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Brand Fortitude in Moments of Consumption

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Home is a symbolic environment that helps create, maintain, and express personal and social identities. McCracken's (1989) work on "homeyness" illustrates how and by what cultural logic the symbolic properties of homes act on individuals. It also demonstrates how these properties give definition to the family unit and help the individual household member "mediate his or her relationship with the larger world, refusing some of its influences, and transforming still others" (McCracken 1989:179). The notion of home space shaping perceptions and organizing experiences, behaviors, and identities is also reflected in the work of Claiborne and Ozanne (1990), Cuba and Hummon (1993), Sherry (2000), and Thrift (1997). Of central concern in all of this work are the boundaries across which we are allowed to pass material and symbolic resources. Implicit in the selection of these resources and their disposition are the ways in which the family conceptualizes itself as a social unit and views the world outside the home. Material resources brought into the home are often laden with meaning produced by commercial agents and extended via public discourse, but they also accrete significance derived from the private discourses and rituals of the household. The objects themselves may or may not leave the home; however, the meanings attached to many of them will ultimately re-enter the public sphere. These meanings will wield influence—of greater or lesser magnitude— on the world outside, and substantiate status claims of the household and its members.

Most work on how objects are withdrawn from the public sphere and incorporated into the routines and rituals of daily life within a household

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describes how they are assigned personal and social meanings and are thereby stripped of commodity status. Silverstone's (1994) "proto-model" of the consumption process represents a particularly detailed and theoretically significant articulation of this phenomenon in which we ground our own contribution. Silverstone describes six "moments" in a "cycle of consumption." The first three moments, "Commodification," "Imagination," and "Appropriation," relate to components of the consumption process that have been amply addressed in the academic literature. The latter three, however, pertain to aspects of consumption that are underrepresented in the literature and, we believe, are less well understood. These are "Objectification," "Incorporation," and "Conversion." Objectification relies on the classificatory schemata that serve to organize a household's understanding of itself and its place in the outside world. According to Silverstone, "objectification is expressed in usage, but also in the physical disposition of objects within the spatial environment of the home" (1994:127) and the construction of microenvironments intended to contain meaning-laden objects.

Incorporation has to do with the role an object comes to play within the "moral economy" of the household; how it serves to express values and distinctions that are meaningful within family culture. Incorporation also describes when, how, and in what relational contexts objects are used by household members, and the roles these objects play within the routines and rituals of daily life. Conversion resembles appropriation (acquisition/purchase) in that it too defines the relationship between the inner world of the family and the organizations and institutions of society at large. It is through conversion that material and symbolic resources that have been subjected to transformational work by the household gain currency in the world outside and come to represent a form of cultural capital for use by household members.

Silverstone's conception is rooted in Kopytoff's (1986) model of consumption as a process in which objects appropriated by household members from the public sphere move into and out of a commoditized state rather than suffering irreversible loss of commodity status by becoming singularized. Appadurai underscores this processual nature, depicting a commodity as "not one kind of thing rather than another, but one phase in the life of some things" (1986:17). Kopytoff (1986) reminds us that at the moment of commercial exchange all things are commodities; to be saleable is to be common, not singular. However, every commodity embodies

the possibility of being drawn into the flow of social relations and thereby becoming singular, unique, and inalienable by acquiring personalized meanings. The cultural categories within which singularized objects will reside are determined by the communities toward whose unique ends they are being put to use. Kopytoff believes that the relevance and utility of these categories may ebb and flow, and their boundaries may expand and contract with changes in the social milieu; however, the entry of objects into these categories constitutes their removal, however temporary, from the commoditized realm. We contend, however, that there is another possibility.

We propose that branded objects idiosyncratically classified by the members of a particular household may concurrently occupy a place within the brand (commodity) category from which they originated. While theoretical work by Kopytoff (1986) and Silverstone (1994), and empirical work by Epp and Price (2010) demonstrates that the same object may have commodity status during one phase of its social history and exist as a singularity during another, none of these authors addresses the role of brands. More importantly, implicit in their work is the assumption that while a singularized object may be recommodified once it leaves the home (see, for example, Hermann [1997] and Lastovicka and Fernandez [2005]), it cannot at once be singularity and commodity. Our study of the American Girl brand led us to question that assumption and to explore the possibility that objects can at the same moment manifest the defining characteristics of commodities and of singularities by virtue of a property of the brands they represent.

