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**PEELING BACK THE CURTAIN:
EXPLORING THE BRAND BACKSTORY**

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ABSTRACT

Compelling brand experiences offer narratives that are carefully crafted to captivate consumers. One such compelling experience, the brand backstory, offers consumers the opportunity to experience the behind-the-scenes or making of a brand. Characterized by the offering of esoteric brand knowledge that is revealed and unveiled to consumers, the brand backstory is captivating in dually offering a deconstruction of the brand whilst also aiming to manifest a sense of truthful transparency to consumers. However, this paradox inherent to the brand backstory construct has received limited attention within marketing research. As such, there is ample motivation for marketers and researchers alike to study and understand the brand backstory and the role of its narrative of revealing and unveiling esoteric brand knowledge to consumers.

The introductory chapter provides a conceptual overview of the brand backstory and the domain in which this thesis is situated. Given that prior research has not examined this increasingly popular marketing practice, this introduction explains how the thesis contributes by presenting three separate and distinct papers that together, provide a holistic understanding of the brand backstory. The three papers focus on exploring the brand backstory from a variety of lenses and provide a pluralistic conceptualization of the construct, demonstrating the negotiations through which the brand narrative is conceived, constructed and received. Specifically each paper centers on the brand backstory: (1) conceptually as a construct in consumer culture, (2) as crafted by brand practitioners and (3) as experienced by consumers. Each paper is a self-contained project with its own theoretical development and contribution to the marketing literature, yet each contributes to an overall theoretical understanding of the dynamism of a novel and underexplored branding construct to ultimately illuminate a holistic understanding of institutional theory at play.

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Co-Authorship Form 1

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CHAPTER 1: PROLOGUE

1.1 Context and General Background

Unlike in the well-known film *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory*, consumers are no longer required to hunt down golden tickets to experience the backstory of their favorite brands. Within the United States alone, 570 factory tours currently provide one avenue for consumers to explore the ‘making-of’ a brand. Beyond factory tours, exhibits allow consumers to venture ‘behind-the-scenes’ as in the *Warner Bros. Studio Tour London: The Making of Harry Potter* in Leavesden, United Kingdom, where consumers can immerse themselves in a narrative on the creation of the *Harry Potter* brand. The exhibit displays major sets, props and costumes included within the film series, and showcases the use of animatronic technology in the films. These brand environments can be very compelling to consumers, as captured in the *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory* film where the ultimate downfall of each lucky golden ticket winner comes as a result of their absorption in Wonka’s well-planned fantasyland backstory narrative.

Consumer researchers often examine the subjective experiences of consumers as they negotiate branded environments (Diamond et al., 2009; Kozinets et al., 2002). It is the narrative which underlines these branded experiences that contribute saliently to consumers’ experience as in McAlexander & Schouten’s (1998) research where the narrative of celebration spurs the *Harley Davidson* brand fest and facilitates embodiment and consciousness of a kind amongst the consumers who attend. Compelling narratives enable stronger consumer-brand attachments (Escalas, 2004) allowing consumers to appropriate cultural meanings (McCracken, 1986) or affirm their identity (Holt, 1995; Thompson, 1997). Yet little research has explored the powerful narrative of the brand backstory – a branded

environment constructed to provide rare and exclusive information behind a brand through a reveal.

This thesis builds on a large body of research on brand environments to explore in-depth how brand practitioners create the narrative and material environments of the brand backstory and correspondingly how consumers experience these brand backstory narratives. This dual approach integrating both managerial and consumer perspectives on the brand backstory offers a multifaceted exploration into the brand backstory, a complex construct that offers a narrative of rare and exclusive esoteric brand knowledge and is often staged or constructed by brand practitioners.

Brand Experiences in Material Environments

Research on consumer experiences fabricated by brand practitioners range from the material environments of flagship stores (Diamond et al., 2009; Kozinets et al., 2002) to the digital environments of brand websites (Ha & Perks, 2005). The major commonalities within this domain of research are the focus on either hedonic or entertaining brand experiences (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Kozinets 2001, 2002; Kozinets et al., 2004) and the strategic management of constructing branded experiences for consumers (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Schmitt, 1999). Research within the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) paradigm (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) offers rich insights into the phenomenology of consumers' experiences constructed by brands (Hollenbeck, Peters, & Zinkhan, 2008; Kozinets et al., 2004). This body of research shows how these carefully constructed experiences dually extend meaning for the brand and thus consumers as the brand is utilized to create and define consumers' self-concept (Sirgy, 1982). To be specific, much consumer meaning within brand experiences is derived from the narrative within the experience (Thompson, 1997). For example, Hollenbeck and colleagues (2008) unpack the various brand meanings that result from consumers' experiences in brand museums that

provide narratives on a brand's biography and history. And indeed the notion that an experience does not acquire meaning without a narrative is captured in Deighton's (1992) words: "I contend that all events, whether fictional or not, owe their intelligibility to the ease with which they form good stories" (p. 368).

Brand Narratives

Brand narratives within this thesis are assumed to be stories that are interpreted and processed by consumers to have broader meaning (van Laer, de Ruyter, Visconti, & Wetzels, 2014). Consumer behavior literature acknowledges that brands all inherently have narratives that construct the overall brand gestalt (Diamond et al., 2009) and that some brands are inherently narrative in their nature (Russell & Schau, 2014). Narrative in this body of work is defined as temporal sequence of causally related events (Richardson, 2000). Brand narratives contribute the storyworld (Herman, 2002) of a brand. These narratives are quilted and manifest an overall compelling brand gestalt (Diamond et al., 2009) that functions by surrounding or encompassing the brand. Whilst some consumer research has distinguished components of the overall brand gestalt (as seen in Diamond et al., 2009), such as the brand biography (Avery, Paharia, Keinan, & Schor, 2010), there is scant literature that explores specific brand manufactured narratives. This research focuses on a specific brand narrative – the brand backstory. Exploring these narratives from multiple lenses is important to shed light and disentangle surrounding negotiations such as the crafting of the narratives to consumers phenomenological experiences of the narratives. Carù & Cova (2007) point to the immersive nature of experiences with narratives and their ability to engage active consumer participation or self-determination. Within consumption experiences in the form of performances, consumers are active in their participation as both performers and audience members (Deighton, 1992).

This research expands the domain of consumption experiences by focusing on how brand practitioners craft a specific brand narrative, the brand backstory, and by documenting how consumers experience and negotiate the meanings of brand backstory narratives.

The Brand Backstory

Rooted within the narratology domain, the term backstory is used generally to describe a sub-plot or sub-narrative that chronicles the history behind a narrative of interest. The *Oxford Dictionary of Media and Communication* (Chandler & Munday, 2011) defines the backstory with regards to fictional narratives (in print, on stage or on screen) as “the untold story of significant events leading up to the situation at the outset of the narrative.” Discussed in relation to anachrony (Genette, 1980), or deviations from chronological order, the backstory is often an example of prolepsis (foreshadowing) and requires interpretive reorientation by the reader (Herman, 2002). Within film media, the backstory often features at the crux of narrative devices such as the exposition, prologue, flashback or foreshadowing (van Sijil, 2005) but more generally the backstory may also provide background knowledge on the construction of the text that is not chronologically bound. As a functional feature, the backstory establishes boundaries on the text receiver’s knowledge by setting the stage or providing context for the main or overarching narrative (Fludernik, 2009; Herman, 2002).

More recently, the term backstory has frequently been used within research on gaming, examining how the backstory construct used as a feature of the narrative design in interactive environments enables learning (Dickey, 2006) and user engagement through the generation of curiosity (Wouters, van Oostendorp, Boonekamp, & van der Spek, 2011) and surprise (Bae & Young, 2008). Background information enables framing of the game narrative, enabling the game player to acquire partial information consequently generating anticipation through the limited insight provided into the pending game narrative. The growing availability of brand backstories can be attributed to increasing media convergence

and the evolution of transmedia storybranding (Jenkins, 2006) which favors the technique of using segregated channels and multiple story narratives.

This thesis applies the term backstory within the branding domain to capture the backstage, “making-of” and/or “behind-the-scenes” of a brand. Specifically, the defining attributes of the brand backstory are the esoteric brand knowledge within and the manner in which this knowledge is revealed or unveiled. The brand backstory refers holistically to the content or information provided within the brand practitioner constructed opportunity, and the flow or manner in which the information is offered or revealed to consumers. This thesis takes into account both components (the content within the brand backstory and the manner in which it is conveyed) and focuses specifically on brand backstory material environments (Diamond et al., 2009) that use both spatial and temporal elements to provide consumers with a physical and embodied experience of the brand backstory narrative. Salient examples of crafted brand backstory material environments are experiential activities such as special tours or museum exhibits (Hollenbeck et al., 2008). Brand backstories are those narratives that are esoteric to the brand in the sense that the information is demarcated as rare and exclusive and by in large, consumers do not previously know the information that is revealed to them. The key construct inherent to the brand backstory is the notion that the revealing and unveiling enables consumers to gain knowledge about the brand that was previously inaccessible. Sub-narratives within the brand backstory may go beyond showing the ‘making-of’ processes within the brand and offer consumers specific insights into the brand biography (Avery et al., 2010), the history of the brand and other information pertaining to the creation of brand elements (such as the brand’s image or philosophy) or the creation of a brand’s consumable product or service. This research focuses on backstories that feature at least one or more sub-narrative within the backstory narrative, thus providing more than just a “historical account of

the events that have shaped the brand over time” (Avery et al., 2010, p. 213) or chronological information pertaining to the development of a brand or its biography.

The brand backstory, as a narrative parallel to other brand-produced narratives, adds to the complex gestalt of brand meanings (Diamond et al., 2009) and augments various other brand narratives or the overall brand storyworld. A unique facet of the brand backstory narrative is its ability to reflect other narratives produced by the brand as a result of its inherent nature of distilling or deconstructing the brand. Although it is recognized that consumers may also construct brand stories (Lanier, Schau, & Muñiz, 2007) such as backstories, the brand backstories considered within this research are limited to those constructed by creators or practitioners employed by the brand. As such, the brand backstory often features the authorial voice of the producer(s) or creators of the brand (Fludernik, 2006). The term authorial (Fludernik, 2006) refers to management of the “arrangement of time frames, settings and the characters” (p. 93) within the narrative. The authorial crafting is further explained within chapter two of this thesis. As the brand backstory is offered by the ‘official’ brand practitioners, the underlying narrative that valences the tone of the brand backstory is the notion that the opportunity provides an exposition and deconstruction of the brand due to the overarching narrative of revealing esoteric information or providing a ‘revealing look’ at deep brand knowledge. The importance of the authorial tone in brand backstories brings up concerns of authenticity. The following section thus addresses the construct of authenticity and provides some reflective issues to consider in exploring the brand backstory.

Authenticity and the Brand Backstory

Whilst prior work within consumer research considers the context-specific antecedents of authenticity from the perspective of the consumer (perceived authenticity) in which issues of legitimization and genuineness are considered, the construct of authenticity

may be relevant when considering the construction and manifestation of the brand backstory from the practitioner perspective. In particular, understanding the perceived authenticity from the perspective of the practitioner in manifesting the brand backstory may be a lens through which to explore the production of the brand backstory and the expression of the authorial voice.

Although its definition is still hotly contested within consumer research (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010), the construct of authenticity is mostly recognized as an assessment of a product or experience made by an evaluator in a particular context (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Therefore, the product or experience being evaluated depends on the interaction between another object, place or person. Grayson & Martinec (2004) specifically refer to authenticity as the as an assessment of the genuineness of a product or experience. Consumer research on the variables against which authenticity is assessed has identified heritage or pedigree, stylistic consistency, quality, relation to place, production method, and downplaying commercial motives as attributes that contribute to the authenticity of a product or experience (Beverland, 2005). Beverland and colleagues (2008) further documented that authenticity exists on a spectrum whereby gradations of trueness emerge from ‘true’ and ‘literal’, to ‘approximate’ and ‘moral’.

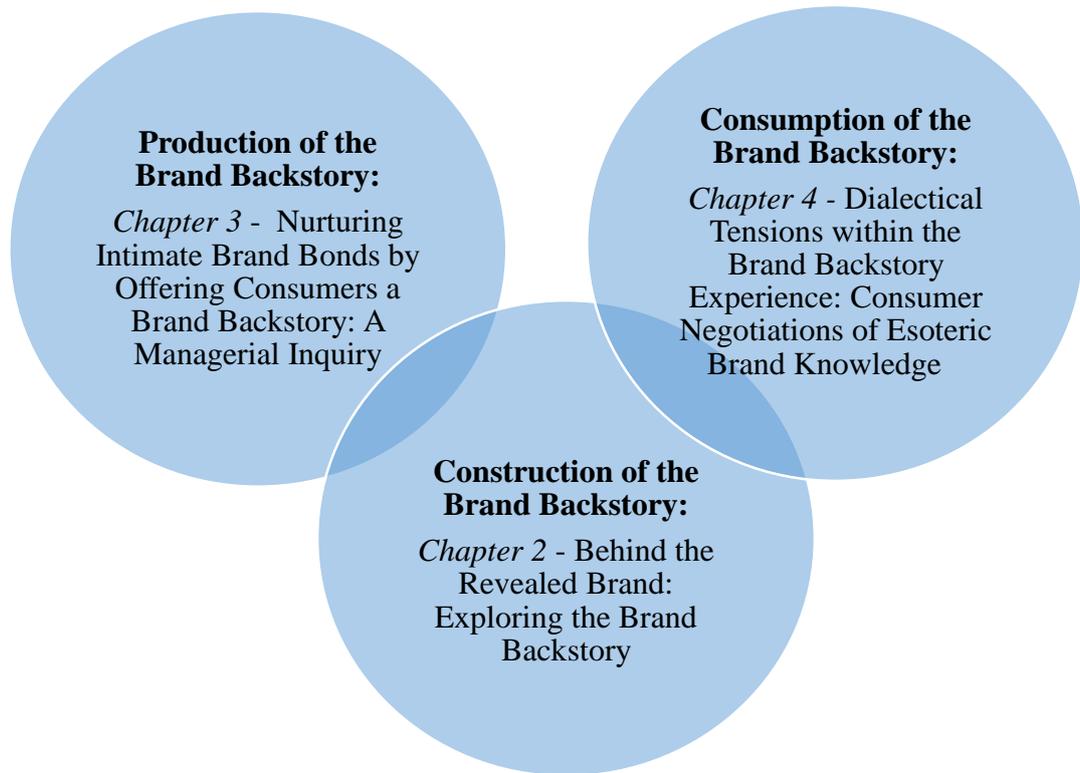
When marketers take advantage of the “realness” of a product or experience, authenticity may be seen as commodified (Starr, 2011); and whilst marketers understand the importance of authenticity to brand positioning, there is scant literature within the consumer research focusing specifically on the commodification of authenticity, on how on marketers manifest a sense of authenticity towards consumers. Within tourism research, MacCannell’s (1973) concept of staged authenticity, in which authenticity is performed for the consumer, is a salient example of the large body of work concerned with commodification of authenticity within other fields such as tourism. The concept of staged authenticity illustrates how

experiences or performances are theatered or orchestrated in order to meet touristic expectations. These experiences or performances usually feature the ‘front stage’ area. Staged authenticity may thus play a role in the construction, manifestation and reception of the brand backstory, which centers on the orchestration of back regions and on bringing forth the back region. The construct of staged authenticity may be a useful reflective lens to discuss the construction of the brand backstory from the perspective of the brand practitioner. As authenticity is a nuanced construct, much research in the area has been qualitative or conceptual in nature, aligning with the approach taken in this research.

1.2 Methodology

This thesis explores both the construction and reception of the brand backstory providing a multifaceted orientation under a Consumer Culture Theory perspective (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). In order to allow for a variety of conceptualizations of this phenomenon, it purposefully samples brand backstories across several brand categories, from consumables to entertainment, to non-profit. This pluralistic orientation (see Figure 1, p. 9) combined with the variety of contexts chosen allows for a broader range of understanding on the brand backstory narrative and the variety of brand backstory narrative manifestations. Specifically this thesis provides insights into the construction of the brand backstory through the analysis of narrative components, the production of the brand backstory through the analysis of the narrative as a process of revealing, as well as the reception of the brand backstory crux from consumers’ experiences.

Figure 1. Multi-faceted Lensing of the Brand Backstory



This section discusses the methodological underpinnings of this research, starting with a discussion of the methodological evolutions within the research paradigm of Consumer Culture Theory, then an outline of the epistemological, ontological and theoretical perspectives taken within this research. Following this, the contexts, methods and procedures for analysis are discussed.

Evolution of Theoretical Perspectives within Consumer Culture Theory

According to Belk, Fischer & Kozinets (2012), the mid to late 1980s witnessed the proliferation of research forays advocating more humanistic inquiry (Hirschman, 1986). It was also during this time that a number of research studies addressing sociocultural, experiential, symbolic and ideological aspects of consumption were made (Belk et al., 1989; Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988). Arnould & Thompson (2005) crystalized the theoretical commonalities and linkages within this research tradition by

offering the umbrella term “Consumer Culture Theory” (CCT) to refer to “a family of theoretical perspectives that address the dynamic relationships between consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings” (p. 868). CCT researchers are linked via their common orientation towards studying cultural complexity (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). To understand the complexities within, CCT researchers commonly employ empirically grounded findings, focusing on the experiential and sociocultural dimensions of consumption to offer theoretical contributions. Arnould & Thompson (2005) elucidate a variety of seminal research pieces that demonstrate the fluidity of CCT research to employ pluralistic multi-methodological approaches, in a more general interpretivist theoretical lensing. The poaching or cross-fertilization of methods specifically allow for retexualization (Thompson, Stern & Arnould, 1998) or reconceptualization or reworkings that enable provoking theoretical innovations and advancements (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Accordingly the methods and contexts chosen within this research follow the more interpretivist theoretical perspective as advocated within the paradigm of CCT. Specifically, within this research the methods chosen build on each other to provide the holistic conceptualization of the brand backstory. However, for clarification, because this thesis takes a PhD by papers approach, the thesis had to meet the guidelines provided by the University of Auckland School of Graduate Studies. These guidelines require that each paper is crafted and focused as separate pieces that are able to be read independently. The following further elucidates the research design and its appropriateness to the type of investigation undertaken.

Qualitative Research Design

A qualitative research design was deemed the most appropriate to the goals of this thesis: to develop understanding of practitioners’ construction and production of brand backstories, as well as consumers’ negotiations of brand backstories. A qualitative investigation enables a rich account of experiences, knowledge, and impressions to be

considered and documented for analysis (Alvesson, 2003). Qualitative research emphasizes the interpretation of a social phenomenon with the researcher attempting to capture the perceptions of participants “from the inside” through deep attentiveness and empathetic understanding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The open-ended nature of many qualitative methods allows for this; letting the voice of the participant prevail throughout the interview (Esterberg, 2002). A qualitative approach fits within the researcher’s chosen ontological and epistemological viewpoints, and guides the selected methodology of interpretive research, discussed next.

Ontological, Epistemological and Theoretical Perspective Considerations

All researchers, at every point of research, inject a host of philosophical assumptions that shape the meaning of research questions, the purposiveness of research methodologies, and the interpretability of research findings (Crotty, 1998). These underlying assumptions include beliefs about the nature of reality, of social beings, and of what constitutes knowledge (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). Without clarifying these assumptions, the significance of a research study cannot fully be understood (Crotty, 1998) therefore it is important for a researcher to make this worldview explicit within their research design (Esterberg, 2002).

This research is grounded in a social constructionist epistemology, which assumes that all knowledge and reality emerge in and out of the interaction between human beings and the world within a social context. Further, the theoretical perspective of hermeneutic interpretivism, an approach focusing on the construction of coherent meaning from the text by “iterating between considering interdependent meaning of parts and the whole that they form” (Klein & Myers, 1999). Hermeneutic interpretivism is the theoretical perspective underlining this research whereby text and researcher are engaged in a cycle of re-interpretation and substantiation where understanding is derived from relating the whole to the part and the part to the whole. This approach was considered appropriate as it enabled

intentions, values, beliefs and feelings hidden in the text to be uncovered. Hermeneutic interpretivism fits within the researcher's chosen ontological and epistemological viewpoints, and guides the manner in which the research contexts were selected as well as the methods employed to collect data. As such, the researcher dialectically tacked back and forth from data to theory within the literature and back throughout the entire research process, allowing for new ideas to drive an emergent research design.

Whilst this research is shaped as interpretive research, to carve out specific areas of interest, particularly for packaging the work into defined pieces for papers within the thesis, specific research questions are included within to appropriately define various aspects of the investigation, framing and packaging it into three separate pieces (Belk et al., 2012). Following from the evolution of the theoretical perspective of grounded theory, the next section briefly outlines this methodology to understand the basis for the interpretive approach taken within this work.

Grounded Theory Evolution

Whilst multiple variants of the grounded theory approach exist, reviewing the integral components of the approach will facilitate a deeper understanding of the more general interpretive approach, inspired from grounded theory taken in this research. Grounded theory is an inductive methodology whereby theory development arises from the data such that the insight and enhanced understanding of the phenomenon at hand is more likely to resemble the "reality" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory is a general methodology that guides systematic data collection and analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Since the original publication by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, the methodology developed and raised much debate, particularly from its founding scholars. Although the controversy led to the development of two distinct variants of the grounded theory

methodology (Urquhart, 2007), many scholars have outlined the core principles of grounded theory (Goulding, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Urquhart, 2007). Firstly, the researcher must set aside theoretical ideas such as philosophical assumptions and approach the phenomenon at hand with an open mind to allow a “substantive” theory to emerge from the data (Urquhart, 2007). Secondly, the data which is largely derived from interviews, observations and documents, is subject to an ongoing process of data collection and data analysis whereby emerging concepts and categories direct the gathering of further data. The grounded theory process is an iterative process whereby data analysis begins as soon as data is available, thus data analysis and data collection occur simultaneously (Urquhart, 2007). This research followed this process, and data analysis began on transcribed interviews as soon as they were available, although not all data had been collected. Specifically, initial data analysis informed the areas and contexts for further data collection, resulting in an emergent research process. Lastly, grounded theory employs a constant comparative method whereby the researcher must compare the data at every phase of the research analysis process (Urquhart, 2007), in order to achieve a refinement of ideas (Goulding, 2002). Collected data are analyzed by way of a process called “coding”. Data were coded according to the open coding and then selective coding process, whereby a dialectical procedure was employed, whereby contrast and comparisons were made. Transcripts and other data collected are reviewed and evaluated to identify concepts. These concepts are compared to other sections of data that contain the same incidents and themes, as well as contrasted with other sections of data with differing themes (Goulding, 2002). The final process in analysis involved weaving theoretical codes into the analysis. Data collection and analysis finishes once theoretical saturation is reached, or the constructs that have been developed are adequate and robust (Goulding, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

It is important to note that despite the conflicting variants of grounded theory, the key elements introduced here were applied in this study under a more general interpretive lensing, aligning with the approach taken in Consumer Culture Theory research (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Under this lensing, the contexts for study were chosen accordingly in an emergent design (Belk, Sherry & Wallendorf, 1988) in which the theoretical understanding from the first context studied (*Outrageous Fortune*) drove the contexts of further study. Throughout this process, dialectical tacking was carried out between individual interviews and observations, the whole within each context (i.e. working within contexts), and between the individual data sets and the entire data set (i.e. working across contexts). The following section elaborates more on the chosen contexts within this research.

Contexts

Data were collected from three brand backstories: (1) The *Outrageous Fortune (OF)* (New Zealand television brand) *Museum Exhibit* at the *Auckland War Memorial Museum* in Auckland, New Zealand; (2) The *Herr's Snack Food Inc. (Herr's)* (American snack food brand) factory tour at the company headquarters and manufacturing plant in Nottingham, PA, USA and (3) The *Girl Scouts of America (GSUSA)* (American non-profit brand) permanent exhibit at the national headquarter offices in New York, NY, USA. Details of these brands and their brand backstories are provided in subsequent chapters of this work.

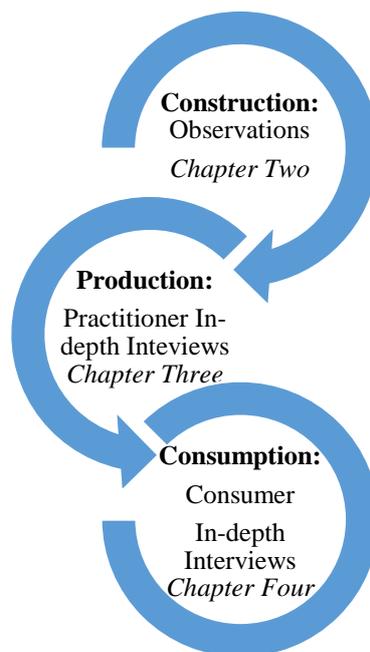
The focal brands were selected to provide a multidimensional view of the brand backstory phenomenon. They vary in the type of brands (media brand, fast moving consumer goods brand and nonprofit brand), the type of spatial brand backstory on offer (museum exhibit, factory tour and headquarters exhibit), the duration of the backstory (one time event and ongoing), the location of the backstory (offsite museum and brand headquarters) as well

as the number and type of backstory practitioners involved in the creation of the brand backstory (multiple practitioners all not necessarily associated with the brand directly vs. one sole creator employed by the brand).

Methods

To appropriately explore the facets of the brand backstory construct, this thesis examines the construction, production and reception of the brand backstory. As such, the methods reflect this multifaceted orientation and the data were collected on-site at each brand backstory environment from researcher observations, the practitioners involved in the creation of each brand backstory, as well as the consumers who experienced the brand backstories. Each method of data collection consecutively builds to provide a systematic and holistic understanding of the brand backstory construct (see Figure 2, p. 15). Collection of data spanned a three year period and a summary of the data collected is tabularized in Table 5 (p. 150) at the end of this thesis.

Figure 2. Methodological Foci of the Brand Backstory



Observations

To broadly explore the material environment of the brand backstory, observations were utilized as a method of data collection and largely reported in chapter two. Observations by the researcher within each brand backstory context were made both as a participant in the brand backstory and as an observer of individuals in their experience within the backstory. The handwritten field notes were delineated (i.e. observation notes vs. theoretical notes) using Corbin & Strauss's (1990) method of note-taking. Field notes are accompanied by photos and video recordings within each context to document impressions and new learnings as well as material objects collected (such as backstory souvenirs) within each context that provide additional insights. Observations include actions, sensory experiences, conversations, interactions, and activities within each context. The researcher visited each brand backstory on multiple occasions for extensive periods of time to gain a finer understanding of each context prior to conducting interviews. This was essential to the researcher as practitioners described the process of vision and creation of the brand backstory experience and consumers described their embodied experiences. Experiencing the brand backstory first hand enabled the researcher to consider specific elements and scale within each brand backstory context.

