



City Research Online

City St George's, University of London

Citation: van Laer, T. (2016). Narrative theory in consumer research: Some synthesis and suggested directions for further research. Paper presented at the Consumer Culture Theory Conference, 6-9 July 2016, Lille, France.

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version. To cite this item please consult the publisher's version.

Permanent repository link: <https://city-ref-test.eprints-hosting.org/id/eprint/18851/>

Copyright and Reuse: Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, unless otherwise indicated, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way. For full details of reuse please refer to [City Research Online policy](#).

“La naissance du lecteur doit se payer de la mort de l'auteur” (Roland Barthes)

[Translation: The reader's birth must be at the cost of the author's death]

Since the early days of humanity, stories have been a central part of social life and cultural production. Storytelling is increasingly put to use in the marketing domain, including market research and strategy, new product development, retailing, and branding (Cayla and Arnould, 2013; Borghini et al., 2009; Holt, 2004). Scholars have dived deep into the cultural relevance of stories for consumption experiences (Shankar, Elliott and Goulding, 2001) but less research has focused on developing a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics at stake in the three stages of the narrative process: story-making, storytelling and narrative reception. In this session, each presentation explores one of these three stages, thereby providing an all-embracing overview of the narrative process. Further, the final presentation acknowledges the active role played by the story receiver in the interpretation, but also the transformation, of the story. With all three presentations building on the French literary critic tradition, including work by Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette, the session is particularly well-suited to the conference theme “Vive la Révolution!”

The first presentation delves into the story-making stage, defined as the design of a story preceding storytelling and story-receiving. The author shows that this stage has received scant attention in prior literature. Using a structural approach to narratology to develop a better understanding of story-making, the author puts forward a set of comprehensive guidelines to aid brand managers understand how stories work and how they should be conceived.

The focus of the session then shifts to storytelling, defined as the communicational provision of a story from the storyteller to the story receiver. The second presentation addresses an essential challenge faced by brands that compete in very dynamic fields and co-brand with highly visible person brands, that is, narrative continuity. The authors study brands in the field of high fashion, and draw on field level theories to identify the institutional work performed by three categories of actors: newly hired creative directors, representatives of the corporation and the fashion press.

Finally, the third presentation explores narrative reception, defined in prior work as the interpretation of a story by its audience and the transformative effects exerted on that audience (Gerrig, 1993). The authors argue for a broader definition acknowledging narrativizing, that is, the action the story receiver undertakes. This is an essential distinction as, in the digital era, story receivers actively transform the narrative using digital devices. In this context, the authors aim to understand narrative navigational consumption practices for serial narratives and subsequent outcomes.

The session, with its presentations drawing from a diverse range of narrative stages and contexts, should attract a significant amount of CCT attendees, and should be of particular interest to researchers interested in storytelling and narrative reception. With a discussant who has significant works on storytelling and narrative transportation, we expect the session to nurture a stimulating and fruitful discussion environment.

Stories Are Waiting, Managers Are Not: Comprehensive Guidance for Brand Story-making

A recent Eurostar campaign ends with the words “Stories are waiting” arguing that Eurostar commits to fast connection from London to Paris as well as to grant full access to experiences to narrate once back from the trip. Google and Starbucks have overcome the idea of simply being information or coffee providers to claim their ability to deliver stories. While remaining true to their business, many more brands have turned their communication from analytical (Escalas, 2007) to narrative persuasive messages (van Laer et al., 2014). Are stories waiting? No, stories are booming.

This conceptual paper—built on extensive literature review and authors’ former research—aims at fostering scant academic works providing managerial guidance about does, don’ts, and risks in brand story-making. Since Gerrig’s (1993) definition of narrative transportation, we observe rich academic works, mostly grounded in cognitive psychology, investigating the profound mechanisms of story reception. Such works help understand the need behind story consumption (van Laer, Visconti and Feiereisen, 2014), how an audience receives a story (Escalas, 2004), what variables are likely to transport it (van Laer et al., 2014), and the engrossing effects of transportation (Green and Brook, 2000; Phillips and McQuarrie, 2010). Yet, these works are too theoretical to be directly applicable to (brand) managers’ decisions, which remain mostly grounded on a ‘trial and error’ approach. As an illustration, CHANEL—likely, the best brand storyteller—also alternates successful and disastrous brand stories for its blockbuster fragrances, N°5 and Coco Mademoiselle.

We contend that academic works have been more concerned about two stages: (1) ‘storytelling’ (i.e. the communicational provision of a story from the storyteller to the story receiver; Escalas, 1998) and (2) ‘story-receiving’ (i.e. the interpretation of a story by its audience and the transformative effects exerted on that audience; Gerrig, 1993; Levy, 2006). Instead, we miss research on the ‘story-making’ stage, that is, the design of a story preceding storytelling and story-receiving. This stage represents the moment where managers take strategic and practical decisions as varied as: Which audience is likely to be persuaded through a story; what are the key structural components of a story to design (Barthes, 1975); how should these components be designed to prove effective; what principles can guide these decisions, and more. We aim at drawing attention to the story-making stage and at providing comprehensive answers to similar questions.