Our analysis revealed patterns of consumer sentiment and practice that not only further energized the American Girl brand beyond its retail setting, but also imbricated it in an emplacement process of homebuilding. We describe the property that allowed the brand to resist dilution of its essence and gradually assume greater influence within the household as *brand fortitude*. Through objects bearing its name, the brand becomes both an affecting presence (Armstrong 1974) that consumers use to build life-worlds and a repository of the energy generated in that building. *Brand fortitude* is a more nuanced and sociological construct than brand attachment and, although the two share a similar hedonic, ideological, and functional charge (Park et al. 2008), the materiality of the object experience is far more central to fortitude.

THE AMERICAN GIRL BRAND AT HOME

The American Girl brand was conceived and executed by entrepreneur Pleasant Roland in 1984 (Morris 2003; Sloane 2002). By the time it was purchased by Mattel in 2005 for more than $700 million, the popular brand had morphed into a phenomenon with almost unprecedented appeal to preteen girls and female family members. The brand originated with a small set of doll characters and a series of books about their heroic exploits in various historical contexts. The American Girl books' storylines eschew the action-adventure formulae typical of boys' fiction (Cassell and Jenkins 1998), instead presenting universally relevant social and moral dilemmas typical of girls' literature. Each girl/doll is introduced in a historical keystone volume, and her adventures are chronicled in a dedicated but thematic series that emphasizes generosity, resourcefulness, resiliency, and resolve deployed against the exigencies of girlhood during one or another historical era. These stories represent common currency among girl-owners and their families, and constitute a wellspring of premises for shared play.

Over time, American Girl significantly expanded with the addition of more dolls and books as well as an extensive array of clothing, accoutrements, and accessories. Dolls, stories, accoutrements, and accessories had also become familiar to girls from a variety of backgrounds and social strata. We followed this "stuff" of American Girl retailing into homes, using traditional ethnographic techniques to explore American Girl consumers' contextualized understandings of the brand.[1]

American Girl products are integrated into the lives of households and their individual members in a manner similar to that described by Wallendorf and Arnould (1991) and Coupland (2005) for commercially prepared foods that were personalized by the surreptitious disposal of packaging and the addition of special ingredients or the substitution of unbranded and uniquely meaningful packaging for the manufacturer-created variety. Yet unlike the branded food products referenced by these authors, which become generic and stripped of brand meaning as they are integrated into the home, American Girl products seem not only to retain their branded character over time, but also to brand the homes and hearts of their owners. Rather than being stripped away, the marketer-authored meanings remain, coexisting with those created by members of the household.

In what follows, we parse our findings across Silverstone's (1994) last three moments of consumption: objectification, incorporation, and con-

version. We present our themes in the form of illustrative ethnographic vignettes, each of which imparts the flavor of brand interactions and the ways in which the American Girl brand both changes (via powerful marketer-created meanings) and is changed by (via meaning-creation activities of the family and its members) the household culture. Rather than being diminished by its tenure in the home, the brand derives strength and dimensionality from its existence beyond the retail setting, its structure reinforced by the incorporation of personal and family meanings. Our description of consumers' interactions with American Girl products illustrates the ways in which brand fortitude manifests itself within the inner sancta of informants' lives.

Silverstone's Fourth Moment: Objectification

Our informants' attitudes toward American Girl dolls, books, accoutrements, and accessories are charged with a sense of responsibility similar to that evidenced by Lois Roget, McCracken's (1988) "curatorial consumer." Like Ms. Roget, the girls seem "bound by familial duty to store, display, and conserve these objects" (McCracken 1988:44). They do so in such a way as to maintain the marketer-created meanings of the brand, while at the same time imbuing the branded objects with individual and family significance. It is apparent that material components of the American Girl brand serve as containers for family memories, even as they continue to embody commercially derived meanings.

Brand and doll recapitulate family ethnohistory.

Lisa is a six-year-old girl who lives with her family in a large complex of garden apartments on Chicago's South Side. Lisa shares the apartment with her mother, father, and younger brother. Her grandmother lives next door.

Lisa tells us that Addy, the Civil War–era African-American doll, was given to her by her grandmother, who purchased the doll before Lisa was born and presented it to her when she was "old enough to appreciate it." Her grandmother was attracted to the brand because its focus on history and heroic femininity would help Addy understand her heritage. What Lisa knows of the period immediately preceding the Civil War has been gleaned from the Addy books her grandmother reads to her and from the stories her grandmother tells. In one of her grandmother's stories, according to Lisa, the children of slaves were made to pick flowers and, if there

were worms on the flowers, the children were forced to eat them. She demonstrates how she had helped her doll, Addy, "cough up the worms" by holding her upside down and smacking her hard on the back.

