An Exploration of Brand Storytelling in a Video Sharing Social Network

Charmaine du Plessis

Abstract—The brand storytelling themes and emotional appeals of three major global brands were analysed by means of visual rhetoric in a digital environment focusing on the ethos communication technique. A well-known framework of five basic brand personality dimensions was used to delineate the analysis. Brand storytelling as a branding technique is becoming increasingly popular, especially since all brands can tell a story to connect and engage with consumers on an emotional level. Social media have changed the way in which brand stories are shared with online consumers, while social video networking sites in particular create an opportunity to share brand stories with a much greater target audience through electronic word of mouth (eWOM). The findings not only confirm three dimensions in the traditional brand personality framework, but can also serve as a heuristic tool for other researchers analyzing brand storytelling in a social video sharing network environment.

Keywords—Communication technique, visual rhetoric, social video sharing network, brand storytelling.

I. INTRODUCTION

ALL brands have a story to tell and marketers increasingly use this branding technique to engage with consumers to connect with the brand on an emotional level. Brand storytelling, also known as narrative branding, has now also become part of the digital environment where there is even more opportunity for brands to connect and engage with consumers online.

This study explores the brand storytelling themes of three major global brands in a social video sharing network site to ascertain which of Aaker's [1] brand personality dimensions are manifested to facilitate an emotional appeal. Principles of visual rhetoric were used by applying Artistotle's [2] classical ethos persuasion technique to a digital environment.

According to Bartel and Garud [3], "narratives portray events in a structured manner and offer a particular point of view on a situation through the use of a plot". Brand storytelling typically uses persuasion to convey beliefs to the target audience through a plot. Using visuals in advertising, including brand storytelling, is a well-known persuasion technique [4].Rhetoric often uses persuasion with words or images [5] and has since also evolved to the digital environment, referred to as digital rhetoric [6]. Digital media can include several audio visual file formats [5], which for this study, were videos published in a social video sharing network.

Charmaine du Plessis is Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Science, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa (phone +27 12 429 6525; fax +27 12 429 3346; e-mail: dplestc@unisa.ac.za).

II. THE BRAND AND BRAND STORYTELLING AS A BRANDING TECHNIQUE

According to Opoku, Abratt, Bendixen and Pitt [7], a brand is a "symbol around which social actors, including firms, suppliers, supplementary organizations, the public and customers construct identities". A brand is thus regarded as a personality or "set of human characteristics associated with a brand" upon which marketers rely to facilitate purchases and to obtain a competitive advantage [1].

Herstein and Zvilling [8] argue that the role of a brand is based on the point of view of either the manufacturer or the consumer. For the manufacturer, the role of the brand is to provide "a means of identification with unique features", while consumers perceive the brand as helping to express their personalities and also to be a form of self-expression. Dahlen, Lange and Smith [9] reiterate that consumers in the post-modern world seek stories upon which to base their identity. Burnett and Hutton [10] further explain that the concept of what a brand entails has changed to that of a "new brand" to stay relevant and to accommodate the new consumers' different lifestyles. The new brand invites consumers to participate on their own terms to enhance their own worlds and to build a relationship with the brand through experiences, metaphors and stories. Branding is considered imperative for any company's marketing strategy and in particular creating a strong brand perception among consumers. Hence a competitive edge is obtained by creating a brand image that engages consumers and which also distinguishes the company's products from those of the competitors [11].

Branding thus creates awareness about who the company is and what it stands for using different branding techniques [12]. Various branding terms exist, for example "emotional branding", "experiential branding", "relationship branding" or "brand equity", but all involve a relationship between the brand and the consumer [10].

Branding techniques are usually aimed at building relationships and touching the emotions of consumers. According to Bostos and Levy [13], the brand image represents an advance in branding in that consumers who need to make daily choices about which brands to choose, are now guided by their brand perception. Through various branding techniques, companies promote the value, image, prestige and lifestyle of their brands [12]. One branding technique that is gaining more prominence among companies is that of brand storytelling. It is argued that all brands have a potential story to tell, but that some brands are more factual about the way in

which they elect to tell the story. Dahlen, Lange and Smith [9], for example, emphasise the importance of brands to engage consumers with interesting stories which personalise company products and services.

