Epic Aspects of Retail Encounters: The Iliad of Hollister

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Abstract

Much has been written about myth and the marketplace. Consumer research has added immeasurably to academics' appreciation of the myths that inhere in fabulous flagship stores and experiential retailing more generally. Studies of consumer mythopoeia, however, have tended to muffle the martial side of retailing, the heroic struggles that some customers undergo in-store. This article argues that the epic offers valuable insights into martial matters, and more. Although epic and myth overlap, they are far from identical. The former is characterized by conventions that can help illuminate consumers' quests, not least their disturbing journeys through the underworld. These are considered in relation to Hollister (HCo), a phenomenally successful retail chain that's renowned for its antithetical atmospherics and inky interior design. A qualitative study of Hollister lovers and haters casts light on the epic in action and adds to scholars' understanding of immersive retailing experiences.
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Describing her first visit to Hollister, the wildly successful lifestyle retailer, Shauna is bedazzled by its in-store evocation of everything she believes, as a nineteen year old Irishwoman, about the United States of America. "I look up," she recounts, "and a humungous American flag dangles above my head. The American flag represents the American Dream in my eyes which gives me butterflies in my stomach. The American dream is all about freedom and being your own self in this world. It inspires me to be a stronger person...This is what people of my age want. They want to be adventurous. Walking around this shop gives me a lease of energy to go into the world and make my own dreams happen!"

Shauna's emotive words are akin to what literary critics call *panegyric*, a heartfelt hymn of praise. The panegyric is a key component of epic poetry alongside *lamentation*, *invocation* and *the dying fall* (Abrams 1993). To be sure, Shauna's accolade was not devised with poesy in mind, yet she unwittingly realized Ralph Waldo Emerson's celebrated contention that America

is an epic poem waiting to happen. For some, as McWilliams (1989) shows, America's national epic is best expressed in its magnificent movies, novels, musicals, and television series. But for Shauna at least, it is brilliantly articulated by Hollister.

Although Hollister has latterly lost some of its luster, this too accords with the epic tradition, where hubris is unfailingly followed by nemesis. The epic literary form may be thousands of years old; however, it remains a rich conceptual resource that affords striking insights into contemporary retail branding. This article, therefore, argues that epic poetry's principles are relevant to retail management and scholarship. It shows how HCo's consumers enact elemental aspects of epic poetry. It reveals how the in-store encounter concurs with the epic's combative character. It illustrates, with the aid of qualitative research methods, how Hollister's evocation of an idyllic, southern Californian lifestyle strikes a resonant chord with some of its customers. It contends, in short, that the epic contains lessons for academicians and executives alike.

We begin with a summary of the epic tradition, noting its poetic origins, cultural modifications, and relative neglect in marketing, retailing, and consumer research. A succinct introduction to Hollister Inc., a subsidiary of Abercrombie & Fitch, follows thereafter. Next is a brief but necessary discussion of

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research methods best suited to the subject matter, as well as a synopsis of our subsequent data gathering and literary theory-led analytical procedures. The findings reveal how consumer experiences in HCo echo components of the classical epic, in accordance with the genre's conventions (Abrams 1993; Sutherland 2010). Comparisons are then made with prior studies of flagships (Kent 2009), martworlds (Joy et al. 2014), brand museums (Hollenbeck, Petersm, and Zinkhan 2008) and contrarian consumer encounters more generally (Dobscha and Foxman 2012; Kozinets 2002a; Hietanen et al. 2016), before concluding with a consideration of epic and myth's affinity.

Epic Background

Formally defined as "a long narrative poem in lofty style, set in a remote time and place, and dealing with heroic character" (Morner and Rausch 1995, p. 65), epic is the ultimate expression of poetic accomplishment (Merchant 1971). Although Aristotle's ranking of literary genres placed epic in second place behind tragedy, these positions had been reversed by the Renaissance, when monumental works like Dante's *Divide Comedy*, Spencer's *Faerie Queene*, and Milton's *Paradise Lost* joined the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid* in epic poetry's pantheon (Williams 2009).

So entrenched was this pantheon that by the mid-eighteenth-century Enlightenment all manner of epic parodies, epic inversions, and epic burlesques were in circulation (Merchant 1971). The term, what's more, was slowly but steadily broadened to embrace elephantine novels (*Moby-Dick*, *War & Peace*, *Remembrance of Things Past*), stupendous movies (*Birth of a Nation*, *Ben-Hur*, *Braveheart*), majestic television series (*Lost*, *Band of Brothers*, *Game of Thrones*), astounding computer games (*Minecraft*, *Grand Theft Auto World of Warcraft*), and analogous cultural forms that are larger than life (James 2016; Russell 2007). Nowadays, Sutherland (2010, p. 32) observes, the word epic is a "loose intensifier," akin to "awesome," "incredible," or "breath-taking." Once reserved for the heroic achievements of Achilles, Beowulf and El-Cid, "epic" is routinely applied to consumer co-created wikis (Lanier and Rader 2017), the algorithmic accomplishments of Google (Wu 2016), or the infarctions-waiting-to-happen on food porn websites (Kozinets, Patterson, and Ashman 2017). Epic Meal Time, for example.

Yet, despite its ancient pedigree and contemporary popularity, epic rarely features in marketing scholarship. With the noteworthy exceptions of Stern and Gallagher's (1991) comparative analysis of lyric, ballad, and epic in advertising narratives; Shankar and Patterson's (2001) Homeric approach to advances in interpretive research methods; Diamond et al.'s (2009, p. 123) aside on the "epic tale" of American Girl's marketing matriarch; and Peñaloza's (2001, p. 371) western stock show-stimulated call for a contemporary "consumer epic," the genre has found few champions or cheerleaders. And most use the word in a colloquial sense. Even the Consumer Odyssey made no attempt to engage with the epic that inspired it (Belk 1991).

The principal reason for epic's absence is because an alternative word dominates academic discourse. That word is myth.

Manifold marketing scholars, from Levy (1981) and Stern (1995) onwards, have built their articles on mythic foundations. These include Belk and Costa (1998), who recount the myths of primordial masculinity enacted by modern-day Mountain Men; Thompson (2004), who describes diverse myths that inhere in the natural healthcare sphere; Arnould (2005, p. 90), who highlights the "myth of individual achievement through perseverance" that's enacted in Niketown; Dobscha and Foxman (2012), who explore the "mythic agency" of eager consumers during Filene's Basement Bridal Event; and, Joy et al. (2014, p. 360), who note the "mythical heritage" that obtains in Louis Vuitton's stunning retail flagships.

Impressive as myth-informed analyses of retail and consumer encounters assuredly are, epic has something different to offer. Although certain scholars employ the terms synonymously (Hirschman 2000), they are not interchangeable. Yes, both myth and epic unfold in marvelous secondary worlds, pertain to primordial times past, and recount events in Aristotelian narrative fashion (i.e., with a beginning, middle and end). However, there are three key differences between them. First, the heroes of epics are mortals not gods (Miller 2000). Granted, the gods often intervene in the action, but epics are about human beings rather than almighty immortals (Bowra 1952). Epics, secondly, are less universal than myths. The latter, as Campbell's monumental and much-cited studies show, are manifestations of a singular, all-encompassing "monomyth." The former, as "national epics" like Finland's *Kalevala*, Ireland's *Ulster Cycle* and Iraq's *Gilgamesh* attest, take pride in their singularity and geographical specificity. Epics, thirdly, are more martial than myths. Whereas myths, as they are understood and employed by marketing and consumer researchers, help reduce existential anxieties in an increasingly uncertain world (Holt and Thompson 2004; Thompson and Tian 2008), epics emphasize the dark side of things. They are combative (Nicolson 2014). They revel in battle. They posit, as Bloom (1994, p. 6) states in his summary of the western literary canon, "a poetics of conflict."

These differences, it must be stressed, do not mean that epic is better suited to marketplace matters than myth. Far from it. The genres are closely related, yet remain sufficiently different to warrant closer examination. Viewing retailing through an epic lens, as we shall show, affords insights that are not in focus when myth is the medium. Epic, Hietanen et al. (2016, p. 422) analogously observe in a recent study of Finland's Restaurant Day, "is a manifestation of the market in the same way that Mr. Hyde is a manifestation of Dr. Jekyll." It follows that epic offers an alternative perspective on marketplace matters, a perspective that is pertinent to Hollister's radical take on retail store atmospherics and the in-store encounter more generally.

Literature Overview

If marketing scholarship is an odyssey, as Shankar and Patterson (2001) contend, then Kotler is our Homer. Among many outstanding works of scholarship, "Atmospherics as a Marketing Tool" remains an incontestable classic. Arguing that there's more to retail marketing than merchandise, Kotler (1973, p. 48) contends that the in-store environment – layout, design,