

American Girl and the Brand Gestalt: Closing the Loop on Sociocultural Branding Research

This article describes an investigation of the American Girl brand that provides a more complete and holistic understanding of sociocultural branding. Recent research on emotional branding, together with prior work on brands' symbolic nature and their role as relationship partners, represents a significant shift in the way marketers think about brands and brand management. However, a full understanding of powerful and emotionally resonant brands has been elusive, in part because sociocultural branding knowledge has accumulated in a piecemeal way and lacks coherence and integrity. In addition, powerful brands are extraordinarily complex and multifaceted, but in general they have been studied from a single perspective in a single setting. On the basis of a qualitative exploration of the American Girl brand that is both deep and broad, the authors posit that an emotionally powerful brand is best understood as the product of a complex system, or *gestalt*, whose component parts are in continuous interplay and together constitute a whole greater than their sum. Studying American Girl from the perspectives of various stakeholder groups in many of the venues in which the brand is manifest, the authors attempt to close the sociocultural branding research loop and identify implications for brand management.

Keywords: American Girl, brands, retail, brand management

Approaching from any direction, the first glimpse is of the giant bas relief sign, three neat rows of red awnings, and two American flags waving vigorously in the Chicago wind. Closer proximity to the magisterial glass doors amplifies the electric buzz of conversation among excited girls and women. Big smiles adorn the faces of those carrying even bigger red paper bags with stark white lettering. The venue is unmistakable: American Girl Place. Inside the store, small groups of women and girls swarm around a variety of perfectly staged displays of dolls, accessories, and books in a large, bright room. Incessant verbal exchange among the occupants is punctuated by activity that involves the touching, lifting, conveying, and replacing of small adored objects. The scene incorporates a surprising number of girl-doll twins, that is, young girls

dressed identically to their dolls. Some dolls seem to be made in the images of their owners, with the same facial configuration, hair color and style, and eye shape and hue. Poses are struck, and cameras flash to record the shared moment. (Excerpt from researcher field notes)

Created by a former schoolteacher in 1985, the American Girl brand is a \$436 million empire (Mattel Inc. 2007) that includes books, dolls, and doll clothing and accessories, as well as immersive retail and catalog environments. Envisioned as a means of bringing history alive and selling it to children in the form of dolls and books (Morris 2003; Sloane 2002), American Girl has transcended its product categories to become a brand powerhouse that adds new meaning and relevance to long-established toys (Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel 2002; Acosta-Alzuru and Roushanzmir 2003).

Dolls representing nine different historical periods and a variety of ethnicities come replete with elaborate narratives and accoutrements. Girls create intricate backstories for their dolls, intertwining content from the books with their own family histories. Mothers, daughters, and grandmothers trek from around the country to visit one of the three American Girl Place stores, experience the brand, and create strong and lasting shared memories. Its treatment in the popular press and the fervor with which large numbers of adherents embrace the brand indicate that American Girl has become something of a cultural icon and has earned a position within the ranks of powerful emotional brands (Gobe 2001; Roberts 2004; Zaltman 2003). Instrumental in this achievement is a complex constellation of meanings

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rooted in narrative and distributed among the brand's many and varied constituencies.

In 1998, American Girl was acquired by the toy titan Mattel for \$700 million. That same year, the company opened its flagship brand store, American Girl Place, a half block from Chicago's Magnificent Mile. Nancye Green, the store's designer, referred to the retail outlet as "a mecca... a pilgrimage site for girl consumers" (Lavin 2003, p. 79). At the time, more than five million people had visited the Chicago location. Brilliantly designed and executed, American Girl Place consists of three sales floors, comprising 35,000 square feet of back-to-the-future retroescape ambiance. Inside can be found museum-like dioramas, a theater, a café, a doll hair salon, and lounging areas designed to facilitate interaction among shoppers and the examination and use of products. Enthusiastic hordes of girls and women can be seen striding down Michigan Avenue, carrying the distinctive red bags that signify the brand, leading researchers to the source of satisfaction. The Chicago store was the brand's sole retail outlet until 2004, when American Girl Place in New York opened; a third flagship brand store was opened in 2006 in Los Angeles. Smaller outlets have recently been added in Atlanta, Dallas, Boston, and Minneapolis, and the original Chicago store was significantly enlarged and relocated to Michigan Avenue's Water Tower Place in fall 2008.

Transfixed by the symbolic world, cultural theories of brands and branding have only begun to scratch the surface of person-object interactions, and understanding brands' sociocultural nature has become a fundamental objective of contemporary consumer research. The effort to achieve this objective has focused the attention of both academics (e.g., Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Holt 2004; Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006) and practitioners (e.g., Atkins 2004; Wipperfurth 2005) on brands with legendary or cult status and the strong visceral element that characterizes consumers' experience of these brands. Such work follows several other advances that have brought the symbolic nature of brands and their roles as relationship partners and cultural agents to the fore, marking a significant shift in the way marketers think about successful brands, brand relationships, and the effective management of brands.

Although this shift was generated by and has paved the way for new knowledge about the social nature of powerful brands, this knowledge has accumulated in piecemeal fashion and is idiosyncratic, lacking coherence and integrity. This is in part because all the cultural components and processes have not been studied within the same brand, making it difficult to close the loop and connect these interrelated elements. In addition, powerful, emotionally resonant brands tend to be complex, the product of multiple creators authoring multiple representations in multiple venues. The complexity of these brands is the source of their power, but it also renders them difficult to characterize completely and definitively. They do not reside in any of their constituent parts; rather, they are products of the dynamic interactions between these parts and the system or gestalt they comprise. Here, we use the term "gestalt" to imply "a 'shape', 'configuration', or 'structure' which as an object of perception forms a specific whole or unity incapable of expression

simply in terms of its parts" (from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed.).

In a recent theoretical paper, Berthon and colleagues (2007) employ the three-worlds hypothesis of philosopher Karl Popper and a construct they call "brand manifold" to explicate their contention that twenty-first century brand management is vastly more complicated than it has ever been. The authors assert that because today's brands have multiple meanings that vary over time and among a multitude of constituencies, brand stewards must effectively manage a "matrix of possibilities." The matrix, or "manifold," is conceptualized as a topological space or surface formed by a set of distributed points. Berthon and colleagues posit that instead of mediating a dialogue between company and customer, brand managers must participate in a "multilogue" and attend to, and leverage, a "symphony" of old and new brand meanings.

We concur with the notion that brands are represented by a multitude of meanings and that this has profound implications for effective brand management. However, we argue that because all elements of the matrix, or manifold, are in continuous interaction with one another, the collection is best conceptualized as a system, or gestalt, within which the brand resides or from which it emerges. To learn how the gestalt gives rise to the brand and to better understand the management challenge facing brand stewards, a single brand must be studied from beginning to end, from planning and execution through consumption by various audiences and constituencies. Through this single brand-focused effort, the nature of both parts and whole may become known. A viable brand epistemology requires the identification and study of as many of the brand's creators, representations, forms, and venues as possible, as well as an understanding of the complex interactions among these system components. Although it is only as a result of such a multifaceted effort that the emergent properties of a brand system will reveal themselves, all brands are not equally amenable to such an effort.

According to Brown (2005), the most compelling brands are those whose narratives are "multistoried stories"—that is, stories built on or nested within other stories. These are more often entertainment brands, such as Harry Potter, Hello Kitty, and even Martha Stewart, than the consumer packaged goods and durables brands that spawned previous branding paradigms. Because the United States constitutes what has been termed an "entertainment economy," Brown asserts that there is more of value to be learned about cultural branding from entertainment brands than from those residing on the shelves of supermarkets, drugstores, and mass-merchandise outlets.

In this article, we attempt to close the loop on the interrelated findings in sociocultural branding research by examining meaning creation and utilization processes from start to finish among the many and varied adherents of a single entertainment brand. Studying American Girl from the perspectives of its stewards and various publics in many of the locations in which the brand is manifest provides a more complete and holistic view of sociocultural branding. Before describing our methodological approach, we summarize the findings and what we view as the limitations of

some of the sociocultural branding work on which our own effort is based. We also briefly discuss research pertaining to children's understanding of brands.

Building on the work of Fournier (1998) and Muniz and O'Guinn (2001) on consumer-brand relationships and brand communities, McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2002) spent time in locations where loyal consumers gathered to investigate the role of community in the creation and maintenance of brand loyalty. An important contribution of their work is the notion that both consumer-brand relationships and consumer-consumer-brand relationships, or brand communities, are situated within a relationship "mosaic" that also incorporates relationships between consumer and product and between consumer and marketer. The mosaic encompasses existing relationships (e.g., those among family members or between friends), as well as new ones, and continually shifts and expands. McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig also highlight marketers' facilitative role in creating a context for community interaction and helping establish shared traditions and meanings. Because the focus of this study is on relationships and loyalty, however, its conceptualization of brand and implications for brand management are unclear. The brand constructed as a set of purely social experiences disconnected from its physical and intellectual/cultural/ideological moorings lacks explanatory power. More significantly, although facilitation of community interaction is a component of the marketer's role to which too little attention has been devoted, it is only one such component.