In-depth Qualitative Interviews

In-depth interviews with practitioners behind the creation of the backstory provided general insights into the production of the brand backstory as well as their views on the expected objectives and role of the branded experiences for the brand more broadly. Practitioners were contacted by the researcher to voluntarily participate in the study and provide their insights into the creation of the brand backstory. Practitioners were selected on the potential that they could offer insights to the manifestation of these brand experiences. A variety exists in the number of practitioner informants within each context according to the number of those involved in the creation of each brand backstory. A variety of techniques

were employed for recruitment including emails, requests based on face-to-face interactions, and snowball sampling over a three-year period. For each brand backstory context, the researcher was successful in obtaining interviews with all practitioners involved in the conceptualization (or now maintenance) of the brand backstory. Most data were collected via face-to-face in-depth qualitative interviews or, where constraints existed and a face-to-face interview was not feasible, a phone interview was conducted as an alternative.

The practitioner data set of 146 single-spaced pages of transcripts consists of 11 in-depth interviews with a varied level of involvement of each practitioner in the creation and/or maintenance of the brand backstory (see Table 1, p. 89). Interviews followed a semi-structured format and long interview techniques (McCracken, 1988). In using in-depth interviews to understand brand backstory conceptualizations through practitioners of brand backstories, it is acknowledged that “the possibility that interview statements reveal less about the interiors of the interviewees or the exteriors of the organizational practices and more about something else” (Alvesson, 2003, p. 17). Rather, issues of secrecy, impression management and representativeness may arise when interviewing brand backstory practitioners- issues that may not be as prominent when interviewing consumers (Cotte & Kistruck, 2006). To overcome these issues, the researcher sought to establish strong rapport with interview informants prior to the collection of data. As a result, practitioners felt comfortable enough to provide the researcher with additional (and some sensitive) archival documents and material pertaining to the construction of each brand backstory. These materials are filed as data in the repository and employed within chapter two.

In-depth interviews with consumers provide phenomenological insights of their experiences within the spatially branded experiences. Phenomenology uncovers the essential invariant features of a conscious experience through critical reflection (Jopling, 1996) by examining what is thought, felt and perceived (Hackley, 2003). Participant recruitment was

undertaken through sign posting at each brand backstory site. Snowball sampling was utilized with initial interview informants providing leads to other potential informants. All informants voluntarily took part in the study and contacted the researcher independently to demonstrate their interest in participating. As with the data collected from practitioners, the aim for the researcher was to collect data through face-to-face interviews however where constraints existed, data was collected via phone interviews. The consumer data set of 475 pages of single spaced transcripts consists of 42 in-depth interviews across two brand backstory contexts – *OF* and *Herr's* (see Table 4, p. 132). Some consumer data were collected from the *GSUSA* but because too few observations were made, these interviews are not included in the final paper (Chapter 4).

With both domains of data collection from practitioners and consumers, an ongoing dialectical method of collection was undertaken over a three-year period as the initial data analysis provided for insights on emergent themes and allowed for further sampling based on these themes.

Analysis

For analysis, interviews were transcribed and field notes were filed together with repository material. This research follows analysis principles recommended by Thompson (1997). Texts are first read in full in order to gain a sense of the whole picture. The text is then scrutinized for meaning “units” which describe the central aspects of the experience. Significant statements are then extracted whereby key words and sentences are identified. Formulation of meanings for each significant statement is made. Data collection occurs simultaneously, and after further data is collected, axial coding is performed whereby the process described above is repeated in which patterns and differences are identified across informants’ narratives and recurrent meaningful themes are clustered, noting relationships between the codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the spirit of phenomenological inquiry,

patterns of experiences are sought and identified within individual interviews (idiographic analysis), across informants' interviews (nomothetic analysis) (Mick & Buhl, 1992; Thompson et al., 1989) as well as across data sources (observations, depth interviews). The last stage of analysis involves broadening of interpretation to include a wider range of considerations (such as existing literature) that help the researcher to arrive at a holistic interpretation. It is recognized that the final explanation represents a fusion of horizons between the interpreter's frame of reference and the texts being interpreted (Thompson, 1997).

Quality of the Research

Miles and Huberman (1994) note how appropriately conducted procedures do not substantiate and justify accurate conclusions. Any research approach, regardless of which method of research is undertaken, requires ways to assess and ensure the trustworthiness of the research (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989). Wallendorf and Belk (1989) build on the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and suggest five criteria to assess the quality or trustworthiness of qualitative research. These are: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability and integrity. According to Cavana, Delahaye, and Sekaran (2001), the main verification of trustworthiness in qualitative studies is triangulation. This research follows the triangulation procedures outlined by Cavana et al. (2001) to ensure the trustworthiness of findings (e.g., research-informant, researcher-researcher, and researcher-literature corroborations).

Ethical Considerations

As social research is conducted by, for, and about people and there is always the potential of harm to other, thus ethical issues need to be considered (Esterberg, 2002). This research follows the ethical codes set out by the University of Auckland. Obtaining informed consent and maintaining the confidentiality of informants (with particular sensitivity paid to

information provided by brand practitioners) are the two main considerations which required attention within this study. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Auckland and consent forms were signed and collected from all informants.

1.3 Thesis Overview

This thesis is structured according to the thesis by papers model whereby chapters within are comprised by a series of published or unpublished research papers. In accordance with the University of Auckland Graduate Centre's guidelines for including publications in a thesis, the papers within are of publishable quality; and whilst a paper within this thesis has been published, the University of Auckland Graduate School does not require all papers to be published upon submission of this body of work. Each paper can be read independently without relying on precursor knowledge from other chapters thus each empirical study is a self-contained project with its own theoretical development and contribution to the marketing literature, yet each contributes to an overall theoretical understanding of the brand backstory experience construct.

Paper one titled "Behind the Revealed Brand: Exploring the Brand Backstory Experience" in chapter two explores the structure of brand backstory experiences from observational insights gleaned of the brand backstory environment as well as via practitioner interviews. The paper reveals how temporal and spatial elements craft the overall architectonics of the brand backstory experience and how the reveal within the brand backstory environments of focus systematically evolve to ultimately unite consumers with the brands' compelling myths within. This paper published within the annual *Research in Consumer Behavior* series (volume 15), focuses on the brand backstories of *OF* and *Herr's* only as data collection at the *GSUSA* backstory was ongoing at the time of publication.

Paper two titled “Nurturing Intimate Brand Bonds by Offering Consumers a Brand Backstory: A Managerial Inquiry” in chapter three extends the tenets explored in chapter two by elucidating the approach and impetus of crafting the brand backstory from the perspective of the practitioner. This paper offers rich insights into how brand practitioners devise strategies within the backstory to fuel the consumer-brand bond and potentially enable stronger and more intimate connections.

Paper three titled “Dialectical Tensions within the Brand Backstory Experience: Consumer Negotiations of Esoteric Brand Knowledge” in chapter four finally explores the reception of the brand backstory through illuminating consumers’ experiences of the construct. The paper considers how the central features of the brand backstory construct insights a dialectical tension within consumers, ultimately showing the paradoxical responses to the brand backstory and consumers’ corresponding (re)evaluation of their consumer-brand bond.

Finally, this research concludes with a discussion section that brings to light an overarching dialog or thread that is common to the three papers. Contributions and limitations are offered within each paper and to summate this research thesis.

CHAPTER 2: Behind the Revealed Brand: Exploring the Brand Backstory Experience

"Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!"

- The Wizard, from *The Wizard of Oz*

The smoke and mirrors magic show, the dog and pony show, the shell and the pea game - to stay afloat within the fiercely competitive marketplace today, engaging in revealing and concealing is now the name of the game for brands. Brands frequently engage in concealing or keeping secret the ingredients, components, and/or manufacturing methods that make them unique. Sometimes, however, brands do offer out their trade 'secrets'. A brand backstory provides consumers the opportunity to visit a brand's inner world, to give them an "insider's sneak-peek" into the "making of" or "behind-the-scenes" of a brand.

Mackey (2003) refers to brand backstories as a type of "diegetic border play", a narrative in which the reader alternates between being in and out of the diegetic, a literary term adopted to describe "the fictional 'world' of events narrated" (van Peer & Chatman, 2001, p 357) and here used to refer to the complex gestalt of brand-produced narratives (Russell & Schau, 2014). The backstory engages consumers' in text-games that specifically allow for diegetic border crossings. As a border-crossing text (Mackey, 2003), the brand backstory may adversely challenge consumers who see the brand as a relationships partner (Fournier, 1998). So, why do brands choose to engage consumers in games they may not wish to play? Understanding how backstories are shaped and how the backstory narrative is crafted may reveal fresh insights about this phenomenon.

To lay the foundation for why brand backstories are often offered as revealed secrets, and how and why brand backstories are created; this chapter presents an overview of the brand backstory, its purpose, its role and the processes through which consumers may experience the brand backstory. Ultimately, this chapter demonstrates how spatial and

temporal elements within the brand backstory experience are manipulated to create the overall brand backstory. Understanding the reveal of the brand backstory experience not only illuminates a facet of the consumer-brand relationship not yet examined within consumer research but also further elucidates the creation of certain marketplace ideologies surrounding brands (Holt, 2002). These nuances are important in further propelling the appreciation of the unique and dynamic relationship between the consumer, the marketplace and cultural meanings (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

2.1 The Brand Experience

A long held view of marketing is that “the firm and the consumer had distinct roles of production and consumption, respectively” (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004, p. 6). However, this once favoured company-centric perspective has gradually shifted to a more consumer-centric view in which consumers become co-creators of value in marketing interactions (Lusch & Vargo, 2006; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). This change in the dominant logic of marketing (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) has fueled a reconsideration of branding, shifting attention from brand producers and products toward consumer response (Schroeder, 2009). Within the consumer-centric view, consumers’ do not passively consume products and services, they experience them, and more importantly they experience brands (van Marrewijk & Broos, 2012). Pine & Gilmore (1999) note that brands can increase their value by staging meaningful experiences for their consumers. Accordingly, much marketing literature has focused on the manner in which brands create meaningful experiences for consumers, particularly as brands may create experiences that influence consumers to behave in certain ways, most apparent in services or retailing environments (Chronis, 2008; Chronis, Arnould, & Hampton, 2012; Nambisan & Watt, 2011; Payne, Storbacka, Frow, & Knox, 2009; Tynan & McKechnie, 2009).

Whilst much literature provides guidance for creating marketing experiences (Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Poulsson & Kale, 2004; Schmitt, 2003), research that has focused on the manner in which marketing practitioners envision, stage and deliver experiences has been limited to retail settings (Brown & Sherry, 2003; Sherry, 1999; van Marrewijk & Broos, 2012). Understanding the impetus and process behind the brand backstory experience from the practitioner's perspective, especially given the paucity of research on this aspect of the brand experience, may provide valuable insight into the creation and value of brand backstory experiences.

Pine and Gilmore's (1998) influential definition of an experience refers to "when a company intentionally uses services as the stage, and goods as props, to engage individual customers in a way that creates a memorable event" (p. 98). Furthermore, Berry (2000) describes experiences of brands as encounters with the company's total product, which includes both tangible goods and services. Consumer researchers, beginning with Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) place the emphasis on the consumers' response within a brand experience, defining it as a personal occurrence, founded on the interaction with the products or services consumed and often with important emotional significance (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982 cited in Carù & Cova, 2006, p. 270). Experience is defined as "the act of living through and observation of events" (Hoch, 2002, p. 448) and direct experience allows people to perceive new information, reflect on it, and think about new ways in which to behave (Kolb, 1984). Direct interaction through the five senses is especially important when individuals have to evaluate so-called experience attributes—those attributes that can be ascertained only by use or contact (Wright & Lynch, 1995). Brand producers must consider these elements of emotional significance and sensory stimulation in designing experiences as stronger, more intense brand experiences predict positive brand outcomes, thus facilitating a relationship with the brand (Brakus, Schmitt, & Zarantonello, 2009).

Most of all, brand experiences deliver brand meanings to consumers or provide an opportunity for consumers to generate brand meanings through the interaction with the brand. For example, the experience may provide entertainment, enjoyment, nostalgia, fantasy or an opportunity for consumers to display some particular knowledge, values or social behaviour (Berry, 2000; Payne et al., 2009; Pine & Gilmore, 1999; Tynan & McKechnie, 2009). Opening the backstage to consumers in the brand backstory experience must therefore be done with careful consideration of potential consumer reactions.

2.2 The Brand Backstory

Brand backstories allow brand creators or producers to reveal aspects lesser known to consumers, enabling them to go behind-the-scenes or into the backstage of the brand. Using both spatial and temporal elements, experiential brand backstories may take several forms. For example, media brands often convey backstories in the form of bonus feature DVDs. Commonly fast moving consumer goods employ experiential activities such as special tours or museum exhibits (Hollenbeck et al., 2008) and abbreviated or concertina styled forms are often featured as documentary pieces within popular media online (ABC News, 2012; Telegraph.co.uk, 2013) or on television such as the program, *How It's Made*.

Brand backstories are essentially deconstructed brand ideologies: they offer consumers insider information about the brand biography (Avery et al., 2010), the history of the brand, and other information pertaining to the creation of brand elements (such as the brand's image or philosophy) or the creation of a brand's consumable product or service. Offering more than the revelation of "historical account of the events that have shaped the brand over time" (Avery et al., 2010, p. 213) or chronological information pertaining to the development of a brand or its biography, the brand backstory adds to the complex gestalt of

brand meanings (Diamond et al., 2009) and augments various other brand narratives surrounding the brand or the overall brand storyworld. As mentioned above, of importance is the manner in which the brand backstory allows for diegetic border-play (Mackey, 2003) so, whilst the brand backstory may augment the overall brand narrative, the brand backstory is unique as a result of its reflective nature.

Brand backstories feature the authorial voice of the producer/s or creator/s of the brand (Stern, 1994) who determine the depth or verisimilitude of information revealed therein. Brand backstories are usually crafted by multiple authors: the company that owns the brand and provides the legal and financial responsibility for the content, and sometimes a creative agent in charge of the design of the actual brand backstory. Where the creative responsibilities are carried out by a separate entity from the entity holding legal and financial responsibilities, we can distinguish between the sponsor/s of the brand backstory from the author/s of the brand backstory. Both sponsor and author are outside voices as they reside outside the crafted text (Stern, 1994). However, authors of the brand backstory may actually exist within the crafted text as well. For example, tour guides may sometime assist and narrate the brand backstory experience, taking on the role of the “persona” (Stern, 1994). Although multiple authors exist (indeed consumers may be regarded as authors), this research addresses the managerial perspective and focuses on the brand backstory text as authored and created by the company that owns the brand and/or representatives from the brand.

Brand backstory experiences that are communicated through experiential or spatial activities, such as tours or museum exhibits, are structured in a manner that aim to not simply satisfy the consumer’s curiosity in how a brand is created but moreover to manifest an impression of revealing *exclusive* information to the consumer regarding the backstage storyworld. For example, the *Warner Bros. Studio Tour London – The Making of Harry Potter* offers consumers the backstory on the creation of the *Harry Potter* film series.

Designed in close collaboration with the film creators, the tour includes major sets, props and costumes that simultaneously reveal and immerse consumers in the narrative of *Harry Potter*, offering consumers the *real* backstory to the media brand.

2.3 The Backstage

Balancing the reveal of information or access to the backstage is a challenge that must be carefully considered in forming the brand backstory experience. Indeed, Holt's (2002) assertion that brands struggle with remaining truthful or authentic in the eyes of the consumer within postmodern consumer culture has resulted in a type of consumer coup in which,

“Sovereign consumers are no longer willing to watch whatever companies choose to present onstage. Rather, they now feel that they have been granted the authority to walk backstage to see what the wizard is doing behind the scrim and to make sure that his character is consistent with what is presented onstage” (p. 86).

A useful base to explore the phenomenon of brand backstories is Goffman's (1959) distinctions between the front and back regions and their functions in supporting the social performance. Whereas the “front” is a social place in which “hosting” occurs, the “back” is a space designed for the preparation for the construction of the performance (e.g. kitchens, boiler rooms) (Goffman, 1959). The performance gains credence by limiting access to the backstage as revealing too much information may “discredit the performance out front” (MacCannell, 1973, p. 591). The backstage of a brand, in revealing its “inner workings” (MacCannell, 1973, p. 595), promises to be authentic (Gammon & Fear, 2005) by allowing consumers access to esoteric information to which they would not otherwise be privy.

The backstage notion has received some treatment in the tourism literature. For instance, in their exploration of the role of backstage football stadium tours as symbols of

local and national sporting heritage, Gammon and Fear (2005) discuss the power in revealing the “authentic backstage” to consumers in reflecting and reinforcing the brand as a symbol of the *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* (Molander & Östberg, 2012). They find that ordinary spaces and objects (such as a changing room) are imbued with elevated or noteworthy qualities as a result of the manner in which they are revealed. Allowing consumers the experience of not simply *being there* but rather *being behind there*, reinforces the intimacy between consumer and brand by further immersing the consumer into the realm of the brand narrative and, simultaneously, reinforces the brand within the socio-cultural realm of society in allowing consumers to feel as if they are able “to recapture virginal sensations of discovery, or childlike feelings of being half in and half out of society” (MacCannell, 1973, p. 596) and thus creating a heightened boundary around the brand itself.

2.4 Potential Consumer Responses to the Brand Backstory

Transportation into the Brand Narrative, Immersion and Disbelief

Entering the backstage reduces the distance between consumers and the narrative storyworld of a brand. As such, the degree to which consumers become transported and immersed into the brand backstory experience world may be a factor in their negotiations of it. Immersion is defined as “...a total elimination of the distance between consumers and the situation, the former being plunged in a thematized and secure spatial enclave where they can let themselves go” (Carù & Cova, 2006, p. 5). Once consumers are immersed within a narrative storyworld the consumer is situated in such proximity that the artifices of the storyworld cannot be acknowledged. Narrative transportation may aid the immersion of consumers within a storyworld, as well as their suspension of disbelief. Narrative transportation conveys the idea that upon experiencing a story, the reader of the text becomes

enveloped within and transported into the story, thus their beliefs shift in a direction consistent with the story and the reader is said to be “immersed”. At this stage, “individuals are less likely to critically examine the facts in the story and more likely to accept them as true and be persuaded by them” (Avery et al., 2010, p. 215). Narrative transportation implies that that the reader is displaced into the narrative (Gerrig, 1993) and the fictional narratives are persuasive enough to overcome an individual’s critical elaboration on a text. Furthermore, individuals may not be motivated to counterargue or correct beliefs as this would detract from their enjoyment and hinder the experience of immersion (Petrova & Cialdini, 2008). As noted by Flavell (1999) in the developmental study of children’s mental theories of reality, individuals may blur the boundaries between the real and the imaginary. This blurring of boundaries between reality and fiction has also been noted in the context of television consumption whereby consumers develop parasocial relationships with TV series characters and no longer distinguish between the television world and the real world (Russell, Norman, & Heckler, 2004). Unlike parasocial relationships where the individual may not self-reflexively acknowledge the blurring between reality and fiction (Narsey & Russell, 2011), the crux of the suspension of disbelief is that individuals willingly acknowledge the fantasy in the narrative storyworld and simultaneously suspend judgment concerning the implausibility of the narrative. For an individual to become transported, a degree of willingness is required of the individual to put aside a need to understand the fictional construct and accept the premise of the storyworld (Gilbert, 1991). Past research has shown that immersive experiences that combine appeals to physical, symbolic, and sensory factors lead to greater suspension of disbelief that the participant is “inside” the fictionally enhanced narrative (Dede, 2009). Often discussed in the consumption of fictionally orientated activity (Grayson & Martinec, 2004), such as magic tricks, the process of the “suspension of disbelief” may also play a role in consumers’ experiences of the brand backstory. Those narratives that

create the illusion of a semblance of truth (Coleridge, 2002) facilitate the suspension of disbelief. And, as readers of the text suspend judgment on its fictional qualities, they become immersed in and more receptive to the storyworld (Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004; Green, Garst, & Brock, 2004).

Revelations

Once immersed in the backstage, the exposition of brand secrets may generate feelings of revelations in consumers. In the brand backstory context, the term ‘revelation’ is used in reference to the reaction to disclosure or exposition, rather than the desire for a miracle or some sort of transformational phenomenon. The discussion of revelation or discovery around brands is not entirely new to the consumption domain. Previous research documents the effect of withholding or revealing brand names within a commercial narrative (Baker, Honea, & Russell, 2004), as well as investigating the differences that revealing a brand can have on expressed behavioral preferences and brain responses (McClure et al., 2004). Baker et al. (2004) found evidence that revealing brand names at the beginning of advertising messages strengthens the memory associations between the brand name and evaluative implications of the advertising: because the commercial’s narrative is understood in the context of the brand name, if displayed first, the advertising message is more persuasively effective. Similarly, McClure et al. (2004) discovered in a brand-cued experiment that revealing brand names biases preference decisions towards the revealed brand, particularly when the brand revealed is embedded with influential cultural meanings. But past research, focused on brand-cued experiments or on the placement of a brand name within a commercial, does not address how the revelation of deeper information regarding the brand (such as the inner workings or mechanics of the brand, like the brand backstory), may be experienced.

To understand the experiences of consumers when brand information is unearthed or disclosed after having been secret or previously obscured, the domain of magic performances

may be useful. Magic performances, like brand backstories, feature esoteric knowledge, knowledge that is not publicly disclosed or confidential. Hence magic performances may be used as a reflective frame for the types of experiences consumers may have with backstories. Psychological theories of magic position belief in magic and magical thinking as a phenomenon specific to the individual and intended to meet needs such as psychotherapy to relieve anxiety and uncertainty (Glucklich, 1997). It can be hypothesized that once this esoteric knowledge is exposed, or when individuals' beliefs regarding phenomena are dissolved, they experience a type of revelation. As little consumer research focuses on brand backstories at the forefront, theories of revelation and discovery within the magic literature domain offer rich theoretical foundations for mapping consumer responses to brand backstories.

Magic Performances

As mentioned, practitioners of magic derive their exclusive power from the possession of esoteric knowledge, knowledge or information that is not publicly disclosed or confidential. Within a magic performance, esoteric knowledge is used in a manner that violates several causal relationships that the audience has learnt (Parris, Kuhn, Mizon, Benattayallah, & Hodgson, 2009). In witnessing violations of causality and expectations during a magic performance (Kuhn, Amlani, & Rensink, 2008a; Kuhn, Tatler, Findlay, & Cole 2008b; Kuhn & Land, 2006), viewers experience the feelings of anger, wonder and envy or the "AWE reaction" (Krell & Dobson, 1999). Without apparent logical explanation, the cognitive response from the viewer is to acquire or create an explanation, thus viewers are more likely to try to understand the real causal sequence of events (Kelley, 1980). A study by Raphaël (2007) investigates the effect that revealing the explanations for magic tricks has on participants' level of enjoyment on a more phenomenological, experientially based level. The study shows that, in general, participants, who had the explanations revealed to them not

only had higher levels of enjoyment during the magic experience but they were also more appreciative of the quality of the magic tricks later performed for them.

2.5 Research Questions

To date, research has emphasized the notion of narrative transportation, immersion and suspension of disbelief to describe the manner in which consumers actively suppress acknowledgements of a fictional world's artifices in favour of an immersive consumption experience (Englis, 1992; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Kozinets et al., 2004; Stern, 1994). Little research has explored consumers' reactions as the suspension of disbelief is collapsed or recognized by consumers, as in when magic tricks are revealed. This paradox may arise upon encountering backstory information as the brand backstory deconstructs the brand's narrative storyworld on behalf of the consumer. Brand backstory creators thus must be cautious to design the fictional storyworld of the brand in such a way that consumers' experience of the storyworld's artifices through the backstory is immersive, and ultimately enhances the consumer-brand relationship.

This research accordingly sets out to explore the creation of brand backstories, examining how authors of brand backstories use spatial and temporal elements to create a revealing yet immersive consumer experience. Building on previous research that has recognised how spatial settings are an increasingly pervasive component to the communication and construction of brands (Kozinets et al., 2002; van Marrewijk & Broos, 2012; Peñaloza, 1998), this research thus explores how the spatial and temporal elements within the unique brand experience of the brand backstory contribute to an immersive consumer experience.

2.6 Exploratory Research on the Structure and Role of Brand Backstories

We conducted a series of interviews with the creators of two experiential activity brand backstories: the museum exhibit developed following the end of the New Zealand television program *Outrageous Fortune*, and a factory tour for American snack foods brand *Herr Food Inc.*

The *Outrageous Fortune (OF)* brand backstory was held at the national *Auckland War Memorial Museum* in Auckland, New Zealand. *South Pacific Pictures*, the production company behind the brand, proposed the exhibit to the *Auckland War Memorial Museum* at the conclusion of the popular television series (Russell & Schau, 2014). In collaboration with the production company and an external exhibit construction company, the museum staff carried out all development and actual creation of the exhibit. The exhibit was open to the public for six months, from December 2010 to April 2011, and delved into the “behind-the-scenes” of the popular television series. It featured the inspirations that sparked the writers, brainstorming notes for each episode, a display of costumes and props, displays that psychiatrically dissected the personalities of the main characters, and most notably, an erected stage set from the television program that consumers were able to walk through and interact in.

Open year round, the *Herr Food Inc. (Herr’s)* brand backstory experience is a factory tour of the company’s snack factory plant in Nottingham, Pennsylvania. Created in 1989 by a senior employee, the free factory tour offers a “behind-the-scenes” look into the history of the brand in a theatre quality short film as well as a guide-led tour of the factory facilities, showing consumers the entire process involved in the creation of *Herr’s* snack foods beginning from ingredient sourcing to production and packaging. Guides recite loosely memorized scripts, providing consumers with a focus on how to view each portion of the live factory and what to look for specifically in viewing. In addition to providing linkages for

making sense and appraising the working factory, guides also ad-lib answers to questions from consumers as they arise on the tour. Aside from detailed descriptions that use jargon or expert terms to explain factory processes, the guides often punctuate their speech with stimulating facts about the brand or process that consumers are witnessing (for example, providing details such as the precise number of tons of waste that the company recycles).

In-depth qualitative interviews were carried out with all brand backstory practitioners involved (six creators for *OF* and one sole creator for *Herr's*). Interviews centered on the experiences of the authors in creating the brand backstory, the process involved in the creation, the goals and aims of the backstory during and after creation, the type of information revealed and not revealed in the backstory and their general expectations about consumer reactions to the brand backstory experience.

In-depth interviews were supplemented with first hand researcher observations of both the exhibit and the factory tour. Field notes were taken regarding the information offered in the experience, the method/s of information communication, general ambience of the experience and consumers' interactions and behaviors within the experiences. Further supplementary data was obtained using material objects collected at the site of each backstory (such as backstory tour souvenirs) to provide additional insights. Additionally, practitioners provided the researchers with additional (and some sensitive) archival documents and material pertaining to the construction of each brand backstory. These materials are filed as data within a material repository.

