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Title: RAPHA AND ITS EMBEDDED STORYTELLING

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Structured Abstract

Purpose: This paper explores how British cycling brand Rapha innovatively embeds stories throughout its touchpoints and in its garments.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Using narrative inquiry methodology and subjective personal introspection, it analyses published brand texts, cycling apparel, primary interviews and lived experience to establish a key story theme and the role, form, value and continuity of stories in the brand's canon.

Findings: It claims that Rapha's texts reveal evidence of a specific story plot, the 'Quest' (Booker, 2015), which acts as a structural editorial device and provides a rich lexicon that taps into a transformative personal experience. The study proposes that the brand's employees identify themselves with quester values that define the brand's essence, providing a coherent message and magnifying the agency in Rapha's stories.

Research limitations / implications: This inquiry offers insight into a single consumer brand, yet it is the material manner in which stories are embedded within the brand offerings plus how lived experiences are recounted through structured storytelling that are of significance to wider practice and understanding.

Originality / value: It brings together industry, academic and personal insight to Rapha's storytelling praxis to illustrate how storied content can be used to transmit values, purpose and passion to its audience.

Keywords: Rapha, fashion, story, marketing, brand, narrative inquiry

Article Classification: Research Paper

Introduction

Since its establishment in 2004, Rapha has positioned itself as an elite cycling brand in both sporting and fashion worlds and communicates this through expansive brand storytelling. This study takes a holistic approach to gathering qualitative data primarily through using narrative inquiry methodology, which prioritizes the exploration of "stories lived and told" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.20) as a way of understanding lived experience. In narrative inquiry, narrative refers to "a discourse form in which events and happenings are configured into a temporal unity by means of a plot" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p.5). The gathering, analysis, chronicling and theming of story through first-person accounts of experience is critical in narrative inquiry with the subject of prime interest the *person* [or brand] in context, contrary to the *universal case* in context, as in grand narrative thinking (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). I have therefore focused specifically on gathering primary data through people in direct connection with Rapha, specifically interviewing its Head of Brand and Marketing, James Fairbank, in August 2016. Fairbank's personal stories of cycling as much as a communication expert are of value here, lending a contextual 'insider' viewpoint and industry insight into the internal mechanisms, strategic role and value placed on storytelling by the brand. As a narrative inquiry researcher, my own role is foregrounded situating me as a participant researcher actively involved in the field, generating autobiographical narratives of my own cycling experience and observations while engaging with brand artefacts and experiences. This subjective personal introspection has roots in ethnographic practices (Gould, 1991; Woodside, 2004) and adds my own insight as a fashion academic, past design journalist and fashion PR, and long-term cyclist as one part of adopting a wider research methodology to avoid bias (Woodside, 2006). Clandinin and Connelly comment on this positioning saying, "It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or a series of places, and in social interaction with milieus" (2000, p.20). I would posit that my multi-disciplinary experience and positioning combine to offer an unusual, valuable and critical perspective on Rapha's internal and external promotional strategies, especially given that marketing practice has tacit dimensions that are embedded in situational, interactional, social contexts (Hackley, 1999).

As part of analysing field data and brand artefacts, this study takes McKee's (2010, p.2) approach: "we attempt to understand the likely interpretations of texts made by people who consume them." I examine how brand stories are interacted with by Rapha's own employee community and consumer base, including myself, to determine the storytelling subtexts and make interpretative 'linkages' (Weick, 2012) that offer 'fidelity' in their contextual consideration (Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995). As part of this contextualisation, I consider views of academic thinkers such as Roland Barthes whose social observations published in 1957 on the spectacle of the Tour de France are relevant today, and Christopher Booker (2015) and his basic core story plots.

This study and selected methodology are in part in answer to calls for scholars to enliven academic discourse for its various audiences and to be emboldened in their research approach, with Boje challenging "Gaps between scholarship and practice are holding back the development of story praxis" (2006, p.223). Other scholars have focused on stories as subject (Brown, 2005), storytelling as a mode of sensemaking of social action (Czarniawska, 2004; Megehee and Woodside, 2010) and storied performances as part of embodied narrative sensemaking (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012). This paper hopes to offer more, along the lines of Stern's (1998, p.9) encouragement to "play with alternative means of telling" and Quinn and Patterson's (2013, p.727) intention to "... raise storytelling's profile further as a legitimate representational technique within the marketing management and marketing education literature". Hence I am strategically using here a hybrid approach to engage readers, opening with a story of my own cycling experience and using narrative analysis (Polkinghorne, 1995), then moving into paradigmatic analysis of storied

narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995) to examine the phenomena of cycling stories and common themes found through the Rapha 'storyworld' (Porter Abbott, 2008), with the objective to lend insight into Rapha's multi-layered activation through storytelling.

