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**And the brand lived happily ever after, or did it?**

A study investigating a storytelling's connection with  
brand identity and brand image

By:

*Monika Kubiak, Elvira Zetterberg & Rebecka Höjgård*

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## **And the brand lived happily ever after, or did it?**

A study investigating a storytelling's connection with  
brand identity and brand image

Monika Kubiak, Elvira Zetterberg & Rebecka Höjgård Hansen

### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to investigate how brand identities can be portrayed through different ways of storytelling and analyze how it affects a customer's brand images.

**Theory:** The theoretical framework is constructed based on Fog et al.'s theories regarding storytelling and their impact on creating an effective story. We propose a new model by combining the theory as a tool to strengthen the relationship between a brand's identity and perceived image.

**Methodology:** A qualitative research design and a hermeneutic approach have been used in the paper. The empirical material have been collected from focus groups that was built on semistructured interviews. The empirical data combined with the theoretical framework is the base of the analysis and conclusions.

**Findings:** The findings of this paper show is that it is possible to construct storytelling based upon all four pillars, which are message, conflict, character and plot, or only to focus on some of them. The important thing is that the four pillars impregnates the identity of the brand, otherwise the brand image can be weakened.

**Research limitations:** The first limitation of this study is the time frame for conducting this paper was short, which made it difficult to get all of the information that was needed. Second limitation is that the scope of the paper was too narrow and that the amount of focus groups were low.

**Originality/value:** This paper is the first one to use a model that connects brand identity, storytelling and brand image.

**Paper type:** Research Paper

**Key words:** Storytelling, Brand Identity, Brand Image.

## **Introduction**

Once upon a time, we were all children and many of us loved to listen to stories. Stories have been told and transferred from one generation to another throughout the centuries (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010). Why do people tend to like stories then? Research has revealed that human beings structure their experiences by creating stories in order to better understand the world, as well as finding explanations for how they fit in it (Fog et al., 2005).

The art of storytelling is one of the oldest and most influential communication approaches (Kaufman, 2003). An interesting phenomenon that have arisen in the last years is the fact that companies have discovered the potential of telling stories about their brands for brand building purposes (Delgado-Balleste & Fernández-Sabiote, 2016). The increasing competitive market has turned competitive advantages into competitive prerequisites, which means that it is not enough for companies to compete with their products anymore. Companies should instead identify competitive advantages in terms of associations and intangible attributes, which is often expressed by an increased focus on brands (Baker & Ballington, 2002). This has led to a greater emphasis being placed on the importance of close relationships between brands and their consumers, instead of products and consumers (Heinrich, et al., 2012; Roberts, 2005). In the context of branding, companies use storytelling in order to set their brand apart from many others (Kaufman, 2003). The concept of storytelling is to tell a story about a brand that evokes emotions and enhances the already existing associations linked to the brand in the minds of the consumers (Baker & Boyle, 2009).

A lot of well-known companies have used storytelling in their communication, where examples are Apple, Coca-Cola and McDonald's (Briggs, 2015). Even though many companies have used storytelling as a communication tool, not all of them have been successful stories. One of the reasons for this is that the advertisement is not based upon the brand's identity or that the advertisement was conducted in a wrong way (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010). Another reason is that the brand's identity is communicated, but that it may not be perceived in the right way by the consumer which creates a gap between the brand identity and brand image (Nandan, 2005). Based on all the discussed aspects, it is important to make sure that the communication and storytelling is created and communicated in a proper way which further leads us to the purpose of this paper.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how brand identities can be portrayed through different ways of storytelling and analyze how it affects a customer's brand images.

## **Literature review**

### *Previous research on storytelling*

Storytelling is a part of content marketing and is a tool that have been used for hundreds of years (Pulizzi, 2012). Stories have the capability to speak to our needs and make lives of the many people more meaningful (Mossberg, 2008). Stories do not only make us store and retrieve information, they are also useful due to the fact that they are able to evoke emotional connection and understanding in the minds of the listeners or viewers (Woodside, 2010).

