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Mastering survivorship: How brands facilitate the transformation to heroic survivor<sup>☆</sup>Candice R. Hollenbeck<sup>a,\*</sup>, Vanessa M. Patrick<sup>b,1</sup><sup>a</sup> Department of Marketing, Terry College of Business, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602, USA<sup>b</sup> C.T. Bauer College of Business, University of Houston, Houston, TX, USA

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the identity transformation from mere survivor to heroic survivor of cancer. Utilizing a multi-method approach, interviews with seventeen female cancer survivors and five blog analyses, this research sheds light on the processes involved in the transformation from mere survivor to heroic survivor and the integral role of brands in this transformation process. Brands are used to signal heroism to the self (inward expression) and to others (outward expression) as well as to combat countervailing forces that deter the survivor's progress toward mastery of a heroic identity. The findings provide a rich understanding of the heroic archetype and its centrality to the mastery of survivorship. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications for brand managers, giving attention to the importance of consumer–brand relationships.

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## 1. Introduction

Once your treatment is over, you must move on. You must believe that you are healed and move on. Our attitude is everything. So many women live the cancer years after their treatments are over and that is not mentally or emotionally healthy. They hold onto the victim mindset. To become a *true* survivor you have to move on from this experience and create a new survivor identity. (Beth, 58)

Beth wanted to accomplish more than surviving cancer; her goal was to master survivorship and transform herself into a heroic survivor. To understand heroic survivorship, one only needs to turn to popular media propagated throughout culture. Mass media is full of exemplary portraits of survivors who must face unbearable obstacles only to come out stronger and more powerful on the other side. Stories about survivorship abound, and emphasize the value of survivorship against all odds.

Survivor ideology, however, is somewhat gender biased and harbors a number of stigmas that challenge whether a woman can ever really

achieve survivorship. The concept of survivorship typically denotes characteristics that are culturally associated with masculine traits. In fact, according to Oxford Dictionaries, a survivor is defined as such: “a person, typically a male, who copes well with difficulties; a person who survives, especially a person remaining alive after an event in which others have died; a person who continues to function or prosper despite hardships or trauma; a person who continues to live; one who outlives another.”

Although heroic stories have been popularized throughout civilized societies dating back to Homer's Iliad and the Odyssey among the oldest works of Western literature, American culture today gives increasing attention to the female heroine. Several recent New York Times bestselling books about heroic female protagonists have resulted in blockbuster movies: Wild (2014), the Twilight film series (2008–2012), and the Hunger Games film series (2012–2015) to name a few. However, even in this modern rendition, the fearless Katniss Everdeen (of Hunger Games fame) takes on traditionally masculine warrior traits of strength, bravery and courage coupled, only secondarily, with female traits of compassion and empathy. Prevalent in these storylines is the notion that females are expected to exemplify male characteristics to endure difficulties, and the failure to do so, results in her characterized as weak.

Female cancer survivors, compared to men, similarly face extraordinary societal and cultural pressures not only to survive, but to survive in a heroic fashion. Cultural, social, and financial stressors associated with survival are escalated in the face of traumatic events such as cancer (Barker, 2013; Seale, 2002), and women are more likely than men to cope with cancer by denying feelings associated with disappointment and fear (Seale, 2002). While cancer survival for men is portrayed as a

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test of pre-existing character, for women it is a significant identity transformation.

A cancer diagnosis typically initiates an identity crisis. An identity crisis can be defined as a “transition” from one specific state to another (Parsons, Eakin, Bell, Franche, & Davis, 2008). Cancer survival is complex and may be viewed as three distinct identity transitions: 1) an identity transition from a healthy person to a cancer victim, 2) an identity transition from cancer victim to a survivor, and 3) an identity transition from a mere survivor to a heroic survivor. In this research we focus on the third, insofar uninvestigated, identity transformation. Specifically, we focus on how female cancer survivors master survivorship to transform from a mere survivor to a heroic survivor and the role of brands in this self-transformation process.

There are three main contributions of this study. First, the findings shed light on self-transformations to achieve mastery of an identity. For cancer survivors, the mastery of survivorship is the transformation from mere survivor to heroic survivor. Notably, while the transformation to heroic survivor is a positive one, it is precipitated by the tragic, unwanted and unforeseen cancer diagnosis. This study thus makes a fine distinction between self-transformations precipitated by pleasurable (Choi, Ko, & Megehee, 2014) or planned events (e.g. retirement, Schau, Gilly, & Wolfenbarger, 2009) and transformations that are hastened by unexpected and unwanted circumstances. Second, this study provides insight into the manner in which mastery over an identity is attained. The findings identify three distinct processes of acceptance, mastery and reinforcement. Notably, while the findings emerged in the context of the mastery of cancer survival and the transformation from mere survivor to heroic survivor, the processes identified might well apply to other identity transformations to mastery, such as the mastery of a leadership position or the mastery of motherhood. Third, a major focus of this work pertains to the role of brands in fostering self-transformations; specifically, achieving heroic survivorship via symbolic consumption as brands as cultural icons (Holt, 2004; Holt, Quelch, & Taylor, 2004). Consequently, this study broadens our understanding of the powerful meanings associated with brands and how brands are used to send signals indicating inward and outward transformations.

