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Fairy Tales Can Come True, It Can Happen To You: Women’s Transformational Myths in an Infomercial

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ABSTRACT
This paper is an exploratory look at the links between fairy tales, women’s fascination with makeovers, and the purchases that occur as a result of this fascination. To test this relationship, quantitative and qualitative data collected during a laboratory viewing of an infomercial for a skincare product were analyzed. We conclude that women love makeovers because they provide hope, and that this hope is consistent with the values they learn from the fairy tales they are exposed to as children.

“He had Cinderella sit down, and sliding the slipper on her little foot, he saw that it fitted her perfectly, just as if it had been made of wax. The astonishment of her sisters was great, but greater still when Cinderella drew from her pocket the little slipper, which she slipped on her other foot. ... Then suddenly, her godmother appeared. Touching Cinderella’s rags with her wand, she changed them into a costume still more magnificent than any she had worn before. Now her stepsisters recognized her. Cinderella was the beautiful personage they had seen at the ball!” - from “Cinderella” (Perrault 1954, p. 26)

INTRODUCTION
Fairy tales have long been recognized as both determinants and reflections of widely held cultural values (Campbell 1991, Bettelheim 1977, Bascom 1965). To the extent that some fairy tale forms are persistent and culturally transcendent, they can also be considered sources of inspired revelation on the human condition. Might the “Cinderella” fairy tale help to explain a consumer phenomenon? In viewing an infomercial, we observed that men and women responded in markedly different ways to certain infomercial segments on both dial tests and attitudinal measures. We also noted qualitative differences in response between men and women in two focus groups who had viewed the same infomercial. The product is a non-prescription acne treatment that is relevant to all, and targeted to both men and women by the infomercial’s producer. Our initial hypotheses regarding these differences as mere variations in attraction to the presenters failed to explain why certain portions of the program were viewed so differently by men and women. Why might men and women respond differently to the same stimulus? Could a possible
explanation lie in a new understanding of the Myth of the Makeover?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Cultural Power of Myth

The work of Joseph Campbell in bringing the cultural roles of myth into everyday awareness should not be underestimated. His popular early 1990’s PBS television series “The Power of Myth” (Campbell 1991) distilled the work of historians, theologians, anthropologists, and psychologists into a form that made the omnipresent power of myth in everyday life immediately available and attractive to American viewers. For a brief time, this popular television series seemed to reduce (or lift?) myth to the status of pop culture totem. Campbell is certainly not the first to explore the continuing role in and relevance of myth to the human condition. Well-known to psychologists is the work of Bruno Bettelheim (1977) who wrote extensively on meanings and uses of fairy tales in child development. One of Bettelheim’s central arguments is that fairy tales are instrumental devices used to shape a child’s moral development within a culture. Bascom (1965) ascribes four purposes to folklore: projective device, cultural validator, pedagogical device, and mechanism of social control. To that extent, myths and fairy tales are culturally reifying devices. As Kolbenschlag (1988) states: “Fairy tales are the bedtime stories of the collective consciousness ... they are shared wish fulfillment, abstract dreams that resolve conflicts and give meaning to experiences” (p. 3). This is not to imply that myths and fairy tales do not change in meaning over time. On the contrary, there are pivotal moments in the cultural history of certain myths (c.f., Campbell 1990). Zipes (1983) discusses the shift in perspective in the Cinderella story from matriarchal to patriarchal around the time of the classic adaptation by Frenchman Charles Perrault in 1697. “In the earlier story Cinderella is a strong independent woman who rebels against the hard labor forced upon her and uses her wits and her dead mother’s help to regain her upper class status in society” (Kelley 1994, p. 88).

While Cinderella undoubtably carries special significance for girls and women in its commentary on their social condition (Dundes 1982), Cinderella has also been viewed as a means of reinforcing gender stereotypes. Gender critiques of Cinderella have been written by Dowling (1981), Kelley (1994), and Robbins (1998), among others. Dowling’s confessional work could be retrospectively criticized as a “self-help” book, and not a serious work of psychological or sociological study. However, she effectively exposes the role of the Cinderella myth:

“It is the thesis of this book that personal, psychological dependency -- the deep wish to be taken care of by others -- is the chief force holding women down today. I call this ‘The Cinderella Complex’ -- a network of largely repressed attitudes and fears that keeps women in a kind of half-light, retreating from the full use of their minds and creativity. Like Cinderella, women today are still waiting for something external to transform their lives” (p. 31).