Kozinets and colleagues (2004) view themed flagship brand stores as spectacular environments, and they examine the interplay between consumer agency and marketer-created structure in such spaces. They discover that at ESPN Zone, far from being overwhelmed or coerced by the sign-rich context, consumers use the retail environment as a stage on which to perform, enthusiastically enacting the brand and cocreating the spectacle. Therefore, emplacement is reconceptualized as a shared endeavor, with the marketer ceding considerable freedom to consumers who use it to "work within the rules of play, to break other rules, and create new rules" (Kozinets et al. 2004, p. 668). While revealing of the power dynamics of consumer culture and the potential for playful use of retail spectacle by consumers to enact individual and brand identity, Kozinets and colleagues' study does not address the use of the brandscape to enhance intercustomer relationships or the ways cocreated brand meanings are employed outside the "cathedral of consumption" (O'Guinn and Belk 1989).

Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry (2003) employ two recently reinvigorated brands—the Volkswagen Beetle and Star Wars—to shed light on the nature and value to consumers of retro brand meanings. Retro brands are those from historical periods that have been revived, modified to contemporary standards, and relaunched. Using a netnographic (Kozinets 2002) method and constructs from the literary critic Walter Benjamin, Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry demonstrate that retro brands are characterized by an appealing sense of authenticity through their tangible connection to the time and place in which they originally existed. Even more compelling is their allegorical content,

didactic messages implicit in brand stories that "invoke and then offer resolutions for consumer states of moral conflict" (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003, p. 21) rooted in culture. Thus, retro brands have a paradoxical essence—their ability to satisfy the need for contemporary levels of design and performance while providing emotional reassurance by embodying the values and perceived simplicity and safety of earlier periods. Although Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry's work is informative, it does not elucidate the processes by which meaning-filled narratives are created, and it offers little about the people to whom these brands matter or the roles of ascribed brand meanings in their everyday lives.

These limitations are also evident in the work of Holt (2004), who further elucidates the cultural origins and significance of brand meanings and the ways they bind consumers to commercial entities. According to Holt, some brands create equity—and in the process acquire iconic status—by providing powerful imaginative constructions that help resolve cultural contradictions. Meanings associated with these iconic brands serve to eliminate felt tensions between societal ideals and people's day-to-day experiences, and they address the anxieties of a nation through myths or stories that affect the way people think about themselves and their lives. "[Iconic brands] operate as identity magnets, delivering myths that are precisely focused to address an acute contradiction in society. If the myth resonates, the brand accumulates followers" (Holt 2004, p. 149). This work demonstrates the importance of cultural insight in creating and sustaining extraordinarily compelling brands, but as with Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry (2003), Holt does not explore or describe the processes by which marketers create cultural myths and, more importantly, how consumers use these myths for purposes dictated by their individual life projects.

Holt and Thompson (2004) offer a more nuanced understanding of how consumers use culturally constructed meanings in their investigation of men's efforts to resolve a culturally rooted masculine identity crisis through consumption. They describe the ways branded goods and services are employed to help reconcile a pair of antithetical American masculinity models and how men use them to construct a version of masculine respect that has meaning and utility for them. However, as with Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry's (2003) and Holt's (2004) studies, Holt and Thompson's study reveals little about the original creation of meanings associated with the brands involved. In addition, because its focus is on the men rather than on the brands, implications for branding and brand management are difficult to discern.

Works by Kates (2004) and Martin, Schouten, and McAlexander (2006) explore the ways different social groups use marketer-created brand meanings to enhance group and individual identity projects. Kates explores brand cocreation among members of the gay community and identifies the ways brand meanings serve to "enhance and dramatize issues of interest and importance" (p. 462) to that subculture. He asserts that "collective action frames," or ways of interpreting and generating meanings within a community, serve to legitimate some brands and bind them to the group; these brands are incorporated into the commu-

nity's collective memory and serve as repositories for interpretations of its shared past. We agree with Kates's conclusion that brands are complex entities, and brand legitimacy may take as many forms as there are consumption communities. However, we believe that this account of brands gives short shrift to the original creation of brand meanings and their roots in culture, a limitation shared by the work of Martin, Schouten, and McAlexander.

Martin, Schouten, and McAlexander (2006) discover that women who ride Harley-Davidson motorcycles subvert the hypermasculinity that is integral to the brand, as well as female gender stereotypes, to create meanings that facilitate the forward movement of their individual identity projects. The "outlaw mythos" that is foundational to the brand is used to "explore and expand" female riders' personal boundaries and their interpretations of femininity, while being transformed to suit individual and group purposes and needs. Again, however, the original creation of the meanings co-opted by female members of the brand community is left to readers' imaginations.

Taken together, the contributions of all the studies we reference strongly suggest the existence of something resembling the brand gestalt. However, each study focuses on only one or two components, providing a less-than-complete picture and leaving open questions related to the way parts of the gestalt interact to produce an effect greater than any or all of them.

Previously, we signaled our intent to discuss relevant research on children's understanding of brands. Little is known about children and sociocultural branding or the coconstruction of brands by children. Evidence exists that until late childhood, brands are understood in concrete terms, rooted in marketer presentation and direct experience. Research by John (1999) and Achenreiner and John (2003) demonstrates that though seven- or eight-year-olds associate brand names with particular products and include them in requests, it is not until late childhood or early adolescence that children think abstractly about brands, attributing to them personality traits and associating them with constellations of user characteristics. In addition, Chaplin and John's (2005) study of self-brand connections reveals that older children's accounts of the brand relationships depicted in their "Who am I?" collages rely on abstractions rather than on the concrete references typical of children several years younger. These findings are consistent with the work of developmental theorists, including that of Piaget (1932, 1970), Kohlberg (1981), and Gilligan (1982).

The perspectives of these theorists vary in several aspects, but they are similar in that they assume the existence of cognitive structures—interpretive frameworks or unified systems of thinking—to which external events are assimilated and are themselves altered to accommodate new experiences. Developmental change, which results from continuous reciprocal influence exerted by an inherently active organism and its environment, is characterized as progression through a series of stages. A child's experience of the physical and social worlds is determined by his or her stage of cognitive development—that is, the cognitive structures he or she has evolved to that point. In general, it is

believed that not until late childhood do these structures enable understanding of others' perspectives and motivations or make abstract thought possible.

In the following section, we discuss our methodological approach; we then describe what we learned about the American Girl brand from studying its history and its texts and material manifestations. From there, we move to what we consider the cultural roots of the brand and the ways it is experienced by adult women and multigenerational female family units and by girls ages 7 to 12, who represent its primary customer target. Finally, we discuss what we believe to be the implications of our work for theory and for managerial practice.

Method: Ethnographic Procedure

To read the American Girl brand through its built environments, members of a multigendered, multigenerational, multinational, multiethnic, and multi-institutional research team deployed themselves inside, outside, and around Chicago's American Girl Place and the living spaces of Chicago-area brand devotees. For more than three years, team members—often in pairs, but occasionally alone—shared the store environment and children's play spaces that house the brand with girls and their mothers and grandmothers. Three of the researchers also spent time in the New York flagship store. Data collection involved participant observation, ethnographic interview, photography, and videography; we obtained informed consent from all participants. The field notes and transcripts generated by this effort constitute the data from which we draw interpretations.

The primary objective of the ethnographic exploration was to understand the sources and uses of meanings assigned to the American Girl brand—that is, where, how, and by whom these meanings seem to have been originated and the locations in which and purposes to which they were used by the brand's constituents. We believed that identification of the points of influence within the manifold or matrix (Berthon et al. 2007) and description of that which was created and propagated at each point would yield a better understanding of the interactive properties of brand systems. We suspect that the power of extraordinary brands resides in such interactions.

With that end in mind, we designed our ethnographic approach to explore the multigenerational aspect of the brand. Most frequently, the mother and grandmother were interviewed along with the young doll owner. In-home ethnographic interviews ranged from two to three hours and typically included a tour of the doll owner's American Girl collection, as well as descriptions and demonstrations of modes of doll play. These interviews were conducted by single or multiple team members and were often followed by trips to the store so that the researchers could shop with the girls in whose homes they had spent time. Families encountered on Michigan Avenue buses—some visiting from as far away as New Jersey—and on the South Shore trains from Indiana were intercepted and interviewed on the spot, in their hotel rooms, or at the store. Hours of unobtrusive in-store observation were logged, tea was taken at the

café, and reviews of the American Girl play (*Circle of Friends*) were shared by girls in earnest after-theater discussions with their researcher/chaperones in nearby eating establishments. A visit to the American Girl Place offices for an interview with the store's marketing director, as well as less formal discussions with sales associates, provided a management perspective on the role of store ambience in the creation of consumption rituals and the emplacement of memory construction.

Members of the team immersed themselves in popular press articles about American Girl and read several of the historical narratives accompanying the dolls to ensure maximum familiarity with the brand. Each interview transcript, text, and retail experience was considered from the standpoint of the shared understanding of the brand phenomenon that prevailed at the time and also served to inform and evolve that provisional understanding. The whole research team met periodically to share experiences and impressions; to disseminate data; and to identify, discuss, and adapt relevant theoretical frames in drafting interpretations. Frequent e-mail communication facilitated the iterative sensemaking effort that took place between meetings.

