Mastering survivorship: How brands facilitate the transformation to heroic survivor

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Abstract
This study investigates the identity transformation from mere survivor to heroic survivor of cancer. Utilizing a multi-method approach, interviews with seventeen female cancer survivors and five blog analyses, this research sheds light on the processes involved in the transformation from mere survivor to heroic survivor and the integral role of brands in this transformation process. Brands are used to signal heroism to the self (inward expression) and to others (outward expression) as well as to combat countervailing forces that deter the survivor’s progress toward mastery of a heroic identity. The findings provide a rich understanding of the heroic archetype and its centrality to the mastery of survivorship. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications for brand managers, giving attention to the importance of consumer–brand relationships.

1. Introduction

Once your treatment is over, you must move on. You must believe that you are healed and move on. Our attitude is everything. So many women live the cancer years after their treatments are over and that is not mentally or emotionally healthy. They hold onto the victim mindset. To become a true survivor you have to move on from this experience and create a new survivor identity. (Beth, 58)

Beth wanted to accomplish more than surviving cancer; her goal was to master survivorship and transform herself into a heroic survivor. To understand heroic survivorship, one only needs to turn to popular media propagated throughout culture. Mass media is full of exemplary portraits of survivors who must face unbearable obstacles only to come out stronger and more powerful on the other side. Stories about survivorship abound, and emphasize the value of survivorship against all odds.

Survivor ideology, however, is somewhat gender biased and harbors a number of stigmas that challenge whether a woman can ever really achieve survivorship. The concept of survivorship typically denotes characteristics that are culturally associated with masculine traits. In fact, according to Oxford Dictionaries, a survivor is defined as such: “a person, typically a male, who copes well with difficulties; a person who survives, especially a person remaining alive after an event in which others have died; a person who continues to function or prosper despite hardships or trauma; a person who continues to live; one who outlives another.”

Although heroic stories have been popularized throughout civilized societies dating back to Homer’s Ilili and the Odyssey among the oldest works of Western literature, American culture today gives increasing attention to the female heroine. Several recent New York Times bestselling books about heroic female protagonists have resulted in blockbuster movies: Wild (2014), the Twilight film series (2008–2012), and the Hunger Games film series (2012–2015) to name a few. However, even in this modern rendition, the fearless Katniss Everdeen (of Hunger Games fame) takes on traditionally masculine warrior traits of strength, bravery and courage coupled, only secondarily, with female traits of compassion and empathy. Prevalent in these storylines is the notion that females are expected to exemplify male characteristics to endure difficulties, and the failure to do so, results in her characterized as weak.

Female cancer survivors, compared to men, similarly face extraordinary societal and cultural pressures not only to survive, but to survive in a heroic fashion. Cultural, social, and financial stressors associated with survival are escalated in the face of traumatic events such as cancer (Barker, 2013; Seale, 2002), and women are more likely than men to cope with cancer by denying feelings associated with disappointment and fear (Seale, 2002). While cancer survival for men is portrayed as a

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test of pre-existing character, for women it is a significant identity transformation.

A cancer diagnosis typically initiates an identity crisis. An identity crisis can be defined as a “transition” from one specific state to another (Parsons, Eakin, Bell, Franche, & Davis, 2008). Cancer survival is complex and may be viewed as three distinct identity transitions: 1) an identity transition from a healthy person to a cancer victim, 2) an identity transition from cancer victim to a survivor, and 3) an identity transition from a mere survivor to a heroic survivor. In this research we focus on the third, insofar uninvestigated, identity transformation. Specifically, we focus on how female cancer survivors master survivorship to transform from a mere survivor to a heroic survivor and the role of brands in this self-transformation process.

There are three main contributions of this study. First, the findings shed light on self-trans formations to achieve mastery of an identity. For cancer survivors, the mastery of survivorship is the transformation from mere survivor to heroic survivor. Notably, while the transformation to heroic survivor is a positive one, it is precipitated by the tragic, unwanted and unforeseen cancer diagnosis. This study thus makes a fine distinction between self-transformations precipitated by pleasurable (Choi, Ko, & Megehee, 2014) or planned events (e.g. retirement, Schau, Gilly, & Wolfinbarger, 2009) and transformations that are hastened by unexpected and unwanted circumstances. Second, this study provides insight into the manner in which mastery over an identity is attained. The findings identify three distinct processes of acceptance, mastery and reinforcement. Notably, while the findings emerged in the context of the mastery of cancer survival and the transformation from mere survivor to heroic survivor, the processes identified might well apply to other identity transformations to mastery, such as the mastery of a leadership position or the mastery of motherhood. Third, a major focus of this work pertains to the role of brands in fostering self-trans formations; specifically, achieving heroic survivorship via symbolic consumption as brands as cultural icons (Holt, 2004; Holt, Quelch, & Taylor, 2004). Consequently, this study broadens our understanding of the powerful meanings associated with brands and how brands are used to send signals indicating inward and outward transformations.

Using a multi-method approach, we interview seventeen female cancer survivors, average age 59, and to triangulate our data we also examine five blogs authored by female cancer survivors. The remainder of the article is as follows. Acknowledging the extant literature on the use of brands to enable self-transformation, this article begins with a tendency in order to improve their own self projection of competency to others. Brands empower consumers with capabilities and, more importantly, brands empower consumers with confidence in achieving a heroic identity.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Consumption and identity construction

Consumption is central to identity and contemporary life and has been characterized as “perpetual shopping” (Baudrillard, 1989). Consumers are identity-seekers and goods provide consumers a way of regulating emotions, gaining social status, and projecting an ideal self (Dittmar, 2008). Brands often serve as “interpretive agents,” helping consumers adhere to what is “normal” and “desirable” (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 875). As such, brands have symbolic functions helping consumers construct, express, and reconfigure identity.

