

# ANALYSING ICONIC CONSUMER BRAND WEBLOGS

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## Abstract

The stories consumers report and tell in which they use brands as props or anthropomorphic actors increasingly form a key part of personal and community Weblogs. These stories are drama enactments enabling the storytellers to experience powerful myths. The brand stories consumers tell on purchasing-consumption requires a protagonist consumer to experience an “inciting incident” (McKee 2003) that focuses her attention and results in action in response to this incident. Since stories help to make sense of the world around us it is not surprising that consumer storytelling about brands extends beyond highly risky consumption acts to the more mundane and improvisational presentations of self (to self and others) in everyday life.

With an understanding of the structure of the brand stories consumers report and tell on Weblogs this study compares the application of semantic analysis software (Smith 2000) automating the text analysis with a manual interpretation involving the human mind using Heider’s balance theory to examine the stories consumers report about two well known clothing brands in naturally occurring contexts on Weblogs. Taking this approach, one can gain insights in determining if market researchers can automatically process Weblogs to obtain brand story abstractions.

## STORIES ICONIC BRANDS TELL

Holt (2003) proposes that some brands become icons. These iconic brands permit consumers to experience powerful myths consciously or unconsciously. Myths are simple stories with compelling characters and resonant plots; myths help consumers make sense of the world. “Myths provide ideals to live by, and they work to resolve life’s most vexing questions. Icons are encapsulated myths. They [icons] are powerful because they deliver myths to us in a tangible form, thereby making them more accessible” (Holt 2003, p. 44).

The most successful icons rely on an intimate and credible relationship with a rebel world: Nike with the African-American ghetto, Harley with outlaw bikers, Volkswagen with bohemian artists, Apple with cyberpunks. (Holt 2003, p. 44)

Examining an unsolicited self-reported (emic) story, Woodside and Chebat (2001) apply Heider’s balance and change theories in examining how a Jewish couple consciously copes with automatic-unconscious retrievals of Nazism and the Holocaust when considering the purchase of a German car (cf. Holt 2002). The work of several other scholars in consumer behavior (e.g., Adaval & Wyer 1988; Arnold & Wallendorf 1994; Hirschman 1986; Holt & Thompson 2004; Padgett & Allen 1997) and in related fields of human inquiry (Bruner 1990; Mitroff & Kilman 1976; Orr 1990; Shank & Ableson 1977; Zukier 1986) support the view that, “...people think narratively rather than argumentatively or paradigmatically” (cf. Weick 1995, p. 127; Wells 1980). Research on storytelling (e.g., see Arnould & Wallendorf 1994; Fournier 1998; McKee 2003; Shank 1990; Zaltman 2003) is useful because it helps clarify and deepen knowledge of how people resolve paradoxes triggered in their minds by unbalanced states (ranging from a vague conscious feeling of unease to awareness of a problem or opportunity arising from an inciting incident). Learning stories enables the researcher to examine the complexity often associating with initial balanced states (e.g., the personal prequel history of the protagonist and supporting actors in a story that affects how consumers interpret the situation in which an inciting incident occurs) that lead to imbalance and the steps taken (consciously and unconsciously—see Wegner 2002) to achieve old or new balance states.

A good storyteller describes what it’s like to deal with these opposing forces, calling on the protagonist to dig deeper, work with scarce resources, make difficult decisions, take action despite risks, and ultimately discover the truth” (McKee 2003, p. 52).

This paper examines case study data to probe the nature of stories about brands found on Weblogs using semantic analysis software as well as the human mind.

## CONSUMER STORYTELLING THEORY

Consumer storytelling theory builds on several related streams of theory and research including Holt and Thompson’s (2004) view that dramatic consumption experiences must be scripted, either by experiential service providers or within the institutional structure of a

consumer subculture. Thus, the structure of a word of mouth (WOM) communication is an important indicator of whether or not the message is a story.

