



**EKONOMI
HÖGSKOLAN**
Lunds universitet

Master Thesis

May 2009

BUS 808 International Marketing and Brand Management

School of Economics and Management

Lund University

‘Store Stories’

- Analysis of a retailer’s store personality in consumer stories -

Authors:

Judith Arndt

Theresa Kovermann

Advisors:

Cecilia Cassinger

Peter Svensson

Abstract

Title:	Store Stories – Analysis of a retailer’s store personality in consumer stories
Date of the Seminar:	2 nd of June 2009
Course:	BUS 808. Master thesis in international marketing
Authors:	Judith Arndt and Theresa Kovermann
Advisors:	Cecilia Cassinger and Peter Svensson
Keywords:	<i>Retail Branding, Brand Personality, Store Personality, Consumer Stories, Narrative Analysis</i>
Thesis purpose:	This study aims at identifying and analysing the construct of a retailer’s store personality in consumer stories and how these stories relate to the retailer’s brand story on a global level.
Methodology:	To fulfil the purpose and analyse a retailer’s store personality, a qualitative approach was chosen to analyse the empirical data provided by a case study of H&M through narrative analysis.
Theoretical perspective:	The main theories that the study is based upon include retail branding and brand personality. Moreover, theories of narrative analysis have been used. In particular, special attention has been paid to Yannis Gabriel’s classification of stories into four generic poetic modes.
Empirical data:	The study is based on various global consumer blog stories that deal with experiences made in stores of the Swedish clothing retailer H&M.
Conclusion:	The analysis of consumer blog stories revealed that consumers tell stories about their experiences made in a store for sense-making. Moreover, the assumption that consumers personate stores/retail brands in their stories was supported. People assign roles to the store in accordance with either the epic, romantic, comic or tragic genre on which conclusions on the store personality can be drawn. Overlapping personality traits between brand and consumer stories were identified and presented the common ground which might indicate a certain control of managers over consumer stories. The study contributes by showing how retailer, personality and stories are connected, how consumers construct store personality in stories and points to the importance of understanding consumer stories for brand management.

Acknowledgement

We would like to acknowledge that this study would have not been possible and as interesting without the diverse range of exciting store stories that consumers wrote about their experiences in the retail store and which they shared with us and the public in their blogs.

Further, we would like to show our special gratitude to Cecilia Cassinger and Peter Svensson, who as our supervisors, have given us guidance and support throughout the thesis writing process and encouraged us with their inspiring and challenging remarks.

Table of contents

1 Introduction.....	5
1.1 Purpose.....	5
1.2 Literature review.....	5
1.2.1 Brand personality.....	6
1.2.2 Retailer's brand personality.....	9
1.2.3 Stories	11
1.3 Problem formulation	14
1.4 Research aim	15
1.5 Research questions.....	15
1.6 Theoretical and practical relevance	16
1.7 Delimitation	16
1.8 Overview of thesis.....	17
2 Theoretical Base - Stories and Storytellers	18
2.1 Stories and narratives	18
2.2 Stories and facts	18
2.3 Stories and sense-making.....	19
2.3.1 Poetic interpretation	19
2.3.2 Analytic interpretation.....	20
2.4 Relation between character and personality.....	22
2.5 Classification of stories.....	22
2.5.1 The comic story: The protagonist as deserving victim or fool.....	24
2.5.2 The tragic story: The protagonist as undeserving victim.....	25
2.5.3 The epic story: The protagonist as hero	26
2.5.4 The romantic story: The protagonist as love object.....	26
2.6 Consumption as heroic quest narrative	27
3 Methodology	29
3.1 Research approach.....	29

3.1.1	Qualitative approach	30
3.1.2	Text as empirical material.....	31
3.1.3	Case study and narrative analysis.....	32
3.2	Data collection procedure.....	33
3.2.1	Consumer blogs	33
3.2.2	Search path.....	34
3.2.3	Story selection.....	35
3.2.4	Ethical considerations	36
3.3	Data analysis procedure.....	36
3.4	Critical reflections on research approach.....	38
4	Analysis – H&M’s Store Personality	40
4.1	H&M’s brand story.....	40
4.2	Epic consumer stories	43
4.2.1	‘H&M’	44
4.2.2	H&M as caring and supportive helper.....	47
4.3	Romantic consumer stories	50
4.3.1	‘H&M-I love it, I hate it, I love it’	50
4.3.2	H&M as adorable love object.....	54
4.4	Comic consumer stories	57
4.4.1	‘Comme des Garcons for H&M comes and goes (off the racks)’.....	58
4.4.2	H&M as unrevealed admired trickster.....	62
4.5	Tragic consumer stories	65
4.5.1	‘News story on H&M racism’.....	66
4.5.2	H&M as discriminatory villain.....	69
5	Conclusion.....	73
5.1	Theoretical and practical contributions	83
5.2	Future research.....	83
	References	85
	Appendix	97

1 Introduction

'H&M was my ish during undergrad (if you know me, you KNOW what I'm talking about), until the end of junior year or thereabouts—whenever it was that the store went on this dreadful barnyard, plaid/tartan tip...ugh. I still become upset thinking about it. Ever since then, I've treated the store like a frenemy (we'll hang out if we must...), but as of today, the beef is squashed' (Wildfryah, 2009).

This excerpt from a consumer story combines the concepts of retailers, store personification or personality and storytelling, which all have gained considerable amount of attention in recent literature and research. Retailers, for example, have more and more been the focal point of researchers in the last couple of years (e.g. Alexander & Colgate, 2005; Burt & Sparks, 2002; Davies, 1992; Dennis et al. 2002; Wileman & Jary 1997), as their power towards product brands and consumers increases. In the past retailers were only seen as a distribution channel for product brands to consumers, but retailers have realized that they are in closer contact with the consumers than manufacturers and started to strategically take advantage of this. This power shift has led to a growing interest of researchers in analyzing how retailers could tap the full potential of their power. Moreover, also personality has long been a very interesting phenomenon in itself. Researchers have discussed the spectrum of human individuality, and why or how people differ in their identity (e.g. Passer & Smith, 2008 or Burger, 2008) constantly, and applied these concepts to brands. Lastly, stories are said to form very important artefacts in human life (Czarniawska, 2004). They help people to learn about the past and historical happenings; they assist researchers to understand the social world; and they support humans to make sense of their environment and experiences by telling stories to themselves or others (Woodside et al. 2008 or Gabriel, 2000).

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of the following thesis is to identify and analyse the construct of a retailer's store personality in consumer stories and how these stories relate to the retailer's brand story on a global level.

1.2 Literature review

The three concepts of retailer, personality and story mentioned in the thesis's purpose seem at the first sight very different and not related to each other as each of them can easily stand

by themselves and contribute in their own way to current research. However, it is believed that these three concepts very well share a connection to each other and together could form an important and promising theory construct. The kind of connection they share and how they relate to each other will be part of the following literature review, where previous research on the concepts of brand personality, retailers and stories will be reviewed and relations between the separate concepts will be identified.

1.2.1 Brand personality

The starting point of the review of previous research is brand personality, which is seen as a concept based in human psychology and human personality. Brand personality comprises firstly of the element brand. Brands are seen as one strategic way to stick out of the growing crowd of corporations that offer similar products and thus successfully differentiate one from competitors (Kapferer, 2008). This is especially of importance since countries are opening up their borders more and more, so that companies can grow even faster and spread wider around the world (Burt et al. 2008). Globalization is therefore already a premise for most companies (ibid). In order to succeed within its own market, but moreover also on a global level, the building of a strong brand becomes a central economic activity of organizations (Holt, 2004). According to the American Marketing Association a brand is a *'name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers'* (Zentes et al. 2007: 121). Brands therefore help the consumer to identify a good through its brand name, logo etc. and build a common ground/platform for consumers to, for example, talk about them with others. Further, brands are believed to create awareness, beliefs of exclusivity and emotional bonding (Kapferer, 2008). Hence, *'a brand is a set of mental [and emotional] associations, held by the consumer, which add to the perceived value of a product or service'* (Keller, 1998 in Kapferer, 2008: 10). This definition makes clear that the set of added perceptions by a consumer to a brand, i.e. brand image, are very essential for every corporation.

Researchers argue that consumer's brand knowledge comprises of cognitive and affective associations and it is further assumed that the affective or emotional meanings stem from the cognitive or personal experience (Da Silva & Seyd Alwi, 2006). Also Martineau (1958) explains that every consumer filters all the functional attributes of a product or service through an emotional lens or as Urde (1999) notes: *'When we interpret a brand, we use both our 'brain' (i.e. reference function) and our 'heart' (i.e. emotional function).'* (Mc Goldrick, 2002: 190). Thus, it is argued that a successful brand invariably has psychological meanings and dimensions which are as important to a consumer as its physical properties (Balmer & Greyser, 2007). These psychological meanings are also referred to as a brand's personality,

which is defined as *'the set of human characteristics associated with a brand'* (Aaker, 1997: 347). Although anthropomorphic qualities are usually associated with living creatures, consumers can also imbue brands (e.g. fashion or automobiles) with human personality traits (Levy, 1985) and it might be argued that brand personality presents the way consumers make sense of brands; by assigning them anthropomorphic qualities. A brand's personality can be created and shaped by any direct and indirect brand contact that the consumer experiences with the brand (Plummer, 1985; Shank & Langmeyer, 1994). As David Aaker (1996) points out, a brand's personality can result from both product-related factors (e.g. product category itself, packaging, price, and the physical attributes) and factors not related to the product (e.g., the consumer's past experience, user imagery, symbols, marketing communication, word of mouth, CEO image, celebrity endorsers, and culture).

As early as the late 1950s, researchers like Pierre Martineau have discussed the emotional meanings that a brand can convey consciously or unconsciously in the consumer's mind. Researchers have had a lot of interest in this phenomenon and compared these emotional meanings to a human personality (e.g. Martineau, 1958, Aaker, 1997, Burt & Sparks 2002, Da Silva & Syed Alwi 2006 or Zentes et al. 2008). Jennifer Aaker (1997) was among others the first who developed a scale with 5 factors (sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness) that comprise 42 personality items to measure brand personality.

Validity of brand personality metaphor

However, this also raises the issue whether it is reasonable to project human personality traits metaphorically to objects, like corporations, products or services. A lot of researchers write about the personality of a brand, but miss out to actually evaluate and establish the validity of using the phrase 'personality', which origins in human psychology, as a metaphor for brands. Cornelissen (2002) criticizes the approach of using metaphors without actually validating them and argues for a method for controlling and evaluating their usage. The latter points out that a metaphor needs to be proven as *'useful heuristic device (...) [that] assist the theorist in deriving specific propositions and/or hypotheses about the phenomenon being studied'* (Bacharach, 1989: 497). Therefore, it is proposed that, in order to warrant the metaphor's further use, it is necessary to identify similarities between the two concepts in question (Cornelissen, 2002). Human personality can be defined as *'the distinctive and relatively enduring ways of thinking, feeling and acting that characterize a person's responses to life situations.'* (Passer & Smith, 2008: 454). This definition combines the two personality features which are individuality and consistency. With regards to the latter point, Baumeister and Twenge (2001) suggest that testing what kind of aspects stay the same

when a person moves from one situation to another allows for inference about the person's personality. Further, Passer & Smith (2008) point out that it is worth considering that our personality features guide our behaviour.

Brand personality and human personality are not completely analogous, however. For example, brand personality traits are only perceived by the consumers, whereas human personality traits are also actual (objective) components of individuals that are independent of the perceiver's characterization (Sung & Tinkham, 2005). Instead, brand personality is a hypothetical construct developed by consumers (ibid). However, as consumers add human personality traits to a brand and as they are further seen as partners by consumers (Fournier, 1998), it can be argued that the brand's personality shares similarities with a human's personality. Fournier (1998) further maintains that brands have meaning in themselves, and add meaning to a person's life, through their status as partners in a relationship with the consumer. She even compares these kinds of relationships to human relationships such as marriage, enslavement or best friends (ibid). And further, brands are also often considered as if they were celebrities or famous historical figures (Rook, 1985). Also consumer behaviour theorists acknowledge that consumers will be more motivated towards a brand when it maintains a positive fit with the consumer's self-image (Sirgy, 1982: 289/90; Grubb & Grathwohl, 1967 or Hogg et al. 2000). Besides, Czarniawska (2004) puts it into another perspective by suggesting viewing an organization from an 'artificial person' perspective, which instead of referring to an organisation's 'self', refers to the 'character' of an organisations as in a theatre play.

The purpose of using a metaphor for describing a brand is to assist the comprehension and communication of a complex phenomenon by reference to a framework that is easier understandable and also more familiar (Davies et al. 2001), i.e. to simplify the consumers' decision-making process (Tan, 2004). The primary rationale for incorporating the personality metaphor to brands is therefore, as Mark and Pearson (2002) point out, that brands reflect the ways in which humans interpret their relationships with their lifestyles, and hence serve to provide emotional meaning that consumers around the world may use for identity construction.

Concluding, the brand personality metaphor seems to be valid and a useful heuristic device, although brand personality is not completely coherent with human personality.

1.2.2 Retailer's brand personality

Another aspect that was brought up together with the initial purpose was to identify the connection between personality and retailer and what previous literature contributed in this area. As said at the beginning of this chapter, retailers have gained a lot of power with regard to the connection between manufacturers and consumers (Burt & Sparks, 2002) and have formed well-known brands. Thus, as retailers came to the fore concerning branding strategies, researchers developed a rising interest in testing whether theories of product brands are also applicable to retail brands. This interest also included the applicability of the product brand personality theory to a retailer's brand personality. Several researchers already acknowledged the importance of research with regards to the affective and emotional aspects of a retailer's brand and considered it a future research priority (Ailwadi & Keller, 2004). However, researchers have yet not paid the same attention to a retailer's brand personality than to a product's brand personality (Zentes et al. 2008). Only few studies exist that have applied the brand personality metaphor to retailers (e.g. Martineau, 1958; d'Astous & Lévesque, 2003 or Zentes et al. 2008). However, as consumers of products think that Coca Cola is cool and all American (Aaker, 1997), also consumers of retailers might experience far more than the physical and functional attributes when shopping at IKEA, H&M or Zara. Especially for retailers it is essential to be aware of the emotional associations of consumers, as they could be the very determinants that decide whether the consumers actually feel affected towards a retail brand and thus, for example, enter a store or not (Martineau, 1958).

One reason for the lack of research is assumed to be the complexity of a retailer's brand, which results from the numerous service attributes of retailers as well as from the multiplicity of brand attributes and consumer-retailer interactions (Zentes et al. 2007). Retail brands are often shaped by the organization per se, several hundred stores, with different locations and store designs, thousands of products, either own label products or other branded products, and dozens of employees in each store (Wileman & Jary, 1997: 40-42). Hence, Burt & Sparks (2002) see a retailer as a hybrid organization. Thus, it is far more complicated to take all these elements into consideration when analysing a brand of a retailer, than for example analysing only one product brand. Consequentially, it is in some cases more helpful to look at each element of a retailer's brand separately in order to be more specific. And since brand personality is mostly constructed by the attitudes of consumers (Aaker, 1997), it is useful to take as an example for a retailer's brand personality the most important element of a retailer to create and influence consumer attitudes towards the retail brand: the store (Martineau, 1958).

Store brand

As retailers are organized to primarily sell products to consumers (Zentes et al. 2007), the store as point-of-purchase plays a major role in the retailer's activities. It even can be said that *'a retailer's 'products' are its stores'* (ibid: 122). And since people usually have to go into a store in order to purchase the needed product, the store and its environment become important assets for a retailer's brand image (Zentes et al. 2007). However, it is arguable that for some retailers, if the name of the retail brand and the products sold such as in own brand stores, the distinction between store brand and product brand might not be made clearly. Researchers like Kotler (1973) acknowledged already in early years that *'one of the most significant features of the total product is the 'place' where it is bought or consumed'* (Bawa et al. 1989: 474). As for the most essential components of a store that form a consumer's image, McGoldrick (2002) provides a table that lists 18 general areas including sales personnel, clientele, service provided, store atmosphere and layout etc. This is almost congruent with Martineau's (1958) store image factors, which are the following: architecture, colour schemes, advertising, sales personnel, and others. Although, he termed them at that time 'personality factors', today researchers would categorize them as cognitive attributes that could cause emotional associations (d'Astous & Lévesque, 2003; Da Silva & Seyd Alwi 2006). As introduced above, brand personality or in this case store personality is directed to those mental dimensions that correspond to human traits (d'Astous & Lévesque, 2003). The personality of a store has been acknowledged as an important component within the branding process and as a research topic. First, the feelings that are generated by a retail store and its environment are determinants of shopping behaviour, i.e. purchase, store choice or loyalty (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982). And secondly, it is of great interest to marketing researchers and practitioners how consumers perceive stores in terms of human attributes, as it is useful for the elaboration and implementation of marketing actions (ibid).

Store personality

Thus, the idea that a store can have a personality is not new at all and can be traced back up to 50 years ago when Martineau (1958) started the discussion about how a store is defined in a consumer's mind. However, extensive research on the concept of store personality is rare and often divergent. Many researchers have acknowledged the emotional quality of store personality, but the majority of research has focused on how a store's functional attributes form store image perceptions (Donovan & Rossiter, 1982). The role played by human personality traits in forming store representations, if considered at all, has often been reduced to consumer evaluations of a single variable - store atmosphere (e.g. Lindquist, 1975; James et al. 1976). For example Darden & Babin (1994: 102) provide evidence that consumers attribute emotional meanings to a retail store environment. As a research

instrument they used personality-related inventory terms developed by Russel and Pratt (1980) concerning the level of pleasantness, unpleasantness, activeness and sleepiness of a store environment, but miss out to include other aspects of a store into their study.

d'Astous and Lévesque (2003: 457) on the contrary, are more specific in their approach to analyze store personality and argue that store personality is not completely analogous to brand personality. They note that according to Aaker (1997) brand personality results from sources like advertising style, brand users, product category associations, brand name, symbol and logo, price policies, and distribution channels. They admit that some sources overlap with regards to store personality such as advertising, symbols or logo. However, they point out that there are also sources that are unique. As an example they mention sales personnel which is clearly a very important factor in forming a mental representation of a store (Martineau, 1958), whereas it plays little or no role in the case of a brand. In addition, they conclude that some common sources may have a different effect due to the relative easiness with which consumers can learn about them. For instance, consumers might learn very easily about other shoppers or product user, as it is very simple to observe others in a store, whereas learning about brand users in a direct manner may often be quite difficult. Thus, it can be concluded that researchers have already acknowledged the existence and importance of the personality of a store. But yet, a complete investigation on store personality and how different pieces of information are combined to form a personality impression are rare.

1.2.3 Stories

Coming back to the question posed in the beginning of this chapter, it could be stated that the connection between retailers, brand personality and stories is twofold. Firstly, story creation around brands is used as a branding tool (Holt, 2003) to enhance a retailers brand and present its brand personality. Secondly, storytelling presents a research method which might be used to understand consumer's experiences with retail brands. The following sections will review previous research regarding both of the connections between retail brand personality and stories being stories as branding tool and stories as sense-making tool.

Stories as branding tool

Starting off with the first connection between stories and retail brand personality it can be observed that in the last years, several researchers argued that for a brand to be successful it also needs to offer a story or myth around its brand (Holt, 2003; Fog et al. 2007; Tsai 2006). Further, it is said that traditional branding strategies do not achieve the desired results

alone anymore (ibid). However, a myth embedded in a brand cannot be replicated easily and as a consequence might distinguish success from mediocrity in brand building (ibid).

This success is, according to Holt (2003), rooted in the assumption that these so called iconic brands enable the consumer to experience powerful myths and therefore provide them with value. According to the Oxford English dictionary a cultural icon is '*a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol, especially worth of admiration or respect*'. (Holt, 2004: 1). This definition is in line with the theological origin of icons which says that icons represent the sacred in condensed pictorial form and are mostly anthropomorphic (Kokosalakis, 2001). Further Holt (2004:1) points out, that people identify strongly with cultural icons and often rely on these symbols in their everyday lives and that the quintessence of an icon is that the person or thing is widely considered as the most compelling symbol that a society sees as important (ibid). When brands reach this iconic state they enable the consumer to experience myths (ibid). Myths can be compared to collective or social dreams (Tsai, 2006), which reveal the hidden structures of our universe and can be seen as archetypal image constellations (ibid). Archetypes are preconscious psychological potentials (ibid) which, according to the Jungian archetype theory (Jung, 1938), are '*elemental forces that play a vital role in the creation of the world and the human mind itself*' (Tsai 2006: 649). With the help of these archetypal myths people are said to make sense of the world (Silverblatt et al. 1999) and therefore brands, which entail an archetypal myth, provide value to the consumer by offering tools for sense-making of their experiences. Holt even goes so far as to say that those iconic brands are able to provide myths which '*every society needs [myths] - simple stories that help people deal with tensions in their lives*' (Holt 2003:43).

Further, archetypal brands, like archetypes, can help consumers to construct their own identities even across cultural boundaries by providing symbolic meanings (Mark & Pearson, 2002; Holt, 2004) through guidelines on how to interpret their experiences and relationships with their lives (Tsai 2006). By providing these archetypal concepts in brand presentations, through brand stories, brands can be turned into iconic brands which are exiting, meaningful and said to be preferred by consumers because of the added value (ibid).

Archetypes and myths are often personified, e.g. in the form of a hero (ibid), and consumers aim at obtaining the symbolisms of these archetypal and iconic brands. It could be consequently argued that consumers see these brands as persons with a personality and built relationships with them as with other humans (Fournier, 1998) and the importance of the brand personality concept becomes evident once again. As said before, brands could therefore be regarded as 'partners' in a relationship. And through acting as forms of self-

expression, the brands are imbued with stories that consumers find valuable in constructing their identities (Holt, 2004). Thus, the brands are taking on the role of actors or characters embedded in stories around them. However, being a character in a story means as well to inhabit special characteristics or personality traits (Woodside et al. 2008) which leads back to the connection between brand personality and stories.

The existence of a relationship between brands and storytelling has already been identified (Woodside et al. 2008) as well as the importance of a brand's story or myth for the brand's success, however how consumers and maybe their own stories relate to these brand stories has not been examined, yet, even though it might provide valuable information on how to tell a successful brand story. This leads to the second function which stories might have in regard to a retailer's brand personality, which is as material for analysis of the consumer side in relation to the brand.

Stories as sense-making tool

Analysing and interpreting stories that people tell, can enhance the understanding of how people make-sense of their experiences and assign meaning to them (Gabriel, 2000). In the context of consumers and brands, it has been found out that not only companies, but also consumers produce stories around relationships to brands or around brand personalities, which are also often archetypal myths (Holt & Thompson, 2004; Wertime, 2002; Woodside et al. 2008). These stories around consumers and brands are produced both on conscious and unconscious levels (Wang et al. 2007; Zaltman, 2003).

Investigating these consumer brand stories might improve the understanding of how consumers process their experiences with a brand and how they assign meaning to these, which might be valuable information for creating branding strategies. Gaining this knowledge through story analysis is possible as humans try to process and make sense of their environment and experiences by telling stories (Woodside et al. 2008) to themselves and others, as they are said to rather think normatively than argumentatively (Weick, 1995). Also Czarniawska (2004) and Gabriel (2000) state that people use storytelling for sense making needs, often in retrospective, and that story analysis offers the opportunity to see beyond the normal and mundane (Gabriel, 2000). Besides that stories '*act as maps, helping people make sense of unfamiliar situations by linking them to familiar ones*' (Weick, 1995), stories are able to create various emotions besides commitment (Gabriel, 2000). Woodside et al. (2008) suggest that consumers experience pleasure by telling stories, and that brands often play essential roles in this process. Further, Lawler (2002) points out that people's life stories

include other life stories, and it is arguable that these other stories include stories about brands as well, as consumers incorporate brands in their storytelling as described above.

Therefore, storytelling and the analysis of consumer stories can be an important mean to get an in-depth understanding of consumer psychology and behaviour (Holt, 2004; Escalas & Stern, 2003) including the investigation of brand or store personality. It is arguable that a connection between personality and a character in a story exists. People assign objects or persons the role of characters in their stories based on the person's or objects behaviour and personality, and based on the experiences people had with that person or object. Further, behaviour is said to be guided by personality (Passer & Smith, 2008) and therefore the story's characters could give indications on the person's or object's personality traits. Therefore, one way of investigating personality is through analysing the characters or roles people assign others to in stories.

Learning the stories consumers construct around brand personalities and how the company brand story is related to the consumer brand story, can provide valuable information on how to adapt marketing efforts and create successful brand experiences and stories. This might not only be the case for local companies but maybe even more for brands existing on a global level. However, research on consumer stories dealing with retail personality is rare and further research in these areas would hence be relevant and interesting for companies.

Comparing the two functions of stories in relation to retail brand personality it could be argued that a change of perspective takes place by having a look at what stories consumers construct related to brands, instead of what stories companies construct. Czarniawska (2004: 62) points out, that stories can be multi-voiced containing different stories around the same course of events. It might be arguable that one level of the story presents stories told from the company's perspective and the other level from the consumer's perspective. However, stories told by consumers around retail brands and especially around retail stores have gained little to no attention in literature so far but present a promising future research area.

1.3 Problem formulation

A review of existing literature shows that a connection between brand personality, the retail industry and stories can be identified. However, as stated before, in previous literature the focus has been on the company perspective and little is known on the consumers' perspective and their creation of stories around retail brands even though enhanced understanding of these would provide valuable information for the creation of successful

branding strategies. Therefore, the focus of this study will have a change of perspective and consider consumer stories. With regards to the retail industry, brand personality has been discovered to be an important mean of differentiation in practice and further, a promising subject of study, but yet the focus of researchers has been mainly on brand products and not on retail brands. In the context of retail brands it has been identified that the store is found to be an important element of image creation. However, little is known on how consumers construct the personality of a store, yet. As a consequence the following study will place special emphasis on store personality as part of retail brand personality to extend previous research. Turning to stories, it can be said that even less is known on if and how consumers construct brand or store personalities in stories. Nevertheless, storytelling is assumed to be an important research device, as people are said to tell stories about their experiences made within a store and based on these experiences they assign the store a role that indicates specific personality traits in accordance with the story's plot content. To contribute to previous research, this study will therefore focus on the construct of store personality in consumer stories. Moreover, it is questionable how it is possible that people in various countries talk about the same retail brand and what constitutes the common ground hereof. Hence, the idea of investigating how people personate a retail store in stories is regarded as quite unique and has not been researched in this way, yet. Therefore, the identified problems and identified knowledge gaps, which are found worth to explore further, lead to the aim of this study presented below.

1.4 Research aim

Based on the identified problems and knowledge gaps, the aim of this study is to identify and analyze the construct of a retailer's store personality in consumer stories and how these stories relate to the retailer's brand story on a global level.

1.5 Research questions

To achieve the aim of the study, the following research questions need to be answered:

- How do consumers personate global retail brands and in particular their stores by using stories?
- How and on what common ground is store personality constructed globally by consumers?
- How do consumers' stories relate to the retail brand story?

1.6 Theoretical and practical relevance

The following study might contribute to theory, as it could provide additional research insights on the applicability of the concept of brand personality in the retail sector. It could especially add to the understanding of the construct of personality with regard to retail stores. In addition, it also might give valuable insights on the construct of a retailer's store personality on a global level. Furthermore, by combining the concept of retail store personality with consumer storytelling it is believed that this could provide additional insight into how consumers create store personalities. Besides, the study might help to understand how narrative analysis of consumer stories in the internet can be used.

For practice, the study might help marketers to create effective marketing strategies including the creation of stories or myths around brands by gaining understanding of what kind of stories consumers construct around retail stores and how store personality is constructed by consumers. Marketers further may get a deeper insight on how consumers make sense of their experiences with the brand and how these experiences are expressed. Through learning how consumers construct the personality of a store in their stories, marketers might see the relevance for creating their own store personality in stories from the company perspective and might gain insights on the interplay or relationship between company's and consumers' brand story. On a more general level, this study is believed to help professionals in the retail industry to understand how consumers personate also retail brands, which might affect marketing strategies and the way relationships to consumers are built. Further, marketers might be able to retrieve from the study what constitutes a common ground on which consumers are able to tell stories about one brand on a global level. Marketers could use this understanding for decision making regarding marketing adaptation strategies.

1.7 Delimitation

The aim of this study is to identify and analyze the store personality construct in consumer stories. Even though various researchers have pointed out that store personality is made up of different components such as store atmosphere or personnel, this study will consider store personality as one concept and will not pay attention to the different elements and how much each of them contributes to store personality. However, future research with a larger time span might explore to what degree each element of store personality is reflected upon in consumer stories.

1.8 Overview of thesis

After having formulated the aim of this study, which was a result of the identified problems, the theory of storytelling as a tool for analysing consumer stories is introduced. The theory of storytelling will support the researchers in interpreting consumer stories and is assumed to help in identifying and analysing the construct of a retailer's store personality. Further, a theoretical base on how consumer stories are read and interpreted is introduced and a short discussion of how characters in a story and personality relate to each other follows. The chapter ends with a framework of story classification.

