**Fragmented Fairytales?**

**Paratexts and the Constitution of Brand Meaning Under Media Convergence**

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**Abstract**

In this paper we respond to the conference theme of consumer culture fairytales with a study examining how branding tales are told in the digital era. We build on previous literary CCT research by introducing Genette’s (2010) theory of transtextuality to marketing and consumer research as we seek to re-frame the theoretical understanding of the constitution of brand meaning for the digital era. We focus not on the primary texts of brand storytelling, but, rather, on the secondary texts, the paratexts, that surround brands. Branding is about far more than advertising, and we illustrate some of the ways in which the focus of brand meaning has shifted from text, to paratext, manifested in many emerging, hybrid, forms of branding practice that defy traditional channel categorisation. We suggest that this new theorisation has major implications for the cultural and managerial understanding of brand meaning.

**Introduction: Brand Meaning and the Paratext**

The idea of brands as sources of stories is well accepted in branding practice (Brown, 2016a) but the literary theorisation of brand meaning has not kept pace with transformations in consumer culture. Questions of how, and why, brands come to have meaning, have been a recurring feature of socio-cultural marketing and consumer research. Many studies have explored brand meaning from the perspectives of cultural anthropology (e.g. McCracken, 1986; Mick and Buhl, 1992; Schouten and Alexander, 1995; Holt, 2002) whilst others have developed consumer cultural analyses based on literary theory (e.g. Hirschman and Holbrook, 1992; Brown, 1999; McQuarrie and Mick, 1999; Stern, 1993). Previous literary theorisations in marketing and consumer research have made use of the idea of the social text (Stern, 1989), but the paratext, the text that is ostensibly about, and secondary to, the primary text, has been neglected, with Hackley and Hackley (2018, in press) a rare exception. In this conceptual paper we draw on Gérard Genette’s (2010) literary theory of transtextuality to focus on the paratext as the key analytical unit of the fragmented and “kinetic” (Gray, 2010, p.41) constitution of contemporary brand meaning in a dynamic, fluid (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017) and digitised consumer culture. We aim to extend our previous research into paratextual advertising to embrace the broader perspective of brand meaning constitution.

To put this more simply, we propose that, in the digitised era characterised as media convergence (Jenkins, 2008), the cultural authority (Holt, 2002) of the primary texts of marketing, such as mass media advertisements, is significantly eroded. Instead, we suggest that consumer cultural meanings around brands are substantially constituted through secondary or paratexts of many types, especially in the form of hybrid genres of media content that combine elements of various branding techniques within and around news, information, events and entertainment. Where a mass media advertisement can be conceived as a completed work, brand paratexts are fragmented, ambiguous and indeterminate. They occupy an ostensibly secondary ontological status, yet, in aggregate, they constitute powerful platforms for the iterative constitution of brand meaning. This influence has not yet been theorised in marketing and consumer research.

The literary paratext is conceived by Genette (2010) (building on the work of Kristeva, 1980) as a secondary text that acts as a threshold through which the meaning of the primary text is interpreted. For example, the ways in which a reader interprets the meanings of an academic research paper are cued and framed partly by the use of title, footnotes, references and other paratextual devices (Brown and Schau, 2007). Paratexts produced outside the primary text, such as reviews and critiques, can also influence the interpretation of the primary text. Genette’s (2010) typology divided paratexts into those within the primary text, called peritexts, and those exterior to the primary work, called epitexts. Peritexts include the title and references as mentioned above, and also the preface, endnotes and publisher’s cover blurb. Epitexts include reviews and critiques as noted, and also parodies, serialisations, and abridgements.

Genette’s (2010) insight acknowledged that the meaning of a social text extends beyond the ‘work’ itself (Barthes, 2000). For example, many people not only interpret a literary work in the light of its prior peritexts, such as the book blurb, title and preface, but they might also form opinions of books they have never read, or change their opinion of those they have, through epitextual paratexts such as reviews, abridgements, or the opinions of friends expressed in person or on social media. Extending the metaphor to the social texts of brands, there may be millions of consumers around the world who will never own a Rolls Royce or Mercedes Benz car, and may perhaps never have seen either first hand, but who have a vivid sense of the cultural meaning of these brands gleaned from appearances of the brand in movies and popular songs. In this sense, the meanings of the social text may extend far beyond the ‘work’, spatially, temporally and conceptually, and these meanings are often iterated in paratextual forms, such as, in our latter example, momentary appearances in the sub-plots of movies, or as lyrics in hip hop music.

