



**UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG**  
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Master Degree Project in Marketing and Consumption

## **The Good, the Bad & the Ugly**

The strategic usage of characters within storytelling

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# The good, the bad & the ugly

## -The strategic usage of characters within storytelling

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This study examines how ad/communication bureaus of storytelling view and work with characters in their storytelling, and what strategic considerations they take to this. The aim of this study is to highlight problems and contribute with insights, for how and why characters can be used when applying storytelling for the purpose of building a strong brand.

**Method:** The study has a qualitative research design. Ten semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals working with storytelling at ten different ad/communication bureaus.

**Findings:** This study shows that ad/communication bureaus of storytelling are not giving characters enough attention, and thereby miss out on many strategic aspects for their brand building. By including the self-image of the target group more, as well as incorporating archetypes, the story can evoke strong emotions and reach motivations hidden deep within the consumers' unconsciousness. Working more with brand archetypes also makes the whole storytelling more cohesive. In addition, when consumers are allowed to be co-creators of the story they become more emotionally immersed with the story, and feel more prone to retell the story to others.

**Limitations:** Theoretically, this study is limited to the strategic aspects of using characters in storytelling for the purpose of brand building. A geographical limitation is that the study was conducted in Sweden and with a sample of Swedish ad/communication bureaus.

**Value:** The paper adds to insights and understanding to the area of storytelling and the role that characters play in the process of building a strong brand. The findings of this study act as a guideline and inspiration to companies who want to apply more persona-based storytelling. Also it will help refine processes for ad/communication bureaus working with storytelling.

**Keywords:** Storytelling, Characters, Strategy, Branding and Brand building

**Paper type:** Master Thesis

## INTRODUCTION

### Once upon a time...

The format of storytelling has been used through the history of mankind to pass down knowledge and share experiences. However, in recent years its field of use has expanded to become an effective communication tool within marketing. It is argued that storytelling may be used for brand building since it can add emotional content to a brand; thereby making the brand more valuable in the eyes of the consumer (Mossberg and Johansen, 2006; Dennisdotter and Axenbrandt, 2008; Fog *et al*, 2010). Consumers interpret society and create meaning through brands (Escala 2004a; Woodside et al, 2008; Escala, 2004b), and brands can be used by consumers to symbolize their values and personality (Fog *et al*, 2010). Even though we may be rational individuals the heart is still a major decisive factor when choosing among products and brands. Also, in a world where products are brands become more and more alike each other, the values and emotional content that a brand holds has gained an increased importance for consumers. (Fog *et al*, 2010)

Stories may be used to create a more positive attitude towards a brand since it triggers imaginative processes in the consumers (Escala, 2004b; Escala 2004a). Consumers use their imagination to portray themselves in the stories. In addition, narratives are used to process and match the brand to the consumer's own story. In this way consumers can create a context in which brands are used to generate a desired self-image. (Escala 2004a; Woodside et al, 2008; Escala, 2004b) Through the format of storytelling, consumers may imagine themselves in the context of the brand and thereby link the brand to their self-image. When using stories for this purpose, it may be particularly helpful to include a character in the story. This since the

audience can more easily identify with the character's goals and motives, while also being able to imagine them in the character's role in the story. (Escala and Stern, 2003; Woodside et al, 2008)

Characters are one of the key elements of storytelling since a cast of interacting and compelling characters is what gives the story the right dynamic as well as pulling it together. (Fog *et al*, 2010) To this, a good starting point when developing the story is character archetypes (Acuff, 2010). Archetypes are character roles which have remained the same through history and are independent of culture and time. Character such as the hero, villain, victim and underdog are all familiar to us and help the audience to understand which emotions that are connected to a certain character and role. (Tsai, 2006) Archetypes can also be assigned to a brand, whereby the whole brand takes on the role of a certain character (Siraj and Kumari, 2011). By specifying a brand persona, the brand appears more human (Herskovitz and Crystal, 2010). According to Mårtensson (2009) the specification of an identity, persona and character are vital parts in the brand building, which should be incorporated in the platform of the brand. From a strategic viewpoint this is crucial since such a brand platform helps the marketing communications to become more integrated. Also, a clear identity and brand persona is much more memorable than by just attaching various plots to the brand (Fog *et al*, 2010).

Even though previous research seem to indicate strategic benefits of specifying character roles. Herskovitz and Crystal (2010) noted that when using storytelling for branding purposes a common mistake is to first focus on the plot instead of the brand persona and characters. An explanation to this is that habit and comfort among practitioners hinder that persona-based storytelling becomes the norm.

Furthermore, Spear and Roper (2013) also noted that in practice, organizations did not leverage their storytelling as much as they could. This was since they did not follow what was suggested by previous theoretical findings on storytelling. Also Heijbel (2011) points out that many companies who today use storytelling do not really have the knowhow and therefore just make it up along the way. On the basis of this, one may question if not practitioners could make their storytelling even better by learning more about theories and research on the subject. The aim of this study is therefore to highlight problems, and contribute with insights, for how and why characters can be used when applying storytelling for the purpose of brand building.

The starting point of this study is in the research field of brand building, storytelling and characters. Our focus will be on ways of using character roles in a strategic manner by practitioners to build stronger brands. This study sets out to investigate how practitioners of storytelling view and work with characters in their storytelling, and what strategic considerations they take to this. The research questions of this study have therefore been formulated as follows:

*I. How do the ad/communications bureaus apply storytelling when working with (ett mellansteg för mycket här) their customers brand strategies?*

*II. Is there a strategic idea behind the choice and design of characters?*

The answer to these research questions will allow for a discussion on the strategic ways of using characters when building a brand with the help of storytelling. The objective is to contribute with knowledge on how and why characters should be used when developing stories around a brand. The findings of this study will act as a guideline and will help inspire companies

to apply more persona-based storytelling, and refine processes for ad/communication bureaus working with storytelling. In the next section we present and discuss some important theoretical findings on the research topic.