Findings: Myriad Meanings

The American Girl brand shows evidence of much complexity, comprising a multitude of narratives that are both textual and textural. The former are literally printed in books that tell the stories of the dolls and conversation cards that sit on tables in the American Girl Café or are enacted from scripts, as in the musical revue that can be experienced at the American Girl Place theater or the made-for-television American Girl movies. The latter are embedded in the well-orchestrated material culture of the enterprise (merchandising and merchandise) and are recovered in reverie and (re)telling as consumers interact with product and components of the retail environment. If brands come to life through stories, this brand is animated, grows, and gains vigor through the multimedia chronicling of tales that are woven into the lives of its users and its large population of engaged fans. Our investigation yielded insight into a multiplicity of brand meanings from a variety of narrative sources: the culture at large, the founder's brand creation myth, the company's stewards, adult women, and the girls who represent the brand's primary target market and core franchise. As we show, constellations of meaning from these sources have different foci and, in many ways, are distinct from one another; yet all are easily accommodated by the brand. A broad focus capable of encompassing these multiple perspectives and the connections among them is critical to apprehending the American Girl brand gestalt.

In what follows, we chronicle the diverse meaning creation and utilization processes enacted by the many and varied adherents of this brand. We begin by detailing the cultural aspects of American Girl, including its intended meanings and cultural purpose. From there, we describe the ways these meanings are presented and enacted in the material environment of the American Girl retail locations. Next, we describe the coproduction and use of American Girl brand meanings by adult women and girls, as well as multi-

generational female families. By encompassing all these perspectives, we provide a glimpse of the American Girl brand gestalt.

American Girl Brand Meanings and the Marketer

In his research on the influence of Walt Disney and his entertainment empire, Sammond (2005) studies a range of popular sociology books, child-rearing manuals, mainstream advertising, mass-culture theory, and Walt Disney motion pictures. He theorizes (p. 106) that rather than representing a commercial "colonization of childhood," the rise of the Walt Disney entertainment brand is linked to a simultaneous "national enterprise of producing normal children." According to Sammond, Disney's response to concerns about the negative and intertwined impacts of consumerism and the mass media on children was to position himself as a father figure to American children and the Disney offering as a kind of social salve to cultural problems.

Our perspective on American Girl has much in common with Sammond's (2005) view of Disney. Pleasant Rowland founded American Girl in Middleton, Wis. (a suburb of Madison) in 1985 to offer 3 historically situated American Girl dolls—a pioneer girl, a Victorian girl, and a Depression-era girl—each with her own story. Eventually, 10 more dolls were added. The result is a line of 13 fictional doll characters representing nine historical eras and several different ethnic groups. Each of the 9 main characters (4 of the primary protagonists have companions) has six novellas relating episodes of her life story and a set of elaborately detailed and historically accurate items of doll clothing, accessories, and accoutrements.

The books' story lines address more or less universally relevant issues: maintaining supportive and loving relationships with families and friends, engendering trust, perseverance, and dealing with embarrassment and disappointment. As such, they are barely cloaked morality tales, each with a different ethnic and temporal/historical spin, a young girl's version of the Harlequin romance or "chick lit" (Chiu 2006) genre. Contemporary dolls are also offered, and girls are encouraged to choose a doll whose skin tone, hair color and type, and facial features are similar to their own from the Just Like You series. Girl of the Year contemporary doll characters have been introduced in recent years, one each January. They come complete with books, clothing, accessories, and furniture, all destined to disappear from stores and catalog the following December. In addition, the American Girl library offers junior etiquette and self-help primers with titles such as *Oops! The Manners Guide for Girls* and *A Smart Girl's Guide to Boys: Surviving Crushes, Staying True to Yourself, and Other Love Stuff*. The company publishes a bimonthly magazine titled *American Girl*, which it describes as "the age-appropriate alternative to teen magazines." These product lines receive no traditional advertising support, and marketing communication channels are limited to the catalogs, Web site, television films, and retail outlets.

From the beginning, Pleasant Rowland, who markets herself as carefully as Walt Disney did himself, represented the American Girl brand as moral salve for a culture whose conception of girlhood was often painfully at odds with

girls'—and mothers'—day-to-day experience. In a 2002 interview in *Fortune* magazine, she relates the birth story of the enterprise in the form of an epic tale squarely centered on its mother-creator. The story commences with fertilization and gestation, as a visit to Colonial Williamsburg and the experience of failing to find an alternative to Cabbage Patch Kids and Barbie dolls as Christmas presents for her eight- and ten-year-old nieces “collide” and “the concept literally explode(s) in (her) brain” (Sloane 2002, p. 70). She then describes a metaphorical miscarriage scare, the result of skepticism on the part of consumer focus group participants and direct marketing suppliers, and recounts the birthing, rapid growth, and ultimate adoption of the business by Mattel Inc. From management's perspective, the key to the brand's success was the mixing of pleasurable fantasy play with education and morality:

“Chocolate cake with vitamins” is how Rowland describes the mélange of imagination, history, and values that characterized the brand. She holds fast to her Midwestern morals in Pleasant Company's efforts to do right by little girls. “Mothers were tired of the sexualization of little girls, tired of making children grow up too fast,” says Rowland. “They yearned for a product that would both capture their child's interest and allow little girls to be little girls for a little longer.” (Sloane 2002, p. 70)

Just as Sammond (2005) describes Disney as an unguent for parents, American Girl may be perceived as a protective shield for little girls against the precocious sexualization that is often blamed on consumer culture and, in particular, brand marketers (Quart 2003; Schor 2004). This ideological framing of the brand's meaning is essential to understanding aspects of its consumption, but “chocolate cake with vitamins” is only one element in the intricate story of this embodied brand.

The result of Pleasant Rowland's efforts is a set of fictional girl doll characters, each revealed in six paperbound novelettes that link significant elements of the character's life in a sequential story arc. The first book in the series invariably tells a story of the girl and her family, for example, *Meet Kirsten* (or Samantha or Molly); then, there is a story about school in *Kirsten Learns a Lesson*; *Kirsten's Surprise* is a Christmas story; *Happy Birthday Kirsten!* is a birthday story; *Kirsten Saves the Day* is an adventure tale set during the summer; and *Changes for Kirsten* is a story about overcoming adversity that is set during the winter. Each book is 60–70 pages in length, contains four or five chapters, and is written at an eight- to ten-year-old reading level with pictures of the girl and her family and friends rendered in realistic colored line drawings. A particular genius of the books is their portrayal of the girl/doll in several outfits and settings that evoke the historical period and lend an air of authenticity to the stories.

The most visually compelling American Girl product line components are the 18-inch dolls, each intended to represent a “real girl” located within a particular part of the country and period in American history. The dolls have a solid, substantial look and feel and have similar proportions to a school-aged child. Skin tone as well as eye and hair color and style varies, but all the dolls share a visage that bespeaks intelligence and good humor. These dolls and

their elaborate and authentic accoutrements, including miniature but perfectly fabricated furnishings, doll clothing, and accessories, aid in the conceptualization and enactment of the historically rooted stories, which many believe represent the soul of the brand. For example, Kirsten is situated in 1854 and is described as “a pioneer girl of strength and spirit.” Addy shows courage because she and her mother escaped from slavery in 1864. Josefina, whose mother had died, found herself in New Mexico in 1824 learning to “preserve what was precious” while welcoming inevitable change. Turn-of-the-century Samantha, characterized as a “bright Victorian beauty,” displays kindness toward and concern for those less fortunate than herself. Bespectacled, dark-haired Molly is “a lovable schemer and dreamer” whose resourcefulness helped her family survive the Great Depression. These descriptions shed light on the nature of the fundamental American Girl innovation: the pairing of more-or-less ordinary dolls with elaborate historical and personal stories that exemplify a well-defined set of values.

Other sources of brand meaning are the universal and timeless themes represented by the books' story lines—relationships between girls and their parents, conflicts with friends, difficulty relating to members of the opposite sex, issues of class and race—to which almost any young girl can relate. For example, *Kirsten Learns a Lesson* depicts the young Swedish immigrant as embarrassed by her lack of linguistic proficiency and being teased by other girls who are native English speakers. The stories are engaging and present dilemmas or conflicts that reach a denouement in the books' final pages. There are also larger, overarching issues pertaining to the life of a particular character that span all six of “her” books and are only resolved in the last one in the series. An example is the absence of Molly's father, who is away from home fighting in World War II during most of the stories. Each book is followed by a non-fiction section called “A Peek into the Past,” which provides greater detail on the relevant historical period with photographs, illustrations, and additional text. The books support the core objective of the brand, which is to “bring history alive and provide girls with role models” (Morgenson 1997, p. 128) who enact morality and traditional values.

As with retro brand meanings (Brown, Kozinetz, and Sherry 2003), those of American Girl derive some of their utility from the historical periods in which they originate. American Girl can be characterized as old-fashioned without being old and thus can transcend (however temporarily) the generation gap between grandmother and mother, mother and daughter, and grandmother and granddaughter. In addition, these historically derived brand meanings may help combat the tendency that Cushman (1990) notes of consumers to experience a sense of emptiness while seeking fulfillment in the moment. This feeling of emptiness is reminiscent of what the cultural historian Gebser ([1949] 1991) calls “denaturing” (becoming disconnected from the natural world) and “deculturing” (losing skills, including storytelling, and artifacts that come to serve as substitutes for natural relationships). As a brand concept, American Girl can be viewed as lifting girls out of their historical moment, creating and providing access to a transcendent “recultur-

ing” place and space that connects what they like to call “our” time with those in which the story characters lived.

