

# Empowered storytelling? An examination of empowerment in storytelling and its impact on millennials

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## Tyrha M. Lindsey-Warren

Clinical Assistant Professor of Marketing, Baylor University, USA

Tyrha M. Lindsey-Warren is a clinical assistant professor of marketing at Baylor University, with over 15 years of experience working in marketing and communications in corporate America, Hollywood and the nonprofit sector. Her research interests are rooted in narrative transportation theory (storytelling), media and advertising, health edutainment, the emotion of empowerment, entertainment and movies. Dr Lindsey-Warren speaks nationally on the topics of multicultural marketing, leadership, branding, diversity, equity, and inclusion, digital marketing and effective communications, and her work has been published in a number of journals. She has a BS in TV/radio/film from Northwestern University, an MBA from the Peter F. Drucker School of Management at Claremont, and a PhD in Marketing from Rutgers University.

Hankamer School of Business, Baylor University, Department of Marketing, One Bear Place #98007, Waco, Texas 767698, USA

Tel: +1 254 710 4727; E-mail: tyrha\_lindsey@baylor.edu



## Christine Ringler

Assistant Professor of Marketing, Culverhouse School of Business, USA

Christine Ringler is an assistant professor of marketing at the Culverhouse School of Business at the University of Alabama, where her research focuses on sensory marketing and frontline employee-customer interactions. Her work has been published in such journals as the *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Journal of Retailing*, *Appetite* and the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*. In addition to her teaching and research duties, Dr Ringler is Coordinator of the Culverhouse Behavior Lab. Dr Ringler has a BS in economics from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, an MBA from Syracuse University and a PhD from Arizona State University.

University of Alabama, Culverhouse School of Business, 361 Stadium Drive, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487, USA

E-mail: caringler@culverhouse.ua.edu

**Abstract** Storytelling is a powerful way to help people connect and make sense of the world. As brands continue to search for ways to make an emotional connection with millennials, being able to articulate a story that encourages millennial consumers to be better, as well as live to their fullest potential, is paramount to building sustainable connections that invite brand loyalty. This paper examines narrative transportation theory — the process by which consumers become absorbed or lost in a story. Specifically, the research explores storytelling in advertisements that exude the emotion of empowerment and its impact on millennials. Using qualitative design and inquiry, the work uncovers insights as to why narrative transportation works and why it is has such an emotional impact.

**KEYWORDS:** empowerment, storytelling, millennials, advertising, branding, narrative transportation, consumer behaviour, emotional connection

## INTRODUCTION

‘Tell me a fact and I’ll learn.  
Tell me the truth and I’ll believe.  
But tell me a story and it will live in my  
heart forever.’ (Indian Proverb<sup>1</sup>)

‘After nourishment, shelter, and  
companionship, stories are the thing we  
need most in the world.’ (Phillip Pullman)<sup>2</sup>

The millennial generation continues to be an enigma to marketers and advertisers. Against the background of a global pandemic, and movements such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, #OscarsSoWhite, #TimesUp and more, the environment is dynamic and constantly evolving, and marketing executives are competing daily for authentic engagement. During the Summer of 2020, for example, against the backdrop of the George Floyd tragedy, numerous major US brands, including Nike, Amazon, IBM, Walmart, ViacomCBS and Estée Lauder, publicly recognised Juneteenth (also known as Emancipation Day, commemorating the end of slavery in the USA) as a company holiday for the first time, and announced their plans for internal action to level the playing field and be more inclusive of all people.<sup>3</sup>

Within this space, where revenues and data rule, marketers and advertisers are beginning to recognise that there is an audience for positive, authentic and motivational storytelling with a purpose. Moreover, such cleverly crafted storytelling can cut through the cluttered marketplace to secure the attention of millennial consumers, drive engagement and ultimately, increase profits. This type of storytelling goes by a number of names, including positive programming, feel-good television, faith-based programming, family entertainment and inspirational lifestyle programming.

Given that 70.6 per cent of the US population identify as Christian,<sup>4</sup> and the fact that faith-based programming in the USA reached some 200 million Americans

in 2014 — a market worth approximately US\$2.1tn<sup>5</sup> — the potential returns from inspirational programming are considerable.

Twenty-three per cent of US Christians fall into the 20–34 age category, and hence may be classified as millennials.<sup>6</sup> With the US millennial population more broadly numbering over 80 million and entering its prime spending years,<sup>7,8</sup> the current and future market power of this generation is undeniable — and not to be ignored.

Dove’s ‘Campaign for Real Beauty’ provides a textbook example of positive, cleverly crafted and transformational storytelling in advertising. By encouraging women to recognise their beauty and strengthen their self-esteem, this highly publicised campaign is cited as an agent for change in the industry. Since the launch of the campaign in 2004, Dove’s annual sales have increased from US\$2.5bn to US\$4bn.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, in a survey conducted by Sheknows.com, 71 per cent of female respondents indicated that marketers should use their advertising to promote positive messages to women and girls; while 52 per cent of female respondents reported purchasing a product they had seen in such a positive advertisement.<sup>10</sup> By 2015, the trend for campaigns targeting women and girls — dubbed fem-vertising — was clearly on the rise, with notable examples being Under Armour’s, ‘I Will What I Want’, Always’ ‘Like a Girl’ and Dove’s ‘Love My Curls’.

This type of storytelling connects with millennials who are what the *New York Times* has called ‘generation nice’.<sup>11</sup> These millennials represent a compassionate and socially aware group of individuals who are more tech-savvy than older generations and love social media.<sup>12,13</sup> Against a background of monumental social and cultural changes brought about by the global pandemic, these dynamics have coupled with the expansion and convergence of media, resulting in this generation uniquely identifying self, community and the world through a different lens.<sup>14</sup> The medium of

storytelling is especially promising for this diverse generation given the evidence that advertisements, films, television programmes, gaming and streaming services that are constructive, relevant and entertaining can play an influential role in addressing issues that matter to this prominent audience.<sup>15</sup>

At the foundation of authentic and impactful storytelling is narrative transportation, where consumers lose themselves and become absorbed in a story. Furthermore, the emergent themes of the data collected for this study are fully captured in the theoretical framework of narrative transportation theory. Rooted in transportation theory, this emotional process captures the attention, feelings and imagery of millennial consumers.<sup>16,17</sup> Green and Brock<sup>18,19</sup> suggest that narrative transportation is a principal device used in persuasion. This is due to its strong emotional nature, which enables consumers to experience changes (positive or negative) in attitudes, behaviours, intentions and beliefs.<sup>20–22</sup> Additionally, this type of storytelling may be influenced by gender, with women more emotionally affected than men — in a study by Green and Brock,<sup>23</sup> women experienced greater transportation into narratives than men due to their high emotional involvement.

Narrative transportation also has the ability to create transformative experiences for the receiver of the story. When millennial consumers are a part of the narrative transportation process, they can become so engrossed in the storytelling of the narrative that it can have a profound effect on them, to the point where the experience can be life-changing or transformative in a positive way.