Fairy tales also have a transcendent quality over time and cultural space. The seminal scholarly work on Cinderella (Cox 1893) recognized some 345 variations of the story. Kelley (1994) notes that she has discovered over 700 versions of the Cinderella
fairy tale, the earliest appearing in ninth century Chinese culture, and comments on the Cinderella-like quality of the character Vivian in the 1990 American film “Pretty Woman.” The Cinderella story is also known to exist in relatively isolated cultures (a traditional Navaho story, for example), perhaps an indicator of the universality of the Myth of the Makeover. Cinderella is a particularly compelling commentary on the human condition because it is more concerned with the human experience than with the mythological, thus lending a special realism to this fairy tale (Ralston 1879).

The uses of myth in understanding consumer culture are well established. Levy’s structuralist approach (1981) has formed the basis of many analyses, including his own understanding of fairy tales (1985). Most recently, Heilbrunn’s (1999) comparison of the structure of the fairy tale Snow White with advertising for cleaning and detergent products highlights the manner in which advertising practitioners have co-opted folklore to develop consumer-brand relationships.

The Role of Myth in Providing Hope

Hope has been studied most extensively in the medical research. Hinds et al., in their work with adolescent cancer patients, define hopefulness as “the degree to which adolescents possess a comforting or life-sustaining, reality-based belief that a positive future exists for themselves or others” (Hinds et al. 1988, p. 85). Using the common definition of hope (to cherish a desire with anticipation) , some say that hope is what differentiates human beings from animals, others suggest that without hope, we have nothing. While consumer behaviorists have yet to consider the impact of hope in academic research, marketing and advertising practitioners have understood the importance of this emotion since long before Charles Revson described cosmetics as “hope in a jar” in the 1930’s (Peiss 1999). All they needed to do was look at one of the most beloved and pervasive fairytales of all time -- Cinderella -- to find the quintessential story of a woman’s hope. Dowling’s (1981) critique of Cinderella could easily be summed up: be good, be pretty, and you’ll get what you hope for. Robbins (1998) assesses the moral of Cinderella: “ ... Cinderella presents a Happily Ever After ending to a living-doll existence, a misleading story suggesting that a young girl’s dream to star as her own Cinderella will, in fact, never come true” (p. 115). The central motif of a young woman’s hopes being fulfilled through a magical transformational experience is the essence of the Cinderella story:

“Her fairy godmother had scarcely touched Cinderella with her wand when her rags changed into a gown of gold and silver, embroidered with rubies, pearls and diamonds. Then – she gave her a pair of little glass slippers, the prettiest in the whole world.” (Perrault 1954, p. 13)

Hence the eternal Disneyesque promise: “fairy tales can come true, it can happen to you, if you’re young at heart.” Dreams of hope spring eternal.

Myths of Physical and Psychic Transformation: The Importance of Physical Attractiveness

As in its human counterpart, courtship and mating in the animal world is also based on physical transformation.

“In the animal world, gaudy plumage and huge body ornaments emerge at sexual maturity, and animals reserve their brightest colors for courting displays. Caterpillars
Males, perpetually on the lookout for fertile females, are instinctually drawn to those who exhibit the visible signs of their ability to bear children – in our culture these signals, which include large eyes, flushed cheeks and lips, large breasts, and shiny hair, tend to be most noticeable during the early teen years as the girl develops from a child into a young woman of child-bearing age (Ettcoff 1999). The health and beauty industry helps "older" women continue to simulate this youthful look with transformational products, services and procedures.

