

## How Authenticity, Narrator, and Plot of a Story Affect Perceived Brand Image

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**ABSTRACT:** Many successful brands have employed brand story to communicate with consumers. Brand story plays a part in helping consumers make sense of the brand. This study intended to investigate the relationship between brand story's dimensions, including authenticity, narrator, plot, and consumers' perceptions of brand image. A 2×2×2 experimental design was employed to test the effect of abovementioned dimensions on perceived brand image. Findings suggested that brand story with high authenticity, clear plot, and told by the first-person narrator tend to be perceived with more positive brand image than those with lower authenticity, non clear plot and told by non-first-person narrator.

Individuals learn to understand and perceive the world through stories (Escalas, 2004). Stories are common cultural element in one's life (Huang, 2005). It helps individuals understand their life experiences and inherently comprehend surrounding things in a narrative way. They learn about history, culture, and themselves through stories and storytelling when growing up. Naturally, stories exist in people's lives and contribute to the understanding of how things work in this world.

Stories are also known as narratives (e.g., Shankar, Elliott, and Goulding, 2001; Stern, 1998a;

Huang, 2005). It is almost impossible to refer to our lives without the existence of stories (Gergen and Gergen, 1988) because they help people understand the world in an orderly fashion in a variety of formats including written, oral, and visual representations (Padgett and Allen, 1997). People tend to use narrative as a thinking tool to simplify the representation of the world and help solve problems (Herman, 2003). Stories and narratives are largely used to communicate and build relationships with people (Loebbert, 2003). Individuals create stories to organize experiences, generate orders, explain causal events, gain perspectives, and form evaluations (Bruner, 1986, 1990). Stories have the power of inviting audience to imagine and therefore, continually influence people to change their perspectives, identification, and judgments (Loebbert, 2003). They have become a good tool of persuading, entertaining, and noticing which help people interpret and create meanings for the world around them (Bruner, 1986).

Marketers start to use stories to communicate with consumers and induce their emotional connections with brands and products. Using stories to win customers' heart has become a common way to connect physical products and customers' feelings and emotion, and they can enhance

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companies' brand identities and brand image. Employing stories to convey ideas and concepts to customers might be an effective marketing communication owing to stories' characteristics and functions which help consumers make sense of the brand (Escalas, 2004). Create a good brand story may induce audience's belief and acceptance and further reinforce brand identities (Loebbert, 2003). In fact, past research has shown that brand with a story can improve the brand image (Chai Wei Wang, 2005) because when customers create meanings for brands in a narrative way, the brands become more valuable and connected to customer's sense of self (Escalas, 2004). The importance of the brand story in helping build a strong brand image thus emerges.

Companies should take the structure and dimensions of the brand story into consideration in order to create a good brand story (Mckee, 1997). A framework in branding proposed by Gruan Yui Huang (2005) identified that a good story should specify 1) what kind of story to be told, 2) who tell the story to whom, and 3) how to tell the story. The author referred to Stern's framework (1998a) which proposed the told (truth/ fiction), the telling (time and plot), the teller (narrative voice), and rhetoric as key elements of a story to further explore story branding. The told (truth or fiction) refers to whether the story is perceived as a real one or made up fictionally in customers' mind. Plot was defined as "an ordered sequence of events made coherent by causality, linear structure, and purpose"

(Stern, 1998). In a brand story, plot is an essential attribute which organizes events with beginning, middle, and an end. Narrator refers to who presents the brand story. Rhetoric is the source of a bundle of devices that narrators can use to persuade audience to accept their points of view (Stern, 1998). These inquiries and framework help people explore how to plot a "good brand story" that would enhance brand image and the relationships between brands and customers. Although Stern's framework aimed at advertisements, brand story in an ad does not differ from the general brand story. Thus, the framework should be suitable for the context of this current study as well. However, as rhetoric is a more abstract tool and has no explicit rules to follow, it is relatively difficult to specify how to manipulate it in certain marketing campaign. Gruan Yui Huang (2005) pointed out that rhetoric is a micro point of view in storytelling. It is too wide and complicated to be involved in this study. Therefore, Stern's (1998) framework will be adopted with some revisions to fit the purpose of this study, and only the told, plot, and narrator will be investigated.

