Narrative Processing: Building Consumer Connections to Brands

Jennifer Edson Escalas

Eller School of Business and Public Administration
University of Arizona

This article proposes that narrative processing creates or enhances self-brand connections (SBC) because people generally interpret the meaning of their experiences by fitting them into a story. Similarly, in response to an ad that tells a story, narrative processing may create a link between a brand and the self when consumers attempt to map incoming narrative information onto stories in memory. Our approach rests on the notion that a brand becomes more meaningful the more closely it is linked to the self. We conceptualize this linkage at an aggregate level in terms of SBCs, that is, the extent to which consumers have incorporated the brand into their self-concepts. The results of an experiment show that narrative processing in response to a narratively structured ad is positively related to SBCs, which in turn have a positive relation with brand attitudes and behavioral intentions.

In this article, we explore how brands become meaningful for consumers by examining one thought process that may create a link between a brand and a consumer’s self-concept: the construction of narratives or stories. In general, people create stories to organize their experiences, create order, explain unusual events, gain perspective, and make evaluations (Bruner, 1986, 1990). Narratives fit the pieces of people’s lives together with causal links: Stories elucidate goals, evaluate actions to achieve goals, and interpret outcomes (Pennebaker & Hastie, 1986). Thus, people use stories to understand the world around them, what goes on in their own lives, and who they are as individuals and members of society.

We argue that the meaning ascribed to products and brands can also be generated by narratives. Many scholars have asserted that people naturally think in story-like form (Adaval & Wyer, 1998; Bruner, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1991; Shank, 1990). It is therefore reasonable that consumers should also interpret their exposure to and experience with brands via narrative thought processes. For example, in response to a question such as, “Why did you buy a Passat?” a consumer might respond with a personal story about the decision-making process:

It was a really difficult decision. I had a Honda Civic before, and I loved that car. But I’ve got two kids and I didn’t feel safe, so I decided to buy a bigger car. I did a lot of research: I searched the web and talked to two of my friends who I think know a lot about car decisions. They convinced me that the Volkswagen Passat was the safest car in its class. I’m really happy with my choice. It’s safe for my kids—I’ve got eight airbags now! —and I think owning a Passat shows that I’m smart.

Consumer stories about brands often involve user and usage associations (in the previous example, driving a Volkswagen Passat is considered “smart”), as well as psychological and symbolic benefits (e.g., the Volkswagen Passat provides a sense of safety), which brand equity researchers relate to the value of a brand (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). Thus, what a brand means to a consumer is based in part on the narratives he or she has constructed that incorporate the brand. Narrative processing maps incoming stories onto stories in memory (Shank & Abelson, 1995). Because stories focus on goals, actions, and outcomes, and stories in memory are likely to be self-related, a link may be forged between brands in an ad story and the achievement of self-related goals. A self-brand connection (SBC) may be formed based on these perceived psychological benefits.

First, this article explores the notions of narrative processing and SBCs. Then, we develop hypotheses and present the findings from a storyboard advertising experiment, which manipulates narrative structure but controls for ad content, to demonstrate that (a) narrative advertising leads to narrative processing, (b) narrative processing enhances SBCs, and (c)
SBCs are positively related to brand attitudes and behavioral intentions. Thus, the contributions of this article are three: we specify one process of building SBCs: stories involving the brand; we develop the SBC concept; and we investigate the effects of narrative advertising.

A FRAMEWORK FOR NARRATIVE PROCESSING AND SELF-BRAND CONNECTIONS

The basic premise of this research is that people may form SBCs by processing their experiences with brands, including advertisements, in a narrative mode of thought, that is, by creating stories or imposing a story-like structure on events. These stories may result in SBCs if the stories create the belief for the consumer that the brand contributes to meeting his or her self-related, psychological needs. First, we discuss narrative processing. Then, we examine SBCs, followed by a discussion of consumer-generated and advertising-generated narratives.

Narrative Processing

Narrative processing is able to create meaning because of the structure of narratives. This structure provides temporal and relational organization and a basis for causal inferencing. First, narrative thought organizes events in terms of a temporal dimension: The events occur over time (Bruner, 1986, 1990). Time is configured in narratives as episodes, which structure time into a beginning, middle, and end. Second, narrative thought structures elements into an organized framework that establishes relations between the story’s elements and allows for causal inferencing. Stories consist of goal-directed action-outcome sequences (Stein & Albro, 1997). Pennington and Hastie (1986) called this structure an “episode schema”: Initial events create responses in characters that can be physical, psychological, or both. As a result of these responses, the characters develop goals that lead to courses of action, which result in certain outcomes.

The consumer story about the Volkswagen Passat has all the elements of a narrative. An initial event (having two children) resulted in a psychological state (felt need for increased safety) that led to the formation of goals (buying a bigger car). Next, the consumer researches which car to buy (action) and purchases the car (outcome). Because narrative elements are organized through time, causal inferences can be made: What happens at Time 1 (the consumer feels unsafe in a small car with children) causes what happens at Time 2 (he researches which larger car to buy), which in turn causes what happens at Time 3 (he buys a Passat). Thus, the meaning of an event is the result of its being a part of a plot (Polkinghorne, 1991). In the Passat example, the research conducted early in the process gives the VW Passat brand a “smart” image. As a result of the meaning arising from the structure of narratives, people are able to make evaluations and form judgments by constructing stories (Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Pennington & Hastie, 1992).

The narrative mode of thought does not necessitate that individuals form elaborate, complex novels in their minds. Rather, when engaged in narrative processing, people think about incoming information as if they were trying to create a story—for example, imposing a beginning, middle, and end, attributing causality, and so forth. In day to day living, individuals continually attempt to impose a narrative structure on occurrences to understand them. The emphasis of this article is on the narrative mode of thought as a process, not as a mental representation or memory structure. Narratives are similar to the general concepts of schemas or scripts in that they are organizing mental structures or frameworks (Polkinghorne, 1991). However, the term schema, which refers to the general knowledge a person possesses about a particular domain (Alba & Hasher, 1983), is a more general concept: Narratives have a more narrowly defined form and function. Narratives are also different from scripts, which represent commonly experienced events as an abstraction (Abelson, 1981). Narratives pay attention to specific details and unusual events to explain and interpret such events. In fact, stories conforming strictly to scripts have been given low story ratings by subjects (Brewer & Lichtenstein, 1981).