Heroic femininity is a leitmotif of many of the tales in the American Girl brand universe. As a result, such themes loom large in many of the meanings girls ascribe to the dolls. The brand also provides a template for harnessing the child's personal creativity. Dolls often serve as objects of contemplation for children, as well as objects on which they are encouraged to act. We see the influence of this contemplative aspect of the American Girl dolls and their ethnohistory at work in the home of six-year-old Lisa. Such resonant connections were not uncommon among our informants. The African-American escaped slave girl, Addy, is Lisa's only doll. If she were to get another, she says it would probably be Kaya, the Native American American Girl doll, because Lisa herself is part "Indian." Her grandmother has mentioned the possibility of buying the Kaya doll to help Lisa understand that component of her heritage, just as she purchased Addy and told Lisa stories about slavery to reify the African-American aspect of her identity.

A collection in its entirety represents something distinct from its individual parts, to which the collector may also be attached (Belk 1995; Belk et al. 1991). In the same way, we see American Girl products being singularized by girls and their families, even as household members maintain a relationship with the brand and all it stands for. McCracken (1988) pointed out that an object may become irreplaceable via everyday possession rituals that both extract meaning from and give meaning to it. Similarly, a brand like American Girl may both draw from and contribute to meanings residing within a household as an extensive collection of objects bearing its name are used, maintained, stored, displayed, and discussed by household members. The brand retains its potency, even as the products bearing its name are reclassified into categories whose significance derives from the emotionally charged agendas of individuals and family members.

The Addy and Kaya dolls may be viewed as members of a class of objects subsumed under the American Girl brand name. The brand is conceived by Lisa's grandmother and mother as a vehicle for connecting Lisa to her family's racial and ethnic identity and history; it represents something distinct from the dolls, just as the curator's relationship with her collection in its entirety may be distinct from her relationship with the objects that comprise it. History is at the core of the American Girl

brand, and the brand's historical character enhances its utility—and that of each of the dolls—to the adult members of Lisa's family. While the marketer-created stories about individual doll characters and their historical contexts are elaborate and detailed, the brand structure they represent is a loose one that is permeable to material authored by the household community. As we will see, this permeability is a key aspect of one of two important structural characteristics of the brand.

Brand and store pervade home.

Three sisters aged 7, 10, and 12 share a spacious upscale residence with their parents. Within a communal play area, the double doors of a closet open to reveal a cornucopic, yet meticulously organized, collection of American Girl dolls, clothes, furnishings, and various miniatures. The interior of a large closet was arranged in such a way that it resembled an elaborate retail display. The middle daughter Maeve, age 10, had initiated the organization:

> In February, we had to take [lower] shelves out so they have room for their beds. There were shelves [in this closet] and the beds didn't fit. First we set it up in our rooms. We kept getting things for, like, our birthdays and things and we didn't have enough room. And so we, um, thought it would be an idea to put it here, so we took some shelves out of that area 'cause the posts are a little too tall. And we named that [pointing to an upper shelf] the party room."

Similar rationales were provided for the arrangement of accessories for other doll characters; individual drawers were assigned to hold clothes belonging to each doll, and the shelves mirrored elements of the historical dioramas and merchandise displays of the store. One shelf held desks, books, and accessories for school; another, the accretions of Native American culture and religion; and a third held skates, skis, a bowling ball, and other sports equipment. We posit that the apparent mimicry of merchandising strategy derives from the potent brand flagship store experience; this experience seems to have facilitated the emplacement of the brand and the translation of retail brand ideology (Borghini et al. 2009) from store to home. Commercially derived brand narratives are enacted at home through display as well as play. These tendencies are not uncommon, and they exist in contradistinction to those manifested by Wallendorf and Arnould's (1991) and Coupland's (2005) informants.

Brand transcends time and space.

Rebecca ("Becca"), age 11, lives in a modest home in a Chicago suburb. Becca feels that the original American Girl dolls are special because of their stories. She sees each doll character as "somebody we can look up to," and has found inspiration in all of the American Girl stories. She tells us that the tales are of girls managing through hard times ("Kit and her family lived through the Depression"), standing up for their principles, or surviving the loss of a loved one ("Samantha's parents had died"). All of the characters were nonetheless "able to lead happy lives." To Becca the stories also represent "pieces of history" from which she has learned about the "times" in which the doll characters lived.