A story's structure includes two important elements: chronology and causality (Delgado & Escales 2004). Regarding chronology, narrative thought organizes events in terms of a temporal dimension: action occurs over time. Time figures in narrative format as episodes (e.g., scenes within acts in a drama); each episode has a beginning, middle, and end, whereas time in reality is an undifferentiated continuous flow (Bruner 1990; Escales 1998; Polkinghorne 1991). "Second, narrative thought structures elements [scenes, action, talk, and acts] into an organized framework that establishes relationships between the story's elements [e.g., actors including persons, products, and brands, see Fournier 1998] and allows for causal inferencing" (Delgado & Escales 2004, p. 187). Escales (1998) provides a narrative structure coding scale that reflects her assessment of the literature (see Bruner 1990 and Gergen & Gergen 1988) on what makes for a "good," or well-crafted, story. Bruner (1990) proposes two dimensions that relate to crafting a good story: the landscape of action and the landscape of consciousness.

Consumer psychology and psychoanalytic research on brands as anthropomorphic identities, archetypes, and brands as icons (see Fournier 1998; Hirschman 2000; Holt 2003, 2005; Rapaille 2004) informs consumer storytelling theory. For example, a consumer and brand may be bound in a kinship relationship by automatic (unconscious triggering) of inheriting brand use from the consumer's mother; Fournier (1998) describes 15 consumer-brand relationship forms including arranged marriages, kinships, flings, secret affairs, enslavements, courtships, and others). Jung (1916/1959, p. 101) defines archetypes as "forms or images of a collective nature which occur practically all over the earth as constituents of myth and at the same time as autochthonous [biologically-based unconscious thinking] individual products of unconscious origin. Campbell (1968, 1974) argues that most archetypal forms originated in Sumer and Akkad around 2500 B.C. Without referring to earlier work by Jung, Campbell, or Hirschman, Holt (2003) interprets storytelling in television commercials as manifestations of archetypes. Holt and Thompson (2004, p. 425) advance such archetypal analysis in their analysis of two consumers' self stories; Holt and Thompson propose through their analysis that "American mass culture idealizes the man-of-action hero—an idealized model of manhood that resolves the inherent weaknesses in two other prominent models (the breadwinner and the rebel)—what we call the ideology of heroic masculinity—to construct themselves in dramatic fashion as man-of-action heroes." (Hunt (1993) criticizes Holt's (1991) prior argument that such interpretative research should not be subject to audits, triangulation, and purposive sampling but that they should be judged on their insightfulness "and their ability to convince the reader, no more." Hunt tellingly differs to this view, nevertheless, the

interpretations by Holt (2003) and Holt and Thompson (2004) are convincing.)

## METHOD

Based on the scarcity of research on the analysis of consumer self-storytelling (relative to consumer attitude research), our intention is that an examination of consumer stories told on Weblogs forms the foundation for developing a nascent stream of research work to help determine the efficiency and effectiveness of the automatic analysis of Weblogs. This report probes only the one set of consumer storytelling propositions. The set of consumer storytelling propositions convert into a degrees-of-freedom instrument for assessing how well a specific Weblog communication matches with the storytelling paradigm. This instrument can be used to automatically pre-screen Weblogs into those worthy of further analysis for brand relating content. Flogs (fake blogs) contrived to maximise brand appeal crafted by advertisers or brand managers but not consumers are unlikely to screen positively to the instrument. For this paper the method used for collecting consumer-generated communications includes doing Google searches for brands for which some consumers experience high emotion during purchase or use—brands-experiences for which archetypal myths are readily identifiable: Versace and buying/wearing a coat, and Tommy Hilfiger and wearing jeans. Versace is the luxury brand of clothing and other products and services (e.g., hotels) that often uses ads showing a "superhero corporate titan closing deals with her mental acumen and intoxicating men with her overt eroticism," for instance, Madonna wears brightly colored, hypersexy daywear while playing corporate executive (Givhan 2005). "Wearing Hilfiger represents youthful success and the state of "cool" being" (Rsingh 2005). The Google searches for consumer communications included entering the brand name and "blog" for each of the two brands. For each brand the first entry returned from the search that was found not to include advertisements or obvious brand sponsorship was selected for analysis. Certainly, this search method for brands and blogs conjunctions is not an attempt to achieve representative sampling; the approach is an example of theoretical sampling to learn if at least some written communications among consumers in a naturally occurring environment matches with one model of consumer storytelling theory and therefore analysed semantically. Future research is necessary to examine how representative storytelling relating to products and brands is in consumer Weblogs.

