Brand Performances in Social Media

Sangeeta Singh [a],* & Stephan Sonnenburg [b]

[a] Department of Marketing, BI Norwegian Business School, Nydalsveien 37, Oslo 0484, Norway
[b] Faculty of Management and Performance, Karlshochschule International University, Karlstraβe 36–38, 76133 Karlsruhe, Germany

Abstract

The branding literature has long recognized the power of storytelling to provide meaning to the brand and practitioners have used storytelling to enhance consumers' connections with brands. The premise of brand storytelling has been that the story and its content, production, and distribution are the brand owner's realm and the consumer primarily a listener. The emergence of social media has changed the consumers' role in storytelling from that of a passive listener to a more active participant. Our paper uses the metaphor of improvisation (improv) theater to show that in social media brand owners do not tell brand stories alone but co-create brand performances in collaboration with the consumers. The first and foremost contribution of such a conceptualization is that it offers a semantic framework that resolves issues in storytelling, demonstrates the necessity of co-creation in storytelling, and identifies the core of an inspiring story. The improv theater metaphor also helps identify the following three propositions relevant for branding in social media: (i) the process of improvisation is more important than the output, (ii) managing brands is about keeping the brand performance alive, and (iii) understanding the audience and its roles is the prerequisite for a successful brand performance.
© 2012 Direct Marketing Educational Foundation, Inc. Published by Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Social media; Branding; Improv theater metaphor; Storytelling; Co-creation; Narratives

Prologue: Storytelling

Stories contain indices such as locations, actions, attitudes, problems, characters, etc. that cause both empathy in the listener (Woodside 2010) and help the story being recalled (Schank 1999). Story indices create empathy by providing a meaning and the more indices a story has, the more places the story can reside in memory and consequently be better recalled. For example, Marlboro successfully used the story of the Marlboro cowboy that conjured up rugged cowboy country with the masculine cowboy. The visuals used in Marlboro's television advertising, dusty canyon terrain (which later represented the quintessential *Marlboro Country*), reflected the idea of freedom in wide-open spaces. These visuals were reinforced with the recognizable theme music from the popular movie of the time, *The Magnificent Seven*, a Western drama with seven tough gunfighters. The story

of the Marlboro man had several indices that helped it achieve this goal: the location of cowboy country, the character of the cowboy as a hero and a protagonist, the attitude of independence, and the recognizable music from the film *The Magnificent Seven*. The story of the Marlboro man was so convincing that even when tobacco advertising was banned on television in 1971, the Marlboro man did not ride off into the proverbial sunset but instead successfully moved to print ads and billboards.

Stories also create or enhance connections with the brand by providing a theme to create conversations between consumers and brands and among consumers themselves that allow the consumers to fit in their own experiences into the brand story (Escalas 2004). Successful brands such as Harley Davidson nurture these consumer connections and provide opportunities for storytelling by creating events that bring the brand closer to the customer such as *Harley Owners' Group* (H.O.G.) *Rallies* and the *Harley Posse Ride*, where riders share their brand related stories with other riders. Thus, stories can help build awareness, comprehension, empathy, recognition, recall, and provide meaning to the brand.

---

* Corresponding author.
   E-mail address: sangeeta.singh@bi.no (S. Singh).

While the branding literature recognizes the importance of stories for brands (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Escalas 2004; Woodside, Sood, and Miller 2008), the story content, production, and distribution have been dominated by the brand owner (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003), but this is changing due to the emergence of social media that enables user-generated brand content. Social media include discussion forums, blogs, social platforms, and video-, photo-, and news-sharing sites that provide networks, relations, and interactions — the three ingredients central to co-creation (Vargo and Lusch 2004). Thus, it is inevitable that the social media, with their opportunities for networks, relations, and interactions between brands and consumers, result in co-creation (Deighton and Kornfeld 2009). When brands and consumers co-create brand stories, owners do not have complete control of their brands (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010) as consumer-generated brand stories can spread as rapidly as those created by companies (Muñiz and Schau 2007). This consumer-generated content provides compelling evidence of brand perceptions and attributes that may or may not be endorsed by the brand owner. The brand owner, therefore, has to navigate its brand content through the consumer-generated content to ensure that consumers' brand stories remain as close as possible to the brand owner's desired story.

The goal of our paper is to offer a semantic framework for navigating brands in social media. This is done by conceptualizing brands in social media settings using the metaphor of improvisation (improv) theater performances. The metaphorical approach compares the abstract phenomenon with a (more) concrete one — identifying equivalent relationships based on knowledge transfer from a source domain (the concrete phenomenon, improv theater) onto the target domain (the abstract phenomenon, brands in social media), using the learning from the concrete phenomenon to help understand the abstract one.