Despite the important role the structure plays in constructing a good story to help establish a positive brand image, very limited research has directly addressed the design of brand stories and its impact on perceived brand image. By understanding the impact of story's structure on how consumers perceive a brand, a systematic way of creating quality story for establishing a strong brand can be developed. In addition, addressing

this issue would help provide a guidance regarding how levels of authenticity, narrators, and clarity of plot should be presented in a brand story. Therefore, this study is interested in understanding the relationship between dimensions of the brand story and perceived brand image. Specifically, it intends to investigate whether or not authenticity, plot, and narrators of the brand story will influence how the brand is perceived by consumers.

### **Brand Story's Dimensions and Brand Image**

#### *Brand Story*

Narrative thought organizes events in terms of a temporal dimension: things occurred over time (Bruner, 1990; Fiske, 1993). People perceive events and narratives as episodes, each with a beginning, middle, and an end. It structures story elements into an organized framework that establishes relationships between the elements and allow for causal inference (Bruner, 1990). Pennington and Hastie (1986) pointed out that story explains goals, evaluates the action to achieve goals, and elaborate outcomes. The protagonists' goals or psychological state could rationalize their following actions then lead to some specific outcome or results. Narratives are stories. Polkinghorne (1991) suggested that "narratives are the most important means by which our experiences are made meaningful". Stories and storytelling help us understand our lives (Shankar et al., 2001), and have become a good tool of persuading, entertaining, and noticing (Common Wealth Magazine, 2003). People

prefer to express their experiences in a narrative way because audience' attention could be attracted more easily in story-formed situation (Loebbert, 2003, 2005). Story serves the functions of helping individuals organize events and making sense of the world as well as helping people understand, evaluate, and cope with emotions (Escalas, 1998). Incoming information is processed by creating new stories based on people's prior experiences and subjective thoughts, which is referred to as narrative processing (Shank & Ablson, 1995). Since stories help people comprehend the relationship between events, the knowledge inside people's mind could be stored in a narrative structure (Bruner, 1986).

As people greatly use stories to understand the world, what goes around them, and who they are as individuals or members of a society, narrative becomes an effective marketing tool to communicate with its customers, such as meanings of products and brands. Scholars proposed a kind of story, brand story, which relates to a brand, illustrates its distinctiveness, and presents to customers who they are, where they come from, and what the future direction is (Gruan Yui Huang, 2005). Elements such as the birth, innovation and development, benefits and values, and visions of brands could all be communicated through the brand story. In some cases, consumers may associate brand stories to their own personal stories and begin to interact with the brands. Moreover, when incoming information is processed as a story (narrative processing), consumers may use it to relate the brand image to

their own personal experiences and their sense of self to create self-brand connections (Dolich, 1969). People might relate brand stories to their own stories and further construct the brand identity.

Therefore, if a brand creates a story which stimulates or induces experiences stored in customer's memory, it could enhance the linkage between self and the brand. Stern (1998) claimed that narrative processing occurs naturally and requires little efforts; thus, consumers are able to understand fairly complex stories rapidly. The narrative processing process can create different meanings to brands and consumers would match incoming narrative information to episodes stored in mind to comprehend information (Shank and Abelson, 1995).

### *Brand Image*

Communicating a brand image to audience has been regarded as an important marketing activity (Gardner & Levy, 1955). A well-communicated image could enhance the brand's market performance (Shocker and Srinivasan, 1979). Brand image is essentially all images related to a brand perceived by consumers (Dobni and Zinkhan, 1990). Keller (1993) defined brand image as perceptions of a brand from the cluster of brand associations in consumers' memory. It is the collection of brand associations which indicates how customers perceive a brand (Aaker, 1996). In other words, brand image is how customers think, feel and expect about a brand. They connect attributes and associations of image of

corporate, users, and products to the image of a brand (Biel, 1991).

