

## **Introduction**

Brand management is increasingly the discipline of our time, with Levy and Luedicke (2012, 61) commenting that “marketing ideology in our current period tends to focus upon branding”.

Branding ideology has a transnational appeal that can be witnessed in the mass popularity of brands in the global marketplace (Cayla and Arnould 2008; Cayla and Eckhardt 2008; Holt, Quelch, and Taylor 2004). Brands occupy an important place within culture, and are a new media object around which there is much interaction and discourse (Lury 2004). Holt’s (2004) research clearly shows how brands operate in the cultural world and the ideologies and myths that iconic brands create which contribute to society. Brand management itself must be understood as primarily a cultural process of meaning making that requires engagement with multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks (McCracken 2005; Schroeder and Salzer-Morling 2006).

While there has been a recent interest in developing genealogies of brands and their cultural meanings (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008; Holt 2004; Holt and Cameron 2010), it’s fair to say that historical analysis of brands is quite underdeveloped in the field of marketing generally, and the objects and ephemera of brand culture are ripe for academic exploration. This paper examines the exhibits and collections of the Museum of Brands, Packaging & Advertising in London and considers what brand artifacts and ephemera can tell us about society and culture. We draw upon an interview with the museum founder and avid consumer ephemera collector, Robert Opie, as well as documentary footage, photographs and visits to the museum as data sources. Our analysis reveals that the museum is predominantly a collection of low involvement packaged goods brands that reflect important developments and changes in British history,

creating a rich “social tableau” of everyday life in Britain over the past 150 years (Marchand 1985). We argue that the study of low involvement brands is neglected in contemporary brand management research, and there is much merit in investigating the “throwaway history” of low involvement brands and packaging to understand their role and importance within society and culture (Opie 2013).

The paper is structured as follows. We first develop a historiography of brands in Britain from 1800 – 1980 which reviews work predominantly from the field of business history. We then analyze the collections of the Museum of Brands, Packaging & Advertising and consider what the study of low involvement brands can tell us about British society and culture. We also evaluate the role of sponsors of the museum and the importance of history to companies generally. Finally, we conceptualize brands as sociocultural phenomena and examine how the exhibits at the museum contribute to our understanding of contemporary brand management theory. We conclude that the study of low involvement brands offers much richness and potential and we argue that there is much scope in marketing to develop brand genealogies of products in this category to contribute to literature on sociocultural branding.

### **Brand Historiography in Britain 1800 – 1980**

The history of brands in the United Kingdom has enjoyed attention from scholars (predominantly business historians) for the last twenty years. It is one which has focused overwhelmingly on low involvement brands in the food and drinks and packaged goods sectors where British branding was and has remained particularly strong (Church 2000; Church and Clark 2001; Church and Clark 2003; da Silva Lopes and Duguid 2010; Duguid 2003; Fitzgerald 1995; Fitzgerald 2005; Jones and Morgan 1994). Historical debates have focused on the reasons for the emergence of

branding, the evolution of branding, the contribution of brands to industrial, organizational and managerial development, the strategic role of brands, the operations of brands within supply chains, the development of brand portfolios, the positioning and re-positioning of brands, the roles of advertising and marketing agencies within branding and the development of retail brands. This historiography has taken the form of articles, collections of essays and monographs. It consists of both discussions of categories of brands such as alcohol, chocolate and household cleaning products and individual case studies (Ibid., see also Jones 2005).

Conventional literature sees modern brands emerging in America and Britain towards the end of the nineteenth century. This was a result of macro and micro economic factors. In relation to the former, developments in transport, repeal of excise duties and regulations, sustained increases in personal income and the overall urbanization of Britain created national markets in which brands could thrive (Church and Clark 2001). The Trade Marks Registration Act of 1875 set in motion a legal framework in which they could be legally protected (Wilkins 1992). On the micro side the emergence of large-scale integrated firms, both in terms of scale and scope, containing advanced managerial and organizational resources laid the basis for the development of the modern brand and subsequent brand extensions (Fitzgerald 1995). This in turn was assisted by developments in retail, distribution and advertising (Church 1999; Church 2000; Church and Clark 2001; Schwarzkopf 2010). Within this paradigm modern brands are seen as strategic and marketing assets created by large-scale corporations, made possible by the emergence of modern, mass-markets underpinned by the state and the law (Wilkins 1992). Their functions are intellectual property, the creation of product differentiation, and enhanced market competitiveness through their ease of recognition, assurance of quality and creation of customer loyalty. It is argued that brands were developed by producers to wrestle control from wholesalers

