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**Once Upon a Time there was a Consumer...: Stories of Magic and the
Magic of Stories**

Abstract

This paper explores how the centrality of narrative to people's understandings of the world, and the power of stories of enchantment in particular, colour consumer culture. Specifically, it analyses the ways in which fantastic themes of magic and heroism are used in the discourses of marketing scholars and practitioners, as well as consumers to shape views of consumption and marketing. It further illuminates the role that marketers and consumers each have in imbuing consumption with a sense of enchantment and situates this phenomenon within the dominant neoliberal ideology. Finally, it discusses implications for marketing theory and for practices aimed at reducing excessive consumption related to such enchantment.

Keywords

Consumer culture; critical marketing; magic; sustainability; consumer experience

Summary Statement of Contribution

This manuscript illuminates the power of stories, especially those of enchantment, to shape views of consumption and marketing. It uncovers the purposes to which fantastic narratives are used by marketing scholars, practitioners and consumers. It further elucidates how consumers' and marketing's narratives combine to enchant consumption, challenging polarized views of consumers' and marketers' roles in this enchantment. Finally, it offers implications for discussions of marketing enchantment and ways of addressing excessive consumption related thereto.

Once upon a time there was a consumer...

'Once upon a time the primary agents of socialization were institutions like the family, school, church etc., but now consumption is a prime socialization agent whereby people are taught how and learn to be consumers.' (Shankar, Whittaker & Fitchett, 2006, p. 492).

The principal aim of this paper is to explore how views of consumption and marketing are coloured by the human tendency to understand the world in terms of narratives (Tversky & Kahneman, 1983; Fisher, 1989), and by the power of fairy-tale and mythic stories (Zipes, 1994; 2002) in particular. Drawing on a critical marketing perspective, we analyse the roles that fantastic themes of magic and heroism play in the discourses of marketing scholars and practitioners, as well as consumers, and explore how such themes are used to construct stories of consumption and marketing. In particular, we consider how narratives provided by marketing combine with those of consumers to imbue consumption with a sense of enchantment within the constraints of neoliberalism. We then draw implications and provide suggestions for future study and practice.

The language of marketing is frequently reminiscent of fantasy fiction and fairy tales, the theme of the 2015 Academy of Marketing conference being a good example. Marketing can provide the experiences that *re-enchant* the world (Badot & Filser, 2007) or *bewitch* us (Belk, Ger, & Askegaard, 2003) while a boy-wizard can constitute one of the most remarkable occurrences of marketing (Brown, 2001). Brands (Mark & Pearson, 2001) and consumers (Veen, 1994) are described as heroes. Scholars criticize marketers for trickery (Sheth & Sisodia, 2006) while legitimizing their actions with

rhetorical appeals to customers being kings or queens (Shankar *et al.*, 2006). Behind this is a general human tendency to understand the world in terms of stories (Abbott, 2008; Fisher, 1989; Randazzo, 2006) and a tendency for certain types of story – ‘masterplots’ (Abbott, 2008) or ‘archetypes’ (Veen, 1994) - to reappear in many different contexts. From an early age children get accustomed to fairy tales of villains and heroes, where the ‘goodies’ ultimately defeat the ‘baddies’ after a struggle where magical or mythical forces may intervene (see Bettelheim, 1976). Related but distinct from fairy tales are myths, which deal with ‘deeds of Supernatural Beings’ (Zipes, 1994, p.1) and are similarly embedded in the collective imagination. Fairy-tale and mythic stories, fed by multiple media systems, stay with people into adulthood. They become part of the fabric of people’s lives (Zipes, 1994) and colour the ways in which they interpret and construct life events, and consumption in particular.

Despite the pervasiveness of these stories in consumer culture (Zipes, 2002), the question of how themes of enchantment are used in marketers’ and consumers’ accounts to create or reproduce an ideology of consumption has been little discussed. Addressing this is especially important because marketing’s promotion of magical thinking and enchantment of material goods is said to facilitate excessive consumption (see Alvesson, 2013; Scott, Martin and Schouten, 2014). Moreover, this role in promoting over-consumption and the environmental problems associated therewith (e.g. Kilbourne, McDonagh & Prothero, 1997; Connolly & Prothero, 2003; Peattie & Peattie, 2009) constitute one of the most, if not *the* most, firmly held criticisms of the discipline amongst scholars and the general public.

