Brand-Consumer Storytelling Theory and Research: Introduction to a Psychology & Marketing Special Issue

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ABSTRACT

This introduction reviews core principles of storytelling theory. The article explains basic propositions of good storytelling. A brief summary of each of the six articles that follow appears. The article extends a note of appreciation to the members of the special editorial board for this issue and to Rajan Nataraajan. © 2010 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Martha Woodside (age 11) refers to school as the "deathtrap." Asked why, she answers, "Because the teachers talk so much and we don't get to move around." The available evidence on the persuasive impact of lecture versus storytelling formats support the proposition that lectures have a tendency to put listeners to sleep or cause counter-arguing, whereas stories move audiences to action (Adaval & Wyer, 1998; McKee, 2003; Wells, 1988). Possibly any engagement in action—students or consumers talking about a problem, getting up, and moving toward accomplishing some objective—represents a rudimentary story that is inherently more appealing than listening to someone else talking.

This *P&M* special issue advances theory and research on storytelling and interpreting stories that people tell about themselves, others, products, and brands in natural and experimental (e.g., thematic apperception testing) contexts.

The objectives for the special issue include (1) increasing understanding of why and how people create stories, (2) increasing the ability to interpret both conscious and unconscious thinking that occur in stories, (3) increasing ability in writing/visualizing good stories—stories that resolve major dilemmas or move people to action—and (4) examining how products and brands enable consumers to become effective protagonists through storytelling.

This introduction serves to introduce basic principles of storytelling. Second, this introduction covers theory of good storytelling. Third, a brief discussion covers each of the six articles in the special issue. A note of appreciation closes the article.

PRINCIPLES OF STORYTELLING BEHAVIOR

"Human memory is story-based" (Schank, 1999, p. 12) is the first principle of storytelling behavior. Information is indexed, stored, and retrieved in the form of stories. A story is useful because it comes with many indices (i.e., touch points to the lives of listeners/viewers or to others that cause implicit and/or explicit awareness and emotional connection/understanding in the minds of listeners/viewers). The following report illustrates indices in stories.

On February 24, 2009, President Barack Obama told the story received in a letter from 14-year-old student Ty'Sheoma Bethea about her school in Dillon, South Carolina, how "the paint peels off the walls, and they have to stop teaching six times a day because the train barrels by." President Obama read part of Ty'Sheoma's letter during his speech. Though her school is in bad shape, she wrote, the students are "trying to become lawyers, doctors, congressmen like yourself and one day president, so we can make a change to not just the state of South Carolina but also the world. We are not quitters. . . ." She was in the audience for that Tuesday night's speech, sitting next to the first lady. She didn't meet the Obama daughters, but she did get to bowl in the White House, she told reporters after about 500 teachers and classmates gathered at J. V. Martin to welcome her home.

Almost all Americans can retrieve automatically their own school and classroom experiences and compare these experiences with Ms. Bethea's description of her school. Indices in stories can cause automatic (implicit) awareness, comprehension, and empathy among listeners/ viewers. The concept of indices and constructing indices in stories is central to creating good stories. These indices may be locations, decisions, actions, attitudes, quandaries, decisions, or conclusions. "The more indices we have for a story that is being told, the more places the story can reside in memory. Consequently, we are more likely to remember a story [vs. a lecture] and to relate the story to experiences already in memory. In other words, the more indices, the greater the number of comparisons with prior experiences and hence the greater the learning" (Schank, 1999, p. 11). The proposition that indices in stories serve as touch points of a story's core message to the listener/viewer is central to Escales's (2004) proposal that narrative processing creates or enhances self–brand connections (SBC) in consumer theory because people generally interpret the meaning of their experiences by fitting their interpretations of experiences into a story.

Second, a substantial amount of information stored in and retrieved from memory is episodic—stories that include inciting incidents, experiences, outcomes/evaluations, and summaries/nuances of person-to-person and person-and-brand relationships within specific contexts (see Fournier, 1998; Schank, 1990).