In our case, the improv theater serves as an insightful metaphor for understanding brands in the social media arena because brand owners and users in social media interact with one another in the same impromptu and uncontrolled fashion that characterizes improv theater. Researchers in marketing and branding have already drawn parallels with classical theater using many expressions from the world of theater such as drama (Moisio and Arnould 2005), performance (Deighton 1992), front and back stage (Grove and Fisk 1992), hero (Mark and Pearson 2001), role (Kozinets et al. 2010), props (Baron, Harris, and Harris 2001), and storytelling (Woodside 2010). We extend this existing terminology to improv theater as it better describes brands in the era of social media; the social media environment is closer to the uncontrolled and unpredictable nature of an improvisational performance than to a classical theater performance.

Improvisation is a theatrical genre that varies from short scenes to longer one-act plays consisting of several scenes tied together by one common theme (for a historical overview see Frost and Yarrow 2007) where a moderator (one of the actors or the director) introduces the story and asks members of the audience to articulate wishes for the performance and/or participate in it. The actors use the audience's suggestions to create an improvised performance. However, this does not mean that anything goes. Improv theater performances have an overall predetermined structure like a topic, a basic script, and a set of rules that navigate the improvisational process. The performance emerges from the collaboration between the actors and the audience where the audience may be passive (views the show) and/or active (suggests from off stage or acts on stage) (Frost and Yarrow 2007).

Using improv theater as a metaphor contributes to the understanding of brands in social media in three ways. First, the improv theater-based semantic framework helps resolve issues in storytelling. Second, it extends the conceptualization of brand stories told by brand owners to brand stories co-created by brand owners and consumers. However, a crucial part in the co-creation is the consumers' continued engagement in the storytelling. Thus, the third contribution of this paper is identifying the nucleus that keeps the brand story alive in social media.

The core of this paper is presented in three scenes. Scene 1 introduces the star (the brand) and supporting players (brand owner and consumers) in a story about the main character's entry into a whole new world (social media). Scene 2 presents the plot twist that keeps the performance interesting, and Scene 3 resolves the performance to be more suitable to social media. The epilogue discusses implications of improvisation for theory and practice to raise pertinent issues for future research.

Scene 1: Introducing the Main Characters and Story

The star of this performance is the brand but one cannot have a performance without a story and without a supporting cast. In classical theater, storytelling is the sole responsibility of the brand's owner and consumers are at best bit players, but much more likely to be listeners. Social media have turned the classical theater into an improvisational version because they allow much more role diversity for all the players involved in the production. Social media have not just helped people make zillions of connections (via the social media website Facebook) and inspire Hollywood (as evidenced by the movie *The Social Network*) but also transformed the way consumers interact with brands. Consumers can read or provide reviews and information of brands, watch or upload their favorite advertisement of the brand, make an advertisement of their own, 'Tweet' or blog about the brand in social media. Technology, Internet, and social media have made it possible to share consumer-generated brand content with friends, other users, or a virtual community.

Consumers are motivated to generate and broadcast online content primarily for intrinsic reasons such as the enjoyment that the act of creating something provides, promoting themselves to attract attention and initiate conversation, or to influence others (Berthon, Pitt, and Campbell 2008). In social media settings, a brand can encourage consumers' participation by initiating conversation through seeding (Schau, Muñiz, and Arnould 2009), provoking (Deighton and Kornfeld 2009), engaging, and providing a platform for conversations, which is well exemplified by Dove's *Real Beauty* campaign.

Dove evolved from a product-focused brand (a beauty soap bar) to a brand that told a story (real beauty) to a brand that co-created a story with consumers (campaign for *Real Beauty*). The initiation of Dove's co-created performance in social media was

Dove's posting *The Evolution Spot* (Fig. 1) in October 2006 on YouTube (seeding). The spot showed a normal looking woman being transformed into the stereotype of a beautiful woman, driving home the point that the idea of beauty created by the beauty industry was not real (provoking).

Within three months, this spot had been viewed three million times (Deighton 2008) which encouraged Dove to take the campaign to its own Internet website, inviting women to discuss beauty and share their views with women around the world (engaging and providing a platform). The initiative received an overwhelming response from women. Women participated by describing their understanding of real beauty ("Relish in the uniqueness that makes you special, stay true to your inner voice and don't be afraid to let yourself shine", source: Jamie R. on http://dovemovement.rxlmedia.com) and/or uploading pictures or films that represented it.

Social media provided Dove with multiple touch points (YouTube, company website, blogs, Facebook, etc.), allowing the brand owner to give different forms of extrinsic motives for the consumer to initiate and/or participate in conversations. Conversations in social media, thus, were generated where none would have taken place naturally otherwise (Godes and Mayzlin 2009). Because people think in terms of events or series of events (narratively) rather than in terms of the validity of an idea (argumentatively), they express themselves with stories (Weick 1995). The consumers' stories, combined with the brand owner's story, co-created the Dove brand performance.

Storytelling is always a social phenomenon because a narrator and listener are involved (Hodge and Kress 1988). However, in social media, the roles of the narrator and the listener are unclear because both the brand owner and consumers can play either the role of a narrator or that of a listener, which results in an interactive co-creation driven by the participants. This is very similar to an improv theater performance that allows an interactive relationship as audience suggestions are used to create the content and direction of the performance by the actors on stage.

