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## Original Article

# The impact of storytelling on the consumer brand experience: The case of a firm-originated story

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**ABSTRACT** Stories fascinate people and are often more easily remembered than facts. Much has been written about the power of stories in branding, but very little empirical evidence exists of their effects on consumer responses. In the present study, we investigate how a firm-originated story influences consumers' brand experience, by comparing the brand experiences of two groups of consumers. One group was exposed to the story and one group was not. An existing brand was used in the study, which had not been launched in the focal country. In-depth interviews were conducted with individuals in the two experimental conditions. The comparison revealed remarkable differences between the two groups. Consumers who were exposed to the story described the brand in much more positive terms and were willing to pay more for the product. The study contributes to brand management research and practice by demonstrating the power of storytelling on consumer

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**experiences. The results are also important from a managerial point of view. They demonstrate how brand stories can be used to create and reinforce positive brand associations. A review of past research in combination with the findings demonstrates that more research is needed on the effect of stories on consumer brand responses.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Stories have always fascinated people and are more easily remembered than facts. Well-told stories regarding a brand appear to have the potential to influence consumers' brand experience, which consists of all the 'sensations, feelings, cognitions, and behavioral responses evoked by brand-related stimuli that are part of brand's design and identity, packing, communications, and environment' (Brakus *et al*, 2009, p. 52).

Consumer-originated stories about brands circulate widely, but firms can also create their own stories. The use of such firm-originated brand stories is esteemed to be influential, especially in services (for example, Mossberg and Nissen Johansen, 2006). Consequently, there has recently been an increase in storytelling research (Adaval and Wyer, 1998; Mattila, 2000; Benjamin, 2006; Mossberg and Nissen Johansen, 2006; Woodside *et al*, 2008). Most brand story research investigates consumer experiences, consequences of product use (Chang, 2009, p. 22), or story content in advertising (Stern, 1994). Furthermore, a wide variety of sources have been analyzed for brand story content, including travel blogs (Woodside *et al*, 2008; Hsu *et al*, 2009), Harry Potter (Brown and Patterson, 2010) and consumer blogs and discussions on DNA tests (Hirschman, 2010). However, firm-originated stories have not been widely investigated. Case descriptions

and some examples can be found in the literature, but very little empirical evidence exists of their effects on consumer responses. A notable exception is Merchant *et al* (2010), who studied the effects of firm-originated stories on donors' (negative) emotions and intentions, and concluded that story content affected both.

The present study investigates if brand experiences differ between consumers who are introduced to a brand *with* a firm-originated story and consumers who get to know the same brand *without* the story. We investigate if a well-told, firm-originated brand story could make the brand more attractive to consumers.

The present study contributes to brand management literature by providing empirical evidence of the effects of company-generated and communicated brand stories on consumers' brand experience. Clear differences were found between the groups in how they responded to the brand.

The article is structured as follows. In a literature review, storytelling is analyzed and an overview is provided of its effects on consumers' brand experiences. Thereafter, the method and empirical results are presented. The study was conducted as a between-subject experiment with 20 qualitative interviews. The article concludes with a discussion of the results, managerial implications, limitations and future research directions.

## STORYTELLING

### The essence of stories

A story has a structure that keeps it together and engages the listener. Brand stories resemble traditional fairy tales (Twitchell, 2004) and narratives, and answer questions like: who, what, why, where, when, how and with the help of what (Shankar *et al*, 2001). They have a beginning, middle and end, and events unfold in a chronological sequence, which, when causal, is called a plot (Stern, 1994, p. 604). Stories often make a point that is valued (positively or negatively) by the audience (Shankar *et al*, 2001), and include a message, a conflict, a role distribution and action (Stern *et al*, 1998). Brand stories need to be credible and well executed to be successful. The audience should be able to identify with its characters and the message should put the brand in a positive light (Mossberg and Nissen Johansen, 2006). Each story should convey only one single message (Fog *et al*, 2005), which is clearly focused, so that it can be summarized in only one or two sentences (Twitchell, 2004). Stories are often used to convey brand values. In his book, *The Dream Society*, Jensen (1999, p. 52) even defines stories as *value statements* (emphasis in the original), and lists various values that could form the basis of stories.