The American Girl brand also provides a set of cultural resources for women to deploy in the construction and transmission of a legitimized gender identity. By offering scripts for the enactment of heroic femininity and templates for the replication and perpetuation of domesticity, the brand helps mitigate the effects of cultural contradictions surrounding the contemporary female role. In addition, by facilitating and participating in what has been called “allo-mothering”—the provision of maternal nurturing to children by nonmothers—American Girl abets women’s efforts to provide their daughters with the impeccable parenting portrayed by the culture as their birthright (see Sherry et al. 2008).

American Girl may be viewed as having been created with the objective of mending tears in the cultural fabric that cause discomfort to women and girls. The brand is intended to palliate the pain associated with cultural contradictions, such as those that Holt (2004) and Holt and Thompson (2004) describe, not through advertising but rather through the development and delivery of product and service experiences and narratives. The impact of the Mattel ethos on the Rowland aura is yet to be fully realized. However, the recent enactment of social dramas rooted in stakeholder concern about the marketer’s representation of ethnic communities and labor management practices suggests that the brand’s rampant growth is being read as incipient “Barbification” (Sherry et al. 2008). If this is the case, the Mattel acquisition is as likely to hurt as to help American Girl.

American Girl Brand Meanings and the Material Environment

The store. Another pivotal element in the creation of this complex brand is the set of distinctive retail spaces in which it resides. Our opening vignette describes Chicago’s American Girl Place, the first flagship store, which draws enthusiastic hordes of girls and women inside through a revolving door and then deposits them back on the street carrying red bags containing artifacts from the world within.

When inside, consumers find themselves on a landing—a threshold between worlds—mediated by a concierge who dispenses advice and summons sales floor assistants to facilitate the expedient location of product by harried parents. Beyond, there is an elaborate bookshop, stocked with the cultural historical biographies that celebrate the signature dolls in the various lines (which are available for purchase immediately beneath the signage bearing their names) and the self-help books that proffer advice to young consumers negotiating the perils of girlhood. Abutting the bookstore is a photographer’s studio, in which the images of young consumers and their dolls are rendered as portraits and framed as American Girl magazine covers.

From the escalator down to the basement floor, the walls of one room are lined with vitrines that display each American Girl doll and all her accessories in museal tableaux. Consumers parade before the glass cases as if visiting a museum of natural history, pressing hands and faces against the displays and passing commentary on the con-

tents. In this particular sales area, the floor is carpeted in dark red, and baroque furniture is arrayed around the room in such a way as to create homey micro zones suggestive of parlors or drawing rooms. Atmospheric settees, divans, and sociables (s-shaped couches that allow sitters to face one another) provide inviting perches for shoppers. The other sales area on this level is lined with vitrines as well, but these are larger-scale dioramas that provide literal windows into life-sized interior worlds of the American Girl dolls’ historical personae.

The “up” escalator goes to the second story of American Girl Place and into the realm of American Girls of Today. In an anteroom, the Girl of the Year doll is merchandised with accessories and books in a less museal way than her downstairs counterparts. This anteroom also contains girl-sized clothing, jewelry, and line-extended paraphernalia, such as electronics and hair accessories, and abuts the largest, busiest, and most variegated sales floor in the building. The magnificent midway on the second level is more dimly lit than the other sales areas, and its floor is padded with black carpet that muffles much of the ambient noise heard in the other rooms. The midway comprises three principal zones and has several specialized sales rooms abutting it. These rooms are boutiques, which feature the Bitty Babies and Angelina Ballerina lines, which are each uniquely accessorized and serve as gateway products into the American Girl/American Girl of Today franchises.

As they leave the anteroom, consumers encounter an enormous glass case housing approximately two dozen Just Like You dolls dressed identically in the purple uniform of a private academy and posed in long rows as if on risers for what appears to be a class photograph. The dolls vary phenotypically by skin, eye, and hair color, but they are morphologically indistinguishable. Cards describing each doll type are attached to the case, so consumers can identify by text, as well as by sight, the exact physical makeup of the doll they desire. Halfway down the corridor, a beauty salon for dolls occupies pride of place. Surrounding the salon are numerous display cases of dolls wearing clothing and accessories from the mundane to the fantastic. The walls of the entire corridor are lined from floor to ceiling with merchandise depicted in the display case. The end of the midway is devoted to developmental self-care literature designed to prepare young girls for the passage into adolescence, to the doll hospital from which broken dolls are transhipped for repair, and to merchandise pickup and checkout registers.

American Girl Place is a sensory and emotional juggernaut that hits women with surprising force. Capitalizing on the “reflexivity within research” opportunity presented by ethnographic observation (Wallendorf and Brucks 1993, p. 342), we captured the impressions and feelings of one member of our research team (a white, Italian, married woman with a son) on her first visit to the Chicago store. We share these to convey the overwhelming nature of the American Girl Place experience:

My God! These are very beautiful things. “Cute!” as Americans say. I’m really impressed, surprised at the richness and the beauty of all of the things I see. There are so many of these beautiful dolls with marvelous clothes and

suits of different shapes and colors. The main colors that they feature are the ones I loved when I was a child: pink, light blue, orange, yellow, lilac, and fuchsia. The colors of young girls, I would say. The colors of joy, beauty, spring. Each doll is wearing a very nice suit with any possible combination of accessories. What impresses me immediately is the variety of dolls' shoes, slippers, bracelets, and bags. They are perfect despite their small size. They are even nicer than "real" shoes and slippers. For a while, I'm not able to appreciate all the particulars because there are simply too many things to see. Too much for my eyes and my mind. I feel like a little girl under the Christmas tree and a bit shamefaced to show my feelings to my colleagues. I'm literally overwhelmed. It is unbelievable; you can't imagine how I feel without also seeing these dolls and their things. "You can't imagine" is the expression I would use to tell others what I'm experiencing. I've come to the shop without ever imagining that I would become so emotionally involved, have such a strong emotional reaction. But I look in the faces of the other women here, and I can see a sort of wonderment and amazement also in their eyes. Anyway, I'm not able to avoid expressing my feelings. I would like to be a child and have the chance to buy something from this store to play with and take care of. Even if I know that I wouldn't be able to choose a favorite thing. It seems very difficult. What I'm describing is not the surprise of the typical Italian tourist visiting a well-refurnished U.S. store with a rich and variegated products' offer. My surprise is like being in the Toy Place of my childhood fables, like the one I experienced in Disneyland Paris in the dolls tunnel of "It's a Small World" or something like that. I can remember that I felt emotions that reminded me of my childhood that drew me back: enchantment, joy, airiness, happiness, and innocence. These are the feelings and sensations I am living now. These feelings remind me of the illusion and airiness of dreams, the possibility of building a beautiful world, and to imagine a painless and perfect life. A life of beauty and wealth. (Field note excerpt, April 26, 2003)

There is surprise and delight in this passage, tinged with nostalgia and wistfulness. This researcher came to American Girl Place "without ever imagining that [she] would become so emotionally involved" and amazed herself—as well as all of us—with her strong reaction. The source of that which overwhelmed her is no proto-American or mass-media unguent ideology. Particularly obvious because of the cross-cultural context in play here (and the researcher's lack of a daughter to share these items with) is that these strong feeling are linked to the "very beautiful things" that work their magic first through the visual sense, a powerful gaze. The dolls and their outfits and accessories are rich and elaborate, in different shapes and the colors of girlhood—colors of "joy, beauty, spring"—and all are "perfect, despite their small size."

As with other branded servicescapes, including Nike Town and ESPN Zone (Sherry 1998; Sherry et al. 2004), American Girl Place serves as a repository of objects and experiences gathered from the outside world, bringing the "outside inside." However, as the following excerpt from our field notes illustrates, American Girl Place also extends itself out onto the street. The "inside" is taken "outside" as mothers, daughters, and grandmothers appropriate façade affordances, sidewalk, and curb space for multifaceted devotional rituals (Miller 2001) that bind the matriliney ever more closely.

The store's window dressings lure audiences to the building, informing and entertaining passersby curious enough to stop. Often, this window-shopping concludes with the snapping of photographs, first of the store displays, then of other features of the facade (signs, flags, etc.), and finally of visitors themselves posed before the building. Trophy photos and video are vehicles of memory creation to which the boulevard outside the vestibule of American Girl Place is devoted. In front of the store, girls pose with bags. Girls pose with dolls. Dolls are posed with bags. Intergenerational photos are perhaps most commonly snapped. Daughters pose with mothers and dolls. Granddaughters pose with mothers, grandmothers, and dolls. A *communitas* of the midway emerges, which energizes (or enervates) shoppers entering or leaving the store. Storefront photos and footage often end up in scrapbooks and home movies (themselves often carried on the journey) that document the pilgrimage from start to finish. (Excerpt from research field notes)

These are not so easily dismissed as mere Kodak moments that become "McMemories" (Ebron 1999), because the many components of the shopping trip continually rehearse the sacred trust of domestic reproduction, which is reinforced over repeated trips and is further strengthened by the intergenerational transfer of material culture in the form of dolls, clothes, and books. The brand can be viewed as rebar for the female descent group, fortifying the bridging and bonding that proves the lineage.