Paratextual theory has been neglected in marketing and consumer research but has been adopted widely in media and television studies to analyse the ways in which media paratexts influence the meanings of media bands such as TV Channels, movies, TV drama series and other genres of media content. Media paratexts include advertisements, movie or TV trailers, interstitials and ‘idents’ (animated graphics or brief video content that brands the TV channel with a visual identity) and other promotional or informative media content that is ostensibly secondary to the primary text of the movie, show or channel (Grainge, 2017; Barra and Scaglioni, 2017). The assumption is that, just as the literary text has a meaning that extends beyond the literary work, “a film or programme is never the entire sum of the text” (Gray, 2010, p. 7, citing Kristeva, 1980) but is also mutually constituted through its paratexts. The meaning of a social text such as a movie is contingent on other texts, in a continuous process of “productivity” (ibid, p.7). In noting that the role of paratexts is not confined only to media brands but also extends to other brand categories, Gray (2010) suggests that “contemporary branding practices require much more than just ads” (p.29). Gray (2010) refers to emerging variations on hybrid branding practices, such as sponsorship and celebrity endorsement as they play out in social media in forms that are not overtly promotional but have an intertextual relation with the brand. Brands have a quality of ambiguity (Brown et al., 2013; Brown, 2016b) and these paratexts can inscribe new stories into the ambiguous space of brand meaning. Aronczyk (2017) suggests that a brand is an empty signifier or an “undefined space” (p.2) the purpose of which is to “create signifieds for itself on an ongoing basis” (p.2). Hence, the primary/secondary text relation is indeterminate. Paratexts destabilise meaning and they not only act as thresholds through which primary texts are interpreted (Genette, 2010) but they can subvert, and invert, the primary/secondary text relation, such as, for example, where a celebrity scandal or PR (Public Relations) disaster changes or fixes public perception of an associated brand.

Just as advertisements make use of polysemic indeterminacy of meaning (Puntoni et al., 2010) so too do brands, diachronically as the culturally constituted meaning of a brand changes over time, or synchronically where different meanings of a brand obtain at the same time for different groups. Of course, both situations may occur where different meanings co-subsist but change differentially over time. For example, the cultural meaning of a brand such as Levi denim jeans once resonated for many consumers as a symbol of a myth of American youth and rebellion, epitomised in BBH’s iconic 1980s advertisement entitled Laundrette[[1]](#footnote-1). The provenance of the brand as an American myth faded as the use of denim jeans as class-less leisure wear globalised, and the market fragmented, in the 1990s.

Below, we will briefly contextualise and elaborate on our theoretical perspective with an outline of earlier theorisations of the constitution of brand meaning in marketing and consumer research, before explaining in greater detail the theoretical foundations of the paratext. We then offer a series of examples of paratextual branding practices and techniques, before discussing the implications of our theorisation for research and practice.

**Brand meaning in consumer culture: from texts to paratexts**

The culturally constituted meanings around brands and consumption have been explored in marketing and consumer research through, for example, social semiotics and cultural anthropology (Levy, 1959; McCracken, 1986; Mick and Buhl, 1992; Schouten and Alexander, 1995; Izberk-Bilgin, 2012) and literary theory (Stern, 1989, 1993; Scott, 1994; McQuarrie and Mick, 1999; Brown et al, 1999; McQuarrie and Phillips, 2005). Many literary studies have engaged in a close analytical reading of an advertisement in order to pick apart the reader response strategies through which ads acquire meaning in interaction with consumers. Such studies conceive of an advertisement as a finished ‘work’ deep analysis of which may reveal its meanings. However, as we note above, the meanings of advertising and other cultural texts extend beyond the work itself (Barthes, 2000) whether these meanings are circulated through the paratexts of consumers, or of cultural authorities such as social commentators, critics and academics (such as Williamson, 1978 or Wernick, 1991). Consumer uses, parodies or subversion of the advertisement for their own purposes of identity positioning and group affiliation may change, or be changed by, the interpretations placed on these ads by others (O’Donohoe, 1994; Ritson and Elliott, 1999).

