

EXPLORING THE ELEMENTS OF A STORY-FORM ADVERTISING AND ITS EFFECTIVENESS

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Abstract: The role of stories and their influence on communication have been widely discussed, yet despite recent advances, one thing remains unclear: How do consumers evaluate and respond to a brand story? To answer these questions, this study conducts a $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2$ between-subjects design to test hypotheses. The results indicate that all elements of story are significant respectively. In addition, the correlation between authenticity and cognition was significantly higher than that between conciseness and cognition; the correlation between connectedness and affect was significantly higher than that between reversal and affect; cognition was significantly more influential to brand attitude than affect to brand attitude.

Keywords: story-form advertising, attitude.

INTRODUCTION

The increasing competitive pressures make marketing managers and researchers put more emphases on communication. In the low trust world, story seems to be an effective way to communicate with audiences (Godin, 2005; West et al., 2004). Several studies have indicated that contents which are conveyed in story form are more effective than that being presented in listed format (Adaval and Wyer, 1998; Mattila, 2000).

The role of stories and their influence in comprehension, communication, and judgment has been an important area of inquiry across a wide range of disciplines such as psychology, linguistics, and sociology (West et al., 2004). Recently, researchers have examined story comprehension and persuasion in advertising (Deighton et al., 1989; Padgett and Allen, 1997), the role of stories or narratives in information processing (Adaval and Wyer, 1998; Mattila, 2000; West et al., 2004) and story construction as a vehicle for consumer self-identification (Baumgartner, 2002).

Despite recent advances, there is still much to learn about the elements which contribute to a more compelling story. How do consumers evaluate and respond to a story? Although some story elements have been conceptually discussed in previous studies related to narratives (Foster, 1974; Chatman, 1978; McKee and Fryer, 2003; Padgett and Allen, 1997; Papadatos, 2006; Taylor et al., 2002), however, much remains to be learned about the relationship between story elements and consumer attitude empirically. According to the stimulus-organism-response (S-O-R) paradigm (Woodworth, 1928) and the attitude theory (Kim and Morris, 2007; Zanna and Rempel, 1988), the elements of a story (stimulus) may influence consumers' affect and cognition (organism), which in turn influence their brand attitude (response). Thus, research is needed that empirically examines the mediating effects of consumers' cognition and affection on the relationships between story elements and consumer brand attitude.

THEORETICAL ISSUES

Brand Attitude

Attitude is a learned predisposition to respond in a consistently favorable or unfavorable manner with respect to a given object (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). Similarly, brand attitude is referred to a consumers' overall evaluation of a brand (Percy and Rossiter,

1992). Consumers' product attribution beliefs may be the same, they have different brand attitudes though (Mitchell, 1986). In previous studies about brand attitude, researchers agreed on the importance of brand attitude. Because brand attitude affects brand equity, brand image and purchase intention of consumer et al (Percy and Rossiter, 1992; Faircloth et al., 2001; Till and Busler, 2000).

Attitude consists of three classes of responses to a stimulus- cognition, affect, and conation (or behavioral component) (Zanna and Rempel, 1988). The cognition included beliefs, judgments, or thoughts associated with an object; affect included emotions, feelings, or drives related with an object (Edwards, 1990). According to these studies, Percy and Rossiter (1992) concluded that brand attitude also consists of both a cognition and affect. The cognition guides behavior and the affect energizes the behavior. Furthermore, Rios et al. (2006) proposed that the brand attitudes sum up beliefs regarding the attributes, the functional, experimental and symbolic benefits, as well as contributing toward the perception of brand quality.

Cognition is the thinking and rational dimension of consumer's response (Vakratsas and Ambler, 1999; Forgas, 2008). Some researchers regarded that cognition was generated during exposure to the advertising focused on the verbal thoughts about the product, others thought that it acquired or changed by the advertising focused on the product attribute beliefs (Mitchell, 1986). Anyway, it is undoubted that cognition plays a critical role in forming attitude (Edwards, 1990; Durvasula et al., 1999; Kim and Morris, 2007). Thus, we propose that cognition plays an important role on brand attitude.