Our approach focuses on narrative processing. We consider consumers to be creative story builders who do not record the world, but create it, mixing in cultural and individual expectations as they construct their personal narratives. Shank’s (1990) and Shank and Abelson’s (1995) view of narrative processing asserts that individuals relate an incoming story to stories they have in memory. Typically, these stories involve the self and one’s personal experiences (Kerby, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1991). This is not always the case; for example, most people can tell the story of O. J. Simpson’s life. However, that story will often include personal details, such as where the storyteller was located when the trial verdict was announced.

Under the Shank and Abelson (1995) view, people match incoming narrative information to episodes stored in memory to comprehend the information. The matching process focuses on key story elements: goals, actions, and outcomes; although if no matches are found for these elements, people can also search for other cues as well (e.g., type of protagonist, setting, etc.). Story understanding consists of three possibilities (Shank & Abelson, 1995). One, the new story matches an already established story in memory, reinforcing one’s beliefs about that story. Two, aspects of the new story are used to update missing aspects of the story it most closely matches. And three, the new story provides further evidence for stories only tentatively understood previously.

Narratives help people interpret the world around them to create meaning, including meaning for brands. The structure of narratives provides the framework for causal inferencing about the meaning of brands and the meaning of consumers’
experiences with brands. For example, if a brand does not perform well, what that means to a consumer depends on the story he or she creates as an explanation. If the consumer matches this episode to a story in memory about a company that uses low-quality components and has an assembly line with poorly trained workers, and therefore produces a bad product, he or she may never buy the brand again. On the other hand, if the consumer creates a story where a quality-focused company cannot control every single person or component in its production process, and therefore the bad product he or she received is just due to uncontrollable random chance, then the meaning of the poor performance is completely different.

Recently, consumer psychology has also taken an interest in the role of narratives in information processing (Adaval & Wyer, 1998). In this line of research, narratives have been shown to improve the evaluation of vacations, compared to simple lists of features. The favorable impact of narratives has a more noticeable effect when negative features of the vacations were included, when pictures accompanied the text, and when participants were encouraged to imagine themselves having the vacation experiences. Narrative processing also increased affective reactions, but these responses did not account for the improved vacation evaluations. The authors assert that the advantage of narratives comes from their structural similarity to information naturally acquired in life experiences and from their tendency to induce holistic, not piece-meal, information processing strategies, but their research does not address the idea that narratives are used to interpret meaning. This article fills this gap by examining the use of narratives to create SBCs.

Self-Brand Connections

It is intuitively appealing and generally accepted by our society that people use products and brands to create and represent desired self-images and to present these images to others or even to themselves. One reason why consumers value psychological and symbolic brand benefits is because these benefits can help consumers construct their self-identity or present themselves to others. Consumer research on the significance of important possessions finds that possessions can be used to satisfy psychological needs, such as actively creating one’s self-concept, reinforcing and expressing self-identity, allowing one to differentiate oneself and assert one’s individuality, and connecting one’s self to significant others (e.g., Ball & Tasaki, 1992; Belk, 1988; Kleine, Kleine, & Allen, 1995; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988). Other researchers have extended some of these possession findings to brands (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Fournier, 1998). For example, recent research indicates that consumers construct their self-identity and present themselves to others through their brand choices based on the congruency between brand-user associations and self-image associations (or possible self-image associations; Escalas & Bettman, 2003).

Thus, one consumer may drive a BMW to fit in with his or her peers, whereas another may drive a Mercedes to differentiate him- or herself from an outgroup. Yet another consumer may drive a Cadillac as a symbol of personal accomplishment, whereas a fourth leases a Jaguar, despite the financial burden of large monthly payments, in the belief it will help him or her achieve future success.

Social cognition research on the self has developed a variety of theoretical constructs to explain the complex nature of self-knowledge and self-related behavior. The self is conceptualized as consisting of multiple aspects (Linville, 1987), including social roles and personality traits, the most important of which are said to be schematic self-aspects (Markus, 1977). Self-complexity is the number and interrelatedness of those aspects (Linville, 1987), whereas possible selves are the future dimensions of those aspects (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The most salient aspect of self at any moment is said to be the working self-concept (Markus & Kunda, 1986). SBCs need only occur between the brand and one aspect of self, with more schematic aspects of self resulting in stronger connections. For example, Gymboree may be connected to one’s mother aspect of self, whereas Burberry may be connected to one’s professional aspect of self. If the professional aspect of self is more schematic than the mother aspect of self, the connection to Burberry is likely to be the stronger one.

We propose that the connection between a brand and an individual’s aspect of self can be made in a variety of ways, as consumers appropriate brand associations to meet self-motivated goals. Brands can be used to construct and cultivate one’s self-concept. They can be used to express one’s self-concept, publicly or privately. Brands can be used as tools for social integration or to connect one to the past. Brands act as symbols of personal accomplishment, provide self-esteem, allow one to differentiate oneself and express individuality, and help one through life transitions. In the process of using brands to construct one’s self-identity, the set of brand associations may become linked to the consumer’s mental representation of self (Krugman, 1965). We conceptualize and operationalize this linkage at the aggregate level of SBCs, the extent to which individuals have incorporated brands into their self-concept (Escalas & Bettman, in press). We believe that SBCs capture an important part of consumers’ construction of self. Therefore, the primary dependent variable in our studies is a measure of the degree to which consumers include the brand in their mental representation of self, that is, form an SBC.