Any improv (and classical) theater performance is made meaningful by the formal framework of theatrical components (Keir 2002; McKee 1998; Smiley and Bert 2005): context (the structure of the performance), content (the substance of the performance), and process (the activity of the performance). The Dove case also provides examples of these theatrical components and their equivalent in social media.

The idea for Dove's *Real Beauty* campaign originated in 2002 with the mission of making more women feel beautiful everyday by widening the stereotypical views of beauty (Deighton 2008).

The goal was to create a definition of real beauty that included women of various ages, shapes, and sizes in their advertising campaign, instead of using professional models (Fig. 2). The *Real Beauty* campaign started with Dove as a story (between years 2002 and 2006) that later transformed to a co-created performance (year 2006 onwards).

The context in improv theater is made up of stage, setting, director, actors, and audience (Woodside, Sood, and Miller 2008). For brands in social media the stage corresponds to the Internet, while the setting is the forms the company decides to engage in on the Internet (e.g. social network, blog, company website, etc.). The brand owner and the consumers take multiple roles in social media, with both playing the director, actor, and spectator roles at various points. In our example, Unilever is the director, actor, and spectator, women are the audience that can either be spectators (enjoying the ongoing brand performance) or actors (participating with their brand stories), and Dove's company website and other social media platforms that it used, like Facebook and YouTube, are the setting.

The content in improv theater is the basic script and interrelated stories. The script (brand concept) not only provides guidelines to the storyline and sets up the implied purpose of the story for the brand owner, but also moves the audience into (collaboratively) co-creating the performance. Since brand owners in social media do not tell stories alone, but co-create with the consumers, the brand content is the interrelated stories told by both the brand owner and the consumers. Dove's idea of real beauty sets the tone for the brand concept and provides the storyline. The audience – visitors to the website, consumers – describes its interpretation of real beauty with words and visuals, helping develop the brand performance.

Process refers to the level of activity the audience has in the improvisational performance and the relationship between the various participants. As an ensemble, the participants and their stories unfold and shape the performance. In an improv theater performance, audience participation can vary from the passive to the active. Some of the audience are mere spectators that watch the performance while others take an active role, either on stage or off stage. Similarly, social media provide consumers a setting where they can have different levels of involvement – consumers as mere spectators, in supporting roles, or in leading roles – and different relationships with one another. Dove's campaign for *Real Beauty* includes different levels and types of involvement that take form in editorials, blogs, and even a self-esteem fund. Dove's performance started out with the consumers playing a passive role (spectator of Dove's idea of real beauty) to a more

Fig. 1. Dove YouTube spot 'Evolution'.
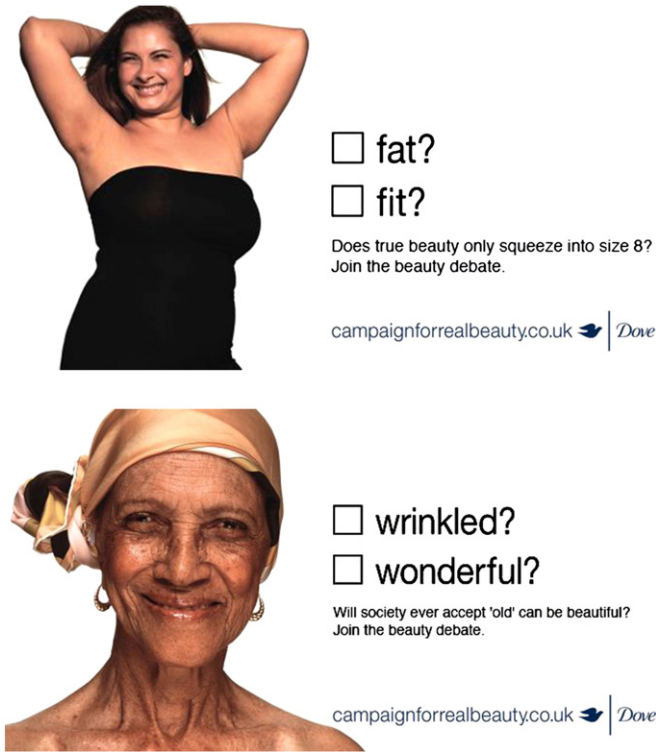Source: Unilever 2006.

Fig. 2. Dove print ads for Real Beauty.
Source: Unilever 2008.

involved one (participating in the idea of real beauty) and even when the performance was more involved, different audience members chose to play different roles that varied from spectator to actor, like protagonist or hero. For example, the self-esteem movement consists of toolkits and videos that encourage young girls to embrace their inner beauty (spectator) to initiating activities online and offline (protagonist or hero).