Green et al (2004) discuss the way people like to be transported from the real world into a narrative one, the so called transportation theory. The more details in the story the higher level of transportation because details make it possible for individuals to create their own vivid images. Furthermore, Woodside (2010) also discusses that a well-told story shows why and how life changes. The story might include a certain life situation where everything can be viewed as being fairly in balance or indirectly in balance (the viewer interprets e.g. a loving wife positively). On the contrary, a story can also be told by starting as for example a catastrophe or a movement towards balance in life (Mossberg, 2008). It is crucial to understand that non-verbal aspects in the story such as the tone of the voice, facial expressions and various gestures can drastically change the emotional association in the mind of the listener/viewer (Denning, 2006). Moreover, Megehee and Woodside (2010) argue that the effectiveness of non-verbal messages can be reinforced in a way words cannot obtain it. Additionally, when a consumer is exposed to a well-performed brand story this person will also have a more unique brand experience (Mossberg, 2008).

Delgado-Ballester and Fernández-Sabiote (2016) and Pulizzi (2012) argue that storytelling has become a tool for businesses when it comes to the brand-building process, retaining existing customers, attract new customers, persuasion and strengthening the brand externally. He further argues that people evoke more positive emotions towards a brand when the brand is put in the context of a story. Moreover, a story has the ability to embrace a brand's core values in a way that cannot be achieved through traditional marketing (Lundqvist et.al, 2013).

### *The proposed theoretical framework*

The theoretical framework in this paper is based upon Fog et al.'s (2010) pillars of an effective storytelling and is connected with the concepts of brand identity and brand image. It aims to describe how companies through a well-planned storytelling can reduce the gap between brand identity and brand image and strengthen their correlation.

The first step of the framework starts internally and consists of the company's brand identity. An identity is the DNA of the brand and therefore difficult to change (Melin, 2002). Moreover, an identity should communicate the vision, key beliefs and the company's core values (Kapferer, 2012). In order to communicate an identity that matches the consumer's image, a company must pay attention to several factors. Some of those factors are brand differentiation, what needs the brand fulfils in the consumers' minds, what signs that makes the brand recognizable, and what the brand's field of competence and legitimacy is (Kapferer, 2012).

The next four steps are connected to the structure of the story in storytelling. It describes four pillars that a story should be based upon. This part of the framework is based on Fog et al.'s (2010) model as a tool of guidance to create an effective storytelling. It is of importance to think of the storytelling on a strategic level in order to create a story that forms strong brand associations and that are effective. In addition, the pillars of a successful storytelling are not a new phenomenon, instead they can be found in a traditional story, and those are message, conflict, characters and plot (Fog et al., 2010).

When it comes to the planning process of storytelling, it is vital for the marketers to think of the strategic message that they wish to tell (Fog et al., 2010). It should consist of only one message in order to be effective and the brand should afterwards be associated with positive associations (Fog et al., 2010).

The next step in the planning process is conflict. One could say that if the message is the theme of the story, then the conflict is the movement which carries the story forward. The reason for having a conflict in the story arises from the social aspect that humans strive after balance in life (Fog et al., 2010). In cases of where the balance is absent, it is in our nature to seek for a problem solution. By including the aspect of conflict into the story, the viewer is given the chance to associate what the brand can offer as a solution and what the brand considers are right and wrong given certain contexts. Also, it is important that people can identify themselves with the conflict in order to develop engagement and emotions (Fog et al., 2010).

In order to create a conflict that drives the message forward, the story needs characters. These characters can be physical as humans, animals, products or intangible as a feeling (Fog et al., 2010). For that reason the characters should be easy to relate to in order to create emotion and engagement (Fog et al., 2010).

Lastly, the plot should be divided into three parts; an introduction, a conflict and an ending. Each part has its own purpose (Fog et al., 2010). The introduction should establish the mood and manner of the story, the conflict should accelerate the pace into climax and the ending should reinstall the balance. Without a good plot the audience will not be able to grasp the story (Fog et al., 2010).

The concept of the framework is that the company should be able to communicate their identity and achieve a match between identity and perceived image through storytelling. A brand image reflects how the external side of a company perceives the brand (Kapferer, 2012). The advantage of a correct brand image is that the company has an opportunity to strengthen the relationship with the consumer and make sure that the consumer sees the company for what it represents. Important to have in mind is that a brand image can be seen as a memory itself, hence to change the image takes a long time (Kapferer, 2012). The associations should reflect the company's identity and make the consumers expectations correspond to the brands identity (Melin, 1999).