Stories and Rapha

After returning from a long cycle ride in January 2016 out in the sparse, undulating hills of Northumberland, England, I searched for the care instructions to wash my new Rapha Classic merino/polyester cycling jersey. I went through the three back pockets of the jersey, removing all the necessary ephemera that had accompanied me on my ride – energy bar, mobile phone, bank card – and finally found the label, in a fourth pocket, hidden behind a minimal zip finely sewn into a side seam. The fabric layers felt heavy and rough to my fingers and as I turned the pocket inside out in order to read the instructions, an additional cloth label was revealed on the facing side. It featured a short text that read: “Via Roma. Vespas and sports cars are parked provocatively around the harbour, gelato being gratefully gobbled in the sun. Milan-San-Remo – la classica di Primavera – the Monument of the Mediterranean that marks the beginning of summer racing. Many campionissimi have won on this glamorous street: Binda, Coppi, Gimondi and Moser, sprinting beneath the blissful Ligurian sky.” I was far away from the heat of the Via Roma yet, as I read this, I imagined myself amongst the impassioned crowd cheering on the suffering, effortful riders as they flew past me on their mission for glory, and subsequently the next time I wore my jersey, while storming along English country lanes, I thought of pro-racing in the Italian sun.

My identification with this little story was instant and intriguing. Why would a micro story be placed in a covert jersey pocket? What was the thrill I felt as I hunted for functional care instructions and yet found a small story vignette that hinted at the magic of the experience, of travelling on two wheels under my own effort through the landscape? Was this a ‘clue’ (McKee, 2010, p.63) to why I personally enjoy putting on a performance jersey, paying a high price in exchange for what I consider is excellence of design, fabric and aesthetic properties, in preparation to ride? James Fairbank at Rapha calls these little text vignettes ‘story labels’ and explains their strategic purpose: “When you buy one of jerseys with the story label in then you are already buying some experience because they’re already woven into the fabric of it, and it’s an encouragement that you should then go and make your own stories.” Rapha’s commitment to stories of experience are clear: “We are trying to shift memories,” explains Fairbank. “There’s a different way of living... which is not acquisition-driven and it can be about doing more with the time that you’ve got. ...We believe that we should be trying to promote people to live a different way.” This statement indicates the hierarchization of story over function, evident again when Fairbank is asked if he would prioritise a story label over a multi-lingual care label: “If I had the ability to do that without being illegal, yes, I absolutely would.” It echoes Fairbank’s reflection of the original intention of Simon Mottram, founder of Rapha: “I think it is worth bearing in mind that Simon had worked as a luxury brand consultant prior to ... starting Rapha, so was very cognoscent [sic] of how brands were built and how they could be valued, so he also came with a number of ideas that make it about a brand rather than products and making sure it was marketing-led more than product-led.” These story labels could be viewed as central to Rapha’s communication style and brand belief, used as promotional structural devices to communicate and transport experiences and values, and share stories of the sport’s heritage past and brand present that resonate with its audience.

As a powerful human connector and meaning-maker, stories have become adopted as a common marketing device for contemporary fashion brands. Heath and Heath (2016) suggest that "marketing's successful promotion of an ideology of consumption is heavily built on its able construction of stories of enchantment around consumption, which

speak to consumers' own formative cultural background" (p.814). Stories are effective at persuasion because they connect with people emotionally: "They are the foundation of word-of-mouth communication and a significant dimension of brand and the advertising used to support them, yet they are also an understated aspect of marketing communications" (Fill, 2013, p.752). Within Rapha, Fairbank suggests otherwise: "It's an orientation thing. It is the thread that joins everything up. And a story in the selling sense is just a conversation you have with someone explaining the product's virtues, and you do that by putting yourself in the mind of the consumer and trying to understand how they are going to use this garment that they may buy." The Rapha story labels have been greatly invested in by the brand, with most products carrying a story label that is created, themed and designed for each collection. A compendium of the best have been published in a small hardback book, *Inside Stories 2* (Rapha Racing, 2014). The introduction reads: "One of the great traditions in the sport of road racing is storytelling. Since Rapha launched, in 2004, almost every product we have created has carried a story in one form or another. Whether woven or printed, Rapha 'story labels' combine typography and illustration to relate an exploit, race, climb or character from the rich history of the sport. A story label directly connects the product and its owner to the heritage of road cycling, from which Rapha continues to draw inspiration. No small thing, even if the labels are." The story labels (see fig. 1) vary widely from descriptive and poetic pieces of personal recollections to harder, factual listings of cycling victories, tragedies, epic races and triumphant underdogs. I find some labels resonate with me and some do not. One label reminds me of over a decade commuting from successive flats in Zone 2 to central London: "We move with hardly a sound, uncovering the city with movement. Every rider draws their own intimate map of the metropolis with these untraceable grooves. The road continues to buzz with hard reality, but in amidst the din, thousands of invisible routes are blooming, as the two wheels carve new lines through the madness." Another story label designed for the professional collection reads: "Proteam. Under low clouds we push hard through the shivering wheatfields, our feet shackled to the pedals. Tongues hang, like those of dogs and the gang breathes fast and heavy..." This recalls memories of my own rides with friends, as we cycle fast as a peloton achieving mileage, a new horizon, a different summit, drinking coffee and eating thick slices of cake, before the return home to family commitments.