In this manuscript, we address this neglect and discuss how marketing practitioners and scholars, as well as consumers, engage with the rhetoric of enchantment in relation to consumption and marketing. By articulating the various ways in which stories of enchantment are used, we contribute insights to critical discussions of marketing. In particular, we elucidate how enchanting narratives are used both by consumers' and marketers' to shape consumption experiences, and also by academics to assert a particular view of the discipline or of themselves as scholars. Specifically, we argue for the importance of avoiding analysing consumer enchantment in terms of simplistic stories that exaggerate either the consumer's agency or the lack thereof. Rather, we adopt a 'limit attitude' (Tadajewski & Brownlie, 2008, p. 11) that pays attention to the details of how consumers and marketing institutions interact to create enchantment within the constraints of neoliberal power relations.

The power of stories

The influential psychologist and communication theorist Walter Fisher (1989) proposed that narrative was the fundamental means by which human beings communicate about, and make sense of, the world. In this view, people's beliefs are not primarily the result of rationally weighing up different possibilities but of how well they can be fitted into a story with their other beliefs (Fisher, 1989). We shall call this the *storytelling tendency*. The relevance of this idea in marketing studies is evinced by Quinn and Patterson's (2013) convincing argument about the importance of preserving narrative in academic writing and in Hopkinson and Hogarth-Scott's (2002) discussion of the different, valuable ways in which knowledge can be extracted from consumers' stories. The storytelling tendency was given powerful empirical support by Tversky and Kahneman

(1983), which discusses the so-called ‘representativeness heuristic’ (p. 295). According to this idea, adding details to a scenario so as to make a good story causes people to increase their estimates of the probability of the scenario being true, in ways that are forbidden by strict logic. They give the example of how a trial lawyer may take an initially unbelievable scenario and decompose it into small elements that in themselves are plausible and form an organized story and in so doing convince a jury of the plausibility of the original scenario. Randazzo (2006) notes that the famous criminal litigator Gerry Spence credited his success to precisely this storytelling technique.

As Ellis *et al.* (2011) note, theories about how the social world operates can usefully be thought of in terms of the stories that underlie them. An example of a theory as a story, which we will discuss further and which represents a particularly strong influence on contemporary discourses on consumption, is neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is built around a story where rationally run businesses, left alone, produce the best possible society (Harvey, 2005). It holds up businesses making contracts for their mutual benefit as the ideal by which all human interactions should be judged (Gershon, 2011). Le Grand (2006) identifies two particular elements within the stories underlying social theories that were central to the success of neoliberalism: the casting of groups of people, on the one hand as *pawns* (with little agency) or *queens* (largely in control) and on the other as *knaves* (selfishly motivated) or *knights* (public spirited) (Le Grand, 2006; Barnett, 2010). Le Grand (2006) considered neoliberalisation to have been largely a matter of policy makers moving towards an idea that public-service providers were knaves and that consumers should be treated as queens. The latter part of this, stressing the normative value of consumer agency, results in a close association of neoliberalism with the celebration of consumer choice (see Shankar *et al.*, 2006).

If, as the representative heuristic holds, people are more likely to believe a story when given extra details that fit together as convincing narrative (Tversky & Kahneman, 1983), then filling in plausible details makes any theory of society more believable. This represents a means through which marketers, by providing details consistent with or contrary to a dominant culture and ideology, can exert considerable influence over culture. Through branding and advertising in particular they play the role of Tversky and Kahneman's (1983) trial lawyer, filling in the details of an ideological account of how the world works and in doing so make it more believable and persuasive. Thus, as Holt (2007) describes, folksy 'postcards' of life at Jack Daniel's distillery don't just sell whiskey, they also support the narrative of a self-sufficient, conservative manliness that the brand symbolises.

Certain basic stories, such as quests against powerful forces and Cinderella-style rags-to-riches tales, are noted as arising again and again, and in different cultures, as the basis of derived stories (see Abbott, 2008; Veen, 1994; Stern, 1995). These stories are known by almost everyone since they were introduced to them as children in the form of fairy tales (Bettelheim, 1976; Zipes, 2002) and they connect with people deeply. Fairy tales are the written, preserved form of folk tales that were previously passed through an oral tradition or stories consciously written in the same style (Zipes, 2002), while myths are grander, traditional tales of supernatural beings (Zipes, 1994). Although the two kinds of story have important differences they are very much entwined (Zipes, 1994) and share the properties of being deeply embedded both in cultures and in individual people's lives, and of typically invoking tropes of heroism and magic. All of this combines to imbue both types of story with an 'extraordinary

mystical power' (Zipes, 1994, p.3) beyond that which the storytelling tendency gives them. In the sequel we shall discuss the ways in which the power of these stories is used by marketers and in various critical discourses about marketing and consumption.