A conflict often propels the story, in addition to a quest for restoring harmony (Fog *et al*, 2005). The solution to the conflict, which needs not be very dramatic, is the central message (Mossberg and Nissen Johansen, 2006). It is important that the action raises interest from the beginning and that the message is clear. A compelling story typically includes an unexpected or unusual twist (Peracchio and Escalas, 2008). Finally, the end, which is often best remembered, should emotionally satisfy the audience (Fog *et al*, 2005; Mossberg and Nissen Johansen, 2006; Guber, 2007).

### Storytelling and brands

Stories have caught people's attention since the beginning of time. People want to believe in myths and stories (Jensen, 1999; Kelley and Littman, 2006), while brands communicate myths (Holt, 2003; Holt and Thompson, 2004). Brands also play an important role in consumers' life stories (Gabriel and Lang, 1995; Fournier, 1998; Woodside *et al*, 2008). Moreover, a company can tell its own story to communicate the brand values and what the company stands for (Fog *et al*, 2005). Whether real or fictional, stories provide meaning to brands (Halliday, 1998; Salzer-Mörling and Strannegård, 2004; Simmons, 2006). They can be thought of as frameworks in which brands can be embedded (Kozinets *et al*, 2010), for instance by coupling luxury brands with archetypal stories.

Consumer stories have been studied in the form of narratives (Delgadillo and Escalas, 2004; Escalas, 2004b; Megehee and Woodside, 2010; Schembri *et al*, 2010), associations and collages (Koll *et al*, 2010), ethnography (Hsu *et al*, 2009), and memorable incidents (Durgee, 1988; Gabbott and Hogg, 1996; Hopkinson and Hogarth-Scott, 2001; Black and Kelley, 2009). Studies on storytelling from a management perspective, however, tend to be either purely conceptual or conceptual combined with anecdotes and case descriptions.

The scarceness of empirical studies regarding firm-originated stories should not be interpreted as a lack of managerial interest in the subject. An increasing number of companies have realized the value of stories and express intentions to make more use of storytelling in marketing. Mossberg and Nissen Johansen (2006) provide numerous examples of how marketers have used real or invented stories to create an atmosphere and enhance the uniqueness of service brands. Story-based messages are assumed to be particularly well suited for the promotion of services owing to their

ability to communicate both symbolic and experiential components (Padgett and Allen, 1997). However, as comparative studies on goods are lacking, it is too early to draw conclusions regarding differences in story effectiveness between goods and services.

### *Positive consequences of brand stories*

Consumers seek experiences appealing to their emotions and dreams, and stories help to create such experiences (Silverstein and Fiske, 2003; Fog *et al*, 2005). Stories have heroes and marketers can turn the brand, the employees, or the customers into heroes with positive effects on both internal and external brand perceptions (Kelley and Littman, 2006; Guber, 2007).

Stories catch consumers' interest (Escalas, 2004a; Mossberg and Nissen Johansen, 2006) and convince by what is called narrative transportation – after being immersed in a story the reader is left changed (Green and Brock, 2000; Escalas, 2004a). Stories also help consumers understand the benefits of the brand (Kaufman, 2003), are less critically analyzed and provoke less negative thoughts than regular advertisements (Escalas, 2004a, p. 38).

Storytelling generates positive feelings in customers and is perceived as more convincing than facts, thereby increasing brand trust, raising awareness and making the brand unique (Kaufman, 2003; Kelley and Littman, 2006; Mossberg and Nissen Johansen, 2006). Advertising research has shown that advertisements with story content increase positive emotions, such as feeling upbeat or warm (Escalas, 2004a). Stories are stored in memory in multiple ways, factually, visually and emotionally, making it highly likely that the consumers will remember them (Mossberg and Nissen Johansen, 2006).