This said, it should come as no surprise that men consider physical attractiveness a more important criterion for dating and mate selection than women do across cultures (Patzer 1985, Ettcoff 1999). The male visual orientation explains the success of the pornography industry, as well as the proliferation of Cinderella stories (frequently written by men), across cultures. Men enjoy looking at and marrying beautiful women, and women enjoy clinging to the hope that they are considered attractive by men (Patzer 1985). Even though attractiveness seems to matter less as relationships progress from courtship to marriage, the importance of physical attractiveness in the dating world cannot be overstated, since there will be no relationship if the man does not find the woman attractive enough to merit his time and attention in the first place.

Because previous research finds a higher correlation between dating popularity and physical attractiveness for women than men (Berscheid et al. 1971), women are more concerned (some might say obsessed) with their own physical appearance (Wagman 1967). While physical attractiveness is the most important criteria by which men judge potential mates, men are more frequently judged based on their status (both realized and potential) and wealth – suggesting a different (though no less important) manifestation of hopefulness for men. Because dating popularity is directly related to marriage, physical attractiveness has historically been of crucial importance for the social mobility of women and their families (Patzer 1985, Ettcoff 1999).

Throughout time and across cultures, daughters have been married off to the most advantageous prospects in order to improve the fortunes and social status of their families. The more attractive the daughters, the more likely they would be to “marry up” (Ettcoff 1999, Patzer 1985). Thus the “hope” of many parents was that their daughters develop into beautiful young women who will capture the hearts (or at least the eyes) of the suitors who stand to improve their families’ fortunes. From a very young age, girls and boys are told stories of transformations through the fairy tales and myths of their cultures. While the boys learn to hope for strength and courage, the girls learn to hope that like Cinderella, they too will be magically transformed into beautiful princesses. Transformational products provide increased likelihood that this hope will be realized.

The Market for Transformational Products

In spite of worldwide political and economic upheaval, the personal care industry continues to grow. Reaching
$125 billion in annual global sales in 2000 (Investor’s Business Daily 2001), 2001 showed no let up in the sale of transformational products such as skin care, hair care, cosmetics, bath and body, fragrances, diet aids, sun care, lip remedies, nail care and spa treatments, the majority of which were purchased by women. In response to having only one means (by being physically attractive) by which to get ahead in society, women were largely responsible for the development of the so-called beauty culture.

“In the early stages of the developing cosmetics industry, from the 1890’s to the 1920’s, women formulated and organized ‘beauty culture’ to a remarkable extent. The very notion of femininity, emphasizing women’s innate taste for beauty, opened opportunities for women in this business, even as it restricted them elsewhere. And women seized their chances, becoming entrepreneurs, inventors, manufacturers, distributors, and promoters.” (Peiss 199, pp. 4-5)

In the United States today combined sales of hair care, cosmetics, skin care and fragrance products total just under $14.5 billion. As the Baby Boomer generation enters their 50’s, skin care and hair care sales lead the category in year-over-year sales growth with 9.4% and 6.0% increases respectively (MMR 2001). Also led by skin care and hair care sales, the global market for transformational products for the first three quarters of 2001 reached just over $79 billion (Koser 2001).

In addition to beauty products, women also purchase the majority of more “permanent” transformations. According to the American Academy for Aesthetic Plastic Surgery in 2001 women were five times as likely to have surgical cosmetic procedures (see Sayre 1999 for a personal narrative on this subject) such as lipoplasty, eyelid surgery and nose reshaping, while they were seven times more likely to have non-surgical cosmetic procedures such as botox injections, chemical peels and collagen injections (RDS Research Alert 2002). Diet, health and fitness product sales are also on the rise across all distribution channels. As the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that one quarter of all American women are obese, and half overweight, the percentage of women who desire to lose 20 lbs. was at an all-time high 2001. Sales of weight loss products and services in 2001 climbed to $46 billion (Sloan 2002).

Beauty products, plastic surgery, diet and fitness products all have one thing in common: they offer the potential for the user to transform herself. Given the importance of female physical attractiveness, it comes as no surprise that a majority of these transformational products is purchased by women. Purchased at department stores, spas and salons, drug and grocery stores, and even from the comfort of their own bedrooms, transformational product sales is a 24 hour a day, seven day a week business.

