

***Connecting Stories: Telecommunication Brands,  
their Narratives and the Paradigm in Mobile Phone Advertising***

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**Abstract:** This paper considers the narratives in mobile phone commercials during a period of unprecedented market expansion. How was the fastest growing global sector in 2012 sold to consumers in different countries and cultures, and how have mobile brands, that differentiate themselves on service personality, conveyed their uniqueness within different global markets? The following research identifies regional characteristics in genres of mobile telecommunications advertising, including motivations and modes of address deployed for different geographic territories. By tracking narrative patterns through a significant sample of mobile commercials we have chartered the variety of message types, identified how brands have used localised customer insights and adjusted to regional variations. Conclusions highlight storytelling techniques used within global creative strategies of multinational campaigns, plus the nuances and patterns of targeted and generic campaigns.

**Keywords:** storytelling, digital, glocal, consumers, strategy.

## **1. Introduction**

The spike in mobile phone sales between 2010 and 2013 was bigger than any other digital hardware in the world. Over one billion mobile phone connections were added between 2011-2012 and by January 2013 the total number of mobile phone users thought to have surpassed six billion (Wireless Intelligence 2010). There are several reasons why 2010-2013 has been the mobile sectors boom period: most significantly the scale of China and India's rising economies have driven targeted ITC, cable and broadband infrastructures to meet their expanding commercial capacity. However,

increased accessibility is only half the context: the drive to stoke consumer demand is the other.

Telecom brands raced to capitalise on emerging markets and drove demand for mobile phones with a new wave of promotional strategies, marketing and advertising. Among the researchers who analyzed mobile phones, Vasković, Ljubojevic, Stankovic and Vasković persuasively asserted their supremacy on the market: 'Mobile phone has become the main communication device, which exceeds all known technologies by the amount of its usage' (Vasković et al., 2013, p. 177).

According to digital market analysts *Wireless Intelligence*, from 2012 European telecommunications operators switched focus from achieving new customers to customer retention, which marked a maturing of the mobile phones market. Before 2012, on the back of mobile innovations such as tri-band, 3G and then apps, many new companies launched into the mobile network market, which prompted existing multi- and national telecom brands to sharpen operations around cancelled customer contracts. During this boom period – particularly in the West, sales tactics also shifted. In 2008 most telecom operators sought to convert pre-paid mobile phone users into contracted users; in Western Europe and Asia telecom operators drove their own 'discounted bundled deal' propositions (mobile contracts tied to home internet and digital television usage).

There were examples of mobile brands addressing new and established markets differently between 2010 and 2013. In North America telecom brands used prepaid offers to counter stalling contract growth, as the (mature) US market for mobiles drew closer to capacity, while in the Middle East, Africa and the Southern Hemisphere the same US operators were still realizing their first growth wave with lifestyle advertising campaigns.

Overall the \$6,439.7m (62% projected annual increase in) spent on advertising telecom brands (Fredricksen, 2010) remains a small portion of the overall \$498 billion annual advertising industry (Wasserman, 2012), but it is expanding faster than other sectors. The boom year for mobile commercials was in 2011 - nearly 71% more spent on commercials than in 2010, when more commercials were being created for multiple viewing formats.

Communicating innovations and service offers during this period proved to be a unique creative challenge for advertisers, who responded by pushing narrative storytelling to extremes, and shaping content to work on laptops, tablets, phones and television. The advertisements themselves used incentives and strategies that often reflected the opportunities and fears of modern mobile phone users. This paper appraises broad (and narrow-) cast commercials created between the key years of 2010-2012, to identify how the 'need' for mobile technology was driven, globally and locally.

## **2. Positioning the Evidence within Existing Literature**

This advertising headline from 2011 was what advertisers called a ‘big truth’: consumers were thought to be more engaged with brands that were identifiable with a good story – especially stories that were specific to the brand. A ‘multidimensional perspective of engagement’ (Hollebeek, 2011, p. 559) involved advertisements communicating by using easily recognizable narrative patterns. When product categories target similar niche markets they tended to share similar ideas, develop similar strategies and representations within commercials. According to Haggarty, the art of traditional storytelling happens ‘in the light of a (shared metaphorical) dream’ (Haggarty, 1999, p. 92), because people similarly ‘image’ and make sense of stories within the narrative of their own daily lives. Phoning friends and family was therefore easily represented as ‘connecting’, which communicated on an emotive level. The most common purpose of narrative techniques was to provide a sense of creativity or variation for campaigns. Previous commentators have argued that variation is the best strategy to reduce boredom (Schumann et al., 1990) and to make the process of understanding ad messages easier (Chang, 2005). One school of thought (Lee and Aaker, 2004), was that narrative advertising deeply influences consumer’s relationship with products and brands, in terms of reinforcing the same message through a variety of arresting content. In other words, framing the same story in different contexts with slight variations raises a messages comprehension.

