Abstract

The story of the circular economy has sparked growing discussion and innovation amongst businesses, yet the role of the customer remains underexplored and a challenge to the implementation of circular designs and business models. Customer involvement may require new behaviours such as rental, repair or return (here we propose 7 ‘R’s in the style of similar ‘re’ models), which represent a departure from traditional purchase-based transactions. Although some fields of sustainable design have developed concepts of design for sustainable behaviour, these have focused on product or service rather than information design, and so-called ‘green’ marketing has had mixed results. The paper reviews some literature from the fields of service marketing and service design, and finds the concepts of the customer journey and ‘touchpoints’ useful to describe the enhanced communication and interactions that may be required between organisations and customers in a circular economy. It also explores literature from the field of information design, and the potential of visual rhetoric and narratives in particular to affect engagement and even behaviour change. Code play and narrative transportation for instance have been shown to constitute persuasive techniques in healthcare communications and in consumers’ adoption of novel products by reducing their resistance to the message. Further development and empirical studies are needed, but current indications are that visual communication can have a significant role to play in engaging customers with the new behaviours required in a circular economy, and this will have important lessons for many organisations.

Keywords: circular economy, information design, service design, visual rhetoric, narrative

1. Introduction

Although models of material cycling and environmental sustainability have been around for several decades, the concept of a circular economy has gained particular attention over the last ten years due to work by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation and endorsement by the European Commission (Commission, 2015). The circular economy has revived the concept of sustainability by capturing the imagination of businesses and making eco-economic decoupling more of a possibility. However, the difficulty of introducing new business models and practices such as product service systems, reuse and return to consumers and of turning these new narratives into action is a major challenge to the success of the circular paradigm. Circular economy may require new behaviours and increased involvement of the customer or user in the product life cycle, for example returning or reselling an item in addition to the original purchase, or subscribing to a service (as in a product service system or PSS, (Tukker, 2004)). The concept of touchpoints as applied in service design (Polaine et al, 2013) can provide a useful conceptual framework for the different channels whereby a customer might be first familiarised with a circular economy brand, and then involved in a product’s onward or return journey. But a question remains as to how the engagement and participation of the customer can be achieved.

Studies in the transdisciplinary fields of design for sustainability and design for behaviour change (DfS/DIBC) have examined the potential of product and service design in promoting behaviour change for sustainability, largely through a sliding scale of control or information measures that encourage or force people to comply (Boks, 2018; Zachrisson Daæ & Boks, 2014). Information alone can be problematic, as the customer or user is in total control and may choose not to comply (e.g. information-based approaches such as green labelling have had mixed success, (Peattie & Crane, 2005; Rex & Baumann, 2007)). However, the control side of the scale also represents difficulties in terms of the ethics of coercing users to behave in certain ways, and the possibility that they may react against perceived control (Zachrisson Daæ & Boks, 2014). This paper focuses on the ‘information’ side of the scale and explores two techniques of visual communication that move beyond labelling...
and may be useful in engaging customers with the new behaviours required of them in a circular economy, namely visual rhetoric and narratives. The power of written or visual messaging to change ingrained attitudes and values is perhaps limited, but certain configurations of message content and style have been shown to affect participation outcomes and behaviour. For instance, puzzlement and narrative techniques have successfully introduced people to new healthcare behaviours and innovative new products—though these may be used in more or less ethical ways (greenwashing has been criticised for selling a spurious story of sustainability (Grant, 2007; Peattie & Crane, 2005), and of course the advertising industry has made use of both techniques to sell products and services to people in the conventional linear economy).

One overarching question therefore is whether new or different forms of communication are necessary for engaging people with circular behaviours and value propositions than have been used for purely commercial or linear propositions in the past. This is too broad a conundrum for the present initial and exploratory study however, and the research question proposed is therefore as follows: How can the design of visual communications at the touchpoints engage customers with the new behaviours required in a circular economy?