The theater and café. On the lower level of American Girl Place is the American Girl Theater, the site of an elaborate musical revue that is part morality tale, part Horatio Alger mythology, and part paean to nationalism. According to the company's marketing material, the *American Girls Revue* was "written by Broadway playwrights" and seeks to bring "the stories of the American Girls characters to life" (http://www.americangirl.com/stores/experience_theater.php#revue). The revue celebrates the coming of age of the brand's quintessential heroine in all her glorious diversity and embodies the American Girl ethos of overcoming challenges by staying true to oneself and one's values and building strong and lasting relationships with family and friends. The play evokes powerful emotional responses among theatergoers; children are transfixed, and many adult audience members may be seen brushing away tears. Thus dramatized, cultural biographies are further reinforced, becoming potent objects of contemplation for the matriliney, in turn provoking projection and introjection.

On the second story of American Girl Place sits the American Girl Café. The café fronts Chicago Avenue, affording patrons a view of the Magnificent Mile and a bank of American flags from the large dining-room windows. Elegant, intimate tables replete with cantilevered doll chairs seat female family units and their dolls. Birthday parties are held in this venue as well. The formality of the setting gives young girls a glimpse of a more civil time and a foretaste of the refined events the future may hold for them. In an amazing production of social interaction, conversation cards containing questions (e.g., "Do you remember your first day of school?") designed to elicit family stories from the group sit in a box on the table. Thus, girls are provided a template for getting to know their mothers and grandmothers as fellow girls whose experiences both define and

transcend the specifics of their times. Consider the following reflection of one informant:

They had these little conversation starters, and they ask you questions about like, “What’s your goal?” “What was your best birthday party?” “Who’s your favorite teacher?”—stuff like that. They were in like a little present box, and you opened them up, and they were printed on little slips of paper and you picked one out.... [My favorite was] “What was your best birthday?” ... I said my second birthday because I had a Cinderella party, and everybody came dressed up ... in, like, fairytale costumes.

This scripted enactment of intimacy, coupled with the sharing of a ceremonial meal, constitutes a powerful cross-generation bonding ritual that melds individual stories into family history and almost effortlessly evokes family identity, the family’s “subjective sense of its own continuity over time” and its unique characteristics (Bennett, Wolin, and McAvity 1988, p. 212). Aligned with female-relevant meanings, the American Girl brand both facilitates and participates in the creation of female family history and family identity (see Epp and Price 2008). The brand experience becomes, literally, of family value.

Regardless of whether the conversation starter device is employed, tea in the café at American Girl Place is a memorable experience:

“Tammy”: I’ve been to tea twice. Once with my mother, my grandma, and myself and, of course, Molly [her doll]. But the one I remember most was my friend was moving to Atlanta, and it was around my birthday, so I went to tea with my mom, my friend “Olivia,” and I... and we went to tea because she was moving. It was my birthday. So it was like celebration and mourning.

Miller (1998) makes clear that shopping is a means of expressing and revealing relationships with others. Shopping resembles sacrifice, “an activity that constructs the divine as a desiring subject” (Miller 1998, p. 148), and is motivated by a desire to engage with the “subject.” Similarly, the purpose of shopping is less to buy things that the “subject” wants than to relate to the individual who wants the things. At American Girl Place, shopping as engagement with others is manifest; this is the most spectacular of the (literal and figurative) spaces hosted by the brand in which grandmothers, mothers, daughters, and granddaughters (as well as ancillary sororal entities, such as aunts, sisters, and female friends) are invited to gather, converse with one another, and share memorable experiences choreographed by American Girl. Women and girls stand together before the dioramas marveling at the realism and completeness of the depictions of past eras or gaze and point at the shelves and glass cases feeling vertigo engendered by the small size and seemingly impossible perfection of yet another outfit, set of accessories, or room of dollhouse-sized furnishings.

The mediatized environment serves to validate grandmothers, who often function as the cruise directors and financiers of American Girl Place outings. The eras in which the doll characters are supposed to have lived are those in which the grandmothers came of age or those during which their parents (the girls’ great grandparents) were children. Thus, the historical periods referenced help realize the grandmother, as well as female family members from

past generations. In addition, retail theater dramatizes the template for family building with which the grandmother is entrusted. Recognizing an opportunity to immortalize herself, one grandmother accepts the brand’s mandate to “make memories” at American Girl Place.

Well, I think grandparents ... parents, too, but especially grandparents ... like to create memories for the children and for the family, you know? And I just thought that this could be one of those memories for her.... I think it would make ... those things I remember of my childhood, you know ... the grown-ups and events in my life that, when I think back about, I like, you know,... they’re special, and I want to create that kind of event for her. That she’d say, “I remember my grandmother, my Nanna ...”—she calls me Nanna—“My Nanna and my mom and I went to American Girl,” and I just ... you know ... I think they’re more important than things, is the feelings and the memories. I mean, I remember it too, you know, but for her it’s much more important.

The American Girl brand is both marketscape and mindscape (Kozinets et al. 2004; Sherry 1998). As a (meta)physical destination, the flagship stores encourage consumers to have a compelling experience of the mastery of rites of passage comprising heroic femininity, resulting in the transmission of a familial template for domesticity. The lived experience of that mastery, the immediacy of the moment that being in the store encourages, is the marketscape payoff. The memorability of that experience—that is, the ability to relive the experience in other venues (and the concomitant need to rekindle the memory by revisiting the store), such that the moment becomes unforgettable—is the more ethereal payoff of mindscape. The importance of memory within the context of American Girl Place is implicit in the tagline mantra, “Café. Theater. Shops. Memories,” as it is in admonitions from management to the research team members not to “interfere with the creation of memories.”

American Girl Place is a brandscape that, similar to ESPN Zone (Kozinets et al. 2004), might be expected to dominate and constrain, but instead it seems to enable cocreation by consumers. In this case, the emplaced enactment of gender and family binds consumers to the brand and enriches the experience of other consumers. As McAlexander and colleagues (2002) show with brandfests sponsored by Jeep, the marketer hosts the community, facilitating the creation of new connections among members while reinforcing existing ones. The marketer and the brand also enter the community, becoming nodes in the network of relationships connecting its members.

American Girl Brand Meanings and Adult Women

American Girl provides mothers and grandmothers with what can be regarded as a model for the comportment of young girls and a manual for their socialization. These commercially sourced aids to enculturation and instructions for transmuted and transmitting traditional values are gratefully received by female relatives charged with helping “tweenagers” negotiate the broken terrain of girlhood in a plural postmodern society. To a significant extent, the American Girl stories represent vehicles for conveying values. Although they have elaborate plotlines, they also refer-

ence and reinforce values, such as hard work, civility, politeness, attention to the needs of others, and respect for adults. They are brand allegories, symbolic narratives or extended metaphors that provide instruction in the resolution of moral conflict. For this reason, they are particularly useful to parents and other adults who willingly acknowledge their debt to the American Girl brand. Consider the statement of one such informant:

“Leticia”: I think that, you know, they study it in school, and I’m glad because I’ve read the books, and I think the books are good and they have a really good message, a message that I would like to teach [“Charlene” (her daughter)]. And one of the books was about some poor girl who wasn’t getting a good education, and Samantha was teaching her ... [long pause] ... and the prejudices that existed back then, and that Samantha didn’t have those prejudices, and those are the kind of messages that I would like [“Charlene”] to have an understanding of and that she wrote. They were talking about factories and things like that and gave the kids a better understanding of like, well, you know, the factory and production and the whole industrial revolution wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. There were these poor starving kids breathing in all this bad air and another whole aspect to that that I would like [“Charlene”] to know and understand. The industrial revolution isn’t everything it’s cracked up to be. It’s not all about getting more money. And so those kind of values that I see in the books I really appreciate.

Important to “Leticia” is the authenticity and legitimacy of the stories, which help validate her own moral stance and aid her in communicating a more nuanced view of the historical period than she seems to believe will be propagated by the cultural authorities and institutions that have access to her daughter.

Similarly, “Mary,” a mother, provides her plans to read the American Girl books to her future granddaughter and the reason she holds the books, and the brand, in high esteem:

You know,... we have read two books because [she laughs] [“Holly” (her daughter)] is too old now. I’ll bring them to my granddaughter. So I read the books myself because, you know, like there are so many negative things out there, and so much violence. These books are just good values, you know, how to be kind, how to be honest, how to work hard, and these kind of things.

“Mary” views the books as providing a counterweight to popular culture’s negativity and violence by referencing timeless virtues, such as kindness and honesty.

The elaborate and extensive nature of the American Girl product line creates endless opportunity for female relatives to pore together over the catalog or Web site. A mother having tea at American Girl Place with her daughter “Amalia” and her own mother (the girl’s grandmother) noted the following:

We like the catalog, and we get it every month. Wish we had this, and wish we had that ... you know, so ... we’ve been talking about this for six months, that we were gonna take “Amalia” to Chicago [American Girl Place] for her birthday. We all got so excited looking forward to it.

The use of “we” is not incidental; the female kinship unit is foregrounded in many discussions about American Girl

product wants and needs, and group excursions to American Girl Place often originate with family forays through the catalogs. These weekend, birthday, or holiday excursions create occasions to share memories and reinforce intergenerational connections while having tea in the café or gathered before the store’s historical dioramas. Members of the research team witnessed more than one mother explaining to a young girl that the bicycle or desk in the display was much like the one her grandmother or great grandmother owned and that those female relatives had come of age during the era in which a particular doll character’s story took place.

