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Charting a Quest: Rapha and its Storytelling Potential

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Abstract

Purpose

This paper explores how British luxury brand Rapha builds written stories of heroic journeys into its published artifacts and specifically utilizes the concept of the cycle ride as epic quest.

Design/Methodology/Approach

Through textual and linguistic analysis, it examines how Rapha attempts to communicate its brand values through stories and meaningful language that taps into the pursuit of a transformative experience.

Findings

It examines how Rapha's allegiances and quest values can be seen to build on many canonical sporting beliefs and historical myths where elite riders are posited as 'warriors' and stage 'heroes' with epic ambitions (Barthes, 1957).

Research limitations/implications

This is the preliminary study in a longitudinal inquiry into Rapha's storytelling as an exemplar luxury brand.

Originality/value

This paper explores how Rapha situates questing tales of glory rides within its promotional brand environment and their function as primary driver of its marketing communications.

Keywords

Fashion, story, luxury, marketing, brand, cycling, Rapha, promotion, quest, storytelling

Article Classification

Research Paper

This short paper adopts a case-study approach focusing on elite British cycling brand Rapha as an exemplar of how luxury consumer brands use storytelling as a persuasive communication tool. As a preliminary study, the aim of this paper is to consider the place and value of stories in the context of luxury brand promotion and to establish and propose that an archetypal story plot lies at the centre of Rapha and its communications.

The primary methodology used in this study is textual analysis taking McKee's (2010: 2) approach: "I attempt to understand the likely interpretations of texts made by people who consume them" to consider how Rapha's stories of cycling show adventures as epic Quests. The study also uses structural linguistic analysis to focus on key written texts to analyse specifically what written elements indicate structural compliance with one of the basic story plots –the Quest story plot – as defined by author Christopher Booker in his book, *The Seven Basic Story Plots* (2015).

Stories are all around us. They shape human experience, motivations and understanding. People use storytelling to make sense of their lives and to draw meaning from social activities and relationships around them (Merchant et al., 2010 cited in Fill, 2013, 752). Stories function to connect and integrate the chaos of internal and momentary experience (Josselson, 2011, 224). Christopher Booker (2015: 8) explains their omnipotent power: "the hidden language of stories provides us with a picture of human nature and the inner dynamics of human behavior which nothing else can present to us with such objective authority." Stories work as they match the way people recall their experiences and data from memory (McKee, 2003; Weick, 1995 cited in Fill, 2013: 752). This natural structuring of story therefore is a human communication device, with meaning believed to be built through narrative modes of knowing (Bruner, 1990), achieved through discourse and recalled through storytelling. As a powerful human connector, it is no wonder that stories have become adopted as a common brand communication tool. McKee states that stories are effective at persuasion because they involve people emotionally: "Stories are the foundation of word-of-mouth communication and a significant dimension of brand and the advertising used to support them" (2003 cited in Fill, 2013: 753).

Since its establishment in 2004, Rapha has positioned itself as an elite brand spanning both the sporting and fashion worlds, stating that it is aimed at 'discerning riders' and communicating this through expansive brand storytelling. Rapha's textual archive is full of both historic and contemporary stories. In 2004, the brand launched itself into the luxury marketplace with an exhibition called 'Kings of Pain' at the Old Truman Brewery on London's Brick Lane. It was an exhibition of stories – a strategic decision for a brand that aspires to be a pioneering brand for 'discerning riders', crossing both sporting and fashion worlds. The exhibition was: "A collection of photography and memorabilia devoted to six iconic riders. Kings of Pain are riders who epitomise the glory, suffering, drama and style of road racing. The stories and images of their exploits have come to define the sport." Rapha's promotional

editorial content is led by stories, whether authored, created or commissioned by the brand. *Inside Stories II* is a small hardback book featuring images of the product care labels sewn into Rapha clothing, which show written stories of cycling victories and tragedies. *Journey* (Ingham, 2015) is a clothbound edition featuring high definition photography of evocative landscapes seen from a bike by Rapha's official photographer Ben Ingham, alongside story-format essays on themes such as 'Glory' and 'Suffering' by contributing writers. On Rapha's website, the online environment is split into retail-driven, product-led selling space, and the editorial section contains written feature articles, complementary photography and documentary films. In this broad canon of published works, the brand shows evidence of all four main aspects of storytelling in organisations, from story gathering, story sharing, story making and storytelling (McLellan, 2006, cited in Fill, 2013: 753).