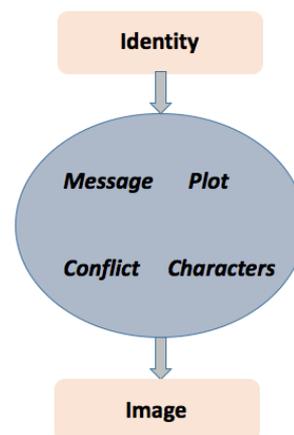


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

## Methodology

### *Research design and scientific approach*

In this paper, a qualitative research design has been used since it enables us to focus on the respondents' views of their world and their personal experiences instead of having the possibility to quantify empirical data (Bryman & Bell, 2013). Furthermore, we

have used a hermeneutic approach since it focuses on gaining knowledge and reaching conclusions about a specific and limited area of storytelling instead of reaching general conclusions in a wider area (Skärvad & Lundahl, 2016).

### *Focus groups*

We chose to perform qualitative interviews in term of focus groups since it enabled us to get a deeper understanding about the respondents' experiences and feelings about the chosen subject (Kreuger & Casey, 2014). The aim with the focus groups was to gather a deeper understanding about the respondents' images of the chosen brands and explore how the exposure to the brands' storytellings affected the respondents' brand images.

We chose to have a total of 14 respondents which were divided into two different focus groups on different occasions. This number was chosen since it is recommended to have 3-10 respondents per focus group (Olsson & Sörensen, 2008). The reason for this is because if the amount of respondents gets too high, every voice will not be heard. If the amount is too low, there will not be no room for group discussions (Olsson & Sörensen, 2008). The focus groups consisted of individuals from Sweden that are in the ages 20-25. This choice was made since we wanted to make sure that all of the respondents knew about the chosen brands in forehand in order to be able to discuss their image. This choice was also made since the respondents were available during the short time frame of this paper.

The focus groups started with discussing the respondents' images of the brands. After that, the companies' commercials using storytelling were shown. The respondents were then asked to discuss the content of the commercials and how it affected their brand image. Before the focus groups were conducted, we had prepared semi-structured questions that were asked to the respondents. These type of questions are prepared in forehand and touch upon important themes and theories that needs to be discussed (Bryman & Bell, 2013). At the same time, the questions gave the respondents the opportunity to interpret them and answer in a freely manner (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). In order to be able to use the results in this paper, the focus groups have been recorded and transcribed which has made it possible for a more thorough analysis and discussion (Bryman & Bell, 2013).

### *Ikea case*

Ikea's commercial is based upon the theme "where life happens" (Youtube, 2017). The commercial, named *Enough*, focus on portraying a rather "grey" scenario where a mother is seen walking home with two grocery bags, seeming quite low-spirited and arrives home to a chaos. Apparently the situations becomes too overwhelming for the mother who throws the bags at the floor and storms outside. Realising the severeness of the situations, the children clean up the mess and reinstall the balance of a warm and welcoming family home. Only one word is expressed throughout the entire commercial and instead the viewers are given the chance to interpret the situation themselves (Youtube, 2017).

### *Volvo case*

Volvo's commercial that was shown is a part of the commercial concept called "Made by Sweden" (Youtube, 2014). In the commercial, Zlatan drives a Volvo through a typical and grey Swedish landscape consisting of forests and snow. While Zlatan is driving, different elements and fragments of his life are shown. These elements and fragments come from his family, his Swedish football career and his hunting skills. During the whole commercial, the national anthem is read out loud by Zlatan and the music is played simultaneously in the background (Carlö, 2017; Youtube, 2014).

### *Method limitations*

There are some restraints with this paper that are related to our method choices, but also the fact that this paper is a small study. First of all, there is high likelihood that the respondents have been exposed to the commercials before which might give a "nuanced" view on the brand's image. Second of all, the article only shows the consumers' perspectives on the brands. Thirdly, Ikea's commercial was released in 2017, while Volvo's commercial aired 2014, which might affect trends in storytelling. Finally, the commercials have different lengths with Ikea's being shorter, which can affect the empirical material in the sense that a longer commercial have more time to show their true identity than a short commercial.