Infomercials

Can’t sleep because you’re worried about blemishes, aging skin, or an expanding waistline? Don’t worry, just turn on your television and be inspired by the “hope on the tube” available from the program-length commercials or infomercials that flood the overnight airwaves. Once the ugly stepsister of marketing media, with the proliferation of low-cost, surplus airtime caused by the growth of the cable market, infomercials have become more prevalent and accepted in recent years (Donthu and Gilliland 1996).
While men also purchase products from Direct Response Television (DRTV), research shows that women account for 79% of all such purchases. Across all DRTV channels (including home shopping networks, direct response ads, and infomercials), women continue to buy the majority of products for their own use, as well as the use of their male family members and friends (Stones 2001). Fifty nine percent of all sales produced by infomercials come from transformational product categories such as exercise equipment, diet programs, and health and beauty aids (Elliott and Lockard 1996).

Previous research suggests that infomercials’ are effective due to their ability to combine elements of conventional advertising, with numerous demonstrations of the product, as well as testimonials which provide vicarious product experience for the viewer (Singh, Balasubramanian, and Chakrabarty 2000). While audiences tend to discount information contained in traditional ads, they are less likely to discount information obtained through direct experience with the product, even if this experience is someone else’s (Singh, Balasubramanian, and Chakrabarty 2000).

This ability to present extended product demonstrations, along with the testimonials of “real people” is one of the two most important motivators for the purchase of DRTV products today (Stones 2001). From a cognitive processing perspective, direct experience is superior to advertising because it results in more strongly held beliefs (Smith and Swinyard 1982), it is actively sought by consumers, engages consumers more than ads do, and most importantly, generates more personal and elaborative memory codes, thus producing stronger learning than ads (Kempf and Smith 1998).

The length of infomercials also facilitates the vicarious learning that allows for a more detailed discussion of product attributes (Elliott and Lockard 1996). This vicarious experience is achieved by watching the numerous testimonials by celebrities, as well as everyday people, who have found a solution to their problems by using the advertised product. Who can resist feeling hopeful after seeing the amazing before and after pictures of the woman cured of acne just days before her wedding, the balding man who regains his hair and sense of self-assurance, or the overweight teen who gets into shape and improves her self-esteem? One of the most successful infomercials promotes an acne product whose $200+ million infomercial-only sales make it one of the top selling non-prescription acne products in the United States today.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT
As a preliminary investigation of the role of myths and makeovers in women’s consumer decision-making, we obtained access to attitudinal feedback to an infomercial for an acne product that is one of the most successful transformational products on the market today. Quantitative and qualitative responses for each segment of the 28-minute infomercial were examined for content by gender (Elliott and Lockard 1996) in an effort to understand why this ad, for this product, was twice as successful at persuading women (66% of purchases) than men to buy the product. Additional secondary data regarding the product was collected from user and discussion groups including ePinions.com, alt.skincare.net and other groups on the Internet.

Research Methods
Our quantitative data consisted of a battery of media research including a dial test conducted while subjects
viewed the infomercial, viewer survey responses, and videotapes of both men’s and women’s focus groups conducted after viewing. The dial test (see Stayman and Aaker 1983) provided us with a measurement of viewer attitudes, including valence and magnitude of overall attitude, as well as channel switching and purchase behavior throughout the 28-minute infomercial. In addition to the dial test, viewer surveys and cognitive responses reflected attitudes toward the product, the infomercial, and toward various elements of the infomercial (e.g. celebrity spokesperson, user testimonials, graphics, product demonstration, call to action, program celebrity guests, pricing, purchase intention). Focus groups of subjects discussing the infomercial were also examined for increased depth of understanding.

We began by examining the dial test data (see Figure One, attached), and noted several points in the infomercial where the gender responses diverged significantly. These differences were most pronounced in the segments of the program that contained the testimonials, which include un-retouched “before and after” photographs of users, as well as videotaped interviews in which they discuss their transformations as a result of using the product.

Investigators independently viewed the infomercial with the dial test results superimposed on the screen, and noted significant differences in response by gender as testimonial segments appeared in the program. The investigators then viewed the infomercial simultaneously to facilitate reconciliation. The qualitative observations were checked for face validity against quantitative and qualitative survey responses, and finally videotapes of post-viewing focus groups (one for women and one for men) were analyzed.