Understanding why narrative transportation works so well remains an empirical question. The literature purports that it is the pronounced empathy or openness consumers experience during the narrative transportation process that affects attitudes, brand and product evaluations.<sup>24,25</sup>

Can empathy be the only emotion in play every time a story is told? How do the effects of other possible emotions possibly impact millennial consumer purchase behaviour and intent towards a brand, product or service?

### **Commercialism within a non-traditional storytelling context**

Millennials live in a world where they are constantly exposed to various forms of media, commercialism and entertainment. Smartphones, Apps, Tik Tok, iTunes, Twitter, Xbox, Netflix, text messaging and Instagram, are just a few of the myriad channels and devices that continuously entertain millennials, as well as promote selling messages to them. Specifically, the average white American watches 140 hours of television per month (35 hours per week),<sup>26</sup> while African Americans on average have four televisions in the household and watch 213 hours of television per month,<sup>27</sup> and Latino Americans watch 33 hours per week and stream over six hours of video per month.<sup>28</sup>

The present research works to uncover the impact of non-traditional storytelling that often occurs within commercialised narratives in marketing and advertising and which has a profit motive. Typically, millennials view commercials on a continuum. The present research recognises this, and also the fact that there are varying degrees of commercialism within each advertisement. For example, many recent advertisements portray a story regarding the human condition with no direct selling proposition regarding a particular product or service. Recent examples of this include Budweiser's Super Bowl advertisement that features the immigration story of the company's founder, and Proctor & Gamble's 'My Black Is Beautiful' campaign, in which African American parents discuss the conversations they have with their children regarding the bias that exists in America as it pertains to communities of colour.

The present study therefore explores the impact of commercialism on this style of storytelling.

The selling aspect of this type of storytelling is often not the key goal of the campaign; rather, the narrative is used to make a statement regarding the company's values and beliefs. Forming a deeper connection with the consumer may also be a priority for the company. In instances where the disclosure of the company's logo or brand imagery may enhance or hinder the narrative transportation experience, the timing of this disclosure is a key consideration. As a result, many advertisements, programmes and public service announcements targeted at millennial consumers do not reveal the brand until a few seconds from the end. Recent examples of this include Under Armour's commercial featuring the ballerina Misty Copeland, and advertisements for Microsoft's Windows 10. Both these examples feature engaging and empowering stories about the human condition and it is not until the last few seconds that the respective brand logos are revealed. This manner of storytelling may be less commercial than what is normally seen in the marketplace, which takes a more traditional approach based on direct selling. This terminology will be used within the context of the present work.

This study aims to illuminate the positive effects of narrative transportation on millennial consumers' behaviour beyond attitudes and brand evaluations. To the authors' knowledge, the literature has not examined the effects of narrative transportation on purchase intentions, behaviour or recall effects, although the negative side of consumer affective abilities has been frequently chronicled. This research also promotes a better understanding of the nature of commercialised narratives and how they can increase narrative transportation. Ultimately, with the transformative nature of narrative transportation, reducing its emotional power to empathy is limiting.

The present work sets out to discover a new emotional outcome of narrative transportation.

Following the introduction, the methodology and the findings from the qualitative studies will be presented, supported by theoretical frameworks from the psychology and marketing literature. This is followed by a general discussion of the topic, along with recommendations for future research and potential managerial implications.

## METHODOLOGY

To examine the notion of storytelling within highly commercialised and less commercialised advertising, and its relationship to the attitudes, behaviours and purchase intent of millennial consumers, the research draws on qualitative design and inquiry, using two datasets to better understand how millennials respond to and interpret both forms of storytelling in advertising.

### Dataset 1

Using depth interviews conducted over a three-year period, preliminary evidence was found based on the first group of interviews conducted in 2014–2015 with 20 diverse participants (ten female and ten male) from a Northeastern university and a nonprofit organisation in Harlem, New York (see Table 1).<sup>29</sup> One-on-one personal interviews with the students at the university were conducted on campus. The interviews at the nonprofit were conducted in a meeting room at the organisation's main office in Harlem. Each participant received a US\$15 Target gift card for their participation.

The participants were shown four 60-second television commercials that featured storytelling in both non-traditional and less commercialised and traditional, direct selling and highly commercialised formats. An example of the more traditional

**Table 1:** Informants for qualitative research (2014–2015)

Pseudonym	Race/gender	Age (years)	Identifier
Karen	Caucasian female	20	Student
Maria	Latino female	21	Student
Asia	Asian female	20	Student
Shawna	African American female	21	Student
Yvonne	Caucasian female	21	Student
Chris	Caucasian male	21	Student
Juan	Latino male	20	Student
Sidney	African American male	21	Student
Robert	Caucasian male	21	Student
John	Caucasian male	22	Student
Joe	Caucasian male	19	Student
Sue	Caucasian female	20	Student
Dave	African American male	19	Nonprofit programme participant
Tony	African American male	19	Nonprofit programme participant
Ace	African American male	19	Nonprofit programme participant
Edward	African American male	19	Nonprofit programme participant
Andre	African American male	21	Nonprofit programme participant
Franny	African American female	24	Nonprofit programme participant
Tracey	African American female	24	Nonprofit programme participant
Tia	African American female	28	Nonprofit programme participant
Denise	Latino female	19	Nonprofit programme participant
Tabitha	African American female	24	Nonprofit programme participant

direct selling commercial included the Target 2014 holiday advertisement, which is devoted to promoting products for Christmas. This commercial, clearly inspired by Alice in Wonderland, features a young girl discovering Target products, with reduced prices, that would make great gifts. An example of an advertisement that was non-traditional and less commercialised was from Under Armour's, 'I Will What I Want' campaign. The commercial features Misty Copeland, the first African American woman to become a principal dancer for American Ballet Theater. Ms Copeland is dancing in the commercial while wearing Under Armour attire while a 13-year-old girl reads a letter explaining why Ms Copeland will never be a professional ballerina. In 2014,

Under Armour received the Marketer of the Year award for its 'I Will What I Want' campaign.<sup>30</sup> The YouTube video of this commercial has been viewed nearly 10 million times.

The findings from this first dataset established that the respondents experienced different levels of empowerment as they were exposed to, engaged with and reacted to the two types of messages.

Marketers and advertisers have traditionally sought to convey messages about their brands, products or services that are aspirational in nature. Whether it be category or quality or price, however, for many consumers, the materialistic goals associated with such aspirational messaging may be impossible to obtain.<sup>31</sup> Despite this,

marketers endeavour to create and sustain the illusion that the objectives they promote are genuinely attainable.

Employing this kind of empowerment strategy as a brand message suggests to consumers that they can achieve whatever they put their minds to.<sup>32</sup> Empowering millennial consumers in this way enables marketers to offer control and power, which can be a promising source of competitive advantage.<sup>33</sup> This rationale is grounded in the idea that a firm can embed a message of empowerment within its marketing of products or services should it believe this will increase consumer satisfaction. If consumer satisfaction is positively impacted, the firm will experience increased sales, ultimately creating competitive advantage.

