Consumers seek to transform themselves, moving from one state of being into another. In many cases, the consumer simply modifies a particular body part or modifies an activity in order to make a change; however, we approach consumer transformations as a much more intense activity that consumers experience physically, mentally, and spiritually, leaving them, in their own words, “a completely different person.” Our research examines the consumer transformation phenomenon within the context of gastric bypass surgery. We find that consumers who transform themselves do so in a pattern that appears to follow the hero’s journey as developed by Campbell (1968).

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an average person could be expected to read (Douglass and Douglass 1993) and was slightly less than the average rate used in most fine print disclosures (Kolbe and Muehling 1997). After viewing the appropriate stimulus for their condition, participants were asked to complete a survey that included measures of disclosure recall and perceived understandability of the advertisement.

In the case of disclosure recall, no significant \((p \leq .05)\) interaction effects were found. Looking at main effects, we find significant results for the effect of distraction \((F(2,255)=5.045, p \leq .01, \eta^2=.038)\) and language \((F(1,255)=10.836, p \leq .001, \eta^2=.041)\) on recall of the disclosure. The effect of audio \((F(1,255)=5.888, p = .44, \eta^2=.002)\) and size \((F(1,255)=2.089, p = .15, \eta^2=.008)\), however, failed to reach significance.

As expected, increasing the level of background distraction decreased recall of the disclosure. Tukey pairwise comparisons indicate no significant differences between conditions of no distraction \((M=2.875)\) and low distraction \((M=2.725)\), but recall under the condition of high distraction \((M=2.063)\) was significantly reduced. Language also impacted recall of the disclosure in the predicted direction. Disclosures written in a nontechnical language scored higher \((M=2.992)\) than did disclosures written in a more technical language \((M=2.248)\).

In the case of perceived understandability of the advertisement, significant \((p \leq .05)\) interaction effects were found for the audio x distraction interaction \((F(2,354)=10.243, p \leq .001, \eta^2=.055)\) and language x distraction interaction \((F(2,354)=3.338, p = .04, \eta^2=.019)\), but all other interactions failed to reach statistical significance. Additionally, the main effect of size failed to meet standard levels of significance \((F(1,354)=3.196, p = .08, \eta^2=.009)\).

Managerially, our results suggest that when recall of the content of the disclosure statement is important, marketers should focus on the background upon which the disclosure appears and the language in which the disclosure is written. However, if the marketer’s goal is instead to enhance the overall understandability of the message, simplifying the language in which the disclosure statement is written becomes critical, as in conditions of both no distraction and low distraction, technical language has a significant negative effect on perceived understandability. The effect of the modality of the disclosure should also be considered in light of its effect on perceived understandability. In the case of low distraction, presenting the disclosure in both print and auditory formats has little to no effect on understandability of the advertisement; while in both the moderate and high levels of distraction, dual modality results in lower levels of perceived understandability.

From an academic viewpoint, this study extends previous work in disclosure research by examining the effect of differing conditions under which disclosures appear. We also suggest more concrete alternatives to the FTC’s standards for clear and conspicuous disclosure. First, we recommend that visual presentation of the disclosure should have text that is at least 1/25 of the screen and be presented in a color that drastically contrasts with the background. We further propose that the disclosure be presented at a time when there is no music or scene change. Finally, the disclosure should not contain language that the average consumer could not comprehend. It is our belief that these three guidelines, when implemented simultaneously, will ensure that television disclosures are able to meet the challenge of fully divulging “all information that could affect decision making and elucidate possibly misunderstood statements” (Herbst and Allan 2006, p. 213).

References

Consumer Transformations: A Hero’s Journey
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Consumers seek to transform themselves, moving from one state of being into another; however, much of the literature that touch upon consumer transformations appears to be concerned with identity projects (i.e., Arnould and Price; Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2001) or with simple modification of the self (i.e., Gimlin 2002; Pitts 2003; Sanders 2008). We take a different approach to understanding consumer transformations by understanding it as something much more than simply modifying the body with a tattoo or plastic surgery or developing an identity that one can carry around like a costume one wears to a party. Instead, we view consumer transformations as a full-body experience where the individual transforms him or herself from one state of being into another. In the case of our research,
the consumers we investigate have undergone gastric bypass surgery which allows them to literally as well as figuratively transform themselves from an obese person into a much smaller.