Female kinship groups also find powerful cultural material in the American Girl brand with which to construct themselves as a family. The complex brand narratives girls, mothers, and grandmothers use to author their own stories facilitate the creation of family mythologies that represent a synthesis of the commercial and the personal. Stories from the dolls’ books are interwoven with those from the lives of the daughter, mother, and grandmother and are used to support family oral history projects and create a shared understanding of collective identity. Plager (1999) calls this “family legacy,” an aspect of people’s “lifeworlds” that connects them with other family members and the kinship group’s past, present, and possible futures. Family legacy is “lived understanding” of personal and family identity constituted through conversation with family-of-origin members, extended family, and members of previous generations. The contribution of American Girl to a tween’s understanding of the context in which previous generations of her family lived is deeply appreciated, as the following comments from a grandmother attest:

Well ... it’s empowering with,... you know, to have a girl shop like this, and the dolls are all of different time period in life; like Samantha is from 1904, and so all her books tell us how life was lived back then and ... answers where girls learn how it was back in the old days.... Well ... it seems like you are connecting with the past, past me [she touches her breast with the open hand, pointing to her identity/soul/personal story/experience], past my generation, you know, cause I’m ... 66, you know, and I don’t know what it was like to live back in 1904, but these books are pretty true to what I’ve heard my mother tell about her life.... She grew up in the 1910 era, so for that ... and then, you know, there are different ones around here [she points to the windows of American Girls collection, Samantha and Addy, which are close to us], just look around here ... Addy... and so she was born during the Civil War, you know, so there are all kind of,... and Kirsten is 1854, and Josephina is 1824, so you know how the Hispanics lived about that time.... There are stories about that,... so I just think that it’s good for girls, to know all that ... of women.

The brand also serves as a stimulus to the playful reconstruction of family history. One of the girls, “Lisa,” pointed out a photograph of her family dressed in Civil War–period costumes that sat on a shelf in her home. In the photograph, she wears an outfit identical to that of the Addy doll she holds in her arms. “Lisa” described the events of the day on which the photograph had been taken, and her mother, “Donna,” brought into the room a homemade holiday card that bore this photograph on its cover. “Donna” rose from

her chair to deliver a dramatic reading of the story printed inside the card, which commingled the historical and contemporary and the real and imagined:

Okay ... December 1865: Dear family and friends, Back in 1864, whispers of freedom spread through the Miller plantation, where even though the risks were high, the family's future was set free by escaping to the Promised Land. Papa Tim went first because he grew tired of being the jester and performing his minstrel show for the master. Now in Chicago, he is learning to read and hopes to go to school next year. Big brother Carl was sold away to the plantation, many miles to the south. We miss him terribly, but now that we are free, he comes to visit on the weekend. Sister Lisa is now five years old and is growing so fast. She is going to school for freed children and loves to draw and write her letters. She was brave that night when we led her into the woods on that journey north to freedom. I could no longer stand to see my family members beaten and sold away. We left baby Garret in the care of the elders, but kept our promise to come back for him. He is now one and loves to play with his spelling blocks. He is also walking now. On April 19, 1865, the Civil War ended and there was much rejoicing in the street. Cannons and guns were fired. We all were celebrating. Unfortunately, the same sounds but with sour occurred a week later after President Lincoln was shot on Friday, April 14, 1865, and died the next morning. With God's grace, we are fortunate as former slaves to have reunited our family. Earning a living and building a new life is a struggle, but with the warmth of family love, we will survive. We are now getting ready for Jubilee Celebration on January 1st as we celebrate the Emancipation Proclamation that was issued by President Lincoln on January 1st, 1863. We face the future with hope and prayers that our grandchildren and our great grandchildren will remember the struggle and know that love for God, yourself, and your family, and your fellow man will see you through. Love always, "Donna Caldwell," Chicago, IL.

Commenting on the way she had drawn from the Addy story and her own and family members' lives to create the saga she shared with family and friends, "Lisa's" mother remarked,

This is funny because basically I took tidbits of our real life in 2000. And, um, like our "big brother Carl" lives out south with his parents, and he comes to see us on the weekend. And "Tim," my husband, is definitely a class clown, so he grew up being that way, and "Lisa" was learning to read. So it all came from Addy doll and reading the Addy books. And that's where it generated from.

Coconstruction and reconstruction of family stories from material provided by the brand was common, and appropriation and reinterpretation of story elements by several adult members of a single family produced new combinations of the commercial and the personal, each of which was imbued with shared meaning.

American Girl Brand Meanings and Girls

With female parents' and grandparents' affinity for the brand's traditional values and their connection with its historical renderings firmly established, we now turn our attention to the relationships of the girls with the brand through its stories, artifacts, and retail presence. Observing hours of play and conducting in-home and in-store interviews with more than a dozen girls who were devoted to their Ameri-

can Girl dolls, we develop a picture of American Girl brand consumption that is consistent with principles of cognitive and moral development (Gilligan 1982; Kohlberg 1981; Piaget 1932, 1970).

We find that older girls (ages ten and above) seem to grasp the abstract relational meanings conveyed by the brand's many stories. Others, frequently younger girls, construct a "reality-lite," which concretizes abstract issues and glosses over moral dilemmas. These girls capture aspects of the historically based stories that parallel their own lives or fixate on details they find interesting or appealing but that ultimately lack significance. The following interview with "Olivia," a ten-year-old middle-class Caucasian girl whose grandmother indulges her with American Girl products, is instructive:

Interviewer: [Holds up a doll] Can you tell me what you know about her story, the story of this doll? Did you read the book?

"Olivia": Uh-huh. Yeah, I've read the first three. I didn't get the others. Kit lived in the depression, and her family turned their house into a boarding house when her father lost his job. And her father paid the workers before their company went bankrupt with his own personal money. So that's—they got really poor. And so she meets up with... she's like, she's really outdoorsy and what they'd call a tomboy. That's one way of putting it. And then like one Christmas her family was so poor they couldn't pay the electric bill, so they couldn't have any lights, and she had to work for her uncle. I forgot why. I don't know. I think he was sick. And so she did everything for him. And so when she was taking his shoes to be shined, the shoe-shining place was closed until the depression was over, and that's what the sign said, and so she did it herself. And it was only ten cents then, but that was a lot. So her uncle paid her because she did a really good job. And so she did all the work instead of taking it to the places for it to be done and earned up enough money for Christmas.

Interviewer: Do you think that her life is so different from your personal experience? Your Christmas is different from hers?

"Olivia": Well, kinda yes, kinda no. Because I think the basics of her life were the same as mine. It's just the little details, like I don't think we're having too much of a depression right now, and everything's a lot more expensive. Like the electric bill then was only \$2.10. I think it's a little more now.

"Olivia" recounts events and key details of the stories: Kit's father lost his business, the electricity was cut off, Kit had to go to work. She applies some categorical labels: The family was poor, Kit was a tomboy, ten cents was a lot of money at that time. "Olivia" also seems to recognize the significance of Kit's father's treatment of employees after his company declared bankruptcy. However, her response to the request that she compare Kit's life to her own is revealing. It seems largely beyond her capacity to make the hermeneutic comparisons the interviewer anticipated or to apprehend and articulate the values for which the stories and the brand itself have been lauded by so many mothers. She views her comfortable, upper-middle-class life as essentially the same as that of a nine-year-old impoverished Cincinnati girl who lived during the Depression and had to go to work to help feed her family. The major differences

she cites between the character's life and her own are "little details," such as the cost of electricity. A similar but age-appropriate pattern begins to emerge in our interview with younger "Jessica," a seven-year-old upper-middle-class girl of mixed race:

Interviewer: Did she (Molly) live in this time, in our time?

"Jessica": She lived in a different time.

Interviewer: And what time was that? Can you talk about that time?

"Jessica": Yeah. I can, um, that time when, how you'd make ice cream is very different than you'd make it now, and when you'd wear a dress, it would look very pretty, like this one that you'd wear on special occasions that would just be a dress. On fancy occasions, you would wear something very fancy, and you know those hats that would curve they had back then.

Interviewer: So it was a more formal time?

"Jessica": Yes. Where sipping tea meant you had to have cookies on your plate, and you'd go like this. [She moves her hands in the motion of sipping tea in a delicate manner.]

The American Girl character Molly is a nine-year-old who lived in 1944, during World War II. When asked about her story, "Jessica" does not speak about the war, Molly's mother's struggles as one of many women raising children alone, or Molly's and her mother's constant concern that her father may be killed, concepts that are beyond the grasp of a typical seven-year-old; instead, she speaks of ice cream. For "Jessica," younger and likely in the preoperational, or early operational (Piaget 1970), or preconventional (Gilligan 1982; Kohlberg 1981) stage, the most salient distinction drawn between 1944 and the current time is that "the ice cream is very different." In addition, she describes girls and women as having pretty dresses and curved hats and sipping tea with cookies. As with "Olivia's" rendering of a different story, "Jessica's" focus is on details rather than on underlying meanings or moral issues that might serve to illuminate her own life. Both, however, emphasize relationships among people and view objects as context for situations that involve girls similar to themselves and others who play important roles in their lives (Gilligan 1982).