and retailers and forge direct bonds with consumers (Church 2000; Church and Clark 2001). A classic example of this is Lever Brother's "Sunlight" soap which was introduced in 1884. Until then soap had been an unbranded commodity which was sold in blocks and cut and packaged by retailers. William H. Lever circumnavigated this by cutting, packaging and branding the soap himself and appealing directly to consumers by sustained use of advertising (Church and Clark 2001; Wilson 1970). These developments are commonly seen as being most developed in the United States of American and provide historical explanations for its present day hegemony in branding (Dyer, Dalzell, and Olegario 2004).

Robert Fitzgerald's analysis of branding in Britain's confectionary sector between 1880 and 1939 distinguishes between a quasi-production and sales strategy at Cadbury which was primarily product focused with a marketing, consumer-focused strategy at Rowntree's (Fitzgerald 2005). The latter was heavily premised on consumer research and led to the development of powerful brands such as Kit Kat, Black Magic, Smarties and Aero. This came about as a result of a financial crisis at Rowntree's between 1929-32 which nearly bankrupted the company and the need to create unique products which were clearly differentiated from the market leader Cadbury and its powerful Dairy Milk brand (Fitzgerald 1995). Fitzgerald draws attention to the role of mature markets, rising incomes and the unstable economic conditions of the interwar period (1919-39) in creating distinct brands within the confectionary sector and draws attention to the use of different marketing strategies by its competing firms. His analysis warns us against accepting and using simple stage models of marketing development which predominate within contemporary marketing thought.

Stefan Schwarzkopf's analysis of the role of advertising and marketing agencies in the development of brands has strongly contributed to our understanding of the emergence of the

modern brand (Schwarzkopf 2010). It clearly points to the interwar period as a key point in the practice of modern branding and the inextricable role which agencies such as J. Walter Thompson and the London Press Exchange played. Schwarzkopf (2010) makes the extremely important point that brands are not just legal trade-marks but occupy distinct positions in relation to markets and consumers which are the result of the cultivation of distinct identities, associations and benefits. It is only when this is realized that the brand is able to fulfill its role of differentiation, added value and the creation of customer loyalty. Whilst concepts such as brand image, brand personality, symbolic branding and lifestyle marketing did not enter marketing discourse until after the 1960s, the practical and tacit knowledge to realize this was achieved in the inter-war period by marketing agencies working for major American and British corporations. It was in these agencies that key concepts and practices were developed and applied to brands such as market and consumer research, campaign planning, positioning, segmentation, benefit marketing and modern techniques of brand communication. These agencies emphasized that brands were assets which created relationships with consumers and acted as strategic resources for companies. Schwarzkopf demonstrates this through JWT's marketing campaign for Lever's premium "Lux" soap brand in the late 1920s and 1930s in the UK (Schwarzkopf 2010). JWT positioned Lux as a fashion brand based on associations of style, lifestyle, aspirations, beauty and Hollywood glamour. Brand personality and market research amongst target female segments, modern communication techniques, and the use of both functional and emotional appeals combined to revive the brand and realize market leadership.

### **Museum of Brands, Packaging & Advertising**

The Museum of Brands, Packaging & Advertising is located in a quaint part of West London near the world famous Portobello Road market. The museum began as a private collection when the founder, Robert Opie, purchased a packet of Munchies sweets from a vending machine in Inverness in 1963. Opie developed a private collection of packaging and brands which culminated in a record breaking 1973 exhibition entitled “The Pack Age: A Century of Wrapping it up” at the Victoria and Albert museum. The collection and museum itself was initially housed in Gloucester from 1984 – 2001 before opening in London in 2005. Opie’s personal collection extends to over half a million consumer items, of which about 12,000 are exhibited at the museum. The collection was funded through Opie’s personal finances (as initially beginning as a private collection), and built through corporate and private donations of brand ephemera as well as the collecting behavior of Opie who went on many domestic and international packaging trips to create it. As a private collection, almost every available space in Opie’s home was taken up with consumer brands and packaging, before the museum was eventually established in Gloucester. Unlike some museum spaces which present images of packaging from a particular age (McLean Ward 1994), the exhibits at the museum present original packaging and products from the decades represented. The museum heavily relies upon sponsorship from companies such as Diageo and Vodafone, and it is now officially registered as a UK charity with paid employees and volunteers contributing to the everyday running of the museum.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