## **Empirical findings and discussion**

In this section, the first step is to describe the brand's identity and the respondents' images of the brand. After that, we will present the empirical material that was collected during the focus groups and analyze the two

companies' ways of building their storytelling in the chosen commercials. Lastly, we will discuss whether the respondents' images have changed and the similarities and differences between the companies' storytelling.

### *IKEA identity*

Ikea is a globally well-known company with strong roots to their Swedish identity (Lundqvist, 2009). They have a vision to "create a better everyday life for the many people" and their business idea is to "offer a wide range of well-designed, functional home furnishing products at prices so low that as many people as possible will be able to afford them" (Ikea, 2017a). Therefore, Ikea's identity can be interpreted as an everyday solution, a brand that offers wide range of good quality products at low prices (Bruzelius & Skärvad, 2000; Ikea, 2017b). Their identity goes beyond furniture and focuses on creating a better everyday life for all people exposed to their products (Ikea, 2017).

Ikea is an example of a company with a strong brand identity. Ikea's core values are togetherness and enthusiasm, constant desire for renewal, cost-consciousness, willingness to accept responsibility, humbleness and willpower, simplicity, striving to meet reality, leadership by example, daring to be different, constantly being on the way, and fear of making mistakes (Tarnovskaya et al., 2008).

### *Respondents' images before*

The overall image of Ikea among all focus groups was perceived as Swedish, a low-cost brand that offers a wide product assortment and family-oriented (Focus 1, 2). It was even considered to be Sweden's largest brand (Focus 1). Most of the respondents would buy the brand, but some expressed that Ikea would

not be their top-of-mind brand, but rather a low cost solution (Focus 1). In contrast, for cheaper basic products one considered Ikea as a top-of-mind brand (Focus 1). Also, one respondent concluded that she would feel comfortable having Ikea furniture as a student, but not as an adult (Focus 1). This image was shared by respondents from focus group two that also draw this connection between student life and Ikea (Focus 2).

Two of the respondents felt more repulsed towards the “Svensson life” which is linked to the typical belief and norm of a typical Swedish family having a house full of Ikea furniture, a dog and a Volvo (Focus 2). They did not prefer to be associated with Volvo, but still one of them would buy Ikea due to the low price and wide assortment. Furthermore, the one respondent that expressed ill will towards buying Ikea in Sweden said that she felt proud towards it when she is abroad (Focus 2).

In a discussion about Ikeas wide product range, elements of different styles that are up-to-date and stylish were mentioned (Focus 2). Ikea was perceived as offering easy solutions. A newer image that the respondents had come across was that Ikea also stands for more expensive products and not as cheap as before due to new competitors on the market. One of the respondents also considered Ikea to be a brand without high quality (Focus 2).

## *Storytelling*

### *1. Message*

All of the respondents argued that the message of the commercial was very clear and that they could recognize themselves in the message that the commercial was trying to communicate. The respondents believed that the commercial communicated a message that life is not always easy and perfect, but

Ikea can be there to help and facilitate in the hard times (Focus 1, 2). One respondent commented that the commercial appealed to her because it presented the reality rather than artificial happiness (Focus 1).

Since the only sound element in Ikea’s commercial is the background music, the strong message interpretation was therefore based on the actions in the scenes. Megehee and Woodside (2010) states that non-verbal messages have the ability to be more effective than words. This is obviously the case in Ikea’s commercial where the message was built mainly on a non-verbal message which was conveyed in a very clear manner according to the respondents in both focus groups.

Another insight that was brought to our attention was the extent to which the respondents discussed the recognition factor in the commercial. To specify, the respondents valued the way in which Ikea showed a reality that the respondents could actually relate to, rather than to place the viewer in a situation that one could not relate to. This chosen technique is supported by Fog et al. (2010) that talks about the importance of the consumers’ ability to identify themselves in the situation.

### *2. Conflict*

According to the majority of the respondents, the conflict in the commercial was the messy home which was overwhelming for the mother to come home to after a long day. This was a situation that all respondents could relate to and for that reason the commercial was perceived as more genuine (Focus 1, 2). Even though one respondent perceived that the commercial had an unhappy touch overall, he believed that the conflict was resolved in the end by the children (Focus 1).

