

**Mirror Images: Unpacking the Cultural Values That Shape Our Lives**

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Advertising has become such a part of our consumer fabric that it is now difficult to separate it from the culture that birthed and coddled it (Stewart, 1992, p. 14). It is so ingrained in our way of life that it can relate to the question of the chicken and the egg. Which came first, culture or the advertising that seemingly sculpts it?

Gone are the days of ads only informing consumers of the specific benefits their product or service will provide. The explosion of narrative advertising has infiltrated the industry and has made a real impact on us all--- those who are the targets of advertising and those who create the work we all consume. This paper begins to outline some of the key issues related to storytelling advertising, especially its impact on culture and values. We also identify a research framework to better understand intended and unintended effects of narrative advertising on both consumers and marketers alike.

### **What is a narrative?**

Merriam-Webster defines the word “narrative” as “a story that is told or written.” Advertising that tells a story is called narrative advertising. Deighton, Romer, and McQueen (1989, p. 335) identify both drama advertising (identified by characters who talk with each other) and story advertising, which adds a narrator to the character and plot of the story.

Literary scholars such as Carol Birch (1997), Yiannis Gabriel (2000), Jim Mittelstadt (2003) and Jim Leitch (1986) are experts who have defined stories by highlighting key

elements such as plot, characters, setting, actions and conflict resolution (e.g. Birch in Foley, 1998; Gabriel, 2000).

According to literary expert Jim Mittlestadt (2003), stories are powerful as they allow people to wander in their own imagery and feelings, to sense the shared essence of experience and to assure that their relationship with the shared story is appropriate and pleasurable. It seems that people engage in stories for the warmth and pleasure they provide as well as their ability to inspire self- discovery. We were read stories as children and some of our first memories of understanding the world around us are based on well-known stories. It is a framework for passing on information that is both commonplace and powerful.

Today, storytelling is considered in such disciplines as management doctrines, children's literature, and media contexts. According to storytelling scholar, Carol Birch (1998), "storytelling is everywhere. The term almost becomes meaningless as it is bandied about to cover oral, print, and multimedia events."

A study by Escalas, Moore, and Britton (2004), discussed factors which most often sold consumers on a product (individual characteristics, ad characteristics, and the interaction between the ad and individual) (p. 105). Their findings confirmed the idea that narrative ads (the ones that tell a story) produce stronger, more positive feelings toward the product/service displayed.

### **How narratives work**

While there are certainly stylistic elements of stories that make them easily recognizable, it's the meanings behind stories that are likely most powerful. Scholars such

as Mittelstadt, O'Neill and Rainer have focused their writing on the learning in stories by discussing concepts such as the teleological principle, which is the process people go through to determine a purpose within the message. These are the big picture lessons within the story. Some literary scholars believe that the key to understanding the bigger purposes of stories is to recognize and resolve conflict within the message. They see a story consisting of a plot and expect resolution of the plot to be the key to conveying the message (e.g. O'Neill, 1994).

Mittelstadt (2003) believes that it is the higher- level teaching and moral values communicated that in fact makes the message a story (p. 24). A main pillar of narrative psychology is that humans have greater comprehension and cognitive learning when information is presented in a story format (Padgett & Allen, 1997, p. 49). In their work on creating brand image for service industries, Padgett and Allen (1997) use narrative theory to suggest that this is a powerful way that consumers cognitively comprehend and interpret the world around them (p. 53).

With storytelling ads, the intent is to build empathy with the viewer's response. Advertisers hope to bring viewers into the message both cognitively and emotionally to gain the greatest amount of connection with the message. When people feel empathy with a stimulus (persons etc.), they tend to remember those experiences more readily than when they do not feel empathy. In fact, some scholars believe that the power of stories lies in the viewer or reader's ability to connect with the core elements of the story so much that they see themselves as the key actor. The stories help to identify and resolve their own dreams as they see themselves in the message, believe in it's meaning and see it as a positive means of interpreting possibilities for themselves (Rainer, 1997). Stories allow

people to live vicariously through characters or situations, allowing for many more connections to those scenes/experiences (Alsup, 2003).

### **Why have they become such a popular form of advertising today?**

Adaval and Wyer (1998) explore how consumers most often make their purchasing decisions when they place themselves in the shoes of the actor in a narrative and “imagine” the use of the product from their perspective (p. 208). This “empathy” has been shown to have a persuasive impact when consumers “try on” the identity of another and view their world living it vicariously through the actors in the narrative (Boller & Olson, 1991, p. 166).

Narrative processing has also been shown to create links between the brand and a consumer’s self-concept (Escalas, 2004a, p. 168). Research by Schembri, Merrilees, and Kristiansen (2010) supports the view that a consumer’s own narrative looks to brand consumption to build on their self-concept (how they perceive themselves to be) (p. 623).

Stories tend to persuade others through the process of transportation. As defined by Green and Brock (2000), it is “immersion into a text,” where one becomes “lost” in the story (p. 702). Escalas (2004) looked further into transportation through narrative and the importance of mental simulation necessary to make this happen (p. 40).

### **What does this mean for those receiving the messages?**

#### Processing

This idea of viewer “identification” with the ad message is important. Advertisers want people to relate to the message such that they can incorporate it into their own experience base. In the process of relating to the message, viewers see themselves in the story, regardless of how well the main characters may appear similar on the surface. Something

in the setting, dialogue or other visual/verbal elements help people to identify with the message.