The interview data were first ideographically analyzed, noting the relationships between codes and then nomothetically across interviews and data sources (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Mick & Buhl 1992; Thompson et al., 1989). A refinement of ideas and themes (Goulding, 2002) was achieved by way of the constant comparative method whereby data

was compared to other sections that contained similar incidents and themes, as well as contrasted with other sections of data with differing themes. These themes were then compared, contrasted and collated with observatory field notes.

2.7 Morphology of the Brand Backstory: Stages of the Brand Backstory Experience

Temporal and spatial features/elements are carefully crafted within each brand backstory to symbolically, dramatically and psychologically direct each distinct stage of the brand backstory experience and ultimately form the overall narrative of the brand backstory reveal (Alexander, 2007). The combination of symbolic, dramatic and psychological elements creates the architectonics of the brand backstory experience. Similar to film architectonics (Alexander, 2007), experience architectonics may be defined as the manner in which the three dimensions of symbolic, dramatic and psychological intent, collectively syndicate to create "...one highly functional artistic whole and a single highly effective artistic language". The experience architectonics manifest and relay the overall brand backstory narrative. Using a combination of temporal and spatial elements, the brand backstory experience features four distinct stages: (1) Initiation; (2) Reveal; (3) Exclusive Access; (4) Extended Access. These stages are discussed in turn.

Initiation

Within the initiation phase, consumers are prepped for the reveal and the "insiders look" by the provision of preparatory information or undertaking safety procedures. In brand backstory experience activities where consumers are taken into the actual backstage such as a factory tour, procedures are often verbally offered by a tour guide and often involve consumers transforming physically to prepare for the reveal such as by the donning headsets and safety glasses to hear the guide's commentary and to ensure safety whilst moving

through the experience. Personalized attention is often given to each consumer in this stage by the tour guide who ensures adherence to safety rules and procedures.

This stage may also involve an overview of the reveal or information that prefaces the reveal, such as a historical overview of the brand or company. Within the *Herr's* Snack Factory Tour, consumers are shown a mini-feature length bio-documentary about the life of the brand's founder as well as an overview of the historical life of the brand and the various changes within the lifetime of the brand. Prior to the film, consumers are placed into familial cohorts through the provision of tickets that play off the labels of various product lines (e.g. "Ketchup Chips" or "Restaurant Style Tortilla Chips"); this practice not only pragmatically segregates the large number of visitors into smaller cohorts for the factory tour enabling a more personalized experience with their tour guide, but as the creator of the factory tour asserts, it also "helps with the brand" in strengthening the familial associations between the consumer and brand.

Within this stage the experience is shaped to establish rapport and a closer connection with the consumer; emphasizing the intimate connections between the consumer and the brand and thus symbolically and psychologically establishing and providing a base for the notion of the reveal.

Reveal

During the reveal, consumers gain a deeper understanding into creation of the brand and its creation through either the reproduction (possibly an impressionistic form) or manifestation of the actual backstage. The combination of the spatial elements in this stage reinforces and reflects the drama of the reveal. Within the *Herr's* tour, consumers are taken through the factory on a purposefully built tour pathway where windows are strategically placed to overlook areas of the factory, showing live factory operations in production.

Although some windows feature blinds that would assumedly cover areas not in operation, windows provide an unobstructed view down to the factory floor, even to areas not in operation. Where visibility into the factory operations may be difficult or not visually stimulating such as within the complex machinery, tour guides direct consumers' attention towards the supplementary video offered via television sets that hang from the ceiling. Tour guides provide vivid commentary throughout the entire tour, evoking consumers' sensory imagination through the use of corporeal descriptions as consumers watch the live factory in production. The tour attempts to appeal physically to all senses, for example on a portion of the tour where guides maneuver consumers through an open warehouse (remaining on the purpose-built tour path, however), where the smells of freshly cooked snacks and sounds of loud packaging machinery compete against narration from the tour guide in capturing the attention of consumers. The desire to create an atmosphere of unveiled transparency to fully immerse the consumer into the narrative of the "live factory tour" is clear in the view of the tour creator who asserts: "They see the employees wave to the tour guides and the tours as they go through".

The same careful attention to immerse visitors into the world of *OF* was a central motivation for structuring the exhibit so that consumers progressively walked through on a specific pathway. One of the creators explains,

"...from having the writers imagine the family and then creating that imagined family, the point of the exhibition was then to meet the Wests head on, face to face in real life. So the actors had their place in the second part of that process. So that was their thought approach for how the whole thing should take the audience through an experience."

The exhibit gradually peeled back the layers of the program by first offering consumers the opportunity to learn about the creative process involved in developing television characters; secondly, deconstructing the characters to demonstrate how the design inspiration in the creative process is realized and finally enabling consumers to “see themselves” in the program by walking through a stage set.

The emphasis on “liveness” within the *Herr’s* tour and the gradual narrative progression within the *OF* exhibit both highlight the drama of disclosing in the overall brand backstory experience.

Exclusive Access

Typically after the initial reveal, spatial components within the brand backstory are arranged to accentuate the symbolic, psychological and dramatic feeling of exclusivity. Exclusive access grants the consumer with a limited edition or unique experience that is only available on-site, within the brand backstory experience, providing a sensation of distinction or extraordinariness to the brand. For example, whilst on the behind-the-scenes tour at *Herr’s*, consumers are offered a taste of freshly cooked potato chips as they are manufactured directly off the production line. Through the purpose-built windows on the tour path, consumers witness the novelty as their tour guide dons a hair cap and gloves (adhering to health and safety regulations) to collect a tray of freshly cooked potato chips direct from the factory line. The act of observing the tour guide enter a demarcated space to which the consumer is restricted access to also enables the experience of tasting the potato chips to be designated as exclusive. The exclusivity of the experience is also stressed by the tour guides who proclaim to consumers, “These are the freshest chips you’ll ever have; only six minutes from the fryer to your mouths.” This distinction is carried on into the gift shop, where sampling is encouraged: “They’re allowed to sample, they see all these things made but when

we come back we say would you like to say a buffalo or blue cheese curl, well they may never have thought to try that. We open up a bag and then we try it.”

With the aims of providing a “...compelling destination experience which was that chance to actually get into the living room set”, the exclusive access with the *OF* exhibit stage set enabled “ultimate immersion” as one of the creators describes: “It’s the ultimate immersion, you know, people go in, they could sit on the couch and that was so great, quite often just cannot achieve that level.” Exclusivity here is not demarcated through a separation of spaces as with the *Herr*’s but rather, a lack of delineation. Much like the rest of the exhibit, the stage set is open and ambiguously unrestrictive, providing unobstructed access and thus a feeling of entitlement and exclusivity to consumers.

Extended Access

The final segment of the brand backstory experience enables consumers to extend their access to the brand by purchasing exclusive merchandise that may only be obtained at the site of the brand backstory experience. *Herr*’s, for example, packages and retails factory seconds as “*Oops*” enabling consumers to take home a memento of the brand backstory experience and provides a feeling of extension into the access behind the brand.

Sold alongside other merchandised *OF* paraphernalia in the gift shop, the *OF* exhibit featured an official souvenir, a DVD titled “*Outrageous Fortune Revealed*” which like the exhibit also offered “the story behind New Zealand’s most successful drama series” through “never seen before” interviews with the creators of the program, behind-the-scenes footage from the series and insights into the construction of the exhibit- the backstory behind the backstory. At the experience consumers were also provided free access to an *OF* themed instant photo booth outside the exhibit space (see Appendix A, p. 40) that allowed for consumers to take away a physical memento of the branded activity.

In extending consumers' access to the brand backstory, the element of time is manipulated to symbolically and psychologically prolong the chronotope of the brand backstory reveal.

2.8 Experiencing the Brand Backstory Narrative

Set by the order of spatial elements and the dynamics of interactions between time and space, the carefully crafted backstory experience aims to not simply immerse consumers in the brand backstory experience itself but also a salient brand narrative. Both the *OF* and *Herr's* brand backstory experiences anchor consumers' journey through the brand backstory on a salient narrative of family identification, which allowed for the generation of earnest feelings such as intimacy and closeness. This journey is discussed next.

Introducing the Imagined Family

Both *OF* and *Herr's* begin the backstory experience with the motivating ideas behind the brand and the 'imagined family' or those involved in the creation and innovation of the brand. In the *OF* exhibit, consumers first enter the writers' space where the research and development into the program are explained via satellite tables and display cases showing notes, media clippings and actual draft scripts (see Appendix B, p. 40). Written modes of description boundary the impressionistic 'backstage art department' where key props, mood boards, costumes and video are used to describe the physical manifestation of ideas (see Appendix C, p. 41). It is in this space where consumers visually experience the creative and family-like collaborative process of the 'production family' behind the produced on-screen family. In the case of *Herr's*, the Snack Factory Tour begins in a 140-seat theatre where consumers view a 27-minute film documenting the biography of the company founder, the company headquarters and company initiatives (see Appendix D, p. 41). Experiencing the

shared tale of the “American dream” from the company’s founder in a motion picture-like format within the darkened film theatre symbolically emphasizes to the consumer the extraordinariness of the imagined family behind the brand. Common to both backstories, textual communication is heavily emphasized in the narratively linear introduction to the imagined family behind each brand.

Meeting the ‘Real Family’

From the introduction space, consumers in both brand backstory experiences enter transitional or liminal spaces that prepare them for the immersion into the “homes” of the brands. This space in *OF* is a long darkened hallway that features a rolling projection of lines from the program accompanied by a looped audio reel from notable scenes in the series. The liminal space in *Herr’s* is also a hallway with a large mural that explains safety rules whilst being led on the guided tour. The hallway is shared with actual employees of the company and signs specific to employees are also clearly visible. Both liminal spaces indicate the presence of the ‘real’ family thus introducing and preparing the consumer to meet the ‘real family’ who personify or humanize brand. From the liminal spaces, consumers enter visceral spaces that invite perceptive engagement. In line with the introductory portion of the exhibit, the *OF* exhibit features two spaces that construct the narrative of meeting the ‘real family’ from the series. From the hallway, consumers enter an open area with shelves that display television sets looping significant scenes from the series as well as noteworthy props, organized in a shrine-like fashion, from the lives of each main character (see Appendix E, p. 41). From the ambience of the basement-like area, consumers walk through interactive displays designed to represent each main character. Text descriptions within each display analyze the psyche of each character: their complexity and motivations (see Appendix F, p. 42). Each display also invites consumers to use their senses as they interact with the exhibit e.g. by featuring drawers to be opened or fabric on display to be touched. *Herr’s* leads

consumers on a guided tour through the working factory via specially created windowed corridors that overlook the production areas inside the plant. Where the tour is led through the windowless packaging and distribution area, tour guides bypass “Authorized Personal Only” signs with consumers (however still remaining on the purpose-built tour path) and it is here that workers engage with consumers by waving and making eye contact (see Appendix G, p. 42). Much like the liminal hallway prior to the commencement of the tour, the tour concludes in a similar shared hallway that features a bulletin board with notices for employees. The spatial elements in this section of both backstory experiences gradually prepare consumers for the heightened sensorial experience that follows by selectively appealing and challenging consumers’ sensorial attention.

Becoming Part of the Family

Both brand backstory journeys culminate with consumers’ immersion into the brand. The sentiment of becoming part of the brand is facilitated by the generation of feelings that unite consumers with the brands’ imagined and real families. Within the *OF* exhibit, consumers are confronted with a sliding door that opened into the most recognizable set from the program – the family living room (see Appendix H, p.42 & Appendix I, p.43). Here, consumers were given free rein to explore the set, sit on the central couch, touch objects, hence corporeally becoming both part of the ‘imagined family’ behind the brand and of the ‘real family’ who embodied the brand (Joy & Sherry 2003). At the conclusion of its guided tour, the *Herr*’s tour guide leads consumers’ into the gift shop where they are able to purchase limited edition merchandise such as t-shirts, hats and mugs that allow them to physically take home the brand, enabling consumers’ identification and association again with both the imagined brand family and real brand family (see Appendix J, p.43). Additionally within the gift shop, staff opens up bags of unique flavored products for consumers to sample, mimicking the notion of ‘breaking bread’ in the family home.

The temporal and spatial features within both backstories encourage fluidity and a progressive journey through the brand backstory narrative. Both experiences begin with spaces that are one-dimensional in engaging consumers' attention (i.e. both begin by simply engaging the consumer visually) and progress through increasing reliance on multisensorial spaces, engaging consumers on many senses that ultimately welcome them in the brand's family (Joy & Sherry, 2003).

2.9 Discussion

The strategies used in crafting the architectonics of the brand backstory experience ultimately work to strengthen consumers' experiential authenticity (Grayson & Martinec 2004). Through the use of temporal and spatial elements within the brand backstory experience to communicate the narrative of the 'brand revealed', the brand veneer is seemingly peeled away (Holt, 2002) and the underlying family narrative emerges (Chronis, 2008). Ultimately the careful construction of the experience becomes an arena in which the consumer is immersed to such a depth that the artifices of the brand narrative cannot be acknowledged. This aids the suspension of disbelief thus shifting the beliefs of the consumer in a direction consistent with the vision of the brand backstory creators. This temporal-spatial immersion within the brand narrative increases intimacy, strengthens the ties between consumers and brands (Borghini et al., 2009; Diamond et al., 2009), and re-enchants consumers towards the brand (Dion & Arnould, 2011; Ritzer 2005).

2.10 Conclusion

The brand backstory experience is a rich brand experience that strengthens consumer-brand ties by engaging consumers in a complex multi-sensorial exchange that engages and

immerses them in a narrative that humanizes the brand (Hollenbeck et al., 2008). Given the relative paucity of existing literature that explores the dynamism and evolution of brands and branding practices (Avery et al., 2010), this research sheds light on a novel and potentially deeply engaging branding practice. Brand backstories construct multi-sensorially heightened brand experiences that likely play an increasingly important role in companies' branding strategies and in consumers' brand relationships.

2.11 Appendix

Appendix A



Appendix B



Appendix C



Appendix D



Appendix E



Appendix F



Appendix G



Appendix H



Appendix I



Appendix J



CHAPTER 3: Nurturing Intimate Brand Bonds by Offering Consumers a Brand Backstory: A
Managerial Inquiry

Tastiest Tour in Town! - There's no fake machinery or actors - it's the REAL factory, the REAL workers, and the REAL process Herr's® has perfected to make their products taste REALLY great. Our tour is a first hand learning experience that includes visual methods that's sure to impress children and adults alike. You'll never forget the little-known facts like what makes a great chipping potato, and how tortilla chips get their seasoning.

- *Herr's Snack Factory Tour*

Sovereign consumers are no longer willing to accept the stage show of traditional branding (Holt, 2002). Instead, “they now feel that they have been granted the authority to walk backstage to see what the wizard is doing behind the scrim and to make sure that his character is consistent with what is presented onstage” (Holt, 2002, p. 86). As the opening statement from the *Herr's Snack Factory Tour* illustrates, brand managers are increasingly providing consumers opportunities to experience their brand's backstory: through exhibitivive mediums that showcase esoteric information about the brand.

The brand backstory offers consumers a material environment consumptionscape (Diamond et al., 2009, p. 122) that combines facets of entertainment and retail brand experience such as the rare opportunity to see *Harley Davidson* motorcycles assembled and tested at the factory in York, PA; or to witness beyond what was not captured on camera at the *Warner Bros. Studio Tour London – The Making of Harry Potter* in Leavesden, UK. Unlike other brand consumptionscapes such as flagship or themed brandstores (Kozinets et al., 2002), the brand backstory is not designed to sell. Brand backstories are concentrated brand experiences that specifically feature how a brand is created, revealing rare and exclusive esoteric brand information to the consumer and a seemingly transparent look into the backstage of the brand (Narsey & Russell, 2013). Thus the domain of the brand backstory is unique in its sole purpose to showcase the brand in a manner that emphasizes not only the

limited or special value of the brand information (referred to as esoteric information) provided, but also the *transparency* of the brand.

In what may be termed the crisis of representation, the creation of brand meaning is not limited to brand management practitioners. Consumers, bloggers, and entertainment and news media are among the voices heard within a brand's narrative, and, with the growing consumer skepticism challenging the truthfulness of brand practitioners, these alternative narratives may present a counter or paradoxical narrative (Klein, 1999), and even disparage the reputation of the brand and its image (Thompson, Rindfleisch & Arsel, 2006). Challenged with the multiplicity of voices and narratives surrounding brands, brand practitioners must seek ways to re-establish a transparent brand image. One way to facilitate an intimate connection with consumers may be through employing a branding strategy involving the crafting of an attachment module; inviting consumers in a seemingly transparent and exclusive brand environment where they can evaluate or re-evaluate their brand-related lives and identity projects (Holt, 2002) hence fostering empathetic consumer–brand linkages.

There is rich branding literature documenting consumers' experience of brands that employ emotional-branding strategies focused on how concentrated brand experiences forge strong consumer attachments (Dolbec & Chebat, 2013). However we know less about how brand managers can use material environments (Diamond et al., 2009, p. 122) as sites to deepen consumers' bonds with their brands, and how brand assets can be transformed into cultural capital to provide this significance or connection with the consumer. Exhibit showcase such as the brand backstory may serve as such consumer attachment-module sites, for two reasons: (1) the apparent willingness to share esoteric information from the brand inherently initiates a sense of intimacy with the consumer; and (2) the apparent processes of revelation to the consumer is one that generates multiple points of sensorial, mental and emotional stimulation that may re-enchant (Dion & Arnould, 2011) or immerse the consumer

further into the brand. Thus, this research explores the strategies brand practitioners employ to craft attachment module sites through a brand backstory. Specifically: how do brand practitioners forge and develop meaningful interactions with consumers to mobilize consumers and ignite intimacy in their brand interactions? Ultimately the research reveals the positional advantages that brand management practitioners may achieve by offering backstories to their consumers.

The Brand Backstory

The core of the brand backstory construct lies in its facility to privilege consumers with esoteric knowledge; that is rare and exclusive information regarding the behind-the-scenes or backstage of a brand. Brand backstories manifested through material environments such as special tours or museum exhibits (Hollenbeck, Peters & Zinkhan, 2008) rely on spatial and temporal elements and often unfold in a sequential four-stage experience that takes the consumer through the stages of initiation, reveal, exclusive access and extended access (see Narsey & Russell, 2013). The brand backstory includes information regarding the brand biography (Avery, Paharia, Keinan, & Schor, 2010), the history of the brand, and the creation of tangible consumable products or services, such as how they are manufactured or developed, as well as intangible elements, such as the brand's image or philosophy. Although multiple creators may be involved in constructing the brand backstory, the backstory's narrative usually features a unified voice of the creator/s or producer/s of the brand.

The brand backstory material environment lies in a liminal zone between the retailscape, designed primarily to sell, and the entertainmentscape, designed primarily to entertain. Research to date provides guidance on how consumer-centric marketing experiences are constructed (Baines et al, 2008; Brown & Sherry, 2003; Mitchell & Mitchell, 2001a, 2001b; Michell & Orwig, 2002; Sherry, 1998; van Marrewijk & Broos, 2012)

however little is known regarding practitioners' strategies for crafting the brand backstory. Such an exploration could provide a holistic understanding of how marketing brandscapes have the ability to immerse and re-enchant consumers towards the brand (Dion & Arnould, 2011; Thompson et al., 2006).

3.1 Experiential Consumptionscapes

Experience, defined as “the act of living through and observation of events” (Hoch, 2002, p. 448), illuminates the corporeal or embodiment aspects of the noun (Joy & Sherry, 2003). Indeed the growing literature on experiential consumptionscapes (Venkatramen & Nelson, 2008) has established that consumers are not passive in their interactions within these domains (Sherry, 1998; Kozinets et al., 2004). Themed environments (Gottdiener, 1997) such as the *Nike Town*, *ESPN Zone*, or *American Girl Place* (Diamond et al., 2009; Kozinets et al., 2004; Kozinets et al., 2002; Sherry et al., 2001) are carefully constructed “theatres of consumption” (Carù & Cova, 2007, p. 7) that deliver multi-sensorial stimulation and ultimately encourage purchase at these sites. These material consumptionscapes facilitate active consumer participation to immerse the consumer within the overarching brand narrative, enabling stronger consumer-brand connections (Diamond et al., 2009; Ponsonby-McCabe & Boyle, 2006; Sherry et al., 2001).

Despite the growing body of research on consumptionscapes, few studies have explored those designed primarily to nurture the consumer-brand bond through a concentrated brand experience. An exception is Hollenbeck and colleagues' (2008) exploration of the brand museum, which they define through three features “(a) historical linkages; (b) museum-like qualities (e.g., galleries, exhibits, paid admission); and (c) an education-based mission” (p. 336). The ‘retail mission’ of brand museums is to “document,

study, and interpret the brand over time” (Hollenbeck et al., 2008, p. 336), solely providing consumers with an *educational* brand experience as opposed to themed retail environments designed to sell branded products through entertainment or the creation of retail spectacles (Kozinets et al., 2004). Hollenbeck and colleagues (2008) identify a variety of brand meanings created for consumers within the brand museum. For instance, they note that, as material brand environments become more spectacular, that is, more multi-sensorial and encourage interaction and participatory engagement, consumers are able to create and define their self-concept from these experiences and subsequently extend the meaning of the brand.

Notwithstanding these initial insights into the potential role of brand museums, we still know little about the ways in which brand practitioners design interactions between consumers and the brand in these environments to ultimately increase the brand’s value. Concentrated brand experiences, such as those offered in flagship brandstores, deepen attachments with the brand due to greater anchoring points, or experiential offerings that sensorially, physically, emotionally, and intellectually facilitate powerful brand experiences (Dolbec & Chebat, 2013). Given that brand backstories provide a cocooned brand experience that also emphasize corporeal experiences through the marvel of the ‘making of’ or ‘behind-the-scenes’ at the core of the brand, they may provide consumers with not simply an intense brand experience, but may initiate an *intimate* brand experience. Privileged access to the backstage may generate a sense of homeyness as the consumer becomes immersed within a secure thematized spatial enclave (Carù & Cova, 2006; Debenedetti, Opewal & Arsel, 2014).

3.2 Intimacy

A central, defining tenet of intimate relationships is the “...presence of confiding interactions between partners” (Prager, 1995, p. 1). Intimacy is fueled by the process of self-

disclosure (Waring, Tillman, Frelick, Russell, & Weisz, 1980), a communication characteristic referring to the ‘...capacity and willingness to share thoughts and feelings that reveal the innermost aspects of the self ordinarily hidden from view’ (Stern, 1997, p. 10). The extant interpersonal relationship literature differentiates between two dimensions of intimacy: intimate interactions and intimate relationships; the former conceptualized as a moment-to-moment outcome of a process reflecting movement and the latter reflecting a state or end product of a relationship (Laurenceau, Barrett & Pietromonaco, 1998). Whereas intimate relationships are defined by the anticipation of enduring future intimate contact between individuals, intimate interactions are dyadic communicative exchanges that may be viewed as comparatively sporadic in nature (Prager, 1997). Specifically, intimate interactions are those “in which partners share personal, private material; feel positively about each other and themselves; and perceive a mutual understanding between them” (Prager, 1997, p. 22). Historically, conceptions of intimate interactions are diverse, focusing on either intimate behaviors exclusively (such as self-disclosure) or intimate experiences (such as the qualities or components of intimate interactions). A review of existing conceptions of intimacy as a process and intimate interactions from canonical social-psychology literature (Lowenthal & Haven, 1968; Prager, 1997; Reis & Shaver, 1988) clearly points to self-disclosure and the subsequent responsive nature of the intimate interactions, i.e. a level of responsiveness within the relationship. These are discussed in turn.

Self-Disclosure.

For intimacy to develop, self-disclosure is required whereby an individual communicates information that is revealing and relevant to another individual (Reis & Shaver, 1988). The regulation of disclosure or the extent to which one maintains control over the exchange of information depends on the interpersonal boundary (i.e. the level of closeness or privacy) one wishes to maintain with another (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977). The

regulation of interpersonal boundaries affects the kinds of relationships an individual maintains with others, such as friendships or within power relationships (Derlega & Chaikin, 1977).

Omarzu (2000) outlines a disclosure decision model that details the variability that occurs in content, depth, breadth, and duration of self-disclosure according to the cognitive process undertaken in disclosing or simply: what and how to disclose. In this model, disclosure is determinant upon the function or goals of the discloser, which may be one of five: self-expression, self-clarification, social validation, relationship development, and social control (Derlega & Grzelak, 1979). The model proposes that when relationship development –and ultimately intimacy- is the discloser’s goal, the discloser evaluates subjective utility (i.e. the reward) of the disclosure over subjective risk. Thus, behavior in the disclosure or the overall disclosure strategy reflects this in how much, how intimately, and how broadly information is disclosed. Berg and Archer (1982) further argue that the extent of the revelation of intimate facts in self-disclosure depends on characteristics within Altman and Taylor’s (1973) personality conceptualizations. It is understood that highly intimate disclosure reveals more about self-concepts of the individual over biographical characteristics; provides self-information that is scarce, rare or less visible and more unique; displays vulnerabilities i.e. real or perceived inadequacies; and lastly, may be considered socially undesirable by a reference group (Berg & Archer, 1982). To achieve a level of intimacy, disclosures focus on successfully achieving the goal. Thus the breadth of disclosure is reduced in favor of maximizing the duration and quantity of the disclosure (Omarzu, 2000). Although disclosure is fundamentally a dyadic interaction, the strength of Omarzu’s (2000) disclosure decision model lies in delineating between the individual processing that occurs in revealing and the responsiveness goals inherent within self-disclosure, to which we turn next.

Disclosure Responsiveness.

Responsiveness holds that participants in interactions attempt “to be responsive to one another and that the form such responsiveness takes will be determined by the nature of a particular interaction (e.g., its structure, the motives of participants, and what has previously transpired)” (Berg & Archer 1980, p. 510). Laurenceau and colleagues (1998) offer a succinct summary of how self-disclosure affects the level of responsiveness within an intimate interaction: intimacy develops “through a dynamic process whereby an individual discloses personal information, thoughts, and feelings to a partner; receives a response from the partner; and interprets that response as understanding, validating, and caring” (p. 1238).

Whilst considerable variability exists in the conceptualization of intimate interactions and of intimacy as a process within the extant literature (Laurenceau et al., 1998), a key focus in this literature is on the receiving individual’s perceptions that result from self-disclosure, such as feeling understood, accepted, and cared for. We distinguish three common threads that define the key aspects of responsive interactions within intimate self-disclosure derived from Reis and Shaver (1988), namely trust, responsiveness, and validation. The interaction becomes catalyzed or responsive after self-disclosure as the receiver responds with an understanding that the disclosure revealed is personal, relevant to the receiver and specifically intended for the receiver. When this happens, the disclosure is seen to employ trust, be responsive and show validation for the receiving individual. As the receiver feels understood, accepted and cared for by the discloser, an interaction is sparked, and as these interactions repeat over time, intimate relationships develop (Reis & Shaver, 1988). Focusing on feelings imparted in self-disclosure over feelings felt by the receiver enables a more nuanced understanding of how exactly disclosure may catalyze intimacy.

