



Epic Aspects of Retail Encounters: The Iliad of Hollister

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Abstract

Much has been written about myth and the marketplace. Consumer research has added immeasurably to academics' appreciation of the myths that inhere in fabulous flagship stores and experiential retailing more generally. Studies of consumer mythopoeia, however, have tended to muffle the martial side of retailing, the heroic struggles that some customers undergo in-store. This article argues that the epic offers valuable insights into martial matters, and more. Although epic and myth overlap, they are far from identical. The former is characterized by conventions that can help illuminate consumers' quests, not least their disturbing journeys through the underworld. These are considered in relation to Hollister (HCo), a phenomenally successful retail chain that's renowned for its antithetical atmospherics and inky interior design. A qualitative study of Hollister lovers and haters casts light on the epic in action and adds to scholars' understanding of immersive retailing experiences.

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Describing her first visit to Hollister, the wildly successful lifestyle retailer, Shauna is bedazzled by its in-store evocation of everything she believes, as a nineteen year old Irishwoman, about the United States of America. "I look up," she recounts, "and a humungous American flag dangles above my head. The American flag represents the American Dream in my eyes which gives me butterflies in my stomach. The American dream is all about freedom and being your own self in this world. It inspires me to be a stronger person. . . This is what people of my age want. They want to be adventurous. Walking around this shop gives me a lease of energy to go into the world and make my own dreams happen!"

Shauna's emotive words are akin to what literary critics call *panegyric*, a heartfelt hymn of praise. The panegyric is a key component of epic poetry alongside *lamentation*, *invocation* and *the dying fall* (Abrams 1993). To be sure, Shauna's accolade was not devised with poesy in mind, yet she unwittingly realized Ralph Waldo Emerson's celebrated contention that America

is an epic poem waiting to happen. For some, as McWilliams (1989) shows, America's national epic is best expressed in its magnificent movies, novels, musicals, and television series. But for Shauna at least, it is brilliantly articulated by Hollister.

Although Hollister has latterly lost some of its luster, this too accords with the epic tradition, where hubris is unfailingly followed by nemesis. The epic literary form may be thousands of years old; however, it remains a rich conceptual resource that affords striking insights into contemporary retail branding. This article, therefore, argues that epic poetry's principles are relevant to retail management and scholarship. It shows how HCo's consumers enact elemental aspects of epic poetry. It reveals how the in-store encounter concurs with the epic's combative character. It illustrates, with the aid of qualitative research methods, how Hollister's evocation of an idyllic, southern Californian lifestyle strikes a resonant chord with some of its customers. It contends, in short, that the epic contains lessons for academicians and executives alike.

We begin with a summary of the epic tradition, noting its poetic origins, cultural modifications, and relative neglect in marketing, retailing, and consumer research. A succinct introduction to Hollister Inc., a subsidiary of Abercrombie & Fitch, follows thereafter. Next is a brief but necessary discussion of

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research methods best suited to the subject matter, as well as a synopsis of our subsequent data gathering and literary theory-led analytical procedures. The findings reveal how consumer experiences in HCo echo components of the classical epic, in accordance with the genre's conventions (Abrams 1993; Sutherland 2010). Comparisons are then made with prior studies of flagships (Kent 2009), martworlds (Joy et al. 2014), brand museums (Hollenbeck, Petersm, and Zinkhan 2008) and contrarian consumer encounters more generally (Dobscha and Foxman 2012; Kozinets 2002a; Hietanen et al. 2016), before concluding with a consideration of epic and myth's affinity.

Epic Background

Formally defined as "a long narrative poem in lofty style, set in a remote time and place, and dealing with heroic character" (Morner and Rausch 1995, p. 65), epic is the ultimate expression of poetic accomplishment (Merchant 1971). Although Aristotle's ranking of literary genres placed epic in second place behind tragedy, these positions had been reversed by the Renaissance, when monumental works like Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Spencer's *Faerie Queene*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost* joined the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid* in epic poetry's pantheon (Williams 2009).

So entrenched was this pantheon that by the mid-eighteenth-century Enlightenment all manner of epic parodies, epic inversions, and epic burlesques were in circulation (Merchant 1971). The term, what's more, was slowly but steadily broadened to embrace elephantine novels (*Moby-Dick*, *War & Peace*, *Remembrance of Things Past*), stupendous movies (*Birth of a Nation*, *Ben-Hur*, *Braveheart*), majestic television series (*Lost*, *Band of Brothers*, *Game of Thrones*), astounding computer games (*Minecraft*, *Grand Theft Auto World of Warcraft*), and analogous cultural forms that are larger than life (James 2016; Russell 2007). Nowadays, Sutherland (2010, p. 32) observes, the word epic is a "loose intensifier," akin to "awesome," "incredible," or "breath-taking." Once reserved for the heroic achievements of Achilles, Beowulf and El-Cid, "epic" is routinely applied to consumer co-created wikis (Lanier and Rader 2017), the algorithmic accomplishments of Google (Wu 2016), or the infarctions-waiting-to-happen on food porn websites (Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman 2017). Epic Meal Time, for example.

Yet, despite its ancient pedigree and contemporary popularity, epic rarely features in marketing scholarship. With the noteworthy exceptions of Stern and Gallagher's (1991) comparative analysis of lyric, ballad, and epic in advertising narratives; Shankar and Patterson's (2001) Homeric approach to advances in interpretive research methods; Diamond et al.'s (2009, p. 123) aside on the "epic tale" of American Girl's marketing matriarch; and Peñaloza's (2001, p. 371) western stock show-stimulated call for a contemporary "consumer epic," the genre has found few champions or cheerleaders. And most use the word in a colloquial sense. Even the Consumer Odyssey made no attempt to engage with the epic that inspired it (Belk 1991).

The principal reason for epic's absence is because an alternative word dominates academic discourse. That word is myth.

Manifold marketing scholars, from Levy (1981) and Stern (1995) onwards, have built their articles on mythic foundations. These include Belk and Costa (1998), who recount the myths of primordial masculinity enacted by modern-day Mountain Men; Thompson (2004), who describes diverse myths that inhere in the natural healthcare sphere; Arnould (2005, p. 90), who highlights the "myth of individual achievement through perseverance" that's enacted in Niketown; Dobscha and Foxman (2012), who explore the "mythic agency" of eager consumers during Filene's Basement Bridal Event; and, Joy et al. (2014, p. 360), who note the "mythical heritage" that obtains in Louis Vuitton's stunning retail flagships.

Impressive as myth-informed analyses of retail and consumer encounters assuredly are, epic has something different to offer. Although certain scholars employ the terms synonymously (Hirschman 2000), they are not interchangeable. Yes, both myth and epic unfold in marvelous secondary worlds, pertain to primordial times past, and recount events in Aristotelian narrative fashion (i.e., with a beginning, middle and end). However, there are three key differences between them. First, the heroes of epics are mortals not gods (Miller 2000). Granted, the gods often intervene in the action, but epics are about human beings rather than almighty immortals (Bowra 1952). Epics, secondly, are less universal than myths. The latter, as Campbell's monumental and much-cited studies show, are manifestations of a singular, all-encompassing "monomyth." The former, as "national epics" like Finland's *Kalevala*, Ireland's *Ulster Cycle* and Iraq's *Gilgamesh* attest, take pride in their singularity and geographical specificity. Epics, thirdly, are more martial than myths. Whereas myths, as they are understood and employed by marketing and consumer researchers, help reduce existential anxieties in an increasingly uncertain world (Holt and Thompson 2004; Thompson and Tian 2008), epics emphasize the dark side of things. They are combative (Nicolson 2014). They revel in battle. They posit, as Bloom (1994, p. 6) states in his summary of the western literary canon, "a poetics of conflict."

These differences, it must be stressed, do not mean that epic is better suited to marketplace matters than myth. Far from it. The genres are closely related, yet remain sufficiently different to warrant closer examination. Viewing retailing through an epic lens, as we shall show, affords insights that are not in focus when myth is the medium. Epic, Hietanen et al. (2016, p. 422) analogously observe in a recent study of Finland's Restaurant Day, "is a manifestation of the market in the same way that Mr. Hyde is a manifestation of Dr. Jekyll." It follows that epic offers an alternative perspective on marketplace matters, a perspective that is pertinent to Hollister's radical take on retail store atmospherics and the in-store encounter more generally.