The collection at the museum is presented through a “time tunnel” which chronicles products and brands from the Victorian era (1800s) in Britain up to the present day. The museum exhibits a variety of products and brands, mostly from FMCG categories such as food, beverages, detergents and personal hygiene, amongst many others. The museum not only

exhibits products and brands, but also chronicles advertisements from various historical time periods. The Royal Family is well represented in the museum, with commemorations of royal weddings and memorabilia from key events in royal history. Many of the brands represented from Victorian times are no longer around, however some have survived and their lineage and evolution is documented historically at the museum. As well as packaged goods, the museum also holds a collection of artifacts from popular culture such as vinyl records from bands like The Beatles fashion items, games and newspapers. The museum shows how brands and products are part of our collective consciousness and the porous nature of brand discourse within the populist world. The museum is not simply a collection of products and brands, it also contextualizes the role that these have played in British society, and how key events in British culture and history are reflected in the products and brands used at the time. Visitors have the opportunity to see the development of certain product categories and the way brands and products have fitted in with and transformed everyday British life.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

For Robert Opie, the story of what could be conceived as mundane consumer objects is an extremely important one:

**Robert Opie:** Yes, OK, I didn't find the Munchie wrapper, I found the story, but there's a huge difference as you'll appreciate we all have these things around us and understanding the idea that there is a story there and to me it's the last huge story that hasn't been told. We've discovered everything else, we've been to the moon, we've discovered the Arctic, the Antarctic, Africa. We understand where dinosaurs come from and in the last 10 years even more about dinosaurs, we've still a lot to learn there. We're

learning about the Romans the Greeks and the Egyptians and everything else. But for me the story that remains undiscovered is this consumer story, and that's a huge chunk of information.

Since 1963, Opie has collected supermarket items to explain the role of brands and packaging in everyday life (he describes himself as Britain's only "professional shopper"). He derides terms such as "obsession" and "amassing" to describe his collection, and differentiates himself from consumers who hoard objects. For him, the social and historical context in which brands are presented is crucial, as this helps to explain the meaning of brands and products within society and culture at the time:

**Robert Opie:** Collectors need to not only understand their own subject but all the surrounding information and therefore for me once I'd started to study and understood the supermarket brands and advertising I wanted to see the wider context of how this consumer world had changed and that includes toys and games and travel and everything that's made this last 200 years possible, and a lot of that's down to technology.

The brands and products on display at the museum develop narratives of technology and progress, and visitors can clearly see how cultural changes are reflected in the packaging of the time. For example, the arrival of convenience foods and the impact this had upon British family life can be witnessed in the exhibits of the museum. On visiting the museum, we were struck by how other visitors recounted their shared memories and sense of nostalgia toward the brands on display, often stopping for several minutes by exhibits to discuss their personal brand memories, emphasizing the depth of social relationship that exists between consumers and their brands (Fournier, Breazeale, and Fetcherin 2012). In many ways, the story of British brands is the story

of British society, and visitors have the opportunity to experience how this narrative has developed historically through the representation of brands and products.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]

What is particularly striking about the museum is the predominance of low involvement brands that are displayed. The division of products into low involvement and high involvement products has become an increasingly important taxonomy in brand theory since the concept of involvement was first introduced by Krugman in 1965 in relation to how consumers perceived and responded to advertising (Krugman 1965; McWilliam 1997). The juxtaposition between low involvement and high involvement products, and by extension brands, is based on perceived risk by the consumer (physical, financial, functional, symbolic, expectant and increasingly environmental) and the ability of the brand to convey certain facets of identity, personality, values, lifestyle and outlook to both the individual consumer and to society (McWilliam 1997). The degree of these two factors will determine information search by the consumer prior to purchase and overall their degree of involvement in certain brands and categories. While low involvement brands are marketed on the basis of salience and quality, high involvement brands are promoted on their ability to emotionally connect with consumers and articulate social esteem and status (Elliott and Yannopoulou 2007).