For instance, Peter was, at one time, over three hundred pounds. For most of his life, he had tried, desperately at times, to lose weight using a variety of more traditional means such as diet and exercise. Furthermore, he had often looked to the marketplace for help, engaging the services of Weight Watchers, doctor-regimented diet plans, and even so-called “diet camps.” As failure after failure mounted, Peter became more and more desperate to lose weight. Finally, after much deliberation, he decided to have gastric bypass surgery. Now, a little over a year after the surgery, Peter is over a hundred pounds lighter with more pounds expected to be shed in the coming months. For him, the experience of losing “a whole other person” has been a transformation along the lines of “becoming someone else.”

This transformation takes literal form in the shrinking body as well as in his relationships with the world around him. For instance, he has had to relearn how to navigate the world. In his previous life, he had to “squeeze into desk chairs at school or on airplanes in order to fit into a world made for skinny people.” Now, he can fit comfortably into desk chairs and no longer feels out of place when he sits them, but he still moves down the airplane aisle in a sideways fashion instead of walking with his body facing straight ahead even though he can do so without bumping passengers that are already seated. Furthermore, he has had to undergo a mental transformation as well, moving from a person who had difficulties with the self-discipline required to maintain various weight-loss programs, to an individual who absolutely needs to maintain self-discipline in order to live. “I slipped one time,” he says, “and had too much Gatorade with all that sugar and I was sick for almost a week. I simply can’t take in anything like I used to, and I have to be really careful.”

Through Peter’s story and the narratives of other individuals who have undergone gastric bypass surgery, we find that consumers who transform themselves do so in a pattern that appears to follow the hero’s journey as developed by Joseph Campbell (1968). The hero’s journey is a mythic structure inherent within the literature and mythologies of many, if not all, cultures where the hero “ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder” where “fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory won,” and then the hero returns to face a new status quo where he (or she) “bestow boons on his fellow man” (Campbell 1968, 30). The three stages of the journey that Campbell identifies are departure, initiation, and return.

Peter’s story follows this same series of stages. The separation stage begins with Peter’s navigation of the ordinary world of his obesity and ends with his entrance into “the belly of the whale” or the actual surgery itself. His Initiation stage involves the trials and victories that start upon waking up from the surgery and ends with the hero “seizing the sword” (Vogler 1992). In this moment, the hero essentially casts aside the remnants of the old self and takes firm possession of the new self. The return involves the reintegration of the hero into the ordinary world where, in Peter’s case, he not only learns to navigate a “new” world in a “new” body, but with a renewed sense of self. Furthermore, he then has the opportunity to provide guidance to others who are seeking to transform themselves.

Our research follows in the tradition of bringing mythological structure to the various activities that consumers engage in. Levy (1981) determined that consumer interviews can be read as mythological narratives much as one might read fairy tales, fables, and other tales. Stern (1995) used Frye’s taxonomy in an effort to better understand the various myths contained within both consumer narratives and advertisements dealing with Thanksgiving rituals. Holt and Thompson (2004) examine the various “heroic” myths related to masculinity within Western culture, finding that, in recent years, the “man-of-action” myth has risen as the celebrated cultural model of masculinity. Additional research from the psychology literature has used the hero’s journey as a framework for understanding in counseling situations (Lawson 2005) and even spiritual development (Feinstein 1997).

Our research intends to define a framework for understanding consumer transformations that take place in the market. We believe that such a framework will be useful for marketers seeking to understand such transformations as well as though attempting to support those transformations. Ultimately, we believe that the framework that we develop will also move beyond the case presented here and extend into such contexts as helping individuals escape various addictions; deal with the loss of health, property, or loved ones; or even to achieve new states of spirituality, consciousness, or awareness. As such, we believe that our research will contribute to the field of transformative consumer research in addition to our understanding of basic consumer research.

Selected References

The Effects of Experience-Based Marketing Communication on Brand Relations and Hedonic Brand Attitudes: The Moderating Role of Affective Orientation
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Introduction
Events such as the “Nike run London”, and theme stores such as “M&Ms World” and the “New World of Coca Cola” (i.e., experience-based marketing communications) are a growing phenomenon in the area of marketing communication. The emergence of this