Although she continues to read and reflect on the stories about her American Girl dolls, Kit and Samantha, Becca admits that she has more interest now in the narratives she herself composes and enacts. In one of her invented stories, Kit and Samantha are in college and share the single set of American Girl "school things" she owns. Other dolls are recruited to join the class, which Becca teaches. When her friend Tammy visits with her American Girl doll, Molly, the girls often cast the three doll characters in the role of adopted daughters. Becca says, "We pretend that we found them on the street and we took them in.... It's very good to care for people." The narratives are new, but the values and priorities that undergird them are those pervading the marketer-created narratives in the books. Becca relates: "We usually make up our own stories, me and her, like they're usually our daughters, and we have various jobs. So like sometimes we're artists, and then they like judge our paintings and help us.... It's like on and on and on, we're cooks and they test our food."

The dolls are subjects: they are taken in and nurtured, and attend the school at which Becca teaches. But the dolls are also objects that subjectify Becca and Tammy: they are judges of the girls' heroic artistic and culinary efforts. The scenarios act as portals for the girls to try on different identities, to manifest imaginary selves through a physical context. In this sense, the brand is redefined through play; the storied meanings of the physical dolls become multistoried through personalizing practices enabled by aspects of what might be conceived as the brand architecture, namely the permeability of its surface and the availability of interstitial space among its components. As the American Girl brand is integrated into the home through play, its marketer-provided meanings temporarily recede in im-

portance, disarticulated from their material substrate, only to reemerge as circumstances and setting change.

For example, girls often enact the roles of the doll characters in scripted "plays." Holding the dolls, they utter lines adapted from marketer-created narratives in the books. Annie, age 8, says, "My mom invited some of my friends to come to my house for an American Girl tea party. So we played and had lots of fun and we did a play about Samantha. We were acting the characters out, so I was Samantha and my friend Carolyn played Nelly." However, even unmoored from the brand meaning of a particular character living in a particular historical period, an American Girl doll does not become simply a doll, a girlishly shaped projective vehicle. Throughout this unmooring, the loose relation between the material thing and the brand attached to it is never truly severed. Girls continue to play with "Molly" and "Addy" and their branded accessories. The doll is an inescapably physical medium, which allows it to transform and alternate as the girl's double, family member, audience, teacher, judge, and friend, as well as a character in a brand-generated narrative. This was evident in the descriptions and observations of many girls' play styles. Consider Olivia's comments:

> I pretended it was Christmas, I pretended that [Molly] broke her leg. I thought it'd be fun so [instead of taking her to the doll hospital at American Girl Place] I pretended like there was a hospital at my house. I pretended that she was walking down the stairs and rolled down and then I picked her up and I ran around the whole house at least two times and put her in one room and put a cast on her and said, "Hello, she is in the recovery room." And we waited and waited and waited like we were in a real hospital. And then I went in to see her, she's in the recovery room. I pretended to pick her up and put her in the wheelchair, and then I got the crutches.

Like Becca, Olivia goes beyond the historical narratives, stretching her imagination—and the use of marketer-created accoutrements—with a story about injury followed by successful treatment. Her narrative represents an improvisation around the theme of care and healing in which the doll's needs become the focus of a multiplayer family drama. These alternative effects are culturally complex. From a purist or managerial standpoint, they might be said to diminish the American Girl brand because they do not tie directly to a marketer-created narrative. However,

we observe that this home-based reinvention of characters and contexts also enhances the value of the dolls, the doll play, and the brand itself by deepening and broadening girls' understanding of, and ability to apply, the precepts that undergird the brand.

Although seemingly reminiscent of the debranding processes described by Wallendorf and Arnould (1991) and Coupland (2005), original or idiosyncratic play does not render the American Girl brand invisible; instead, such play seems to make it magnetic, capable of drawing congruent entities toward it and engulfing and incorporating them. In addition, there exists an abundance of interstitial space among the components of the American Girl architecture; the interstices represent lacunae to be filled with cultural material authored by those for whom the brand has meaning. Through mimicry and schooling, the brand is affected by contagion, cornucopic display, and a host of sacralizing tendencies (see Belk et al. 1989) intrinsic to American Girl. It is through this unmooring of brand and object, this personalizing suspension of managerial linkages, that the brand's wider attractive force is activated. Rather than making the brand generic, this loosening of programmed linkages causes an association of the singular and unlabeled. It is in large part the "openness" of the brand—its ability to incorporate and house consumer-generated material—that is the source of its power and its ability to sustain itself over time.

Material girls.

Doll play is a material experience. The literal nature of this material relationship was apparent in our in-home interview with Maggie and Meghan, two seven-year-old best friends. In two corners of Maggie's room stand small trunks, each open to display a shelf containing an array of tiny accessories and a horizontal pole on which are arranged miniature hangers holding doll dresses and outfits. There are three doll beds of traditional style, each with a nightstand and lamp, and a large doll crib with a colorful mobile hanging above its American Girl Bitty Baby occupant. There are cases of American Girl doll clothes and accessories on the shelves of a wooden bookcase that also hold a library of American Girl books. Additional cases of clothing and accessories lie open on the floor.