H1: Cognition is positively related to the brand attitude.

Comparing with cognition, affect is the feeling and emotional dimension of consumer's response (Vakratsas and Ambler, 1999; Forgas, 2008). Affect refers to subjective moods and feelings and is intimately correlated with feelings of depression, anxiety, fatigue, stress and burnout (Archer et al., 2007). Affect was viewed as a dangerous, invasive force that subverts rational thinking originally, until Damasio (1994) indicated the affect is a useful and even essential component of cognition and behavior (Forgas, 2008). While applying in this opinion, no matter positive or negative affect which were caused or triggered by advertising therefore can potentially influence the brand attitude (Burke and Edell, 1989; Forgas, 2007).

H2: Affect is positively associated with the brand attitude.

Zajonc (1980) argues that cognition (thinking) and affect (feeling) are two independent evaluation systems. However, Burke and Edell (1989) found out that cognition and affect are intertwined rather than separate. Thus, the link between cognition and affect in attitude has been demonstrated in several studies. The C-A-B paradigm in which Cognition (C) determines affect (A) which, in turn, results in behavior (B) (Holbrook and Batra, 1987). In other words, affect not only appears after cognition but also is based on cognition (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975; Vakratsas and Ambler, 1999; Forgas, 2008).

H3: Cognition positively correlates with Affect.

Story

Stories instruct, inform, entertain, warm and warn. A good story touches something familiar within us, yet shows us something new about our lives or our world (Zemke, 1990). Sidney (2001) points out that the largest activity in marketing is the provision and consumption of stories. This fact is so general and pervasive that it commonly escapes notice or it is so prominent and noticeable that it interpenetrates all experience....Stories are brought and sold, they are part of them media of exchange, and they are the vehicles for all other goods and services. Advertisers appear to be implicitly aware of the power of narratives because many ads tell stories (Escalas, 1998).

The definition of a narrative ad is simply an ad that tells a story (Escalas, 1998). Ads that tell stories are able to involve and entertain consumers and, more important, are able to communicate and model how products may be used to create meaning (Escalas, 2004). A variety of research has been done related to this issue: drama ads (Deighton et al., 1989), narrative processing (Escalas, 2004; Adaval & Wyer, 1998), narratives vs. self (Escalas and Bettman, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1988) and story grammar analysis to advertising (Mick, 1987). However, little has explored the issue of elements of narratives.

Aristotle is the first one who developed the theory about story. More than 2000 years ago, Aristotle, in his Poetics, said stories should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. They should include complex characters as well as a plot that incorporates a reversal of fortune and a lesson learned. Furthermore, the storyteller should be so engaged with the story- visualizing the action, feeling what the characters feel- that the listeners become drawn into the narrative's world (Aristotle, 1987). In the past few decades more theories about story have been developed. For example, Bruner (1990), Burke (1969) and Mandler (1984) propose different viewpoints about story elements. Indeed, there is no universal agreement on elements of story, particularly across differing academic fields. According to previous studies, this paper summarizes some key elements of storytelling.

Authenticity

When speaking of storytelling, authenticity is usually treated as a basic element. Authenticity can be defined as a sense that we obtain from the material which makes us be associated with the past and reality or the psychological feeling. Stories which are authentic convince the audience easier. Schwab (2000) contends films which provide consumers with more valid information is higher authentic.

Godin (2005) maintains that a great story is true. Consumers are too good at sniffing out inconsistencies for a marketer to get away with a story that's just slapped on.

According to Edwards (1990) and McGuire (1969), the cognition-based component of attitude includes belief, judgments, and thoughts associated with an object. Reading story-form ads which is higher authentic may help them build knowledge about the product.

H4: Authenticity in story-form advertising positively correlates with cognition.