From a different perspective, Escalas (2004) reasoned that ‘narrative transportation’ helped consumers to imagine stories that related to a brand, by seeing stories that seemed credible and dynamic. Escalas asserted that, ‘by encouraging participants to mentally simulate using a product via an advertisement, we hope to encourage the strong affective responses associated with narrative transportation’ (Escalas, 2004, p. 40). This type of narrative processing suggests why storytelling became the dominant way to engage consumers through telecoms commercials.

In short, the relationship between storytelling and advertising drew on established narrative conventions, more so than other brand advertising categories. For instance they all contain a plot, in the manner of film narratives which, as film commentators have previously observed, contain ‘...the temporal sequence of lead character reactions to story events’. (Boller & Olson, 1991, p. 172). Such perspectives offer a rationale for formulaic patterns that emerged during analysis.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1. Sample**

Both national and global telecom service providers have relied on television commercials to build their brands: despite the growth of digital advertising, commercials are still recognized by brands (and their advertisers) as the best platform

to reach their audience. The first part of this study is based on quantitative evidence: 40 commercials from 30 countries (spanning six continents) provided a basis to examine patterns of structure, language and narrative form.

The commercials collated for this study range between 30-90 seconds in length and were first broadcast between 2010 and 2012, after which many were subsequently narrowcast online via video, social networks or brand sites. With more available broadband services (as cables and servers improved), cheaper handsets and a global boom in personal mobile ownership, these pre-saturation years were distinct, and this is evident in commercials. Therefore the material reviewed in his paper represents the 'third generation' of global telecoms advertising, following stage one, that marked the launch of mobile telecommunications (selling aspirations, from 2003) and stage two, branded market segmentation (characterized by repertoire buying and differentiating product benefits, from 2007).

The range of commercials demonstrate narrative dynamics more explicitly than marketing and PR of telecommunications. Most, for instance, develop a narrative *Scheherazade* to draw viewers into a brand's world. The cross-continent sample incorporates different political and technological paradigms, for instance they illustrate how brands appeal to early and late-adopters of mobile technologies, and regional variations in outlook.

In drawing a shortlist of 40 commercials we have considered the size of populations (two commercials each from China, USA, Canada, India and Australia) and the extent to which mobile phone markets were established (including the up-take of online advertising and mobile phone broadband). Europe produced more mobile phone commercials than any other continent so we selected 14 commercials to represent the cultural spread from 10 European countries. The remaining 20 were picked to give cross-cultural range in each continent. We aimed to capture brands of different sizes, market reach and stages of growth. We also took into account cultural diversity of range so that we could contrast their strategies for address (see Table 1):

Brands	Countries	No of ads
Vodafone/Vodacom	Romania, Germany, France, Italy, Greece, Spain, Egypt, India, Fiji, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa	12
T-Mobile	Czech Republic, UK (2), Austria	4
Movistar	Uruguay, Mexico	2
Mobitel	Morocco, Sri Lanka	2
AT& T	USA (2)	2

Orange	Romania, France	2
Claro	Peru , Brazil	2
Telecom	New Zealand	1
Cosmote	Greece	1
Fido	Canada	1
Digi Broadband	Malaysia	1
Verizon	USA	1
Zain	Lebanon	1
Virgin Mobile	Australia	1
Megafon	Russia	1
Local/national brands	China Mobile, Mobinil (Egypt), Airtel (India), M9 (Pakistan), Bell Mobility (Canada), Saudi Telecom (United Arab Emirates)	6

**Table 1***Brand distribution on countries*

Source: the authors

In establishing a balanced selection, it became obvious that global telecom brands are dominant in Europe, America and Australia. National brands were more specific to Asian and Arabic countries. At a first glance, this table reveals an unbalanced distribution of brands on 5 continents, because of Vodafone popularity: in fact Vodafone have delivered their messages in narrative form for over a decade and their commercials simultaneously span Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Africa and Asia. The significance of their output was therefore considerable in ensuring our selection was representative of the scale and spread of mobile communications.

### 3.2. Research Method and Hypotheses

Our research used content analysis due to its potential to organize data and provide evidence on both visual and verbal levels, as well as by connecting all types of data. The method was applied in two stages: first, it was used to generate hypotheses and design a coding scheme, both based on quantitative methods; second, on a qualitative level, it was used to draw a connection between results regarding the archetypes of the myth of return to origins. The views that emerge from this analysis are that:

- Mobile phone campaigns have affectively exploited narrative techniques;
- Narrative-led commercials have a secondary audience through video sharing sites;
- Global phone campaigns become less international and more local in terms of their tone, reference points and subject matter. This enables brands to use regional consumer insights and appeal by tugging at cultural nuances;
- Narrative techniques engage with the specific cultural values in every country that a campaign runs;
- By analyzing phone commercials one can establish the relationship between the brand identity, the service provider's offering and the consumer.