It was proposed that the brand image is derived from consumers' functional needs, symbolic needs, and experiential needs. (Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis, 1986). Functionally needs focus on basic functions and features of brands that satisfy consumers' needs and solve their problems. Symbolic needs address desires for products that fulfill internal needs for self-enhancement, role position, group membership, or ego-identification. Experiential needs refer to desires for products that provide sensory pleasure, variety, and/or cognitive stimulation. Every product can be positioned with a functional, symbolic, or experiential image, or a mixture of them (Park et al., 1986) and business can develop different brands with these images.

### *Perceived Brand Image and Brand Story*

Previous research has suggested that brand with a story could raise the functional, symbolic and experiential elements of the brand image (Chai Wei Wang, 2005). When consumers create meanings for brands in a narrative way, the brands become valuable and connected to customer's sense of self (Escalas, 2004). If the meanings of a brand match past experiences in consumers' memory, deep connection could be formed. Moreover, if brands are perceived to be associated with human characteristics, consumers would prefer the brands (Sirgy, 1982). Therefore, telling a good brand story may be an effective way to influence how consumers perceived the image of a brand.

Every brand has its own story, but how to tell a good story is a key point to success (Gruan Yui Huang, 2005). A story could give brand meanings and further convey these meanings to consumers. According to Simmons (2001), the most surprising power occurs when a story has been told. Meanings accompany with the story would create the resonance in audience' mind and influence them deeply. Hence, telling a brand story can be an easy way to connect brand with consumers and build up the relationship. As aforementioned, narrative helps people think and decompose events and experiences into smaller pieces for easy processing (Herman, 2003). Therefore, composing a good brand story with influential structure could be an effective way to build the favorable image for a brand.

Once the brand story helps people interpret the world and create meanings for them, it could be inferred that what a brand means to customers comes from part of the brand stories. Furthermore, participants who engaged in the narrative processing can transport their attentions from critical thoughts and generate positive affect, resulting in favorable associations (Escalas, 2004). On the contrary, if there is no story with the brand, consumers would lack for a channel to do brand association and would tend to value the brand through the product itself (Escalas, 2004).

#### *Authenticity*

Researchers have found that authenticity is often "made-up" rather than real (Brown, 2003).

A story would be believed to be "a real story" in that it embraced some meaningful senses to people in real life (Loebbert, 2003). A story loses its authenticity if it is not accordant with life experiences and behaviors, and appears to distort or hide the truth (Loebbert, 2003). What is perceived to be authentic must fit into customers' mental perspectives of how things "ought to be". Thus, authenticity of a story is an attribute which audience give and perceive it rather than it is originally a real one. Some attributes of authenticity such as links to past, hand-crafted method, respect for traditions, or culture links, all of which could somehow affect customers' perception of authenticity (Beverland, 2005). Thus, instead of creating an "authentic" brand story, an indirect route to motivate people is to address these attributes in the marketing communication.

The attributes of authenticity may affect how consumers perceive the brands, which indicate reliability and quality, committing high performance, living up to consumers' expectations, decreasing buying risk, experiencing history and soul of brands, and further stimulate interest for products. The core concept of authenticity is commitment (Loebbert, 2003) in which it increases consumers' trust toward the brand and further changes their perceived image. Hence, this study further hypothesizes that:

H1: Brand story perceived as higher authenticity will enhance positive brand image than those perceived as lower authenticity.

### *Narrator*

In order to tell a good story, narrators play an important role because they have the power to decide how to tell stories and what contents to keep or put away. The narrators serve the functions to guide and persuade audience. They also give authenticity to stories by using sentences such as "I witness it, "I heard of it", "I was on the scene", or "this is my personal experience" (Loebbert, 2003). People tend to believe narrators' personal experiences rather than information about third parties (Loebbert, 2003). Thus, the appropriate roles narrators play may affect customers' perceptions of story (Loebbert, 2003). Specifically, the point of view taken by narrators plays a key part in storytelling. Based on Stern's (1991) framework, stories told by the first-person narrator, which presenter tells his/her own story and reveals personal experiences about him/herself, could be more believable than those told by the third-person narrator.