Intimacy within the Consumer-Brand Relationship.

Much existing consumer-brand relationship literature treats intimacy as a unidimensional construct, whereby the presence of behaviors such as commitment or

empathy from either the brand or the consumer, independent from each other, signals intimacy or an intimate consumer-brand relationship. As such, intimacy is conceptualized as an indicator of relationship strength and depth (Aaker, Fournier, & Brasel, 2004; Fournier, 1994, 1998), and also a strategy employed in advertising to establish relationships with the consumer (Stern, 1997).

Where a consumer-centric perspective is taken, antecedents of strong consumer-brand relationships are consumers' perceived depth of understanding the brand and the perceived depth of understanding of the consumer from the brand (Aaker et al., 2004; Fournier, 1998), with deep levels of consumer-brand intimacy revealed by consumers' elaborate knowledge structures surrounding brands. In parallel, research on attempts to establish intimacy within the consumer-brand relationship emphasizes the role of intimacy as a salient attribute that may contribute to customer loyalty (Yim, Tse & Chan, 2008). Stern's (1997) conception of attributes of intimacy within advertising brings nuances in the consumer-brand relationship construct and the manner in which the construct manifests in advertising messages. Her mapping of key attributes of intimacy, namely communication, caring, commitment, comfort and conflict resolution, onto depictions in advertising also illustrates the cyclical nature of the intimate relationship. But, while the presence of intimacy attributes in advertising is interpreted as a demonstration of the emphasis on the construct in advertising, Stern (1997) also notes that the mere presence of these attributes do not manifest an interaction within the consumer-brand relationship nor an attempt from the brand to enact an interaction. Thus research to date falls short in offering a holistic view of intimacy, where intimacy is regarded as a catalyzing construct in which interactions between the consumer and the brand are considered. In particular, we note that there is little guidance provided regarding how brand practitioners may craft strategies to promote interactions between the consumer and the brand that lead to intimacy.

3.3 Brand Transparency and Exclusivity

Beyond cultivating consumers' personal involvement through learning; manufacturing plant tours, company museums and visitor centers may also mobilize consumers to engage in interactions with the brand (Mitchell & Orwig, 2002). The transparency and exclusivity that these brands showcase and promote lend to a fertile environment for interaction exchanges that may lead to intimacy. As consumers reciprocate feelings of empathy in comprehending the disclosure revealed in the brand backstory as rare and exclusive, the brand backstory enables dyadic interactions (Mitchell & Orwig, 2002). Extending this notion, Debenedetti et al. (2014) suggest that commercial sites where a porous boundary is created between the commercial and private domain, such as the brand backstory, may acquire qualities of 'homeyness'. Specifically, the authors demonstrate how 'homeyness' enables commercial settings to manifest feelings of familiarity that encourage dyadic responses such as consumer engagement (Debenedetti et al., 2014). Trauer and Ryan (2005) also suggest that "cocooned spaces" promote relational depth and the development of intimacy as a result of concentrated and transparent disclosures that only become apparent to visitors when divulged from the guidance of 'locals', 'experts' or 'insiders'. Thus we see the potential for intimate familiarity or esoteric knowledge within commercial spaces to enhance the homeyness of a consumptionscape (Debenedetti et al., 2014), and facilitate participatory interactions from the consumer.

3.4 Participatory Interactions

Carefully crafted brand backstories may be considered participatory institutions where the brand's mission and core values are furthered whilst simultaneously meeting consumers'

expectations for active engagement (Simon, 2010). Participatory institutions are characterized by their ability to shape the experience within through encouraging fluid participatory interactions that have the potential to fuel intimacy. Contemporary learning theories refer to the idea of designing for interactivity as “instructional scaffolding” (Hein, 2002), where material provides support and guidance to allow participant self-expression. Participatory experiences that are “scaffolded” rather than prescribed or open ended enable participants to feel comfortable in engaging. Thus achieving participatory interactions are often heralded as the zenith goal for practitioners such as museum directors who craft participatory experiences (Simon, 2010). Scaffolded experiences are constructed so ideas and tasks are simplified to encourage the learner toward “successful experiences with that idea or task” (Wolf & Wood, 2012, p. 34). Wolf and Wood (2012) use the example of *The Power of Children: Making a Difference* exhibit at *The Children’s Museum of Indianapolis* to illustrate scaffolded participatory experiences. To deliver the complex themes and messages of prejudice and intolerance to young children, the exhibit relies on simple activities such as the Kindness Tree in which “leaves” on a magnetic tree are illustrated with acts of kindness. The activity encourages physical engagement of the child whilst parents assist the scaffolded experience by reading the leaves and providing salient contextual background in relating the acts of kindness to the child.

It is now well established within consumer research that consumers are active within the process of consumption commonly interpreting interactive consumer experiences as the act of engaging (Brodie, Ilic, Juric, & Hollebeek, 2013; Lusch & Vargo, 2010). Defined as highly interactive and experiential, brand engagement is comprised of numerous sub-processes: learning, sharing, advocating, socializing and co-developing (Brodie et al., 2013). These sub-processes may be thought of as participatory interactions that enable consumer brand engagement and ultimately strengthen the consumer-brand relationship as a result of

consumer loyalty and satisfaction, empowerment, connection and emotional bonding, trust and commitment (Brodie et al., 2013). Indeed, research has recognized that emotional attachments with the brand develop as a result of an ‘enduring involvement’ (Trauer & Ryan, 2005) from the participation of the consumer. To encourage diverse forms of participatory interactions that may develop into intimate participatory interactions, experiences must not only be valuable to the consumer but also compelling.

3.5 Research Questions

Existing research makes clear that experiential consumptionscapes such as touristic environments (Mitchell & Orwig, 2002) may facilitate intimate relationships through participation (Truer & Ryan, 2005) and that participatory interactions fuel consumer engagement and have the potential to develop into emotional attachments and intimacy (Debenedetti et al., 2014). Building on this foundational research, this paper explores brand practitioners’ strategies for crafting brand backstories to investigate whether and how offering consumers access to the brand backstory, a concentrated, behind-the-scenes attachment module, ignites participatory interactions between consumers and their brand that may potentially lead to intimacy. The overall objective of this research is to uncover how the carefully crafted brand backstory environment is shaped into a fertile space for intimacy development. More specifically we ask:

1. What goals do brand practitioners have when offerings consumers brand backstories?
2. What strategies do brand practitioners implement to:
 - a. engage the consumer within the brand backstory?

- b. manifest a dialog between the consumer and brand within the brand backstory?
- c. ensure enduring involvement from the consumer within the brand backstory?

3.6 Methodology

To document the goals and strategies of brand backstory practitioners, a strategic set of brands were selected, namely *Outrageous Fortune*, a New Zealand media brand, *Herr's Snack Food Inc*, an American snack food brand, and the *Girl Scouts of the USA*, an American nonprofit brand. These brands all offer backstories that adhere to the definition of brand backstories offered in material environments, revealing rare and exclusive brand knowledge. Furthermore, brand backstory practitioners approached for this project were receptive, available and willing to share their views and insights on the backstory as well as provide access to historical documents such as backstory creation manifestos or documentation describing the project scope of the brand backstories.

Context

Outrageous Fortune (OF) was New Zealand's longest-running television drama. Its success was evident by the many awards won for its writing and acting as well as the large domestic and international audience as a result of being sold to networks in over eight countries. Much media attention attributes the program's success not only to the exceptional writing and acting showcased but also the cultural resonance of its content, enabling a connection between fiction and everyday New Zealand life (Philpott, 2010). The *OF* backstory took the shape of a museum exhibit held at the national *Auckland War Memorial Museum* in Auckland, New Zealand. The exhibit was proposed by the program's production company to the *Auckland War Memorial Museum* which, in collaboration with the production

company and an external exhibit company, carried out all development and actual creation of the exhibit. The exhibit was open to the public for six months, from December 2010 to April 2011. It delved into the “behind-the-scenes” of the television series by featuring the inspirations that sparked the writers, brainstorming notes for each episode, a display of costumes and props, expressionistic installations that psychiatrically dissected the personalities of the main characters, and most notably an erected stage set from the television program in which consumers were able to walk and interact in.

Herr's Snack Food Inc. (Herr's) produces American snack food products such as potato chips, pretzels, tortilla chips, popcorn, cheese curls and onion rings. Sold in over 28 states in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States, the brand is most noted for its locality, on the Eastern seaboard, as well as for producing distinctively untraditional flavored snack food products such as Old Bay seasoning, horseradish and baby back ribs. Open year round, the *Herr's* brand backstory experience is a factory tour of the company's snack factory plant in Nottingham, Pennsylvania. Created in 1989 by a senior employee, the free tour offers a “behind-the-scenes” look into the history of the brand in a theatre quality short film as well as a guide-led tour of the factory facilities, showing consumers the entire process involved in the creation of *Herr's* snack foods right from ingredient sourcing to production and packaging.

The *Girl Scouts of the USA (GSUSA)* is a non-profit youth organization designed to empower and teach American girls values such as confidence and citizenship through activities such as camping and community service. Founded in 1912, the brand is noted for its strong culture of community building. *GSUSA* offers the backstory behind the national brand at the company's headquarters in Manhattan, New York, in the form of guide-led tour of the offices of the CEO, the national archives and a small permanent exhibit. Although group tours must be scheduled, visitor walk-ins are welcome to experience the exhibit that documents and displays significant artifacts and moments in the history of the brand on a

national level. On the tour, consumers gain a thorough understanding of the inception of Girl Scouting, its development throughout the eras, the significance of the national non-profit in society today, as well as the role of the CEO in running a national non-profit company.

The selected brands vary in product category (media brand, fast moving consumer good brand and nonprofit organization), in the type of spatial brand backstory on offer (museum exhibit, factory tour and corporate headquarter exhibit), in the duration (one time event and ongoing) and location of the backstory (offsite museum and brand headquarters) as well as in the number and type of backstory creators involved in the creation of the brand backstory (multiple creators all not necessarily associated with the brand directly vs. a sole creator employed by the brand).

Method

The sampling frame recognizes that brand backstories, which feature the authorial voice of the producer/s or creator/s of the brand (Stern, 1994) who determine the depth or verisimilitude of information revealed therein, are usually crafted by multiple authors: the company that owns the brand and provides the legal and financial responsibility for the content, and sometimes a creative agent in charge of the design of the actual brand backstory. Where the creative responsibilities are carried out by a separate entity from the entity holding legal and financial responsibilities, we can distinguish the sponsor(s) from the author(s) of the brand backstory. Both sponsor and author are outside voices as they reside outside the crafted text (Stern, 1994). However, authors of the brand backstory may exist within the crafted text as well. For example, tour guides sometimes assist and narrate the brand backstory, taking on the “persona” role (Stern, 1994). Although multiple authors exist and recognizing that indeed consumers may also be regarded as authors, this research addresses the managerial perspective and focuses on the brand backstory text as authored and created by the company that owns the brand and/or representatives of the brand.

In-depth qualitative interviews were carried out with those with responsibilities in the manifestation or now maintenance of the brand backstory. In all, interviews were carried out with six practitioners for *OF*, the sole creator for *Herr's* and four practitioners for *GSUSA* (see detailed sample in Table 1, p. 89). Interviews were conducted at the backstory site to enable the interviewing researcher to gain first hand observations and an applied experience as a simulated consumer of the multisensorial brand backstory environments discussed in the interviews. These first hand observations were recorded as data through handwritten notes and supplemented the interviews carried out. The interviewing researcher visited each backstory site on multiple occasions for lengthy periods of time. Where practitioners were available, follow up interviews were suggested by the interviewing researcher and conducted with three *OF* backstory practitioners in a group interview and one *GSUSA* backstory practitioner. Interviews lasted between 33 and 125 minutes, centering on the experiences of the creators in creating or maintaining the brand backstory, the process involved in the creation and maintenance, the goals and aims of the backstory during and after creation, the type of information revealed and not revealed in the backstory and general opinions on consumer reactions to the backstory.

The interview transcript data were first ideographically analyzed, noting the relationships between codes and then nomothetically across interviews and data sources (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Mick & Buhl, 1992; Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989). A refinement of ideas and themes was achieved by way of the constant comparative method whereby data were compared to other sections that contained similar incidents and themes, as well as contrasted with other sections of data with differing themes (Goulding, 2002).

3.7 Strategies for Intimacy Development within the Brand Backstory

Crafting the Brand Backstory Experience for Intimate Interactions

The in-depth interviews uncover three process strategies for how brand practitioners initiate the development of intimacy within the backstory. The findings reveal that participatory interactions such as consumer engagement and dialog are triggered via: (1) Sensitization; (2) Consignment; and (3) Designation. The manner in which these mutually exclusive strategies map onto trust, responsiveness, and validation- the defining key aspects of responsive interactions within intimate self-disclosure (Berg & Archer, 1980; Reis & Shaver, 1988)- is discussed in turn. These three defining aspects provide a lens through which we explain how brand practitioners construct the backstory to induce interactions that acknowledge understanding from the receiver that the intimate disclosure revealed is personal, relevant to the receiver and specifically intended for the receiver (Reis & Shaver, 1988).

Sensitization

Creators of brand backstories discuss the strategy of concealing or not revealing information through a focus on paring down the mechanics or technical details behind the creation of aspects of the brand. By channeling the focus of the brand backstory, creators seek to efficiently direct consumer attention towards specific brand initiatives, sensitizing information in the process and heightening sensorial stimulation for consumers. For *OF*, the mandate of the backstory was to move beyond retelling narratives and instead create fresh narratives such as delving into the connections between the series and New Zealand culture. Although the program won many awards for its technical construction, it was noted within the media for its widespread appeal due to its accurate representation and reflection of New Zealand culture (Philpott, 2010). Creators of the *OF* backstory realized the consumer-brand connection characterized by strong emotional connections (Fournier, 1998) over and above

an appreciation for the mechanics or functionality of the program. They emphasized, “We didn’t just want to represent the series, we wanted to unpack those characters and take them out of ‘*Outrageous*’ and kind of look at them, why were they so cool” (OF2). And further: “But we didn’t show any of the camera work, we didn’t show anything about lighting because those are technical issues. We wanted to get to the things that communicated the characters and therefore the underlying successes of the show I guess” (OF3). Similarly, the *Herr’s* brand backstory creator admits concealing information such as details about new products through the limited script given to tour guides, asserting “...there is a script and they know what they’re allowed to tell”(HI). The tour creator however describes the tour experience as one of learning:

“They are learning, they probably think they are but they're not learning things they need to know to make that chip. They don’t know the temperature of the oil, they don’t, they might know the variety, they're hearing the variety of potatoes that we use. But they don’t know to what point they put that chip to get the moisture out, they're secrets that they just don’t know. And they couldn’t duplicate it, so no, we’re not giving any secrets out. We’re giving them what any other company, any tour any moment if they ask the same questions they could find the answers”(HI).

Here the *Herr’s* brand backstory creator maintains that although consumers are offered an experience characterized by learning, the backstory is crafted in such a manner that duplication of the *Herr’s* products is made impossible. More specifically, this strategy enables the brand to maintain trade secrets whilst also seemingly satisfying consumers’ desire and curiosity to experience the reveal and esoteric information within the brand backstory. Although the technical details such as the development of new products or the specific sources of raw materials are not discussed on the tour, the importance of the information shown to consumers is crafted to seem esoteric to the brand by the creator implementing rules

such as ‘no touching of artifacts’ in the *OF* exhibit or ‘no photography’ on the *Herr*’s tour. This process is similar to how Kates (2004) describes brands achieving legitimacy by avoiding the appearance of “commercial contamination” (p. 462) where the brand disassociates or aims to remove associations from the “profane spheres of commerce and profit seeking” (Thompson et al., 2006, p. 53). Through sensitization, the significance of information within the brand backstory is amplified as the brands emphasize the protection of information to circumvent possible commercial reproduction. The *Herr*’s tour creator explains,

“So we used to take pictures in the factory; we stopped taking pictures. Not that there’s a lot that’s different but some of it you don’t want to share with your competitors. So what we do is the tour script that they have, the tour guides learn the information we want them to have- they don’t know all the secrets. And now we will say there’s flour, water, yeast, we don’t give the amounts” (*HI*).

The forbidding of reproduction functionally protects the sacred nature of the information as consumers are unable to share information learnt. Moreover, this tactic deems the information as important to the brand. Thus combining the seemingly transparent information with a cloaked atmosphere generates veiled transparency: giving consumers a sense of exposure that in reality is fabricated. However, over and above offering the simplistic distillation of the processes behind the brand, the strategy also involves extracting tangible kernels of brand information that highlight the successes of the brand, thus dually heightening the importance of the offered information and creating veils of transparency that appear to provide deeper insights into the brand. The creator of the *Herr*’s factory tour explains how the emphasis on the recycling program at the company is impressive and “...shows that we are good stewards of our money” focused on a type of conscious capitalism that illustrate the brand’s commitment to social responsibility; and over and above: a subscription to tenets within an

emotional branding strategy. Much in the way Thompson et al. (2006) discuss emotional branding strategies that brands may use to leverage and overcome stigmatization from consumers, in skewing the portrayal of capitalist business practices to garner reactions of reverence, the brand redirects attention towards the successes and achievements of the company. The *Herr's* backstory creator goes on to say,

“People come through here and they have no idea how much it takes to make potato chip or how much it takes to make a pretzel. So they go through and they see it all and they understand, or have a better understanding. So why does it cost \$3.99 for a bag of potato chips? Because in their mind well you could buy a whole bag of potatoes and you ought to be able to get 5 pounds of potato chips out of it. But in reality it takes 4 pounds of potatoes to make 1 pounds of chips, so you've already lost 2 pounds and then you have to pay for packaging, and you have to pay the labor to do it. So they don't get it, until they go on the tour and then they walk around saying, oh I had no idea. Now I understand. And that's clearly what you want to do”(H1).

As a non-profit organization, a sense of information transparency is essential to the *GSUSA* brand and exhibiting its backstory fits within its ultimate mission of honoring heritage to enable future growth and building the national brand as a cohesive community of *Girl Scouts* (*Girl Scouts of the USA*, 1986). One of the directors of the organization explains this as the reasoning behind showcasing the executive offices on tour: “Because it's almost like we're like the Pentagon when it comes to *Girl Scouts*. We're the headquarters, we're the national headquarters and it doesn't get any higher than this. So we feel that girls are VIPs: they're VIPs, we all exist to serve them” (*GS3*). Although providing a seemingly fully transparent brand backstory takes precedence, the director of the exhibit and tour admits “It's not even all encompassing” (*GS1*) and whilst the backstory focuses on providing an authenticating (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; MacCannell, 1973; Thompson et al., 2006) experience for

visitors already in the Girl Scouting communities, much focus remains on emphasizing common consumer misinformation or myth debunking. The Director of the *GSUSA* National Historic Preservation Center and liaison director of the exhibit and tour gives one such example:

“People are like oh, *Girl Scouts* have the first, what is it, recipe for S’mores, they invented S’mores. I can’t tell you that. I can tell you that we have the first known printing of what a S’more was but I don’t know that it didn’t exist before that. I can’t tell you that. Unless at the time there was some other sort of secondary proof or news or whatever it might be in print, in multiple sources, that other people were saying the same thing, you know. But you can’t prove that” (*GSI*).

Much like *Herr*’s, rather than focusing on capitalist business practices such as the revenue generating initiative of *Girl Scout* cookies, the *GSUSA* backstory is a vehicle that illuminates and spotlights the brand’s role in society as an influential non-profit.

Ultimately, the process in which brand information is sensitized provides consumers a perception of transparency through the generation of veiled disclosure. As a result, a heightened sense of importance or aura is imbued to the information that is “revealed”. In doing so, brands ultimately not only define boundaries of knowledge on what is made known or “revealed” but sensitization also enables a valancing on the boundaries of knowledge thus limiting breadth but providing a seeming level of depth to the information disclosed (Omarzu, 2002). As a result, this strategy enables consumers to feel part of an enchanted private sphere (Carù & Cova, 2007; Dion & Arnould, 2011; Kozinets et al, 2002). As consumers experience the backstory, the brand offers its faith to them: entrusting consumers with sensitized information provides the impetus for them to reciprocate through a dyadic intimate interaction. Wortman, Adesman, Herman and Greenberg (1976) suggest that when

individuals perceive they have been personally selected for intimate disclosure, they feel trusted and liked and are more likely to evaluate the discloser favorably, thus increasing the potential for reciprocal interaction. Through attribution, the disclosed information offers consumers the opportunity to feel more than just the entrustment from the brand but over and above, a feeling of being appreciated and accepted by the brand. Promoting these feelings within consumers through the sensitization strategy enacts the development of autonomy and bonding within consumers, ultimately strengthening consumer-brand bonds (Thomson, 2006).

Consignment

The strategy of consignment seeks to actively construct knowledge in the minds of consumers, enabling ownership over the information gained through the brand backstory. Hein (2002) suggests that learning and thus meaningful and profound experiences in exhibits are best facilitated in constructivist environments that promote physical, social and intellectual accessibility. Creators employ the consignment strategy with the aims of engaging consumers to immerse them in the backstory rather than simply capturing their attention. Engaging consumers through exhibit areas was seen as an especially important consideration for the creators of the *OF* exhibit. Circumventing the stereotype of the sterile museum full of “dusty old things” (*OF2*) was imperative, as one of the *OF* creators of the exhibit explains:

“When [the producers of the television show] talked to us first, what was really clear was that they wanted to install *Outrageous Fortune* as a kind of cultural icon. And, they wanted to make a statement about that, and they saw an exhibit as the perfect way to do that. And I’m sure they thought a lot about this, this is where on the one hand it’s kind of frustrating for museums because we are seen as a place of capturing,

and at that very moment of capturing or sort of nullifying the liveliness, aliveness of these things” (*OF2*).

Thus it was important for the exhibit creators to create harmony in consumer behavior patterns and in the type of information and artifacts about the program to which they had access from the television program’s production company. Revealed information was thus strategically organized and ordered to promote this revelation process. The creators of the exhibit first chose to reveal some backstory information through captured mediums where consumers read or observed content such as displaying copies of the program’s scripts (see Appendix A, p. 90 for example). Gradually the exhibit would “transmogrify” (term used by creator *OF2*) or transmute consumers back into the brand’s fictional narrative world through collaborative formats such as the walk-through living room set that required greater interactivity and mental stimulation from consumers (see Appendix B, p. 90 for example).

The creator of the exhibit explains this strategy here,

“So, by that stage, we were sort of feeling a bit like you may be working on the show and you’re behind the scenes, and understanding a bit about it. And then I remember thinking so much about this, I really wanted that little corridor piece to feel as though you were being transformed into it” (*OF2*).

To further immerse consumers into the narrative of the brand, the creators sought to install exhibit features that required interpretation and physical engagement from consumers, such as interactive quiz LCD screens and exhibit pieces that consumers were able to physically explore. This process reflects the strategy of interpretive inquisitive learning (Davidson, Heald & Hein, 1991; Hein, 2002) that “...encouraged visitors to ask questions about how translated reality or fantasy version of Auckland’s identity can in turn influence and contribute to our understanding of ourselves, and wider New Zealand culture” (*OF1*). By

interpreting and translating brand backstory information into introspective questions for consumers, the creators directed attention away from the revelation process itself, and focused consumers not only on the narrative of the backstory but also their relationship with the brand, seeking to stimulate a sense of ownership over the brand. Further to the interactive areas, the exhibit featured the living room set from the television program in which consumers were able to walk and also sit in, revealing and immersing consumers simultaneously as a creator explains: “So in a way that pulled the whole thing together because it was both, walk onto the set and you have a feeling of what it was like to actually be making the television program. Walk onto the set and feel as though you’re part of the series, and you’re immersed in the series” (OF2). The “hands-on” components of the exhibit sought to engage and immerse consumers particularly after viewing more confrontational elements of the backstory such as the revelation of art department props and methods involved in hair and make-up. The formative areas of the exhibit where brand processes such as the constructions within hair and makeup were revealed, laid bare the artifices for consumers to negotiate. These elements were offered early on in the exhibit and did not seek for consumer interpretation, thus these elements may have been viewed as challenging or aggressive to consumers in revealing the artifices of the brand without any moderating preparation for the subsequent revelation.

In discussions of the construction of the *Herr’s* factory tour, the creator stressed how the company differentiates itself from its competitors and other factory tours through its emphasis on consignment. The creator explains that the tour engages and allows for consumer interpretation throughout:

“In this area, in the mid-Atlantic States, potato chips are probably the number one snack food. And in this area there’s about 20 competitors so you have an edge. There’s people that do tours, there’s other companies but they don’t have guided

tours. We put the expense of having a tour guide around here. That makes us different than everyone else” (*HI*).

Throughout the tour, guides solicit any ad-hoc questions as they arise. The live performance in which there is the presence of an audience is said to offer a complete sense of access to content, enabling full engagement and direct exchange of the content thus it may be viewed as authentic (Gracyk, 1997). The creator emphasizes that revealing backstory information through a live tour is important in authenticating consumers’ experience (Grayson & Martinec, 1997) of visiting a live factory tour as opposed to a recording that provides a reproduction or representation, asserting:

“[Consumers] are allowed to sample, they see all these things made but when we come back we say ‘Would you like to try say a buffalo or blue cheese curl?’ Well they may never have thought to try that. We open up a bag and then we try it. We try warm potato chips out on the factory floor, that’s the other difference from other tours. We actually give them warm chips to eat and they hear that it took 3 minutes to make, and this is the warmest potato chip they will ever eat...they never forget that” (*HI*).

GSUSA on the other hand relies on the consignment strategy to ensure immersion and overcome “talking head syndrome” (*GSI*). To avoid a domineering voice within the tour, consumers are invited to engage in the tour and exhibit through questions and requests that evoke thought processing of the information conveyed. The director of the exhibit and tour explains:

“You interpret [brand information] to greater meaning, you ask them questions so that they learn. So it’s not a talking head, it’s not that you’re in a lecture. It’s that you’re involving them and you’re getting them to give you answers. And you guide them

with the way you answer questions, you give them hints and things like that. So they're engaged and they're involved and they're more likely to remember what they've learned past the exhibit and past the tour" (*GSI*).

Across all brands, consumers are given the opportunity to physically partake in the backstory experience, to promote a sense of ownership over the revealed information, diverting attention away from concealed information not revealed such as technical details like product recipes and instead allowing consumers to introspectively reflect on their relationship with the brand. Further to this, these brands turn the reveal of information, which may be perceived as confrontational to some consumers, into conversations, encouraging consumer interaction within the backstory experience. Berg and Archer (1982) suggest that disclosures where the demand or requirement for reciprocity in the exchange is lessened, individuals engage in reciprocally contingent actions and the discloser is able to maximize the potential for positive responses. Following this, by enacting a branding strategy that highlights the receptiveness towards consumers, consignment successfully nurtures consumer responsiveness, enabling the dyadic intimate interaction and also fueling feelings of empowerment and openness within consumers. Accordingly, when individuals acquire the action of responsiveness, or learning to adjust their behavior in response, they begin to develop the fundamentals needed within intimate relationships (Sullivan, 1953) and the autonomy and bonding needed in fostering stronger consumer-brand attachments (Thomson, 2006).