Stories of enchantment

The storytelling tendency provides a space in which marketing practices can exert a great deal of power. Marketing's successful promotion of an ideology of consumption is heavily built on its able construction of stories of enchantment around consumption, which speak to consumers' own formative cultural background. These stories, woven around 'pleasurable dreams' (Alvesson, 2013, p. 43), 'grandiose fantasies' (Alvesson 1994, p. 306) or myths (Holt, 2004) give consumption an 'aura of magic' (Alvesson, 2013, p. 43), while offering consumers some kind of a magical transformation (Baudrillard, 1988; Otnes & Scott, 1996; James, Handelman & Taylor, 2011). Such stories often build on themes of fantasy and heroism, whether showing *Marks and Spencer's* fairies spreading the 'magic and sparkle' of the Christmas season or Mr. Bean turning into a martial artist after eating a *Snickers*. At times, they make explicit appeals to well-known fairy-tale narratives, showing Cinderella magically getting rid of all the dirt with *Cif ActiFizz* or using a sophisticated version of the 'Three Little Pigs' to illustrate *The Guardian's* broad coverage of the news. Most obviously, the entertainment industry thrives on people's love of fairy tale: from the 'Harry Potter industry' (Brown, 2001) through the combined dream factory of *Disney-Pixar-Lucasfilm-Marvel* to the countless rom-com Cinderellas and sports-movie giant killers found in mainstream movies for adults. Marketing practitioners meanwhile can buy manuals on how to build brands that embody Jungian archetypes of heroes or outlaws

(Mark & Pearson, 2001). The magical effect of such narratives is then heightened by what Ritzer (2010) calls ‘cathedrals of consumption’ (p. 7), which are the structures that enable consumption (e.g. Disneyland, department stores) via ‘increasingly magical, fantastic, and enchanted settings’ (p.7).

This adding of wonder or joy to consumption is held to be a means by which neoliberalism reproduces itself (Shankar *et al.*, 2006; Gabriel & Lang, 2015). It further attracts scholarly criticism for its contribution to a materially oriented view of the ‘good life’ with negative social and environmental impacts (see e.g. Belk & Pollay, 1985, p. 887; Scott *et al.*, 2014). Marketers are seen as ‘hegemonic advocates of commodification’, creating consumer demand via persuasive, deceptive, or manipulative techniques (Stoeckl & Luedicke, 2014, p. 23), while disregarding the social and ecological costs of their actions (e.g. Varey, 2010). At times these criticisms can seem overblown, telling a story with marketing in the role of an all-powerful puppet master behind every incidence of greed or envy. Critical scholars are also quick to resort to magical or fairy-tale metaphors to describe marketers’ influence on consumers: from ‘perpetrators of an immature fantasy of the world as a gigantic candy-store’ (Alvesson, 1994, p. 309) to sorcerers or casters of ‘magic spell[s]’ (McLuhan, 1953, p. 557; Otnes & Scott, 1996), confusing or ‘mystifying’ consumers with smoke screens (Alvesson, 1994) and mirrors (Scott *et al.*, 2014). Advertising, in particular, is said to produce ‘hypnoid states of uncritical consciousness’ that reduces consumers to passive subjects (Pollay, 1986, p. 26; see also Baudrillard, 1988). Consumers themselves tell similar stories, describing marketers as a ‘[necessary] evil’ using ‘devilish techniques’ (Heath & Heath 2008, p. 1030; see also Farmer, 1977; 1987) that force them to buy.

Marketing's partaking in fairy-tale narrative via the market receives criticisms outside the marketing arena. The folklorist Zipes (2002) discusses how supernatural beliefs and magic are commercially instrumentalized in the interest of marketing (Dégh, 1994). Zipes (1997; 2002) condemns the 'culture industry' (see also Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972), and in particular advertising, for engaging in their commodification. He argues that the instrumentalization of fantasy in general and of fairy tales in particular reduces their ability to fire people's imagination in ways that favour individual self-actualisation and collective liberation (Zipes, 1997; 2002). To support this, Zipes (2002) draws on Adorno and Horkheimer (1972) who argue that entertainment experiences have been transformed into 'after-images of the work process' (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972, p.137) destroying the ability of such experiences to help people to imagine a different system of social relations to that which governs their work life. As an example of the ways in which mass-mediated fairy tales can limit viewers' mental horizons, Zipes (2002) mentions viewers' 'heavy exposure to conventional images' that promote 'Disney-like utopias' (p.118) as the model of utopia available to their imaginations. In a similar vein, the sociologist Ritzer (2010) discusses how the reproduction and rationalization of 'enchanted' spaces of consumption (e.g. Disney) to attract an increasing number of consumers, leads to the disenchantment of these spaces. This brings to mind Banksy's *Dismaland* exhibition with its crashed pumpkin coach and unsmiling, mouse-eared staff (Brown, 2015), which both serves as a satire of Western commodification of fairy tales and as a form of consumer's creative resistance (see Holt, 2002) to such commodification.

