

## **Convergent/Transmedia Storytelling as Foundation for Engagement**

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### **Abstract**

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*The communication tool of convergent storytelling can be instrumental in encouraging the diffusion and subsequent engagement with a brand. This multi-media/multi-story approach to promotion is designed to engage multiple audiences, many of whom may avoid or delay purchase. This paper advances a model of how very different groups are reached by the different media employed and how this synergy of multiple media and multiple communication elements (convergent storytelling) can not only reach these audiences, but provide them with an immersive brand experience and by doing so, create a higher level of engagement.*

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**Key words:** Brand Engagement, Convergent Storytelling, Transmedia Storytelling, Diffusion, Promotion

### **Introduction**

Today, engagement is the difference between marketers just selling goods and services and marketers developing customer relationships. This brand engagement is a tool to build the long-term value of their brand. Of course, brands are more than just goods on a store shelf. Today, celebrities and athletes understand that they are a “personal brand,” one with personal and emotional connections to their fans. Their brand value can then be loaned to the branded merchandise they endorse in what is called “borrowed interest.” Intellectual properties like books and movies are also brands to be promoted and protected in order to increase their value and longevity. Getting these branded properties to be known by large numbers of people takes a concerted effort of promotion through media both available to, and used by, the people assumed to be potentially interested (our target market).

This paper proposes that marketers recognize the value of multiple streams of connecting with different kinds of audiences in what is called transmedia or convergent storytelling. Since the transmedia term, common in communication literature, is confusingly similar with the promotional effort of a single-strategy advertising campaign across media, or multi-media campaigns, we will use the convergent term for marketing purposes. This term also more accurately describes the objective of the storytelling – to bring together separate promotional content elements into a converged whole.

Storytelling is merely a form of promotion, whereas instead of listing features, affordable pricing, or brand comparison, it features a story. It could be a story of the company’s founding, its founder, how the brand is used in the home, focused on employees’ commitment, etc. It could also be a fictional story of how the brand “could” solve a consumer problem or even a fanciful or humorous story using the brand as a hero. The use of stories has shown to increase persuasion and reduce counterarguments. They can disarm and enthrall consumers, but they are not always a better strategy (Mahoney, 2019). Indeed, when a product class is first introduced into the marketplace, the emphasis is usually going to be to highlight its relative advantage over existing product classes instead of creating this emotional engagement. But even here, the opportunity to tell a story about innovation can create a unique connection with the consumer (Smith, 2020).

This telling of stories unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each media vehicle making distinctive contributions to the storyworld, and thereby providing an integrated approach (Jenkins, 2008). The convergent part of storytelling is the technique used to make the necessary frequent, and emotional, connections – connections that vary slightly in content – needed to achieve engagement with the brand. These slight variations in the ads create an incentive to find the other promotional variations for the brand, creating an engaged connection to the brand in the pursuit of the other variations.

This approach is especially well-suited to dealing with storytelling brands like books, movies, television programs, etc. Because of the natural storytelling inherent with these products, they will be used as examples in this paper, but due to the increasing interest in building relationships and engagement for marketers, the author will also show that most other types of brands can also benefit from the emotional connections that convergent storytelling offers.

**The Product Life Cycle and Diffusion**

The process by which the brand becomes liked, purchased, and repurchased by more and more people is known as a Product Life Cycle. Product classes, and sometimes brand names, go through the stages of Introduction, Growth, Maturity, and finally, Decline as competitive substitutes enter the marketplace. Different groups of people, however, will be willing to try these new product classes and brands at different stages of the PLC and these group characteristics are explained by Rogers’ Diffusion of Innovations (Rich, 2010). Their characteristics are labeled Innovators, Early Adopters, Early Majority, Late Majority, and finally, the Laggards who generally resist trying new products and brands. Figure 1 shows how the two concepts can be plotted simultaneously to show both the growth of the product and who is driving that growth.

It is common to see the two graphs superimposed as in Figure 1 since they both refer to the introduction of new product classes. However, it is useful to remember that the PLC is always seeking to elongate, or extend the time line (at least once it hits Maturity) by extending the life cycle with new variations and new target markets so that the product class is profitable longer. On the other hand, the Diffusion process is seeking to compress, or contract time so the categories enter the marketplace faster, which makes adoption (50% of the market) faster and taps into the latter categories faster so that the product class is profitable faster.