A story also creates expectations (Rosen, 2000), which affect subsequent evaluations

of the brand. The story can convey positive features of a good or service, without being perceived as commercial. The ice cream brand Ben & Jerry's may serve as an example. On their homepage ([www.benjerry.com](http://www.benjerry.com)) the brand's story is presented. In the story, the idea of high quality has been weaved in by describing ingredients and queuing customers.

Stories may add favorable and unique associations to a brand: such associations can increase customer brand equity (Keller, 1993; Wood, 2000; Leone *et al*, 2006). A story may become a value-adding asset, as Aaker (1991, p. 15) describes in his definition of brand equity as 'a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add or subtract from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers'.

The episodic nature of a story increases the likelihood that consumers will pass it along (Fog *et al*, 2005; Mossberg, 2008). The story makes the brand more interesting to talk about and consumers are more likely to become ambassadors of the brand (Mossberg and Nissen Johansen, 2006; Guber, 2007).

To achieve these positive consequences, the brand and the story must be perceived as authentic, because many consumers are critical of what they perceive as manipulative marketing (Firat and Venkatesh, 1995; Holt, 2002). The story need not be based on real events. In fact, people enjoy made-up tales, as long as they can relate to the characters (Mossberg and Nissen Johansen, 2006). Often it is enough that the relationship between the brand and the story appears authentic. A story that is meant to entertain need not be true, but stories should never be perceived as deceptive. Pretending that fiction is reality will eventually lead to loss of trust in the brand (Mossberg and Nissen Johansen, 2006).

## METHOD

The empirical study was conducted as an experimental case study of an international cosmetics brand. Case study research often relies on consumer stories (Woodside, 2010), although in this study the focus was on the responses that a firm-created story evokes in consumers. Whereas some researchers claim that findings from case studies cannot be generalized directly to other cases (Stake, 2000), others are of an opposing view (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Woodside, 2010). Case study findings may provide in-depth information that can be used for theory-building purposes (Eisenhardt, 1989), and for further research directions (Patton, 1990). As the study presented here demonstrates, the story can indeed affect the consumer brand experience, including brand associations and willingness to pay for the brand. The established causation works forward from two alternative conditions (story versus non-story) to the consequent outcomes (Ragin, 1999).

The selected cosmetics brand is considered suitable for the study for several reasons. Cosmetics and health products often use stories to enhance perceptions of their products and emotionally engage customers. Typically, someone has encountered a problem, but through innovation and persistence the hero (a person or company) has found a remedy (usually a nature-based ingredient) that solves the problem (Mossberg and Nissen Johansen, 2006). In addition to representing an industry where storytelling is often used, the chosen brand has built its marketing strategy around a company brand story and individual cosmetic product stories, which are told to customers by the salespeople. The company story describes the history of the company and its values, whereas the product stories describe how a natural ingredient was discovered or how the product was invented. The company, its founder and scientists are the heroes. The packaging of the products

is plain, coherent with the story. Labels on bottles and tubes only contain a logo and the ingredients. The brand relies on word-of-mouth and public relations marketing (PR). A policy of generously sampling products encourages trial and reduces the threshold of repeat purchases. The brand is sold mainly through stores designed to support and enhance the story. The story and brand values are actively communicated through the stores' servicescape (Bitner, 1992). The brand has been on the market for many decades and is now owned by a global cosmetics company, which seeks to further expand the market. The products are rather expensive, in line with other exclusive cosmetics brands. As the brand has not been launched in Finland, it was possible to study a real brand with a real story, rather than an invented brand and story.

## Research design

The study was conducted in cooperation with the company owning the brand. For competitive reasons, we are not allowed to reveal the name of the brand. According to the brand manager in Sweden, a neighbor Nordic country, typical customers are young, urban and trendy. Eighty per cent are women. When the brand is first introduced to a market, it tends to appeal to young, trendy customers. Through them it spreads to a wider customer base. Based on this information, the study was limited to urban women who had no previous knowledge of the brand. A market research agency recruited 20 participants. They were informed that it was a market research on cosmetics and were rewarded for participation. Ages ranged between 25 and 40 with a mean of 31.4 years. The participants represented a wide range of professions, for example, hair dresser, lawyer, psychologist, entrepreneur, nurse, boat seller, sales secretary and customer manager.