## **THEORETICAL DISCUSSION**

Based on a literature review on storytelling and marketing, four areas are highlighted since they all illustrate the reason for why characters are such a crucial element in storytelling when building a brand. First, studies on where to start the work with characters in the storytelling process are presented. Then it is discussed how characters within the story can be developed. Third, the idea that the whole brand can take on a character role is presented. Lastly, it is outlined how characters can connect with consumers' emotions and self-identities, as well as letting these become co-creators of the story. The following theoretical discussion is structured according to these four themes.

### **CHARACTERS IN STORYTELLING**

#### **How the story begins**

When deciding to use storytelling many factors are involved to create the story. Before a story can be told it should first be clear what business purpose it should achieve, as this affects which type of narrative is needed (Denning, 2006). The work can start from inside of the organization by pinpointing the organizational values, culture and already existing authentic stories (Simmons, 2007; Fog *et al*, 2010). Keeping the target audience in mind may also be good since stronger emotions can be produced when the audience feels that the stories are closer to their own ideal story (Shankar *et al*, 2007). To make sure the story is good enough, the drafts of different stories could

be tested in various ways (Fog *et al*, 2010). It is important to point out that many authors highlight that there is no correct model or magical formula to do good storytelling. (Fog *et al*, 2010; Dennisdotter and Axenbrandt, 2008; Simmons, 2007; Denning, 2006) Nonetheless, as Fog *et al* (2010) puts it there are still many “guidelines” and “checkpoints” to be found in the literature.

### **The Role of characters**

According to Herskovitz and Crystal (2010), a common mistake when doing storytelling for branding purposes is to first focus on the plot instead of the characters and the brand persona. Fog *et al* (2010) suggest that once the story has been identified, a pre-decided constellation of the characters is needed in order for the story to get the right dynamic. The characters are one of the key elements of the story since a cast of interacting and compelling characters is what gives the story its action, conflict and pulls the story together. To find the right cast of characters, different models which illustrate the classic cast of characters in fairytales may be used, these include characters such as the hero, challenger, supporter, beneficiary and benefactor. Each character should supplement one another and the individuals as well as their roles and functions are set in relation to each other. When the story has all the right characters to give it dynamic, it may be applied to both epic stories as well as everyday stories. (Ibid.) However, a character role might not always be completely static. A hero may for instance have overlapping roles and also be partly adventurer, rebel, creator, lover, caregiver, the wise prophet among others (Fog *et al*, 2010; Robbins, 2006) A classic example is Robin Hood, as he is both a rebel and a hero.

## **CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT**

### **Archetypical Characters**

The reasoning above asserts that there is a basic set of characters which are classically found in most fairytales. A theory with similar premises is the one regarding archetypical characters. Acuff (2010) suggests that character archetypes are a good place to start when doing storytelling since they are an integral element in the character mix. These archetypes have remained the same throughout the course of time, and are the same ones as the classic cast of the hero, challenger, supporter, beneficiary and benefactor, in addition to many other roles (ibid). The concept of archetypes is however more complex than the classic cast of characters and include a much more vast number of roles. As Tsai (2006) explains the theory of archetypes was first suggested by Jung (1938). The idea is that archetypes are preconscious psychological potentials, which are innate and found on the unconscious level of the mind. They are universal and found in every culture and period in history, and thus images such as “mother”, “child”, “hero”, “explorer”, “lover” are experienced the same way universally (Tsai, 2006). Tsai (2006) argues that there are just a few archetypes that exist in the unconsciousness, but that there are an endless variety of images that lead the mind back to these basic archetype. This is why it plays such a vital role in the creation of the world and the human mind. Furthermore, Moxnes (2013) explains that archetypes are our elemental ideas, feelings, fantasies, dreams and visions. It connects with us at a very deep level and reaches our motivation to thoughts and actions found on the subconscious level (Siraj and Kumari, 2011). In this way storytelling may touch us deeper, where our emotions and attitudes are (Herskovitz and Crystal, 2010).

## THE BRAND AS A CHARACTER

### Brand Archetypes

As mentioned above, Herskovitz and Crystal (2010) emphasize the creation of a strong brand persona before developing the plot or narrative. A brand persona makes the brand appear human, and it connects all narratives. It should be stable at its core, but also be able to grow from various situations. The personality of the brand is often unique and hard for competitors to mimic, and is therefore an important aspect for differentiating the brand from competitors (Mårtensson, 2009). The brand persona can be based on archetypes, which gives the target audience a quick and easy recognition, as well as a sense of familiarity. (Herskovitz and Crystal, 2010) For instance Pampers takes the brand archetype of “the caregiver” where the audience recognizes that this brand supports the young family and make sure the little ones in the family are comfortable (Siraj and Kuamari, 2011). The benefit of using a brand archetype, such as the one in this example, is that it is a personification that is accepted universally and touches the

consumer’s unconscious ambitions, motivations and drives (Siraj and Kumari, 2011; Tsai, 2006). This archetype is appropriate in this case as you want your babies to be taken care of by a caregiver, and not an underdog or an adventurer. Tsai (2006) argues that one of the main reasons for adding a brand archetype is that they reflect how humans interpret their relationship with their way of life. It serves a symbolic meaning which consumers use for identity construction. The soul of the brand can be translated to an archetype which press on the right buttons in the consumer’s subconscious. The author attests that by using brand archetypes companies are able to draw on the fundamental human psychology of identity construction which consequently helps them build and obtain consumer loyalty. (Ibid.)

Mark and Pearson (2001) identified 12 master brand archetypes for building strong brands. In the table below, one can see that some well-known multinational companies are paired with these 12 archetypes (Siraj and Kumari, 2001).