A vibrant stream of research demonstrates the role of brands in identity construction. Brands symbolize human-like attributes (Aaker, 1997), represent values and beliefs (Aaker, Benet-Martinez, & Garolera, 2001) and can be used to bolster one’s self-view (Gao, Wheeler, & Shiv, 2009). Correspondingly, brands are relied upon to restore harmony to an ambiguous, incongruous, or unsatisfying self-concept (Schouten, 1991). Belk (1988) suggests that “we are what we have and that this may be the most basic and powerful fact of consumer behavior” (p. 160). Likewise Ahuvia (2005) reiterates, that a consumers’ sense of self is built upon the people and the things they love.

Indeed, identity and consumption are linked in a wide variety of contexts (for an excellent review see Ruvio & Belk, 2012). For example, recent work has explored identity projects in various contexts including retirement (Schau et al., 2009), loved objects (Ahuvia, 2005), death rituals (Bonsu & Belk, 2003), and dispossession of cherished objects (Price, Arnold, & Curasi, 2000). Products and specific brands often allow consumers to reflect, restore and create new aspects of the self, providing consumers with a sense of control over shaping others’ beliefs about themselves.

2.2. Consumption and transitional identities

Transitional identities are a result of life disruptions (Adams, Hayes, & Hopson, 1976) and often cause a ripple effect including a restructuring of routines, life-styles, relationships, and values (Levinson, 1978). One way consumers cope during times of transition is through consumption (Schau et al., 2009). Possessions to which consumers are attached help them define a present self and consumption can help define a desired self (Mehta & Belk, 1991). Specific brand meanings are especially salient to those in identity transitions as brands are often used to signal an identity to others (Ruvio & Belk, 2012) especially during times of transition Belk, Russell W. (2013). The Digital Extended Self. Journal of Business Research.

Researchers have long suggested that consumers choose brands that communicate a desired identity (Belk, 1988; Douglas & Isherwood, 1979; Holt, 1985; Solomon, 1983). For instance, Schouten (1991) found role transitions to be critical times in determining the quality of consumers’ lives and, during such times consumers have an increased need for self-control. Throughout transitions, the self-concept is often ambiguous and mutable and, in cases where consumers are unable to find harmony with their self-concept, the result can be extreme feelings of regret and dissatisfaction (Belk, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi, 1981). Furthermore, Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1982) suggest the less complete or secure consumers feel in certain roles to which they are committed, the more likely they are to use symbols (such as brands) for role competency in order to improve their own self projection of competency to others. Schouten (1991) posits that consumption activities foster the maintenance and development of a stable self-concept during transitional identities.

Brands serve as a means for boosting self-esteem and expressing identity via explicit identifiers of wealth, status, or luxury (Holt, 2004). Consumption can be used to express not only indications of social class (OstUNeR & Holt, 2014), but luxury products have important signaling functions in relationships (Yajin & Griskevicius, 2014), and possess more influence in the marketplace (Ko & Megehee, 2012). Furthermore, when consumption is conspicuous, consumers engage in social competition to enhance their status (Ordabayeva & Chandon, 2014). In relation to identity construction, brands are useful tools in a social context for signaling an identity to others and, more importantly, brands empower consumers with confidence in achieving a heroic identity.

2.3. Becoming a heroic survivor

Survivors of cancer consistently report a low quality of life, especially with regard to physical, role, and social function and a high level of symptoms and problems especially with financial difficulties and pain (Masika, Wettergren, Kohi, & von Essen, 2012). Consequently, the transition to a strong and well-grounded survivor identity is a critical component of cancer survival. Research documents that an established survivor identity correlates with psychological well-being and post-traumatic growth (Park, Zlateva, & Blank, 2009). The individual
consumer must be able to be her own architect, envisioning and then mastering a survivor identity.

Heroic survivorship is a psychological state in which a survivor feels a sense of mastery about what it means to be a survivor and exudes power and authority over her own set of given circumstances (Rucker, Galinsky, & Dubois, 2012). Mastery comes from being the best survivor she can be. The heroic survivor archetype helps consumers enact desired abilities and fulfill roles that they may not necessarily believe they are capable of doing. The heroic archetype is not taught to survivors, rather, it is a primal, original human prototype (Megehee & Spake, 2012) embedded in the social and cultural context of human experience (Jung, 1981). Specific brands play an important role in enabling survivors to achieve a pleasurable life by mentally and physically enacting the heroic archetype (Woodside, Sood, & Miller, 2008).

Turning to Holt and Thompson (2004) for a grounded understanding of a heroic identity, their work shows that mass culture advances and influences heroic ideals among males. They suggest that compensatory consumption, otherwise known as using consumption for relief from pressured conformity to culturally-driven roles (e.g., Belk & Costa, 1998; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995; Sherry et al., 2001), fails to capture the most powerful idealizations forged through consumption. Thus, men do not consume merely to escape conformity. Rather, Holt and Thompson (2004) find that men engage in pleasurable tensions between idealized masculine identities, namely the “breadwinner” and the “rebel,” to employ a “man-of-action” identity. Their findings show that masculine identity construction moves through two cultural productions: mass culture discourses and everyday consumption practices. Building upon this work, we surmise that a heroic identity is an identity that is idealized in American culture, may be a source of satisfaction and contentment and can be attained via everyday consumption. The present study explores the mastery of heroic survivorship among female cancer survivors.

To master an identity is to take control of life circumstances and exude power and strength in not only attaining the desired identity, but going beyond by reaching for higher life goals that resemble excellence and a deeper sense of satisfaction and fulfillment (Greene, 2013). Research shows that the desire to display power and strength is associated with the consumption of brands (Han, Nunes, & Drèze, 2010; Mazzocco, Rucker, Galinsky, & Anderson, 2012; Rucker et al., 2012). We posit that brands not only signal survival, but can also be used to signal mastery of a desired identity. Such signals could be directed to a general audience or to select individuals important to the signaler (Berger & Ward, 2010; Han et al., 2010; Wernerfelt, 1990) or signals to self.