The relative collapse of the cultural authority, to use Holt’s (2002) term, of advertising, in the context of the decline and fragmentation of audiences for mass media in general, poses a problem for the textual status of an advertisement as a source of meaning. Static analysis of the primary texts of branding does not resonate with the “kinetic” (Gray, 2010, p.41) ways in which brand communications are consumed in the digital media convergence era (Jenkins, 2008; Jenkins et al., 2013). Consumer engagement with branded content of all forms through social media is often momentary, discontinuous, and fragmented, off-and online. For example, a brand might sponsor a TV show that is viewed via a smartphone so the viewer sees a brief visual ident, and the consumer might then see the same visual identity on discarded brand packaging in an urban setting. The consumer might also see characters from the show in other settings such as celebrity media, news or in other shows, with the sponsoring brand intertextually present in each scene. Close interpretive reading of a single advertisement by a cultural authority (such as an academic) may be a fascinating and illuminating exercise in the constitution of meaning, but it does not necessarily mirror the ways in which consumer meaning is constituted in the digital era. Consumers rarely sit and consider a single print or TV advertisement deeply in isolation from other sources of brand meaning. Rather, we engage in fragmented and momentary branded experiences, thousands of times, via a media landscape that is at once infinitely diverse and, at the same time, ineluctably unified, by virtue of all being accessed through a smartphone screen (Grainge and Johnson, 2015).

There have been noted analyses of linguistic, musical and visual rhetoric in advertising that draw on interpretive theory mainly of literary origin (Campbell, 2013; McQuarrie and Mick, 1996, 1999; Moeran, 1985; Stern and Schroeder, 1994; Phillips and McQuarrie, 2004, 2008; Tanaka, 1994; Scott, 1990, 1994). In their different ways, these works are all concerned with the analysis of how meaning is constituted through consumption, including the consumption of some of the paratexts of branding, such as advertisements and other components of branding that extend the brand identity through other forms, including the visual imagery and brand identification, the jingles, the straplines, the catch phrases and other forms of creative output. However, such analyses tend to privilege the cultural authority of the primary text, however conceived, and they seem somewhat static in the light of the influence of digital communication on contemporary consumer culture.

***Transtextuality and the paratext***

Where Julia Kristeva’s (1980) theories contextualised the cultural constitution of meaning within broader linguistic and cultural frames, Genette’s (2010) theory of transtextaulity focused on the ways in which the meaning of primary texts is framed and cued by paratexts. As touched upon above, literary paratexts might include peritexts within the parameters of the work, such as a book’s title, the preface, footnotes and references, chapter headings, and the cover blurb, and epitextual paratexts that extend the meaning of the work through, for example, advertisements, endorsements, reviews, critiques, and serialisations. Genette (2010) provided more categories of paratext, including hypertexts, which are epitextual manifestations of the work that extend the meaning through subsequent texts that are superimposed over the original text, such as adaptations, pastiche, parody, or imitation. The conventional view, still held by some, is that the work has a privileged status and that paratexts are trivial or incidental to its meaning. However, whilst the work, such as a work of art, may well have a merited cultural status based on its intrinsic value, Genette (2010; Genette and MacLean, 1989) showed that the paratexts that surround a creative work are far from incidental or peripheral to its culturally constituted meaning. He suggested that the paratext “...is the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers, and more generally to the public. Rather than with a limit or a sealed frontier, we are dealing in this case with a threshold...between the text and what lies outside it, a zone not just of transition, but of transaction; the privileged site of a pragmatics and of a strategy...” (Genette, 2010, p.261).

Genette (2010) conceived of paratexts as points through which a primary text is entered. However, whilst some paratexts are clearly temporally and ontologically prior to the reader’s experience of the work, such as the book blurb, perhaps a review, and the title, introduction and preface, other paratexts (particularly epitexts and hypertexts) are engaged with during or after the experience of the work. Hence, the meaning of the text is not merely entered through the paratext but potentially changed by engagement with a subsequent paratext. For example, reading a parody of a classic work can sometimes make it difficult to take the original as seriously. Hence, the role of the paratext and primary text is mutually constitutive of meaning.