Literature Overview

If marketing scholarship is an odyssey, as Shankar and Patterson (2001) contend, then Kotler is our Homer. Among many outstanding works of scholarship, "Atmospherics as a Marketing Tool" remains an incontestable classic. Arguing that there's more to retail marketing than merchandise, Kotler (1973, p. 48) contends that the in-store environment – layout, design,

look, feel – is often “more influential than the product itself in the purchase decision” (see also Martineau 1958; Tauber 1972). And subsequent analyses of servicescapes (Bitner 1992), flagship stores (Kent 2009), brand museums (Hollenbeck et al. 2003), themed environments (Gottdiener 2001), and the experience economy more generally (Pine and Gilmore 2011), lend empirical weight to Kotler’s observations. As numerous researchers have shown, the spectacular flagships of Nike (Peñaloza 1999), ESPN Zone (Kozinets et al. 2004), American Girl (Borghini et al. 2009), Louis Vuitton (Joy et al. 2014), and Chanel (Dion and Arnould 2011) are breath-taking retail milieus where the full array of atmospherics is deployed to maximum customer- and merchandise-moving effect.

Much has also been written about the component parts of store atmospherics – visual, aural, olfactory, tactile, etc. – both separately and in combination (Baker, Levy, and Grewal 1992; Lund 2015; Spence et al. 2014). There is no shortage, furthermore, of critical comment on the allegedly excessive theming of contemporary consumer society (Lukas 2016). Some of the most striking studies, though, are myth-informed (Arnould 2005). Foremost among these are Sherry’s (1998) mythopoeic remarks about Nike Town Chicago, Kozinets et al.’s (2004) analysis of ESPN Zone’s mythic qualities, Hollenbeck et al.’s (2003) myth-interpretation of the World of Coca-Cola, and, as part of a larger study of retail brand ideology, Borghini et al.’s (2009) myth-placed remarks on American Girl. The latter, Arnould (2005, p. 90) observes, is a place where consumers “assimilate general cultural resources such as myths of wholesome American family values and norms about virtuous girlhoods.”

Virtuous and wholesome are entirely apt adjectives. Because the impression conveyed by all four myth-led studies is overwhelmingly upbeat and affirmative. Niketown’s denizens delight in its dreamland (“It’s amazing. . . It’s like a fantasy. . . It’s hard to verbalize. . . It makes you feel like you can ‘do it’”). Sports fans adore ESPN Zone Chicago (“It makes me like really want to come here more. It’s like a fun place to be. It’s actually, like, interesting. And it’s like amazing”). Coke’s consumers savor the brand’s incredible heritage (“I will never forget it. It was so much fun. I was overwhelmed”). Family bonds are forged in the utopian embrace of American Girl Place (“It’s all so beautiful and perfect. It’s overwhelming and wonderful. . . Everything is perfect”). Hardly a negative word is reported in any of them. Yes, some Niketown citizens complain about high prices; one ESPN Zone fieldworker is aghast at its awfulness; and a few unenthusiastic visitors to Coca-Cola World are there to keep their families happy. Indeed, if Borghini et al. (2009) are to be believed, American Girl Place is flawless and fault-free. Even skeptics succumb to its sublimity (p. 125).

At least some of these pleasantries, however, are attributable to the authors’ myth-mindedness. Myths, as far as the CCT community is concerned, are salvific. They abet individual consumer identity projects and assuage the anomie of contemporary consumer society (Holt 2004; Thompson 2004; Tillotson and Martin 2014). But if myths are believed to be beneficent, then research findings are liable to reflect this fact. As Kuhn and Fey-erabend made clear many years ago, there is no such thing as an interpretive Table rasa (Firat and Venkatesh 1995). Researchers’

interpretations, if far from foregone conclusions, are insidiously shaped by myth’s utopian cast. Thus, it comes as no surprise to read that ESPN Zone Chicago conveys a symbolic message of “eternity, completion, infinity. . . and all of achievement-oriented human activity” (Kozinets et al. 2004, p. 22). This may be so, but the Chicago store closed in June 2010, as did the entire ESPN Zone operation. Eternity? Infinity? Hardly.

An interesting exception to the rule – and the study that is closest to our own – is Dobscha and Foxman’s (2012) investigation of Filene’s Basement Bridal Event. Employing Joseph Campbell’s ten-stage monomyth model of the hero’s journey, they highlight the trials, tribulations, agonies, ecstasies and personal transformations that transpire as would-be brides battle their way to the bargains in the basement, and return triumphant with off-price prizes. The authors observe, furthermore, that Filene’s in-store environment is “made deliberately difficult” for the wedding dress questors and that overcoming these difficulties is part of the event’s intrinsic appeal. Granted, their research focuses on a periodic, time-limited event (whose frenetic action lasts little more than five minutes) and they fail to note key aspects that would have been evident had their work been epic attuned (not least consumers wandering around empty-handed, like the ghosts of the underworld). However, they rightly conclude that future students of “contradictory” retail atmospherics could do worse than study Abercrombie & Fitch, a brand whose principal (and even more successful) subsidiary is Hollister Inc. (Dobscha and Foxman 2012, p. 293).

Hollister Inc.

Hollister is the antithesis of apparel retailing (Eggers 2015). Infamous for its inky interior, obstructive layout, overpriced products, overpowering aroma, ear-shattering background music, and eclectic décor featuring palm trees, chandeliers, distressed furniture, randomly scattered surfboards, loosely draped American flags, and vast video screens featuring scenes from Huntington Beach, CA – to say nothing of elephant, tiger, and peacock-print wallpaper – HCo inverts the conventional wisdom of in-store atmospherics, where bright lights, attractive displays and ease of circulation have long been the cynosure of best retail practice (van Marrewijk and Broos 2012).

Externally too the stores’ complete absence of display windows is decidedly unconventional, as is their frontage, which looks more like a ramshackle beach hut than a premium priced fashion emporium. On top of that, its sales associates are under-dressed, not to say half-naked, and seem to be employed less for their customer service acumen as their good looks, great bodies, gleaming grins. Customer coddling is not high on the CEO’s agenda either, since he’s inclined to berate consumers who are too big for his slim-fit wares: “A lot of people do not belong in our clothes, and they cannot belong. Are we exclusionary? Absolutely!” (Levinson 2013). This statement runs counter to almost everything that’s been said about customer orientation (cf. Brown 2003) and, taken aback, academic authorities have responded in kind:

Now, the concept of a retail store that makes some children feel beautiful at the expense of making other children feel unattractive is disquieting, to say the least. For this, and a number of other reasons I won't go into, Hollister is a hostile brand that disturbs me to my core... There are few things more disaffecting than coming face-to-face with the brand that stands for values that you distaste. (Moon 2010, p. 172)

As if that were not enough, the epic story Hollister uses to sell the brand is not so much embroidered as fabricated (Schlossberg 2015). Cut from the whole cloth by Abercrombie & Fitch CEO Mike Jeffries, its hero is one John Hollister. Scion of an elite east-coast family, whose forebears ranked among the Founding Fathers, John escaped the gilded cage of Victorian conformity and set off to seek his fortune. His travels took him through the jungles of Siam to the uplands of Assam, where he sought spiritual enlightenment. It was in the Golden State of California, however, that Hollister found Nirvana. The nascent surfer lifestyle, coupled with its unspoiled setting, comprised the Shangri-La he'd been seeking. In 1922, he opened a small surf shack not far from Huntington Beach, on the southern outskirts of Los Angeles. Selling apparel, lessons, equipment et al, the store helped further the town's growing reputation as Surf City central. Despite, or perhaps because of the Great Depression – when escapism was the order of the day – Hollister gradually expanded his retail operation, while remaining true to the laid-back So-Cal lifestyle he'd helped initiate. However, it was John Hollister Jr. who exploited the surfing fad of the sixties, and its revival during the 1990s, and built the apparel brand that bears his father's name (Eggers 2015).