Since narrators connect the audience with the story, the trust between narrators and audience could affect how much the audience believes in the story. If consumers believe in what narrators present, it increases the favorability of brand associations and further creates positive brand image. Thus, narrators may be able to directly help create positive brand image. The first-person narration sounds more sincere than others and people are likely to believe since "I" resembles our daily communication (Marc Gobe, 2004). In addition, if stories are perceived as

people sharing their secrets or heartfelt outpourings, audience is likely to accept the story (Stern, 1991). As stated above, this study hypothesizes that:

H2: Brand story told by first-person narrator will induce more positive brand image than those told by non-first person narrator.

### *Plot*

Plot plays a central part of a story. It is an essential attribute that organizes events with a beginning, middle, and an end (Stern, 1994). Stern (1994) identified four generic plot elements which are progression of temporal events, conflict, characters, and outcome. Stories make it possible for people to organize experiences and attach meanings to those experiences. Plot, thus serves the important role of organizing experiences and make them meaningful in a logical sequence. Stern (1994) proposed that choosing an appropriate plot could always maintain the emotional connection between brand and consumer. Audience could be drawn into the context by attractive and clear plot.

A clear plot should have rational deployment of time, character, scenes, and situations. Moreover, it must contain rational time sequence and coherent linkage of beginning, middle and end. It could also help audience understand the value and ideas companies want to convey. It will be easier to establish associations if the information and cues included in the story are rational. When the consumers become familiar with

the brand and hold some favorable, strong, and unique brand associations in memory, brand image can be formed. On the contrary, non-clear plot may create confusions for audience regarding meanings of stories. If audience can not be persuaded by the information presented, the brand story becomes hard to help them enhance the brand image (Keller, 1993). Thus, this study develops the following hypothesis:

H3: Brand story with clear plot will induce more positive brand image than the one with non-clear plot arrangement.

**Method**

A 2\*2\*2 factorial design (see Table 1) manipulating the authenticity, narrator, and plot was conducted to examine the impact of dimensions of brand stories on consumers’ perceived brand image. The independent variables include the degree of authenticity, narrator, and the clarity of plot, while the dependent variable is perceived brand image. Questionnaire was employed to collect data.

The degree of authenticity was defined by audience rather than its original state. It was divided into the level of high authenticity and low

authenticity in the experiment. Narrator was defined as the one who presents the story, and was manipulated into first-person narrator and non-first-person narrator in this study based on Stern’s trichotomy. Plot, serves the function to organize the beginning, middle, and end of a story, was manipulate into clear and non-clear plot. A clear plot should have rational chronology to arrange the story elements such as scenes, actions and characters, as well as presenting causal relationship of events.

*Pre-test*

In order to control the effect of previous knowledge and awareness toward existing brands on measures of perceived brand image, a fictitious brand and corresponding stories were created to be employed in the experiment. Since the previous studies have found that “perfume” is regarded as product which perceived more emotional than rational one (Pei-Ting Lai, 2006; Chai-Wei Wang, 2005). Since persuading effects of a story come from the emotional responses rather than the arguments of the advertised products (Green& Brock, 2000), and perfume is considered to involve hedonic and symbolic product con-

**Table 1 Experimental Design of This Study**

Experimental Groups		
Authenticity	Narrator	Plot
High authenticity	First Person Narrator (FPN)	Clear plot
		Non-clear plot
	Non-FPN	Clear plot
		Non-clear plot
Low authenticity	FPN	Clear plot
		Non-clear plot
	Non-FPN	Clear plot
		Non-clear plot
Control Group	No brand story	

cept (Park, et al., 1986), this study chose perfume as the product category to create the fictitious brand and story for. Eight versions of brand story with varying degree of authenticity and clarity of plot were created for the pre-test. Narrator was not pre-tested since the manipulation was simply first and non-first persons. Seventy nine college students from a university located in the North part of Taiwan participated in the pretest. Results revealed 4 versions of stories with high authenticity versus clear and non-clear plot, and low authenticity versus clear and non-clear plot.