Third, retrieving, reliving, or repeat watching of stories results in what Aristotle (see Hiltunen, 2002) refers to as "proper pleasure"—a catharsis—that relates usefully to the work of Holt (2003) and Jung (1959): Watching, retrieving, and telling stories enables the learner (sometimes with the assistance of the trainer but not necessarily the protagonist) to experience one or more archetypal myths. An archetype is an unconscious primary form, an original pattern or prototype in the human mind; archetypes are not learned or acquired—they are with us from birth and are as natural and embedded in us as our own DNA; archetypes are collective unconscious forces affecting beliefs, attitudes, and behavior implicitly and/or explicitly (Jung, 1959; Wertime, 2002). Recognizing archetypes takes effort and insight by a consumer or researcher studying the story. A catharsis is not a given in any story or indeed any travel experience. Nor does catharsis simply come out of the blue from reliving and retelling of stories. Aristotle (in Butcher 1961) actually describes a slow unfolding of tragedy and catastrophe that then leads to the moment of realization and release—the "hamatea"—or experience of catharsis. Catharsis is usually experienced by the audience/reader, not necessarily by the protagonist unless a cathartic surfacing has been written into the story as part of its plot. The protagonist may fail completely to understand her own hubris and, not infrequently, will die in that state of self-delusion. A tragedy or catastrophe has to be severe for a cathartic process to be warranted (e.g., the young tourist shot in the hotel in Mumbai and subsequently rescued). One might hope that there would be relatively few instances of this magnitude in tourism.

Fourth, specific brands and products often play pivotal roles enabling consumers to achieve the proper pleasure that results in a consumer mentally and/or physically enacting a specific archetype—and reliving the experience by periodically retelling a given story. The brand–consumer storytelling and pleasure outcome builds on Bagozzi and Nataraajan's (2000, p. 10) idea "that people need help in finding what makes them happy, and this is where marketing comes in." The view that happiness can be the outcome via brands enabling consumers to enact stories with specific archetypal plots is a micro complement to Nataraajan and Bagozzi's (1999) more macro explication of the role of marketing in aiding consumers' conscious quest for happiness.

Fifth, individuals seek clarity, to make sense of prior conversations, events, and outcomes from others and themselves by telling stories. "How do I know what I think until I hear what I say?" (Weick, 1995) partly summarizes this proposition. Story repetition is often a plea for clarity that may be achievable in part by recognizing that the drama in the story is one illustration of one or more specific archetypes (e.g., story of rebellion, mother-of-goodness, little trickster, ultimate strength, the hero; see Wertime, 2002, for the storylines for these and other archetypes). The above set of propositions builds from the proposals of Escalas (2004) Holt (2003), Hiltunen (2002), Jung (1959), Mark and Pearson (2001), Wertime (2002), and Woodside, Sood, and Miller (2007).

The propositions help to describe explicitly how products and brands enable archetype engagement. The proposals here go deeper than Holt's (2003, 2004)

proposal that icons are encapsulated myths; the proposals in the present article describe how consumers' stories involving actions with brands and products provide a proper pleasure (Aristotle's *Poetics*; Butcher, 1961) that relates unconsciously to one or more archetypes (Jung, 1959) and helps consumers achieve deep satisfying levels of sense making.

The retelling and reliving of stories can be experienced in many different ways, including with unutterable boredom (i.e., a bad story) or retraumatization and catharsis. Reaching catharsis is a very complex process. A conflation throughout a text between a story's protagonist and author or listener/viewer is likely to occur in subjective personal introspections (see Holbrook, 1995). When a text is autobiographical, the author is still the reader of the finished text, not the text itself. The protagonist does not have to be an active agent in the story; a story's enactment may result in the reader experiencing a deep understanding or catharsis while the protagonist in the story remains completely passive to the end.

Archetypes are not outcomes. As Jung (1959) points out, archetypes are potentially dangerous psychic forces that rarely, of themselves, bring pleasure or fulfillment. It is the process of engaging with the archetypes that brings realization and understanding. Listening, viewing, and interpreting a story may be distinctly unpleasant. Several different types of stories are told—a trip may be an important event but not necessarily a great experience.

Narrative theory informs the development of propositions of storytelling behavior by providing understanding and description of story enactments and content. For such contributions, narrative theorists frequently propose three-level divisions of narratives. For example, Bal (1985, pp. 7–9) proposes fabula, story, and text: The fabula is a series of logically and chronologically related events, caused or experienced by actors. Bal calls this the deep or abstract structure of the text; the story is the way the fabula is looked at, and consists of the "aspects" or "traits" peculiar to a given story; finally, there is the text, by which one uses language signs to relate a story, which is produced by an agent who relates the story.