Designation

Crafting the brand backstory to attract a diverse range of consumers is not only useful to ensure broad appeal it also generates an impression of complexity within the reveal. The designation strategy draws on this complexity to provide consumers with a sense of genuine

entitlement over the revealed information. With the specific aim of changing the brand perception surrounding the national museum, the creators of the *OF* exhibit sought to “...link the museum with award winning contemporary popular New Zealand culture” (*OF1*) and “...capture new audiences and nurture existing audiences” (*OF1*) in order to “be responsive, relevant and meaningful to all the Auckland communities” (*OF1*). Thus, delineating between insiders and outsiders became a strategy employed by the creators of the *OF* exhibit to not only achieve these aims but also to create the realm of secrecy surrounding the brand backstory. In order to “...make it true to the *Outrageous Fortune* audience” (*OF1*) whilst appealing to the broader public who visited the exhibit, the creators juxtaposed novelty exhibit features such as a “lost episode from the archives” 3D short film, with areas that triggered introspection for the visiting consumers, as discussed above. By tailoring exhibit areas with specific appeal to fans of the television brand, the creators simultaneously marked zones of the backstory for those “in the know” and delineated between insider and outsider consumers (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995) of the television program. Ultimately, this empathetic multidimensional showcase seemingly provides emotional stimulation for a diverse audience.

In a similar manner, *Herr's* takes pride in recognizing and caring for the small population of repeat tour consumers in a privileged opportunity of sampling tastings of new products. This designation strategy acknowledges these consumers who may wish to both deepen and revisit previous consumption experiences (Russell & Levy, 2012). Simultaneously, the backstory creator emphasized the service to the community that the tour provides in educating children about production and the food industry: “The city children have no idea that a potato grows underground and that a farmer has to dig it up, a truck needs to bring it here, and what we do to make it into a chip” (*H1*). Thus, in placing emphasis on fulfilling consumers’ inquisitive desires, the brand creates hierarchical customer boundaries

of inclusion and exclusion, empathetically showing all backstory consumers that their interests are held in high regard.

Alongside accommodating *Girl Scouts* as part of their program curriculum, the GSUSA National Headquarters offer the headquarters tour as an educational resource for school and family groups. In an attempt to cater to these groups on a broader scope, the tour features a presentation of the *Girl Scouts National Archive*. The director of the exhibit and tours assert, “You can bring school groups that it doesn’t matter if it’s not *Girl Scouts* because there are photographs in there that will surprise you, that are not ‘Girl Scouty’, you know, they’re super cool” (GSI). As with the other backstories examined, GSUSA privileges *Girl Scout* troops by gifting troops with an ‘Executive Office’ patch, upholding the “pin and patch culture of *Girl Scouts*” as the director of the tour and exhibit affirms, “So it’s just our way of making learning about the structure a little bit more fun. The general public doesn’t get [the patch], that’s just for the *Girl Scout* community. If the general public asks about our hierarchy we will just chit chat about it” (GSI).

In delineating brand insiders (often fans, those consumers already in possession of greater brand knowledge capital or those part of the brand community) from general consumers of the brand (outsiders, or those who are not in possession of as great/little brand knowledge capital) within the brand backstory (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), the brand both demonstrates an empathetic understanding of its diverse audience and simultaneously fosters a sense of sympathetic listening (Stern, 1997) towards consumers. The information revealed to insiders thus gains an enigmatic quality that heightens the aura of intimacy in the backstory and also potentially mesmerizes general consumers in the complexity of the reveal, thus also manifesting an aura of intimate disclosure. Furthermore, the designation strategy enables validation of the individual consumer and feelings of being understood by the brand within its backstory providing a profound feeling of distinction to all who experience the

brand backstory. Here, meaning is shared and consumers are granted with mutual understanding, mobilizing affective responses towards the brand within the dyadic intimate interaction. Validation also enables consumers to feel a sense of belonging and comfort or the perception that they have received meaning from the brand correctly (Prager, 1995), fostering autonomy and bonds that strengthen consumers' attachment not only to the brand (Thomson, 2006) but also fosters a recognition of belonging or being part of the brand's community (McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig, 2002; Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001)

Fueling Intimate Interactions into Intimate Relationships

The foundational intimacy literature generally acknowledges that intimate relationships manifest only with the development of repeated intimate interactions (Reis & Shaver, 1988). The interviews with practitioners illuminate two overarching processes that guide the above strategies of revealing and fueling interactions, aimed to develop into repeated interactions and catalyze the development of intimate relationship. These are: manifesting iconicity and manifesting oneness.

Manifesting Iconicity.

All brand backstory creators felt the primary mandate in offering consumers a backstory was to ingrain the brand into the mainstream consumer cultural sphere. This echoes findings in Hollenbeck et al. (2008) and Beverland, Lindgreen and Vink (2008), where associating the brand with history and culture enables a form of clout and power that adds to the overall brand meaning; in line with Holt's (2004) notion of iconicity as the general regard for the person or thing as "the most compelling symbol of a set of ideas or values that society deems important" (p. 1). A brand becomes an icon when the compelling myth offered speaks to consumers by resolving tension and forging a deep connection within the culture.

All brand backstory practitioners interviewed discussed showcasing the “founder’s story” and felt that the exhibit of the brand’s development and rise to mainstream popularity was a story in which consumers took great interest. Specific to the *OF* exhibit held at a national museum, the creators felt that as a sociocultural institution typically reserved for high culture (Hein, 2002), merely reproducing an immersive environment that brought consumers back into the popular culture fantasy narrative created by the brand was not sufficient. Rather the institution was required to “be responsive, relevant and meaningful to all the Auckland communities” by telling “...stories about how we do things, how do we make the TV show, why do we make TV shows, why are they relevant?” In doing so, the creators envisioned the museum as an arena where popular culture could be presented in the wider cultural content, stimulating debate and thus aspired to place the brand into “cultural history.” A producer of the exhibit shows the responsiveness of the exhibit to the current mainstream culture through describing the choice to showcase the inspiration and genesis moment in which one of the main writers of the program developed the idea for the media brand from real life experiences:

“...so this is the real life that inspires the writers for *Outrageous Fortune* and creative crew, how their team worked, collectively translates the theme, story lines and characters into the finished product. Come face to face with the family in their own world confronted by the family characters, their dynamic and their ongoing quest to go straight. And then the real family, exposing point of recognition for audiences, what do the Wests tell us about ourselves as human beings and New Zealand cultural landscape.”

Through experiencing the mainstream and pop culture oriented brand in an institution typically reserved for high culture artifacts and objects of scientific, artistic, cultural, or historical importance (Hein, 2002), the exhibit creators anticipated to imbue the brand with

cultural significance by displaying brand artifacts but also by simultaneously institutionalizing the brand and thus taking part in the history of the brand. Similarly, the current director of the *GSUSA* exhibit and tour felt that showcasing the *GSUSA* brand and its legacy inscribes the brand within mainstream culture;

“A lot of people aren’t thinking about history as happening now, they’re thinking about it as this old stuff. A lot of people see old stuff and they’re like, oh I thought we were trying to be fresh and new, it’s like, our legacy is part of being fresh and new. It’s an important part of it, girls need to know it, the public needs to know it, there’s that nostalgic factor” (*GSI*).

Nostalgia and a yearning for the past shape the *Herr’s* factory tour which is regarded by the tour creator as a “giant commercial” (*HI*) for the company. The creator emphasizes that, unlike international companies, *Herr’s* was founded under the humble national ethos of the American dream, a long held traditional spirit within the American popular culture realm. The tour highlights this notion specifically in the biographical video feature documenting the brand’s rise “from humble beginnings in a shed on the family farm” (Bellury & Guterl, 1995) and the creator asserts, “It’s the American dream, people like to know that. And that there really was an individual, it’s not some big corporation, it’s family”(*HI*). Through dedicating physical space and resources to the story behind the brand at the company headquarters, the creator manifests the impression of distinction and communicating the “founder’s story” specifically instilling the brand with a type of homegrown cultural significance for consumers.

Manifesting “Oneness.”

The intimacy literature has established that emotional expression, empathy and the ability to trust non-familial peers is due at least in part to analogous familial notions

(Vangelisti & Caughlin, 1997; Vangelisti, Caughlin & Timmerman, 2001). In offering a backstory that reveals the roots of the brand, creators bring consumers into the brand's world or core home, thus establishing closeness with them on an individual level and ultimately manifesting the feeling of "oneness" with consumers and fostering brand loyalty (Yim et al, 2008). Creators of the *OF* exhibit discuss how,

"We wanted to create something that would pick up on the classic fan motivation which is 'I want to be part of this world' so a lot of the design and delivery was around recreating the world so that we could make this feel as though they were immersed in *Outrageous Fortune* land" (*OF2*).

Thus, for these creators, "...being consistent about what we really felt consumers would understand better" (*OF2*) was an important consideration in structuring the exhibit and choosing specific narratives to reveal that would further immerse consumers into the brand and consequently generate feelings of intimacy in the consumer-brand relationship (Fournier 1998). As explored in Narsey and Russell (2013), the feeling of oneness is also facilitated by the spatial and temporal architecture of the brand backstory environment: each distinct stage is carefully crafted to symbolically, dramatically and psychologically envelop consumers within the material environment and immerse them in narratives within.

The *Herr's* tour creator discusses the importance of sharing the family narrative behind the brand in connecting with consumers, admitting: "Well Mr Herr's I guess, he just thought it was important to take people on the tour but the family has gotten to understand it's important to tell their story". Revealing the family behind the brand becomes the key differentiation for *Herr's* which strives to emphasize the wholesome family narrative of the brand,

“And here’s what’s the difference between us and Frito Lay, which an international company: it’s the family experiences, its dedication, quality and service that makes us stand out. And on the tour, they hear about that, they see it. They see the employee’s wave to the tour guides as the tour goes through. Or they will see a name and they will realize its ones of the grandchildren so it’s important” (HI).

The wholesome family narrative extends out to all considerations surrounding the tour, including its costing. The creator of the tour explains her rationale for keeping the tour free by saying, “My feeling and so of the *Herr’s* [family] is that you’re inviting them into your home, you’re showing them your product. It’s bad enough they have to buy a t-shirt to advertise your company, they shouldn’t have to pay to see your company” (HI).

Similarly, the *GSUSA* exhibit and tour director asserts that the initiatives of the exhibit lie over and above providing an outlet to display the legacy of the brand, they also provide a hub to showcase female leadership: “It’s for *Girl Scouts* but it’s for the public and we want it to be public friendly. We want it on a *Girl Scout* level to be a true center for leadership and a center for how our *Girl Scout* program ties in with what kids are doing in school and how it helps them” (GSI). In emphasizing narratives with familial and nurturing themes and evoking the identity, history and values of the brand, the brand backstory attempts to serve as a potent and authenticating experience for consumers as they are invited into the “home” of the brand (Borghini et al., 2009).

3.8 Discussion

Having documented a previously underexplored facet of the brandscape, the brand backstory, this study contributes to a greater understanding of the strategies brand practitioners use to self-disclose and fuel intimacy within consumer-brand relationships. The

strategies of sensitization, consignment and designation are intended to induce consumer trust, responsiveness and validation ultimately allowing a deepening of the bonds between the consumer and the brand. The findings also illuminate the approaches to develop interactions into intimate relationships by maximizing the manifestation of brand iconicity and individual and collective bonding with consumers. This paper provides yet another approach that considers the relational purposes and outcomes of carefully crafted brandscape experiences.

Theoretical Contributions

Firstly, this paper contributes to scarce research on the envisioned vs. implemented brand strategies from the perspective of the brand practitioner. This paper privileges the practitioner perspective to elucidate implementation, a critical factor in the performance of a brand (Bonoma, 1984). Moreover, this paper offers a counterpoint to the growing body of consumer research on the reception of brand stories by illuminating the intended outcomes from a managerial standpoint. As with research that undertakes a similar lensing on brand practitioners (Cayla & Arnould, 2013), the analytical depth provided in this theory-building orientation offers a broad understanding of brand backstory contexts and the rich nuances within the strategies offered.

Our findings establish the importance of relational goals in designing environments that enable consumer-brand interactions and highlight the role of disclosure in promoting intimacy. Specifically, we identify trust, responsiveness and validation as three dimensions of interaction responses to intimate self-disclosures that are new to the extant literature. By considering the interplay between intimacy and disclosure, the findings provide a framework of strategies that are commonly employed by brand practitioners in disclosure.

Prior intimacy literature has been limited in detailing the pre-cursors to relationship development. Whilst some literature details how intimate interactions may contribute to

relationship formation, less have explored the construction of these interactions (Yim et al., 2008). The strength of this paper lies in exploring how intimacy may develop through the promotion of interactions. The brand backstory is an ideal context to understand the nuances within the pre-cursors of intimate interactions as these consumptionscapes are less about selling as we see in retail environments, and more about offering authentic brand experiences that offer consumers the “truth” behind a brand and how the brand is constructed. Consumers are positioned to experience the ‘real’ backstage of a brand and receive immediate hedonistic gratification within each context. Exploring the construction and manifestation of intimate interactions within this type of consumptionscape provides a highly focused context crafted to strengthen consumer-brand bonds.

Implications for Practitioners

By developing engagement and fostering intimate interactions with consumers through an attachment module such as the brand backstory, brand practitioners can take to reign in authorial brand power whilst simultaneously offering consumers a sense of empowerment and bonding with the brand. There may, of course, be limitations to practitioners (re)establishing themselves as brand authors on the receiving end of the backstory. Although participatory and emotional marketing strategies are effective in enabling a reactive (Brehm, 1966) relationship between consumer and brand (Carù & Cova, 2006), practitioners may face unexpected and undesirable consumer reactions such as cynicism, resistance or apathy (Thompson et al., 2006). Offering but also controlling consumers’ access to the brand’s backstory hence enables practitioners to reclaim the auteur’s voice (Fludernik, 2006) at the forefront of the brand. Furthermore, as these strategies emphasize empowering consumers in a seemingly transparent and interactive way through the qualification of self-disclosure interactions, they may overcome the cultural backlash that may emerge with other branding strategies that employ emotional narratives (Thompson et

al., 2006). With legal obligations to provide a truthful brand backstory, this may be especially pertinent for brands with less socially desirable backstories that, through the reveal of this esoteric information, may involuntarily dispel romanticized myths surrounding the brand.

Notwithstanding these cautions, mobilizing consumers by successfully manifesting feelings of empowerment through the strategies of revealing the backstory benefit the brand in several ways. As prior interpersonal research shows, reciprocity as result of self-disclosure increases liking and the expectation that a relationship will develop (Prager, 1995). Collins and Miller (1994) succinctly provide evidence for the link between disclosure and liking, noting three significant relations: (1) Those who engage in intimate disclosures tend to be liked more, (2) Disclosure generally occurs to those who are more liked and (3) Individuals like those who disclose them. Further to this, research has shown that if consumers are made to feel autonomous and related, stronger attachments may result towards the brand (Thomson, 2006). Thus, the strategies of sensitization, consignment and designation elucidated in the manifestation of backstories show the potential for positive outcomes for the brand.

The strategies revealed in this study offer guidance for brand practitioners involved in the construction of brand backstory environments to facilitate relational reciprocity and saliently, to transform “courtship” relationships into potentially committed relationships. To do so, brand practitioners should consider the potential sub-narratives of the brand and highlight brand stories with prospective abilities to support consumer trust, responsiveness or validation. Over and above, practitioners should focus on understanding their consumers and their values to construct an environment that is meaningful to consumers through the promotion of iconicity and exclusive bonding. Ultimately, the strategies emphasize the need for exclusivity within the attachment module site but also the importance of consumers in the overall cultural fabric of the brand. The strategies empower consumers who are actively nurtured in establishing attachments with the brand through meaningful interactions.

Previously described as "intimacy at a distance" (Horton & Wohl, 1956), attachments such as the bond established by the brand backstory experience enable the development of reciprocal relationships that are meaningful to both the brand and consumers.

Finally, these strategies may be useful to practitioners who wish to develop other attachment module sites or manifest tactics that emphasize sharing such as in beta-testing initiatives. Implementing the strategies of sensitization, consignment and designation in such initiatives would allow practitioners to glean substantial and more meaningful responses from consumers as they engage in interactions that respond to intimate disclosures. Further to this, practitioners may find these strategies useful in conceptualizing how to create "private" realms to stimulate closer unions with consumers such as with social media initiatives like *Twitter* or *Facebook* where consumers revere intimacy and disclosure. Mapping the strategies suggested in this paper in these initiatives provide a structured agenda for how brands may efficiently enable a path towards intimacy.

3.9 Limitations and Future Directions

As is the case for any research project, the dimensions of the paper deliver limitations, some of which offer fruitful avenues for research. An obvious next step would involve empirical validation from consumers to triangulate and further identify whether the strategies implemented by practitioners to initiate intimacy are received as intended. Future research should also further explore the social dynamics that might be at play within backstory experiences, beyond engaging individual consumers. Although some of the practitioners interviewed recognized that hierarchies or stratification that may exist within the brand communities, the findings do not offer clear evidence of how the strategies used to develop

the backstories consider these sociality dynamics. These dynamics therefore deserve further exploration.

In this study, the trust, responsiveness and validation dimensions were the most evocative to capture the essence of intimate interactions. However, there may be additional dimensions underlying intimate interactions as well as other nuanced factors that may play a role in the interaction such as satisfaction. Furthermore, although the findings point to the development of liking as well as intimate relationships as a result of the facilitated interactions, future research should attempt to corroborate these outcomes through consumer-based inquiries.

Finally, another marked path of future research would consider brand backstories offered through more static mediums. Our interviewees' perspective on dynamic spatial, temporal material environments does not consider other such backstories commonly offered in supplementary DVDs or television documentaries. Whether these variations of brand backstories are crafted as attachment modules such as the backstories of focus within this paper is unknown.

3.10 Conclusion

Although these limitations must be kept in mind when considering our results and implications, we hope our findings provide academics and practitioners alike with new insights about nurturing consumer-brand bonds and potentially manifesting intimacy with consumers. This paper ultimately distills nuances in practitioner strategies to profoundly fuel attachment modules, offering insights both for theory and practice.

Table 1. Brand Backstory Practitioner Informants

BRAND BACKSTORY	CODE	NAME	AFFILIATION	POSITION
<i>Outrageous Fortune</i>	OF1	Claire	<i>Auckland War Memorial Museum</i>	Project Manager
	OF2	Denise		Exhibits Manager
	OF3	Ian		Artistic Director
	OF4	Ryan	<i>Gibson Group</i>	Creative Designer
	OF5	Nadia	<i>South Pacific Pictures</i>	Project Manager
	OF6	Hugh		Chief Executive Officer
<i>Herr's Snack Food Inc.</i>	H1	Faith	<i>Herr's Snack Food Inc.</i>	Public Relations Manager
<i>Girl Scouts of USA</i>	GS1	Leigh	<i>Girl Scouts of USA</i>	Director, National Historic Preservation Center, GSUSA
	GS2	Yelena		Archivist, National Historic Preservation Center, GSUSA
	GS3	Theresa		Director, Office of the CEO at GSUSA
	GS4	Regina		Former Archivist, National Historic Preservation Center, GSUSA

3.11 Appendix

Appendix A.



Appendix B.



CHAPTER 4: Dialectical Tensions within the Brand Backstory Experience: Consumer
Negotiations of Esoteric Brand Knowledge

I think it was more like because everyone else had gone and it was such a big huge fuss about it and like yeah like I said one of my work mates was like oh it sounds like you know you learn so much more about it. And he'd say yeah and that was why we went just out of pure curiosity like I wonder what, like I say I think we went in with the intention of we might have missed something we might have been missing a whole new season for all we know so let's go.

Danielle, 24, about her visit to the *Outrageous Fortune* Museum Exhibit

You know, little things like that you don't forget, you know, it's the whole thing. It's craning your neck to try and see, you know, further down the line and see what they're, actually what they're producing. And I look at the floor and see all the stuff that's kind of spilled out over, or just look for little things that are just, to me, I try not to look at the big picture, I try to look at the little things. Like in a painting, you know, you look at, you pick a point.

Randell, 50, about his visit to the *Herr's Snack Food Inc* factory tour

These quotes illustrate how rare and exclusive material provided to consumers who visit the behind-the-scenes or making-of a brand ignites curiosity and intrigue. From a greeting card brand's essence of creativity to the distinguishing sound from the engine of a motorcycle brand (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995), curious consumers are sometimes offered the opportunity to experience the processes behind their favorite brands and discover esoteric brand knowledge - rare and exclusive information to which the average consumer is not privy. Experiential narratives of a brand's backstory promise consumers this esoteric brand knowledge through staging. Despite the increasing availability of such revealing brand narratives, little research has tackled how consumers experience these backstories and what impact these experiences may have on consumer-brand relationships.

Prior research has shown that compelling narratives create meaningful consumer experiences within branded environments. McAlexander and Schouten (1998) for example demonstrate how the narrative of celebration spurs the *Harley Davidson* brandfest and facilitates embodiment and consciousness of a kind amongst the consumers who attend. Compelling narratives strengthen consumer-brand attachments (Escalas, 2004) allowing

consumers to appropriate cultural meanings (McCracken, 1986) or affirm their identity (Holt, 1995; Thompson, 1997). The wealth of research within the Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) paradigm (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) offer rich insights both into the phenomenology of consumers' experiences of narratives within branded environments (Hollenbeck, Peters & Zinkhan, 2008; Kozinets et al., 2004) and into how these negotiations of experiences facilitate new brand meanings that dually shape consumer culture and reflect a broad range of social, cultural and ideological codes (Holt, 2004; Thompson, 2004).

The introductory quotes clearly illustrate how a compelling backstory that offers esoteric brand knowledge can allow consumers to indulge in the reveal and be intrigued by the unveiling of the brand. But the inherent nature of discovering esoteric brand knowledge may also demand reconciliation with consumer's own personal narrative of the brand. Hence, the brand backstory narrative may create a dialectical tension within consumers. In order to provide rich insights into the brand backstory experience, this research explores consumers' negotiations of brand narratives that reveal esoteric brand knowledge.

4.1 The Brand Backstory

Brand backstories may be in the form of experiential consumptionscapes such as special tours or museum exhibits (Hollenbeck et al., 2008) that rely on spatial and temporal elements designed to offer consumers a behind-the-scenes or backstage experience of a brand (Narsey & Russell, 2013). Defined as the reveal of rare and exclusive esoteric brand knowledge, a brand backstory may include knowledge regarding the brand biography (Avery, Paharia, Keinan, & Schor, 2010), the history of the brand, the creation of tangible consumable products or services such as manufacturing or development processes, as well as intangible elements, such as the brand's image or philosophy. Thus the brand backstory, with its overarching narrative of the production of the story behind the brand, is part of the overall

brand gestalt (Diamond et al., 2009) or the complex quilting of consistent and compelling brand narratives that compose the brand storyworld. The brand backstory distinctly defined as featuring the narrative of revealed esoteric brand knowledge has roots in the narratological structural convention (Herman, 2002) of the backstory.

4.2 The Backstory

Inherent to the backstory construct is the notion of “breaking the fourth wall”, a concept attributed to Denis Diderot (1713-1784) in which the audience is acknowledged within the narrative. Previously characterized as the “social organization designed to reveal inner workings” (MacCannell, 1973, p. 595), backstories essentially acknowledge the existence of an audience and deconstruct front-back divisions that enable performance credence or authenticity of the “front” region. Revealing the backstage of a brand admits the existence of a performance of brand narratives (through venues such as themed consumptionscapes) and offers the audience an otherwise inaccessible view. Goffman (1959) dichotomizes the stage, viewing the “front” as a social place in which “hosting” or the “performance” occurs, and the “back” as a space where preparation for the construction of the performance occurs (e.g. kitchens, boiler rooms). Consumer research literature has yet to uncover consumers’ negotiations when the front stage and backstage of a brand are unified, as in the case where consumers are invited to experience the brand backstory.

MacCannell (1973) discusses how back regions in tourist settings can generate intimacy within relationships because sharing the back region is associated with ‘truth’ and solidarity, both features of intimacy. Grayson and Martinec (2004) demonstrate that staged authenticity may be effective in the ‘front’ regions of historical and pseudo-historical exhibits. However, issues of authenticity and boundary crossing can become complex in

settings such as tourist spaces, which are arranged in such a manner that consumers are not offered Goffman's (1959) dichotomous "backstage" but rather a staged back region that requires mystification as it only appears to seemingly reveal esoteric information (MacCannell, 1973). In MacCannell's (1973) own words, "Just having a back region generates the belief that there is something more than meets the eye; even where no secrets are actually kept, back regions are still the places where it is popularly believed the secrets are" (p. 591). Couldry (1998) underscores that the privileging of revealed information within backstory experiences is attributed to the "power of place" (p. 98): the dissolution of the boundary between production and consumer connects the visitor to a world or perspective previously unconsidered. Privileging revealed information that would otherwise be unknown adds "gravitas," as in Gammon and Fear's (2005) study of the power held by the backstage in tourism (p. 244). By and large conceptualized as a production of a narrative manifested to offer a revealing or unveiling of deep or esoteric knowledge, the backstory enables the experiencer to gain information that is lesser known and even unknown to the common majority. To understand consumers' negotiations of the revelation of esoteric knowledge in the brand backstory experience, we turn to a review of literature on the construct of esoteric knowledge.

4.3 Esoteric Knowledge - Holding, Withholding, Enfolding and Beholding

In reviewing the construct of esoteric knowledge we recognize the various marketplace interactions an individual can have with this type of knowledge, under a role playing lens (Üstüner & Thompson, 2012). We delineate that esoteric knowledge is only possessed by an individual if this possession is exclusive to the holder and discrete from the possession of others. In this act, possession of the knowledge is signified as owned and held from others. Furthermore, the knowledge may be utilized in disclosure to others and we

recognize the nuances within disclosing and reactions of others to the disclosure itself and discloser; in other words, how people respond to esoteric knowledge is likely to depend on the role they take upon exposure to esoteric knowledge. Thus, a role-playing lens offers appropriate insights into consumers' negotiations and subsequent marketplace interactions. Furthermore, as esoteric knowledge is often offered as a spectacle in magic tricks, reflecting from this domain may provide salient insights on how individuals respond to esoteric knowledge, particularly as the clear delineations of roles are relied upon to distill these understandings within the domain.