*Research Design*

Subjects were randomly assigned into each of the 8 experimental groups as well as the control group. Subjects in each experimental group received the same version of brand story while those in the control group received no brand story. Questionnaires assessing subjects' perceived brand image were distributed. After reviewing the brief description and stimulus story about the brand, subjects were requested to complete the questionnaire. Demographic information was collected at the end.

The dependent variable, perceived brand image,

was defined as the perception and associations in consumers' mind. It was measured by the 12 brand image items adopted from Geiwei Wang's (2005) study which request subjects to indicate their agreement or disagreement with the statements on a seven point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). These items measured three dimensions of the perceived brand image, including the functional, experiential, and symbolic. The higher sum scores of the items represented more positive brand image.

Owing to the experimental design, a convenience sample was employed to be the subjects in this study. Subjects were drawn from undergraduate and graduate students in a university located in the Northern Taiwan. Two hundred and thirty four subjects participated in the experiment, resulted in two hundred and eleven valid questionnaires returned. About 58.5% of subjects were female with the majority age under 25 years old (96.6%). Table 2 presents number of subjects assigned to each experimental group.

*Reliability*

The reliability for each dimension as well as

Table 2 Number of Subjects in Each Experimental Group

Authenticity	Narrator	Plot	N
high authenticity	FPN	clear plot	26
		non clear plot	26
	NON FPN	clear plot	29
		non clear plot	28
low authenticity	FPN	clear plot	30
		non clear plot	25
	NON FPN	clear plot	23
		non clear plot	24

Note. "N" represents the sample size.



overall perceived brand image was tested. The Cronbach's alpha value equals to 0.91 for the 12 scale items. The Cronbach's alpha values for the functional, experiential, and symbolic dimensions are 0.85, 0.86, and 0.81, respectively. Results revealed an acceptable reliability for the overall scale as well as scales measuring each dimension.

**Results of Hypotheses Testing**

One-way ANOVA was employed to test the hypotheses regarding the impact of brand story's dimensions on perceived brand image. Results demonstrated in Table 3 showed that the mean value of perceived brand image in the high authenticity group (mean=54.80) is higher than the low authenticity group (mean=49.46), indicating that brand with a high authentic story is perceived with a significantly more positive image than with a low authentic story ( $F_{1,203} = 17.70, P < .01$ ). Thus, H1 was supported. The role narrator took was also found to significantly affect perceived brand image ( $F_{1,203} = 6.15, P = .01$ ) with higher mean value of perceived brand image in the group which story is presented by the first-person narrator (mean= 53.60) than the non-first person narrator (mean=50.76). Thus, H2 is supported. Finally, the clarity of plot was discovered

to have a significant impact on perceived brand image ( $F_{1,203} = 42.93, P < .01$ ) with clear plot (mean=56.36) been perceived more positively than non-clear plot (mean=48.09).

**Discussions and Implications**

This study took the brand story's dimensions into considerations and examined the effects of variation of authenticity, narrator and plot on brand image. Results supported proposed hypotheses and revealed that all three dimensions of the brand story have a significant impact on consumers' perceived brand image. Specifically, the brand story regarded as high authenticity, presented by first-person narrator, and perceived as clear plot was found to elicit more positive brand image from consumers than the one regarded as low authenticity, presented by non first-person narrator, and perceived as non-clear plot.