While these three elements are essential for an improv theater performance, they account for neither co-creation nor
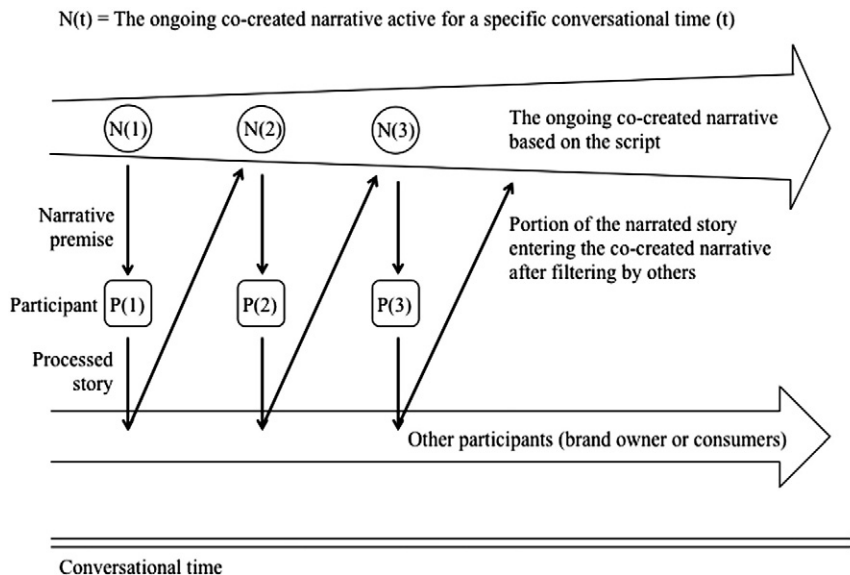
the continuity of the co-creation. Brand owners have to keep the performance going as co-creation can abate because of uninteresting stories. Therefore, owners may need to reanimate the brand performance by fostering diversity of opinions and stories that challenge one another (Sonnenburg 2004). Diversity of opinion and challenging stories refuel consumers' waning interests and maintain the consumers' engagement in the brand performance, which is imperative for the performance to even exist, let alone evolve. The next scene discusses these co-creation issues and the factors that set a brand performance into action and keep it going.

However, before we proceed, it is important to clarify something about storytelling. According to the field of narratology, story is the content and the process of telling the story is the narrative (Genette 1980; Richardson 2000). Since storytelling in social media is a continuous on-going and collaborative process, made up of interlinked content, we conceptualize brand performances in social media as brand narratives co-created from interrelated stories.

Scene 2: The Plot Twist

The adapted model of co-creation in improv theater (Sawyer 2003) shown in Fig. 3 helps explain the idea of a co-created brand narrative that is ongoing (N(t)) and changes with each story. Each story provided by a participant (P(1)) depends on two conversational forces to be a part of the co-creation: the premise emerging from the current brand narrative (N(1)) and the reactions of the other participants to the processed story of the participant (P(1)). These forces play a crucial part in how each story is integrated into the brand narrative (N(2)) (Sawyer 2003). The co-creation of the brand narrative depends on the type of perspective participants choose to offer in the narrative community (e.g. fan who praises the brand, evangelist who preaches the brand, critic who challenges the brand, and hacker who slanders the brand), the forum (e.g. blog, social networking,

Fig. 3. The co-creation of the ongoing brand narrative (based on Sawyer 2003).

narrative and its co-creation toward a more universal perception and meaning.

So, what sets this narrative process into action? In an ideal case, it is a conflict, paradox, ambiguity, or bipolarity (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Holt 2002; McKee 1998) that dramatically upsets the balance of forces (McKee 1998), providing the motive to consumers for participating in the brand narrative. Had Dove not challenged the existing idea of beauty (external) with real beauty (inner), consumer participation would not have come. This idea was disruptive because most beauty products focus on the stereotypical definition of external beauty, which is both limiting and unattainable, and Dove's campaign struck a chord with women worldwide that engaged them in the campaign. The importance of this disruption – tension – can be further exemplified by comparing Dove's campaign for *Real Beauty* with that of another company that markets beauty products, L'Oreal. Even though L'Oreal's campaign has a clearly defined script of *Because You're Worth It*, by advocating the existing stereotypical concept/idea of ideal beauty, it fails to provide the tension needed to engage its consumers in the 'performance'.

Tension is the main driver that offers an opening for consumers to be emotionally involved in the brand narrative (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003) and even more, it moves the consumer to participate. Brand owners can initiate brand narratives by seeding tension through an inciting incident (McKee 1998), which is already mentioned in the branding literature (Woodside 2010) but not as the strategic core of a good brand narrative. Inspiration for an inciting incident can come from brand history (e.g. Ben & Jerry's ice cream using the hippie background of its founders), cultural and societal values (e.g. Absolut vodka's support of upcoming struggling artists), archetypes (e.g. Marlboro cigarettes with its cowboy) or from existing consumers' stories (e.g. Avon as *The Company for Women* built around women's issues such as fighting breast cancer).

There are three basic types of tension: internal, personal, and external (McKee 1998). Internal tension is characterized by a

Fig. 4. Apple 'Think Different'.
Source: Apple 2000.

websites), and communal norms (Kozinets et al. 2010). The broadening arrow indicates that the interrelated content grows as more stories are connected with the unfolding narrative whereas the script helps synchronize the processed stories into a (more or less) coherent whole.

