



Consumer enactments of archetypes using luxury brands[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the meaning of luxury brands through the use of visual narrative art created from studying consumer blog entries. The article describes visual narrative art as a qualitative research tool. Mapping contexts and stories that blog entries describe reveals the nature of the brand, the blogger, and interpretations by the visual narrative artists. This study extends the consumer storytelling literature that follows from creating VNA and its use for deepening understanding of consumer reports of their enactments of brand myths.

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1. Introduction

Visual narrative art (VNA) is useful for mapping scenes or episodes in a story through multiple media forms—photographs, drawings, clip art, dance, video, and symbols—to convey imagery and meaning of events in the story (Megehee and Woodside, 2010; Woodside and Megehee, 2010a, 2010b). Nonverbal VNA is one of the oldest forms of human storytelling and sense-making (e.g., cave paintings and interpretive dance) and remains a major form of communication in the 21st century.

Fig. 1 is an example of VNA in a four-panel storyboard. The storyboard bonds four separate stories into a meta-story. Panel 1 shows the story of a siren luring sailors (men) to destruction with their beauty. Panel 2 shows the tale of Medusa, a siren, in Greek mythology. Panel 3 shows the viewer that Versace high fashion brand is Medusa. Panel 4 shows the consumer that she transforms into a siren via buying Versace and enacting the siren myth. The consumer likely is aware only unconsciously of the connecting details of the transformations in the meta-story and her accomplishing the transformation into the archetype of a dangerous siren capable of luring men to destruction. Creating VNA informs description and explanation of such archetypal transformations.

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This study proposes and empirically examines the proposition that creating and interpreting VNA helps to transform implicit meanings in stories into consciousness—meanings that otherwise are likely to remain completely implicit, puzzling, or obscure to storytellers and audiences. The study explicates the process of creating VNA, includes examples of the artistic outcomes of the process with interpretations, and provides implications for marketing theory and management practice. The findings extend the view that consumers acquire experiences rather than seeking products and services—experiences that serve as vessels for consumers to enact archetypal myths. These largely unconscious archetypal forces drive consumers to acquire experiences involving products, services, and brands as props/tools and expressions of self (e.g., “I am Jeep”; “I transform into a Siren after putting on my Versace coat”).

This study answers calls for broadening storytelling research in marketing (Hopkinson and Hogarth-Scott, 2001) and extends Megehee's and Woodside's (2010) call for reporting creations of VNA for luxury brand experiences. Such VNA creations represent a pedagogical tool for interpreting the meanings of luxury brands in the stories that consumers tell. The study includes reviewing the nature of luxury brands in the marketing literature, as well as the rationale for using the technique of creating VNA to improve sense-making into the meanings that brands convey. The research relies on the theory of the extended-self and dual-system mental processing theory.

2. Rationale for creating visual narrative art (VNA)

The five propositions of consumer storytelling introduced in Woodside et al. (2008) underlie the theory and rationale behind using VNA to bring out the meaning of consumers and brands from