3. Method

3.1. A multi-method approach

Our study began by attending two cancer survivor awareness campaigns and conducting 22 brief interviews during and after the campaigns. Through these initial brief interviews, we identified seventeen volunteers who invited the researchers into their homes for three consecutive home visits. All home visits were with women, average age 59, who had been diagnosed with a form of cancer, had completed active treatment for cancer for a year or more prior to the study, and, were now considered “cancer survivors”. All informants live in the southeastern United States and home visits ranged from 90 to 120 minutes in length. The sessions were audiotaped and transcribed in their entirety.

During the home visits, the researchers sought to create an environment where the participants felt at ease and comfortable discussing their personal experience with cancer. Face-to-face interviews in the relaxed environment of the survivors’ homes allowed the researchers to delve deeper into fully extrapolating the personalized meanings of brands. All interviews were characterized by a conversational quality in which the course of interview dialogues was largely set by the participant (Thompson, 1997). The interview guide for home visits was flexible, and we adapted to each participant and her unique constraints. As the research field was particularly sensitive, and the interviewees vulnerable, we remained attentive to the interviewees’ experiences and addressed their personal needs during the interview process such as stopping for short breaks, snacking during the interview, or allowing time for emotional release. Although the topic was sensitive, the women expressed gratitude for being offered the opportunity to discuss their feelings, and to be able to talk freely about their personal experiences with cancer.

During three consecutive home visits, the researchers focused on different aspects of brands in the lives of participants. The first home visit explored current brand usage in everyday situations. Participants were asked to collect their favorite brands before the interview, and in a conversation that typically took place at the kitchen table, participants were asked to reflect on why the brand is a favorite. The second home visit focused on the use of brands in expressing a desired identity. For offline branded expressions, interviews transpired as the researcher walked through the homes of participants exploring the refrigerator, cupboards, cabinets, pantries, and closets. The researcher scanned rooms and public display areas, flipped through picture albums, and looked on counter spaces. Discussions between the researcher and the informant explored new brand acquisitions, brand usage that was maintained before and after cancer, and brand “dumping” which related to brands that were disposed of after cancer. The third home visit focused solely on brands shared in digital spaces, such as Facebook. The informant and the researcher sat down together in front of the interviewee’s personal computer and the informant guided the researcher on a virtual tour of her favorite websites. The researcher viewed the informant’s social media profiles (e.g., her Facebook page, her Instagram account, her Pinterest account) and asked questions in a conversational style. Facebook was used as the primary means for cross-case comparisons as all of the informants in this study had a Facebook account.

Following prior work advocating the use of multiple methods for both collecting and interpreting consumer–brand relationships (Woodside, Megehee, & Sood, 2012), projective techniques were used during the second and third home visits to fully understand a brand’s meaning. For example, informants were asked to relate found brands to animated objects, asked to situate a brand within the context of an imaginary story, asked to match brands with similar personalities, or asked to develop an ad for a brand using their own descriptive adjectives. Visual story boards served as an interpretive tool for conversing with informants about their relationships with brands (Woodside et al., 2012). The visualizations offered a “multiple-conversation paradigm” and served as a means for interpreting nonconscious (brand) information” (Woodside et al., 2012).

Data from the home visits were combined and analyzed using conventional iterative interpretive methods (Spiggle, 1994). The researchers analyzed verbatim quotes using the part–whole process of hermeneutic analysis (Thompson, 1997). The researchers tackled back and forth between theory and data analysis using a constant comparative method (Belk, Sherry, & Wallendorf, 1988). A constant comparative method is an iterative process where analysis is ongoing as data is collected, such that each interview informs the next interview. This comparative process continues until “conceptual categories are saturated and reach a point of redundancy, making further data collection unnecessary” (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989, p. 3). Using the ATLAS software, the researchers developed codes for different themes and, through data reduction the data merged into more general themes and categories. Table 1 provides profiles of the cancer survivors that participated in the home visits and the key brands discussed.

To triangulate the findings, purposive and theoretical sampling was used to select and analyze 5 blogs authored by women (Belk et al., 1989; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to prior studies, first-person
accounts, through digital self-expressions such as blogs, serve as textual and historical data (McQuarrie, Miller, & Phillips, 2013; St. James, Handelman, & Taylor, 2011). Blogs are primary sources of data which offer cultural and societal insights over time (Sewell, 2005). The blog analysis offered a means for investigating our emergent themes with survivors using a different mode of self-expression. The blogs selected were written in English, authored by an amateur blogger and had a sizable group of followers, comprised mostly of family members and other cancer survivors. The blog analysis used a constant comparative method for cross-case comparisons of verbal texts with an emphasis on narratives related to specific brands. Line-by-line analysis was used in categorization and dimensionalization of the text (Spiggle, 1994).

Then, visual narrative art was used as a mapping exercise where blogger stories were created from their blog entries. These interpretations were useful in understanding the nature of the brand and the blogger (Woodside et al., 2012). The authors of this study and two paid research assistants independently analyzed published blogger posts. Using the process of iteration, the researchers moved back and forth between blogger posts and our in-depth interviews, and this allowed for part to whole comparisons (Spiggle, 1994). Table 2 offers a descriptive summary of the five bloggers. The blogs served as a means for negative case analysis, and further substantiated the themes from the interviews. No contradictory findings emerged.