Consumer Narratives

As stated previously, narrative processing provides the mechanism to link brands to the self as incoming information is matched to stories in memory (Shank & Abelson, 1995). These stories may be impersonal, such as those based solely on advertising images, or they may be very significant for the
consumer—for example, a life narrative where a brand plays a critical role in a personal transition (cf. Huffman, Ratneshwar, & Mick, 2000; Kleine et al., 1995). In general, the marketing environment presents people with product and brand information. Narrative thought is likely to be used to integrate external information with personal brand experiences because individuals naturally tend to impose a narrative structure on events to interpret their meaning. Narrative thought is also likely to relate such brand experiences to people’s self-concepts because people tend to create their self-identity via self-stories (Polkinghorne, 1991).

When incoming information is processed as a story, consumers will try to map that information on to their existing story memories, the majority of which involve the self, because one’s self is present at every moment of one’s life. In some cases, consumers may use stories to relate the brand’s image to their personal experiences and their sense of self, creating an SBC. In these stories, the brand may help the consumer achieve a self-related goal or it may meet a psychological need for the consumer. In some cases, brands may be incorporated into consumers’ life narratives, which are used to describe their path of identity development, with brands as props or artifacts in that process (Grayson & Shulman, 2000; Kleine et al., 1995). In the Volkswagen Passat story example, the story builds a link for the consumer between the need to be smart and the process of buying the car. In the end, he concludes that Passat “shows” that he is “smart,” meeting his psychological need on that dimension.

Advertising Narratives

Marketers may be able to influence the degree to which consumers form SBCs by their brand’s features, positioning, image, and advertising, and by influencing consumer narratives. By managing consumer narratives about the brand through advertising, marketers can establish special meaning for their brand. Advertisers appear to be implicitly aware of the power of narratives because many ads tell stories (Escalas, 1998). Ads that tell stories are able to involve and entertain consumers and, more important, are able to communicate and model how products may be used to create meaning. Narrative advertising includes a variety of advertising types studied by consumer researchers: drama ads (Deighton, Romer, & McQueen, 1989; Stern, 1994), some forms of transformational advertisements (Puto & Wells, 1984), slice of life ads (Mick, 1987), and so forth.

Advertisements tell stories to varying degrees (Mick, 1987). Some ads are complete, well-developed stories in and of themselves. For example, a recent ad for Pizza Hut is told in the form of a narrative. At a Little League baseball game, the main character, a young redheaded boy, plays right field. The action begins when a ball is hit in the boy’s direction. He raises his glove and miraculously catches the ball, accomplishing his goal. His face first registers shock, then joy. The cheering team runs out to celebrate this game-winning catch. The ad ends at a Pizza Hut, where the team celebrates its victory, with the right fielder at the center of attention. Many advertising campaigns tell the same core story over and over again varying only the characters and settings (e.g., ads for the painkiller Aleve). Other ad campaigns tell continuing stories. The quintessential continuing story campaign was that of Taster’s Choice, where each successive ad built on the story line presented in the last ad.

There are many ways that an ad can prime narrative thought. First, ads that are in the form of a story may prime narrative processing by encouraging viewers to think in narrative form by focusing on the story elements and being drawn into the story rather than analyzing brand attributes, critiquing the ad, or even turning out the ad. Some consumers will try to match the incoming story to existing stories in memory. In some cases, consumers may relate the ad’s story to a personal story and begin to think in a narrative way about their own lives. In this case, the externally presented story provides what can be considered as a narrative shell or script, an initial narrative direction or starting point for self-generated thought. Another way that advertising can elicit narrative thought is by directly encouraging self-generated narratives, for example by evoking autobiographical memories or mental simulation of product use, both of which are often in the form of stories (Baumeister & Newman, 1994; Fiske, 1993). Ads may prime mental simulation and autobiographical memory retrieval indirectly, with images, music, and so forth, or more directly, with specific instructions or cues for the consumer to follow (e.g., Sujan, Bettman, & Baumgartner, 1993). Thus, there are degrees to which a consumer becomes an active participant in narrative processing in response to an ad, ranging from processing narrative ad elements to narrative elaboration on personal experiences.

HYPOTHESES

We propose that consumers actively construct their self-identities using brand associations that arise through narrative processing, and this process results in SBCs. Consumer researchers have studied self-generated, naturally occurring consumer narratives and found that stories about brands that help achieve self-identity goals result in SBCs (Escalas & Bettman, 2000). In this article, we focus on narrative advertisements, which should prime narrative thought, as a means of building SBCs. A story ad incorporates a brand into narrative elements (e.g., goals, actions, outcomes). As consumers try to map incoming narrative ad information onto their stories in memory, they compare the ad story to their own personal experiences, searching for stories with similar goals, actions, and outcomes. This matching process provides the basis for the formation or strengthening of an SBC. If a consumer matches an ad story where the brand being advertised
helps the actor achieve a certain goal (e.g., self-enhancement, belonging to a reference group, etc.) onto his or her own stories about actions taken to achieve those same goals, a link may be formed between the brand and the consumer’s perceived ability to achieve a desired outcome. Narrative structure provides the temporal and componential relations necessary for these types of inferences. Our core hypothesis, H1, is therefore that narrative processing will create or enhance SBCs. (We assume that the narratives are positively valenced in terms of the brand.)

H1: Narrative processing will lead to the creation or enhancement of SBCs.

Our experiment directly tests whether narrative ad structure evokes narrative thought processes and separately measures the effect of narrative ad structure on SBCs. Our empirical test of this hypothesis is conservative because we examine narrative processing in the context of an externally presented narrative advertisement, as opposed to an entirely self-generated consumer narrative.

SBCs should, in turn, have a favorable effect on brand attitudes ($A_B$) and behavioral intentions (BI). Brands that are connected to a consumer’s sense of self should be regarded more favorably than less meaningful brands. Consumers should be predisposed to respond favorably toward a brand that helps them achieve their self-identity goals. Furthermore, consumers with SBCs should also behave more consistently with regard to the brand, thus there should be a positive relation between SBCs and consumers’ likelihood of trial, purchase, higher willingness to pay, or all of these.