We address four questions leading to our corresponding contributions. First, adhering to a structural approach to narratology (Barthes, 1975), we question what are the structural components grounding successful stories and detect four of them including: (1) identifiable characters (i.e. characters whose thoughts, feelings, and behavioral motivations are clearly understandable; van Laer et al., 2014; 2015); (2) imaginable plot (i.e. a spatially embedded sequence of events thematically and symbolically interconnected; Thompson, 1997); (3) climax (i.e. an emotional and narrative construction leading to a key turning point, which may result from rhetorical deployment of different story genres; Stern, 1995); and, (4) outcome (i.e. a clear take-away facilitating appraisal of a brand’s contract and memorization; Stein and Albro, 2010). Second, we question the guiding principles for strategic story-making and discuss three of them:

(1) historical fit with ongoing acute social contradictions (Holt, 2004); (2) connectivity across the story's text and other existing texts (i.e. intertextuality; Kristeva, 1986); and gestaltic storytelling deriving from a concerted use of multiple storytellers (Diamond et al., 2009). Third, relying upon extensive illustration from managerial practice, we challenge what sources brands use to inspire their story-making. We illustrate the following: (1) brand heritage; (2) brand's charismatic leader; (3) existing myths and famous stories; (4) consumers' narratives; (5) brand characters; and (6) distinctive product ingredients. Fourth, we inspect limits and risks to adoption of brand stories. In particular, we comment on limitations deriving from product categories implying relevant risks (economic, performance, safety, and social) for the consumer. We argue that brands associated to such product categories may maintain a story format while actually conveying analytical arguments to support consumers' decision-making. We also comment on possible drifts that stories are susceptible to take whenever brand managers lose control on story-making and/or contradict an established brand contract. Last, we identify ethical risks related to story-making and -telling (van Laer, Feiereisen, and Visconti, 2015).

Story-making has long been acknowledged as art within the precincts of literature and philosophy. Brand story-making is not requested to stand as art. Yet, it demands way more than current 'bricolage'. We are confident our work can help improve brand managers' understanding of how stories work and how they should be conceived.

Sewing Patterns: How Institutional Work Contributes to Brand Narrative Stability in the Ever Changing Field of High Fashion

"The Spirit of Dior Past Lays Ghost of Galliano." (*The Guardian*, 3-07-2012)

On April 9th 2012, French fashion house Christian Dior named designer Raf Simons its next couturier. The company had recently fired its lead designer of 15 years, John Galliano, distancing itself from him over anti-Semitic remarks he had uttered in drunken display at a Parisian café. The press release claimed Simons would "propel [Dior's] iconic style into the 21st century." But while Simons was seen as an influential fashion figure, some fashion journalists questioned how the house's ultra-feminine legacy would fare in Simons' minimalist hands (e.g., Horyn, 2012). Yet within mere months, the fashion press was claiming (as in *The Guardian* headline above) that Simons' first haute-couture collection was animating "the spirit of Dior past" and putting to rest the ghost of Galliano. And when Simons unexpectedly announced, in October 2015, that he was stepping down, the press credited him and the label with having had a "fruitful three-and-a-half year collaboration that saw the fabled French house tilt in a more modernist direction" that resulted in "strong sales growth in the post-Galliano period." (*WWD*, 22-10-2015).

The Dior case indicates a central challenge facing leading brands in the high fashion market, which is in a continual, and arguably escalating, state of change (e.g., Dolbec and Fischer, 2015). Somehow, such brands must exhibit narrative continuity with their heritage while at the same time renewing themselves. And in their efforts to do so, such brands are deeply dependent on the high profile creative directors, with whom they "co-brand" (Parmentier and

Fischer, 2015). However inspired and inspiring these individuals may be, human foibles like those exhibited by Galliano can become liabilities and (among other things) disrupt brand narrative continuity. Moreover, when new “person brands” (Parmentier, Fischer and Reuber, 2013) are brought in the mix, their brand associations may not immediately be seen as complementing those of the house. And, if a creative director does fuse with the house’s brand, there is again a threat to the label’s narrative continuity when that person departs, particularly if unexpectedly.

We address the question of how narrative continuity is maintained for brands that a) compete in highly dynamic fields and b) co-brand with highly visible person brands. We study brands in the field of high fashion: these may be extreme cases of brands facing narrative challenges, but we argue that brands in other contexts also do so. Our analysis draws on field level theories that focus on distinct categories of actors in fields (e.g., Bourdieu, 1990), and on the work that different categories of actors in fields perform (e.g., Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006).