The extent of low involvement packaged brands in the museum, from biscuits and chocolate to washing detergents and bathroom products, can partially be explained by the fact that the Museum began life as a private collection, and is still to a large extent, a collector's museum. Robert Opie himself has always had more interest in products within the low involvement category:

**Robert Opie:** Well I've always gone for that end of the scale [Low Involvement] because that to me is, I've always gone for the everyday, I'm more interested in what ordinary people buy rather than luxury. Having said that every brand, pretty much, with any history starts off as a luxury, so the golden rule that I've always adhered to and I talk about this in my DVD is that a lot of brands and products start off as luxuries before they ever become part of, before they become a necessity, and there are two things behind that, one is you're not manufacturing enough to make it economical, and secondly as history progresses people have greater disposable income.

What the Museum of Brands, Packaging & Advertising discloses is the democratization of the brand in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries from luxury products for the few to consumer goods for the many, and the museum tells us something very important about the evolution of branding in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Whilst the public at large tend to associate brands with high involvement categories, with cars, luxury products or with consumer electronics, for example, the reality is that over the last two centuries the experience of most Britons with brands has been with low involvement, packaged, consumer products. The brand historians Teresa Da Silva Lopes and Paul Duguid, for example, have shown that trademark registrations for consumer goods constituted 56% of all registrations in the UK in 1900, fell to 40% in 1910 and then remained at around 35% for each decade until 1970 when their study ends (Duguid, da Silva Lopes, and Mercer 2010). Since a large proportion of trade marked goods would have been capital products traded between businesses, such as machinery, for example, these figures are impressive. Britain, in fact, registered proportionately more trade marks in consumer goods between 1900 and 1970 than the United States, though less than France which was the clear leader in this category.

One key component of low involvement brands is salience. Salience demands that consumers should not only be aware of certain brands but that these are part of their active brand repertoire that can be independently recalled when a category need occurs, e.g. Cadbury Dairy Milk with chocolate. Low involvement brands should therefore be top-of-mind amongst consumers, particularly as these products require minimal cognitive processing and are often bought on the basis of habitual buying behavior. For salience to occur consumers must be actively aware of brands based on familiarity, positive feelings, trust, perceptions of quality and loyalty (Ehrenberg, Barnard, and Scriven 1997). In this respect differentiation is not so important, particularly as brands in low-involvement categories tend to be very similar. Producers of low involvement products should not, therefore, focus on differentiating their brands or on creating emotional or personal attachment, but should aim at creating higher degrees of salience based on communication and distribution (Elliott and Yannopoulou 2007). It is shelf space, advertising and packaging that sells low involvement brands rather than identity or distinction. As a result of this, low involvement brands should aim at constant presence in consumer's everyday lives, whether psychological or physical. As Ehrenberg, Barnard, and Scriven (1997) have argued, their publicity should revolve around themes of "Here I am" and category association. To a large degree this argument is historically demonstrated in the Museum of Brands, Packaging & Advertising. The visitor is struck by the fundamental role that packaging, advertising and merchandising has played throughout British history. The exhibits clearly show that for many brands, such as in food, confectionaries, cleaning products, over-the-counter medicines and beverages, packaging has remained almost constant (with minor alterations) for decades. Familiarity and consistency have been constituted as axial strategies of these brands. It has been this combined with investment in advertising and merchandising that

has guaranteed their success. In addition, all of these brands have emphasized for decades their associations with quality, health and wellbeing. Strategies of salience have relied on a combination of familiarity, awareness and trust.

