Get your stories straight - A comparative analysis of organisational stories and brand narratives

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Title: Get your stories straight: 
A comparative analysis of organisational stories and brand narratives

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Summary:
This paper gives a structured review of narratives in both the organisational and branding literature. It shows, that comparing and contrasting the two branches of the narratives literatures has been neglected. This study identifies similar dimensions in brand and organisational narratives, such as nature, origin, function and focus. It also identifies five additional dimensions in brand literature such as connection, actor, relationship, value and frame of reference. These have been insufficiently considered to date.

In the second part of the paper the findings from the literature are compared to a case study that has included about 20 stories. The field research on 20 narratives that were conducted in a larger study show at least some of these additional dimensions that can be taken into account in relation to brand narratives. Among actors and types of stories three meta-themes have emerged: the Enfant Terrible, Avant-garde and Family Cocoon.

Word count: 1996
Introduction

Narratives form a particularly important aspect of human communication; they shape our identity (McAdams 1996; Habermas and Bluck 2006), our relationship to others (Frost 2011) and the culture we live in (Granitz 2015; Hammack 2008). In recent years the concept of narratives also attracted interest in fields other than literary criticism and linguistics, such as dramatics, philosophy, psychology, film and media, and journalism (Foster-Harris 1959, Fisher 1987, Denning 2005, Jung 1954, 1981, Howard 1991). They also found their way into the literatures on organisations and on branding.

This paper gives a structured review of narratives in both the organisational and branding literature, and compares the two bodies of literature. In the second part of the paper the findings from the literature are compared to a case study that has included about 30 stories. Common dimensions are defined, thus filling up the missing parts as a linkage of the two branches. Prince (1992) has defined narratives in a very broad sense as “the representation of at least two real or fictive events or situations in a time sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other”. This definition informs this particular study.

Literature review

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Table 1: Organisational Narratives.

In recent years the interest in organizational narratives has grown significantly (Gabriel 2011). Swap et al. (2001) define them as detailed narratives of past management actions, employee interaction and other intra- or extra-organisational events. The table shows a structured literature review of 29 journal articles from 1972 until 2015 including only academic journal articles that mainly deal with organisational narratives found via databases searches and by working back through the references of the newer articles. There are four dimensions, each with two manifestations: Nature, origin, function and focus.

Two concepts relating to the nature of organisational stories are prevailing. One is that there is just one collective unifying myth that all employees draw from. Boje (1991), for example, sees the organisation as a storytelling system that constitutes an institutional memory ultimately
formed by individual memories. Abma (2000) writes that personal stories all form one common organisational myth. Wilkins (1984) and Meyer (1985) argue that stories express common values and norms and thereby have a collective theme.

Then again, multiple voices in an organisation tell conflicting narratives based on different interpretations. Dailey and Browning (2013) argue that this leads to dualities such as control/resistance, differentiation/integration and stability/change. Their research is based on Martin et al. (1983), who found seven basic stories in each organisation. There are also contrasting views when it comes to the origins of narratives. Thereby, researchers either draw on terms such as archetypes and ancient myths (Abma 2000, Bowles 1989). Other researchers prefer to draw on themes from more recent literature such as Gabriel (1991), who refers to five types of stories: comic, tragic, epic, comic-tragic and epic-comic types.

The third dimension relates to the functions addressed, either emotional such as sense-making (Meyer 1985, James and Minnis 2004) and addressing corporate values and ideals (Collison and Mackenzie 1999) or cognitive, dealing specifically with organisational learning via narratives (Swap et al. 2001) The articles focusing on emotional function strongly predominate.

The last dimension revolves around the focus of narratives, whether the study deals with the structure of the narrative itself, themes and story arcs, or with the process of telling, retelling and interpreting the heard story. While Boje (1995) argues that a story is constantly retold and fragmented and changed, Dailey and Browning (2013) see stability in interpretation. On the other hand, there is a huge academic body of literature that deals with the structure of the story itself, such as Martin et al. (1983), who see seven basic types of stories in organisations, or Yost et al. (2015), who describe different story arcs and themes.

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Table 2: Brand Narratives.

Adopting the same procedure as with the organisational narratives, 28 publications were found ranging from 1995 until 2016. There were 9 dimensions identified, far more than in the organisational branch of the literature indicating a richer and more unexplored topic.

*Nature* can be clustered into brand narratives and consumer narratives. Brand narratives tell the story of a brand, for example an underdog story (Paharia et al. 2011), whereas consumer
narratives tell the story of a consumer’s experience (Escalas 2007), or his or her relationship with a brand (Fournier 1998).

In brand narratives, concerning origin, a lot of researchers draw on archetypes, such as the seducer (Stevens and Maclaran 2007) or the siren (Megehee and Spake 2012). There are also some researchers that make use of more modern concepts in literature such as the underdog metaphor (Paharia et al. 2011) or Booker’s (2004) seven element theory (Brown and Patterson 2010). Regarding cognitive and emotional functions (Escalas 2004, Fournier 1998) there are very few articles about the cognitive effects, such as purchase intention (Paharia et al. 2011) or brand knowledge (Koll et al. 2001).

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Table 3: Brand Narratives – additional dimensions.

The focus of the articles either revolves around the structure, types (Aaker and Aaker 2016) and construction of narratives (Shankar et al. 2001) or the process of telling and interpreting which often involves narrative advertising (Luecder et al. 2014; Schroder 2005).