### 4. Findings

After conducting qualitative research with female cancer survivors via face-to-face interviews and an exploration of blogs, an important theme emerged within and across all cases: the desire to master survivorship by achieving a heroic archetype. This desire was not related to sexual or body type ideals. On the contrary, interview informants in this study described a strong desire to be brave, independent, emotionally strong, and capable. Brands provide a means for achieving this heroic archetype.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informant name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Heroic brands (as outward signals)</th>
<th>Heroic brands (as inward signals)</th>
<th>Newly acquired brands</th>
<th>Relinquished brands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Kashi snack bars</td>
<td>Blue Sky, Lucky Brand</td>
<td>Ecco Bella Makeup</td>
<td>Cover Girl Makeup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audrey</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>LL Bean sheets</td>
<td>Teddy's soda</td>
<td>Organic Valley egg whites</td>
<td>Grocery store brand eggs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernice</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Newman’s coffee</td>
<td>Birnaturaes foods</td>
<td>Nourish deodorant</td>
<td>Secret deodorant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Avalon hand lotion</td>
<td>Starbuck</td>
<td>SmartWool slippers</td>
<td>Kmart slippers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doris</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Tropicana juice</td>
<td>Tony Lama Cowboy Boots</td>
<td>Bridgedale socks</td>
<td>Nike socks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elise</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Manuka healing honey</td>
<td>Styleko. dresses</td>
<td>Ruby Tuesday’s salad bar</td>
<td>Burger King whoopers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fran</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>Apple and Bee bags</td>
<td>Quaker Oats cereal</td>
<td>ORP nail polish</td>
<td>Revlon nail polish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazel</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Puma running shoes</td>
<td>Boots No7 face cream</td>
<td>Locally-owned retail Stores</td>
<td>Wal-Mart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Steve Madden leather boots</td>
<td>Chobani yogurt</td>
<td>Chipotle Mexican Grill</td>
<td>Taco Bell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Numi tea, Burt’s Bees products</td>
<td>Braun Electric Shaver, Sno Pac frozen veggies</td>
<td>Avenda Soap</td>
<td>Coast Soap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Schwinn bikes</td>
<td>Miss Dion perfume</td>
<td>Robert Marc glasses</td>
<td>Iod glasses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jada</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>Alba products</td>
<td>Smart Balance butter spread</td>
<td>Coach bag</td>
<td>Fossil bag</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>Back to Nature crackers</td>
<td>Amy’s Kitchen frozen dinners, 3/50 Project</td>
<td>Alfani dress</td>
<td>Merona dress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>HoMedics humidiifier</td>
<td>Patagonia clogs</td>
<td>Toms toothpaste</td>
<td>Crest toothpaste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Nature Made vitamins</td>
<td>Estée Lauder skin care products</td>
<td>Apple iPad</td>
<td>Dell laptop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Wheat Thins</td>
<td>Boca veggie burgers</td>
<td>Subway</td>
<td>McDonald’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>Contigo water bottle</td>
<td>Vitamin Water</td>
<td>Athletic Club</td>
<td>Gold’s Gym</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.1. Acceptance of the new identity

The feeling of loss is a critical component of the experience of cancer, and although a woman may survive cancer, the feeling of dissonance between a woman and her body and the longing to make amends or peace with herself may remain well beyond treatment and recovery (Rosedale, 2009). Informants discussed how they had to reconcile incongruities with an unstable self during post-survival stages. For instance, Jane experienced feelings of doubt and disorder once she survived cancer as she attempted to make sense of her experience and accept the fact she had survived. According to Sekse, Raaheim, Blaaka, and Gjengedal (2009) one’s psychological state is mirrored in the biological state, and the converse is also true. Struggling to find balance and harmony deep within herself, she determined to transform herself into a strong, independent woman. However, before Jane could move past her own pain and disappointment, she had to acknowledge that her wellness had been disrupted, and through this process she began to question her own body and its reliability and, she reflected on her body as a body (van Manen, 1990).

I had to learn to live and I feel really bad for the stage four cancer patients who are learning how to die... I was told [by other cancer survivors] to ‘connect, communicate, and conquer’ but then I had to figure out how to do that on my own. Even though the support groups [face-to-face groups supported by the local hospital] were there, it was a personal journey, I had to go within…and I had to get to know myself and by body all over again. (Jane, 63)

It was not until Jane made the decision to survive in a heroic fashion, that she was able to feel successful. Jane, like other participants, subdued weak or vulnerable tendencies that stemmed from self-doubt and self-criticism. Jane conveyed: “I had to shut down my weaknesses and find ways to become strong and I started walking on a different path that was leading me toward a new Jane that was much more confident.” Jane began a journey toward heroic survivorship.

4.1.1. The power of connection with like-minded heroines

Loneliness and isolation are experienced by all cancer survivors to some extent and such symptoms can lead to bouts of depression (Rosedale, 2009). Even though the hard-fought battle of cancer is over, the survivor may still feel isolated and alone. Research suggests...
environmental and physiological stressors are important predictors of depression (Hawkley et al., 2008) and, experiences like cancer are major sources of both types of stressors (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2007). In addition, the feeling of loneliness is found to be stronger among more women than men and, women struggle with more emotional imbalances after cancer (Cacioppo, Fowler, & Christakis, 2009).

Connecting with other like-minded individuals helped survivors cope with their transition to heroic survivorship and pushed them forward in mastering their new identity. Research by Chan, Berger, and Van Boven (2012) shows consumers who have a strong desire to communicate identity typically conform on choice dimensions that are strongly associated with their group. Likewise, blog narratives examined in this study confirm that survivors typically subscribe to common brand identities. All five blog narratives discussed symbolic attachments to brands with a strong identity like Disney and Apple, organic food brands, and well-known, non-for-profit cancer related brands. Whether it is for leisure (e.g., Disney) or for achieving better health (e.g., Earthbound Farm organic foods), brands discussed symbolize strength while providing a connection to other survivors. All five blogs were very active with collaborative comments among survivors, connecting with one another while making recommendations for specific brands (see Table 2).

Likewise, a connection to others and a common linkage to similar brands empower interview participants. For example, Audrey had old bedsheets for 10 years until she finally gave them to charity. She bought new LL Bean sheets because another survivor friend (who is also a survivor and a mentor for Marsha) has the same sheets.

Marsha [her mentor] told me about these [sheets] and she got her’s a year ago. Before cancer I wouldn’t have spent the extra money to get them, but it really makes me feel good...I bought my LL Bean Supima Flannel sheets and it’s like $50.00 for one sheet and I wouldn’t have done that before [before cancer] but they make me feel like I’m taking care of myself and I’m surviving. When I sleep on them, I think of Marsha and I think of all the other survivors, and in-effective in curing cancer...

