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Is Sweaty Betty a Hollister Follower? Parsing the Poetics of Branding

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Fifteen years after Sherry and Schouten's seminal article, poetry still hides its light under a bushel. This paper illuminates branding's poetics, arguing that poems are an apt metaphor for radiant brands. It highlights, with the aid of an empirical exemplar – Hollister Inc. – how poetry can help enlighten consumer research.

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INTRODUCTION

According to Alain Badiou (2014), a fashionable French philosopher, the “age of the poets” is over. For the best part of one hundred years high modernist poetry was the touchstone of western thought. But those days are gone, he says, never to return. *The Washington Post* agrees. Despite valiant efforts to revive the art form, such as National Poetry Month, the patient is either dead (Zomparelli 2010) or terminally ill (Petri 2013), depending on who’s asking.

The business community begs to differ, however. Numerous corporations, Meredith (2000) reports, refuse to let poetry go gently into that good night. American Airlines hands out complimentary anthologies, as do Amtrak, Safeway and Lancôme. DaimlerChrysler and Bertelsmann sponsor poetry performances, readings, slams, and recitation contests like Poetry Out Loud (*Economist* 2014). Blue-chip consultancies invite esteemed poets to mentor top management teams (Morgan, Lange, and Buswick 2010). The BBC, British Airlines, Marks & Spencer and other elite Anglophone organizations routinely appoint poets-in-residence (Walton 2014). Business schools, too, are coming to terms with the poetic imperative (Coleman 2012); ditto individual academic disciplines (Ramsey 2006), marketing and consumer research among them (Belk, Fischer, and Kozinets 2013).

Impressive as these developments are, more needs to be done if poetry is to fulfil its full potential (Downey 2016). This paper, therefore, contends that poetry is an apt metaphor for branding in our increasingly abbreviated age. We begin with a brief review of poetry’s place in the consumer research firmament. This is followed by a potted history of branding and its poetic components. Our brands-are-poems metaphor is outlined thereafter and demonstrated with an empirical study of Hollister Inc, an iconic American brand. A brand of trope and poetry...

PUTTING POETRY IN ITS PLACE

A decade or so ago, poetry was described as a looming presence over our discipline (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Twelve years on, it’s no longer looming but loitering with intent. Annual anthologies are being published; special sessions at conferences are commonplace; freestanding poems are appearing in prominent journals and edited volumes alike (e.g. Dholakia 2005; Kozinets 2002; Schouten 2009; Sherry 2008). These works, what is more, come in a wide range of forms, from haiku, sonnets and elegies to light verse, free verse and, as often as not, “concrete” or “pattern” poetry, where the words are set out in striking geometrical arrangements (Fry 2005). Prose poems, such as Holbrook’s (1994) lyrical paean to New York City, also form part of marketing’s literary tradition, alongside short stories, screenplays, novels, and dramatizations of diverse stripe (Schroeder 2014).

In addition to individual artworks, a light sprinkling of learned articles about poetry is evident. Some seek to make the case for the art form, arguing that it is well established in other academic disciplines, the hard and life sciences among them (Sherry and Schouten 2002). Others point to the palliative benefits poetry bestows on its readers and writers, not least solace to scholars in their demanding day jobs (Downey 2016). Yet others contend that verse is more than

an important source of empirical inspiration (Belk 1986) but a valuable means of conveying information in a cogent, compact, compelling manner (Canniford 2012). It is a condensed mode of communication that is becoming ever more appropriate in an aphoristic world of short-form social media messages like likes, tweets, tags and texts (Johnson 2011).

Another important element in marketing’s poetic ecosystem is literary criticism. Thanks, more than anyone else, to the endeavors of Barbara B. Stern (1989), a diverse array of literary theories has been brought to bear on marketing matters. Alongside Scott (1994), Hirschman (1989), McQuarrie and Mick (1996), Stern showed that poetics – the formal study of poetry – deserves a place in marketing’s methodological and theoretical pantheon. Indeed she even performed, in accordance with best critical practice, a cogent close reading of several lengthy poems by leading consumer researchers (Stern 1998), concluding that poetry is a superior way of representing truth than the standard academic article. It is a way, we believe, that can be adapted to the study of branding.