The marketing literature relating to consumer empowerment focuses primarily on choice, control, decision-making and power.<sup>34-43</sup> In a financial literacy context, McGregor<sup>44</sup> suggests that empowerment is me-power and involves giving the receiver the perception that they have the inner power and strength to take action. Specifically, McGregor argues that when consumers are empowered, they are able to recognise their self-worth and see value in their potential and their personal ability to control their destiny.<sup>45</sup>

The type of environment that supports empowering consumers is one that is safe and trusted, and where consumers feel comfortable in exploring their attitudes, values and perceptions. It leads to consumers discovering their reflective state — an experience that may be described as an ‘aha’ moment.<sup>46</sup> The study by Wathieu *et al.*<sup>47</sup> looks at consumer empowerment within the overall context of consumer control and choice. When firms empower consumers, they put them in the dominant position in the decision-making process — something that consumers may perceive as a benefit and may lead to satisfaction. The researchers suggest that progress cues, information about other consumers, and control over the choice

consumption set can give consumers a subjective sense of empowerment. Moreover, empowerment can also create optimism, self-confidence and a sense of control in everyday life.<sup>48</sup> In a world that can be incredibly daunting at times, empowerment in storytelling may fulfil a salient need among millennial consumers for positivity and encouragement in their everyday lives. Essentially, the millennial consumer’s ability to expand their control and shape their choice set is a significant determinant in experiencing empowerment. The following comments from respondents are apposite:

‘I internalize empowerment to mean support. When empowerment is visualized in commercials/media, I feel as though the brand is aiming to support me as the consumer. It makes the brand more personable.’ (Chris, student)

‘I define empowerment as meaning a collective and collaborative effort towards a goal. When I see empowerment in media and commercials, I automatically aim to support the brand and company.’ (Yvonne, student)

In the psychology literature, empowerment has been studied in various disciplines, including mental health, family and health services, leadership and organisational behaviour.<sup>49-58</sup> Researchers have identified a range of dimensions involved in empowerment including meaning, self-determination, competence, powerlessness and control of the future.<sup>59,60</sup> They have also defined this emotion as psychological empowerment, and have determined that it is a multidimensional construct that ultimately helps people take control of their lives.<sup>61,62</sup> Early research in the area by Rappaport<sup>63</sup> defines empowerment as the connection between a consumer’s personal capabilities and the will to take action in a public domain,<sup>64</sup> while Segal *et al.*<sup>65</sup> defines empowerment as the process where consumers take control of their lives and gain the ability to influence organisational and societal structures. In all,

the varying perspectives and definitions in the literature on empowerment shed light on how incredibly multifaceted and complex this emotion is.

The empowerment scale developed by Rogers *et al.*<sup>66</sup> was initially created for mental health services. Rogers *et al.* concluded that an individual ‘who has a sense of self-worth, self-efficacy and power; can recognise the importance of the group or community to effect change, but the empowered person also values autonomy’.<sup>67</sup> One interviewee defined empowerment as follows:

‘Empowerment means to be fulfilled with yourself. I am not sure if I see it in the media enough.’ (Andre, programme participant)

Having combed the literature for definitions appropriate for the marketing discipline, the present study defines empowerment as a multi-layered emotion that creates optimism, inner-power, confidence and an inherent call to action that encourages positive and transformative behaviour for consumers. It may also be powerful enough to encourage consumers to look beyond their selves and make a positive impact on their larger community. Empowerment has the ability to pull emotionally at the heartstrings of consumers. It has the power to touch the soul and enable a consumer to see unimaginable possibilities and positive outcomes.

Based on this definition, an empowerment appeal within a storytelling context may be attractive to millennial consumers who want a stronger value proposition from brands. The trend towards more values-based marketing strategies is supported by the values-driven marketing matrix 3.0 created by Kotler *et al.*<sup>68</sup> Within this framework, the goal is to create a strong consumer interaction by providing a collaborative and human experience that delivers authentic value propositions that not only matter, but are also functional, emotional and spiritual.<sup>69</sup> As one respondent commented:

‘In today’s world, having faith is a big deal, because I feel like in a religious, like in a Christian culture, it’s kind of like constantly being slammed and not being ashamed of that and always showing — not being afraid to say, hey, I do believe in God, and I have faith. I think that’s a big deal.’ (Jane, student)

The present study initially incorporated experimental design work. During a Qualtrics survey pre-test of the empowered storytelling commercial stimuli in 2015, 192 diverse students at a north-eastern university were queried regarding their thoughts and definitions of empowerment. The interviewees were asked ‘What does the word empowering mean to you?’, ‘Why did you find the ads empowering?’ and ‘What elements in the ads made them empowering?’. As the following comments demonstrate, the survey found clear evidence that millennials have a strong perspective regarding the emotion of empowerment:

‘The word “empowering” means how people are motivated by some other outside influence that gives them the “power” to do something.’ (Joe, student)

‘Empowering means giving another person the hope and encouragement to continue on and succeed in a difficult situation.’ (Sue, student)

The notion of commercialism was also evident in the respondents’ comments — when companies used social imagery in an empowered storytelling context, this was observed to have an emotional impact, whether positive or negative, on participants. Indeed, with the empowered storytelling stimuli, the participants were often unaware that the commercial was promoting a brand or product.

Overall, themes such as motivation, encouragement, strength, looking beyond yourself to help others, self-determination and being your best greatly assisted in

creating the foundation for the second dataset.

**Dataset 2**

For the second dataset, 11 diverse millennial students (six females and five males) from a Midwest university were interviewed (see Table 2). The participants were shown two 60-second television commercials produced by well-known sports apparel brands.

The Nike ‘Find Your Greatness’ commercial is an example of empowered storytelling that was non-traditional and less commercialised. Rather than sell or promote any specific Nike products, the 60-second commercial features an overweight 12-year-old boy from Ohio, jogging on a road in a rural area (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYP9AGtLvRg>). The advertisement is complemented by a voice-over narration on how ordinary people can find their own truths and inner power so they can become extraordinary and ‘great’.

The Skechers ‘Air Cooled Memory Foam’ commercial, by contrast, is an example of a traditional, highly commercialised and direct selling advertisement. The 60-second commercial features the actress Kelly Brock discussing the new air-cooled memory foam technology the company

is using for its shoes. Ms Brock wears the shoes while hanging out at the swimming pool of a gorgeous mansion. At the end of the commercial, a handsome man emerges from the water and flirts with the actress (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KAeh2N-02No>).

All interviews with participants were an hour in length. Participants were not directly advised about the primary constructs of interest of empowerment, storytelling and commercialism. Instead, the questions were based on the empowerment scale (see Appendix A); the narrative transportation scale (see Appendix B); and items on the ad and media transportation scale (see Appendix C).<sup>70-72</sup> All interviews were recorded using an audio device on an iPad. The student participants received extra credit and US\$15 restaurant gift cards for their participation.