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blogger</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Relation to heroic brands (inward)</th>
<th>Relation to heroic brands (outward)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blogger 1</td>
<td>Female, 55 Total number of brand mentions: 1767 Unique brand mentions: 270</td>
<td>Blogger 1 started her blog as a humorous way to cope with getting breast cancer. She is a private person and felt social support through talking about her life on a blog. She now lives a lot of meaning and purpose from her blog. She advocates for people with cancer and has won the Healthline Contest for best health blog.</td>
<td>Blogger 1’s changing brands seem to relate to both the physical and the psychological components of having cancer. For instance, she eats different foods as she tries to gain weight. She also talks about cancer medications. However, she has abandoned some “younger” clothing brands, since the cancer has aged her physically. Exemplar Brands: Amys, Amazon, Apple, Earthbound, Kashi, Kindl, Soma and the City, Uggs, Disney, Latisse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogger 2</td>
<td>Female, 29 Total number of brand mentions: 137</td>
<td>Blogger 2 is a young woman who undergoes breast cancer treatment while planning her wedding. She unfortunately has a rare genetic disorder that predisposes her to lifelong cancer risk. She created her blog to reveal the emotion journey of breast cancer. Books, Disney, Latisse.</td>
<td>Blogger 2 radically changed her lifestyle to be more active and healthy before she got breast cancer. However, breast cancer and her genetic disorder have given her an added impetus to be healthy. She also identifies with fashionable brands in conveying a sense of heroism. Exemplar Brands: Betsy Johnson, Earthbound, Weight Watchers, Healthy Choice, Disney Channel, Chanel, Chobani, iPhone, Starbucks, Apple.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogger 3</td>
<td>Female, 24 Total number of brand mentions: 67 Unique brand mentions: 34</td>
<td>Blogger 3 found out she had leukemia at age 22. She decided to blog about her experience through the New York Times. Blogger 3 is a high achiever and enjoys giving back to others. She receives a sense of accomplishment and purpose from blogging.</td>
<td>Blogger 3’s blog gives attention to utilitarian brands such as her blackberry. Since her blog is in the New York Times, her posts are more concise and directed to her audience. Exemplar Brands: American Apparel, Apple, Facebook, Skype, HBO, New York City Ballet, Apple, Disney, Earthbound, Kashi, Vitamin Water, Silk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogger 4</td>
<td>Female, 35 Total number of brand mentions: 41 Unique brand mentions: 23</td>
<td>Blogger 4 started her blog as a form of emotional release. She had a mastectomy, but did not have additional major treatments. In her blog, she emphasizes moving on and creating a new life. She doesn’t want cancer to hold her back.</td>
<td>The brands Blogger 4 mentions center around her children. An important brand for Blogger 4 is Disney. She mentions Disney weekly and travels with Disney to her children’s fix. On Disney as the “happiest place on earth” serves as a way for her to escape “cancerland.” Exemplar Brands: Disney, Track Your Happiness, Ted Talk, iPod, Pinterest, Apple.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogger 5</td>
<td>Female, 45 Total number of brand mentions: 213 Unique brand mentions: 78</td>
<td>Blogger 5 started her blog as a way to deal with her emotions 5 years after her diagnosis. Not only did she have cancer, but her husband also left her “out of the blue” a year before her diagnosis. As a result, she wants to begin her own charity helping women who are coping with divorce.</td>
<td>Blogger 5 says that she ate too many sweets and she worries this is what gave her cancer. Disney/ Pixar are especially important brands for Blogger 5. These brands relate to hope of making things normal for her and her kids. Exemplar Brands: Disney/ Pixar, Swedish Fish, Gozete Caramels, Target, Frye Boots, Apple, Whole Foods, Justin’s Peanut Butter Cups.</td>
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All of our face-to-face interviewees discussed the importance of virtual connections to others. Heather reiterated that positive affirmations via Facebook are important in motivating her to accept her new identity.

I like these new pair of Steve Madden black leather boots because they make me feel powerful and they look bad ass. As soon as I put them on, they make me feel free and in control... as soon as I posted a picture with my boots on Facebook, I got all kinds of recognition. It was like a bunch of high-fives. (Heather, 48)

Comments to Heather’s post (noted above) ranged from the brand of boots and where to buy them to how much the boots cost. One survivor friend commented: “I can’t wait to get my own Steve Madden boots!” Heather suggests “I got all these Facebook likes when I posted my picture in my boots and this made me feel like I could conquer the world.”

Informants learned to utilize social media in order to connect with other survivors and gain affirmations, which helped them accept their new identity and move toward mastery.

4.1.2. Discovering the authentic hero inside

Equally important as connecting with others, in becoming heroic, survivors must accept themselves in their truest form, recognizing and adhering to their own desires and interests. The quest for personal authenticity is especially challenging for survivors who often feel some degree of marginalization from the general population (Fogel, Albert, Schnabel, Ditkoff, & Neugut, 2002; Telch & Telch, 1986). As many as 30% are likely to have continued poor health, 17% are unlikely to ever return to work, and, 58% have one or more functional limitation (de Moor et al., 2013).

Amid the common burdens associated with the aftermath of cancer, participants interpolated peace and contentment via self-discovery. Going within allowed for a purposeful focus aimed at contributing to a higher cause. For Kathy, her religious-like pursuit of self-discovery led her to initiate a 3/50 Project in her small town; a pro-local-business brand aimed at raising the awareness of supporting the local economy. Kathy’s acceptance of her new survivorship identity was complemented by her desire to do something remarkable for locally owned businesses and artists. Rather than tidying away locally-made necklaces in her closet or storing them in her jewelry box, she displays local jewelry on her walls.