THE HISTORY AND POETICS OF BRANDING

Brands, Moore and Reid (2008) remind us, have been around for thousands of years, ever since makers’ marks made an appearance on ancient Roman pottery. However, as Blackett (1998) makes clear, there is an important qualitative difference between trade-related marks and 21st century brands. The former are part of a corporation’s intellectual property, valuable assets that demand constant vigilance. The latter include intangible attributes, such as personality and identity, which are predicated on uncontrollable consumer perceptions.

Although the history of branding, Blackett (1998) contends, is less venerable than many imagine, it has made up in alacrity what it lacks in antiquity. From a standing start in fast-moving consumer goods, when mass production, mass consumption, mass marketing and distribution emerged in the administrative and industrialized centers of the western world (Bastos and Levy 2012), branding’s imperium has spread to every conceivable product and service category, from cities and celebrities to charitable organizations and university colleges (Bengtsson and Ostberg 2006; Muñiz and Schau 2005). Even the once unassailable fine arts are falling under branding’s dominion. In a domain where a “shift from art to marketing” is discernible (Alvarez 2006, p. 107), “each artist, regardless of temperament, must become his or her own producer, promoter and publicist” (Timberg 2015, p. 7). And brand for that matter. If branding is about being different, attracting attention and standing out from the crowd, then it’s as important as artistry itself when building a career in the brutally competitive cultural industries.

The arts, to be sure, have not been immune to branding’s blandishments. When Stern (1998) waxed lyrical about the poetics of commerce, for example, she was reiterating H.G. Wells who wrote about the poetry of patent medicine promotions in 1909; she was seconding William Stead’s (1899, p. 62) announcement that “ordinary persons cannot write advertising any more than they can write poetry;” she was echoing T.S. Eliot, who inserted brand names into his earliest experiments in verse and named his breakthrough poem after a brand (Crawford 2015); she was on a direct line of descent

from the peerless Claude Hopkins, the doyen of scientific marketing, who made his name with a rhyming slogan for Schlitz (Poor Beer vs. Pure Beer) and later articulated his credo for advertising copy in the imperishable iambic tetrameter *The More You Yell, The More You Sell* (Feldwick 2015).

Poetry, in point of fact, has been part and parcel of commerce since the birth of the brand. Mellifluous brand names like Hubba Bubba, Sweaty Betty, Coca-Cola and “Zanozan” are more impactful than less euphonious alternatives (Argo, Popa, and Smith 2010). Rhyming tag lines, such as *A Mars a Day/Helps You Work Rest and Play*, rarely fail to resonate with consumers (Sedivy and Carlson 2011; Schouten 1998). Jingles similar to “Pepsi Cola Hits the Spot,” rank among the most insidious earworms imaginable, thanks to their often unforgettable combination of rhyme, rhythm, refrain (Cone 2008). Alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia, and every other trick in the poetaster’s book have been pressed into marketing service, not least among academicians, whose introductory textbooks are interspersed with acronyms, mnemonics, and wordplay (Brown 2002). Social media are equally partial to rhythmic tweets, rhyming texts, honeyed hashtags and dulcet postings (Johnson 2011). Oreo’s much-admired instant response to the power outage during Superbowl XLVII – “you can still dunk when it’s dark” – is retweet testament to poetry’s profile-raising prowess.

From a scholarly perspective, nevertheless, perhaps the most important connection between poetry and branding is metaphor. The very word is a figure of speech (Twitchell 2003) and those who have sought to formally define, or encapsulate, the concept unfailingly resort to figurative language (Brown 2016). A brand, we are reliably informed, is a relationship, a rainbow, a prism, a pyramid, an umbrella, an onion, an amoeba, an iceberg, a doppelgänger, a gestalt, a promise, a conversation, an idea to live by (see de Chernatony 2009; Yakob 2015). A brand, others sagaciously observe, is nothing less than “an opus, a complex design, a mosaic, a symphony, an evolving cultural construct” (Bastos and Levy 2012, p. 360). We likewise talk about brand image, identity, personality, aura, essence, love and lifecycles, metaphors one and all (Kitchen 2008). Perhaps the only thing that brands haven’t been likened to, oddly enough, is poetry...