The theoretical chapter is followed by the methodology. This chapter will provide methodological reasoning on how the aim of this study could be achieved best. The chapter will begin with an argumentation for the research approach that has been chosen, followed by the procedures of data collection and data analysis. The chapter will be completed with a reflection and evaluation of the quality of the research approach.

After the methodology, the analysis of the empirical material, that has been gathered follows. This part is divided into five sections. First, the brand story of the appointed retailer is presented, followed by the consumer stories which are separated into epic, romantic, comic and tragic stories. Every section starts with a detailed analysis of one story that has been chosen to serve as a typical example of the respective genre and is then followed by findings of other stories in the same genre in order to affirm these. Furthermore, every section contains a discussion on the identified retail store personality and a short comment on the situation and purpose of the narrator.

The thesis is completed by a concluding chapter that discusses the findings and contributions of this study and further, future research areas in this field will be identified. In the attached appendix, the empirical material can be found to increase transparency of data collection and analysis.

2 Theoretical Base - Stories and Storytellers

In order to achieve the proposed aim and answer the research question, the next chapter presents the theory that is needed to analyse the empirical material. As it is one of the objectives of this study to learn how consumers construct store personalities in their stories, theoretical concepts regarding narrative analysis are introduced and evaluated in terms of their applicability for this study to analyse and interpret consumer stories.

2.1 Stories and narratives

Scholars define stories in different ways but various ones agreed that stories are emploted narratives (Czarniawska, 2004:17; Gabriel, 2000:239). A narrative, first of all, is usually understood '*as a spoken or written text giving an account of an event/action or series of events/actions, chronologically connected*' (Czarniawska, 2004:17). Additionally, plots entail characters, transformation over time and a form of action (Lawler, 2002:242). Further, story plots may contain '*conflicts, predicaments, trials, coincidences and crises that call for choices, decisions, actions and interactions*' (Gabriel, 2000:239). They present the arguably most important element of a story (Ricoeur, 1991:21), hence, they transform separate events into episodes (Somers & Gibbson, 1994:58), link past and present together (Lawler, 2002:242) and thus, bring all parts into '*a meaningful whole*' (Czarniawska, 2004:7). For this study, narratives present the basis of stories and stories are seen as emploted narratives, following the argument of Czarniawska (2004) and Gabriel (2000).

2.2 Stories and facts

Another often discussed point is the relationship of stories and facts, which has been described as being plastic, as stories interpret events and infuse them with meaning but do not eliminate facts (Gabriel, 2000:6). Additionally, the truth of stories is said to be in its meaning and not in its facts (Reason & Hawkins, 1988), that stories are not concerned with facts as information but with facts as experience (Benjamin, 1968:6) and that what matters is the interpretation of these experiences (Lawler, 2002:243). Further, it is worth noticing that by interpreting and reworking stories the researcher actively engages in the co-production of the stories (ibid).

2.3 Stories and sense-making

Departing from a point of view that stories are infused with meaning, it is proposed that sense-making of stories takes place on two levels as narrator and audience or researchers are involved in a story and its sense-making process. Firstly, the storyteller makes sense of his experiences and interprets these by telling a story which has been called poetic interpretation (Gabriel, 2000:35). Secondly, the audience, or in this study the researcher, interprets the stories told by the storyteller. This process is called analytical interpretation by Gabriel (2000:43). To interpret and analyse stories appropriately it is hence regarded as important to consider both of the sense-making levels and what processes and tools are employed and therefore, the following sections will have a closer look at poetic and analytical interpretation.

2.3.1 Poetic interpretation

Poetic interpretation, where poetry refers to '*the art of moulding something meaningful out of relatively inert material*' (Gabriel, 2000:56), is used to describe the process in which the storyteller interprets an event and tries to discover the underlying meaning (Gabriel, 2000:35). Gabriel argues that to make sense of their experiences persons construct stories and try to see beyond the literal truth of events and find a deeper more powerful truth (ibid). Further, persons align single events in a meaningful way to make sense out of them for themselves and for the audience (Gabriel, 2000:43). Different persons however may interpret and make sense of the same event in different ways (Gabriel, 2000:33) which leads to differing stories told about one and the same event.

To generate meaning storytellers use poetic (Gabriel, 2000:56) and rhetoric tropes (Czarniawska 2004:20) as tools or interpretive devices. Tropes are figurative expressions and '*mark various turns of purely literal expressions*' (ibid). They are applied to make sense or to link different parts of the story together and without them '*no symbolic, rhetorical or narrative elaboration can be effective*' (Gabriel, 2000:36). Gabriel identified eight poetic tropes, being attribution of motive, attribution of causal connection, attribution of responsibility namely blame and credit, attribution of unity, attribution of fixed qualities especially in opposition, attribution of emotion, attribution of agency and attribution of providential significance (ibid). These poetic tropes might be used by the storyteller in combination with figurative expressions, rhetorical tropes, such as metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche or irony (Czarniawska, 2004:20).

Further, it has been suggested that persons create stories using widely circulating symbols (Lawler, 2002:253; Bourdieu, 1984), 'things' which have collective symbolic meaning such as objects referring to a certain class of society. Moreover, people are not independent of their environment, but are influenced by a collective set of meanings when generating stories (ibid). Acknowledging the processes by which persons make-sense of their experiences in stories, will improve the analytical interpretation of these.

2.3.2 Analytic interpretation

Analytical interpretation aims at discovering the underlying meaning presented in stories which might not have been found out by the storyteller him-/herself or his/her audience yet (Gabriel, 2000:43). The researcher is aiming at understanding why people ascribe meaning to certain events and whether they have a deeper layer of significance. Moreover, the researcher interprets to understand the truths behind the changes undergone by meaning (ibid). Czarniawska (2004:84), based on Culler (1977), summarizes the aim of story interpretation by saying that it is to '*discover the structures and conventions of social discourse which enable them to have the meanings they do*'.

Structural analysis

One traditional way of analytical interpretation and the analysis of stories followed by many sociologists is structural analysis, which is closely related to semiology and formalism (Czarniawska, 2004:76). Structural theorists see actors or characters in stories as results of action, and not only of single actions but of a series of actions (Czarniawska, 2004:84 based on Propp (1968) and Greimas & Courtès (1982)). Greimas and Courtès (1982) however, substituted the word actors by actants, because actants can refer to humans as well as objects or concepts and are defined as '*that which accomplishes or undergoes an act*' (Greimas & Courtès, 1982 in Czarniawska, 2004:84). Through this replacement, structural analysis became also suitable for the study of technology and science, since often objects or concepts are investigated (Czarniawska, 2004:84), and it could be further argued that it is appropriate for the study of business and business concepts, including brands and store personality, for the same reason as well. Furthermore, theorists argue that '*actants become characters if they manage to keep the same (or the same but transformed) role through a series of actions or if their performance leads to acquisition of competence*' (ibid). However, the connection of events or series of actions in stories are achieved through emplotment and it is therefore arguable that the plot produces the characters and that this kind of connections between the events or series deserves special attention in the interpreting and analysing process of stories (ibid).

Dramaturgical analysis

Focusing on the analysis of a story's plot and characters, dramaturgical analysis might offer a suitable approach to read and interpret consumer stories as it aims at understanding the roles, scenes, scripts and performances of people when interacting with each other (Bryman & Bell, 2007:547). It is further arguable that these social interactions also take place within the stories where actants take on roles and are portrayed in different scenes with various scripts. To understand concepts in drama theory and consumer psychology in relation to storytelling, Woodside et al. (2008:110) extended the dramaturgical framework by Moiso and Arnould (2005) (see figure 1). In their framework, firstly a division is made between the observable elements of a drama or story and the unobservable. Within the framework 'drama structure' refers to the set of theatrical components such as setting and actors. 'Drama interaction' is the level of consumer involvement or activities and 'drama content' refers to the cultural resources (Woodside et al. 2008:110).

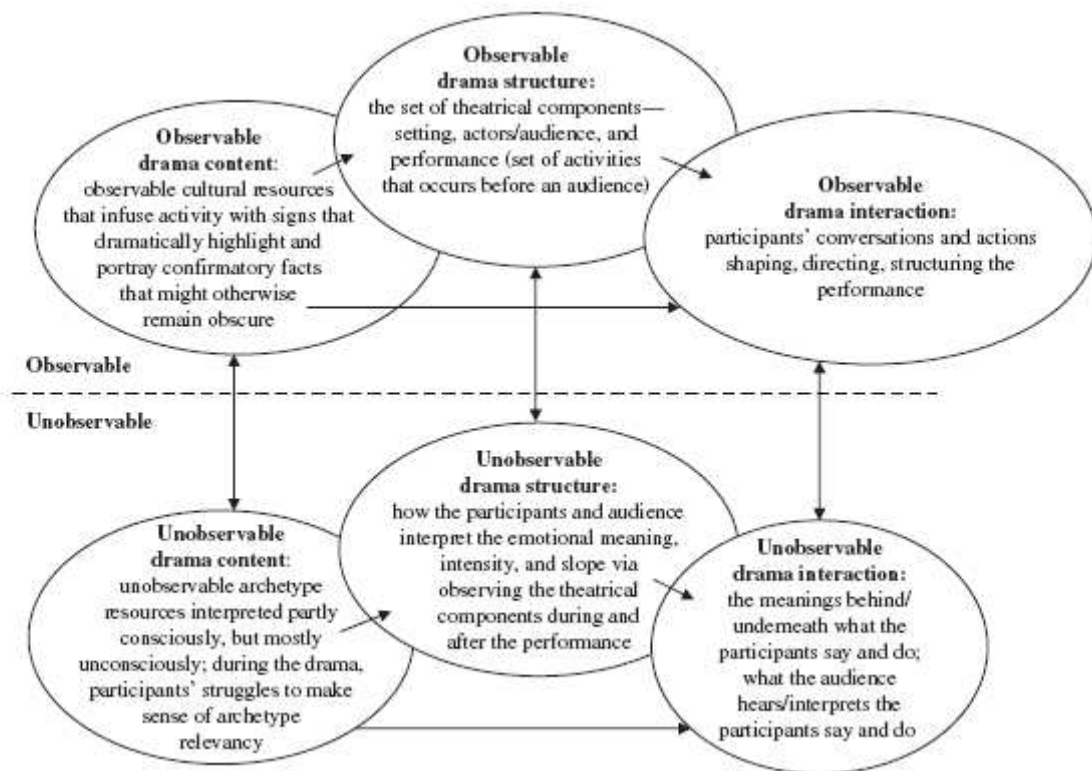


Figure 1: Extended dramaturgical framework in marketing and consumer psychology (Woodside et al, 2008)

Further, the framework points to the importance of archetypes as a tool for sense-making and also points to the consumers' desires to archetype fulfilment (Woodside et al 2008:112). Substituting actors by actants, this framework might offer a suitable opportunity to structure the analysis of consumer stories about brand experiences and might present a framework for

reading consumer stories from the perspectives of narrator, audience and researcher to get access to underlying or hidden 'meaning'.

2.4 Relation between character and personality

The aim of the study is to analyse the store personality construct in consumer stories using narrative analysis. It is arguable that a connection between personality and a character in a story exists and that through the roles assigned to in stories, conclusions can be drawn on the personality. Persons interpret the world and their experiences poetically to make sense out of them and tell stories in which they assign roles to themselves and others, including objects or brands (Gabriel, 2000; Czarniawska, 2004). They assign objects or persons the role of characters in their stories based on the person's or objects behaviour and personality and based on the experiences people had with that person or object (ibid). To make-sense of behaviour of others or objects, people look for causal information in behaviour, which is called attribution in social psychology (Culpeper, 1996), and based on that information people attribute a certain role to that other person or object in their stories. In a reverse process, it is possible to investigate the characters in stories and through analysis reveal his/her behaviour and personality traits of the character. Further, behaviour is said to be guided by personality (Passer & Smith, 2008) and therefore the characters behaviour can also give indications on the person's or object's personality traits. This notion is supported by Culpeper (1996) and Van Peer (1989:9). The latter points out that technically a character '*is what readers infer from words, sentences, paragraphs and textual composition depicting, describing or suggesting actions, thoughts, utterances or feelings of a protagonist*' (ibid:9). Hence, he concludes that a text can determine the kind of '*picture*' the author may create of characters (ibid: 9). Moreover, Culpeper (1996: 353) supports the assumption that a character's behaviour is '*diagnostic of personality*'. He comes to the conclusion that people attribute a character a certain personality in accordance with its behaviour (ibid). He further points out that the behaviour of a character in a text can give stronger indications on its personality than can be inferred from persons in real life as '*character behaviours have greater significance*' (Culpeper, 1996:353). Thus, one might confirm that conclusions on personality can be drawn by analysing characters in stories.

2.5 Classification of stories

After reading and analysing stories using dramaturgical analysis, stories might be classified according to their various poetic modes or ways of infusing meaning based on structural and thematic aspects. Gabriel (2000:60) suggested a typology to classify stories according to five

features being the protagonist, a predicament, attempts to resolve the predicament, the outcome of these attempts and the reactions of the protagonist (Gabriel, 2000). The protagonist of a story is the leading or main character which might be the narrator him-/herself but could also be another person or object. He argues further that stories above all can be distinguished by their emotional tone (ibid). For instance, stories which generate pride in the narrator and were meant to generate admiration in the reader could be classified as epic stories (ibid). In contrast, a comic story is identifiable by generating mirth and amusement; and a tragic story, is normally found by generating pity or sorrow (ibid). Hence, Gabriel (2000: 60) points out that *'each type of story builds a rather different type of relationship between narrator and audience'* and thus, each type of story represents a different poetic mode in order to infuse meaning. In total, Gabriel (2000: 84/85) identified four generic poetic modes being comic, tragic, epic and romantic and four secondary poetic modes being humour, cook-up, tragic-comic and epic-comic. However, in order to reveal a clear-cut classification when analysing stories and to reinforce the distinct elements of the poetic modes it might be arguable to focus on the four main generic poetic modes, namely comic, tragic, epic and romantic when analysing consumer stories. The generic modes with the according features are presented in the table beneath:

	Comic	Tragic	Epic	Romantic
Protagonist	Deserving victim, fool	Non-deserving victim	Hero	Love object
Other character	Trickster	Villain, supportive helper	Rescue object, assistant, villain	Gift-giver, lover, injured or sick person
Plot focus	Misfortune as deserved chastisement	Undeserved misfortune, trauma	Achievement, noble victory, success	Love triumphant, misfortune conquered by love
Predicament	Accident, mistake, coincidence. Repetition, the unexpected and unpredictable	Crime, accident, insult, injury, loss, mistake, repetition, misrecognition	Contest, challenge, trial, test, mission, quest, sacrifice	Gift, romantic fantasy, falling in love, reciprocation, recognition
Poetic tropes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. providential significance 2. unity 3. agency before misfortune 4. denial of agency during misfortune 5. fixed qualities (pomposity, arrogance, vanity. Etc) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. malevolent fate 2. blame 3. unity 4. motive(to the villain) 5. fixed qualities by juxtaposition(victim: noble, decent, worthy, good; villain: evil, devious, mean etc.) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. agency 2. motive 3. credit 4. fixed qualities (nobility, courage, loyalty, selflessness, honour, ambition) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. emotion (loving, caring) 2. motive 3. credit(worthy love object) 4. fixed qualities (gratitude, caring, loving, vulnerable, pathetic)
Emotions	Mirth, aggression, (hate), scorn	Sorrow, pity, fear, anger, pathos	Pride, admiration, nostalgia, (envy)	Love, care, kindness, generosity, gratitude, (nostalgia)

Table 1: Generic poetic modes (Gabriel 2000: 84)

As identified earlier, each type of story casts the protagonist and supporting persons in different roles, uses a distinct set of poetic tropes and causes specific emotional responses in the reader. Gabriel further (2000) points to the interdependence of the different characters in a story, meaning that the protagonist and the supporting actants are dependent on each other's role such as fool and trickster or victim and villain. This interdependence enables to draw conclusions on the roles assigned to actants in a story even if only one role seems to be explicitly defined. Moreover, stories and the four poetic modes differ in relation to structural aspects such as cast, predicament and emotions as well as in thematic aspects (Woodside et al. 2008) and that both structure and topic of a story might work as genre indicators. Further, it is questionable whether the narrator and the reader always assign stories as belonging to the same category or whether the perspective might influence the classification. Paul Ricoeur (1970: 8), for example, explains that the audience may test the narrator's story and try it out in their own imagination (ibid). If then the audience's perspective is in line with the narrators point of view, they may accept it, but if not they may actually reject or modify it (ibid) and consequently might classify a story as belonging to a different genre. To point out more about the structural and thematic differences between the four generic modes, each mode will be described in more detail in the following.

2.5.1 The comic story: The protagonist as deserving victim or fool

As already said previously, the comic story is identifiable by generating mirth, amusement and often laughter (Gabriel, 2000:61). In the simplest form, the comic story involves a protagonist who acts as a fool or deserving victim and a predicament that is a misfortune (ibid). The misfortune can be, for instance, an accident or a mistaken action, which usually is regarded as foolish within societies' norm system, but unintentionally done by the protagonist and therefore, triggers amusement or laughter in the reader (ibid). Hobbes (1651/1962) points out that the peoples' own '*imperfections are forgotten as (...) [they] relish in the misfortune of others*'. Therefore, laughter can be seen, above all, as '*corrective*' (Bergson, 1980: 187). According to Bergson (1980:187), by laughter, '*society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it*.' Hence, people laugh to release their own tension caused by their own imperfection. For example, when someone is slipping on a banana skin, he/she transfers himself/herself into an inert physical body being at the mercy of its human weak mechanics (ibid) and thus, by being both agent, though unwitting, and victim he/she causes amusement and laughter. The victim's predicament must be seen as 'deserved' by the reader, so that the victim is regarded as 'deserving fool' who is bringing misfortune or its own 'punishment' to him or herself (Gabriel, 2000). However, it could also be that another character, a trickster, is the reason for the protagonist's misfortune. Very often the trickster is characterized as being clever, deceitful, and selfish (Caroll, 1981). In many myth stories the trickster is portrayed as

someone or something that lures the victim into a trap in order to gratify his/her own desires (ibid). However, Carroll (1981:305) states that in some cases the trickster can also act as a 'culture-hero' who makes the world 'habitable' for humans by providing 'those things that make human society possible'. In conjunction with a comic story, the trickster can be seen as a cause of the victim's misfortune, but in the end the comic quality results from the agency of the victim. This can be generated by the poetic trope of agency. In order to be casted as 'deserving' victim or fool, he or she needs to seem active, though unwitting, in his or her misfortune (Gabriel, 2000). However, at the same time, misfortune also has to be denied by him/her, in order to reduce the misfortune to something that has happened to him/her out of his/her own human control (ibid). It even increases the level of amusement if the victim regards his/her foolish action as something that is 'cool' or 'fashionable' (ibid).

2.5.2 The tragic story: The protagonist as undeserving victim

Instead of the laughter and amusement that the comic story causes, tragic stories are found to generate grief, pain, anger and shame (Gabriel, 2000: 70). However, comic and tragic stories have several features in common. For instance, tragic stories are also the result of human misfortune and as well deal with the unintended consequences of human action (ibid). Tragic stories, moreover, also put the protagonist into the role of a victim, but compared to the comic story, the victim is not casted as deserving his or her misfortune; instead he/she undeservingly suffers misfortune (ibid). The misfortune that occurs to the protagonist causes him or her painful trauma or shock and is usually the result of unjustified punishment (ibid). The predicament that causes the misfortune can be for example an accident, a crime or an insult, which can lead to different emotional reactions of the reader. For instance, the reader may feel pity when the protagonist gets into a natural catastrophe like a heavy thunderstorm, but the reader may feel angry when the protagonist gets hurt as a result of criminal behaviour (ibid). When a tragic story deals with the latter, normally another character is the reason for the protagonist's suffering. This character is then referred to as the villain (ibid). The villain is casted as the 'assailant' who deliberately hurts or insults the protagonist (ibid: 71). The key poetic trope used in such tragic stories is the attribution of blame to the person, object or fate that can be made responsible for the victim's undeserved misfortune (ibid). However, these kinds of stories are not as tragic as those ones known from ancient Greece times. Hence, it seems that not all tragic stories share the same qualities. Frye (1957), therefore, points out two different types of tragic modes drawn from the importance of the victim in relation to the audience. The first type of tragic story is referred to as a high mimetic story and deals with heroic characters such as Othello and their downfalls, mixing heroic actions with a flaw of the hero (ibid). This type is in contrast to the second type, the low mimetic tragedy, in which the protagonist, that faces the misfortune caused by some

villain, is a person whom the reader regards as someone like him or herself (ibid). The low mimetic story can also be described as pathos (ibid). According to Frye (1957:38), '*pathos presents its hero as isolated by a weakness which appeals to our sympathy because it is our own level of experience*'.

2.5.3 The epic story: The protagonist as hero

The epic or heroic story is characterized by its focus on agency and especially on heroic achievements such as mission accomplished, challenges met or crisis resolved (Gabriel, 2000: 74). Similar to the comic and tragic stories, epic stories may evolve from dramas or crisis, but in contrast to the others, the highlight of the epic story is on the epic quest; the '*resolution of the crisis through acts of courage, force, or wit*' (ibid: 74). Further, the emotional tone is quite different compared to comic and tragic as epic stories generate pride and admiration (ibid). The protagonist of epic stories is the hero who is often characterized by his or her '*perseverance in the face of the adversity, courage and dedication to the task*' (ibid: 76). In no other story type is the protagonist pronounced so positively as in the role of the hero. He or she is usually presented as someone that is '*loyal, impetuous, decisive, wise, controlled, dedicated, compassionate, approachable, loving, and caring*' (Gabriel, 2000:76). Such qualities never enter into a conflict with each other or lead to self-doubts of the hero (ibid). Therefore, the plot of an epic story is rather straightforward, not ambivalent and only revolves around success or failure of the hero, which is dependent on the qualities attributed to the hero. Hence, defeats are attributed to be very important parts within epic stories (ibid). Thus, Gabriel (2000:77) states that victories in epic stories have to be achieved in great style, so that at the end the hero is irrepressibly admired. Also other characters exist in epic stories. These could be, for instance, a villain that causes the crisis that has to be resolved by the hero, or an assistant who helps the hero to overcome the challenge.

2.5.4 The romantic story: The protagonist as love object

Quite different from the other generic poetic modes that often evolve from conflicts or crisis, romantic stories usually do not contain comparable conflicts or crisis (Gabriel, 2000). The protagonist appears to confront no predicament and instead the plot revolves around romantic love (ibid). Also the emotional tone of romantic stories is distinct. The tone is characterized by being very gentle, showing tender feelings and is sometimes even sentimental (ibid). However, Gabriel (2000:82) also points to the vulnerability of the loving person who can be challenged in a way that he or she loses his/her rationale viewpoint and thus, '*human emotions, such as compassion, gratitude, and love, become the instigators of altruistic action in lieu of rational-instrumental factors (...)*' (Gabriel, 2000:82). Nevertheless, Gabriel (2000:82) notes that romantic stories seem to proclaim that '*love conquers all: the*

hardships and injustices of work, the pains inflicted on us by culture, fortune, and nature, they all can be endured and even overcome with the assistance of love.' Therefore, romantic stories also represent an approach of dealing with suffering and misfortune and illustrate that the loving character feels protective of the objects of love and tries to shelter them from criticism by others, by loving them (ibid). Thus, Gabriel (2000:83) concludes that within romantic stories, love is not an affliction, but a '*redemptive power*'.

In sum, it could be said that all four generic poetic modes are considerably different from each other and all have very distinct ways of turning facts into meaningful and emotionally charged stories. Each mode has a different character as protagonist that has to deal with a different predicament and other characters that influence his or her actions.

The combination of dramaturgical analysis and story classification according to poetic modes will enhance to group stories with similar patterns and further might help to crystallize personality traits through the roles assigned to store brands and their underlying meaning in consumer stories.

2.6 Consumption as heroic quest narrative

An additional approach of classifying and categorizing stories worth noticing derives from consumer behaviour research in which scholars have claimed that people's consumption follows the heroic quest narrative (Hirschmann, 1989:644). In short, the heroic quest narrative deals with a protagonist who is set apart from his followers and faced with a threat he/she needs to overcome. The protagonist might receive help from others during the quest, is tested throughout and might achieve status transition upon the successful completion of the task or challenge (Hirschmann, 1989:640). Consequently, consumer's consumption stories might follow the heroic quest narrative as well where the consumer is the protagonist and others, including objects or brands, might take on supporting roles. Even though this point of view predetermines the consumer to take on the role of the protagonist in stories, it is still seen as compatible with the typology of stories presented before as it might fit the epic mode and could further be analysed dramaturgically. The difference between the epic quest presented above and the consumption quest, might lie in the degree of the presented challenge and the force needed to overcome this challenge, as in consumption quests, the quest is not seen to be as challenging as in the epic genre and the hero does not need to embrace as much strength and courage. However, both quests present a challenge for the protagonist and by achieving the task and overcoming the challenge the protagonist turns into a hero in both the epic and the consumption quest narrative. It has further been

investigated that various consecutive theories in consumer behaviour, which mostly are concerned with the buying decision process, follow the heroic quest narrative (Hirschman, 1989:6). Therefore, it could be argued that from a company's point of view the heroic quest narrative presents the market oriented view of the buying process, where the consumer is the 'hero', or also often called 'king', and the company is the helper or saviour. Consequently, brand or marketing stories might follow the heroic quest structure and as a consequence if consumer stories reproduce the brand story, they might also follow the heroic quest narrative.

3 Methodology

The following chapter will reason for the research approach chosen and will further discuss the data collection and data analysis procedure seen as most appropriate for this study. This chapter will end with a critical reflection and evaluation of the quality of the research approach.

3.1 Research approach

The research approach should be crafted to most likely achieve the study's purpose (Easterby-Smith, 2002:43). The aim of this study is to identify the construct of a retailer's store personality in stories from a consumer perspective and as the purpose already denotes, store personality is seen as a socially constructed concept and not as an already existing one. Being part of the image, store and brand personality are assigned to brands by consumers which further points to the constructed nature of the concept, which refers to the ontological notion of constructionism that 'categories that people employ in helping them to understand the natural and social world are in fact social products' (Bryman & Bell, 2003: 21)¹. Further, stories are seen as constructed by the narrator, the audience and the researcher and consequently are also seen as a socially constructed category. Lastly, as the aim of the study is to investigate people's meaning and how they create store personality in their stories, the focus lies on the construction and process of these, which points to a social constructionist point of view as well. These assumptions about the nature of reality and of the problem presented in this study are connected to the assumption that the best way of understanding reality and the problem is interpretation of sense data and the epistemological position of interpretivism (Bryman & Bell 2003: 16). It is therefore assumed that, in order to enquire how consumers construct store personality, it is not enough to look at the presented but at deeper meanings and significances that are obtained by interpretation of gathered raw material. This means that data collection on consumer's store personality constructs goes together with data production through its interpretation. By engaging in the interpretation of data, the researcher becomes an active part of data production and consequently co-produces the research findings (Lawler, 2002:243). As a consequence, in Esterby-Smith's matrix of research philosophies (2002: 55) with positivist and social-constructionist on the one dimension and researcher's role as detached or involved on the other dimension, this

¹ The term constructionism has been used in literature to denote epistemological and ontological assumptions (Esterby-Smith, 2002 ;33 /Bryman&Bell, 2003; 25). For this study constructionism refers to assumptions about the world and reality, which is constructed inter-subjectively, and therefore relates to ontological assumptions

study would be found in the quadrant of social-constructionist point of view and involved researcher.

3.1.1 Qualitative approach

The nature of the problem, consumer's construct of store personality, is seen as socially constructed and the aim of this study is to obtain knowledge about this construct. This knowledge is gained through understanding the inner 'meaning' of the consumers' perspective in their stories. As 'meaning' usually is not obviously identifiable and needs further interpretation on the data collected, a qualitative approach is regarded as the right strategy to reveal 'meaning'. As Easterby-Smith (2002:3) points out, '*qualitative methods might concentrate on exploring in much greater depth the nature and origins of people's viewpoints.*' Therefore, a qualitative approach, which '*is sensitive to how participants interpret their social world*' (Bryman&Bell, 2003:25), which places emphasis on understanding meaning compared to numbers (ibid) and where qualitative data is gathered is seen as an appropriate choice.