My passion just came to me after I survived cancer...One day I just said to myself ‘local is important to me and I want to do something about it and help out’...I just started liking colorful, hand-made jewelry made by a local artist. It makes me feel like I am doing something for myself and I’m supporting her [the local artist] because I love her jewelry, and it makes me feel unique and I like that. (Kathy, 64)

According to Mead (1928), we have to distinguish ourselves from other people and this is accomplished by doing something for ourselves that other people cannot do or do as well. Participants told stories about how cancer revealed their inner desires to do something great. In realizing their passions, informants set out on a course to bring to fruition their desire to do something special and unique that resembled heroism. The meaningful act of excelling beyond survivorship to achieve excellence and deeper satisfaction was a driving force toward mastering their new identity.

Similar to Kathy, other participants described instances where they were compelled to do more, to push themselves further to find an inner desire or passion because they felt they were given a second chance at life. The heroic archetype is incarnated through a higher cause that is personally satisfying. Examples of excelling beyond survivorship to do something great include: becoming an extreme athlete (Julie, 63; Doris, 50; Blogger 2), teaching other women (Audrey, 64; Beth, 58; Laura, 52), writing a book with the goal of helping others (Laura, 52; Blogger 1, Blogger 3), participating in mission trips (Elise, 63 and Juda, 72), initiating a local garden club (Patricia, 59), and starting her own local charity (Bernice 61, Blogger 5).

4.2. Mastering the new identity

The mastery of an identity is driven by a primal force that guides a survivor forward. There is an inspiration to go beyond simply arriving...
at a new identity by striving for higher pleasure and fulfillment. Mastery is a religious-like quest for a higher level of excellence and a deeper sense of satisfaction and fulfillment in daily routines (Leonard, 1992). According to Greene (2013), there is a major barrier to achieving mastery, and it is summed up as counterforces. Three important counterforces emerged from our data analysis: 1) doubting one’s own ability to survive, 2) fixating on the past and feelings associated with the past, and 3) wallowing in a self-indulgent attitude concerning one’s own difficulties. In the following, we describe these counterforces from the participants’ points of view.

4.2.1. Doubt: My ability as a woman
A prominent counterforce that participants grappled with is the historical and cultural depictions of femininity. Schroeder (2003) suggests that gender is much more than a demographic variable and should be considered a basic cognitive construct and a cultural category that explains consumer behavior. Through the course of interviews, participants explained that they came to adulthood during a time when women began openly advocating for their rights, and they told stories that alluded to their awareness of cultural depictions of women as “weak” and “vulnerable.” Fran conveyed that she works hard to appear self-reliant because she doesn’t want to appear “fragile” or “needy” as the latter traits are associated with weakness. Fran directly compared heroic traits with masculine characteristics and she described instances when she uses brands, like Levi jeans, to symbolize “manliness” and provide herself with a sense of mastery.

I don’t typically wear dresses because I prefer pants. I like Levi jeans because they make me feel more comfortable and I feel like I can do anything around the house in my jeans. I can change a light bulb or go to the grocery store. My jeans work for any occasion…I think people know that I’m a rugged person and not afraid to get my hands dirty. (Fran, 69)

Social-historical advertisements of Levi jeans are typically aimed at rugged men doing manly chores while wearing the jeans (Gentry & Harrison, 2010). Fran utilizes these culturally embedded depictions of masculinity to express her own sense of heroism to others. Fran says: “after cancer I’m proud [of wearing Levi jeans] and I’m more likely to show off my jeans to other people because I want to be a strong survivor.” In wearing Levi jeans, Fran overcomes counterforces associated with roles and identities associated with gender. Levi jeans offer fulfillment in Fran’s day-to-day routine by allowing her to feel more self-assured and presumptuous. She masters her new heroic identity as she wears the Levi jeans while performing the same tasks traditionally assigned to men (e.g., changing a light bulb, getting her hands dirty).

4.2.2. Remembrances of the past
Another common counterforce among survivors in this study is hurtful or painful memories associated with past experiences. Here again, brands played an important role in allowing the survivor to free herself from the past by letting go of brands linked to a negative past experience. As part of her self-transformation process, Laura took pleasure in freeing herself from a brand that resembled herself before cancer.

I didn’t want to be loaded down with all of these things [brands] that were no longer being enjoyed. My philosophy is ‘if I don’t enjoy it, it goes.’ My sickness made me want to free myself of the clutter that had taken up so much of my living space. I wanted to be healthy like a lot of women in my support group. We tell each other about products that are cleaner or healthier. And I wanted to fix my own things… I want to find things that are healthy for me. I have thrown out lots of stuff…the humidifier has been replaced with an environmental friendly one…the half-used toothpastes have all been thrown out and now we use Toms. (Laura, 52)

As Laura’s narrative demonstrates, surviving cancer prompts participants to discard brands that fail to resemble a heroic archetype. Informants also described replacement brands that offer a more suitable representation. For instance, when we examined Juda’s kitchen, she conveyed that her beautiful William Sonoma olive oil bottle sitting on the counter serves as a daily reminder that she is purifying her body. This bottle was a replacement for a dark, cheap olive oil container from Target. Juda’s new bottle is “clear, clean, and beautiful just like my body” and the oil that goes in the bottle is “fluid just like my insides.”

4.2.3. Resisting notions of self-pity
An important counterforce conveyed by participants is the temptation to pity oneself. Participants described how learning to express self-love was a healthy response to exaggerated self-pity. As we walked through participants’ homes, they discussed specific roles brands played in anchoring self-love, as opposed to self-pity, mindsets.

I constantly feel this pressure to succeed and overcome cancer, but it is not that easy. People think that the tough part is over when the treatments end, but I still struggle…fear of reoccurrence can be overwhelming. I want to just give up. But I look at my Numi tea sitting on the counter and it says ‘come on let’s get on with the day’ and just holding a cup of fresh brewed tea gives me that extra boost needed to go on at work, to be competent at my job. (Jackie, 52)

Jackie has a basket of Numi tea that sits in the middle of an island in her kitchen. It is centrally displayed as a reminder to take time to care for herself. Jackie uses the phrase ‘Numi at Nine’ to mean that she drinks tea at nine in the morning and nine in the evening. Feelings of doubt and insecurity continually batter Jackie as she resists temptations to pity herself and her reconstructed body resulting from a double mastectomy. Jackie uses brands, such as Numi tea, as a means for coping throughout her day. Although we did not visit Jackie’s workplace, she described brands that evoke confirmations of survivorship at her work desk.