Findings

A very clear pattern emerged from our analysis. Women viewed the testimonial segments more positively than men. This finding was supported by both the quantitative measures as well as by our interpretation of the cognitive responses and focus group discussion.

In the quantitative measures, we examined mean responses to the following survey items relevant to the testimonial segments of the infomercial:

1) How do you rate the scenes that show the “before and after” results of (product name) users? (five-point scale, n=32) Men 3.62 Women 4.12 p < .05
2) How do you rate the “testimonials” from women, men and teens who have used (product name)? (five-point scale, n=31) Men 3.53 Women 3.81 p < .10
3) How do you rate the scenes with (celebrity guest and her son) and other (product name) users explaining the benefits? (five-point scale, n=32) Men 2.56 Women 3.12 p < .05
4) How do you rate the segment where (celebrity host) shows wedding photos of (product name) users? (five-point scale, n=32) Men 3.06 Women 3.31 p < .10
5) Please rate how effectively the results achieved by (product name) were demonstrated.
   Men 3.62 Women 4.50 p < .05

In examining the open-ended responses to the survey, when respondents were asked for the main reason for their interest in the program, half of the women mentioned some aspect of the testimonials, while only one-quarter of the men did so. Typical of the women’s responses were:

- “The pictures I saw of people before and after helped me
believe that the product might work for myself.”
• “All the people who I saw before and after photos and their testimonials.”
• “When it started showing how many people’s faces cleared up.”
• “About that one lady who was about to get married.”
• “I saw very bad skin turn really good seeing results.”

The women’s focus group revealed similar comments:
• “I was really impressed with the photographic results, the visual aids. I’m really impressed with that, because I had acne when I was a lot younger. And boy, if it can clear up that, I’d give it a shot.”

And when the women in the focus group were asked for the main message of the show they said:
• “It’s about happily ever after.”
• “It stood out because you saw the before and after, because there was definitely hope.”

In reference to one dramatic product-user testimonial, a focus group respondent said:
• “My heart went out to her. She looked so beautiful afterwards.”

Discussion

We believe that this data supports our theory that women have more positive attitudes toward beauty makeovers, and that accordingly, the before and after pictures which are featured in infomercials have a more positive effect on women than men. Television executives know that makeover episodes are guaranteed ratings boosters, and often save them for sweeps week (LaFerla 2001). In 1998 E! Entertainment Television introduced a program called “Fashion Emergency,” which “like a hip older sibling, mixes helpful pointers with gentle mockery, pausing to linger on the sins of the before only to guide the show’s subjects into the promised land of the after” (Noxon, 1998, p. 59). Nine months after its introduction, “Fashion Emergency” was given five additional slots in the weekly schedule due to demand from the cable channel’s predominantly female viewers. According to Leon Hall one of the show’s beauty specialists, the show’s “honest emotional core” is what makes it so popular. “How can you not like Cinderella? We don’t make the person better, but we do make them special” (Noxon, 1998, p.59).

Like E!’s “Fashion Emergency,” The Learning Channel’s “A Makeover Story” provides professional hair, makeup and fashion help for participants with compelling stories. Viewers not only tune in, but also participate in online bulletin boards to ask for help, discuss their favorite episodes and the makeover techniques employed. They connect emotionally with the makeover participants and actually talk to each other about their favorite characters.

“Hi Everyone. I’m new at posting my thoughts, but I just had to say something. I love almost all of TLC’s shows and am in LOVE with the makeover show. I do however, wish that they would post better pictures of the finished styles so that we may copy them ourselves. How else to make TLC our own personal TLC than to be able to carry the proposed solutions on into our real lives? I love the “Scrubby Sisters” episode. The longer-haired sister’s hair cut was amazing and I so wanted to take it with me to the salon.” (posted to TLC.com May 9, 2001)

TLC also offers a second makeover program called “A Personal Story,” that
shows before and after results from plastic surgery procedures. The newest addition to the TLC lineup is a program about weight and fitness makeovers. Suggesting that the Myth of the Makeover may translate to areas other than physical appearance, the most popular program on TLC today is one in which, with the help of a decorator and carpenter, two friends perform decorating “makeovers” on rooms in each other’s homes. This program, called “Trading Spaces,” receives in excess of 700 posts to its fan bulletin board each week!

