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To cite this article: Adam J. Mills & Joby John (2021): Brand stories: bringing narrative theory to brand management, Journal of Strategic Marketing, DOI: [10.1080/0965254X.2020.1853201](https://doi.org/10.1080/0965254X.2020.1853201)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0965254X.2020.1853201>



Published online: 19 Aug 2021.



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## Brand stories: bringing narrative theory to brand management

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### ABSTRACT

While the use of stories in branding has been well-researched from a consumer influence perspective, limited work has taken a strategic view of brand storytelling. Most research on brand stories focuses almost exclusively on what brand stories do rather than on specifically what they are. This paper examines brand stories and brand storytelling through a lens of brand management strategy, leveraging narrative and literary theory to inform and define the brand story construct in marketing. Three critical elements of brand stories – plot, character and purpose – are examined, and presented in a comprehensive model of the brand story. Subsequently, a conceptual framework for brand story theory-building is offered to guide how brand stories can be better designed to engineer brand positioning and image.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 6 September 2019  
Accepted 14 November 2020

### KEYWORDS

Brand image; brand story; brand storytelling; narrative theory; brand strategy

Recent scholarly interest into strategic brand storytelling (Granitz & Forman, 2015) lacks a clear and consistent definition of the brand story construct. The definition of brand story – much like the definition of brand – is a ‘familiar but conceptually elusive entity’ (White, 1980, p. 18), perhaps because the term is so commonplace that a concrete definition has seemed unnecessary. Because most of us have an essential understanding of what a story is, we tend to assume the brand story construct needs little explanation. To more deeply understand the use of brand story in scholarly research, we must first define the concept of ‘the story.’ A story is defined as ‘an oral or written performance involving two or more people interpreting past or anticipated experience’ (Boje, 1995, p. 1000) – a narrative account of one or more events leading to a transition from an initial state to a later state (Bennett & Royle, 2009; van Laer et al., 2014). Stories can be studied by unpacking this definition into its component parts: a plot arc, characters, perspective, a cause-and-effect transition, and a means of transmission.

The marketing literature displays a better conceptual grasp on this last element, the *telling* of stories, than the actual stories being told. ‘Storytelling is essential to successful branding’ (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010, p. 21) because stories add symbolic value to products, and differentiate brands by adding emotional components (Lundqvist et al., 2013). People by nature think in story-like ways in narrative form (Abbott, 2002). It follows that ‘consumers should also be able to interpret their exposure to and experience with

brands via narrative thought process' (Escalas, 2004b, p. 168). Some scholars have proposed a paradigm of 'story-dominant logic' (Brown, 2007, pp. 296–297; Brown & Patterson, 2010). We adopt the Mills and Robson (2019, p. 163) definition of the brand storytelling as: *'the use of literary storytelling techniques and narrative discourse applied specifically to marketing communications in order to promote brands to consumers in an engaging and meaningful way.'*

How stories are created by marketers is just as important as how they are told and received by consumers. Unfortunately, most research on brand stories focuses almost exclusively on what brand stories *do* rather than on specifically what they *are*. Very little scholarly research explores the brand story as a strategic tool, or brand storytelling as a strategic brand management process. 'Storytelling deserves a more prominent place in the brand management literature. Apart from books with practical advice and case examples, storytelling has been scarcely discussed in the brand management literature' (Lundqvist et al., 2013, p. 292; see also: D. Aaker, 2018; Kapferer, 2008; Keller, 2013; Ryu et al., 2018). A strategic approach to brand storytelling is critical for two reasons. First, marketing managers are increasingly reclaiming creative control over their brands from advertising agencies, and thus taking more control over creating and telling their brand stories (Avery, 2019). Second, because almost all research on brand storytelling has been undertaken at the consumer goods level, it has inadvertently overlooked a significant and important arena of business-to-business brand storytelling (D. Aaker, 2018).

In this paper, we review the literature on brand storytelling in marketing, and explicate the broader concepts of story and storytelling from narrative theory to ground our understanding of brand management theory. We identify the three key elements in structuring (brand) stories – plot, character and purpose. We first present these elements as used in literary work before applying them to brand management theory and present a comprehensive model of brand storytelling. We conclude with limitations of the theory and suggest future directions for theory development. Our contributions to the marketing strategy literature are: first, a definition of the brand story construct; second, a theoretical framework that provides a systematic guide for future research into brand storytelling from a strategic perspective; and third, showing how brand storytelling can be integrated into marketing strategy as a managerial practice.