Another respondent commented that this reflects the respect and understanding that children have for their parents in a Swedish society and also that a household is built on teamwork (Focus 2).

The proposed theoretical framework in this paper argues that a storytelling need a conflict in order to drive the story forward (Fog et al., 2010). Furthermore, by including a conflict the story can manage to capture the viewers on an emotional level and engage them to consider what they feel is the correct outcome and if that correspond with the brand's solution (Fog et al., 2010). In the case of Ikea, the respondents felt the presence of an identifiable conflict that has or could occur in their own everyday-life. None of the respondents seemed to disapprove of the resolution of the conflict which indicates that they support the company's chosen solution.

Furthermore, we believe that the usage of this type of conflict is appropriate in the long-term due to the fact that it will always exist to a certain extent. If the respondents were asked to retell the commercial six months ahead, we argue that the majority would be able to retell in a more detailed manner because of that fact.

### *3. Characters*

Two of the respondents pointed out that the construction of the family viewed in the commercial was different in the sense that it was multicultural and did not have the "typical" structure of a normal family with a mother, father and children (Focus 1, 2). While mentioned, the other respondents agreed that this was something positive and highly suitable for Ikea in the sense that it showcased a modern Swedish family (Focus 1, 2).

Another aspect that was discussed in both focus groups was the grey nuance throughout the whole commercial. The grey nuance was discussed in terms of clothes, environment, building, weather and mood (Focus 1, 2). One respondent summarized these factors by saying that for her, the grey nuance is in line with a typical picture of Sweden (Focus 1).

The theoretical framework argues that a story needs characters that can be of a variety of sources, and that the characters should be easy to relate to in order to create engagement (Fog et al., 2010). In the Ikea commercial, the choice of characters were highly appreciated by the respondents since it updated the image of how a typical Swedish family should look like. Lundqvist et al (2013) argue that a story has the ability to embrace a brand's core values. In Ikea's commercial, we believe this is the case where Ikea through the characters in their story succeeds in showcasing some of their core values like togetherness, the strive to meet reality, humbleness, simplicity and daring to be different only by telling the story of this multinational and modern family.

We believe that this grey nuance helped the story to be told in the best way possible because the commercial is supposed to have a negative tone. Seeing it from Ikea's perspective, the Swedish part of Ikea's identity is strengthened by alluding on the grey nuance.

### *4. Plot*

All of the respondents agreed that they could follow a clear path where they got to be a part of the story from the chaotic beginning to the happy end (Focus 1, 2). Furthermore, some of the respondents perceived the Ikea commercial as boring due to the fact that it was not very entertaining (Focus 1, 2). One of the respondents did not agree with this, and

believed that Ikea had a “twist” in the commercial that caught her attention (Focus 1).

According to the theoretical framework, the plot should be divided into an introduction, a conflict and an ending that each needs to have its own purpose. The introduction should establish the mood and manner of the story, the conflict should accelerate the pace into climax, and the ending should reinstall the balance (Fog et al., 2010). In Ikea’s commercial, this was the case since the respondents could follow the commercial from the introduction where the mother sees the messy apartment, to the conflict where she storms out of the apartment and finally to the happy ending where the children have cleaned the whole apartment. Even though the commercial was short, it managed to demonstrate in an everyday sense how and why life changes, something that has been argued as key factors (Megehee & Woodside, 2010).

The respondents thought that the commercial was not particularly entertaining. Even though the commercial lacks entertainment we would argue that it is in line with Ikea’s identity because Ikea stands for simplicity and an everyday-life that is not always entertaining.

#### *Respondents’ images after*

##### *Sweden*

The association of Sweden was enhanced by the commercial. The respondents felt that Ikea managed to capture the grey and typical features of a Swedish everyday life which contributed to the Swedish image (Focus 1, 2).

##### *Family-and Student oriented*

The respondents believed that the commercial strengthen the image of Ikea being family-oriented in the sense that it is suitable for both young and elder people, as well as middle class or mixed family structures (Focus 1, 2). Additionally, Ikea’s image as being suitable for students was also strengthened among some respondents (Focus 1, 2).