Conciseness

Conciseness is a desired quality in many areas of writing, and it is also a key to good business writing (Sloane, 2003). Conciseness is an element which people perceive at the first glance before they start to read the story. Because holding the attention of audiences, the point should be made in seconds, not in minutes. (Denning, 2004), conciseness of the story might determine their will to read the ad. People have neither the time nor the patience to absorb a richly detailed narrative. As previous studies suggest, conciseness could be concluded that using simple and short phrases to express complicated ideas.

The cognitive element consists of subject's judgments of the ad's characteristics whereas the affective element is based on feelings subjects experience during ad exposure (Burke and Edell, 1989). Since conciseness is an element which people perceive at the first glance before they start to read the story, instead of experiencing during reading the story, conciseness might correlate with cognition.

H5: Conciseness in story-form advertising positively correlates with cognition.

Reversal

Reversal is a turning point, a change, and the climax of a scene; it is the point when the action and/or the emotion takes either a surprising twist or reaches an unexpected intensity (Reichman, 2003). The story contains reversal might let listeners remain curious and in suspense – wondering what's going to happen next (Guber, 2007). When a good story progress, the protagonist always faces a series of crises or reversal, thus forcing him (her) to struggle against the problems (Grant, 1999). Without reversal, the story and the character would become flat and boring.

As Alwitt (2002) suggests, a key emotional reaction to the ongoing events in the narrative is the alternation of hope and fear as the narrative unfolds. This arousal of the emotion could be induced by reversal in the story. The emotions and feelings about a particular product or brand constitute the affective component of an attitude (Breckler, 1984; Schiffman, 2004). Thus,

H6: Reversal in story-form advertising positively relates with affect.

Connectedness

In organizational communication, three topics are emerging to provide points for comparing different approaches: connectedness, spiritual traditions, and valence (Sass, 2000). Connectedness can neutralize concerns without direct confrontation and allow the audiences involve more. People interact and make relationship through each similar experience. The story which is bound to the experience of audiences (or their friends) might render them to feel they are the character in the story. They identify with the characters in the story, and therefore they are unforgettable for the story (Guber, 2007). It is clear that connectedness is one key factor in storytelling. Hence, this research has a proposition from all discussions above:

H7: Connectedness in story-form advertising positively relates with affect.

METHODOLOGY

Procedure and sample

Because testing the hypotheses requires a controlled setting in which the impacts of various factors of a story could be measured, a 2 (authenticity: high/ low) × 2 (conciseness: high/ low) × 2 (reversal: high/ low) × 2 (connectedness: high/ low) between-subject design was adopted. The experiment design consisted of combinations of four story factors which required creating 16 stories (2⁴=16). All the respondents were asked to read the printed story ad on the first page. After finishing reading the story ad, participants started to fill out the questionnaire. All the items of questions were measured on seven-point scales with the following anchor points: “strongly disagree” to “strong agree.”

The participants in this study were undergraduate and graduate students. To increase the motivation and seriousness of subjects' participation, the participants received extra credits. All the participants were randomly assigned to a different story and collection resulted in a total of 738 completed questionnaires (43-50 for each scenario). Participants were informed that the experiment was intended to examine the influence of each story element on consumers' brand attitude.

Measures

Authenticity

The construct focuses on the perceived authenticity of the story. Zemke (1990) asserts that the most powerful stories tell about real people, describe specific actions, and have a strong sense of time and place. Therefore, in this study, stories are composed of three elements which are the company, character, and service/product. An authentic story has a web site of company, a real name, school, and department of character, as well as the numeral information of service/product. Three items were used to measure whether participants would consider the story authentic or not. These three items were adapted by reviewing the past literatures (Todorov, 1977; Hearon, 2004). The cronbach's alpha for the three items of this construct was 0.93.

Conciseness

According to Reinstein and Trebby (1997), conciseness means that candidates present complete thoughts in as few words as possible, while ensuring that important points are covered adequately. Therefore, in this study, conciseness is manipulated by the length of the story while the important points are mentioned under both conditions. Stories which are manipulated to be highly concise contain less than 300 words (in Chinese); on the other hand, stories with lower conciseness consist of over 900 words (in Chinese). Conciseness is measured with 2 items. The cronbach's alpha for these two items of this construct was 0.86.