Hollister may be the last word in selling So-Cal's surfer lifestyle, but not a word of John Hollister's story is true. Hailing from Columbus, Ohio, Hollister opened its doors in 2000 – not 1922 – and, bar the looped video feed from Surf City (Huntington Beach, CA), has no direct connection to Southern California. Yet, despite outraged denunciation of the brand's fabricated heritage (BBC 2009), nothing impeded HCo's progress. Within a few years of its creation, Hollister surpassed A&F, its older and more established parent brand. Less than a decade later, it was selling its fantasy lifestyle in 550 stores around the world from Germany to Japan. Averaging 7,000 sq ft, these were devoted exclusively to HCo's wares – thus making it a “premium brand store” in Joy et al.'s (2014) classification – wares which were not available through third parties such as department stores or fashion websites (Moore and Doherty 2009). Limiting access in this manner added to the brand's allure and, for a while at least, Hollister seemed unstoppable. So much so, that the brand's conquest of casualwear was crowned with several “EPIC” flagship stores in several “destination” shopping streets including Regent Street (London), Färbergraben (Munich), and, as the SoHo Store video reveals, New York City (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1O9_7MZPuw).

The EPIC name was ill chosen, however. Epic narratives are not renowned for happy endings (Bowra 1952). Less than four years after the flagships' appearance, Hollister's profits had plummeted, its CEO had been replaced, and the brand's retail offer had been refashioned (Shah 2016). If not quite an epic fail,

HCo's EPIC adventure foreshadowed an epic fall from grace. The epic narrative, though, operates on more than one level, especially among consumers.

Research Methods

In a series of analyses of epic works of literature, including Homer's *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Goethe's *Faust*, and Joyce's *Ulysses*, Holbrook (1993) argues for more poetic approaches to marketing and consumer research. To this end, he posits a lyrical methodological procedure called Subjective Personal Introspection (SPI). “I associate lyricism,” he says, “with a more personal expression of feelings and suggest that, as the content of consumer research deals increasingly with experiential or emotional phenomena, its style should adapt accordingly” (Holbrook 1993, p. 260).

Closely related to the autoethnographic research approach that's proving increasingly popular among cultural anthropologists (Hackley 2017), SPI has been successfully applied to hedonic retailing contexts and assorted themed environments. Sherry (1998, p. 113), for example, employs the “disciplined reflexiveness of introspection” in his study of Nike Town Chicago. Hetzel (1998, p. 261) makes a case for “personal interpretation” of the Mall of America. Kozinets (2002a, 2002b) reports, in both poetry and prose, his findings from the Burning Man festival. Schau (2003), similarly, laments the despoliation of her home town, Huntington Beach, CA, the commercial heart of which was transformed into a Surf City themed attraction.

Although SPI is well suited to spectacular retailing environments, not least because the fantasies, feelings and fun that such hedonic settings induce are difficult to capture in conventional customer surveys (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982), the technique has been attacked for its reliance on the allegedly unreliable reflections of individual researchers (Pickles 2017). But this can be – and has been – circumvented by the collection and compilation of multiple SPIs, most notably in the case of Patterson, Hodgson, and Shi's (2008) study of Lewis's, a venerable department store in Liverpool, England. After assembling 200 student self-assessments of in-store shopping experiences, the authors concluded that Lewis's was on its last legs. It expired two years later.

Multiple Perspectives

The present study employs the multiple SPI approach advocated by Gould and Maclaran (2003) and adapted to experiential retailing by Patterson, Hodgson, and Shi (2008). Following established convention, a sizeable group of marketing students (studying Branding 101) were required to visit a Hollister store, then write reflective accounts of their experiences. In order to maximize the richness and resonance of our informants' reports, very few specific instructions were issued beforehand. Apart from recommending that they refer to previous visits (if any) and assess the likelihood of future visits (or not), they were urged to make their accounts as imaginative, as lyrical, as creative as possible. No formal guidance, furthermore, was given on storytelling or narratology, much less epic poetry. As Patterson,

Hodgson, and Shi (2008, p. 32) make clear, multiple SPI investigation aims to be “entirely open-ended in its design.”

Our dataset comprises 97 reflections on the Hollister encounter. Approximately 42% of the purposive sample (Bahil and Milne 2006) are female, ages range from 19 to 45 and, although the majority is Irish, the views of an English, Scottish, Italian, and Indian informant also feature, as do those of two American and three German exchange students. Per Patterson, Hodgson, and Shi (2008), all our essayists are undergraduates – most are recent graduates from HCo’s young adult target market and have plenty to say about the brand – albeit fourteen percent are either employed in, or previously worked for, a wide range of retailing organizations from convenience stores to apparel outlets. These include four former employees of Hollister, plus several more who’d been interviewed by, or offered employment in, HCo. They thus brought an expert, occasionally jaundiced eye to Hollister’s retail offer and the attendant customer encounter. Roving eyes are not absent either. Although a clear majority of informants confine their comments to the store in Belfast, Northern Ireland, prior visits to HCo outlets in Liverpool, Glasgow, Birmingham, Orlando, Toronto, Minneapolis, Long Island, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Vancouver, as well as the flagships in London and New York, also feature in the dataset.

Analytical Approach

The reflective essays range from 1,509 to 2,538 words, with an overall average of 1,910. This equates to approximately 800 pages of double-spaced text, which compares well with consumer narratives derived from depth interviews or netnographic foraging (e.g., Kozinets and Handelman 2004; Thompson 2004). Over 40% of the accounts incorporate photographs, images or reproductions of HCo’s logo – most sourced from the internet – and one or two include pertinent paraphernalia like carrier bags, clothing labels, and even a head-mounted torch to symbolize Hollister’s nocturnal atmospherics. The essays were analyzed in accordance with the “close reading” principles of literary criticism, as formulated by the New Critics, reinvented by Marshall McLuhan, and adapted to marketing and consumer research by Stern (1989), Scott (1994), and Hirschman (2000) among others. Such procedures, although long established, differ somewhat from the “bottom up” approaches that predominate in CCT. Literary criticism, as a rule, involves directed, “top down” approaches to the data – i.e., scholars typically set out to deconstruct a text or interrogate it with, say, feminist findings in mind – whereas ethnographers, phenomenologists and grounded theory-guided researchers let salient themes well up in an emergent manner (Belk, Fischer, and Kozinets 2012). However, this down/up distinction is less clear-cut in practice than it is in principle. Starting point excepted, the analysis proceeds in an iterative manner, moving between empirical data, epic conventions and prior research, along with occasional periods of reflection, revision, reevaluation. Indeed, it was informants’ incessant reference to the stores’ inky interiors, which leapt out in our initial reading, that suggested a conceptual connection to the underworld. This led to considerations of the epic more

generally, whose conventions were thereafter related to HCo in traditional back-and-forth fashion, until redundancy prevailed.

That said, the SPI study reported herein was preceded by preliminary research involving three focus groups and eleven extended interviews with Hollister consumers and employees, inclusive of six parents paying for children’s purchases. The study was followed up, furthermore, by the authors’ unobtrusive observation in four stores (all three in London, plus Newcastle-upon-Tyne). The latter proved necessary because our SPI study unfolded between September and November 2014, just as HCo was faltering (Jeffries was sacked in December 2014) but before it was refashioned (Forbes 2015). Coincidental though this was, our SPI findings refer to the old, iconic Hollister, when it was teetering on the brink. However, we bring things up to date in the discussion section below.

Findings

Literary critics, like scholars everywhere, are inclined to disagree with one another. For every theorist who, following Bakhtin (1994) and Benjamin (1968), believes the epic is outmoded, there is another like Mandleson (1976) or Moretti (1996), who makes the case for its continuing relevance. Yet, regardless of these internecine debates, there is consensus on the literary form’s component parts (Abrams 1993). For present purposes, the three key considerations are: (1) *time and place*; (2) *monstrous gods*; and (3) *underworld encounters*.

Time and Place

According to Ezra Pound, the founding father of the Modernist movement in literature, an epic is “a long poem containing history.” Although his definition is far from definitive, Pound nonetheless captures the temporal and spatial aspects of epic encounters. Originally recited from memory by professionally trained performance poets, epics not only take a long time to narrate (the *Iliad* contains almost 16,000 lines, the *Mahabharata* boasts 74,000 verses) but are often set in the dim and distant past.