REASONS WHY

Yet strange as the comparison initially appears, a moment’s reflection reveals at least eight pertinent parallels between poems and brands. First and foremost, poems are very distinctive. They stand out on the page like tropical islands in a wide blue ocean of prose (Baker 2009). If being different is one of the routes to branding success, poetry is a toll-free turnpike. Poems, secondly, are more than mere “verbal icons” (Wimsatt 1954). Like brands, they are profoundly visual thanks to their striking imagery, which captures and commandeers the mind’s eye (Sutherland 2010). The most powerful poems induce synesthesia (Richards 1924), activating many senses simultaneously, much like iconic experiential brands (Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006). Dynamism, thirdly, is a trait many poems possess. Powered by driving rhythms and chiming rhyme schemes (“Rhymes the rudders are of verses/By which, like ships, they steer their courses”), poetry parallels the zest, pizzazz, and irrepressible energy that the best brands are blessed with (Kotler 2003). Voice or tone, fourthly, refers to the uniqueness, the singularity, the inimitable stylistic flourishes that make outstanding poets stand out (Alvarez 2006). Uniqueness, likewise, is something that charismatic brands enjoy (Apple, Nike, IKEA, for example), and copycats strive to emulate. They are endowed with an unmistakable tone of voice which speaks volumes even when whispered (Wijland 2011, 2015; Wijland and Fell 2009).

The fifth parallel pertains to constraints. Poems in traditional meters – unfree verse, as it were – are constrained by the requirements of the form, be it seventeen-syllable haiku, fourteen-line sonnets or the rigid rules of the villanelle (Morner and Rausch 1995). Brands too are unfree for the most part. They face all sorts of restrictions: Resource shortages, financial controls, competitive pressures, historical baggage, which can in fact be beneficial, because branding breakthroughs often involve “beautiful constraints” (Morgan and Barden 2015). More beautiful still – and the sixth salient feature – is the simple fact that poetry is comparatively compact. Poems typically pack a lot into a little (Eagleton 2007). Their power is predicated on compression. They are thus well suited to today’s ferociously frugal, do-more-with-less forms of marketing communication (Polman 2015).

Legal aspects comprise the seventh concordance. Both poems and brands are legally protected – the former through copyright, the latter via trademarks – and as anyone who has ever sought permission to reproduce a line or two of poetry is well aware, versifiers are just as protective of their intellectual property as brand owners (Davis 2008). The eighth obvious similarity is that brands-are-poems complements prior tropes, particularly the increasingly popular proposition that brands are narratives, stories and, not least, myths (Cayla and Arnould 2013). Many of the latter, remember, began life in poetic form when they were passed down orally by the lyricists of pre-literate societies (Fenton 2003). Poetry, in sum, is a pocket-sized mode of storytelling, something that can be artfully employed by culturally inclined consumer researchers. It provides a compact method of presenting findings in today’s short-form-favoring world of texts-tags-tweets.

CONSIDER HOLLISTER

According to its official brand biography, the Hollister Company (HCo) is the retail store scion of an inveterate adventurer, John Hollister, Jr., who travelled far and wide throughout the Dutch East Indies during the early days of the 20th century. On his return to the United States, Hollister settled in California where, in the year of our Lord 1922, he established the emporium that not only bears his name but commemorates the great man’s far eastern adventures in aspects of its in-store décor.

Not a word of this pre-post-colonial farrago is true, however, not even remotely. Hollister’s back-story is cut from the whole cloth. It’s as fabulously fantastic as several other literary masterpieces from 1922, including Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, Eliot’s *Waste Land* and Malinowski’s *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Jackson 2013). If Nobel Prizes were awarded for the noble art of brand narrative, Hollister’s shaggy dog story would surely be in with a shout. Or on the shortlist at least.