The data reported herein supports the proposition that women have more positive attitudes toward beauty makeovers than do men, but why? We suggest that the desire to be transformed or made over is due to the power and pervasiveness of the myths most parents share with their children. The story of Cinderella, for example, teaches young girls and boys that a really beautiful woman can marry a handsome prince and live happily ever after. As Dowling (1981) suggests, the moral of the story is that girls and women need to find someone to take care of them, and that dependence rather than independence is the preferred and normal state.

The opposite is true for boys, who learn that they must always be strong and powerful so they can provide for their loved ones, an equally daunting challenge. Certainly, enlightened parents do not set out to raise vulnerable, helpless and looks-obsessed daughters, but the intimacy and warmth created during the repeated readings of these fairy tales can have no other effect than the internalization of these enduring values. Girls learn that they need to find someone to take care of them, and the more beautiful they are, the more likely they will be able to accomplish this goal. When Cinderella’s fairy godmother transforms her from soot-faced chambermaid to beautiful princess, hope is created that such transformations are possible in everyday life.

Nothing beats the power of a good makeover for engendering hope in girls and women, however, one does not have to be made over personally to feel inspired. The movie “Flashdance” is an excellent case in point. While few girls and women actually aspired to be transformed from steel-welding strippers into classical ballet dancers, the music, fashions and hope this movie inspired made it a smash hit at the box office, and helped popularize aerobics, a dance-like workout style tailored to women. For those who receive the makeovers, which are seldom replicated without professional help, just knowing the potential they possess is inspirational (LaFerla 2001).

Clearly marketers are aware of the power of the makeover, or we would not see makeovers used so frequently in female-targeted advertising and entertainment. While some may argue that it is unfair for these unscrupulous marketers to exploit such a weakness in women, we argue that the enduring values that empower the makeover are deeply ingrained, and that marketers are merely giving women what they want: hope.

CONCLUSIONS

Theoretical

Consistent with prior work on myths of transformation and consumption (c.f. Heilbrunn 1999; Runser-Spanjol, Lowrey, and Ottes 1999; and related work by O’Guinn and Schrum 1997; and Belk and Costa 1998), we believe archetypes passed down through cultural values reify norms and social structures. Marketers find such archetypes an endless source of advertising appeals, which strike powerfully close to the hearts of many consumers. In particular, the Myth of the Makeover offers everlasting hope to
women consumers. Whether the actual transformation ever occurs or not, the hope is itself a powerful and persuasive appeal.

Managerial

Gaining greater depth of understanding of the essential meanings of our childhood myths and fairy tales provides marketers with access to an almost primal source of consumer motivation. To the extent to which adult consumers are no longer aware of the power of these myths and fairy tales in their lives, marketers may create appeals to consumers which resonate both superficially in the “now” but also at a deeper level from our collective “past.” Tapping into these distant, early sources of values and norms can allow a thoughtful marketer to create positioning strategies that feel appealingly natural and comfortable to the consumer. We also believe there are ethical dimensions to engaging in such practices, since the full nature of the appeal may not be well understood by many consumers.

Limitations of the Research

Our research was conducted using secondary data. While we had the full cooperation of the infomercial and product producers, we were limited in our analysis to the existing data. We did not have validity and reliability measures for the scales used in the quantitative measures, nor did we have any input into the focus group discussion outlines or process. These limitations undoubtedly impacted the depth of our understanding, leaving us to speculate on the level of tying myth to managerial practice. Our research is further limited in its generalizability by our examination of a single infomercial, and a relatively small number of viewer participants.

We believe that subsequent academic research in this area would benefit by access to the practitioner research process at the design stage. Such collaboration would more fully allow us to elaborate and test theory, further enriching our understanding of practical marketing strategy.

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