As we note above, Genette’s (2010) ideas have been taken up and extended into television and media studies. Gray (2010) suggests that media vehicles such as movies or TV programmes can be understood as texts that are never complete but are contingent to a web of inter-textual relations, informed by paratexts. Gray (2010) and Aronczyk (2017) point out that branding practices in general are not dissimilar to those of media brands. Grainge and Johnson (2015) illustrate this from a practitioner perspective in their ethnographic examination of Red Bee, a former in-house BBC video production company that became an independent media agency and has subsequently developed into an integrated brand, advertising and marketing service provider and digital producer. From animated TV Channel brand idents and drama show trailers and interstitials, to fully produced TV advertising spots, branding design, street advertising and events and activation management, the more progressive agencies in the branding area are expanding their skill sets and services to respond to the needs of brands in a convergent media landscape.

Gray (2010) refers to the utility brands derive from “attaching their brand identity to other established texts, whether individuals, events or shows” (p.29). This of course is not new: P.T. Barnum, for example, was well aware of the utility of selling his shows through sensational stories in the media (Brown and Hackley, 2012). Paratexts have been useful for brands since the dawn of print and consumer culture. For example, early movie stars had the power to leverage huge sales increases from fans eager to use the same cosmetics, to wear the same clothes and to eat the same foods as the stars they idolise. This often occurred through photographs of the stars eating/sporting said items that accompanied fan magazine features of the star relaxing at home, or, later, in TV interviews (Barbas, 2001). The star might be promoting a movie, as well as various lifestyle items, in a context in which the star is ostensibly the primary text but there is also a substantial role for the sponsoring brand or movie being promoted. As fans physically go to see the movie, or purchase the product for use, the relation of primary text to paratext shifts, as the movie (or the product) now becomes the primary text, the interpretation of which is influenced by the paratexts surrounding the star.

**Paratextual branding practices**

The convergence of media channels into one, internet-enabled screen (Jenkins, 2008; Grainge and Johnson, 2015), and, especially, the speed and reach of social media, have generated infinitely greater possibilities for paratextual branding. For example, since 2002, BMW cars have produced a series of short action movies that are aired (and shared) on social media and feature their latest model, alongside with major Hollywood stars[[2]](#footnote-2). These movies generate fan discussion on social media, as well as in trade, car and entertainment media comment and features, and all together generate many millions of views. The movies and associated publicity are ineluctably secondary to the brand, which is notionally the primary text. Even the model of car that features in the movies is secondary to the brand, since it is another iteration of the meaning of the primary text, the brand, even though the movies contain no product information or sales-oriented elements. These paratexts, the movies, the plot and the presence of the model of car within it, the fan discussion on social media, the media comment and publicity, are all fragments of brand stories, through which the meaning of the brand itself is contoured in a never-ending storyline.

Brand paratexts might include all forms of advertising and promotion (Hackley and Hackley, 2018, in press) including brand blogs, advergames, videos and other sponsored content such as ‘native’ advertising or brand appearances in entertainment media vehicles. Brand paratexts could also include physical manifestations of the brand that can be engaged with on- or offline, such as its design and logo, toys or other entities connected to the brand, packaging in retail settings, branded vehicle livery and other brand signifiers visible in urban settings. These examples might be broadly conceived as brand peritexts (adapting Genette’s (2010) typology) in the sense that they are produced by the brand and ostensibly fall within a planned brand strategy. Paratexts that are external to the brand, epitexts, might include independent media coverage of individuals or entities associated with the brand, non-paid and serendipitous brand appearances in news and entertainment, social media posts from consumers about the brand by consumer communities, and consumer sub-cultural adaptations of the brand such as in car modification clubs, biker gangs or other sub-cultural lifestyle communities.

Brand paratexts are no longer incidental or supplementary to branding strategies. Under media convergence, as mass media audiences fall away and are absorbed into multiple social media platforms, brand paratexts have emerged as key strategic branding resources and practices. Many of these practices could be dismissed as digitally enhanced and extended versions of old school publicity PR (Public Relations), sponsorship, sales promotion and other forms of non-advertising and sales promotion. Yet, this characterisation would fail to capture either the strategic unity of such techniques or their cumulative cultural influence on brand meaning. We suggest that shifting the focus of analytical attention from the primary texts of brands and consumption to the paratexts offers fundamentally new insights based on a holistic understanding of the communication dynamics at play under convergence.