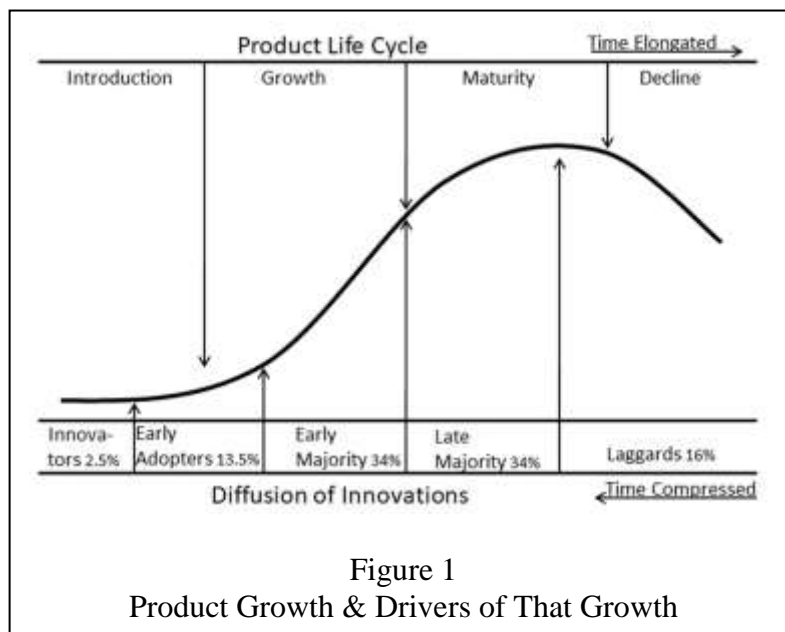


Figure 1  
Product Growth & Drivers of That Growth

Traditional promotion strategies tell us that these groups will be interested in different media, so media and media vehicle selection is an important part of targeting them. However, even those in say, the innovators group – and perhaps especially the innovator group – are looking to be impacted differently for each media contact made. These individual, and different, contacts offer the opportunity to engage in a different, and more impactful, way of connecting emotionally (i.e. engagement) with the brand. This is the basis of Convergent Storytelling.

## **Convergent Storytelling**

Convergent Storytelling – also known as transmedia storytelling (Hansen, 2009) – says that “every story, image, brand, relationship plays itself out across the maximum number of media platforms, shaped top down by decisions made in corporate boardrooms and bottom up by decisions made in teenager’s bedrooms.” This increases the desirability of properties that can exploit “synergies” between different parts of the medium system and maximize “touchpoints” – or points of contact with consumers – with different consumer niches. This is why this technique is used for franchise-building in general and media entertainment in particular (Jenkins, 2009).

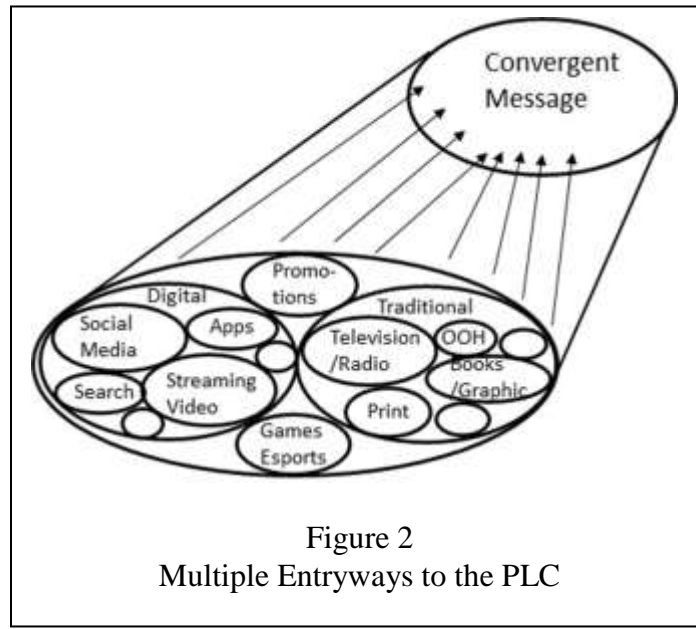
Jenkins (2009) is proposing maximizing touchpoints for not only different niches (target markets) but also recognizing that synergies will develop because of the multiple contacts, or frequency, of the promotions. So far, that’s not very different from standard promotional strategy. But Jenkins (2009, 334) goes on to explain the real value of this convergent/transmedia storytelling. “A transmedia story represents the integration of entertainment experiences across a range of different media platforms. A story like [TV shows] ‘Heroes’ or ‘Lost’ might spread from television into comics, the web, computer or alternate reality games, toys and other commodities, and so forth, picking up new consumers as it goes and allowing the most dedicated fans to drill deeper. The fans, in turn, may translate their interests in the franchise into concordances and Wikipedia entries, fan fiction, vids, fan films, cosplay [costumed role-playing], game mods [modifications], and a range of other participatory practices that further extend the story world in new directions” (Jenkins, 2009).