Individual thematic interviews were conducted of about 60 min. The interviews

were conducted at the market research company's facilities in Helsinki, Finland. The interviews confirmed that none of the respondents had any previous knowledge of the brand.

Participants were randomly allocated to one of the two experimental conditions and individually interviewed. Half of the participants were asked to first read a three-page story about the company brand, including the company values, whereafter they were shown a slide show of a shop where the products were sold. They were also told the story of one of the cosmetics products, a facial cream of which they were asked to express the monetary value later in the interview. The other half of the participants was exposed neither to any stories nor to the slide show.

The story used in this study reveals how the firm was established and evolved from a one-man store to a large company. The story is presented in a chronological order, and answers the questions related to who, what, why, where, when and how, as Shankar *et al* (2001) suggest a story should. Thus, it reports true events, which is one form of narrative content (van Laer, 2011). The story further introduces the people who through their personalities have contributed to what the firm is today, presenting characters that people can relate to (Mossberg and Nissen Johansen, 2006). Although the story does not fulfill the criteria of a compelling story as it does not involve a conflict or a twist (Peracchio and Escalas, 2008), or a protagonist (Woodside *et al*, 2008), except for the founder, it nevertheless represents a real firm story. Thereby, it allows the researcher to study whether a more traditional firm-originated story influences consumers.

Each participant was invited to investigate and test a selection of 15 products of the brand and to express their thoughts aloud. The packaging of the products can be described as plain, as they are modeled

from reusable plastic. Participants were asked what they thought of the products (probing, if necessary, their feelings, thoughts on the content, smell and form), which associations they experienced in connection with the brand, whether it evoked interest, what they liked or did not like – their overall perceptions. They were also asked to describe the brand with three adjectives. The interviewer then picked out one of the products, a facial cream, and asked the participants how much they thought it would cost in retail and if they, in general, would be prepared to pay the expected price for a good facial cream. Six cost ranges were provided to cover a wide range of brands of cosmetics on the market, from cheap retail brands to luxury brands: (i) <€10, (ii) €10–€20, (iii) €20–€30, (iv) €30–€40, (v) €40–€50, and (vi) >€50. Thereafter, the price of the cream (€31) was revealed and the respondents were asked if they would pay that price for this cream. Last, participants were asked if they had anything else to add regarding their perception of the brand.

The analysis followed common procedures in a qualitative study. The data were organized according to themes, which were coded and categorized (Spiggle, 1994). The interviews were analyzed according to the similarities and differences between the two groups of respondents on how they perceived the brand. The presentation of the findings is organized according to: (i) packaging associations, (ii) other brand-related experiences, and (iii) willingness to pay for the brand.

## FINDINGS

### Associations related to the packaging

The two groups differed clearly in their perceptions of the packaging. The findings are summarized in Table 1, with examples of quotes for each category.



