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

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Copy of a paper presented at the *British Academy of Management Conference 2017*,
Warwick Business School, 5 to 7 September 2017.

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Submission for the British Academy of Management
Conference

From 5th-7th September 2017, Warwick Business School

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

Dimension	Manifestation A	Authors	Manifestation B	Authors
Nature	Collective	Clark 1972, Wilkins 1984, Meyer 1985, Boje 1991, Aaltio-Marjosola 1994, Gold 1997, Abma 2000, Humphreys and Brown 2002.	Personal/Conflicting	Martin et al. 1983, Kelly 1985, Gabriel 1991a,b, Boje 1995, Collison and Mackenzie 1999, Swap et al. 2001, O'Connor 2002, Vaara 2002, James and Minnis 2004, Dailey and Browning 2013, Yost et al. 2015.
Origin	Modern	Martin et al. 1983, Kelly 1985, Gabriel 1991a, Collison and Mackenzie 1999, O'Connor 2002, Vaara 2002, Yost et al. 2015.	Ancient	Clark 1972, Mahler 1988, Bowles 1989, Boyce 1996, Abma 2000.
Function	Emotional	Clark 1972, Martin et al. 1983, Wilkins 1984, Kelley 1985, McConkie and Boss 1986, Gabriel 1991a,b, Boje 1991,1995, Aaltio-Marjosola 1994, Meyer 1995, Boyce 1996, Collison and Mackenzie 1999, Abma 2000, Feldman and Skoldberg 2002, Humphreys and Brown 2002, O'Connor 2002, Vaara 2002, James and Minnis 2004, Dailey and Browning 2013, Yost et al. 2015.	Cognitive	Wilkins 1984, Boyce 1996, Gold 1997, Smith and Keyton 2001, Swap et al. 2001, O'Connor 2002, James and Minnis 2004, Rhodes and Brown 2005.
Focus	Process	Clark 1972, Weick and Browning 1986, Mahler 1988, Boje 1991, 1995, Aaltio-Marjosola 1994, Gold 1997, Abma 2000, Swap et al. 2001, Feldman and Skoldberg 2002, O'Connor 2002, Dailey and Browning 2013.	Structure	Martin et al. 1983, Kelly 1985, Gabriel 1991b, James and Minnis 2004, Yost et al. 2015, Rhodes and Brown 2005.

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 uniting 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 focussing 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.

Dimension	Manifestation A	Authors	Manifestation	Authors
Nature	Collective	Allen and Olson 1995, Padgett and Allen 1997, Adaval and Wyer 1998, Mattila 2000, Papadotas 2006, Schroeder 2005, Polyorat et al. 2007, Stevens and Maclaran 2007, Brown and Patterson 2010, Cooper et al. 2010, Paharia et al. 2011, Lundqvist et al. 2013, Lueck et al. 2014, Aaker and Aaker 2016.	Personal/Conflicting	Fournier 1998, Stern et al. 1998, Shankar et al. 2001, Escalas 2004, 2007, 20007, Ahuvia 2005, Woodside et al. 2008, Koll et al. 2010, Megehee and Woodside 2010, Philipps and McQuarrie 2010, Schembri et al. 2010, Megehee and Spake 2012, Ardelet et al. 2015, Megehee and Spake 20125.
Origin	Modern	Fournier 1998, Schroeder 2005, Brown and Patterson 2010, Paharia et al. 2011.	Ancient	Stevens and Maclaran 2007, Woodside et al. 2008, Cooper et al. 2010, Megehee and Woodside 2010, Megehee and Spake 2012, Aaker and Aaker 2016.
Function	Emotional	Fournier 1998, Stern et al. 1998, Mattila 2000, Shankar et al. 2001 Escalas and Bettman 2005, Papadotas 2006, Stevens and Maclaran 2007, Woodside et al. 2008, Megehee and Woodside 2010, Philipps and McQuarrie 2010, Paharia et al. 2011, Megehee and Spake 2012, Lueck et al. 2014.	Cognitive	Padgett and Allen 1997, Adaval and Wyer 1998, Ahuvia 2005, Schroeder 2005, Escalas 2007, Polyorat et al. 2007, Koll et al. 2010.
Focus	Process	Adaval and Wyer 1998, Escalas 2004, Schroeder 2005, Luedicke and Giesler 2008, Woodside et al. 2008, Philipps and McQuarrie 2010, Lueck et al. 2014.	Structure	Allen and Olson 1995, Fournier 1998, Stern et al. 1998, Shankar et al. 2001 Ahuvia 2005, Papadotas 2006, Brown and Patterson 2010, Paharia et al 2011, Aaker and Aaker 2016