This paper fits within a larger project on co-branding alliances between person and product brands. Here, we draw on two sources of data. The first is a decade long archive of media data that covers the arrivals and departures of a series of fashion designers employed as creative directors of six labels: Balenciaga, Dior, Gucci, Saint Laurent Paris, Louis Vuitton and Lanvin. All but one of these brands is owned by one of two French luxury conglomerates: LVMH and Kering. The second source of data for this project is field notes gathered through observation conducted at flagship stores for these brands in Paris and in New York.

Our data analysis led us to focus on three categories of actors performing institutional work that builds narrative continuity for brands. The first category includes the newly hired creative directors themselves. While designers are generally thought of as individuals with distinctive stamps brought in to “shake things up,” we find they engage in “homage work” to stitch together connections between their creations and those of the founders or family of the houses that employ them. The second category of actor includes representatives of the corporation who control “touch points” such as the websites and retail outlets where stakeholders encounter the brand. These actors engage in “segregation work,” in that they control the extent to which the creative director’s name and image are on display. The third category of actor that is critical to brand continuity is the fashion press. Members of the press perform an “education work” by explaining to readers how the clothes created by newly hired designers harken back to earlier images in the houses’ collections.

After identifying the types of institutional work that actors perform, this paper traces implications for our understanding of brand narrative continuity and destabilization.

Narrative Navigational Practices in the Digital Age

The digital era is fundamentally affecting how consumers watch TV. Recent research reveals that in the US, at least 63% of consumers use digital devices more than once a week to stream videos or watch on-demand features (Crosett, 2013). More crucially, these devices enable consumers to modify the way they navigate TV narratives. Narratives are usually defined as a temporal sequence of causally related events (Richardson, 2000). Consumers have always been

able to control the narrative when reading, a self-paced medium. However, consumer control is now spreading to a wider range of media, including TV programming, movies, but also radio podcasts that, traditionally, were externally paced. While techniques for storytellers to manage narrative pace have been of central interest to literary researchers (Genette, 1980; Tucker, 2007), a topical question is: What happens to narrative consumption in the digital context?

Prior work in the cyber-literature borrowed the term *noema* developed by Husserl (1962) to distinguish between noematic and extranoematic efforts (Aarseth, 1997). While noematic efforts allow the reader to participate in the unfolding of the story but not modify how it develops, extranoematic efforts reflect when the viewer is able to alter the narrative rather than simply being guided by it. We argue for a broader definition of narrative to acknowledge 1) the temporal unfolding of events, 2) the structural and material fact of texts, images, etc. and 3) the narrativizing, the action taken by the story receiver (Drucker, 2008). Navigational tools, such as those enabled in the digital environment, provide narrative possibilities for the receiver at all levels (Drucker, 2008). Building on the concept of narrative navigation and on prior research on the consumption of TV series (Russell and Schau, 2014), we aim to understand narrative navigational consumption practices in the context of serial narratives and subsequent outcomes.

In line with recommendations about using contexts to extend theory (Arnould, Price, and Moisio, 2006), we use TV series viewing as an empirical context. We conducted 36 interviews with TV series watchers using a mix of grand tour questions and floating prompts (McCracken, 1988) to yield first-person accounts of participants' viewing practices and experiences of serial narratives. An initial identification of themes was developed, and theoretical categories were elaborated on during open and axial coding procedures. We then began a process of dialectical tacking, moving back and forth between our findings and the literature to deepen our understanding of the practices associated with TV series consumption.

Two key dimensions emerge to document how consumers navigate serial narratives: 1) Time, which refers to the compression and expansion of the viewing experience and 2) Depth, which relates to the layers up to which consumers choose to immerse themselves. The depth layers are inherent to the narrative, with the first layer being the story itself and deeper layers including the style of narration, the world of the actors and directors, and the meta-world of the series.

We find that consumers navigate these two dimensions to engage in either distillation or augmentation practices. For instance, one informant reports augmenting both time and depth when watching a series, investing days in viewing but also watching additional content such as interviews with producers, immersing himself beyond the most superficial narrative layers. Other narrative navigational practices distil both time and depth. For example an informant reports saving time by reading online summaries of the second season of *Homeland* before watching selected scenes only, as well as skipping all scenes featuring a specific character from the series 24, because it is perceived as unrelated to the main storyline. Interestingly, these two strategies lead to opposite outcomes: While the first strategy triggers a reduced pleasure from viewing the series and an inability to evaluate its quality, the second strategy is a truly gratifying experience for the informant, as skipping the side story of a character he reports hating enables him to devote himself to the main storyline. Therefore, while Genette (1980)'s semiotic work studies narratives as linguistic objects, detached from production and reception, we intend to examine how consumers navigate and transform the narrative, and to disentangle the complex

outcomes derived from such actions. After delineating the narrative navigational practices viewers engage in when watching TV series, we identify the impact on outcomes such as enjoyment of the series and ability to evaluate the show. We also discuss the implications of our work for our understanding of narrative consumption in the digital age, in particular the need for a broader definition of narrative acknowledging the transformative power of the story receiver.

References available upon request