Maggie and Meghan speak knowledgeably about a period of American history in which one of the dolls lived, and confide that they enact scenarios based on the historical narratives contained in the books, as well as others that take place in the present. Maggie says, "We play in her

time, and then in our time, so back and forth." However, when clothing is mentioned, the conversation becomes notably more animated. Reference is made to an "apple-picking outfit" and we ask Maggie and Meghan to tell us more about it, which prompts both girls to leap to their feet. They kneel next to cases of clothing from the American Girl collection and pull garments from the satin-lined interiors, turn them right-side-out, fasten their closures, smooth them, and display them against their own chests or midriffs so we can better appreciate them. This self-identifying pressing of doll outfits against live girl bodies reminds us that material objects like these are not merely cognitive categories linked to conformity or resistance, but deeply embodied aspects of the social world (Küchler and Miller 2005). It is this very physicality which, we postulate, energizes the ludic forces that enable products bearing powerful brand names like American Girl to resist decommodification, and instead become more broadly and deeply relevant agents in consumers' own cultural worlds.

Like other emotionally compelling entertainment brands, American Girl has multiple material manifestations that colonize domestic space. Books, dolls, accoutrements, and accessories are artfully arranged in bookcases, on dressers, and in designated areas on the floor, or arrayed on closet shelves. We observe that these objects are integrated into the lives of individual household members, and woven through the social fabric of the extended family group that includes girls, mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunts, girlfriends, and the occasional father or grandfather. Here is revealed another structural characteristic of the brand: soundness. The components of the American Girl brand architecture are woven together in such a way that they enhance and extend one another, giving the form intelligibility and a degree and kind of logical and aesthetic order that facilitates engagement. By managerial design, the multitude of constituent parts articulate with and complement one another to form a cohesive and coherent whole.

Silverstone's Fifth Moment: Incorporation

Polyvocal brand.

The American Girl brand has come to play a unique role in the relationship between a middle-aged man, Alan, and his daughter, Olivia. Alan took Olivia to American Girl Place for a birthday shopping expedition.

Along with several requested additions to her extensive collection of dolls, clothes, and accessories, he purchased a blonde "Just Like You" doll and a 1960s outfit consisting of a pair of bell-bottom jeans and sandals, a tie-dyed T-shirt, a peace symbol necklace, a flowered headband, and round glasses with pink lenses. While still in the store, he requested that the American Girl Salon stylist braid the new doll's hair to look like that of the doll wearing the outfit in the display. Upon arriving home, he took the doll from her package and dressed her in the 1960s outfit. He then placed her on a shelf in his home office directly above his desk between a collection of commemorative photos, referred to by his family as "the wall of heroes" and what he calls "my army stuff." His daughter found this puzzling, though not off-putting. She told us, "My friends said it's for you, it's not like he's going to keep it, of course he's going to give it to you...five weeks later I said he's not giving it to me!" She and her friends sometimes visit the office and her father talks about the doll he privately calls "my icon," but to whom he has (under duress from his daughter) assigned the moniker "Flower Girl." He describes the historical period in which the doll character lived, and plays songs from that time. The children listen in wonder, and refer in conversation with one another and their families to "Olivia's dad's American Girl doll."

The doll's meaning to the father is complex and nuanced, and the immediacy of its physical presence is clearly important to him:

> The thing that's kind of funny is that I never experienced any of this (because) I was over there (in Vietnam). She (Flower Girl) is just such a perfect symbol: rose-colored glasses, flowers in her hair . . . she takes me back to the entire period in time that was very different. I mean, I could buy a picture of three hippies grooving in Haight Ashbury from some photo collection, but that wouldn't have the intimacy of the doll . . . .

Alan continues by noting why he believes a "hippie" doll is unlikely to bear some other brand name, apparently equating a variety of races and ethnicities with a plurality of sociopolitical perspectives.

> I can't imagine someone other than American Girl making a doll like this.... [Y]ears where there were only white, Christian, whatever: as WASP as could be, then the era of making a black doll in addition to the white doll. ...[T]hey (American Girl) were different, willing to explore the range, where before there was no notion that people come

> from different ethnicities, different heritages. But they came out with dolls that say America is a country of immigrants, came out with the whole range because that's what America is....

