Storytelling and Brand Attitude: The Role of Consumers' Level of Involvement and Available Time

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Abstract

Storytelling is a powerful tool in which brands communicate their story to build a relationship with a consumer. Some research has been done regarding the effects of a brand story on consumers' attitude towards the brand. However, the assumption being made here, is that consumers are involved with the story and have time to elaborate on it. According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model, these are two important factors to become persuaded. In practice, consumers are exposed to thousands of advertising messages and will not extensively process all the messages. Therefore, consumers' level of involvement and available time need to be taken into account when explaining the effect of a brand story on brand attitude. No research has examined these factors in the context of storytelling yet. A total of 159 consumers participated in the research. Participants were randomly divided among 5 conditions: high involvement/no time restriction, high involvement/time restriction, low involvement/no time restriction, low involvement/ time restriction and a control group. They received different instruction letters, and were asked to read a story about a sock brand "Alfredo Gonzales". Afterwards, questions followed that assessed consumers' attitude towards the brand. The results showed that differences in brand attitude between conditions exist. High involved consumers who have time available are more positive towards the brand after reading the story than consumers that lack motivation and/or time. For lowly involved consumers, factual information about the brand is equally effective. Furthermore, the level of involvement moderates the effect of time on brand attitude. The more involved the consumer is, the more important it is that they have time to elaborate on the brand story.

Keywords: *Storytelling, Consumer Involvement, Time, Brand Attitude*

1. Introduction

Every brand has a story and nowadays, companies acknowledge the value of communicating their story (Merchant, Ford, & Sargeant, 2010; Mossberg, 2008). Storytelling is used to bring a brand to life, giving them a perspective and personality. In the academic literature there is a strong belief in the benefits of storytelling in branding (Lundqvist, Liljander, Gummerus, & van Riel, 2012). Storytelling is also seen as a way to differentiate a brand from competitors and to connect with consumers.

In a recent study, Lundqvist et al. (2012) investigated how a brand story influences consumers' brand experience, and learned that consumers who were exposed to a story described the brand in much more positive terms. Mossberg (2008) found that certain settings are more suitable for a consumer to become transported into a story and to have an extraordinary experience.

Most brand story research investigates consumer experiences, but the academic research into the actual effects on the consumer's attitude is limited. These two brand concepts are closely related, but not identical. Moreover, in past research, the assumption is made that consumers are involved with the story and have time to elaborate on it (Lundqvist et al., 2012). These are, according to the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), two important factors to become persuaded. This well-known theory explains that an individual will only process a message at a deeper level and change their attitude, when they are involved and have the ability to do so. In addition, Mossberg (2008) proposes that involvement is an important facilitator for a consumer to be immersed in the story. In practice, consumers do not always have the opportunity to elaborate on a message. In daily life, they are exposed to thousands of advertising messages and they cannot and/or will not extensively process all of them. Time is restricted and not every message is personally relevant. When explaining the actual effect of a brand story on brand attitude, these factors need be taken into account. Yet, there is no research that examines consumers' level of

involvement and available time in the context of storytelling. Therefore, this research will contribute to the current knowledge of storytelling by investigating whether the effect of a brand story is dependent on the situation of the consumer. This leads to the following research question:

RQ: "How does consumers' level of involvement and available time affect the relationship between a brand story and the attitude towards the brand?"

By answering this research question, the study contributes to brand management research and practice by demonstrating the power of storytelling on consumer response. More specifically, it investigates the applicability of two factors of the Elaboration Likelihood Model in the context of storytelling. It examines if storytelling is equally effective across different situations.

This research is also important for practitioners because it demonstrates how brand stories can be used to affect consumers' attitude towards the brand. With the explosive growth of social media and content marketing, the opportunities to tell a story increase. This means that consumers are exposed to an overload information, and have to make choices regarding on which messages to elaborate. The role of consumers' level of involvement and available time in processing a brand story is therefore also an important issue for marketers and brand managers.

2. Theoretical Discussion and Hypotheses

Bennet and Royle (2004, p. 55) defined stories as 'a series of events in a specific order, with a beginning, a middle and an end'. Stories and storytelling help us to make sense of our lives (Shankar et al., 2001). We need stories to create meaning, to understand what goes on and to manage our relationships. From the moment we are born, our parents begin to tell us stories and we become familiar with understanding the narrative form. A story answers questions like who, what, why, when and how. It is comprised of a theme and often conveys a deeper meaning. A life without storytelling is hard to imagine, whether listening to, or watching, reading and telling them.