We have knowingly simplified the co-creation description but the real process can be more unorganized and in most cases even chaotic as the processed stories can emerge concurrently rather than sequentially. The pinball metaphor (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2010) better illustrates the disorderly complexity of the unfolding co-created narrative. Once a brand script is brought into action, managing the co-created brand narrative is like playing pinball. The brand owner continues to manage the ball (the narrative) with the agile use of flippers but the ball often does not go where the owner intends. Thus, even the ability to set the direction of the narrative does not necessarily allow the brand owner to control the flow or final path of the co-creation. But it is in the brand owner's interest to bind the processed stories of the different participants as close to the basic script as possible because the closer the stories correspond with the script, the easier it is for the brand owner to navigate the brand

Fig. 5. iPhone 4s' app Siri.

tension-filled conversation with oneself, personal tension emerges out of the diversity between people and their attitudes, whereas external tension refers to a tension between an individual (or a group) and nature, society, or the supernatural. For example, Apple Computers, created internal tension in the business user to liberate creativity and rebellion. The iBook challenged the business professionals to *Think Different* by reconsidering their mandatory use of the black tie (Fig. 4). This tension is still fostered today as the recently launched iPhone 4S feature Siri (Fig. 5), a voice-activated artificial intelligence software, that responds to personal requests and questions such as 'What do you think about Android?' with the rebellious tongue-in-cheek reply 'I think differently'.

Harley Davidson creates personal tension by the fragmented demographics (diverse age range, income group, educational background) of its customers, but unites them in their love for riding motorcycles (Fig. 6). Mountain Dew utilizes external tension to make the brand popular with young men who feel excluded from manhood as defined by the nation's ideology (Holt 2004), in a similar way as Dove challenged the existing ideal of beauty for women. During its introduction, Mountain Dew's hillbilly theme was used to personify the antithesis of the existing ideal of manhood at that time, the corporate man that deferred individuality through conformity to a corporate

and suburban nuclear family life culture. Mountain Dew has sequentially modified the hillbilly into the redneck (antithesis of the urban professional who mercilessly pursues wealth and power) and the slacker (antithesis of the over-achiever who undertakes extremely difficult and often dangerous challenges) to match the societal shifts in the ideal of manhood.

A captivating brand narrative plays with several types of tension simultaneously (McKee 1998) or with one type successively. For example, Dove uses both internal and external tension for its engaging narrative. It encourages women to shift their concept of beauty from physical to inner beauty to create internal tension and challenges the societal ideal of physical beauty of a perfectly formed person to a more realistic one to create external tension. In contrast, Mountain Dew has consistently used only external tension over several decades, but kept it relevant by changing the antithesis of the prevalent ideal for manhood.

Community is one of the key distinctive features of the interactive marketing age so it is not enough that brands build relationships with consumers; they have to develop relationships among consumers also. Tension not only makes consumers collaborate with the brand but also connect them to a brand community as in the case of Harley Davidson (Fig. 6). Thus, tension provides the excitement that initiates the brand narrative,
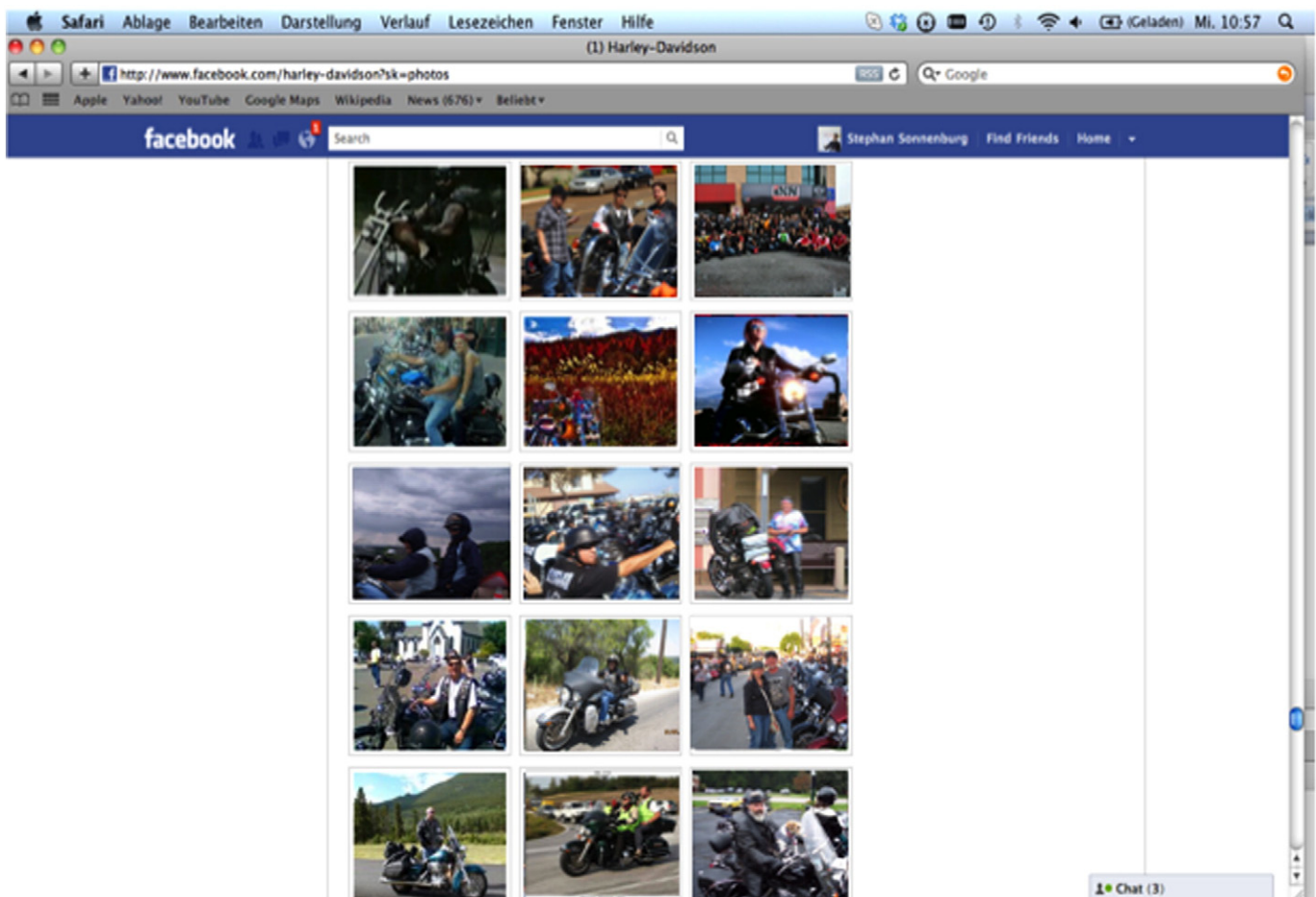

