoods. This approach is based on the hierarchical structure of autobiographical memory (Barsalou 1988). The highest level of abstraction involves landmark events (i.e., national and cultural happenings that pinpoint a moment in time rather than specific years or dates). The other levels—life themes, generic action events, and emotion/sensory images—were not mentioned in the memory walk because we wanted participants to fill in these details with their own memory stories.

When the researcher gets to participants' earliest childhood, he or she asks them to write down or draw images associated with their EM of the product/brand. (McAbee and McAbee [1979] find that drawing EMs is a valid method for helping clients recall information.) Then they are told, "close your eyes and imagine a time when you had an experience with a brand/product and that defined that brand/product for you (pause), what you learned what that brand/product was like through this experience (pause); it portrayed a certain personality to you (pause), and you portrayed a certain personality to the world in this brand/product (pause); bring that experience to mind." Participants are then allowed several minutes to write down words and images associated with that experience. After the memory-walk session, they are given a questionnaire that asks them to write a story about each of the memories and to answer a few questions about it, such as, "How old were you when this experience took place?" "What is the most vivid part of the memory?" and "What emotion did you feel as you experienced the event?"

Before and in preparation for our main study, we conducted pilot studies on EMs and DMs using the previously described methods—one for Coca-Cola (Braun-LaTour, LaTour, and Zinkhan 2005) and the other for an automobile manufacturer (Braun-LaTour 2001). In the Coca-Cola study, we found that even for an iconic brand such as Coke—we conducted this study with participants from the Deep South who (literally) were served Coke in their baby bottles—participants' memories were more easily accessed at the product (not brand) level. In that study, we asked participants to write down their EM and DM before the main session, and we compared them with the memories that were elicited in the main session; we used questionnaires similar to those that psychoanalysts and social psychologists use. We found that the DMs did not vary much, but we found many more singular memories and EMs when participants went through the relaxation and memory-walk session (though the general themes did not differ). This is consistent with findings in the literature. For example, Usher and Neisser (1993) were able to get people to remember events as early as age two with their targeted techniques, whereas most EM researchers report an average age of three or four when using a questionnaire (Kihlstrom and Harackiewicz 1982). For adults, it is easier to recover memories from late adolescence than to recover memories from early childhood because it operates with the same autobiographical memory system (Kotre 1995). As did Rapaille's respondents, many of our participants reported remembering things from childhood that they had not thought about for years after the memory elicitation session.

In the automobile study, we explored whether people would tell longer and more involved stories if they were recorded with a camera than if they were simply asked to write down such stories on a questionnaire. We found that people were much more willing to tell their stories to a camera than to write them down. This method also offered an opportunity to probe the memories for more details, linkages to other experiences, and so forth. Note that Bruhn (1990) and others (e.g., Mosak and DiPietro 2006) believe that several memories may be needed to identify life themes, so this superficial questioning (five to ten minutes per participant) helped draw out such connections. Allers, Katrin, and White (1997) compare tape-recorded EMs to written EMs and find significantly more words and more self-references in the tape-recorded versions (though about the same amount of projective material). Written EMs may be less nuanced because participants may omit feelings or vivid details.

The pilot studies resulted in three adaptations to our initially contrived memory session. First, we learned that we would best be able to access memories at the product level. Second, we recognized that the relaxation/memory walk was an important component of the exercise and should be retained because of the greater quantity of singular memories and EMs. Third, we found that videotaping and superficial questioning of the memories would yield more detailed and vivid accounts than written memory stories.

Modes of Analysis

Interpreting the EMs and DMs is like detective work; it is a process of searching for meaning (Levy 1981). The memories can be examined on two levels—the more literal, content level or the mythic, deeper level. The content level involves coding the memory stories and quantifying them on various dimensions, such as age when the memory took place, whether it was a singular or a recurring event, whether it involved close family members or an extended social circle, the emotions associated with the memories, themes in the memories, and generic events featured in the memory stories. According to Mosak and Di Pietro (2006), there was a group of researchers who sought to quantify aspects of the EMs, but this led (in their opinion) to superficial analysis of the memories. This viewpoint is congruent with what Levy (1981) observes in his different levels of analysis of the narrative form. Therefore, we code for these aspects not only to get an overall impression of the memories but also to go deeper in the analysis.

To interpret the memory stories as myths, it is necessary to be able to read and interpret the metaphors and symbols in the stories, make comparisons across individuals (within the culture) regarding their stories (e.g., significant characters, events, actions), and learn and understand the culture that produced the myth. Observing how participants project themselves and their feelings about cars into their memory stories through their choice of incidents, language, emotional tone, and logic is of foremost interest (Levy 1981). Such approach is similar to the hermeneutical approach to consumer narratives (Thompson 1997) in which the stories are viewed as expressing existential themes by which a person's self-identity is reflected and as drawing from a cultural code of shared historical meanings and viewpoints.

In Rapaille's approach to interpreting memory stories, he focuses on structural elements, especially on the verbs used (Woll 2001), rather than the content. For example, when considering participants' memories of automobiles, he is more interested in the relationship between the person and the car than whether one story takes place in the city and another in the country. This is related to Jung's ([1919] 1970, ¶ 53) view of the archetype as action or image: "Archetypes are systems of readiness for action, and at the same time images and emotions. They are inherited with the brain structure—indeed they are its psychic aspect." Samuels (1985) argues that archetypes can be found in everyday experiences. Rapaille's goal is to find the archetype or "the code" for the product, which is typically described as one word, for example, "car = identity." Rapaille (2004) claims that each product has an enduring archetype, and different age groups within the same culture should not differ in their expression of that archetype. Rapaille's interpretation of the memory stories is similar to what Zaltman (2003) proposes when looking for deep metaphors. Deep metaphors are the home for latent and emerging needs and the source of basic perceptual and behavioral predispositions. The importance of deep metaphors is reinforced by contemporary work in neurobiology and cognitive linguistics pertaining to embodied cognition (Zaltman 2003). According to Zaltman (2003, p.

14), archetypes and deep metaphors are often one and the same. As universal patterns or motifs that come from the collective unconscious, archetypal images are the basic content of religions, mythologies, legends, and fairy tales (Hirschman 2000).