In contrast, older girls made higher-level comparisons and found inspiration in the stories. Two ten-year-olds, "Becca" (mixed race, middle-class) and "Tammy" (Caucasian, middle-class), demonstrate in the following accounts their ability to apprehend and relate to some of the broader ethical issues addressed in the historical narratives:

"Becca": I think it's because they [the doll characters] are somebody we can look up to, because a lot of their stories are inspiring. Well, they are to me. I don't know about everybody else, but they are to me. 'Cause, like Kit, she had to live through some really hard times, and Samantha's parents had died. So they both have like different issues that they had to deal with that were probably very hard to deal with, but they were able to live happy lives.

"Tammy": Felicity, she's—her time period is the Revolutionary War, and she has to grow—well, her grandfather's on the side of the king, and she's not, so she has to be

appropriate for her grandfather; she has to like live up to those standards. Then, she learns that she would really like to live up to her own standards.

The life lessons implicit in the Felicity and Samantha stories are evident to "Becca" and "Tammy." Even the younger informant, "Jessica," is able to draw direct parallels from a story about overcoming adversity to unusually difficult challenges she is facing in her own life:

She [Molly] was on a boat in Girl Scouts because she was trying to get back; you know you go canoeing in Girl Scouts—well, she would, you know—and she lost the oars and she's on her sailboat, you know, and she's trying to get back, the water was just rushing and the water was pouring, and she has glasses.... She is just trying to get back to camp, and it takes like, I don't know how many hours it would take in the book, but it would take, like, two or three hours just for her to get back ... in the book.

When "Jessica" was asked whether anything comparable had ever happen to her, she was immediately able to draw parallels between this chapter of Molly's story and components of her own life narrative. After describing the time her family was at a restaurant that was robbed at gunpoint, "Jessica" explained the connection between that experience and the one Molly endured on the boat:

Well, you think you're scared, and you think you might die or something, but, because you're kind of locked up and can't get out, because, you know, there might be something out there or something, like she couldn't get out of the boat. You get back and you think that you've died, but you don't really die; it's kind of similar like that because Molly probably thought that she was going to die on that boat, because, you know, usually you do; you fall out.

On the subject of her parents' divorce, "Jessica" commented,

Well, I wish that I didn't get in it. I wish my parents didn't do it, like Molly wished that she hadn't gotten on the boat 'cause it wouldn't happen. I wish that I just didn't have to go to counselors and stuff, and it's like I'm really tied up in something I don't want to do, and I never wanted to do it because I didn't even know it would happen. I can't stop it because it wasn't my choice.

"Jessica's" understanding of how Molly triumphed over adversity on the boat became intertwined with her own life narrative. Her engagement with the American Girl brand, through the Molly doll and story character, provided perspective on the challenges she faced.

It is evident from these vignettes that there is great variation in the girls' ability to use the stories to illuminate their own lives and facilitate the performance of life tasks. Differences in the degree to which the girls extrapolated from particulars to more abstract and broadly significant meanings and the extent to which they evidenced concern for others seemed to reflect their respective stages of cognitive and moral development. As may be the case with "vitamins"—Pleasant Rowland's favorite metaphor for the values that permeate the brand—efficacy depends on the administration of the appropriate dosage in the correct form at the right time. The dolls and their stories are conceived as antidotes to premature ripening, but intended meanings may

be missed or uniquely constructed if girls are not developmentally ready to receive them.

The books, dolls, clothing, and accoutrements are designed to provide girls with a wide range of options for imaginative play. The expectation is that girls will link their fantasy manipulation of the historical characters to a domestic reality with which they are familiar. In the following interview with two seven-year-old, upper-middle-class Caucasian girls, “Maggie” and “Meghan,” we inquired about imaginative play with their American Girl dolls:

Interviewer: Can you give me an example of a story that you made up about your doll’s time?

“Maggie”: Like once, Samantha—her Mom and Dad died when she was three years old, so her grandmother who was very, very rich—she sent Samantha to school. And she hoped Samantha would be a proper lady, but she likes to climb trees and she ripped her tights, so she’s a pretty adventurous, but her uncle and her—I can’t—what’s her name?

“Meghan”: Which one are you talking about?

“Maggie”: With the two sisters. Well—well the uncle—he was thinking about marrying her [Samantha] and Samantha was thinking about they get married and she was correct, and so she has two younger sisters that—she’s a grown-up, but she has two younger sisters who are about Samantha’s age and so Samantha and they—both of them were in “Happy Birthday, Samantha” and “Samantha Saves the Day,” and that’s pretty much it.

The story told by “Maggie” and “Meghan” does not deviate significantly from the one contained in Samantha’s books. Other girls invent and enact stories that have little to do with the historical periods in which the doll characters live. When “Becca,” age ten, spends time with her friend “Tammy,” the girls often disregard the stories in the books and act out situations that replicate stereotypical female roles: “We usually make up our own stories, me and [“Tammy”], like they’re usually our daughters, and we have various jobs. So like sometimes we’re artists, and then they [the dolls] like judge our paintings and help us. And like sometimes we’re hairdressers or spa people, and then we do their hair all fancy ways.”

Stories aside, a home visit to a young collector involves viewing, touching, admiring, and discussing a proliferation of dolls, clothes, and tiny and detailed household items—lots of “stuff.” We observed that the girls’ main activities were dressing and undressing the dolls, managing their (often vast) wardrobes and sets of accessories, and brushing and styling their hair. The doll play we observed was very tactile and visual; much of the fingering and stroking appeared ritualistic, designed to soothe and relax rather than to stimulate thought or imagination. Some actions by the girls clearly recapitulated behaviors evidenced by their own mothers and other caring adults, though much dressing and undressing was designed to prepare the doll characters for particular chapters of their life stories (“She’s going apple picking today”). Even when the time for reading the books and enacting the stories has passed, girls continue to touch and groom their dolls. “Angie,” a 12-year-old Caucasian girl

and the eldest of three sisters in a family with nine American Girl dolls, relegated hers to a closet shelf, separate from the family play area:

I don’t play with them anymore, but sometimes I get them down to change their clothes and brush their hair. I’ll never give them up [despite the pleas from her younger sisters]. They are part of me. They are in me [points to her heart].

The American Girl product line is marketed as a set of tools for creative play that is designed to teach values. Our in-home observations make it clear that only sometimes are girls using doll play to absorb the finer moral and ethical points of the American Girl stories. Left to their own devices, most of the girls reenact stories from the books quite literally, make up stories that have little to do with the characters in the books, or simply engage in tactile manipulation of the dolls themselves and their clothing, accessories, and accoutrements. From these observations and the data on girls’ readings of the American Girl narratives, we would conclude that the values pervading the stories are apprehended and appreciated by mothers, grandmothers, and other interested adults to a far greater extent than by the girls.

As with the subcultures that Kates (2004) and Martin, Schouten, and McAlexander (2006) reference, women and girls of various ages use marketer-provided brand meanings in original or transmuted versions in their own ways to suit their own purposes and further their own life projects and agendas. The marketer and brand serve as partners to adult women charged with enculturating young girls or intent on creating or recreating female family. Older girls abstract from the brand narratives lessons they find useful in dealing with life’s challenges, while those a few years younger enjoy the literal enactment of these stories or derive pleasure from touching, holding, and dressing the dolls.

Conclusions and Managerial Implications

This article suggests that powerful brands are the products of multiple sources authoring multiple narrative representations in multiple venues. A brand is the product of dynamic interaction among all those components—a continually evolving, emergent phenomenon, best studied in its totality. Our research on American Girl reveals a network of meanings that are rooted in narrative and distributed among the brand’s many constituencies. It supports and extends Berthon and colleagues’ (2007) brand manifold construct and helps address some of the gaps in understanding of brands and brand management that Keller and Lehmann (2006) identify in their article geared to the needs of managers. It is particularly relevant to what these authors characterize as unanswered research questions pertaining to consistency versus complementarity of brand meanings and messages and those related to the experiential components of brand equity that are controlled by the marketer.

The notion that the “sources and uses” of brand meanings are many and varied, as are the contexts within which they are created and enacted, is hardly new. Nor is the idea

that understandings of a brand by various constituencies are interrelated both because they are rooted in a common culture and because they have the opportunity to influence one another in myriad ways. Indeed, the field seems to have been moving inexorably toward something resembling the brand gestalt construct for the past two decades. However, as each aspect of the brand gestalt has been revealed, another has been obscured; it has been difficult to apprehend the whole phenomenon and to translate the expanding knowledge of brands into intelligible direction for those charged with managing them.

The brand gestalt is both an epistemological tool and a representation of brand content. It guides the acquisition of brand knowledge by serving as a reminder of all that must be investigated to contend credibly that a brand is known. In addition, if we can describe in detail the component parts of a particular brand and elucidate the relationships among them, we have reason to believe that its essential nature has been captured and that the brand can be managed effectively. Because interactions among the parts are critical to knowing the brand, insight into only some components is inadequate for prescribing effective action on the brand's behalf. If what is not known cannot be managed, the value of the brand gestalt is incalculable.

The brand gestalt embodies the notion that it is not one but a combination of elements, and the reciprocal influences among them, that best explains the power of brands. Extraordinarily powerful brands may not be either those with the greatest number of positive associations or those with the most compelling identity myths. They may not be the brands with the largest and most interactive communities or those that provide spectacular retail environments with the most opportunities for emplaced cocreation. They may instead be brands whose components evidence the greatest degree of synergy and whose constituent parts best complement and enhance one another. The brand gestalt encourages us to take a broader and more encompassing view of branding and brand management. If brands represent symphonies of meaning, managers must be viewed as orchestrators and conductors, as well as composers, whose role is to coordinate and synchronize as well as to create.