According to Denning [14], the brand story is usually told by the product or service, the customer (word of mouth) or even by a convincing a third party. In this regard, Herskovitz and Crystal [15] refer to "persona-focused storytelling" which means that the brand's story usually starts with the spoken form of a brand's character or personality. All brand story elements should thus focus on this personality to connect the brand story as a whole, thereby making the brand more recognisable instead of telling incoherent brand stories. Brand story elements usually include a theme, characters, a plot and a setting [15].

A. Theoretical Framework Used for the Visual Rhetorical Analysis

Burnett and Hutton [10] reiterate that the brand story should also include the mission and vision of the company based on the brand's personality. However, various perspectives exist about what character traits a brand personality has. The best-known study was done by Aaker [1], in which a framework consisting of the following five central brand personality dimensions was identified:

- sincerity (down-to-earth, honest, wholesome, cheerful)
- excitement (daring, spirited, imaginative, up-to-date)
- competence (reliable, intelligent, successful)
- sophistication (upper class, charming) and
- ruggedness (outdoorsy, tough)

This framework is still generalisable across all product categories today and is referred to as brand personality themes in this study. Sophonsiri and Polyorat [16] accurately point out that one brand may have several brand personality dimensions and not only one.

Earlier studies such as that ofOpuku et al. [7] extended brand personality studies to an online environment. For example, the study of online brand personality by Opoku et al. [7] added to Aaker's [1] framework by not only identifying more synonyms, but also confirming the original five dimension in an online environment.

III. Brand Storytelling Through Social Media

Social media have changed the way in which brands tell their stories by making available numerous social media networking sites and allowing electronic word of mouth (eWOM) by and to potentially millions of online consumers. The brand's story can be shared by its followers across various social media networks while the company can also follow the participation in the story. Pace [17] argues that in social media the consumer reads the brand narrative and then contributes to the story based on his or her own experiences and feelings. According to Seven and White [18], in a social network environment, branding through storytelling should be relevant and engage the online user, who usually assumes an active role but does not need to leave his or her home. The

existing brand image is replaced by new images and perceptions as they participate in the conversation because the brand story also addresses the emotions of the online audience and communicates brand values in an understandable way. A video sharing site such as YouTube provides the ideal online platform for companies to tell their brands' stories using interesting characters and visuals.

A. Telling a Brand Story with YouTube

YouTube was founded in 2005 and provides a platform through which billions of users can watch and share original videos. YouTube, now a Google-owned social video sharing networking site, combines user-generated content with social networking features making it a powerful visualisation tool to 800 million unique users each month [19]. The growth of online videos specifically necessitates an understanding of the target audience to be visible in an online video-viewing platform such as YouTube [21].

According to Tang, Gu and Whinston [20], providers can upload original videos or existing ones in their original or even edited format. Providers are afforded the opportunity to create a subscription-based dedicated channel where they can then post notifications to subscribers about any new videos that were published [20]. Similarly, many companies now also create brand channels on YouTube to promote their brands and to engage with fans of the brand by frequently publishing videos.

IV. Research Question

The research question is:

Which brand personality themes were conveyed to evoke emotions of viewers as part of the brand storytelling of three major brands on YouTube?

V. Research Methodology

Drawing from the perspective of Byers [6], a visual rhetorical analysis was conducted focusing on the ethos persuasion technique of three brand storytelling videos on YouTube of the three major global brands. Artistotle's [2] classical three types of argumentation, namely ethos, pathos and logos were accepted as the foundation for this analysis since images have a persuasive purpose and the broader perspective of rhetoric, which was also embraced for this study, does not exclude these three types of persuasion. These tie in with the approach of Byers [6]. The traditional ethos persuasion technique refers to a speaker's trustworthiness, an emotional appeal and overcoming prior perceptions [6]. Since the analysis was done in a digital environment, where consumer engagement plays an essential role, only the emotional appeal element of ethos was considered. Herskovitz and Crystal [15] argue in this regard that the brand's personality enhances the emotional bond with consumers through engagement underscoring the ethos technique in brand storytelling.Similarly, Byers [6] argues that ethos can inspire a positive, persuasive and emotional reaction by instilling a sense of goodness.

The purpose of the analysis, however, was not to analyze the actual visual elements of the videos (semiotics), but only to identify the themes in accordance with the theoretical framework as well as the potential emotional appeals conveyed through the brand stories.