The Study

Automobile memories are the focus of our study. We chose this product category because it has been heavily researched in the self-concept literature and provides an opportunity to build on this prior research (for a thorough review, see Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982).

Our sample came from the southwestern United States and included 60 participants who represent three age cohorts: 20 13ERs, or Generation Xers, between the ages of 25 and 35 (10 male, 10 female); 20 baby boomers between the ages of 40 and 55 (12 male, 8 female); and 20 participants from the silent generation (or pre-baby boomers) ages 65 and over (12 male, 8 female). A professional market research firm recruited these people to participate in this study. Each was paid \$100 for their participation (more if they completed a depth interview the next day). The interviews were conducted during the spring of 2002, a year after the PT Cruiser was introduced (and was a huge success), the year Ford Thunderbird was released (with much anticipation), and amid rumors of the Ford Mustang being reintroduced. It was shortly after September 11, and fear was still abundant in this large metropolitan city in which driving has always been an important part of life. Retro cars were hot, and so was retro advertising. The "crossover" vehicles (e.g., the Escalade, the Hummer) were not yet introduced.

Heterogeneity among consumers' personal histories can frame their perceptions of their needs in different meaning systems (Thompson 1997). In his research, Rapaille has typically considered differences across countries when considering cultural differences in imprinting. However, we focus on three generations of Americans. According to Strauss and Howe (1991), each generation has its own personality or viewpoint from which it approaches automobiles. For example, the silent generation is more "other directed" and adaptive; the baby boomers are more idealistic, filled with optimism and hubris; and the Generation Xers were the most neglected and looked down on. In addition, each generation grew up during a period that advocated different types of parental roles. The silent generation was told to obey and be quiet and were overprotected by their parents; baby boomers were the most spoiled, having mothers at home and being the most nurtured and most relaxed; and Generation Xers had parents who were more distant toward them and underprotected them. Because parental involvement is so important for the development of childhood memories, we expected this to influence the type of memories elicited. Each generation also grew up in a different cultural environment, with different models of cars, different types of landmark events, different wars, different movies, and so forth. We were interested in whether the age cohorts would exhibit similar or different types of EMs and DMs (e.g., Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982). We expected dif-

ferent types of car models and historical references to be of importance across the different cohorts, but we were also interested in similarities in the types of experiences (and their underlying metaphors/archetypes) they discussed. Whereas Rapaille believes that the cultural imprint should not vary among age groups, we believed that the cultural environment in which our sample grew up was so vastly different that there would be differences. In addition, this sample enables us to examine how different types of memories affect decision making across the consumer life cycle.

Procedure

Participants were recruited over the telephone and were told the following:

We're interested in hearing about your childhood experiences with automobiles. We're asking you to participate in a memory journey exercise where we will help you remember past experiences by giving you cues and providing memory guidance. In order to prepare for your journey, we'd like you to begin thinking about your childhood and experiences that you associate with cars. For instance, you might consider looking at a photo album or talking to family members about your childhood. We are particularly interested in childhood memories, memories of experiences that occurred to you early in life (under age ten); however, if you have a particularly important memory that occurred later, you might start thinking about what that memory means to you.

Note that such instruction "primes" them for the main session and enables them to benefit from "hypermnnesia" (Schacter 1996), a finding in the memory literature that when a person is given a task, such as remembering people in his or her high school class, the person is able to remember more and more over time because of the consolidation processes in the brain. In addition, researchers (e.g., Zaltman 2003) have found that providing "homework" material before the session leads to more engaged participants.

The three age cohorts were run in separate groups. The main session followed the same format we described previously, beginning with a relaxation session, then turning to the "memory walk" back in time, and then focusing on the EMs and DMs. Participants received a written questionnaire in which they wrote their memory stories and answered questions such as, "How old were you when the experience took place?" "Where did the experience take place?" "What is the clearest part of the memory?" "What is the strongest feeling in the memory?" "If you had to put a title on this memory, what would it be?" "What role did the car play in this memory?" and "If the car could talk, what would he or she say about this experience?" They were also asked to write down what personal and cultural events were occurring around the time their memory took place. Participants were taken one at a time to another room in which they were asked to relate both their EM and DM memory stories to the researcher. The researcher asked them some questions about their memories, prompting them for details such as when, where, and with whom the experience took place to help them develop a richer narrative. When appropriate, the researcher asked whether those experiences affected the

participants' current choices or decision making for cars at other times in their lives.

At total of 15 participants, 5 from each age cohort, were selected to come back the next day for a depth interview about their memories. That interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. Participants were asked to bring pictures or images that represented their EMs or DMs. This interview was structured similar to a Zaltman metaphor elicitation technique (ZMET) interview in which the participants' memory pictures are used to guide the interview (Zaltman 2003). In general, pictures/collages have been used to help guide personal interviews (e.g., Belk, Bahn, and Mayer 1982). For example, participants were asked how the pictures related to their memory, to tell their memory story again, what images/emotions came to mind, who was involved in the memory, what else was happening to them during the time the memory took place, why they thought they remembered that particular event, what they learned from that experience, what the next memory that came to mind was, and so on. The reason for conducting these one-on-one interviews was to determine whether the EMs and DMs elicited during the session would yield insights into brand and product meanings beyond those experiences.

Coding

In total, there were 60 EMs and 60 DMs elicited from participants. We used the transcripts of the videotaped sessions, not the written memory stories, for the analysis (though we checked to make sure the stories were the same). The transcripts of the depth interviews provided additional material about how the EM and DM influenced other aspects of the participants' lives. These stories and interviews provided a framework for understanding consumers and their developing relationship with automobiles. The interpretation of the memory stories was discovery oriented (Wells 1993). For the analysis, we used two coders who were trained extensively in qualitative data interpretation. We used an extensive, structured process to identify the key themes (as per Dey 1999; Spiggle 1994), or what the memory literature might deem as "generic events" (defined as the basic action taking place in the story, such as going fishing). They also coded whether the event was singular or recurring, the participant's age during the experience, the emotion of the memory, and who was involved. In addition, the stories were examined for structural similarities (within and between generations) to identify myths (and potentially the archetype or "code").