The interviews aimed to capture the following: At what point does the receiver of the story become fully involved in the storytelling? What components of empowered storytelling have the greatest impact? Does the consumer understand the emotion of empowerment? Is the consumer open to seeing it in marketing and advertising activities? Does a firm benefit by incorporating storytelling that exudes the

**Table 2:** Informants for qualitative research (2017)

Pseudonym	Race/gender	Age (years)	Identifier
Al	Caucasian male	24	Student
Bill	Hindu male	28	Student
Edward	African American male	19	Student
Isaac	African male	23	Student
Sara	Caucasian female	20	Student
Martha	Caucasian female	32	Student
Janice	Caucasian female	19	Student
Mary	Caucasian female	20	Student
Patty	Mixed female	27	Student
Jane	Caucasian female	33	Student
Linda	Caucasian female	21	Student



emotion of empowerment in its marketing and advertising efforts?

The process by which the empowerment occurs is through narrative transportation. The extant literature on narrative transportation theory defines it as the process of telling a story, where the receiver of the narrative becomes fully involved and transported into a fictional world. Fundamentally, this process of being so grossly absorbed into a story is rooted in comprehension and the intellectual capacity of consumers to understand the narrative. Early research on the subject dealt with the recall of text and summarisation of protocols in the working memory.<sup>73,74</sup> Involved in this processing is the 'tripartite of attention, imagery and feelings'.<sup>75</sup> It can affect attitude, beliefs and changes in perception.<sup>76,77</sup>

Research by Gerrig<sup>78</sup> examines the effects of transportation in the written text and its persuasive nature on consumers. He describes the mental process involved as similar to that of a traveller who goes around the world transported by some means of conveyance. When the traveller returns to his place of origin, he is transformed in some way by the journey.<sup>79</sup> According to Green and Brock,<sup>80,81</sup> this transportation of a traveller or of an individual into the world of a story is the principal device of narrative persuasion. Green *et al.*<sup>82</sup> complement this work by defining narrative transportation theory as the process when individuals lose themselves in the story.

From a media, advertising and entertainment perspective, Green<sup>83</sup> delves into the positive benefits of narrative transportation and the transformative experience it can produce as a result of the desirable and altered states consumers encounter. First and foremost, pleasure and enjoyment are at the heart of the consumer experience of narrative transportation. It is the combination of cognitive and affective processing that enables narrative transportation to be so effective.<sup>84,85</sup> The

ability to escape, or flow into another world for an optimal experience where the consumer can lose track of time, is another key characteristic of this theory.<sup>86,87</sup> These narrative worlds are safe and non-threatening.<sup>88,89</sup> The altered pleasurable state consumers find themselves in when experiencing narrative transportation enables them to consider their past selves and create a vision for their future selves.<sup>90,91</sup> Moreover, narrative transportation enables consumers to trust, feel safe, empathise and enjoy. The process allows for expanded learning capabilities, leaves behind stress and anxiety, and can be helpful in managing mood. It is similar to positive affect, which encompasses a person's primary reactions to stimuli and results in feelings that enable one to have a positive mood.

According to Holbrook and Hirschman,<sup>92</sup> positive affect may lead to fantasies, feelings and fun. Entertainment products like movies, television and plays arouse these perceived whimsical feelings among consumers and may actually fulfil their salient emotional desires and needs. Positive affect also impacts learning and decision-making. It influences social interaction and can lead to assisting others, kindness and personal compassion. Ashby and Isen<sup>93</sup> suggest that positive affect greatly influences the outcomes of cognitive elaboration, including memory recall, rehearsal, creative problem solving and even enhanced attention. They explain that the release of dopamine in the brain is responsible for these outcomes. Isen<sup>94</sup> states that positive affect augments learning and can lead to innovation, creativity and cognitive flexibility. It can also encourage an open mind and organisation. All of these positive attributes created by narrative transportation can result in an openness that enables consumers to absorb new information and see truths about themselves.<sup>95</sup> Therefore, narrative transportation may be complemented with positive emotions and empowerment, and have a similar impact

on consumer behaviour. As one student commented:

‘It was real. It was calm, but it was empowering. It was sympathetic. And still gave the idea across that you don’t have to look like a supermodel to have that specific product.’ (Martha, student, responding to Nike ad)

### The craftsmanship of storytelling

According to the marketing literature, the storytelling process requires three salient components: relatable characters, conceivable plots and verisimilitude.<sup>96</sup> Relatable characters are those portrayals where the receiver of the narrative can emotionally identify with and understand the experiences of the lead players.<sup>97–100</sup> With respect to conceivable plots, this refers to the storyteller creating a world and a sequence of events with sufficient resemblance to real life that the receiver of the narrative can mentally recreate them and they can possibly take on a new meaning in their mind.<sup>101–104</sup> For the purposes of the present research, conceivable plots must also incorporate a complementary message or point of view that can be empowering as well as motivating to the receiver. Finally, verisimilitude suggests the articulation of truth, realism and the likelihood that the events within a story may actually occur.<sup>105–107</sup> This articulation of the truth in the context of the storyteller evoking empowerment can be the transformative aspect of the storytelling process where the receiver realises their inner power from the story. Fundamentally, the higher the verisimilitude, the more likely narrative transportation will increase for the receiver of the story.<sup>108</sup> The authenticity of the experience for the receiver of the story is paramount for the success of the storytelling process. As one respondent commented:

‘The character looked like he didn’t have a lot of pure athletic ability, but he was trying anyway, so he has a big heart, it seemed.

Ambition. I don’t know the word for it. But [inaudible] the little guy, the underdog.’ (Al, student, responding to Nike ad)

### Narrative transportation as an effective form of persuasion

Millennials have been digitally wired since childhood. Reared on video games and digital devices, millennials have grown up immersed in a world of storytelling.<sup>109</sup> For this reason, the persuasive power of narrative transportation may impact this generation more than its predecessors. The extant literature has illustrated the effects of narrative transportation, from cognitive and affective perspectives as well as relating to persuasion. From an emotional perspective, narratives inherently educe emotions and feelings, both positive and negative, as well as influence consumers’ desires.<sup>110,111</sup> In narrative transportation, various personal prerequisites are required, especially emotionally. Argo *et al.*<sup>112</sup> posit that the more empathetic an individual is, the more they will immerse themselves into the world of the story.

Narrative transportation can elicit both critical and fictitious thoughts.<sup>113,114</sup> Escalas<sup>115</sup> found that the cues in stories, like characters, enable the receiver of the narrative to create his or her own storylines. This cognitive process also allows individuals to absorb incoming information in a manner where they can see themselves in the situation.<sup>116</sup> Individuals who use this type of cognitive process are able to learn and recall information better than their counterparts. Narrative transportation can also influence beliefs, attitudes and intentions. The more a consumer is transported into a story, the more it enables the individual to experience a type of verisimilitude, which prompts the consumer to adopt mannerisms and ideas consistent with the story and message being conveyed.<sup>117–119</sup> Consumers who are transported into narratives are more likely to perceive the storyline as real, which can affect their attitude in a positive or negative

way.<sup>119–121</sup> These viewers of stories are also willing to carry out actions witnessed in the narratives in a similar or more intense manner. Similarly, the more consumers are transported into a narrative, the greater their willingness to emulate the intentions and characteristics of the lead players of the story in their own lives.<sup>122</sup> This may also ring true with regards to consumerism and the perceptions made by consumers towards firms.