Heroic Defences of Marketing

While talk of ‘enchantment’ can make critics of marketing sound like tellers of fairy tales, defences of marketing are at times no less fantastic, painting the discipline as a faithful and powerful servant to the wise, sovereign consumer: Merlin to the customer’s Arthur. In this spirit, O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy (2002) dismiss the claim that marketing is responsible for a society of consumption and reject the view of consumers as victims or pawns of marketing. The authors frequently resort to exaggerations of critical positions to construct their defence of marketing, such as the idea that hedonism-consumerism is depicted by critics as the ‘modern bogey-man’ (p. 524). Such arguments are then used to construct a story in which critiques of marketing must be wrong since their view is just too implausible: *e.g.* ‘There would be something wrong with society, if the whole of a person’s self-identity were defined by his or her possessions’ (p. 532).

Perhaps the *most* commonly told story used in marketing’s defence is that of ‘consumer sovereignty’. This is considered a ‘sacred article of faith’ (Peattie, 2007, p. 201) and is used to legitimize marketing practice (Benton, 1987; Witkowski, 2005; Shankar *et al.*, 2006). Consumers are seen as kings (or queens), deciders or rulers who exercise their free choice (Princen, 2010) and ‘serve society by engaging in rational decision making and wisely exercising their economic votes’ (Sirgy & Su, 2000, p. 1).

According to Persky’s (1993) history of the term, ‘consumer sovereignty’ was coined by Hutt (1940) referring to the assertion that, under conditions of a free market, producers’ output is determined by consumers’ preferences. For all that the term sits

squarely within the rhetorical mainstream in marketing it should be noted that in Hutt's own discipline of microeconomics it is rather out of favour; Persky (1993) claimed that the term had 'largely disappeared from active discussion' (p.189, 190) and Galbraith (2001), himself a critic of the concept when it was still dominant, said it had been 'set aside' in economics journals and textbooks (p. 32).

Hutt argued in favour of a society in which consumption was the site of power and freedom while producers were required (if they wished to earn a living) to serve consumers' needs (Persky, 1993). It is worth noting, however, that in Hutt's conceptualisation it was consumers *collectively*, through the market, who were sovereign and *individual* consumers were not assumed to be sovereign, or even free or powerful. Indeed, Hutt's argument focussed on choices being constrained by those of others but without them being able to blame anyone in particular for their domination, which produces social stability (Persky, 1993). As Persky (1993) perspicaciously notes, this is in fact close to a Marxian view of commodity fetishism and false consciousness, with the only important difference being normative.

In marketing literature however, and with a few exceptions such as Hoyt (1939) and Dixon (2008), 'consumer sovereignty' is supposed to be wielded by individual consumers and is roughly synonymous with the neoliberal idea that consumers should be treated *as if* they were each a queen in the sense of Le Grand (2006). This normative assumption is challenged by the ways in which it fails to reflect the empirical reality of consumers agency, which is constrained by the actions of others, including those of other consumers and marketers (see e.g. Peattie, 2007; Tadajewski, 2010). As Peattie (2007) discusses, 'sovereignty' is a decidedly problematic metaphor for the

position of consumer in a marketplace since sovereigns are necessarily ‘unique individuals’ whose will must be obeyed (p. 201) rather than members of a society whose rights and preferences have to be balanced against those of others. In addition, there is plenty of evidence demonstrating that consumers do not always *wish* to behave rationally (see e.g. Sirgy & Su, 2000). Hence, the majestic position of consumers is criticized as a ‘myth’ in itself, convenient for those who actually have market power and gain the most from consumption (Princen, 2010, p. 145).

Although, in the sense that it is used in marketing, ‘consumer sovereignty’ is often vague, it serves a variety of functions for scholars. It acts as an incantation to be invoked against criticism of marketing’s role in fuelling and shaping consumption and as a shibboleth with which authors can identify themselves as a member of the tribe of mainstream marketing academics. In addition, critical scholars may use the weaknesses of the metaphor of sovereignty to dismiss positions in favour of marketing without necessarily dealing with the arguments that sit behind the analogy.

Consumer enchantment: who casts the spell?

Marketing practices, especially advertising, are said to validate consumption through fantastic and magical inducements (Elliott, 1997; see also Baudrillard, 1998; Thompson, 2004), and encourage magical thinking regarding the effects of possessions and consumption (Scott *et al.*, 2014). While marketers’ part in the enchantment of consumption is generally accepted, the role of consumers therein and the contexts in which enchantment occurs have been less debated.