Results

The purpose of this section is to illustrate how managers can use the EM and DM data. We begin by describing the different properties of the memories (e.g., average age, type of events, emotions); then we create a memory network map, which is drawn mainly from our depth interviews but also incorporates comments participants made during the videotaped sessions. This map defines areas in which the EMs and DMs can lend the most insight. It also identifies the tension or struggle within this product category, which is the basis of mythmaking. Each generation dealt with the

tension differently, and this led to different myths. Thus, we discuss them separately.

EMs

The average age at which the EMs occurred was six. This stage is what Piaget (1952) classifies as the early preoperational period and is a time when all components of the autobiographical memory system are in place. Research suggests that people have already learned symbolic meaning and brand status by this time in life (Hite and Hite 1995), and self-brand connections are in a state of development (Chaplin and John 2005). Across generations, the EMs stood for similar notions; some of the major aspects involved in the EMs included family car, excitement, safety (physical and emotional), bonding, comfort, and fun. Of the EMs, 80% were for single experiences (and almost all the Generation Xers had singular EMs and showed the strongest relationship between that memory and their current car choice). For example, the following is Generation Xer Tom's memory of a singular event that influenced his later preferences:

When I was about four years old, I remember going to the beach in my dad's Toyota truck. The day stood out because it was my birthday, and my dad took off work to bring me to the beach. I can smell and taste the saltwater breeze mixed with the exhaust of this off-road machine, and to this day, I have a fascination with Toyota trucks. Ever since I was brainwashed as a child with this love for Toyota trucks, I have been a definite consumer of this brand name. My personal consumer memory has almost forced me to only want this type of vehicle. Since I have been able to work and drive, I have owned three Toyota trucks.

We used the recurring memories for the analysis as well. They contained similar themes and content as the singular EMs. What they lacked was detail.

The categorization of memories into general action events resulted in the following experiences: weekend family outings or special outings with a parent, birthday parties, family vacations, visiting grandparents or other relatives, and "pretend" driving on a parent's lap. It was noteworthy that most of these experiences were family oriented and associated with feelings of attachment. As we discussed in the "Background" section, children actively seek out attachment relationships during this time of their life. Thus, it is not surprising that the majority of EM was concerned primarily with the need for attachment—seeking to be with family to share and relate experiences together. Cars were viewed as an essential part of family life and were associated with bringing joy and family unity (Rapaille 2006).

In the EM experiences, the car played the role of bringing family members together. The car was either stationed at home or involved in transporting members to and from their homes. Furthermore, although DMs included people other than close family members, the focus in all the EMs was on family. No external actors were present.

The EMs represented feelings of "emotional safety," which is a safe psychological bond with family members. For example, Marisa, a Generation Xer, described her uncle's car as like "being in a living room" where it was

comfortable and where she felt safe and warm. Another respondent described the family van as being “home” and containing all the person’s toys and junk.

Positive EMs reflect wishes, what people return to again and again. The following silent generation memory demonstrates how even in the most depressing situations, the car acted as comfort and provided a “homelike” container: Alan recalled being at his father’s funeral and was surprised by how comfortable he felt in the limousine, noting that he was as comfortable as being in a large chair in his own home. Several participants remarked on the size of the family car and its comfort.

The emotion involved in these memories was a feeling of safety, of being cared for and comforted. The psychotherapist Donald Woods Winnicott ([1958] 1965), best known for his “transitional object” theory (i.e., security blanket), finds that EMs that bring a feeling of being warm and snug tap into how a patient experiences security, emotional comfort, and basic ego relatedness. By extension, it is possible that these EMs could represent the components of “mothering” as portrayed in the transitional object. Such an object enables the child to have a fantasized bond with the mother as she gradually separates for increasingly longer periods of time. In adulthood, the EM represents a way to reconnect to that feeling of being cared for.

In addition to exploring the role of the participants and what they experienced, another important issue is the role of the car in the memories. Is it a passive observer? Is it central to the action? What sort of “personality” does it reveal? In both types of memories, the car played a central role. As we discussed previously, the car’s role in the EM was that of connecting family members. The survey asked participants what they believed the car would “say” about their experience if it had a chance (Cooper 1974); some of those responses were, “Let’s go, happy wanderers” (baby boomer); “I am glad that I provided your family with everything I could” (silent generation); and “Look how happy they are” (Generation Xer).

Participants also had an opportunity to list the personality traits associated with their EM car. One participant said that the image of the Chevron car, with a smile on its front, came to mind. The following are some of the adjectives they chose: “jovial,” “happy,” “comfort,” “fun,” “reliable,” “motherly,” “dependable,” “staid,” “sturdy,” “calm,” “steady,” “trusting,” “gentle,” and “strong.” Finally, participants were asked what, if any, aspects of their EM car they would like to see on cars today. They responded with words such as “reliable,” “dependable,” “comfort,” “family friendly,” “simple,” “solid,” “strong,” “roomy,” and “safe.” Note that these are traits that consumers look for when selecting a “family car” to purchase. The brands or products they most associated with their EM were Jeep, Grand Torino, Volkswagen bus, van, Chevy Bel Aire, Cadillac, Buick, station wagon, sedan, and minivan.

DMs

Whereas the EM experiences centered on families, the DMs showed the influence of external members of the participants’ social circles. These memories featured the ideas of “showing off,” “going for a joy ride,” the car being an

expression of “me,” and desire for status. Of the DMs, 60% were for singular experiences. Many combined experiences together, such as “riding in a convertible.” Neisser (1981) dubbed such memories as “repisodic” because they appear as constructive amalgams of repeated episodic memories.

We found that 14 was the average age when DMs occurred. Piaget classifies consumers at this age as being in the formal stage of operations. People who reach the formal operation stage are capable of thinking logically and abstractly. Defining memories included people, socialization, learning, life, school friends, and new cars. The following generic experiences were associated with the DMs: learning how to drive, pride in owning a car, admiring another person’s car, driving in a “cool” car (and enjoying being admired), and going for a joy ride. The majority of these experiences are related to purchasing or being directly involved with the car. The car enabled the consumer to define him- or herself to others. Emotions, such as pride, were involved. Consider Mary’s (a baby boomer) statement:

My dad bought a new 64 Pontiac Grand Prix. It had leather interior and awesome air conditioning.... Our last car did not have either. It also had wood grain.... I felt like we arrived. I even got into an argument with my friend, saying that it was more prestigious than his parent’s Lincoln Continental, but of course I was wrong.