The second part of this paper dissects the 40 commercials and draws eight categorizations of commercial narrative type – *slice of (everyday) life* and *biography* are defined by narrative voice and reflect the purpose of characters within the commercials; *fragmentation* (non-chronological storylines), *embedding techniques* (stories within stories) and *parallel narrative lines* (simultaneous real-time stories) concerned the narrative structure and focalization; *anticipation* (familiar narratives), *retrospection* (flashbacks) and *imagined* (dream sequences) concern the narrator as a point of reference in the narrative.

In these categories we observed patterns between different geographic and cultural regions of advertising - for instance we identified several units of the content analysis, which we applied to the sample: local visual and cultural dialects used to build persuasive scenarios; unique branded attributes, scripted in the form of local satire; different types of narrative; relationships between 'narrative voices', particularly through focalization and the use of central characters in storytelling; relationships between advertising and film narration styles in messages - particularly through interplay between film, text and sound construction; relationships between (1) brand, (2) service claim, (3) principle characters and (4) viewing audiences.

From the data assembled, we were able to establish national characteristics of selling mobile phones and make distinctions between narratives and cultural approaches to personal digital technologies. We were also able to capture global moments in developing the mobile market. For instance, we document how commercials communicated distinctions between similar telecom services; we capture how mass-available, affordable handsets were modelled to appeal to a wider user base, and we examine how differentiated user-experiences of communications were portrayed: how new branded rental services persuade customers to move from established providers; how a subject matter without an inherent physical identity harnessed associations, emoted the self-assured confidence and constructed 'everyday stories' for a telecom

brand. The material produced compelling findings that could readily map on to political, sociological and visual-cultural contexts.

The main hypothesis of this paper focuses on the significance of the narrative layers within a telecom advertisement. The narrative techniques describe the complexity of mobile phones advertisements relying on their storylines adjusted to cultural and geographical background. Secondly, the narrative voice conveys authenticity and credibility designed to mobile phones regardless the global or local brands. As for the research questions this paper investigates the following issues regarding the relationship between storytelling and advertising:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: What are the main types of narration in telecom advertisements?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: Who tells the story in a narrative advertisement?

RQ<sub>3</sub>: Who is the hero in telecom commercials?

RQ<sub>4</sub>: What are the narrative layers within commercials?

RQ<sub>5</sub>: What are the main technical strategies identified in the sample?

RQ<sub>6</sub>: What is the relationship between the global and local aspects of telecom storylines?

#### **4. Findings**

Given that commercials for mobile telecoms involve narrative, critical methods used in this study have been adapted from studies of content analysis and storytelling. We appraise the narrator in telecom commercials by considering the purpose and characteristics of narrators and their overarching narrative voices. Narrative voices in telecom commercials are consistently used to tie storylines to a branded service – more so than for other sectors. We discovered that commercials for telecom brands, more than other sectors, aim to strike more profound connections between user and brand through their messages. Fundamental ideas of what communications are and can do and the basic nature of relationships are all addressed.

##### **4.1. Types of Narration**

According to Bryman (2008, p. 274), content analysis is a key method that is applicable to a variety of media. We chose it for its clear form and potential to organize data evidence. There were two stages in our application: the hypotheses, then the design of a coding scheme.

The social commentator Bal (1981) observed that a narrator is the one who ‘says’ the story and implicitly has some form of relationship with the characters depicted. Bal underlined differences and connections between doing, seeing and saying, and maps

borders between techniques used for storytelling (Bal, 1981, p. 45). Margolin (2005) asserted a systematic definition of this perspective, emphasizing different roles in the communication of narratives: 'A narrator is a linguistically indicated, textually projected and readerly constructed function, slot or category whose occupant need to be thought of in any terms of a communication role' (Margolin, 2005, p. 351). Margolin's was, for this study, a synthesized view which brings the purpose of narratives more up to date.

Almost all commentators concur with the school of thought evident in the writing of Genette, who characterized two types of narrator in fictional texts that emerge through different criteria (a matter of *person* and a matter of *diegesis level*: Genette, 1980). According to Genette a narrator could be *heterodiegetic* (telling the story at third person, in an objective manner) or *homodiegetic* (being involved in the story, usually at first or second person). In both cases the story might be told by an *extradiegetic* narrator (placed outside the narration, like a camera) or an *intradiegetic* one (inside the narration, at the same level with the characters). A combination of storytelling types is possible and not necessarily closed to interpretation: sometimes narratives are left open for conjecture, sometimes deliberately for viewers to co-create spin-off narratives through their own imagination. While Genette's perspective primarily addressed verbal narration in fiction, it can also be applied to contexts where a linear story is easily identified, fictional or not.