##### *Problem solver and simplicity*

Some of the respondents perceived a new image of Ikea as a problem solver and simple, which are a part of Ikea’s identity. Ikea is perceived as a solution of everyday problems and for every type of family, not just the happy ones (Focus 1). As one respondent said “life is not all beer and skittles” (Focus 1). This strengthened the association of Ikea as simple.

##### *Volvo identity*

Volvo is a Swedish and globally well-known company, where the vision is to “be the world’s most sought and successful supplier of transport solutions” (Volvo, 2017). Furthermore, the mission for Volvo cars is to “make people’s lives easier, safer and better” (Volvo, 2017). Similar to Ikea, they are also strongly connected to their Swedish heritage which is a central part of their identity (Carlö, 2017).

Volvo is built upon three core values which are safety, quality and care for the environment (Volvo, 2017). Everything that Volvo does starts with people. It’s about making people feel special and contributing to make the world become a better place for everyone to live in (Volvo, 2017). During the last couple of years, Volvo has used different celebrities from Sweden in their communication in order to show their brand

identity and their brand heritage. They allude on famous celebrities being “Made in Sweden” and driving a Swedish car (Carlö, 2017).

### *Respondents’ images before*

The overall image of Volvo was positive in all of the focus groups (Focus 1, 2). All of the respondents agreed upon the fact that Volvo is one of Sweden’s biggest and most well-known brands. Volvo has always been present in their life in some way, they have all grown up with either having parents or other adults in their surroundings that have owned a Volvo (Focus 1, 2).

The overall image of Volvo was very similar in all of the focus groups, were the recurrent images and key-words were “safety”, “Swedish” and “family” (Focus 1, 2). The respondents agreed that “safety” is connected to Volvo and that it feels secure to drive the car. Furthermore, safety was also discussed in terms of knowing that you get what you pay for when you buy a Volvo (Focus 1, 2).

When the respondents discussed Volvo in terms of “Swedish” and “family”, they all referred to the typical and Swedish “Svensson family life” (Focus 1,2). Two of the respondents believed that Volvo is strongly related to the “Svensson family life” and that the purchase of a Volvo depends on what kind of view one has on this typical lifestyle (Focus 2). They both argued that they would never buy a Volvo because of the strong linkage between “Svensson family life” and Volvo. On the other hand, one of the respondents would buy a Volvo because of the fact that it is related to having a “Svensson family life” (Focus 2).

## *Storytelling*

### *1. Message*

The respondents agreed that the commercial had a strong message, which was “Made in Sweden”. In addition, there was an overall agreement that Volvo is not only representing Swedish quality but that the commercial shows that Volvo is Sweden (Focus 1, 2).

After seeing the commercial, the majority of the respondents felt that the different elements in the commercial, such as the landscape and national anthem, contributed to a genuine Swedish feeling (Focus 1, 2). One respondent commented this by saying that the national anthem was a crucial element in order to deliver the feeling (Focus 1). Two other respondents commented this by saying that the way Zlatan is reading the lyrics of the national anthem gave them goose bumps (Focus 1). The majority of respondents agreed upon that the commercial would not have been the same without the national anthem in it (Focus 1, 2).

The message in Volvo’s commercial was perceived as clear during the discussions in both focus groups, this goes hand in hand with Fog et al. (2010) description of a message. Something that was especially emphasized was the presence of Swedish national anthem and how Zlatan performed it in the commercial. This can be linked to what Denning (2006) has discussed with regards to non-verbal aspects. He argues that the tone of the voice is a factor that is able to drastically change the listener’s emotional association. Something worth highlighting is that there was an overall agreement that the respondents were especially involved in the commercial emotionally. We believe that the strong non-verbal aspect such as the way Zlatan use his voice when reading the lyrics allows for

broad individual interpretation where the listeners/viewers evoke strong emotions towards Sweden and Zlatan.

### *2. Conflict*

None of the respondents registered any conflict in Volvo's commercial which is an important pillar in the theoretical framework and necessary for a successful story (Focus 1, 2; Fog et al., 2010). On the contrary, Mossberg (2008) argues that a story does not need an imbalance, instead it can portray a life in fairy- or indirect balance. The commercial portrays Zlatan's life which seems to be in balance and the respondents perceive scenes with his family and his leisure time as happy moments in his life. So even if Volvo does not follow the theoretical framework, their construction of a story seemed to work as most of the respondents were positive towards the commercial. What needs to be considered is if the absence of conflict makes a weaker connection between the brand and the consumer since they consumer do not get the opportunity to see the brand's standpoint (Fog et al., 2010).

