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The functions of memorable consumption experiences – Case Leijona brand

Linda Turunen and Pirjo Laaksonen

ABSTRACT

Although consumers' brand decisions are influenced by prior experiences via memory, the brand meanings stored in memories have received little attention in marketing and consumer behavior research. This study analyzes brand-related consumption experiences in order to find out what makes these experiences memorable for a consumer. The study was conducted by investigating brand memories from the point of view of the uses or functions of episodic memory. The empirical data consists of 1048 written stories about memorable consumption experiences related to a Finnish watch brand. The empirical data was explored through content analysis with deductive logic to uncover how memory functions (self-reflective, social and directive functions) come into existence in written stories. The findings revealed that the brand is tied to consumers' life stories in multiple ways, and the meanings of the branded product were created particularly in socially, spatially and temporally specified consumption situations.

Introduction

Consumer decision-making, brand preferences and even brand-related meanings are largely influenced by prior experiences via memory (Keller, 2003; Escalas & Bettman, 2003). Despite the importance and role of memory, previous marketing literature has mainly focused on one aspect of autobiographical memory – semantic memory – while neglecting affect-associated episodic memory (Butler & Berry, 2001). From the marketing point of view, the neglected episodic memory may be more influential when it comes to brand preference and stored brand meanings, as it stores personal memories associated with self-constructs and social functions (Alea & Bluck, 2003).

Past experiences stored up in our episodic memory are linked to brand and product meanings. Our past experiences and information we store in our memory have an influence, albeit often unconsciously, on how we interpret the world around us, how we focus our attention and what brands and products we prefer or regard as meaningful (e.g. Keller, 2003). Memories guide our perceptions and even our actions without us always consciously being aware of this. Particularly memorable experiences related to specific products serve an important role, as they influence our "orientation" towards the brands.

Memories are stored in our minds in the form of stories and narratives (e.g. Woodside et al., 2008; McKee, 2003). The episodic nature of these memories helps us in structuring, interpreting and understanding our experiences and lives (Shankar, Elliott & Goulding, 2001). These memorable experiences might relate to situations, products, brands and people – anything remarkable enough to have left an impression in our memory (Ryynänen & Heinonen, 2017). Besides storing the content of the memory (i.e. memorable experience) in our minds, the way of structuring and sharing it requires narrating (Woodside et al., 2008). From the marketing perspective, it is valuable to know the contents of these memorable experiences, and also the way of narrating the content, as this plays a crucial role in transferring the meanings (Söderlund & Sagfossen, 2015).

Although it is acknowledged that consumption experiences in episodic memory have an influence on the product and brand evaluation (e.g. Brakus et al., 2009), this topic has been neglected in consumer behavior and marketing literature from the memory perspective. This study analyzes brand-related consumption experiences in order to find out what makes these experiences memorable for a consumer. We are interested not only in what consumers remember, but also in what kind of role and meaning they assign to their remembered consumption experience and how the interpreted stories are linked in the present. Episodic memory functions – self-reflective, social and directive functions – are chosen as a theoretical framework for revealing the uses of consumption experience. The objectives of our study are structured according to the three memory functions as follows:

- 1) How is the branded product connected to the consumer's self-identity and its constructions in consumption experiences?
- 2) How is the branded product linked to building and maintaining social relations in consumption experiences?
- 3) How is the branded product seen to guide reasoning, thinking and behavior in later stages and pursuits of life with respect to consumption experiences?

The empirical analysis dives into written stories of past consumption experiences to shed light on the connection of consumption experience and consumer's life experience. This is achieved by applying theorizing on episodic memory functions in analyzing brand-related consumption experiences. In this way we hope to shed new insights into the connections between consumer (identity) and brand (identity), as well as bidirectional meaning transfer.

The next section provides a selective review of literature concerning memory functions and brand experiences. Then, the empirical data will be described, and finally the findings related to memory functions will be discussed. Conclusions about memorable consumption experiences, meanings and brand literature will be drawn in the last chapter.