### **Role of commercial narratives and social imagery in the narrative transportation process**

Van Laer *et al.*<sup>123</sup> call for a distinction in the marketing literature between commercial and non-commercial narratives. The former are narratives with a profit motive — their primary goal is to sell. This type of selling is commonly demonstrated when the featured talent directly addresses the camera with the selling message. By contrast, non-commercial narratives uphold the structure of their genre (eg comedy, drama, romance) and the inherent values of the story, whether entertaining, educational, or both.<sup>124</sup> Van Laer *et al.* also argue that less commercialised stories are associated with increased narrative transportation. In this type of environment, the consumers witness the values and authenticity of the company in a less critical and unobtrusive manner than with traditional advertising.<sup>125</sup> Therefore, in an empowered storytelling context, the narrative can maintain the inherent values of a story and can be highly commercialised through the strategic use of non-verbal social imagery, such as a company logo, throughout the telling of the story. Consequently, when a story is told in a more commercialised context and it is immediately revealed to consumers that the persuasive motivation behind the narrative is sponsored by a brand, narrative transportation may be compromised.<sup>126,127</sup>

Within the empowered storytelling context, social imagery that is less

commercial or even non-commercial can communicate verisimilitude, cultural relevance and authenticity, especially regarding the firm and its values. By definition, social imagery entails visual representations or impressions that reinforce certain perceptions within society.<sup>128</sup> Specifically, as a complement to this definition, social imagery can be seen in the marketplace through the use of stills, tags, logos, language and moving pictures that can influence social learning and impact consumer attitudes, feelings, understandings and behaviours towards others.<sup>129,130</sup> Specifically, the non-verbal elements used, from logos to photographs, may also have a profound effect on consumers and their storytelling experience. Social imagery can also function as a powerful social signal that can influence and motivate certain behaviours.<sup>131</sup> Within these various articulations, viewers often perceive social imagery not only as truthful but also as holding cultural meaning, due to its ability to assert and confirm a particular reality in the minds and hearts of consumers.<sup>132,133</sup>

For companies, social imagery can play a very significant role in the area of impression management due to its ability to transmit the company's self-expression and symbolise its value to consumers.<sup>134</sup> As authentic cultural resources, companies can enhance their credibility by creating storytelling with creative ingredients, from visuals and messaging, empowering the receiver of the story to be in control of their choices.<sup>135</sup> Within this postmodern perspective, companies can have authenticity as well as transparency by placing themselves and their social imagery in world environments that are relevant and relatable to consumers. The impact of this genuine presence by companies in storytelling can have a powerful effect consumers' memory. This is because the stronger the activation of a company's social imagery within the storytelling, the more likely the company will be remembered by the consumer.<sup>136</sup>

Ultimately, consumer evaluations and beliefs based on a company's social imagery can influence purchase intentions. This type of influence can take place through both verbal and non-verbal articulation of the company's social imagery in advertisements, promotional materials and more. Specifically, the non-verbal elements may enjoy an even greater impact due to the inferences that consumers make from viewing the company's social imagery.<sup>137</sup> In this respect, the following comments from the interview participants are relevant:

'From the start, because you don't see anything and then you kind of slowly see him running towards you. And then it's just someone talking and it's very quiet, so you're intrigued into what they're going to say, what the purpose of it is. Especially since there's no branding at all until the very end, so it's kind of interesting and surprising that it's a Nike commercial. Because usually any other of their commercials it's like they've got their logo at the bottom, you see all these athletes wearing it and talking about it.' (Janice, student, responding to Nike ad)

'I think the difference between those commercials, like when I look at Skechers now I'm kind of thinking they don't really have a lot of, like they don't have much depth to their brand, as opposed to Nike, who at least they're trying to look like they have depth to their brand. They didn't really have anything positive in that commercial I think. They were just kind of like basic.' (Jane, student, responding to Skechers ad)

The importance of relevant and relatable characters within the context of empowered storytelling was evident from the way that the participants reported identifying more with the character in the Nike advertisement than the one in the Skechers commercial. First, the featured talent in the Nike advertisement was not famous; rather, he was just an everyday youth who was exercising in order to lose weight. By contrast, the

leading character in the Skechers commercial was a beautiful, sexy actress, whose role was to seduce not only the men in the advertisement, but also the viewer. Moreover, the advertisement was predicated on the assumption that the actress would be familiar to viewers. However, none of the participants in this study recognised her. One respondent commented:

'I was watching this commercial and this lady was talking about putting on shoes, and then all of this craziness happened. She was in this mansion, and there were man-servants. Everyone was young and attractive, and rich, and you know, she sat down on the fluffy, white couch, bed, or whatever. Yeah, it was craziness and over the top.' (Al, student, responding to Skechers ad)

The participants also suggested that the articulation of truth and authenticity within the Nike advertisement resonated more than with the Skechers advertisement. Indeed, while the participants recognised the authenticity of the story in the Nike advertisement, several commented that the Skechers story was unrealistic. In the words of one student:

'This is ridiculous. They couldn't up with a better idea? It just didn't make sense to me. They just threw in a hot guy to make everybody pay attention in a pool. And I'm like, "Okay".' (Linda, student, responding to Skechers ad)

The study participants related much better to the character and plotline in the Nike advertisement compared with the Skechers advertisement. Simply put, they related to the idea of a person working hard to improve himself and his position in life. The Skechers plotline, by contrast, was simply a sales pitch for the company's shoes. Moreover, the participants appeared to become absorbed in the story-telling in the Nike commercial more quickly (ie within

a matter of seconds) than with the Skechers advertisement. This may be attributed to the unique combination of narration and visuals in the Nike advertisement, which piqued the participants' curiosity before fully absorbing them with its impactful message. The following comments are apposite:

'It was more truthful. It's — kind of pulls at your heartstrings a little bit. It kind of gives you a better story, a better background. Almost like a race, you're watching it from the far end, but there is a finish line, and they're working towards it.' (Martha, student, responding to Nike ad)

'... all these superstars, sports celebrities, I know who all they are and I'm like, well, they have money. They can afford top of the line shoes. I'm not any of them. I have a budget. So, seeing a normal kid who looks like he can afford these shoes makes me think I can go to the store and buy these shoes too.' (Patty, student, responding to Nike ad)

## Findings

The strongest themes to emerge from the data were motivational and encouraging, altruistic and communal in nature. According to the definition of empowerment defined in this research, the multi-dimensional aspects of the emotion, from optimism to confidence, were greatly captured in the responses of the participants. Moreover, the altruistic and communal attributes of this definition were truly revealed in the answers the participants gave regarding empowerment, indicating that the participants had a good understanding of the emotions associated with empowerment.

### *Encouraging and motivational — Food for the soul*

Modern life is stressful. The economic and political issues of the day are broadcast 24/7, while accounts of domestic violence committed by NFL players circulate through magazines and social media next to the

latest photos of Kim Kardashian's buttocks. Children are shot in school, while unarmed African Americans, such as Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri, die at the hands of the very officers who have sworn to protect and serve. Such stories dominate the various media channels every day. For millennials, this is the reality of everyday life.