This concept of relating stimuli to one's self is often called self-referencing in marketing literature. Self-referencing is important to advertisers because they realize that knowledge about oneself is rich and plentiful. If viewers relate my ad and brand to these important personal mental structures, advertisers expect a greater likelihood of enhanced memory and affect. Self-referencing seems to benefit the viewer by increasing the number of pathways to the ad information in their minds. Since people remember personal experiences so well, advertisers would benefit if their messages connect to those experiences. When self-connections are made to brand messages, it can also benefit persuasion by heightening elaboration of that brand's distinct features and benefits (Meyers-Levy, Peracchio 1996, per Klein & Loftus).

Additionally, we find other concepts from psychology, which can help us better describe a story telling ad. Scripts and scenes are two such concepts. Experts have found that interpretations fit into identifiable scenes and scripts that are imbedded within the culture and the minds of the target consumers. A scene is "an organized whole, a representation of an idealized event (real or imagined) that includes people, setting, time, place, actions, affects and psychological functions." The minimal definition of a scene is that it includes at least one affect and at least one object of that affect" (Tompkins, 1979, p. 210). Scripts are formed as the person co-assembles families of related scenes, and then constructs individual rules for predicting, interpreting, responding, controlling and creating further scenes.

Everyone has a number of scripts varying in density and interconnectedness (Carlson and Carlson, 1984). The storytelling ad leverages these interconnections and gains its power from the script associations it generates. Scripts are based on deeply held beliefs imbedded and prompted based on affect associated with these situations. In other words, scripts that stick within our minds and hearts are not simply situations that have happened many times, but rather are based on situations that are deeply emotionally touching (either positively or negatively).

### **What does it mean for those crafting the messages?**

The impact that storytelling techniques have had on marketing campaigns does not just affect viewers. As the industry has changed, the individuals developing the messages have also been challenged. In a study of advertising history (PBS, "The Persuaders", 2004), our hosts describe how the industry has moved from "er" words in advertising to going way beyond simple comparisons. The field has evolved from convincing audiences of the specific benefits of the brands they pitch to deeply understanding the nuances of their audiences and carefully crafting messages that connect with them. Many of these connections are values based. Whether the values relate to humor, drama or story, marketers and creative teams are determined to move their audiences in demonstrative ways.

### **How creators make the storytelling ads**

There are a number of advertising scholars who have done very in-depth work in better understanding not only the types of creativity in advertising, but also some of the

subtleties in how the work is created in the first place. Creative practitioners, who are typically art directors, copywriters and creative directors, or as they are commonly called ‘creatives’, are affected by organizational culture through an informal and implicit code that directs and limits expressions of creativity in the development of advertisements (Stuhlfaut and Windels, 2011). Based on the findings of two of their qualitative studies, the creative code appears to consist of four dimensions: an agency’s shared meanings, values, and practical rules of thumb for what is creative; shared values for what is not creative; agreements about how ads should look; and understandings about how advertising should be produced.

The code operates subtly in the background to guide creatives in selecting concepts and techniques that will increase their reputation with their peers, and in choosing concepts that will most likely be approved by the creative director and, ultimately, by clients (see Nixon 2006). These codes drive the work developed and the overall theme and mood of creative output.

### **Next steps: Research possibilities - two studies**

We believe the narrative focus in creative advertising development is significant and has many implications for society as a whole. We also believe it especially impacts new employees and those we are teaching in our universities. For that reason, we are recommending two research studies as next steps from this paper. The first will help us better understand the scope of narrative ads and the potential impact on societal values/culture. The second will aid in understanding implications for marketing and advertising professionals who are developing these kinds of campaigns.

**Study 1:** In this study, we propose researching a few different product categories to be able to better articulate the level and kind of stories present in today's advertising. While preliminary, we are considering the automobile and soft drink categories, as they are heavily advertised, span price ranges and involvement levels by their target audiences, and have a range of work to study over several decades. We expect to do two kinds of research. First, we will conduct content analyses over similar time frames to determine key messages that are being produced. Then we will probe consumers, in smaller, more in-depth settings to better understand how these ads are impacting them. We will likely use mock ads and perfect a set-up which allows the respondent to give more honest and accurate feedback. Most consumers do not see themselves being impacted by advertising even though we know they are affected more than they think. Our goal is to better understand the subtle messages being received.

**Study 2:** The second research study will take place with the marketing teams themselves, especially advertising agency personnel who spend significant time developing and producing advertising messages. We will build off of the creative code study to determine how values are shared and absorbed by those working in the industry. We are especially interested in understanding how newer marketers are managing the value expectations in these organizations and how this impacts their self-concept and moral judgments with the work they produce. We believe there are many values being imposed on junior employees and want to better understand how they are managing these issues.

**Conclusion**

Narrative in advertising is a creative technique that seems to be here to stay. It is a framework that not only fits well within an entertainment focused society but also integrates seamlessly between disparate media forms. Whether you are advertising on television or getting a message out on social media, the story set up breaks through clutter and is accessible for a variety of vehicles. Audiences also seem to connect well with the hard work and money spent. Yet, while we recognize and often appreciate the efforts of these compelling creative techniques, we fear the implications of this work are not well understood. We believe there is an important opportunity to better understand story ads and the ways they impact the values that shape our lives. We believe the studies that we've outlined in this paper are an important way to begin this discovery.

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