H2: SBCs will be positively related to attitudes toward the brand and behavioral intentions.

One also might argue that ads that tell stories should be evaluated as better advertisements and therefore generate higher attitudes toward the ad ($A_{Ad}$). However, there are many different types of advertisements that do not tell well-developed stories, but still may be considered excellent advertisements and engender high ad attitudes. In a recent content analysis, Escalas (1998) found that just over 20% of advertisements contain well-developed stories. Although this frequency makes the study of narrative advertising effects relevant and interesting, it leaves a great deal of room for other types of advertisements that may be very well-received by consumers—for example, vignette advertisements (Stern, 1994), lecture ads (Wells, 1988), informational ads (Puto & Wells, 1984), and so forth. Therefore, the relation between narrative structure and $A_{Ad}$ will be left as an empirical question.

STORYBOARD AD EXPERIMENT

In this study, storyboard advertisements were used to manipulate narrative processing. Storyboards are commonly used by advertising agencies to sketch out ad concept ideas. As a medium, storyboard ads present a series of scenes, which enables them to tell a well-developed story. On the other hand, these are not actual television ads with live action and a soundtrack, so their ability to tell a story will be a conservative test of our hypotheses. However, the storyboard ad stimuli enable us to manipulate narrative structure while simultaneously controlling narrative content.

Four ads were used in the experiment, crossing story and nonstory versions over two brands (all between subject). We first ran a pretest to collect and analyze participants’ thought protocols to be certain narrative ad structure leads to narrative processing. Then, the experiment was run (with distinct participants) to collect the dependent measures (SBC, $A_B$, BI, and $A_{Ad}$) without the elicitation of thought protocols, to avoid the assertion that the act of writing the thought protocols affected our dependent measures. Involvement in the product category was included to rule out the possibility that SBCs reflect involvement rather than a connection between the consumer’s self-concept and the brand. Real-world brands were used, requiring the measurement of prior SBCs (Prior SBC) and prior brand attitudes (Prior $A_B$) to be used as covariates.

Ad Stimulus Creation

Scenes from two real-world television ads were digitally captured and modified for this study. Specifically, the ads were for American Express, with 9 scenes, and Kodak film, with 10 scenes. These scenes were arranged to create one story-like structure and one nonstoried, vignette structure for each brand.

Stern (1994) differentiated classical (considered here to be narrative) dramas from vignette dramas based on differences in attributes, such as plot, character, and narrativity. Briefly, the attributes of classical dramas are plot, linear chronological progression, few but central characters, and less explicit narration; whereas the attributes of vignettes are episodic repetitions of actions, lack of chronological ordering, many but unrelated characters, and more explicit narration (in the case of the stimulus storyboard ads, the same wording was used under each scene, so the differences in narration are not relevant). The scenes used in the story condition and in the vignette condition were identical, with only

---

1Please note that although the existence of a SBC implies a positive brand attitude, the inverse is not true. Consumers may have favorable attitudes toward many brands where no SBCs exist.

2While the original American Express ad was clearly a story, the ad for Kodak was not. Therefore, additional scenes were added to create the storied version of the Kodak ad.
the order of presentation changed. In the vignette condition, some of the individuals were slightly modified (hair color, skin color) so that it would not look as if it were the same people again and again. A brief description of each scene and listing of the orders presented in the story versus vignette conditions can be found in Table 1.

Thought Protocol Pretest

**Subjects.** Two hundred fifteen introductory marketing students from a southwestern university participated in exchange for credit toward fulfillment of a course requirement.

**Procedure.** In the first part of the study, participants filled out a questionnaire that included a measure of prior AB conditions can be found in Table 1. "Please write down what you were thinking while you watched the storyboard version of this advertisement." After writing down their thoughts, they turned to a new page where they were asked some additional questions not used for this project, and then they were dismissed. The thought protocol pretest took about 20 min. (To reiterate, the procedure up to and including exposure to the storyboard ad was identical in the pretest and in the experiment described next.)

Measuring narrative processing. To test the assertion that narrative ad structure leads to narrative processing, the thoughts participants' reported as having while watching the storyboard ad were coded by two coders blind to the experimental conditions. The thoughts were coded for the degree to which these thoughts told a well-developed story using the six-item scale shown in Table 2. The set of each subject's thoughts was coded as a single story unit, rather than being broken down into smaller component phrases (Riessman, 1993). The scale items are based primarily on Pennington and Hastie's (1986, 1992) episode schema, which highlight the causal and temporal relation between story elements found in narrative thought: An initial event results in a response in a character, actions are undertaken to achieve goals, and these actions result in an outcome (Items 1