The analyses of the stories include the following steps which can be automated: (1) building events and emic narrative interpretation maps within applications of Woodside and Chebat's (2001) approach for updating Heider's balance theory; (2) applying the consumer storytelling degrees-of-freedom instrument to each blog communication; (3) applying the Leximancer computer

software program (see Smith 2000) and comparing the results with the findings from the other two analyses.

Leximancer generates an automated analysis; Leximancer is a data mining tool used for extracting the main concepts contained within electronic documents. Leximancer helps facilitate the analysis and interpretation of stories rather than replace it. Concepts in Leximancer are collections of words that occur together throughout the text. For example, a concept such as “jeans” will have many other associated words such as “pants,” “trousers,” and “denim” that provide evidence that we are talking about jeans. In Leximancer, the concepts are sets of associated words that are extracted automatically by the system. Leximancer’s content and relational analysis is based on Bayesian theory applied to linguistics, which essentially says that it is possible to determine concepts on the basis of the language used, and the propensity of grammar to collocate terms within a certain distance of a central idea. Under Bayesian theory no dictionary definition is likely to be entirely accurate for a concept. The evidence for a concept will be found in the texts under consideration. Concepts maybe claimed to be language independent but they are not totally independent of context. These concepts are displayed on an interactive map that provides a single holistic view of the information as well as allowing one to automatically search for instances of the text that contain the given concepts. For the analyses in this article, replacements are first made of “I” in the communications with “emic” and “etic” replaces the use of “me” in the story to pick up these concepts (cf. Martin, 2005)—since Leximancer output does not report personal pronouns as concepts and we drew the conclusion in running Leximancer that the output should include actors as important concepts.

## FINDINGS

The findings include a balance/imbalance mapping and flow diagram of relationships for each blog communication; a consumer storytelling degrees-of-freedom analysis; and a Leximancer output.

The first story: Scott wears Tommy Hilfiger Jeans unzipped. The start of the story includes two negative associations in a balanced three-way relationship that includes Scott (clearly the protagonist in this report), an aching back, and a wheeled garment bag. The positive relationship between Scott and the bag creates balance that overcomes the two negative relationships between Scott and an aching back.

Scott’s first mention of Tommy Hilfiger jeans reflects one example of “brands causing trouble” (Holt 2002).

Not only that, but I happened to be wearing a pair of loose-fitting jeans that day, purchased in a foolish attempt to look with it. (Damn you and your marketing, Tommy Hilfiger!) These pants were almost loose enough to fall off when they were fastened, and in their current state I feared that they would slip to the ground at the slightest encouragement.

This quote indicates Scott’s meta conscious (thinking about thinking) awareness of his attempt to live the myth that he perceives Tommy Hilfiger pitches—what R Singh (2005) summarizes as the state of cool being. Scott’s parenthetical editorial reflects a nascent view of Holt’s treatise that some consumers become inflamed (in Heider’s change paradigm) to unfreeze and refreeze in adopting an antibranding sentiment and lifestyle in rebellion to marketers cultural authority.

The Leximancer output interprets a dominance of the wheeled bag over the pants in Scott’s story. However, Scott as a self-concept “I” overlaps more with the pants than the bag. Scott provides an epilogue. “EPILOGUE: It turned out that the garment bag was too small, so I couldn’t even take it on my trip. I wanted to return it, but I couldn’t bring myself to go back. The bag is still sitting in my closet. I haven’t worn those jeans since that night, and I haven’t been back to the store.” The ironies of neither using-returning the bag nor the jeans serves to illustrate Scott’s story as a satire of his life with brands and serves as a self-exposé of a “secret affair” with Tommy Hilfiger, that is, a privately held relationship considered risky if exposed to others (see Fournier 1998).