Abductive approach- theory in relation to research

One way of achieving the research aim could be to approach the research without any pre-established theory but generate theoretical assumptions based on the empirical data, which would be an inductive research strategy (Bryman & Bell, 2003). As this strategy is closely related to the qualitative approach followed in this study and suits the aim of not testing but generating theoretical concepts or hypotheses, it presents an appropriate possibility. However, as a number of theoretical concepts or frameworks, have been identified in literature which could be of use for this study and its analysis of stories, an abductive approach was suggested. Even though the abductive approach departs with a pre-conceptual framework, it is more closely related to an inductive than deductive approach as it is aimed at generating not testing theoretical concepts (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). The analytical framework used is seen as a preconception and as a guideline for the researcher. In addition, it is developed further by what is discovered in the empirical analysis and its interpretation (ibid). According to Dubois and Gaade (2002) this approach '*creates fruitful cross-fertilization where new combinations are developed through a mixture of established theoretical models and new concepts derived from the confrontation with reality*' (559). Further, it has been argued that this approach where the researcher goes back and forth between theory and empirical material enhances the understanding of both (ibid). In accordance with the adductive approach, a point of departure was taken following the theoretical concepts that people conceive of stores and brands as having a personality and talk about their experiences with these in form of stories. Further, Gabriel's (2000) framework

of poetic modes has been used as a guideline on how to group and classify consumer stories in this study and it further helped to draw conclusions on H&M's store personality based on the characters assigned to in the different story genres. However, these pre-existing concepts were not tested but rather used to generate new insights on how consumers construct store personality by combining them as guidelines throughout the research, which demonstrates the abductive approach chosen.

3.1.2 Text as empirical material

To access store personality from a consumer perspective it is of interest to assess consumers' brand image and their attitudes towards the brand as store personality is seen as a constructed concept expressed in consumers' attitudes. Attitudes are *'a cognition, often with some degree of aversion or attraction (emotional valence), that reflects the classification and evaluation of objects and events. While attitudes logically are hypothetical constructs (i.e., they are inferred but not objectively observable), they are manifested in conscious experience or verbal reports'* (Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, 2009:1). Being evaluations of objects or experiences, attitudes are seen as representations of 'meanings' from consumer's perspective. Therefore, the empirical data desired should provide information on consumers' thoughts and attitudes. As it is difficult to observe behaviour and thereby understand attitudes; the material to be investigated should be textual and produced by consumers as it has been stated above that attitudes are presented in verbal reports. Further, to understand how consumers assign meaning to objects and their experiences with the stores and to understand social constructs such as personality, social constructs such as language, texts or documents might give access to these (Thompson et al. 1994). A qualitative strategy usually places emphasis on the interpretation of words in order to uncover in-depth views of people (Bryman & Bell, 2003) and points to the importance of language. Thus, it often deals with the property of an individual's creation, e.g. text or stories. To be able to analyse empirical material on consumers' attitudes about store personality and on their construct of store personality consequently, the data to be collected needs to be conveying consumers 'meanings', which is closely related to textual material (Bryman & Bell, 2003: 302). The text enables the researcher not only to get to know a person's experiences from his/her story, but more importantly to encode it and reveal hidden beliefs of this person (ibid). Further, stories are said to give access to deeper truths-the truths of experience and events (Gabriel, 2009). Therefore, analysing and interpreting consumers' stories is viewed as a good mean to uncover consumer's hidden meanings and attitudes concerning store personality.

3.1.3 Case study and narrative analysis

To identify the construct of a retailer's store personality from a consumer perspective, a case study of one retail brand and its store personality as constructed by consumers is chosen as a research strategy. A case study '*focuses on understanding dynamics within single settings*' (Eisenhardt, 1989:534) and gives answers to 'how' or 'why' questions (Yin, 2003) and as the aim is to reveal how consumers construct store personality in their stories a case study provides a suitable research strategy. A retailer can be seen as a case since cases can be of populations, such as companies (Ragin & Becker, 1992). Further, a retailer's brand, its brand image and store personality can be seen as cases within a case because cases of conceptual categories, such as brand image or store personality, can be examined as well (ibid).

Combining a case study strategy with narrative analysis might be a promising option since it has been argued that a connection between case study and storytelling exists, as cases are said to tell their own stories (Stake, 2005:456). Further, researchers should pick out stories as it is not possible to tell the whole story a case entails and forecasting the order and size of the story prevents from gathering too much data (ibid). As the aim of this study is to investigate store personality, the focus within the case study will be on store personality stories told by the case.

Case/retailer selection

In the case selection process, the concept of population is argued to be crucial, as it defines the group from which a sample can be drawn (Eisenhardt, 1989). For this study the population would consist of retailers which operate on a global level under the same name. However, as it is of interest to investigate a retailer's store personality on a global level, a retail sector which is less influenced by cultural differences might be favourable. A case of an industry which is less culturally bound will decrease the influence of culture on the findings and investigation. As the fashion industry is said to be less culturally bound, a fashion retailer will be the subject of inspection in this case study. Moreover, it could be argued that the purchase process of fashion garments is influenced more by emotions than the purchase of other commodities, emphasising the importance of brand and store personality in that sector. Further, according to Holt (2004), brands which people use for self-expression means, including fashion, are more often related to myths and stories around the brand and it is therefore assumed that also consumers construct more stories around this kind of retail brand.

It has been argued that a case from which one can learn a lot (Stake, 2005) and which might represent an extreme situation (Eisenhardt, 1989) is a good option to choose. Due to its fast and successful global expansion, which arguably could be seen as an extreme situation within its industry, the Swedish fashion retailer H&M was chosen for this study. Further, due to its successful expansion, H&M is seen as a case which might present numerous learning opportunities. H&M is therefore regarded as a case of a retailer in this study, which enables to study the concept of store personality in consumer stories as a sub-case or case within the case.

3.2 Data collection procedure

To collect material on consumers' sense-making regarding store personality, expressed in consumers' attitudes about store personality, the collection of consumer stories has been argued to present a promising method. When collecting stories, a decision between two main approaches has to be made (Czarniawska, 2004: 43) The first way of story collection is by elicitation, where stories are collected by asking specific questions (Gabriel 2000: 137). Even though this collection method might generate a great amount of material suited to the researcher's purpose, it faces the risk that the stories collected have been influenced by what the researcher defined as important or meaningful (ibid). In contrast the second option of story collection, 'in situ', which means the recording of stories as they are (Bryman & Bell 2007:139) is assumed to be less obtrusive and therefore chosen as a collection method for this study. Further, it should be pointed out that hence stories are suggested to be collected in written compared to the oral form, the problem of recoding stories when they occur is decreased.

3.2.1 Consumer blogs

An analysis of consumer blogs is argued to allow obtaining these consumer stories including the desired information on consumers' attitudes. Blogs refer to websites that contain a series of regularly updated, reverse chronologically ordered story entries, which are usually written by a single author (Bar-Ilan, 2005; Herring et al. 2005; Serfarty, 2004). Those applications are characterized by instant text and graphic publishing, an archiving system organized by date and to which other readers can give comments through a feedback mechanism.

Blogs are arguably very suitable places to conduct research as they provide naturalistic data in textual form, allowing people to stay anonymous in the online context. As a consequence of the anonymity people are said to express themselves more freely as no interference or influence from the outside or from the researchers takes place (Hookway, 2008). Moreover,

blogs typically take the form of self-narratives, where private and intimate content about lived experience, beliefs, and attitudes is published worldwide, often in a daily, weekly or monthly manner (Hookway, 2008; Woodside, 2008). Hence, blogs have been acknowledged as: *'a socially transformative capacity, conceptualized as a new genre of open-access, participatory journalism'* (MacDougall, 2005; Wall, 2005); a *'reinvigorating [force to] a flagging public sphere'* (Ó Baoill, 2004); *'encouraging civic and political engagement'* (Kahn & Kellner, 2004; Kerbel & Bloom, 2005); *'creating new forms of community'* (Blanchard, 2004; Wei, 2004) *and identity'* (Bortree, 2005; Hevern, 2004); and *'as a new medium for facilitating knowledge production (...)'* (Hookway, 2008). Therefore, it could be argued that blogs could be seen as important and promising cultural artefacts, allowing for public discourse about various topics including brands. Consequently, blogs are very useful as a technique for collecting data about peoples' everyday life experiences and as means to understand consumers as observers and informants of social life. Therefore, they are also seen as useful to collect consumer stories, which deal with experiences made with retail brands and stores, to uncover the construct of store personality.

An advantage of these kinds of application is that they enable even users with low technical competence to create and regularly update online material (Thelwall & Wouters, 2005). Hence, it is believed that consumers with diversified backgrounds might be involved in these applications and that they are not limited to certain social strata. In addition to the diversity of the population, the online sphere allows the researchers to have access to populations otherwise geographically or socially removed from the researcher (Hessler et al. 2003; Mann & Stewart, 2000), as blogs are mostly globally accessible (Hookway, 2008). As the aim was to identify H&M's store personality in consumer stories on a global level, the geographically independent accessibility of blogs was seen as an advantage and a helpful tool in obtaining stories from consumers around the world.

3.2.2 Search path

During the story collection process the unit of analysis should be kept in mind. According to Gabriel (2000:140) those units may be individuals, organizations, individual stories, stories on specific incidents or specific story themes. As this study is a case study of consumer's accounts on store personality, the unit of analysis could be argued to be a specific story theme, being store stories which are seen as stories told around experiences in the retail store. Further, these store stories should be told by consumers and be about H&M, the company chosen as a case and as relatively recent stories were desired, the time span was set to be between 2007 and 2009.

In order to find blog entries which actually dealt with H&M's store, blog search engines were used as an aided tool. Among others, most commonly Blogsearch.google.com, blogdigger.com or technocrati.com were consulted. To further reduce the amount of blogs that were found after typing in H&M and to search more purposively, keywords, such as store or experience, were added to the query. Using search engines reduced the findings and matched them more adequately with the researcher's aim, however, by making use of them the researcher adapted the definition of 'blogs' and what to be included in this category of the search engine. Further, it should be pointed out that not all bloggers choose to list their blogs in these search engines and by solely using these devices the scope of results might be limited. As a consequence in this study it was not only relied on search engines but also made use of alternative search paths, such as following links on consumer blogs to other consumer blogs.

3.2.3 Story selection

The criteria for the selection of stories for the analysis were that they firstly needed to be in English and secondly they had to comply with the requirements set for a text to be a story. As described in the theoretical base, stories are defined as emplotted narratives (Gabriel, 2000; Czarniawska, 2004) and therefore consumer blog stories needed to comply with the requirement of containing a plot with characters, transformation over time and some kind of action. Further, stories needed to be about consumer's experiences with the store not with the brand in general. Furthermore, as the purpose was to see how consumers construct store personality on a global level, consumer blog stories were collected regarding the country of origin of the narrator. The aim was to find stories of all continents where H&M is present, being North America, Europe, Middle East and Asia. However, as H&M's main markets are in Europe and North America, the majority of the experiences were made in stores in those markets but the narrators were not necessarily American or European respectively, therefore the focus was on the origin of the narrator. As the age of the blogger is not always visible on the website, age was not a criterion for story selection. Another criterion for story selection was that bloggers were not paid by H&M and even though this is difficult to observe, advertisements or numerous blog stories about H&M by one author were seen as indicators of a commercial relationship between the company and the blogger and these blog stories were consequently eliminated from the pool of stories.

Moreover, stories at a later stage were chosen according to whether they supported an already identified pattern or presented a new but worth investigating plot and/or topic. Stories were collected as long as new patterns were emerging and material was needed to support

the already identified ones. When the point was reached that sufficient stories were found presenting similar structures and topics and new material only confirmed findings but did not add new insights anymore, the data collection was terminated.

Gender aspect

Consumer blog stories were chosen without regards to the gender of the author as differences in storytelling related to gender was not a point of observation in this study. Therefore, stories were selected only based on the criteria described above, neglecting the gender aspect. Having selected more stories written by women was therefore not deliberately done but might be in correspondence with the observation that the majority of consumer stories about this fashion retailer were written by women.

3.2.4 Ethical considerations

When collecting and analyzing blogs and other online contexts it has to be taken into consideration what the conventional notions of public and private mean. There are several views on what can be regarded as public or private. However, most commonly researchers argue that as long as the material is publicly available in the internet, participant consent is not necessary (Sudweeks & Rafaeli, 1995; Walther, 2002). This goes together with the position that online context is analogous to public media, where observations and recording of publicly accessible content is handled like research on TV or radio content (Hookway, 2008). Blogs are normally located within the public domain, where everyone has access to, so that it can be argued that participant consent is not necessary. Moreover, blogging is seen as a public act where blog authors especially want that others read and comment on their blog entry. To comply with the generally accepted guidelines, for this study, only stories retrieved from publicly accessible websites were chosen.

3.3 Data analysis procedure

As explained in the previous chapters, some of the texts produced by consumers can be classified as stories, defined in social research as emploted narratives (Czarniawska, 2004). The analysis of these stories is *'an approach to the elicitation and analysis of language that is sensitive to the senses of temporal sequence that people detect in their lives surrounding episodes'* (Bryman & Bell 2007: 541) and is therefore one of the few approaches which takes the episodic character of persons' lives into account. Further, narrative analysis offers a suitable tool for analysing consumers as it is argued that people use stories to make sense of and interpret their experiences and the world (Lawler, 2002). To investigate which genre consumers use and what role they assign to the store in their self-stories gives indications on

how consumers view and construct store personality. The classification of stories and the search for patterns further helps to compare findings on a global level.

To be able to classify and group stories together, stories were read following the dramaturgical framework (Woodside et al. 2008) to identify observable and unobservable content, structure and interactions of the story. To improve understanding stories were read several times, following one of the principles of the hermeneutic circle, which argues that the whole(story) can only be understood if its separate parts are understood, and separate parts are understood with the help of the whole (story) (Thompson et al. 1994).

Further, to analyse whether stories can be classified as one of Gabriel's poetic modes (2000), three tools were used. Firstly, the structure of a story was identified to give hints towards the stories genre and therefore, stories were segmented into story cast, plot focus, predicament, poetic tropes and emotions and were accordingly to these categories classified into one of Gabriel's poetic modes (2000). Secondly, the topics or themes of the stories allowed categorizing the story into one poetic mode. The last tool used to classify stories, was to observe whether stories can be classified as following the same or different poetic mode(s) depending on the perspective of narrator, audience and researcher which are all seen as being involved and contributing to the story. In the consumer stories the consumers are the narrators and in the brand story, H&M was considered to be the narrator. Regarding the various perspectives, it is worth mentioning that it has been found out that some stories were told in a different poetic mode by the narrator than they were read by the audience.

After inter-textual reading and classification of a single story, intra-textual reading and comparison between consumer stories took place to verify identified genre patterns and story classifications. Next, for each poetic mode one blog story was chosen that corresponded best with the different aspects of Gabriel's poetic modes and hence serves as a typical example of the respective genre, presenting the common patterns. Furthermore, other stories of every poetic mode have been used and presented to confirm identified patterns and thus, affirm the findings. Based on the results of the narrative analysis and the different characters identified, conclusions were drawn with regards to H&M's store personality. The different personality traits have been identified through the various roles that consumers assigned H&M and its stores to in their blog stories.

Moreover, to reveal whether the situation or function of the story influences the characters assigned to in the blogs story, the story genre and consequently the described personality, the situations in which stories were told and the aim of consumers to tell these stories in their blogs have been considered and analysed as well. The situation was considered to

investigate whether store personality is situational and it was further believed that the reason why the narrator tells the story might give indications on the situation as well.

3.4 Critical reflections on research approach

In the following, critical reflections on the research approach will be stated, which are based on Guba & Lincoln's (1994) four categories of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability discussed in Bryman & Bell (2007:411). These four categories are adjusted to suit the qualitative approach and social constructionist view and stem from the terms validity, generalizability and reliability (ibid).

Credibility

In regard to credibility, which also refers to the trustworthiness of the findings (ibid), it can be said that few literature exists regarding retail store personality and even less in connection with storytelling. Therefore, links between certain theoretical concepts needed to be drawn by the researchers. However, to increase their credibility, multiple sources have been used.

Further, besides the advantages of blogs, they also have their shortcomings. As much as it is an advantage to stay hidden within an online context, it also raises issues like potential identity play and deception (Hookway, 2008). People might impersonate themselves as someone different or do not tell the truth in their stories. However, this is not seen as harming the credibility of this study considerably, as, even though people might act as someone else or invent stories or part of them, it still tells the researchers something about the manner in which ideas emerge and the way store personality is constructed. Further, as pointed out earlier, the truth of stories is lying in its meaning not in its accuracy (Gabriel, 2000).

Moreover, as blog search engines and keywords were used the amount of stories to draw from has been limited and in an ideal situation these aided tools should be neglected and stories should be taken from the whole blog sphere.

Lastly, even though the aim was to gather stories from different parts of the world, the criteria that stories should be written in English limited the diversity of findings and arguably might have favoured English speaking countries such as Great Britain and the US. However, stories chosen for analysis still represent a comparably high number of different countries and are therefore still seen as credible and valid to draw conclusions on a global level.

Transferability

Transferability refers to whether findings can be generalized to a broader population or other social settings (Bryman & Bell, 2007:410). For this study this would mean that findings should be transferable to other international retailers but findings from a qualitative case study are difficult to be generalized to a wider universe (Bryman & Bell, 2003; 56). However, taking a qualitative approach the aim was not to generalize statistically but to gain a better understanding (Yin, 1984) of how consumers construct store personality in their stories. Instead the study might add to theoretical concepts used and thereby provide a certain degree of theoretical generalizability (Bryman & Bell, 2007: 424)

Dependability

Dependability or external reliability is addressing whether studies can be replicated, which normally presents a difficulty in qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2007: 410). However, in this study it has been aimed at to describe in detail which steps were taken during the data collection and analysis procedure. This might increase the ability to replicate the study and also to apply it to other brands, as others are able to follow the research path taken.

Confirmability

Recognizing that complete objectivity is impossible (Bryman & Bell, 2007:414), that researchers are influenced by their own prepositions and that a social constructionist point of view allows for subjectivity, the researchers tried to increase the confirmability of the findings by not trying to be guided by personal values. Further, the confirmability might be increased by not only having one researcher interpreting the empirical material, but by having two researchers. It is believed that the influence of one's own prepositions is lessened, when the findings are discussed and hence, confirmed. In addition, the team of researchers agreed on how data should be interpreted, so that great deviations were excluded and confirmability increased.

4 Analysis – H&M’s Store Personality

The following part contains five sections and begins with the retailer’s brand story, i.e. H&M’s brand story, and how the story’s characters can be interpreted with regards to their personalities. This section is followed by a narrative analysis of the different consumer blog stories² which have been classified in accordance with Gabriel’s poetic modes (Gabriel, 2000: 84). Each poetic mode is separately discussed in one section. It will be started with a narrative analysis of blog stories that have been categorized as epic, followed by romantic, comic and tragic poetic mode stories.

4.1 H&M’s brand story

To be able to compare the stories consumers tell about H&M’s personality with the company’s brand story, the following chapter will have a closer look at H&M’s own story. As point of departure it is assumed, as explained in the theory part, that brand stories might often follow the heroic quest narrative with the consumer as the protagonist and the store as the supporting role.

Hennes and Mauritz AB, known as H&M, is a Swedish fashion retailer which started operating in 1947 in Sweden and expanded its operations substantially in the last years. In 2009 it sells clothes and cosmetics of its own brand for woman, men and children in more than 1700 stores in 34 countries in Europe, North America, Asia and the Middle East. H&M has about 73,000 employees and had a turnover of SEK 104,041 million in 2008. Further, H&M is well-known for their different designer collaborations with style icons such as Karl Lagerfeld, Stella McCartney, Viktor & Rolf, Roberto Cavalli, Comme des Garçons and Matthew Williamson (H&M a, 2009).

Looking at H&M’s corporate website (H&M, 2009), it can be found that no explicit brand story is presented. However, the H&M story might be understood through interpretations of its other corporate material presented on its homepage. As the aim was to analyse the brand story from H&M’s perspective only material published by H&M and no third party material was seen as valid. Besides its homepage, other corporate material, such as advertisements or the H&M magazine, was found to be mostly images and not of textual nature and as the

² Besides the blog stories serving as typical examples only parts of the other consumer blog stories have been used in the text. The whole blog stories can be found chronologically ordered in the appendix.

focus was on analysing text to interpret the H&M story, other material was not found to be of considerable value.

H&M's philosophy and business concept is to *'to give the customer unbeatable value by offering fashion and quality at the best price'* (H&M b, 2009). From this statement it could be argued that H&M offers the consumer a solution to the problem of expensive fashion wear, by providing fashionable clothes at low prices. H&M could, as a consequence, be seen as a helper in the consumer's quest for fashionable clothes or maybe even as a saviour by saving people from the situation of not being able to afford qualitative fashionable clothes. Furthermore, H&M can be seen as a helper as it offers various collections with suitable accessories with which H&M aims at helping the consumer to find their own personal style (H&M c, 2009). By claiming that it puts the customer in focus (ibid) H&M assigns the customer the leading role in a story and portrays itself as the supporting act, which is in line with the concept of the market view with the customer as king. Further, it could be argued that H&M takes on the helper role in its story viewed from a different perspective. By telling the consumer that it is a socially responsible and environmentally friendly company (H&M d, 2009), it might assist the consumer in having a good conscious by shopping at H&M and therefore solving another problem for the consumer.

Besides the story H&M entails around its brand, a story might also be found around its store as H&M sees the store as the most important point of contact with the consumer (H&M, 2009) and describes their stores the following way:

'New items come into the stores every day, so that customers always can find something new and exciting in H&M's range. H&M's stores are always in prime locations. ...It is [therefore] important that customers can find their way about easily. The store environment must also be comfortable and inspiring and generate a sense of well-being. It is important to give customers ideas and inspire them to choose things that suit their own style.... H&M's stores are constantly rejuvenated' (H&M e, 2009)

From this extract one could argue that also the store itself takes on the role of a helper, as it firstly provides the consumer with new things and new store designs continuously which safes the customer from boredom. H&M could therefore be seen as a helper with changing appearances who offers assistance in different situations. Further, by having stores all over the world and being in prime locations the customer is prevented from taking time consuming and exhausting trips to the stores but can access them instead easily. And also within the store H&M provides guidance both on where to find items as well as assisting the consumer to find their own style, making the consumer quest for clothes easier and minimizing the troubles one might be faced with on this search.

However, by saying that the stores 'give' customers ideas, it might be arguable that H&M's store takes on the role of a pushy helper, who wants to impose its ideas on others, which from a readers perspective might be seen as someone thinking she/he knows everything best. And further by constantly rejuvenating and changing itself in the role of a helper, it could be argued that H&M expects similar behaviour from its customers which indicates its pushy trait once more.

Besides, H&M can be identified in the role of a helper through their different designer collaborations. Each year H&M launches a limited collection created by famous designers, like Karl Lagerfeld or Roberto Cavalli (H&M f, 2009). These items of designer collections cost a third of normal haute-couture items. Hence, many men and women are thankful that they are able to afford a 'unique' designer piece. Thus, by saying that fashion and design is not a matter of price, H&M is helping the consumers who are not able to buy expensive designer clothes. In addition, through constantly changing the designers and corresponding fashion styles, H&M helps the consumers to find their right style and accomplishes that every consumer will identify with one of the collections at one point.

In sum it could be said that H&M's story follows the heroic quest narrative, where the consumer is set out to search for fashionable affordable clothes and H&M provides help in this quest with its products and its stores. According to Gabriel's poetic modes this type of story could be classified as epic with the hero (consumer) as the leading role and the assistant (H&M) as the supporting role in a story plot of success and achievement (consumer's successful shopping for fashion).

From the role and character H&M's store takes on in the story a connection to its personality could be drawn. H&M could firstly be described as a helpful person, as it provides help to the consumer in various ways. Further, it could be seen as a fashionable, innovative and exciting person full of surprises, as it changes its appearance and way of assisting the consumer continuously. To be able to provide unbeatable value H&M needs to be a person who is competitive and using all its energy to fight for and achieve its aim. Besides, H&M entails caring personality traits demonstrated through its caring for the customer as well as the environment. Lastly, through helping the consumer find his/her style, H&M could be seen as a role-model for dressing which could be seen as a personality trait as well. Moreover, it could be argued that by offering newest fashion, affordable for everyone in mass production, H&M is a person who sees everyone as being equal and has an egalitarian point of view as everyone should have the option to buy fashion knock-offs. Further, as described before

H&M can be seen as a pushy person by imposing its opinion and continuous change on others, which further might indicate that H&M is not an easily satisfied person.

Concluding it could be said that H&M tells a story about itself which can be categorized as following an epic mode and at the same time following the consumer heroic quest narrative, portraying H&M as the helping person and the consumer as the hero overcoming a challenge. From an audience point of view, H&M might still be seen as the assistant and the consumer as hero, however, the reader might as well see H&M as deceiving or fooling the consumer by letting the consumer feel as a hero even though H&M's own motive might be to increase its profit. It could be further argued that the heroic consumption quest or market oriented view thereby does not only portray the company as helper but also as entailing nuances of a trickster.

4.2 Epic consumer stories

H&M's story was found to follow the heroic quest narrative, which according to Gabriel (2000) could be classified as a story following the epic poetic mode. As a consequence of the relation between brand story and consumer story, it could be argued that consumers' stories also follow the epic mode and heroic consumption quest narrative, reproducing the brand story with the consumers themselves as the protagonists and H&M as the supporting character. In the following consumer blog stories will be presented which, following this line of argumentation, were classified as epic stories.

'H&M'

I first encountered H&M in London when I studied abroad. Being a poor college student in the UK did not bode well with the exchange rate 8-10 years ago...I can't imagine what it must be like today. I didn't do a lot of clothes shopping (believe it or not, there was a time when I controlled myself) but before I went to visit a friend in Spain, I stopped in to pick out some appropriate going out attire. The experience was fine--decent clothes at a decent price. Fairly trendy but not a budget breaker. And I thought when I left the country, I left H&M behind.

But clearly that is not the case; H&Ms are popping up like Duane Reades around this city! After my first traumatic experience 6 or 7 years ago in a Downtown NYC H&M, I pretty much swore them off. There are three things that make for a Shoegirl Shopping Meltdown and unfortunately H&M seems to have all of them.

- 1. For starters, I'm a fabric snob; if something is itchy or wrinkles when the wind blows, it is a no go.*
- 2. I overwhelm easily--4 floors of fashions tightly packed together is not my idea of a good time.*
- 3. People--there are just too many people. Have you seen the lines for the dressing rooms in those places?! Anyone who knows me knows that I am not the biggest fan of the general population, particularly those that are oblivious to the world around them. My affection only lessens when you put me in close proximity with a large amount of these people all looking for a bargain.*

Now, all of that being said, we are in a recession and a girl still has to shop (well, that may not technically be true, but this girl still has to shop). So, I ventured back into an H&M for the first time in years last Saturday...and I survived! I even thought there might be purchase potential! It seems that now that there is an H&M on every corner, one can strategically pick a location where people are not likely to go in droves and perhaps, just perhaps, have an enjoyable shopping experience.

I have to be honest though--I spent approximately 10 minutes in the store looking around and then headed to an appointment I had, so I can't definitively say that my recent assessment is correct. I'm going to complete my mission this weekend after I've appropriately prepared both mind and body (i.e. eat a big brunch and drink lots of coffee) and report back. Stay tuned...

(Shoegirl, 2009)

4.2.1 'H&M'

The blog story by ShoeGirl (2009) is taken as an example of one of the many consumer stories following a similar plot and poetic mode within the category of epic stories. In this blog story a North American woman (ShoeGirl, 2009) talks about her experiences with H&M, both at an earlier time during her studies in the UK and recently in the US. She explains that she found H&M to have trendy and inexpensive clothes, when she was a student in Europe, but that she left H&M upon her return to the US, as H&M was not very present in the US back then and because she did not like the shopping experience in H&M stores considerably (ShoeGirl, 2009). In addition, she describes her recent experience with H&M in the US where she went again to an H&M store due to the economic crisis.

Taking a closer look at her story and the topic it can be found out that she takes on the leading role herself and H&M is assigned to play a supporting role as she talks about her own experiences with herself in the centre of the story and attention. As in some epic stories the narrator itself takes on the role as the protagonist, in this case ShoeGirl, and '*casts (...) herself as a hero dealing with a crisis or a challenge*' (Gabriel, 2000:75). The challenge in this case consists of encountering affordable fashion items. Talking about her experience in the store some years ago she says that

'the experience was fine--decent clothes at a decent price. Fairly trendy but not a budget breaker' however 'there are three things that make for a ShoeGirl Shopping Meltdown and unfortunately H&M seems to have all of them'. (Shoegirl, 2009)

The shopping Meltdown at H&M is created by the questionable quality of the fabrics, the tightly packed fashion and the many people in the stores (ShoeGirl, 2009). This shows that even though H&M offers a solution for the search of inexpensive fashionable clothes, the consumer has to overcome some challenges or hassles in the store to acquire these items. The consumer, as the protagonist of the story, has to overcome the problem of finding fashionable clothes and at the same time faces challenges within the store, and this focus on challenges or crisis within the plot structure resembles an epic story with the protagonist as the hero (Gabriel, 2000:74). This plot structure is close to the heroic quest narrative and might

be seen as reproducing the company story of H&M in that sense that H&M offers a solution to the problem of finding cheap fashion. Further, the story's structural elements also resemble Gabriel's epic mode with a protagonist, a hero, who has to overcome a challenge to succeed (Gabriel, 2000).