Holding

Esoteric, defined as “intended for or likely to be understood by only a small number of people with a specialized knowledge or interest” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2008) is a term usually associated with the context of religious movements or domains. In this paper, however, esoteric knowledge is defined more generally as specialized information that is limited or rare to a specific group of individuals. Specialized information may be concentrated on a specific area or expert information; and rare or limited signifies that those in possession of esoteric information are generally segregated as ‘in the know’. Historically, German sociologist Simmel (1950) discusses the role of esoteric information as a necessary element of human society in structuring and creating social hierarchies. Holding esoteric knowledge does not gain significance until others acknowledge a sense of possession. As Simmel (1950) asserts, “The strongly emphasized exclusion of all outsiders makes for a correspondingly strong feeling of possession. For many individuals, property does not fully gain its significance with mere ownership, but only with the consciousness that others must do without it” (p. 332). Consumer researchers have shown that the exclusion of others generates feelings of esoteric knowledge possession. For example, Sherry et al. (2004) demonstrate how male consumers' perceptions of possessing esoteric knowledge allows them

to identify as sports experts (or insiders) due to the male-centric gendering of the ESPN brandscape.

Withholding

The withholding or non-circulation of knowledge works in a manner similar to the role of gift exchange and circulation. As with the entitlement presented in bestowing a gift in gift exchange (Sherry, McGrath & Levy, 1993), withholding a gift also demarcates entitlement. Concealing or withholding demarcates possession as the acknowledgement of the existence of this special property (the esoteric knowledge) distinguishes roles of the possessor from the non-possessor and importantly “alters the attitudes of both towards the thing possessed” (Luhmann, 1989, p. 136). Practitioners of magic derive their exclusive power from the possession of esoteric knowledge: knowledge or information that is not publicly disclosed or confidential. Within a magic performance, esoteric knowledge is used in a manner that violates several causal relationships that the audience has learnt (Parris, Kuhn, Mizon, Benattayallah, & Hodgson, 2009). In viewing violations of causality and expectations during a magic performance (Kuhn, Amlani, & Rensink, 2008a; Kuhn, Tatler, Findlay, & Cole, 2008b; Kuhn & Land, 2006), viewers experience the feelings of anger, wonder and envy or the “AWE reaction” (Krell & Dobson, 1999) as they are not in possession of the esoteric knowledge. Without apparent explanation, the cognitive response from viewers is either to acquire the esoteric knowledge or to create an explanation, in an attempt to try and understand the real causal sequence of events (Kelley, 1980). Similarly, within consumer research, withholding esoteric information motivates consumers to more actively uncover the information. For instance, Brown (2001) discusses the use of esoteric knowledge in retromarketing. Mystique and intrigue is incited within consumers as they engage in considering and questioning the crafting of the product, as with *Coca-Cola* where marketing emphasis is placed on the “classic secret recipe” that makes the product unique.

Enfolding

Imparting access to learnt esoteric knowledge within the magic trick community is governed by the moral economy of rules of concealment and revelation that are normatively held within the culture. In conforming to these community norms, holders of esoteric knowledge are further able to assert their identity within the community through attributing knowledge accumulation from prestigious teachers and innovators (Jones, 2011). In addition, adherence to these rules may generate defensive feelings within holders as they strategize and calculate methods of maximizing personal advantage through exchange (Jones, 2011). Studies that focus on the discloser of esoteric information in the form of secrets suggest the cognitive consequences of imparting access or revealing often result in curative feelings within the discloser as providing access relieves the discloser from the effortful control and work needed in withholding (Lane & Wegner, 1995).

Esoteric information disseminated through self-disclosure may fuel intimacy within relationships (Waring, Tillman, Frelick, Russell, & Weisz, 1980) as the receiver of such information may feel validated, understood or cared for (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998). Consumer researchers are well aware that the strategic exchange of esoteric brand knowledge within consumption communities strengthens consumers' feelings about their membership in the community and deepens their communal relationship (Kozinets, 2001; Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). However social psychologists have noted potential curvilinearity in the relationship between the depth of disclosure (how much and type of information disclosed) and the satisfaction felt within the relationship (Cozby, 1973; Feldman 1979; Gilbert 1976): too much intimacy, such as in the form of disclosed esoteric information, may in fact create anxiety in some marital relationships (Feldman, 1979; Harper & Elliot, 1988). It should also be recognized that one may access esoteric information through disclosers other than the originator of the esoteric

knowledge (Caughlin, Scott, Miller, & Hefner, 2009). For instance, in Kozinets, De Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner's (2010) study of word of mouth online, they show that communicators attempt to demonstrate their trustworthiness to affirm a leadership position. On the receiver end in these instances, Caughlin and colleagues (2009) detail that the receiver of esoteric information may feel relationally distant and hold hurt feelings towards the originator of the esoteric knowledge due to the receiver feeling an uncharacteristic intentional strategy from the withholder to preserve information.

Beholding

Jones' (2011) study of the magic trick community directs attention to the manner in which esoteric knowledge is circulated. Within the magic trick community (commonly known as holders of esoteric knowledge) single initiation rituals to discover esoteric knowledge do not exist, but rather there are multiple points of entry through the acquisition and display of skill to access this knowledge. The manner in which knowledge is acquired affects the emotions that are felt not only towards the revealer but also towards the self and the knowledge offered. Luhmann (1989) emphasizes this in saying, "When the knowledge is hidden, and revelation demands hard, painful work but brings status in its wake, one treats these secrets with overvaluing awe" (p. 138). A study by Raphaël (2007) investigates the effect of revealing esoteric knowledge or the explanations for magic tricks on participants' enjoyment on a phenomenological level. His study shows that, in general, revealing explanations increases participants' desire to view more magic tricks later. Specifically, those who had the explanations revealed to them not only enjoyed the magic experience more but they were also more appreciative of the quality of the magic tricks later performed for them. This research shows that the relative ability to access the esoteric knowledge determines its worth, a notion also explored in the domain of consumer behavior.

4.4 Unveiled Esoteric Knowledge about Brands in the Marketplace

Other than the obvious incentive for companies to remain secretive about certain organizational processes (Birchall, 2011), esoteric brand knowledge kept from consumers and competitors enables brands to remain competitive within the market by maintaining the qualities of rareness and inimitability that distinguish the brand (Vermeir & Margócsy, 2012). Indeed marketing brand secrecy which involves deciding “what to tell and how to tell it, as well as what not to tell and how not to tell it” ensures control of brand information to the public with the goal of creating or preserving brand value (Hannah, Parent, Pitt, & Berthon, 2014, p. 3). Hannah and colleagues (2014) emphasize how marketing secrets, or the existence of esoteric brand knowledge, generates strategic value for the brand. This is achieved through the denial of information and privileging of those let in on the secret with an emphasis on offering exclusive information to those privileged. Whilst it may be suggested that revealing esoteric brand information formulated as a secret may initiate intrigue and interest from consumers, thus bolstering desire for the brand (Hannah et al., 2014), existing consumer literature does not provide clear answers on the resulting effects on the consumer-brand relationship as information that is inherently deep and esoteric in nature is revealed to consumers.

It is well established that consumers who hold strong consumer-brand relationships carry elaborate or rich knowledge structures surrounding brands as an indication of deeper levels of perceived mutual understanding and intimacy (Aaker, Fournier & Brasel, 2004; Fournier, 1998). These knowledge structures are composed of consumers’ personal brand narratives that have developed through the meaningful experiences they have with brands (Thompson, Rindfleisch & Arsel, 2006). We recognize that personal brand narratives are “contextualized within a complex background of historically established cultural meanings and belief system” (Thompson, 1997, p. 440) and consist of the personalized cultural

meanings that contribute to an individual's sense of self-identity. The specific quilting of brand narratives function to compose a consistent and compelling brand storyworld (Herman, 2002). When brands employ narratives and create meaning that is injected into a "culturally constituted world" (McCracken, 1986, p. 71), consumers accept these meanings and choose brands that suit their self-identity (Aaker, 1997; Fournier 1998). As such, consumers' knowledge structures are enhanced as they more easily link the brand to their own narrative framework (Escalas, 2004). Whilst the meanings within each consistent and compelling brand storyworld are distinct to each consumer and each 'knows' a brand discretely from others' understanding of knowing (Holt, 1995; Mick & Buhl, 1992; Thompson & Haytko, 1997), the narrative brand backstory which emphasizes unveiling esoteric brand knowledge may not directly map onto the consumer's existing ways of knowing the brand.

4.5 Processing of Unveiled Esoteric Brand Narratives within Knowledge Structures

As van Laer, de Ruyter, Visconti, and Wetzels (2014) note, narrative arises from consumers' reception of brand stories through the activity of engaged interpretation and processing. Interpreted stories have multiple functions for the consumer, including enabling consumers to appropriate cultural meanings (McCracken, 1986) or affirm their identity (Holt, 1995; Thompson, 1997). As consumers have a natural affinity to employ stories to make sense of their lives (Shankar, Elliott & Goulding, 2001), the power of stories to influence consumers' knowledge structures is immense (Adaval & Wyer, 1998) and branding research has shown that those brands that offer compelling narratives foster stronger consumer attachments (Escalas, 2004). Although we acknowledge the vast landscape of research on narrative comprehension (Graesser, Olde & Klettke, 2002) we focus on the foundational framework provided by Shank and Abelson (1995) due to the concentration on knowledge-based inferences (Graesser, Singer & Trabasso, 1994) and the impact on knowledge

structures in processing narratives (over other components of the narrative such as temporal discourse markers and their impact on knowledge structures). Shank and Abelson's (1995) framework of narrative comprehension presupposes three tenets: (1) All knowledge is based on past experiences constructed as stories, (2) New experiences are comprehended via comparison with prior or predetermined knowledge structures already held, (3) The knowledge that is comprehended and remembered is dependent on the manner in which it is communicated.

To process brand stories, consumers may undergo one of three methods to map incoming stories onto stories in their predetermined memory or knowledge structures: story matching, story updating or story supporting (Shank & Abelson, 1995). Under this approach, consumers are said to be 'adaptive learners' (Keller, 2003) where brand knowledge is transferred and leverages the brand. This process involves considering components of the story and either reinforcing predetermined knowledge structures (matching), informing predetermined knowledge structures (updating) or strengthening predetermined knowledge structures (supporting). We consider each process within the scant literature that focuses on consumers' comprehension of esoteric brand narratives.

Matching.

Matching occurs where knowledge structures are complemented. Where the esoteric narrative matches with consumer's inherent knowledge structure, an illusion of "a semblance of truth" (Coleridge, 2002) may be created in which the narrative becomes compelling. At this point, consumers suspend judgment on the fictional quality of the narrative and allow themselves to become immersed within the storyworld (Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004; Green, Garst, & Brock, 2004). Successful narrative transportation requires seamless matching

of the esoteric narratives to the personal narrative, enabling consumers to fantasize and thus willingly suspend disbelief (van Laer et al., 2014).

Updating & Supporting.

Updating and supporting result in enhancements of existing knowledge structures. These processes occur through learning and either modify (update) or add (support) knowledge. Both processes enable consumers to potentially deepen their personal narratives. Yet, if and when consumers are presented with contestable narratives (Thompson & Haytko, 1997), a dialectical tension may arise as the esoteric knowledge alters predetermined knowledge structures and requires negotiation. For example, Thompson and Haytko (1997) offer various ways in which consumers negotiate the dialectical tensions that may arise when countervailing discourses are presented through appropriating to generate personalized narratives.

4.6 Research Questions

Research on the reception of esoteric knowledge in the interpersonal realm suggests that the disclosure of rare and exclusive information is likely to foster awe and curiosity within individuals (Luhrmann, 1989) as well as enable intimacy between individuals (Waring et al., 1980). But the extant research also suggests that, while consumers may become transported into a narrative that offers esoteric information, facilitating an alignment of beliefs (van Laer et al., 2014), the provision of too much esoteric information may also create anxiety and discomfort and too little may create dissatisfaction if the need for intimate disclosures is provoked (Cozby, 1973; Feldman, 1979; Gilbert, 1976; Harper & Elliot, 2007; Simmel, 1950). Ultimately, this literature suggests that a dialectical tension may surface between the desire to acquire intimate and esoteric knowledge about the object of affection

(whether a lover or a loved brand) and the desire to maintain a distance or boundary perhaps, we postulate, to sustain a level of yearning and interest in the unknown.

Prior consumer research on information that is inherently deep and esoteric in nature to the brand suggests that revealing esoteric brand knowledge through a narrative may initiate consumer intrigue and interest, resulting in increased desire for the brand (Hannah et al., 2013). However, consumer literature has paid scant attention to how consumers experience and negotiate the reveal of esoteric brand knowledge within the brand backstory environment. Hence, this research asks:

1. Does a dialectical tension exist between the desire to acquire intimate and esoteric knowledge about a brand and the desire to maintain a distance or boundary to sustain a level of yearning and interest in the unknown? If so, how do consumers negotiate this tension?
2. How do consumers reconcile their own personal brand narrative with the esoteric brand knowledge in the brand backstory?
3. Does, and if so, how does, the provision of a narrative that reveals intimate and esoteric knowledge about a brand influence the desirability of the brand?

In order to answer these questions, this paper examines and compares consumers' reactions to marketers' provision of the brand backstory for a branded food product and a media brand. The next section outlines methodological procedures followed to answer these research questions.

4.7 Methodology

A phenomenological approach provides deep insights from consumers' perspective. A phenomenological approach is particularly appropriate in this context as we seek to understand the meaning of consumers' backstory experiences within the experiential environment and as related to the environments in which they live or the totality of human-being-in-the-world (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989).

The research centers on two selected brands that adhere to the definition of a brand backstory, defined as the production of the story behind the brand that features revealed esoteric brand knowledge. The two brands of focus are *Outrageous Fortune* (New Zealand television brand), and *Herr's Snack Food Inc.* (American snack food brand).

Outrageous Fortune

Shortly after *Outrageous Fortune's* (*OF*) sixth season series finale, in 2010, *The Auckland War Memorial Museum*, New Zealand's largest museum, created a six-month long exhibit about the television program (Russell & Schau, 2014). The longest-running New Zealand drama, the program won many awards and gathered a growing domestic and international audience and its final episode garnered 18.2% viewership of the country's population. Sold to networks in over eight countries, the success of the program is attributed not only to its exceptional writing and acting (winning over 60 awards in these areas) but also the cultural resonance of its content, enabling a connection between fiction and everyday New Zealand life (Philpott, 2010). The exhibit produced in collaboration with the production company (*South Pacific Pictures*) behind the television drama, included a behind-the-scenes look at the program, revealing the inspirations that sparked the writers such as real-life headlines, scripts and brainstorming notes for each episode. The centerpiece of the exhibit was the series' main set – the Wests' family living room, which visitors were able to experience as a real living room: they were able to sit on the couch, interact with the props, as

well as take photos or videos of themselves. A section of the exhibit was dedicated to the program's art department with a display of the fictional brands created especially for *OF*, as well as costumes used on the show. Another section of the exhibit was dedicated to the main characters on the program, each with a display dissecting his or her personality, complete with a psychiatric analysis. Visitors could take a quiz to find out which character they most resembled. The exhibit closer featured a never-before-seen 3D short scene. Outside, the exhibit the museum gift shop was stocked with *OF* merchandise and consumers were also able to purchase a behind-the-scenes DVD of the exhibit, featuring information displayed at the exhibit as well as special footage showing the construction of the exhibit.

Herr's

Open year round, the *Herr's Snack Food Inc. (Herr's)* brand backstory is a factory tour of the company's snack factory plant in Nottingham, Pennsylvania. Founded in 1946 on the East coast of the United States, the company emphasizes their stronghold in the mid-Atlantic region and prides their exclusive distribution to this area. This strength is reflected in the types of consumers who regularly visit the brand backstory experience, generally consumers that are local to the region. The free guided tour, created in 1989 by a senior employee, offers a "behind-the-scenes" look into the history of the brand in a theatre quality short film as well as an in-depth tour of the factory's production of their snack foods, showing consumers complete processes involved in the creation of *Herr's* snack foods from ingredient sourcing to production and packaging. After viewing the short documentary film, consumers are taken on a 60-minute guide-led tour of the facility via a specially built pathway. The pathway enables consumers to experience the inner workings of the factory through windows that overlook production areas. Depending on the production schedule for the day, the company features the live production processes of potato chips, pretzels, tortilla chips, cheese curls and popcorn. On the tour, the guides recite loosely memorized scripts,

providing consumers with a focus on how to view each portion of the live factory and what to look for specifically in viewing. In addition to providing linkages for making sense and appraising the working factory, guides also ad-lib answers to questions from consumers as they arise on the tour. Aside from detailed descriptions that use jargon or expert terms to explain factory processes, the guides often punctuate their speech with stimulating facts about the brand or process that consumers witness live during the tour (for example, providing details such as the precise number of tons of waste that the company recycles). A major feature within the tour that is boasted by the company as particularly exclusive, is the ability to sample freshly fried potato chips warm off the production line. At the end of the tour consumers are given a sample size snack pack and directed into the gift store where they can purchase products only available at the factory headquarters.

Informants were recruited on site both at the museum and the factory tour via sign posting. The interviewing researcher observed many of the informants experiencing the brand backstory prior to interviewing. The majority of informants were obtained through this method however snowball sampling with initial interview informants also provided leads to other potential informants. All informants voluntarily took part in the study and contacted the researcher independently to demonstrate their interest in participating. In total, 42 informants were interviewed: 15 from the *Herr's* tour and 27 from the *OF* exhibit (See Table 4, p. 132). Interviews lasted between 25 and 90 minutes with questions focused on informants' general experiences of the brand backstory and more specifically, motivations and expectations for visiting the backstory. Phenomenological insights within the backstory experiences were sought and accordingly the semi-structured interview was loosely designed to probe informants' experiences of physical, temporal and spatial elements within the visit, as well as their thoughts and feelings about the brand after visiting. Each informant was offered a gift

(*koha*) to show appreciation for their time and contribution to the research. The final data set consists of 475 pages of single spaced transcripts.

We adopt a Consumer Culture Theory approach (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), holding that brands are socio-cultural objects that convey cultural meanings. Accordingly, brand meaning depends not only on consumer-firm interactions, but is also mediated by socio-cultural processes – such as historical context, ethical concerns, and cultural conventions – that influence both consumers and firms in the process of meaning co-creation (Holt, 2004; Thompson, 2004). Accordingly, to explore the experiential dimensions of brand backstory consumption, the analytical techniques utilized reflects this approach.

Transcripts were analyzed through the lens of first-hand observations of consumers at the brand backstory sites. Patterns of consumer experiences were sought and identified within individual interviews (idiographic analysis) as well as across informants' interviews (nomothetic analysis) (Mick & Buhl, 1992; Thompson, Locander & Pollio, 1989). A refinement of ideas (Goulding, 2002) was achieved by way of the constant comparative method whereby data were compared to other sections that contained the same incidents and themes, as well as contrasted with other sections of data with differing themes. These findings reveal insights into consumers' experiences of the backstory environment, providing direction to how consumers negotiate narratives that reveal esoteric brand knowledge.

4.8 Findings

The findings first direct attention to the key role of the intensity of consumers' self-brand connection (Escalas, 2004) in their initial negotiations and behavior as they experience the revealing and unveiling within the brand backstory. The self-brand connection is the degree to which consumers includes the brand within mental representations of self and may

be manifested via personal brand narratives or knowledge structures of the brand (Escalas, 2004). Gradations of self-brand connections were found, however personal-brand narratives were found to have either strong or weak brand knowledge structures within. As such, two distinct subgroups of brand backstory consumers are identified.

Consumers’ negotiations of the esoteric brand knowledge within the backstory highlights the reconciliation that occur within consumers and the subsequent shift in attachment that is triggered towards or away from their personal brand narrative and thus self-brand connection. We explain how experiencing the brand backstory can enhance or instead disrupt consumers’ brand knowledge structures as consumers attempt to reconcile the structures with the esoteric knowledge on offer. These reconciliation strategies result is a shift in the desirability of the brand. The negotiations to the unveiling, revealing and esoteric information from the distinct subgroups are outlined in Table 2. below and discussed in the following section.

Table 2. Consumers' Negotiations of the Brand Backstory

BRAND BACKSTORY COMPONENT	CONSUMER NEGOTIATION	AGNOSTIC AMBIVALENCE		ESOTERIC ENGAGEMENT	
UNVEILING	Initial reaction of experience...	Paralyzation		Provocation	
REVEALING	Behavior in experience...	Observation		Inspection	
ESOTERIC KNOWLEDGE	Narrative reconciliatory strategies enacted...	Cherry Picking	Bulldozing	Scaffolding	Excavating

Negotiations of the Brand Backstory Revealing and Unveiling

Reactions to the revealing and unveiling within the brand backstory vary as a function of consumers’ depth of details or knowledge structures of their conceptualizations, and corresponding attachment towards their personal brand narrative prior to the experience. The

findings demonstrate degrees of self-brand connections varied amongst the study's informants, but more determinant of their experience of the backstory is whether consumers' brand knowledge structures were well defined or loosely defined and correspondingly whether informants had strong or loose attachments to these conceptualizations. Those with stronger self-brand connections tend to have well-developed knowledge structures with vivid and fixed conceptualizations within. In contrast, those with looser self-brand connections have fluid personal brand narratives with more abstract and less defined conceptualizations within.

Compelled by the intrigue and interest in discovering esoteric brand knowledge, consumers are drawn to experience the brand backstory. Inherent within the backstory construct is the notion that the esoteric knowledge is conveyed via a narrative that emphasizes *revealing* and *unveiling*. The process of revealing, defined as the promise of making unknown information known to others, influences consumers' initial reactions to the brand backstory upon discovering access to esoteric brand knowledge; whilst unveiling, defined as the process of uncovering, influences consumers' reactions to the delivery of esoteric knowledge and thus behavior in the experience. Exploring how consumers negotiated these brand backstory practices enables some insight into the dialectical tension between the desire to acquire intimate and esoteric knowledge about the brand and the desire to maintain a boundary to sustain a level of desire and interest in the unknown.

Agnostic Ambivalence

Consumers with intricately defined conceptualizations of their personal brand narrative prior to the brand backstory experience typically took pleasure in their well-defined knowledge structures, the strength of the felt connection with the brand and the manner in which the brand was included in representations of self. Often, these consumers could clearly

articulate their fondness for the brand that they held in high regard. For example, Neil (50) discusses his family's passion for the *Herr's* brand through his desire to purchase branded merchandise such a *Herr's* golf shirt and claims that he would have no problem advocating the purchase of the brand to others.

Due to their well-defined knowledge structures, these consumers are drawn into the brand backstory with the hopes of finding a narrative that matches or supports these structures rather than an update of structures. Consumers such as Danielle (24, *OF*) explain the initial draw of the backstory in her yearning to support her knowledge structure conceptualizations. She says,

“What I was most looking forward to was being immersed back in that family, and rather than... Yeah I guess I was a bit hesitant, not hesitant, but I kind of was hoping that they weren't going to dissect it a bit too much... because in my head I had this ideal of them being, being this family as a whole, rather than actors playing this family. So, but yeah at the same time I was really curious about how they'd made it, and, coz like I work in the film and TV industry, so from that aspect I was quite interested to see how they did it.”

Although initially compelled at the prospects of discovering exclusive brand knowledge, the reveal for consumers like Danielle draws intense attention towards the *raison d'être* of the backstory in providing a deconstruction of narratives surrounding the brand. Many informants express surprise at the level of detail provided in the brand backstory. For example Tabitha (38, *Herr's*) says, “I was surprised because I didn't think it would be that informative. I really liked the part where you go up the walk to the factory and see everything.” Many *OF* consumers also discussed reconsuming (Russell & Levy, 2012) or

reliving the television program in their expectations prior to their experiences of the brand backstory to deepen their brand conceptualizations.

Consumers' understanding of the unveil and gaining unexpected esoteric knowledge dispels vivid and consistent knowledge structures and facilitates self-reflexive consciousness or critical reflection within the experience as consumers are forced to update their knowledge structures. Consumers describe initially feeling overwhelmed and paralyzed as they enter the brand backstory and this unease results in behavior in the brand backstory characterized by perusing or observing from a distance. In Rachelle's own words (20, *OF*): "You know there was too much to take in, so I just went through it." The reveal is unimagined by these consumers in their expectations, thus an initial reaction of awe and wonder (Krell & Dobson, 1999) occurs and consumers feel a sense of paralysis. The violations of expectations (Kuhn et al., 2008a; Kuhn et al., 2008b; Kuhn & Land, 2006) initiate behavior that can be described as observation within the brand backstory and characterized by careful watching and listening of brand backstory esoteric material. There is an unwillingness to suspend judgment and disbelief in the brand backstory narrative, thus we use the term agnostic ambivalence to capture these notions towards the disclosure provided within the brand backstory.

Esoteric Engagement

In contrast, some of the backstory visitors had more loosely constructed and more abstract conceptualizations of the brand within their personal narrative, and thus shallow self-brand connections. These consumers were more able to critically articulate and reflect on their consumption of the brand in the interviews. Commonly, for example, the brand was one of many that added to the consumer's bricolage or pastiche of consumption habits (Marion & Nairn, 2011). Their interest in the brand and its backstory may be more socially motivated. For Elle (32), sharing *OF* was the focal point of a weekly update with her twin sister who

lived in another city thus the social bond was further strengthened through their discussions of the program. Similarly, Adam (23), an active member of the online *OF* forum, watched the series to maintain relationships with other forum members and his status as an active member. Experiencing the brand backstory provides these consumers with knowledge capital that is often envisioned to strengthen these social bonds or their social standing as we see with some of the *Herr's* consumers who experience the brand backstory as a family outing to facilitate a goal of family intimacy.

In experiencing the reveal of the brand backstory, these consumers accept the consumption environment as providing supplementary knowledge that updates or supplements, however the change in brand knowledge structures is unexpected. As a result, consumers initially react towards the brand backstory with provocation or intrigue and interest to discover additional brand knowledge. George (34) for instance discusses his expectations of the *Herr's* backstory,

“You know again when you, when your wife comes to you and says ‘hey I think this will be a great idea.’ And you kind of look at it, and when it's all said and done you see hey how chips are made, you're like ‘eh, okay...’...This is just going to be about slicing and frying... It didn't seem completely exciting... and then when you get there and you start to hear the story and start to realize that it's really nothing more than an ordinary individual that was able to accomplish some extraordinary things. It starts to again give you a nice developed picture that you know for lack of a better word...”

Without a strong self-brand connection, George is initially unenthused about the potential for the reveal to captivate his attention. Yet, within the experience he unexpectedly appreciates the potential to discover esoteric material. The quote illustrates how he is provoked by the reveal to glean more brand knowledge in an attempt to calibrate and configure the unexpected

brand knowledge contained in the backstory with existing knowledge structures (Kelley, 1980). Subsequently, the unveiling within the brand backstory prompts these consumers to actively gather and inspect the revealed knowledge as they seek to satiate the aroused desire for esoteric material. Neil (50, *Herr's*) for example discusses his focus on details of the unveil:

“We knew we were going to see chips being produced. I was curious as to which chip we were going to see produced; was it the plain, was it one of the flavors, was it the ripple cut, was it the flat chip? You know, so it really wasn't what product but, like, what version of the product we were going to see.”

As the brand backstory discloses and enhances opportunities to suspend disbelief, these consumers take advantage to become more deeply engaged, thus their experience is termed esoteric engagement.