In particular, critical discussions of excessive consumption often support views of consumers as ‘vulnerable’ or ‘victims’ (see e.g. Alvesson, 1994; Galbraith, 1958) of marketing’s ingenuity. These narratives help to construct a story of consumers as ‘bewitched’ or passive creatures, who have little chance of resisting marketing spells. Such a view has merit in pushing marketers to reflect upon their practices; however it also excuses consumers from their role in excessive consumption with claims of being ‘alienated’ or enchanted by marketing (see e.g. Heath & Chatzidakis, 2011). With biting irony, Twitchell (1999) mocks the idea that consumers are pawns: ‘We can’t really want – ugh! – disposable things. We must have been tricked’ (p.6); ‘Left alone, we would never desire things (ugh!). They have made us materialistic.’(p. 273).

Given the hegemony of neoliberal ideas in contemporary, developed societies (Harvey, 2005), any understanding of the ways in which experiences of consumption become enchanted needs to account for the structuring influences of neoliberalism. Beyond the support that this ideology gives to marketing’s influence on consumption, it also exerts a more direct influence on consumers (Kilbourne, 2010). Although a detailed account of neoliberal thought is beyond the scope of this paper, we shall introduce some basic elements that elucidate its influence on consumption. As we noted before, under neoliberalism, contracts between businesses represent the preferred model for human interactions (Gershon, 2011). Ideal neoliberal actors ‘reflexively and flexibly manage themselves as one owns and manages a business, tending to one’s own qualities and traits as owned and even improvable assets’ (Gershon, 2011, p. 542). This is particularly relevant to our present discussion given that it means, amongst other things, that consumers’ selves can be developed and remade by their ‘management decisions’ and invested in through the purchase of goods and services (Gershon, 2011; Harvey, 2005).

It is also an understanding of selfhood that chimes with the Consumer-Culture-Theoretical view of identity construction in which selves can be extended, developed and invested in via ‘identity projects’ (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 871; Belk, 1988) through which particular aspects of people’s identities can be modified by consumption choices. We believe that this adds support to Fitchett, Patsiaouras and Davies (2014) claim that Consumer Culture Theory is both a product of neoliberalism and broadly supportive thereof, Askegaard’s (2014) counterargument notwithstanding.

In addition, neoliberal thought holds that this ‘business-like’ mode of thought does not come naturally but must be achieved through social norms and other means (Gershon, 2011). This produces normative pressure that affects consumers’ daydreaming by privileging and encouraging those fantasies that can be realised within the market while marking those that cannot be as foolish or inappropriate. This can result in people applying their capacity to create enchantment within the field of consumption at the expense of enchanting other elements of their lives.

We note that neither of these effects suggests that consumers are pawns or that their fantasies relating to consumption are imposed on them from outside. It does however mean that these fantasies are structured and constrained by the logic of the market and by the goods, services and brands available and visible in the particular markets with which the consumer interacts, as Holt (2002) also notes. In the following we will discuss the particular ways in which consumers use these fantasies and the stories of enchantment that they construct within these constraints.

Consumers' uses of enchantment

A number of studies that discuss the pervasiveness of stories of myths and magic in consumer culture help to elucidate consumers' uses of enchantment. In particular, they illustrate how such stories can constitute an important resource for consumers to manage 'identity projects' (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 871) in alignment with, or dissociation from, the market and dominant ideological discourses. Holt (2004; 2007) claims that the most effective brands ('iconic brands') are those that carry with them an 'identity myth' (Holt, 2004, p. 2) through which consumers can adopt identities that help them resolve the cultural contradictions of their time and place. He gives as an example Jack Daniel's whiskey allowing post-war, American men who felt dissatisfied with their grey-suited, suburban lives to identify themselves with the rugged masculinity of the Wild West (Holt, 2007). Likewise consumers of 'natural health' products appeal to mythical narratives to assert their opposition to culturally dominant discourses of conventional medicine (Thompson, 2004), and people attending Burning Man (Kozinets, 2002) and 'Modern Mountain Men' gatherings (Belk & Costa, 1998) construct elaborate shared rituals of a more 'authentic' way of life set apart from mundane reality or marketing's influence. This type of identity construction is supported by the cultural commitment in the global North since World War II to 'expressive individualism' (Luban, 1997, p. 46) and the more recent phenomenon of the neoliberal self that can be reflexively managed (Gershon, 2011), as described in the previous section.