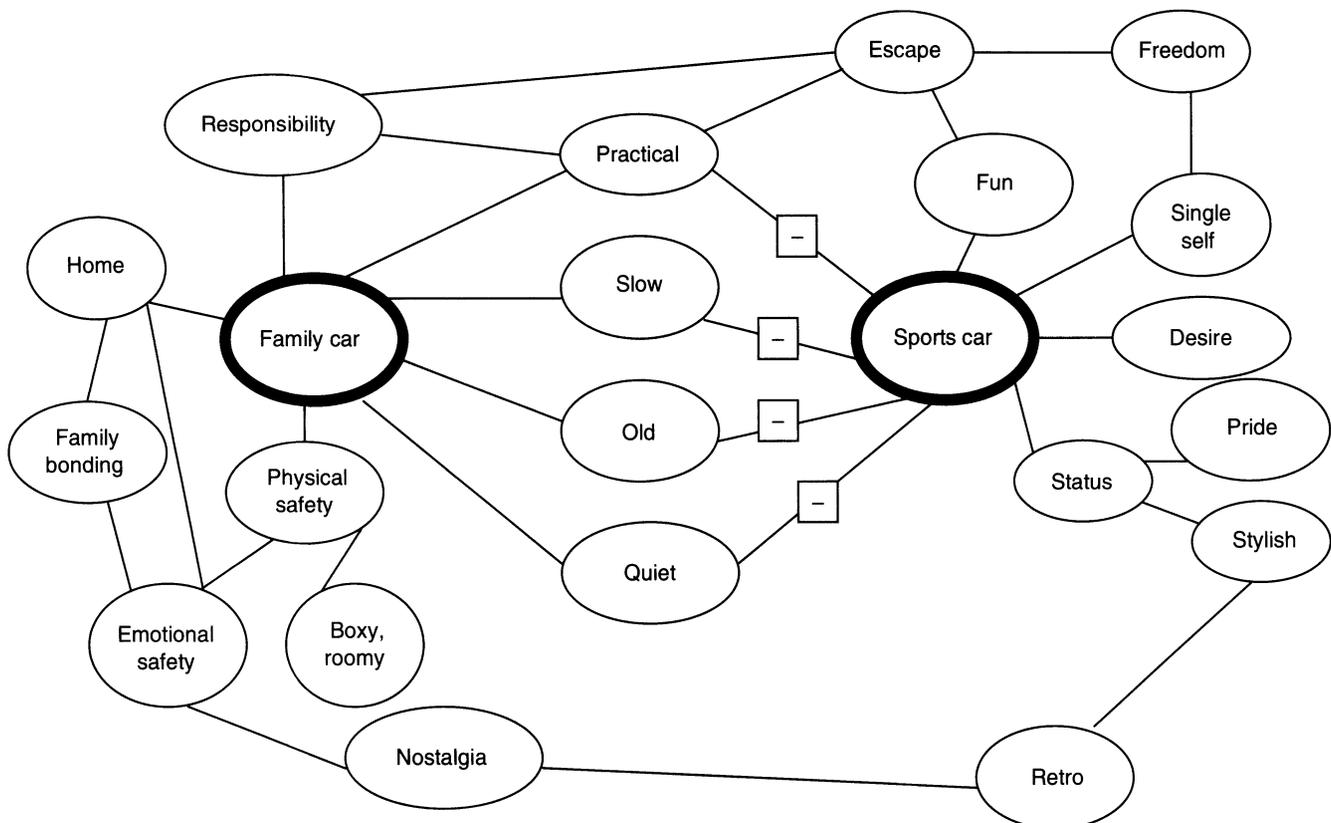
The car was a means to “show off” or impress. Note that there is also a level of vulnerability here or a need for approval. Steve, a baby boomer, related that his Porsche 914 was the epitome of “sophistication and cool” and that women were really impressed. In his research on male enthusiast drivers, Belk (2004, p. 247) finds that men often view cars as a “magical sexual charm that will make them irresistible to women.” The car was viewed as a symbol of success and accomplishment. Likewise, Generation Xer Mark remembered that he and his best friend both had Nissan Z cars and called themselves “Z-men,” and that made him feel special, as if he had accomplished something.

The defining car was something to be experienced, enjoyed, and shown off. The following descriptions are what people noted that the car would say about their DM: “Let’s rock” (baby boomer), “I lived my 15 minutes of fame” (silent generation), and “I took you folks on the ride of your life” (Generation Xer). Participants described their brand-defining car as having the following personality traits: “fashionable,” “sexy,” “cool,” “image maker,” “fast,” “proud,” “attractive,” “classy,” “fun-loving,” “outgoing,” “macho,” “almost uncontrollable,” and “smooth.” Desired qualities from the defining car were “luxury,” “sexy,” “speed,” “convertible,” “expensive,” “fast,” “cool,” “reputation,” and “styling.” The brands or products most associated with the DMs were Stingray, Capri, Corvette, Thunderbird, Celica, and hot rod.

Memory Map

The nodes on the memory map (see Figure 1) represent constructs from our interviews, and the connections between the nodes show associations. Only constructs mentioned by at least two-thirds of the participants from each generation appear on the map. We constructed the map primarily from the depth interview data, but examples also

FIGURE 1
Memory Map



came from the surveys. As such, the map represents a majority of our participants.

The most obvious distinction, or tension, in the map appears in the disconnect between “family car,” represented on the left-hand side (i.e., the EM data primarily related to the family car and the DM data primarily related to the sports car). This tension of needing a safe vehicle while desiring a fun, sporty car existed for all generations, which is consistent with Solomon’s (1983) proposition that an automobile can be used to identify with the individual sense of self or the family sense of self. Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry (2003) call such contradictions “paradessence,” in reference to the paradoxical essence of a brand.