Archetype	How it Aids Consumers	Brands
Innocent	Be Yourself	Pears, Johnson and Johnson
Explorer	Adventure Seeker	Levi’s, Marlboro
Sage	Understand the World	Unilever, Amway
Hero	Improve the World	Sony, Microsoft
Magician	Change Catalyst	Mastercard, Mattel
Outlaw	Break the Rules/Convention	Harley-Davidson, Hero Honda Pleasure
Regular Guy/Gal	Love what they are	Tata Sonata, VISA Cards
Lover	Spread Love and Emotions	Archies Cards, Revlon
Jester	Enjoy the Moment	Mentos, Pizza Hut
Caregiver	Give Care and Support	L’Oreal, Pampers
Creator	Convert Ideas into Reality	Eureka Forbes, Samsung
Ruler	Take Charge Attitude	General Electric (GE), Duracell

*Source: Siraj and Kumari (2011)*

Siraj and Kuamari (2011) explain that in order to identify the right brand archetype one must understand the brand's value, vision and essence. Then all stories and characters should be managed in line with this. It is also important to understand the consumers' motivations, since this is what the archetype should target. For instance, if the consumers want to avoid financial ruin, a proper archetype would be the caregiver since this instills a feeling of security. Another classical example is Marlboro who uses the Marlboro man as a representation of the archetype "explorer" (Siraj and Kuamari, 2011). Tsai (2006) argues that consumers buy iconic brands for the reason to gain the symbolism of that mythic archetype and to use it to construct their identities in both the self, social and cultural context. Schmitt (2011) takes it a step further and explains that consumers can use brands to enact archetypal myths and for the purpose of social representation. More explained, by wearing Levi's jeans can I become the explorer. This is supported by Megehee and Spake (2011) who found that the acquisition of the experience is more important to consumers than the actual product or service in itself. The experience becomes a space for the consumer to portray and enact an archetypal myth. In this way it is possible to tap into forces which are often found on the unconscious level of the consumer's mind. The products, brands and services become props or tools for the consumer to experience the archetypal myth in connection to the consumer's self. Woodside *et al* (2008) explain how brands and products play an important role in allowing the consumer to experience a specific desired pleasure when enacting an archetype. Also, the story may be experienced partly through retelling it, even though sometimes just mentally or/and physically.

## **CHARACTERS AND CONSUMERS**

### **Stories connection to emotions**

Escala (2004a) explains that audiences today interpret society and create meaning through brands. Brands and products are used to create a desired self-image, and narratives work as a means for processing and matching the brand story to the consumer's own story. (Escala 2004a; Woodside *et al*, 2008). When exposed to stories the consumers are inspired to visualize themselves in connection to the product. The story can even trigger them to reevaluate earlier experiences and make them rethink these experiences. (Escala, 2004b). In addition to this, Shankar *et al* (2007) argue that stronger emotions are produced when stories are closer to the consumers' own ideal story, and when they can make it into something of their own. More positive attitudes and brand evaluations may be created when the brand is more closely linked to consumers' self-image. (Escala, 2004a; Escala, 2004b)

When audiences recognize emotions in stories, this has a significant positive effects on attitude (Escala and Stern 2003; Escala, 2004a). This also connects to the findings of Tsai (2006) who explains that archetypes are experienced the same way universally, and to Siraj and Kumari (2011) who explain that archetypes reach motivations to thoughts and actions on the unconscious level of the mind. From the story, the audience can recognize portrayed emotions such as love, bravery or care, and then absorb and share these emotions, which effectively lead to a more positive attitude (Escala and Stern, 2003). This can be translated to the way you may react to other people's emotions in everyday life; for instance you start to smile when somebody smiles at you. Escala and Stern, (2003) argue that even a quite dispassionate audience can understand the intention and meaning of emotional responses when feelings are communicated and displayed.

The audience goes through stages of sympathy and empathy when experiencing a drama. Sympathy is the emotional response for awareness of the feelings of others, but not absorption in the feelings themselves. You see a person laughing and understand that they are happy, but you do not necessarily laugh yourself. Empathy on the other hand refers to the audience's ability to feel in with another person's emotions. Conversely, in this case you actually feel the joy and laugh with them. Structured classical dramas aim to have a consistent pattern with adding sympathy first, and more easily achieved emotional responses and empathy later on. (Ibid.) A drama with such structure has the capacity to help consumers both comprehend and to participate. (Escala and Stern, 2003; Woodside *et al*, 2008)

Moreover, Escala and Stern (2003) explain that audiences are able to recognize the characters' emotions in a story. They may then begin to think about whether the character's goals and motives are close to their own, which in turn stimulates the audience to imagine themselves in these roles (Escala and Stern, 2003; Woodside *et al*, 2008). The audience may simulate events and reflect over their own actual behavior or potential behaviors and imagine scenarios which look like their own stories in which they are the main characters. Fog *et al* (2010) suggest that in order for listeners to become personally involved with the story, they must be able to identify with the characters, or recognize a little bit of themselves. This may generate in an overall positive attitude (ibid). Woodside *et al* (2008) argue that simple stories with convincing characters and understandable plots help audience make sense of the world.

### **Co-Creators**

In connection to the research outlined above, it could be said that audiences can be co-creators of the story. Singh and Sonnenburg (2012) suggest that brand

owners can leverage their storytelling even more when letting the audience co-create the story. By this they can create their own world by mixing in their own cultural and individual expectations as they construct their own personal narratives. When the audience gets involved this is likely to take attention away from critical thinking, resulting in more positive attitudes towards the brand (Escala, 2004b). The argument is that the brand becomes more meaningful for the audience the more closely it becomes connected to the self (Escala, 2004a; Woodside *et al*, 2008).