Millennials understand that staying motivated during both good times and bad is essential. To this end, they seek to develop a better understanding of self, including how they identify with respect to societal systems and structures.<sup>138</sup>

From a behavioural perspective, the millennial generation is multifaceted, introspective and empathetic, and open-minded about other people.<sup>139</sup> Empowered storytelling possesses characteristics such as 'encouraging' and 'motivational in life' and supports the hardiness model proposed by Maddi *et al.*<sup>140,141</sup> This framework summarises the three 'C's for coping with the stressful circumstances of life and turning potential problems into growth opportunities, namely: commitment, control and challenge.<sup>142</sup> For this model to work successfully, encouragement and motivation must be firmly implemented at its foundation.

One student commented:

'It encourages me to really let it be known and really express that it's OK to be different and be great in your own way and not to have to really take the person that you idolize and make yourself be them, because you won't ever 100 per cent be them. You'll act and do things and dress things like them, but you won't be them. You'll be like — you're different in a good way.' (Janice, student, responding to Nike ad)

This study finds that millennials view empowered storytelling as encouraging and motivational. In the world they are living in, this type of storytelling provides a breath of fresh air — a well-needed pick-me-up to get them through their day. This suggests that

marketers and advertisers may be missing the mark when it comes to understanding the true motivations of millennial consumers. The following comments from the interviewees are apposite:

‘It motivates me to be me. It shouldn’t have to change how I live, how I act, how I treat myself, or how I treat others. It shouldn’t — it should just kind of open your eyes as to you’re great, just the way you are. Don’t characterize yourself or put yourself as different from everybody else just because you’re not doing all of the things that they’re doing.’ (Janice, student, responding to Nike ad)

‘It doesn’t really motivate me, but maybe it could motivate someone by making them feel like if they get those Sketchers shoes, they’ll be young and attractive and rich, and where it’s always sunny... It really wasn’t encouraging to me.’ (Al, student, responding to Skechers ad)

#### *Altruism — It ain’t all about me*

Unlike preceding generations, ‘do-goodish millennials’ are intrinsically motivated by different passions and purposely ‘favour companies that embrace the values of good citizenship’.<sup>143</sup> In a survey conducted by the Brookings Institute, 91 per cent of millennials expressed increased trust and loyalty for those firms that supported ‘solutions to specific social issues’.<sup>144</sup> This heightened sense of altruism marks out millennials as a generation with compassion and depth — a fact that marketers and advertisers must do more to recognise. As one respondent commented:

‘Well, if you’re working together, you can definitely get more done for a community.’ (Sara, student)

Barry’s notion of ‘altruistic collaboration’ purports that ‘a society should strive to benefit all of its members even at the expense of efficiency and personal enhancements’.<sup>145</sup> Based on the feedback obtained from

the present research, it would appear that millennials agree with this sentiment, and look beyond themselves to help others and make their lives better in some way.

It has been articulated in the literature that the primary affective consequence of narrative transportation is its ability to produce empathy in the receiver of the story. The present research, however, shows that it is quite possible to have additional affective outcomes beyond empathy. Indeed, this study finds that the emotion of empowerment produced by an empowered storytelling message can lead to the development of a stronger emotional outcome. This happens when the characteristic of self-expansion that is inherent to narrative transportation combines with the altruistic and communal nature of empowered storytelling. The study data clearly indicate that for the millennial participants, the emotion of empowerment includes looking beyond oneself to improve the lives of others.

#### *Communal nature — Keeping it real and letting the world know*

Having grown up in the digital age, millennials have never known life without the internet or social media. For this reason, the virtual tribes and communities millennials become a part of feel like an extension of the relationships they have with family and friends in real life.<sup>146</sup> For millennials, it is imperative to be able to share details from their daily life with their ‘virtual family’. Indeed, it is this shareable content that truly binds millennials to their virtual family and friends. Therefore, content that is meaningful and ignites one’s soul is paramount to millennials. As one interviewee commented:

‘Cause I think that the Nike commercial was a good commercial. I would want other people to see it too. And when you retweet it, all of your followers can see it as well.’ (Linda, student, responding to Nike ad)

The global phenomenon of hip hop illuminates the paradigm of ‘connective marginalities that links culture, class and historical oppression among the youth around the world’.<sup>147</sup> Within this type of connectedness lives a strong bond where ‘hip hop is malleable and is adapted to speak’ to the multitudes, and ties together consumers from around the world.<sup>148</sup> Empowered storytelling has this same effect, especially as it relates to how millennials share this type of messaging in a social media context. The following comments are apposite:

‘You could tweet pictures and have a caption of like, “Greatness doesn’t matter”. Or it shouldn’t characterize fit people from not-fit people. You don’t have to show off, like have all your muscles shown off to like be characterized as, “Oh, I’m great because I work out and I eat clean”. Just going that kind of route ... Yeah. Twitter, you can like Instagram photos. I know people when they start to work out, they start to show results. They post their results and share their stores, so you could kind of do it that way.’ (Janice, student, responding to Nike ad)

‘I’d probably give him verbally, say Nike’s got a new commercial; it looks pretty

interesting. You should watch it. Or YouTube it myself and say, here, watch this commercial. Show it to your friends.’ (Patty, student, responding to Nike ad)

In the spirit of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, this study finds that empowered storytelling lends itself towards collectivism and communal inspired behaviour among millennials, enabling them to connect with the message on a more emotional level. This type of storytelling also provides the receiver with an expansive narrative transportation experience that is more extensive than empathy; this can truly be more of an individualistic event within a storytelling context (see Table 3).

To describe the six ways to make something contagious, especially via social media, Jonah Berger coined the acronym ‘STEPPS’ to represent social currency, triggers, emotions, public, practical value and stories.<sup>149</sup> Of particular importance to millennials are ‘emotion’, with its focus on feelings, and ‘stories’, which is defined as whether the story is not only viral, but also valuable. Therefore, within a marketing and advertising context, the emotion of empowerment supports this notion of

**Table 3:** Comparison of empathy vs empowerment

Definition of empathy in the literature	Definition of empowerment from field data
Openness	Motivational
Understanding	Encouraging
Compassion	Confident
Personal	Can-do/inner power
	Against all odds
	Strength
	Helping others in a way that makes their lives better
	Connection to faith and spirituality
	Altruistic
	Communal/community oriented

Source: Argo, J.J., Zhu, R.J. and Dahl, D.W. (2008) ‘Fact or fiction: an investigation of empathy differences in response to emotional melodramatic entertainment’, *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 34, No. 5, pp. 614–623; Van Laer, T., Visconti, L.M. and Wetzels, M. (2014) ‘The extended transportation-imagery model: a meta-analysis of the antecedents and consequences of consumers’ narrative transportation’, *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 40, No. 5, pp. 797–817.

providing a valuable and emotional reason for the social sharing of messages, pictures, videos and posts for millennials. Here, the following comments from the respondents are relevant:

