Towards a Narratology of Brands

Marius K. Luedicke, Innsbruck University School of Management, Austria
Giesler Markus, Schulich School of Business, Canada

Understanding the effective cultural meanings of brands engages a salient stream of consumer culture theory. Researchers in this field have advanced insightful approaches for effectively studying brand meaning from micro- and macro-level perspectives. This study contributes to this research by offering “brand narratology” as a meso-level analytical framework for inquiring into brands as interrelated and intertemporal webs of stories. Brand narratology combines theory and methods for systematically eliciting, examining, and synthesizing the contents, compositions, and contexts of brand-related narratives. This essay introduces the basic tenets and discusses implications of the framework for marketing and consumer culture research on brand meaning.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The meanings of brands are among the most valuable and effective symbolic resources of contemporary consumer culture (Levy 1959, p. 119). Understanding their emergence, evolution, and socio-cultural influences is consequentially a central aim of marketing and consumer culture research (Arnould and Thompson 2005).

Traditionally, marketing researchers have studied brand meanings from either micro and macro perspectives. Micro-level approaches predominantly employ quantitative measures, for instance, of brand personalities (Aaker 1997) and brand images (Gardner and Levy 1955; Keller 1993) that accumulate consumers’ associations with brands. These approaches reliably represent the actual literal connections that consumer make with a brand, but systematically neglect the ideologies, tensions, and cultural resources that influence these associations over time and space (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Consumer culture theory approaches this gap by using analytical approaches such as deconstruction (Stern 1997), discourse theory (Hirschman et al. 1998), semiotics (Mick et al. 2004), brand genealogy (Holt 2004), narrative relationship analysis (Stern et al. 1998), dramaturgical analysis (Grove and Fisk 1992), or poststructuralist analysis (Giesler 2008; Thompson 2004; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli 2007). With focus on consumption, media, and advertising texts, they better reveal the social and ideological influences on the evolution of brand meanings.

Yet despite valuable insights, for instance, into the influences of conflict (Kozinets 2001), religiosity (Muñiz and Schau 2005), mythology (Thompson 2004), or legitimacy (Kates 2004) on brand meaning, existing approaches are still unsatisfactorily equipped for studying the complex intertemporal brand systems through which brands become effective cultural resources for owners, antagonists, and other interest groups (for an exception see Holt 2004).

On these grounds we offer the idea of “brand narratology.” Drawing on literary theory (Polkinghorne 1988; Ricoeur 1984), brand narratology combines theory and methods for systematically eliciting, examining, and synthesizing the contents, compositions, and contexts of consumer brand narratives. By means of systematic narratological dissection of individual stories, we expect to enable researchers to better elicit how interrelated brand narratives emerge, how they are perceived, experienced, and socially constructed within a particular social environment, and which dramatic forms of narratives are more likely to resonate in the respective realm of influence than others.

The approach bases upon the following premises. First, it accepts the idea that humans cognitively process and communicate their lives as narratives (Bruner 2004). Existing marketing theory supports this belief especially within the dramaturgical framework (Deighton 1992; Escalas 2004; Moisio and Arnould 2005; West et al. 2004). Second, from this view it derives that consumers also organize their brand-related experiences in the forms of narratives. The resulting “consumer brand narratives” are influential threads in people’s life stories that explicitly involve brands. Third, as consumers begin to share their brand-related experiences, they develop “brand systems” as systems of communication that organize consumers’ evaluations of expected experiences and social effects of particular brands in various contexts (Giesler 2003; Luedicke 2005).

A brand narratological analysis, as outlined here, consists of the analysis of consumer brand narratives and the synthesis of a meta brand narrative map. Based on the concepts of Genette (1988) and Stanzel (1984), the narratological analysis of consumer brand stories inquires into three domains: content (the narrative), composition (the narration), and context (the narrator in a social context) (Jahn 2005). The analysis of the content of a consumer brand narrative evokes insights into the experiences, the involved primary and secondary pro- and antagonistic characters, the key environments, props, and plots, and the symbolic devices that are relevant to the narrator. The analysis of the composition of a narrative allows for deriving knowledge on the emotional involvement of the respondent with the brand narrative, the closeness to the story, the author’s self- and other-orientation, and the position of the narrator within the social system that is described. The examination of context allows for interpreting the experiences and events that are expressed in the narrative in the context of the overall ideologies, experiences, and resources of the respondent. If narratives are elicited through interview, the study of context also informs about the relationship of the respondent with the interviewer, which may influence the choice and tonality of the narrative.

In a second step, brand narratology suggests a synthesis of the central narratological elements of the consumer stories into a meta brand narrative map. Such a literary construction of salient themes is sought to organize the key story lines, complementary and oppositional brands, influential actors, typical settings, historical tensions and etc. that brand interest groups perpetuate in their communications about the brand over time. We expect that an empirically grounded mapping of consumer brand narratives on a meso-level of analysis will reflect the effective cultural meanings of a brand more comprehensively than existing micro- and macro-level measures and, thus, allow marketers for more pointedly advancing the system.

In conclusion, we hope that the idea of brand narratology inspires scholars to further research and advance the study of effective cultural brand meanings on a systems level.

References