Hollister is no different. The amount of time it takes to shop HCo is a constant refrain. Apart from the long journeys that some informants make to get to the big city store, many cannot find it when they arrive. As Hollister does not look like a normal retail outlet – no display windows, no external signage, no name on the fascia, no fascia! – more than a few mistake it for a Chinese restaurant and wander around the mall for some time before catching on. It’s the long line of shoppers waiting outside that gives the game away and, although many express dismay about time spent in a slowly-moving queue, the delay heightens consumers’ anticipation. As Jordan, shopping with his girlfriend, recalls:

When two hundred meters away from Hollister, I couldn’t help but notice the humongous queue just to get in. I could not believe my eyes. I was in total shock as I have never experienced something like this before. Joining the end of the queue, I asked “Is it always like this?” to which she replied

495 “yeah,” although the wait only added to my excitement of
496 my first time visiting this popular store.

497 And the dilatoriness does not end once inside. To the contrary,
498 it gets tardier and tardier, thanks to the subdued lighting (which
499 makes size and price labels hard to read); thanks to the absence
500 of in-store mirrors (which means queuing for the limited supply
501 of changing cubicles); and thanks to the disorientating layout
502 (whose one-way circulation system is confusing for the uninitiated).
503 If, as Underhill (2008) contends, dwell time spent in store
504 is directly proportional to total spend, Hollister’s delaying tactics
505 are a marketing masterstroke (Moore and Doherty 2009). Not
506 least because the longer consumers tarry the more reluctant they
507 are to surrender their shopping sunk costs. Lauren, for example,
508 divulges that “all I wanted to do was run the other way!” But
509 “because I had waited so long,” she feels obliged to see things
510 through.

511 Time does not just drag in the HCo cabana, it stands still and
512 gets thrown into reverse. Many informants refer to the retro feel
513 of the retail offer. Whether it be the aged beach hut exterior,
514 complete with sun-bleached shutters, or the antique armchairs
515 in the vestibule, or the artfully distressed display tables, or the
516 waiting area adjacent to the checkouts, with its time-worn furnis-
517 shings, the overall aesthetic is similar, several said, “to my
518 grandmother’s front parlor.”

519 Yet for all its contrived and carefully packaged heritage, Hol-
520 lister triggers authentic feelings of nostalgia among youthful
521 customers (Grayson and Martinec 2004). Several say it brings
522 back happy memories of innocent childhood, when they played
523 on the beach with their siblings. Others mention prior visits to
524 Southern California, where they enjoyed the laid-back lifestyle
525 that HCo evokes. And yet others reminisce about their adoles-
526 cent obsession with the Hollister brand, which they have since
527 outgrown. Given that the average age of informants is less than
528 21, this early yearning may appear incongruous. Nostalgic feel-
529 ings are not only age dependent but increase as people get older
530 (Davis 1979). However, as Holbrook and Schindler (1994) show,
531 nostalgic imprinting peaks in early adulthood and is expressed
532 later in life. Steven’s reflections indicate that vicarious nostalgia
533 (Goulding 2001) can be triggered early too:

534 My visit to the store was on a cold and drizzly November
535 evening so needless to say I was glad of a bit of heat and
536 shelter. And then the smell hit me like a bullet to the temple
537 and just like that I felt young and cool again. I felt like I was
538 thirteen years old and all the feelings that go with that [fear
539 of talking to girls, worried about zits, anxiety over appear-
540 ance]. While at that time these were not feelings I enjoyed, I
541 suddenly realized that I would love to go back to those days
542 when life seemed easier (even if it was only six years ago)
543 and sit with my old crew and talk about the same trivial talk-
544 ing points that used to dominate our lives. It made me realize
545 how much I missed those days and left me with almost a
546 feeling of nostalgia.

547 Hollister, then, is tantamount to a time machine, albeit a time
548 machine like *Dr Who*’s Tardis that transports them to differ-
549 ent places. For the most part that place is Southern California.

The smells, the sounds, the “shack,” the state and national flags
draped overhead, the array of customized surfboards behind the
checkouts, the vast video wall streaming pictures of surfers,
and the semi-desert temperature of the palm tree-peppered
retail store, all combine to convey for Annette an overpowering
impression of . . .

. . . entering into the beach life of California! We were greeted
at the front door of the almost “beach hut like” building by
members of staff and asked “how are you today?” I felt like
I had just stepped out of a plane into a foreign country as the
heat of the place nearly knocked me out. I quickly took my
winter gear off to try and cool down.

So-Cal is not consumers’ only destination, however. Hollister
serves as a fantasy departure lounge for many imagined places,
not least those with similar surfer lifestyles such as Hawaii,
Australia, and South Africa. It is also routinely compared to
the busy lobby of a boutique hotel, to a themed casino on the
Las Vegas strip and, more often than not, to an exclusive night-
club for beautiful people (largely on account of the expectant
crowds queuing outside and the deafening music within).

Imaginary secondary worlds are likewise invoked by
informants, most notably Narnia (mainly because of the
wardrobe-like display units), Oz (with its great and powerful
wizard, Mike Jeffries), and Walt Disney’s *Jungle Book* (a pre-
sumed inspiration for the “weird wallpaper”). Theme parks,
movie sets, computer games, and television shows, such as *Bay-
watch*, *Home and Away* and *The OC*, similarly spring to mind
 (“It felt,” James states, “as though you’d stepped through a
door and into another part of the world with beautiful women
everywhere”).

Most agree, though, that its atmospheric is deliciously
discombobulating, a retailing version of what symbolist poet
Arthur Rimbaud terms “a derangement of the senses” and what
Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) deem “fantasies, feelings, and
fun.” Bedazzled bewilderment, in fact, is a very common reac-
tion to the hypnotic Hollister encounter. “I was completely
disorientated,” Ryan records, “I didn’t have a clue what I was
looking for. . . But had subconsciously decided that I wanted
something from here.” Jack, furthermore, finds himself exiting
the store with wonderful wares he did not know he wanted: “I
know this because I initially intended to enter the store to pur-
chase a body warmer but left having spent a fortune and three
bags full of clothes and a bottle of perfume.”

Darren, furthermore, was so enraptured during his first visit
that he is ready to take the next flight to LAX and live the beach-
combing life of a surfer dude (immigration officials permitting):

I felt no rush to get out of the store as I felt myself warming
to the surroundings. I would love to visit California in the
near future and being provided with this brief encounter as
to how life is on the other side of the water has given me
encouragement to look into visiting the area, not just as a
tourist but as a potential resident.

Not everyone is as captivated as Darren. For many, HCo
means captivity, the retailing equivalent of a “prisoner of war
camp.” The cloying scent, pounding soundtrack, constricted

605 layout, and all round sensory overload evoke a world of water-
606 boarding rather than surfboarding for some. On top of that is
607 the indiscriminate pushing and shoving and snarling and swear-
608 ing when the store gets busy. As Siobhan says, “the shop was
609 packed and there was so much going on around me. Running for
610 the clothes, people were quick to get their size. I was astonished
611 at how this brand made individuals almost kill for the clothes.”
612 Michael concurs: “the store was overcrowded and it was like a
613 fight to the death to find a product you wanted before anyone else
614 did. I grabbed anything I remotely liked so no other person could
615 take it.” Many more refer to the unremitting “madness” of the
616 interior and its seething swarms of clothes-crazed consumers.

617 *Monstrous Gods*

618 In the annals of the heroic epic, one thing remains constant.
619 The presence of gods and monsters (Miller 2000). From the
620 Bull of Heaven in *Gilgamesh*, through Grendel and his dam in
621 *Beowulf*, to the nine Black Riders in *Lord of the Rings*, there
622 are always (life-threatening) monsters that must be overcome
623 by the (all too human) hero (Bowra 1952). Such encounters
624 are engineered and overseen by higher powers (often but not
625 always in a hands-off fashion). On occasion, indeed, the gods and
626 monsters are one, be it Satan in *Paradise Lost* or Don Corleone
627 in *The Godfather*.

628 Hollister, most informants agree, is the home of the gods. The
629 heavenly beauty of the sales associates is referred to repeatedly.
630 On copious occasions, HCo’s scantily dressed employees are
631 described in classical turns of phrase. For one, they’re “demi-
632 gods.” For another, they’re “carved by Zeus himself.” For yet
633 another they’re “half-naked Adonises with abs that could break
634 concrete.” And yet another breathlessly records that “I get a
635 wide smile and cheerful ‘Hello’ from Hercules.” Collectively,
636 HCo’s associates are “beautiful mythical creatures. . . high Greek
637 gods.” So surpassing is their pulchritude that several informants
638 are struck dumb, much like the patriarchs of Troy when they first
639 laid eyes on Helen (Bowra 1952). Michael, though, manages to
640 mumble. . .