Reversal

According to Grant (1999), to create reversal in your story, give your character a goal, then ask yourself what fear hides behind that goal. In addition to creating a goal for the character, Schneider (2005) asserts that the reversal is developed through action, dialogue, and interior monologue, and by story's end the conflict is resolved in some way. Therefore, the way we manipulate reversal is to create some obstacles to prevent the character from smoothly accomplishes his goal. Three items were modified from past literatures (Schneider, 2005; Wall, 1997) to better fit this study. The cronbach's alpha for the three items of this construct was 0.76.

Connectedness

Connectedness is described as "affects or is affected by what is going on in certain other relationships" (Hakansson and Snehota, 1995). It indicates the definition of connectedness is to make relationship with other people. Therefore, the way we manipulate connectedness is to create different issues for students. Stories which are manipulated to be highly connectedness describe about student loan and investment in fund; on the other hand, stories with lower connectedness describe about mortgage and business start-up loan. Conciseness is measured with 3 items. The cronbach's alpha for these three items of this construct was 0.88.

Cognition

In order to assess subjects' perception, we referred to the items from Schiffman and Kanuk (2004) and developed three items. All the items were measured on seven-point scales anchoring "strongly disagree" to "strong agree." The cronbach's alpha for the three items of this construct was 0.90.

Affect

We developed three items which are more suitable for this study according to Spotts et al., (1997) Schiffman and Kanuk (2004). Seven-point scales with the following anchor points: "strongly disagree" to "strong agree" was adopted. The cronbach's alpha for the

three items of this construct was 0.86.

Brand Attitude

The dependent variable in our study is brand attitude. Schiffman and Kanuk (2004) propose that attitude is a learned predisposition to behave in a consistently favorable or unfavorable to some object. Attitudes consist of three major components which are cognitive, affective, and conative component. Since cognition and affect were positioned as mediators in this study, the attitude toward the advertisement and the brand attitude were mainly assessed by conation. We referred to items Schiffman and Kanuk (2004) suggest, and developed specific measures of the respondent's brand attitude to suit this study. The cronbach's alpha for the three items of brand attitude was 0.92.

Manipulation Checks

As manipulation checks, we examine whether if the manipulations on authenticity, conciseness, reversal and connectedness were adequate. The results of independent-samples t-tests revealed that the subjects assigned to high authentic conditions reported higher scores on authenticity index than those assigned to low authentic scenarios (Mean: 4.64 vs. 3.29, $t=-13.57$, $p<.05$). Advertisement containing fewer words were perceived more concise than those with more words (Mean: 5.34 vs. 4.68, $t=-7.34$, $p<.05$). Subjects assigned to read stories with reversal reported higher scores on reversal index than those who read stories without reversal (Mean: 4.81 vs. 3.52, $t=-15.92$, $p<.05$). Subjects assigned to high connectedness conditions reported higher scores on connectedness index than those assigned to low connectedness conditions (Mean: 4.20 vs. 3.16, $t=-10.04$, $p<.05$).

Measurement Model

To test the consistency of the measurement model, we will conduct a confirmatory factor analysis using the maximum likelihood procedure of LISREL 8.71. The χ^2 values of the four elements were 165.58 (df=38, $p<.05$), as well as the comparative fit index (CFI), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), and 0.067, respectively. These values suggest an acceptable fit of the data.

Convergent validity was examined for construct validity. Convergent validity is supported when the average variance extracted (AVE) values are greater than 0.50 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981) and the loading on the hypothesized construct is significant. In this study, the AVEs for authenticity, conciseness, reversal, and connectedness were 0.83, 0.83, 0.57 and 0.74 respectively, and all loadings were significant. Thus, convergent validity is indicated. Discriminant validity was evident when the squared multiple correlations (R-squared) between two factors are less than the square of the estimated correlation between the two factors (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). In this study, the largest shared variance between two constructs is 0.34 between reversal and affect.