Furthermore, several other conclusions can be drawn from her storytelling about H&M's store role. For example, her story starts with a reference to her first encounter with an H&M store and then continues with sequent experiences using the story to connect the different episodes to each other. By saying that

'I first encountered H&M in London when I studied abroad... And I thought when I left the country, I left H&M behind. But clearly that is not the case; H&Ms are popping up like Duane Reades around this city!' (Shoegirl, 2009)

she points to the spreading of H&M stores all over the world in the recent years and that H&M has become a brand with global recognition. Further, by assuming that H&M will be similar in her own town in the US to the H&M stores she visited in Europe, she assigns H&M a global image, including brand personality, and thereby explains how she can tell a story about H&M without having been to a store in her own country yet. That people expect or experience H&M to be the same way in different locations gives further explanation to the fact that people can talk about H&M in various countries.

Moreover, by saying that she does not want to be around people who look for a bargain (Shoe Girl, 2009) ShoeGirl uses the poetic trope of unity, where everyone else in the store is the same and only looks for a bargain and as she did not used to be or wanted to be one of them she *'pretty much swore them (H&M) off'* (ShoeGirl, 2009). However, now that there is a recession and *'a girl still has to shop (well, that may not technically be true, but this girl still has to shop'* she reconsiders H&M, who is able to save her in this situation of wanting fashionable clothes but not having the money to afford other brands. Therefore, this statement reinforces the initial assumption that the H&M store can be seen as taking on the role as a supportive saviour in her story with herself as the hero, overcoming the challenge of finding fashionable affordable clothes.

Further, the challenges experienced in H&M stores previously, such as untidy racks, are lessened and ShoeGirl (2009) acknowledges that shopping at H&M might even be an enjoyable experience nowadays. This again points to the helping role of H&M, offering not only affordable fashionable clothes but also providing them in a pleasurable shop experience. It might further demonstrate that H&M has changed over the years and improved, which, when compared to a human, could be that a person has grown and

strengthened his/her personality. Due to this heroic helping character that H&M takes on, it is further described with a certain degree of gratefulness and admiration when ShoeGirl points out that at an H&M store you can have '*an enjoyable shopping experience*' (ShoeGirl, 2009) even in times of recession. The emotions of gratefulness and admiration again point to the epic genre of a story where the victory of the hero would not have been possible without the helping assistance of H&M (Gabriel, 2000).

In sum, it could be said that in accordance with Gabriel's terms the woman casts herself in the role of the hero who is supported by H&M, as a helping assistant. Hence, she is able to meet and overcome the challenge which ends with the victory of acquiring fashionable clothes. However, it should be pointed out that the consumer is not as heroic as a hero in epic novels as the challenge might not need as much courage and force as in epic novels. Moreover, she gets assistance from H&M as helper which might lower her status as hero as well. Returning to Gabriel's interpretation of an epic plot structure it can be declared that, in order to put more meaning into her experience, she uses the poetic trope of agency by assigning H&M an anthropomorphic role as an assistant and credits herself with the achievement or mission accomplished of finding cheap fashionable clothes. Achievement and missions accomplished are according to Gabriel (2000:74) two tropes of agency commonly used in epic stories. Moreover, she uses the trope of unity by seeing all H&M stores as one brand and of the same character. These elements of the story follow Gabriel's classification of an epic mode (Gabriel, 2000) and further can also be seen as components of the consumer heroic quest narrative.

Besides the more explicit mentioning of H&M's store as having a fashionable personality, the role H&M takes on in this kind of consumer story may indicate store personality traits due to the relation between personality and characters in stories as explained before. Due to its role as supporting assistant, H&M's personality could be described as helpful and being a leader or role model when it comes to fashion. Being casted as a helper with potential heroic traits and therefore admired, it could be concluded that H&M possesses an admirable personality. As persons who are commonly admired and respected, often in a certain time, are sometimes referred to as icons (Holt 2004:1); it could be put forward that H&M's store, in this time of recession, develops into an icon by being admired and respected for its solution to the consumers' problems. To be able to provide cheap clothes and stand out of the other retailers, H&M could be described as a competitive, strong person who fights for the success of its hero, the consumer, showing ambitious personality traits. Further, H&M's store can be seen as having a 'global' personality due to its global presence and similar role in the various countries. Being 'global' in terms of personality can arguably also be referred to as

cosmopolitan. Cosmopolite in Ancient Greece meant citizen of the world (Ribeiro, 2001). Among others it is said that global communities of citizens should be able to communicate across cultural and social boundaries forming a 'universalist solidarity' (ibid). A cosmopolitan person, for example, can have a feeling of belonging to a neighbourhood, a city, a region, a country, or a continent (ibid). Since ShoeGirl assumes that all H&M stores are similar around the world, she regards H&M as having a global image and thus the character of H&M could be described as cosmopolitan – someone that helps its consumers across boundaries and further, by having stores worldwide, creates a feeling of home all over the world. Moreover, it could be argued that by offering newest fashion affordable for everyone in mass production, H&M's store is a person who sees everyone as being equal and that everyone should have the option to buy fashion. Additionally, due to its improved presentation in its stores, it could be said that H&M has changed and grown from an unorganised or messy person into a more structured and organised personality.

In the end of her story the woman points out that she wants to be honest, that she only spent little time in the store and needs to go back to see whether her recent assessment of H&M was correct (ShoeGirl, 2009). From this statement it could be interpreted that the reason for her to tell and publish this story is to inform others about her changed image of H&M, with the aim of maybe persuading the readers to go and experience H&M themselves and experience a similar transformation.

4.2.2 H&M as caring and supportive helper

Besides the epic story following the consumer heroic quest narrative told by ShoeGirl various other consumer blog stories were found to contain similar structural and thematic aspects, where the consumers cast themselves in the role of the hero and H&M's store in the role of caring and supportive helper that assists the protagonist to overcome a challenge, classifying the stories as epic. Furthermore, both narrator and audience were found to classify the stories as epic and following the heroic quest narrative.

H&M's helping and caring character comes to the fore in the story 'The H&M challenge-Work Casual' written by Monie from the US, in which H&M assists her by facing '*the challenge: find two outfits for around \$100*' (Monie, 2009) that she can wear both casually and also at work. By being able to provide Monie these outfits H&M helps her to overcome this challenge and even though Monie normally does not shop at H&M she was very impressed by it (Monie, 2009). Another similar example is the blog story 'H&M comes to Seattle' in which a woman from Seattle casts herself into the role of the hero, being on a quest for affordable fashion and overcoming this problem with the help of H&M as an assistant once more. She explicitly

points to the supportive character of H&M by saying that *'it was one of the few places I could afford to shop on the wages I made'* (Into the Fray, 2009). Also in the story 'H&M' by Gloria (2009), an Asian-American woman, the protagonist is facing the challenge of finding affordable fashion and writes that *'as a very young girl, I'd read through fashion magazines and see that the least expensive ones were always from H&M'* (Gloria, 2009). However, until recently no H&M store existed close to her home but when she finally went to the newly opened store she writes that *'today marks a very important and special day in my life'* (ibid) showing the strong emotions and admiration she has for H&M. Thus, as consumers describe that the clothes bought at H&M are *'really awesome and the price was unbeatable'* (Gloria, 2009) it is pointed out that H&M's store stands out of the crowd of other fashion retailers by providing fashionable clothes at the lowest price and therefore obtains consumers' respect and admiration and as said before it could be described as taking on the role of an heroic assistant.

Even though H&M takes on the role as supportive helper, the consumers' stories found, mostly also refer to H&M's store as presenting a challenge for the shopper by being *'thronged'* (Into the Fray, 2009) and containing *'crowded areas'* and *'so many women fighting over clothes (which) is just so scary'* (Gloria, 2009). Consequently, although H&M is presented as a caring assistant it has a slightly ambivalent role and in a way is at the same time helping, but also the reason for the consumer's challenge. However, overcoming not only the challenge of finding cheap clothes but also the challenges presented in the store might strengthen the heroic achievement of the protagonist/consumer and might make the hero feel even more proud and successful. But as in the example story, bloggers describe as well, that H&M has improved the shopping experience for the consumer in the stores and lessened the challenges encountered there. Consumers point to this aspect by saying that *'clearance racks in most stores are usually so messy that it's a pain to find anything, but I thought the one at H&M were quite organized'* (Gloria, 2009), This change in H&M's presentation and characteristic of its helper role could again point to a more developed and grown-up personality. Further, although from the consumer's/narrator's perspective not evident, from the audience's perspective H&M's role as 'humble' helper seems to be slightly deceitful, as in the brand story. As it is believed that the goal of H&M is to attract the consumers to an H&M store in order to buy something, H&M seems to not only want to help the consumer in an altruistic manner, but to profit itself from the consumers need for cheap and fashionable clothes. Hence, this aspect points again at a slightly ambivalent role of H&M in the epic stories where H&M has the intention to help, but at the same time also wants to get the consumer in the store to buy something.

Another common aspect of the stories is that the protagonists encountered H&M in various parts of the world and always experienced it in a similar way. In the story 'H&M comes to Seattle' (Into the Frey, 2009) the protagonist describes that she first encountered H&M in Amsterdam, then went to a shop in Prague and finally visited a newly opened store in her hometown Seattle, always expecting H&M to help her find affordable clothes. This might show once more that consumers see H&M as having a global presence and cast it accordingly in their stories. Coming to H&M's personality this global character in the story might be transferred to its store personality, which could be described as cosmopolitan consequently as well.

In conclusion, other stories also follow the epic mode and heroic consumption quest narrative with the consumer as hero and H&M as caring and supportive helper. Although it has been acknowledged earlier that the consumer as hero is not comparable to heroes in epic novels and he/she receives assistance of H&M, the consumer was still identified as acting heroic in terms of overcoming the challenge of finding cheap and nice clothes on its own. Hence, the market oriented view with the consumer as hero is supported here. Moreover, the other stories confirm the presented personality traits of H&M identified already in the example story by also characterizing H&M's store as helpful, fashionable, inexpensive, and cosmopolitan. In addition, H&M has been identified as deceitful, though not from the consumer's perspective, but from the audience's perspective. Moreover, as H&M's store offers clothes with competitive cheap prices, it can be seen as a person who is energetic to fight for cheap, but qualitative good clothes. Furthermore, through the increasing attention and admiration of consumers, H&M could be described as becoming iconic.

Besides similar patterns identified by the stories' structure and content also the situations in which these epic stories were told revealed some similarities. They mostly included various encounters with the store, sometimes even in different countries. Moreover, the storytellers' emotional tone shows some admiration for H&M. The stories often include a turning point in the protagonist's opinion which is created through the reconsideration of H&M as a retailer which might be linked to the socio-economic situation in general such as in times of recessions or in lifecycle stages of less disposable income, such as during student life. Thus, it could be concluded from the observations that people want to tell others about their changed experiences with H&M, but that the storytellers from an emotional point of view could still be described as neutral or maintaining a critical stance.

4.3 Romantic consumer stories

Besides consumer blog stories which were categorized as epic stories, some stories also presented elements which classified the stories as romantic. These romantic stories are presented in the following chapter, starting again with an example story followed by the analysis and a summary of other romantic stories following similar patterns as the example one.

'H&M – I love it, I hate it, I love it'

It took me a while to recognise that I am kind of addicted to H&M. I still remember when I was first introduced to H&M: my mother gave me a dark blue, velvet-looking hat saying, "I bought it at a new clothes shop. It's called Hennes&Mauritz", I was 9 years old and did not worry much about what I was wearing. Moreover, I wasn't even quite sure if I like this hat. Nevertheless, from then on I regularly bought my clothes at H&M, first with my mum and then...on my own, of course. But why? I think it is the large range of affordable, popular, but individual clothes that made me a shopping victim and the Scandinavian retailer a world brand. I know it sounds incredible, but there is rarely a day on which I don't wear something from H&M. On the other hand, I sometimes hate this brand as well, for example, if I fall in love with a fancy t-shirt in one of the shops, I often notice that it is dirty or damaged and so grab for another one - same pattern, same size - and have to admit that it doesn't quite have the same fit. Then I start getting angry about the lack of quality in cheap clothes... If additionally there is a queue at the changing rooms starting outside the shop's doors I usually feel like I'm living in hell on earth! But still I am always delighted to see a H&M store wherever I go, asking myself, what I would do without it?

(Sylvia, 2007)

4.3.1 'H&M-I love it, I hate it, I love it'

The above story from Sylvia reports on her falling-in-love experience with H&M. She starts with describing how she was first introduced to H&M. She writes that she still knows exactly when and what it was that made her aware of H&M's existence (Sylvia, 2007). She was only 9 years old and got a dark-blue, velvet-looking hat bought by her mother at H&M (ibid). From then on, she states, she regularly bought her clothes at H&M (ibid). The dark-blue, velvet-looking hat and the act of buying clothes at H&M stores regularly can be interpreted as a falling-in-love process. As in other love stories, first of all a person meets another and gets in contact with him/her/it (Aron & Lewandowski, 2001). Then the person has to decide whether he/she likes the other person/object and would like to extend the relationship with each other (ibid). Sylvia, for example, is first not quite sure if she really likes the H&M hat (Sylvia, 2007). Nevertheless, she got interested and curious about the new clothing store and now is a regular customer of H&M (ibid). As discussed earlier, brands or in this case H&M can act as partners in a relationship with the consumer and hence, these can be compared to human

relationships such as marriage, enslavement or best friends (Fournier, 1998). The same holds for Sylvia, who describes in her story that she has built up a love relationship to H&M and therefore, casts H&M in the role of the love object. Consequently, the focus of this blog story is Sylvia's love to H&M and can be seen in accordance with Gabriel's poetic mode (Gabriel, 2000: 80) of a romantic story where H&M has the character of a love object and Sylvia can be seen as the loving girlfriend of H&M.

According to Gabriel (2000), romantic stories often evolve after successful treatment. Also in this story the love to H&M can be regarded as a result of good treatment. For example, Sylvia asks herself why she likes H&M so much and comes to the conclusion that the reason is the *'large range of affordable, popular, but individual clothes'* (Sylvia, 2007). Hence, she feels well treated by H&M's clothing style and regards H&M as a worthy love object, so that *'there is rarely a day on which (...) [she does not] wear something from H&M'* (ibid). This love statement clearly highlights her affection to H&M through taking H&M's clothes always with her in life. In addition, Sylvia seems to like the popularity of H&M when she writes that she is attracted to H&M's *'popular (...) clothes'* (Sylvia, 2007). So, in addition, H&M takes on the role of a popular love object that is not only admired by her but also by others. As popular persons, like celebrities, are usually regarded as unique human individuals (Gamson, 2001) and are said to be surrounded by myth stories, they are admired by the population and provide value by offering symbolic means for sense-making and identity-forming (Holt, 2003). It is believed that also Sylvia, by assigning H&M the role of a popular brand, wants to take part and benefit from this myth. The myth might provide her with value as she seems to feel good by wearing H&M clothes and further might think that the popularity of H&M transfers to herself by becoming part of the H&M shopper group.

On the other hand, Gabriel (2000) points to the vulnerability of the narrator when he or she falls in love with someone and hence, challenges the rational thinking of the loving person. Sylvia, for instance, admits that she is *'addicted to H&M'* and H&M has turned her into a *'shopping victim'* (Sylvia, 2007). The phrase 'shopping victim' is commonly associated with a strong desire to buy something. Separating the words from each other, 'shopping' is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (2009) as *'the action of visiting a shop or shops for the purpose of making purchases'* and a 'victim' is further described as *'a person, who is (...) subjected to torture by another; one who suffers severely in body or property through cruel or oppressive treatment.'* Hence, it could be thought that Sylvia also feels mistreated by H&M. For example, the story's plot turns from flattery love talk into angry critique when she states that she sometimes hates H&M as well (Sylvia, 2007). She explains that she is often angry about the missing quality of H&M's clothes, i.e. a t-shirt that she would like to buy is dirty or

damaged and others in the same size do not have the same fit and she feels like *'in hell on earth'* (ibid). This exemplifies that also within love stories misfortune can evolve. Further, it is a typical feature of a story that the plot turns in order to raise the tension. As Czarniawska (2004:19) points out, *'an 'ideal' narrative begins with a stable situation which is disturbed by some power or force'* and thus, cause disequilibrium. The disequilibrium then could be compensated by action of a force directed in the opposite direction (ibid).

However, Sylvia does not initiate any re-directed action, but only concludes at the end that she cannot imagine living without H&M (Sylvia, 2007) and thus, presents the 'good turn' in her story. As Gabriel (2000: 82) writes, romantic stories are different from other poetic modes as they do not turn misfortune into a deserved chastisement like comic stories or malignant fate that must be endured like in tragic stories. Romantic stories seem to proclaim that *'love conquers all'*, i.e. the hardships and injustices of life, the pains inflicted on us by culture, fortune, or nature, they all can be endured and overcome with the assistance of love (ibid). Although Sylvia has a plausible reason for not loving H&M, she remains loyal towards the Swedish clothing label. An explanation for Sylvia's behaviour could be that persons who are in love with someone quickly forgive the loving person/object its false behaviour and thus, the 'blindness' of a loving person and its vulnerable qualities (Gabriel, 2000) are reflected in Sylvia's forgiving behaviour towards H&M. This kind of behaviour is often compared to the metaphor of wearing pink glasses through which the loving person is unable to view the rationale behind the relevant subject. This is also in-line with Gabriel's (2000: 82) aspect, where human emotions such as love become *'the instigators of altruistic action in lieu of rational-instrumental factors'*. Therefore, Sylvia's love to H&M helps her to forgive H&M and its misfortune with its clothing quality.

In sum and comparing Gabriel's table of poetic modes, it can be said that Sylvia's blog story comprises all structural characteristics of a romantic story. In contrast to the epic stories where H&M was casted into the role of the caring and supportive helper, in this romantic story H&M can be seen in the role of the protagonist as love object of Sylvia, the second character, who is represented in the role of the loving girlfriend. Further, the romantic mode was identified through its plot content that deals with triumphant love that overcomes the lack of H&M's clothing quality. In addition, H&M and its clothes also serve as cause of Sylvia's predicament. On the one hand, H&M's *'affordable, popular and individual clothes'* are the reason for her affection to H&M. On the other hand, they are also the reason why she feels like *'in hell on earth'*. However, taking a closer look at the plot structure, it can be identified that through the use of a *'storyteller's central interpretive devices'* (Gabriel, 2000:36), i.e. love intended poetic tropes, Sylvia turns her information on H&M into a worthy experience and

hence, communicates to the reader that she loves H&M. Sylvia's endless sympathy for H&M reveals the poetic trope of fixed qualities. Another example of the use of a love intended poetic trope is the use of a caring emotional tone by Sylvia: '*there is rarely a day on which I don't wear something from H&M*' or '*what (...) would [I] do without it*' (Sylvia, 2007).

From this story several conclusions can be drawn with regards to H&M's store personality. First, being a love object in a relationship could further imply that Sylvia and H&M care about each other. On the one hand, H&M takes Sylvia's love, but on the other hand, it is also natural in relationships to give love back to your partner. However, it could be argued whether H&M as an object is able to respond to Sylvia's affection in the same way a human person would do. Even though, it has been found that H&M's store somehow responds to Sylvia's love by presenting her stylish and individual clothes, so that she is able to take her beloved brand everywhere with her, this kind of relationship is still seen as particularly one-sided as H&M as an object is not able to replace a passionate lover who gives tenderness. Therefore, H&M is described as a love object rather than a lover, showing a more passive character. However, H&M has a great effect on Sylvia and could therefore also be characterized as extremely irresistible, since Sylvia cannot resist to shop at H&M nor wearing H&M for a day (e.g. *there is rarely a day on which I don't wear something from H&M* (Sylvia, 2007)). Moreover, H&M is also caring with regards to Sylvia's pocket, as it cares for Sylvia by being affordable. Thus, it could be believed that H&M has a loving and caring personality. Another aspect that has come to the fore is that Sylvia regards H&M's store as a popular brand. Popular persons are admired and liked by many persons and are '*prevalent or current among the general public*' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2009). As also icons are persons or objects worthy of admiration, it could be argued that Sylvia characterized H&M's store as being iconic as also many other consumers admire H&M at the current time. Moreover, it could be argued that popular persons are often characterized by having very individual or extroverted personalities. And people who are extroverted usually reveal one of the following characteristics: outgoing, sociable, fun-loving, affectionate or cosmopolitan (Burger, 2008). And it could also be argued that these personality characteristics are as well true for H&M's store as H&M could be seen as very outgoing and cosmopolitan in offering a '*large range [of] clothes*' (Sylvia, 2007) all over the world. Further, H&M could also be seen as sociable and affectionate as H&M's store likes to be surrounded by people and cares about its consumer as said above. However, in contrast to the loving and caring character, H&M could also be regarded as slightly dangerous. When Sylvia (2007) points out that she is addicted to H&M like someone could be addicted to a drug, less Sylvia, but the audience might perceive H&M as being addictive and hence, a bit dangerous. However, as the consumer is the main focus

of this study and the story obviously deals with Sylvia's love to H&M, the positive personality can be seen as outweighing the other attributions in this poetic mode.

One reason for Sylvia to write this story is seen in the long-lasting relationship that she has with H&M. She tells the reader that she has known H&M since she was 9 years old and from then on, she has developed a great affection towards the Swedish clothing retailer (Sylvia, 2007). She might tell the story because she wants to inform others about the greatness of H&M and maybe that even though H&M has some minor flaws, it is still worth her love. However, the long-lasting relationship is an important prerequisite for her to tell this story because if she had been to an H&M store only once, she would have not been able to develop this kind of loyal affection towards H&M. She even admits this herself: *'It took me a while to recognize that I am kind of addicted to H&M'* (Sylvia, 2007). This aspect can be seen in contrast to the epic stories in which the protagonist experiences mostly single challenges with H&M stores instead of regularly 'meeting' H&M stores over years as in Sylvia's romantic story. Therefore, the connection of H&M and consumers like Sylvia can be found to be more intense and tight than the short-term relationship of ShoeGirl in the identified epic story.

4.3.2 H&M as adorable love object

In addition to Sylvia's romantic story, also other blog stories were identified having similar plot structures and contents in which the narrators cast themselves as loving partners in a relationship with H&M's store in the centre of attention as adorable love object.

For instance, it has been found out that several blog writers explain that they feel well treated by H&M and hence, feel gravitated towards H&M. Consequently, they assign H&M the role of the love object in their stories. Wildfiyah (2009), for instance, a Ghanaian girl from England, argues in her story 'I Heart H&M Again + Trendwatch' that *'H&M's current spring collection is the truth'*. Or another example would be the story of a Saudi-Arabian woman called Shoegarfreeruby who writes in her story 'The H&M-Riyadh Experience' about an H&M store opening in Riyadh. A few days after the store opening she explains the reader that she visited the H&M store again. In this context, she describes that she is in love with the H&M store, because she was still able to discover new clothing pieces that she had not seen the last time - *'there's always something to lure you at H&M'* (Shoegarfreeruby, 2009). This also shows that very often successful treatment, i.e. H&M's good style or having always some new clothing pieces, is the reason for the beginning of love involvement.

Moreover, a common falling-in-love schema has been discovered. In the story 'H&M Bestill My Heart', for example, a woman called Natalie (2008), first hears from the *'greatest clothing*

retailer known to man' by friends and gets, therefore, interested in H&M ('It sounded like heaven on earth.'). Then she takes a four-day trip to New York with a friend and 'meets' an H&M store for the first time in her life (ibid). She describes how 'neat' it was, 'because everything seemed so affordable' and at the same time all the clothes were in 'cool designs' (ibid). And 5 years later she still is 'thrilled' to discover that four H&M stores are coming to Atlanta, USA, her home area (ibid). Therefore, her long-lasting sympathy towards H&M and its stores can be interpreted as proof that she likes H&M and is willing to extend the relationship. It could be argued that her relationship to H&M develops into a romance where she considers H&M to be the beloved object. Further, she literally states that she 'fell in love' with H&M and thus, her blog story could, similar to Sylvia's story, also be categorized as a romantic story where H&M's store in the centre of the story embodies the adorable love object that treats Natalie well and hence, makes her fall in love with it.

However, it also has been noticed that blog authors of romantic stories often write about misfortune that they experience with H&M. For instance, Wildfiyah (2009) writes that

'whenever it was that the store went on this dreadful barnyard, plaid/tartan tip...ugh. I still become upset thinking about it. Ever since then, I've treated the store like a frenemy³ (we'll hang out if we must...)'.

Nevertheless, as in Sylvia's blog story, it seems that most other blog writers, who like H&M, are also forgiving towards it and its flaws. Though, most of them seem to only forgive H&M if they can feel that H&M really cares for their nuisance and does something about it. Wildfiyah (2009), for example, tells further that the clothing style of H&M has improved in the last years since she treated the store as a 'frenemy' and thus, today, she colloquially expresses: 'the beef is squashed' (ibid) as she likes the new spring collection a lot (ibid), pointing out that she now sees H&M more as a friend than an enemy again. That consumers do not admire H&M at a similar degree continuously but that times exist where they doubt or question certain traits, has been identified as a common pattern in the romantic consumer stories. However, in the end the admiration and love for H&M always wins.

In sum, it could be said that all romantic love stories identified reveal similar structural and thematic patterns. One major aspect that has been identified is that most of the blog writers developed their relationship to H&M over a longer period of time. It was found out, in the different love stories collected, that love does not evolve just after a one-time meeting with an H&M store, but with regular meetings allotted over years. Hence, all of the blog-authors

³ 'Frenemy' is a combination of "friend" and "enemy" which can refer to either an enemy disguised as a friend or to a partner who is simultaneously a competitor. Source: Oxford English Dictionary (2009)

writing about their affection to H&M describe recent experiences with H&M stores as well as steady experiences over years. In addition, it has been discovered that H&M's role as protagonist is reinforced by the very detailed way of telling stories by the loving blog-writers. Natalie, for example, uses several adjectives in a row to describe how great H&M is for her '*Ahh, wonderful, marvellous, totally cool and amazingly trendy H&M*' (Natalie, 2008). Or Shoegarfreeruby (2009) describes her arrival at the H&M store as follows: '*Our elevated pulse rates was the result of running towards the store after getting out of the car, plus the excitement of finally making it on the opening of course.*' Thus, it can be found that she writes in detail how they arrive at the store and therefore, puts H&M's store even more into the centre of the plot. Others might have just written that they arrived at the H&M store without mentioning details like their pulse rate. Another important aspect within romantic love stories is that romantic characters always seem forgiving towards their love object. Seeking to shelter the love object from criticism, e.g. the lack of H&M's clothing quality, is typical for loving persons.

In essence, it could be said that romantic stories differ from epic stories in ways of intensity meaning that consumers who compose romantic stories with H&M in the centre of the plot already shift from H&M in the secondary role in epic stories to H&M as protagonist in romantic stories. Moreover, most romantic blog-writers describe that they regularly visit H&M stores over years because they love it and therefore, cannot imagine being without it. In contrast, consumers writing epic stories mostly describe single visits on an irregular basis, because for most of them H&M was only a saviour during a one-time crisis, e.g. recession (ShoeGirl, 2009).

In the role of a love object it was identified that H&M embodies several personality characteristics. First, the more apparent adjectives found describe H&M's personality as '*wonderful, marvellous, totally cool and amazingly trendy*' (Natalie, 2008). Moreover, on a deeper, more unobservable level H&M's store personality could be also described as caring, as it takes care by having always new and trendy, but affordable clothing collections. Further, H&M can be characterized as attentive as it seems to listen to its costumers' nuisance (e.g. when their clothing style does not seem to satisfy their costumers (Wildfiyah, 2009)) and hence, it tries to improve itself in accordance with designer styles and the contemporary taste of the costumer (e.g. by launching special designer collection (H&M f, 2009)) which might point to a personality that is developing continuously and grows with the challenges presented in its environment. In order to be so attentive, it could be also argued, that someone has to be very ambitious. Additionally, as consumers compare H&M to '*heaven on earth*' (Natalie, 2008) and icons have been defined as standing for the presentation of

heaven on earth or present the sacred in condensed form (Kokosalakis, 2001) it could be argued that these consumers see H&M as being an icon that they can adore.

The reason why consumers tell romantic stories might be that they want to inform others about their feelings and the greatness of their love object. It could further be argued that people who are happy enjoy talking about their happiness and want to share it with others. Further, to be able to tell a romantic story a longer lasting relationship with the love object is a requirement.

4.4 Comic consumer stories

The following chapter will present stories told by consumers in blogs which were classified as following the comic poetic mode. Firstly, the example story 'Comme de Garçons for H&M comes and goes (off the racks)' will be discussed followed by additional consumer stories which support the structural and thematic findings of the typical example story.