A contemporary example of one possible trajectory for paratextual branding can be seen in a Christmas 2017 UK campaign for the Aldi supermarket chain[[3]](#footnote-3). The characters Kevin and Katie Carrot were introduced in 2016 in a TV ad for Aldi narrated by Hollywood star Jim Broadbent. For 2017, the brand brought back the carrot characters with a major on- and offline campaign including TV ads, social media videos, soft toys (now selling for £1000 on ebay such has been the demand), and children’s story books that tell the tales of the orange anthropomorphs and their growing family. One typical TV ad included intertextual references to films including Titanic and The Polar Express[[4]](#footnote-4) thereby deepening the engagement of older viewers. The extraordinary scale of engagement generated by the social media campaign, and the huge demand for the carrot soft toys, generated considerable epitextual media coverage in trade and national press[[5]](#footnote-5). The highly concentrated and oligopolistic UK grocery retail brand market has been dominated by the major players Tesco, Asda and Sainsbury’s for many years, whilst non-UK new entrants such as Aldi, Netto and Lidl have struggled to gain more than a niche presence[[6]](#footnote-6). All of a sudden, the rather colourless discount supermarket brand of German origin was mentioned in every national newspaper as the UK’s fastest growing grocery brand[[7]](#footnote-7). There is more to this than sales promotion. The various carroty paratexts do not contain any sales-oriented elements or brand information as such. The paratexts intertextually extend the meaning of the brand, including acting as a primary source of meaning for those who have interest only in the characters. The vegetable vignettes engaged many consumers, especially children, who might never shop there, whilst also normalising the brand for consumers who would not previously have ventured into the Spartan interiors of the cut-price chain to buy a cheap cauliflower.

There are precedents for character-led paratextual branding, for example in the UK price comparison website market. The extraordinary phenomenon of the CGI meerkats created to promote one website brand[[8]](#footnote-8) has been noticed by brand practitioners since it is credited with driving and sustaining growth in an entirely new category, the online price comparison website. The anthropomorphic meerkats have become media celebrities and now even have their own storylines as free-standing signifiers that have become semi-detached from the signified brand. This approach could be dismissed as simply another storytelling-driven brand strategy leveraged by the marketing heft of hit anthropomorphic brand characters (Brown and Ponsonby-McCabe, 2014). However, seen as paratexts, the characters can be seen as vehicles for iterative brand stories that are part of a holistic strategy. The Aldi campaign described above was well-planned and executed around a strong creative idea, as successful advertising campaigns are wont to be, but its depth, reach and commercial resonance is only captured by conceptualising the various manifestations of the carrots as paratexts. As brand narratives they are quintessentially paratextual, ambiguous, indeterminate and incomplete, yet as narrative vignettes in themselves they tell complete stories of the characters. They initially achieve a narrative coherence only through their intertextual link with the primary text of the brand, but they may subsequently become detached from the primary text as when, for example, consumers, especially children, engage with and consume the products and stories of the characters without understanding anything about the brand. The brand paratext thereby destabilises the primary/secondary text relation (Aronczyk, 2017) yet, through its role as a threshold (Genette, 2010) through which primary texts are understood, extends the meanings of the brand into a vast space of ambiguity and polysemy. As noted above, this polysemy is not only a quality of brand advertising (Puntoni et al., 2010) but extends by inference to the brand itself and amounts to a strategically useful resource for brand management. Iterative new narratives can be inscribed through the strategic use of new paratexts into the ambiguous (Brown at al., 2013) brand, extending its cultural resonance and increasing its reach into new potential market segments.