Levi-Strauss (1977) takes a structuralist approach to myth and proposes that the purpose of a myth is to provide a logical model that is capable of overcoming a contradiction. His argument is that (1) all cultures try to account for apparent contradictions in the world around them and (2) in almost all languages, myths follow similar structural lines in dramatizing these contradictions into story form to resolve them. In our interpretation of the data, we do not take such a strong structuralist perspective, but it is noteworthy that the memory map represents contradictions that consumers experience (e.g., the tension between other and self, the tension between family car and status car). This finding maps onto Holt and Thompson’s (2004) man-of-action hero myth, which is a resolution of two opposites:

the rebel cool (sports car) and the secure-but-boring breadwinner (family car).

Brands that can resolve the contradictions are successful. The brand’s myth is the consumer belief that the brand offers a way to resolve a problem or situation that previously represented some kind of contradiction (Holt 2003). In the case of the successful PT Cruiser, the car resolved the contradiction by being both big and roomy (aspects of the family car), thus having some emotional comfort, and stylish, distinctive, and attention getting (which is associated with the sports car side of the map). As Rapaille (2004) said:

What people told us is that “we’re tired of these cars that have no identity. I have good quality, good gas mileage, good everything else, but when I see the car from a distance, I have to wait till the car gets close to know what it is, and I have to read the name.” When you go to see your mother, she doesn’t need to read your name to know who you are, you see? We want this reptilian connection. And so this notion of identity, absolutely key, was very reptilian for a car. Chrysler’s other research told them people don’t want to buy cars anymore, they want SUVs [sport-utility vehicles], minivans, etc.

From this perspective, brands with strong contradictions are viewed as “better.” In other words, strong opposition leads to strong myth. By extension, brand positioning is superior if it can capture (and resolve) contradiction in its brand story. Companies with dying (or injured) brands are

often companies whose brand myths have fallen behind or are out of tune with contemporary culture (Holt 2003). The problem with myth identification is that brands are complex, and people are even more complex. In many instances, there might be more than one myth that describes the product or brand. According to Levi-Strauss (1977), the binary opposition is mediated by a third term, which typically constitutes something valued in the culture. Consumer memory stories are situated in a broader cultural system of meanings. Cultural myths that manifest in consumer meanings are grounded in the collective cultural memory (Thompson 1997). Our data suggest that though all generations share a binary opposition or struggle, the third variable—how it is mediated or resolved—differs among the generations. Others have found gender differences in automobile ownership (Belk 2004), but the most overwhelming difference in our data was generational.

The Generation Xers

In our sample, the fear in post–September 11 America was still operating, though at an implicit level (i.e., no one acknowledged it directly). In this post–September 11 world, the Generation Xers were beginning to start families. The natural urge to relive or re-create their own childhood (as discussed in other texts; Levy 1981) is heightened by the reality that their own childhood was not really that good. They grew up in the era during which divorce was rampant, their self-centered baby boom parents often ignored them, women were breaking away from families to start careers, and so forth. Despite this difficult childhood environment, in our sample, the Generation Xers indicated in their video interviews that their EMs were something they cherished. This group also showed the strongest relationship between their EM and current car choice.

To make sense of this contradiction, members of this group created their own myths about their childhood. In almost all the EMs, the father was central to the experience. He was frequently a larger-than-life figure. Zoe remembered putting her own hand in her father's hand and noticing how it dwarfed hers; she remembered looking up at his seven-foot-tall figure and being amazed at how large he was; she recalled stopping during their childhood vacation, getting out of the car, and playing in a running creek with her siblings and her father reaching down and lifting them out. Later, she noted that she may have remembered this experience because of the fantasy of wanting to have a father who was involved in her life (that was the last trip they took together as a family; he separated himself from their lives after that point). Her current car was a red Jeep Cherokee; she said that she was drawn to it for its box shape and wondered now if she was influenced by the red station wagon of her childhood experience (it was also square shaped).

Zack recalled his EM as being in the back of the station wagon in the third seat (facing backward) as his father drove toward the vacation destination. About a half hour into the trip, he vividly recalled the car coming to a halting stop. Because he was facing the other direction, he did not see that his father had slammed on the brakes to miss hitting a deer in the road. He barely caught a glimpse of the deer

before it ran off into the safety of the woods. He recalled a feeling of safety in the car when his father drove, as if any potential obstacle could and would be averted. That he was facing backward has additional symbolism in this memory. Later, he said that he enjoyed the feeling of isolation in the third seat; facing backward made him feel separate from his female siblings:

I was in the third seat, sort of in my own world. Brought my toys back there. It was fun.... Sometimes I'd feel kind of isolated.... It was great because I didn't have to worry about my sisters bothering me or my parents yelling at me.... It was kind of cool.

As Holt and Thompson (2004) note, the hero myth drives male behavior; we found that this was particularly the case with men, cars, and their current family. Stuart recounts the following experience:

The first time I really noticed or cared about a car is when I got to go with my Dad to test drive a Trans Am. My family had just seen *Smoky and the Bandit*, and that is the car the hero of the movie, Burt Reynolds, drove to get away from all the bad guys. It was the car to have, and I was really excited.

Later, he said that as a child, he played with the Trans Am toy car in his backyard. He admitted that he had had a sports car at one time, but now that he was married with a child, he had an SUV. The interviews were conducted before the release of the Hummer and some of the larger SUVs, so at that time, such a car choice represented protecting and isolating oneself (or family) from the "bad guys" (drivers, terrorists) because it rode higher than other cars on the road. Lauer (2005) claims that consumers usually attribute buying SUVs to their safety and space, but he finds that safety is viewed as emotional rather than physical and that space is not interior cargo but rather social space—the privileged ability to traverse inhospitable terrain to remove oneself from society.

Another memory from Samantha evokes the dark side of the hero archetype (the destroyer). She recalled being driven by her father in his "souped-up" Toyota truck to school so she could be admired by the other kids because the truck was so cool. She and her brother were known as the "cool kids" because of the truck and would purposefully be late to school so that they could be driven in that chariot. Her EM was of her father crashing and destroying the car. That memory symbolized fear of having something taken away and of not having a strong hero to save the day.

A brand story that might be effective for reaching this generation would be one that evokes the mythic father figure. Such a story might show the current father as a hero, protecting his family from the bad guys and confronting and overcoming evil. The father would be viewed as being empowered and in control (some of the feelings that were taken away from him on September 11 in particular but also as he started a family and no longer had his freedom and his sports car).