Softly, softly, gently as we go. There's an art to riding in the city; in music they call it *pianissimo* and it's an art like any other. So while the city may not be the soaring symphony of a mountain climb, it offers another kind of music, different and distinct. It can start suddenly, before settling to a gentle, then gentler *diminuendo*. The city has its rhythms, of lights and lanes, of ebb and flow. The art lies in following these rhythms, hearing the beat: piano, piano, stop. Piano, piano, pianissimo...



Fig. 1. Story label (Rapha)

The Rapha stories could be seen to contribute to the company's business success. In 2015, the brand ranked 94th in *The Sunday Times* Fast Track 100 of companies with a 44% rise in annual sales over 3 years marking its appearance as one of Britain's private companies with the fastest-growing sales (Fast Track, 2016). The brand's mission,

explicitly written on its website Rapha.cc, is to “create the finest cycling clothing and accessories in the world”. Behind this product-led objective, however, I believe is the priority of marketing-led objectives, sharing stories of experience that are critical key to Rapha’s trajectory and success. Stories shape human experience, motivations and understanding and are universally understood, so Rapha’s celebration of cycling through storytelling in turn suggests that this approach enables a customer’s own engagement through personal memory-making. “To engage culture is to tell stories about joint experiences” observes Weick (1995, p.189) and the range of storytelling within the Rapha archive reveals accounts of group cycling that communicate clearly the brand’s culture and allegiance with the myths, traditions, heritage and personal lived experiences of the sport. Stories provide various functions for humans such as connecting and integrating the chaos of internal and momentary experience (Josselson, 2011, p.224) or an organising function for the ‘experiencing self’ (Kahneman, 2012, p.381), that is a way of sorting out lived experience in the moment. Christopher Booker in *The Seven Basic Story Plots* (2015, p.8) explains their omnipotent power: “the hidden language of stories provides us with a picture of human nature and the inner dynamics of human behaviour which nothing else can present to us with such objective authority.” In agreement with Fairbank, I believe Rapha’s story labels of cycling victories and tragedies played out by heroes and villains in challenging backdrops provide an insight into human nature and if the reader is a cyclist, fuels their passion and memories for the sport energising their ‘remembering self’ (Kahneman, 2012, p.381), thereby stimulating an unconscious desire to cycle while wearing Rapha apparel, of course, as the connected brand enabler.

Stories have a materiality to them which works across mediums and channels. An “intra-weave of strands of storytelling and materiality...” (Boje and Saylor, 2013) is seen on and in Rapha clothing and on the website. Rapha.cc (2016a) is partly a retail-driven digital selling space with product sections such as ‘Men’s Shop’, ‘Women’s Shop’ and ‘Stores’, and other sections including ‘Teams’ (providing information on professional cycling squads sponsored by Rapha), ‘Travel’ (offering information on their concierge cycling service), ‘Rapha Cycling Club’ (community section) and ‘Features’, the editorial section. An initial exploration of this brand touchpoint reveals a rich seam of stories, whether authored, created or commissioned by the brand. There is significant evidence of all four main aspects associated with storytelling in organisations, from story gathering, story sharing, story making and storytelling (McLellan, 2006). The ‘About Rapha’ webpage declares implicitly in its written text its positioning as a prestige, luxury clothing and accessories brand: “Designed without compromise for the most discerning riders, Rapha products use the finest fabrics and components to create apparel and accessories that offer riders unrivalled levels of performance, comfort and style.” It proceeds to recount its launch through a public exhibition called ‘Kings of Pain’ at the Old Truman Brewery on London’s Brick Lane, the choice of location in the heart of the capital’s creative district revealing its strategic courting of style and cycling press: “A collection of photography and memorabilia devoted to six iconic riders. Kings of Pain are riders who epitomise the glory, suffering, drama and style of road racing. The stories and images of their exploits have come to define the sport.” (Rapha, 2016b). The place, role and value of storytelling can be seen embedded in this inaugural exhibition. Fairbank reflects on the vision of Simon Mottram, founder of Rapha: “He felt that if he was to draw together a company that could help explain these stories and help explain why cycling was the greatest sport in the world and infuse everything he did with that storytelling, from the story labels in products through to the content that was commissioned for the website, through to the aim of the business itself, which was trying to encourage more people to ... take part in road cycling in the first place and then start unpicking the sport themselves, then that would be a well stratified way of bringing a brand to life.” Mottram’s vision chimes with the concept that people use storytelling to draw meaning from social activities and relationships

around them. In this regard, it is easy to view the central conceit of the Kings of Pain exhibition as linking Rapha with iconic heritage heroes, all distinctive cyclists who embodied superhuman and traditional qualities, which would reflect well on Rapha's own ambition to be the brand for 'discerning riders'.