641 In my moment of despair the Hollister gods sent me an angel
642 to help, well at least she looked like an angel. A Hollister
643 employee had seen me wandering around the shop in a daze
644 and had come over to help me in my struggle to find fashion-
645 able clothing. The girl was absolutely stunning, she had long
646 flowing blonde hair, bright blue eyes and a sparkling smile
647 that lit up the room. . . She said “Welcome to Hollister! Can I
648 help you with anything?” I was left completely speechless. I
649 had never seen anyone so beautiful working in a shop before.

650 And it’s not just the physical specimens in-store. Supersized
651 sepia photographs of HCo models gaze down on consumers
652 while they wander among the wares. Divinities one and all, they
653 are graven idols incarnate. But they are far from unapproachable.
654 Many informants are amazed by the affability of such heavenly
655 creatures, creatures who would not give them a second glance
656 (much less deign to speak) in the real world outside HCo. Such
657 up-close-and-personal encounters are doubly delightful for con-
658 sumers, if only because the flaws in the perfect façade become

659 apparent. The fake American accents adopted by sales asso-
660 ciates are much mocked by our essayists, as are the climatically
661 inappropriate uniforms and regulation red flip-flops. Enforced,
662 evidently, by corporate fiat, the incongruity of their attire and
663 intonation helps humanize the otherwise superhuman. Nicola’s
664 irreverent remarks illustrate this:

665 At first, I was greeted by one of the godliest figures of a man
666 I have ever laid eyes on. At last things were looking up for
667 Hollister! His colorful checked shirt encased his body per-
668 fectly, caressing every curve of his muscular physique. He
669 flicked his hair to one side and flashed me a smile, bring-
670 ing me to freeze on the spot for what felt like ages but in
671 reality was just a few short seconds. However, the atrocious
672 sound that came from his luscious lips shattered all hope for
673 any future happening between us. The boy’s false American
674 accent conflicted with his natural Belfast twang, scraping the
675 skin off my eardrums and causing my whole body to wince.

676 For sure, the deities at the door of the store – and the seraphim
677 smiling beatifically behind the cash registers – are not the only
678 gods in attendance. Another presence looms large: the parent
679 or guardian. Quite a few of the informants recount stories of
680 adolescent expeditions to Hollister, when it was *the* brand to
681 be seen in, with the almighty custodians of the family’s purse
682 strings. Stern of countenance, they sit silently in the armchairs
683 opposite the checkouts. Baleful of eye, they wait for their lost
684 sheep to return with armfuls of apparel. Wrathful of mien, they
685 wonder whether it will cost them an arm or a leg to escape the
686 HCo torment. “I spotted my dad in the comfy seat,” Lisa reports.
687 “He gave me that look. Everyone has been given *that* look. The
688 look that meant ‘Hurry up before I drag you by the ear out of
689 here’.”

690 Patriarchs and matriarchs may be forbidding, occasionally
691 indignant divinities, but they are not the brand’s most monstrous
692 creatures. The real demon, for many, is Hollister’s CEO Mike
693 Jeffries. His untoward remarks about plus-size consumers, who
694 are not only unwelcome in his stores but actively discriminated
695 against by the sizing of HCo’s product range, enraged numerous
696 essayists. Equally widespread is the belief that his brand makes
697 life difficult for the differently abled (inadequate wheelchair
698 access, for instance), willfully destroys unsold merchandise, and
699 buys up cast-offs from thrift shops to ensure that the poor, the
700 homeless, and analogous undesirables are not seen sporting the
701 seagull. Most deplorable of all is the treatment allegedly meted
702 out to a prosthetic-armed employee, who was confined to the
703 stock room except in wintertime when long-sleeved tops are
704 permitted (Craik 2011).

705 For some, the entire brand is a marketing monstrosity. It
706 employs every ploy in the atmospheric playbook to part fools
707 and their money. It’s gull-winged logo is entirely apt since
708 gulling the customer is what the brand’s all about. It is noth-
709 ing less than “the Satan of retail stores,” “a drug that teenagers
710 crave,” “an ant colony of pod people,” “an evil corporate entity
711 flogging retro.”

712 This antipathy, however, surely represents a form of revenge
713 for those who feel the real monsters are themselves. Again and
714 again, informants are wracked by paroxysms of self-loathing.

The beautiful people all around, the body-shaming clothes that do not fit, and the sneaking suspicion that they are not only out of place but secretly being laughed at by the store's sales personnel, often gives rise to feelings of futility, abjection, despair. Even the most self-confident consumers feel pigeon-chested, round-shouldered, snaggle-toothed, cellulite-infested or ugly-tree bludgeoned. "I left that store," Danielle despairs, "feeling completely down about my self-image and feeling like I was by far the ugliest human on this planet." Similarly stricken, Katherine decides that "I need to go and find the nearest Weight Watchers group and sign up right away." Sarah-Jane, conversely, has sudden cravings for a fast food fix. "I felt like turning around," she confesses, "and going straight to KFC to comfort eat, cry, and re-evaluate my life." Nicola's no different, apart from her preferred destination:

Frustrated, depressed and empty-handed, I finally left the store. I strutted my way in protest to the closest McDonald's determined to order equivalent in the cost of food to that of an overpriced Hollister hoodie. As I chowed down on my extra-large cheesy Big Mac, feeling more ashamed with each and every bite I took, I thought back to my California fantasy experience. Maybe I had set my expectations too high, maybe I was just having a bad day or maybe, as I looked down at my expanding waistline, I was not quite the body type that the Hollister brand exemplified. As I compared myself to the half-naked staff member who looked as though she was just off the Victoria Secret runway, I could literally feel myself becoming engrossed with envy. Could a retail clothing store have this much impact or was this the guilt of the grease I had just consumed finally kicking in?

Most of these feelings are kept private, admittedly, or confessed to the companions who accompany our informants. Occasionally, however, the mortification is made public, as when a pair of friends is approached by the store manager and one is offered a modelling job on the spot. The other is not. As Jamie confesses:

Maybe I'm just being bitter because I have never been asked to work for Hollister. The closest I actually came was when I was with a friend who was approached. I had to stand awkwardly as the conversation progressed between the scout and the friend. I did my best to smile politely and throw in some bicep flexing when I thought it was appropriate, just in the hope that the conversation would turn to me next. I didn't even get offered a stockroom job.

Underworld Encounters

Although dark thoughts about the brand are commonplace, dark thoughts about the darkness are universal. If there is one thing that everybody agrees upon, it is the inkiness of Hollister's interior. Informants incessantly refer to the lack of lighting and the resultant inability to see the merchandise clearly, let alone orient themselves in the pitch-black building. The consequences of this roaming in the gloaming – stumbling on the stairs, tripping

over potted palms, buying bright red T-shirts that turn out to be sickly pink – are routinely recounted. James is typical:

The décor inside was amazing looking but seemed pointless when it was so hard to see. The lighting within the shop was awful. Any piece of clothing I lifted I had to double check the color and try seeing the size. . . The darkness of the shop was unbearable. Every product looked different because of how dark it was. It made shopping a lot more difficult than it already was. With a beach-themed shop, I thought it would have been bright and positive but not with the outside being day and the inside being night.

Dark humor, rather than righteous indignation, is the prevailing mood, however. Many make jokes about the need for a torch, or a pair of night-vision goggles, or coming down with a sudden attack of conjunctivitis. Sarcastic remarks are also made about the reasons for the murk: power outage, failure to pay utility bills, desire to keep running costs to a minimum, a sneaky trick to stretch time spent in store (and, therefore, consumer spending).

Joking aside, quite a few informants embrace the darkness. Apart from those suffering bad hair days who are thus able to hide the fact, the gloom granted respite from store personnel attempting to make a sale, as well as the judgmental appraisals of other customers. It also offers a frisson of excitement that's rarely found in fashion shops (cf. Dobscha and Foxman 2012). Several compare it to an Aladdin's cave, a treasure hunt and Alice's Wonderland, albeit with a better soundtrack.