Rimmon-Kenan (1983, pp. 3–4) provides another three-level conception of narration. To Rimmon-Kenan, a narrative consists of story, text, and narration: The story is equivalent to the histoire and fabula mentioned above; the story to her is an abstraction of text events; text, to Rimmon-Kenan, is equivalent to discourse, and consists of what we read or hear—the text is spoken or written discourse as it is told; the events of a text need not be arranged in chronological order (cf. Talib, 2008). The learners' (e.g., students in degree programs) experiencing (i.e., performing) of cognitive-sculpting activities of consumer stories provides a useful introduction to narrative theory—an introductory segue via learning-by-doing, as Schank (2005) recommends.

TELLING GOOD STORIES

McKee (2003) advocates that the best way to persuade someone (students, friends, deans, and family members) is by telling a compelling story. "In a story, you do not only weave a lot of information into the telling but you also arouse your listener's emotions and energy. Persuading with a story is hard. Any intelligent person can sit down and make lists [for use in a lecture, such as writing 'reason-why-to-buy advertising copy']. It takes rationality but little creativity to design an argument using conventional rhetoric. But it demands vivid insight

and storytelling skill to present an idea that packs enough power to be memorable. If you can harness imagination and the principles of a well-told story, then you get people rising to their feet amid thunderous applause instead of yawning and ignoring you" (McKee, 2003, p. 52).

What are the principles of a well-told story? A story expresses how and why life changes. A story includes a situation or context in which life is relatively in balance or implied to be in balance—you believe that you are happily married forevermore with a wife who loves you and a 3-year-old daughter. You expect your life will continue that way. However, a story may begin with a terrible disaster and progress toward stability or some other kind of resolution. In his work McKee is only describing one context of the structure of narrative. Not all stories have dramatic flow—the chaos narrative, for instance, constantly digs itself into an ever-deepening hole. However, the story's audience is likely to image a prequel of balance existed before stories that open with a chaotic event.

But then an event—screenwriters call this event the "inciting incident"—throws life out of balance. Your wife announces that she is in a relationship with the contractor finishing the basement and she is going to be seeking divorce. The story goes on to describe how, in an effort to restore balance, the protagonist's subjective expectations crash into an uncooperative objective reality. A good storyteller describes what it is like to deal with these opposing forces, calling on the protagonist to dig deeper, work with scarce resources, make difficult decisions, take action despite risks, and ultimately uncover the truth—all great storytellers deal with this fundamental conflict between subjective expectation and cruel reality (McKee, 2003).

Good storytelling displays the struggle between expectation and reality in all its nastiness. The great irony of existence is that what makes life worth living does not come from the rosy side. We would all rather be lotus eaters, but life will not allow it. The energy to live comes from the dark side. It comes from everything that makes us suffer. As we struggle against these negative powers, we're forced to live more deeply, more fully. (McKee, 2003, p. 53)

Skepticism is another principle of the storyteller. The skeptic understands the difference between text and subtext and always seeks to learn what is really going on. The skeptic hunts for the truth beneath the surface of life, knowing that the real thoughts and feelings of institutions or individuals are unconscious and unexpressed (cf. Wilson, 2002). "The skeptic is always looking behind the mask" (McKee, 2003, p. 54).

What questions should a story listener/viewer ask in making sense of a story? Answers to this question include asking who the principal protagonist is. Also, what does this protagonist want in order to restore balance in his or her life? "Desire is the blood of a story. Desire is not a shopping list but a core need that, if satisfied, would stop the story in its tracks" (McKee, 2003, p. 55). Next the story interpreter should ask, what is keeping the protagonist from achieving his or her desire? Forces within? Doubt? Fear? Confusion? Personal conflicts with friends, family, lovers? Social conflicts arising from various institutions in society? Physical conflicts? The forces of Mother Nature? Lethal diseases in the air? Not enough time to get things done? Antagonists come in the form of people, society, time, space, and every object in it, or any combination of these forces at once.

Finally, the story sensemaker (i.e., audience member) asks, How does the protagonist decide to act—and continue the action—in order to achieve his or her desire in the face of these antagonistic forces? The answer to this question

reveals truth about the protagonist—because the choices the protagonist makes under pressure uncover and reveal the truth to and about the protagonist. The protagonist comes to learn his or her unconscious essence by self-examination of his or her own behavior (Wilson, 2002).