Using a multi-method approach, we interview seventeen female cancer survivors, average age 59, and to triangulate our data we also examine five blogs authored by female cancer survivors. The remainder of the article is as follows. Acknowledging the extant literature on the use of brands to enable self-transformation, this article begins with a synthesis of a former theory that reviews consumption and identity construction and consumption and transitional identities. Then, we ground heroism as a key concept in our research. Next, we describe our method and discuss our findings using direct quotes from cancer survivors to support our conclusions.

## 2. Conceptual background

### 2.1. Consumption and identity construction

Consumption is central to identity and contemporary life and has been characterized as “perpetual shopping” (Baudrillard, 1989). Consumers are identity-seekers and goods provide consumers a way of regulating emotions, gaining social status, and projecting an ideal self (Dittmar, 2008). Brands often serve as “interpretive agents,” helping consumers adhere to what is “normal” and “desirable” (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 875). As such, brands have symbolic functions helping consumers construct, express, and reconstruct identity.

A vibrant stream of research demonstrates the role of brands in identity construction. Brands symbolize human-like attributes (Aaker, 1997), represent values and beliefs (Aaker, Benet-Martínez, & Garolera, 2001) and can be used to bolster one's self-view (Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009). Correspondingly, brands are relied upon to restore harmony to an ambiguous, incongruous, or unsatisfying self-concept (Schouten, 1991). Belk (1988) suggests that “we are what we have and that this

may be the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behavior” (p. 160). Likewise Ahuvia (2005) reiterates, that a consumers' sense of self is built upon the people and the things they love.

Indeed, identity and consumption are linked in a wide variety of contexts (for an excellent review see Ruvio & Belk, 2012). For example, recent work has explored identity projects in various contexts including retirement (Schau et al., 2009), loved objects (Ahuvia, 2005), death rituals (Bonsu & Belk, 2003), and dispossession of cherished objects (Price, Arnould, & Curasi, 2000). Products and specific brands often allow consumers to reflect, restore and create new aspects of the self, providing consumers with a sense of control over shaping others' beliefs about themselves.

### 2.2. Consumption and transitional identities

Transitional identities are a result of life disruptions (Adams, Hayes, & Hopson, 1976) and often cause a ripple effect including a restructuring of routines, life-styles, relationships, and values (Levinson, 1978). One way consumers cope during times of transition is through consumption (Schau et al., 2009). Possessions to which consumers are attached help them define a present self and consumption can help define a desired self (Mehta & Belk, 1991). Specific brand meanings are especially salient to those in identity transitions as brands are often used to signal an identity to others (Ruvio & Belk, 2012) especially during times of transition Belk, Russell W. (forthcoming). The Digital Extended Self. *Journal of Business Research*.

Researchers have long suggested that consumers choose brands that communicate a desired identity (Belk, 1988; Douglas & Isherwood, 1979; Holt, 1995; Solomon, 1983). For instance, Schouten (1991) found role transitions to be critical times in determining the quality of consumers' lives and, during such times consumers have an increased need for self-control. Throughout transitions, the self-concept is often ambiguous and mutable and, in cases where consumers are unable to find harmony with their self-concept, the result can be extreme feelings of regret and dissatisfaction (Belk, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi, 1981). Furthermore, Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) suggest the less complete or secure consumers feel in certain roles to which they are committed, the more likely they are to use symbols (such as brands) for role competency in order to improve their own self projection of competency to others. Schouten (1991) posits that consumption activities foster the maintenance and development of a stable self-concept during transitional identities.

Brands serve as a means for boosting self-esteem and expressing identity via explicit identifiers of wealth, status, or luxury (Holt, 2004). Consumption can be used to express not only indications of social class (ÜstÜner & Holt, 2014), but luxury products have important signaling functions in relationships (Yajin & Griskevicius, 2014), and possess more influence in the marketplace (Ko & Megehee, 2012). Furthermore, when consumption is conspicuous, consumers engage in social competition to enhance their status (Ordabayeva & Chandon, 2014). In relation to identity construction, brands are useful tools in a social context for signaling an identity to others and, more importantly, brands empower consumers with confidence in achieving a heroic identity.

### 2.3. Becoming a heroic survivor

Survivors of cancer consistently report a low quality of life, especially with regard to physical, role, and social function and a high level of symptoms and problems especially with financial difficulties and pain (Masika, Wettergren, Kohi, & von Essen, 2012). Consequently, the transition to a strong and well-grounded survivor identity is a critical component of cancer survival. Research documents that an established survivor identity correlates with psychological well-being and post-traumatic growth (Park, Zlateva, & Blank, 2009). The individual

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