2. **Methodology**

The nature of this paper is trans-disciplinary, exploratory and conceptual, and involved using a snowballing approach to review some core literature and draw linkages between the diverse fields of design for circular economy and design for sustainability, service business and marketing, service design and visual communication. For example, several articles from the recent comprehensive collection on information design (e.g. Boag, 2017; Jansen, 2017; Kostelnick, 2017; Moys, 2017) were found to be useful, and reference lists were scanned to source further articles and texts of relevance to the topics of visual rhetoric and narrative. Literature focusing on information design and narratives in the context of healthcare and new product marketing was found to be particularly relevant, since it addressed the topic of communications that can introduce or persuade people to accept entirely new behaviours or types of product—rather than just shifting customers’ allegiances from one brand to another (as for instance in traditional advertising). It should be noted however that this is a working paper, and it is intended that the concepts and cross-disciplinary linkages are developed further before leading on to empirical studies.

3. **Customer participation in a circular economy**

The number of academic studies on the subject of circular economy are increasing, but although attention is being paid to circular design, business models and material processing, the issue of customer activities and the changes that will need to be wrought in terms of people’s everyday behaviours has been largely neglected (Kirchherr et al., 2017; Piscicelli & Ludden, 2016; Schotman & Ludden, 2014). The fields of Design for Sustainability and Design for Behaviour Change are relevant in that they have studied the effect of product and service design on people’s behaviour in a sustainability context usually during the use phase, but these have generally not focused on the role or design of information specifically, and have not examined the series of interactions or touchpoints that comprise the customer’s whole experience (Boks, 2018; Zachrisson Daae & Boks, 2014).

The role of customers in a CE is in fact vital, as their participation will determine the success of new business models and practices such as extended use or recovery of products, design for disassembly or product service systems (PSS) (Bakker et al, 2014; N. M. P. Bocken et al., 2016; Hollander et al, 2017; Tukker, 2013). Rather than being perceived as merely a purchaser of goods or user or experiencer of services, these strategies dictate that customers be involved in additional activities such as the return, rental, reuse or resale of items. They must also change current practices, for example from buying new to buying used items or renting those items instead. In the tradition of ‘R’ models and waste hierarchies (see Kirchherr et al., 2017), 7 ‘re’ activities are here suggested (see Table 1) that customers specifically might participate in as part of a CE. These do not represent any kind of hierarchy and are extrapolated from the business models and practices suggested in literature rather than direct empirical research (Bakker et al., 2014; Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2013; Hollander et al., 2017; Piscicelli & Ludden, 2014; Tukker, 2013).
2016; Weelden et al, 2016), but they represent a sample set of behaviours that require active involvement or initiation by customers.

1. Return an item to the retailer, or to a third party
2. Repair an item themselves
3. Resell an item via an internet platform or offline
4. Rent or access a product/service as an alternative to ownership
5. Re-buy an item that has been previously used, repaired, remanufactured or recycled
6. Retain an item to prolong its life and postpone disposal
7. Remunerate, i.e. pay more for an item or service that has greater longevity

Table 1: 7 ‘Re’ activities of customer behaviour

In a circular economy, products are ‘objects with a career’ or ‘assemblages of materials’ (Spring & Araujo, 2017) that are stabilised and then transformed, for instance when repaired or downcycled, with each transformation or circulation (or service) enabled by networks of actors –including customers. Single-use or disposable items are not considered part of the design of an idealised circular economy (Hollander et al., 2017) and are thus out of scope of the present exploration. For many models of CE, it is clear that customers will need to be increasingly engaged with the life cycle of the products they use, as well as with the organisations that provide the means to engage with circular products and services. Organisations therefore have a role to play in facilitating this behavioural change at different stages of engagement –through business models, but also through marketing and communication (N. Bocken, 2017).

4. Services, marketing and customer experience

In the field of business and marketing, a goods-dominant approach has given way to a service-dominant logic in recent years (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). The service-centred approach is consistent with stronger market orientation and longer customer relationships, ultimately leading to increased profits and more successful business (Bolton, 2016). Traditionally, companies focused on the moment of product purchase, utilising functionalist and short-term methods of persuasion to prompt a transaction (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998). But a service-based approach moves beyond this to focus on building relationships with customers whom it sees as participants in value co-creation. (Ballantyne et al, 2011). Traditional goods-based marketing considers price, product, promotion and place, but services marketing includes the management of processes and people, meanings and relationships (Bolton, 2016; Duncan & Moriarty, 1998). Goods become service ‘appliances’, and value is a measure of experience rather than acquisition, determined by the customer at the time of use.