This paper adopts a definition of rhetoric as "types of discourse", which acknowledges its interdisciplinary nature of being applied in different situations and contexts [22]. Visual rhetoric refers to methods to interpret visual data [23] which, in this instance, were visuals of brand stories published on YouTube. References to visual rhetoric in this paper also imply positive rhetoric to tell the story of a brand while emotionally engaging users with the brand, similar to the perspective of Dhir [24].

A. Visual Rhetoric in a Digital Environment

Digital rhetoric is still relatively unexplored, while numerous theorists such as La Grandeur [25] argue against Aristotle's [2] classical persuasion techniques in an online environment because of its fragmented nature and a totally different way of communicating. In this regard, Zappen [26] explains that communication in an online environment is interactive and also differs when it comes to speed, reach and a more informal style. It is thus acknowledged that it remains a challenge to adapt traditional rhetoric to a digital environment. However, Lunsford, Wilson and Eberly [27] elucidate that an analysis of digital rhetoric should rather be focused on specific cases of online communication, which for this study involved three brand storytelling videos for an exploratory study to establish how traditional rhetoric could be used in a social video sharing network. The study thus focuses on instances of persuasive appeals based on elements of distinguished brand personality themes.

B. Sample

A purposive sample of three brand story videos of Interbrand's three best global brands in 2012 was used for this study, namely Coca-Cola (best brand), Apple (second best brand) and IBM (third best brand) [28]. Interbrand is a global brand consultancy that evaluates brands by considering their financial performance, the role of the brand in purchase decision making and its ability to create loyalty (brand strength). Coca-Cola is a global player and the largest seller of soft drinks in human history. Apple is renowned for its OS X luxury Macintosh computer, iPad tablet and iPhone smart phone products, while IBM is a multinational US-based technology company [28].

VI. Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study can be elucidated as follows:

A. Brand Storytelling Coca-Cola

By March 2013, Coca-Cola had 111 718 subscribers to its YouTube brand channel with more than 127 million video views for 1592 videos.

The video *Coca-Cola Security Cameras* was purposively selected for analysis because of its high number of views, indicating its popularity. The video's statistics and Aaker's [1] identified brand personality theme are depicted in Table I below.

TABLE I
AN EXAMPLE OF BRAND STORYTELLING COCA-COLA

Plot	Security cameras around the world are watching ordinary people who show acts of kindness and bravery towards others which opens happiness. They all drink Coca-Cola
Title of video	Coca-Cola security cameras
Characters	Ordinary people
Date published	30 November 2012
Setting	City life
Length of video	1.31 minute
Audience	International
Aaker's brand personality theme	Sincerity
Emotional appeal	Those who drink Coca-Cola are happy people - become part of happiness
Number of views as on 10 March 2013	183 182

B. Brand Storytelling Apple

By March 2013, Apple had more than one million subscribers to its YouTube brand channel and more than 37 million video views for 45 videos.

The video *Apple – iPhone5 – TV Ad- Dream* was purposively selected for analysis because of its high number of views, indicating its popularity. The video's statistics and Aaker's [1] identified brand personality theme are depicted in Table II below.

TABLE II
AN EXAMPLE OF BRAND STORYTELLING APPLE

Plot	The two William sisters, Venus and Serena, are playing table tennis against each other. It is proposed that nobody wants to be disturbed while watching them play. The iPhone 5 allows one to set the *do not disturb* button so that you can only be disturbed by important calls that you pre-set.
Title of video	Apple iPhone 5 Dream
Characters	The two Williams sisters who are champion tennis players
Date published	1 January 2013
Setting	Table tennis
Length of video	31 seconds
Audience	International
Aaker's brand personality theme	Sophistication
Emotional appeal	Be part of the cool people
Number of views as on 10 March 2013	1,796,310

C. An Example of Brand Storytelling IBM

By March 2013, IBM had more than 16 000 thousands subscribers to its YouTube brand channel and more than six million video views for 249 videos.

The video, *Touch: 5 Future Technology Innovations from IBM,* was purposely selected for analysis because of its high number of views, indicating its popularity. It is part of a series of brand storytelling videos in which IBM predicts future

innovations concentrating on the five senses, namely touch, hearing, sight and taste. The video's statistics and Aaker's [1] identified brand personality theme are depicted in Table III below.