RESULTS

A structural model was tested using LISREL 8.71. The model yielded an acceptable fit of the data ($\chi^2=874.23$, df=157, $p<.001$, CFI=0.97, GFI=0.90, and RMSEA=0.08). As figure 1 show, all paths (H1 - H7) were significant.

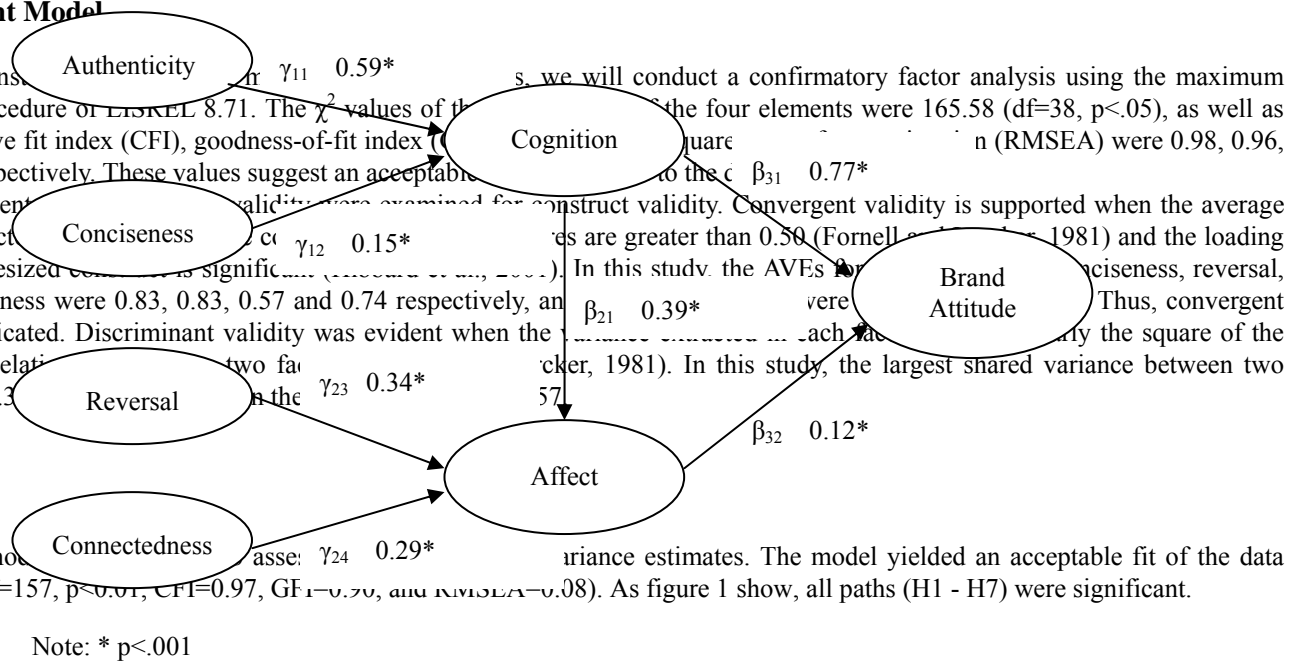


Figure 1 Results of structural model

Relative Effects of the Elements and Mediators

To further explore the nature of the structural model, we compared a model in which γ_{11} and γ_{12} were constrained to be equal with an unconstrained model. The result indicated that $\gamma_{11} > \gamma_{12}$ ($\Delta\chi^2=60.10$, $\Delta df=1$, $p<.05$). In other words, the correlation between authenticity and cognition was significantly higher than that between conciseness and cognition. Similarly, we compared a model in which γ_{24} and γ_{23} were constrained to be equal with an unconstrained model, and revealed that $\gamma_{23} > \gamma_{24}$ ($\Delta\chi^2=14.66$, $\Delta df=1$, $p<.05$). The correlation between reversal and affect was significantly higher than that between connectedness and affect.

To further examine the relations between mediator and dependent variables in the proposed model, we similarly compared a model in which β_{31} and β_{32} were constrained to be equal with an unconstrained model ($\Delta\chi^2=58.66$, $\Delta df=1$, $p<0.05$). In brief, cognition is more influential on brand attitude than affect does.