The American Girl brand offers a valuable lesson in managing complexity. With the emergence of the narrative view of the brand (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Sherry 2005), and a reader-response view of the consumer (Scott 1994; Stern 1993), comes the prospect of the balkanization of experience and the emergence of consensus communities (Kozinets 2002; Muniz and O'Guinn 2001) that interpret the marketer's offering in unimaginably varied ways. In the case of American Girl, each doll embodies a story, every book invites sociocultural or autobiographical reverie, and every aspect of merchandising in themed flagship brand stores encourages the enactment of gender roles and the performance and recovery of divergent familial histories. The marketing organization itself is imbricated in ethnicity and gender identity politics on a media stage. This multistoried brand is less a matryoshka with tidily nested identical entities than a disorderly aggregation of complementary and contradictory accounts, filled with ambiguities that consumers are driven to resolve and lacunae they are

compelled to fill. These personal narratives are then redacted, recirculated, and replayed. The brand depends for its vitality and longevity on its constant reanimation by the cultural context in which it engages stakeholders and by the stakeholders themselves. Rather than avoiding complexity, the brand thrives on it.

What our research findings imply, along with those of other investigators, is that the brand is located within a complex system. Influences exerted by the components of this system are probabilistic and reciprocal rather than linear and causal; therefore, it is impossible to determine where the brand's creation begins and ends. The production of the brand can be understood to originate with the development by the marketer of a positioning, an offering, a set of marketing communications, and often a place (brand-scape) in which its essence is intended to reside. It might also be contended that what seems to be created by the marketer is actually rooted in, as well as ultimately contextualized and given meaning by, the cultural milieu. In other words, the brand's creation is instigated and framed by cultural themes and trends and tears in the cultural fabric. Alternatively, it could be said that the brand is created, or at least meaningfully recreated, through its use in the achievement of individual consumer identity and life project objectives, as well as the identity projects of a multitude of distinct consumer groups. No matter where and how the creation process is assumed to commence, the evolved brand ultimately becomes a component of the system from which its next incarnation will spring.

Our work also bears on two other issues pertaining to the authorship of brand content, the first of which is the origins of marketer-contributed meaning. Brands have long borrowed from other sources to create their images and expressive content; popular songs, movies, and art all have been plundered for brand-building purposes, with brands appropriating meanings that seem to resonate with consumers and prove useful in their individual and group identity work. In the branding future that Holt (2002) envisions, such practices will no longer be possible. He argues that as consumers become savvier and more demanding in their consumption and deployment of meaning, brands will no longer be permitted to simply repackage and repurpose cultural content from other sources. They will need to become cultural creators in their own right, producing original content that is meaningful to target consumers and relevant to their sovereign identity projects. The American Girl brand exemplifies this approach. From hiring established writers to author the characters' canons to the elaborate choreography of the Broadway-style plays and the spinning of the compelling, almost mythical backstory about its birth, the American Girl brand has consistently originated its own substantive content. As an original producer of cultural meaning, it may be viewed as a prototypical "future brand."

Our work addresses a second authorship issue that is relevant to the future of brands. Pitt and colleagues (2006) develop a typology of brand aspects—physical, textual, meaning, and experiential, each of which can be "closed" in the sense that content can be authored only by the firm or "open" in that all brand stakeholders have access to the means of creation. Open source (OS) implies that "power

and control are radically decentralized and heterarchical; producers and consumers coalesce into ‘prosumers’” (Pitt et al. 2006, p. 118), and the value of the brand to users is significantly greater than to owners. The OS state is one in which only a few brands (e.g., Linux, Wikipedia) exist today but toward which Pitt and colleagues contend the majority of brands are moving. Though attractive to marketers intent on increasing the value of their brands to consumers—and deepening consumers’ involvement with those brands—the OS agenda is characterized by a loss of control for which many firms may be ill-prepared. Pitt and colleagues propose a research agenda to illuminate further the OS end state and the evolution of brands toward that state over time. In detailing this research agenda, they specifically reference the meanings assigned by various stakeholder groups to OS brands and brands moving along a trajectory toward OS. Because American Girl evidences the sharing of authorship and ownership typical of OS brands, our investigation sheds light on some of the OS research issues that Pitt and colleagues identify. For example, it suggests that marketers can retain a significant degree of control while choreographing coauthorship opportunities and that all four aspects of a brand—physical, textual, meaning, and experience—can be “opened” to consumer input, thus enhancing consumer value, while primary brand ownership remains with the corporation and value to the corporate owner is undiminished.

A close reading of the American Girl brand suggests several additional managerial implications, which we frame in terms of our brand gestalt construct. A product may become more successful to the extent that its customer manifestation is not merely an embodiment of functional or expressive satisfactions. It may comprise search (e.g., in the form of devotional ritual), acquisition (e.g., in the form of edutainment), and disposition (e.g., in the form of maintenance services or of bequest), as well as use, in its effectual engagement with customers. A customer does not merely “buy,” “have,” or “use” an American Girl doll; she is caught up in a mesh of interwoven experiences, some engineered by marketers and others improvised by stakeholders, at every touchpoint of the brand. Attention to stakeholders further suggests a target-plus strategy that not only attracts consumers in terms of transition to and from the expected segment (in this case, gateway opportunities for girls entering and leaving the “tweener” market) but also attracts guardians charged with overseeing these transitions (again, in our case, intergenerational relatives who may act as custodians and curators). Finally, the challenge of colonizing what might seem to be disparate realms of experience—the extension of the American Girl brand’s essence into theme parks and even colleges (Twitchell 2004) is neither implausible nor improbable—must engage the marketing imagination.

Implications for promotion and price are latent in our findings and are reasonably straightforward. Proliferation of authentic touchpoints and facilitation of stakeholder interaction set the stage for the amplified word of mouth that is so essential to sustaining the cult or elevated status of a brand. To the extent that a product is imbued with drama and can evoke performance, it carries the seeds of its own

promotion, and evangelists will proselytize in its name. A masstige pricing strategy in an era of mass affluence is especially effective when customers realize that they are actually paying for the product plus experience cubed: the stuff, the setting, and the solidarity with community that consumption affords. Buttressing this strategy with opportunities to trade up (Silverstein and Fiske 2003) and treasure hunt (Silverstein and Butman 2006) by providing price points to suit the nature of any visit occasion (ritual, either ceremonial or mundane) is also appropriate.

Place is perhaps the most obvious mix element to yield managerial implications. The semiotic intensity (Sherry 1998) of a servicescape depends on how tightly the dialectics of structure (formal/informal) and function (economic/festive) are simultaneously compacted. The tighter the compression, the more energized are the shoppers. American Girl Place is at once a shrine and a dwelling; it is commercial space and domestic space. The American Girl brand is both a host and a guest, facilitating the making of families even as it joins them as a member. The brand can be understood as an archetypal parent, bridging and bonding generations. To the extent that retail outlets enplace a brand, permitting consumers to experience its psychosocial essence, they will introject that essence, allowing the brand to dwell in them.

As ethnographers, we acknowledge the excitement underlying the ostensible discovery and celebration of the experience “economy” (Pine and Gilmore 1999) and the experience “culture” (Schmitt, Rogers, and Vrostos 2004) that has swept the field of marketing. We also recognize that consumer culture theorists have a long tradition of inquiry into the experiential dimensions of marketplace behavior (Levy 1978). From early foundational arguments for its pervasiveness (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982) to contemporary exhortations for its resurrection (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989; Zaltman 1997), the importance of experience in understanding consumer behavior and guiding managerial decisions has been granted.

Happily, the increased deployment of qualitative research methods, especially into extraeconomic aspects of consumption and marketing, has coincided with an era that has witnessed the apotheosis of commercial spectacle. A consequence of this phenomenon has been the proliferation of studies into immersive experience (for genealogies and examples, see Belk and Sherry 2007). Dramaturgical analyses have become a staple in the consumer culture theory tradition (Giesler 2008; Sherry 1991), and the servicescape literature in particular has explored the phenomenon of retail theater with increasing sophistication. To the extent that theater is at the heart of the genre of spectacle that brands such as American Girl embody, its viability is highly contingent. Marketers must continue to engage consumers with refreshed scripts, props, and stages of sociohistorical value that resonate with contemporary concerns. Consumers must find the recovery and enactment of relevant cultural values compelling enough to warrant their continued investment of imagination (not to mention money) over and against the claims of other entertainment genres on their attention.

Going beyond the discipline's four Ps framework and its many elaborations, we offer the observation that a brand such as American Girl is a cultural cynosure, an object of focal fascination and contemplation by virtue of its resonance with norms, values, and mores. Because a culture's key identity issues are always under construction and in active negotiation, such a cynosure is a site of contestation. The brand acts as both a lightning rod and a fault line for contemporary cultural debate. American Girl has already demonstrated its ability to antagonize and befriend con-

sumers along the lines of ethnicity and religion, as a result of unanticipated and unintended consequences of managerial decisions (Sherry 2005). Marketers must recall that they are often managing political, not merely commercial, properties and cast their decisions in a broader theater of influence. The brand is always a narrative, even if it is also a cycle, cluster, or canon—that is, polysemous and antiphonal in character, requiring careful attention to all its stakeholders.

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