Once Upon a Time: Using Brand Stories to Sell Signature Sneakers

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In 1985, Air Jordan 1, the most iconic shoe of all time, was banned by the NBA for violating the Uniformity of Uniform rule. Jordan was fined $5,000 every game if he wore the shoes. Despite the infamous letter from NBA warning Nike decided to repeatedly pay the fines…’

This is one of the most famous product stories in sports history. Although there is no evidence, this beloved myth created by Nike’s storytelling marketing captivated sport consumers around the globe, granting additional value to the product.

Storytelling has been a popular concept in marketing literature. Numerous scholars have highlighted its positive effect on attitude (Holmes et al., 2017), perceptions (Moore, 2012), and purchase intention (Lundqvist et al., 2013). As seen from the Air Jordan story, storytelling can be commonly witnessed in the signature shoe industry since signature products connote narratives featuring values of both athlete and brand (Morones, 2003).

Despite its ubiquity, the influence of storytelling in the signature shoes domain has not been investigated. Thus, we aim to examine the effect of storytelling, operationalized as the presentation of a signature footwear with either an athlete-based or product-based narrative, on purchase intention. This study will also investigate the roles of product involvement (Zaichkowsky, 1985) and message engagement (Wang, 2006) since these constructs gain noticeable attention in consumer research contexts. Transportation-imagery model (van Laer et al., 2014) which demonstrates the narrative transportation process would be used as a theoretical framework.

Based on previous literatures, the following hypotheses will be tested with two experiments using 3 x 2 between-subject design:

H1: Storytelling will have a positive impact on purchase intention.
H2: Message engagement will mediate the relationship between storytelling and purchase intention.
H3a: Product involvement will moderate the relationship between storytelling and message engagement.
H3b: Product involvement will moderate the relationship between storytelling and purchase intention.

Recruited by MTurk, participants will be randomly assigned to one of the three conditions and complete the items on product involvement (Zaichkowsky, 1985). After exposure to stimuli, message engagement (Wang, 2006), purchase intention (Yi, 1990) and demographic information will be measured. For the stimuli, two stories will be created based on the storytelling elements (Stern, 1994), featuring a fictitious athlete and a fictitious product. For instance, an athlete-based story will be a narrative encompassing the personal life or characteristics of an athlete, while a product-based story will present the product development and its history. For the non-story (control) condition, participants will see the general product information in a bullet-point format without any narrative (Adaval & Wyer, 1998). Items of story elements (Escalas, 2007) and the content (Krause & Rucker, 2020) will be used for manipulation check.

For analysis, Hayes’ (2013) PROCESS (model 8) will be used. Experiment 2 will replicate the first experiment in a different sport product category (i.e., soccer shoes) to ensure external validity.

This study will extend our knowledge on storytelling in sport marketing. Also, practitioners will benefit by understanding the importance of storytelling and its relationship with consumers’ involvement with sport products.