Heijbel (2010) suggests that a story needs to be let free and that every re-teller creates their own version adapted for what is essential for that specific person and situation. This is supported by Woodside *et al* (2008) who argue that audiences always try to find familiar contexts that help them make sense of the story. They try to figure out what their own role in the story is as they view themselves as the main characters. In connection to this, Singh and Sonnenburg (2012) suggest that today this is even more evident due to social media. Social media has taken away some control from the brand owners and made the consumers active co-creators of stories. Due to social media, brand owners can no longer just focus on the story output, rather focus should be on the development of the narrative as well as being responsive to what consumers add to the stories. (Ibid.) One important argument is that stories should preferably be true and resonate within the company (Spear and Roper, 2013). This comes from the view that we are unlikely to spread a story we do not think is true or is too complicated to re-tell (Heijbel, 2010).



## METHODOLOGY

The previous section outlines theoretical findings on the strategic aspects of characters in storytelling. However, the research questions of this study aim to answer how and why characters can be used when applying storytelling for the purpose of brand building. Therefore, in order to answer these questions, the practical application of storytelling needed to be investigated in further detail. To explore this a qualitative research design was considered to be most appropriate. A qualitative approach focuses on interpretation and understanding of reality as socially constructed (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008) and tries to uncover the views and meanings of the research participants in order to understand the world as experienced by them (Daymon and Holloway, 2002). Hence, this was considered to be an appropriate research design to gain an understanding of how practitioners actually view and work with characters and storytelling.

To be able to gain and develop a solid basis of knowledge for arguments, the research started with an exhaustive literature review in order to get an understanding and a holistic view of the subject. By this it was possible to identify some of the most important researchers within the field, as well as delimiting the theory and scope of the study to focus on characters and storytelling within strategic brand building. Due to the time and extent of the research we decided to make delimitation so that the study was conducted with only ad/communications bureaus based on the Swedish market. In order to find suitable agencies for the study, a compilation was done by scanning the official websites of different communication bureaus and the type of services they offer. From this online scanning, in conjunction with leaning on the theoretical framework above, a set of possible candidates were selected and

contacted, furthermore an interview guide was formulated.

In-depth interviews were chosen as the method for primary data collection. This was considered appropriate since the aim was to explore how and why characters can be used when building a brand with the help of storytelling. As Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) explain, a benefit of using interviews is that one may reach people's experiences, ideas and point of view. In addition, in-depth interviews provide information about personal experiences, feelings and individual reflections (ibid).

Ten firms who work professionally with storytelling were chosen and one employee at each firm was interviewed in-depth. Three interviews were conducted face-to-face, and the other eight had to be conducted over the telephone since the interviewees worked at different locations in Sweden. The interviewees were chosen based on a convenience sample. As Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) explain this is a common way of sampling within the qualitative approach since the aim is not to make statistical generalizations, thus a systematic sampling technique is not required. Rather, accessibility and suitability of participants are factors that should be stressed. This was also the case for this study. The first interviewees were selected based on that storytelling was offered as one of their services. A condition was also that they would work with storytelling for branding and external communication purposes. One of the first companies that were chosen was Stylt Trampoli since this firm has a long and good reputation for being successful within the storytelling business. Stylt Trampoli is one of the actors that sets the guiding rules which other companies then follow. Thus, it was considered advantageous for the study to let Stylt Trampoli be one of the first firms that were interviewed.

<b>Company/position</b>	<b>Ways of working with storytelling</b>	<b>Location</b>
<b>Nine Yards</b> - CEO/Partner	Focuses on building brands from the inside out, provides a wide range of services e.g. design, pr, events, digital solutions, internal communication.	Gothenburg
<b>Bertilssons Byrå</b> - CEO	Copywriting, focuses on texts and language, e.g. for websites, presentations, social media. Also provides workshops and lectures.	Gothenburg
<b>Stylt Trampoli</b> - CEO	Design and communication agency, focuses mostly on storytelling within the experience industry. Architects, designers, communicators, concept developers among other things.	Gothenburg
<b>Berättelsebyrå</b> - Copywriter	Focuses on images and stories. Produces stories, films and print material based on the client's idea. Art director, copywriter, photographer.	Stockholm
<b>Storybox</b> - CEO	Gives lectures in corporate storytelling, pedagogic storytelling, events, produces marketing material, stories for brand building. Qualified storyteller.	Karlskrona
<b>Actionform</b> - Art Director/Storyteller	Provides workshops and lectures. Mainly helps to develop a strong brand by using storytelling.	Malmö
<b>Beyond Communication</b> - Brand developer	Offers a wide range of services such as communication, copywriting, brand building, art director, media and webb. Storytelling is used as part in these.	Borås
<b>Wave Communications</b> - CEO	Offers storytelling in conjunction with content marketing. Other services are social media development, film, copy and text.	Sandviken
<b>Fabel</b> - Project Manager	Mainly designs and produces solutions to make company target groups more engaged. Utilises different forms of media depending on solution.	Stockholm
<b>2 Add more Stories</b> - CEO	Helps to find the company's story, brand building. Provides lectures and workshops.	Bromma

The first three interviewees were selected based on geographical proximity, so that the interviews could be conducted face-to-face. However, as the number of firms who offer storytelling was rather limited in the geographical region, the sample had to be broadened to also include firms located in

other cities. Since these other firms were not selected based on geographical closeness, they were instead mainly selected based on suitability of their storytelling service offer and suitability for the purpose of this study. It should also be mentioned that three of the interview

subjects were found based on personal recommendations from the other interviewees. The recommendations were based on that the interviewees believed these candidates would provide interesting insights to the study as they were considered to be recognized actors in the business. This was also an important aspect for the validity of the study, since we considered that this sample of respondents would give us the relevant and appropriate data needed to answer the research questions. Validity is an evaluation criterion of the research that indicates whether the research provides an accurate description of what has happened (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). This concept can be further divided into internal and external validity (Bloor and Wood, 2006), and there are different ways for ensuring this in the research process (Riege, 2003; Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). This has been taken into consideration and we explain further in this method section how validity has been ensured throughout this study.