**Table 1:** Associations to the package (respondent identification in parentheses)

<i>Non-story group</i>	<i>Story group</i>
<p><i>Amount of text</i> An awful lot of text, which could be on the back of the jar. Gives a feeling of ecological product. The text makes it look like it tries to be scientific. (R1) ... that oh no, I can't be bothered to find out what they are for and what is in them. Like they are trying to be so scientific when there is so much of that text. (R4)</p> <p><i>Ecological</i> It looks like that kind of ecological store products. Not very interesting. I would walk right by it at [department store] if they had it. (R2)</p> <p><i>Cheap product</i> A bit cheapish. Brings to mind some [grocery store private label] bottle. (R3) Clearly cheap, so that you might perhaps find it in some ecological store. (R6) Nice smell but the neutrality of that packaging and sort of modesty makes one doubt whether they can be good. (R8)</p> <p><i>Conservative</i> Looks Swiss or German. Alps-thing. Pretty conservative. Looks more like some kind of network marketing product line or something that would be on a store shelf. (R1) A feeling of old-fashion. Old Spice has something like it. Could be the kind of every man's product. (R7)</p> <p><i>Confusion</i> And then in some [products] there is this [picture]. Like why is it, it is not in those. That like makes one wonder – It doesn't look very uniform. (R4) The product is probably good but the bottles not ... a bit mixed. If there was some uniformity it would be like easier to find a kind of ... that now it's just like ... quite difficult – Sense tells that the plastic bottles are quite good but ... still. (R5) But I don't like get it why so much text is needed? Like what's the point? (R3)</p> <p><i>Underestimating customers</i> Well, perhaps I perceive it so that they underestimate the customer when they don't put any effort into the look of it. They don't even want the customer to buy it with the help of how it looks. That they are somehow underestimating the customer. Almost saying F— you. (R3)</p>	<p><i>Amount of text</i> I like that there is a lot of text. They don't say things that they can't keep. No statements that you will become one thousand years younger, but saying what it is about. Informative. (R15) First when you look at it you may think that 'what a lot of text'. But then when you start looking you understand, its idea opens up for you, that they really want to tell you what is in them. They have nothing to hide. And that is really good. (R14)</p> <p><i>Ecological</i> Well, first of all it is really good that one sees, that they can be recycled. That they are plastic and not a combination of plastic and glass. The jar does not have to be so great if the content is good. It is really positive that they are so simple. It gave a positive reaction immediately. (R14)</p> <p><i>Simple elegance</i> One can really see that they have put a lot of effort into the appearance. Wonderful! Really nice. (R11) These bottles are charming – their simplicity appeals to me. (R13) I was thinking that, wonderful simple elegance. (R17)</p> <p><i>Interest in values</i> Well, I got interested in what they are really like. That how caring they are. I would like to get to know them better. (R11)</p> <p><i>Story-enhanced image</i> I think it is really charming! They have kept the old style. One can see that it has its own history and that it has been there for a long time. It works. (R17) My favorite is this ... Now that one knows its story it becomes nice somehow. (R11) It is surely to a large extent the story that raised my interest. I immediately forgot the modest outlook. The story clearly affects you. (R12)</p>

The group that was not exposed derived only negative associations from the packaging style. They perceived the brand as cheap, mundane, boring, old-fashioned and conservative. The large amount of text on

the packaging was perceived as irritating. The brand was perceived as pretending to be scientific although it was not. Packaging was perceived to look eco-friendly, but this was expressed in a slightly negative tone,

perceiving the brand as naïve or bohemian, and the plastic bottles as cheapish. One respondent complained that ‘the modesty [of the packaging] kind of goes against the use of cosmetics’ (R8), finding the packaging design ill-suited to the product category. Some participants showed outright contempt toward the brand and one thought that it misjudged its customers. It was perceived as a brand that could be found in grocery stores, perhaps a retail brand. In addition, respondents found the brand image confusing, and complained that they had difficulty understanding why the products looked like they did.

By contrast, participants exposed to the story developed much more positive and uniform associations with the brand. The relatively simple packaging style did not appear to disturb them. The story seemed to more than compensate for the lack of visual extravagance of the packaging. As a result, the style was interpreted as radiating simple elegance. The respondents repeatedly, and unprompted, mentioned the story.

I became interested in a completely new way, now that I have heard and seen a bit more. My interest in these products rose with that story in a totally different way. I now have a completely different view, compared to what I had before you told me the story. Back then I thought that they were just a bunch of products. They all look a bit different, but on the other hand it kind of brings out the feeling of the origin of them [referring to the story]. They are not in a negative way like – maybe that is the wrong word – but like ‘branded’ as so many cosmetics brands are nowadays. (R11)

The packaging style was perceived as honest, supporting the contents, while the historic outlook and text made the products look trustworthy. The ecological, reusable plastic of the bottle was perceived posi-

tively. Overall, the products were perceived as attractive.