The reality is rather more mundane. Hollister is a subsidiary of Abercrombie & Fitch, the upscale fashion brand. Headquartered in Columbus, Ohio, its first retail outlet opened in July 2000 – to popular acclaim – and a program of national and international expansion soon transpired (Foster and McClelland 2015). As of 2016, HCo comprises some 600 stores in nineteen different countries, from Germany (19 stores) via Canada (12 stores) to Japan (4 stores) and the UAE (3 stores). More competitively priced and targeted at a slightly younger market segment than A&F, Hollister sells an idealized version of the Southern California lifestyle (surf, sand, sunshine, seductive sexuality) to would-be way-cool high school students. With its striking beach-hut exterior, disorientating dimly-lit interior, pounding indie soundtrack, buff ‘n’ beautiful sales associates, vast video screens featuring live feeds from the Pier at Huntington Beach, CA, and a select range of fashionable casualwear, with seagull logo much

to the fore, Hollister exudes a synthetic So-Cal surf shop vibe for *Baywatch* wannabes worldwide. When it comes to theming and retail theater (Kozinets, et al 2002), HCo is the acme of atmospheric.

Our Hollister dataset consists of 105 autobiographical accounts by consumers in the brand’s youthful target market. Their introspective essays averaged 2,000 words, supplemented with photographs, videos, clipart and, in one case, a flashlight (to symbolize the store’s Stygian interior). When analyzed in accordance with the precepts of Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005), the reflections reveal a multiplicity of conflicting feelings about the brand: love/hate, disgust/delight, disdain/desire and, more often than not, delirious discombobulation. But from a poetic perspective, the experiential accounts are especially intriguing because the majority of essayists intuitively employ an archetypal narrative structure. Namely, that of the classical quest, the epic journey, the thrills and spills-filled adventure, where trials and tribulations are overcome and the author-hero ultimately triumphs (Hirschman 2000).

Although manifold forms of poetry are associated with questing – the Homeric epic in dactylic hexameter, Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in terza rima, Milton’s *Paradise Lost* in blank verse – one of the most common is the ballad, both in its demotic (folk ballad) and artistic (literary ballad) variants. Often quite lengthy and characterized by a rollicking rhythm of alternate four- and three-beat lines (usually in quatrains, rhyming abcb), ballads rank among the foremost learn-by-heart literary works in the western tradition (Fry 2005). Seminal examples include Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner*, Longfellow’s *Evangeline*, Yeats’ *Fiddler of Dooney*, Kipling’s *Barrack Room Ballads*, Moore’s *Night Before Christmas*, and Thayer’s much-loved *Casey at the Bat*. *Rime of the Hollister Follower* accords with that tradition (Figure 1). Sweaty Beatty swears by it:

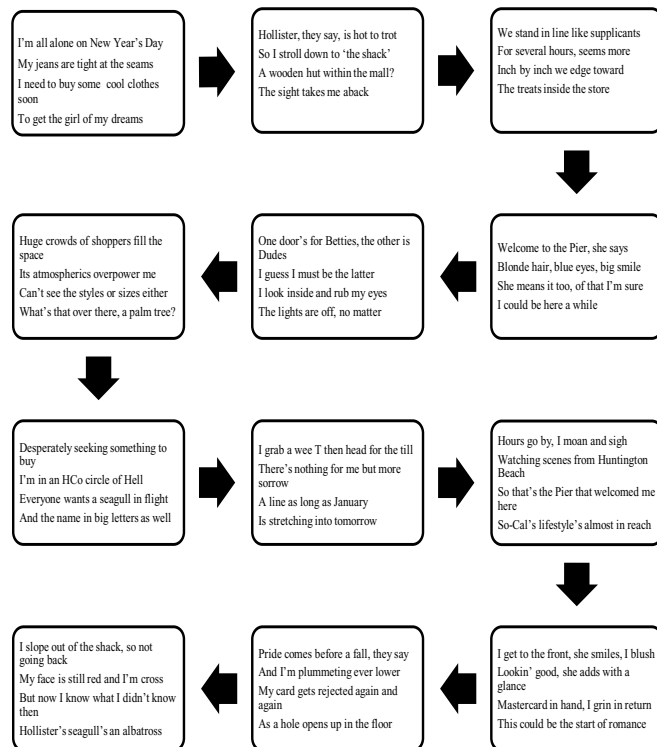


Figure 1: The Rime of the Hollister Follower

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