Consumption experiences and memory functions

Memory has been researched extensively in psychology and medicinal sciences, and its influence on everyday life has been pointed out (Addis & Tippet, 2004; Conway et al., 2005). As memory includes a wealth of detailed knowledge that influences and guides behavior, it is also widely acknowledged in marketing literature (e.g. Brakus et al., 2009; Keller, 1987). The general term "memory" often refers to autobiographical memory, which is divided into two components: episodic and semantic (e.g. Piolino et al., 2002; Skowronski & Walker, 2004; Pillemer, 2003; Alea & Bluck, 2003). *Semantic memory* consists of general knowledge and facts about the individual's past, e.g., schools attended or names of friends, and also about the whole world. In brand and marketing literature, the emphasis has been on semantic memory, and thus the episodic part of memory has received less attention in consumer behavior and marketing.

Episodic memory contains personal experiences and specific events situated in place and time, e.g., one's first day at school or a specific birthday party (e.g. Tulving et al., 1988; Conway, 1996; Baddeley, 1992). Episodic memory contains event-specific knowledge and detailed information with sensory-perceptual features (Rice & Rubin, 2011), which are features stored in memory. They are often researched in the context of brand experiences, and particularly in the service context and the tourism industry (Khan & Rahman, 2015; Schmitt, 2009). Brakus, Schmitt and Zarantonello (2009) conceptualize brand experience as sensations, feelings, cognitions and behavior responses evoked by brand-related stimuli, which can be regarded as features stored in both episodic and semantic memory. As brand-related meaning structures include all descriptive and evaluative brand-related knowledge, and the meanings can be situation-, product- and/or brand-specific (Keller, 2003; Brakus et al., 2009), brand- and product-related consumption experiences are worth investigating from the episodic perspective, linking the branded products to specific socially, spatially and temporally specified situations.

The functions of memorable experiences

Autobiographical memory recollects episodes from an individual's life, and thus serves three functions: self-representative, social and directive (Williams, Conway & Cohen, 2008). The *self-representative function* includes personal memories to create and maintain the coherence and continuity of self-identity. A stable self-identity allows for evaluation of past experiences (reflections), which leads to self-insight and self-growth. This self-referring nature of autobiographical memory is the most significant feature that separates autobiographical memory from other types of memory systems (Brewer, 1986). The marketing literature has devoted extensive attention to the self-referring nature of memory in the context of consumer-brand relationships (Fournier, 1998; Levy, 1959). Besides brands' personal meanings, their roles in terms of identity and personality constructions have been pointed out (Fournier, 1998; Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

Social function, in turn, develops and maintains social bonds. Sharing personal memories with others is a way to facilitate and strengthen social interaction and preexisting bonds. Examples of different types of social functions include intimacy (developing and maintaining relationship bonds), teaching and informing others, and showing empathy (e.g., Cohen, 1998; Hyman & Faries, 1992; Pillemer, 2001; Alea & Bluck, 2003). Brands contain symbolic meanings, and thus their socially relevant meanings have been a topic of research in brand literature (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998; Ligas & Cotte, 1999); however, they have not been studied from the memory perspective.

The third function, namely *directive*, uses past experiences as a reference for solving current problems and as a guide for our actions in the present and the future. Memories can be used as a basis to create successful models of behavior. (Williams et al., 2008.) For example, in branding literature, it has been suggested that memorable brand experiences clearly influence a consumer's behaviors and thoughts in the future. Marketing constructs such as brand loyalty – and also service-rooted concepts such as customer engagement, involvement and satisfaction – are often also closely tied to memorable experiences and branding. (Brakus et al., 2009; Khan & Rahman, 2015.)

Previous brand literature has uncovered that brands have personal, social and behavior-directing meanings (Cohen, 1998; Pillemer, 2001). However, so far, these have been approached mainly from a deterministic angle and from a semantic memory perspective. From the consumer research perspective, remembered consumption experiences have often been studied through the lenses of nostalgia (Ryynänen & Heinonen, 2017; Holbrook & Schindler, 2003). However, this study takes a different angle by approaching the brand and consumption experiences from the episodic memory perspective, aiming particularly to shed light on how memorable brand-related consumption experiences function in building identity-related, social and behavioral meanings.