The second story: Pollee buys and then wears a Versace coat sans knickers (i.e., no underpants). The author of this communication, Pollee (an alias) entitles the report, “Long coat, no knickers.” Given that the substantial evidence found in the entry supports all ten dimensions of storytelling, the report reflects a narrative story. In Pollee’s story she also buys lingerie at Rigby and Pellar (retail store) and she decides to pull “into a garage to use the loo.” She decides to surprise her “man of the moment” buy removing her dress and knickers in the loo to wear only her coat and lingerie (likely a slip and stockings) home to “my man.” She is stopped by two police officers after the garage stop for using a cell phone while driving (illegal in Britain) and the officers also asked why she was wearing a coat on such a warm (August) evening. “Quick as a flash I told them I was going to a fancy dress vicars and tarts party.” Such a party requires guests to arrive dressed as a vicar or a prostitute; such parties are an English tradition. This story expresses characteristics of the Versace coat assisting in a courtship relationship and participating directly in a secret affair (see Fourier 1998). Courtships refer to an interim relationship state possibly on the road to a committed partnership contract—the man of the moment morphs into “my man” with no hindrances apparent to a possible committed relationship. Versace is a co-conspirator with Pollee in a secret affair when she wears the coat without knickers—a highly emotive, private bonding that leads to a risky exposure to police officers.

## DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, STRATEGY IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS

The findings support the view that individuals at least some of the time write stories in naturally occurring Weblog communications that include enactments of brands as icons. This conclusion complements and extends the work of Holt (2003, 2004, 2005), Holt and Thompson (2004), and related literature (e.g., Adaval & Wyer 1988; Arnold & Wallendorf 1994; Boller 1990; Delgadillo & Escales 2004; Fournier 1998; Hirschman 1986; Padgett & Allen 1997; Woodside & Chabet 2001). Several previous studies that may introduce researcher/experimenter biases (Fisher 1993; Shimp, Hyatt, & Snyder 1991) in informant reports, for example, Delgadillo and Escales' (2004) procedure in their study 1 reads as follows, "Please tell us about a recent experience you've had with a product or brand...." The use of the word "tell" would likely suggest storytelling to some informants. Similarly, Holt and Thompson's probing follow-up questions in the face-to-face interviews with the two informants that is the focus of most their article are likely to stimulate self-generated validity problems (see Feldman & Lynch 1988). However, a content analysis (Kassarjian 1977) method avoids such issues; at the same time the analysis and findings provide confirmatory evidence supporting Holt's views of how and why brands become icons.

The implications for market researchers intending to automate the process of analysing brand stories on Weblogs include the following points. First, crafting a story whereby the brand is a supporting actor enabling the protagonist to achieve conscious and/or unconscious goals likely reflects very favorable consumer-brand relationships (e.g., committed partnerships, best friendship, flings, or a secret affair). The storytelling analysis in this article includes self-oriented thinking by the storyteller with near-conversational interactions with the primary brands appearing in the stories (e.g., "Damn you and your marketing, Tommy Hilfiger!" Pollee's and "Versace did not let me down."). Consequently, learning—not only thinking about—what buyers and users say to the brand and what the brand says first and back in such conversations is likely to provide valuable clues for designing highly effective strategies to hone the rules of semantic analysis which would not normally allow for a human relationship with an inanimate object. Narrative reports and drama enactments are more likely to encourage vicarious participation (see Boller, Babakus, & Olson 1989) while lecture forms of advertising tend to evoke argumentative forms of thinking. Given that learning via storytelling is more memorable and retrievable than lecture-based learning (Bruner 1990; Shank 1990), learning the stories consumers tell in natural settings represents a useful grounding for creating an overall database of stories that can be compared and contrasted in

a semi-automated fashion with the naturalistic stories or acceptable fantasies that are appearing on blogs.

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