As commercials convey messages on visual and verbal levels, we interrogated our sample using Genette's delimitations. Six advertisements in our sample contained no verbal narrative - just a visual storyline, so the corpus for analysis was the remaining 34 examples. From the sample there appeared to be a balance of narration type, between uses of extradiegetic (18) and intradiegetic (16) narration. Within this sample a heterodiegetic narrator is evident in 20; a homodiegetic narrator occurs in 14. A 'third person' viewpoint was often deployed to appear impartial, as if the viewer casts an unseen eye on the narrative plot.

Commentators of modern narrative still contend such divisions of narrative type (Booth, 1983; Wilson, 1986; Chatman, 1990). Thomson-Jones addressed this issue directly (2007) as 'argument-and-contrargument' within Genette's type of storyteller. According to Thompson-Jones, '...the cinematic narrator is an implicit visual narrator of the story from the inside, or from a fictional point of view' (2007, p. 80). However, Chatman (1990) provided a more applicable perspective for this study: he reasoned that a cinematic narrator is like a visual guide and his role is to present events, to enrich their meaning while they fluidly roll on the screen. In this sense the narrator is a witness to events, which fits with *the* third person perspective readily adopted by telecom commercials. Another perspective from Wilson (1986) considered the narrator to be an agent for 'showing images' - providing captions to otherwise unmediated events. For this study, we have used Genette's version of first, second and third-person



narratives and Wilson's more recent notion of narrators providing captions (Wilson, 1997).

The sample of commercials in this essay certainly fit with the perspectives of *witness position* and *image maker*. What the viewer sees is expected to be related to their own experience - and 21 of the commercials allowed viewers a witness position, where they expected viewers to identify themselves with a principal character. In 19 of the ads sampled the image maker is the narrator, who shapes the meaning of an unfolding storyline.

It was also apparent that there is a relationship between narrator and *focalization*: commercials steer viewers' empathy for characters by constructing narrative focalization – similar to that noted by Currie (2007) and Niederhoff (2009). For our purposes Niederhoff's perspective sits with Genette (1980) who identified three focalization types - zero, internal and external. A main heterodiegetic narrator leads to a zero focalization approach (as in 16 commercials reviewed); internal focalization occurred in 14 cases while 10 commercials take a more externalised way in to their narrative. In each case it was clear that a storyteller witnessed events through the lens of internal focalization.

#### 4.2. The 'Hero' in Telecom Commercials

One characteristic of telecom commercials was to feature a hero in the narrative: this was not always the central character nor was it necessarily obvious in the storyline. In our sample the brand tended to be a hero in the storyline, despite difficulties in representing what a telecoms brand actually looks like. In most cases the brand is represented as an abstract idea, which provided a challenge for advertisers in constructing narratives that stuck a story to a brand.

According to Bremond (1964) every story has an agent, a patient, opposite forces and adjutants – which allows for the creation of scenarios that suit telecoms services. Given that telecom brands are services and not physical products, the 'hero' was often an idea of what the brand represented. For instance in two commercials the storyline - being hungry, having a dirty house - required resolution. The service became central in orchestrating communications to resolving the issue. The hero tended to 'be' the brand (or brand mascot) in of the 21 commercials reviewed, while it was the service provided in 17 commercials.

The central character (or hero) tended to take on consistent guises in the commercial. For instance:

- ***The brand as an animation*** where the central character is an animal embodied brand values. In a 2012 Vodafone India commercial (*Just you, just me*) two teenagers - boy and girl - are too shy to talk. In the story the boy watches as his dog

snatches the girl's scarf and brings it to him. The incident provides an easier opportunity for the boy to connect with the girl - illustrating the commercial's central message: *Instant connection*. In this case, the brand was the dog, enabling a relationship through simple fluid connection.

- ***The brand as enabler*** becomes true in making aspirations. In a Vodafone Germany spot the four-bar phone icon for signal strength is represented by four formally dressed men of different heights. They help the central character negotiate bad weather, traffic diversions and a restaurant reservation - information provided by Vodafone apps and utilities - to enable a date to go smoothly, courtesy of Vodafone.
- ***The brand as global connector***, bringing together huge geographical distances and time zones. One commercial by New Zealand-based service provider Telecom featured two childhood friends separated as one family relocates to London. The children are shown holding aloft laptop computers to overcome the distance, by overlapping the on-screen real-time sunrise in one country with the off-screen sunset in the other. This seamless point of contact from opposite sides of the world overcomes the 12 hour/180-degree longitude separation – and ‘badges’ the creative solution for the internet provider.

Vodafone's strategy was significant in global telecom commercials during 2012. They were preoccupied with positioning themselves as a ‘hero’ by proxy. When a spot character is the hero and he/she does not have any connotation with brand or service, commercials such as Vodafone's become metaphoric, abstract and closer to film principles rather than marketing tactics.