Stories are more easily remembered than facts (Lundqvist et al., 2012). This is because the human memory is story-based: information is indexed, stored and retrieved in the form of stories. When we experience something new, we connect the information to existing information in our mind. Our brain prefers to believe that there are connections between the things that it sees, because that makes it easier to interpret the bigger picture. In general, people create stories to organize their experience, create order, explain unusual events and make evaluations (Escalas, 2004; Green et al., 2004; Green & Brock, 2000, Van Laer, 2012).

Although a lot has been written about effect of a brand story on consumer experience, little empirical evidence exists of their effect on the attitude of the consumer. Brand attitude as 'general evaluative judgments about the brand (e.g. "I like this brand") based on beliefs or affective reactions.

An indicator for brand attitude might be the attitude towards the brand story itself. Brand attitudes may be affected by consumers' attitude towards the advertisement itself. Attitude toward the ad is defined as a "pre-disposition to respond in a favorable or unfavorable manner to a particular advertising stimulus during a particular exposure occasion". Although consumers do not recognize a brand story as a typical advertisement, it is indeed a way to advertise (Simmons, 2006). It is used as part of the company's corporate branding strategy and as sales promotional tool (Fog, 2010).

To become transported and adjust beliefs or attitudes, it is essential that consumers are involved with the message content. They have to find the message personally relevant and/or important. The relationship between involvement and consumers' reaction to persuasive communication has been studied extensively by researchers. A well-known theory that is used in this context is the Elaboration Likelihood Model, or ELM. It is a model that explains attitude change and the effectiveness of persuasive communications. With "elaboration" the authors mean to what extent a consumer thinks about the relevant arguments in the message. The elaboration likelihood is said to be high when consumers process the message on a deeper level.

In daily life, consumers are exposed to thousands of advertising messages and it is not possible to extensively process all these messages. The Elaboration Likelihood Model distinguishes two ways in which a consumer can process a message: central route processing or peripheral route processing. For the message to be centrally processed, a consumer must have the opportunity (depending on i.e. time availability) and they must be involved with the message. When employing a brand-processing strategy, a consumer is motivated to elaborate on the relevant arguments in a message. It is likely that the consumer will follow the central route and this can lead to a permanent change in their attitude.

In situations where consumers are not motivated to process a message, it is more likely that they take the peripheral route. Here, peripheral

cues play a role in attitude formation. This is a simple cue, like attractiveness or credibility of the speaker that affects attitudes in the absence of argument processing. Permanent attitude change in this situation is less common because consumers base their beliefs on other things than the relevant arguments. Although the level of involvement is the first step towards the central route, a person must also have the ability to think about the message.

The level of involvement and available time, are important ingredients to become transported and to change or adjust attitude or beliefs regarding a brand. A consumer will only be transported into the story and follow the central route to persuasion when they are involved and have the ability to process the message. The effect of a brand story on brand attitude is therefore expected to be highest for high involved individuals with no time restriction, and is expected to be least for low involved individuals with a time restriction.

H1a: High involved consumers who have time available are more positive towards the brand after reading the story than consumers that lack involvement and/or time.

H1b: For low involved consumers that are restricted in time, factual information about the brand is equally effective as a brand story.

The elaboration likelihood depends on the level of involvement and ability. In some situations, the involvement with the message is high whilst the ability is low, and vice versa. In situations where both the involvement and ability are high, it is likely that consumers follow the central route and change or adjust their attitude towards the brand permanently. It is expected that the interaction of these two factors affects the persuasiveness of a brand story.

H2: The interaction between consumers' level of involvement and available time affects the relationship between a brand story and attitude towards the brand.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this research is to examine the effect of a brand story on brand attitude, and the possible moderating role of consumers' level of involvement and available time. A 2x2 between subjects experimental design was applied to investigate the effect of a brand story on brand attitude. Two factors are manipulated (involvement and time), with two levels of each variable (high/low involvement and time restriction/no time restriction). This leads to four experimental conditions plus one control group.