## Storytelling and brand stories

People 'naturally think in story-like form' (Adaval & Wyer, 1998; see also Bruner, 1990; Escalas, 2004b, p. 168; Polkinghorne, 1991; Schank, 1990b) by connecting events in a sequential and causal manner (Pennington & Hastie, 1986). The telling of a story should be persuasive enough to arouse emotion and energy (McKee, 2003), capture our attention and draw us in to the narrative (Avery, 2019). Unlike explanation, where the teller articulates the intended meaning and relevance, in storytelling the teller articulates only the tangible elements like plotlines and characters in the content, leaving the inference of meaning, via narrative, to the listener (Godin, 2009; Twitchell, 2004). Consumers create, tell, and share stories about brands (Escalas, 2004b; Fog et al., 2010; Woodside, 2010; Woodside et al., 2008); and, about how those brands fit into their lives (Escalas, 2004a; Fournier, 1998; Gabriel & Lang, 1995). Beyond using brand stories to interpret experience (Escalas, 2004b), brand stories can actually motivate purchase behavior (Merchant et al.,

2010) or help create product experience (Chiu et al., 2012; LaTour et al., 2014). Besides its use in discrete purchase and consumption experience, stories are used to convey brand values (Fog et al., 2010; Lundqvist et al., 2013), build cultural capital (Batra et al., 2000; Özsomer & Altaras, 2008) and are particularly useful for conveying prestige and luxury (Gurzki et al., 2019; Ryu et al., 2018, 2019). Thus, most research on brand storytelling in marketing examines the influence of brand stories on consumer behavior.

Much less research has been conducted on storytelling from a brand management perspective (Fog et al., 2010; Lundqvist et al., 2013) and most continues to emphasize the positive and influential effects of storytelling on consumer behavior. For example, research by Merchant et al. (2010) confirmed the role of brand storytelling in the nonprofit sector influences both consumer emotion and intention to donate. Lundqvist et al. (2013), investigating the influence of the brand story on consumer brand experiences, found that the presence of the firm-originated brand story had a significant influence on brand experiences and associations. Stories told about the origins of the brand have a notable influence on consumer perceptions of the brand (Brakus et al. (2009). The research on brand storytelling remains limited to its influence on consumers, but where these brand stories *originate*, what that story actually says, and why and how it says it are fundamentally critical to brand managers.

### Bringing narrative theory to brand management

By examining the components that comprise a story, we resolve the conundrum of the story being a 'conceptually elusive entity' (White, 1980, p. 18). Twitchell (2004), for example, suggests that the brand story comprises a plot, character(s), a given point of view, and an implied purpose or meaning. Avery (2019) suggests a parallel four elements of story: a plot, character(s), conflict, and a moral or message. Singh and Sonnenburg (2012; also, Granitz & Forman, 2015) propose that brand stories contain plots, characters and outcomes. Brown et al. (2003) imply that brand stories include elements of plot, character and a given setting. Stern (1994; also: Deighton, Romer, & McQueen, 1989; Escalas, 2004b) posit that brand stories comprise a plot, character(s) and a narrative perspective or voice. The consensus is that brand stories must contain elements of plot and character, plus some authorial intent – a purpose, moral, message or lesson anchored in a resonant context.

The conveyance of a moral or lesson in a brand story, unlike other types of story, is that it is crafted for a more strategic reason than simply teaching a life lesson. The goal is to convey the how purchasing and/or using that particular brand can improve the consumer's life. Thus, the momentum behind the creation of a brand story is more about strategic intent than human morality. We posit that the brand story must contain elements of **plot** and **character**, as well as an element of **purpose**. We propose a working definition of brand story as '*a strategic brand narrative comprising critical elements of plot and character with the purpose of representing the brand in a meaningful way to consumers.*'

These composite elements of character, plot and purpose are what narrative theory refers to as 'indices' (Schank, 1999; Woodside, 2010). Indices are the touch points or components of a story that aid comprehension and understanding by virtue of familiarity, relevance or empathy (Woodside, 2010). Consumers use indices to map product

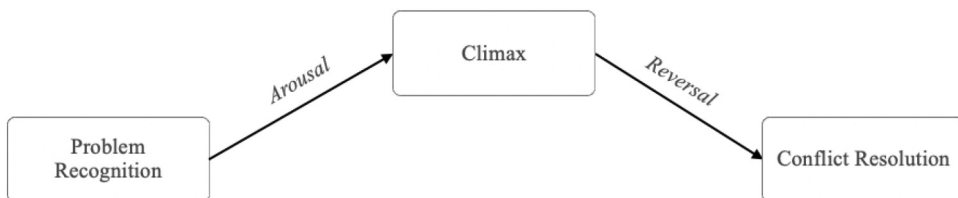
information onto their existing knowledge about the product or product category (Fiske, 1982; Fiske & Pavelchak, 1986). Thus, brand story must contain indices that enable the listener or reader to connect with the brand via the story. Indices in a story engage memory recall (Schank, 1999) and the listener comprehends the story by first, recognizing familiarities in story indices, and second, comparing the new story indices with those already indexed in memory (Polletta et al., 2011; Schank & Abelson, 1995; Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). The greater the number of relevant indices available in a story, the more easily and efficiently it can be understood, appropriated, remembered and recalled (Schank, 1990a, 1999; Singh & Sonnenburg, 2012). If the incoming information does *not* match the consumer's existing knowledge, consumers must resort to 'piecemeal processing' of information, examining pieces of information individually and separately rather than as a whole (Adaval & Wyer, 1998, p. 210). Thus, prudent managers can strategically leverage how plot, character and purpose, as indices, aid the likely resonance and impact of their brand stories. Next, we explore each of these three elements in depth, to guide our development of a theoretical model of brand story.