Fig. 6. Harley Davidson riders.
Source: Facebook 2011.

engages the consumer in the narrative, builds a brand community around the narrative, and keeps the narrative going.

Scene 3: Resolving Storytelling

The metaphorical approach we use not only gives a new orientation for branding in social media but also consolidates definitions and concepts within a framework. We require a modern glossary of terms that takes into account the role of social media and the network of consumers in co-creating brands. The current marketing and branding terminology still reflects the one-to-many thinking, with its use of the military language: target group, campaign, positioning, strategy, tactic, or planning. Because thinking significantly moulds perceptions and social behavior, these military marketing terms are no longer suitable in the era of democratized and interactive media, where the consumer not only responds to branding communication but also helps co-create it.

Our conceptualization of brands as improv theater performances also resolves issues in storytelling and narrative processing. The current conceptualization of storytelling and narrative processing in branding has three primary shortcomings: (i) the relationship between stories and narratives is not clearly established for an application in social media branding, (ii) the co-creational dimension of narratives in social media is missing, and (iii) the core that keeps the narrative alive has not been identified. The following paragraphs address these shortcomings.

Story and narrative are used synonymously in the branding literature (Escalas 2004; Shankar, Elliott, and Goulding 2001; Stern, 1994, 1995) which does not refer to the discussion in the field of narratology (Richardson 2000). According to the field of narratology, story is the content and narrative the process of telling the story (Genette 1980; Richardson 2000). This distinction between story and narrative is important for brands in social media because storytelling in social media is a continuous ongoing and improvisational process, made up of interlinked content. Thus, we extend the basic proposition of good storytelling for branding as proposed by Woodside, Sood, and Miller (2008) to shift from stories to narratives.

Storytelling and narrative processes are relevant topics in branding (Woodside 2010) but they are still not conceptualized to fit the new requirements of social media. According to both storytelling (Woodside, Sood, and Miller 2008) and narrative processing (Escalas 2004; Holt 2002), consumers tell stories about the brand to assign brand meanings which help them construct their identity around the brand. The underlying principle is that consumers repeat their understanding of the story provided by the brand owner. This does not reflect the conversational and co-creative style of social media. Our conceptualization of brands as improvised performances incorporates the social and interactive dimension of storytelling and social media where both brand owners and consumers not only initiate stories but also build on each other's stories. Therefore, brand owners are not the only ones telling the story and consumers do not merely repeat the story told by the brand owner.

Because consumers build on others' stories (either that of the brand owner or that of other consumers), they can be extrinsically motivated by the others' stories to participate in the brand narrative. The motivation to play different roles, according to our framework, depends on how the story provokes and excites the consumer: the tension, and whether the story resonates strongly enough with the consumer for her to participate more 'vocally' in the conversation or only enough so she is just an interested listener. Thus, we add to Deighton and Kornfeld's (2009) 'interactive consumer' typology, which illustrates discrete consumer roles but does not explain what motivates people to play different roles, by identifying what motivates consumers to take on different roles during the ongoing performance. Since the roles played by the consumers depend on the tension generated by the brand, it implies that the brand can influence (and in extreme cases even decide) the consumers' roles and that each consumer can change her roles not just with passage of time but also with changes in felt tension.