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story Order</th>
<th>Vignette Order</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kodak Ad</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Photo: film box and tagline (True Colors)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Photo: bride, “The bride on wedding day”</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Photo: baby with father, “Babies start out so cute and small.”</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Photo: toddler girl by wreath, “Merry Christmas.”</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Photo: preschool girl in fairy costume, “Trick or treat.”</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Photo: young girl smiling, “Father teaches his daughter to dance.”</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Photo: young girl with father, “Ballet recital.”</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Photo: film box and tagline, “Kodak Film: For the times of your life.”</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Express Ad</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Photo: card and tagline (Membership has its privileges/Don’t leave home without it) Announcer: The American Express Card.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Photo: hand near computer monitor, “Doctor pointing to sonogram: ‘Here’s the head.’”</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Photo: woman handing man small shoes, “Expecting mother: ‘Do you like these baby shoes?”’</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Photo: formula bottles, “Announcer: ‘So many things are needed for a baby…”’</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Photo: woman by mobile, “Mother-to-be: ‘Isn’t this cute?”’</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Photo: couple with salesperson at counter, “Father-to-be: ‘We’ll take everything.”’</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Photo: card and tagline, Announcer: “American Express helps you be prepared.”</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative Structure Coding Scale Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. To what extent do these thoughts/does this ad consist of actors engaged in actions to achieve goals?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. To what extent do these thoughts/does this ad let you know what the actors are thinking and feeling?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. To what extent do these thoughts/does this ad provide you with insight about the personal evolution or change in the life of a character?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. To what extent do these thoughts/does this ad explain why things happen, that is, what caused things to happen?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. To what extent do these thoughts/does this ad have a well-delineated beginning (initial event), middle (crisis or turning point), and ending (conclusion)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. To what extent do these thoughts/does this ad focus on specific, particular events rather than on generalizations or abstractions?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** These items are measured on 5-point scales, anchored by not at all (1) and very much so (5).
scores were used for the remaining participants. The overlapping 10% (Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .75 \)) for this overlap, the two coders’ average narrative scores were highly correlated (\( r = .54, p < .001 \)). Therefore, the two coders’ narrative scores were averaged to form one narrative score per ad for the overlapping 10% (\( \alpha = .75 \)) and their individual average scores were used for the remaining participants.

**Pretest results.** One of the primary assertions in this article is that the narrative structure of an advertisement will affect the extent to which ad viewers will engage in narrative processing. The pretest tests this claim directly. The coded narrative structure scores are significantly different by ad type, vignette = 1.18, story = 1.37, \( F(1, 210) = 12.66, p < .001 \), in a model of brand, ad type, and their interaction, indicating that storyboard ads that tell a story lead to greater narrative processing than storyboard ads that do not tell a story. (Brand is also significant in this model; however, the interaction of brand by ad type was not.) Although these narrative processing numbers may appear low, the narrative structure scale used to code the thought protocols was designed to evaluate a wide range of narrative quality, including television advertisements (Escalas, 1998). Furthermore, the relatively low narrative processing results work against H1, making the test more conservative.

**Experiment: Method**

**Participants.** One hundred eighty-three introductory marketing students sampled from the same population as the pretest participated in our experiment, again in exchange for credit toward fulfillment of a course requirement. Participants were randomly assigned to one of six sessions ranging in size from 23 to 35 students. In one session, the classroom equipment failed during the study. Thirty participants were eliminated for this reason, leaving a total of 153 participants.

**Procedure.** The procedure for this experiment was exactly the same as the thought protocol pretest, until after the storyboard ad was shown. As before, participants were led to believe that they were participating in two separate “experiments.” In the “first experiment” participants filled out a series of questionnaire items to be used as covariates. In the “second experiment” participants were given the same description of the use of storyboard advertising in advertising agencies and then viewed one of the four storyboard advertisements, projected onto a large theater-style screen in an electronically equipped classroom (15 sec per scene).

At this point, the experiment differs from the pretest. Here, ad exposure was followed by a questionnaire that asked participants to circle their ad and brand attitudes and indicate their likelihood of purchase. The questionnaire then asked a series of unrelated questions. Once these questions were completed, participants participated in another advertising filler task where they viewed a different storyboard ad for an unrelated product (counterbalanced across all subjects) and completed more questionnaire items. This was followed by a seven-item SBC scale for the brand advertised in the original storyboard ad and several manipulation check items. The entire procedure for the experiment took about 1.5 hr.

**Dependent variables.** After exposure to the storyboard advertisement, \( A_{ad}, A_{b}, \) and behavioral intentions were measured. Ad and brand attitudes were measured using three 7-point scale items, anchored by very unfavorable/very favorable, very bad/very good, and very negative/very positive (\( \alpha = .90, \alpha = .98 \), respectively). Behavioral intentions were measured using one 7-point scale item: “How likely would you be to purchase and/or use this brand?” After the filler task, participants completed a 7-item SBC scale for the brand seen in the storyboard ad (\( \alpha = .94 \), well separated from the other dependent variables to avoid potential confounds (see Table 3 for a list of the seven items; see the Appendix for a discussion of the development of this scale).

**Covariates.** Prior to ad exposure, participants completed three of the seven SBC scale items (1, 2, and 3, \( \alpha = .96 \)) to measure prior SBC and a two-item prior \( A_{B} \) scale (\( r = .89 \)) to be used as covariates in the analyses of results. (In the interest of time, because these items were repeated for a number of filler brands to disguise the purpose of the items, only three of the seven SBC scale items were used to measure prior SBC.) These three items were chosen based on their having the highest item-to-total correlation with the 7-item SBC scale (\( r > .85; \) Escalas & Bettman, 2003.) Gender was also included as a covariate because the content of
the two ads might not be gender neutral (see Table 1). Finally, product category involvement, measured by four items (level of involvement, self-reported expertise, high versus low interest, and frequency of use, $\alpha = .68$), was included in the models to assure that SBCs are distinct from involvement.

**Manipulation checks.** Three items measured the degree to which participants perceived the storyboard ad told a story (“the ad told a story”; “the ad had a beginning, middle, and end”; “the ad showed the personal evolution of one or more characters”; $\alpha = .78$). Three additional items measured the degree to which participants felt the ads were more like a vignette, based on Stern’s (1994) classification criteria (“the ad showed many unrelated scenes”; “the ad had many different characters”; “the ad had no chronological order”; $\alpha = .62$). Finally, three 7-point scales assessed the perceived quality of the ad (“the storyboard ad was professional”; “the storyboard ad was high quality”; and “the storyboard ad was realistic”; $\alpha = .86$).

**Experiment: Results**

Hypothesis 1 and the effects on $A_{Ad}$ are analyzed with an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) model that includes the four covariates (gender, category involvement, prior $A_B$, and prior SBC), a brand variable (Kodak vs. American Express), an ad type variable (story vs. vignette), and their interaction (brand by ad type). Hypothesis 2 is tested with an ANCOVA model that also includes the four covariates and the brand dummy variable, with the average of the seven-item SBC scale as the independent variable.