### **Plot: narrative theory**

The plot of a story is the evolutionary path of its narrative (Avery, 2019). It is the structure of the story (Polletta et al., 2011), a pattern of action (Cawelti, 1972) and comprises a series of events sequenced in an intentional, usually chronological, order (McKee, 1997). The plot of the story is its roadmap, incorporating key elements of sequence and reversal.

Sequence is the chronological progression of events (Escalas, 2004b) comprising a beginning, middle and end (Chiu et al., 2012; Shankar et al., 2001; Woodside et al., 2008). The chronological representation of time is accomplished by the deliberate *sequencing* events and actions in a plot such that the story communicates cause and effect relationships between events (Frye, 1971; Polletta et al., 2011; Stern, 1994). This sequencing of events in a cause-and-effect pattern (McKee, 1997) involves a tension between a previous state and a latter state. The story introduces a hurdle or problem, usually for the protagonist, and through an unfolding of events in the plot allowing for triumph over the crisis (Fog et al., 2010; McKee, 2003). The essential plot 'pyramid' (e.g. Dobson et al., 2011; Sternberg, 1993; Vonnegut, 2005) is mapped in Figure 1.

The peak of this plot curve, commonly known as the climax of the story (Chiu et al., 2012; Reichman, 2003), is the point at which the plot is at the height of arousal, and the moment at which the plot shifts from cause to effect. This shift in action-valence following the climax is referred to as the reversal (Alwitt, 2002; Casebeer, 2008; Chiu et al., 2012; Reichman, 2003; Taylor et al., 2002). Reversal connotes a return to stability after the plot



**Figure 1.** The essential plot pyramid.

events unfold – the return to good from evil, from bad to good, from crisis to stasis. Conflict builds the momentum in a story, and its resolution is critical – otherwise, the story feels unfinished and leaves the reader longing for harmony to be restored (Avery, 2019; Fog et al., 2010).

Literary scholars have labored to create universal plot archetypes by categorizing story patterns (cf. Barthes, 2004; Brooks, 1992; Campbell, 2008; Frye, 1971; Tobias, 2012; Todorov, 1975). The most cited and noteworthy is Booker's (2005) organization of stories into Seven Basic Plots: rags to riches, voyage and return, comedy, tragedy, rebirth, the quest, and overcoming the monster. Each of these shows both the sequence of events (beginning, middle, end) with rising tension toward the climax, followed by a reversal, to a final state of stasis.

### ***Plot: brand management and marketing theory***

Brand stories must also have a plot. Chronology and causality are critical elements of a brand story (Escalas, 1998). Brand story plots should have a climax, followed by a reversal, leading to some final state of happiness or satisfaction (Alwitt, 2002; Casebeer, 2008; Chiu et al., 2012; Reichman, 2003; Taylor et al., 2002). The brand story plot can be defined as a structured unfolding of actions or events in a sequential manner suggesting a benefit to be gained from use of the brand. The brand story plot is critical because this is where marketing teaches the customer how happiness results from using a given product or service (Bagozzi & Natarajan, 2000). Consumers use products and services to solve problems and bring pleasure, and thus the story plot is leveraged to embed a *particular* product or service in the customer's own story (Woodside, 2010). Similarly, plot reversal is critical to brand stories and centered on consumer problem-solving. 'From the customers' point of view, [it] is very simple: They just need to get things done [and] essentially hire products to do that job for them' (Christensen et al., 2005, p. 76). Conflict resolution in the brand story links the product (Godin, 2009) to solving that consumer's problem(s).

'A product is merely the frozen potential for performance' (Deighton, 1992, p. 362). For more than a century (c.f., Dewey, 1910) marketers have identified 'problem recognition' as the identification of a disparity between a consumer's actual state and desired state with respect to a particular want or need (Bruner & Pomazal, 1992). As wants and needs are the operationalizations of goals (Zeithaml et al., 1993), and goals are the catalyst of willful consumer action (Gollwitzer & Moskowitz, 1996) it follows that the consumers' goal is to resolve a conflict in the pursuit of happiness (Bagozzi & Natarajan, 2000; Woodside, 2010). 'Identifying the physical, emotional, relational, or spiritual pain points that consumers experience helps craft stories with meaningful conflicts to elicit consumer action' (Avery, 2019, p. 6). The intensity of the conflict resolution in the brand story, additionally, can be linked to customer engagement, because story intensity leads to a higher state of arousal (Alwitt, 2002) and escalated motivation to cognitively process the story (Chiu et al., 2012; Fog et al., 2010).