Epilogue: The Improvisational Turn

We have argued that improv theater is a better metaphor than classical theater to understand brands in social media, which has helped us identify the following propositions relevant for branding: (1) the process of improvisation is more important than its output, (2) managing brand performances is about managing tension, and (3) understanding the audience and the roles it plays is crucial for meaningful brand performances. We discuss the implications of each of these for both theory and practice to raise issues for future research.

Proposition 1. The process of improvisation is more important than its output.

"Improvisation is not about doing one right thing (output view), but about continuously doing things right (process view)" (Vera and Crossan 2004, p 738). Improvisation hinges on spontaneous co-creation, making it unpredictable, and thus difficult to predict the output. Because of this unpredictability, a brand owner that focuses on the output (which until now has been the common practice) cannot be flexible enough to respond to changes in the environment and rapid changes are 'de rigueur' in social media. An output-oriented view may have sufficed in a world of spectators where the brand owner could predict the output, but is not suitable for the collaborative and co-creative world, where the brand owners have less control on the output.

We propose that the success of the improvisational process is the responsibility of brand owners. Brand owners can influence the improvisational processes by nurturing the parameters suggested by our improv theater metaphor: the basic script and tension. It is crucial to identify situations in which a tightly scripted performance (less improvisation) is needed and those which call for a loosely scripted one (more improvisation). To encourage the improvisation process, brand owners should not only be good storytellers but also good story listeners, searching for contradictions that help develop the brand narrative and performance.

Fig. 7. Dove YouTube spot 'Onslaught'.
Source: Unilever 2007.

A challenge for theory and practice then is to find ways for evaluating processes where the elements of the process are mutable. In a world of spectators, one compared the predicted output with the achieved output but this is not possible when the output is difficult to predict. Process-orientation means real-time evaluation where retrospective analysis (typically quantitative) is no longer suitable and calls for participatory research techniques (qualitative). Our model in Fig. 3 combined with the pinball metaphor is an initial step to provide direction for future research that develops process-based models.

Proposition 2. Managing brand performances is about managing tension.

Tension is the main driver of improvisation that helps the brand owner successfully navigate the improvisational performance and losing control over tension can hurt the brand. We demonstrate this by using the Dove case one last time, this time presenting the not-so-rosy side of the campaign. In addition to sharing their diaries and pictures representing their ideal of beauty, people shared 'parodies' of the hugely successful *Real Beauty* advertisement on YouTube. Fig. 7 presents snapshots from the advertisement and Fig. 8 snapshots from one of the 'parodies'.

The *Real Beauty* advertisement advises you, 'talk to your daughter before the beauty industry does' while the 'parody' ad tells you, 'talk to your daughter before Unilever does', after informing that Dove (tension: beauty without artifice) is brought to the consumers by the same company that brings Axe (tension: to improve men's performance in the mating game). Dove and Axe are two of Unilever's most successful brands and have managed to co-exist because Unilever has been a house of brands (rather than a branded house) and most of the audience is unaware

that the same company is behind two very different brands. The social media are changing this, as demonstrated by the 'parody' Dove advertisement, and the audience realizing that the conflicting tension perpetuated by each brand is actually from the same company. If brand owners are not consistent in enacting the brand tension, the audience contributes with parody — distorting and diluting the brand meaning. This does not mean that the brand owner has to use the same type of tension all the time or even stick to just one type of tension at one time. The idea that a brand can use more than one type of tension leads to a prospective research area: the combinations of different types of tensions that make for a successful fit. This, naturally, will depend on the brand performance that the brand owner wishes. McKee has identified three types of tension (internal, personal, and external) but there may be other types of tension that need to be identified. Different forms of theater like comedy, tragedy, and drama could serve as an inspiration for research that can help develop a typology for tension.

Proposition 3. Understanding the audience members and the roles they play is crucial for meaningful brand performances.

The 'parody' advertisement for Dove described above is interestingly made by a man — notice that Dove pointedly uses 'women' in their advertising and on its website, indicating that they consider women as their sole audience. In the era of social media, brand owners have to remember that their audience is more than users or consumers of the product or brand and that non-users may be actively involved in co-creating the brand narrative to influence the tension constructively or in some cases, as in Dove's, destructively.

Our improv theater metaphor shows that the audience roles in social media can vary during the performance from modest

Fig. 8. YouTube Spot 'A message from Unilever'.
Source: Rye Clifton 2007.

(spectator) to very overt (actor), depending on the degree of improvisation and tension offered by the brand. Process-based models that we suggested in Proposition 1 should, therefore, take into account what engages the audience into taking on different roles and offering a particular perspective: that of a fan, evangelist, critic, or hacker. Such models would help understand why one person chooses to be an evangelist (praise the brand) while another a hacker (slanders the brand), and in the case of the hacker, how to deal with negative content. The processes that transform one role to another and the reasons behind the transformations can also provide additional insight. While we have identified the degree of improvisation and level of tension felt by the individual as catalysts for the different roles, there is room for identifying other drivers of these roles such as personality traits or dispositions.

Acknowledgement

References

Baron, Steve, Kim Harris, and Richard Harris (2001), "Retail Theater: The 'Intended Effect' of the Performance," *Journal of Service Research*, 4, 2, 102–17.