When I get to my office, my Burt’s Bees lip balm and lotion are sitting there waiting for me. I love the smell and feel of Burt’s Bee. When I begin to have negative thoughts about cancer, I reach for my lip balm and then, rubbing my lips together, I say a prayer to God to help me through this day. I tell myself that I love myself and I try to be kind to myself all day, like using as much Burt’s Bees lotion as I want and not worrying about running out. It sits on my desk where everyone can see it and everyone in the office knows that I love Burt’s Bees. (Jackie, 52)

For Jackie, products such as Burt’s Bees and Numi tea reflect her heroic transformation, downplaying weaknesses and fostering a sense of strength and courage. The brand language for the products noted above embodies “natural” and “healthy” concepts and Jackie adopts the brand’s language to signal survivorship to herself. Jackie’s narrative illustrates that brands embody personal meaning for survivors. Brands serve as inward signs of “taking care of” self and usage offers subtle reminders of the heroine she can be.

4.3. Reinforcing the new identity
Brands play an important role in reinforcing the new identity. Wicklund and Gollwitzer (1981) suggest the less complete or secure consumers feel in certain situations, the more likely they are to use symbols (such as brands) for role competency. Our findings reveal that survivors use brands to fulfill archetypal character traits within the context of a heroic identity. Brands provide a means for exemplifying heroic traits and balancing the tensions between incompatible characterizations such as rational versus irrational, independence versus connectedness, or excellence versus imperfection.

Tensions were explored using projective techniques. Participants were asked to describe a brand as either male or female, explain what
kind of car the brand would drive, and give the brand a career and a personality. Using a continuum, participants evaluated brands as male versus female, and, strong versus weak. This technique provided insight into informants' cultural understanding of brands and how perceptions associated with brands are used to fulfill heroic roles. In essence, when informants feel weak, they select brands with masculine traits self-reported as strong, courageous, and independent to appear strong to others and to signal strength to self. Cultural depictions of gender in marketplace discourse positions women as vulnerable (Martin, Schouten, & McAlexander, 2006), thus, within a cultural and sociological framework, femininity is associated with connectedness, emotionality, and irrational behaviors; whereas, masculinity is associated with strength, courage and rational behaviors (Coleman, 2012). Within this social and cultural context, informants navigate heroic survivorship, utilizing brands associated with enhancing strengths or diminishing weaknesses to portray masculine versus feminine traits in order to exude a heroic identity. Symbolic consumption reinforces the heroic archetype and provides visible evidence of mastery.

4.3.1. Enhancing strengths versus diminishing weaknesses

In mastering survivorship, there is a collective desire for achieving excellence among informants in this study by enhancing strengths and acknowledging and diminishing weaknesses. The pursuit of excellence is a shared attitude among heroic survivors, and an important distinguishing attribute separating heroic survivors from mere survivors. While informants strive for excellence, they discussed a simultaneous realization of their weaknesses or imperfections. Further discussions revealed how brands help restore balance and harmony when confronting imperfections.

For instance, Julie's story exemplifies how the Nike brand allows her to feel excellent at running while realizing her imperfections. Julie runs on a regular basis, but conveyed that running is not her strong suit. However, Julie believes her Nike running shoes allow her to master the heroic identity while realizing her imperfections.

Nike has the 'just do it' slogan and that really resonates with me. I tell myself that I've got to just do it. Sometimes I can't stop and think of all the things I have to do...I just do the next thing...When I wear my Nike shoes, I feel more confident because I'm always on the go and when I look down at my shoes I see the swoosh and it reminds me that I am a hero. (Julie, 63)

Nike served as a visible reminder of heroic survivorship for Julie. When she sees the swoosh symbol, Julie feels a sense of confidence in her ability to do things well. Julie explains that she would never have attempted her desire to complete a triathlon without her Nike running shoes. The Nike brand reinforces Julie's heroic survivorship identity to the extent that she also participated in a triathlon, even though she claims to be a dilettante athlete.

I just wanted to do something great. I was determined to do even greater things for my health, so I completed a triathlon last April because I knew I could do it and that it would make me feel like a conqueror. If the Iron Nun can do triathlons at age 82 and complete something like 340 triathlons, I knew that I could do it too. (Julie, 63)

The Nike brand reinforces Julie's heroic archetype, as a conqueror, and symbolizes her mastery of survivorship—that she can do something great. Julie's example illustrates how women in this study pushed themselves beyond survivorship to express a heroic self. The heroic archetype provides a mental model for survivors in overcoming imperfections, unwanted circumstances, and negative experiences; and, brands reinforce the mental model. In mastering their new identity, informants found deeper satisfaction and a higher purpose for their everyday lives.

4.3.2. Adopting a masculine versus feminine identity

During interviews, informants reported using masculine-oriented brands to indicate independence while using feminine-oriented brands to signal connectedness. Hazel (56) discussed her desire to be independent stating: “I bought a tough and rugged Jeep after I finished my cancer treatments because I wanted to feel strong and independent...like a survivor.” Yet, during the same conversation, Hazel also noted: “even though it is not my favorite wine, I am very loyal to Fish House Sauvignon Blanc because I’m very close to my friends and we all drink Fish House.” Hazel's example demonstrates how informants utilize brands in balancing traits that may be paradoxical on the surface, but, in essence, both characteristics fulfill a heroic archetype.

The archetypal hero, Katniss Everdeen, for instance, is both an independent warrior and a socially-connected team player. Brands provide a means for reconciling seemingly incongruous identities. According to Jung (1981), archetypes reside within the collective unconscious of society, evoking deep-rooted emotions that represent fundamental human motifs. The archetypal hero can take on many forms, whether it is a warrior, crusader, rescuer, superhero, soldier, winner, or team player. The archetype motivates brand evaluation and ultimately influences consumption. In mastering a heroic identity, survivors find deeper meaning in consumption, reflecting on brands and the use of brands in ways they had not done before cancer.