Brand stories that highlight how a particular good or service serves as a tool to overcome challenge and reverse the plot toward customer satisfaction are particularly engaging when the consumer empathizes with the challenges faced by the story characters (Casebeer, 2008; Chiu et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2017). The clarity of weaving this message into the brand story plot is critical when the purpose is motivating consumer

action: 'A great plot with an insignificant message is mere entertainment and probably soon forgotten. A great message with a boring plot may never get the attention it needs to resonate' (Miller, 2017, p. 131).

### **Character: narrative theory**

Characters are the actors, human or human-like agents, and role-players within the story (Chiu et al., 2012; Deighton et al., 1989; Polletta et al., 2011). Stories must have at least one central character (Mandler & Johnson, 1977), the protagonist (Kniazeva & Belk, 2007; Polletta et al., 2011). It is often the protagonist that faces the largest challenge in the story, the solution to which is the catalyst for the plot reversal (Casebeer, 2008; Deighton et al., 1989). Pressure, or conflict, is a necessary element of the interaction between character and plot, because choices made in the absence of risk or consequence mean very little. 'The greater the pressure, the deeper the revelation, the truer the choice to the character's essential nature' (McKee, 1997, p. 101). Stories serve as vehicles for the listener/audience to empathize with the main character(s) (Chatman, 1980; Escalas & Stern, 2003; Polletta et al., 2011).

Each character in a story has both a persona and a personality. Persona is what most people first think of when the term 'character' is used. Persona refers to *who the character is* – a social role that imbues the individual with an identity that can be represented to and recognized by others (Jung, 1972; Perlman, 1986). Personality, on the other hand, refers to *what the character is like*, often discussed in terms of traits, responsible for 'individual differences in characteristic patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving' (Pervin, 2000, p. 100) or consistent patterns in individual behavior (John & Gosling, 2000).

There are seven archetypal characters that present universally across stories (Propp, 1968; see also: Do Rozario, 2004; Fell, 1977; Murphy, 2008): the hero, villain and heroine are the most common central characters, without whom the story could not exist. Peripheral characters like sidekicks, false heroes, and advisors (very often a magician or other type of wiser elder) add richness by supporting the central roles, as the plot unfolds. Not all characters are present in all stories, of course, and oftentimes a peripheral character may fill multiple roles.

### **Character: brand management and marketing theory**

Brand story characters are the actors, agents or role-players within the brand story that face and overcome challenges in the brand story. There are typically at least two characters in a brand story: the consumer and the brand itself. The brand is often personified by a human or human-like figure of some sort: spokespeople or 'spokes-characters' (Garretson & Niedrich, 2004; Neeley & Schumann, 2004; Ülger, 2008). While not perfectly parallel to Propp's character archetypes, a typology of twelve brand story characters is proposed by Mark and Pearson (2001; see also: Avery, 2019; Woodside et al., 2008):

- **Hero:** Brand helps exert mastery, become competent, and act courageously in order to prove one's worth and triumph over adversity, difficulty or challenge. (p.105–106)
- **Outlaw:** Brand seeks revenge or resolution by disrupting the status quo, fighting for virtues and principles, and breaking the rules. (p.123–124)
- **Explorer:** Brand helps on a journey to seek out a better world, escaping boredom and striving to experience a more authentic, fulfilling life. (p.71–21)



- **Ruler:** Brand takes and asserts control by gaining and maintaining power; leadership leads to prosperity. (p.244–246)
- **Sage:** Brand is a scholar or teacher that helps make smarter decisions through the pursuit of truth and the use of intelligence, research and analysis to understand the world. (p.88–90)
- **Innocent:** Brand promises a rescue from an imperfect world and a return to simpler, better times. Life should be simple, pure and good. (Mark & Pearson, 2001, p.53–54)
- **Regular Guy/Gal:** Brand reminds and assures that being ordinary can be virtuous. Blending in with the crowd and being ordinary means fitting in, belonging and connecting with others. (p.165–167)
- **Lover:** Brand promises beauty, appeal and sensual pleasure, as well as finding and giving love and intimacy. (p.178–181)
- **Jester:** Brand helps enjoy life, live in the moment, be oneself, have fun and be carefree. (p.196–197)
- **Magician:** Brand makes dreams come true by applying the laws of nature, often with exotic or ancient origins and rituals, to affect transformation. (p.140–142)
- **Caregiver:** Brand is altruistic, compassionate, caring and protective; moved by a desire to help others. (p.209–210)
- **Creator:** Brand enables self-expression and encourages imagination, gives form to vision, and prioritizes authenticity. (p.227–228)

The marketing lens implicitly puts either the brand or the consumer in the role of the protagonist, but not both simultaneously (Lundqvist et al., 2013; Prior, 2008). In the brand-as-protagonist perspective, the brand is the Hero, Outlaw, Explorer or Ruler, and the consumer plays a secondary role, leveraging the power of the brand. In the consumer-as-protagonist perspective, the brand as the Caregiver or Lover assumes a role reminiscent of the heroine; the brand as Regular Guy/Gal or Jester fills the role of the the sidekick; the brand as the Innocent, Creator Sage or Magician fulfills the role of the wise guide or advisor. In these brand-in-a-supporting-role scenarios, the purpose of the brand story is to communicate how the brand serves to enable the growth of the protagonist in the story – i.e. the consumer – helping them to overcome their problems and become better or happier. Similarly, the purpose of the brand story is also to communicate how choosing *not* to use the brand is a risk: ‘Audience members must also clearly understand what will happen to heroes if they don’t avail themselves of the assistance of the brand. Understanding the consequences of not buying is as important as seeing the proof that buying leads to successful goal achievement’ (Avery, 2019, p. 5).