'Probably post it on her Facebook wall, but kind of make it private, because I wouldn't want people to be like, why are you doing that? But, yeah, I would probably post it like, hey, here's — she wanted to start working out because my dad's very health conscious. He's very aware of what he puts in his body. He just had major back surgery, and he's still going and working out, now that he's able to, I mean. So, I would tell her, as a motivational tool. I would utilize that, on her Facebook wall. Yeah. I guess she has Instagram now, so, I didn't know. But I would probably put motivational things on her wall to help her kind of stay focused on being more healthy.' (Jane, student, responding to Nike ad)

'I think I would probably Facebook it. I would probably just put a little link [and say] if you like Sketchers, this commercial might appeal to you. It doesn't appeal to me. But not all my friends have the same taste, so maybe they like the commercial, where it's bright and airy and generic, I think, is what I would say, the commercial was very generic to me, very uninspiring. I wasn't inspired to go out and buy shoes like I was the other shoe. So, something like that. So, some people might focus on the pretty girl and her really bright, pink shoes and that might do it for whoever Skechers is trying to grab.' (Patty, student, responding to Skechers ad)

### Message recall

This initial research into the impact of empowered storytelling also finds that message recall can be stronger for this type of storytelling than for traditional direct selling messages. When participants were asked to recall the stimulus advertisements and their corresponding messages approximately 35–45 minutes after first viewing the commercials, most participants were better

at recalling the details of the empowered storytelling message than the traditional direct selling message. Specifically, their responses included very detailed descriptions of the story, character and message of the Nike advertisement.

Such detailed recall could imply that the cognitive processing of empowered storytelling may be retrieved from long-term memory in a more efficient manner due to the participants' emotional connection to the storytelling message. Certainly, the human memory is highly dynamic in nature, especially as it relates to the processing of narratives. In particular, declarative memory has the ability to be updated constantly as well as altered with life experiences. These units of experience become stories that lead to the concept of story-based memory. Stories are how we hold on to and connect life experiences in our minds. An empowered storytelling message may therefore have a stronger impact on story-based memory rather than semantic memory due to its emotional connections to the receiver of the story. This is how story-based memory complements episodic memory because what people say and why are informed by what they remember.<sup>150</sup>

Furthermore, in terms of nonverbal communication, when the participants recalled the empowered storytelling message, their physical demeanour, from their posture to their facial expressions, changed in a positive manner. Specifically, participants sat up straighter and smiled in a sentimental manner when recalling the message in the empowered storytelling advertisement, as if it touched them in some meaningful manner. This reaction was in stark contrast to when participants recalled the Skechers commercial, as this induced no obvious change in body language.

### DISCUSSION

The qualitative investigation from this research has illuminated the different impacts



that millennials experience when watching an empowered storytelling message versus a traditional direct selling message. The numerous benefits and positive outcomes from the narrative transportation experience spotlight the value in exploring the emotion of empowerment as a part of this process. The participants show more depth in their responses when receiving an empowered storytelling message and show greater self-awareness. Moreover, the emotional connection manifesting from an empowered storytelling message is authentic, more self-expansive and exudes an altruistic nature.

### Theoretical contributions

The power of narrative transportation has been consistently demonstrated in the literature; why it is so powerful, however, remains open to debate. Historically, it has been reported that the success of narrative transportation is a result of its strong affective consequences, which are often grouped together under the umbrella of empathy. But is empathy the only way to categorise the strong affective consequences of narrative transportation? The present research contributes to the literature by identifying empowerment as another emotional outcome of narrative transportation, and highlighting the powerful impact of non-traditional and less commercialised narratives within a marketing context. Regarding the former, the study finds that the emotion of empowerment can be an outcome of narrative transportation theory and its characteristics of altruism and its communal nature add to the current definition of emotion in the literature, especially in a marketing context.

Furthermore, these additional traits make empowerment a perfect emotion in a marketing sense, especially as it relates to its potential relevance to consumer behaviour within social media and digital marketing.

There are, however, limitations regarding the transformative power of

narrative transportation. Historically, research conducted in this area has been focused on the written story and has failed to recognise the diverse modes in which consumers view advertisements and have brand experiences.<sup>151</sup> McFerran *et al.*<sup>152</sup> argue that while there is plenty of evidence to demonstrate transportation effects on persuasion, the role of narrative transportation in marketing stories is less known. This highlights the need for investigation into the effectiveness of verisimilitude in commercialised stories that do not have an overt goal of selling.

In regard to the impact of non-traditional and less commercialised narratives within a marketing and advertising context, the present research supports one of the propositions set out by Van Laer *et al.*<sup>153</sup> in their meta-analysis of narrative transportation theory, specifically, that within an advertising context, less commercialised narratives can have a stronger impact than narratives devoted to direct selling and promotion. The present research proves that non-traditional and less commercialised narratives have a strong and lasting impact on the millennial consumer. The study finds that verisimilitude is incredibly potent within this type of non-traditional storytelling and that the participants found it made the narratives more relatable and relevant to their own lives.

Finally, the results also confirm that narrative transportation can be successfully studied beyond the written format, which is how most of the field currently studies this theory. The use of real-world television commercials as stimulus moves the research into narrative transportation theory into environments that are more reflective of how millennials see storytelling in their everyday lives.

### Managerial implications and future directions

Today's marketing and advertising executives are tasked with identifying more sustainable

marketing strategies in a tremendously competitive global environment, and creating brand affinity and loyalty at a deeper and more meaningful level. Learning more about the emotion of empowerment may help marketers to understand much more about the characteristics and values of their millennial consumers. In addition, better understanding contemporary vehicles for telling stories, from smartphones, television and Twitter to Instagram, TikTok and e-gaming, may have important implications for future marketing and advertising campaigns.

For marketers and advertisers, connecting with consumers, especially millennials, in an authentic and sustainable manner, is an ongoing problem. Given the high usage of social media among both this audience and generation Z, marketers and advertisers desperately want to create memorable and shareable campaigns that cut across all promotional channels. To this end, it is important to understand that strategies that incorporate storytelling with empowerment can have both tangible and intangible benefits, including increased product awareness, word-of-mouth, affinity and repeat purchases.<sup>154</sup>

In addition, given the strong focus on customer experience (CX) in business today, with companies evaluating all their systems and processes in order to provide consumers with the best possible experience, from interacting on social media all the way to the retail and billing experience, in an effort to impact positively on customer decision making and purchase outcomes, the present research highlights the potential utility of using empowered storytelling as a key part of the customer journey. As the former Executive Director of the Marketing Science Institute, Katherine Lemon, has posited:

‘there is a complexity within CX that exists today that is “messy, ugly and hard”. The customer journey flows through multi-channels with a tremendous amount

of touch points. Understanding the circumstances in which the customer is experiencing and interacting with the firm takes an enormous amount of patience and even empathy, especially if companies want to truly understand and simplify their CX process’.<sup>155</sup>

By using empowered storytelling within the CX process, firms can strategically control and articulate their narratives to their stakeholders in a manner that may bring positive and sustainable results in the areas of customer satisfaction and loyalty, employee retention, customer complaints and sales growth.