'Comme des Garçons for H&M comes and goes (off the racks)'

My trip to Wien this week was the best break I could've had. We arrived late on Wednesday evening, and headed right to the hotel, via the new speed train Cat, that connects the airport to city center. We stayed at the delightful Sacher hotel, one of the most important historical hotels in Wien, the birth place of the famous Sacher chocolate cake. Of course, we tasted some of their sweets before going to bed to be ready for the Tuesday morning Comme des Garçons launch at H&M. Being in Wien, I expected the line not to be as long as in other more fashiony cities like NY or Paris. And I was right. We had our breakfast (with lots of delicious sweets, for energy of course) at eight o'clock. And at around 9AM there were only 2 persons queuing in front of the H&M we choose. So we decided we have time for a Starbucks Christmas flavored coffee. At the time we returned, there were around 4-5 persons around the H&M windows, so we were practically in front line. We've waited for around 40 minutes for the opening of the doors at 10 AM, and by that time the queue was quite big and scary. But definitely not big comparing to the ones I saw in pictures from LA, NY, Milan or Paris. There were around 70 shoppers, but I was confident that being in front I will get what I wanted. The H&M staff took pictures of us waiting, and we took pictures of the H&M staff inside. All through glass doors, of course. My plan was to grab first a wallet (cute, really!) and then to head over to the jackets (only one version of deconstructed jacket was available at that store in Wien). I managed to grab the wallet, but it was harder than I imagined, because everyone had the exact same plan as me: Wallet, then jacket :). By the time I arrived near the rack with the boiled wool jackets, a lady had the entire lot in her arms. But one of the jackets (she had around 10 of them in her arms, crazy!) slipped a little, so I was lucky enough to be there to grab it.

Then I went near the shirts, because I really wanted the pink one, being the pink fanatic that I am. There I had more luck; everyone else seemed to be more focused on the dots, so the pink shirts lasted the longest.

Oh ya! And I got also what it seems it was a highly coveted piece of the collection: the polka dotted scarf. They were put in a hidden corner, and when I arrived near them, all of them were still on the rack. Later, all the scarves seemed to disappear though.

I got also a plain black long-sleeve t-shirt and a polka dot cardigan.

My husband on the other hand had a more calm atmosphere in the men's department. Although he fought with an old man for a pair of sneakers (and won of course, I taught him well how to shop), he managed to get his hands on several shirts that he likes very much. He tried one the white buttoned suit, but it didn't fit him quite right.

All in all, a great shopping experience, calmer than last year Cavalli. By 10:40 AM, our shopping ended, we carried the 2 large bags back to our hotel. Because we had some time to kill, we decided to take a long walk, to visit some more shops and eat some Maronies. That's when we discovered a second central H&M, which carried as well the Comme des Garçons collection. And among the leftovers: the shirts with the diagonal line on their chest that weren't available at the first H&M. My husband is saying that he has shirts now for at least 2 years to come. I can't really agree, because I know that next year it will be another designer collaboration, and I am sure there will be shirts in it too...

By the way, who do you think (or want) to be the next designer to collaborate with H&M?

(Dana, 2008)

4.4.1 'Comme des Garçons for H&M comes and goes (off the racks)'

The story written by a Romanian woman called Dana reports on her trip to Vienna for the Comme des Garçons launch at H&M. The launch was a special and limited collection designed for H&M by Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons (H&M g, 2008). In her story, Dana starts with describing her arrival in Vienna and how she prepared for the next day's launch at H&M (e.g. *'We tasted some (...) sweets before going to bed to be ready for the Tuesday morning Comme des Garçons launch at H&M'* (Dana, 2008)). The next day, she and her husband got up extra early in order to be first in line in front of the H&M store so that she could get every item that she had had in mind (ibid). Dana has already gained experience in attending launches of H&M's special collections such as the year before when she had been to the H&M Cavalli launch (ibid). Hence, it can be assumed that she likes H&M and its special collections a lot. This affection of hers to H&M and the fact that she travels from Rumania to Vienna only to be live on-site when H&M introduces its new collection to the public and further accepts all the exertion that follow when lining up with thousands of

people, show Dana's enthusiasm about H&M and that she is quite a big fan of H&M. According to the Oxford English dictionary (2009), a fan can also be regarded as fanatic and is described as '*an enthusiast for a particular person or thing*'. However, Dana cannot only be regarded as a fan, but also as a fool with the respect that she intentionally takes on the burden of pushing, grabbing, fighting etc. that can occur together with a launch like that (Alexis, 2009).

As Dana does not see herself as a fool but rather as an admirer or fan of H&M and H&M as a love object, the story could also be classified as a romantic story from the narrator's perspective, showing similar structural and thematic aspects as discussed in the section on romantic stories. However, as said before, her fan behaviour could be seen by the audience as fanatic, turning Dana into a fool. Therefore, Dana's story can be seen in accordance to Gabriel's poetic mode (Gabriel, 2000: 61) of a comic story from the reader's perspective where the protagonist embodies the role of a deserving victim or fool. As a consequence, the poetic mode differs depending on the perspective. Taking the stance of the reader, Dana takes on the role of the fool and H&M could be seen in the role of a trickster as it tries to lure Dana and other consumers with its designer collection into its stores by providing designer clothes at affordable prices and satisfying the desire of its consumers of designer wear. By promoting that the collection is limited many people try to get one piece whatever it costs without realizing that H&M just tries to get people into the store to also buy other items and thereby, draws attention to itself. H&M tricks Dana by saying that it will provide her with valued designer clothes only to lure her into the store, without her noticing the trickster.

Gabriel (2000:61) points out that '*in their simplest form, comic stories entail a protagonist who is a victim and a predicament that is a misfortune*' which can be seen as structural features of the comic story genre. The protagonist of this story is Dana, in the role of the deserving victim. In addition, her misfortune is that she is not the only one who has decided to attend the Comme des Garçons launch at H&M in Vienna, but also a mass of other H&M fans attended and are probably as '*confident*' as Dana that '*being in front I will get what I wanted*' (Dana, 2008). The victim's predicament, further, has to be seen as 'deserved' and the victim has to be regarded as a 'deserving fool' bringing misfortune to him or herself (Gabriel, 2000). Dana (2008), for instance, acts foolish in the way that she freely decides to attend the launch of H&M's new collection, even though she is aware of the fact that launches of special collections of H&M can be pure madness. Further, Dana might be perceived as a fool by her desire to obtain items of the designer collection and taking tremendous effort to acquire these clothes. Moreover, she might be foolish to follow or have the illusion of obtaining designer clothes, which, even though they are designed by a well

known designer, might not be the same as high end designer clothes due to their mass-production. Hence, her misfortune can also be seen as her own 'punishment' (Gabriel, 2000) for her foolishness, and maybe also for not revealing H&M's hidden agenda as a trickster. Therefore, the story's structural components, including cast and predicament, follow Gabriel's comic poetic mode from a reader's perspective.

Other features that a comic story could contain are attempts to resolve the predicament, the outcome of these attempts and the reaction of the protagonist (Gabriel, 2000). Dana (2008), for instance, attempts to resolve her predicament by first, getting up early and hence, '*being in front*' of the H&M store ('*We had our breakfast (with lots of delicious sweets, for energy of course) at eight o'clock.*') and second, having a plan how to strategically shop ('*My plan was to grab first a wallet (cute, really!) and then to head over to the jackets (only one version of deconstructed jacket was available at the store in Wien).*'). Her attempts seem to have a right effect: '*there were around 4-5 persons around the H&M windows, so we were practically in front line*' (Dana, 2008), because by the time the doors should be opened '*the queue was quite big and scary.*' However, her strategic plan did not seem to work out that well, '*because everyone had the exact same plan as (...) [her]: Wallet, then jacket*' (Dana, 2008). Nevertheless, Dana's reaction is not to give up, which can be interpreted as fanatic behaviour. This is in line with how the Oxford English Dictionary (2009) defines someone that is fanatic. There, being fanatic is '*characterized by excessive enthusiasm*' (ibid). Every other person probably would have had already enough by the time people were hysterically trying to grab a piece of the collection but not Dana, her excessive enthusiasm does not end. When she sees a woman that has the entire lot of jackets in her arms, Dana manages to observe that one jacket slips a little from the woman's arms and is able to grab one (Dana, 2008) without really caring about the woman or what size she got.

According to Gabriel (2000), comic stories set mirth and amusement free. Also Dana's story unleashes mirth and amusement. Her fanatic behaviour, i.e. making all the efforts to be at one of the Comme des Garçons launches, preparing everything in detail, taking all the exertion (e.g. standing in line) and still being eager to attend the launch of the special collection to get the desired clothing pieces, amuses the reader. Gabriel (2000:61), for instance, states that a person's '*own imperfection are forgotten as (...) [he/she] relishes in the misfortunes of others*' and hence, is the source of amusement. Therefore, readers of Dana's blog might feel deviated from their own problems and relieved as they do not have to experience these exertions and thus, enjoy Dana's misfortune. Since the protagonist does not see herself as suffering from this misfortune but is happy with her acquisitions and experience '*all in all, a great shopping experience*' (Dana, 2008), the situation is not tragic

but rather comic. Another indicator of the comic genre is the happy end (Gabriel, 2000), which in this story is that Dana has a great shopping experience and is even able to acquire some of the desired items.

Also in this blog-story poetic tropes have been used by the author in order to infuse her experiences with meaning. One typical poetic trope for comic stories reveals the attribution of agency (Gabriel, 2000). Attribution of agency relates to the 'active' part of the victim's misfortune (ibid). For example, through attribution of agency, Dana appears to be an active part in her misfortune and hence, 'deserves' it. She actively decides to attend the launch of H&M's special collection. However, it is assumed that she does not see herself as the cause of her misfortune, because Dana is looking forward to a great shopping experience and does not consciously want to punish herself. It just happens to her as H&M's store, in the role of the trickster, unconsciously lures her with the limited designer collection. Gabriel (2000:63) further points out that '*while they suffer misfortune, agency must be denied to them*'. Dana (2008), for instance, does not seem to feel being punished by standing in line. She describes it as a '*great shopping experience*'. Hence, she indirectly denies that she is involved in her misfortune. Gabriel (2000), for example, says that people who regard their foolish acting '*as fashionable or 'cool' may instantly draw ridicule upon themselves*' (ibid: 63). As Dana does not see her misfortune in the same way as maybe the reader would do, she therefore amuses him/her. Further, the reader might laugh about Dana, because she is not able to reveal the trickster and behaves foolishly, which points to the 'corrective' aspect of laughter (Bergson, 1980: 187), as the reader might see him/herself as smarter by understanding the situation and might want to correct Dana.

As previously identified H&M's store can be seen in the role of a trickster in this comic story. From this role as a trickster, H&M could be firstly characterized as an amoral (neither good nor bad) person. On the one hand, it is bad of H&M to lure Dana with its limited designer collection, and hence, thousands of other people try to get one piece whatever it costs, and thus, cause pure madness. On the other hand, it is good of H&M to bring out special designer collections, as they are for once affordable and hence, fulfil the dream of most women to possess a 'unique' designer piece. This description of H&M trying to trap consumers and wanting what is best for itself is in correspondence with Carroll's (1981) definition of a trickster. However, Carroll (1981:305) also says that a trickster can make the world more '*habitable*' and act as a '*cultural hero*', which in this story might be presented in the way that H&M, through its role as a trickster, enables consumers to obtain designer clothes they might otherwise not be able to afford. Moreover, the trickster and therefore H&M can be seen as very clever by offering limited clothing pieces for a limited period of time and

thus, causes the effect of very high demand, which can be seen as great mean for sales increases. However through its role as a love or fan object, H&M also reveals a lovable personality, especially from the narrator's point of view. Being able to fulfil a woman's fashion dream means a lot to a woman and hence, makes her to become a loyal fan as Dana (2008) is, as she is already wondering at the end of her story, who the next designer that collaborates with H&M is going to be (Dana, 2008).

The reason why Dana tells this story in her blog might be that she wants to share this experience with others and show others what she has been through to obtain H&M designer clothes and also to show her support and affection for H&M. Further, as Dana was able to acquire some items, she might also want to show off her success by letting others know about it. However, Dana herself is probably not aware that the reader might read her story as comic but she herself might rather see it as a romantic story, describing her love to H&M.

4.4.2 H&M as unrevealed admired trickster

Several other comic stories have been found that revealed similar patterns as the just explained example story. They all can be classified as comic stories from a reader's perspective but might follow the romantic poetic mode from the narrator's stance. Furthermore, they share similar structural features such as the cast of H&M's store as the unrevealed but admired trickster and the consumer as fool around a plot of deserved misfortune. Moreover, the topic of the story resembles the one of the example story and the comic structural element of a happy end exists in these stories as well.

Several other blog-authors have also written about their experience with the launch of a designer collection in different cities. Similar to Dana's story people were writing about their efforts to be part of the launch and their willingness to do everything it takes to grab a piece of the limited designer collection. For example, a woman called Dogmom (2008) writes in her story 'Commes Des Garcons for H&M Release: Another Dangerous Stampede' that she does not '*regret lining up at 5am today for Rei Kawakubo's Commes des Garcons*' in San Francisco. She even says that she has '*a special fold-up seat for these festive occasions*' (Dogmom, 2008). Like Dana (2008), she is already experienced in attending H&M launch-events. She explains that she is '*a grizzled vet of H&M releases*' and hence, '*qualified to provide examples of high-demand/low-supply situations (...)*' (Dogmom, 2008). Thus, she also can be regarded as a fan of H&M and its limited collections who acts foolish or as 'deserving' victim by voluntarily taking all the exertions (e.g. pushing, grabbing, fighting etc.). To imagine how it is like at the various H&M collection launches, another woman, called Alexis, reports in her story on the madness of people

'At Roberto Cavalli I saw women snarl over piles of spangled gold dresses. At Stella McCartney I saw a woman elbow a fellow shopper in the ribs. At Comme des Garçons, I saw people snatch entire racks of clothes, hangers and all, in one greedy move' (Alexis, 2009)

In addition, one woman, called FabSugar (2009), is so thrilled about the upcoming designer collection that she can hardly sleep and admits by herself that she turns into a 'groupie':

'Breathe in, breathe out. This was me last night when trying to fall asleep. You know when you're so excited for something insomnia ensues and obsession overpowers? You all know I've been anticipating Matthew Williamson's H&M collection since the news broke, but I didn't expect to turn groupie' (FabSugar, 2009).

In these stories consumers are identified as great fans of H&M. Their excessive enthusiastic behaviour gets even more induced by the fact that H&M has special designer collections. As in the example story, the protagonists can be seen as fools who take any effort to be at the launch and this degree of excitement for clothes might be seen as exaggerated. And as the protagonists take the situation very seriously and e.g. see it as a 'festive occasion' (Dogmom, 2008) instead of admitting their exaggeration, the situation becomes even more comic and the consumers more foolish. H&M therefore also takes on the role of the trickster in these other stories, similar to the example story. Due to the cast and structure, also these other stories might be classified as following the comic poetic mode from a reader's perspective. However, once again, the perspective of the narrators differ, who rather sees themselves as following their love object H&M, which then could be classified as a romantic story. The identified comic stories therefore shared the aspect that the story could be classified as belonging to different genres depending on the perspective.

One further element that points to the comic poetic mode is that also others experience similar misfortune as Dana (2008). For instance, Dogmom's misfortune is in this respect almost the same as also many other people were eager to attend the H&M launch event in San Francisco (*'The line was 60 or so when we arrived at 5 am and stretched down Powell and around the corner by 9 am'* (Dogmom, 2008).). Additionally, it gets even worse for her when she *'got slammed into one of the closed glass doors'* as *'hundreds of people pushed and ran from all directions into the store'* (Dogmon, 2008). Thus, it increases her 'punishment' degree and somehow even more amuses the reader because she is foolish enough to stay in the middle of a crowd of fanatic people. Another identified pattern was that consumers mentally prepared for the launching day and made a plan for that day, including when to be at the store and sometimes even how to walk through the store to best be able to obtain the desired items. That not enough items are available and people have to decide in advance what items to hunt after, shows once again the misfortune experienced by the protagonists and further also points again to the foolish behaviour of not revealing H&M's

plan. Besides, it shows H&M's store once more as the clever trickster who lures consumers into its store by advertising limited editions.

Thus, several conclusions can be drawn with regards to H&M's store personality from the role as a trickster in the comic stories. First, as already identified earlier, H&M's role as trickster leads to an amoral personality where H&M is somehow between the fronts of good and bad by luring consumers into extreme situations, but at the same time also giving them desired designer pieces. Furthermore, it can be regarded as very clever of H&M to increase attention tremendously for a short time. At the same time this aspect can also be seen as selfish of H&M. As H&M limits the time and pieces available for the different designer collections, it could be argued that H&M just thinks about its own quick turnover and not about all the other consumers that would love to snatch a clothing piece of the designer collection, showing once again its selfish or egoistic character. This description of H&M is in line with Carrol's (1981) characterization of a trickster being clever, selfish, and deceitful and consequently H&M might be described as a clever, selfish and deceitful person. In addition, H&M can be characterized as being footloose or with little responsibility when it exposes consumers to all the exertions and hardly seems to control the stampede of thousands of consumers running simultaneously in a store. However, it is assumed that consumers still regard H&M as lovable and irrepressibly sympathetic, as consumers stay loyal to their fanatically beloved Swedish clothing retailer and every time that a new launch occurs are coming back to experience the same madness as last time. This characterization of H&M refers more to its role as love object in the stories from a narrator's perspective. Further, due to the fact that consumers come back and know in advance that they like the designer collection, H&M has to be a reliable person on who the consumer can count on in regards to the designer collections. Being able to obtain this degree of affection and admiration, H&M must have an attractive and fascinating personality. The description of H&M as an unrevealed but admired trickster sums up its ambivalent personality well, pointing to its clever and selfish traits as much as to its lovable ones.

What distinguishes the trickster and H&M's roles in the comic story from epic or romantic stories is that H&M becomes a person who is not only portrayed with positive traits but through its role and behaviour as a trickster by fooling consumers, its personality entails negative or questionable traits. Whereas in romantic and epic stories mainly the bright side of H&M's personality was described, through its role as helper and love object, the comic stories add a snapshot on its darker personality side. However, even though H&M tricks consumers, it does not hurt or insult them and the consumers still admire H&M and therefore H&M is still portrayed as a likeable person and positive emotional feelings towards H&M

overweigh. From a narrator's perspective H&M is portrayed similarly in the romantic and the comic story as a love object. However, in the comic story H&M takes on the role of a fanatically loved and admired person, which is an increase of admiration from the romantic stories. If H&M can be seen as becoming an icon in romantic stories, this development of H&M is even strengthened in the comic stories from the narrator's perspective.

The reasons why the consumers might have told these comic stories is that they experienced a day at H&M which was not like every day and which was highly emotional for the consumers and maybe they want to share this experience with others. In contrast to authors of other story genres, the consumers of these identified comic stories were probably not deliberately writing a comic story nor are aware of that the story might be read and seen as comic.

4.5 Tragic consumer stories

Within the classifications of stories according to their poetic modes, Gabriel (2000) suggests that stories can also be categorized as tragic. The analysis and interpretation of consumers' blog stories about H&M's stores revealed that some of these stories can also be classified as following a tragic poetic mode.

'News story on H&M racism'

Hi Everyone

Today wrote the following complaint letter to the Better Business Bureau and H&M Corp. Office. I will be contacting the local news and periodicals regarding this. I am asking you to kindly forward this information to everyone you know. I want as many people as I can reach out there to read this. I believe this is very important for you to know. If you can give me any other advice I truly appreciate it. I am still in shock and disappointed.

Thank you for your time,

Frannie

On 9/13/07 @12pm, I went to H&M on Mich. Ave. While looking at clothes, a male employee named Joseph H.; visual merchandiser, who was standing close to me, raised up his right hand and said, "Mail order bride in the house," and ran over to another female employee and they both started laughing. I looked around myself and the only other person standing next to me was a male security guard. I approached the two employees and asked them to try on clothes that I had desired to purchase. Joseph H. rudely pointed to the fitting rooms at the end of the room and said, "Can you read that sign, it says fitting room." As I walked away, Joseph said "ching, ching, chong." I went into the fitting room and told one of the sales associates what happened and asked him to help me by calling the manager. Tom the Dept. Manager came down. I reviewed everything with him and told him how upset I was. Tom stated, "we will discuss this with him later today, I am sorry this happened." He did not ask for any other info. I asked Tom for his name and number. He told me to, "call back next week to follow up because I

am leaving for OOT tomorrow." I left and came back @130pm to speak to the manager again because I wanted to get Joseph's name. Joseph was still working on the floor. I spoke to another manager named Greg because Tom was not available and told Greg that I am writing a complaint regarding the situation. Greg gave me the address of the store and told me that he did not have any formal paperwork I could write on "because Joseph would get a verbal warning first, and if it happens again, then it would be written down." He gave me Joseph's name and told me to address the letter to the General Manager. I told him that this is unfortunate because there will be many other Asian women walking in the store today and Joseph H. is inappropriately making derogatory comments. Greg apologized and said there was nothing else he could do.

I do not believe Joseph H. should continue to be employed at H&M, I want this complaint in his employee record, and he owes me an apology.

(Frannie, 2007)

4.5.1 'News story on H&M racism'

The story is taken as an example of this poetic mode representing the common elements of this story classification found in consumer blog stories representing H&M as a discriminatory villain. In this story the author, Frannie, directly addresses the reader and informs him/her that she has written a complaint letter to the board of H&M and also contacted the local news. The reason why she has a complaint is that she has experienced racism and been insulted due to her Asian appearance in one of the H&M stores in the US. Besides complaining about the insult itself, Frannie also wants to bring to the front that even though the matter was taken to the store manager no action has been taken from H&M's site and the employee, who insulted her, is still working there; but Frannie wants him to be expelled.

As Frannie puts herself in the centre of the story, she is portrayed as the protagonist of the story and H&M is taking on the role of a supporting character. The roles both take on in the story and the relationship to each other become clear in the following part where Frannie presents the incident:

'While looking at clothes, a male employee named Joseph H.; visual merchandiser, who was standing close to me, raised up his right hand and said, "Mail order bride in the house," and ran over to another female employee and they both started laughing. I looked around myself and the only other person standing next to me was a male security guard. I approached the two employees and asked them to try on clothes that I had desired to purchase. Joseph H. rudely pointed to the fitting rooms at the end of the room and said, "Can you read that sign, it says fitting room." As I walked away, Joseph said "ching, ching, chong."'(Frannie, 2007)

The protagonist is called a 'mail order bride' by an H&M employee which refers to the circulating stereotype that Western man order Asian woman from a catalogue by mail to be their wives, and the content of the phrase points to that Frannie is insulted and discriminated against because of her Asian looks. The employees further laugh about this comment, which increases the effect of the insult. Further, Frannie is asked whether she cannot read the signs, which might show that the employee has the image that Asians or women are less

educated. Lastly by saying 'ching ching chong', which is used as an ethnic slur to mock Asians (Tang, 2003), Frannie is insulted another time by the employee.

As Frannie is affronted without any reason only because of her looks she takes on the role of the non-deserving victim and H&M by deliberately insulting the consumer takes on the role of the villain. The story can be classified as a tragic story according to various features of its structure. Firstly, the story plot can be described as a misfortune that happens to the protagonist leaving her with a trauma. Secondly, it might be said that the insult or injury was deliberately done by the employee to hurt the protagonist as no other motive is existing. These constellations of characters and the story plot are in accordance with Gabriel's tragic poetic mode. As the injury caused by the villain is perceived to be on an emotional or psychic level and not on a physical level, the story is not considered to cause fear as in horror stories but rather sadness as in tragic stories. As Frannie is most likely seen as similar to the audience, the story could further be categorized as a low mimetic tragic story or pathos, which is usually associated with low mimetic stories and an individual victim (Freye 1957: 38).

Besides the structural aspects, also the topic of the story classifies it as a tragic story, as oppression and harassment of ethnic groups are often predicaments in tragic stories (Gabriel, 2000:70), and as in Frannie's story, a victim and a villain can mostly be clearly identified. Further, the topic of harassment can be linked to the malevolent fate of Frannie, who due to her foreign looks might arguably be designated to experience insults or tragedy, which is another element of tragic stories. Moreover, the villain uses fixed qualities by stereotyping Asian looking persons, which is another indicator of tragic stories.

In the continuation of the story it becomes evident that Frannie is not only victimized through the insult itself but also through the way H&M treats her complaint in the store.

"Tom the Dept. Manager came down. I reviewed everything with him and told him how upset I was. Tom stated, "we will discuss this with him later today, I am sorry this happened." He did not ask for any other info. I asked Tom for his name and number. He told me to, "call back next week to follow up because I am leaving for OOT tomorrow" (Frannie, 2007)

This first encounter between Frannie and the management shows that the management is not taking her complaint seriously since the manager is not taking any notes or explaining Frannie what the consequences for the employee will be. That Frannie is not supported or helped by the management becomes further clear when she comes to the store a second time and

'Greg (manger) gave me the address of the store and told me that he did not have any formal paperwork I could write on "because Joseph would get a verbal warning first, and if it happens again,

then it would be written down." He gave me Joseph's name and told me to address the letter to the General Manager. I told him that this is unfortunate because there will be many other Asian women walking in the store today and Joseph H. is inappropriately making derogatory comments. Greg apologized and said there was nothing else he could do' (Frannie, 2007)

It could be argued that in the course of the story the tragic element and trauma for Frannie increases as the insult is harmful enough, however the mistreatment and lack of attention following the incident might present an even greater tragic happening. This surplus of injustice when a victim or already weak person is further affronted is what Gabriel named pathetic quality of tragic stories (Gabriel, 2000: 72). It could be argued that Frannie is exactly experiencing this surplus of injustice and portrays herself as being in a powerless situation since the store management is not taking any actions.

By not taking any actions against the employee immediately and by referring Frannie to other persons instead of helping her, the store management does not clearly set itself apart from the comment made by the employee. H&M is therefore taking on the role of a villain in two instances in the story, firstly by insulting her directly and secondly by not helping her out of her situation or providing support.

By saying that *'I want H&M to know that this is unacceptable'*(Frannie, 2007) Frannie might express that she felt injured not only by one person of H&M but by more using the trope of unity, presenting H&M's employees and management as one and blaming that entity or that one person for his/her behaviour and projecting H&M as the evil villain. This attribution of blame and the simultaneous attribution of unity is a typical characteristic of the tragic poetic mode (Gabriel, 2000: 70). It might be argued that by drawing a clear line between herself as the undeserving victim and H&M as the evil villain, Frannie follows an archetypal point of view dividing the world into good and bad. Further, Gabriel pointed out that *'the point of most tragic stories is that the world in general and organizations in particular are unjust and unkind'* (Gabriel, 2000: 70). It could be argued that with this story Frannie does not only want to show the injustice happened at H&M but point to the general unfairness and racial discrimination in the world, as she unifies employees into one and as she wants to draw the public attention to what has happened to her and *'want as many people as I can reach out there to read this (her complaint letter)'* (Frannie, 2007).

As a result of the plot structure, the audience responds with a stronger feeling of pity and shame for the protagonist and anger towards the villain because of the injustice of what has happened when the story elaborates. These emotional responses are elements of tragic stories (Gabriel, 2000: 70) and point out that not only the narrator sees the story as tragic but

that also the audience classifies this story as tragic. Therefore, the story represents the tragic poetic mode from both perspectives, the narrator's and the audience's.

Taking the standpoint that personnel is often seen as representing corporations and that corporations are personified through their personnel, whose behaviour or personality then directly relates to the company's behaviour or personality, H&M's store personality might be identified in this story firstly through the more explicit behaviour of the personnel. Further, the role H&M's store is assigned to in the story is arguably giving indication of H&M's store personality. Personality traits might be identified through the double role as villain that H&M was assigned to in the story. Firstly by being a discriminatory villain, H&M could be described as a person who has racial tendencies and enjoys insulting and affronting others, maybe especially ethnic groups. It can further be described as a person who easily stereotypes and thinks in prejudices. As H&M feels to be in the position to mock others it is arguable that it is a person who thinks of himself as being superior to others. Secondly by being portrayed as a villain who is not helping the victim and therefore increasing the misfortune experienced by the victim, H&M is not a person who steps up for victims and does not show caring or helping personality traits, which might point again to a personality who feels superior to others and hence could be described as arrogant, egocentric and maybe even cruel. Further, H&M is not a person who takes responsibility for his own behaviour and also does not show social responsibility traits.

As Frannie says herself that ' *I felt very helpless and upset when this all happened*' (Frannie, 2007) it becomes evident that she tells the story out of an emotional state of anger, disappointment and lack of power. Further, as said before, she wants to draw attention to her story and wants to reach as many people as possible and make them aware of what she experienced. Her aim might be to thereby gain support from others and at the same time warn or point to the misbehaviour of H&M and maybe even society as a whole.