Methodology: Data description and analysis

The empirical data consists of stories of consumption experiences related to the Leijona-branded wristwatch. The stories were written by consumers participating in a competition where they were asked to share a memory about their first Leijona watch. The competition was held in 2010 to celebrate the 100-year-old Leijona brand. The possibility of winning a Leijona watch inspired writers all around Finland to share their memorable Leijona experiences. Due to its long heritage and popularity in the Finnish watch market back in the day, the brand is the most well-known brand in Finland (Puustinen, 2015; Perkko, 2014). In addition, research conducted by Taloustutkimus also found out that Leijona has the most positive price perceptions in Finnish watch market with prices varying from 55€ to 159€ (Perkko, 2014).

A data set of memorable consumption experiences has its benefits; as

unforgettable and momentous situations are often emphasized when recalling the past, it is possible to assume that there are close linkages between brand experiences and life experiences. In previous literature, these kinds of memorable experiences have been explored in the field of tourism with respect to consumers' holiday experiences (e.g., Gunter, 1987). It is also suggested by Aho (2001, p. 45) that lived experiences may take time to mature, and therefore temporal distance can be regarded as bringing value to the data set. What's more, it gives an opportunity to explore the directive memory function and whether the brand plays a guiding role in later stages of a consumer's life as well.

Altogether, 1048 consumption stories were received, of which 583 stories were written by women and 465 by men. The stories generated 243 pages of textual data written in Finnish. The competition had no strict instructions and guidelines, only an invitation to share memories concerning one's first Leijona watch. While the stories were submitted to competition purposes, the background information of the storytellers was limited only to name and contact details. For example, the information about the age of the writers is unknown, but as many stories drew on memories situated in the 50s and 60s, it can be assumed that most of the writers were around 50+ years. The length of the stories varied greatly – from 15 words to 943 words. In addition, the stories were different in style and approach: some were vivid and detailed descriptions including reflections and feelings, while others reported the situation in a general manner without any descriptions of the watch. Most of the stories related to situations, experiences and life itself, while some contained a detailed description of the product. The stories were positioned in the past and are thus applicable for analyzing memory functions.

The empirical data was analyzed at two levels: first, content analysis was conducted to make sense of the stories' contents, e.g., the analysis identified the actors of the stories, what kind of memorable experiences were told, and how the branded product related to the experiences. The second level of the analysis was conducted using deductive logic: the theory-driven content analysis was applied to identify the categories of self-representative and social memory functions by exploring how the writer experienced the brand in relation to oneself, to an event, situation or to other people. After that the directive function was uncovered by examining whether the story included any descriptions of how the branded product was involved in or guided later behavior.

Findings: recalled consumption experiences

The stories contained key elements: subject (usually actor, usually a human being), object (watch), context (actual or symbolic, situation, other people, etc.). Most often the actor in the memories was the writer him-/herself, and the stories were told from a personal point of view. There were also stories where the storyteller was an outsider, and these described the owner of the watch (dad, mum, sibling) and the situation in which the watch was so important to the storyteller or remarkable at that time.

“Mum had the most beautiful hands. When I was little, she had a sewing atelier. Hands played a big role in her life and she took very good care of them. (...) When thinking about mum’s hands, my memories also relate to the precious Leijona watch she always wore on her wrist. On busy days she quickly checked the time from it. (...) That watch is my inheritance, and it always reminds me of mum.” (*Woman*)

As can be seen in the quote above, stories operated in multiple temporal frames (see also Ryyänen & Heinonen, 2017); when describing ordinary everyday situations, the watch reminds the storyteller of the distant past. Although the stories were anchored in childhood memories, the narration often linked the story to the present time. These multiple timeframes showed the interpretation process and meaning construction of everyday memories, unveiling how the brand might be unconsciously attached to the consumer’s past in meaningful ways.

Some memories were detailed descriptions of the surroundings and the situation; these stories were contextualized and focused primarily on describing the world back then. The symbolic meanings were often constructed through the rarity and extraordinariness of wristwatches or ordinary everyday memories that reminded the storyteller of family ties. These multilayered interpretations position the stories in two dimensions: both past memories and reflections of today’s world.