The table above gives more detailed information about each firm and interviewee. The firms all gave their permission to disclose the name of the firm in the study. Even though the interviewees all worked with storytelling and branding in various ways, they showed quite a lot of diversity within this field. Among the firms, there were only a few who offered storytelling as their only core service. Instead, two did it in combination with other areas such as copywriting, producing films and design among other things. Some saw storytelling as one of their many core services, whereas some used it more as a sub-technique for branding among many other techniques. The chosen firms were therefore quite unlike each other although they all worked within the same field. However, this was not seen as a limitation for the study, but rather a strength since it provided a broader and more holistic overview of the practice side. Since using

more than one perspective when drawing conclusions strengthens the internal validity (Patel & Davidson, 2011; Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008; Riege, 2003), this was thus seen as beneficial for this study. Further explained internal validity is a measure to see whether the study investigates what it is actually supposed to (Malterud, 2001), and whether the conclusions drawn correspond to what the data shows (Bloor and Wood, 2006).

Daymon and Holloway (2002) explain that interviews allow for flexibility since a researcher can dig deeper into subjects that emerge during the interview. The opportunity to have flexibility during the interviews was considered advantageous for this study since little was known beforehand how the firms actually work with storytelling. It was argued that by having flexibility during the interviews, the interview subjects would feel freer to explain their own thoughts and work in regards to storytelling. However, it was also considered that some guidelines were still needed to stay on topic so that the research questions could be answered. Thus, to achieve these objectives a semi-structured interview style was chosen, a method which is often used in qualitative research (Bloor and Wood, 2006). Moreover, as Longhurst (2009) explains a semi-structured interview allows the researcher to explore issues thoroughly, and may be used to collect a range of different opinions. Since this was also the aim in this study, this constituted a strong argument for the choice of semi-structured interviews as the method for data collection.

Longhurst (2009) explains that for a semi-structured interview, a set of predetermined themes and questions may be prepared. However, the actual interview does not need to follow these too strictly since the interviewer is free to explore certain topics that may arise during the interview more in-depth. Due to this, semi-

structured interviews tend to become more conversational. (Ibid.) On the basis of this, an interview guide was prepared before the interviews were conducted. This consisted of a set of questions concerning the four themes highlighted the theoretical discussion: 1) where to start with the characters in the storytelling process, 2) how characters in the story can be developed, 3) the brand as a character and 4) how characters connect with consumers as co-creators as well as their emotions and self-identities. The questions also went in-depth on the topics such as the strategic decision behind using storytelling; branding strategies in connection to storytelling; development and connection to characters; the role of emotions and self-image; archetypes; co-creation and evaluation of result. The purpose of asking the interviewees questions about these topics was to develop more insights in how they use characters in their storytelling. The questions were constructed in accordance with Moisander and Valtonen's (2006) suggestion that open-ended questions can be used to avoid directing answers too much. We decided to use this form of questions since we searched for the interviewees own interpretations and allowing them to express this freely.

All the interviewees gave their consent of being recorded (audio) during the interview. These recordings were later transcribed into text, which included the words that were spoken aloud. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) explain that when transcribing interviews it is often enough to include the spoken words unless performing for instance a Discourse analysis or Conversation analysis. As this was not the case, only the spoken words were included. The transcriptions were analyzed in regards the four themes outlined in the theoretical discussion. During the data collection we continuously analyzed the interviews separately by writing down our reflections and

comparing our findings to each other. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) there is one version of reality that can be approached from different angles, and thus by adding these views together provides a better understanding and representation of reality.

Moreover, Stake (2010) explains that a characteristic of qualitative research is more about interpretation and understanding what actually happens, rather than trying to influence or change a situation. Thus by following Stake (2010), the analysis focuses on giving a description of how the interviewees perceived their work. To find similarities and differences we compared the respondents' answers to each other.

In the discussion section below, this information is further interpreted with the help of theory. The reason we did this is to be able to describe a phenomena within the area and inspire to refined processes when conducting storytelling for brand building. During the entire process we continuously looked for patterns, similarities and contrasts when interpreting the data. These steps taken in the research process connect to the concept of external validity. More explained external validity refers to the generalizability of the conclusions and to which contexts the findings can be applied (Bloor and Wood, 2006; Malterud, 2001). Furthermore, Riege (2003) explains that qualitative research is concerned with analytical generalization whereby particular findings are generalizable to a broader theory. This is also the case for this study since its objective is to contribute with knowledge on how and why characters should be used when developing stories around a brand, thereby contribute to storytelling and branding within the field of marketing. In addition, findings of this study have been reached with the help of previous theory and are thus strongly anchored to the same research field as it sets out to contribute to.

Hence, this reflects the steps taken to ensure the external validity of this study.

To ensure validity, the data collected have to be relevant for the problem, the interviews were recorded (audio) and transcribed for future analysis. Therefore, as a means to certify the validity of the analysis, the authors worked semi-independently and cross-checked their interpretations (Stoker, 2011; Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008). We first did our own in-depth analysis of the transcriptions, and wrote down our analyses independently in text form. This later allowed for an effective comparison between the two interpretations of the transcriptions. These were then synthesized into one common analysis and this is presented in the findings section below.

## FINDINGS

The interviews were analyzed by examining what the interviewees said regarding the four different themes that were outlined in the theoretical discussion above. That is: 1) where to start with the characters in the storytelling process, 2) how characters in the story can be developed, 3) the brand as a character, and 4) how characters connect with consumers as co-creators as well as their emotions and self-identities. The main findings from this analysis are presented below and help answer the research questions of this study, that is, how storytelling is applied in brand strategies and if there is a strategic idea behind the choice and design of characters.

### **The brand: the root of storytelling**

In their work, most of the interviewees see the brand as the evident starting point for their stories. Stories are based on brand values, promises, ethics and culture within the company as well as the history of the company. To this, the brand in relation to competitors and the competitive situation is also taken into consideration before

creating the story. The business purpose is also highly important and it is commonly viewed that storytelling is a strategic marketing tool above anything else. However, the business purpose is often just to build a strong brand and not so much further specified than that.