However, for every nighthawk like Leanne who feels "drawn into the darkness," there's a daylight lover like Lauren who dislikes the nocturnal ambiance. Far from being a laid-back beach shack filled with ripped and rugged surfing dudes as dusk descends in southern California, Hollister, for her, is more like a black hole, a dungeon, a torture chamber, a dank cellar, a Venus flytrap in the depths of the equatorial jungle:

It reminded me of a haunted house. When I walked inside, I saw. . . NOTHING! I had to let my eyes adjust to the lack of light and. . . I felt like I had entered another world. I began to trek around what now looked like a rainforest. I was intrigued and tried my best to look at some of the clothes but found myself bumping into palm trees and expecting coconuts and maybe a monkey to jump onto my head.

In this regard, informants' accounts accord with the most distinctive component of epic narratives: descent to the underworld (Macdonald 1987; Smith 2001; Thurston 2009). Formally known as *katabasis*, underground excursions are not only integral to ancient epics – legendary visitors include Orpheus, Theseus, Jason, Hercules, Demeter, Odysseus, and Aeneas – but they are their oldest element. *Katabasis* has been a constant throughout the genre's long history from Dante's *Inferno* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* to latter-day epic poems like Pound's *Cantos* and Eliot's *Waste Land*. As Falconer (2007, p. 2) puts it in her study of descent narratives in post war western culture, "we are still very much governed by a 'katabatic imagination', that is a worldview which conceives of selfhood as the narrative construct of an infernal journey and return."

For many consumers, when they pass through Hollister’s porch, then take a left (Bettys) or right turn (Dudes), they’re stepping down into a retro grotto, a retailing underworld of sorts. It is an underworld that’s thrilling for some, terrifying for others, overwhelming for many, underwhelming for a few. It is a world of demons (other customers, shoving and pushing) and angels (drop-dead gorgeous employees), of pleasure (wonderful music, beautiful smell) and pain (awful music, offensive smell), of magic (the video wall streaming pictures of surfers) and mystery (cannot see what’s right in front of them), where fantasy (sunny southern California within) meets reality (incessant Irish rainfall without) and expectations are exceeded (both positively and negatively). It is so different from any other retail store that some want to wallow in it forever and others cannot escape too quickly. “It’s like being pushed down a mineshaft,” Michael complains. “It is,” former employee Zoë ruefully explains, “a stage set that loses its luster when the lights go up:”

6.00 p.m. The beach hut doors close. The lights are turned on. With one click of a switch, the brand was sucked out of the shop entirely as the music disappeared and the famous Hollister smell went with it. From the outside as a customer looking in, it looks like the best store in the world. The darkness allows the bright clothes to catch everyone’s eyes. However, as an employee I discovered that the dark hides all the negative features of Hollister. The turning on of the lights exposed the store, showing a horrible bland brand in its true colors.

Although katabasis is central to the epic tradition, trips to the underworld are undertaken for a reason (Thurston 2009). The ghosts of the glorious dead are summoned for sagacious advice, as well as their prophetic prowess (Nicholson 2014). And something very similar happens in Hollister, where the act of stepping down onto the infernal shop-floor is accompanied by advice from disembodied others. These are the many and varied companions of our informants, who frequently feature in the stories and whose forthright opinions inform consumers’ accounts. Although around one third of the essayists venture into Hollister alone – mainly to make up their own minds and avoid being influenced by other people – most visits involve third parties, ranging from rugby clubs, though family groups, to Sarah-Jane’s raging aunt who refuses to let it go thereafter. “My fifty-year-old auntie claimed it to be the worst shop ever, and that is no exaggeration. She has complained and complained and complained about her visit for months. And when someone even mentions the word Hollister, still to this day her rant begins AGAIN!”

In addition to this phantom chorus, informants’ introspections are filled with many other shadowy characters. These are the will o’ the wisps of social media, as well as the disembodied “they” of “they say that.” Just about everyone is aware of what’s being said about Hollister long before they darken its doors, let alone delve into the darkness beyond. Whether it be the need for a flashlight, the allure of the employees, the overpowering smells and sounds, or the latest scuttlebutt about Jefferies’ maladroitness remarks, consumers are well informed beforehand. However very few, Jack among them, are fully prepared for the retailing reality:

I was stunned by the darkness of the store. I had never been in a store like it before in my life. What sort of store that wants to sell their products doesn’t have any of them displayed in the windows outside? Or that has terrible lighting almost as if they are trying to actually hide it from the customers? I believe this was purposely done by Hollister. I believe the layout is purposely designed to way it is because if you are looking for a hoodie for example but have no idea where to get them, you will have to walk throughout the entire store and then maybe see something else you like and may want to purchase more than what it is you came in for.

That said, more than a few feel Hollister has become a ghost of itself. The madness amid the darkness, which many remember from their teenage years, has dissipated and lost consumer traction. It’s no longer the place to be or be seen in (through the gloom). Hollister, for some, is in limbo, a pale reflection of its former magnificence. It is “stuck in the past age,” Marcus says. It is “a closed theme park,” Ryan reports. It has gone “from a ten to a two,” Rachel concludes. Ironically, though, just as many of our Hollister essayists note that the brand is not what it was, so too the outcome of this fall from grace – much less crowded, more laid back, largely hassle-free – is closer to the way cool So-Cal spirit it sold in the first place. As Steven, a former Hollister hater, concedes:

I moved from the front foyer further into the shop, the shop that I remembered to be darker than a nightclub and with music almost as loud. Except, it wasn’t like I remembered it at all. While yes, the music was definitely above average and yes, it wouldn’t hurt to invest in higher voltage lightbulbs. But it was definitely a lot more pleasant than I remembered it to be. In fact, I would go so far as to say it actually added to the atmosphere and, even further than this, I actually enjoyed it! The whole shop seemed really laid-back – living up to the surfer image they preach. I mean, after all, who needs lightbulbs? Am I right? I felt really relaxed here, compared to the uneasy feelings I remembered from my past visits. Was I falling in love with Hollister?

Discussion

Steven, it seems, is in two minds about HCo. As such, he symbolizes the interplay of myth and epic. In keeping with myth-informed studies of experiential brand environments, such as ESPN Zone (Kozinets et al. 2004), World of Coca-Cola (Hollenbeck, Petersm, and Zinkhan 2008), American Girl Place (Borghini et al. 2009) and Louis Vuitton (Joy et al. 2014), there is much that many consumers admire about Hollister. These include: the southern Californian surfer theme; the evocative echoes of earlier times; the good-looking sales associates; the awesome music and alluring aromas; the striking seagull logo; the vast video wall; the brushed cotton T-shirts and super-skinny jeans; the American ideology that inspired Shauna’s introductory *panegyric*.

Set against these myth-aligned findings is the martial world of epic poetry (Merchant 1971). This too is readily apparent in the Hollister encounter. The heaving crowds; the oppressive heat;

the lengthy queues; the exorbitant prices; the in-store obstacle course; the shortage of shop-floor mirrors; the claustrophobic changing cubicles; the Adonis- and Aphrodite-like sales associates who denude customers' self-confidence; and, above all, the "mart of darkness" atmospherics which make it impossible to discern colors, prices, sizes, much less place one foot in front of another without falling over. More than a few infuriated informants concluded that the retail brand should be renamed "Hollister."

If our study had taken prior, myth-informed retail scholarship as its point of departure, our findings might have been much sunnier and more upbeat than they are. However, by beginning with the hitherto-neglected epic – and its characteristic "poetics of conflict" (Bloom 1994, p. 6) – we are better able to explicate, understand, and encapsulate unsavory aspects of consumers' exasperating Hollister experiences. Our findings thus suggest that, much as Belk et al.'s (2003) study of consumer desire (which regards it as a lack or absence), is complemented by Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman's (2017) analogous analysis (which treats desire as an active presence), myth and epic provide parallel yet interpenetrating perspectives on contemporary consumer behavior in immersive retailing milieus. Epic's contributions do not end there, though. The genre intimates that, when it comes to Hollister, and in marketplace matters more generally, *pain pays*, *opposites attract*, *times change*, and *peace accords*.