5. General discussion

This study analyzes how survivors transform themselves from mere survivors to heroic survivors, drawing on the symbolic meaning of brands to achieve the mastery of a survivor identity. These findings advance our understanding of mastery processes: acceptance of the new identity, mastery of the new identity, and reinforcing the new identity while combating the counterforces that challenge the transformation to mastery. This study shows how survivors use brands to signal characteristics associated with a heroic archetype, and why survivors use brands to balance paradoxical or contradictory heroic characteristics.

Informants' narratives illustrate the powerful meanings brands hold in the marketplace and how brands can be used to construct archetypes. For instance, when a brand did not fit the newly aspired heroic archetype, that brand was discarded and replaced by a more suitable brand with heroic significance. Informants navigated the cultural and symbolic meanings of brands to determine a brand's relevance to survivorship, and struggled to achieve mastery by deflecting counterforces that impede the new identity. Brands symbolically reinforced the heroic archetype and provided a means for externalizing control over unwanted circumstances and encumbering counterforces.

Prior research shows how very subtle actions, such as branded self-expressions, can affect one's self-view confidence and undesirable circumstances can lead consumers to choose self-view-bolstering brands (Gao et al., 2009). Building upon prior works, the present study found that brands can be subtle confidence-boosters in achieving desired self-transformations, sending symbolic messages to the self as well as sending explicit messages to others that signal survivorship. Brands are imbued with symbolic meanings (Chaplin & John, 2005) and through these meanings brands serve as a catalyst for self-expression (Aaker, 1997; Esclatas & Bettman, 2005) and, thus, signs for heroic self-transformation. If possessions are viewed as part of self (Belk, 1988), it follows that brands can indicate well-being and survival.

Moustakas (1956) conveys that the self is constantly emerging and can only be understood as a unique personal experience through self-expression. Transitioning from mere survival to heroic survivorship often plunges one into a self-exploration process where consumption is central to one's identity. Brands are acquired, relinquished, or given new meaning to symbolize heroic survivorship.

Finally, this study brings attention to the heroic ideology shared among women cancer survivors. The desire to be heroic does not refer to sexual or body type ideals or the roles typically ascribed to women.
Rather, the heroic archetype is akin to culturally ascribed characteristics resembling a brave, independent inner-self, emotionally strong and capable of giving to others, and able to endure physical and psychological pain. We posit that similar processes of mastering an identity may occur in analogous situations when people must respond to traumatic events. For example, women who are victims of rape or violence must also overcome the emotionality and vulnerability associated with mere survival of the event. Pushing forward toward mastery is a rewarding and self-satisfying path for overcoming adverse circumstances.

6. Implications for brand managers

The findings of this study point to the evolving role of brands in today’s dynamic consumer environment. Brands are central to social and cultural discourse and are imbued with social cues that denote characteristics (e.g., strong, courageous) as well as gender (e.g., masculinity or femininity) and role competency (e.g., confidence, independence). As such, consumers can use brands to craft their own unique archetypes to overcome difficulties ranging from disappointing news (e.g., job layoff, missed promotion) to a devastating diagnosis (e.g., cancer, AIDS).

Archetypes are fundamental to human psychology and are grounded in culture with pertinent consumer emotions (Jung, 1981). Brand managers should aim to understand universal archetypes and the accompanying myths that bolster certain identities. Cultural archetypes can offer a mental model for survival, thus, a broader understanding of culturally embedded archetypes can equip brand managers with the dialectical knowledge needed to position brands with constructive characteristics.

Brand managers should seek to understand the collective unconscious of consumers as brand meanings are shaped by experiences and cultural discourse. Consumers desire to create their own worlds, to have a voice, and to define their position in the world and, brands serve as a language for self-expression and mastery of self-transformation directed by archetypes. With technology, brand managers have real-time access to consumer voices and social discourse. Online chatter related to brands offers an opportune picture of the cultural content created by consumers. The context can be narrowed to subgroups and communal networks. For instance, while cancer survivors have a heroic archetype, parents with young children may have a mother of goodness archetype. Discourse evolves over time, thus emphasizing the importance of real-time insights gathered from consumer-generated content specific to a target segment.

In terms of managing brand perceptions, it is important that brand managers align brands with positive words or phrases that allow for personalization meaning. For example, advertising campaigns or taglines must be culturally relevant and transferable to various target markets. Attention must be given to a brand’s online and offline image, ensuring integration across all communication channels. Although online advertising can be a lean approach for marketing budgets, there are incentives beyond cost savings for firms to increasingly make online strategies a part of their overall marketing mix. As demonstrated in this study, consumers directly influence other like-minded consumers’ consumption. Engaging consumers through digital marketing has short-term and long-term rewards for brand managers (Teixeira, 2013). In today’s marketing-saturated world, consumers are no longer attentive to interruptions, repetition, and the brute ubiquity of brands. To win the attention and trust of a target audience, marketers must think less about what brand communications are saying to consumers and more about what the brand is doing for consumers (Rapport, 2013). Brands must become a sustained and rewarding presence in the lives of consumers.

In the case of survivors, branding in a social sphere means that communications must be relevant, address a social need, and facilitate interaction among survivors in innovative ways. The new media consumer is a “lean-forward participator” by actively engaging in the construction and multiplication of new selves (Cambra-Fierro, Berbel-Pineda, Ruiz-Benítez, & Vázquez-Carrasco, 2013). As such, brands should be positioned as an agent for positive self-transformations.

In conclusion, our study of the interplay between the symbolic meaning of brands and the identity transformation process from mere survivor to heroic survivor, represents an important domain of research inquiry into the role of brands in consumer identity transformations and mastery of life domains and can have profound implications for brand strategy and consumer welfare.

References