### Other brand associations

When the participants were asked to use adjectives to describe the brand, further differences became apparent. Those who had not been exposed to the story described the brand as traditional (5), clean (3), ordinary (3), ecological (2), but also as high quality (2). Other associations included old-fashioned, safe, multifaceted, informative, cheap and inconsistent. As one participant said, ‘more a utilitarian, not a trendy product ... it doesn’t raise my interest. One gets the feeling that this is not at all for you. Made for someone different’ (R1). However, those who heard the story chose adjectives that described the brand as a sympathetic and high-quality humane brand with a long history. They used terms as friendly/sympathetic/warm (5), traditional (5), high quality (4), natural (3), interesting (2), as well as trendy, valuable and elegant. Only positive associations were made with the brand.

Those values are very important to me. Really. Today when you don’t know where these products come from and like that. That they take part in projects and those ethical principles. Today it feels like they are decreasing. It feels like there are very few companies that really care. Nice if some cosmetic brand manages to naturally combine good values in its work. (R11)

Different aspects of the story appeared to appeal to different people. Some picked out the environmental aspects, others social responsibility, service, or the history as a family-owned company.

When I read the story I thought it was a really good choice not to make ads, that it is the service that is important. That it is important to meet the customer. Perhaps



because of my profession [Educator in a company] I value that and pay attention to it, but even as a customer it is nice that they make an effort with customers. (R15)

... somehow the story brought a lot into the picture. I am definitely impressed by those ethical values. Environment, welfare and work with developing countries – that is the ethical values. That it is not only profit maximization, it can be something else, something softer. (R18)

You see that it has its own history and it has been going on for so long. It works. (R14)

One participant spontaneously said that she would talk about the story and the brand to others: ‘It would certainly raise discussion! If you would replace the brands you use with this one, you could start telling these stories they are based on. I think that would be fun. If there are wonderful stories behind some product it is good when they are spread around ... This document made me think “cool”. I could imagine that when I sit with friends I could talk about these products’ (R15).

### Willingness to pay

To establish if hearing the story would increase the perceived value of the brand, the participants were asked how much they would be prepared to pay for a specific product. They were asked to inspect a facial cream of 125 ml and say what they thought its approximate retail price was. They were then asked if they would be willing to pay that price for a good facial cream (in general). The real price of the product (€31) was then revealed to the participants, who were asked if they were prepared to pay that price for the product. The results are summarized in Table 2.

The results show that the respondents in the non-exposed group estimated the price to be between €10 and €30, while a

**Table 2:** Willingness to pay for the brand (number of observations in parentheses)

	Non-story	Story
Own price estimate of the shown face cream	€10–€20 (7) €20–€30 (3)	€10–€20 (3) €20–€30 (3) €30–€40 (2) >€50 (2)
Willingness to pay own price estimate for a face cream	Yes (10)	Yes (10)
Willingness to pay €31 for the shown face cream	Yes (5) No (5)	Yes (10)

majority chose the lower price range of €10–€20. In the story group the price range was broader, from €10 to more than €50, evenly spread over four price ranges. In both groups, all the participants were willing to pay the estimated price range for a good facial cream. In the non-exposed group, only half the respondents were willing to pay the product’s real price, that is, €31 for this product. By contrast, all respondents in the exposed group were willing to buy the cream at the real retail price.

### CONCLUSIONS

The study demonstrates that a well-crafted firm story may create positive associations with a brand and ultimately increase consumers’ willingness to pay for it. Consumers in the two conditions perceived the brand attributes quite differently and developed different brand attitudes. Specific features were interpreted differently, such as the amount of text on the packaging, and the groups also developed distinct product associations. This finding is in line with Sax (2006) and Shankar *et al* (2001) who suggest that storytelling provides a framework to organize experiences and give them meaning. Narratives help consumers to interpret the meaning of brands (Escalas, 2004b), which the associations made by

consumers in the two conditions demonstrate. Consumers' reactions to the story could also be explained by narrative transportation, which has been shown to increase consumer enjoyment (Green *et al*, 2008; Mazzocco *et al*, 2010).

The difference between the two conditions and their impact on participants were also evidenced by the atmosphere during the interviews. Consumers who were exposed to the story talked more about the brand and behaved much livelier when making associations. Their voice and facial expressions were more positive toward the brand and they often related it to themselves. Respondents who were not exposed to the story were more impatient and showed a relatively negative attitude toward the brand, not only by their choice of words but also through the tone of their voice, and by being more critical toward it. The positive response by the consumers who were exposed to the story supports previous findings that stories engage and entertain consumers (Busselle and Bilandzic, 2008).