As the stories were collected by asking consumers to share memories of their first Leijona watch, it is evident that the descriptions of these experiences emphasize the most unforgettable memories (Gunter, 1987; Aho, 2001). Thus, many of the stories emphasized a change in possession, e.g., memories of receiving, owning and/or losing the watch, and included meaning creation and interpretation by the actor (narrator). Although some memories involved worries and troubles – for example, memories in which the storyteller lost the watch – the stories radiated positive attitude towards the brand.

In conclusion, these stories of recalled experiences can be divided into three different groups: stories that emphasized context description and surroundings, stories that narrated the situation or event involving the watch, and stories that focused mainly on the watch itself and gave a detailed description of it. These are the main approaches emphasized in these shared memories, and in many stories all of these layers co-existed, as most of the memorable experiences were temporally, spatially and socially positioned. The stories also aptly represented the multi-layered nature of memory; the meanings and emotions (episodic memory) were at the core of the stories, but the stories were enriched with the product characteristics (semantic constructs). Next, the episodic memory structures will be analyzed through three memory functions of self-representativeness, sociality and directedness.

Memory functions: Self-representative function

The self-representative function of the memory was uncovered by identifying the connections between the self and the watch. The storyteller's first watch was often meaningful to him/her, and it got its value in relation to the temporal context and society: the stories highlighted how the wristwatch was something that was linked to personal transitions and entering adulthood. In particular, some stories described how the wristwatch used to be a childhood dream and it was something only a few peers possessed. Many stories pointed out the exact year, and some stories positioned the situation in a timeframe, describing and shedding light on the historical context in Finland at that time.

The memorable experiences related to something special that the storyteller experienced with the watch, whether a change in the situation (becoming a watch owner or losing the watch) or everyday situations that the storyteller would long for and cherish later. When the watch was received as a gift, it was often linked to a turning point in one's life: for example, a watch received as a birthday present just before starting school signified trust, and a watch received as a confirmation gift at the age of 15 reminded the recipient of entering adulthood. "*Confirmation camp itself prepared me for adulthood, and the brand-new gift watch on my right wrist was a direct sign of being an adult.*" (Man.) The watch was regarded as being personally meaningful, because the watch often carried the meaning of a personal transition from childhood to adolescence or from adolescence to adulthood: the watch was a reminder of important transitions in life and of personal growth.

Meaningful transitions in life were also supported through self-gifting, where the watch often signified hard work, one's first paycheck or career transitions. "*When I received my very first pay from my very first real job, I went and bought a Leijona watch. I really felt I had earned it and every day after that I felt like a real career-woman when I had it on my wrist.*" (Woman.) In addition to transitions, the Leijona brand was connected to empowerment: The brand symbolized "*the strength of a lion*" (Man). (Note: the brand name, Leijona, means lion in English.) The watch empowered the owner, and regardless of whether the storyteller had received the watch as a gift or bought it for him-/herself, the memories of the watch were filled with pride and happiness. The watch seemed to be a dream come true for many.

These stories of consumption experiences showed that the self-reflective function relates closely to achievements and accomplishments as well as transitions in life situations. However, it is noteworthy to point out that although the memorable experiences often related to a specific product – a wristwatch – the brand-related meaning structures cannot be strictly separated: for example, back in the day, Leijona was a synonym for a wristwatch in Finland, as few alternative brands were available in the Finnish market in the 50s and 60s. In addition, when the watch was received as a gift, multiple meaning dimensions were attached to the branded product through a high-involvement situation; the first Leijona watch became personally meaningful and a part of life transitions. Thus, the brand-related

meanings contain brand, product and consumption experience related meanings, but it is impossible to clearly differentiate these meaning layers. The stories showed that although the recalled experiences of the distant past related to meanings at the product level, the brand involvement became apparent in later phases of life through other memory functions.

