Using Narrative Transportation to Enhance New Product Comprehension

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Are consumers who are unfamiliar with a really new product aided in their understanding by storytelling? In a questionnaire study, respondents read a narrative about someone using a product, and were then tested on their comprehension and degree of mental submergence into the story (‘transportation’). The results show that respondents with low familiarity with the product domain depend on transportation to understand the new product. Respondents with high familiarity were more easily transported, but transportation did not help them to understand the product better. Implications are discussed for transportation theory and for consumer research on really new products.

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humanise (or excuse) bodybuilders by introducing Ann as a grandmother of four who came to bodybuilding for health reasons. She has lost “almost half her bodyweight” (Madison 2006, 45) and no longer needs her blood pressure tablets. The message “Welcome to the extreme world of competitive health” precedes a description of Australian Natural Bodybuilding (Madison 2006, 45). Mostly though, the text uses a tongue in cheek style to set up an ‘us and them’ scenario for the reader.

Pressure is a curious concept. For most of us, eating little more than protein powder and grilled chicken, then working out six time a week would be tough, but for these athletes (as they preferred to be called), pressure is a processed salty snack. (Madison 2006, 46)

The bracketed comment suggests that ‘we’ might wonder at such strict punishing self-discipline and might not call this athleticism. The perception of where real pressure lies is the crux of the differences the author seems to intend the readership to feel. In spite of the potential here to challenge usual stereotypes of women, a reinforcement of the gender order is evident in the comments about “hulking men lifting free-weights and muscled women in sparkling bikinis and towering perspec heels” (Madison 2006, 46). The men are described taking the active and physically strong role, while the women, who pursue the same activity, are merely appearing dressed in an alluring manner to be gazed on. And the point is taken up by a competitor who says that her mother refers to her as “a very muscly boy” (Madison 2006, 46). This conventionality about appropriate gender roles is further reinforced for the reader a couple of paragraphs later when the author asks, “Do muscles make girls feel less of a lady?” (Madison 2006, 46). The response from a competitor is quoted “The high heels make you look feminine” and also a response from a spectator who works out “My boyfriend doesn’t support me because he says he doesn’t want a muscly girlfriend. But that’s because he’s insecure” (Madison 2006, 46). This is striking because these were questions asked of women bodybuilders over twenty years ago (Duff and Hong 1984) and, in spite the potential for women’s bodybuilding to rupture the association of maleness with masculinity and strength, the evidence here is of no change. Despite reporting the near superhuman effort around workouts and eating regimes, bodybuilding women are not presented as worthy of high regard and the text not only detracts from their physical mastery but also re-asserts a focus on effort for appearance alone, with suggestions that this is not especially feminine, and motherhood. Even so, body builders themselves feel good,

Security and self-esteem are a common theme with bodybuilders. Many competitors admit that reshaping their bodies has played a significant part in helping them overcome a lack of confidence or face up to their fears. After all, there’s only so much of your fake-tanned self you can hide when you’re flexing on a stage in front of hundreds of scrutinizing people, wearing little more than a handkerchief. (Madison 2006, 47-48)

In the dismissal the struggle over meanings of femininity and corporeal appropriateness is revealed. Muscular women continue to threaten the visible difference between men and women and muscles continue to be coded male. However, what do these two activisms (one for muscles and one for fewer skinny models) reveal in terms of resistance, subversion and compliance? And is this a viable, long-term brand strategy?

DISCUSSION

Overall then, two kinds of women’s body activism were represented in this cultural artifact. Some women felt strongly about the manner of their representation in the media and were prepared to take a stand and be photographed for a calendar. Other women exert enormous effort to change the appearance of their bodies going beyond dress to change their actual body shape. None of these women labeled themselves feminists, nor worked in any concerted manner for overt political ends, but all took an activist stance. The sparkly bikinis were more erotic than the plain white underwear, but both types of resistance were presented for our gaze in vulnerable near nakedness. Resistance can be empowering and women in both examples make statements to that effect. However, as Budgeon and Currie (1995) noted, resistance is not inherently politicising. Although the calendar girls are presented sympathetically as resisting an undefined stereotype, presumably fashion model skinness given the positioning statement from the brand that attempts to intervene here, Dove, they are nonetheless compliant with a hegemonic femininity. This is the discourse of femininity that suggests that women must work hard to overcome their insecurities about their bodies, that their bodies usually know better than they do and that through motherhood they will achieve a special relationship to the world. In contrast, the bodybuilders constructed their bodies themselves and controlled their bodies through discipline to produce visible muscles. This body activism was sufficiently resistant to require an unsympathetic presentation to the readership, but was this subversive?

The underlying key to discussions of women’s body activism is the gaze (Foucault 1977). Even in experimental, multiple subjectivities of postfeminism, for women the disciplinary gaze of society at large, the presentation of self in everyday life has a specific effect. Identity is visually presented for the wider community to assess but, importantly, subjectivity as it interfaces with society is not only about identity. Furthermore for women this is a quite particular relationship as a result of the prevailing gender order. A useful way to theorise women’s specific relationship to the cultural discourse of femininity, subjectivity and the gaze is offered by Smith, and this perspective offers a trajectory into the future that demands close consideration by brands that would be activist in this arena. Smith (1990, 162) argues that texts are part of social structure, social action and discourse in which they are assembled and thus “textually mediated discourses” (Smith 1990, 163). She argues that “doctrines and images of femininity are inextricable from the outset” (Smith 1990, 171), and in the everyday world of women, fashion magazines are like instruction manuals. The gap between the real and the ideal generates work for women and, once worked on, the body itself also becomes a text when reflected back as an image in the mirror. The body, for the feminine subject, is the object of the subject-at-work (Smith 1990, 189). Working on the body as the subject-at-work, interpreting the textually mediated discourses of femininity both hegemonic and non-hegemonic, a woman is a self possessed individual with agency, which Smith calls a “secret agent” (1990, 191). It is when the object of her work, her body, is presented for viewing or, is displayed to be read as a social text, that she becomes the subject-in-discourse and is deprived of agency to become the object of the gaze (Smith 1990, 206). The gaze is the key to the viewed and displayed women of the calendar and the bodybuilding competition. The power differential expressed in the gaze derives from:

the ubiquitous idolatry of the textual image with its power to form the standards under which we are judged and read, and with which we judge and read others. (Smith 1990, 206)