Berthon, Pierre, Leyland Pitt, and Colin Campbell (2008), "Ad Lib: When Consumers Create the Ad," *California Management Review*, 50, 4, 6–30.

Brown, Stephen, Robert V. Kozinets, and John F. Sherry (2003), "Teaching Old Brands New Tricks: Retro Branding and the Revival of Brand Meaning," *Journal of Marketing*, 67, July, 19–33.

Deighton, John (1992), "The Consumption of Performance," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 19, 362–72.

——— (2008), "Dove: Evolution of a Brand," *Harvard Business Publishing Case.*

——— and Leora Kornfeld (2009), "Interactivity's Unanticipated Consequences for Marketers and Marketing," *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, 23, 1, 2–12.

Escalas, Jennifer E. (2004), "Narrative Processing: Building Consumer Connections to Brands," *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 14, 1&2, 168–80.

Frost, Anthony and Ralph Yarrow (2007), *Improvisation in Drama*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Genette, Gérard (1980), *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Godes, David and Dina Mayzlin (2009), "Firm-Created Word-of-Mouth Communicaion: Evidence from a Field Test," *Marketing Science*, 28, 4, 721–39.

Grove, Stephen J. and Raymond P. Fisk (1992), "The Service Experience as Theatre," *Advances in Consumer Research (North America)*, 19, 455–61.

Hennig-Thurau, Thorsten, Edward C. Malthouse, Christian Friege, Sonja Gensler, Lara Lobschat, Arvind Rangaswamy, and Bernd Skiera (2010),

"The Impact of New Media on Customer Relationships," *Journal of Service Research*, 13, 3, 311–30.

Hodge, Robert and Gunther Kress (1988), *Social Semiotics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Holt, Douglas B. (2002), "Why Do Brands Cause Trouble? A Dialectical Theory of Consumer Culture and Branding," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 29, June, 70–90.

——— (2004), *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Publishing.

Keir, Elam (2002), *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*. London: Routledge.

Kozinets, Robert, Kristie De Valck, Andrea C. Wojnnicki, and Sarah J.S. Wilne (2010), "Networked Narratives: Understanding Word-of-Mouth Marketing in Online Communities," *Journal of Marketing*, 74, March, 71–89.

Mark, Margaret and Carol S. Pearson (2001), *The Hero and the Outlaw: Building Extraordinary Brands through the Power of Archtetypes*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

McKee, Robert (1998), *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principle of Sreenwriting*. London: Methuen.

Moisio, Risto and Eric J. Arnould (2005), "Extending the Dramaturgical Framework in Marketing: Drama Structure, Drama Interaction and Drama Content in Shopping Experiences," *Journal of Consumer Behavior*, 4, 4, 246–56.

Muñiz, Albert M. and Hope J. Schau (2007), "Vigilante Marketing and Consumer-Created Communications," *Journal of Advertising*, 36, 3, 35–50.

Richardson, Brian (2000), "Recent Concepts of Narrative and the Narratives of Narrative Theory," *Style*, 34, 2, 168–75.

Sawyer, R. Keith (2003), *Group Creativity: Music, Theater, Collaboration*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Schank, Roger C. (1999), *Dynamic Memory Revisited*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Schau, Hope J., Albert M. Muñiz, and Eric J. Arnould (2009), "How Brand Community Practices Create Value," *Journal of Marketing*, 73, September, 30–51.

Shankar, Avi, Richard Elliott, and Christina Goulding (2001), "Understanding Consumption: Contributions from a Narrative Perspective," *Journal of Marketing Management*, 17, 3/4, 429–53.

Smiley, Sam and Norman A. Bert (2005), *Playwriting: The Structure of Action, Revised and Expanded*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Sonnenburg, Stephan (2004), "Creativity in Communication: A Theoretical Framework for Collaborative Product Creation," *Creativity and Innovation Management*, 13, 4, 254–62.

Stern, Barbara B. (1994), "Classical and Vignette Television Advertising Dramas: Structural Models, Formal Analysis, and Consumer Effects," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 20, March, 601–15.

——— (1995), "Consumer Myths: Frye's Taxonomy and the Structural Analysis of Consumption Text," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22, September, 165–85.

Vargo, Stephen L. and Robert F. Lusch (2004), "Evolving to a New Dominant Logic for Marketing," *Journal of Marketing*, 68, January, 1–17.

Vera, Dusya and Mary Crossan (2004), "Theatrical Improvisation: Lessons for Organizations," *Organization Studies*, 25, 5, 727–49.

Weick, Karl E. (1995), *Sensemaking in Organizations*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.

Woodside, Arch G., Suresh Sood, and Kenneth E. Miller (2008), "When Consumers and Brands Talk: Storytelling Theory and Research in Psychology and Marketing," *Psychology and Marketing*, 25, 2, 97–145.

——— (2010), "Brand-Consumer Storytelling Theory and Research: Introduction to a Psychology & Marketing Special Issue," *Psychology & Marketing*, 27, 6, 531–40.