This expansion of “narrative universes” contributes to the storytelling, allowing individual consumers to have a personal interpretation of the information, but also allowing the individual to be part of the storyworld’s community (Jenkins, 2009). An important part of this storytelling is the participatory aspect, often soliciting contributions from the community (Weedon and Knight, 2015) into the storyworld. This aspect of convergent storytelling is especially important because it provides motivation for the consumer to seek out other elements of the story that exist only in/on other media platforms.

Therefore, convergent storytelling provides marketers the opportunity to make more connections, and a higher level of “engagement,” that is often elusive through the standard tools of marketing and media strategy. The value of this engagement will be discussed in the next section.

It should be noted that convergent storytelling is not exclusively used for commercial purposes. When faced with complex or technological issues to explain, storytelling can provide explanations to those with less professional understanding (McErlean, 2018), such as in education (Kwon and Byun, 2018).

Figure 2 shows that there is not a single entry point into the PLC – Product Life Cycle/Diffusion curve. Convergent storytelling provides us with many entry points, each with its own set of media/contact connections and each of these sets with different interested people. People do not interact with only a single entry point, but flow across from one medium to another. The result is a “new kind of narrative where story flows across each platform forming a rich narrative tapestry” (Gomez, 2010) for an array of products.



It is proposed in Figure 2 that the groups of people from these many media points will combine at some point on the PLC. The illustration also shows the increasing role of digital media as an input source. The primary – if not only – growth in digital is digital mobile. Mobile accounts for 70% of time spent with digital in the U.S. (Smartphones, 2019). Noting this trend, two-thirds to three-fourths of marketers have indicated that digital will be part their advertising for the second half of 2020, while less than one-half are planning on using traditional media like television, radio, and print (Data, 2020). A promotional strategy that does not include digital mobile is one that is destined to fail or is targeting only older consumers as the growth of smart phones has grown from 35% in 2011 to over 80% now (Pew Research, 2019). The initial target market chosen for the new product will dictate the media mix.

The Diffusion process has shown that people who are the first to try new brands have characteristics different from people who enter later, but different groups are more in contact with some media and less with others. Therefore, people do not necessarily enter the convergent storytelling media modes simultaneously and different groups will prefer different media for their first contact. Some are likely to first encounter a brand property as a book, then perhaps a movie and game simultaneously, and later as a graphic novel. Others may see a movie first, and then be interested in developing the story further by gaming and novels.

Several brand properties have already shown how to engage in convergent storytelling. The television series “Castle” from a few years ago has its fictional lead character, Richard Castle, portrayed as a mystery writer while also releasing actual mystery books with this fictional character as the author. The television show is produced by ABC Studios and broadcast on the ABC network, while the books are published by Hyperion. All three companies are owned by Disney. On the NBC series “Parks and Recreation,” the fictional lead character was writing a non-fiction book, while the show’s producer actually wrote that book, albeit one of fiction (Fine, 2011). Confusingly blurring the reality and make-believe at times but offering lots of Jenkins’ touchpoints with different content in each, they synergistically offered the true fan a much more immersive brand experience than that of the casual fan.

Another example would be the Marvel “Avengers” entertainment properties. While they don’t blur the lines between fiction and reality, they synchronize timelines where if one missed seeing one of the movies, they would be confused on several plot elements when watching one of the television series. Each franchise property advances the overall storyline while providing its own unique story elements into the overall storyworld, encouraging consumers/fans to seek out the properties they may have missed.