Mediation Effects

To examine the mediating effects of cognitive and affective component on attitude toward the ad and brand attitude, we estimated models following Baron and Kenny (1986), Holmbeck (1997) and Maxham and Netemeyer (2002). The first condition is satisfied if the independent variables (story elements) affect the mediators (affect and cognition). The second condition is satisfied if the mediators affect the dependent variable (brand attitude). Both of these conditions were met by the paths estimated.

The third condition is satisfied if the independent variables (story elements) affect the dependent variable (brand attitude). The direct paths from independent variables (story elements) to dependent variable (brand attitude) were estimated ($\chi^2=236.54$, $df=67$, $p<0.01$, CFI=0.98, GFI=0.96, and RMSEA=0.059). All direct paths were significant and the results; the third mediation condition was therefore met.

Finally, the last mediating condition is satisfied if the direct paths from the independent variables (story elements) to the dependent variable (brand attitude) reduce or become insignificant when the paths from the independent variables to the mediators and the mediators to the dependent variable appear in the model. This condition is satisfied because all the direct paths from story elements to brand attitude and purchase intention reduce. Thus, both cognition and affect mediate the relationship between story elements and brand attitude and purchase intention.

DISCUSSION

Conclusions and Managerial Implications

This study concludes four elements to compose a good story which are authenticity, conciseness, reversal and connectedness. These elements influence customers' brand attitude through affect and cognition.

The results imply that authenticity, conciseness, reversal and connectedness are essential elements which positively affect customers' brand attitude. The further analyses show that authenticity seems to impact consumers' cognition stronger than conciseness. It is not surprising for the result because the most critical touchstone of story is authenticity (Guber, 2007). In addition, although the means between low conciseness and high conciseness are significantly different, the means tend to be high (Mean: 5.34 vs. 4.68, $t=-7.34$, $p<0.05$). Perhaps people were senseless for number of words without comparison.

Other analyses show that the effect of reversal is higher than that of connectedness. Nevertheless the difference of loading between reversal and connectedness is not huge, especially compare with the authenticity and conciseness as well as cognition and affect. Our research also indicates that cognition might be more influential to brand attitude than affect. A possible explanation is that the story is talked about financial service/ product, the consumers' attitude in financial or investment decision making are more cautious, rational and conscientious.

The implication of this study is that we identified four critical elements of story and these elements could be applied in advertising. Story-form advertising not only influences on the sales of product/ service profit but also on the brand attitude. In other words, if a firm had myopia to create a fictitious story, it would injure their brand and customers would reduce their loyalty. Hence, authenticity is the most important element in story. Our study suggests that not only affect but also cognition is possible to induce more positive brand attitude. Authenticity and conciseness correlate with cognition while reversal and connectedness are associated with affect. In similarly, customers seem to emphasize cognition more than affect in a low-trust world.

Limitation and Future Directions

Although this study provides a number of new insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the proposed elements of story are not intended to be a complete influencing on brand attitude. Clearly other elements of story contribute to the development of effects on brand attitude and should be included in future research. For example, suspense (Chatman, 1978; Alwitt, 2002), surprise (Chatman, 1978), and human (Charles, 1998) and so forth were not included in this study.

Participants in this study were restricted to undergraduates and graduate students who might have similar characteristics. Future research also might focus attention on the diversity of samples. Scholars usually discussed the difference of customer characteristics under individual differences including gender and personality. Nonetheless, it may be interesting to examine how different cultural diversity is as well as the interactions between different groups.

Furthermore, future research could consider other story forms not only to narrate in words but also in addresses or to use nonverbal type otherwise, such as pictures and cartoons. In addition, because of technological breakthroughs they can present in several ways including movable type, movies, radio, television and the internet (Guber, 2007). Previous researches revealed that using the same factor in different media might have different effects (Weinberger and Gulas, 1995; Weinberger and Campbell, 1991).

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