The exhibition contained evidence of the values or 'cultural expressions' that Fairbank says Rapha is built around: Love the Sport, Suffer, Think for Yourself and Inspire Others. Fairbank expands on one particularly: "We know that 'glory through suffering' is an internal tagline and it is the name of the essay that accompanied the original business plan that Simon provided to all of the angel investors. And it's part of our DNA and we will never move away from it." Fairbank suggests that resistance to suffering is a key component of Rapha's own story and this concept can be found embedded throughout Rapha's textual archive. One example is Rapha's clothbound edition, *Journey* (Ingham, 2015), which features 'Glory' and 'Suffering' as explicit thematic chapters with pages of story-format essays and black-and-white photography documenting cyclists scaling steep ascents and sweeping through evocative scenery. 'Glory' and 'suffering' also make an appearance embedded in Rapha's product design process, as visualised in the Data Print Pro-team collection created in collaboration with design studio Accept & Proceed (see fig. 2). The monochromatic chevron pattern printed on the cloth is a visual scaled representation of the physical effort, elevation gain and distance expended by Team Sky rider and British Road Race champion, Peter Kennaugh, during the weeks of the Tour de France race. As one of Team Sky's sponsors at the time, it could be viewed as a bold move by Rapha to push the creative possibilities of the relationship. Fairbank reflects: "We did that because we wanted to be mildly disruptive, I think it is quite easy to do black jerseys with white arm stripes, and every so often it is quite fun to do something which is quite visually – like, wow!" Kennaugh told the cycling press: "Cycling to me is not just about the numbers and winning races, it's about the style. The sense of freedom when you are off the front, when you are driving the peloton and knowing you are putting others in pain, putting it all on the line in the little hope that you might pull off something legendary. ... It's what I enjoy about working with Rapha, a company that understands the incredibly emotional nature of this sport. To them, it's not just a cycling jersey, or a pair of socks; there's a reason for every single part of the design, and they want their products to tell a story." (*Cycling Weekly*, 2015).



Fig. 2. Promotional photograph of cyclist wearing Data Print Pro team collection (Rapha)

I posit that selecting personal emotive aspects of cycling such as 'glory' and 'suffering' for use as story themes is key to Rapha's success. Fairbank acknowledges that there is a continuous presence of the concept of suffering

internally in Rapha: “We discuss it as a company so people understand what it means.” This suggests a deep professional identification with it that in turns informs the business from structural, organisational, personnel, design and branding.

‘Glory through suffering’ is also a distinctive clue that leads to a basic story plot which employs these values at the heart of its structure. ‘The Quest’ is identified by Christopher Booker as a story archetype with a distinctive textual make-up: “No type of story is more instantly recognisable to us than a Quest. Far away, we learn, there is some priceless goal, worth any effort to achieve: a treasure, a promised land, something of infinite value. From the moment the hero learns of this prize, the need to set out on the long hazardous journey to reach it becomes the most important thing to him in the world. Whatever perils and diversions live in wait on the way, the story is shaped by that one overriding imperative: and the story remains unresolved until the objective has been finally, triumphantly secured.” (2015, p.69). It is common in literature to find a conflict propelling a story, along with a quest restoring harmony (Fog *et al*, 2005). The synonyms for a Quest (*Oxford University Press*, 2016) indicate the scale and magnitude it can take, from macro and legendary (expedition, odyssey, crusade, mission, pilgrimage, adventure) to micro and humble (venture, search, errand). Distinct from a journey – that is the linear act of travelling from one locale to another – a Quest adds to durational travel a serious and purposeful agenda and Questing values such as expenditure of vital energy, personal risk through tackling a series of ordeals and adversity, investment of direction by moral compass (whether individual or communal, social or political) and an end goal elevated to iconic status. It is pertinent at this point to speak of the literary interpretations of a Quest. Historically, the conceptualization of cycling as an epic storied experience has been explored by French sociologist Roland Barthes in his essay ‘The Tour de France as Epic’ (1957). Barthes's semantic observations included describing the Tour as Epic, mythological Legend and Spectacle, and I propose extending the onomastic naming of an epic ride to include Quest. The Quest's ultimate goal searching ideals can easily be seen in Barthes's words and mention of literature's ultimate Quest story: “The Tour thus possesses a veritable Homeric geography. As in the *Odyssey*, the race is here both a periplus of ordeals and a total exploration of the earth's limits...” (1957). It is apposite then to consider the natural site of cycle Quests as mountainous landscapes, with riders as Questing heroes with summit searching ideals, who undergo stages of ordeals that involve ‘glory through suffering’, that are retold later through storytelling.