### **Purpose: narrative theory**

The story is more than the text it comprises (Iser, 1972). In considering the cause and effect nature of plot as explicated by the climax and reversal, we see that stories inherently make a point (Polletta et al., 2011; Schank & Abelson, 1995) and intend for an ultimate meaning or message to be extracted, as in the moral of the story. Morals are the output variables of a story: the lesson the audience learns and remembers (Schank & Abelson, 1995). The larger takeaways from the story require reflection and interpretation on the part of the audience (Iser, 1972; Polletta, 2006; Polletta et al., 2011). In simple



stories like fairytales for children, the point of the story is revealed explicitly, often with the familiar conclusion (Polletta et al., 2011; Searle, 1975). In more complex stories, however, the meaning and core message are conveyed not *in* the text but *by* the text (Searle, 1975, p. 332; Jameson, 2001). Stories convey meaning via emotion, and the audience learns how to think and feel in a particular way by reading the text (Twitchell, 2004). 'A story expresses how and why life changes' (Woodside, 2010). The author creates the text, but the audience must realize the meaning (Iser, 1972).

The interplay of plot and character with purpose becomes elucidated when considering how familiarity and clarity enable the communication of meaning from author to audience. If extracting the meaning from stories depends on the audience's interpretation of the text (Fishbein & Yzer, 2003; Polletta, 2006; van Laer et al., 2014), then the more normative the indices like character and plot, the more authentic the story seems, and the more accessible and resonant the core message becomes (MacIntyre, 1984; Ochs & Capps, 2002; Polletta et al., 2011).

### ***Purpose: brand management and marketing theory***

The narrative theory conceptualization of moral leaves much to chance: there is a risk that the audience may miss the point, or not fully grasp the intended meaning or message of the story. Brand stories must provide takeaways for the customer as tangible outcomes conveying how using the brand can improve the consumer's life. Brand stories are designed to motivate action, to drive customer traffic and/or sales. If the brand story is to motivate action, rather than simply teach a lesson, brand managers cannot afford to leave the transmission of the moral of the story to chance. In curating brand management theory, however, we must shift control over understanding the story's message back to the marketer as much as possible; for hope is an inferior strategy. Thus, we use the term *purpose* rather than *moral* to articulate this third element of the brand story. We define the brand story purpose as the intended consumer outcome conveyed explicitly or implicitly by the brand story.

The brand is the reputation of the organization (Bloomberg, 2004) and the customer-facing narrative attached to its products and services (Twitchell, 2004), so the brand must be effectively communicated through the story. Brand stories can be engineered to be more easily understood by the target audience by including recognizable and relevant indices that can include plot, character, and a host of other recognizable places, products, people, things and scenarios that can be mapped onto existing knowledge about the world. The greater the marketer's insights into the psychographic profile of their target customer group the more effective their brand stories.

There are two mechanisms that aid in the reception of a brand story by the consumer: it must be perceived as authentic, and it must evoke emotion (Mills & Robson, 2019). Authenticity is the degree to which consumers are confident in accepting the truthfulness of a brand story, and the ultimate believability of a brand story (Beltrami, 1982). Authenticity is a subjective perception and evaluation that occurs in the domain of the audience (Lewis & Bridger, 2001). Chiu et al. (2012, p. 265) define authenticity as 'a sense that readers obtain from material that makes them believe and associate the story with reality,' and note that indices serve as the 'cues' by which readers evaluate the authenticity of a story. 'Modern marketing creates tension between authenticity and inauthenticity for consumers' (Chiu et al., 2012, p. 265) and thus the perception of authenticity is of utmost importance to the brand story (Brown et al., 2003; Guber, 2007; Lundqvist et al., 2013).

The second component of brand stories that enables narrative reception is emotional arousal (Mossberg, 2008; Spear & Roper, 2013; Woodside et al., 2008). Brands offer a means of personal expression as symbols for consumers to tell their own stories. Through an alignment of the brand story with the consumer's own story, products help or enable the consumer communicate their own values and stories (Fog et al., 2010). 'A strong brand is a combination of facts and emotions. We rationalize and legitimize with our brains, but we buy with our hearts' (Fog et al., 2010, p. 22). Brand stories convey meaning via emotion, and the consumer learns how to think and feel in a particular way by reading the branded story (Twitchell, 2004). Consumers process messages, including brand stories, at deeper levels that can influence attitude formation when they become emotionally involved and immersed in the story (Jameson, 2001; Jensen, 2001; Mossberg, 2008; see also Malär et al., 2011).