A novel, radical perspective on this kind of fantastic identity building is found in Varul (2013) who argues that it is precisely this element of consumer culture in which the

seeds of freer and fairer, post-revolutionary society are to be found. This promise provided by consumer society of making and remaking ourselves like so many Bowies or Madonnas is, according to Varul (2013), something that any desirable alternative to capitalism will have to provide. For Varul it is capitalism's failure to allow any but privileged minority to fully realise this promise, in other words that consumers are taught that they should think of themselves as queens when in reality they have mostly pawn-like lives (see Le Grand, 2006), that holds the seeds of the system's destruction. This idea that commodified enchantment is ultimately liberating runs contrary to the claims of Zipes (2002), discussed before.

More prosaically, consumers are found to imbue consumption experiences with magic, in an attempt to make sense of or control life experiences, as James *et al.* (2011) elucidate. In particular, they found that women seeking to lose weight would invoke narratives involving magic-like forces to cope with the difficulties they encounter in so doing. Magical and mythical forces are also invoked in consumption experiences involving a deep connection with nature (see e.g. Arnould & Price, 1993; Belk & Costa, 1998; Holbrook, 2006), where, for example, kissing a particular rock may assure a river rafter's safe passage over rapids (Arnould & Price, 1993).

Beyond these uses of the fantastic, consumers construct enchanting stories around consumption because of the pleasure these provide. Specifically, consumers 'desire to desire' and this happens to a great extent via their private and pleasurable construction of fantasies in anticipating consumption (Belk *et al.*, 2003, p. 342; see also Fournier & Guiry, 1993). Such fantasies often refer back to a 'prior state of bliss' or to childhood memories (Belk *et al.*, 2003, p. 335), allowing consumers to travel back in time and

revisit ‘magical’ identities. This explains, for example, how figures such as Batman, Peter Pan, and Cinderella still ‘bewitch’ adult consumers (Belk *et al.*, 2003). Thus, to the extent that consumers learn to be sensitive to the nostalgia of enchanting themes, they have the potential to exert an important role in consumption by giving consumers details (see Tversky & Kahneman, 1983) and inspiration with which to fill in their own stories of enchantment.

These fantasies or daydreams are especially important because, just like the fairy tales in which they are often based (Zipes, 2002), they offer consumers *hope* of a change of their condition for the better (e.g. becoming healthier, more attractive, being loved) (see Belk *et al.*, 2000; 2003; James *et al.*, 2007). Much earlier, Bloch (1986), a Marxist philosopher writing in the 1930s and 40s, stressed the importance of dreams, fantasies and hope in human progress and referred repeatedly to fairy tales, considering them repositories of the hopeful spirit with which the poor and the weak can prevail over the powerful and change their lives for the better. He gave an account of the role of daydreaming, including the ‘sedate longing’ for ‘a group of purchasable comforts [...] imagined in detail but unpossessed’ (Bloch, 1986, p. 32), which could well have been written by a present-day theorist on hedonic consumption. Given its relevance to understanding consumption, it is surprising how the concept of hope has only rarely been discussed in marketing literature (see MacInnis & Mello, 2001).

Even if some disappointment may ultimately replace hope (see Campbell, 1987; Belk *et al.*, 2003), consumers are usually aware that the fantasies built around consumption *are* fantasies (see Campbell, 1987; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). Just as like most children after the age of five do not perceive fairy tales as “true to external reality”

(Bettelheim, 1976, p. 64), consumers do not believe that *Cif* cream cleaner gives them real magical powers or that *Marks & Spencer* have fairies who spread sparkle and joy. They have, however, the ability to treat their fantasies *as if* they were real, gaining pleasure therein, despite knowing that they are untrue (Campbell, 1987).

Along with providing hope and other emotional benefits, these fantasies may act as a motivating force for consumers to reach their goals. Literature on self-gift giving suggests that imagining a story of how when a project is finished, an indulgence will have been earned, can be an effective source of motivation (e.g. Mick & DeMoss, 1990). Pollay (1986) discusses how advertising creates in consumers a sense of inadequacy by ‘constantly showing [...] that the grass seems greener elsewhere’ (p. 26). This may be true but, whilst creating dissatisfaction with one’s current state, the ‘greener grass’ can be something for consumers to aspire to and in so doing, better themselves.