Rapha and the Quester

In Booker's Quest story plot (2015), the activity is spearheaded by a significant subject, the Quester. A figurehead motivated by a spiritual or politicised agenda, the Quester lends the mission its epic significance and acts as central character with a singular aim: “the working of the hero or heroine of the story towards some ultimate goal of wholeness and personal fulfilment” (Booker, 2015, p.272). Barthes talks in similar language of the rider's laborious process and liberating aim in the context of the Tour de France: “...The Tour would represent in it that ambiguous moment when man strongly personifies Nature in order to confront it more readily and to free himself from it more completely” (1957). In similar shape-shifting style, I propose a cycling Quester is an agent of purpose who through the course of overcoming ordeals, transcends to an epic anthropomorphic missionary.



Fig. 3. Promotional photograph of cyclist wearing Data Print Pro team collection clothing (Rapha)

Within Rapha, historic Questers subjects can be found in its literature archive, such as written profiles of heritage cycling heroes in the brand magazine, *Mondial* (Rapha, 2015) and the six Kings of Pain in the launch exhibition. Identification with contemporary Questers can be seen in its sponsorship deals, such as with the British professional cycling team Team Sky between 2012–2016, which resulted in Rapha being seen on the winner’s podium – a prestige position for any luxury sportswear brand. In 2015, Rapha announced its official sponsorship of WIGGINS, the newly formed team of Tour de France 2012 winner, Sir Bradley Wiggins (see fig. 4). Lauded as an athletic demi-god for his phenomenal sporting achievements, Wiggins is critically fêted for qualities that Barthes (1957) described as ‘form’ – “a state more than impulse, a privileged equilibrium between quality of muscles, acuity of intelligence, and force of character” and natural ‘leap’ – “a veritable electric influx which erratically possesses certain racers beloved of the gods and causes them to accomplish superhuman feats”. Nicknamed ‘Le Gentleman’ by the French press, Wiggins’ Quester appeal can be seen as aesthetic as physical, with his personal style on and off the bike, his modish charm and rakish humour all contributing to a groundswell of popular support in both sporting and fashionable circles. I suggest Rapha’s endorsement of this idealized hero adds weight and distinction to its portfolio of iconic Quester subjects. Icons are encapsulated myths (Holt, 2003) and myths drive consumer engagement. Fairbank understands this connective value to the Rapha fan base: “Bradley Wiggins is definitely an example of someone who moves a dial, because he is waspishly charismatic hence it is like wandering around with a grenade with a pimpled axe, you never know what kind of Brad you are going to get, and that in its nature is very, very, compelling. He’s the one cyclist internationally who is ... a celebrity.”



Fig. 4. Sir Bradley Wiggins (Rapha)

Rapha's strategic alignment with elite questers also extends to creating its own self-defined tribe, described with an implicit collective noun and sold in with a tribal story: "The Rapha Continental is about exploring roads less travelled, discovering the world with likeminded riders. It began in the USA as a road trip on handbuilt steel bikes, a more creative expression of endurance riding in undiscovered territories. It's also about the stories these rides can bring: the landscape, the people and the adventure" (Rapha, 2014). It is useful to reflect on the linguistic syntax and mythology employed here with Rapha speaking of its riders' (not cyclists') advancement through territories, highly specialized equipment and their story-gathering / story-making function. Rapha speaks of discovery, pioneering qualities and endurance, I would suggest all aspirational values for the contemporary cultural crusader. It reminds me of Barthes, who calls the Tour a 'battle' comparable to a "modern army, defined by the importance of its material and the number of its servants", and his description of its ethics: "certain knightly imperatives constantly mingle with the brutal demands of the pure spirit of success" (1957). Over half a century later, I believe a similar lexicon of strategic questing is echoed in contemporary Rapha content as it frames its own elite riders as modern day pioneers.

Rapha and the Quest story plot

The lexical and structural nature of the Quest story plot is clearly in evidence within the Rapha editorial features, even where there is variance in topic, writing style and author (guest contributor, brand or brand representative). Booker (2015) believes that construction elements of the Quest story plot act as a formula or archetypal pattern embedded deeply in the human imagination and cognitive understanding. The structuring of story works as a human communication device, with meaning believed to be built through narrative modes of knowing (Bruner, 1990), achieved through discourse and recalled through the storytelling. If story is "an *event* or sequence of events (the *action*)" then narrative discourse is "those events as represented" (Porter Abbott, 2008, p.19). Rapha's Features on its website generally tell stories of hills climbed, struggles undertaken and routes forged, often presented in chronological order. Narratives organize time with narrative knowing (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.111) structuring information according to a schematic format, spatially or temporally, with structure working as a cognitive configuring device. Indeed, Barthes commented on the stages of the Tour de France saying, "each of which has the unity of a chapter in a novel" (1957), an indication of how a series of social events can operate as structured narrative.