We now propose our comprehensive model incorporating all three elements in brand stories to guide the managerial practice of brand storytelling.

### **A theoretical model of brand stories**

At the core of scientific inquiry, descriptions and explanations of phenomena are achieved through classifications, models and theories (Hunt, 1983). With the purpose of representing the brand in a meaningful way to consumers we have defined the brand story as a strategic brand narrative comprising critical elements of plot and character, each with core sub-elements, as shown in Figure 2.

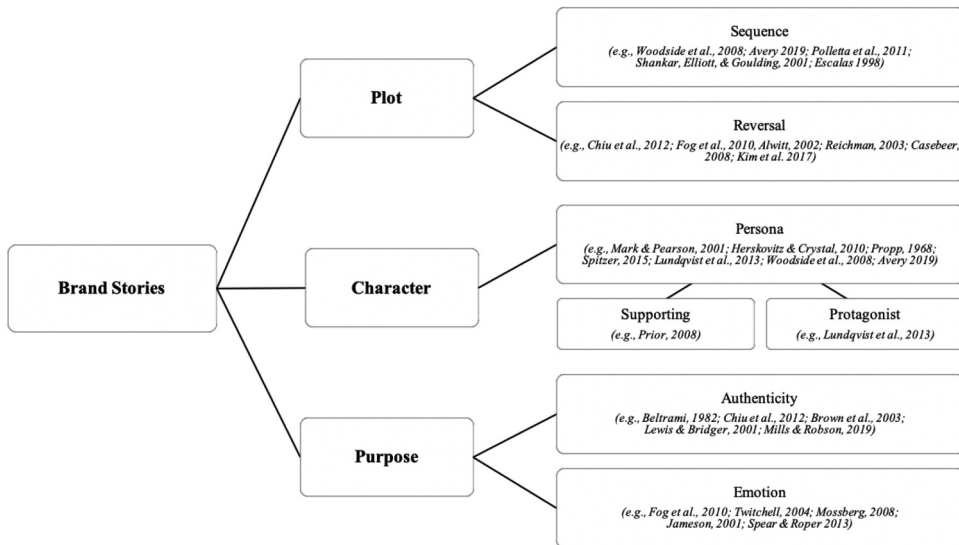
The *brand story plot* is a structured unfolding of actions or events that evolves in a sequential manner suggesting a benefit from the use of the brand. Plot considers both the sequential ordering of events with the purpose of illuminating a cause-and-effect relationship, and the 'reversal' of a suboptimal state (desire, want, or need) into a more optimal state, as a result of overcoming conflict, solving a problem, or satisfying a desire.

The *brand story characters* are the actors, agents or role-players within the brand story that face and overcome challenges in the brand story. Each character in the story has an archetypal persona, and either the consumer or the brand can be the central character in the brand story. Each character also has a personality, or set of recognizable and consistent patterns of behavior and conduct.

The *brand story purpose* is the intended consumer outcome conveyed explicitly or implicitly by the brand story. Brand stories are crafted with the explicit purpose of conveying a core message to the consumer. The more receptive the consumer is to the story, the more effectively the brand story can serve its purpose. Two key elements of the brand story that encourage customer reception are authenticity and emotional involvement.

### **Brand story theory building: future research directions**

Our contribution to the marketing strategy literature is first, to propose a definition of the brand story construct, and second, to offer a theoretical framework that provides a systematic guide for future research into brand storytelling from a strategic perspective. We use the structural elements of plot, character and purpose to suggest avenues for exploration of theoretical relationships in our model.



**Figure 2.** A theoretical model of brand stories.

Within the action-valence framework, how does the sequence of problem-recognition to conflict resolution affect the effectiveness of the brand story on consumer perceptions of the brand? What is the relationship between degree of arousal leading up to plot reversal to the customer identification with the final stasis of the story as a desirable state? How do the seven basic plots of Booker (2005) as universal storyline archetypes in narrative theory transfer to brand management? Brand theory proclaims that consumer perceptions are more important than reality (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990) and thus the effectiveness of a brand story to shape such perceptions are critical. A portfolio of brand story plot archetypes presents an ideal place for classification research studies to examine appropriateness of a type of plot to intended brand image.

If brands have a recognizable personality (J. Aaker, 1997; Briggs, 1992; Plummer, 1985; Randazzo, 2006) the brand can be used as a character in a story (Kniazeva & Belk, 2010; Prior, 2008). Brand personality defined as ‘the set of human characteristics associated with a brand’ (J. Aaker, 1997, p. 347) is arguably critical in creating an emotional connection with the consumer and the brand story character (Randazzo, 2006). Future research to explore the interplay of brand personality and brand persona in the realm brand story-telling and management will be fruitful. The influence of brand story characters’ persona and personality on brand image can be studied to determine the normative and prescriptive approaches in brand story design. A review of the extant studies on relationships between product spokespersons or celebrity endorsers may present opportunities for follow up studies as well.