The story did indeed create high-quality expectations, based on genuine values, which, according to Rosen (2000), is one of the most important aspects of stories. The group that was not exposed to the story developed expectations regarding functional benefits mainly based upon the packaging and to some extent upon inspecting the content. They also experienced difficulties in making sense of the brand, and expressed confusion about the packaging design and the brand's overall message. In the other group, however, the story took over the visual role of the packaging, and the brand associations appeared to be developed based on the story, as evidenced by the following quote: 'It was to a large extent the story that made me interested. I immediately forgot the modest outlook' (R12). It could be said that the personality of the brand (Aaker, 1997) changed from

sincerity to excitement in the group that was exposed to the story.

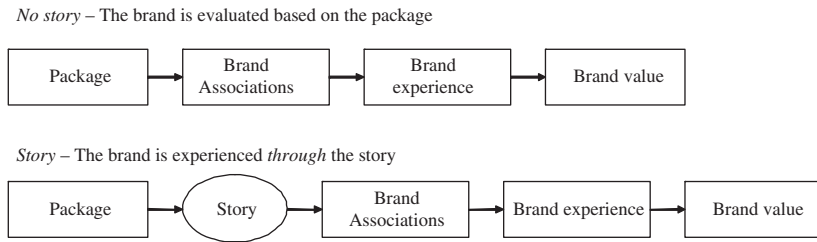
In essence, the story had a filtering effect, changing the evaluation of the brand, raising its value. This effect is illustrated in Figure 1, showing that consumers in the non-exposed group based their brand associations solely on the packaging, whereas those who heard the story related all their associations to the story.

The stories were backed up by the servicescape, which forms part of the consumers' brand experience (Brakus *et al*, 2009). When asked to what extent the pictures of the store had influenced them, respondents said things like: 'It was the worldview that was most important' (R5), 'The story itself had the biggest impact' (R16), and 'The story impacted more than the pictures ... even if the store was exactly like the story' (R17).

We conclude that storytelling is an effective way of communicating brand values to consumers, even if the story falls short of emotional intensity. A story can embrace the core values of a brand in ways that traditional marketing communication cannot. Hence, storytelling deserves a more prominent place in the brand management literature. Apart from books with practical advice and case examples (Vincent, 2002; Fog *et al*, 2005), storytelling has been scarcely discussed in the brand management literature (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1998; Kapferer, 2008; Keller *et al*, 2008).

## Managerial implications

Stories add symbolic value to goods and services, and can be used to sell a broad array of products, ranging from antiques to everyday goods. Stories offer a way to differentiate the brand by adding an emotional component, which is difficult for competitors to emulate (for example, De Chernatony and McDonald, 2003). Stories connect to consumers' dreams and lifestyles, thereby increasing loyalty, which



**Figure 1:** The effect of storytelling on brand experience.

cannot be achieved through attribute-oriented benefits (Fournier, 1998; Thompson *et al*, 2006).

Owing to its relationship-building elements, storytelling is also well suited for customer-to-customer marketing. A good story engages consumers to become ambassadors of the brand, spreading positive word-of-mouth and recommending the brand to others. First, however, the story, or stories, must be communicated to potential customers. Stories can be incorporated into TV commercials as ad vignettes or plots (Stern, 1994), into online advertising, as exemplified by the ice-cream brand Ben & Jerry's ([www.cdbenjer.com](http://www.cdbenjer.com)), or they can be told interactively to customers who enter a specially designed store to inspect products. The servicescape can then be used to support and strengthen the image of the story and the brand.