In order to engage in strategic, purposeful polysemy (Puntoni et al., 2010) brands have to deploy subtle elements of intertextuality. O’Donohoe (1994, 1997), for example, focuses on the role of intertextuality in the production of meaning in advertisements, and does not invoke paratextuality. But, the mutual inflection of meaning is, nonetheless, apparent. Where an advertisement intertextually invokes another social text, this serves to inflect the meaning of the brand, which, in turn, serves to inflect the meaning of the intertext. For example, a 2011 car insurance campaign featuring Iggy Pop[[9]](#footnote-9), a sixties rock icon famed for his heroic substance abuse and refusal to conform even to the notoriously lax conventions of the rock music business, rendered the brand, and the category, less boring, whilst at the same time, subverting Iggy’s status as an iconic cultural rebel, at least for some diehard fans. The text, and the intertext, constituted their meanings in a mutual relation. However, each advertisement is not only a completed work but it is also a paratext of the brand, as it is also a paratext of the evolving persona of Iggy Pop who rendered himself a far more marketable persona through his association with the brand. Admittedly, invoking the paratext does not particularly enrich the analysis in this case, until one considers the web of intertexts that can spin through social media from the centrifugal effect of the initial event. When the insurance company, Swiftcover, first hired Iggy, in 2009, the fact that he himself could not be insured by them because Swiftcover at that time regarded musicians as too risky to insure became a major media story[[10]](#footnote-10), and a potentially damaging one. The brand embraced the incongruity of the one and only Iggy Pop shilling insurance by featuring an interview on their website in which Iggy addresses criticisms that he ‘sold out’[[11]](#footnote-11), complete with profane language as a nod to his undiminished punk integrity. The campaign generated a reported 30% increase in Swiftcover’s car insurance business in the first few months. Iggy’s iconic status in the rapidly diminishing pantheon of rock originals is heartily endorsed by fans and critics who do not begrudge him some easy money for his pension pot[[12]](#footnote-12). The invocation of the paratext illustrates how the convergence of media channels behind one screen (Grainge and Johnson, 2015) creates a single centrifuge in which paratexts of different genres (in this example, national press, trade press, brand websites, social media comment and memes, advertising and video sharing platforms) can spin an intertextual web of a scale and reach that was previously unattainable. Importantly, convergence brings these multiplying paratexts potentially within the strategic scope of brand management.

**Discussion: Paratextual branding as a new paradigm**

We suggest that paratextual branding theory offers an alternative to, and an extension of, extant theorisations. Managerial brand science, for example, claims that the meanings of brands can be planned and controlled (e.g. Keller, 2011) by the organisation through the application of persuasive psychology (called the mind share model by Holt and Cameron, 2010) through which the brand’s distinctive features are imposed in the memory of the consumer, triggering positive affective and behavioural responses (Rosenbaum-Elliot et al., 2015). This cognitive and affective approach tends to play down the cultural context and ignores the inherent qualities of media channels. Media are regarded as neutral conduits through which the brand identity is inserted hypodermically into the psychology of the consumer, by means of the marketing mix.

Some culturally oriented branding theorists also claim that brands can be managed, but their claim is rather more qualified, being contingent on and subject to the appropriate cultural conditions (McCracken, 1986; Holt, 2002; Thompson and Arsel, 2004; Cayla and Eckhardt, 2008) although, again, little attention is paid to the culturally constitutive qualities of media (McLuhan, 2001). In contrast to the brand science model, the cultural model sees brands as things that subsist independently of managerial control, in a sense, they have a life (Brown, 2016b) that evolves within complexes of consumer cultural myth and symbolism (Levy, 1959; Arnould and Thompson, 2005; Brown et al., 2013; Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016). As such, the interventions of brand management may be re-interpreted, resisted, or co-opted to unintended purposes (Schouten and Alexander, 1995; Kozinets, 2015; Izberk-Bilgin, 2012). Indeed, adapting to and harnessing the interpretive latitude enjoyed by consumer groups is a key element in culturally-oriented analyses of brand management. Cultural theorisations of consumption embrace the erosion of the cultural authority of marketing (Holt, 2002) and, rather than seeing the lack of cognitive control over consumers as a challenge, seek to react to and to exploit ideological disruptions (Holt and Cameron, 2010) in consumer culture.

The literary theorisation of marketing and consumption, like the cultural approach, treats the consumer as an interpreting reader, unlike the brand science approach that implicitly treats the consumer as an information processing entity. In other words, the cultural and literary approaches share the assumption that the hypodermic model of brand management intervention is an oversimplification. Rather, culturally oriented branding approaches suggest that managerial brand marketing interventions occupy spaces in the consumer cultural landscape that, alongside other symbolic elements within consumer cultures, contextualise and frame brand meaning. We suggest that a difficulty of previous literary approaches is that is that they have not developed to account for the palpable changes in contemporary consumer culture under media convergence. Attempts by cultural theorists to articulate some of the defining features of the consumer cultural landscape under convergence include noting its participatory (Jenkins, 2008), collaborative (Shirky, 2010), and attention-driven (Davenport and Beck, 2001) character. Also noted are the shift toward the consumption of experiences rather than the ownership of material goods (Pine and Gilmore, 2011; Rifkin, 2000) and the deep integration of brand marketing practices with the entertainment industry (Wolf, 2003; Sayre, 2007). In addition, under the specific influence of digitisation, there is an ephemeral, experience-based and access-oriented quality of much contemporary consumption that has been characterised as fluid (Bardhi and Eckhardt, 2017) consumption. The effects of convergence are central to this fluidity, whether the brand at issue is Uber, AirBnB, Google, or indeed, BMW, Aldi or Swiftcover.