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).

Dimension	Manifestation A	Authors	Manifestation B	Authors
Connection	In-group	Paharia et al. 2011, Aaker and Aaker 2016.	Out-group	Escalas and Bettman 2005, Aaker and Aaker 2016.
Actor	Self	Stern et al. 1998, Escalas 2004, 2007, Ahuvia 2005, Escalas and Bettman 2005, Woodside et al. 2008, Megehee and Woodside 2010, Schembri et al. 2010, Megehee and Spake 2012.	Brand	Allen and Olson 1995, Padgett and Allen 1997, Adaval and Wyer 1998, Fournier 1998, Mattila 2000, Shankar et al. 2001, Schroeder 2005, Papadotas 2006, Polyorat et al. 2007, Stevens and Maclaran 2007, Luedicke and Giesler 2008, Brown and Patterson 2010, Koll et al. 2010, Cooper et al. 2010, Paharia et al. 2011, Lundqvist et al. 2013, Lueck et al. 2014, Ardelet et al. 2015, Aaker and Aaker 2016.
Relationship	Partner	Allen and Olson 1995, Fournier 1998, Escalas 2004, Woodside et al. 2008, Megehee and Woodside 2010, Schembri et al. 2010, Paharia et al. 2011, Megehee and Spake 2012.	Enabler	Padgett and Allen 1997, Adaval and Wyer 1998, Stern et al. 1998, Mattila 2000, Shankar et al. 2001, Escalas and Bettman 2005, Schroeder 2005, Papdotas 2006, Escalas 2007, Polyorat et al. 2007, Stevens and Maclaran 2007, Brown and Patterson 2010, Koll et al. 2010, Philipps and McQuarrie 2010, Lundqvist et al. 2013, Lueck et al. 2014, Ardelet et al. 2015, Aaker and Aaker 2016.
Value	Identity	Allen and Olson 1995, Fournier 1998, Shankar et al. 2001, Escalas 2004, Ahuvia 2005, Stevens and Maclaran 2007, Woodside et al. 2008, Cooper et al. 2010, Megehee and Woodside 2010, Phillipps and McQuarrie 2010, Schembri et al. 2010, Megehee and Spake 2012, Ardelet et al. 2015.	Utilitarian	Padgett and Allen 1997, Adaval and Wyer 1998, Stern et al. 1998, Mattila 2000, Schroeder 2005, Papadotas 2006, Escalas 2007, Polyorat et al. 2007, Brown and Patterson 2010, Koll et al. 2010, Paharia et al. 2011, Lundqvist et al. 2013, Lueck et al. 2014, Aaker and Aaker 2016.
Frame of Reference	Reality	Fournier 1998, Stern et al. 1998, Shankar et al. 2001, Escalas 2004, 2007, Escalas and Bettman 2005, Ahuvia 2005, Schroeder 2005, Woodside et al. 2008, Brown and Patterson 2010, Schembri et al. 2010, Paharia et al. 2011, Ardelet et al. 2015.	Fiction	Allen and Olson 1995, Polyorat et al. 2007, Stevens and Maclaran 2007, Cooper et al. 2010, Koll et al. 2010, Megehee and Woodside, Phillipps and McQuarrie 2010, Megehee and Spake 2012, Lundqvist et al. 2013, Lueck et al. 2014.

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 (Lueck et al. 2014; Schroeder 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 Wyer 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.

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