#### 4.3. Narrative Layers within Commercials

Even if commercials are aired for just 10 seconds, narratives can develop in more than one direction. This alone marks a significant shift in expectations of viewers watching habits. 30 years ago commercials frequently ran for two minutes. It's clear from the commercials reviewed that today viewers are expected to absorb snippets and connect narratives over time.

Most advertisements in our sample (24) developed stories on a single meta-level, where narrative runs chronologically and usually through the perspective of one single character. Multi-level narrations featured a minimum of two stories in the same spot, linked by a central uniting brand message at the end. One of the clearest examples of this was for Airtel India, based on types of friend (‘Har Friend Zaroori Hai, Year’). The supposition is that young mobile users have a network of friends connected through their hones, and call on different friends for different situations. The action depicts

students waiting for a teacher in class. One starts singing and the others join in, as the viewer sees cut-away to different 'slice of life' situations; an early morning airport pick-up, crashing out at a party, a shopping buddy and an emergency hospital dash. The commercial sets the view that each friend has their role, and invites viewers to identify similar roles from their 'phone buddies'. Five advertisements in our sample used this multi-level (30-second) style of narration.

Five commercials in our sample featured parallel narration - two storylines running simultaneously. Two storyline events unravel at the same time in different places before reverting back to conclude in one setting. One of the most explicit examples was 'Wedding' for Vodafone Romania. The narrative began with an interview to camera of a young couple, explaining their plan to marry at the top of a mountain, which would prevent their family, community or friends attending. Different viewpoints from friends and family are intercut with vignettes of local street scenes to set the ambience in contrast to the mountains cape. As the ceremony takes place, it is relayed simultaneously through a Vodafone network so that friends and family can participate in real-time. The commercial intercuts the family during the service, for real-time reaction shots, making their remote viewing of the wedding closer and participatory. In other words, the story is diachronically captured and presented as a parallel narration. Both parallel narrations drew heavily on film narrative structure by compressing time and re-ordering content.

#### 4.4. Defining Types of Narrative Techniques

Criteria	Narrative techniques	Description	No of ads
Plot sequentiality	<i>Slice of life</i>	- a single moment or instance of a character's life is rendered	11
	<i>Biography</i>	- the character's entire life is distilled into a short narrative	1
Continuity vs. discontinuity	<i>Fragmentation</i>	- the narration is not chronological; only key events are conveyed, leaving narrative gaps in-between	11
Linearity vs. non-linearity	<i>Parallel narrative lines</i>	- viewers see two stories unfold at the same time; the narrative line is diachronic	4
	<i>Embedding techniques (frame)</i>	- a story within a story, linked by the service or character	4

	<i>narration)</i>		
Reality vs. imaginary	<i>Anticipation</i>	- narrative where a brand/product is used to fulfil the expectation	4
	<i>Retrospection</i>	- a time-shift where the hero return to their past	1
	<i>Imagined</i>	- the hero creates their own story – a dream or better imagined reality	4

**Table 2***Narrative techniques in Telecom Ads*

Scientific literature has also been the subject of content analysis where text segmentation, plot, chronological ordering, (dis-)continuity, narrative perspective and sequential narrative were the points of reference. According to Boyer, sequentiality is connected with a model of causality, that emerges from the ‘...study of causal thinking (which assumes) intuitive ontologies and intuitive expectations of causal powers’ (1994, p. 152). By extension, each advertising story was underpinned by an assumption that existing social *Zeitgeist* - most notably family and friends as common ground, were shared and constant to justify their resolution. One such underlying assumption was that mobile phone users are international, cash-comfortable but time poor (hence the need for fluid information), and with a wide network of friends. The subtext is that if you’re popular and active, you need the advantages up-to-date mobile phones provide.

In contrast to the common assumptions of mobile users, narrative tactics within the sample were more polarised: there were discontinuous and continuous storylines; linear and nonlinear texts.

As Table 2 shows, the most deployed narrative technique from our sample was *fragmentation*, to compress key facts in a short timeframe. This is understandable given the necessary speed required to convey stories and achieve the core purpose of connecting stories to the advertisement’s commercial purpose. Fragmentation occurred through the interruption of a music score and creative editing - spliced together juxtapositions to deliver unexpected contrasts of style and imagery. One of the most-played commercials of 2012 (filmed in 2010 but peaking in popularity early in 2012) contained fragmented content for British operator T-Mobile, called *Dance*. Filmed at Liverpool Street station in London, the narrative used various music styles spliced together, with cast dancers performing alongside members of the public spontaneously

joining in. The narrative suggests that T-Mobile's service generated a sense of public exuberance and engagement.

A different type of fragmentation occurred in a Romanian commercial for Orange telecommunications, where a teenage Romanian girl sends a series of love letters to a class mate, who seems to ignore them. Scenes cut between school locations - in class, in the library and in front of the school. In the final scene, the classmate responds by sending a bouquet of paper flowers made up of the letters he received. Within this commercial juxtaposed locations build the sense that the time and space for communication is not static but on-the-move, anytime, anywhere.