The sample in this study consists of random

consumers. A total of 159 participants between the age of 16 and 59 ($M= 27.22$, $SD= 9.27$) completed the questionnaire. The majority (61%) of the participants was between 20 and 30 years old, which is the target group of the brand that was used as stimulus material. The group consisted of 74 men (46,5%) and 85 women (53,3%). Of all participants, 4,4% has had a low-level education (i.e. high school), 20,8% has an average educational level (i.e. vocational school) and 74,8% of the participants was highly educated (i.e. bachelor degree or higher). The participants are more or less equally distributed across the five conditions.

Participants in both the control group and experimental conditions were exposed to the same introductory page that informed the participants about the research. The lay-out of another faculty (Social and Behavioral Sciences) is used for the questionnaire to distract the participants from the goal of the research. In the high involvement, no time restriction condition, participants were asked to carefully evaluate the brand and to imagine that they are considering buying the product (brand processing strategy). Instructions were given to elaborate on the content, and to read the story from beginning to end. In the high involvement, time restriction condition, participants also received instructions to evaluate the brand, however pointing out that they had only 60 seconds to do this. They were instructed to scan through the information to obtain a general view of the brand. In the low involvement, no time restriction condition, participants were given general reading instructions and they were told to focus on the overall writing style and readability (non-brand processing strategy). Nothing was said about timing. In the low involvement, time restriction condition it was pointed out that participants are automatically forwarded to the questions after 60 seconds. In the control group, participants received instructions to evaluate the brand based on some facts and pictures. These facts were also communicated in the brand story. The same pictures were used and no story or customer timer was set.
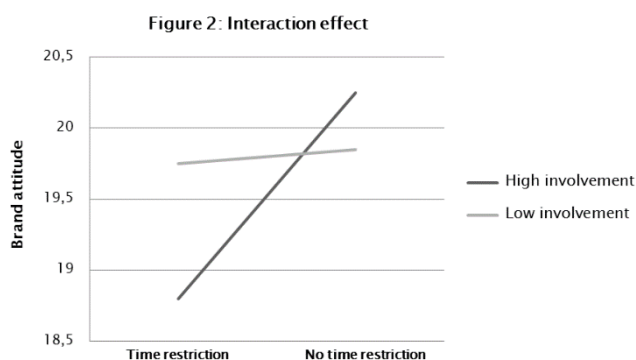
4. Results

When comparing the average scores on brand attitude across the different conditions (Figure 1), it is clear that participants in condition 1 report more

Figure 1: Average scores on brand attitude across conditions
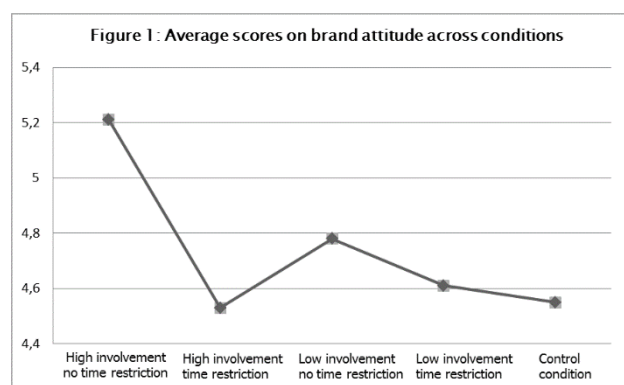
positive brand attitude ($M= 5.21$, $SD= 0.69$) than participants in all other four conditions.

Hypothesis 1a stated that the effectiveness of a brand story is dependent on a consumer's situation: high-involved consumers who have time available are more positive towards the brand after reading the story than consumers that lack motivation and/or time. Furthermore, it was hypothesized (1b) that low involved consumers that had to deal with a time limitation (condition 4), are equally positive towards the brand as participants exposed to factual information (control condition). A one-way ANOVA was conducted to determine if brand attitude significantly differed across conditions. Participants in the *high involvement, no time restriction* condition are more positive towards the brand than participants in the other three experimental conditions and the control group, F (4, 154=2.461; p <.048). Consumers are the most positive towards the brand if they have time and are involved with the message. Consumers that do have time, but are lowly involved, are less positive ($M= 4.77$, $SD= 0.93$) about the brand (t (57) = .280, p = .043). Low involved consumers that have no time to read the story, are equally positive about the brand as consumers that were exposed to factual information (t (68) = .204, p = .839). Hypotheses 1a and 1b are therefore accepted, and this implies that the effectiveness of a brand story is, to some extent, dependent on the situation of the consumer.