In relation to this last point, the Museum of Brands, Packaging & Advertising demonstrates through its exhibits that brand association has been prevalent in maintaining salience. Brand association can be defined as links which the brand is able to generate between itself and certain attributes related to functionality, quality, value, symbolism, users, use situation and organization, which are communicated to consumers (Aaker 1996). Brand association is usually connected to strategies that revolve around brand identity and differentiation. Whilst this may be so in relation to high involvement brands, in the case of low involvement products it is more related to familiarity and presence, i.e. to salience. Robert Heath (2001), for example, has argued that association in relation to low involvement brands operates at a lower, shallower level of consciousness. We learn about them and remember them implicitly rather than actively. Effectiveness in advertising and communication is thus based on presence, repetition and familiarity rather than explicit messages or complex elaboration (Heath 2001). Many brands in the Museum, from the 1880s to the present day, project strong associations in their packaging and advertising related not only to health and quality but also to popular social and cultural constructs such as sport, family, humor, nature and historical events and phenomenon such as the British Empire, the Royal Family, war (ranging from the Boer War, 1899-1901 to the Second World War, 1939-1945), trade exhibitions, royal coronations, celebrities and popular culture. Whilst some of these themes, such as Empire and warfare, are no longer relevant, though were extremely important at the time, other motifs, such as royal coronations and jubilees, have remained as pertinent today in merchandising and advertising in brands as they were over one

hundred years ago. What is interesting here, however, is that most of these associations are generic, being shared amongst competing brands, rather than specific to individual trademarks in an attempt to differentiate themselves from their competitors (Ehrenberg, Barnard, and Scriven 1997). This suggests that their role was to generate social relevance, topicality and presence amongst consumers in an attempt to assimilate themselves into the lives of others. To remain salient means being able equally to blend in as it does to stand out. Furthermore while the exhibits in the Museum of Brands, Packaging & Advertising should alert us to the strategies of salience and association, which have been adopted by British low involvement brands for over a hundred years, they should also remind us that they are as much historical and cultural artifacts, revealing something about the everyday lives of their individual consumers and the environments which they lived in, as they are trademarks and symbols whose goal was economic gain and competitive advantage.

One important question is what level of support do the producers of brands on exhibit give to the Museum of Brands, Packaging and Advertising? While many of the brands shown in the museum, particularly those from before World War Two, are no longer produced, the companies behind them are still in operation and continue to produce successor brands. In addition, a related question is how do these companies see the history of their brands? Do they view it as an important strategic asset which contributes to the strength of their brands and do they see the Museum of Brands, Packaging & Advertising as an important partner in the reproduction of this historical asset? In order to answer this three of Britain's largest consumer goods companies were contacted who all have brands on exhibit in the museum. These are Diageo, Reckitt-Benckiser and Unilever. All three companies were asked the following three questions:

1. What is your company's view of its history (both of the organisation and its brands) in relation to the present, and current and future market environment?
2. Why does your company contribute exhibits to the Museum of Brands? Do you have a close relationship with the Museum?
3. Do you feel that having exhibits on the Museum of Brands benefits your brands? If so how does it do this?

Answers were received from a combination of archivists, PR consultants and communication managers.<sup>1</sup> Both Unilever and Diageo took a highly positive view of history and saw it as a vital factor in the success of their brands. Unilever has an archive which it opened in 1984. It has five archivists and is open to external researchers. Diageo similarly has an archive which it opened in 1990 and also employs five archivists. The company takes a highly proactive view to history and is extremely proud of the history and heritage of its brands, some of which, such as its J&B whisky range and Guinness, are over 250 years old. Its archives hold material on more than 1500 brands, 200 production sites and 150 markets. What is interesting about Diageo is its use of historical events and pseudo commemorations to promote its brands. It has celebrated, for example, Guinness and Arthur's Day for four years to mark (originally) the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the lease of the St James Gate Brewery in Dublin. It has also recently announced the launch of the John Walker & Sons Voyager, a luxury yacht which will travel through Asia Pacific for over six months, replicating the trade routes of the Johnnie Walker whiskies in the area in the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Reckitt Benckiser took a more ambivalent view to history. Whilst it is proud of the heritage of its brands, it prefers to see itself as a forward looking company whose main aim is to get its products to market, find out what its customers need and keep them excited about its products by constantly refreshing and renewing them. Much of this is

determined by the fact that it is in the fast moving consumer goods sector. The company stated that it looked to the present and the future rather than to the past. Whilst it did have an archivist when Reckitt merged with Benckiser in 1999, it was felt that this was not appropriate for the new company.