Pain Pays

Conventional retail wisdom holds that customers must be coddled (Berman and Evans 2012). But as Dobscha and Foxman (2012) show in their study of Filene's Basement Bridal Event, making life difficult for customers can pay dividends too. Just as denial increases consumer desire for limited edition and deluxe products like the Birkin bag or the Morgan roadster – both of which have a waiting list for the waiting list (Beverland 2009; Kapferer 2015) – so too HCo persecutes its customers and profits thereby. This is more than mere price gouging or strategic product shortfalls, though, because shoppers benefit as well (Brown 2003). They benefit from the trials, tribulations, and torments of the in-store encounter. The hazing that HCo's customers undergo are part of the brand's appeal and, as studies of initiation rituals likewise reveal (Cialdini 2007), help strengthen their commitment to it. The unalloyed joy of making that just right purchase ("it made me feel very stylish"), the ego-enhancing compliments of friends and family when the new product is worn in public ("I felt like a model"), and the prideful feeling that comes from sporting the striking seagull logo ("I felt invincible") are partly attributable to the endurance test consumers undergo in store. Or as Morrison (2012, p. 119) puts it in *Tales From the Mall*: "The most alarming fact about happiness and consumer choice concerns individuals overcoming terrible odds to finally possess their desired product. The greater the obstacle, the greater the happiness." Indeed, if the epic teaches us anything at all, it's that the physical tribulations make the psychic triumphs more delicious.

Hollister, in effect, sells pleasurable pain much like Tough Mudders (Scott, Cayla, and Cova 2017), Burning Man (Kozinets 2002a), white water rafting (Arnould and Price 1993), skydiving (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993), trekking (Ladwein 2007), or what critical criminologists call "deviant leisure activities," such as parkour, base jumping, and binge drinking (Smith and Raymen 2017). HCo is fashion apparel's equivalent of Black Friday's customer fisticuffs, or IKEA's willfully bewildering store layout, or the roach-rich rooms of the Worst Hotel in the World, or indeed the no-go areas that are found in luxury retail brand stores like Oger in Amsterdam and Chanel's legendary flagship on rue Cambon. In the former, the top-floor boardroom is off-limits to all but the most high-net-worth individuals (van Marrewijk and Broos 2012). In the latter, the stairs to Karl Lagerfeld's atelier are policed by uniformed security guards (Dion and Arnould 2011). And they are all the more intriguing as a consequence, much like the inaccessible top floor of Niketown Chicago (Sherry 1998, p. 124).

HCo, it seems, is less of a comfort zone than a discomfort zone. It's not so much a third place as a third-degree place. On entering the retail store, heroic consumers either emerge triumphant or retreat defeated. Regardless of the outcome, the experience itself is unforgettable. It is an in-store challenge that is difficult to replicate on-line. Until such times as Oculus Rift retailing headsets – or Pokémon Go HCo, perhaps? – become readily available.

Opposites Attract

Hollister, to put it another way, is a secular form of *askesis*. *Askesis* is the extreme asceticism that many true believers employ – fasting, celibacy, mortification of the body, and so forth – to attain higher spiritual states. Not everyone wants that higher spiritual state, however. As our SPI essays show, many consumers hate HCo with a vengeance and cannot get out of the store quickly enough. True, this tendency is more marked than it might otherwise be, since our informants were *required* to visit Hollister and hence had no choice in the matter. Nevertheless, it brings the divisive nature of the brand into sharp focus. This is something that is missing in myth-mediated research on flagship stores, where researchers are largely reliant on consumers who have chosen to patronize the emporia and, although hints of negativity are evident in some accounts, an arcadian air of sweetness and light prevails.

Much like Marmite, Mini, Red Bull, Ryanair, Starbucks and Hummer, Hollister is a "hostile brand" (Moon 2010). It divides consumers into pro- and anti-camps who are at odds with one another. Numerous studies of brand communities show that "us" versus "them" is a powerful bonding agent, not least because external hostility increases internal cohesion and commitment (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Cova, Kozinets, and Shankar 2007; Müniz and O'Guinn 2001). Breaking the rules binds the rule-breakers, as the recent rise of Restaurant Day in Finland bears witness (Hietanen et al. 2016). A consumer-driven, pop-up food festival, Restaurant Day has developed into a social movement that flies in the face of official food-preparation legislation. Not only does it "turn the status quo of city life on

its head” (411), but shows that there are alternative, antithetical ways of doing things, and doing them successfully. Restaurant Day is a carnivalesque version of Hollister’s hell-hole appeal.

Although external hostility increases internal cohesion and commitment, it can come at the cost of conservatism and unwillingness to change (Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003). This too is true of Hollister, where the campaign to depose Jeffries became an epic struggle in itself (Berfield and Rupp 2015). However, when the crunch came in 2014, and sales fell by 30%, the brand changed its formerly winning formula and abandoned the darkness (Shah 2016). The change, though, was very much in keeping with Hollister’s rebellious ethos. That is to say, HCo succeeded in the first place by doing the opposite of what every other apparel brand was doing, not least with its brilliantly antithetical atmospherics. When the moment of truth transpired, the brand remained true to itself by doing the opposite of the opposite. It reverted to the norm, regressed to the mean, which in Hollister’s case means leaving the darkness behind and letting the sunshine in (Bhasin and Rupp 2017).

The revamped format, accordingly, has replaced the beach hut frontage with formal display windows, with name-emblazoned fascias, with attractively lit and well-laid out merchandise displays, with a fragrance-free, music-muted, multi mirrored, easy-to-navigate interior (Forbes 2015). The fussy foyer arrangement has gone, as have the overstuffed armchairs opposite the checkouts. Sales associates no longer wear the shorts ‘n’ sandals combo and they many lack buff ‘n’ beautiful credentials that previously obtained. Although implementation of the new look has been patchy to date – the Belfast store was revamped in October 2015, but three of our four observed stores still boasted the cabana look in late 2016 – it seems as though HCo has grown up, put away its childish things, and adopted the mantle of adulthood. Unlike the mighty Achilles, it’s clear that Hollister has chosen a long and comfortable life over early death and everlasting fame.

Times Change

Time and tide wait for no brand. And HCo’s decision to revert to the norm accords with retailing precedent. Manifold theories of retail evolution – the wheel theory, the accordion theory, the dialectical theory, the crisis-response theory, the polarization principle, et al. – attest to retailing’s zigzag, cyclical, rise-and-fall character (Brown 1990). Yet prior studies of immersive retailing environments, bar Barbie’s debacle in Shanghai (McGrath, Sherry, and Diamond 2013) and Lewis’s leaving of Liverpool (Patterson, Hodgson, and Shi 2008), have ignored this dynamic dimension. Much time, certainly, has been devoted to developing typologies of flagship formats, usually with the aid of four-cell matrices whose veracity has since been challenged (Webb 2009). But studies of change, be it the shuttering of ESPN Zone, the multiple overhauls of Niketown Chicago, or the advent of American Girl’s smaller satellite stores, are conspicuous by their absence. Emplacement rather than replacement has been retail scholars’ principal concern.

To be sure, our multiple SPIs study of Hollister is equally culpable. It too pertains to a particular point in time, albeit a

particularly important point in time. This point is known in classical poetry and drama as *peripeteia*, meaning “sudden change.” HCo’s *peripeteia* has been attributed to the vagaries of fashion, familiarity breeding contempt, being outgrown by its demographic, and the fleet-footedness of fast-fashion brands like Zara (Shah 2016). However, our data suggest that *hamartia*, a fatal weakness akin to Achilles’ infamous heel, played at least some part. Fully one quarter of our informants referred to Jeffries’ offensive remarks about HCo’s customers or the retail chain’s allegedly discriminatory employment practices. The brand was an accident waiting to happen, and happen it did.

Perhaps, though, hostile brands like HCo, and pleasurable pain purveyors more generally, do not last very long. Filene’s bridal event finishes in a few minutes, Tough Mudders takes a matter of hours, Black Friday is one long day of delirium, Colorado River rafting demands “several days’ journey into the unknown” (Arnould and Price 1993, p. 25), Burning Man is extinguished in a week or so, Restaurant Day pops up four times per year. Hollister dazzled for a decade, as did ESPN Zone. However, this is rather short in the “spectacular retailing” scheme of things, where magnificent department stores like Macy’s, Selfridges and Galleries Lafayette have been dazzling shoppers for centuries (Leach 1993). In this regard, it may be worth building on Borghini et al.’s (2009) intriguing idea that there are identifiable “quilting points,” historical moments when cultural brands cohere into powerful commercial entities. Conversely, it’s quite possible that antithetical “quitting points,” when powerful commercial entities fall apart, also exist. Identifying the quitting point, as Parmentier and Fischer (2015) did in their study of a once-successful television series, is a future challenge for retail scholars.