We would like to caution brand managers against being too optimistic regarding the effects of introducing firm-originated storytelling into their marketing efforts. There are few studies to show what kinds of story work and when, and a sudden surge of brand-related stories could cause consumer irritation. It requires skills to construct a realistic and compelling story (Patterson and Brown, 2005; Busselle and Bilandzic, 2008). Furthermore, consumers cannot identify themselves equally well with all brands or become immersed into every brand story. For some brands,

consumers' own stories might be more effective communicators of brand benefits and brand values than a firm-originated story. Indeed, research has reported some commonalities between firms that generate stories among consumers (Solnet and Kandampully, 2008). An engaging, funny, fanciful TV-ad plot that only remotely relates to the brand could also be more effective than a true story that does not engage the customer. When the company has a good story to tell, however, our study shows that it is worth telling it.

### Limitations and future research directions

Based on the previous discussion, it can be observed that this study has some limitations, some of which lead to suggestions for further research. One limitation is that the study was performed on a relatively small sample, thereby limiting the generalizability of conclusions that can be drawn from the study. However, small samples are common in qualitative studies and many recent studies on consumer brand stories have used even smaller samples (Woodside *et al*, 2008; Hirschman, 2010; Schembri *et al*, 2010). Also, the results of the study are in line with other studies showing positive results from storytelling (Delgadillo and Escalas, 2004; Escalas, 2004b; Mossberg and Nissen Johansen, 2006; Woodside *et al*, 2008), which supports the generality and validity of the findings (Gummesson, 2007). Nevertheless, we recommend further

studies on the effect of stories on consumer brand experiences.

In our study, the servicescape appeared to add little to the formation of brand associations. This may be owing to the experimental design, where participants could not actually visit the store. The role of the store atmosphere and the way in which it conveys the story may be more important in reality, as part of the full brand experience. It is also possible that the servicescape plays a smaller role in goods retailing than in a pure service environment, like in hotels and restaurants (cf. Mossberg, 2008). This consideration warrants further studies.

Some caution should be taken when transferring the results of this study to other types of stories. Our study was limited to one brand, which markets itself with a claimed authentic story about the history of the brand. No traditional marketing channels are used, with the exception of online sales in selected countries. Word-of-mouth marketing and handing out samples form the basis of brand marketing. This is not a concept that suits all brands. Therefore further research is needed on different types of stories. Distinctions could be made between authentic and non-authentic stories, or stories based on the history of the product versus stories about consumers using the product.

Of particular interest appear consumer reactions to made-up stories when the story is revealed to be non-authentic. Mossberg and Nissen Johansen (2006) tell the story of a woman who swore never to return when the story of a restaurant was revealed to her as invented. Although real information is usually preferred to fictional information (Argo *et al*, 2008), others contend that stories need to be plausible rather than real (Busselle and Bilandzic, 2008). The lack of systematic empirical research on consumer reactions to real versus fictive stories suggests a need for further investiga-

tion (cf. Argo *et al*, 2008). Furthermore, it seems that many brand stories have been created early on in a brand's life. One could wonder whether it is possible to add stories later on, when remodeling the market communication of an existing brand.

Moreover, stories and storytelling have been interpreted in a number of different ways (Gabriel and Lang, 1995), comprising any type of story related to the use of a product, or claim about a brand, making comparisons between studies extremely difficult. Comparative studies regarding stories around a variety of goods and services should be performed to answer the question if storytelling works equally well for all types of products and price ranges. One might also ask if some products are particularly well suited for storytelling. Is storytelling, for example, better suited for ego-involving and self-expressive products than for utility goods? Furthermore, could stories add to the value of business-to-business products? More research should also be done on the psychological mechanisms underlying the effects of storytelling. For example, does storytelling influence the beliefs and expectations consumers have, or does it influence the sense making and emotional engagement, or both?

Although benefits were not expressed as such in the study, consumers in the group that was exposed to the story expressed an emotional enthusiasm for the story, which may ultimately develop into emotional and symbolic benefits of the brand. We therefore suggest that future studies should look closer at what types of benefits, or values, storytelling may bring to consumers' brand experiences.

Finally, a consumer perspective was taken in this study, but there is also a need to study companies' views of the role of storytelling in brand building. Of primary interest is studying how stories are related to other brand-building elements, whether

there is a fit between them, and how that fit affects consumers, employees and company performance.

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