4.5.2 H&M as discriminatory villain

Besides the example story presented above, few other consumer blog stories were categorized as tragic stories. They resemble the example story and can be categorized as tragic due to structural aspects such as a cast of villain and victim and a plot of misfortune. Moreover, also the topic of harassment or discrimination categorizes these stories as tragic and H&M is assigned the role of the villain by discriminating against breastfeeding mothers, transgendered persons and voluptuous women. Further as in the example story, the story is similarly seen as a tragic experience by the narrator and the audience and as a consequence of the role assigned in the story, picture H&M's personality in a similar way.

The story 'H&M Canada discriminates against nursing mums' by Listen Up-Mofos (2008), a Chilean woman, sees herself as a victim and H&M as a villain because of its discriminatory behaviour. In this story Listen-up Mofos publishes an email from her sister Manuela who writes about her discriminatory experience in relation to breastfeeding at an H&M store in Canada. After starting nursing, she was asked by a store clerk to go to a special fitting room because it was against H&M's policy to breastfeed in public as it would offend others. Manuela says that H&M' *punished me for breastfeeding by putting me in seclusion and thus confirmed the idea that public breastfeeding is offensive and shameful* (Manuela in Listen-up-Mofos, 2008). This shows that the woman feels affronted insulted and discriminated against by the H&M employee and H&M's policy, which says that she has to leave the room for breastfeeding her child (ibid). She sees herself as the victim who has not done anything wrong and describes H&M as the villain who hurts and insults her. H&M as the villain discriminates against the powerless woman in public, leaving her with a feeling of shame. By saying that H&M as the villain was *'offering me a much more comfortable space to do it. But of course, they were not "offering" anything, they were forcing me to do it in seclusion or I could not do it at all* (ibid) she points to the double-faced character of the villain who pretends to want the best for the woman or victim but actually only wants the best for him-/herself. Manuela is not only blaming the single employee but due to its policy she blames H&M as a whole and as in the other story uses the trope of agency and blame together. It could be argued that thereby the division of the bad villain H&M and the non deserving victim as herself and other woman is increased.

Also other blog stories were found in which the authors were writing about experiences of discrimination in connection with H&M. For instance, a transgendered person, called Kasumi_astra (2007), writes that she was dismissed by an H&M employee when she wanted to join her girlfriend into the changing rooms to give her advice and thus, felt highly discriminated against by being excluded because of her transgender. She felt very 'distressed' when she was told:

*"Wait a minute, mate"
I asked if there was a problem.
"You'll have to wait here. There are mothers and their daughters down there. We could get complaints...". I was being told to wait outside of the segregated changing room area.
"... Uh, we've got a sign"'.(Kasumi_astra, 2007)*

Hence, by declaring that she felt 'distressed' she puts herself into the role of the non-deserving victim and further H&M into the role of the villain whom she blames for having her *'publicly gendered in front of other people'* (Kasumi_astra, 2007). Once more, the consumer is insulted and discriminated against without deserving the mistreatment and therefore sees

himself as a non-deserving victim and is equally seen as such by the audience. H&M again takes on the role of a villain hurting feelings of others deliberately, discriminating against and stereotyping.

Another example of a tragic blog story is written by a woman called Marvel (2009) and deals with her experience as a big woman and H&M clothing sizes. She writes that due to *'medication that causes severe weight gain (...) [she has] packed on 50 extra pounds'* (Marvel, 2009). She further explains that this is a reason why she suffers a lot and always feels uncomfortable in her skin. One day, she decided to do some shopping at H&M as *'pre-recession type therapy'* (ibid) but she was not able to find a single clothe in the store that would fit her. She explains:

'I am bigger than the biggest size at H&M. In fact, I had a really hard time finding anything over a size 10. I couldn't squeeze myself into the largest size without hacking off pounds of flesh' (Marvel, 2009).

Thus, she describes that she feels *'disgusted'* by *'experiencing the size discrimination implied by not stocking larger sizes of clothes'* (ibid). Therefore, she blames H&M for not being able to help her and at the same time also feels as a non-deserving victim who has been indirectly accused by H&M for being big. And it is even worse for her as she cannot do anything about her weight and hence shows the malevolent fate and designated destiny or the victim which is typical for tragic stories.

In the tragic consumer blog stories, the consumers assign themselves the role of the non-deserving victim and H&M the role of the villain who causes trauma and injury to the consumer by insulting or discriminating the consumer. Further, the consumers do not blame individual employees but project their anger and disappointment towards the whole corporation by appointing H&M and not single employees as the villain. All the stories reveal characters of non-deserving victim and villain and a plot of misfortune or trauma following Gabriel's classification of a tragic story. Further, also the other victims introduced above could be seen as similar to the audience and hence, the tragedy is of low mimetic or pathos.

In all the tragic stories H&M is described as the villain by the narrators as they feel insulted by it without having done anything or being responsible for the reason of the insult. Further, in all instances H&M was discriminating against 'minorities' or persons who might be discriminated against more often in general showing their malevolent fate, which results in that the audience sees H&M as the villain as well and feels anger and shame. Moreover, the evil villain character of H&M is strengthened as H&M is mostly not aware of its behaviour nor takes responsibility for it or helps the victims out of their misfortunate situation and is

perceived more evil from both perspectives, the narrator's and the audience's. As the role H&M is assigned to in the different stories resembles the role in Frannie's tragic story, conclusions on H&M 's personality traits are similar as well as H&M is portrayed again as a discriminatory person who does not stand up for or help weak persons or victims. From the role H&M has in the stories, its personality is discriminatory, arrogant, cruel and further H&M is not a very social responsible person as it does not support or help weak persons or groups. Compared to the roles H&M takes on in other genres, the character in the tragic story points to the more 'negative' personality traits or the dark site of H&M's personality.

Moreover, it could be argued that the storytellers see their different insults not only directed to them as individuals but to all women or men. For instance, Manuela (Listen-up Mofos, 2008) writes that for her '*women continue to be socially punished and made to feel ashamed when they do it publicly*' (ibid). This statement might further show that not only in this story, the villain is found embodied in H&M, but in society in general, e.g. always when woman are stopped from breastfeeding publicly or persons are harassed because of their gender. That H&M might be presented as a villain standing for other villains in society, is special to the genre of tragic consumer stories as this element of projection or generalization was not found in the other consumer stories.

It could be said that, hence the consumers are angry and disappointed they want to tell others about their experiences. In the case of Manuela, in addition to herself also her sister supports her through forwarding the story by publishing it in her blog. Thus, it could be said that both Manuela and her sister tell the story to inform others about what Manuela experienced, but also to draw attention to the topic and generate public discussion as it seems to be an important matter for both of them. Therefore, tragic stories might be told by consumers when they experience misfortunes, traumas or injuries and feel angry, disappointed and hurt. Further, consumers might tell tragic stories about their experiences if these further entail a greater scope or topic to which the consumer wants to draw public attention (such as racism or other forms of discrimination) which is different from the other consumer story genres identified. Further, in comparison with other genres, it might be pointed out that tragic stories were few and seemed to be very tightly linked to the situation and a onetime experience in the store which however had a strong and lasting negative impact on consumer's lives.

5 Conclusion

The following chapter will discuss findings of the analysis in relation to the research questions and objective posed in the beginning of this study. The research aim was to identify and analyze the construct of a retailer's store personality in consumer stories and how these stories relate to the retailer's brand story on a global level. On the basis of this research objective the empirical material gathered, with H&M as a case study, was analysed and thus, the following conclusions were drawn with regards to the construct of a retailer's store personality.

Telling store stories

The idea that people tell stories to themselves and others to make sense of their experiences, such as with a retail brand (Woodside et al. 2008 & Gabriel, 2000), and that these stories might provide access to a deeper truth of the consumer's experience, was supported during the analysis of consumer blog stories. The analysed consumer stories of H&M revealed that indeed retail brands, such as H&M, play a decisive role in people's life and hence, consumers write stories to tell themselves and others about their experiences made with H&M stores. For example, in the identified tragic stories, it was clearly found that the consumers used the story to process their experiences made with the store and assign meaning to the event by publicly telling their stories. Thus, it could be concluded that consumers tell stories about their experiences made with the retailers with the intention to communicate and share these with others in order to make sense of them and thus, generate meaning. Further, blogs were found to present a platform with high potential to encounter consumer stories as people use blogs frequently and are able to present their stories and experiences there freely.

When telling stories, it was found out that consumers often base their evaluation on experiences made in the store. As noted initially the store of a retailer can be regarded as the number one contact point for consumers to experience the retail brand (Zentes et al. 2007; Kotler, 1973), but until now the focus had not been on whether consumers attribute personality traits to a store when telling stories. Thus, the focus of this study was proposed to be on identifying and analysing how a retailer's store personality is constructed in consumer stories. However, it needs to be noted that in some cases it was less obvious whether consumers point at the brand or store in their stories, since some retailers, such as H&M,

commonly use their label 'H&M' for brand, store and products. Thus, in later stages it was not always possible to differentiate between the role of the store or brand in consumer stories. Nevertheless, as people were mostly writing about experiences after having visited an H&M store, it can be confirmed here that the point of departure and first point of encounter was the store and the roles assigned to the retail brand were based on consumers' store experiences. This supports the initial assumption that the store of a retailer is one of the most important elements within the retail brand and further is essential for a retailer's image creation process. As a consequence of the assignment of a character of a store in a story, also the personality, which could be transferred from the role taken on in stories, is mostly of the store instead of the whole brand. This proves the importance of store personality as part of brand personality once again.

Moreover, as similar stories have been encountered written by authors from various parts of the world, for example the US, UK or Saudi-Arabia, consumers are viewed to have similar experiences, perceptions and images of H&M stores which enable them to tell stories about the same retail store and narrate stories around its personality in different countries. Consumers who visited an H&M store expected other H&M stores even in other countries to be fairly similar, showing again that consumers might have similar images which might be due to H&M's strategic approach of standardization. In addition, it generated the notion that H&M has a global image, which has led to the indication that H&M might have a cosmopolitan personality.

In essence, it can be concluded that consumers from various parts of the world tell stories in order to make sense of their experiences made in stores. Hence, the store is incorporated into the consumer stories as a distinct character that reveals a specific personality, e.g. discriminatory villain, in relation to the consumers' experiences made. In total, the different personalities attributed to the characters in the various consumer stories form the store personality of a retailer altogether.

Situation as determinant of store personality

In addition, it was discovered that, when telling store stories about experiences made at H&M, also the situation in which the consumer made his/her experience in the store and the intended function of the story played a role in the construction of store personality. In general, consumers were found to tell stories to communicate and share their experiences of the store with others, being positive or negative. In epic, romantic and comic stories the almost always positive image consumers had of the store and its personality overweighed and hence, the function seemed to be to tell others about their affectionate feelings and

admiration for that store, so also others may consider a relationship to the store. Moreover, these three story types were mostly told when experiences were mainly about the stores characteristics such as offering, location or interior. In contrast, the few tragic stories encountered had in common that the experiences made, even though made in the store, were not directly related to the store or brand itself. Negative experiences were caused by the employees and consumers then projected their personality and behaviour back to the store or brand. However, the experiences of discrimination or racism might not be 'unique' to this particular store but could be seen as a social issue with a broader scope, attacking the consumer very personally. It is therefore arguable that tragic stories are told when the consumer experiences personal mistreatment which relates to a bigger social issue. Further, these consumers might use the negative associated store personality and its behaviour to exemplify and point to this social issue, and catch public attention with the stories they tell to others. Thus, it could be concluded that, especially in critical situations, the situation plays a decisive role which personality a character is assigned to. Therefore, the personality of a retail store becomes in some cases highly situational. Consequently, the context in which consumer stories are told is regarded as important since it influences the outcome and the way a retailer's store personality is constructed.

The constructed store personality of H&M

It has been found that, when consumers process their experiences in their stories, H&M's store takes on various roles in these, e.g. trickster or love object. Casting different roles to the store of H&M in their stories shows that people think about the store in distinct ways. Moreover, the processing of consumer experiences in stories further illustrates how people personify objects or brands by giving them anthropomorphic characters in their stories. By assigning the store as well as themselves roles, which are interdependent and are linked to each other, the connection or relationship the consumer has with the brand or store is made evident. Further, due to the living role of H&M in the story the relationship was found to often resemble almost human forms of relationships. Therefore, the study supported the notion of Fournier (1998) that persons have human-like relationships with brands and that consumers also have these relations with retail stores and see retail brands as persons. However, as also discussed briefly in the analysis of romantic stories, objects like stores or brands are believed to not respond in the same emotional way a human would do in a relationship. But the consumers were still found to express in their stories that they feel a bond with H&M and hence, regarded H&M as a 'partner' or love object in their lives. In contrast, others were found to not have a relationship based on likelihood, but on anger or even hate and thus, regarded H&M more as a villain.

Consequently, the role people assign to the store in their stories depends not only on the consumers experience and the kind of situation the experience was made in, but also on the kind of relationship that the consumers have with the store. The determinant of these aspects lies in the object's behaviour. Depending on how an H&M store has presented itself to the consumers, the consumers either found themselves to have had a positive or negative experience. For instance, within the tragic stories H&M's misbehaviour obviously led to a negative experience and therefore, H&M was characterized as a discriminatory villain. Thus, the story's characters are found to be based on the behaviour of H&M. Further, the behaviour of the character is said to be guided by personality (Passer & Smith, 2008; Culpeper, 1996) and indications on the store's personality traits were retrieved by analysing the characters and their described behaviour. Therefore, the notion that a character's personality is evident from its behaviour can be supported. Thus, the view of Culpeper (1996:353) that a character's behaviour is '*diagnostic of personality*' can be confirmed. Consequently, the assumption that a connection between a character and personality exists has been supported.

As different kinds of stories were identified that were based on different behaviour of H&M and hence, different experiences were produced with the store, also the character of H&M's store in relation to the consumer experience changed. The change of roles assigned to H&M's store from one genre to the other, affected also how its personality was described and showed that H&M does not only have one personality, but multiple personalities constructed by different consumer experiences. The following table summarizes the different characters of the consumers and the characters that were assigned to the H&M stores by the brand itself and by the consumers and further, presents the identified personality traits. In addition to the personality traits, examples of what has led to the respective traits are presented as well.

Genre	Brand story	Epic story	Romantic story	Comic story	Tragic story
Consumer's character	Hero	Hero	Lover	Fool	Victim
H&M's store character	Helper	Helper/ (Saviour)	Love object	Trickster	Villain
H&M's store personality	<i>helpful</i> by offering a solution for everyone to be able to shop for nice clothes	<i>helpful</i> by offering a solution for everyone to be able to shop for nice clothes	<i>irresistible</i> by making costumers coming regularly to a store	<i>amoral</i> by offering designer clothes that consumers want, but only limited	<i>discriminatory</i> by prohibiting breast feeding in store
	<i>fashionable</i> by having wearable, modern and stylish clothes	<i>fashionable</i> by. having wearable, modern and stylish clothes	<i>popular</i> by being known and adored worldwide	<i>clever</i> by knowing that consumers want affordable designer clothes	<i>prejudiced</i> by showing no tolerance for transgendered people
	<i>caring</i> by offering affordable, but still fashionable clothes	<i>caring</i> by offering affordable, but still fashionable clothes	<i>caring</i> by offering affordable, but still fashionable clothes	<i>selfish</i> by offering limited designer clothes to raise turnover	<i>arrogant</i> by thinking of being superior to other social groups
	<i>competitive</i> by being one of the cheapest, but fashionable clothing stores	<i>competitive</i> by being one of the cheapest, but fashionable clothing stores	<i>outgoing</i> by offering clothes to people in stores all over the world	<i>footloose</i> by not ensuring safety of consumers at launch event in store	<i>egocentric</i> by centring around itself and not listen to others nuisance
	<i>exciting</i> by surprising the consumers with new clothes regularly	<i>cosmopolitan</i> by having a feeling of belonging worldwide	<i>cosmopolitan</i> by having stores all over the world and a feeling of belonging worldwide	<i>deceitful</i> by luring the consumer into the store with designer collection	<i>cruel</i> by insulting people from other ethnical groups
	<i>innovative</i> by taking trends into account and changing clothing styles	<i>organised</i> by improving their in-store arrangement and layout of clothes	<i>sociable</i> by wanting people to come to stores	<i>sympathetic</i> by fulfilling need of affordable designer clothes	
	<i>democratic/ egalitarian</i> by having fashion knock-offs in mass production	<i>democratic</i> by having fashion knock-offs in mass production	<i>ambitious</i> by continuously developing their clothing lines	<i>fascinating</i> by being able to lure thousands of consumers at the same time	
	<i>(pushy)</i> by imposing its opinion/ideas on other and demand continuous change	<i>admirable</i> by helping the consumer in his challenge and hence, sharing victory	<i>adorable</i> by being 'wonderful, marvellous, totally cool and amazingly trendy'	<i>admirable</i> by offering unique designer clothes	
	<i>(deceitful)</i> by intending to lure the consumer into the store to make profit	<i>(deceitful)</i> by intending to lure the consumer into the store to make profit	<i>passive</i> by being not able to return affectionateness		
			<i>(dangerous/ addictive)</i> by making consumers to a shopping victim		

Table 2: H&M's store personality

Taking a closer look at the different roles H&M's store has been assigned to, it can be observed that, though some personality traits are similar, the various characters are quite distinct from each other. The greatest difference between the characters is reflected in H&M's character as a villain in the tragic stories. In this role, H&M was cast by the consumers as someone that is characterized by being discriminatory, prejudiced and arrogant and further, likes to show its power to people seen as inferior. Thus, it has been identified that H&M, as the villain, has the most distant and cold relationship with the consumers. In contrast, in the role of the trickster in the comic stories, consumers were found to have a very close already fanatic relationship with H&M. However, this relationship was not perceived by the audience as one of the most honest relationships, since it was grounded in the clever and selfish personality of the trickster that trapped and deceived consumers. However, from the consumer's/narrator's point of view the relationship to H&M resembled the one of a love relationship wherein the H&M store seemed irresistible and was attributed the role of a love object. In the romantic stories, H&M, as love object, was identified to be adorable, irresistible and worth of admiration, and the consumers felt the most loyal towards H&M. The relationship that consumer and love object shared was built upon a long-time acquaintanceship and hence, characterized as strong and tied and comparable to a marriage. However, the relationship was not seen as comparable to a 'real' human relationship, but as a rather passive one. In this kind of relationship the consumer was the active part who regularly meets up with an H&M store to be with the adored one. H&M, on the other hand, was, from the audience's perspective, in some cases even seen as dangerous when one consumer described the H&M store to be like a drug that makes her addictive. This reveals again the slightly ambivalent and amoral character already found in the role of the trickster and exemplifies that also traces of the comic story can be found in the romantic story. This slightly addictive character however, is mostly not identified from the narrator/consumer perspective, but from the audience's perspective. In the epic stories, H&M's store role, from a consumer perspective, was mainly identified as a helpful and caring assistant, who supports the consumer in times of problems or needs. However, through the act of saving, H&M also succeeds by convincing the consumer to buy something and hence, as well egoistic traits are evident in H&M's behaviour to rise the own turnover from an audience's point of view. Thus, observing it from the audience's view H&M somehow deceives the consumer by only taking a side role, but actually indenting to profit from the consumer's heroic act. With regards to the relationship between consumer and H&M in the epic stories, it was found that it mostly lasted only until shortly after the challenge was successfully overcome and therefore contrasts the duration of the relationship in the romantic and comic stories. In the story of H&M, H&M was identified as characterizing itself as being a

fashionable, innovative and democratic helper and H&M casted the consumer into the role of the hero following the market oriented view. Similar to the epic, the relationship between H&M and the consumer was found to be only based on the challenge that was overcome together. This shows that H&M wants to be perceived as a kind of 'humble' helper that does not want to be seen as demanding more. However, in the perspective of the audience this can also be regarded as deceitful, because actually it is believed that H&M like every other retailer, aims to have loyal customers that are regularly visit the store and buy clothes in order to raise profit. Thus, traces of H&M as trickster are evident once again.

Examining the different characteristics of H&M and the relationships to the consumer once again, it could be as well argued that from the epic to the romantic to the comic story a connection exists and H&M becomes more and more relevant and admired by the consumer. For instance, elements of the epic stories with H&M as the helper were existent in the other story genres as well. However, in romantic stories the store was not only seen as a helper anymore but as a love object, showing the increased emotional attachment or closer relationship of the consumer and H&M. Hence, consumers' admiration towards H&M increased in romantic stories. Further, in the comic stories the consumer was seen as a fool by the audience but saw himself as a lover or fan of H&M. Therefore, the comic stories entailed romantic elements as well, as consumers would have categorized their story as romantic, showing their affection to H&M. However, compared to the romantic stories and their protagonists, the consumers showed an even greater emotional attachment, admiration and arguably fanatic behaviour when it came to H&M in the comic stories. Therefore, it could be concluded that from an epic over romantic to comic consumer story an increase in admiration for the other character, or in this case H&M, takes place. As H&M is elevated from one to the other genre, it could as well be concluded that H&M is coming closer and closer to being seen as an icon that stands above the general population and gives guidance.

In conclusion, consumers construct a retailer's store personality through processing their experiences made in a store by telling stories around the brand and its store. Consumers personate retail stores, such as H&M, by using stories and assigning themselves and the retail store a character that, according to the characters' behaviour attributed in the stories, leads to distinct personality traits. These personality traits are then further leading to a retailer's store personality.

Common ground and global personality

Apart from the differences, the various consumer stories also revealed overlapping characteristics of H&M's store. H&M' store therefore can be seen has having different but

partly similar personalities. From a quantitative stance it was observed that the majority of consumer stories on a global level could be categorized as either epic or romantic and that comic and tragic stories were presented in a considerable smaller quantity. Further, it was not observable that these two genres were overly presented in certain countries but that in general epic and romantic stories presented the largest quantity of blog stories everywhere. Therefore, it can be concluded that the way H&M is portrayed and its personality is constructed in those two story genres was found to be the common ground in this study. Being the helper and love object, H&M as a person was most commonly characterized by being caring, helpful, fashionable, competitive, cosmopolitan and arguably deceitful. It might further be concluded that these stable personality characteristics which remain the same from one genre to another and from one country to another form the true personality of H&M's store and thus, supports the notion of Baumeister and Twenge (2001) that personality consists of those stable aspects that remain the same throughout different situations. As a consequence, these overlaps can be seen as a common ground on a global level representing H&M's stable and global store personality. Another consistent element across the different genres, and due to the similarity of the stories on a global level, also across countries, was that besides in the tragic stories, all other consumer stories revealed elements of the heroic consumption quest narrative in which H&M helps the consumer to find fashionable, cheap clothes. H&M could be seen as a helper also in its role as love object or trickster, as it provides solutions to the consumer problems and arguably even saves them. Following the heroic consumption quest narrative and thereby the market oriented view, H&M's stores further could be described as deceiving or fooling the consumers from the audience perspective meanwhile helping the consumers from a consumer perspective, which was also identified as a common ground and part of H&M's global store personality. Therefore, the heroic quest narrative, with H&M's store as a helper, combined with the personality traits mentioned, present the similarities of the consumer stories and could be seen as a common ground on which consumers agree in regard to H&M's personality on a global level.

In contrast, H&M as a trickster or villain was less often identified in consumer stories and not found on a global level. Instead these personality descriptions were more dependent on the situation or context. As a consequence the tragic and comic stories rather reflect H&M's more situational and less common or global store personality.

Relation between brand story and consumer stories

As identified in the previous section, the consumer blog stories shared certain similarities which contained the role of H&M as a helper and personality traits of helpful, caring,

cosmopolitan and deceitful. These kinds of characteristics are almost in line with H&M's brand story, where H&M casts itself as being the caring and fashionable helper that feels to belong all over the world to serve as many people as possible with individual, but at the same time affordable clothes. As a consequence it can be concluded that the common ground of the consumer stories reproduces the brand story and thus a relation between H&M's brand story and the consumer stories is evident. As the brand story was compared to the market oriented view, where the store assists the consumer as a hero to overcome the challenge of finding affordable clothes but at the same time deceives or fools the consumer, these elements were also reproduced in consumer stories. However, from a consumer perspective, H&M was rather seen as the helper or saviour and the deceiving personality was identified from an audience perspective. Nevertheless, the heroic consumption quest or market oriented view, which presents the basis of the brand story, was, to a certain extent, reproduced in the consumer stories and demonstrates the relation between brand and consumer story.

As a consequence of the relationship between brand and consumer story, the assumption, that stories can be multivoiced and contain different stories around the same course of events (Czarniawska, 2004: 62), can be confirmed. The first level can be seen as H&M's or the retailers story presenting a sequence of events and the second level as the consumer stories which are emplotted narratives about these events. The story told by the company and the stories told by the consumers can be regarded as separate levels, which in total form the comprehensive brand personality of a retail store, including similar and different personality traits.

Who controls stories?

As store/brand personality is found to be formed by different layers of stories and is part of the brand image which is projected on the store/brand by consumers in narrated form, marketers face a challenge of control over this image. To evaluate the power managers might have over the brand personality and the narrated image it is worth considering who these stories around brands belong to. They might belong to the consumers telling the stories, the situation the stories are told in, the culture of the storyteller, the brand and thereby the managers or to some other power. In this study no differences in storytelling were identified across cultures neither did Gabriel confirm an influence of culture on existing story genres (Gabriel, 2009), which might indicate that culture is not the entity with the most power over consumer blog stories. That culture was not found to influence storytelling considerably in the consumer blog stories even though it is generally regarded as an important element (Lawler, 2002; Bourdieu, 1984), might be due to the global presentation of

H&M and its standardized appearance, or might as well point to a common/global way of culture on how to tell stories in the blog sphere. However, as previously discussed, the situation has been found to be of influence on stories and in consequence, stories might arguably partly belong to situations. In regards to the consumer power, this study did not consider consumers characteristics, such e.g. an optimistic or pessimistic general attitude, which, however, might influence the story considerably and is a point worth of future research. The most important aspect for marketers however is, whether the story belongs to the brand and thereby to the marketers. This study showed that similarities in consumer stories occurred, within genres but also across genres, leading to what might be called a common ground. Further, this common ground has been identified to match the brand story to a considerable extent and therefore it might be argued that the blog stories did partly belong to the brand. For marketers, this might indicate that through the brand story they might be able to control consumer stories to a certain extent; the degree of this power and the process on how to exert this power successfully need to be subject of further studies though.

Anthropomorphizing the business world

The phenomenon that brands or stores are said and found to have personalities and that consumers describe store characteristics in terms of personality traits can be seen as one of the instances in which the business world is being anthropomorphized. It might be argued that various parts of the business world are anthropomorphized by utilizing a metaphor comparing businesses to humans, such as in corporate identity or brand personality. The process of anthropomorphizing business might aim at facilitating the comprehension of complex phenomena (Davies et al. 2001) and at relating the business world and the consumers closer together. In this light the presented study supports the previous argumentation and shows that people relate to retail stores and brands as to other persons and verify the notion that consumers use brands to reflect the way they interpret their relationship with their lifestyle (Mark & Pearson, 2002). Even though consumers process experiences and describe brands as personalities, it is questionable whether the comparison of brands to personality is really exact. This study revealed that, even though stores are assigned a personality in stories and consumers compare them to living persons, it is arguable that the relationship between consumers and brands is not mutual but rather asymmetric, as brands are not able to be as emotionally attached or giving as consumers are. This relationship feature between consumer and store was found out in the case of the love relationship between consumer and brand/store, where the consumer projected more emotions and feelings to the brand than vice versa. As a conclusion it might be argued that, even though brands might be perceived as persons, they are more passive than active, and

are, due to their unlively nature, not able to project strong feelings. Further, store personality is seen as a constructed part of image projected onto the store or brand where else human personality is seen as something inert of humans. Even though the study revealed some smaller incongruence between store and human personality, it still pointed out that the metaphor is appropriate and that the comparison of brands/business to humankind might be a valuable tool in relating brands/business closer to the consumer and enhances communication and comprehension of business concepts.

5.1 Theoretical and practical contributions

This study contributes to existing theory by pointing to the connections of retailer, personality and story and further shows that consumers construct store personality through assigning a character to the store in their stories, based on consumers' experiences with the store. In addition, it supported the assumption that not only product brands but also retail brands are personified by consumers and that the store presents the most important contact point with the brand.

For practice, this study showed that consumers incorporate brands in the stories they tell to themselves and to others, assigning them an anthropomorphic role, and that the consideration and understanding of consumer stories presents a valuable tool to understand consumer brand experiences. Further, marketers might be able to check the appropriateness of their branding activities by comparing the brand story to the common ground in consumer stories and see whether similarities exist.

5.2 Future research

This study found that consumers construct retail store personality in the fashion sector by telling stories and assigning the store diverse characters. Further, these consumer stories could be classified according to Gabriel's four poetic modes. To verify if the findings are transferable to other retail sectors, a similar study focusing on retailers who might distribute a diverse range of brands is suggested.

Furthermore, the question, to whom the stories belong to, was raised during the study and future research would be needed to further contribute to the answer of this question. A special focus therein might be worth laying on the power of the brand story or the marketers, and to what degree and how they are able to influence stories told by consumers to control the brand image. In this context, it could be of interest to analyze the personalities found in

advertising stories of brands and later compare them to consumer stories, in order to assess the influence of the respective branding strategies of a company.