Thus, engaging with magical thinking or other enchanting fantasies around consumption can help consumers to find agency (see James *et al.*, 2011) over their life conditions, projects and identities. While marketers may act as ‘sorcerers helping to enchant’ consumers, one can reasonably argue that consumers ‘act as sorcerers’ apprentices’ (Belk *et al.*, 2003, p. 327) and gladly *use* marketing’s stories to build, cultivate and co-construct their own stories of enchantment. Ritzer (2010, p. 70, 71), himself an important critic of consumer societies, questions the view that consumers are necessarily controlled and exploited by means of consumption and suggests rather that consumers may be the ones in control, demanding ‘reenchanted cathedrals of consumption’. This notwithstanding, we acknowledge that the meanings and fantasies

that consumers actively create (Elliott, 1997) are constrained by the cultural frameworks, including marketing systems (see e.g. Douglas & Isherwood, 1979; Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Shankar & Fitchett, 2002) and the dominant neoliberal ideology (Gershon, 2011), within which consumers operate. These constraints bias individuals towards constructing their stories of happiness within the boundaries of the market (see also Shankar *et al.* 2006; Gabriel & Lang, 2015).

And they lived happily ever after...

‘...we can then build castles in the air, half aware that these are just that, but gaining deep reassurance from it nonetheless. While the fantasy is *unreal*, the good feelings it gives us about ourselves and our future *are real*, and these real good feelings are what we need to sustain us.’ (Bettelheim, 1976, p. 126).

As would be expected given both the strong tendency for people to organize information into stories (Abbott, 2008) and the pervasiveness of fairy-tale stories in the culture industry of the western world (Zipes, 2002), consumers’, practitioners’ and academics’ accounts of consumption are populated with fantastic themes. In this manuscript, we discuss the phenomenon of consumption in light of these themes and elucidate the uses that marketing professionals and consumers make of them as well as the ideological context in which they do so. This allows us to contribute novel insights to critical discussions of the discipline, and of consumption in particular.

Firstly, this study brings attention to the power that stories exert in shaping meanings and people’s understandings of consumption (and consumer society). That we are

‘storied creatures’ (Randazzo, 2006, p. 11) and that we are, in particular, drawn by fairy-tale or mythical themes of magic and heroism, is reflected in scholars’, practitioners’ and consumers’ discourses of consumption and marketing. Marketers harness the power of these stories to sell consumers a commercialized version of them, which is bought and recreated by consumers. Meanwhile, scholars draw on the power of the metaphor of enchantment to write their stories of marketing and consumers.

Secondly, this manuscript draws attention to the various (and not always apparent) *purposes* that stories of enchantment serve for scholars and practitioners of marketing, as well as consumers, in relation to consumption and marketing’s role therein. Scholars use such stories to malign or defend marketing, to paint consumers as passive prey to bewitching marketing, or as powerful kings and queens, to create a smoke-screen of vagueness over their own arguments, or to mock those with whom they disagree. Practitioners rely heavily on such narratives to seduce consumers while diverting their minds from the consequences of excessive consumption. Consumers, on the other hand, engage in fantastic stories for their own pleasure, to gain hope or encouragement, to manage identities, or to excuse their self-indulgences on account of marketing having “cast a spell” on them. In some cases, mythical and fairy-tale motifs are used to show individuals’ resistance to the market, as the Burning Man festival and the recent Banksy’s *Dismaland* exhibition illustrate. By bringing awareness to the variety of uses that stories of enchantment serves in relation to consumption, this manuscript sows the seeds for informed discussions of consumption enchantment in ways that better reflect the contexts in which it occurs and the voices of different storytellers.

Equally, this discussion highlights how stories of enchantment can feed into overly simplistic views of the agency of marketers or consumers and thus limit our understanding of consumption. Specifically, by adopting a polarised view of the consumer as a queen or a pawn, and of the marketer either as a manipulator or a servant of the consumer, like ‘goodies’ and ‘baddies’ in a fairy tale (Bettelheim, 1976), we overlook the particular, contextual ways in which the actions of one influence or constrain the other as well as their interaction with the wider cultural and economic context. Consumers certainly do have a large measure of agency in constructing stories that imbue their experiences of consumption with a sense of enchantment. They actively seek out such enchantment and combine fantasies borrowed from marketing systems and other cultural institutions with their own experiences and memories to construct their private stories and meanings. Crucially however, they are not free to choose the ideological background in which they construct these fantasies. The dominant ideas and institutions (including marketing) of neoliberal society exert considerable structuring influence that privileges fantasies that can be realised within the market while denigrating those that cannot.

This discussion carries important implications for scholars, policy makers and social marketers wanting to address the environmental consequences of overconsumption and the role of marketing therein. Inasmuch as daydreaming and enchanting narratives about consumption are important drivers for the accumulation of goods they represent a challenge for sustainability. For this reason, Scott *et al.* (2014) advocate a movement to remove magical thinking from consumption and get consumers to focus firmly on the materiality of their possessions. However, on the basis of the arguments we make in this paper we believe that Scott *et al.*'s (2014) approach, while well-meaning, is mistaken.