TABLE III
AN EXAMPLE OF BRAND STORYTELLING IBM

Plot	An expert at IBM explains how within five years our phone will become part of our everyday experiences by integrating effortlessly into our own worlds through the sense of even touch, for example, by sharing fabrics, texture and vibrations.
Title of video	IBM – Touch – 5 Future Technology Innovations
Characters	Robyn Schwartz, Retail Industry Expert, IBM
Date published	13 December 2012
Setting	IBM's offices
Length of video	1.13 minute
Audience	International
Aaker's brand personality theme	Excitement
Emotional appeal	With IBM you will be part ofinnovation and up-to-date
Number of views as on 10 March 2013	232,530

The rhetorical situation of the visual rhetorical analysis is three purposively selected videos available in the dedicated brand channels of the three best global brands in an online video sharing network, YouTube, which overall, has 80 million unique visitors per month [19].In the context of this study, the speaker is either a character or characters making an emotional appeal to viewers who elect to watch the brand stories based on interest (receivers) while sharing a brand story (message) as part of a coherent theme. The receivers are also subscribers to the brand's YouTube channel who can also elect to share the videos with a wider audience through electronic word of mouth (eWOM).

Tables I to III indicate the three videos' statistics as well as identified brand personality themes and possible emotional appeals. It should, however, be noted that the brand storytelling videos selected for the analysis form part of a series of brand storytelling videos published on YouTube by Coca-Cola, Apple and IBM and should thus be considered in their entirety instead of individually.

However, since this study was merely exploratory, three videos were analysed to ascertain whether Aaker's [1] traditional brand personality dimensions (themes) could also be applied to brand storytelling in this social video sharing network. All the published videos of the three top brands on YouTube have different characters, plots and settings, but base their stories on a recognisable brand personality with a coherent theme unifying the brands, as also argued by Herskovitz and Crystal [15].

Coca-Cola, for example, shares brand stories portraying fun, freedom and refreshment, Apple shares stories about class, taste and being cool and IBM shares thought-provoking innovative brand stories. YouTube as a social video sharing network provides the ideal opportunity to publish a series of brand storytelling videos accessible to a global target audience.

In the context of the three videos analysed in this study, Aaker's [1] brand personality themes are also applicable in the form of sincerity, sophistication and excitement. These themes make an emotional appeal to viewers by attempting to evoke an emotional reaction through positive associations with the brand in the form of a story.

Aristotle's [2] classical ethos communication technique is evident in the positive, persuasive arguments and possible emotional reaction evoked by those who elect to watch the videos. For example, in the case of the security camera video by Coca-Cola, it was suggested that if viewers drink Coca-Cola, they would also be happy. In the iPhone 5 Dream video by Apple, an emotional appeal is made to be part of all the cool people, while IBM appeals to viewers to be part of exhilarating, cutting-edge innovation and advanced technology, also when it comes to the sense of touch. These emotional appeals could be both visualized and strengthened through brand storytelling in a social videosharing network.

VI. CONCLUSION

Although the framework used for this visual rhetorical analysis could be criticized, it could serve as a useful framework for future similar studies in a marketing context.The results of this exploratory study indicate that the brand storytelling videos of the three major global brands are part of a cohesive theme and form part of a series of stories depicting different aspects of the brands' personalities.

Aaker's [1] framework of sincerity, sophistication and excitement could also be applied to the brand storytelling themes of the videos in the sample. These videos could all make an emotional appeal to viewers by potentially evoking positive associations with the brand. The limitations of this study are also acknowledged in that only three videos were analysed and not the series of available brand stories. The results cannot also be generalised to other brands or videos.

Future studies could include more videos in the analysis, a more in-depth analysis of brand storytelling techniques and themes as well as brand storytelling videos where consumers share stories about their experiences with a brand.

Brand personality dimensions (themes) as well as Aristotle's [1] classical persuasion techniques are all interdependent, while viewers may also experience brand stories in different ways and not necessarily as intended.

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Charmaine (TC) du Plessis is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Science, University of South Africa in Pretoria, South Africa and lectures both undergraduate and postgraduate courses in the Department's organisational communication section where she specializes in online marketing communications. She obtained her Master's degree in Communication Science in 2000, her Doctorate in Communication in 2005 and a Postgraduate Diploma in Marketing Management in 2010 from the University of South Africa in Pretoria, South Africa.

Charmaine (TC) du Plessis gained wide-ranging experience in both marketing and public relations before she joined the academia at the beginning of 1997. She has since published and presented papers both locally and internationally, and supervises numerous master's and doctoral students. She has also contributed numerous chapters to academic books.