Articulating the degree to which the brand adds value to the consumer’s life is the goal of the brand story, and the associations of the brand with solutions to problems, wants or needs are central to brand strategy and positioning (Persson, 2010). How well the brand story works as a tool to create, shape or reshape a brand may be underscored by the authenticity and emotional involvement concepts (Beverland, 2005): Do these concepts play mediating or moderating roles? What variation in impact might the levels of each

concept (authenticity and emotional involvement) have on consumer perceptions about the brand? How does the construction of plot influence the efficacy of authenticity and emotion (e.g. Chen et al., 2014) in portraying the goal of the brand’s narrative?

As we have drawn from narrative theory to provide a structure to storytelling in brand management, it seems a logical next step to add to brand *image* management as an avenue to for theory development (e.g. van der Merwe et al., 2007). Brand image is a key driver of competitive differentiation and brand positioning (Kumaravel & Kandasarny, 2012), and an important factor that affects purchase decisions (Keller, 2001) with related concepts of brand awareness, brand attitude, consumer-brand attachment and brand equity (Ansary & Hashim, 2017). The management of brand image requires consideration of functional, symbolic and experiential elements (Park et al., 1986), and our model of brand stories is a framework to map the concepts and relationships to direct the study of how brand stories can be better designed to produce the intended brand image across all three elements (functional, symbolic, and experiential) of the brand image. Based on Figure 3, below, we envision research to confirm the explanatory power of our brand stories model.

Each concept in our model can be seen as mediating variables in the relationship (gap) between: the brand manager’s intended brand image versus what actually results as the brand image perceived by the individual consumer (Malär et al., 2012). We also see research opportunities examining the mediating or moderating variables in the impact of antecedents of brand image on brand performance. In general, all of the research on antecedents of brand image in the realm of advertising or other marketer-controlled communication mechanisms will present opportunities for research using any of the concepts in our brand story model. These antecedents range from the consumer’s prior brand attitude (e.g. brand story indices alignment with consumer’s past experience), credibility of brand communications (authenticity), to multidimensional brand image.

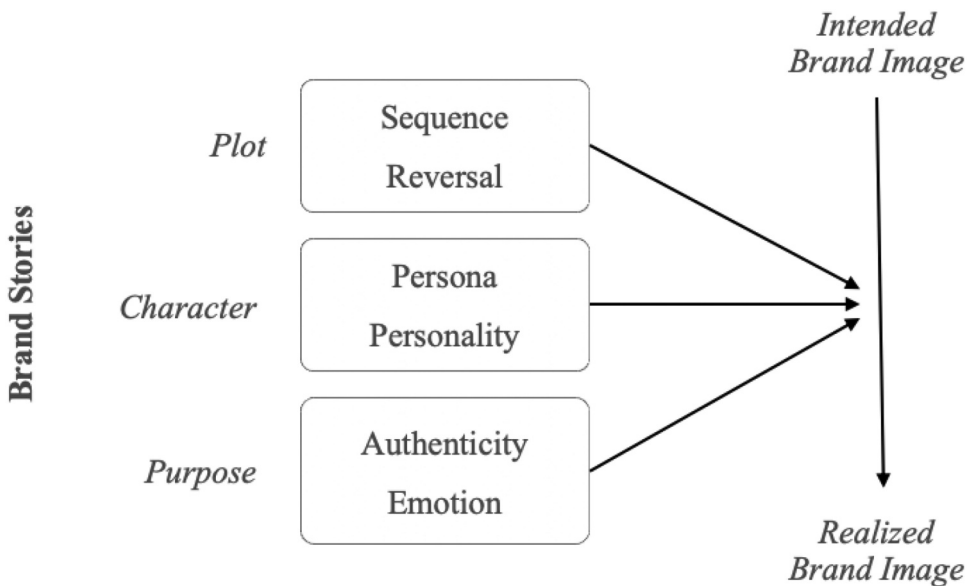


Figure 3. Conceptual map for brand story theory building.