The doll sustains Alan's reveries and reflections, helping him conduct a life review. It also allows him to create for his daughter and her friends a multimedia guided tour of a historical era he had selectively experienced firsthand, but which he now uses the brand to recover. The brand animates history for the storyteller and his audience. Alan may be said to become a "ceremonial grandma" (Sherry et al. 2008), embodying the history he transmits to the girls, his status rising in their eyes on the brand's account. The line extension, American Girl of Today, is designed to allow consumers to choose an American Girl doll with skin color, hair color, and eye color similar to their own. Alan's retrofitting of a product from that line in such a way as to appropriate the ethos of the historical line and blur the boundaries between the two further illustrates the plasticity of the brand and the opportunities it provides for personalization.

Interiority of the brand.

Sasha is the 10-year-old only child of Russian immigrant parents living in a two-bedroom apartment in a working-class suburb. She invited us into her room, the most sparsely decorated of those we visited, to talk about American Girl. Unlike other informants, Sasha did not have an American Girl doll in her possession. She related the sad tale of losing Molly, telling us that she had taken the doll to the park, become distracted as she played with friends, and accidentally abandoned it. On realizing her error and racing back to retrieve the doll, she found it gone. Sasha's family's circumstances precluded immediate replacement of the doll and provided little assurance that another would be hers in the future. Though still mourning her loss and the opportunity to pass the doll along to her own daughter, she had enthusiastically agreed to be interviewed when a neighbor referred her to us. Despite Molly's absence, Sasha indicated that the doll and the brand were still very much part of her life; after describing how she continued to read the American Girl books, she pointed to her chest and echoed a phrase we had heard from other girls who were still in possession of their dolls: "She's in me." The doll and the brand seem to become intertwined with the experience of girlhood and sense of self.

Silverstone's Last Moment: Conversion

Disruptions and disjunctions.

Branded objects may create static in household value systems capable of impairing value-laden communication among family members. Parents express anxiety about gifts representing alien brand values entering the home, and acknowledge that often such gifts "manage to get lost." Mindful of the propensity of toys to travel with children, parents are concerned not only about the entry into their homes of the wrong toys, but about these toys reemerging cloaked in brand and household ideology in full view of neighbors and friends. As Diana, an African American and mother of Keisha tells us, "She's not getting that (a doll whose brand ethos is incompatible with that of the household) because where are we gonna take it?" Over time, Diana has "lost" several white dolls given to Keisha by others.

For Diana, the American Girl brand is interwoven with personal and cultural "baggage" that threatens the core values of the household. Although her knowledge of American Girl is limited to what she's seen in ads on city buses (only white faces), she professes dislike of the brand, claiming that it should be rechristened "European Girl." She feels that role models are critical in the socialization of girls, and her principal reservation about the brand is that it glamorizes "whiteness" to the exclusion of "role models of color." While pressure from her friends and her daughter has prompted Diana to consider a visit to American Girl Place, it is clear that Keisha's choices on that occasion will be constrained. Diana tells us that she will be permitted to select "any non-European doll of color." The issue of cultural heritage will loom large in this future shopping expedition and influence the microenvironment the two share with other American Girl Place visitors, and potentially (if attentive and conscientious staff overhear them) the brand itself.

Homecomings and reinfusions.

American Girl dolls often accompany their owners back to the store, where girls and their families are reinfused with brand ideology by once again standing before the historical dioramas, perusing the displays of merchandise, visiting the doll hospital and styling salon, conversing over tea at the café, and seeing the play. Allison, who, with her younger sister Kathryn owns three American Girl dolls, tells us, "It was like a play

about friendship, so I wanted to see how they acted it out.... They made a friendship quilt like in Kirsten's birthday story and they acted out each of the squares, one (story) for each of the American Girls." Verbal exchanges among women and girls evidence the fact that many, like Allison and Kathryn, return to the store not to shop, but to share the American Girl experience and reflect on the values embodied by the brand.

Just as important as reconnecting with the marketer-created meanings at American Girl Place is the display and exchange of idiosyncratic meanings acquired during the dolls' residence in households. Often these occasions represent opportunities for girls and family members to show off clothing and accessories purchased on previous visits, perhaps combined in unique and personal ways. Sometimes, however, dolls return to the fold wearing outfits handmade by a family member or purchased from an unauthorized source (e.g., the "18-inch-doll" section of a mass merchandise outlet). These customizations of the branded commodity are tolerated, although as we learned from Jane, the mother of 5-year-old Christine, this tolerance has limits. Jane's daughter was refused service at the hair salon because, as the stylist confided, the doll in her arms wasn't "a real American Girl doll." It is not only dolls that return to the store transformed; young doll owners (and the occasional mother) can be observed to have remade themselves at home in the images of particular doll characters, sporting similar hairstyles, pairs of glasses, and items of clothing. These infinitely variable personalizations of the brand become components of the context within which brand meaning is conveyed and brand and family narratives co-created.