Related to the humanization of business, in this study, it was brought to the front that consumers admire the brand and it was argued that the personality consequently could be seen as iconic, following Holt's line of argumentation. However, this raises the question of whether a connection between icon and personality is existent and whether brands need to have a personality to become an icon. It might be argued that consumers start to admire a brand and its personality because of its unique personality representation and then further, through telling stories and creating a myth around the brand, create an iconic brand. Brands therefore need to be seen by consumers as personalities, so that consumers can create stories around them to make sense of their experiences affectively. Future research investigating the relation between personality and icons in relation to retail brands however is needed to verify or modify assumptions and add to current knowledge on if and how iconic brands can be created.

Moreover, the comparison of story genres revealed that an increase of admiration and emotional attachment from epic to romantic and comic stories takes place and it could be argued that an increase in loyalty takes place simultaneously as people with greater emotional bonding and tighter relationship with the brand might be seen as more loyal. To examine the relationship between story genres told and loyalty might be a promising future research topic as it would give indications on what consumer stories are desired in terms of loyalty.

References

Aaker, D. (1996) *Building strong brands*, New York: Free Press

Aaker, J.L. (1997) 'Dimensions of brand personality', *Journal of Marketing Research*, Vol. 34, No. 3, pp. 342-52

Ailawadi, K.L. and Keller, K.L. (2004) 'Understanding retail branding: conceptual insights and research priorities', *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 80, No. 4, pp. 331-42

Alexander, N. and Colgate M. (2005) 'Customers' responses to retail brand extensions', *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. 21, No. 3, pp. 393–419

Alexis (2009) '*Matthew Williamson for H&M Insanity*' Available at:
<http://www.blackvoices.com/blogs/2009/04/23/matthew-williamson-for-handm-insanity/>
[Accessed 29.04. 2009]

Aron A. and Lewandowski G. (2001) 'Interpersonal Attraction, Psychology of', in: Smelser N.J. and Baltes B.P. (2004), *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, Elsevier Ltd.

Bacharach, S. B. (1989) 'Organizational Theories: Some Criteria for Evaluation', *Academy of Management Review*, Vol.14, No.4, pp. 496–515

Balmer, J.M.T. and Greyser, S.A. (2007) '*Revealing the Corporation*', London: Routledge

Bar-Ilan, J. (2005) 'Information Hub Blogs' *Journal of Information Science*, Vol. 31, No. 4, pp. 297–307

Baumeister, R.F. and Twenge, J.M. (2001) '*Personality and Social Behaviour*', in: Smelser N.J. and Baltes B.P. (2004), *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, Elsevier Ltd.

Bawa, K.; Landwehr, J.T. and Aradhna, K. (1989) 'Consumer Response to Retailers' Marketing Environments: An Analysis of Coffee Purchase Data', *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 65, No. 4, pp. 471-495.

Benjamin W. (1968) *'The storyteller: reflections on the works of Nikolai Leskov'* in: Gabriel Y. (2000) *'Storytelling in Organizations- Facts, Fiction and Fantasies'* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Bergson, H. (1980) *'Laughter'*, in: Meredith, G. (ed.) *'Comedy'*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press

Blanchard, A.L. (2004) *'Blogs as Virtual communities: Identifying a Sense of Community in the Julie/Julia Project'*, in: L.J. Gurak, S. Antonijevic, L. Johnson, C. Ratliff and J. Reyman (eds) *'Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community, and Culture of Weblogs'*. Available at: http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/blogs_as_virtual.html [Accessed March 2006]

Bourdieu P. (1984) *'Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste'*. London: Routledge

Bortree, D. (2005) *'Presentation of Self on the Web: An Ethnographic Study of Teenage Girls' Weblogs'*, *Education, Communication and Information*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 25–39

Bryman, A. and Bell, E. (2007) *'Business Research Methods'*. 2nd edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Bryman, A. and Bell, E. (2003) *'Business Research Methods'*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Burger, J.M. (2008) *'Personality'*, 7th edition, Belmont: Wadsworth

Burt, S. and Sparks, L. (2002), *'Corporate Branding, Retailing and Retail Internationalization'*, *Corporate Reputation Review*, Vol. 5, No. 2/3, pp. 194–212

Burt, S., Davies, K., Dawson J. and Sparks, L. (2008) *'Categorizing patterns and processes in retail grocery internationalisation'*, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, Vol. 15, No.2, pp. 78–92

Carroll, M.P. (1981) *'Lévi-Strauss, Freud and the Trickster: A new perspective among an Old Problem'*, *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 301-313

Cornelissen, J.P. (2002) 'On the 'Organizational Identity' Metaphor', *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 13, No. 3, pp. 259-268

Culler J. (1977) 'Foreword' in: Todorov T. 'The poetics of Prose' New York: Cornell University Press

Culpeper, J. (1996) 'Inferring character from text: Attribution theory and foregrounding theory', *Poetics*, Vol. 23, pp. 335-362

Czarniawska B. (2004) 'Narratives in Social Science Research' London: Sage Publications

Dana (2008) 'Comme des Garçons for H&M comes and goes (of the racks)' Available at: <http://www.shopaholicsite.com/2008/11/comme-des-garcons-for-h-comes-and-goes.html> [Accessed 11.04. 2009]

Da Silva, R. V. and Syed Alwi, S. F. (2006), 'Cognitive, affective attributes and conative, behavioural response in retail corporate branding', *Journal of Product and Brand Management*, Vol. 15, No. 5, pp. 293-305

d'Astous, A. and Lévesque M. (2003) 'A scale for measuring store personality', *Psychology & Marketing*, Vol. 20, No. 5, pp. 455–469

Darden, W., and Babin B.J. (1994) 'Exploring the concept of affective quality: expanding the concept of retail personality', *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 29, No. 101, pp.101-109

Davies, G. (1992) 'The two ways in which retailers can be brands', *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, Vol. 20, No. 2, pp. 24–34

Davies, G., Chun R. and Da Silva, R.V. (2001) 'The personification metaphor as a measurement approach for corporate reputation', *Corporate Reputation Review*, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 113–127

Dennis, C.; Murphy J.; Marsland, D.; Cockett T. and Patel T. (2002) 'Measuring image: shopping centre case studies', *The International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research*, Vol. 12, No. 4, pp. 355–373

Dogmom (2008) '*Comme des Garçons for H&M release – another dangerous stampede*' Available at: http://www.dogmomsdish.com/dogmoms_dish/2008/11/commes-des-garcons-for-hm-release-another-dangerous-stampede.html [Accessed 29.04.2009]

Donovan, R.J. and Rossiter, J.R. (1982) 'Store atmosphere: an environment psychology approach', *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 58, No. 1, pp. 34-57

Dubois A. and Gadde E. (2002) 'Systematic combining: an abductive approach to case research' *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 55, pp.553-650

Eisenhardt K. (1989) 'Building theories from case study research' *The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 14, No. 4, pp. 532-550

Encyclopaedia Britannica Online (2009) '*Attitude*' Available at: <http://search.eb.com.ludwig.lub.lu.se/eb/article-9011180> [Accessed 04.April 2009]

Escalas J. & Stern B. (2003) 'Sympathy and empathy: emotional response to advertising drama' *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 29, No.4, pp. 566-578

Esterby-Smith M., Thorpe R.& Lowe A. (2002) *Management Research: An Introduction*, 2nd edition. London: Sage

FabSugar (2009) '*Mathew Willimason for H&M burns through foggy San Fran*' Available at: <http://www.fabsugar.com/3072044> [Accessed 29.04. 2009]

Fog K., Budtz C.& Baris Y. (2007) '*Storytelling- Branding in Practice*' Berlin: Springer

Fournier S. (1998) 'Consumers and their brands: Developing relationship theory in consumer research' *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 24, No.4, pp. 243-374

Frannie (2007) '*News story on H&M racism*' Available at: <http://ryne-ee.blogspot.com/2007/10/news-story-on-h-racism.html> [Accessed 12.04. 2009]

Frye, N. (1957), '*Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*', Harmondsworth: Penguin

Gabriel Y. (2000) '*Storytelling in Organizations- Facts, Fiction and Fantasies*' Oxford: Oxford University Press

Gabriel (2009) 'Storytelling in Organizations' *Seminar*, Lund: Lund University

Gamson, J. (2001) 'Celebrity', in: Smelser N.J. and Baltes B.P. (2004), *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, Elsevier Ltd.

Gloria (2009) 'H&M' Available at: <http://gloriayang.net/?p=153> [Accessed 12.04. 2009]

Greimas A. and Courtés J. (1982) '*Semiotics and language: an analytical dictionary*'
Bloomington: Indiana University Press

Grubb, E. and Grathwohl, H. (1967), 'Consumer self-concept, symbolism and market behaviour: a theoretical approach', *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 31, pp. 22-7

Guba E. and Lincoln Y. (1994) '*Competing paradigm in qualitative research*' in Denzin and Lincoln (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Thousand Oaks: Sage

Herring, S.C., Scheidt, L.A., Bonus, S. and Wright, E. (2005) 'Weblogs as a Bridging Genre', *Information, Technology & People*, Vol. 18, No. 2, pp. 142–71

Hessler, R., Downing, L., Beltz, C., Pelliccio, A., Powell, M. and Vale, W. (2003) 'Qualitative Research on Adolescent Risk Using E-mail: A Methodological Assessment', *Qualitative Sociology*, Vol. 26, No.1, pp. 111–124

Hevern, V. (2004) 'Threaded Identity in Cyberspace: Weblogs and Positioning in the Dialogical Self', *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*, Vol. 4, No. 4, pp. 321–35

Hirschmann E. (1989) 'Consumer behaviour theories as heroic quest' *Advances in consumer Research*, Vol. 16, pp 639-645

H&M (2009) '*Corporate Website H&M*' Available at: www.hm.com [Accessed 07.04.2009]

H&M a) (2009) '*About H&M*' Available at: http://www.hm.com/us/abouthm__aboutm.nhtml
[Accessed 11.04. 2009]

H&M b) (2009) '*Business Concept*' Available at:

http://www.hm.com/us/abouthm/factsaboutm/ourbusinessconcept_ourphilo.nhtml

[Accessed 11.04. 2009]

H&M c) (2009) '*Fashion Concept*' Available at:

http://www.hm.com/us/abouthm/factsaboutm/ourfashionconcepts_concepts.nhtml

[Accessed 11.04. 2009]

H&M d) (2009) '*Corporate Responsibilities*' Available at:

http://www.hm.com/us/corporateresponsibility_responsibility.nhtml [Accessed 11.04. 2009]

H&M e) (2009) '*Store*' Available at:

http://www.hm.com/us/abouthm/factsaboutm/fromideatostore/stores_fromideatostorestores.nhtml [Accessed 11.04. 2009]

H&M f) (2009) '*The brand*' Available at:

http://www.hm.com/us/abouthm/factsaboutm/thehmband_thhmband.nhtml [Accessed 26.04.2009]

H&M g) (2008) '*Comme des Garcons exclusive collection for H&M*' Available at:

http://www.hm.com/us/_prfashion.nhtml?pressreleaseid=681 [Accessed 26.04.2009]

Hobbes, T. (1651/1962) '*Leviathan: Or the Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiastical and Civil*', London: Collier-Macmillan

Hogg, M.K.; Cox, A.J. and Keeling K. (2000), 'The impact of self-monitoring on image congruence and product/brand evaluation', *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 34, No. 5/6, pp. 641-666

Holt D. (2003) 'What becomes an icon most' *Harvard Business Review*, Vol.81, No. 3, pp. 43-49

Holt D. (2004) '*How brands become icons*' Cambridge: Harvard University Business School Press

Holt D & Thompson C. (2004) 'Man-of-action heroes: The pursuit of heroic masculinity in everyday consumption' *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 31, No. 2, pp. 425-440

Hookway, N. (2008) 'Entering the blogosphere': some strategies for using blogs in social research', *Qualitative Research*, Vol. 8, pp. 91-113

Into the Frey (2009) '*H&M comes to Seattle*' Available at:
<http://intothefray.com/blog/2008/06/25/hm-comes-to-seattle> [Accessed 12.04. 2009]

James, D. L.; Durand, R.M. and Dreves, R.A. (1976) 'The Use of a Multi-Attribute Model in a Store Image Study', *Retailing*, Vol. 52, No.2, pp. 23-32

Jung, C.G. (1938) '*The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*', Princeton: Bollingen

Kahn, R. and Kellner, D. (2004) 'New Media and Internet Activism: From the "Battle of Seattle" to Blogging', *New Media and Society*, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp. 87–95

Kapferer, J.N. (2008) '*The New Strategic Brand Management*', London: Kogan Page

Kasumi_astra (2007) '*H&M*' Available at: <http://kasumi-astra.livejournal.com/13512.html>
[Accessed 29.04. 2009]

Keller, K.L. (1998) '*Strategic Brand Management*', Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall

Kerbel, M. and Bloom, J. (2005) 'Blog for America and Civic Involvement', *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, Vol.10, No. 4, pp. 3–27

Kokosalakis, N. (2001) 'Symbolism (Religious) and Icon', in: Smelser N.J. and Baltes B.P. (2004), *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, Elsevier Ltd.

Kotler, P. (1973) 'Atmospherics as a Marketing Tool', *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 49, No.4, pp. 40-64

Lawler S. (2002) '*Narrative in Social Research*' in May T. (2002) '*Qualitative Research in Action*' London: Sage Publications

Levy, S. J. (1985) 'Dreams, fairy tales, animals, and cars' *Psychology & Marketing*, Vol. 2, pp. 67–81

Lindquist, J. (1975) 'Meaning of Image', *Journal of Retailing*, Vol. 50, pp. 29-38

Listen-Up Mofos (2008) '*H&M Canada discriminates against nursing moms*' Available at: <http://listenupmofos.blogspot.com/2008/08/h-canada-discriminates-against-nursing.html> [Accessed 12.04. 2009]

MacDougall, R. (2005) 'Identity, Electronic Ethos, and Blogs: A Technologic Analysis of Symbolic Exchange on the New News Medium', *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 49, No. 4, pp. 575–99

Mann, C. and Stewart, F. (2000) '*Internet Communication and Qualitative Research: A Handbook for Researching Online*'. London: Sage Publications

Mark, M. and Pearson, C. (2002) '*The Hero and the Outlaw: Building Extraordinary Brands through the Power of Archetypes*', McGraw-Hill, New York, NY.

Martineau P. (1958) 'The Personality of the Retail Store' *Harvard Business Review*, Vol.36, No.1, pp. 47-55

Marvel (2009) '*Fuck you H&M*' Available at: <http://themarvelist.blogspot.com/2009/04/fuck-you-h.htm> [Accessed 29.04. 2009]

McGoldrick, P. (2002) '*Retail Marketing*', 2nd edition, London: McGraw-Hill Education

Moisio, R., & Arnould, E. J. (2005) 'Extending the dramaturgical framework in marketing: Drama structure, drama interaction and drama content in shopping experiences' *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, Vol. 4, pp.1–11.

Monie (2009) '*The H&M Challenge- Work Casual*' Available at: http://technorati.com/posts/meg5rOhJxEnVf61nnR_9vvaijaR55S8Z7fHKfY6DpII%3D [Accessed 12.04. 2009]

Natalie (2008) '*H&M bestill my heart again*' Available at: <http://qiddensfamily.blogspot.com/2008/05/h-bestill-my-heart.html> [Accessed 11.04. 2009]

Ó Baoill, A. (2004) 'Weblogs and the Public Sphere', in L.J. Gurak, S. Antonijevic, L. Johnson, C. Ratliff and J. Reyman (eds) 'Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community, and Culture of Weblogs'.

Available at: http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/weblogs_and_the_public_sphere.html
[Accessed March 2006]

Oxford English Dictionary (2009), 2nd edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Passer, M.W. and Smith, R.E. (2008) 'Psychology – The Science of Mind and Behavior', 4th edition, NY: McGraw-Hill

Plummer, J. T. (1985) 'How personality makes a difference?', *Journal of Advertising Research*, Vol. 24, No. 6, pp. 27–31

Propp V. (1968) 'Morphology of the folktale' Austin: University of Texas Press

Ragin C. and Becker H. (1992) 'What is a case?: exploring the foundations of social inquiry'. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Reason P. and Hawkins P (1988) 'Storytelling as inquiry' in Reason P. (ed) 'Human inquiry in action: developments of new paradigm research' London: Sage

Ribeiro G.L. (2001) 'Cosmopolitanism', in: Smelser N.J. and Baltes B.P. (2004), *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, Elsevier Ltd.

Ricoeur, P. (1970) 'Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation'. New Haven: Yale University Press

Ricoeur P. (1991) 'From text to action: essays in hermeneutics 2' London: Athlone

Rook, Dennis W. (1985) 'The Ritual Dimension of Consumer Behavior', *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 251 -264

Russell, J.A., and Pratt, G. (1980) 'A description of the affective quality attributed to environments', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 38, No. 2, pp. 311–322

Serfarty, V. (2004) 'Online Diaries: Towards a Structural Approach', *Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 3, pp. 457–71

Shank, M. D., & Langmeyer, L. (1994) 'Does personality influence brand image?' *Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 128, pp. 157–164

ShoeGirl (2009) '*H&M*', Available at: <http://wholovesshoes.blogspot.com/2009/02/h.html> [Accessed 09.03. 2009]

Shoegarfreeruby (2009) '*The H&M-Riyadh experience*' Available at: <http://thepinktarha.blogspot.com/2009/04/h-experience.html> [Accessed 12.04. 2009]

Silverblatt, A., Ferry, J. and Finan, B. (1999) '*Approaches to Media Literacy: A Handbook*', London : M.E. Sharpe, Inc.

Sirgy, M.J. (1982) 'Self-concept in consumer behaviour: a critical review', *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 9, pp. 287–300

Somers M and Gibson G. (1994) '*Reclaiming the Epistemological "Other": Narrative and the Social Constitution of Identity*' in Craig Calhoun. (ed) *Social Theory and the Politics of identity*. Oxford & Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers

Stake R. (2005) '*Qualitative Case Study*' in Denzin N. and Lincoln Y. (2005) '*The Sage handbook of qualitative research*' 3rd edition, Thousand Oaks: Sage

Sudweeks, F. and Rafaeli, S. (1995) '*How Do You Get a Hundred Strangers to Agree? Computer-Mediated Communication and Collaboration*', in T.M. Harrison and T.D. Stephen (eds) *Computer Networking and Scholarship in the 21st Century University*. New York: SUNY Press

Sung, Y. and Tinkham S.F. (2005) 'Brand personality structures in the United States and Korea: common and culture-specific factors', *Journal of Consumer Psychology* Vol. 15, No. 4, pp. 334–350

Sylvia (2007) '*H&M-I love it, I hate it, I love it*' Available at: <http://www.blogyourbrand.com/blog/2007/11/h-i-love-it-i-hate-it-i-love-it.html> [Accessed 11.04.2009]

- Tan, T.W. (2004) 'Extending human personality to brands: the stability factor', *Brand Management*, Vol. 11, No. 4, pp. 317–330
- Tang, I. (2003) 'APA community should tell Shaquille O'Neal to come to Chinatown' *AsianWeek*, Available at: http://www.asianweek.com/2003_01_03/sports_yaoming.html [Accessed 11.05.2009]
- Thelwall, M. and Wouters, P. (2005) 'What's the Deal with the Web/Blogs/the Next Big Technology: A Key Role for Information Science in e-Social Science Research?', *CoLIS Lecture Notes in Computer Science 3507*, pp. 187–99
- Thompson C., Pollio H. and Locander W. (1994) 'The Spoken and the Unspoken: A hermeneutic approach to understanding the cultural viewpoints that underlie consumers' expressed meanings, *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 21, pp.432-452
- Tsai S. (2006) 'Investigating archetype-icon transformation in brand marketing' *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, Vol. 24, No. 6, pp. 648-663
- Urde, M. (1999) 'Brand orientation: a mindset for building brands into strategic resources', *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. 15, pp. 117-133
- Van Peer, W. (ed.) (1989) '*The taming of the text: Explorations in language, literature and culture*'. London: Routledge
- Wall, M. (2005) "'Blogs of War": Weblogs as News Journalism', *Journalism*, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 153–72
- Walther, J.B. (2002) 'Research Ethics in Internet-Enabled Research: Human Subjects Issues and Methodological Myopia', *Ethics and Information Technology*, Vol. 4, pp. 205–216
- Wang L., Baker J., Wagener J. & Wakefield K. (2007) 'Can a retail website be social?' *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 71, pp. 143-157
- Wei, C. (2004) 'Formation of Norms in a Blog Community', in L.J. Gurak, S. Antonijevic, L. Johnson, C. Ratliff and J. Reyman (eds) *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community, and Culture of Weblogs*.

Available at: http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/formation_of_norms.html [Accessed March 2006]

Weick K. (1995) *'Sense making in organizations'* Thousand Oaks: Sage

Wertime K. (2002) *'Building brands and believers: How to connect to consumers using archetypes'*, Singapore: Wiley

Wileman, A. and Jary, M. (1997) *'Retail Power Plays: From Trading to Brand Leadership'*, New York

Wildfiyah (2009), *'I heart H&M again+ Trendwatch'* Available at: <http://hotchocolatefiyah.blogspot.com/2009/03/i-heart-h-again-trendwatch.html> [Accessed 13.04. 2009]

Woodside A. et al (2008) 'When consumers and brands talk: Storytelling theory and research in psychology and marketing' *Psychology and Marketing*, Vol. 25, No.2, pp. 97-145

Yin R. (2003) *Applications of case study research*, 2nd edition, London: Sage Publications

Zaltman G. (2003) *'How customers think'* Boston: Harvard Business School Press

Zentes, J., Morschett, D. and Schramm-Klein H. (2007) 'Strategic Retail Management', Wiesbaden: Gabler

Zentes, J., Morschett, D. and Schramm-Klein H. (2008) 'Brand personality of retailers – an analysis of its applicability and its effect on store loyalty', *The International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research*, Vol. 18, No. 2, pp. 167-184.

Appendix

Epic stories

1. 'H&M'

I first encountered H&M in London when I studied abroad. Being a poor college student in the UK did not bode well with the exchange rate 8-10 years ago...I can't imagine what it must be like today. I didn't do a lot of clothes shopping (believe it or not, there was a time when I controlled myself) but before I went to visit a friend in Spain, I stopped in to pick out some appropriate going out attire. The experience was fine--decent clothes at a decent price. Fairly trendy but not a budget breaker. And I thought when I left the country, I left H&M behind.

But clearly that is not the case; H&Ms are popping up like Duane Reades around this city! After my first traumatic experience 6 or 7 years ago in a Downtown NYC H&M, I pretty much swore them off. There are three things that make for a ShoeGirl Shopping Meltdown and unfortunately H&M seems to have all of them.

For starters, I'm a fabric snob; if something is itchy or wrinkles when the wind blows, it is a no go.

I overwhelm easily--4 floors of fashions tightly packed together is not my idea of a good time.

People--there are just too many people. Have you seen the lines for the dressing rooms in those places?! Anyone who knows me knows that I am not the biggest fan of the general population, particularly those that are oblivious to the world around them. My affection only lessens when you put me in close proximity with a large amount of these people all looking for a bargain.

Now, all of that being said, we are in a recession and a girl still has to shop (well, that may not technically be true, but *this* girl still has to shop). So, I ventured back into an H&M for the first time in years last Saturday...and I survived! I even thought there might be purchase potential! It seems that now that there is an H&M on every corner, one can strategically pick a location where people are not likely to go in droves and perhaps, just perhaps, have an enjoyable shopping experience.

I have to be honest though--I spent approximately 10 minutes in the store looking around and then headed to an appointment I had, so I can't definitively say that my recent assessment is correct. I'm going to complete my mission this weekend after I've appropriately prepared both mind and body (i.e. eat a big brunch and drink lots of coffee) and report back. Stay tuned...

Written in February 2009 by ShoeGirl from the US

<http://wholovesshoes.blogspot.com/2009/02/h.html>

2. 'H&M'

Today marks a very important and special day in my life.

No... I didn't get engaged or married or found out I'm pregnant or had a baby or anything like that... rather...

I finally shopped at an H&M store!!!

Yes, I'm silly... but you must understand. As a very young girl, I'd read through fashion magazines and see that the least expensive ones were always from H&M. I looked online for the closest store and they were all in the East Coast! FINALLY after a billion years, they finally opened up stores on the West Coast. When it first opened, I heard the line was extremely long, so I didn't bother to go look. I'm really not a fan of crowded areas, and the image of so many women fighting over clothes is just so scary! So after a few months. I have finally decided to go.

My friend and I both needed some new clothes. I needed a blazer for interview purposes, while my friend needed some tops that's more suitable for work. Since we're both on limited budgets, I suggested H&M, remembering all the cute and inexpensive clothes I've seen in magazines.

It was a wonderful experience to say the least. I love the huge variety of clothes they have, from casual to work-attire to trendy clothes. The trendy clothes were a bit scary, but I think I'm just getting old and can't imagine how anyone would find it appropriate to walk down the street wearing some of those items. There was also 50% off racks around the store that was quite nicely assorted. Clearance racks in most stores are usually so messy that it's a pain to find anything, but I thought the one at H&M were quite organized.

My friend ended up buying an adorable black and skirt A-line skirt that I love, a simple black top with ruffled sleeves, a simple but bold short-sleeved red button up top, and a really nice black blazer.

I ended up buying the same black blazer (it was really awesome and the price was unbeatable) and a really cute white and green flower print cotton skirt. I put it on, and honestly, I wanted to wear it out of the store because it was just soooo cute! I didn't since I generally find that a bit odd and tacky, but I do have a great excuse to wear it tomorrow since I have a lunch date with another friend.

Written in August 2007 by Gloria, an Asian girl, from the US

<http://gloriayang.net/?p=153>

3. 'H&M Comes to Seattle'

The very first time I set foot in an H&M was in Amsterdam in 1999. I'd never heard of it but my friend who was enjoying a year abroad repeatedly told me I'd love it. She was right.

When H&M opened in Prague, I didn't bother going for at least a month because I knew it'd be thronged. By the time I did go, it was still insanely busy but it was very much worth it as it was one of the few places I could afford to shop on the wages I made there. I still have a pair of velvet pants I bought there 4-5 years ago now.

I can't believe it's taken so long for the chain to come to Seattle. And again, I'll probably wait at least a month to go. Maybe.

Written in June 2008 by (Into) the Fray from Seattle, USA

<http://into-thefray.com/blog/2008/06/25/hm-comes-to-seattle>

4. 'The H&M challenge – Work Casual'

My friend was in town visiting, and I took her shopping. I didn't really need anything, so I decided to use the time to start my new challenge series. The challenge: create two looks for around 100\$. The variables: store : H&M, look: work casual Sweater - 20\$ Shirt - 20\$ Pants - 35\$ Belt - 10\$ Pants - 35\$ Belt - 10\$ Sweater - 10\$ on sale Shirt - 25\$ It wasn't easy, and I was strapped for time, but I could definitely wear this to work. I don't usually shop at H&M, so I was actually impressed.

Written in April 2009 by Monie from Los Angeles, USA

http://technorati.com/posts/meg5rOhJxEnVf61nnR_9vvajjaR55S8Z7fHKfY6DpII%3D

Romantic Stories

1. 'H&M - I love it, I hate it, I love it'

It took me a while to recognise that I am kind of addicted to H&M. I still remember when I was first introduced to H&M: my mother gave me a dark blue, velvet-looking hat saying, "I bought it at a new clothes shop. It's called Hennes&Mauritz", I was 9 years old and did not worry much about what I was wearing. Moreover, I wasn't even quite sure if I like this hat.

Nevertheless, from then on I regularly bought my clothes at H&M, first with my mum and then...on my own, of course. But why? I think it is the large range of affordable, popular, but individual clothes that made me a shopping victim and the Scandinavian retailer a world brand. I know it sounds incredible, but there is rarely a day on which I don't wear something from H&M.

On the other hand, I sometimes hate this brand as well, for example, if I fall in love with a fancy t-shirt in one of the shops, I often notice that it is dirty or damaged and so grab for another one - same pattern, same size - and have to admit that it doesn't quite have the same fit. Then I start getting angry about the lack of quality in cheap clothes... If additionally there is a queue at the changing rooms starting outside the shop's doors I usually feel like I'm living in hell on earth!

But still I am always delighted to see a H&M store wherever I go, asking myself, what I would do without it?

Written in November 2007 by Sylvia from Ireland

<http://www.blogyourbrand.com/blog/2007/11/h-i-love-it-i-hate-it-i-love-it.html>

2. 'I Heart H&M Again + Trendwatch'

H&M was my ish during undergrad (if you know me, you KNOW what I'm talking about), until the end of junior year or thereabouts--whenever it was that the store went on this dreadful barnyard, plaid/tartan tip...ugh. I still become upset thinking about it. Ever since then, I've treated the store like a frenemy (we'll hang out if we must...), but as of today, the beef is squashed.