In terms of the relationship with the Museum of Brands, Packaging & Advertising the response of these companies was relatively neutral. Reckitt Benckiser, unsurprisingly, took a relatively sanguine attitude to the museum. While it thought that it played a positive role in showing the important role that brands have historically played in daily life, particularly to young people, its forward-looking orientation precluded it from giving support. Unilever adopts a propriety policy towards its history and heritage which it views primarily as an internal resource. It stated that it does not officially allow the Museum of Brands, Packaging & Advertising to make its history available to the public. This is the role of its archive and archivists. Unilever also stated that it has had a difficult relationship with the museum over the years, particularly in relation to its reproduction rights in Unilever imagery. Yet even here it would appear that its support is relatively neutered with exhibits coming from Robert Opie's private collection rather than the company.

### **Brands as Sociocultural Phenomena**

Products and brands as artifacts of consumer culture are deeply meaningful and impart much knowledge about a society and its inhabitants. The Museum of Brands, Packaging & Advertising presents the story of low involvement brands, and tells us much about the development of British society as well as the cultural, social and economic changes that have taken place. As Miller (2010, 125) reminds us, "stuff matters" and the exhibits at the Museum of Brands, Packaging &

Advertising clearly document how important stuff is in understanding British collective history.

Objects say much about who we are and what we do, as Kopytoff (1986, 67) notes:

The biography of a car would reveal a wealth of cultural data: the way it was acquired, how and from whom the money was assembled to pay for it, the relationship of the seller to the buyer, the uses to which the car is regularly put, the identity of its most frequent passengers and those who borrow it, the frequency of borrowing, the garages to which it is taken and the owner's relation to the mechanics, the movement of the car from hand to hand over the years, and in the end, when the car collapses, the final disposition of its remains. All of these details would reveal an entirely different biography from that of a middle-class American, or Navajo, or French peasant car.

Objects themselves are constitutive of social relations (Douglas and Isherwood 1986; Miller 1994), and consumers engage with each other through the exchange of products and brands. As recent research has shown, consumers co-create meaning through engagement and product use and form interpersonal relationships with brands that are highly significant (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Diamond, Sherry, Muniz, McGrath, Kozinets, and Borghini 2009; Fournier 1998; Hatch and Shultz 2010). Also, perhaps as importantly, consumers form relationships with each other around brands, which act as a fulcrum for social interaction, as we can see in the concept of brand communities (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Muniz and Schau 2005). At the Museum of Brands, Packaging & Advertising, we can observe how brands and products have been used in British society, and the social relationships that have been created through the shared consumption of products and brands such as confectionary and deserts. Consumers have formed deep relationships with brands and have collective relationships through brands, which form part of the fabric of our culture. We can see how low involvement products

have been integral to British society and there is significant meaning in the mundane of low involvement brands. These brands form part of our shared and collective consciousness, and the museum documents how these brands assumed such an important role in our lives.

The meaning of brands is culturally constituted and infused with social significance (McCracken 1986). According to Douglas and Isherwood (1996, 38) "...they [goods] are needed for making visible and stable the categories of culture". Brands operate within culture and create their own myths and ideologies that resonate with consumer audiences (Holt 2004; Holt and Cameron 2010). Indeed, brands play an important social role in storytelling and mythmaking, which contribute to culture (Beverland 2009; Brown 2005; Randazzo 1993; Twichell 2004). At the Museum of Brands, Packaging & Advertising, brands are presented as "citizen artists" (Holt 2002, 87) whose meanings are an implicit part culture and society and compete with other cultural products such as music, literature, film and art. Brands and products are entwined with important events (such as world wars or cultural revolutions), and the museum shows how low involvement, FMCG brands were important harbingers of cultural and social change in Britain.