**Scale verification.** Analysis of the seven SBC items shows that the SBC scale is unidimensional, reliable, and empirically distinct from $A_B$. First, exploratory factor analysis of the seven SBC items results in a single-dimension solution (with the first eigenvalue > 5.10, all others < 1.0, and a distinct elbow in the scree plot) that explains 73% of the variance in the seven SBC scale items. The seven SBC items load on this single factor ($r > .73$). Next, an unconstrained LISREL model, with seven SBC items, three $A_B$ items, and everything free to vary except the two-factor structure, results in a significant chi-square statistic, $\chi^2(34) = 170.44, p < .001$, which is not unusual given this test statistic’s sensitivity to sample size. However, the other fit indexes suggest that the two-factor model fits the data reasonably well (comparative-fit index [CFI] = .92, incremental-fit index [IFI] = .92, goodness-of-fit index [GFI] = .80, and standardized root mean square residual [RMR] = 0.07). The standardized factor loadings exceed 0.80 for SBC and 0.96 for $A_B$ (all $t > 10.0$). To provide evidence of discriminant validity between the two constructs, we ran a LISREL model constraining the 10 scale items to load on a single factor. This model is significantly worse than the unconstrained model ($\chi^2$ difference = 707.37, $p < .001$).

**Manipulation checks.** The main study contains two manipulation checks designed to assess whether participants perceived the storyboard ads to be stories or vignettes, both
Hypothesis 1. This hypothesis asserts that increased narrative processing, manipulated by whether the ad scenes were ordered to create a story ad versus a vignette ad, will enhance SBCs. H1 is supported by the data, vignette = 2.78, story = 2.95, F(1, 149) = 3.31, p < .05. (Neither the brand variable nor the interaction of brand by ad type is significant. Of the four covariates, prior AB and prior SBC are significant, whereas the category involvement variable is marginally significant. Furthermore, when allowed to interact with themselves, brand, and ad type, none of the covariate interactions are significant.)

Hypothesis 2. This hypothesis predicts a positive relation between SBCs and AB and BI. A within-subjects multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) examining the effect of SBCs on the brand attitude and purchase intention variables is significant, \( \lambda = .96, F(1, 149) = 3.31, p < .05 \). (The category involvement and prior AB covariates and the brand dummy variable are also significant in this model.) The univariate results also support this hypothesis. SBCs positively and significantly affect AB, \( \beta = .23, F(1, 146) = 8.86, p < .01 \), and likelihood of purchase, \( \beta = .43, F(1, 146) = 18.52, p < .001 \). (In the model of AB, the category involvement and prior AB covariates and the brand dummy variable are significant, whereas prior SBC is not. In the model of PI, prior AB and the brand dummy variable are significant, whereas category involvement and prior SBC are not.)

Attitude toward the ad. In this study, we find no relation between the narrative structure of the ad and \( A_{\text{ABd}} \). \( F(1, 150) < 1.0, n.s. \). (Only the brand variable is significant in this model.) We controlled the content of the two storyboard ads to be as identical as possible in this study. Rearranging the order of the scenes and altering the appearance of some actors does not affect how well participants like the ad.

Discussion of Results
This study examines the effects of the narrative, SBC framework in the context of storyboard advertisements and real-world brands. Our results provide preliminary support for the framework developed in this article. First, we successfully manipulate the degree to which participants engage in narrative processing with our storyboard stimulus (prettest results). When we show participants a well-developed story order of the ad scenes, their self-reported thoughts while viewing the ad exhibit more narrative structure than the thoughts reported by participants in the vignette storyboard condition.

In terms of our first hypothesis, we find that viewing a storyboard ad organized into a narrative results in significantly higher SBC, compared to viewing the same scenes in a vignette order. We find this result despite the fact that the content of the storyboard ads is essentially identical. Combining these results with the pretest results, we propose that narrative processing improves SBC. For our second hypothesis, we find that SBCs are associated with better attitudes toward the brand and higher likelihood of purchase. Finally, narrative structure has no direct effect on ad attitudes. This finding is logical in this study, because ad content is tightly controlled and both classical dramas and vignette dramas are common, well-accepted forms of advertising (Stern, 1994). This finding also runs counter to alternative explanations that the narrative order created better or more easily comprehended ads, or that the vignette order was considered confusing.

CONCLUSION
This article explores narrative processing as one process by which brands can become connected to consumers’ self-concepts. To make sense of what goes on in the world, people naturally construct stories. Narratives are a mental organizing structure that provides meaning by combining elements temporally toward a goal or conclusion. The meaning of a brand is often the result of its being part of a story. Through the narrative meaning-making process, some brands become more important and valuable than others to consumers, becoming connected to consumers’ sense of self. Our experiment demonstrates that ads eliciting increased narrative processing are associated with enhanced SBCs. These meaningful brands are evaluated more favorably and have a higher likelihood of purchase than brands with few or no SBCs.

Theoretical Contributions
This article proposes and empirically supports the idea that narratives are one means through which SBCs are formed. Previous research into consumer narrative processing (Adaval & Wyer, 1998) demonstrated the positive effects of this style of thought on brand evaluations, but it did not explore the creation of meaning (i.e., SBCs). The narrative SBC framework identifies one specific mechanism by which narratives are able to create meaning: through their structure. When consumers engage in narrative processing, they at-
evoked by different ad stories. The relational structure and temporal dimension of stories allow consumers to make inferences and draw conclusions about the brand and its potential link to their self-concept-related goals. This precise identification of the mechanism by which narratives create and/or enhance SBCs extends other consumer research that has made general claims that people use narratives to create a self-identity (e.g., Kleine et al., 1995; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1990).