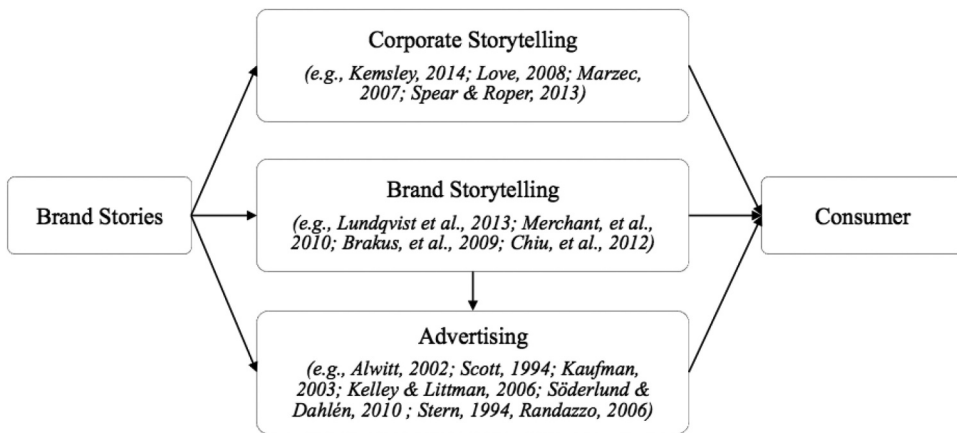
## Managerial implications

Brand stories are superior to other forms of marketing communications for creating, changing, and maintaining brand associations, beliefs, and attitudes. In today's world, where attention is scarce brands that are able to tell compelling stories can break through the clutter and create engagement (Avery, 2019; Teixeira et al., 2014). Our day-to-day exposure and involvement in social media can overwhelm the intended brand message of the marketer. Social media specialists in firms preemptively participate in preventing an unfavorable, misguided or unfair consumer story or take advantage of favorable brand stories being shared by the consumer on social media. There are other opportunities from direct consumer communications from consumers to the marketers that can be structured in the form of brand stories as a routine effort in brand management. CMOs are taking more control of the narrative on their brands. Our model provides a general working framework to understand what brand story is and how to leverage the power of brand stories when used proactively in brand management practice.

## Model limitations and additional future research directions

As marketers, a significant proportion of what we do is storytelling conceptualized as either inbound or outbound storytelling. *Inbound* storytelling finds the point of origin of the marketing story with the consumer, and the marketer's job is to find, capture, understand and leverage the story for firm. Inbound marketing storytelling is the realm of consumer research and applied marketing research. *Outbound* storytelling finds the point of origin of the marketing story within the firm, and the marketer's job is to disseminate the story to the consumer. Outbound storytelling is the realm of strategy, and where we locate this current work. As we noted at the outset, we have delimited our paper to brand storytelling quite specifically excluding at least two other forms of outbound storytelling in marketing: corporate storytelling and advertising, as explicated in Figure 4. As our model does not address either of these applications, they are inherently limitations of our model until we are able to, in the future, discuss how this model of brand storytelling may or may not be a useful to these other applications.

The goal of corporate storytelling is to 'help demonstrate the importance of the corporate brand to internal and external stakeholders, and create a position for the company against competitors, as well as help a firm to bond with its employees' (Spear & Roper, 2013, p. 491; see also, Roper & Fill, 2012). In many cases, this corporate storytelling focuses on the internal customer rather than the external one, and storytelling is operationalized as a tactical 'technique' for packaging the corporate message and brand values for employees (Love, 2008, p. 24). Successful corporate stories draw on firm history and organizational memory to provide 'ideas about where the firm is heading in the future, and illustrate compelling characters (e.g. brands)' (Baker et al., 2014, p. 653). Evidenced here by the use of the product or service brand construct as a character in the larger corporate or firm brand story, from these definitions of corporate storytelling, we see that the perspective of narration and depiction (Genette, 1980) is invoked at the corporate level, rather than at the individual consumer product level. Evidence from the strategic leadership literature suggests that there may be parallels to our proposed theory of brand storytelling to how the



**Figure 4.** Three perspectives of outbound marketing storytelling.

specific purpose or objective of the story is framed. Denning (2006), for example, articulates eight distinct objectives of leadership storytelling in organizations.

Storytelling is often invoked in advertising theory (Alwitt, 2002; Scott, 1994)(Kim et al., 2017; Lundqvist et al., 2013; Stern, 1994), often to great positive effect (Kaufman, 2003; Kelley & Littman, 2006; Mills & Robson, 2019; Söderlund & Dahlén, 2010), but advertising and storytelling are not synonymous. While advertising can and frequently does *use* or *contain* brand stories, it is not a requisite element: not all advertising uses stories (Avery, 2019).

## Conclusion

Although brand storytelling has become increasingly prevalent in the popular press, the majority of scholarly research on brand storytelling in marketing focuses on the consumer and the stories they tell about brands. Firms also tell stories about their brands, and, so the understanding of what that story is, and how and why it is told by the firm, is of equal significance. However, despite numerous calls-to-action for marketers to focus on storytelling as a strategic practice (e.g. Kapferer, 2008; Keller, 2003; Lundqvist et al., 2013), marketing strategy research in this area is notably thin compared to consumer research.

This paper has addressed this gap of brand storytelling research in marketing strategy. Focused on the domain of brand management, we explicated the concepts of story and storytelling from narrative theory and applied it to brand management theory. We identified the three key elements in structuring (brand) stories – plot, character and purpose, presenting these elements as used in narrative theory and showing their application to brand management theory. We presented a definition of brand story and a comprehensive model of brand storytelling, with the intention of laying a conceptual foundation for future theory-building in brand management. We concluded with limitations of the model and scope, and suggested future directions for theory development. Our definition of the brand story construct and theoretical framework provide a systematic guide for future research into brand storytelling, and show how brand storytelling can be integrated into marketing strategy and practice.

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