The sheer ubiquity of stories and fantasy suggests that asking consumers to be less day-dreamy is likely to fail for the similar reasons to those that Scott *et al.* (2014) accept that asking them to be less acquisitive would, namely: it would be interpreted as moralising; it requires people to give up something in which they are deeply invested; and it runs contrary to the dominant social paradigm in which consumers are embedded. Moreover intellectual movements against magical thinking have historically proven highly problematic; as Adorno and Horkheimer (1972) said '[t]he only type of thinking that it is sufficiently hard to shatter myths is ultimately self-destructive' (p.4). This, they claimed, had caused the Enlightenment to lose its early potential as a liberating force and to come to serve the interests of the powerful. The same, we believe, would be a serious risk for any movement for sustainability that was too dismissive of the importance of daydreams and magic.

Thus, we propose that anyone interested in promoting more sustainable patterns of consumption should take the tendency of people to build narratives that imbue their everyday activities with a sense of enchantment as a fact that cannot simply be wished away. Specifically, social or pro-environmental marketing campaigns that seek to work *with* the human capacity for creating stories should therefore be more effective than those that work against it. For example, firing people's imaginations with compelling stories that enchant those experiences other than shopping (e.g. a magical walk in an enchanted park with the family) will likely do more to curb excessive consumption than hectoring them not to be enchanted by shopping. At the same time, pro-environmental campaigns could benefit from explicit appeals to fairy-tale or mythic themes (e.g. emphasizing the 'magical value' of nature) in the same way that commercial campaigns do.

Our next recommendation is that arguments based upon the assumption of a simplistic story about consumers as either pawns or queens should be avoided in all contexts. Such arguments serve only to obscure the nature of the constraints on consumers' agency. What is more they do not even serve rhetorical purposes well, since while each benefits from being a neat story it is balanced by the equally neat opposing story. Thus such arguments should be considered limiting, whether in scholarly articles, policy debates about regulation (e.g. compulsory recycling), or even consumers' discussions of responsibility for excessive consumption.

A final implication to which we want to draw attention is for scholars in particular and concerns the importance of the storytelling tendency as a structuring force on discourses. We need to be aware that any account of a marketing phenomenon (or anything else) will be shaped as much by how well it forms a convincing and well-organized story as by how well it explains the observations for which it claims to account. In particular, a risk always exists of us, as academics, fitting our arguments too neatly into narratives that help us to assert a certain identity (e.g. as mainstream or critical marketing scholars) or accepting uncritically those stories that are consistent with others we heard before (e.g. in existing articles whose authors share a paradigm and therefore a metanarrative). That is to say that we are no less susceptible to the structuring influence of storytelling than any other consumer and this can lead us away from accurately representing the phenomena we study. This effect of storytelling is analogous to the effect of literary style that Brown (2004) discusses in relation to the writing of Theodore Levitt. Just as, according to Brown, readers may be convinced by Levitt's work not so much for the ideas it contains as for the stylish prose in which they

are expressed, so we are apt to be more convinced by a neat, interesting story than by a confusing, dull one. Good writing style and good storytelling are of course Good Things, but scholars need to be careful not to be seduced by either into believing the claims contained within them any more strongly than the evidence or arguments warrant. We propose as a preventive measure that scholars of marketing, as consumers of existing scholarship, should engage in the same practices that other consumers use to manage the meanings of consumption: reflection as to whether we should accept the interpretations given (reflexive resistance) and attention to produce different possible interpretations (creative resistance) (Holt, 2002).

The present article is limited by the absence of primary data. The debate initiated here would benefit from empirical studies aimed at analysing the origins and meanings of consumers' narratives of consumption with regards to the use of magical, mythical or fantastic themes, and at exploring their role in endorsing consumption. Further, it would be of value to explore whether and how consumers use those narratives to justify excessive consumption. Equally, it would be useful to perform a systematic discourse analysis of published scholarly work that invokes themes of magic or heroism to further illuminate the ways in which these themes are used.

Consumption and the consumer society are much more complex than any fairy-tale dichotomy between 'heroes' and 'villains' would allow. Practitioners use their skills to try and enchant consumers, in the same way as scholars use their language to attempt to enchant their readers (especially reviewers). Meanwhile, consumers are willing and eager more-or-less consciously to chase unicorns and to use the enchantment of consumption as a tool to build dreams of a better existence. Rather than blaming either

the 'sovereign' consumer or the marketing 'wizard' for excessive consumption, we must look at how marketing, consumers, and culture at large are intertwined in the creation and proliferation of the magical and fantastical appeal of consumption. Perhaps, we could then 'all live happily ever after'.

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