UNPACKING BRAND FORTITUDE

Articulating Brand Fortitude

American Girl products—branded, commercial entities—are reinterpreted by household communities, "classified and reclassified" (Kopytoff 1986) into idiosyncratic categories that have relevance and utility for the communities and their individual members. We observe with Silverstone (1994) that these branded objects accrete private meanings that reflect individual and household priorities, and when they reenter the public sphere they do so cloaked in significance acquired during their sojourns in the home. We also note, however, that marketer-created brand discourses are very much in evidence throughout this process.

We view Silverstone's six moments of consumption as a single stage in the overall process that Kopytoff (1986) calls the "cultural biography" of an object and endorse Kopytoff's notion, echoed in Silverstone's theoretical work, that an object is not exclusively either a mass-produced commodity or a home-based singularity: that it can represent a commodity in one phase of its life cycle and a singularity in another. We go further, however, and contend that objects bearing some brand names can at the same time manifest the defining characteristics of both commodities and singularities. We use the *brand fortitude* construct to represent what it is about these brands that make this possible; that is, what enables "dual citizenship in the Land of Commodities and the Land of Singularities." Our findings lead us to believe that two structural characteristics of brands constitute what we have termed *fortitude*: *soundness* and *openness*.

The Structural Characteristics of Brand Fortitude

The American Girl brand manifests itself in many and varied physical forms, including dolls, books, clothing and accessories for dolls and humans, and historical and contemporary accoutrements (furniture, pets and pet accessories, outdoor recreation and sports equipment, musical instruments, school supplies, and personal technology, among others). In addition, a multitude of narratives represented in books, plays, magazines, catalogs, television "specials," and films animate the individual doll characters and give rise to compelling meta-narratives about morality and personal integrity, heroic femininity, homebuilding, and American-ness. *Soundness* relates both to the sheer number of physical and narrative elements that comprise the brand architecture and their variety of form and content. *Soundness* also reflects the degree to which these constituent parts articulate with and complement one another to form a coherent whole. Our findings demonstrate how consumers relate to the constituent parts of this complex brand in ways that are unique to them and their individual and collective projects and priorities, yet still reflect the brand's core premises. Doll forms are situated historically and otherwise using a variety of intertextual linkages, items of clothing and accoutrements are assigned central roles in morality plays, and the messages of how-to-live books are closely attended to by girls and by parents anxious to mitigate the influence of the negative role models they perceive as dominating the landscape of contemporary girlhood. The components of the American Girl brand architecture are woven together in such a way that they enhance and extend

one another, giving the structure intelligibility and a degree and kind of logical and aesthetic order that facilitates engagement with the meanings built into the brand by its creator and sustained by its managers.

We observe the effects of structural *soundness* in the way Becca abstracts commonalities and derives life lessons from the large and diverse array of stories contained in the American Girl books. She applies what she's learned from these stories about facing adversity with courage and conviction and manifesting kindness and consideration toward others in her doll play, as well as in her relations with friends and family. We also see *soundness* at work as we talk with Maggie and Meghan, and with Maeve and her sisters, all of whom are surrounded by the American Girl dolls, accoutrements, and accessories that populate the intimate spaces they share. These products and the brand name under which they are united are imbued with a mélange of clearly articulated, yet interrelated marketer-created significances.

Brand fortitude additionally assumes *openness*, reflecting both degree of surface permeability and amount and distribution of interstitial space among the structure's components. We contend that brands whose structures manifest *openness* are permeable and hospitable to meanings authored by consumers. It is the permeability of such a brand's surface that enables cultural material authored by consumers to enter, and the presence of interstices or lacunae among the components that allows material that penetrates the structure to lodge in it, ultimately becoming integral to the brand architecture and contributing to its strength and permanence.

The effects of *openness* are evident in the use by Lisa's grandmother of American Girl–created stories of Addy, the African-American doll, and her Civil War–era clothing and accoutrements to animate and reify the family's ethnohistory. Alan uses the "Girl of Today" doll he has outfitted in marketer-created hippie garb to recover a lost part of himself and to forge novel connections with his daughter, Olivia, and her friends.