Marchand (1986) has introduced the concept of advertisements as "social tableau" which are reflective of society in some way. Frank's (1997) insightful study demonstrates how American advertising of the 1960s constituted the spirit of counterculture revolution in order to sell commodities such as cars. At the Museum of Brands, Packaging & Advertising, we can readily observe how brands and products have reflected society, particularly during periods such as wartime where messages of self-preservation and stoic resistance were articulated ("Keep Calm and Carry On" was the motif of the time, a slogan which often appears on British merchandise to this day). We also see how brands have developed and changed with culture and society, and their relative omnipotence in our lives. Brands are an implicit part of our social

existence and their meanings are complexly interwoven within our culture (O'Donohoe 1994; Ritson and Elliott 1999). The museum highlights particularly how low involvement brands are used and their prevalence within the landscape of branding. While consumer objects can sometimes be viewed as trivial, mundane or ephemeral, the museum and collection demonstrates the importance of brands and products in explaining our social and cultural evolution. These brand artifacts tell a compelling story about British culture and society, and through them we can see important historical events and eras reflected. The social tableau, as represented in the exhibits at the museum, clearly illustrates how low involvement brands contribute to the narrative of British society. The popularity of the museum and its collection is indicative of consumer interest in marketing related phenomena (O'Donohoe 1997). Brands are cultural resources around which there is much fascination and enthusiasm, and the museum demonstrates the role that low involvement products and brands play in our collective society.

## **Conclusion**

In recent brand management research, there has been an explicit focus upon the sociology of the brand and understanding how brands create meaning (Holt 2006; Schroeder and Salzer-Morling 2006). Branding must be understood as primarily a sociocultural process that generates mythical meanings for products (Danesi 2006), and the study of these social and cultural processes is of particular interest to contemporary brand management researchers (Heding, Knudtzen, and Bjerre 2009). While branding practices have a long history that stretch back at least 9000 years (Eckhardt and Bengtsson 2010), the Museum of Brands, Packaging & Advertising presents us with compelling brand genealogies that historically contextualize low involvement product use within British society over the past 150 years. This brand history is particularly useful for

understanding the myths and stories that these brands created and the ways in which they reflect cultural and social changes in Britain.

Consumer objects and brand ephemera are extremely important for understanding how society has evolved, and the Museum of Brands, Packaging & Advertising is a rich site to conduct brand history and genealogy. Marchand's (1985) groundbreaking work illustrated how print advertisements could reflect social structures, and the museum shows us how products and brands can also be used to map social and cultural history. Robert Opie considers that the museum has an important role in documenting this, as he explained:

**Robert Opie:** The story that we tell down in the museum is part of that consumer story, is that over time we have become a much richer society, we have more disposable income, and that story gets reflected in everything you see so you see the arrival of the motorcar in the 1890s but it's not until the 1960s or 70s that most people have a motorcar. So there's all these different stories there which show us how society keeps changing and moving.

The products and brands reflect as well as create cultural change, and it's important to have a museum that narrates this history through brand artifacts and ephemera. What is perhaps most compelling in our study of the museum was the fact the vast majority of brands we encountered at the museum were what would traditionally be considered low involvement products. The content of the museum reflects the historiography of the brand in Britain reviewed briefly at the beginning of this article. In a recent DVD produced by museum founder Robert Opie (2013), consumers are interviewed and discuss their memories and experiences of low involvement products such as confectionary, detergents, beverages and cigarettes. What is

particularly interesting about this film is how meaningful and important the brands are to these consumers, who discuss their consumption of these brands in highly relational terms (Fournier 1998). Many consumer research studies in brand management tend to focus upon consumer durables or what would be considered high involvement goods like computers or cars (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Muniz and Schau 2005), but the Museum of Brands, Packaging & Advertising highlights the vital importance of seemingly mundane products and brands in the everyday lives of consumers. We argue that the study of low involvement brands is crucial to understanding consumption and these brands are useful sources for writing social and cultural history. The Museum of Brands, Packaging & Advertising highlights the prevalence of low involvement brands in Britain and how their study can reveal much about how our world has changed and evolved. It is a museum that holds as much interest for the general public as it does for marketing researchers and is a London visit we would wholeheartedly recommend.

1 Information in this section from the companies in question was obtained from an interview with Public Relations Officer, Penny Roberts, from Reckitt Benckiser's PR agency, The Firm, on 23<sup>rd</sup> December, 2012, and from email correspondence with the archivist of Unilever's archives, Jeanette Strickland on 3<sup>rd</sup> January, 2013 and with Vanessa Shaw, Head of Communications at Diageo on 29<sup>th</sup> January, 2013.

2 Email correspondence with Vanessa Shaw, 29<sup>th</sup> January, 2013.

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