Reconciliation of Esoteric Brand Knowledge

As consumers experience the esoteric knowledge they encounter in the brand backstory, their attention is directed to the constructed nature of the brand's storyworld, and they are prompted to reevaluate and reconcile their knowledge structure conceptualizations. As a result, the brand backstory can enhance or instead disrupt consumers' brand knowledge structures and subsequently trigger a shift in attachment towards or away from their personal brand narrative and thus self-brand connection. The following sub-sections unfold reconciliatory strategies enacted by consumers to the esoteric brand knowledge and the underlying trajectory shift in attachment towards personal brand narratives.

The data uncover a variety of possible trajectory shifts in consumers' attachments with their personal narratives depending on their self-brand connection, the richness of their conceptualizations of their personal narrative (i.e. their knowledge structures) and their

willingness to suspend disbelief in the brand backstory. We term these trajectory shifts hyperbolic and parabolic; where hyperbolic shifts are characterized as expulsion shifts that break free from the gravity of prime focus, and parabolic shifts begin with a similar expulsion but are followed by a return towards the gravity of prime focus. Whether the esoteric brand knowledge revealed in the brand backstory dispels or enhances consumers' conceptualizations results in trajectory shifts towards (parabolic) or away (hyperbolic) from their attachments to their personal narratives and thus their self-brand connection. Table 3. below summarizes four esoteric brand knowledge negotiation styles that characterize each narrative reconciliatory strategy and underlying trajectory shift for each group of backstory consumers. These esoteric knowledge negotiation styles are discussed in turn.

Table 3. Narrative Reconciliatory Strategies of Esoteric Brand Knowledge and Underlying Personal Narrative Trajectory Shifts

	AGNOSTIC AMBIVALENCE	ESOTERIC ENGAGEMENT
Parabolic Trajectory	“Cherry Pickers”	“Scaffolders”
Hyperbolic Trajectory	“Bulldozers”	“Excavators”

Agnostic Ambivalence

“Cherry Pickers”

For “Cherry Pickers,” the esoteric knowledge initially creates an awareness of the constructions of artifices within the brand storyworld and draws those with strong knowledge structure conceptualizations away from their personal narratives. However, “Cherry Pickers” experience a turning point, back towards their personal narratives due to the intense negotiations with the esoteric knowledge offered inside the brand backstory. The experience of “Cherry Pickers” in the brand backstory exemplifies strategic consumers where

connections with a brand are stronger when brands connect to aspects of self that are more schematic of the individual (Escalas, 2004). Thus within the brand backstory, these consumers often highlight their experience with specific facets of the revealed esoteric brand knowledge.

Gail (50) for example, as an immigrant, uses *OF* as a tool to learn about New Zealand culture and the brand becomes a shared cultural experience for her. Developing her self-brand connection and thus conceptualization and attachments towards her brand knowledge structures allows her to feel “connected to the culture and to the other people that were watching it.” The esoteric knowledge is not a prominent feature in her recollection of the brand backstory experience. Gail’s main motivation for visiting the exhibit was to celebrate the dissolution of the *OF* brand with her partner (Russell & Schau, 2014), so for her, viewing the esoteric material was a “bonus.” During her visit, it was observed how Gail watched others reading exhibit material and focused on taking photographs of her partner and herself in the museum. Whilst Gail does re-iterate some learnings from the exhibit that do show an updating of brand knowledge structures, these facts are ‘cherry picked’, as Gail maintains that visiting the exhibit enables her to “feel closure” for the concluded television program. Thus we see how whilst some knowledge structures are inevitably altered within the brand backstory, Gail’s persistence to gain closure for the brand rather than actively engage in the esoteric material results in a parabolic trajectory where she is drawn in back towards her personal narrative.

Some “Cherry Pickers”, forced to reflect on new knowledge that does not always uphold and support their predetermined knowledge structures, do not respond well to the contentious esoteric material. As a case in point, Sarah (38) discusses the value of witnessing the creation of *Herr’s* snacks food through highlighting the significance of health to her. On the tour, Sarah keenly observes the frying process of potato chips, demonstrating a sense of

amazement in pointing to the factory floor processes from outside in the windowed tour hallway. She says: “I think it's great I mean that's especially when you feel so separated from your food a lot of times you don't have, you're kind of seeing the steps that it goes through and how simple some of the steps are. And that it's not really that processed.” Although she is aware *Herr's* does not manufacture ‘health food’, closely witnessing the creation of the brand's snack foods enables her to justify the consumption of the snack food by stating that the production process is short. Again, Sarah ‘cherry picks’ esoteric knowledge to add to her structures and neglects to acknowledge information regarding the process of frying, or quality and healthiness of the ingredients used in manufacturing the brand's product; she prefers to uphold her solid knowledge structures. She decontextualizes the contentious esoteric material to avoid a conflict with her predetermined knowledge structures.

“Cherry Pickers” focus on material that is perceived as supporting their knowledge structures in order to enhance their personal narrative. Many *Herr's* consumers discuss how the brand biography component reinforced their enthusiasm for the brand and continued patronage of the brand over others. This was especially clear in the focused attention towards the documentary shown on the tour. Some *Herr's* consumers also noted how learning esoteric brand knowledge added to their subsequent consumption experiences as they reiterated knowledge learnt. For Edith (37) “looking out for the burnt chips” becomes significant in her consumption of *Herr's* after learning the process intended to sequester unsatisfactory chips from the produced product. She says,

“And then you get the chip, like the burnt chips in the bag, or which we think are burnt, and then you get the green chip, you're like, oh my God, they've put a lot of potato in here and you just don't know what happened. But you know it's some kind of machine that's doing something, you're like, is the machine watching? And then

he tells you, oh, this isn't because we gave you guys a bad chip or we burnt it, it's because the potato had more sugar than it was supposed to or something. Then you heard about the technology that takes those things and blows it out, it was just, it was really neat.”

Edith exemplifies how the degrees of willingness to suspend disbelief in the brand backstory varies according to the focus within the experience. The ‘cherry picking’ tactics deployed by these consumers are sometimes conscious, as with Gail’s maneuvering of the esoteric material, or subconscious as both Sarah and Edith illustrate. The tactic may be deployed by “Cherry Pickers” as a way to strategically avoid Mace’s (1976) ”love-anger cycle” which suggests that, as relationships become more intimate through self-disclosures, differences are accentuated leading to disagreement, anger and consequential dissolution. Mace (1976) suggests that to obtain love, individuals seek intimacy to enable a sense of closeness. As a result, the differences in the relationship are brought to light, instigating conflict and negative feelings that creates anger. The solution sought after to avoid more negative feelings results in an abandonment for the quest of intimacy or eventual relationship dissolution. Much like textual poaching (Jenkins, 1992) where power is bestowed to the interpreter to produce personal narratives, the strategic quality of “Cherry Pickers” enables these consumers to experience the brand backstory and indulge in the promise of the reveal and unveiling within, but also maintain a comforting sense of ‘grounding’ in their predetermined knowledge structures and avoid an accentuation of differences that may arise in the esoteric material revealed and unveiled in the brand backstory.

“Bulldozers”

Unlike the former category of agnostic ambivalent consumers, “Bulldozers” largely experience a hyperbolic trajectory where they become completely detached with their well-

developed knowledge structures. The negotiations made by “Bulldozers” upon experiencing the backstory are less quarrelsome than “Cherry Pickers” because they are simply unwilling to accept narratives that deviate from their own knowledge structures. Thus the esoteric brand knowledge is confrontational as it highlights the incongruity to their preconceived and vivid knowledge structures, to which they are intensely attached. As a result, a strong and harsh reconciliatory experience occurs. Unwilling to accept narratives that confront their own conceptualizations, these consumers are expelled away from their robust knowledge structure conceptualizations. Danielle (24) discusses this in length in relaying her experience of the *OF* exhibit,

“But then again it got better as it went along, but at the same time it was very exhibit in the way that it didn't feel like a TV program anymore, it kinda seemed like, it kind of seemed like a bit of a research piece in a way. Like everything was all picked apart and kinda looked at in ways that I didn't really want to look at it in a way, like I mean. I don't know I think I just missed, just missed experiencing the family and stuff like that, because that was what made me such a huge fan to begin with. So I think it kind of missed that in a way, like I know that it wouldn't have, the people who created the exhibit, chose not to go in that direction. But I think that it probably disadvantaged them in a way by choosing not to do it that way.”

Danielle wishes she had not witnessed the brand backstory after realizing her personal *OF* narrative (a lifelike “real” family) had been exposed as crafted by practitioners and its fictionality revealed. She internally rejects the backstory as she realizes the artifices it explicitly displays, taint and soil her personal brand narrative of a “real life” family. As such, the hyperbolic trajectory demonstrates an internal feeling of struggle as “Bulldozers” grapple with their desire to maintain the heavy load of their preconceived knowledge structures whilst attempting to negotiate the esoteric brand material discovered in the backstory. Danielle

discusses her rapid movement through the exhibit, and disinterest in additional material that did not allow her to relive the brand as she had conceptualized. As such, she says “I wasn’t too keen on reading, like I just wanted to watch stuff and there wasn’t as much stuff to watch though.”

Gabrielle (49) offers a similar sentiment in her experience of the *Herr’s* backstory:

“I mean I think there’s some things that it’s better if you don’t know and [other consumers] are just really curious as to how the chips are made and the flavor’s just part of it so they don’t really want to break it down and find out how the flavor was made or whatever.”

Whilst Gabrielle acknowledges some consumers may express intrigue in the ability to glean esoteric brand knowledge, as a highly health conscious person, she herself feels as if she is better off not knowing ‘insider information’ regarding the snack food brand, preferring to maintain her personal narrative regarding the brand as a wholesome family snack. Where esoteric material does not match predetermined knowledge structures, we see how ‘Bulldozers’ level off or look over the esoteric knowledge discovered demonstrating an attempt to cursorily omit the additional knowledge from their account of the brand backstory. The anxiety provoked here results from too much disclosure from the brand and the tactic of disregarding the esoteric knowledge attempts to regulate or adjust the disclosure to overcome the undesired emotions felt (Feldman, 1979). Because the brand backstory experience detracts from the personal brand narrative, the consumer experiences a hyperbolic trajectory shift away from their personal narrative.

Esoteric Engagement.

“Scaffolders”

“Scaffolders” willingly suspend their disbelief within the brand backstory and use the esoteric material provided within to help build their brand knowledge structures. With loosely defined knowledge structures, these consumers experience a parabolic trajectory: as they engage with the esoteric brand knowledge provided in the backstory and become moderately attached towards these structures. The esoteric knowledge within the brand backstory is scaffolded (Hein, 2002) by consumers to supplement and develop abstract and permeable brand knowledge structures. As such consumers feel grateful for the transparency provided and also express a feeling of comfort towards the brand. Rachelle (20) for example discusses how understanding the behind-the-scenes of the *OF* brand enables an appreciation for the brand as a uniquely New Zealand produced program. Similarly, Neil (50) values the exclusive knowledge witnessed in the *Herr*’s backstory saying,

“Yeah, and I think it’s because it comes off as though they’re proud of what they do and that makes it special. They’re not just showing you chips. They’re saying ‘these are my chips, this is how we do it and I’m proud of the way we do it so I’m gonna show you the thing from beginning to end and yeah, we’re gonna have to walk around here and around here and we’re going to go into a live warehouse, that kind of things and you’re going to see, okay, these chips were rejected’, it’s like they’re willing to share the whole thing. And I think that’s, you know, that’s just a very welcoming, and it’s comforting, I don’t know if that sounds silly, but it’s comforting to know that they are that proud. That I know if I ever had a problem that they’re there to stand by.”

Rachelle explains that the *OF* exhibit allowed for another lensing of the brand that further enhanced her appreciation for the brand:

“I just think it helps me understand more and appreciate it more, and see what goes into it kind of thing. Also with the locations and all of that I know where they've been filming it. Oh and it is actually West Auckland and all that, and I don't know, I suppose it makes me feel more part of the show just to know more stuff about it, rather than just watching it. I actually know, you know what's going on and all that, which I find enjoyable. I'd rather know everything.”

Within the experience, “Scaffolders” attempt to engage in much of the esoteric material provided to craft and update knowledge structures. For *OF* consumers, this meant taking a leisurely pace in navigating through the exhibit as well as an attempt to engage all senses as Rachelle explains in her experience of the living room set within the exhibit: “And you could actually touch it, and see it, you know actually in front of you, that was pretty cool.”

As “Scaffolders” engage all sense, they also become acutely mindful in the processing of the backstory material. Specifically, “Scaffolders” critically explore the brand backstory much like detectives, attempting to process the esoteric material through deconstructing or analyzing. For example, Natalie (34) talks about the “bits and pieces” within the *OF* exhibit sharing her critical views of the installation that attempted to provide esoteric knowledge of the program characters:

“...it was almost like those bits just summarized who the character was, and it would've been nice to do it in more of a background sort of way, of how the writers arrived at those characters. So instead of saying here's the end point read it, it would've been nice to have more of the beginning bit. More of the behind the scenes, the how they developed the psyches of each character, yeah.”

With strengthened knowledge structures and personal brand narratives, “Scaffolders” leave the brand backstory with stronger attachments towards the brand demonstrating the social reward of receiving disclosures (Worthy, Gary & Kahn, 1969). Although the experience inevitably alters “Scaffolders’” personal narrative, they do not become completely enchanted in the brand backstory. Indeed, the manner in which these consumers navigate the backstory through their own critical approach, dismantling and analyzing the esoteric material, restricts a complete suspension of disbelief in the brand backstory and ultimately turns them away from their strengthened personal narratives. “Scaffolders” exemplify how the provision of esoteric knowledge with loose predetermined knowledge generates a contrast effect (Taylor, 1973) that results in an evaluative response on the appropriateness of the disclosure from the brand (Derlega & Grezlak, 1979). As “Scaffolders” navigate the brand backstory through their analytical approach, the esoteric knowledge gleaned is contrasted against their more critical assessments of the backstory, highlighting the differences between the holistic comforting narrative provided in the backstory and consumers’ own piecemeal critical lensing. As such, “Scaffolders” do not experience complete enchantment in their brand backstory experience as an evaluative interpretation is expressed.

“Excavators”

“Excavators” enter the brand backstory with loose conceptualizations within their brand knowledge structures. As with the enticement and desire manifested by the learning of magic tricks (Raphaël, 2007), “Excavators” are compelled to experience as much esoteric brand knowledge on offer, providing greater appreciation for the backstory offered. Experiencing the backstory allows them to update and deepen their understanding and as such, experience a hyperbolic trajectory. “Excavators” ultimately feel greater affinity towards their newly updated conceptualizations within their personal narratives as the esoteric brand knowledge provided adds to their knowledge structures and becomes more valuable through a

contextualization of the esoteric knowledge learnt. “Excavators” are unexpectedly surprised by the exclusive nature of the esoteric material and feel a strengthened affinity towards their personal narrative and the brand. George (34) for example describes how his *Herr’s* backstory experience makes him feel like he has made a ‘connection’. He says,

“So for me they were just chips that I like. And they just happened to be at the price I like to buy that. But now it's a little bit different when you think about again the things that, the people that you’ve met that make those products kind of come to life. There's a little bit of connection there. So I may like another brand for certain reason but I choose *Herr’s* because of the experience that I had.”

The surprise experienced by “Excavators” spawns behavior that attempts to fully engage with material in the brand backstory. And, as they experience the backstory, these consumers attempt to accumulate and immerse themselves in the esoteric material provided. Allie (27) illuminates this in describing her experience in the *OF* living room set,

“I didn’t so much think of the show when I was in the lounge room to be honest I just had such an overwhelming feeling of to me loyalty and wanting to look at things closer than what I was able to watching it on TV. Things that were hanging on the wall or me and my friend opened up, tried to open up all the cupboards in the kitchen and. So many little things like that just wanting to try and get as much detail out of it as possible I think was the main focus.”

Collecting details allows the “Excavator” to simultaneously strengthen their personal brand narrative and further immerse deeper into the backstory providing a complete understanding of the esoteric material on offer as Cybil (57) also elucidates,

“Oh I definitely wanted to have a seat but then it was, only because I’d been there for awhile. I remembered touching the kitchen counter and thinking how authentic that they had made it. Right up to the things pinned on the board and those are the sorts of little detail of a life. You know everybody’s got the third drawer in the kitchen and you open it and its got everything in it. You know. It’s the everything drawer of course. Which brings it to life. I can remember looking at some of the things on the shelves and how they, the level of detail that they had gone to. I don’t know if it’s -. Did I wanna touch it because those other famous people had touched it, no. I was interested in, just in the level of detail.”

Tabitha (38), who claims she is generally unaware of brands purchased in her household, felt that the family outing to the *Herr’s* backstory actually enabled awareness of the values behind the brand, which she found appealing. She explains,

“Like it’s a family business, I think that means a lot when, you know it’s a family business and they have their own children, and you know they worry about them obviously. And then it’s run by the children, you know for their children, and you know it’s really done with, you know pride and, I think in that, you know they’re not gonna give you something that’s bad for you. Because I really think that they think about it, and, you know I mean between everything that that they make is, you know I mean okay it’s all deep fried and everything. But it’s still made with healthy ingredients, you know and, you know I mean the kids don’t eat it every day obviously but, you know when they do eat it you kind of feel better about it because it is made with, you know it’s a family kind of run business.”

We see how consuming esoteric brand knowledge fosters a consciousness of brand values that enables “Excavators” to form a connection or personal affinity with the brand. Tabitha

becomes so enamored by the esoteric brand knowledge presented and states knowing the values behind the product and how it was produced “makes her feel better” about consuming it. As a result, the experience satiates the desire for intimate knowledge and enables satisfaction or enchantment in the brand backstory (Harper & Elliot, 2007). “Excavators” experience a complete suspension of disbelief in the brand backstory as the compelling narrative enables a hyperbolic trajectory shift towards with the newly updated knowledge structure and strengthens personal brand narratives (Escalas, 2004).

4.9 Discussion

Initial Responses and Behavior within the Brand Backstory

The findings illuminate consumers’ initial negotiations and behavior within the brand backstory; notably, the study reveals the dialectical tension between consumers’ desire to discover esoteric brand knowledge and their need to maintain distance or boundary in order to enhance or preserve their knowledge structures. Those with stronger self-brand connections, and well-developed brand knowledge structures, are less willing to accept the premises within the brand backstory narrative thus encounter it with a feeling of paralysis as they observe the information offered. In contrast, those with weaker self-brand connections and thinner conceptualizations within their knowledge structures are more willing to suspend disbelief and accept the premise of the backstory narrative, entering the backstory with provocation and inspection. Accordingly, the various ways in which consumers negotiate the esoteric brand knowledge presented in the backstory result in parabolic or hyperbolic trajectory shifts, towards or away from their personal brand narratives.

Curiosity as an Antecedent Toward the Desire and Experience of Esoteric Brand Knowledge

Prior research shows that curiosity motivates individuals to seek information to confirm or disconfirm hypotheses when knowledge gaps appear (Klayman & Ha, 1987). As the opening quotes illustrates, curiosity may indeed be a salient motivator for experiencing the brand backstory. Indeed the findings show that all informants, including those with fuller knowledge structures, expressed a sense of curiosity about the promise of esoteric brand material within the backstory. However, the findings also indicate that this curiosity renders differently for consumers in the ways that they attempt to navigate the dialectical tension posed by the backstory, demonstrating a function of their self-brand connections. Those with weak self-brand connections are curious and ‘esoterically engaged’ because the backstory allows them to fill gaps in their knowledge structures. Those with strong self-brand connections and comprehensive knowledge structures however, anticipate pleasure in discovering new knowledge about their brand but their ‘agnostic ambivalence’ inhibits their ability to suspend disbelief. Curiosity still drives them to the backstory but it is the anticipated pleasure from satisfying the curiosity (Loewenstein, 1994) that brings the resolution they seek.

Consumers’ Reconciliation of Esoteric Brand Knowledge

The findings also illuminate consumers’ dialogical relationship between their predetermined personal narratives and that of the brand backstory. Consumers’ experiences within the backstory and responses to its content and to the brand vary depending on their willingness to accept the premise of the esoteric brand knowledge. Whilst those ‘esoteric engagement’ consumers all update their knowledge structures as a result of the backstory, for those ‘agnostic ambivalent’ consumers, their personal narratives are matched, supported and (sometimes unwillingly) updated by the esoteric knowledge learnt. Whilst some find pleasure in the knowledge gleaned, for other consumers, the experience results in a highly focused critique of the brand backstory environment, as well as a desire to have not experienced the

brand backstory. Those more critical of their experience of the brand backstory felt a sense of resignation in accepting knowledge that was incongruent with their conceptualized structures. Thus, these particular consumers experienced feelings of rebellion towards the brand. On the other hand, consumers whose conceptualizations within their brand knowledge structures lacked depth, were able to supplement their personal narratives via the esoteric knowledge gleaned in the backstory. These consumers express appreciation or feelings of endearment towards the brand because the backstory enhances their understanding of the brand. Specifically these consumers describe resonance with the sub-narrative of the brand biography, a greater appreciation of the labor efforts involved in establishing the brand (Morales, 2005) and an enhanced emotional connection with brand ethics, values and principles all exhibited within the brand backstory.

Role Distancing within Narrative Reconciliation Strategies

The findings point towards the concept of role distancing that occurs in the micropolitics of consumers' negotiations of the esoteric brand knowledge within the backstory. Defined by Goffman (1975) as "actions which effectively convey some disdainful detachment of the [real life] performer from a role he is performing" (p.110), role distancing occurs as consumers become disorientated within the complex brand backstory environment. The brand backstory environment manifests a type of 'Gruen effect' where consumers enter an unfamiliar and potentially disorientating space in which behavior is directed by cues in the environment that are crafted by the marketer. Here, the marketer is able to assign esoteric information as exclusive, specifying the exclusivity rules and infusing the information with meaning as well as designating the receiver for the information on offer. Accessibility to the exclusive esoteric material within the brand backstory is crafted via the qualification of the consumer as 'insiders'. MacCannell (1976) discusses how backstage environments direct visitors to become qualified as insiders of information. Whilst the 'reveal' sparks curiosity

and intrigue from consumers, drawing consumers further into the backstory storyworld, MacCannell (1976) also notes that the staging or crafting lends the environment a superficiality that is not always perceived and to which the consumer “is usually forgiving about” (p. 98).

However, the findings from consumers’ reactions within this paper provide contrary evidence towards a notion that consumers are very much attuned to the enigma within the brand backstory, that is, its simultaneous revelation and deconstruction of the brand. Whilst we see excitement for those consumers without predefined brand knowledge develop enthusiasm for the esoteric knowledge offered and warmly encapsulate the role offered as an ‘insider’; those with well-defined brand knowledge feel overwhelmed from the new content and find themselves distancing themselves from the role offered.

Role distancing often arises as disdain for a role and is seen through support of a character that is seen as socially advancing (Cohen, 2004). Role distancing “allows one to show that something of oneself lies outside the constraints of the moment and outside the role” (Goffman, 1975, p. 114). Commonly, those consumers with strong self-brand connections and highly formed conceptualizations of the brand distanced themselves from becoming locked into their role as the ‘brand backstory audience members’ by displaying their felt expertise of the brand through enthusiastically emphasizing their knowledge and passion for the brand. As their knowledge structures become reconfigured, these consumers attempt to implement role distancing as embracing the role within the brand backstory would provide support for an ambiguous identity. It is important to note that just as Goffman (1975) did not limit role distancing as an absolute, our findings also show gradations of role distancing and role embracement. This notion accounts for the variety of negotiation strategies enacted within the brand backstory.

4.10 Limitations and Future Research

This exploratory study elucidates consumers' reconciliatory strategies between their personal brand narrative and the esoteric brand knowledge on offer in the backstory. We recognize the complexities underlying the personal narrative construct (Thompson, 1997) and the limitations of this study in enabling a complete distillation of the nuanced themes within subsets of consumers' personal narrative. Broader cultural and social factors may further affect the ways in which the encounter of esoteric knowledge shapes consumers' personal narrative and these present rich opportunities for future research. Future studies could focus particularly on cultural and social factors such as the brand communities and subcultures that brand backstory consumers are situated within (Muñiz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

Whilst consumer research has explored consumers' responses to the appropriation and reconstruction of unknown brand information as originating from consumers (Lanier, Schau, & Muñiz, 2007) demonstrating ownership of this material is contested, less has explored the resulting sentiments towards the brand in focus. An exploration of consumers' negotiations esoteric brand knowledge through mediums such as *Twitter*, would perhaps highlight the sociality of esoteric brand knowledge, particularly if specific focus was placed on the learning of esoteric brand knowledge from other than the disclosing brand (Caughlin et al., 2009).

4.11 Conclusion

With the omnipresence of mobile applications such as *Snapchat* and online social media, consumers have direct access to brands who increasingly provide esoteric knowledge

as an attempt to create a sense of transparency. The overall findings direct attention to the appeal of esoteric knowledge, manifesting a sense of curiosity within consumers. However our findings reveal that while transparency may enable some consumers to deepen their connections with brand, this may not be the case for those with existing strong self-brand connections. The brand backstory may fulfill considerable emotional investment as the esoteric knowledge enables a sense of ‘closeness’ however if the knowledge offered is seen as too transparent, consumers may instead distance themselves from the brand.

Whilst brand practitioners should consider these findings in their strategic provisions of esoteric brand knowledge to consumers as an attempt to foster stronger consumer-brand connections, the findings also speak to an emerging disciplinary project that explores brand narratology and consumers’ responses to new narrative material (Russell & Schau, 2014). In this way, this paper contributes to the reciprocal manner in which consumers maneuver attempts from the brand to forge meaningful and enduring affective bonds with consumers by conveying story-driven meanings that demonstrate an understanding of the consumer (Thompson et al., 2006).

Table 4. Brand Backstory Consumer Informants

Brand	Informant	Gender	Age	Occupation
Herr's	Eileen	F	33	Caregiver
	George	M	34	Human Resource Manager
	Sarah	F	38	Accountant
	Gabrielle	F	49	Caregiver
	Carl	M	61	Retired
	Raewyn	F	44	Caregiver
	Edith	F	37	Accountant
	Tom	M	37	Teacher
	Nelly	F	60	Teacher
	Neil	M	50	Community Business Director
	Randell	M	50	Engineer
	Anne-Marie	F	58	Retired
	Ada	F	58	Retired
	Tabitha	F	38	Public Relations Personnel
	Nathan	M	59	Project Manager
Outrageous Fortune	Serina	F	45	Senior Investment Advisor
	Linelle	F	17	University Student
	Stewart	M	17	High School Student
	Danielle	F	24	Film Assistant
	Adam	M	23	University Student
	Gail	F	50	Nurse
	Rachelle	F	20	University Student
	Elise	F	31	Graphic Design Account Manager
	Laine	F	45	Accounts Payable Clerk
	Deanne	F	37	Communications Manager
	Cybil	F	57	ICT specialist and consultant
	Hayley	F	38	Part time Crane Driver/Caregiver
	Adele	F	46	Teacher
	Lisa	F	20	Teacher
	Tina	F	29	Secretary
	Eva	F	57	Operations Manager
	Annette	F	48	Nurse
	Natalie	F	34	Clinical Psychologist
	Val	F	68	Retired
	Nadine	F	34	Caregiver
	Tony	M	33	Operations Manager
	Daphne	F	33	Caregiver
	Elle	F	32	Sport Development Manager
	Allie	F	27	Project Development Coordinator
	Alexandra	F	53	Beneficiary
Leanne	F	26	Govt Org. Manager	
Darlene	F	44	Caregiver	

CHAPTER 5: EPILOGUE

5.1 General Discussion

Review of Key Findings

By offering in-depth exploration of the conceptualization, manifestation and reception of the brand backstory (see Figure 1, Chapter 1, p. 9) this thesis ultimately provides a holistic understanding of the brand backstory construct, a prevalent branding practice that has received limited attention within the academic marketing literature. Chapter one of the thesis framed the independent papers within and provided a definitional introduction to the brand backstory construct as well as methodological considerations taken in conducting each study.