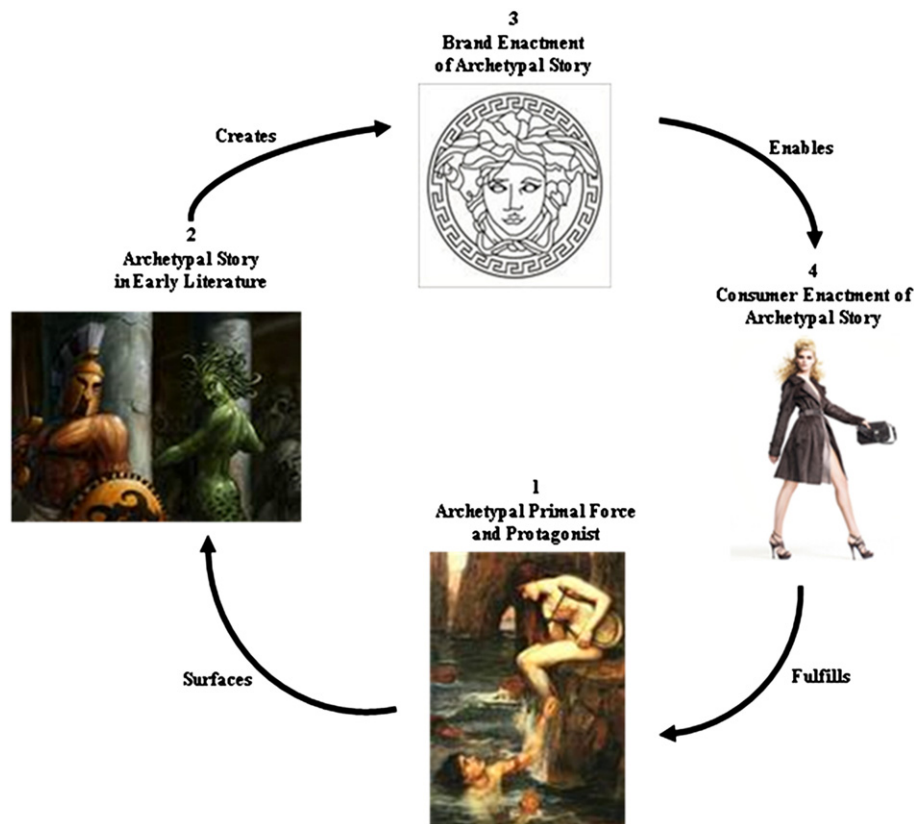


Fig. 1. Storyboard of siren's song transforming into medusa as a brand myth (and Versace logo) transforming a consumer into a siren.

stories told in blogs. The first proposition in storytelling theory is that people naturally think in narratives or stories rather than in arguments and paradigms (Hiltunen, 2002; McKee, 2003; Weick, 1995). Via weblogs (or blogs), individuals post stories, pictures, and videos expressing their experiences, beliefs, and attitudes about their lives—including brands with which they identify and consume (Woodside et al., 2008). The second proposition in storytelling theory is that information is often stored in and retrieved from memory as episodes or stories (Fournier, 1998; Shank, 1990). The third proposition states that retrieving, reliving, and repeating stories provides “proper pleasure” (Aristotle in Hiltunen, 2002, p. 6), and allows the storyteller to experience archetypal myths (Woodside et al., 2008). Archetypes are primal, original human prototypes that are not learned but are innate and imbedded in the human experience (Jung, 1981; Wertime, 2002). The fourth proposition is that specific brands can play an important role in enabling consumers to achieve proper pleasure and mentally or physically enact specific archetypes (Woodside et al., 2008). The fifth and final proposition for the theory is that through storytelling and repetition, individuals can clarify and make sense of events, conversations, and outcomes. Repetition (oral reflection) allows the storyteller to hear what he or she says (Weick, 1995) and possibly achieves clarity through recognizing one or more archetypes being fulfilled (Wertime, 2002).

Creating VNA of stories that consumers tell about luxury brands achieves several objectives. First, the VNA creation process helps revise and deepen sense-making about the meaning of events in a story, as well as what the complete story implies about the individual and others. VNA tells the story of the brand, as well as the consumer telling the story (Holt, 2003; Woodside et al., 2008). Story-based memories provide multiple reference points for retrieval and interpretation (Shank, 1990, 1999), and telling stories repeatedly often brings clarity (Weick, 1995) and catharsis (Woodside et al., 2008)—all of which aid in learning.

A second objective of creating VNA is that it surfaces unconscious thinking of the protagonist and other actors in the story (Levy, 1981). In many stories, the storyteller is often the protagonist, and unconscious thinking relating to consumer and brand experiences in stories fulfill one or more archetypes identified with the protagonist and/or storyteller (Jung, 1981). VNA can help reveal symbolic meanings of the brand, latent motives for buying or using the brand, and other aspects of consumption that usually cannot be readily uncovered through more direct methods of research (Thompson and Haytko, 1997).

A third objective of creating VNA of the stories that consumers and brands tell is that the process is inherently and uniquely fulfilling, pleasurable—and possibly healing—for the artist (Rosenthal, 2003). Using visual media allows artists to express emotions of the protagonist, the author, other characters, and possibly audience members. Emotions about events and outcomes such as anger or bliss may be better expressed with VNA than with words alone. VNA provides a tangible, emotional, and holistic experience that is uniquely satisfying and does so in a form that many audience members enjoy over and over again (Nodelman, 1988). Retelling stories can provide emotional clarity and tension reduction by surfacing unconscious or repressed memories (Woodside et al., 2008).

3. The nature of luxury brands

Luxury brand marketing is big business in many product and service industries and its importance goes beyond the field's financial impact. Buying, wearing, traveling, giving, driving in, and eating luxury brands enable consumers to enact psychological archetypes from Casanova to the Fairy Godmother. “Luxury” as a concept is defined within the scope of socio-psychology as a result of its connection to a culture, state of being and lifestyle, whether or not it is personal or collective.

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