The fifth dimension is connection, a relation either to the in-group or to the out-group. There are only three articles that take these dimensions into account. Escalas and Bettman (2005) relate to the out-group regarding unfavourable self-brand connections if the brand is linked to the out-group. Paharia et al. (2011) discuss the identification with the underdog as part of an integrative in-group. Aaker and Aaker (2016) include both the customer and supplier, as part of the out-group, and the founder as part of the in-group. The main actor of the narrative is not consistent with the nature dimension, but shows some correlations. All brand narratives show as the main actor the brand or some instance of the organisation, whereas some of the consumer narratives have also the brand as the main actor (Ardelet et al. 2015, Fournier 1998). Another dimension is the relationship that is established between consumers and the brand. It is argued that if the brand is a partner, or is anthropomorphized (Fournier 1998, Woodside et al. 2008, Allen and Olson 1995) or serves simply as an enabler that brings benefits (Adaval and Weyer 1998). Based on this, the value dimension considers whether the brand’s value is utilitarian or identity-related. The last dimension revolves around the narrative’s frame of reference. Consumer narratives are mostly perceived as real, enabling relationships (Fournier 1998) or experiences (Escalas 2007), whereas brand narratives often tell a fictive story (Stevens and Maclaran 2007).

In sum, brand and organisational narratives have some dimensions in common. But some of the brand narrative dimensions were not taken into account in the organisational narratives, such as
the main actor and the in-group and out-group theme. These two dimensions will be researched in the field study.

**Methodology**

The data of the stories used in this paper are part of a bigger ethnographical case study about a subsidiary of a multinational corporation. The dataset consists of 20 narratives that were found in 33 interviews with employees on every hierarchy level; the interviews lasted around 40 minutes on average and were executed in 2014/2015.

**Findings**

The narratives were examined regarding theme, main actors, emotions and values they displayed and if they were positive or negative. The themes of the stories were rich, ranging from personal successes in the early days of the career to encounters with employees from the parent company. Only seven of the 29 stories were not narratives involving the self as main actor. The non-self narratives included the story about a project that was kept secret a long time and then turned out to be a huge success, or founder-stories, such as that of a founder who used to conduct job interviews in a sports car.

Other characters are the boss, the antagonist customer having unrealistic ideas about a project, the positive customer, when the project was successful, and the product, displaying fascination and passion. The role of the boss is mostly displayed in stories that have a family cocoon theme or an enfant terrible theme. Stories starring the CEO or founder have mostly the family cocoon theme.

A lot of the self stories included a personal success, or a success with a project which was particularly near and dear to the employee. Three narratives had this theme. Another frequent theme was the success in the early days of the subsidiary. The in-group and out-group theme was a clearly emerging theme in four stories. They displayed Colleagues and direct superiors as in-group and employees of the parent company as out-group. Two stories were about the parent corporation slowing down the procedures at the subsidiary and doing everything in a pedestrian way. Another story was about employees of the parent company that were treated in a different, negative way, and the employee expressed feeling lucky to work for the subsidiary. He used the phrase ‘horror story’ to describe the story. Distinction from the parent company is a huge emerging theme.

Regarding the values, there are three meta-themes emerging: the Enfant Terrible, Avant-garde and Family Cocoon.

The Enfant Terrible is often used in arts and also in politics. It means a person or organisation that engages in misconduct that is frowned upon but also forgiven. The values that reflect this theme are spontaneity, pragmatism, bending the rules, audacity, fun and flexibility. A story about frying eggs on the hood of a BMW in hot California on a field trip for fun is an example for this kind of narrative.

The second theme that emerged was the Avant-garde theme. In art and politics avant-garde has a strong orientation towards progress and is radical in pursuing it. The values that reflect that theme are innovation, pioneering, passion, advocacy, entrepreneurship and solution orientation. An example for this kind of narrative is a story about making one’s own rules and procedures and ignoring those from the parent company.

The third theme that emerged is forming an anti-thesis to the other two. It displays a theme of the Family Cocoon; of comfort and emotional security. Whatever bold, brave or naughty behaviours employees display, the superiors and the organisation offer protection and emotional support. Values entailed in this theme are forgiveness, appreciation and collaboration. An
example here is story of the CEO having a friendly ear for every employee, regardless of their status in the firm.

**Conclusion and future work**

The literature review shows that there is a considerable body of literature on both organisational narratives and brand and consumer narratives, but to date this research, especially the brand narrative research, is lacking in structure. Comparing and contrasting the two branches of the narratives literatures has also been neglected. This study aims doing such identifying similar dimensions, such as nature, origin, function and focus. But there are also other dimensions in the brand research, such as connection, actor, relationship, value and frame of reference that are insufficiently considered. The research described in this paper shows how at least some of these additional dimensions can be taken into account in relation to brand narratives.

The objective of this present paper is to present initial findings in this research project, including a structured model of organisational and brand narratives as well as to draw together the commonalities between them. The stories show very rich data and have to be further examined and structured; some of the dimensions have not been evaluated yet, such as the emotions each story evokes. The three main themes will also be further elaborated and reviewed for completeness. This developmental paper is only a small part of a bigger research project. In the next steps, a closer look will be taken to the relevance of stories in organisational and brand context and their significance to culture and employees’ sensemaking. Future research could also address the presence of the themes in other organisations and their evolution during the life cycle of an organisation.

**References**