The Baby Boomers

During the time of the interviews, the baby boomers were becoming empty nesters, and the responsibility of raising a

family was not at the forefront of their experience. They were most influenced by the DMs they indicated in their video interviews and said that they were more pleasant and more cherished than any of the other generations. As Sally noted, "I'm at a point in my life where I can focus back on me, and when I look for a car today I am looking not for the practical hauling of kids but for the cute, sportiness that represents freedom from all those responsibilities." There was also a stronger relationship between the DM and the current choice behavior. Many respondents in our sample were considering buying a sports car (five men and one woman indicated that they were eyeing the Ford Thunderbird). This is consistent with Belk's (2004) finding that people in their middle age try to reclaim lost youth and all the excitement they associate with their late teenage years by buying cars that are reminiscent of those they desired when they were younger. As children, the baby boomers were the most spoiled by their parents. The angst that is evident in the Generation Xers and the interest in re-creating their childhood (in more positive ways) were not at all apparent in this generation. What appeared to be more prevalent was re-creating the need to break from parental control, and the memories featured either that break or putting off responsibility. Many of the memories featured convertibles along with feelings of freedom at "letting one's hair down."

Mike's first memory involved his uncle winning a Cadillac Eldorado convertible in a raffle. According to him, the car cost more than the row house in which his uncle lived in Little Italy. He remembered being impressed with the car and wishing he had one in his own garage today (though the car was way out of his price range). He remarked, "[G]oing through this exercise, a lot of my memories revolved around convertibles." When asked why, he said that they are carefree, not a responsibility car, and "yeah, [I] would like to buy one to relive my youth." He was one of the men eyeing the Ford Thunderbird.

Jim, who was also eyeing the Thunderbird, recalled his memory of being with his uncle in his 1955 Oldsmobile, "the most beautiful car I've ever seen, ... red and white two-tone with lots of chrome." The memory involved a time when they drove through farmland at more than 100 miles per hour to get to his aunt's house. He said that "the experience taught me I like fast cars." He later bought two Oldsmobiles. His interest in the Thunderbird was that it "matched" his DM of his neighbor's canary-colored Thunderbird convertible. He remembered admiring it and enjoying being taken to school in it (as opposed to his parent's more confining sedan). He admitted being drawn to cars that are a little different, that people stop and notice.

Pat recounted her memory of being six years old and sitting in the backseat with her little brother in a car seat; her mom stopped at a neighbor's house and left them alone for a few minutes. She was always fascinated with driving and took that as an opportunity to practice, sitting behind the big wheel and moving the gears. What she did not realize was that she released the parking brake, and the car rolled down the driveway and across the street and hit (and left a large hole in) the house across the street. She recalls that "everyone was moving so slow, and so fast, at the same time." The most symbolic aspect of that experience was that

she let her mom believe that she had not left the parking brake on, keeping that secret to herself for more than ten years and not taking responsibility for the accident.

Feelings of freedom, wanting to relive youth, and not taking responsibility are all associated with the Peter Pan image (or what Jung would call the "eternal boy/girl archetype"). The baby boomers' response to the fear of post-September 11 was to escape to their more idealistic adolescence. Therefore, brands that embrace remaining eternally young in body, mind, and spirit, as well as those that feature images associated with baby boomers' DMs, would appeal to this generation.

Silent Generation

The silent generation was perhaps the most intriguing. As children, they were war casualties in the sense that they were often overlooked, and their parents, who were faced with the Depression, worked long hours, and there was not much time for nurturing. Their life paralleled the development of the automobile, from the mass-produced Ford A, to the Corvair, to the 1957 Chevy, to the present. Their life has also been an internal struggle between the practicality to which their parents ascribed and the abundance available to them after World War II; for this generation, the struggle was not between family and sports car (on the memory map) but rather between practical and status car. Their life paralleled the growth, sophistication, and transformation of the automobile, and some aspired throughout their lifetimes to own the best car available. Others condemned that type of conspicuous consumption and the extravagance of the automobile as a status symbol, harkening back to their parents' more practical views about the role of cars. The view that eventually prevailed was revealed in their childhood memories.

For Alan, this struggle was ongoing. He grew up in a tenement building in Brooklyn. One of his EMs is of escaping the day-to-day squalor and misery by taking a ride in his uncle's Model A and being exhilarated when riding in its rumble seat. A wealthier neighbor owned a Buick, which he said represented "power ... [and] prestige," and he befriended the neighbor's "dippy" son so that he could ride in it on occasion. When he was older and had some money to buy a car for his business, he said,

I guess I thought, why not indulge myself. I never do. I didn't even compare prices. I didn't shop. I just wanted to get this thing. It wasn't the car that I loved. I wanted to get a Buick. I never until now associated that Buick with [his neighbor's] Buick, but now I wonder. All those years, this thing was buried in my mind or burned in my heart.

He bought the Buick, and for him, it became a metaphor for his own personality. "Buick was right for me, quiet prestige, not showing like a Cadillac." This view of a Buick was consistent with what Social Research Inc.'s original 1954 study found about Cadillacs and Buicks; namely, Buicks were socially a notch below Cadillac, but for those on the way up, Buicks were considered reliable, sturdy cars for substantial people, whereas Cadillacs were resented as snobbish or snooty (Easton 2001). Currently, the more practical side of Alan won; he owned a minivan. He said, "there goes practical Alan again." Thus, although he was able to give

into his desire for status at one time in his life, the practicality learned during his childhood years took over again.

Dennis wanted the status of owning something “new” and different. His EM was of his father bringing home a new car for the first time. “What an experience,” he recalled, “the excitement of having a new car.” He said that just having a new car was something special back then. He remembered climbing in and exploring it, the smell, and the awe of the experience in general. His DM was also about a new car. He said that “everyone is into something; my thing just happens to be new cars.” He recalled many family photos taken in front of the car (rather than in the house or in front of the house). He said that his family did not know anyone who owned stocks or bonds, and everyone lived in roughly the same type of house; it was the car that differentiated people. His EM involved the Hudson Terraplane, which he thought looked a lot like the PT Cruiser (“a cute car.... Yeah, I’d buy one”). Again, his earliest experience infiltrated current preference.