Consumers' thoughts and actions involving tourism behavior frequently include elements of good stories. Protagonists (e.g., a tourist reporting on his or her own travel plans and actions) are found in their diaries, blogs, and oral reports of their plans and actions involving leaving home, going on a journey, reaching one or more destinations, and returning home. These reports frequently contain antagonists in the form of bad weather, earthquakes, thieves, surly waiters, and bad experiences with travel companions—and personal blocks such as feelings of failure, inability to perform trip-related activities due to a lack of skill or ill health. Such reports sometimes include reviews about the protagonists' life at home, problems with children, spouses, lovers, and doubts about why they made or are making the trip. The relevant literature includes advances in theory and case study gestalt studies of consumers' own reports of their thoughts and actions covering all phases relating to planning, taking the trip, and returning home (e.g., Woodside, Krauss, et al., 2007; Woodside & MacDonald, 1994; Woodside & Martin, 2008).

THE CONTRIBUTIONS IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

Each of six articles in this special issue serves to increase the reader's understanding and skill in interpreting stories that consumers and marketers tell about themselves, experiences with brands, and surface and deep meanings relevant to the actions and outcomes of these stories. Collectively, the six articles serve as a toolkit for creating good stories. Certainly, additional references are necessary for crafting good stories; this special issue introduces the reader to many of these important references.

Selling Stories: Harry Potter and the Marketing Plot

The paper by Stephen Brown and Anthony Patterson plots the Harry Potter stories onto Booker's (2004) seven-element theory of narrative emplotment and considers how consumers interact with the Harry Potter brand phenomenon. Brown and Patterson's paper demonstrates the use of theory for interpreting nuances and the gestalt of a good story. The article includes a handy test to learn if your child or neighbor's child is a wizard.

Brand–Self Identity Narratives in the James Bond Movies

The paper by Holly Cooper, Sharon Schembri, and Dale Miller offers an analysis of the James Bond film series, resulting in the emergence of three different and contrasting brand narratives relating to the Bollinger, Aston Martin, and Jaguar brands. Each of these brand narratives reinforces a particular archetypal myth of lover, hero, or outlaw, respectively. Reading Cooper, Schembri, and Miller's paper is an excellent starting point in learning how to decode archetypal meanings that consumers and brands enact in stories.

Evolutionary Branding

The paper by Elizabeth Hirschman examines three examples of branding narratives constructed around interpersonal ties. The first deals with the human tendency to see the self as part of a group having a unique and attractive history. The second examines humans' desire to reach outward to others seen as having the same traits and values as ourselves. The third deals with the negotiation of identity within a branded community. Hirschman always offers unique and valuable perspectives. Read her article in this special issue to see how she reaches the following conclusion: Brand stories and human stories are both the products of a human tendency to see causality in the world, to experience time (whether cyclical or linear) as an opportunity for change and challenge, and to project human-like traits onto external objects and those of external objects onto ourselves.

Multi-Method Research on Consumer–Brand Associations: Comparing Free Associations, Storytelling, and Collages

The paper by Oliver Koll, Sylvia von Wallpach, and Maria Kreuzer demonstrates the value of using three approaches to assess brand knowledge: free association technique, storytelling, and collage creation. Each method is suitable to tap and reproduce different aspects of brand knowledge. Their findings offer nuances in applying research methods that deserve attention in planning consumer research. For example, the authors find that direct references to competitors are rare in the free association and collage methods, but more frequent in storytelling. The collage task may even counter the objective of uncovering competitive information as respondents may specifically search for pictures that contain the focal brand (if it is as prominent as the one in this study).

Creating Visual Narrative Art for Decoding Stories That Consumers and Brands Tell

The paper by Carol Megehee and Arch Woodside shows how creating visual narrative art revises and deepens sense making of the meaning of events in a story and what the complete story implies about oneself and others. The authors advocate adopting the view that most communication is nonverbal; consumers mostly think in stories via pictures, not in words, and dual processing theory and research indicate that the oldest thinking process (System 1) has attributes that associate with the archetypal collective unconscious: automatic, implicit, holistic, evolutionary old, emotional, low-effort, visual-contextualized, and primal (shared with animals).

Brand Consumption and Narrative of the Self

The paper by Sharon Schembri, Bill Merrilees, and Stine Kristiansen interprets consumer narratives of how brand consumption contributes to the construction of the self. The findings demonstrate that consumers use brands in different ways: symbolic, iconic, and indexical. This narrative study demonstrates that consumers use brands in different ways to construct the self. A brand can be

symbolic in the meaning it conveys. Alternatively, the brand can be iconic, where the consumer aspires to achieve what the brand resembles. Indexical involves a further meaning, when a brand has a factual connection to something.

A NOTE OF APPRECIATION TO THE SPECIAL EDITORIAL BOARD AND TO RAJAN NATARAAJAN

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