The most contemporary forms of communication were conveyed using *parallel narrative line*. It was used within four commercials where storylines conveyed simultaneous events occurring in different spaces and brought together through split screen and the to-and-from inter-cutting of dialogue. In each case two unrelated events ultimately influence each other (in a manner reminiscent of 1990s Hollywood films). For instance, in a Vodafone France commercial a man on a long-haul flight recognizes an actress sleeping in the same birth; he moves to an empty seat and poses beside her, using his mobile phone camera to snap and send pictures that suggest the two are cuddling. The story then switches between two narratives - on the plane with the central character and his friend at home receiving and responding to the pictures. Eventually the narrative is disrupted when the central characters phone rings, waking the actress. Parallel narrative commercials contained a formulaic narrative pattern:

Scene 1-the primary frame of reference;

Scene 2- a secondary story, which took longer to set out the context;

Scene 3 - return to the introductory frame of scene 1, with a narrative-twist in conclusion.

The closest example we found that bores semblance into conventional film was a commercial for telecoms operator Fido (Canada). The 109 seconds commercial featured a ubiquitous 'fairy-tale' narrative. The opening frames featured an old-fashioned storybook, titled "Unlimited Christmas". It ran:

*Once upon a time, in a condo, not too far away, there lived a grumpy young man that some might call a Scrooge. Friends tried to reach him on his cell phone, but he refused to answer. Didn't they realize how much it would cost? 'I don't want any friends!' But then, a knock at the door changed his life. It was Fido, with the urban package. Unlimited incoming calls with 400 anytime minutes in my urban zone? Excellent! From that day forward he was able to reconnect with all his friends and enjoy the spirit of Christmas.*

*Have an unlimited Christmas, with the urban package from Fido!*

The end frame showed the storybook closing – an inversion of the first frame. The narrative focussed on a man alone at Christmas, who rejects friends' efforts to contact him until he hears a knock at his front door. It is Fido the Vodafone dog who, in 2012, emerged as Vodafone's brand character in campaigns around the globe. The dog bought a package, which sparked the moment where he starts to enjoy Christmas. The commercial achieves its intention: to position the brand as a conduit to delivering the Christmas spirit, framed in a readily identifiable fairytale.

#### **4.5. Technical Strategies Identified in the Sample**

It is evident within the 40 global telecom commercials that narrative framing devices produced a means of succinctly telling compelling branded stories. Because of the need to compress time in commercials, the distillation process of storytelling resulted in proven technical strategies and visual narratives, often held together by an edit-led over-writing of the storyline: the purpose of the advertisement would not have been apparent before the final editing stage, as many of the commercials relied on juxtaposition, over-dubbed sounds and connecting of images with text – all achieved in an edit suite. If anything, the final two-second pack-shot that is a conventional 'outro' of television commercials served to fix the purpose of mobile telecom commercials, as the final frame consistently featured a hanging shot of the brand.

In one sense, such tricks of editing have been common in cinema for a century – for instance, FW Griffith used a similar repertoire of editing tricks - interspersed close-up shots with birds-eye views of scene and compressing time with fade-outs (Monaco, 1977, p. 112).

More recently postmodern cinema introduced means to express narrativity using digitalization and computerized cutting techniques, which meant taking control of the events – sometimes the order of information, sometimes the link between real and imagined within the storyline. Frame-disruption emerged as the most widely used strategy within the sample of telecom commercials. It was used to interrupt sequential storytelling to make the viewer work harder by having to re-order the content and fill spaces left by the deliberate juxtapositions. Often this involved jumping over large periods or jumbling up the sequence of events. As Scholes noted, regardless of technique, strategies still 'depend(ed) upon narrativity and could not function without it' (Scholes, 1985, p. 396).

Our sample demonstrated a variety of visual strategies - some cinematic according to Schmidt's theory on narration in film (2009) - that has proven to be effective globally. The *shot reverse* technique was evident in four commercials. Each storyline profiled at least two characters talking to each other. The flitting nature of mobile-phone use - especially holding simultaneous conversations between friends - mirrored the experiences of mobile phone users. Shot reverse commercials tended to exploit non-

verbal communications, mostly by sifting between shots and emphasizing frame distance to convey an everyday sense of typicality.

Within the 40 commercials under review, it is possible to claim that visual strategies had been significant in the construction of storylines, in as far as they pay attention to temporality, spatiality and plot. It is also clear that telecom commercials are confident enough in their techniques to leave plots open-ended. Many expect viewers to fill in the gaps when watching commercials, by re-ordering sequences, decoding metaphors and filling in commentary to understand scenarios after they have unraveled in their entirety.