The authenticity dimension of brand story could help consumers make more sense of the brand. Regardless of the truthfulness of the stories behind a brand, the key point is to make them seem authentic. Findings from the 12-item scale employed to measure perceived brand image revealed that when consumers perceived the

**Table 3 Results of ANOVA on Brand Story's Dimensions and Its Impact on Brand Image**

Dependent Variable	Groups	N	Mean	df	F	Sig.	
Perceived Brand Image	Authenticity	High	109	54.80	1	17.70	.00***
		Low	102	49.46			
	Narrator	FPN	107	53.60	1	6.15	.01**
		NFPN	104	50.76			
	Plot	CP	108	56.36	1	42.93	.000***
		NCP	103	48.09			

Note: \*\*p<.05, \*\*\* p<.01

brand story as highly authentic, they had more positive experiential feelings towards the brand and felt that the brand was more reliable and has better quality. By manipulating the brand story into highly authentic, audience would believe it more and increase their self-relevance toward the brand.

Take "Timex" for example, the brand story focused on its long history, implying the insistence of brand spirit which helps enhance consumers' perceived authenticity and perceived reliability of the brand. Evian also emphasizes the origin of the brand to represent its specialty through the brand story. Those attributes of authenticity indeed have been applied to the brand stories in practical. Furthermore, the manipulation of authenticity in this present study specified the traceable origin of brand and indicated professional people who create the brand to help boost consumers' perceived authenticity in order to create positive brand image. Brand managers and marketers can thus employ these ideas when creating brand stories.

Brand story told by first-person narrator was found to elicit more positive brand image compared to the one told by non-first-person narrator. Brand stories told by first-person narrator may help generate persuasive effects, induce and enhance favorability and strength of brand associations and then result in more positive brand image. Since the brand story can arouse ones' emotional responses and feelings, telling a brand story by the first-person narrator is a good way to stimulate consumers' sympathy

and make them feel the same as the narrator. As discovered in this study, because the story told by first-person narrator was perceived to be more sincere and truthful, it helped induce favorability and strength of brand associations and build positive brand image.

Results further showed that clear and well arranged plot in a brand story can carry out more positive brand image from subjects than the one with not-so-clear plot arrangement. A clear plot can present the brand story well and may help consumers understand the information or meanings conveyed in the story. Brand story with a clear plot can further help consumers' understanding about the meanings embedded in the brand and thus enhance the strength of brand associations and create positive brand image. Thus, brand story should have clear sequence linking the beginning, middle, and the end to comprise complete events or ideas. Brand managers should consider the clarity of plot when creating the brand story in order to clearly convey ideas they want to communicate with customers. No matter what theme a brand story wants to convey, it should be expressed in a clear plot. Therefore, companies should carefully design their brand stories which can be easily understood and have rational causal relation.

The keen competition and similarity of the market make building a strong brand a crucial task. Successful brands sometimes have well-known brand stories because attractive brand stories can stimulate consumers' emotional responses

rather than rational evaluations toward the features or advantages of the product itself. Firms could even persuade consumers and convey special spirits through brand stories. In addition to traditional marketing communication tools, findings of this study provided an alternative. By manipulating the authenticity, narrator, and arrangement of plot, it is possible to systematically construct messages that communicate strong and positive brand image to consumers.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

Despite the insights provided by findings of this study, some limitations need to be addressed for opportunities of future research. First, based on Stern's (1998) framework, this study only investigated three out of four dimensions proposed in the framework. Rhetoric was not addressed in this study owing to its complexity and range. In addition, other dimensionality of brand stories should be discovered and examined in relation to brand image.

A fictitious brand and story were employed in this study. It would be more realistic to test real brand stories with existing brands in the market to examine whether the structure of brand stories truly affects consumers' perceptions towards a brand. Moreover, in addition to perceived brand image, many marketing and brand related variables such as brand personality, perceived trustworthiness, or attitude toward the brand, could be put into consideration in the future study.

Furthermore, perfume was selected as the target product in this study. Researchers could choose brand stories from various product categories or service industry to examine the proposed relationship between brand story and brand image. This may further lead to comparing brand story's impact on consumers' perception regarding physical goods and intangible services.

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