Memory functions: Social function

In the narratives, some storytellers even recalled that the Leijona watch served as glue in social relations and both reflected and created social relations. Often, family members, relatives, colleagues, school friends, clockmakers or vendors were mentioned as actors who were involved in highlighting the social importance of the watch:

"I inherited this watch from my beloved grandma ten years ago. (...) My acquaintance who is a clockmaker has tried to buy my watch many times; but it is not for sale. I cannot count its value in money although the clockmaker has highlighted how rare the piece is. (...) Nowadays my granddaughters always want to hear first the tick-tock when we meet. It is our own shared memory. I hope that some day they will value this watch as much as I do." (Woman)

The symbolic function operated on multiple levels, and besides signaling to the self, signals directed to others also had central communicative uses and roles. The watch carries memories and ties generations together.

Signals concerning the possession of the watch played an important role, but it was not insignificant what kind of watch was possessed. *"I waited so much for my birthday; I knew I will get a watch as a gift. (...) The watch I unwrapped was a pocket watch. I was so disappointed! I could not use the watch at school – everyone would have laughed."* (Man.) The story tells how the cultural meanings and surroundings have a huge influence on the meanings a person attaches to the product. In this example, the striving to belong morphed into differentiation and outsider status because the storyteller received the wrong type of watch, i.e., a pocket watch, as a gift.

The symbolic value of a watch was highlighted, and the symbolic signals of the watch had different kinds of meanings: The signals were either lifecycle-related/general (e.g., signal of adulthood) or targeted to show off to specific people, e.g., school friends. *"I used the brand-new watch all the time. I wanted everyone to know I knew how to read the time. I felt it made me a man."* (Man.) A wristwatch (regardless of the brand) was an important object for showing status – both economic and intellectual. *"Earlier only a few friends of mine had a watch. They came from wealthy families. Receiving a wristwatch as a birthday gift enabled me to belong to this special group at the school."* (Man.)

Especially in situations where a watch was received as a present, it reflected the

relationship between two individuals. It was noteworthy that some of the gift watches were not brand new when received: *"receiving the old Leijona watch of my grandfather was more meaningful for me than any other new watch I have ever owned."* (Man.) Although the watch was used, it was regarded as being highly precious, even more valuable than a brand-new watch. It carried a memory of the life of the previous owner (often grandmother or -father) and tied the gift receiver to the continuum of the family. Often the story related to passing the memory on to children or grandchildren in the form of a Leijona watch.

Although the stories concerned a Leijona-branded product, as set out in the competition guidelines, the recalled memories that related to social bonds and symbolic meanings were seamlessly tied to the product (wristwatch) and brand. For example, stories recalled from the distant past contextualized the memorable consumption experiences in a time and place (e.g., Finland in the 50s and 60s) where a wristwatch itself was a symbolically meaningful artifact. The Leijona brand was the only brand in the market back then, which may have had an influence on the inseparable associations between wristwatches and the Leijona brand.

Memory functions: Directive function

The directive functions of memory related to issues regarding how memorable brand experiences were seen to guide reasoning, thinking and behavior in later stages and pursuits of life. At the psychological level, the years spent with one's trustworthy Leijona partner brought encouragement or reminders from the past. The stories with a directive function often operated on two levels; they described a consumption experience situated in the distant past but narrated the storyline in the present time or even described possible practices of the future.

Stories with metaphorical content included directive functions that gave encouragement or directed the storyteller's life. The Leijona brand helped these people to get through challenging times, as it reminded them of bravery and strength. *"Clothes, bags, jackets change, but my Leijona has seen all the best and worst times. (...) Somehow I have felt it has brought me good luck."* (Woman.) Due to the feeling of empowerment and confidence, there were also stories related to changing behavior; such stories described how memorable experiences led to repurchase, passing the artifact to younger generations, and changing the status of the gift receiver to gift giver. For instance, one storyteller wrote: *"(...) passing the tradition; I received my first Leijona as a confirmation gift. I could not think of any other gift for my godson."* (Man.) In addition, usage experiences fostered trust in Finnish quality: *"Over the years I have changed only the strap, and the watch has received a face-lift. I could not wish for better quality."* (Woman.) Often the stories described how they preferred the Leijona brand in their repurchases after having good experiences of the brand. In other words, the directive functions in the stories revealed how memorable consumption experiences may link to brand loyalty or brand involvement in later stages of life.