### *3. Character*

The choice of character in the Volvo commercial was discussed. The majority of the respondents were positive towards Zlatan as a person since he is one of Sweden's most well-known celebrities of this generation. He has made his way from the bottom to the top of the society by himself, and is now a successful and wealthy football player (Focus 1, 2). As in the Ikea commercial, the respondents felt that the new and typical Swedish family was updated thanks to Zlatan which is not the typical Swede (Focus 1, 2). Moreover, some of the respondents argued that Zlatan contributed to strengthen the image of Volvo as a safe choice, and some of

the respondents argued that he actually weakened the image of Volvo since Zlatan would never drive a car like that. Another character that the respondents discussed was the environment which was perceived as Swedish, cold and grey (Focus 1, 2).

The fact that the respondents had different opinions of Zlatan in the commercial made us question whether the choice of Zlatan in the story actually helps the brand to showcase and embrace the brand's core values or not (Lundqvist et al, 2013). From the empirical material, we argue that the image of Zlatan is very positive among all the respondents, but that the problem is that Zlatan is not connected to the brand and the core values in only a positive way. We therefore argue that this would benefit the brand in the short-term since Zlatan is likeable, but that it could potentially harm the brand in the long-term if there is a bad match between the company and him. Furthermore, the grey light in terms of the Swedish weather was discussed. In this case, the story helped to embrace and showcase the Swedish nature and strengthen the Swedish part of their identity.

### *4. Plot*

Another reflection that was brought up in both focus groups was that the Volvo car is barely noticeable in the commercial (Focus 1,2). In the second focus group, one respondent contributed to the discussion by saying that she would never expect car brand to be the producer of this type of commercial since she had always associated more practical elements to car brands (Focus 2).

Furthermore, the respondents perceived that they could not follow a clear path in the commercial (Focus 1,2). Instead, they felt that the commercial was built on short fragments of Zlatan's life without a certain end. Even

though, all of the respondents agreed upon the fact that the commercial created strong emotions, and that the commercial was exciting to watch (Focus 1,2).

The respondents felt that Volvo did not have a clear plot with an introduction, conflict and an ending (Fog et al, 2010; Focus 1,2). Instead, the commercial showcased fragments of Zlatan's life and a lot of details. On the other hand, Green et al (2004) discuss that the more details in the story, the higher level of transportation because details make it possible for individuals to create their own vivid images. This is something that is applicable to the Volvo commercial. There was a lot of details in the commercial, which made the respondents feel like they were able to learn about Zlatan's life.

The respondents perceived a strong emotion towards the commercial which we believe is a good thing, but we also argue that the strong emotion is directed towards Zlatan's image than the brand's image. Additionally, we believe that due to the fact that the commercial does not have a clear plot, the commercial will be hard to remember. It also has a lot of details, but the problem is that the details are not about Volvo, but instead about Zlatan. This will result in that the only thing that people will remember of the commercial is Zlatan.

#### *Respondents' images after*

##### *Safety*

When it comes to the safety image of Volvo, all of the respondents believed that this was shown in the commercial (Focus 1,2). Some of the respondents argued that the commercial clearly showed the safety aspect of driving a Volvo and knowing that you get what you pay for (Focus 1). The respondents in focus group 2 agreed upon the fact that Volvo wanted to

showcase and strengthen their image of being safe by putting a great emphasis on family and their source-of-origin.

Furthermore, Zlatan was discussed as part of the safety aspect. Some of the respondents believed that when Zlatan is driving the car, you can expect to pay a premium price but at the same expect a good quality car. Other respondents did not agree, and believed that Zlatan does not enhance the safety image since Zlatan would never drive a Volvo car. This was rather an aspect that was considered to weaken the image of safety (Focus 1, 2).

##### *Swedish and family*

When it comes to the Swedish and family image of Volvo, all of the respondents in the different focus groups believed that this was clearly shown in the commercial, but that this was done in a very modern way. One of the respondents stated that the family- and Swedish image was very intertwined in the commercial, but that it was the new generation of Swedes and families that was showcased (Focus 2). The old image of a "Svensson-family" was not shown, and instead, a new image of the typical Swedish family in the multicultural Sweden was showcased.