Rapha's editorial storied content exhibits narrative unity and its coherence to the structured Quest story plot is of interest now. The critical fit can be tested through structural linguistic analysis of a key sample text, 'The Forgotten

Highway’ authored by Nicholls and O’Hagon in 2014, it has been selected from the website's Features section as a typical long-form written article with photographs. The objective is to chart how closely it maps on to the five steps of a Quest – or ‘stages’ as they could aptly be called in the context of this cycling study – and to examine the progression of the central figure or Quester in their achievement of their mission.

Stage one of Booker’s Quest is The Call, defined as the event or summons that will “lead the hero or heroine out of their initial state into a series of adventures or experiences which, to a greater or lesser extent, will transform their lives.” (Booker, 2015, p.18). In The Forgotten Highway feature, the written text begins its story by immediately introducing its heroes as six Rapha Continental riders and successfully sets up the locale, mission and pioneering nature of the quest as “the first Continental ride in New Zealand”. Ideas of risk-taking and venturing into the unknown are communicated through emotional observation: “Anxious eyes eagerly check out the unloading of the planes’ precious cargo” (their ‘metal steeds’ – the Quester’s essential equipment), and scene-setting emotion is added: “anticipation of what is to come begins to build. Tomorrow we will roll out from the coast, with little knowledge of where and what we will discover over four days of riding.” Here, is a predictive duration of adventure that promises to play out through the storytelling showing powerful alignment with Barthes’ observation of the Tour’s duration as ‘fictive narrative’. The riders’ answer to a compulsive ‘call’ – the call of the road perhaps – is added to by the opening photograph (see fig. 5) which shows a pack of questing riders heading away down a track, whose rocky surface promises anything but easy passage.



Fig. 5. ‘The Forgotten Highway’ feature (Rapha, 2014)

Stage two is The Journey: “The hero and companions set out across hostile terrain, encountering a series of life-threatening ordeals...horrific monsters to be overcome; temptations to be resisted; and, probably the need to travel between two equally deadly ‘opposites’.” (Booker, 2015, p.18) In The Forgotten Highway, each day’s entry leads with empirical data that holds meaning to any cyclist, specifying the extreme nature and epic largesse of the Quest: “Day 1: Taranaki to Ohura: 217km, 2600m elevation gain”. Hostile terrain is indicated through descriptive, metaphoric observations that clearly illustrate travel between environmental opposites, for example, the “plentiful seafood, bush and fertile ground” becomes a “wall of wind” and “narrow, twisting turning roads”. Contrary to Booker's Quest story plot, there is a notable absence of deadly opposition, though as this is a high-end cycling brand with a taste for rarefied adventure, the monster or adversity metaphor can be read into the description of the dissolution of once lively trading posts now “virtual ghost towns”, the riders’ sleeping in accommodation called Ohura Prison, and the visual imagery of

rusting cars (see fig. 6) and a lone rider working his way through a sparse, melancholy landscape (see fig. 7). In this stage, for Booker, these minor ordeals alternate with periods of respite and hospitality for the Quester and his companions. The Forgotten Highway feature complies with frequent calorific sustenance (beers, cheesecake, coffee) offered to the riders by locals who are portrayed as friendly allies.



Fig. 6. 'The Forgotten Highway' (Rapha, 2014)



Fig. 7. 'The Forgotten Highway' (Rapha, 2014)

Stage three is Arrival and Frustration: "...now, on the edge of the goal, he sees a new and terrible series of ordeals looming up between him and his prize, which have to be overcome before it can be fully and completely secured" (Booker, 2015, p.18). These mid-quest ordeals can be found in *The Forgotten Highway*, portrayed as unpredictable hazards hindering the riders' progress, from a "...spooked cow. Crazily careering down the centre of the highway..." to failing equipment and harsh conditions: "It's wet, and before long, we hit gravel. Cue puncture. Frozen hands struggle to change tyres." (See fig. 8). The language of adornment features in the description of the scenery: "we skirt the mountains, hidden behind dense curtains of rain clouds" and for the first time in this feature, the riders' reliance on their tools results in a mention of the Quester's clothing, described as protection against the inhospitable elements, "zips are drawn up against the cold". In the photograph, it is possible to spot the Rapha logo on the dark protective overshoes and this shows the rider as branded. The rare visual sighting of the marque is a sign of 'stealth wealth', showing Rapha's largely social subtlety in communicating cultural taste and distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). On a scale of possible product placement, in this text (and others), Rapha products remain peripheral to the epic storied nature of the quest. The author instead focuses on communicating more basic physiological and safety needs (Maslow 1987).

saying: “Now, riding through almost barren plains, exposed to the elements, all thoughts turn to surviving the day. There are no impromptu excursions, no desire to explore our unique surroundings in search of adventure. Just desperation for warmth and shelter.”



