The consumer experience and the absorbing story

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Abstract

Storytelling is frequently discussed in the experience literature, yet this literature rarely deals with consumption of stories per se. Here, we argue that absorption is a central aspect of both experiences and story consumption. Because this state of mind is assumed to facilitate changes in attitudes, beliefs, and behavior, it is highly relevant for marketers to understand the antecedents of absorption. The purpose of our study is to empirically examine (1) a set of theoretical factors likely to have an impact on story absorption and (2) assess the consequences of absorption for a set of typical outcome variables in marketing research. The main findings were that empathy and sympathy for story characters contribute positively to story absorption, and we discuss the implication of this for marketing of experiences – particularly for offers involving face-to-face encounters between customers and firm representatives.

Keywords: *Experiences, narratives, story-telling, empathy, customer satisfaction*

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1 Introduction

Several observers stress that consumer experiences are likely to enhance the firm's competitive position, for example, by making the offer more differentiated in the consumer's mind (Dubé et al 2003, Walls et al 2011) and by increasing consumer loyalty (Dubé et al 2003) and affective commitment (Iglesias et al 2011). Consequently, the creation of consumer experiences has been suggested as a central objective for firms in many sectors, including retailing, tourism, and services. Researchers, however, still struggle to come to terms with what an experience really is from a conceptual standpoint. Nevertheless, the notion of an experience typically refers to a reaction that is intense, involving, personal, enjoyable, and memorable (Kim et al 2012; Oh et al 2007; Pine & Gilmore 1998). According to Cameron Wild et al (1995) one core aspect of an experience of this type is that objects of attention are experienced with a pronounced quality of engagement that is differentiable from ordinary experiences of these attentional objects. Several researchers in marketing-related fields also emphasize that the experience construct is holistic and multi-dimensional (Brakus et al 2009; Carù & Cova 2008; Gentile et al 2007; Verhoef et al 2009), meaning that copious factors are likely to influence consumers' experiences (Verhoef et al 2009).

In this paper, we make an attempt to contribute to the consumer experience literature by focusing on one particular type of consumption hitherto neglected in both empirical experience research (and in consumer behavior research in general), namely the consumption of mediated stories. For our purposes here, a story is one of several formats for information and messages, and the main characteristic of the story format is that it focuses on one or several characters involved in a sequence of activities (Carroll 2007; Green & Brock 2000; Green 2006; Oatley & Mar 2005; Oatley 2011; Ryan 2005). When stories of this type are transferred to the consumer through various mass media – such as books, movies and TV – we refer to them as mediated. All stories reaching a receiver are of course in some sense mediated, yet our focus here is on

mass media-mediated stories (sometimes referred to as public narratives; Brock et al 2002) as opposed to stories transferred on a face-to-face basis by, for example, friends or parents. The reason for this focus is that the receiver of stories from mass media typically has a role resembling a customer in a general marketing setting, and it is experience-related research in such settings that we wish to make contact with. Moreover, mass-media mediated stories is a broad category including also commercial messages with story content, yet the stories examined by us (transferred to the receiver by books and movies) are traditional in the sense that they do not serve primarily as advertising vehicles for other products.

Surprisingly, experience-related marketing researchers seldom deal empirically with mediated stories as source of consumers' experiences. For example, in a seminal attempt to conceptualize experiences in an empirical study, Brakus et al (2009) included an impressive number of brands to be assessed in experience terms by participants, but none of the selected brands was a mediated story. Yet mediated stories, and particularly those consumed for entertainment purposes, represent a huge commercial sector, while many individual stories, such as Harry Potter and Avatar, are examples of highly successful products in terms of the revenues they generate. At the same time, experience researchers in marketing frequently make conceptual connections between (a) stories or storytelling and (b) suggestions regarding increasing the experience-creating potential of the firm's offer or brand. Typically, in such cases, it is argued that storytelling aspects of an offer may enhance the experiential qualities of the offer (Morgan et al 2009; Mossberg 2008; Padget & Allen 1997; Papadatos 2006). The same type of reasoning is also at hand in branding literature when it is claimed that stories about the brand are likely to strengthen the brand (Woodside et al 2009). We do agree with such suggestions, yet we believe that empirical studies explicitly dealing with consumption of stories are needed to give the suggestions more substance.

More specifically, we believe that the capacity of mediated stories to lead to an absorbed state of mind would be a fruitful point of departure for empirical examinations. Being absorbed by a story means that the receiver is distanced from the surrounding environment and that s/he becomes totally focused on the story content (Busselle & Bilandzic 2009). Absorption in a story context is also typically conceptualized as involving and positively valenced (Green et al 2004; Green 2006). This means that absorption shares several fundamental aspects with how an experience is depicted in experience models. For example, in the Pine & Gilmore (1998) categorization of experiences, absorption is an explicit dimension, and positive affect and involvement are typical characteristic of experiences (Kim et al 2012; Oh et al 2007; Walls et al 2011). One main reason why marketers should be particularly concerned with the absorption aspect of an experience is that it is likely to reduce the receiver's resistance to what the story attempts to persuade us to believe in (cf. Bilandzic & Busselle 2008; Moyer-Gusé 2008). Absorption is thus assumed to facilitate change in the receivers' beliefs, attitudes, and behavior, and this capacity must been seen as highly relevant for marketers. The purpose of this study, then, is to empirically examine (1) theoretical factors likely to have an impact on story absorption and (2) assess the consequences of absorption for a set of typical outcome variables in marketing research.

An explicit examination of the absorption aspect of experiences, we argue, has the potential to contribute to the experience literature. More specifically, we believe that an assessment of the antecedents of story absorption is likely to contribute to our understanding of factors influencing consumption-related experiences in general. The contribution in this case consists of adding specific factors in relation to those already present in models such as Brakus et al (2009), Pine & Gilmore (1998), and Verhoef et al (2009). In addition, we make an attempt to expand the nomological network of experiences in relation to its consequences, in the sense that relatively few existing examinations of the consequences of experiences have comprised standard effect variables of the type that most marketers are familiar with, such as consumer satisfaction, the attitude toward the product, loyalty, and word-of-mouth.

We also intend to make contributions to the literature on narratives; this literature contains several possible factors that are likely to have an impact on story absorption, yet explicit empirical assessments of the relative importance of such factors – within the frame of the same assessment – have been in short supply. Moreover, the literature on the effects of narratives comprises an impressive list with many consequences, ranging from "bad" (e.g., the receiver becomes more violent and engages in sex at an early age) to "good" (e.g., the receiver's understanding of him/herself and others improve), yet very few such studies have examined standard effect variables from the marketing field.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1. Absorption in a story

Our main point of departure is that receivers of a story can be "transported" into the story world and thereby become absorbed by the story content (Green and Brock, 2000; Green et al 2004, Moyer-Gusé 2008). In general, the state of mind of cognitive absorption (in the present study we are concerned with absorption as a state, not as a trait) is characterized by focused immersion (Agarwal & Karahanna 2000; Saadé & Bahli 2005). To be absorbed also means to be involved (Agarwal & Karahanna 2000; Roche & McConkey 1990) and this typically goes hand in hand with heightened enjoyment, temporal dissociation, and curiosity (Agarwal & Karahanna 2000; Saadé & Bahli 2005). And in a story context, to be absorbed/transported means to be distanced from the surrounding environment and to be mentally involved in the story (Busselle & Bilandzic 2009; Green & Brock 2000). A closely related construct is flow, in the sense that flow is characterized by a high level of absorption and involvement in an activity (Csikszentmihalyi

1975). Some story researchers have referred to absorption in terms of flow (e.g., Busselle & Bilandzic 2008), yet here we view absorption as distinct from flow, because flow has different antecedents. Flow is a function of a balance between the individual's skills and the difficulty of the task (Csikszentmihalyi 1997), but the presence of such a balance does not appear to be at hand when receivers are absorbed in a story. Indeed, people seem to be able to be absorbed in stories without any particular skills at all, probably because the story format is a natural way of organizing information (Woodside et al 2008). In any event, another important aspect of absorption in a story is that reactions to the story content – particularly emotions – would be experienced similarly to various objects in real life (Appel & Richter 2007; Slater & Rouner 2002).

The absorption potential of stories means that the story format is particularly potent when it comes to having an impact on the receiver (Bilandzic & Busselle 2008; Bussell & Bilandzic 2009; Green 2006; Slater 1997; Slater & Rouner 2002). Indeed, following a story requires cognitive effort from the receiver, while explicit and critical questioning of the content may reduce the pleasure from consuming a story. These two aspects are likely to reduce the receiver's resistance to what the story attempts to persuade us to believe in (Bilandzic & Busselle 2008; Moyer-Gusé 2008). Therefore, it is hardly surprising that marketers, politicians, leaders, educators, and journalists often make attempts to present information in a story format when their intentions are to affect receivers' attitudes, beliefs, and behavior. It may be noted that some authors view stories as an attractive form also to aid business students' learning (Short & Reeves 2009).

2.2. Story elements and their potential to produce absorption

Why, then, are stories likely to produce absorption? One general reason is that a story format represents a natural way of organizing information, because "people think narratively" (Woodside et al 2008). Another reason is that a main motive behind story consumption is that we want to become absorbed; absorption is a positively valenced state of mind (Green et al 2004; Green 2006). In addition, the typical story leaves certain elements out, and it is the receiver's task to fill in the gaps to make sense of what is going on (Narvaez 2002; Oatley 2011). And to fill in the gaps requires a focused effort from the receiver. Yet many stories are not absorbing; most of us are familiar with quitting a book before reaching the end and changing channels on TV in the midst of a movie. So what is it that makes some stories absorbing? Here, our main concern is a set of specific factors related to the story content and their link to absorption.

First, given that a main component of stories is characters (i.e., human beings involved in various activities), it has been suggested that *identification* with characters is likely to enhance absorption. Identification means that we "become" the character; his or her plans and goals become our own (Oatley 1999). Identification, then, is at hand when we see what is happening in a story from one particular character's point of view and when we (at least temporarily) forget our real identity (Busselle & Bilandzic 2009; Cohen 2001; de Graaf et al 2012; Green et al 2004; Igartua 2010; Moyer-Gusé 2008). A specific reason why identification is likely to lead to absorption is that identification gives us an opportunity to "try on" various identities, which extends our emotional horizons and social perspectives (Cohen 2001), and this is likely to be so involving that it leaves little room for other cognitive activities. Empirical studies, such as Moyer-Gusé & Nabi (2010), indeed show high correlations between identification and absorption. We thus expect a positive impact of identification with story characters on story absorption.

Second, story characters evoking *empathy* may contribute to absorption in a story. Empathy in this context has to do with feeling the same as a story character, particularly the same emotions (Busselle & Bilandzic 2009; Coplan 2004; Igartua 2010; Keen 2006). Empathy, however, is not the same as identification; it is possible to feel what another person feels without believing that one is that person (Coplan 2004). In any case, empathy is assumed to be a crucial human capacity; under-

standing the feelings of others facilitates social interaction (Zillmann 1994). Seen in this light, others' feelings are generally interesting for us, because they allow us to compare ourselves with others, and they offer explanations for what has happened in our previous interactions (others' feelings also offer predictions for our own future interactions). Thus others' emotions are likely to be attention-catching. Again, given limited information processing capabilities, we assume that a story in which the characters evoke our empathy are cognitively demanding and leave little room for thinking about several other things. Empathy in relation to story characters should therefore contribute positively to story absorption.

Third, characters in a story may evoke our *sympathy*. In contrast to empathy, which refers to feeling *with* characters, sympathy is about feeling *for* characters (Busselle & Bilandzic 2009; Coplan 2004; Keen 2006). Sympathy, then, is about caring for story characters, to be concerned with what happens to them, and is it characterized by heightened attention regarding another person's state of mind (Escalas & Stern 2003). In other words, sympathy requires involvement in characters' situation, and we assume that such involvement contributes to absorption in story content. Empirically, a link between caring for characters and absorption has been established in previous research (Green & Brock 2000, although they view absorption as the cause variable in relation to caring for characters). In our case here, however, we expect that sympathy for story characters has a positive impact on story absorption.

Finally, what happens to characters in stories has been shown to evoke the receiver's *own memories* of similar or related activities in the receiver's life. Such memories are assumed to be particularly relevant and engaging for the receiver (Mar & Oatley 2008; Oatley 1994). Some authors even claim that receiver emotions resulting from consuming a story are less related to the story content; instead, those emotions are related to the receiver's own memories of activities outside the story, yet these memories are becoming accessible through various clues in the story (Oatley 1994). A related assumption is that a story's impact on the receiver is due to the link between story content and the receiver's previous experiences; the stronger this link, the higher the level of personal resonance of the story (Larsen & Seilman 1988). In empirical terms, resonance in this sense has been shown to be positively associated with absorption (Schank & Berman 2002). These arguments, then, imply a positive link between the story's capacity to evoke memories and story absorption. The empirical existence of such a link, however, remains to be explored further, because it is indeed possible that a memory-evoking story may produce absorption in one's own memories rather than story absorption.

In sum, the story receiver's identification, empathy, and sympathy in relation to story characters, and the memory-evoking potential of story content, are demanding from an information processing point of view. Therefore, these factors are likely to enhance the receiver's absorption in a story. However, to the best of our knowledge, the relative contribution of each of these factors has not been assessed in empirical terms, so this is an issue that must be settled in empirical terms. In the study presented below, then, the four factors will be assessed within the frame of the same empirical study.

2.3. Consequences of story absorption

If we view a story in general terms, as one among several forms of organizing information, and as a form relatively independent of the particular media vehicle used to transfer the story to a receiver (e.g., books, movies, and TV series), the list of effects on the receiver of consuming stories is indeed impressive. For example, story consumption is assumed to increase our understanding of ourselves and others (Oatley 2011), increase our knowledge of the real world (Cunningham & Stanovich 1991), and boost our vocabulary (West et al 1993). Many negative effects, however, are also present on the list of story effects, such as increased aggression (Wood et al 1991), false beliefs regarding many empirical matters in the real world (O'Guinn & Shrum 1997), and harmful sexual behavior (Zurbriggen & Morgan 2006). In any event, and as already

indicated, many authors assume that absorption in a story is the platform for such effects (Bilandzic & Busselle 2008; Moyer-Gusé 2008).

However, story researchers seem to have forgotten that the receiver of stories typically is not only a reader or a viewer, but also a consumer – a consumer whose reactions are important for those story producers who supply stories to a market. In any event, research on narrative impact has rarely comprised effect variables of the type that are familiar to most marketers (e.g., customer satisfaction, loyalty, and word-of-mouth). This, we argue, represents an important lacuna in existing absorption research. Moreover, many studies of story consumption are focused on the consumption of one particular story, thus neglecting that one particular story can have implications for further story consumption. Here, however, we assume that story consumption – similarly to consumption of other products and services – results in an overall evaluation by the consumer, and we assume that this evaluation affects the consumer's future story consumption behavior.

For the present study, we are particularly interested in two general evaluation variables used frequently in the marketing and consumer behavior literature: the consumer's attitude toward the consumed product and consumer satisfaction. More specifically, and given that absorption is an involving and pleasant state of mind (Green et al 2004; Green 2006), which many individuals voluntarily seek to obtain, we expect that absorption is positively associated with both (1) the attitude towards the story and (2) consumer satisfaction. Empirical support for the absorption-satisfaction link (outside a story context) has been provided by Oh et al (2007), in the sense that they found positive correlations between high absorption characteristics of an offer and consumer satisfaction. A positive association between brand experience and consumer satisfaction has also been reported by Brakus et al (2009).

We also expect that the impact of the consumer's overall evaluation on further story consumption behavior is mediated by the consumer's intentions to consume stories. Thus, and more

specifically, and in a story consumption context, we expect that evaluations such as the attitude towards a story and consumer satisfaction derived from a story would have a positive influence on intentions to consume more stories produced by the same storyteller (author, movie director etc.), and even to consume the same story again. In the experience literature, Brakus et al (2009) have reported a positive association between the consumer's brand experience and a multi-item measure of loyalty in which one of the items refers to repurchase intentions. In addition, given a general positive association between the consumer's evaluation and the consumer's word-of-mouth activity (Anderson et al 1994), we expect a positive influence of story evaluations on word-of-mouth.

3 Methodology

3.1. Data collection and participants

We used a questionnaire to collect data. The beginning of the questionnaire instructed the participant to select one particular story (from either a book or a movie) that had made him/her felt drawn into the story and that had made a memorable impression. The option of choosing either a book or a movie was predicated on the assumption that receivers of stories can be absorbed in story content regardless of the modality of communication (Green et al 2004). The participant was asked about the title of the story, to make a short summary of the story content, and to indicate if the story had been consumed as book or a movie (44 percent selected a book-based story; 56 percent selected a movie-based story). Examples of selected stories are *The Great Gatsby*, *Harry Potter*, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, and *Schindler's List*. In the next step, the participant was instructed to answer a set of questions with regard to the selected story.

The participants (N = 103; 40 percent were males, 60 percent females; M_{age} = 23.14) were recruited from three separate courses in business administration. Thus, a convenience sampling approach was used, something considered adequate

in studies attempting to test general theoretical propositions (such as in the present case) rather than generalizing from data (Calder et al 1981, Calder et al 1982).

3.2. Measures

All individual items regarding (a) antecedents of absorption and (b) absorption per se were scored on a scale ranging from 1 (do not agree at all) to 10 (agree completely). More specifically, the following six items were used for measuring *identification* with story characters: "In the story, there were one or several characters which I felt was similar to me", "Characters in the story were thinking like I do", "I felt connections between myself and characters in the story", "I identified with story characters", "It felt almost as if I 'was' one of the characters" and "In the story, there were characters that behaved like me" (Cronbach's alpha = .88). For *empathy*, the following items were used: "When consuming the story, it felt as if I was sharing the experience of a character in the story", "I could feel what characters in the story felt", "My emotions when consuming the story were similar to the emotions of the story characters", "I felt emotionally involved with the characters' feelings", and "I understood the characters' feelings and emotions" (alpha = .79). Moreover, we measured sympathy with the following items: "I was worried about what would happen to the characters", "I was concerned about the well-being of characters", and "In the story, there were characters that affected my mood" (alpha = .65). To assess the extent to which the story evoked own memories, we used these items: "The story evoked memories from my own life", "There was a connection between what happened in the story and what has happened to me", and "The story made me think of things that have happened in my own life" (alpha = .92).

Absorption was measured with a four-item scale: "Taken together, I felt absorbed by the story", "While I consumed this story, my attention was focused on what happened in the story", "In my thoughts, I was 'in' the story", and "I was really concentrating on the story content" (alpha = .77).

These items were thus intended to capture the focused immersion aspect of absorption (Agarwal & Karahanna 2000). Similar items appear in, for example, Green and Brock's (2000) transportation scale and in the attention focus subscale to measure flow used by Wang et al (2007). As already stated, we believe that absorption share conceptual content with the notion of an experience in the experience literature, and one key aspect of experiences is that they are (or should be) memorable (Kim et al 2012; Oh et al 2007; Pine & Gilmore 1998; Zarantonello & Schmitt 2010). Therefore, as a validity assessment of our absorption scale, we measured the lingering effect of the consumed stories. We used the following items scored on a scale ranging from 1 (do not agree at all) to 10 (agree completely): "When I had finished the story, I found that I was still thinking about it", "After finishing the story, I kept thinking about the content", and "When I had finished the story, the content was still on my mind for some time" (alpha = .91). The zero-order correlation between absorption and lingering was positive and significant (r = .48, p < .01), thus indicating that absorption is an experience-like construct in terms of memorability.

As for evaluations of the story, we measured *consumer satisfaction* with the following question: "What is your evaluation of having consumed the story?". It was followed by three satisfaction items used in several national satisfaction barometers (Fornell 1992), which we adapted to a story context: "How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with having consumed the story?" (1 = very dissatisfied, 10 = very satisfied), "To what extent does this story meet your expectations?" (1 = not at all, 10 = totally), and "Imagine a story in the same category that is perfect in every respect. How near or far from this ideal do you find the story you consumed?" (1 = very far from, 10 = cannot get any closer). Alpha for this scale was .79. Moreover, *the attitude toward the story* was measured with four adjective pairs (bad-good, dislike it-like it, unpleasant-pleasant, and negative impression-positive impression), scored on a 10-point scale (alpha = .77). For the subsequent analysis, and for each

of these variables, we used the unweighted mean of the responses to the individual items. Means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations are reported in the Appendix.

With regards to the assumed consequences of the customer's evaluations, in terms of intentions, we assessed *further story consumption intentions* with two single-item scales: "How likely is it that you would consume the same story again?" and "How likely is it that you would consume another story by the same author/director?". Both items were scored on a scale ranging from 1 (unlikely) to 10 (likely). Finally, we measured *word-of-mouth intentions* with the item "How likely is it that you would recommend this story to a friend?", scored on a 10-point scale from 1 (unlikely) to 10 (likely). Thus, for all intention measures, we employed an intention conceptualization based on probabilities, which appears to be the most common approach in marketing-related research in which satisfaction is the independent variable (Söderlund & Öhman 2005).

4 Findings

To assess the impact of the four story content-related factors on absorption, we used regression analysis with absorption as the dependent variable. The overall regression was significant ($F = 12.62$, $p < .01$, $R^2 = .31$). The regression coefficients (unstandardized) are reported in Table 1.

Table 1 reveals that the impact of identification on absorption was not significant. This is at odds with some authors, such as Moyer-Gusé & Nabi (2010), who have found a positive association. It should be noted, however, that our result regarding identification was obtained in an analytical

Table 1: Regression coefficients

Story-related factor	B	t	p
Identification	-.03	-0.49	.62
Empathy	.41	4.21	< .01
Sympathy	.22	2.71	<.01
Own memories	-.08	-1.81	.07

context in which also other potentially influencing factors have been allowed to exist. Moreover, both empathy and sympathy had a positive and significant ($p < .01$) impact on absorption. And the receiver's own memories of previous experiences, from outside the story context (yet evoked by the story), had a negative influence on absorption ($p < .10$). This negative impact does not question the assumptions that story elements can evoke memories from the receiver's own life and that such memories are engaging for the receiver (Mar & Oatley 2008; Oatley 1994). Yet the negative association signals that such memories can shift the receiver's attention from the story to his/her own previous experience and thus reduce absorption in the story.

It should be recalled that our data collection approach allowed the participant to select a story in terms of either a book (44 percent selected a book-based story) or a movie (56 percent selected a movie-based story), which means that the analysis of the four content factors can be done separately for these two forms of transferring stories to receivers. When we conducted this analysis, in terms of the regression described above but separately for the two groups, the main pattern from Table 1 was still at hand. In our case, then, it is hard to see any particular impact of story medium. This is mirroring a common assumption in narrative research, namely that the effect of a story on a receiver is likely to be relatively independent of the medium of the story (e.g., Busselle & Bilandzic 2008). It may also be noted that the level of absorption per se was not significantly different between books and movies, which is consonant with the assumption that receivers of stories can be absorbed in story content regardless of the modality of communication (Green et al 2004). Yet in our case, one minor difference may be observed: the explained variance was slightly higher for book group of participants ($R^2 = .36$) than for the movie group ($R^2 = .29$), which may reflect that our theoretically derived factors stem from narrative research primarily concerned with literature rather than movies.

Turning to the effects of absorption on evaluations of the consumed story, we computed the zero-order correlation between absorption and the two main evaluation variables. The association was positive and significant for both consumer satisfaction ($r = .62$, $p < .01$) and the attitude toward the story ($r = .50$, $p < .01$). Absorption thus appears to contribute positively to both evaluation variables. At the same time, however, unexplained variance remains for both of them, thus suggesting that others aspects than absorption are involved, too.

Moreover, it was expected that both evaluation variables would have an impact on intentions. This was indeed the case; satisfaction was positively associated with the intention to consume the same story again ($r = .42$, $p < .01$), the intention to consume another story by the same author/movie director ($r = .47$, $p < .01$), and word-of-mouth intentions ($r = .62$, $p < .01$). The same pattern occurred for the attitude toward the story; the corresponding correlations were $r = .38$, $r = .51$, and $r = .56$ ($p < .01$ for each of the three associations).

5 Discussion

5.1. Summary of main findings

The main findings from our attempt to explain absorption in a story context was that the receiver's empathy and sympathy vis-à-vis story characters were the two relatively most important factors. Moreover, absorption had a positive impact on the attitude toward the story and on consumer satisfaction, and these two evaluation variables were positively associated with intentions to consume more stories and to engage in word-of-mouth.

5.2. Contributions and implications

Given that many experience marketers have stressed that storytelling elements of an offer may enrich the consumer's experience, we believe that our finding that empathy and sympathy in relation to story characters are relatively important factors in inducing story absorption has general implications for experience-related marketing theory and practice.

It should be underscored that empathy and sympathy occur in relation to *human beings*, so our findings suggest that the presence of a human component of an offer has a potential to enhance the consumer's level of offer absorption. Therefore, we believe that the main implications for marketing from our study is to be found in offers comprising face-to-face encounters between the customer and a representative of the firm. Research in service, tourism, and retailing have long established that the frontline worker – as one of several element of the environment in which the consumer is exposed to an offer – contributes significantly to the consumer's experience (Morgan et al 2009; Verhoef et al 2009), so a proposition regarding the importance of the employee per se is hardly novel. Yet we believe that that our results regarding empathy and sympathy offer some novel implications regarding specific influencing aspects of employees.

Several existing studies indicate that the frontline worker's empathy for the consumer has a positive impact on consumers' evaluations (Aggarwal et al 2005; Gruber et al 2006; Verma 2003). Similarly, sympathy-related variables, such as if the frontline worker cares for the customer, has been found to impact customer satisfaction (Winsted 2000). Our results, however, suggest an additional path of influence for empathy and sympathy in face-to-face encounters between consumers and frontline workers. If we view the consumer as a receiver, and the frontline worker as a character, it is indeed possible that the consumer's empathy and sympathy for the frontline worker add to the consumer's experience in terms of absorption. In other words, given that fictitious characters in stories such as *Harry Potter* or *The Great Gatsby* (which we know are fictitious) have the capacity to evoke empathy and sympathy, these two variables are likely to be affected in a real social context involving face-to-face encounters. Presumably, they may also be evoked by communication material produced by the firm (e.g., material telling the story of employees or owners), at least if this material has a story-like format and thus depicts human beings.

The specific characteristics of an empathy and sympathy-evoking human being who is a front-

line worker, however, remain to be explored. Yet some clues are provided by research on the impact of narratives. For example, with respect to empathy, it has been suggested that a story with vivid and detailed descriptions of characters and the situations in which they find themselves would increase the receiver's empathy (Keen 2006). It may be added that we humans appear to be hardwired for empathic reactions to others, because this facilities social interaction. It is this ability that a story triggers (Zillmann 1994), given of course that the story provides enough material for us to assess what is going on in another person's mind. As for sympathy (defined as caring for a character), it has been suggested that sympathy for a character is predicated on a judgment of a character's moral standing in terms of being a bad or good person. Such judgments appear to require relatively limited information, yet some information must be at hand (Green & Brock 2000; Raney 2004; Zillmann 1994). In other words, both empathy and sympathy require that the receiver somehow gets to know the characters. This suggests that very short and impersonal encounters between the frontline worker and the consumer are unlikely to be able to evoke empathy and sympathy from the consumer. This in turn means that excessive managerial concern with such practices as shortening interaction times, in order to cut waiting time for consumers, and detailed and standardized scripts for what the frontline worker is supposed to do, may not be a viable route to absorbing experiences.

Moreover, our finding that absorption is positively associated with well-established evaluation variables (customer satisfaction and the attitude toward the product) contributes to experience-related studies by adding effect variables to the consequence part of the nomological net of the experience construct. That is to say, and most likely as a function of the need to devote much effort to conceptualizing the fuzzy experience construct per se, relatively few existing experience studies have empirically examined the effects of consumer experiences in terms of traditional marketing effect variables. This means that several existing studies have dealt in detail with the dimensionality of the experience construct per se without assessing its impact on effect variables (e.g., Gentile et al 2007; Kim et al 2012) or built extensive models of antecedents of experiences in which no effect variables are present (e.g., Verhoef et al 2009). In addition, given the alleged "holistic" nature of an experience, and given limitations of a "rationally based information processing model", some authors have argued that experiences must be captured by qualitative, interpretative approaches (e.g., Carú & Cova 2008; Schembri 2009). Such approaches, however, make the assessment of consequences of experiences less straight-forward.

We believe that the present study also make contributions to the literature on the impact of narratives, because to date few such studies have empirically addressed the antecedents of absorption in terms of models in which several independent variables are allowed to co-exist. The non-significant impact of identification and the *negative* impact of own memories evoked by the story content are particularly noteworthy, because these findings represent opposing views in relation to some arguments in the literature on narratives. Moreover, as already indicated, existing research has produced a long list of consequences of narratives, yet few such studies have included evaluation and intentions variables of the type that marketers typically use when they examine commercial offers. Our study, then, extends the already long list of effects of narratives on the receiver towards the area of marketing.

5.3. Limitations and need for further research

One limitation is related to our assessment of antecedents to story absorption. We assumed that the four story content factors in our model (identification, empathy, sympathy, and own memories) would have an impact on absorption, and the overall explained variance was relatively good. However, existing experience models contain several other factors assumed to contribute to the consumer's experience. Clearly, then, a richer picture would have been obtained if our study had assessed also such existing factors and their

relations to our four story content-related factors.

Moreover, it was assumed on theoretical grounds that the four content factors are cause variables (and that absorption is an effect variable). Our analysis approach with regression analysis, however, cannot disentangle causes from effects. This, then, is a limitation we share with many previous correlation-based attempts to deal with causality in a story context. To come to terms with this, experiments are needed. Several previous studies have indeed employed an experimental approach in which story content is systematically manipulated (e.g., Raney 2005; Appel & Richter 2007; Zillmann & Johnson 1973). Researchers considering this approach for examining factors likely to have an impact on story absorption, however, need to be mindful about some aspects. First, access to participants who are willing to consume a full story (in our case: a movie or book) prior to being subject to measurement, and for the purpose of participating in an experiment, may be restricted. Second, participants who are allowed to self-select a story that is absorbing (such as in our study), thus allowing for variation in the stimulus material between participants, means loss of control for the experimenter. Third, the practical problems of manipulating story content in terms of factors such as empathy and sympathy – without affecting other aspects of story content, and without affecting the overall quality of the story – should not be underestimated. That is to say, useful manipulations of this type may demand cooperation with professional storytellers.

In addition, our intention measures regarding story consumption represent only a small sample of intentions regarding future story consumption that may follow the completion of one particular story. For example, given the contemporary prevalence of so called transmedial storytelling, one would like to know if one specific modality of a story (e.g., a book) is more likely than others (e.g., a movie) to encourage the consumer to continue to follow the story in different media. Similarly, given that the consumption of one particular story is a part of a larger portfolio of consumed stories, it would be interesting to capture how one particular story encourages the consumer to move on to other works by the same author/movie director, to other authors/movie directors, and how specific stories encourage further consumption within and between genres. Indeed, these are general issues in the need to be addressed also for other experience-creating products than mediated stories. For example, given the intense, positively charged, and holistic nature of experiences, it is possible that one particular experience, delivered by one specific supplier, may encourage the consumer to move to new suppliers for additional experiences. Thus a genuine experience may not be a loyalty guarantee vis-à-vis the supplier responsible for the creation of the experience.

It should also be observed that our data collection approach with regard to the specific stories was based on the participants' self-selection of stories. The instruction to the participants called for a story that had made them felt drawn into the story and that had made a memorable impression. Our instructions thus did not call for stories with any particular valence (i.e., negative or positive). Yet the overall mean values for customer satisfaction ($M = 8.59$) and attitude toward the story ($M = 8.67$) reported in the Appendix indicate that stories with positive rather than negative effects on the participants dominate in our sample. This aspect means that our empirical results should be seen as restricted to stories capable of producing positive overall impressions. Further research is therefore needed to explore if absorption could be linked also to negative overall impressions. For example, is it possible to become highly absorbed by a story and evaluate this story negatively? Conceptually, this does seem to be possible. Given that marketers in general would want to avoid producing offers resulting in dissatisfaction and negative attitudes, it seems worthwhile to examine if such offers could be absorbing and, if so, why this is the case. Similarly, further research may explore if negatively charged stories can have a positive effect on content factors of the type examined here (identification, empathy, sympathy, and memories). Existing research on stories acknowledges that stories with negatively charged elements

(such as violence and horror) can be enjoyed, and can be viewed as exciting by the receiver (Söderlund & Dahlén 2010), yet if such stories can also be absorbing must be subject to empirical studies. One way to come to terms with this in an empirical study is to measure both negative and positive emotions for receivers (cf. Söderlund & Dahlen 2010), and the omission of such measures in the present study represents another limitation.

Furthermore, our sample of participants comprised relatively young people (M_{age} = 23.14). Given that (1) age has implications for how many stories the participants had been able to consume prior to taking part in this study, (2) frequency of consumption is positively related to consumer expertise, and (3) experts process information differently compared to novices (Alba and Hutchinson 1987), it is possible that a sample with older participants would have produced different results. Prior research on narratives, however, does not provide clear indications regarding the nature of such differences, because the main age-related distinction in such studies appears to be between children and adults. Yet Cameron Wild et al (1995) show that the association between the number of books read per year and absorption (as a trait) is positive, thus indicating that frequency of story consumption may have an impact on the extent to which receivers are able to become absorbed by stories.

Finally, the stories we examined in this study were traditional in the sense that they were not embedded in commercial communication messages. Stories, or at least attempts to tell a story, however, also appear in printed ads, television commercials, and in other commercial messages. Some previous studies show that such stories can affect receivers in ways that are similar to traditional stories (Söderlund & Dahlén 2010) and that ads with stories are more effective than ads with non-story content (Adaval & Wyer 1998; Deighton et al. 1989). If stories embedded in commercial messages are as effective as traditional stories in the impact on receivers, however, is an open question demanding further research efforts.

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Appendix: Means, standard deviations and zero-order correlations for the main variables

	MEAN	S.D.	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Identification	5.71	2.04						
2. Empathy	7.80	1.41	.44***					
3. Sympathy	8.18	1.52	-.01	.43***				
4. Own memories	4.63	2.62	.43***	.26***	-.04			
5. Absorption	8.16	1.31	.07	.47***	.45***	-.08		
6. Consumer satisfaction	8.59	1.14	.21**	.32***	.26***	-.06	.62***	
7. Attitude toward the story	8.67	1.07	.17*	.27***	.14	-.08	.50***	.72***

*$p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$