*“The brand IS the story. All promises, expectations and demands on the brand is the foundation for what the story is going to be about. If one does not start from the brand, and use it as a foundation it goes wrong!”*

Nine Yards

In addition, the interviewees argue that when working with storytelling for branding purposes the story should be true. Some point out that it would be all right to do a fictive story. However most had not done it before, nor would do it themselves. It was pointed out by several that if a fictive story would be chosen; it had to be obvious for the audience that it was made up, as one should not trick the receivers. It is all right to modify minor parts of the story and make it adapted, as long as it does not lose its credibility. Without credibility the story will not succeed.

### **Breaking the code of the archetype**

In addition to anchoring the story in the brand, most of the interviewees mention that they usually assign the brand with a persona and an archetype. However, it should be noted that a few were oblivious about how a whole brand could be assigned with an archetype as they had not worked with archetypes in this way before. Another interesting aspect was that the stories were not always adapted to be in line with the overarching brand archetype. Even though a brand may be assigned an archetype, the other stories were not always made consistent with the themes and roles attached to this brand archetype. Rather, stories seemed to be created more at random and using the current company

situation or the project at hand as the foundation for the story.

One particular interviewee however stands out from the rest in terms of how brand archetypes are used and viewed. This interviewee incorporates brand archetypes to a great extent in the storytelling process, and seems to have realized how much potential and power it can have for the storytelling. He explains that the advantage of using brand archetypes is that they reflect back to the stories that the listener is already aware about. They can be seen as codes that have been broken. In addition, the archetype holds a certain power because the listener knows the story, what it symbolizes and the picture is already pre-programmed in their imagination. These codes are unclaimed brands that are free for usage and the character is also the cliché picture of the broken codes. As an illustration, an example of an Italian restaurant in New York called Gemma is brought up. This restaurant clearly uses the broken codes of what symbolizes the Italian lifestyle in the minds of the consumers. One draws upon knowledge which has been gained by consumers after being exposed to multiple stories on this theme; for example the Sopranos, the Godfather, or the stories about Al Capone. The consumer knows this picture and setting for the Italian lifestyle, as well as which characters are involved and how they should behave and what to expect.

*““Gemma” uses the archetypes to the fullest and takes advantage of the broken codes. The waiters are only Italian looking men that talks with an Italian accent, the tablecloths are red and white checkered, the whole experience is influenced by the archetype, and when you leave you pay to an old man in a both... This becomes a story we already know.”*

Stylt Trampoli

## **The cast of the story**

To build up the characters and place these in the context of the story, none of the interviewees except one seem to use any model or framework to guide them. Most however seem to agree upon that there are a set of basic characters found in all stories which can be incorporated in the storytelling:

*“If you go back to the classic tradition where storytelling comes from, there is the old fairytale tradition that you should always have 7 characters in the story.”*

Storybox

In addition, it is mentioned that one should include heroes, helpers, good and bad guys as characters into the story. Often the hero was a natural character to use when portraying a client. However, it is also highlighted among the interviewees that these character roles do not need to be followed too strictly.

In general the plot is considered to be more important than the characters. Most of the interviewees claim that it is more important to focus on actual events rather than building strong characters. As one particular interviewee explains:

*“In general when we work with storytelling it is more connected to events rather than related to characters. It is more events connected to the brand. We only work with stories that come from the brand, and thus the story is almost never build on characters”*

Beyond Communication

The characters are seen as having secondary importance in the story, and the many of the interviewees seem to select these almost at random. When asked about how characters are created and developed in regards to the story, some of the

interviewees seem almost puzzled about the question as they explain that they have not considered this before. Often the employees within the organization are used as the characters of the story. It was explained that the motive behind this was that the employees can have a strong impact when they tell the story because these are the voices of the brand and the values that the brand stands for.

## Archetypes and social changes

Just as with brand archetypes, the use of archetypical characters varies to different extents. Most of the interviewees use them although some do not seem to be fully aware of that it is actually archetypes they are using. Some are neither familiar with the term of calling it archetypical characters. As noted above, the role of the hero is commonly used, as well as the role of the helper. Even those interviewees who claim that they are not using archetypes seem to incorporate the hero and the helper. In contrast, some explain that they quite strictly follow Jungian archetypes. Here many make references to the 12 archetypes that were suggested by Mark and Pearson (2001), and which are depicted in the table above in the theoretical discussion section. However, one of the interviewees also claims that it is getting trickier to work with archetypes nowadays:

*“It is harder to use stiff and rigid characters since the world and the target group has become more complex. The target group is too smart for stiff archetypes, and it lowers the credibility. Even if the starting point is characters it has become much harder to work with it since our postmodern society has become so diversified and the number of archetypes have increased.”*

Fabel

Another one highlights that the archetypes follow business cycles and other changes in society:

*“Some archetypes are more popular than others in different business cycles and conjunctures. When the IT-bubble was at its peak, the story about getting to the top of the mountain was the most prominent. That kind of story was supposed to signal where the company was going!”*

Nine Yards

## Feelings and Gut Feelings

The general opinion is that the creation of feelings is essential for the story. It is the basic purpose for why the story is created and why it is seen as such an effective tool. Thus, the power of emotions is both acknowledged and exploited by the interviewees. This is further illustrated in the following quote:

*“When we create a story, we want this to address the emotional side. You want to create a feeling that is in line with the values and the brand. This is also one of the conditions for the story to be told over and over again.”*

2 add more stories

Furthermore, one interviewee highlights that it is important to dare to use strong emotions since this is what makes the story powerful. Another one explains that it is important to evoke strong emotions in the audience since research has shown that we make decisions based on our emotions, and then confirm this decision with our logic side. However, although it is generally agreed upon that emotions can be risky in the sense that it is sometimes uncertain how the target audience will react to the story, almost none of the interviewees seem to test the story in any way except on their clients. Furthermore, many do not rely on any framework, guidelines or literature for their storytelling. Rather they

seem to rely on their own gut feelings, claiming that everybody knows what a good story should contain. In addition, they appear confident in what they believe in, and seem to be guided by their previous experiences in the storytelling process. As one interviewee explains, to give a story the right emotional tone is actually a quite straightforward process:

*“Why do you become afraid when you watch horror movies? Why are dramas serious? Why is there suspense in action? One simply writes in different genres.”*

Bertilssons Byrå

### **Recognizing yourself**

When asked about how much the story should be anchored in the target group, opinions and views differed among the interviewees. One strong argument was that the brand should be the foundation for the story and not the target group. In contrast, some acknowledged the importance of including the target group, but that focus should first and foremost be on the brand. In addition to this it was generally viewed that it is critical to stay true to the essence of the brand. One interviewee in particular argued very strongly for this. He explained that he saw it as if the story is good enough, anybody will appreciate it, both the target group and others. He explicitly states:

*“I think the story is superior to the target group and that everybody can understand it. It is inherent in our culture!”*

Berättelsebyrå

However, there is some contradiction when the interviewees say that the target group is not the main focus when doing storytelling. Even though claiming that the story is not based on the target group, almost all agree that it is very important for the audience to

be able to imagine themselves in the story. These could either have a role in the story, or there can be characters who reflect who the audience is:

*“The target group needs to have a part in the story. They have to be able to recognize themselves. Be able to get an emotional reaction from the story. Stories are about being swept away and recognition is an important part of it.”*

Fabel

It is noted that if a consumer can recognize him or herself in the story, it creates a stronger desire for the brand and the value that it offers. If the audience is able to identify with the brand, they will be more likely to listen to the story, remember it and tell it to others. In one interview, an example regarding Starbucks is brought up to illustrate just how devastating a story can be if the target group and the listeners are not able to recognize themselves. Starbucks launched a campaign called #RaceTogether to make a statement in the discussion about race. This would probably have been successful if Starbucks had known their target group a bit better. Customers instead lashed out on the campaign and claimed that this was just another way for Starbucks to increase sales and to compensate for previous critique that the company was very secluding. The picture of Starbucks was not at all a company that showed acceptance towards all races and thus the image in the consumers' minds were quite different compared to the story they tried to push.

In contrast, another example shows how beneficial it can be to incorporate the target group's images in the story. An accountant firm wanted to be portrayed as a cool firm. However, the agency that had been hired to do the branding work realized that people did not see accountants as being cool. Rather, the code or image of an accountant was as far from cool as possible. Instead of trying to change everyone's perceptions of



accountants, they decided to use the already existing code which represented the image of an accountant. Thus in their story, the accountant firm was portrayed as the coolest nerd, something which was both accepted by the target group and which the accountant firm could stand behind.

The interviewees were also asked if they work with the target group's image of their ideal self. In general this was not something that was incorporated in the storytelling. However, one company mentioned that they had actually done this in a project and it had proved to be very successful:

*“One of our most recent projects was about selling fiber optic connections to private house owners. For this project we used the consumer's self-image as a foundation. The self-image of the consumer was incorporated in the story by characters of a grumpy old lady and man who resist change and do not understand why they should be interested in these new modern things. In this case we used a self-image which we know that the customer certainly do not want to strive for.”*

#### Beyond Communication

One interviewee also mentions that self-image and recognition can be worked with in a quite subtle way by exploiting what the consumer desires. By incorporating elements which are connected to the consumer's desired self-image, the brand also becomes desirable as it is seen as a tool which can be used to build one's identity. The desirable elements can be translated to the story and in this way one can work with the consumers' self-image more implicitly. Furthermore, some of the interviewees explained that it was not necessary to portray an exact image of the target group in the story. A character that was desired to be or admired by the target group could be used in the story.

To be noted that some of the interviewees point out that they do not always have full access to the story's target audience. Often the client who has requested the story becomes a barrier between the story-creator and the end-customer. Thus, the storyteller often has to rely on information about the target group, which is provided by the client since they are not able to do interviews directly with individuals from the target group.

#### Co-creating the story

Co-creation is believed to be an effective element in the storytelling. The more that is left for interpretation, the stronger the conclusions will be among the listeners to the story. It is good if the receiver of the story is left with something to contemplate and reflect upon after the story has been told. However, it is also noted that stories are difficult to control, and thus it is extremely important to get the essence of the brand right in the story. This is since the essence of the brand constitutes the stable core of the story, and when other elements of the story change, the core should remain the same.

Only a few of the interviewees seem to be reactive in the sense that they will check how the story progresses and changes some period of time after it is released. Often the only mission is to create the story and it then is up to the end client to implement, monitor and continue to work with it. Neither is social media exploited as a tool for co-creation. However, most of the interviewees acknowledge that it would probably be a very effective tool but that they have not used it that much yet.

#### DISCUSSION

In general many of the agencies interviewed do not seem to lean on guidelines or theoretical frameworks when developing their characters and storytelling. Rather, these practitioners

seem to rely on their gut feelings and experiences to guide them in the process. This corresponds to what Heijbel (2011) has noted, that the norm is that practitioners rely on their gut feelings for doing storytelling. However, the previous studies outlined in the theoretical discussion section above emphasize that there are many different strategic ways in which characters could be used in regards to brand building. Thus, this suggests that practitioners of storytelling could probably refine their work even more by learning about, and taking inspiration from, what previous theoretical findings have concluded on the subject. In addition, by only relying on one's gut feelings and experiences there is a risk that work processes become inconsistent. Also, this requires that the client puts faith in the agency to deliver what has been promised since the service offer becomes rather intangible.