The ability of the American Girl brand to attract, admit, and accommodate material authored by its constituents—girls and their families—is evident in the vignettes presented in this chapter (see also Diamond et al. [2009] and Acosta-Alzuru and Kreshel [2002]). While American Girl, as a toy and entertainment brand, might seem particularly well suited to the insertion of consumer-generated material, *fortitude* and its defining properties of *soundness* and *openness* is demonstrated by other brands that do not fit the toy/entertainment description. For example, the Japanese household products brand MUJI,[2] which has a significant global presence

and an unusually extensive product line, manifests what we have called "structural soundness" in that its multitude of conceptual and material component parts articulate in such a way as to support—if not actually comprise—a lifestyle guided by an explicit design philosophy. Like MUJI and American Girl, Coleman has an extensive product line that occupies large areas of consumers' homes. More important, its products play a role in emotion-laden patterns of domestic discourse and practice related to the sharing of outdoor recreation activities with family and friends. For these reasons, the products and the brand itself carry a multitude of individual and household meanings that comfortably coexist with—and enhance and extend—those proffered by the marketer. Like American Girl books, dolls, and accessories, Coleman products are rarely referenced without mention of the brand name under which they are united; consumers say "our Coleman stove" or "my Coleman tent" rather than "the stove" or "the tent."

Maintaining the vitality of a brand within the confines of a consumer's private space depends upon the continual investment and recovery of meaning in tangible objects; tangibility grounds all practices of branding in our framework. The American Girl brand moves within time, space, and culture. It is updated with each contextualized connection and marketing appeal. From the first taste of historical fiction to the continual deployment of dolls, accoutrements, and accessories within private spaces, through the teaching and judging themes of doll play to the dressing and grooming of the dolls, our observations return inexorably to the material basis of branding. The physical world of the brand, the sights, shape, textures, colors, smells, and embodied "feel" of the products are vital and immediate aspects of it. These aspects are continually reintegrated ideologically. The product exists without the brand, but the brand cannot exist without the product.

A FEW FINAL THOUGHTS

We would note that in addition to being different and distinct from brand attachment (Park et al. 2008) in ways identified earlier in this chapter, brand fortitude must be distinguished from another related construct, *brand meaning resonance* (Fournier et al. 2008). Fournier and her colleagues explored the process by which meaning affect brand equity, and the factors that mediate this process. Their investigation led them to conclude that "brands die when their meanings lose significance in con-

sumers' lives" (Fournier et al. 2008:35). Meaning resonance helps sustain significance and operates on three levels: personal, cultural, and organizational. Personal resonance is "the goodness-of-fit between a brand's architecture of claimed meanings and the meanings the consumer seeks in his/her personal life." Cultural resonance "reflects the degree to which claimed brand meanings reflect, reinforce and shape meanings from the collective social space that links consumers to others in a shared language and interpretation of experience" (Fournier et al. 2008:40). Although our investigation reveals that the American Girl brand achieves meaning resonance on both personal and cultural levels, it additionally suggests that meaning resonance represents something different from brand fortitude, and is best characterized as a facilitator or enabler of fortitude. Meaning resonance increases the likelihood that branded objects will be recontextualized and reclassified in ways uniquely suited to the interests of individuals and groups, and thus incorporated into the symbolic environments that support the creation of individual and group identities. It does not, however, address the ability of branded objects singularized in this manner to resist the stripping away of marketer-created brand meaning; this is the role of brand fortitude.

As we seek to understand a world where the market power of brands and branding appears foundational, and where both the consumption and marketing of brands assumes a nearly infinite variety of forms, scholars and practitioners require flexible and culturally grounded theories as guides. How to preserve, evolve, adapt, and transform marketer-created meanings in such a way as to make the products and services that bear their names more valuable to consumers is an issue of considerable significance to marketing practitioners.

The rise of mass customization and "markets-of-one" (Gilmore and Pine 2000) reflects not just advances in digital technology that enable effective online marketing and inventory management, but also—and more important—customer preferences for niche markets that are capable of satisfying narrow interests. These circumstances make it incumbent on marketers of broadly targeted brands, especially those with global presence or aspirations, to create products and services that retain their marketer-created meanings even as they are singularized by becoming implicated in consumers' day-to-day lives. One way to accomplish this is by building *fortitude* into brands by using the structural properties of *soundness* and *openness* described in this chapter.

We contend that by building fortitude into brands, marketers not only help ensure that commodity meaning will not erode or be destroyed during branded objects' tenure in households; they also afford consumers the opportunity to enhance the value of their products and services via singularizing, de-alienating discourses and practices.

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NOTES

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1 Toward this end, members of our multinational, multigenerational, multiethnic, and multi-institutional research team spent time in the living spaces of 16 brand devotees residing in the greater Chicago metropolitan area. Over the three-year duration of a larger research project, team members also conducted observations of and interviews (of varying depth) with several hundred consumers at other sites in which the brand was manifest, including sponsored events and American Girl Place stores in Chicago and New York.

2 See http://www.muji.com.