H&M's current spring collection is the truth, and at a great time, too. This recession is getting real, but looking and dressing a mess isn't going to make any of us feel better about life, is it? Methinks "no"! Moreover, now that the sun is coming out (yes, even in London), it's time to shed the sweaters and wool coats and substitute them with...something else.

Start with the long black/white/red dress that has been flying off the shelves here in London. I saw some of the madness myself this morning on Oxford street, when I was shopping for sundresses to wear in Ghana next week (spring break). It's featured on H&M's extra snazzy website, via a campaign featuring two somewhat Monroe-esque models (Shalom Harlow and Eva Herzigova). Judging by the way the US has been borrowing trends from the UK, the craze will soon arrive in New York, if it hasn't already. (I actually couldn't bring myself to buy the gorgeous dress because I hate wearing what everyone is wearing...but it is a *really* nice dress. Accessorized properly, you could definitely give it a unique look.)

For the many of us who don't pull off the maxi dress look as well as our taller, leggier sisters, you juuuust miiiiight be able to find one of the fabulous tulip-shaped sleeveless black and white zebra print dresses the store is carrying. It's so cute and so chic that it could easily pass for a Lewis Cho...except that it will cost you less than 30 dollars. Featured here, on a great fashion blog.

And for those of us who, like me, are super-dieting (more on that painfulness later), and who need to look leggy and slim when we're actually not at the moment, H&M is carrying a one-piece jumpsuit that made me almost wet my pants when I saw it on the mannequin. Unlike many jumpsuits, it's not skin-tight polyester hooker-ness (nor is it uber flowy hippie-ness), and it's sooooo delicious. Featuring a spaghetti strap top with buttons down the front and a harem pant....you simply cannot go wrong. It's versatile, understated, and edgy all at once. Even if a million people had it, you'd still need it in YOUR life. Pair with the appropriate sandal, bangle and be fly. Period. I'm dancing around in mine like RIGHT NOW, in between typing!

Written in March 2009 by Wildfyah, a Ghanian girl, from England

<http://hotchocolatefiyah.blogspot.com/2009/03/i-heart-h-again-trendwatch.html>

3. 'H&M Bestill My Heart'

Ahh, wonderful, marvelous, totally cool and amazingly trendy H&M. How I love thee. You are my first real fashion love and even now, after all these years of little to no contact, when I was afraid that maybe I had forgotten just how neat and hip you really were, you did not disappoint.

For those of you living under a rock, H&M is one of the greatest clothing retailers known to man. I remember both Emily and Heidi, who were lucky enough to go while we were in college (well, Heidi, yours was a college-related trip, so even though we had graduated, I'm still counting it) relating their experiences of shopping at H&M. It sounded like heaven on earth. Cute, trendy clothes at inexpensive prices? Bless those Swedes! Between Ikea and H&M, they have U.S. consumers on lock. *(Do you like my use of the trendy vernacular? Yeah, I'm still with it...)*

My first time actually shopping at H&M was in February of 2003. My friend Mandy and I took a four-day trip to the Big Apple and I fell in love. We literally spent hours in the store, trying on anything that caught our eye. It was neat because everything seemed so affordable. A bounty of shirts for less than \$10, a plethora more for less than \$20. And we're not talking cheapo plain-colored t-shirts here, we're talking cute shirts, made of more than just cotton, with neat cuts or cool designs. Not to mention all the jackets, pants, jeans, skirts, dresses and accessories. Heaven!

Imagine how thrilled I was to discover my personal shopping heaven was finally, FINALLY making its way to my part of the country. H&M, as cool as it is, doesn't do online shopping. It's strictly in-store only. So when they announced Atlanta would be welcoming not one or two, but FOUR H&M's in the metro area, I was overwhelmed.

The big day was yesterday, the 8th. The first H&M in Atlanta celebrated its grand opening. And guess which totally cool moms were there with babies and strollers in tow?

Thankfully, my mom convinced me to leave Everett at home, and good thing I did because when we got in line at 9:45, we thought the store was going to open at 10. We soon found out that it wouldn't open until noon. We made a quick, unanimous decision to stay put and see out our dream of local H&M shopping. And we weren't disappointed. Juliana and Lydia did fabulously! They ate and smiled and played with each other. They totally wooed the other women standing around us in line. So much so that after we had gotten into the store and were shopping, one gal, who had been standing near us in line, came up to me, asked me what I was planning on buying and then played with Juliana one last time. She even remembered her name. "Bye bye Juliana. Be a good girl." Ahh, the bonds that come from standing in line like a crazy person waiting for a clothing store to open. Those are the ties that bind, I tell ya.

We even had a slightly famous person show up for the grand opening: Robert Verdi, celebrity stylist. For all its grand openings, H&M hands out gift cards to the first 200 people in line. These cards range from \$10 to \$250. Paula and I got \$25 and \$50, respectively. We also scored a black H&M bag, H&M bottled water, a black H&M t-shirt and an H&M umbrella. Hello? Score!

Once the doors opened the inside quickly turned into a madhouse. I have to give us props for maneuvering well with our strollers. It was nice to have a built-in shopping cart and they also helped us to bully people out of our way.

Whew, it was a full-day affair. We didn't get home until after 3 p.m. and we were exhausted. Exhilarated, but exhausted. I scored a pair of black capris and two patterned shirts for a total of \$49.73. Did I plan that well or what? We had so much fun, we're contemplating going to the grand opening of the next Atlanta location to see if we can win a bigger gift card. What do y'all think? Would it be worth it?

Written in May 2008 by Natalie from the US

<http://giddensfamily.blogspot.com/2008/05/h-bestill-my-heart.html>

4. 'The H&M-Riyadh Experience'

Isa ito sa mga kina-reer ng PT girls...

Opening sign outside Sahara Mall luring all **H&M** lovers

The Pink Tarha Girls (minus Mary who's now in Pinas) met after work for our most awaited day, the **H&M** opening. We decided to check out the Sahara Branch and arrived around 5:30PM. A little bit late for excited shoppers I know, but we had to wait after office hours (*mga working girls naman*). We still did our best to be there the earliest we can. The ride to the mall was the most dreaded part, since the roads to Sahara Mall are under renovation. Perfect timing.

Our elevated pulse rates was the result of running towards the store after getting out of the car, plus the excitement of finally making it on the opening of course. We were welcomed by Mickey Mouse (Can you believe? See Sundrenched's post) at the red carpet entrance. A handful of shoppers were already there. *Wala pa masyado kaagaw*. We got our baskets quick and we were just so ready to explore the store and find the items in our list. This however, was cut short due to prayer time and we had to wait for half an hour before proceeding to our shopping again. After prayer, floods of people came. The store was as we expected it to be. Loads of springy-summery basic tops, shoes and accessories adorned the shelves and racks. We literally wanted to pass out, confused by all the pretty stuff surrounding us. What should we check out first?! If there's one thing that would stress us really, this was it. Who would have imagined shopping would be this difficult? *Haaay*.

I also visited the Riyadh Gallery Branch about 3 days after the opening. There you'll be welcomed by Superman (Filipino version) with mattress foam-like abs. I thought I've seen everything, but then there's always something to lure you at **H&M**. Reason why we love the shop. *Di nauubos ang maganda, LOL*.

One thing's for sure, we can't get enough of **H&M**.

Written in April 2009 by Shoegarfreeruby from Saudi-Arabia

<http://thepinktarha.blogspot.com/2009/04/h-experience.html>

Comic stories

1. 'Comme des Garçons for H&M comes and goes (off the racks)'

My trip to Wien this week was the best break I could've had. We arrived late on Wednesday evening, and headed right to the hotel, via the new speed train Cat, that connects the airport to city center. We stayed at the delightful Sacher hotel, one of the most important historical hotels in Wien, the birth place of the famous Sacher chocolate cake. Of course, we tasted some of their sweets before going to bed to be ready for the Tuesday morning Comme des Garçons launch at H&M.

Being in Wien, I expected the line not to be as long as in other more fashiony cities like NY or Paris. And I was right. We had our breakfast (with lots of delicious sweets, for energy of course) at eight o'clock. And at around 9AM there were only 2 persons queuing in front of the H&M we choose. So we decided we have time for a Starbucks Christmas flavored coffee. At the time we returned, there were around 4-5 persons around the H&M windows, so we were practically in front line.

We've waited for around 40 minutes for the opening of the doors at 10 AM, and by that time the queue was quite big and scary. But definitely not big comparing to the ones I saw in pictures from LA, NY, Milan or Paris. There were around 70 shoppers, but I was confident that being in front I will get what I wanted. The H&M staff took pictures of us waiting, and we took pictures of the H&M staff inside. All through glass doors, of course.

My plan was to grab first a wallet (cute, really!) and then to head over to the jackets (only one version of deconstructed jacket was available at that store in Wien). I managed to grab the wallet, but it was harder than I imagined, because everyone had the exact same plan as me: Wallet, then jacket :). By the time I arrived near the rack with the boiled wool jackets, a lady had the entire lot in her arms. But one of the jackets (she had around 10 of them in her arms, crazy!) slipped a little, so I was lucky enough to be there to grab it.

Then I went near the shirts, because I really wanted the pink one, being the pink fanatic that I am. There I had more luck; everyone else seemed to be more focused on the dots, so the pink shirts lasted the longest.

Oh ya! And I got also what it seems it was a highly coveted piece of the collection: the polka dotted scarf. They were put in a hidden corner, and when I arrived near them, all of them were still on the rack. Later, all the scarves seemed to disappear though.

I got also a plain black long-sleeve t-shirt and a polka dot cardigan. My husband on the other hand had a more calm atmosphere in the men's department. Although he fought with an old man for a pair of sneakers (and won of course, I taught him well how to shop), he managed to get his hands on several shirts that he likes very much. He tried one the white buttoned suit, but it didn't fit him quite right.

All in all, a great shopping experience, calmer then last year Cavalli. By 10:40 AM, our shopping ended, we carried the 2 large bags back to our hotel. Because we had some time to kill, we decided to take a long walk, to visit some more shops and eat some Maronies. That's when we discovered a second central H&M, which carried as well the Comme des Garçons collection. And among the leftovers: the shirts with the diagonal line on their chest that weren't available at the first H&M. My husband is saying that he has shirts now for at least 2 years to come. I can't really agree, because I know that next year it will be another designer collaboration, and I am sure there will be shirts in it too...

By the way, who do you think (or want) to be the next designer to collaborate with H&M?

Written in November 2008 by Dana from Romania

<http://www.shopaholicsite.com/2008/11/comme-des-garcons-for-h-comes-and-goes.html>

2. 'Commes Des Garcons for H&M Release: Another Dangerous Stampede'

Does H&M care that shoppers are injured each time a new guest collection is released? Apparently not. In fact, the company delights in touting statistics like today's San Francisco 'sell-out in six minutes'.

Don't get me wrong...I love the affordable designer pieces from these collaborations and don't regret lining up at 5 am today for Rei Kawakubo's Commes des Garcons. Heck, I even have a special fold-up seat for these festive occasions, as I'm a grizzled vet of H&M releases (see Bumps and Bruises in the OC), multi-hour, mile long iPhone queues and a GAP x Colette capsule collection where shoppers were let in one by one to the bodega size store. Bottom line is that I'm qualified to provide examples of high-demand/low supply situations where businesses either recognize and manage dangerous situations or take a more laissez-faire approach. Apple and GAP represent the former, H&M the latter. According to the H&M line started at 1 pm on Wednesday, almost a day before the 10 am Thursday release. The line was at 60 or so when we arrived at 5 am and stretched down Powell and around the corner by 9 am. Around this time, a suited security guard hassled everyone out of doorways, etc. The line surged forward as word spread that the store would open early.

Without warning or announcement, a couple of the glass doors opened at 9:45 and someone screamed 'Holy F**k' as hundreds of people pushed and ran from all directions into the store. I got slammed into one of the closed glass doors (you can see this door in one of the Chronicle photos), but didn't get a broken nose like the teen at the off/on-again Robert Pattinson Stonewtown Mall Hot Topic appearance earlier this week. Once inside H&M, employees and the one security guy stood by while folks continued to trample each other and randomly grab merch. The guy in front of me dove onto the polka dot bags, covering them with his entire body and violently slapping anyone who tried to grab one.

Yes, all items were gone in six minutes and serious injuries averted, but did anyone inside have a positive shopping experience? How about the folks who didn't act like idiots to run up the street and storm into the store? Just wish H&M would put a micro-fraction of the resources employed in creating and promoting these collections (cover of WWD and other papers today) into actually managing the safety and experience of the customers who so enthusiastically greet their arrival.

Written in November 2008 by Dogmom from San Francisco, USA

http://www.dogmomsdish.com/dogmoms_dish/2008/11/commes-des-garcons-for-hm-release-another-dangerous-stampede.html

3. 'Matthew Williamson for H&M Insanity'

Ten minutes. That's how long it took almost every item from the Matthew Williamson for H&M collection to get snatched from the shelves. Matthew Williamson, though not a household name, is a British fashion megastar whose dresses typically sell for \$2,000 - \$3,000. His line launched in H&M stores from London to Tokyo today, and I was there.

I waited on line patiently for one hour, arriving at the corner of 59th and Lexington Avenue in New York City at 9 am, one hour before the doors of this location would open. Having braved the Comme des Garçons, Roberto Cavalli and Stella McCartney for H&M sales, I expected to be towards the middle or back of line by arriving at that somewhat late time.

But I ended up being fifth or sixth, near the door. Even close to the moments those doors opened, the line barely extended around the corner from the entrance. Now this was a first in H&M's history of luxury collaborations. At Roberto Cavalli I saw women snarl over piles of spangled gold dresses. At Stella McCartney I saw a woman elbow a fellow shopper in the ribs. At Comme des Garçons, I saw people snatch entire racks of clothes, hangers and all, in one greedy move. This was almost the complete opposite. Compared to past sales, there was almost no one there, and very little in merchandise was presented. Yet, the people who did show up clearly had a passion for fashion, and let it loose once the glass doors were unlocked exactly at 10 am. I chose this out-of-the way location because I was traumatized for life by my experience shopping at the flagship H&M for Roberto Cavalli. That was my only time living in New York that I feared being physically harmed by another human being. I don't think it's worth getting stabbed over a leather jacket, no matter how fabulous it is. These ladies grabbed at everything, but were kind and (relatively) cordial:

At the Lexington Avenue location, there were many fewer items as the store did not carry the entire line, but what I was able to purchase, is quite beautiful. The leather jacket is about \$250.00, but it is buttery soft and has exquisite details, including golden, solid-looking zippers with little feathers etched into them.

I also scored the coveted wide studded belt. I heard the buzz going through the crowd about that item while I was on line, so I made it my duty to snatch up two once inside to make sure I got the right size. (I put the wrong size back.)

I let everyone else fight over the dresses, sweaters and T-shirts. Many of the more marvelous items, like the silk jumpsuit and the teal suit were not available at this location, but that's okay with me. Matthew Williamson's line was much pricier than the typical H&M designer diffusion. For instance, a dress in the line cost \$349.00, which is an unheard of price for H&M. Perhaps these high prices is what kept people away, the wait short and the range of items in this store low. Still, at 50 bucks, a studded belt similar to mine would cost nearly \$1,000 at a normal Matthew Williamson price. There is reportedly nothing left now, but bloggers report there will likely be returns available soon. I am sure you can find many items on eBay, for a higher price, right now. But there is a recession going on...

Can I convince myself that I am "saving" money by buying designer goods at a steep H&M discount? I can't go that far. But I did get some gorgeous goods at a fair price. Did anyone else hit up the Matthew Williamson for H&M sale? Are you getting ready for the launch of his summer collection, which includes men's clothes, on May 14th? If so, see you there!

Written in April 2009 by Alexis from New York, USA

<http://www.blackvoices.com/blogs/2009/04/23/matthew-williamson-for-handm-insanity/>

4. 'Matthew Williamson For H&M Burns Through Foggy San Fran'

Breathe in, breathe out. This was me last night when trying to fall asleep. You know when you're so excited for something insomnia ensues and obsession overpowers? You all know I've been anticipating Matthew Williamson's H&M collection since the news broke, but I didn't expect to turn groupie

Rise and shine, join the line at the Powell Street H&M. The line was only about eight stylistas deep at this point. PartySugar, also a MW groupie, joined me around 7:30 a.m. — store opens at 10. But something had been brewing behind Fab's scenes, I just didn't want to jinx anything. And then, the fashion gods looked down upon me, and I got the email — I was granted early press access. Not to shop mind you, but to enter the store (this was about 9ish), survey the scene, try things on, take pics, and revel in MWHM. I already had my wish list, as did Party, so you can imagine our elation.

The West Coast district manager, Alexis, dished on how she thought this was the most commercially viable designer collection. Agreed. She was gaga over the leather jacket and the hot pink gold-studded belt. Interestingly, this SF store gets more stock of the designer goods than LA's Beverly Center store; who said SF didn't love to shop? We also chatted about Phase II — the Summer collection, hitting stores May 14. Alexis promised hot bikinis and a fresh geometric print overnight bag (stay tuned for pics!). I had to ask if Missoni for H&M is up next and she replied "no comment" which leads me to think it's true since the news broke just yesterday and she knew what I was talking about, sneaky Fab.

We were able to hang tight inside the store, out of the fog, but still not shop, until doors opened at 10 a.m. But our plans of attack were in place. And like that — mayhem. This was my first time really tolerating this. I missed the first collection, Karl Lagerfeld, slept through Stella McCartney, slacked on Viktor & Rolf, cried post Roberto Cavalli, and gave up on Commes de Garcons. But not Matthew. This was *my* H&M collection. And so, I raced though the racks plucking my new babies, calm as a clam.

The dramatic ruffled print maxi dress was the first to go. And in person, this one was amazing; the black sequined detailing was divine. The short version of this was a hot one, too. And as celebrities still work their PR magic, the sequined artsy dress worn by Ginnifer Goodwin and the peacock dress modeled by both Nicky Hilton and Katy Perry were gone in no time. None of these screamed Fab. I added the glam rockin' blue blazer, the yellow embroidered top, the pink feathered cardigan, the butterfly tee, and the hot pink studded belt to my arsenal.

That's how Matthew Williamson For H&M burned through foggy San Fran, see you May 14!

Written in April 2009 by FabSugar from New York, USA

<http://www.fabsugar.com/3072044>

Tragic stories

1. 'News story on H&M racism'

Hi Everyone,

Today wrote the following complaint letter to the Better Business Bureau and H&M Corp. Office. I will be contacting the local news and periodicals regarding this. I am asking you to kindly forward this information to everyone you know. I want as many people as I can reach out there to read this. I believe this is very important for you to know. If you can give me any other advice I truly appreciate it. I am still in shock and disappointed.

Thank you for your time,

Frannie

On 9/13/07 @12pm, I went to H&M on Mich. Ave. While looking at clothes, a male employee named Joseph H.; visual merchandiser, who was standing close to me, raised up his right hand and said, "Mail order bride in the house," and ran over to another female employee and they both started laughing. I looked around myself and the only other person standing next to me was a male security guard. I approached the two employees and asked them to try on clothes that I had desired to purchase. Joseph H. rudely pointed to the fitting rooms at the end of the room and said, "Can you read that sign, it says fitting room." As I walked away, Joseph said "ching, ching, chong." I went into the fitting room and told one of the sales associates what happened and asked him to help me by calling the manager. Tom the Dept. Manager came down. I reviewed everything with him and told him how upset I was. Tom stated, "we will discuss this with him later today, I am sorry this happened." He did not ask for any other info. I asked Tom for his name and number. He told me to, "call back next week to follow up because I am leaving for OOT tomorrow." I left and came back @130pm to speak to the manager again because I wanted to get Joseph's name. Joseph was still working on the floor. I spoke to another manager named Greg because Tom was not available and told Greg that I am writing a complaint regarding the situation. Greg gave me the address of the store and told me that he did not have any formal paperwork I could write on "because Joseph would get a verbal warning first, and if it happens again, then it would be written down." He gave me Joseph's name and told me to address the letter to the General Manager. I told him that this is unfortunate because there will be many other Asian women walking in the store today and Joseph H. is inappropriately making derogatory comments. Greg apologized and said there was nothing else he could do.

I do not believe Joseph H. should continue to be employed at H&M, I want this complaint in his employee record, and he owes me an apology.

Written in October 2007 by Frannie, a Philippine woman, from Chicago, USA

<http://ryne-ee.blogspot.com/2007/10/news-story-on-h-racism.html>

2. 'H&M Canada discriminates against nursing moms'

Last Saturday, August 2nd, my sister and her husband went shopping for clothes for him and obviously took their 2 month old daughter with them. When my sister attempted to breastfeed the baby, this is what happened, as told by her on email:

"Despite all the medical evidence that encourages breastfeeding, it seems that women continue to be socially punished and made to feel ashamed when they do it publicly. Today, I was shopping with my husband and our 2 month old baby at H&M stores at the Pacific Centre Mall. When he went into the fitting rooms my baby started crying, so I naturally proceeded to breastfeed her. After a couple minutes, though, I was approached by one of the store clerks who told me that unfortunately, I could not breastfeed there unless I went into a special fitting room to do it in private. When I asked why, she said it was the store policy because what I was doing offended other costumers and that there were also children around (sorry H&M, my bad: I was not aware that the sight of a breastfeeding mother could be harmful to a child.) She even said that this is the protocol they are taught to follow during their training. At that point, two other employees came to escort me to the fitting rooms as if I was a dangerous criminal. I was offered to speak to the manager, a very kind man called Guru, who explained to me again that it was the store policy, because breastfeeding in public was offensive to some costumers, and also that they were offering me a much more comfortable space to do it. But of course, they were not "offering" anything, they were forcing me to do it in seclusion or I could not do it at all. So I told them I would publicly campaign against their policy because it is wrong and discriminatory: it punished me for breastfeeding by putting me in seclusion and thus confirmed the idea that public breastfeeding is offensive and shameful."

Please let's not this allow to happen to other breastfeeding moms.

Written in August 2008 by Manuela/Listen-up Mofos, Chilean women, from Canada

<http://listenupmofos.blogspot.com/2008/08/h-canada-discriminates-against-nursing.html>

3. 'Fuck You, H&M!'

Over the past year I have gained weight. A lot of weight. A huge amount of weight. I am taking a medication that causes severe weight gain and so far I have packed on 50 extra pounds. This is suckage for many reasons. I am at risk for diabetes. I am uncomfortable all the time because I'm carrying extra pounds. I feel totally unattractive and strange in my skin. Absolutely none of my clothes fit me. I have no idea what my actual size is anymore because it changes as I expand. It doesn't seem to matter what I eat or my activity level (admittedly very low but it was before the weight gain), I keep getting bigger.

I was depressed and feeling shitty and decided on some pre-recession type therapy. Shopping. I literally had two pairs of pants that fit me and desperately needed more. I have been shopping at H&M and Jacob for years and I could always buy my clothes off the rack without trying them on because I was always the same size. Now I was on a hunt to find something to fit my new body. Well la di dah. I am bigger than the biggest size at H&M. In fact, I had a really hard time finding anything over a size 10. I couldn't squeeze myself into the largest size without hacking off pounds of flesh. Same story at Jacob. It's just fucking depressing. Luckily Old Navy caters to all kinds of sizes and I was able to score a couple of pairs of cheapish jeans.

It disgusts me that these stores only carry certain sizes. I have known this for years and been indignant but it really hit home harder experiencing the size discrimination implied by not stocking larger sizes of clothes. It was a double whammy to my extremely shaky self esteem to not even be able to buy what I wanted because it didn't exist. Well fuck them. They've lost a customer and Old Navy has gained a loyal shopper. They can kiss my mushrooming ass.

Written in April 2009 by Marvel from Canada

<http://themarvelist.blogspot.com/2009/04/fuck-you-h.html>

4. 'H&M'

I had a bit of a difficult situation on visiting H&M in Meadowhall last week. I sent them an e-mail asking them to clarify exactly what their customer service policy and explained what happened. I've since changed my attitude towards these things- instead of firing off a "complaint" from the word go, I've instead simply explained what happened and asked what should've happened. First, I'll give you an idea of what happened.

Myself and Chad were shopping in H&M, and Chad found some items she wanted to try on. In the Meadowhall H&M, there are traditional changing rooms- where they are segregated from the rest of the shop in the gender-specific shopping areas. For people who don't know me better, Chad is my girlfriend- and although her being a bit odd, has no other cross-gender traits other than her name.

So, we wait in line- as is usually the case in H&M- for the changing room. When we get to the front, I was hoping to hover outside her changing room to give my approval. This is quite common in changing rooms, and it being half-term there were plenty of mums giving their advice to their daughters.

So, when Chad is assigned a changing room, I was disappointed to be told:

"Wait a minute, mate"

I asked if there was a problem.

"You'll have to wait here. There are mothers and their daughters down there. We could get complaints...". I was being told to wait outside of the segregated changing room area.

"... Uh, we've got a sign".

Sure enough, the almighty sign commanded people to wait outside changing rooms- as opposed to more than one person occupying a single room. Here's the summing up of my problem:

- Being referred to as "mate" publicly gendered me in front of other people. People usually make up their own minds and mostly don't think twice- and if they do they usually don't give a crap. I don't appreciate being hailed by my gender, birth or otherwise, by a stranger or by a member of staff. It's not friendly, it's not professional, and for me it can be distressing.

- I appreciate that changing areas are a gender sensitive area, and transpeople in highly gender-loaded places face the chance of attracting unwanted attention. However, the terms of my treatment and recognition in my chosen gender also require that I live permanently in gender-role. It would be inappropriate for me, in a different context, to be using the men's changing rooms. I should have a reasonable expectation to use some facilities without raising an eyebrow.

- I have my off-days when it comes to my appearance, everybody does. On this specific day, I was on an offday. I wasn't dressing super-feminine, and I hadn't bothered with straightening my hair or using moisturiser that morning. I was also wearing a androgynous (non-gender specific) top underneath my coat. However, despite these differences, I was wearing trousers purchased from Evans and a coat purchased from H&M. I remind you, I wasn't trying for super feminine, and my appearance should not be considered as such- but regardless it fits my idea of dressing within gender role. I don't believe anything about my appearance immediately leapt out as GUY! but my height and complexion usually set me out. It upset me that this was enough for the sales assistant to gender me as male and openly refer to it. Again, I expect much more from a stranger, and particularly a shop assistant. It is rude to make assumptions about customers in such circumstances, not to mention unprofessional.

- I understand that it was half-term, and mothers have a strong instinct to protect their children- and that children are often completely inept at judging whether a certain piece of clothing is suitable. But for fuck's sake, I'm not going to molest anyone in public. If a scene did arise, I would leave quietly without saying anything and ask discretely for assistance. Pre-empting this by asking me to stay out of the changing room area *feels like* an accusation.

- I'm regular customer with H&M, I love their ranges of clothing. I firmly believe they're the best shop on the high street for fashion. What would the reaction have been if I was using the changing room? It's not an unreasonable proposition- I'm going to be buying clothes in the future after all, and I'm going to want to try some on as any other woman would- that's the idea, isn't it?

If I had been using the changing rooms that day, the mother+child concern would still come into play in the same logic, wouldn't it?

If I had been trying on clothes, would I have been asked to leave? Would I have been addressed as mate? These are very important issues for my personal security and well being whenever I am outside.

H&M have sent me a personal response which mostly satisfies what I asked them to clarify. I will paraphrase their reply:

- H&M are sorry for my experience

- H&M do not specifically have a policy for transgender people using their changing facilities

- Some stores do have non-gender specific changing rooms, although the traditional setup is the norm in most stores

- H&M confirms that I should not have experienced any problems in using the changing rooms- although they do not specify any company policy regarding a single shopper waiting outside of the changing room, as in my case.

- H&M have asked transvestites to use the changing room appropriate to their birth sex before, due to complaints from other customers. H&M acknowledges this is clearly different from my situation.

- H&M states that I should not have been referred to as "mate", and this is not the standard of service I should expect.

- H&M will follow up the incident in the interests of good customer service.

So, a great result! I feel satisfied by the quality of the response I got from H&M. I'd hoped they'd have been a little more specific about changing room policy as it seems as though the Meadowhall branch's sign is a local policy instead of a national one. Certainly the level of service I received was poor and showed very little initiative or thought.

I'm also happy that I could achieve such a response without completely slagging off someone. I made this mistake a month ago, or so, with the BBC's coverage of the Eurovision Song Contest, and I ended up embarrassing myself something rotten.

Further to this incident, within a year or so it will become illegal to discriminate against transsexual people in the provision of goods and services. H&M will have to be very mindful of their business with transgendered people once this becomes law, and I'm certain the current apparent level of training at store level will lead to action being taken against them.

Gender loaded areas are there for the security of everyone, and not just the reassurance of a select group of people. I really hope when I come around to feeling ambitious enough to use them myself, I can feel as secure as everyone else. Ultimately, it's in everyone's interests.

Written in June 2006 by Kasumi-Astra from England

<http://kasumi-astra.livejournal.com/13512.html>