In addition, we have extended narrative research to the realm of advertising. The narrative framework allows consumer researchers to understand many different types of advertising that have been studied by others, such as drama ads (Deighton et al., 1989; Stern, 1994), transformational ads (Puto & Wells, 1984), slice of life ads (Mick, 1987), ads that evoke autobiographical memories (Sujan et al., 1993), ads that induce mental stimulation (Escalas & Krishnamurth, 1995), and so on, from an integrated framework that captures the essence of narrative structure harbored in these other forms. All of these ad types elicit narrative thought. Although there may be subtle differences in the degree to which narrative thought is evoked and its subsequent effects, an overall framework based on the way that narrative processing works and its general effects may aid in understanding the way these ad types work.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The experiment described in this article represents an initial demonstration of the effects of narrative processing on SBCs. Obviously, not all stories will create or enhance SBCs. Future research can uncover and explore different aspects of narrative advertisements that help or hinder an ad’s ability to (a) evoke narrative processing in consumers and (b) encourage SBC building by consumers. Some potential aspects of narrative advertisements that could be studied include whether the brand is a minor prop or a central aspect of the story, whether the story has unexpected elements, different dramatic forms (or plots; e.g., comedy vs. tragedy; see Stern, 1995), different degrees of character development, moment-by-moment plot twists, and different types of emotions evoked by different ad stories.

Our experiment is also limited by the fact that, as a cross-sectional design, it does not provide as strong evidence of the direction of causality between narrative processing and SBCs as we might have liked. The argument can be made that consumers with strong SBCs process incoming advertising information in a more narrative manner because the connections are already in memory. We reduce the possibility of this alternative explanation by including prior SBC as a covariate in our models and by analyzing the thought protocols in a separate pretest. However, it is reasonable to assume that if a consumer has a series of self-related brand stories in memory, their narrative processing of incoming stories will be different from consumers who do not possess such stories. Future research could explore the implications of self-related brand stories on narrative processing of incoming information, as well as potential memory effects.

In our theoretical development, we discuss the difference between self-generated narratives and advertising-generated narratives. Based on this discussion, we would predict that self-generated stories should be much more likely to positively influence SBCs than ad-generated narratives. However, our experiment does not examine the degree to which participants’ thoughts were based on ad elements or on the participants themselves. For example, both of the following excerpts were given a narrative structure score of 2.17 by the independent coders: “A young couple preparing for their first-born and how they’re able to afford the things they want for their baby with American Express” versus “I was thinking about when I had my two babies. About how it is a milestone in every parent’s life.” Unfortunately, we do not have a data set that includes both the thought protocols and the SBC scores. Future research can explore the degree to which consumer narratives in response to advertising are guided by the ads themselves or serve as starting points for self-generated stories and the differential effects of such thoughts on SBCs.

Finally, there may be a number of additional factors that moderate the effects of narrative advertisements on creating meaning and building SBCs. For example, future research can examine individual differences in the propensity of consumers to form SBCs. Some consumers may view brands from merely a utilitarian perspective, whereas others may be more inclined to consider their symbolic properties. Other potential moderators emerge from the social cognition literature, including which aspect of self is active in a consumer’s working self-concept and whether these are schematic versus nonschematic aspects of self. Activation of more important, schematic aspects of self should enhance SBCs to a greater extent than activation of nonschematic aspects. Finally, consumer research also reveals potential moderators, such as the degree to which consumers use persuasion knowledge (Friestad & Wright, 1994) and their level of ad involvement (Celsi & Olson, 1988). The former may serve to reduce a narrative ad’s ability to generate narrative processing and subsequent SBC formation, whereas the latter may serve to enhance this process.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was partially funded by the University of Arizona Foundation and the Office of the Vice President for Research at the University of Arizona. I thank my dissertation committee for their contribution to this research: James R. Bettman (chair), Julie A. Edell, Marian Chapman Moore, Patricia W. Linville, and Lynn Hasher. I also thank...
REFERENCES


Appendix

Self-Brand Connection Scale Development

This appendix summarizes the process undertaken to develop a scale to measure SBCs. First, based on a review of related theory, the self-brand concept was defined, as summarized in the text. Next, we developed a list of 27 potential scale items designed to measure the degree to which consumers have formed a SBC with a particular brand. These items were adopted from Abelson and Prentice’s (1989) study of the dimensions of meaningful possessions, brand equity research (primarily to measure the notion of brand esteem, which is positive sentiment toward a brand; Owen, 1993), plus some additional items created to address the role of the self more specifically. Once this set of items was assembled, a sorting task study with 20 undergraduate participants was conducted to empirically reduce the set of potential scale items to a more manageable number that reliably and validly captured the SBC construct.

In the sorting task study, participants sorted a wide range of brands selected to assure that the student participants had strong SBCs to some brands and weak SBCs to others (n brands = 20). Participants were asked to sort the various brands, listed individually on 3 x 5 cards, into three piles: The first pile was for meaningful brands that are “me,” that is, represent who the subject is, communicate something important about him or her, or have a special, personal meaning, or both. The second pile was for meaningless brands, which were defined as brands that lack strong associations for each participant. Finally, the third pile was for meaningful brands that have strong associations, but represent the antithesis of who the participant perceives him- or herself to be. Participants then completed a questionnaire that included the 27 potential scale items for all 20 brands.

Based on a series of factor and LISREL analyses, we reduced the 27 items used in the undergraduate study to seven SBC items (see Table 3). Cronbach’s alpha statistics were calculated for the seven-item scale, across the entire set of observations (α = .95) and various subsets (three levels of SBCs from the sorting task, alpha ranged from .92 to .93, and each brand individually, .80 < α < .98). Principal components analysis was also performed on the seven scale items to be certain they all loaded on one dimension. The single-factor solution (the first eigenvalue = 5.33, the rest < 1.0) explains 76% of the variance in the seven SBC scale items.

LISREL analysis also provides evidence of validity. A LISREL model with the seven scale items measuring one underlying construct fits the data reasonably well, χ²(14) = 341.48, p < .001, with 65% of the 395 sorted brands correctly classified, compared to 44% if assigned using the largest group criterion.