Fig. 8. ‘The Forgotten Highway’ feature (Rapha, 2014)

Stage four comprises The Final Ordeal: “The hero has to undergo a last series of tests to prove that he is truly worthy of the prize. This culminates in a last great battle or ordeal which may be the most threatening of all” (Booker, 2015, p.18). In *The Forgotten Highway* text, the Questers’ are seen hesitating in their mission as the mountain is cast as monster and nature as adversity becomes real: “Through the weather, the weight of the mountain – Ruapeh – makes its presence felt. Its slopes are not seen behind the curtain of grey clouds, but we know it’s there.” The Quester’s psychological robustness, egos and personal ‘call’ however are seen to win through and the Quest is resumed with militarised strategy: “Gradually the rain eases, then stops. Warm rays cause layers to be peeled off and the riders start to go about their work. Steam starts to rise off the road, creating a surreal image as bikes seem to disappear into the clouds.” The nearby photograph shows an image of a hero at ease framed in front of a curved, sculptural bridge, which forms a metaphoric gateway to the promised land. In the following photograph (see fig. 9), a rider is pictured now in motion ascending the curve of a road, raised off his saddle, he appears focused on his mission and goal. In both the text and the images there can be interpreted a slow, effortful and glorious elevation of the riders to god-like Questers, with the ambition of the two-wheeled Quest posited as trying to reach some form of philosophical transcendence or self-actualization (see Maslow, 1987).



Fig. 9. ‘The Forgotten Highway’ feature (Rapha, 2014)

The final stage in Booker's Quest is The Goal which is described as: "After a last 'thrilling escape from death', ... the life-transforming treasure are finally won: with an assurance of renewed life stretching indefinitely into the future" (2005, p.83). In The Forgotten Highway text, the goal is the final mountain, significant as once the riders have succeeded in summiting, nature is anthropomorphically portrayed as rescinding to its victorious Questers: "Acknowledging it has been conquered, the weather eases, and the mountain throws off the cloud cover that has kept it from view for the last two days. ... Sunlight streams through trees standing like an endless row of sentries marking our progress...." The Quest story plot's thrilling escape from death can be laudably recognised – as luxury branding steers away from true tragedy – as the euphoric jubilation of the riders as they return to what is termed 'civilisation'. Life-transforming treasure is apparent in the text in the descriptions of pilgrimage iconography and achievement of purposeful Questing goals: "Wet, tired, caked in mud, a bedraggled group of riders finally emerge at the coast. Mud encrusted frames honour a journey along paths less travelled." The accompanying photograph (see fig. 10) shows the riders idling down a wet road signifying that a rain shower has passed, with dramatic undulating hills positioned passively to one side and high, billowing clouds in the background. The text finishes, "The riding has been tough and our exhausted bodies make it seem as if we have shared in the physical toil that marked the settling of this land." It is perhaps unclear how the author can equate toil through cycling with toil of early settlers, and so this could be viewed as taking creative dispensation. The last photograph (see fig. 11) pictures the riders at ease, studying maps in a local general store while locals look on, as if to illustrate, 'we have achieved, we have been there, we are here'. It is clear that the narrator's casting of the rider collective is as modern pioneers, the language used is of achievement of a monumental quest and the accomplishment of a life-affirming goal. At the level of brand storytelling, both the written text and photography display claims of heroism, evidence of Quester values and crucially for Rapha, reinforces their story theme – a sense of 'glory through suffering'.



Fig. 10. 'The Forgotten Highway' feature (Rapha, 2014)



Fig. 11. 'The Forgotten Highway' feature (Rapha, 2014)