The Quest is identified by Christopher Booker as one of the seven core story plots or archetypes. He defines its distinctive textual make-up as: "No type of story is more instantly recognisable to us than a Quest. Far away, I learn, there is some priceless goal, worth any effort to achieve: a treasure: a promised land: something of infinite value. From the moment the hero learns of this prize, the need to set out on the long hazardous journey to reach it becomes the most important thing to him in the world. Whatever perils and diversions live in wait on the way, the story is shaped by that one overriding imperative: and the story remains unresolved until the objective has been finally, triumphantly secured." (2015: 69).

The conceptual connection between cycling as an epic experience has been explored by French linguist and critic Roland Barthes (1957) in his essay, 'The Tour de France as Epic'. Here, I view Barthes' critical and semantic observations from the translated British edition (2015) and extend his historical viewpoint to chart how similar Barthesian lexicon is used in Rapha story texts. Where Barthes describes the Tour as Epic, mythological Legend, and Spectacle, here I propose extending this onomastic lexicon to include Quest. The brand's identification with contemporary Questers can be seen in its explicit endorsement of elite cycling athletes, such as its sponsored connection British professional cycling team, Team Sky (2012–2016) and its official sponsorship of WIGGINS, the newly formed team of Tour de France 2012 winner, Sir Bradley Wiggins. This strategic alignment with public iconic, heritage Questers is evidently built into Rapha's brand identity, and it also has its own self-defined tribe or Quester collective who author many of the Stories features, the Rapha Continental. It is useful to reflect on the linguistic syntax and mythology that is being employed in this statement with Rapha speaking of its riders' (not cyclists') advancement through territories and highly specialized equipment.

Narratives organize time (Ricoeur, as cited in Polkinghorne, 1988: 64) and Polkinghorne (1988: 111) builds on this stating that narrative knowing is able to structure information according to the schematic format, spatially or temporally, with the structure working as a

cognitive configuring device. Booker (2015) believes that construction elements of the Quest act as a formula or archetypal pattern embedded deeply in the human imagination which can contribute to timely, sense-making of the world and cognitive understanding. Barthes (1957) describes the Tour stages as structural devices – “each of which has the unity of a chapter in a novel” – and Booker’s stages, I would argue, act as equivalent narrative unifier. The Quest’s five steps comprise: The Call, The Journey, Arrival and Frustration, The Final Ordeals and The Goal. It is through these five stages that the central figure, hero or Quester must travel to achieve his higher purpose. The next stage of further study will be to apply these stages to Rapha texts and to establish the extent of its use as a storytelling structural device.

In this paper, it has been proposed how elite cycling brand Rapha is enlivened with Quester purpose and communicated through tales of epic Quests that are informed by historic cycling mythologies. The positive reception that Rapha has gained since its establishment indicates that their definable brand belief is embedded into their brand storytelling texts, and the adoption of a basic story plot that resonates with human instinct builds meaningful connections with international audiences. This research provides ‘clues’ (McKee, 2010: 15) to the rationale of why luxury cycling brand Rapha publishes written stories of epic tales that adopt the Quest as an archetypal story plot. The Quester values seem to be embedded in Rapha’s own beliefs echoing Rapha founder Simon Mottram’s words in *Journey* (Rapha, 2015: 68): “The cycling I love requires geography and is defined by it. Terrain, topography, gradient and climate matter more to me than watts, heart rates or kilometres per hour.” Mottram’s definable brand belief is echoed throughout the brand texts indicating why Rapha’s consistent story gathering, sharing, making and telling may in turn be connecting meaningfully with a growing audience of cyclists. The next stage of this research is to discuss with the Rapha professionals who create the brand stories how their own experiences as cyclists and questers are woven into the communication, promotion and fabric of this luxury cycling brand.

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