The technique is not new but also not often used with traditional branding. Historically, in the 1940s, Hollywood used Superman and the character's storyworld across the media of comics, radio, cinema, and television and merged it with the reality of World War II (Freeman, 2015).

Works of fiction like those highlighted above are especially well suited to this kind of "alternate reality" storytelling since the product being sold is stories. Owners of the fictional property can continue to extend the story, characters, etc. into new media as the opportunities develop. This convergent storytelling technique, however, can easily be adapted to a wide variety of products, services, and experiences. One merely has to start with a story and then add/withhold elements that will be medium or vehicle specific. Having a vision of the overall story should be a first step so that when the story pieces are assembled, or converged, the resulting "whole" becomes a satisfying exercise for the consumer.

## **A Marketing Model for Convergent Storytelling**

### **Value of a Brand**

The goal for owners of brands is to build the brand's value, measured by brand equity. Brand Equity, like a firm's equity, implies an economic value beyond the functional characteristics of the branded product (Hawkins, 2010). In many ways, it represents the brand's future profitability. When developing a formula to estimate the dollar worth of a brand's equity, one of the primary components will usually be brand loyalty.

Brand Loyalty represents the degree to which a customer is willing to purchase the brand without considering alternate brands. Also, brand loyalty must include an emotional component (e.g. liking, preferring) in order to distinguish loyalty from simple habit. Of particular interest to marketers is the possibility of pushing loyalty further into the realm of brand passion (Paine, 2010).

Brand Passion is an extreme end of the scale of loyalty and engagement (more below) that implies a more long-term connection (Paine, 2009) with the brand and a self-identification with the brand to the point of adopting characteristics of the brand's personality as one's own. One can see how this is sometimes called "brand worship" (Assael, 2003) and commonly used to describe fans of brands like Apple and Harley-Davidson.

One can also see this brand passion with fifty years of various "Star Trek" properties, the sixty years of James Bond books and movies, and the same with "Harry Potter" and "Twilight" franchises. In the last couple of decades, the Marvel universe of properties like the "Avengers" and "Wonder Woman" series of comics, graphic novels, and movies have become extremely popular. More recently, the alternate history "Watchmen" series of comics, graphic novels, video games made their way to becoming the successful HBO limited television series in late 2019. These fictional brand properties and their promotional partners offer fans a variety of opportunities to engage with the brands and their spinoff products, including special dress-up parties in which the fans have the opportunity to recreate and reimagine their favorite characters (Target, 2012).

The newer digital and mobile devices coming to market will enhance the opportunity for consumers to communicate with both firms and fellow brand fans on a scale more massive than ever before (Learmonth, Teicher, Diaz, Patel, & Klaassen, 2012). The rapid growth of mobile devices within the last decade was described earlier. All of this developing loyalty, leading to passion, cannot occur without the connection between the fan and the brand through brand engagement.

Brand Engagement is a term loosely used to describe the process of forming an attachment, both emotional and rational (Nail, 2006), between a person and a brand. Brand engagement is created by the actions, attitudes, and behaviors of both the organization and those with whom the organization is communicating (Paine, 2009). Importantly, brand engagement is enhanced by the increased number of interactions, or touchpoints, between the firm and the person, and secondly, by the channel variety with which the person has those interactions (Jenkins, 2008). These frequent and emotional connections will be a key to developing both brand loyalty and the possibility of brand passion.