Furthermore, the agencies generally anchored the story in the brand in the way that is also suggested by Simmons (2007) and Fog *et al* (2010). Many argued that emotions are vital in storytelling and the ultimate goal when working with it. However, less attention is given to making the target group involved in the story. Considering the strong theoretical arguments that stronger emotions are produced when stories are closer to the consumers' own ideal story (Escala and Stern, 2003; Woodside *et al*, 2008; Shankar *et al*, 2007), it is surprising to see that so many of the agencies consider the target group to be of subordinate importance in the storytelling. As already mentioned, the goal of the storytelling is to reach strong emotions. Hence, this could probably be more easily achieved by including the target group to a larger extent, thereby also increasing the chances of creating a successful story. Moreover, when audiences recognize emotions in stories a more positive attitude towards the brand can be created (Escala and Stern,

2003; Escala 2004a). Thus, greater inclusion of the target group could be beneficial for the brand since the receivers of its story will find it more relevant and feel more strongly about it. This connection between the target group and the brand is also crucial when choosing the proper brand archetype as suggested by Siraj and Kumari (2011). This is since the brand archetype should target the motivations hidden deep within the consumers.

Even though brand archetypes are generally used by the interviewees, they do not seem to coordinate the other subordinate stories and characters in line with this overarching brand archetype in the way that is suggested by Siraj and Kumari (2011). As a suggestion, practitioners could view the brand archetype more as a guiding platform for the rest of the storytelling. The brand archetype can be seen as a movie with a basic theme. Is it a horror movie, a drama or a comedy? Once this has been established, all sub-stories turn into scenes that confirm this lead story. By deciding a brand archetype and building all the stories from this platform, the brand strategy can also become more cohesive. In addition, if the audience recognizes more of themselves in the story, co-creation is likely to occur to a greater extent since the audience becomes more engaged in the story (Escala, 2004a; Escala, 2004b; Woodside *et al*, 2008). In terms of co-creation, the interviewees could also start looking more into how social media may leverage the storytelling since this is acknowledged by both the interviewees and previous theory (Sing and Sonnenburg, 2012) to be both beneficial and relevant in today's society. This however would require a deep understanding of how the storytelling should be adapted to the social media context, as well as the changing roles and dynamic between the story creators and the receivers of the story (Singh and Sonnenburg, 2012).

## CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to explore how characters in storytelling can be used in a strategic manner to build stronger brands. As was noted in the introduction, Fog *et al* (2010) explain that there are no correct way of doing storytelling, but that there are guidelines that can be followed. Previous research suggests that characters are a vital part of the storytelling. Also, many benefits can be gained by focusing on the development of strong characters. However as this study shows, practitioners are not giving characters enough attention when doing their storytelling. Brand values, organizational culture and emotions are generally factors which are given heavy focus when creating the story. Though, the findings indicate that practitioners are missing out on the benefits that could be gained by connecting the target group with the characters of the story. More detailed, an understanding of the consumer's motivations, emotions, self-image and unconscious desires gives direction for which archetype should be used in the story. Furthermore, a clear specification of the brand archetype provides a platform for the rest of the stories, also making the brand strategy more cohesive.

Thus, by making the target group and the characters the starting point when developing the story, a stronger direction and foundation for the whole storytelling process can be created. In addition, by incorporating these aspects more could also increase the target group's involvement and engagement with the story. This could allow for more co-creation and make consumers more prone to re-telling the story, and by this making the story come alive and spread further. In this sense, this study contributes to a set of guidelines for how characters can be treated when doing storytelling. The ambition of exploring this issue is that with such guidelines, practitioners will be able

to leverage their strategic branding work even more. Also, such guidelines can help practitioners to reach their strategic branding goals without only having to rely on their gut feelings and previous experiences of storytelling.

## MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Based on the findings of this study we suggest some applications for ad/communication bureaus working with storytelling. If managers want to reach the strategic benefits identified in this study, it will require them to revise some of their views and work processes on how storytelling should be done. For instance, characters were considered to be of subordinate importance in respect to other elements of the story. However, as the findings in this study shows, there are strategic benefits to be gained by developing strong characters. Hence, ad/communication bureaus need to acknowledge and learn about these strategic aspects and start viewing the characters as an integral element in the story.

Also, there was generally a strong opinion that the brand should be the foundation of the story and should not be adapted that much to the target group. As the theory suggests, benefits could be gain if the story is anchored both in the brand and the target group, not one or the other. Who the consumer is directs which character to assign the brand with, and the brand archetype could further be used as the basis for all other stories and characters. This also gives a more coherent image of the brand when this is communicated, as well as gives a sense of direction. The brand archetype becomes the lead story while the characters and surrounding stories confirms the identity. Thus, by expanding the horizon to learn more about the target group when developing the story and its characters may also provide many strategic benefits.

Furthermore, the findings of this study show that gut feelings are often used to decide how the story should be developed. However, we argue that by collecting inspiration from guidelines, frameworks and theoretical findings on the subject the process of storytelling can be refined. By anchoring the storytelling in theoretical finding makes the service of storytelling more credible and understandable for clients. It will be easier to understand the purpose of storytelling and that it is a legitimate method for building strong brands.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

In this article we have focused on how characters are used by practitioners of storytelling and what can be gained by developing these characters even more. During the research process we discovered multiple subjects that could be interesting for practitioners to look further in to. Due to time and resources constraints we limited ourselves to the Swedish market and used Swedish storytelling companies as our sample. However, other contexts could certainly be interesting to look further into; especially since it was noted above that the choice of characters may be affected by changes in society. The effects of society and time on character archetypes would be a wide area of exploration which could certainly be angled in different ways. Also, it would be interesting to gain deeper knowledge on the subtle ways of making a brand more desirable. As was noted by one interviewee, it is possible to work with self-image in a very subtle way by incorporating what is desirable to the consumer. The brand becomes desirable for the audience since it may be used as a tool for constructing their self-image. Thus, future research could investigate consumers on a deeper level to find out what their desires are and how these can be

connected and translated to the brand and its stories in practice.

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