The goal of contemporary branding practices is not merely to persuade, but to activate the consumer into engagement, through clicks, likes, shares, memes, comment, and purchases (Peñaloza and Thompson, 2014). In a convergence (Jenkins, 2008) era characterised by a ‘third wave’ (Toffler, 1980) of economic and technological development, consumers are enabled through the smartphone to act as if we are quasi-producers and co-producers of brand meaning within social groupings (Arvidsson and Calliandro, 2016). The new technologies of convergence have quickened the pace and deepened the reach of consumer activation through the immediacy of access to social media and to fully integrated brand platforms which offer advertising, search, order reconciliation, payment and consumer service. A historically unique aspect of convergence is that information, entertainment and news, as well as private and family friendships and communication, are a seamless extension of our sensory experience, in the sense that a medium can be understood as an “extension of ourselves” (McLuhan, 2001, p.7) and we can now consider mediated experience as a “total field” (ibid, p. 13). McLuhan (2001) urged social scientists not to be distracted by new forms and styles of media content but to consider the patterns of media effects in totality. We suggest, though, that alongside a consideration of the patterning effects of media, a focus on the paratext enables the consideration of form and content as a totality. In particular, we suggest that paratextual branding practices may be exploiting, and extending, changes in the poetics (van Laer et al., 2014) of mediated brand storytelling. For example, under convergence, the narrative of the mythical hero has become truncated and abbreviated to accommodate the rise of ‘celetoid’ celebrities (Rojek, 2012) who emerge through media without the accompanying traditional mythical storylines (Hackley and Hackley, 2015).

Brand meaning under convergence, then, is culturally constituted through paratexts within webs of intertextual relation in which the cultural authority of the primary text is constantly re-framed by emerging paratexts. Distinctions between primary and secondary texts, authenticity and inauthenticity, real and fake (Appel and Maleckar, 2012) are not merely blurred but entirely dissolved within a unified field of mediated experience. Brand meaning is distributed across webs of intertextual relation in which the only fixed point is the culturally constituted experience of the consumer. Analysis of paratextual branding, then, whether for managerial ends or toward a cultural analysis, needs to take not only a distant reading of the relational characteristics of brand paratexts, taking account of the “spatial, temporal, substantial, pragmatic and functional characteristics” of the paratext (Genette, 2010, p.4), but it must also take in a consideration of the content alongside the forms. In this paper we maintain that such an analysis is potentially possible through the analytical unit of the paratext.

**Concluding comments**

This paper has introduced the literary notion of the paratext to marketing and consumer research, placing it in a context of theoretical analysis of the cultural constitution of brand meaning. In the paper we have attempted to outline the beginning of, and hint at the possibilities for, a new theorisation of the constitution of brand meaning, based on the paratext. Under convergence, promotional culture (Wernick, 1991) can no longer be conceived as if it were constituted through a series of fixed points of brand meaning constitution (Powell, 2013; Davis, 2013). The contemporary consumer cultural landscape is encountered as an extension of sensory experience (McLuhan, 2001) via the smartphone screen (Grainge and Johnson, 2016) (or other mobile device). The contemporary consumption of brand experiences has a dynamic and “kinetic” (Gray, 2010, p.41) character under convergence (Meikle and Young, 2011) since digitisation accelerates and fragments consumer experience of media. The paratext enables a broader range of analysis of brand meaning that potentially spans the individual paratexts and the webs of dynamic intertextual relations that constitute the brand ecosystem.

We conceive of paratextual analysis as an extension of interpretive method that links form with content. For example, the form of a particular paratext is integrated with its poetic elements (say, evincing emotional sympathy through a short video vignette) but the role this plays in the constitution of brand meaning cannot be fully understood unless the relation of this paratext (and its intertextual elements) are linked with a mapping of the entire configuration of the paratexts that surround the brand on given media, in given regions and between given times, for particular consumer groups. The tasks of research and practice in paratextual branding therefore entail an interplay of close paratextual analysis with a mapping of the wider intertextual (epitextual, peritextual and hypertextual) linkages. Future research on this theme could be conducted in case analyses of individual brands, or in cross-sectional analyses of specified brands within a given category.

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