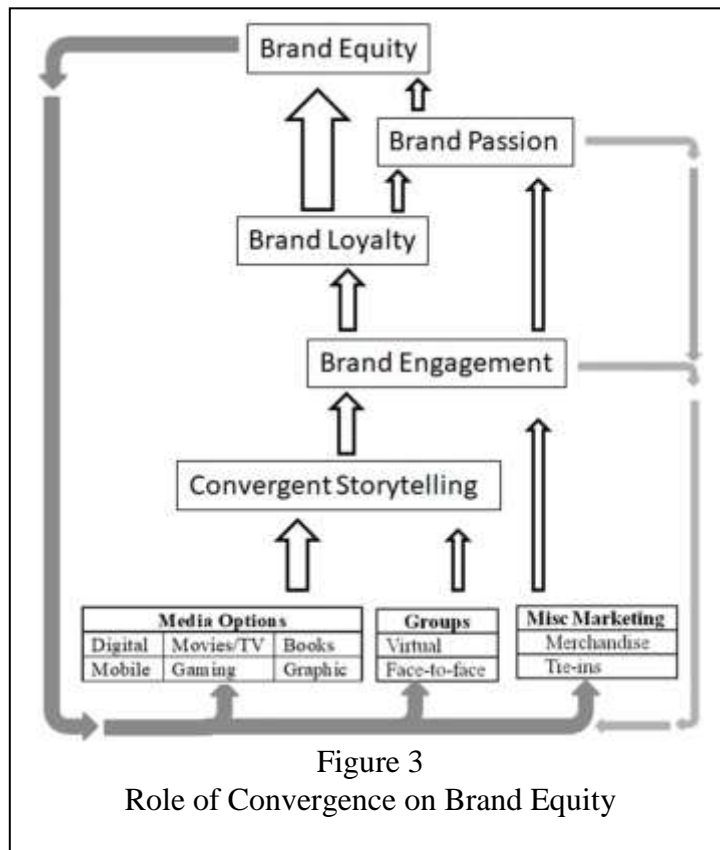
Importantly for advertisers, engaging ads are less likely to be skipped by viewers (Sass, 2009) in this video-on-demand, DVR-enhanced lifestyle. In fact, many marketers today are stressing that they are more interested in developing (and measuring) engagement rather than simply counting contacts with advertising (e.g. Click-Through Rates, reach, exposure, frequency).

While the attractiveness of increasing engagement as a motivation for – and as a result from – convergent storytelling is apparent, the traditional measures of ad effectiveness may not be designed to reflect the impact of engagement with the ad (Baar, 2011). Baar (2011) reports that relevance, however, does impact ad effectiveness, and this is consistent with the aims of convergent storytelling.

These elements of brand engagement, loyalty, passion, and equity lead to the need for a model of the interaction and direction of the connections. The input of Convergent Storytelling is highlighted as a preferred method of stimulating these connections.

**The Convergence Model**

A marketing model for Convergent Storytelling as a means to brand equity is proposed in Figure 3. The model shows multiple entries to the model besides the media alternatives. This recognizes that groups, both face-to-face and virtual (e.g. Instagram, Facebook, Twitter) offer additional avenues to touch and enhance the convergent storytelling. Stimulating word-of-mouth is also often part of an ad campaign’s budget. Movie studios spend over \$27 million to market a release, and while most of the budget still goes to television (but that needs to change as its efficiency declines), much was also dedicated to merchandising and movie tie-ins with the studios’ marketing partners (For, 2019).



The model shows that not all engagement is dependent upon the storytelling. Other marketing tools associated with the introduction of books, movies, video games, etc. may not have influence on the storytelling, but may still have influence on building brand engagement by increasing the frequency of brand contacts, increasing the touchpoints.

The model illustrates a feedback loop for the traditional brand extension of popular brands through the brand equity loop. It also proposes a feedback loop for early brand engagement and brand passion, which may eventually lead to brand equity, but in the meantime may be utilized to enhance inputs such as additional merchandise and additional media and group contacts. The model offers many opportunities for future research.

## **Conclusion**

Marketers will continue to champion brand engagement as a long-term means to evoke passion, loyalty, and equity in their brand. They also need to look to the value of this convergent/transmedia strategy as an important tool because of the emotional connection between the target and the brand that the strategy will create.

As previously illustrated, works of fiction like movies, books, and television programs lend themselves especially well to the convergent storytelling technique since fiction is at its essence, telling stories. Whether it is the more common books-to-movies or the coordinated release of multiple brand properties, storytelling is an effective and efficient way to reach different targets – and for the same target, multiple touchpoints.

What this paper has demonstrated is that more traditional brands may also use this storytelling strategy to enhance the consumer connection to the brand property. While fictional properties and franchises were used as examples, it was also discussed earlier how traditional marketers can also create their own stories to tell – about the firm, the brand, the owner, the town, the production process, and so forth. Stories create bonds and any marketer can create stories whether the stories are true, a little true, or fanciful. The key is to make the stories have an emotional and relevant connection with the target market.

The synergy of different media, with each media vehicle's individual inputs contributing to the storytelling, a richer, fuller story will be created. This fuller, richer story will increase loyalty and engagement for each of the early target markets who in turn will help influence later groups in developing the brand's storyworld community.

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