Bob was a more practical son of the Depression. His EM involved taking the family car to visit his cousin, getting stuck in the muddy road, needing to band together to push the car, and pushing the car over his cousin’s legs (who did not get hurt). He said that this was a fond memory and became a family myth; they would all laugh about it each time they visited. His memory symbolizes making the best out of a bad situation. With respect to cars, he said that his dad bought older cars until they dropped and then bought another older car. To his father, a car was a tool, not a toy: “Looking at new cars was not anything of interest to us because it would be like wanting to be the King of England. We knew we’d never be a king, and we knew we’d never have a new car.” Bob’s practicality in terms of cars continues. He currently owns a Dodge van. Previously, he owned a Mazda van, which he bought for \$12,000. After approximately three years, he tried to turn it in and buy a new model but gawked at the \$24,000 price tag, which he claimed was too high for basically the same van. He said that some of his friends were into buying showy cars, such as a Mercedes, and thinking that buying such cars would change them somehow, but he never saw the point (even though he could afford it).

The archetype relevant to members of this generation is the Midas/miser, the pull between being showy and buying the best while being practical and remembering their roots. For a brand that wants to engage the psyche of this generation, perhaps Alan said it best in his reference to the Buick: “quiet prestige.”

A General Note on Archetypes and Deep Metaphors

Although the three generations could be best described through the archetypal stories we recounted, there was some overlap. For example, one male Generation Xer, who was the only one to feature his mother, recalled an experience in the car with her in which he played a game of sticking his hand out the window and holding it there as his mother accelerated. This sort of playful EM (and his other memories as well) would fit better with the Peter Pan archetype. This person did not have a family at the time of the

interview, and thus some of these concerns were not pivotal to his life. His current car was a sports car (Trans Am), and he said that he chose it for the feelings of freedom and escape. Likewise, there was a female baby boomer whose EM was of her father driving her family’s station wagon down a dark, windy road after a family visit to Santa’s Village. Her father hit another car on the way home (everyone was fine). For this woman, safety has continued to be a foremost concern in her car choices, and she would probably respond well to the “father-as-hero” archetype described for the Generation Xers.

Marketing Implications

The memory data can be used to provide insights for marketers. For example, the objective memory data information described in the EM and DM sections could help managers construct effective autobiographical ad campaigns or corporate communications (e.g., Baumgartner, Sujan, and Bettman 1992). The “generic events” represent the easiest entrée to the past (Barsalou 1988). The images, life themes, and landmark events (which we did not fully discuss in this article) could provide specific symbols and images to incorporate into consumer communications. By associating themselves with important childhood memory experiences, brands can benefit through the emotions brought forth as consumers relive those memories (in the manner of Proust and his “petite madeleine”). Within the EM and the DM experiences are similarities and differences that define the generations and suggest segmented communication strategies. In terms of similarity, the generic experiences and life themes were shared across generations. Consistent with Levy’s ([1957] 1999) finding, some aspects of human nature and life remain unchanged. Consumers yearn for stable families, bettering their children’s lives, and finding happiness. The differences are observed in the symbolic meaning attached to these memories (we discuss this in greater detail subsequently) and the landmark events associated with them, which would allow for more targeting of the collective memories of the different generations (Halbwachs [1950] 1980).

There was a mythic quality to the EM experiences that enabled us to analyze them not just for the literal information but also for their symbolism. Participants remembered themselves and the brands in terms of how they would like themselves to be (rather than how they actually were). As Vailliant (1977, p. 197) said, “It is all too common for caterpillars to become butterflies and then maintain that in their youth they had been little butterflies. Maturation makes liars of us all.” The “lies” people tell about their childhood make them perfect for interpretation. Although some truth was probably associated with the memory stories, there are also many elements associated with present-day experiences (e.g., lifestyles; preferences; and current concerns, such as a preoccupation with post-September 11 America). In this way, people’s idealized selves are projected onto the past.

According to Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry (2003), such a utopian ideal has only been hinted at by scholars, and it plays an important role in understanding brand meanings and connections. For brand managers who want to create an

“authentic” self or image, connecting to consumers’ past experiences provides a promising opportunity. As Belk (1990, p. 670) states, “Even though our nostalgia memories are essentially un-real and imaginary rather than objective and inherent in the objects that inspire them, we nevertheless insist upon the authenticity of these objects.” Authenticity is an important aspect of brand identity (Keller 1993). Kelly (1998) claims that brand essence is the brand’s DNA, or what it stands for to consumers. In our research, the meanings of the brand/product changed but continued to influence current preferences. Through one strategy, a brand could work to reconcile the overall tension in the map between focusing on the self and focusing on the family, or the sports car versus the family car, as the successful PT Cruiser has done. Note that since the time these interviews were conducted, the Crossfire, Escalade, and Hummer have all attempted to establish their own brand myths based on this conflict. An alternative strategy involves focusing on a particular generation or consumer type and then creating a brand myth toward these experiences, using the hero, Peter Pan, or the Midas/miser archetypes as guides.

General Discussion

The purpose of this article was to introduce EMs and DMs as projective techniques that marketers could use to uncover brand meaning. Our method was guided by researchers in psychoanalytic counseling and social psychology, as well as the well-established G. Clotaire Rapaille. The consumer memory stories were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. In the following sections, we discuss our results in terms of positioning a brand across the consumers’ life cycle, how our findings are related and could be used to add a narrative dimension to the conception of the brand schema, and the strengths/weaknesses of this memory elicitation method compared with other projective methods.

Life Cycle

Products can serve different purposes throughout a person’s lifetime. Numerous brands, each exuding different personality traits, correspond to these varying needs. This finding is congruent with contemporary personality research, suggesting a situational component best revealed through narratives. A major implication is that automobile manufacturers should be aware of the role that vehicles have played in consumers’ past to understand what they want in the future. This insight is especially important in industries in which design planning occurs far in advance of product introduction.

The consumer–brand relationship is dynamic and changing, but it is also cyclical. Certain key experiences can provide insights into what the consumer will desire in the future. We found that EMs of car experiences were indicative of choice in a family vehicle later in life. For example, defining experiences provided insight into the selection of a sports car, after family issues had been handled. In addition, EMs of safety and functioning become an issue (e.g., from discussions with the silent generation participants). For example, children today who are escorted to and from school or who go on family vacations with their Generation

Xer parents in their family’s Hummer will seek similar design attributes and present-day associations when they buy their own family car 30 years from now; they will seek their own form of emotional safety.