Besides the brand loyalty that can be seen as a result of the directive function, the everyday behavior that the Leijona brand encouraged and supported can also be pointed out. The stories highlighted how possessing a Leijona watch guided the storyteller to be punctual and precise as well as to behave in a more trustworthy way. Owning the watch encouraged the storyteller to be on time.

Conclusions

The stories of brand-related memories explored through episodic memory functions revealed a variety of meanings tied to the consumer's life story; they were attached to the self, social relations and behaviors that linked past and present by unveiling brand preferences. The paper contributes to previous brand literature in three ways: first, it expounds the meaning of episodic memory in the consumer-brand relationship construction. Besides brand-related meanings, the meanings emerging from memorable consumption experiences were constructed also at the product and situational levels; these levels cannot be clearly separated from the brand-related meanings (e.g. Fournier, 1998). For example, in the specific temporal context, the wristwatch itself was regarded as a rarity, which contained symbolic meanings at both the personal and societal levels. On the other hand, some stories clearly related to the feelings of empowerment and encouragement provided by one's first own Leijona watch, and thus the watch was associated with both the consumption situation and the brand and its characteristics. Second, the findings show the intertwined connection between temporality and consumer's brand relationship. Exploring the memory functions showed that memories are multilayered constructs, and when recalling them, people interpret and reflect them against their present situation (e.g. Rynänen & Heinonen, 2017). In addition, the stories unveiled how consumption situations play an important role in meaning creation – meanings are not carried solely by the brand. Thus, these stories are intertwined in consumption situations, brand- and product-related meanings that operated at both the personal and social levels, as well as in multiple temporal frames. Past memories in which the Leijona brand was perceived as personally or socially valuable often also linked the stories to the present day and displayed brand attachment and loyalty in the form of repurchase or gifting.

Exploring the memorable brand experiences through the frame of memory functions unveiled how a branded product becomes meaningful for oneself or in social relations. Hence, the paper sheds light on meaning transfer between a consumption object, a consumer and a social context, which constitutes the third theoretical contribution of our study. The study suggests that the meanings related to the consumption situation are *transferred to the brand*; for example, the Leijona watch was seen to denote adulthood and achievement. Moreover, the characteristics of the Leijona brand were *transferred to the owner* of the Leijona watch. For instance, the stories highlighted how both the functional characteristics (like precision and punctuality) and symbolic characteristics (like the strength and courage of a lion) of the Leijona watch were seen to be transferred to the watch owner. The findings thus propose that a meaning transfer takes place between the

brand and the consumer in a bidirectional manner. Meaning transfer is a process that has been suggested to occur in culture production processes, and based on semiotic theory it is argued that meanings are linked to products through marketing processes, and that consumers extract these meanings from the products (McCracken, 1988). In line with this suggestion, our study proposes that consumers play a central and active role in meaning creation; the meanings of the Leijona branded product are created through consumption experiences. In addition, the stories contain expressions indicating the transference of meaning both from the Leijona watch to the consumer and vice versa.

This research is not without limitations. First, although using a data set collected for purposes other than research boosts authenticity, it also involves some challenges. For instance, no additional background information is available on factors such as the age of the writers. In addition, the competition set-up and motivational watch prize might have influenced the content of the stories and the positivity towards the brand memories. Second, the deductive logic guiding the data analysis set some boundaries for the findings of this paper. Thus, it would be valuable for future research to explore the data set inductively as well. In addition, it would be interesting to examine in greater depth how high-involvement situations have an influence on the level of brand involvement. For example, it is reasonable to ask to what extent and how the high involvement or extraordinary situations connected with the branded product (personal life transitions; new job, first salary, gift) strengthen and enrich the brand-related memory functions? Further, in a high-involvement situation, can the high situational involvement turn into life-long lasting brand involvement? On the other hand, do the memories connected to everyday situations place a greater emphasis on product-specific involvement, and not necessarily brand involvement?

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