There is a past challenge too, insofar as HCo has completely abandoned the retro look that was integral to its initial appeal. As the SPIs showed, more than a few informants found the old-style stores deeply nostalgic. They were transported back to fondly remembered childhood holidays, playing happy families by the seashore. Today’s Hollister, however, is less conducive to reminiscence. The tumbledown shack has gone, as has Old Glory overhead, as have the distressed furnishings, chandeliers in the foyer and doors labelled ‘Betties’ and ‘Dudes’. The vast video wall, likewise, is more devoted to the latest sales promotions than idyllic images from that celebrated retroscape: Huntington Beach, CA.

Whether these changes comprise a turning point for the nostalgia tide that rose in the late 1990s and has been in spate ever since (Lowenthal 2016), remains to be seen. But the fact that comparatively young consumers experience significant pangs of retail store-induced yesteryearning is nonetheless noteworthy. Nostalgia is not supposed to assail the young (Holbrook and Schindler 1994). It’s an old person’s emotion (Davis 1979). Granted, the study of nostalgia has been revolutionized in recent years. The condition is more widespread and less debilitating than previously believed (Routledge 2016). At the same time, however, the significance of situational influences – such as in-store atmospherics – remain something of a mystery. As past-time room settings have been shown to improve the wellbeing of Alzheimer’s sufferers (Draaisma 2014), suitably themed retail

store contexts may do something similar for youthful consumers with comparatively little to be nostalgic about. Is there such a thing as False Shopping Memory Syndrome? Braun, Ellis, and Loftus's (2002) work on Disneyland, where reminiscing consumers "remembered" meeting Bugs Bunny in the bowels of the Magic Kingdom, is suggestive in this regard. Or perhaps it's just a case of kids growing up more quickly these days. More research on early-onset vicarious nostalgia (Goulding 2001) is necessary.

Peace Accords

In addition to vicarious nostalgia, studies of retrospection have long distinguished between those who yearn for the good old days and those who not only prefer the present but look back aghast at the past (Davis 1979). The same could analogously be said about myth and epic. Their light and dark worldviews can be difficult to reconcile. It does not have to be one or the other, however. The two constructs are indeed different. But, as our HCo study has shown, there is a positive side the epic encounter and, as Dobscha and Foxman (2012) demonstrate in their investigation of Filene's, negativity is not absent when myths are enacted.

The two can be reconciled, furthermore, if it is accepted that myth is general whereas epic is specific and that myth deals with deities whereas epic emphasizes the human. Hollister sells an American myth worldwide, a myth that's carefully managed and rigorously controlled by the demiurges in the brand's design department. However, at the local level, within the individual retail stores, every hero-customer undergoes a personal epic quest through Hollister's unsettling underworld. Some emerge triumphant. Others fall by the wayside.

The relationship between myth and epic, in short, is akin to that between strategy and tactics, between structure and agency, between nomothetic and idiographic, between *langue* and *parole*, between the rolling waves and swerving surfers of Huntington Beach, CA.

Conclusion

Storytelling, according to Salmon (2010), bewitches modern managers' minds. And myth is a primal form of storytelling that has many contemporary champions, not least on the consultancy circuit (Mark and Pearson 2001; Randazzo 1995). Executives are routinely urged to myth-inform their brands, then turn them into legends (Vincent 2002). Today's brands, Holt (2004, p. 59) contends, compete in "myth markets" and thereby deliver "symbolic sustenance" to consumers. "The telling of product and brand-based myths," Caruana and Glozer (2014, p. 199) claim, "serves to ameliorate existential ambiguities surrounding personal identity burdens."

Myth has cornered the market among culturally inclined retailing and consumer researchers (Arnould 2005; Arnould and Thompson 2005). Epic, by contrast, rarely features on retailers' radar, except as a superlative, an adjectival intensifier that's primarily employed for sales promotional purposes (epic offers, epic deals, epic prices, etc.). Yet the epic, as a literary genre,

offers an alternative perspective on marketplace matters, a perspective that is related to, yet different from, the myth-shaped stories that dominate academicians' discourse and the storied solutions sold by management consultants.

Whereas the contemporary consensus is that myths are "a good thing," epics do not offer easy resolution. They focus on the struggle, often in individualistic terms rather than the gentler, collective project to attain meaning and belonging. They pertain to the battle for survival, to overcoming the odds, and of course to the euphoria that ensues thereafter. Chaotic, dystopian, personally demanding, occasionally agonistic, the epic is about human, all-too-human engagement in physical and psychic challenges.

Considering retail through an epic lens – and retailing is nothing if not combative (Obeng et al., 2016) – does *not* mean that myth-informed perspectives must be abandoned. The opposite, if anything, is the case. Better understanding of experiential retailing comes from multiple perspectives. Sherry (1998) and Peñaloza's (1999) similar yet different studies of Niketown attest to the insights that arise from contrasting viewpoints. Despite epic's martial mien, it is not battling with myth for conceptual supremacy, nor is SPI waging methodological war with ethnography. SPI may be antithetical to mainstream qualitative research, but as Hollister analogously proved in relation to apparel retailing, opposite is apposite. Epic is to myth as, in Kelly's (1994) artful parallel, lute is to trumpet. Played together they make sweet martial music that retailers should attend to.

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Executive summary

1519 If brands are warriors, as Gilmore (1999) suggests, is Hollister
1520 the Achilles of apparel retailing? Achilles, the hero of Homer's
1521 *Iliad*, was fleet of foot, fair of face, frail of heel, ferociously com-
1522 petitive, famously rebellious, and given the choice, preferred a
1523 short life of everlasting fame over a long, happy, and anonymous
1524 existence.

1525
1526 Hollister too was fast moving, racing from a standing start
1527 in Columbus, Ohio, to a place of global renown. Hollister too
1528 was famous for its exceedingly good looks, or that of its sales
1529 associates at least. Hollister too was nothing if not combative,
1530 especially toward consumers who were insufficiently svelte to
1531 wear its slim-fitting fashions. Hollister too was a retail store rene-
1532 gade, whose unconventional approach to atmospherics proved
1533 spectacularly successful for a while. And Hollister too had a
1534 suspect heel that finally proved fatal. However its ghost – like
1535 that of Achilles in Homer's later *Odyssey* – still haunts scholars'
1536 understanding of retail brand management.

1537 This article recounts aspects of the epic story of Hollister Inc.
1538 (HCo), a subsidiary of Abercrombie & Fitch that not only sold a
1539 brilliantly imaginary evocation of Southern California's idyllic
1540 surfer lifestyle, but became a must-have brand that simultane-
1541 ously enraptured fashion-conscious teenagers and enraged their
1542 parents or guardians, who suffered in silence while paying for
1543 the premium-priced privilege.

1544 With the aid of qualitative consumer research, and a concep-
1545 tual framework derived from the ancient conventions of epic
1546 poetry – not least its mandatory journey through the underworld
1547 – this article uncovers some of the secrets of the retail brand's
1548 seemingly inexplicable success.

1549 Focussing on Hollister's inky and intimidating atmospher-
1550 ics, which wilfully disrupted the received wisdom of retail store
1551 design, the study shows that making life difficult for customers
1552 can sometimes pay dividends. And, although tormenting the cus-
1553 tomer may antagonize more than a few – occasionally to the point
1554 of apoplexy – that's not necessarily a bad thing when it comes to
1555 targeting the way-cool, fashion-conscious, in-with-the-in-crowd
1556 market segment.

1557 Among other things, the research also suggests that the appeal
1558 of antithetical atmospherics, take-it-or-leave-it sales tactics, and
1559 the primordial allure of the underworld is inherently short lived.
1560 The dying fall, akin to that of Achilles and analogous epic heroes,
1561 is both dramatic and untimely. "Live fast, die young," in retail-
1562 ing as in life, is not for everyone, especially executives with an
1563 aversion to white water revenue streams.