A traditional way of thinking is that the brand exists as an entity and possesses its own set of attributes and “personality traits.” One limitation of this approach is that it might be difficult for managers to find a way to make these traits meaningful to the consumer. The narrative approach of examining the brand is based on the assumption that a brand takes on its meaning to consumers through their interactions with the brand (or product). For example, the trait way of viewing a Buick might be to ascribe certain adjectives to the brand, such as “old,” “dull,” or “stodgy.” In contrast, the narrative way of viewing the brand would be to associate a Buick with people’s experiences of riding in the back of their grandparents’ car, of sucking on butterscotch candy, of being taken to the movie theatre, and so forth.

Although marketing scholars have recognized the importance of the experiential nature of the brand, this has not been fully integrated into how brand management models are defined (cf. Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003). In the past, a brand’s schema has been defined as all the associations connected to the brand in memory (Keller 1993), which are assumed to be stored in a semantic-type network. This research offers another perspective that is consistent with the literature on the relational aspect of brands (e.g., Fournier 1998). In this approach, brands and their associated meanings emerge from the interactions they have in consumers’ lives. Key to understanding what a brand means today is unlocking what consumers remember about their usage of the brand or product in the past. From this perspective, marketers are “meaning managers,” and consumers are cocreators of brand essence (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Brown and Sherry 2003).

Methodological Considerations

There has been a resurgence of interest in identifying research methods that “dig deeper” into the consumers’ unconscious (e.g., ZMET, physiological measures, response-latency techniques). Nonetheless, some projective techniques have been around for a long time (e.g., TAT, Q-sort, Rorschach). The childhood memory elicitation method is best classified as a projective technique based on consumer storytelling, and the memory elicitation procedure we described here identifies important memory markers as the makings of consumer memory stories. Note that this approach is different from traditional storytelling research (i.e., Levy 1981), which asks in general about family tales or stories; from life-story interviews, which probe the entire life history and can last three to five hours; from the TAT, which develops pictures or cartoons that “ask questions” to spur participant storytelling (Rook 1988); and from the ZMET, in which participants’ own images direct the storytelling.

The memory elicitation method begins at the individual level; people recount their EMs and DMs of a product. Their recollection process is enhanced by allowing a time lag between the initial contact and the main session, during which their “synapses” begin “warming up” childhood

associations. The memory walk further encourages them to recall earlier points in their lives, and the short interview session helps them form a comprehensive narrative. As other researchers using a memory method have noted (Lupton 1994), these important memories may rest at a more unconscious level and be difficult to articulate without such assistance. Indeed, in our Coca-Cola pilot work, we found that the memories elicited in a focus group session were different from those recalled as a result of the memory elicitation procedure. We also found that when focus group participants read memory stories elicited by others during a memory elicitation session, they related to them much more than the stories discussed by the group itself. This finding is consonant with Halbwachs's ([1950] 1980) observation that though remembering may appear to be an individual process, no "individual" memory exists, and the social and cultural influences result in many similarities (see also Lupton 1994).

Although other researchers have focused on frameworks for deriving insights from consumer stories (e.g., Thompson 1997), the current research focuses on a technique to uncover important stories, or the "content" of what researchers analyze. The main advantage of this method over existing methods is that consumers' EMs and DMs provide a quick, symbolic snapshot of the consumer, offering insight into how present concerns, past experiences, and lifestyles converge in the creation of a memory story. Researchers have found high test-retest reliability in thematic aspects of EM and DM techniques (some researchers found 80% test-retest reliability for matching specific events, and this is probably higher for generic memories or episodic events; see Bruhn 1985).

The output of the method, as we discussed previously, offers managers a concrete means to market and promote their brands. For example, the generic memory experiences can be used to guide a memory-referencing ad campaign, and the emergent myths can be used to help brands develop their own brand story. With any research technique, the benefits of having a larger, more generalizable sample must be weighed against the desire for a deep understanding of consumers. The memory elicitation method strikes a good balance by running the age cohorts in groups of 20 with multiple video cameras. In this way, participants have an opportunity to tell their memory stories while they are still fresh from the elicitation session. Because participants might feel self-conscious during the relaxation and memory walk, the group setting reduces this feeling while maintain-

ing the individual integrity of the memory recollections. Because our focus is on EMs and DMs (and the role they played in participants' lives), the resulting narratives are shorter and more focused than might be expected from a depth or typical-life-story interview, which makes analysis more efficient. We followed the memory elicitation with longer interviews and note that that data were critical in forming the overall memory map. However, Rapaille uses only the data from the memory session in his interpretation, and we found that the videotaped memory stories provide the most useful data for interpreting the symbolic and mythic qualities associated with these memories.

The psychotherapist Franz Plewa (1935) finds that EMs offer more insights into dynamics of an individual than any other psychic expression. Participants report "having fun" on their memory journey and "learning something about themselves," and it builds a nonthreatening, empathetic relationship. We found that this was the case especially with the silent generation, who genuinely enjoyed the reminiscing process. We also found that Generation Xers felt positive about their experience: "I would like to begin by saying that I was very surprised how many memories came back to me as you were leading us back in time; it was a cool activity."

Further Research

The use of childhood memories to understand current consumer preferences may increase as research derived from psychoanalysis and social psychology develops. We hope that the current controversies regarding Rapaille will not diminish that effect; note that Holbrook (1988) ascribed Ernest Dichter's flamboyant personality and outrageous claims as one of the reasons for the demise of projective techniques in marketing. There will need to be more studies to establish validity and reliability of our approach. However, its usefulness to marketing researchers will depend on more academic studies exploring childhood memories in the consumer domain. For example, although singular EMs have been an important aspect in the clinical domain, in which individual insight is sought, they may or may not be as important in the consumer domain, in which myths or repeated incidents might be more salient or relevant. It is also important to understand the best methods for eliciting memories that are both useful and expedient for marketing managers. Finally, it is important to develop comprehensive perspectives for analyzing these memory meanings.

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