Figure 2 illustrates that the level of involvement moderates the effect of time on brand

Figure 2: Interaction effect

attitude. The more involved the consumer is, the more important it is that they have time to elaborate on the message. This corresponds to the result that was explained earlier: consumers are most positive about a brand if they have time and are involved with the message. For highly involved consumers, a time restriction can work negatively. They are motivated and are willing to read the story, but are not able to pay the desired attention due to the time limitation. Elaboration on qualitative arguments is suppressed and the effectiveness of the brand story

actually backfires. It results in a more negative attitude towards the brand. This means that hypothesis 2 ("The interaction between consumers' level of involvement and time affects the relationship between a brand story and attitude towards the brand) is supported under a significance level of $p = 0.05$. The full results can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1 Full Analysis Results

Variable	B	SE $_\beta$	β
Intercept	2.506	.527	
Gender	.228	.125	.123**
Age	-.018	.007	-.180*
Attd to storytelling	-.016	.065	-.017
Attd to the story	.451	.057	.586**
Involvement	.132	.069	.121*
Time restriction	.141	.112	.077
Involvement*Time	.408	.239	.111*

5. Discussion

This study investigates the applicability of the Elaboration Likelihood Model in the context of storytelling. Two factors of this theory are being studied: involvement with the message, and the ability to process the message. The interaction between these two variables affects the relationship between a brand story and attitude towards the brand, under a significance level of p = 0.10. Highly involved individuals that are able to process the message, follow the central route to persuasion and this results in a more positive attitude. An important finding is that available time is more important for highly involved individuals. The Elaboration Likelihood Model advocates that the level of involvement is the first step towards central route processing. This is in line with the findings of this study. Only when individuals are highly involved, ability (i.e. time availability) becomes an important factor. A low involved consumer will not be more positive about the brand if they are given more time to elaborate on the content.

Storytelling is embraced by practitioners, but they must be warned against being too optimistic regarding the effects of a brand story. There are only few studies that show what kind of story works well and when. Based on the findings of this study, it seems that factual information is equally effective. This could be because of the particular story of product category (socks) used. It might be that storytelling does not work equally well for all types of products and price ranges. Before spending a significant amount of the marketing budget on

storytelling, marketers and brand managers should therefore investigate if their brand fits storytelling.

If that is the case, practitioners should think about what to communicate in their story and how to present it. It requires experience and expertise to construct a compelling story, and consumers' attitude towards that story is an important indicator for their respective attitude towards the brand advertised. What has been shown in this study, is that consumers exposed to a brand story perceive the brand as more expensive than consumers exposed to factual information. This may be the intention if a brand is a premium and luxurious good, but might be a drawback if it sells functional, utilitarian goods. Ultimately, it is about selling and therefore it is important to think about the image a company wants to create in the mind of the consumer. Besides that, it is essential for practitioners to take the situation of the consumer into account. It is important for highly involved consumers that they have time to elaborate on the brand story. A brand manager needs to facilitate this. They cannot isolate a consumer from other advertising messages, but they can present the brand story in a manageable way. For example by presenting the brand's history through an infographic.

This research has some limitations, some of which lead to suggestions for further research. Some caution should be taken when transferring the results of this study to other types of stories. Although participants generally liked the story and the brand, only 31% indicates to buy the brand in the future. Participants agreed that €10 is too expensive for one pair of socks, and the common answer was that it is not a product to make a statement with. 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. Further research should investigate if storytelling only suits symbolic goods, or also functional goods.

Finally, the method used has some limitations. The downside of performing an experiment within an online survey is that only the assumption can be made that participants follow the instructions explained in the cover letter. A custom timer was set to make sure that participants in the time restriction conditions were automatically forwarded to the questions after 60 seconds. For participants in the no restriction conditions, it was possible to proceed to the questions after 90 seconds, to make sure that they were exposed to the story for a longer period. The question remains if participants used the time to actually read the story. This can only be assured within a face-to-face experiment.

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