The findings of this research could also be deployed as a powerful strategy to address a host of social issues facing millennials and their loved ones, including domestic violence, bullying, race relations and serious health conditions such as cancer and heart disease. To this end, marketing executives for such issues in the public and private sectors would benefit from employing the three ‘E’s of entertainment, education and empowerment when creating positive and impactful health messaging targeted at millennials.<sup>156</sup> At the same time, building relationships with content and programming producers and writers to collaborate in telling non-commercial narratives that are impactful would also be beneficial.<sup>157</sup>

Using the strategy of incorporating empowerment in stories could also work in managing employees, educating students, working with patients and more because it is a way of communicating information in an authentic, purposeful and compassionate manner. With this type of narrative transportation process, the storyteller consciously sets out to motivate the receiver to want to be better and achieve more.

The values-based matrix by Kotler *et al.*<sup>158</sup> also reinforces this trend towards marketing that empowers and can impact consumer values. Indeed, in today’s marketing landscape, values-driven marketing is the

dominant focus. Within this context, the goal is to create a strong consumer interaction by providing a collaborative experience that delivers authentic value propositions that not only matter, but are also functional, emotional and spiritual.<sup>159</sup> Continued work in this area is necessary to identify how to connect with consumers in a functional, emotional and spiritual manner.

Essentially, storytelling can do more than just bring enjoyment and pleasure. This powerful vehicle can also be used to heal, motivate and empower millennial consumers to excel in all aspects of their lives. In this way, evoking empowerment in narratives may in the long term reap incalculable dividends.

Future research on this topic can delve into the various components of empowered storytelling as well as additional consumer segment analysis. Regarding the former, examining copy and scriptwriting may assist in better understanding the vocabulary that resonates with this type of storytelling. In addition, further analysis on imagery, music, tone, lighting, distribution channels and other aesthetics that make storytelling with empowerment effective may be useful to practitioners. For example, research may uncover that the emotion of empowerment has its own vocabulary, so that when writers want to express the feeling of joy, they may find that scripts that include the word 'celebrate' achieve better results than those that include the word 'happy'.

Regarding research on additional consumer segments, empowered storytelling may prove to be an incredible strategy for brands that want to connect with multicultural consumers in a more meaningful and effective way. Future research may also find empowered storytelling to be a respectful communications strategy that can be used to target the LGBTQIA+ segment in a more humanistic manner. In all, delving into the emotion of empowerment more may also create its own lexicon of elements to assist marketers and advertisers in

portraying this emotion in brand storytelling and narratives, with a view to improving brand awareness, amplifying advertising campaign messaging, boosting message recall, strengthening customer loyalty and increasing purchase intentions.

It would also be very interesting to incorporate eye scanning, fMRI and neuro-imaging scanning into this analysis to better understand the cognitive processing of empathy versus empowerment. Historically, the effects of narrative transportation theory stop at its ability to arouse emotions and elude empathy. Having the ability to incorporate eye and neuro-imaging scanning into this research would expose the physical differences between empathy and empowerment.

Finally, understanding the effects of modality and storytelling continues to be a necessity. As millennial consumers are able to view and share content in many different viewing environments, continuing to better understand which modality is most effective for empowered storytelling is essential. The millennials interviewed for the present research reported that the primary devices they used were mobile phones, laptops, iPads and some television. They mainly watched entertainment programmes on Netflix and Hulu, and accessed news and educational information from Twitter, YouTube and Facebook. If the millennials in this study connected with a story or any type of message, they used Instagram, Twitter and Snapchat to share the message with their friends, and Facebook and YouTube to share the message with their older family members.

Expanding this work to include storytelling by way of the performing arts, live events (eg concerts, Cirque du Soleil, conferences, TED Talks) and even religious pulpits could help to identify further insights regarding how the emotion of empowerment can positively affect the consumer attitudes, behaviours and purchase intent of millennial consumers.

In sum, storytelling that exudes the emotion of empowerment can strategically assist marketers and advertisers in strengthening their connections with millennial consumers. With the millennial audience demanding more from firms, it is imperative for marketers and advertisers to obtain a better understanding with regard to how storytelling that incorporates the emotion of empowerment must evolve. In the final analysis, it may be the companies that are able to build an authentic connection with millennial consumers and assist them in better interpreting the world around them that will enjoy both limitless benefits and profits.<sup>160</sup>

### AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors dedicate this paper to the lives and beautiful spirits of Dr. Jerome D. Williams and Dr. Geraldine Rosa Henderson. This paper was completed under their great tutelage and guidance.

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## APPENDIX A: MODIFIED EMPOWERMENT SCALE

Items:

- *Factor 1: Self-esteem-self-efficacy*
  - I generally accomplish what I set out to do.
  - I have a positive attitude about myself.
  - When I make plans, I am almost certain to make them work.
  - I am usually confident about the decisions I make.
  - I am often able to overcome barriers I feel.
  - I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others.
  - I see myself as a capable person.
  - I am able to do things as well as most other people.
  - I feel I have a number of good qualities.
- *Factor 3: Community activism and autonomy*
  - People have a right to make their own decisions, even if they are bad ones.
  - People should try to live their lives the way they want to.
  - People working together can have an effect on their community.
  - People have more power if they join together as a group.
  - Working with others in my community can help to change things for the better.
  - Very often a problem can be solved by taking action.
- *Factor 4: Optimism and control over the future*
  - People are limited only by what they think possible.
  - I can pretty much determine what will happen in my life.
  - I am generally optimistic about the future.
  - Very often a problem can be solved by taking action.

Notes: 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree)

## APPENDIX B: NARRATIVE TRANSPORTATION SCALE

Items:

- While I was reading the narrative, I could easily picture the events in it taking place.
- While I was reading the narrative, activity going on in the room around me was on my mind. (R)
- I could picture myself in the scene of the events described in the narrative.
- I was mentally involved in the narrative while reading it.
- After I finished the narrative, I found it easy to put it out of my mind. (R)
- I wanted to learn more how the narrative ended.
- The narrative affected me emotionally.
- I found myself thinking of ways the narrative could have turned out differently.
- I found my mind wandering while reading the narrative. (R)
- The events in the narrative are relevant to my everyday life.
- The events in the narrative have changed my life.

Notes: R = Reverse scoring; 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree)

## APPENDIX C: AD AND MEDIA TRANSPORTATION SCALE

Ad transportation items:

- I felt caught up in the context of the ad.
- Watching the ad was relaxing.
- My mind was only on the ad and not on other things.
- The ad improved my mood, made me feel happier.
- I lost myself in the content of the ad while watching it.
- I thought the ad was entertaining.
- The ad captured my attention.

Media transportation items:

- I felt caught up in the programme.
- My mind was only on the programme and not on other things.
- The programme improved my mood, made me feel happier.

- I lost myself in the story while watching this programme.
- I thought the programme was entertaining.
- The programme captured my attention.

Notes: 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree)