

# Beyond Advertising Narratives: *Josefinas* and their storytelling products

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## Abstract

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In the last few years, advertising narratives have become increasingly important. Facing an environment of fierce competition and communication overload, brands needed to reinvent their communication strategies, and stories became protagonists, particularly in the digital environment.

This article addresses a new way of applying storytelling in marketing, which is using it to extend products. In our theoretical framework, we review the general importance of storytelling as a communication tool and strategy, departing from the notion of storytelling as the essence of human communication (Fisher, 1987).

As empirical work, we present the case study of *Josefinas*, a Portuguese luxury handmade shoe brand. For each new product, the brand presents a story that not only explains the inspiration for the product, but also communicates values, a lifestyle, emotions, and inspires. We studied a sample of communication pieces and applied a thematic matrix (Kuckartz, 2014), with coding categories inspired by storytelling models and also by brand equity (Aaker, 1991) and product extension (Kotler and Keller, 2012) models.

In our findings, we stress the originality of the brand in going beyond advertising in its use of narratives, applying it to add layers of meaning to their products, which are reflected in the brand image, and even in its equity. Thus, we conclude by suggesting the concept of 'product narratives'.

**Keywords:** narrative; product narratives; storytelling; advertising; content marketing; branding

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**Resum.** *Més enllà de la narrativa publicitària: Josefinas i els seus productes de storytelling*

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En els últims anys, la narrativa s'ha convertit en un component cada vegada més important de la publicitat. En un ambient de competència feroç i abundància de comunicació, les marques han necessitat reinventar les seves estratègies de comunicació. Les narratives, així, esdevindran protagonistes, sobretot en l'ambient digital.

Aquest article aborda una nova forma d'aplicar l'*storytelling* al màrqueting, que consisteix a aplicar-ho als productes. En el nostre marc teòric, presentem una revisió de la importància de l'*storytelling* com a estratègia i eina de comunicació, a partir de la noció que la narrativa és l'essència de la comunicació humana (Fisher, 1987).

En el nostre treball empíric presentem l'estudi de cas *Josefinas*, una marca portuguesa de sabates artesanals de luxe. Per a cada nou producte, la marca presenta una història associada que explica la inspiració i comunica valors, un estil de vida i emocions. Estudiem una mostra de les peces de comunicació de la marca aplicant una matriu temàtica (Kuckartz, 2014) amb categories de codificació inspirades en models de *storytelling* i també en els conceptes de valor de la marca (*brand equity*) (Aaker, 1991) i d'extensió de producte (Kotler i Keller, 2012).

Els nostres resultats destaquen l'originalitat de la marca a portar les seves narratives més enllà de la publicitat, aplicant-les per afegir capes de significat als seus productes, que es reflecteixen en la imatge de la marca i també en el seu valor. Així, vam concloure suggerint el concepte de 'productes narratius' per descriure l'estratègia i les accions de la marca estudiada.

**Paraules clau:** narrativa; productes narratius; *storytelling*; publicitat; màrqueting de continguts; gestió i comunicació de marca (*branding*)

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**Resumen.** *Más allá de la narrativa publicitaria: Josefinas y sus productos de storytelling*

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En los últimos años, la narrativa se ha convertido en un componente cada vez más importante de la publicidad. En un ambiente de competencia feroz y abundancia de comunicación, las marcas han necesitado reinventar sus estrategias de comunicación, y las narrativas se convertirán en protagonistas, sobre todo en el ambiente digital.

Este artículo aborda una nueva forma de aplicar el *storytelling* al marketing, que consiste en aplicarlo a los productos. En nuestro marco teórico, presentamos una revisión de la importancia del *storytelling* como estrategia y herramienta de comunicación, a partir de la noción de que la narrativa es la esencia de la comunicación humana (Fisher, 1987).

En nuestro trabajo empírico presentamos el estudio de caso *Josefinas*, una marca portuguesa de zapatos artesanales de lujo. Para cada nuevo producto, la marca presenta una historia asociada que explica la inspiración y comunica valores, un estilo de vida y emociones. Estudiamos una muestra de las piezas de comunicación de la marca aplicando una matriz temática (Kuckartz, 2014) con categorías de codificación inspiradas en modelos de *storytelling* y también en los conceptos de valor de la marca (*brand equity*) (Aaker, 1991) y de extensión de producto (Kotler y Keller, 2012).

Nuestros resultados destacan la originalidad de la marca en llevar sus narrativas más allá de la publicidad, aplicándolas para añadir capas de significado a sus productos, que se reflejan en la imagen de la marca y también en su valor. Así, concluimos sugiriendo el concepto de 'productos narrativos' para describir la estrategia y las acciones de la marca estudiada.

**Palabras clave:** narrativa; productos narrativos; *storytelling*; publicidad; marketing de contenidos; gestión y comunicación de marca (*branding*)

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## Introduction

In recent years, individuals have been linked through digital channels and this evolution has altered the form of communication. Stories gained more importance and became a connecting link. Marketing and branding realized the value of storytelling and began to communicate their products through stories thanks to their empathic nature. Today, we can see that products gain a new life when communicated through stories and, above all, when they function as an extension of this story itself.

### 1. Theoretical framework

#### 1.1. Narratives: Their origin, meaning and applications

The human being uses stories on a daily basis. Locating the relevance of stories for human beings as their main way of communicating implies contextualizing their use and circumscribing some of their domains.

For Fisher (1987), individuals are natural born storytellers; for Polleta (2006), the power of stories exists in all individuals because they all have their own story<sup>1</sup>; for Selbin (2010), it is not possible to separate stories from individuals because they are the essence of human beings and/or rational individuals<sup>2</sup>; for Salmon (2010), “*storytelling* implies a ‘worldview’ and projects it on the whole society” (2010: 29); and, for Hopkins (2015), stories are also intrinsic to human beings<sup>3</sup>. This narrative skill that human beings seem to have, and which according to the authors cited exists in a natural way, is an intrinsic human characteristic. At the same time, stories also have an exemplification power and a lesson nature. Concepts like “morality”, “teaching”, “action”, “organization”, “communication” (among others) are concepts that we can associate with the key concept of narratives.

The narrative paradigm presents individuals as storytellers - *Homo Narrans* – and is constituted by the phenomenon of narration that Fisher defines as “symbolic actions – words and/or deeds – that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them. (...) Narration is relevant to real as well as fictive creations, to stories of living and to stories of the imagination.” (Fisher, 1987: 58). While Fisher (1987) argues that it is through narratives that individuals communicate and perceive the surrounding reality,

1. “On one hand, we celebrate storytelling, and especially personal storytelling, for its authenticity, its passion, and its capacity to inspire not just empathy but action. Everyone has a story, we often say, and that makes for a discourse with uniquely democratic possibilities.” (Polleta, 2006: 1)
2. “If it is our biology that makes us human, it is our stories that define us as people” (Selbin, 2010: 6).
3. “My analysis is grounded in a phenomenology of narrativity which understands storytelling to be a central and essential human activity, the primary means by which we make sense of ourselves and our world.” (Hopkins, 2016: 4)

Hopkins (2015), in his field theory, considers that narratives have an educational and entertaining nature.

Andrea Fontana (2011) believes that there is a phenomenon allied to storytelling – narrative trance. This phenomenon is defined by the power of immersion that stories have and consists of seven steps: “1) contact: the beginning; 2) familiarity: confidence; 3) immersion: the entrance; 4) identification: self-identification; 5) emergence: the output; 6) distancing: taking the distances and 7) transformation (relative): the changes”<sup>4</sup> (Fontana, 2011: 22-24). These stages characterize the effects that individuals feel during the “consumption” of a story either through reading or through a film, audio book, etc.

As we have seen with the authors mentioned, narratives are used in different contexts and have different applications, but they share a particularity; they are inherent to human beings and are present in different domains of daily life. The exchange of experiences in verbal format implies a relationship between individuals and it is this sharing that constitutes the essence of human beings.

### 1.2. Use of stories in Branding

Nowadays, when we talk about storytelling as a marketing or promotion technique, it also makes sense to highlight the concept of branding. Brands try to differentiate themselves from each other and stories take centre stage in that role. This change of approach in brand communication and the place brands occupy in our society is defined by Salzer-Mörlling and Strannegård (2004) as *Brandscape*<sup>5</sup> and by Kornberger (2010) as *Brand Society*<sup>6</sup>. This top place occupied by brands shapes society itself as we have seen with the authors.

Brands have their own characteristics and/or attributes that can be measured. The concept of brand equity is a way of being able to evaluate brands and has been approached by different theorists, of which we point out Aaker (1991), Keller (1993), Tuominen (1999), Salzer-Mörlling and Strannegård (2004) and Diogo (2008). Brand equity means “brand rate” or “brand value” (Diogo, 2008: 79).

Brand equity is defined by two perspectives - consumer and business (Diogo, 2008: 81) and, according to Aaker (1991), it is divided into five cat-

4. Translated from Italian to English. “1) contatto: l’inizio; 2) familiarità: la confidenza; 3) immersione: l’entrata; 4) identificazione: l’autoriconoscimento; 5) emersione: l’uscita; 6) distanziamento: il prendere le distanze and 7) trasformazione (relativa): i cambiamenti.” *In* (Fontana, 2011: 22-24).

5. “brands are a new way of organizing production and managing consumption. (...) Society changed from a focus on production towards a focus in consumption.” (Kornberger, 2010: XIII).

6. “brands, rather than commodities, are flooding the marketplace, the social landscape is, in many aspects, turned into a commercial ‘brandscape’” (Salzer-Mörlling and Strannegård, 2004: 225)

egories: 1) *brand loyalty*, 2) *brand awareness*, 3) *perceived quality*, 4) *brand associations* and 5) *other proprietary assets*. As we can evaluate brands through these principles, we can also analyze and differentiate products according to criteria. A product is the combination of two realities, the tangible<sup>7</sup> and the intangible. One of the ways we can perceive the differences between competing products, or how we can classify them, is through the product levels that precisely allow us to respond to this differentiation.

For Kotler and Keller (2012), we see that there are five possible levels to classify products, which are: 1) *core benefit*, 2) *basic product*, 3) *expected product* 4) *augmented product*, and 5) *potential product* (Kotler and Keller, 2012: 318). Through the variables that make up brand equity and product levels, it is possible to analyze and target similar products in different brands.

Today, branding that focuses on stories has proven to be successful. Now, factors such as empathy<sup>8</sup> are essential for brands to succeed in a market where there is a great deal of competition. In a digital universe where feedback is instantaneous, the stories linked to branding and those shared by the consumers themselves make all the difference. With Kornberger (2010), we see that stories are also inseparable from branding<sup>9</sup>. The author highlights the importance of intertextuality<sup>10</sup> and how it is achieved<sup>11</sup>. He moreover gives us some examples of how to identify it in advertising: 1) *visual language* and 2) *product placement* (Kornberger, 2010: 108). Nowadays, brands communicate essentially in digital format, and through narratives<sup>12</sup> they achieve levels of empathy that allow the brand to move and to maintain itself in a state of liquid modernity<sup>13</sup>.

### 1.3. Advertising Narratives, Digital Storytelling and Storytelling Products

Digital storytelling is a feature of storytelling that differs essentially by how it is shared and by the media used. For Miller (2004), it is described as:

7. "Many people think a product is a tangible offering, but it can be more than that. Broadly, a product is anything that can be offered to a market to satisfy a want or need, including physical goods, services, experiences, events, persons, places, properties, organizations, information, and ideas." (Kotler and Keller 2012: 317).
8. According to Quek (2013: 1) "The brands that are able to forge connections with their customers are the ones who are the most gifted storytellers".
9. According to Kornberger (2010: 109) "Brands create a new mental and social space in which contradictory identities can be combined into one single story".
10. According to Kornberger (2010: 108) "Brands give us intertextuality stories that work across different media. They are the only grand narratives that are left".
11. According to Kornberger (2010: 108) "This happens through a multi-channel communication strategy that engages our five senses".
12. "The idea that storytelling is key to attract and retain customers" (Pulizzi, 2012: 116).
13. Concept developed by Zygmunt Bauman, arguing that in contemporary society, structures such as relations, interests and structures have become more volatile, and human agency has become preponderant, but operates in a very uncertain and fluid environment.

Digital storytelling is narrative entertainment that reaches its audience via digital technology and media—microprocessors, wireless signals, the Web, DVDs, and so on. Interactivity is one of its hallmarks. Older media, which is supported by analog technology (film, video, LPs, audiotape), cannot support back-and-forth communications between the audience and the material—interactivity—and this is a radical difference between the older media and the new. (Miller, 2004: xiii)

Burgess (2006) adds that:

Digital storytelling can be understood not only as a media form but also as a field of cultural practice: a dynamic site of relations between textual arrangements and symbolic conventions, technologies for production and conventions for their use; and collaborative social interaction. (Burgess, 2006: 210)

Both perspectives are similar and simultaneously complementary, but Burgess addresses the importance of the “collaborative social interaction”, which is what truly defines digital storytelling.

In the context of advertising narratives, the digital format has gained increasing popularity. Individuals are permanently on line and connected through social media. For Jensen (1999), stories are “value statements, and the product is just an appendix to embody whatever story is being sold” (1999: 53). This approach shows the value that is given to stories and that can also be applied in the digital context. Another peculiarity of the digital universe is the sharing of stories<sup>14</sup> affiliated to visual elements, that is, the best of both worlds appears fused and in a complementary way, thus enriching the narratives.

Also in today’s digital environment, consumers are refusing advertising, especially when it is made more intrusively (Essex, 2017). To react to this, brands are focusing more on content marketing than advertising, but people still place more trust in arguments and recommendations from peers or experts than in brands (Qualman, 2009). The opinion of some bloggers<sup>15</sup> is sometimes enough to decide whether or not to acquire a product; YouTube is full of videos of demonstrations of products, ranging from the universe of make-up to the simple vacuum cleaner to keep the house clean. The decision to buy is heavily weighted and researched on line and consumers base their decision on content available on line (Court et al., 2009). Sharing stories is essential and has great influence. Brands are gradually realizing that stories, more than enthusing consumers, are adding value and allowing referral sharing through the products they create (Godin, 2012).

14. “While stories are verbal narratives, which are primarily concerned with cognition and meaning, visual images are pictorial signs which operate more on an aesthetic and expressionist level”. (Salzer-Mörling and Strannegård, 2004: 229-230).

15. “Most consumers will share brand stories through social media when they have had either a very positive or negative experience with the brand.” (Gensler et al., 2013: 246)

Product narrative can be an effective strategy for brands to be able to tell their stories as they associate them with products, and it is customers and potential customers who take ownership of the products (or acquire them).

## 2. Empirical Work: From advertising narratives to product narratives

### 2.1. Methodology

#### 2.1.1. Goals and research question

Our empirical work aims to explore, in an applied setting, the notion of product narratives, addressing two main research questions: 1) Can we find cases and examples of product narratives, that sustain and inspire the proposition of this new concept? 2) If so, are product narratives a derivation of advertising narratives, or a new and original application of storytelling in marketing promotion?

#### 2.1.2. Methods

Our method included a preliminary phase of market scanning and benchmarking, looking for cases and examples of storytelling techniques that were associated with or applied to products themselves, instead of merely to their advertising. We focused on the digital environment, as storytelling has been a very common technique in digital advertising (Rampton, 2016). As an outcome of this preliminary search, we identified a brand that consistently tells stories that not only promote its products, but that are related to its intrinsic features. We selected this brand as an exploratory single-case case study (Yin, 2014), focusing on: a) describing how this brand is promoting its products by associating narratives with them; b) investigating the goals and motives that led the brand to adopt this strategy; and c) determining whether these narratives add value to the product or to the brand equity.

For data collection and analysis, we followed an interpretivist approach (Maxwell, 2005) and used a combination of qualitative methods, which include documentary search and analysis, a thematic analysis following the technique of thematic matrix (Kuckartz, 2014), and an in-depth interview of the CEO and founder of the brand.

#### 2.1.3. *Repetto, Carel and Josefinas* – Examples of storytelling brands

In our market scanning, we identified several brands that regularly use storytelling as a promotion technique. Taking a closer look at the case that we chose to explore in greater depth, let us consider *Josefinas* in comparison with two other footwear brands that stand out for their storytelling, all operating in the medium-level luxury segment - *Repetto* and *Carel*. We focused on this market and segment because our preliminary search identified a recurrent use

of storytelling associated with women's shoes, which occupy an iconic place in the imagery of women.

*Repetto* is the oldest of the three brands, created in 1947 by Rose Repetto, who invented *ballet* shoes. This French brand offered dance shoes and clothes, and in 1956 was catapulted into the limelight by the request to create a model for the actress Brigitte Bardot to wear in a movie. The brand remained successful until the death of Rose Repetto in 1984. Afterwards, it declined and came close to bankruptcy, until being acquired by Jean-Marc Gaucher in 1999. The brand is slowly being revitalized, maintaining its essence, craftsmanship and connection to the universe of dance (ballet), using storytelling to communicate the iconic and inspirational value of its products.

*Carel* is also a French brand and was created in 1952 by Georges Carel and his wife Rosette. It soon became a success due to its original and colourful models. At the advertising level, the brand started to collaborate with a well-known photographer of the time – Jeanloup Sieff. This partnership lasted two decades and made the campaigns of the brand emblematic. In 2010, *Carel* was acquired by Frédérique Picard and Monia Ghazouani (the couple responsible for the French perfumes brand Annick Goutal). The brand has modernized, resorting to storytelling in promotion. The advertising campaigns gained a new air and the stores were renovated.

The Portuguese brand *Josefinas* started out by offering handmade shoes, aiming to maintain the essence of Portuguese footwear at a time of crisis (2013). The brand has a motto – follow a dream. In about four years, *Josefinas* has grown exponentially and is successful in Portugal and beyond.

In terms of advertising, these three brands focused on the digital format and each new product is shared with their followers. The favourite type of communication usually includes stories. In the case of *Repetto*, the brand combines the footwear inspiration from the dance universe with stories such as Romeo and Juliet. In the case of *Carel*, they share appealing stories and the main focus is rarely the product marketed but rather the story itself. Lastly, the *Josefinas* brand chose to share, with each new launch, the story behind the product, reinforcing the connection between story and product by making the inspiration for the product the theme of the story.

#### 2.1.4. *Josefinas and our corpus of analysis*

*Josefinas* is a medium-level luxury hand-made Portuguese shoe brand founded by Filipa Júlio in 2013, who named the brand after one of her grandmothers, Josefina.

This brand was created in an extremely difficult period, as Portugal was facing a severe economic crisis and was under the intervention of the Troika, which imposed a set of austerity measures on the country. This significantly diminished consumption and investment in Portugal, unemployment reached unprecedented levels, and many companies went bankrupt. Howev-



er, Filipa Júlio was driven by a dream, which included making something she loved and contributing to revitalizing the country.

The brand launched its first collection exclusively on line in 2013, and soon partnered with popular Portuguese fashion bloggers. This strategy resulted in a great deal of interest from the traditional media, and also in a high number of followers of the brand's presence on the social media, namely Facebook and Instagram. In 2014, Josefinas started to be featured in international blogs and fashion magazines, and the CEO decided to capitalize on this media attention by launching new products: the model Moscow and the line "Winter Wonderland". Filipa Júlio thought it was interesting to share the "story" behind each product, and these campaigns feature the universes of the Moscow ballet and of Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland as the designer's inspirations for these products.

The brand soon realized that fans and consumers related to these universes, identified with characters and lifestyles, and appropriated the products as ways of expressing their identities or adding a little fantasy to their daily lives. The mobilizing and mesmerizing power of stories was evident, and during 2015, *Josefinas* broadened the inspirational universes associated with the new products it launched, ranging from Arabian Nights and Marie Antoinette to pop culture icons such as Twiggy and The Beatles. In 2016, the brand reached an important milestone, the opening of its first flagship store, located on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, in New York.

As the *corpus* of analysis, we selected the campaigns and products that were most popular on the brand's social media profiles. The analysis of the campaigns intends to test whether they include the main elements of storytelling. Thus, the coding categories of our thematic analysis result from the main components of a narrative identified in the literature (Miller, 2004; Propp, 2009; Alexander, 2011; Hedges, 2013). The analysis of the products intends to determine whether the narratives associated with them are merely promotional or add value to the products, using as coding categories the models of brand equity by Aaker (1991) and of product extension by Kotler and Keller (2012).

## 2.2. Findings and Discussion

### 2.2.1. Do Josefinas communicate product narratives?

Drawing on our literature review about the essential features of digital storytelling, we identified the existence of characters(s), of a setting (a specific time and place), and of a sequence of actions (e.g. Miller, 2004; Propp, 2009; Alexander, 2011; Hedges, 2013). We used these elements as coding categories and applied them to two promotional campaigns of *Josefinas*, as Table 1 shows. Our analysis confirms that the brand uses advertising narratives. However, the advertising narratives are not merely promotional, because they convey the inspiration source for each product, ranging from

**Table 1.** Thematic matrix featuring the elements of narratives in the promotional campaigns of *Josefinas*

	Theme	Characters	Setting	Action
"Walking in a Winter Wonderland" (2013)	Inspired by the universe of "Alice in Wonderland".	By order of appearance: Rabbit, Queen of Hearts, Caterpillar, Cheshire Cat and Alice.	Natural landscape, in the Winter.	The paths of different characters of "Alice in Wonderland" cross in a forest, during a snowstorm that brings them together. The products are not the focus.
"Pop Square" (2015)	Inspired by the partners of The Beatles, each model of the collection is named after Yoko, Mo, Pattie and Linda.	Four young girls who are friends, representing the inspiration by the four partners of The Beatles, Yoko, Mo, Pattie and Linda.	A crossing at Abbey Road, in the emblematic neighbourhood of Camden, in London, recreating an iconic photo of The Beatles. The characters are styled with inspiration from the 60s, but it is noticeable that the story takes place in current times.	Four young friends cross Abbey Road, in the emblematic neighbourhood of Camden, in London, recreating an iconic photo of The Beatles. They are modelling for the campaign, but the story also subtly conveys female emancipation.

Source: elaborated by the authors.

fiction to pop culture. In this way, products and inspirational universes become deeply intertwined, and products evoke, for fans and users, those inspirational universes.

Based on this finding, we propose the notion of product narrative to convey a type of storytelling that is not about advertising products, services or brands, but that actually adds value to the product.

### 2.2.2. What is the added value of product narratives?

We argue that using storytelling applied to products themselves instead of promotion – creating product narratives – adds value to such products. Furthermore, we argue that such value can be identified as a new layer of product extension. Following the product extension model of Kotler and Keller (2012), we added the "inspirational product" layer, arguing that narratives convey an inspirational dimension that goes beyond the product itself, associating with it features from the universes it evokes. The product itself becomes a representation and evocation of such universes, thus becoming inspiring for those who use it and for others. In order to test this argument, we applied a thematic matrix to three *Josefinas* products, in which the coding categories correspond to our expanded version of the model by Kotler and Keller (2012), presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Thematic matrix featuring layers of product extension applied to *Josefinas* products

	Core Benefit	Basic Product	Expected Product	Augmented Product	Potential Product	Inspirational Product
<b>"Marie Antoinette"</b>	Protection when walking.	Comfort when walking.	High quality of materials and manufacturing Aesthetics.	Luxury and status Fashion trends and lifestyle.	Luxurious and fashionista lifestyle.	Being a queen; luxury and glamour; being a trendsetter.
<b>"B Side" (Thelma &amp; Louise)</b>	Protection when walking.	Comfort when walking.	High quality of materials and manufacturing Aesthetics.	Luxury and status Fashion trends and lifestyle.	Luxurious and fashionista lifestyle.	Being a rebel; female emancipation; living and enjoying life; female friendship.
<b>"Rose Couture"</b>	Protection when walking.	Comfort when walking.	High quality of materials and manufacturing Aesthetics.	Luxury and status Fashion trends and lifestyle.	Luxurious and fashionista lifestyle.	Portuguese tradition; femininity; female emancipation.

Source: elaborated by the authors.

Our analysis shows that the product extension model by Kotler and Keller (2012) can be applied to *Josefinas*' products, and also that the wider layer of "inspirational product" that we suggest is applicable. Also, we observed that, when applied to products of the same range or line, from the same brand, the inspirational layer is the one that affords greater differentiation and uniqueness to each version and model of the product. Thus, we argue that product narratives are a strategy to extend products, and add value to them by facilitating differentiation. Based on this finding, we decided to further explore the ways in which narratives can add value to products. For this purpose, we applied a new thematic matrix to the same three products, but this time the coding categories are based on the model of brand equity by Aaker (1991), as presented in Table 3. For this analysis, we collected information through documentary research on line, using *Josefinas*' website and social media presences as sources (including both official posts and users' comments).

This thematic matrix reveals that the stories associated with each of the products analyzed have an impact on the main components of brand equity. Identification with the stories enhances the engagement with digital content and its virality, as followers and fans like to share stories that they identify with, thus expanding brand awareness. Also, the stories widen the possibilities of brand associations and enable a better differentiation of the products, even within ranges and lines. Furthermore, the stories also contribute to enhancing brand loyalty, mostly because of the identification and emotional connectedness that they promote. Perhaps the added value to the perceived quality is less significant, but even so, when alluding to universes of luxury, as in the case of "Marie Antoinette", or craftsmanship, as in the case of "Rose Couture", this dimension is also reinforced.

**Table 3.** Thematic matrix featuring brand equity applied to *Josefinas* products

	<b>Brand Awareness</b> (based on website and social media metrics).	<b>Perceived Quality</b> (based on social media comments).	<b>Brand Association</b> (based on Josefinas' communication and social media comments).	<b>Brand Loyalty</b> (based on ecommerce and website metrics and social media comments).
<b>"Marie Antoinette"</b>	The association of the name of the product to a well-known historical figure reinforces brand awareness.	Handcrafted product, using high-quality materials, and produced in limited quantity. The colours, materials and style are inspired by fashion trends launched by Marie Antoinette herself, reinforcing its perception as a luxury product.	Association with the story of the French Queen, well known for the way she dressed, for her luxurious lifestyle, and for being a fashion trendsetter. Using the shoes refers to the imagery of royalty, the court and luxury.	Brand loyalty is reinforced by the identification with the product, by the emotions it evokes and by the engagement with its narrative. All these elements are transferred to the brand and stimulate the exploration of other lines and ranges.
<b>"B Side" (Thelma &amp; Louise)</b>	Brand awareness is reinforced by association with an iconic movie (1991), with award-winning actresses (Geena Davies and Susan Sarandon), which conveys a message of female emancipation, still relevant in current times.	Handcrafted product, using high-quality materials, and produced in limited quantity. Includes accessories to adorn the shoes and customize them.	The storytelling creates an association between the products and the messages conveyed by the movie. The range is inspired by both lead characters and customers choose based not only on product features but also on their identification with one of the characters.	The identification with the messages conveyed by the movie – female emancipation, friendship and solidarity among women – is expressed by brand loyalty. Accessories also motivate loyalty and further purchases.
<b>"Rose Couture"</b>	Brand awareness is reinforced by including traditional Portuguese embroidery on the product.	Handcrafted product, using high-quality materials, and produced in limited quantity. They are a blend of comfortable and sporty shoes combined with traditional embroidery. They convey luxury and irreverence simultaneously.	This model is a tribute to the Portuguese embroiderers of the Sousa Valley. It is a mixture of tradition and creativity, contemporaneity and irreverence.	The association with Portuguese character and tradition motivates loyalty to the brand for those who identify with it.

Source: elaborated by the authors.

### 2.2.3. *What are the strategic goals of Josefinas, when creating product narratives?*

After this analysis, we wanted to explore to what extent creating narrative products is a conscious and innovative strategy of the brand, and the main benefits that it affords. For this purpose, we conducted an interview with the founder and CEO of Josefinas, Filipa Júlio, following a semi-structured script.

Our interview revealed that the association between products and stories began naturally, bringing together the sources of inspiration of the designer for each product and her desire to communicate with fans and potential consumers how the products were created, designed, developed and manufactured. Filipa told us that “the products have a life of their own, and I ended up telling that story (...) about the idea and the execution of the product.” She adds “I love telling stories, they are fundamental to our life; they are our heritage, our future, and because of that they are perfect for conveying concepts.”

However, Filipa explained that, after the first year of existence of the brand, they realized the power of stories: “It is important that our fans and clients know what we are doing, what motivates us, our values, and if we don’t convey this, there is no communication.” She states that fans started telling them their own stories about how they adopted and incorporated the products into their lives. They shared these stories more privately, via email, or more widely on social media. Sometimes they told the stories to the brand, posting on the brand’s channels, but they more often referred to the brand in their daily communication through their own digital presence. Filipa added that “this connection with women is one of the strongest features of the brand”.

Thus, *Josefinas* came up with a strategy that is applied to all products: “Each product has an identity, a concept, and a story.” In addition, each story includes “the values of the brand”, which include meaning, dreaming, femininity, strength, happiness, proactivity, and the value of hand-made work and craftsmanship. The fans and clients moreover adhere to the stories because they “identify with the values we incorporate in the stories.”

The brand does not objectively measure the impact of stories. Filipa stated that stories enhance awareness and recommendations, but she did not share any quantitative data or metrics about the social media presence of the brand with us. She admits that they do not measure whether stories have an impact on sales, but she states “I believe they must bear a strong weight.” About the benefits of product narratives, Filipa summarizes: “Stories bring products to life.”

### 3. Conclusion

Throughout history, stories have always been intrinsic to the human way of communicating, and this affords them an almost irresistible appeal (Fisher, 1987; Polleta, 2006; Selbin, 2010; Salmon, 2010; Hopkins, 2015). In our contemporary digital context, consumers are facing information overload, stimuli-clutter from brands, abundant and similar offers, all this with little time and attention in a fast-paced and hyper-connected media landscape (Davis, 2009). This context, associated with increased possibilities of participation and choice, has led consumers to reject traditional push advertising, and has forced brands to look for new strategies. Brands have been shifting to pull strategies of promotion, among which content marketing and storytelling have played an important role. However, attracting attention remains a challenge, and brands are struggling to remain relevant, to personalize their communication, and to reach their public opportunely (Miller, 2004; Salzer-Mörling and Strannegård, 2004).

By looking into advertising narratives, our empirical work identified product narratives as a variation, in which storytelling is not used just occasionally to promote products (or services, or brands), but instead stories are intertwined with the product itself. In our case study, *Josefinas*, the brand started by sharing stories related to the inspiration for the product, the concept behind it, and then evolved to creating stories about the fantasy and inspirational universes that the products allude to and evoke. Our research shows that product narratives can be regarded as a new level of product extension (Keller, 1993), adding an inspirational layer. This inspirational layer creates an identification with the product, and leads buyers and potential buyers to appropriate the products for their own self-expression (Kornberger, 2010). This is also reflected in the brand equity (Aaker, 1991), as it enhances engagement with the brand, loyalty, and recommendations.

Our results need to be considered in a context that entails some limitations. We studied only one case study, and from a market with specificities, as luxury has always had an inspirational strand, and shoes play a specific role in the imagery of women. Also, the brand operates globally, but it incorporates its Portuguese origin. Despite this singularity, we believe that the guidelines drawn from this case study are useful for marketing professionals, and also that it opens up new research directions about the specificities and potentialities of product narratives.

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