Through conducting structural and linguistic analysis of The Forgotten Highway feature, it is clear that the written text and photographs reveal close alignment with Booker's Quest core story plot, displays traditional and contemporary Quester values and shows the brand giving a prominent voice to its own Questers as guest authors of their own stories. There is a remarkable resemblance between Barthesian observations from over half a century ago pitching the Tour de France as epic crusade and riders as militarised heroes participating in a fictive narrative and Rapha's contemporary staged stories of epic quests adopting similar rhetoric of riders, missions and pioneering routes.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored how Rapha embeds stories of experience throughout its brand offerings and that this has resulted in brand belief, passion and purpose, embodied by brand employees and translated into its internal and external communications. James Fairbank's reflections in 2016 as Head of Brand and Marketing for Rapha have revealed the vast extent, significant value and role of storytelling built into the brand from its beginning. It has been established that Rapha is built on thematic brand values and I propose that one of these – 'suffer' – is a consistent narrative thread found throughout its brand storytelling. I believe it indicates a core story plot called the Quest (Booker, 2015) and that Rapha's brand texts appear to fit this structured storied praxis providing narrative unity and coherence. I have presented evidence that the brand is implicitly and explicitly enlivened with Quester values communicating this through stories of epic Quests often drawn from mythologies and heroism. Barthes' observations on professional cyclists provide a historic framework and I have proposed that Rapha's endorsed riders and guest authors fit a parallel mould, cast as modern pioneers or strategic missionaries, with Barthesian values of epic 'form' and 'leap' and aspirations of iconic goals.

I believe that the multi-disciplinary data set and rich findings drawn through narrative inquiry provides significant 'clues' (McKee, 2010) as to why Rapha gathers, shares, makes and tells stories as a fundamental basis to its business, and why storytelling is a vital component in its growth as a marketing-led brand. Humans seek and enjoy story so we would get the benefit of practice (Gottschall, 2013); Rapha's stories can then be viewed as promotional 'flight simulators' of human life (Oatley, 2008) with epic two-wheeled quests used to inspire an international audience – from armchair travellers, novice riders to professional Questers – to undertake their own transcendent cycling experiences, all branded by Rapha, the marque of distinction. It also seems that this young brand uses selective storytelling of cycling past and present as a critical part of building its own hugely distinctive identity. Boje (2006) calls it an 'organization's historical becoming' (p. 224) saying, "Stories and myths are part of history, which is quite

voluminous; it is part of the ongoing sensemaking and sense-forgetting of the organization, and it is part of the *being* of storytelling, which is in a state of constant proliferation and rehistorization" (p.218).

Rapha's continuous identification with iconic Questers I think also reflects Rapha's own employees' connection with the concept, for example, Fairbank's potential as a Quester on a mission is revealed when he says: "We are all obsessed with doing something that leaves a positive legacy on the sport." I would propose that it is Fairbank's seemingly authentic professional passion plus personal dedication that contributes to Rapha's internal brand belief and in turn, translates externally into coherent storytelling that embodies his encouragement to "go and make your own stories". Edson Escalas (2004) states the power of emotional connection for consumers: "Because stories focus on goals, actions and outcomes, and stories in memory are likely to be self-related, a link may be forged between brands in an ad story and the achievement of self-related goals. A self brand connection (SBC) may be formed based on these perceived psychological benefits". Fairbank seems personally convinced: "I joined Rapha because there was no other company who could have the impact into the defining passion of my life." This statement is reminiscent of Thompson's (1995) description of the self as *symbolic project*, "which the individual must actively construct out of the available symbolic materials, materials which the individual weaves into a coherent account of who he or she is, a narrative of self-identity." (p.210). In Fairbank's role driving branding and marketing for Rapha he can readily construct a storyworld from available symbolic materials. This indicates that Rapha's employees may be its biggest asset, able to contribute greatly to the richness, authenticity and materiality of the brand storytelling.

However, I believe that there are signs of longer term concerns that may affect Rapha's storytelling: its fervent cultish zeal at times feels dogmatic; its long-established romance with 'glory through suffering' may need to evolve to an epithet with wider 'pluri-appeal' (Brown, 2005) in tune with its growing focus on women; and its popularity may move it from a cult brand of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) worn by early adopters to a popular fashion and sportswear brand that is accessible to all – a position to be carefully navigated by a high end brand. Fairbank reflects: "I think that's part of the challenge of us as we grow, to ensure that we don't just continue to keep talking to ourselves, as I think it will be one of those things that will really hamstring us when it comes to accelerated growth, because I think you just run the risk of become a self-acknowledging club." Rapha could be suggested to have attained the qualities of a 'passion brand', displaying the characteristics of active belief, confidence rooted in capability and staying vibrant in an ever-changing world (Edwards and Day, 2006). Indeed, for this brand it may be that in the future, its consumers' own stories might be more effective communicators of brand benefits, passion and values than its own originated stories (Lundqvist *et al*, 2013) and dialogic storytelling of cycling experiences in collaboration with its consumer base may better engage an increasing transnational audience.

The wider influence of the narrative inquiry methodological approach within the domain of marketing is that mapping "stories lived and told" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p.20) through lived experience reveals our socio-cultural engagement with the world and the artefacts we come into contact with. Further implications of this study are that future story research could achieve insights into brands and their internal and external marketing activities through revealing the idiosyncratic stories that transmit authentic meaning.

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