Chapter two focused on the construction of the brand backstory and explored the narrative construction (Thompson, 1997) of the backstory; highlighting the common myth of family and homeyness exhibited within the two brand backstories studied. It explored the specific elements that contribute to the orchestration of the 'back' regions of social establishments (MacCannell, 1973), with a special focus on how the back region is crafted to be viewed as the front region. In doing so, that paper laid out a solid definitional introduction of the brand backstory construct, situating it within the overall brand gestalt (Diamond et al., 2009).

Chapter three empirically examined the production of brand backstories through in-depth qualitative interviews with creators of brand backstories. The findings direct attention to the strategies enacted by practitioners (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) to fuel a sense of intimacy through the mobilization of consumers within these brand experiences. The exploration of the manifestation of the brand backstory offers clear direction into how a brand narrative is mobilized to initiate and sustain brand goals and aims (Diamond et al., 2009). This paper identified the faceted representations offered within the brand backstory, be they historical or

staged production, allowing the brand to form closer ties with consumers (Escalas, 2004) through the offer of esoteric knowledge.

Lastly, chapter four offered a phenomenological understanding of the consumption of brand backstories from the perspective of consumers. This chapter uncovered the reception of these particular narratives (Hollenbeck et al., 2008) with an emphasis on consumer negotiations of the esoteric knowledge revealed. The findings elucidate the process through which consumers dialectically consider the desire to acquire esoteric knowledge alongside upholding prior conceptualizations or brand knowledge structures. This in-depth exploration of consumers' negotiations of the brand backstory show how consumers are granted a sense of agency (Ahearn, 2001), where they feel they are given access to information that is of esoteric quality. What is shown in the paper is not manipulation by the brand to generate this feeling, but rather a sense of participating in the brand, allowing for closer bonds with some consumers but for others, distancing.

This epilogue elaborates on the points above; first offering a broader reflection and a more general theoretical discussion of how this thesis fits in and extends socio-cultural consumer research; and then discusses the contributions of each paper in greater detail. Finally, the limitations of this research are acknowledged, and directions for future research are suggested.

Reflections from Researching the Brand Backstory Narrative

Exploring the conceptualization, production and construction of the brand backstory illuminates guiding principles enacted by brand practitioners as well as central tenets that structure the brand backstory narrative. Conceptualizations of the brand backstory narrative uncovered within chapter two direct attention towards the sub-narratives within the brand backstory, bringing to light the manner in which truth and trust is manifested and presented

by brand practitioners. By further tracking the production of these narratives within chapter three, we begin to understand how truthful disclosure is enacted to reach specific branding goals. Taken holistically with the inclusion of chapter four, this thesis offers a dyadic view of the envisioned vs. real reception of brand narratives. An emphasis on themes such as family and homeyness, combined with careful crafting of the brand backstory enables trust, responsiveness and validation of the consumer. Thus, the brand backstory practitioner ultimately manifests a sense of the ‘heart’ or the core of the brand and indeed, enables the consumer to perceive the brand backstory as under the brand’s bastion of control. As uncovered in chapter four, some consumers believed that what was presented in the brand backstory experience was the ultimate and only narrative of the backstage of the brand due to their sense that the brand backstory could only be crafted by practitioners behind the brand.

As consumers become increasingly savvy to the tactics presented by brands to sell themselves (Thompson, Rindfleisch & Arsel, 2006), they also sharpen their critical eye or self-consciousness (Ewen, 1976). Aligning with Giddens’s (1984) theory on structuration, we see how the transgression of the rules and conventions of displaying the brand’s backstory to consumers does not result in further resistance and questioning from some consumers, but rather a more matter of fact acceptance of the brand backstory as an additional narrative provided by the brand. The findings within chapter four show for example that some informants did not question the construction or manifestation of the authorial voice within the backstory suggesting that these consumers believed that the brand backstory was the original and only backstory available about the brand, displaying structuration theory at work.

Structuration theory holds that both social structure and individual agency result from the dyadic negotiations between. Prior consumer research that theoretically draws from institutional theory illuminates the process in which an organization is legitimated through the enactment and upholding of social norms through their offerings to the market (Arnold,

Kozinets & Handelman, 2001; Handelman & Arnold, 1999; Humphreys, 2010). Rather than becoming persuaded by the brand, consumers allow themselves to become enchanted or seduced by the brand (Deighton & Grayson, 1995). Much like Handelman and Arnold (1999) found that a minimum level of organizational action was required to meet norms and become legitimated, this research demonstrates how the blurring of boundaries through the purported reveal of esoteric knowledge is accepted by some and countered by others. In an age where information transparency and the deconstruction of truth is prominent, the question is posed as to how and why some consumers' reactions to the brand backstory do not facilitate a counter reaction that calls for greater transparency and/or objection to the brand entirely as a result of the brand revealing and thus directing consumers awareness towards the fact information may have been previously withheld. This notion is probed in this section which discusses the power of the brand backstory in dually providing consumers with a sense of authenticity (Grayson & Martinec, 2004) of the brand backstory and yet giving them agency and ownership (Otnes, Ruth & Crosby, 2014) over the esoteric information shared.

The Illusion within the Brand Backstory Narrative

Ewen (1976) chronicles the evolution of consumer culture through a transformation of the self within advertising. The strength of advertising as a manipulator of social relationships lies in an illusion of freedom of choice in which the hegemonic nature of capitalism is disguised. The mechanisms of the brand backstory work similarly to strengthen the consumer-brand relationship. Within chapter three, the findings direct attention towards the strategies that mobilize consumers towards the brand. Here we see how brand practitioners create an environment where coercion or manipulation of consumers does not occur but rather a conscious movement by consumers to further enhance their relationship with the brand. The illusion within the brand backstory experience as we see in chapter three, lies in the fact that consumers are purportedly given a choice in viewing the esoteric brand

information. The practitioner data reveal that consumers are set up to “discover” or “uncover” esoteric brand knowledge. Further to this, findings in chapter four show that the esoteric knowledge provided in the brand backstory can be viewed as a scarce resource and similar to the divulgement of a secret that requires an access pass to be discovered, a feature also covered within the narrative of the brand backstory as noted in chapter two.

Chapter two illuminates how the brands studied within this research also focused heavily on a narrative of home and family. Much like Arnould, Kozinets and Handelman’s (2001) study on the *Walmart* brand, the brands within this research communicate a “homeyness” (Debenedetti, Oppewal, & Arsel, 2014) mythology that enables consumers to anchor on to the feeling of being invited in by the brand within the backstory. Thus, the backstory adheres to the norms of the system the brand remains in and enables a legitimization of the experience and the brand (Arnould et al., 2001). The brand backstory is thus not a barrier to which consumers must be confronted, but rather becomes a mutually dependent duality in which consumers feel a sense of agency in their action of viewing the brand backstory. As a result, this choice enacts the feeling that the consumer has acted freely without coercion from the brand and thus, the violation that could occur from deconstructing the brand from the inside out in as one experiences the brand backstory does not result. Instead the illusion created gives rise to the “Tinkerbell Effect”.

The Tinkerbell Effect

The Tinkerbell Effect alludes to the character within the *Peter Pan* tale whereby collective thought from a group on a specific idea or notion gives rise to the existence of this idea or notion. Within the onstage production of the tale, the mythical figure Tinkerbell is revived from near death through a request from the audience to affirm their belief in fairies. The audience signal their belief on the existence of fairies through applause and it is through this collective gesture and corresponding collective belief that Tinkerbell is revived from

death in the narrative. The Tinkerbell Effect describes the process through which legitimization of institutional narratives such as the brand backstory occurs. Within the brand backstory the Tinkerbell Effect occurs whereby legitimization of the backstory is propelled via the collective belief of consumers who take part in the experience. Without the belief from consumers, the brand backstory would remain powerless in presenting a narrative of “truth” to consumers. As prior research has uncovered, the legitimization of brands occurs through collective action or a shared ways of interpreting meaning (Kates, 2004). Much of this research has focused on consumers as interpreters of legitimate practices or products (Humphreys, 2010; Kates, 2004). However it should be recognized that prevailing institutional logics dually enable and constrain the agency of actors within (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013), as it is seen with consumers’ negotiations of the brand backstory. The process of legitimizing the brand backstory however is unlike the legitimization of other institutionally produced brand communications. As emphasized throughout this thesis, the brand backstory is a communication where the artifices of the brand are deconstructed for consumers. As such, consumers are given a sense of trust, responsiveness and validation in the brand’s offering of esoteric information, even though the extent to which esoteric information is provided to consumers is limited by the discretion of the brand. Thus, even though the brand backstory dually enables and constrains consumers, not all consumers feel the constraint, as the findings in chapter three denote. The legitimization of the brand communication also here is somewhat more complex in that consumers are shown an orchestrated backstage or the alternative underside to the front-story or the ubiquitous mass-advertised narrative: a hyperreal (Belk, 1996) backstory.

Inventing “Reality” – The Hyperreal Brand Backstory Experience

Hyperreality as conceptualized by Baudrillard (1994) and Eco (1986) is the simulation of reality or alternatively, the simulation or representation of an idea without an

original reference. In constructing the brand backstory for consumers as explored in chapter three, practitioners use methods of disclosure to build a semblance of truth and reality. This, as noted by MacCannell (1973), is an example of how consumers are not shown the real backstage but rather a staged back region that is constructed to simulate a backstage. What may be thought of as the backstory actually becomes part of the frontstory of the brand and the overall brand storyworld. This construction is legitimized by consumers as the truth through the Tinkerbell Effect. Consumers accept the narrative as the hyperreal representation of the backstory as a result of a combination of methods that simulate self-disclosure. The findings of this research suggest that savvy consumers not immersed already within the brand backstory appreciate the truthfulness of the brand – more than being true to reality, but being true to the core of the brand; weaving seamlessly in the established quilt of narratives within the brand storyworld. Whether fabricated or not, the brand backstory fleshes out the brand storyworld, becoming a marker in which the brand is able to immerse consumers within one of many narratives that augment the overall brand gestalt (Diamond et al., 2009). Similar findings can be seen in Gammon and Fear’s (2005) study of stadium backstage tours whereby the power of these tours in becoming representations of salient symbols of cultural heritage lies in the promise of revealing the “authentic” backstage to visitors. Similarly, the brand backstory enables the brand to become a salient representation within its culture, propelling the brands towards iconicity (Holt, 2004). This legitimization of the brand backstory shows the ultimate power of the brand narrative at work.

The Brand Icon

Manifesting the brand backstory into an experience enables consumers to accumulate cultural knowledge or cultural capital that may either enhance their appreciation of the brand or instead, detract from their prior appreciation of the brand. In both cases however, the brand backstory enacts a transformation of the allure surrounding the brand whereby the

accumulation of brand capital within consumers strengthens the brand aura or brand power. Additionally, by focusing on mythologies that establish strong links between consumers and the brand (family and homeyness in the brands studied within this research), the brand becomes a salient representation of these values within its society. This is most evident in the brand *Outrageous Fortune* being featured at the national museum in New Zealand. Brand icons are those that are the most successful and most valuable to consumers in aiding the construction of consumer identities (Holt 2004). This research concludes that those brands that have successfully become institutionally legitimized by consumers become iconic their culture.

5.2 Contributions

The contributions of this thesis reflect Marketing Science Institute's 2012-2014 Research Priority Topic of "Designing Experiences, Not Products. What Accounts for Experiences That Are Remembered, Interesting, Repeated, and Valued?" (see MSI, 2013 Priority 3). Not only does it contribute to new knowledge that may affect business decisions, but it ultimately addresses the need for greater research-based insights and fosters collaboration between practitioners and academics. Ingrained in actual brand backstory cases, the overall strength of this research lies in its ability to explore the phenomenon of the brand backstory from a pluralistic approach that incorporates the perspective of both consumers and brand practitioners, an approach scarcely taken in branding literature.

Overview of Key Contributions

Through an in-depth exploration of the conceptualization, manifestation and reception (see Figure 1, p. 9) of the brand backstory this thesis ultimately provides a holistic understanding of the brand backstory construct, a prevalent concept within branding practice

that has received limited attention within the marketing literature. This research provides three overarching contributions that are first briefly described below and then further detailed in this chapter.

The first specific contribution of this research is methodological. The overarching intensive approach taken with this research whereby facets of a construct were explored through the sampling of a variety of data sources has not yet been commonly employed in Consumer Culture Theory research. The sequential investigation followed in this research, in which the methods chosen build on top of each other, ultimately provides nuanced understandings of the brand backstory construct, from both managerial and consumer standpoints.

The second contribution is a deepened theoretical understanding of the brand backstory within the consumer research domain, bringing to light the manifestation of the crafted piece through the lens of the practitioner and also the final reception through the lens of the consumer. The contributions of this thesis in exploring the conceptualization, manifestation and reception of the brand backstory specifically articulates the allure within the narrative of the brand, outlining the immersive qualities within.

Finally, the third contribution of this research is the provision of practical implications to marketing and advertising practitioners, specifically in identifying successes but also possible disconnects between the envisioned (by practitioners) versus real reception (by consumers) of brand narratives.

Methodological Contributions

The pluralistic approach taken in this research in which data from contextual observations, practitioner interview and consumer interviews offer a holistic perspective to

exploring the construct of the brand backstory. This approach is scarcely taken in CCT research and in taking this intensive approach, offers some significant contributions.

Research that employs the use of in-depth interviews, typically aims at gathering rich insightful description towards theory building rather than theory testing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Cotte and Kistruck (2007) detail the manner in which in-depth interviews with executives such as marketing practitioners and advertising managers are used within multiple method study designs, either as exploratory precursors to large scale quantitative surveys, or alternatively as a follow up method to provide additional depth to quantitative data findings. The authors go on to highlight the benefits of depth interviews with executives, namely; 1. Understood organizational meaning, 2. Understood variety of consumer conceptualizations amongst executives, 3. Depth of understanding unobtainable in other methods. What is of limited focus in prior research however is how interviews with executives or practitioners specifically are used in conjunction with more traditional consumer depth interviews within CCT research as seen in Hamilton & Wagner (2014). What is seen within this thesis is not only the richness of data through in-depth interviews and observations, but also a triangulation of understood brand meaning and understood consumer conceptualizations. As a result, the methods combined offer a deeper perspective into the construct of the brand backstory. This is particularly salient due to the innovativeness and novelty of the construct within consumer research specifically.

Theoretical Contributions

This research first makes theoretical contributions by holistically exploring the conceptualization, manifestation and reception of a specific brand narrative, the brand backstory and provides a theoretically grounded definition for the construct.

Prior research by Malär, Nyffenegger, Krohmer, and Hoyer (2012) has broached a holistic exploration of brand strategies in their study of the envisioned and realized brand personality strategy from the point of view of practitioners as well as consumers. That study however is limited in elucidating the final reception of the brand strategy from the point of view of consumers. Through an interpretivist perspective, this thesis provides rich insights into a sequential understanding of the production and reception of brand stories, illuminating how they are institutionally (re)produced, bounded, constrained, liberated, regulated, seen in the belief in an imagined consumer and received in the actual consumer. As such, this research also makes a theoretical contribution by uncovering the relationships between brand narratives, brand experiences and brand engagement. More specifically, the overall findings point to the tension that can exist between brand backstory practitioners and some brand backstory consumers. Saliently, it can be seen how brand backstory practitioners wish to provide a sense of revealed esoteric brand knowledge through the strategies uncovered in the construction of the brand backstory; yet, we also see the contrasting desires for the reveal of further esoteric information from brand backstory consumers, whereby some consumers welcomed greater information and for others who did not desire any more. This thesis paves the way for a wealth of future research that could explore other potential tensions that may arise between practitioners and consumers in the brand backstory.

Past research has recognized the dearth of branding literature that explores the dynamism and evolution of brands and branding practices (Avery et al., 2010) and this research explores the manner in which a specific brand narrative is conceptualized and offered to consumers. Unlike brand narratives studied in past research, the brand backstory provides unique insights due to its inimitable qualities- both deconstructive and reflective of the brand in nature. As such, the insights provided on the manifestation of this narrative in a physical consumptionscape, particularly through the Consumer Culture Theory interpretive

lensing taken in this research, offer extensions to prior consumer experience research by exploring the faceted notion of staged authenticity. MacCannell's (1973) conceptualization of staged authenticity where authenticity is performed for the consumer, does not delve into notions where the backstage is orchestrated and brought forth into the front stage. This research extends research on staged authenticity of the backstage by exploring the construction and manifestation of the backstage; and also consumers' negotiations of the staged authenticity. MacCannell (1973) argues that tourists seek the 'authentic', however that this may be unsuccessful due to the artificial constructions of the sites of interest being gazed upon, resulting in deterring inquisitive tourists. What is seen within this research is how the artificial construction is not a deterrent for consumers, and indeed many consumers within this research were aware of the construction of the brand backstory. Rather, consumers are drawn to the brand backstory in order to satisfy their search and desire for stronger connections with brands through additional avenues in which they are able to experience the brand.

Ultimately this research responds to Edvardsson, Enquist, and Johnston's (2005) call for a deeper exploration from the producers' perspective into the creation of brand experiences and the *Marketing Science Institute's* call for research on designing experiences (MSI, 2013), exploring the notion that distinctive management and organizational structures, cultures, or practices in firms may be successful in designing consumer experiences that have important outcomes for the brand in strengthening their relationship with consumers.

The relationships consumers build with brands have been well explored throughout consumer research literature (Fournier, 1998; Kozinets, 2001; Muñoz & Schau, 2005). However much focus has remained on consumer narratives where the connection with the brand is understood as somewhat parasocial- much is known about the brand from the point of the view of the consumer. This research attempts to understand the co-created relationships

(Vargo & Lusch, 2008) between consumers and brands, as consumers knowingly become acknowledged by brand practitioners. This acknowledgement of consumers is an evolution in branding increasingly becoming conspicuous as a result of social media, such as *Twitter* for example where brands converse with consumers in real time. Further to this, in understanding consumers' experiences of brand backstories, this research initiates theoretical discussion around consumer responses to brand knowledge that is marketed as esoteric, an exploration called for by Hannah, Parent, Pitt and Berthon (2014). Understanding these experiences sheds further light into the levels of consumer immersion within the brand storyworld that may transpire in the narrative consumption experience (Carù & Cova, 2006) and specifically how brand narratives such as the brand backstory may be provocative in purportedly offering revelations of esoteric information to consumers.

Contributions to Practice

Given the importance of brand narratives on the endurance of a brand (Smith, 2011), brand backstories may be an avenue brand producers may wish to take in positioning their brand in the dynamic market environment. This research first identifies how brand narratives such as the brand backstory can be constructed into consumer experiences and further elucidates how these experiences are leveraged to strategically strengthen the connection between consumers and brands, potentially enabling brand practitioners to initiate intimacy. Hamilton & Wagner (2014) discuss the use of the nostalgia narrative and various devices within physical consumptionscapes to evoke emotional responses that improve consumer experiences (Desai & Mahajan, 1998). The manifestation of the brand backstory in a physical consumptionscape offers insights to practitioners in leveraging the control the brand has over the esoteric information within the brand backstory. As the last bastion of control, the brand backstory within a consumptionscape is a powerful experience and in doing so may be able to leverage stronger connections with consumers.

When devising branding strategies, branding practitioners often begin by considering the opportunities for consumers. The findings within this thesis show how the brand backstory responds to consumers' desires for esoteric information and in doing so, benefits the brand by strengthening the consumer-brand bond and potentially facilitating greater brand loyalty. In manifesting the reveal esoteric information to consumers through the brand backstory however, brands essentially present a narrative that is of disclosure and transparency to consumers. By providing transparency to consumers, brand practitioners should consider the fine line between offering too much information or simply being too provocative in the tone of revealing and substantiating a feeling of confrontation or suspicion from consumers, and revealing or appearing to reveal just enough to substantiate trust from consumers. How much to tell, who to tell and how transparent the brand should present itself can be tailored according to the goals of the brand as presented in chapter three. Chapter four discusses the real and diverse consequences of presenting a narrative that depicts the brand as revealed and as shown. In order to appropriately 'reveal' to consumers, brand practitioners should first consider the outcomes of potentially providing esoteric brand knowledge. In an era in which consumers have been conscious to the tactics used by brand practitioners to sell the brand, it is imperative for brands to strike a balance between showcasing a brand that is revealed and transparent, and maintaining a brand that creates enough interest through its allure by enabling consumers to mold the brand to their own life project (Holt, 2002).

5.3 Conclusions

This thesis proposes that the consumer's dominant perceptions about a brand are located in brand narratives. Moreover, the experience of brand narratives plays an important role in the establishment of emotional and meaningful connections between consumers and brands. As such, exploring the meanings that emerge in consumers' experiences of brand

narratives alongside conceptualizations and constructions of the narratives from the perspective of brand practitioners provides a holistic understanding of how envisioned brand stories emerge as narratives.

Outside the realm of this research domain is the exploration of brand backstories produced by consumers, for example fan-made fictional stories. Lanier and colleagues (2007) find that successful fan fiction involves appropriating and reconstructing unknown brand information and that ownership of this material is contested. Less is known regarding the creation of consumer created backstory material specifically, consumer response to this material and the resulting impact on the consumer-brand relationship. It is noted within this thesis that the brand backstory is a carefully crafted narrative that provides consumers with a staged backstage. An exploration into the construction, production and reception of consumer brand backstories may be a fruitful endeavor in further elucidating consumers' conceptualizations of unknown brand information. Further this avenue may be a counterpoint to this research thesis in addressing the credibility or truthfulness of narratives that surround a brand.

This thesis has also opened up many possibilities to study nuances of the brand backstory that contribute to the various consumer responses such as the credibility of the narrative (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989) i.e. how truthful and believable the brand backstory narrative appears. Adams and Balfour (2011) explain how consumer expectations of open secrets, the abundance of available brand insider information to consumers, may create a difficult situation for organizations that must privilege corporate social responsibility and balance ethical disclosures with the cultural context of values and ethics. Open secrets may become 'masked' when the organization "may not be aware of the unethical and even destructive consequences of organizational action even as they may be quite successful in the marketplace while complying with the letter of the law" (Adams & Balfour, 2011, p. 415).

When ethical disclosures become an afterthought for organizations the potential for social conflicts rise. Thus, the exploration of credibility of the disclosure within the brand backstory could provide brand backstory practitioners with further guidelines to successfully reveal esoteric brand knowledge to consumers. Future research should further explore the findings within this thesis whereby some consumers accepted the reveal of esoteric information and others rather questioned this reveal. For example, exploring the boundary conditions between acceptance and questioning of the reveal esoteric information could potentially inform existing research on the notion of the “willing suspension of disbelief” and consumers’ perspectives of truthfulness or believability of the brand backstory.

A parallel avenue of research could also explore other forms of revealed esoteric material such as a branded “Easter Eggs”- brand material that can be described as an intentional inside joke, hidden message, or consumption segment that is intentionally concealed by the brand and uncovered by consumers. Through Easter Eggs, brands provide consumers with additional consumption opportunities that are both rare and exclusive. These opportunities are extra or additional to the overarching brand consumption activity, usually small or trivial in nature and typically discovered by consumers via word of mouth in brand consumption communities (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009). Examples of Easter Eggs may be hidden extra segments such as alternative scenes in media brand DVDs, or hidden menu offerings by fast food brands. By deeply exploring consumer negotiations of this particular type of brand revelation, additional insights may be garnered particularly on the manner in which consumers seek out and scavenge additional esoteric brand material.

This thesis has brought to light merely one dynamic branding construct now more frequently utilized in marketing, opening up a multitude of avenues future research may take. A holistic approach as the one taken in this thesis, offers rich insights that are often unheeded in branding research. Although this approach requires intensive effort from the researcher, it

is suggested that future research should consider the fruitful and rewarding understandings that may be gleaned via this method, particularly when venturing into underexplored domains.

Table 5. Summary of Data Collected

	<i>Outrageous Fortune</i>	<i>Herr's</i>	<i>Girl Scouts of America</i>	DATA TOTAL
Practitioner Informants (see Table 1, p. 89 summarizing informants)	6 Informants: (6 individual informant interviews + 1 group interview with 3 of the informants = 7 interviews total)	1 Informant: (1 individual interview)	4 Informants: (4 individual informant interviews + 1 follow up interview with 1 informant = 5 interviews total)	11 Total Brand Practitioner Informants
Average Practitioner Interview Length	57.5 minutes	50 minutes	78.5 minutes	
Consumer Informants (see Table 4 p. 132 summarizing informants)	27 Informants: (21 individual informant interviews + 3 paired informant interviews = 24 interviews total)	15 Informants: (15 individual informant interviews)	-	42 Total Consumer Informants
Average Consumer Interview Length	49 minutes	40 minutes	-	
Hours of Field Observation	26 hours	24 hours	18 hours	68 Total Hours of Field Observation
Documented Photographs	48 photos/short videos inside exhibit and exhibit gift shop	9 photos of visitors center and gift shop	76 photos of exhibit, headquarter offices and visitors on tour	
Material Repository and Additional Documents	<i>Outrageous Fortune Revealed</i> museum exhibit souvenir DVD; free exhibit memorabilia; 2 CDs of high quality museum exhibit digital photographs from museum collection; <i>OF</i> museum exhibit guiding charter; <i>OF Museum Exhibit</i> summative evaluation; personal mementos and photographs from consumer interview informants; website screen captures	<i>Herr's</i> Snack Factory free pamphlet; <i>The History of Herr's</i> souvenir book; <i>Herr's</i> Snack Factory post-tour visitor survey; <i>Herr's Snack Factory</i> tour trading card souvenir; website screen captures	Archived documents from official <i>GSUSA</i> archives concerning exhibit proposal, plans, guiding charter and personal communication 2012 <i>Girl Scouts of America</i> (DC) Annual Report; <i>GSUSA</i> visitor scavenger hunt booklet souvenir; website screen captures	

5.4 References

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