#### **4.6. Global and Local Aspects of Telecom Storylines**

In other product or services sectors such as sports brands, energy providers, automotive or computing, the relationship between local and global communications is managed within an overarching multinational plan. Similarly telecom operators should be able to share their message - the ability to connect people and enable them stay in touch, regardless of their circumstance or distance. One would initially assume that advertising campaigns for global brands could be standardized to share the same values and message all over the world. Yet as the writer on global advertising Marieke de Mooij reasoned, there are key motivational differences within global markets: 'There may be global products, but there are no global people. They may be global brands, but there are no global motivation for buying those brands' (2010, p. 5).

Since global smartphone markets opened up in 2009, networks often include free calls abroad within their payment packages to incentivise global and local network usage.

The terms *cultural hybridization* and *cultural convergence* (coined by George Ritzer) are useful in this sense, to explain why there is a need to reference local awareness of circumstances in commercial communications (2010, pp. 255- 258). *Hybridization* in a global environment concerns the dilemma of *diversity vs. uniformity*. According to Ritzer 'a cultural hybrid involves the combination of two, or more, elements from different cultures and/or parts of the world' (2010, p. 255). Hybrid can be simultaneously local and global – and flit between the reference points for each. In turn, *cultural convergence* is an evolving flow of similarities between different regions, which makes globalizing values and beliefs possible.

In terms of *hybrid* or *global* fit, 21 commercials reviewed leant towards global markets – their central message was general enough to locate with typical issues of mobile usage and global connectivity. This suggested a trend towards more globalized approaches to promoting telecommunication brands. The most common global characteristics were the use of English language, music and references to everyday popular entertainment – sports and leisure activities most commonly.

A more tailored local presence was apparent in 13 commercials; a hybridized approach could be traced in six: these tended to reference local festivals and value systems (where reinforced family hierarchies made them culturally specific).

There are circumstances and explanations that might flavour more glocalised and hybrid approaches. The economical growth and outreach of each country is very important in positioning the future international reach of mobile brands: many national telecom operators still harbour export ambitions. Countries that tended towards globalized campaigns were well developed or had a steady economy - in our sample Germany, France, Italy, Spain, South Africa, USA, Canada, Australia, Brazil, New Zealand and China.

Locally referenced commercials were produced in countries at an earlier stage of implanting their digital infrastructure - Romania, Egypt, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Czech Republic, and Russia. Some strategies aspired to a more international identity: for instance the US film actor Chuck Norris promoted T-mobile in the Czech Republic, while an Orange Telecom commercial in Romania included location shots from central Europe. Some national brands made a point of reiterating their roots by referencing their own cultural fabric. For instance an Easter festival formed the background to a Vodafone Italy commercial; Africa and the Middle East also opted for festival scenarios – preparing for Ramadan in Egypt, and family gatherings in Saudi Arabia and Monaco. Within the commercials, elements that pinned commercials to their region included references to religious preparation rituals, skin colour, local behaviours and styles of humour.

Brands such as Vodafone and Mobitel clearly adopted a local approach, while such brands as Orange, T-mobile, Bell Mobility, Claro more readily embraced a more internationalised strategy that loosely connected their regions of operation.

## **5. Discussions on Demarcating Telecom Brands**

In using narrative methods to reposition telecom commercials, glocal persuasive factors could be identified for mobile technology adoption. In particular, national campaigns used local reference points – notably collective gatherings, to suggest natural regional belonging. Global campaigns tugged on human truths, notably the essence of communication – conversations. Early-adopting nations such as Germany presumed digital utilities where stronger drivers – restaurant finders, GPS orientation and web-search, rather than primary telephone services. Essentially, North European and Australasian ads tended to metaphorically illustrate the Universal reach of the internet and, by extension, the network service providers. With fewer cost restrictions online than via broadcast, commercials for global consumption, such as Vodafone, tended to be longer (than 30 seconds), have layered storylines and more narrative stages.



*In each scenario there was a dilemma to resolve*; the brand became the enabler in achieving the hero's objectives. By drawing on established visual communication strategies stories were readily accessible, which worked across different media formats and allowed a series of commercials from the initial narrative.

The casting of heroes was a recurring theme through commercials. Heroes were broadly sketched, making it easy to identify with them - they could be any viewing consumer. As the central character emerged the 'hero' of each storyline, a sense of well-being was evoked, flavoured by the brand.