The undergraduate sorting task study was followed by a second sorting task study using 20 MBA student participants, 12 brands, and the seven-item SBC scale obtained in the undergraduate study. The scale development process analyses were replicated on the MBA sample; specifically, Cronbach’s alpha statistics were calculated, across the entire set of observations (α = .95) and various subsets (three levels of SBCs from the sorting task, .89 < α < .92, and each brand individually, .87 < α < .96). Principal components analysis resulted in a single-factor solution (the first eigenvalue = 5.32, the rest < 1.0) that explains 76% of the variance in the seven SBC scale items. The LISREL model also fits the data well, χ²(14) = 76.16, p < .001, due to sample size; CFI = .96, IFI = .96, GFI = .91, and standardized RMR = 0.03. The factor loadings for each item were significant (r > .95, t > 11.81). Finally, the results of discriminant analysis show that the seven-item scale is able to significantly predict into which evaluation category each brand fell for each participant, λ = .60, F(1, 390) = 16.23, p < .001, with 65% of the 395 sorted brands correctly classified, compared to 44% if assigned using the largest group criterion.

Validity of the Self-Brand Connections Scale

To provide some indication of convergent validity, we identified one scale that measures a similar concept to SBCs. Sivadas and Machleit (1994; in Sivadas & Venkatesh, 1995) developed this scale to quantify Belk’s (1988) extended-self notion in the realm of possessions. Because the SBC concept was based in part on Belk’s extended-self concept, these two scales should be highly correlated. We were able to adapt the...
extended-self scale to measure brands rather than possessions with only minor modifications. The Sivadas and Machleit scale was included in the questionnaire for the MBA sorting task study. The extended-self scale was highly correlated with the seven-item SBC scale ($r = .80, p < .001$). Thus, the Sivadas and Machleit extended-self scale is similar to our SBC scale. To test whether the SBC model is significantly better able to distinguish between the three brand-sorting categories than the extended-self scale, a $t$ test was conducted to compare $R^2$s across two, non-nested models (Davidson & MacKinnon, 1981). In the two-stage regression analysis conducted for this test, $\lambda$ is equal to 0, $F(1, 236) = 79.16, p < .001$, indicating that the SBC scale is better at predicting which pile brands will be sorted into than the Sivadas and Machleit extended-self scale.

To provide discriminant validity for the SBC scale (compared to brand attitudes), as well as test for nomological validity, a self-referencing study was conducted. Self-referencing has been shown to enhance brand attitudes consistently across different formats when ad arguments are strong—for example, second-person verbiage (Burnkrant & Unnava, 1995; Meyers-Levy & Perrachio, 1996), mental stimulation (Escalas & Krishnamurthy, 1995), and autobiographical memory (AM) recall (Sujan et al., 1993). However, we propose that there will be qualitative differences in the extent to which two of these different formats affect SBCs. Autobiographical memories are much richer and more closely tied to the self than MSs. Memories are based on real experiences and as such should be more detailed than imaginations about the future (Krishnamurthy & Sujan, 1999). In autobiographical memories, the self is the protagonist in detailed recollections, even if the memories are not necessarily veridical. Therefore, autobiographical memories should have a greater effect on SBCs than MS (P1). On the other hand, self-referencing should increase elaboration about the ad, regardless of whether the self-referencing is induced via MS or AM retrieval. Therefore, there should be no differential effect of the type of self-referencing cue on attitudes toward the advertised brand (P2).

These propositions were tested in an experiment where 40 undergraduate marketing students viewed one of two full-color print ads for a Geo Tracker, showing a photo of the car in front of a mountain and lake, with a couple dressed in camping clothes off to one side. In the MS condition, the ad text read, “Think about the next time you’ll need an all-terrain vehicle to get where you want to be…” In the AM condition, the ad text read, “Remember the last time you needed an all-terrain vehicle to get where you wanted to be…” SBCs were measured using our seven-item, 7-point scale ($\alpha = .94$), whereas $A_B$ was measured with three 7-point scale items, anchored by very unfavorable/very favorable, very bad/very good, and very negative/very positive ($\alpha = .95$).

Analysis of the seven SBC items and three $A_B$ items shows that these two concepts are empirically distinct from one another. An unconstrained LISREL model with seven SBC items, three $A_B$ items, and everything free to vary except the two-factor structure, results in a significant chi-square statistic, $\chi^2(34) = 70.70, p < .001$, due to sensitivity to sample size. The other fit indexes suggest that the two-factor model fits the data reasonably well (CFI = .90, IFI = .90, GFI = .75, and standardized RMR = 0.06). The standardized factor loadings exceed 0.67 for SBC and 0.92 for $A_B$ (all $t > 4.55$). To provide evidence of discriminant validity between the two constructs, we ran a LISREL model constraining the 10 scale items to load on a single factor. The model constraining the 10 items to be one factor is significantly worse than the unconstrained model ($\chi^2$ difference = 81.87, $p < .001$).

Both the MS condition and the AM condition evoke equivalent amounts of self-referencing, $M_S = 3.85, M_A = 3.63, F(1, 35) < 1.0, p > .60$. The assertion that AM retrieval will enhance SBCs to a greater extent than MS is supported: SBCs are significantly higher in the AM condition compared to the MS condition in a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) model, $M_S = 2.04, M_A = 2.53, F(1, 33) = 4.06, p < .05$; P1. Furthermore, the results show that, as expected, there are no significant differences in the brand attitude means across the two conditions, $M_S = 3.33, M_A = 3.45, F(1, 33) < 1.0, p > .40$; P2. This simple study provides some preliminary evidence of validity for the SBC scale used in this article. The experiment described in the text provides additional nomological and discriminant validity for the SBC scale (again compared to brand attitudes).

---

4Two covariates are included in these analyses: attitude toward American cars and an “outdoors” type of person measure.