#### *The two companies storytellings*

##### *Identity*

Mossberg's (2008) argues that a well-created brand story will result in a more unique brand experience by the viewers. We believe Ikea succeeded in showing their brand identity in the selected commercial. After the respondents were exposed to the Ikea commercial, they touched upon core values that were uncovered, enhanced or given a deeper meaning, but also other aspects that we believe are strongly linked to the brand

identity of Ikea. We believe that Volvo succeeded in showing their brand identity in the selected commercial only to some extent. After the respondents were exposed to the Volvo commercial, they also touched upon core values that were enhanced and given a deeper meaning, but they did not uncover any new core values. Additionally, there were different opinions to whether the “safety” core value was presented in a proper way or not.

### Storytelling

The companies were considered to be two of Sweden’s strongest brands (Focus 1, 2) and are both associated with the “Svensson-life”. This paper demonstrates that two brands with some shared values are using the construction of storytelling in two very different ways. Ikea follows the theoretical framework’s recommendation on all the four pillars, while Volvo choose to focus on the message and character pillars. These different ways of using storytelling are summarized as similarities and dissimilarities according to the four pillars in Table 1 below.

	<b>Similarities</b>	<b>Dissimilarities</b>
<i>Message</i>	Grey nuance Clear message	Music type Recognition factor vs. emotional
<i>Conflict</i>		Volvo lacked a conflict
<i>Character</i>	Updated view of “Svensson-life”	Endorser
<i>Plot</i>		Balance vs. imbalance

Table 1. Similarities and dissimilarities in Ikea’s and Volvo’s storytelling

In the end, the majority of the respondents preferred Volvo’s commercial before Ikea’s, but we believe that this does not necessarily

mean that Volvo’s commercial is more effective and that the relationship between brand identity and image is strengthened.

### Image

Ikea’s storytelling managed to strengthen the existing perceived image of family- and student oriented and Sweden. It also helped to reduce the gap between identity and image as the respondents now also perceive Ikea as a problem solver and that they stand for simplicity, two pillars of Ikea’s identity (Focus 1, 2). Overall, the respondents agreed that the commercial was in line with their association of the brand beforehand (Focus 1, 2).

Volvo’s storytelling managed to strengthen their perceived image as Swedish and family oriented (Focus 1, 2). The gap between the identity of safety and the image has both increased and decreased due to that there were spited meanings regarding the safety aspect in the context of Zlatan. Overall, the respondents felt that the commercial was in line with their association of the brand beforehand, but that the associations have been updated (Focus 1, 2).

To conclude, the respondents experienced the Ikea commercial as something typical Ikea and their image afterwards corresponded better with the brand’s identity. On the other hand, Volvo’s commercial was experienced as not being a typical Volvo commercial and instead only updated the respondents’ image of the brand.

Delgado-Ballester and Fernández-Sabiote (2016) and Pulizzi (2012) argue that storytelling has become a tool for businesses when it comes to the brand-building process, retaining existing customers, attracting new customers, persuasion and strengthening the brand externally. This paper has shown that this is truly the case. We believe that if the

storytelling is built in a way that supports the identity of the brand and that results in producing of a correct brand image, then the storytelling will contribute to the brand-building process.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper was to investigate how brand identities can be portrayed through different ways of storytelling and analyze how it affects a customer's brand image. Reflecting on the research question, we can conclude that it is possible to construct storytelling based upon all four pillars, which are message, conflict, character and plot, or only to focus on some of them.

The important thing is that the four pillars impregnates the identity of the brand, otherwise the brand image can be weakened.

## **Further research**

To gain further insight into storytelling as a brand management tool and achieve a deeper understanding, we suggest to perform a longitudinal study about storytelling by following a commercial from its creation to a study of consumers' responses afterwards. By conducting this type of study, the researcher will hopefully be able to capture what specific identity associations were meant to be communicated through the commercial, which pillars were used to portray them and finally if those specific associations were perceived by the viewers or if they perceived other ones. A study like that would be able to capture the internal- and external part of a brand and give a deeper understanding than this current research had the opportunity achieve.

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