Although telecom commercials clearly borrow visual structures from film and verbal structures from literature its hybrid form is unique. Mobile commercials are more compressed than film with more literal metaphors. Such transparency in a short timeframe has been repeatedly used to characterise the relationship between brand-consumer service and the viewer. Different narrative patterns do transfer to on-phone ads if they had:

- 5.1. *meta-narration* - reframing a story within an established familiar parable. Difficulties would be in sticking the aura devise to the brand;
- 5.2. accumulated *convergent scenarios* running simultaneously that, by the conclusion, connects through the brand;
- 5.3. a "*mirror effect*" - two parallel stories placed at different times and locations.
- 5.4. *comparative stories* - two narrations in antithesis, both of which are mediated through the branded service;
- 5.5. *animation*, which incorporates diagrammatic visual abstraction; this devise, often diagrammatic, is used to convey digital development;
- 5.6. clear patterns also emerge for representing telecommunications brands within a narrative. These are tend to be brand service *represented as a metaphor* – for instance, the Vodafone dog, Fido; and *visual metonymy* – to substitute something for someone, for instance the German phone ad replaces signal bars with four men who support the commercials hero.

The research also highlighted how international operators such as Vodafone, T-Mobile and AT&T prefer storytelling as a method. Vodafone, the biggest global telecom advertiser in 2012, used narrations globally, localizing campaigns by incorporating regional reference points, sensitivities and nuances. For instance, religious scenarios - preparing for Ramadan in a Lebanese commercial; an Orthodox Wedding ceremony in Romania and a spoof royal wedding for T-Mobile in the UK (coinciding with the Royal Wedding of 2011). Vodafone's earlier pre-2009 strategy emphasized their global credentials, so their current approach(es) suggest local references impact more on consumer loyalty.

Other providers used stereotypical narrative conventions synonymous with more traditional styles of service advertising – tourism, awareness and charity advertising for example. Newer telecom brands, though regional, tended towards a more global outlook, perhaps because they identified that appearing established was significant in a globally competitive market.

This research captured commercials during an unprecedented moment in the uptake of mobile phones. Most viewers already owned handsets and discovered their potential. The timeframe of this research therefore gathers the efforts of global brands to distinguish their presence, while newer brands sought to prove they were just as reliable. Given the drive of the mobile advertising market, there is obvious purpose to study future timeframes and compare shifts of approach with the results in this paper. Other logical follow-on research from this study includes the analysis of late phone-adopting countries, such as the Middle East and China in particular skipped by-passed domestic landline phones and went straight to mobile, as market leaders. Another future goal consists in establishing the relationship between global, glocal and local through online advertising, where content operates more fluidly between media platforms. This will definitely have an impact on the treatment, clarity and the narrative nature of storytelling within mobile advertising in particular.

## **5. Conclusions**

This analysis captures advertising for telecom services at a point when emerging digital content – apps, social networks and entertainment, was being used to promote mobile phone handsets. This was evident in advertising that targeted first-world countries, where narratives focused on vignettes of everyday consumer's lives, and how they could improve through better (branded) personal technology. In a boom period for telecom brands, their commercials shared enough formats and incentives to become a discreet advertising genre in their own right, symptomatic of their era.

The most common advertising tactic illustrated how telecom services could enhance users' lifestyles, in a manner similar to the first wave of 'unique selling proposition' product commercials of the 1950s. In global campaigns the focus is on the product and lifestyles, where regionally commercials targeted more localised motivations.

These were also the first commercials to have a post-broadcast second-life online. Blog comments and discussion boards give their relevance longevity, and a pattern emerged where shorter aired commercials had longer versions available online. For instance, a wedding narrative (for Vodafone Romania) was broadcast as a 40 second information-packed commercial; its YouTube version runs at two minutes 54 seconds and borrows more freely from film narrative conventions.

Regions had their own manner of telling stories, which makes them ripe representations of cultural type and difference. Broadly, narratives tend to be hung on

styles of humour and esoteric reference points relating to traditions, myths, legends and typical family scenarios. From this perspective, online mobile ads provide an ideal anthropological ‘way in’ to review cultural nuances. For instance, a Lebanese commercial set during Ramadan illustrates a heroine hap-hazardly preparing festivities for her family. In the end, she draws on friends for help in a way that involved intrinsically Lebanese wit and references.

Another clear pattern was for brands to shape their global strategies around a central narrative storyline. For instance Vodafone, AT&T and T-Mobile ran worldwide campaigns based on stories, typically involving introductory social bonding – simple love stories. Love, friendship and family were common narrative elements, which is distinct from the product-and-service comparative approaches used to sell other electrical (IT, automotive and white) goods.

In nearly all cases, a simple conceit within a single-narrative structure had been constructed. Global campaigns often constructed narratives around children. For instance one Vodafone storyline featured childhood friends separating because one family is emigrating: flexed imaginations with simple, inspired visual solutions (to negotiate linguistic barriers) provided the pivotal spark on which the advertisers branded the narrative.

In comparison, commercials designed for online use are longer, with. Overall, through telecoms commercials a newer form of international storytelling has emerged: one that is nuanced and layered and designed for multiple viewings in different media platforms. The period of advertising studied was the first to design for this era of viewing – one that marks a significant turn in content as well as format.

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