This changed perspective has meant that organisations are increasingly interested in building longer term relationships with their customers (Bolton, 2016), and is also more in line with business models like product service systems (PSS) and servitisation (Lightfoot et al, 2013; Tukker, 2013) which have been proposed to support a CE through the integration of physical products and associated services. Such models imply the potential (but not guarantee) of providing a sustainable solution to resource requirements through the provision of results or functions without necessitating outright purchase or ownership of a product (Bhamra et al, 2017).

Reciprocity and negotiation emerge as features of these new service-based customer relationships, and the role of communication as process rather than transfer is brought to the fore: interactions with customers are extended over time and
bring new possibilities for value creation, as SD logic recognises the importance of sustaining relationships at various interaction points (Ballantyne et al., 2011). For instance, in a circular economy communications may be required to ensure that a customer knows how to repair a product themselves, or brings it back to the retailer after use so that it can be checked and rented to another.

Customer experience has been defined as the ‘cognitive, emotional, social and behavioural dimensions of all activities that connect the customer and the organisation over time, including all touch points and channels’ (Bolton 2016, 4-5). Every communication that a customer has with a company will confirm or redefine their impression of it (Boag, 2017; Duncan & Moriarty, 1998), and for service-based models this includes the pre-purchase, purchase, consumption, engagement and non-purchase phases – all of which may form part of the customer journey (Bolton, 2016). Circular and PSS or servitization models in particular emphasise the transformation of products, materials and value through different lifetimes, thus providing opportunities for new services or customer communications at each stage (Spring & Araujo, 2016). In other words, in order to maximise material efficiency and reduce wastage, as part of a CE information and communications must accompany and facilitate the transition of materials through the system.

Of course, as with non-CE models, customers’ attention and responses will be guided by their practical and emotional goals and motivations, and although consistency across different media should be a goal, any brand’s communications will be differently understood by different people in different situations (Bolton, 2016). Moreover, in the increasingly digitalised and online world of communications and sales, the market becomes a ‘network of social actors with economic interests’ (Ballantyne et al., 2011). The new world of social media allows communications increasingly to be two-way instead of one-directional, with customers co-creating and co-producing their experience through sharing information within or outside organisational parameters (Bolton, 2016). The challenge for businesses is how to manage the service process and shape the CE customer experience across its many touchpoints.

5. Service design and the circular economy customer journey
The field of service design deals with the shaping of experience for a service recipient, such as a customer, and often with the co-production or co-creation of experiences by service recipients too (Polaine et al., 2013). Although there is a lack of consensus as to its definition (Schneider et al., 2011), service design focuses on people and performance rather than product, with practitioners (e.g. designers, marketeers, customer service managers) using techniques of experimentation and iteration to create a desirable and usable service for their customers (Saco & Goncalves, 2008). Service designers use models such as the customer journey in order to take a holistic and people-focused approach to designing customer experiences. Rather than the one-time contact between supplier and receiver that occurs with a transactional product sale, the delivery of a service evolves over time and involves several contact or ‘touch’ points between the two (e.g. Figure 1 (LiveWork, 2018)). Each interaction or touchpoint is an opportunity for involving and communicating with the customer and contributes to the overall service experience (Boag, 2017; Duncan & Moriarty, 1998). The growth of CE models such as PSS or servitization therefore necessitates a much richer understanding of the touch points, networks, episodes and customer journeys that facilitate a material or product’s career (Spring & Araujo, 2016).

In a CE, the customer service journey would include not just awareness, purchase, use and after sales but also ‘after use’ options, such as return or resale, that aim to keep the product in circulation after the initial customer has finished with it. For instance, we can divide the 7Rs of customer behaviour into three phases of purchase or acquisition, use and after use (see Table 2) – though of course there will be many other opportunities for communication and interaction between the organisation and the customer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purchase/acquisition</th>
<th>Use</th>
<th>After use</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rent</td>
<td>Repair</td>
<td>Return</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-buy</td>
<td>Retain</td>
<td>Resell</td>
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<tr>
<td>Remunerate</td>
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Table 2: The 7Rs can be divided into different phases along the customer journey

Customers are influenced by and get information from many different channels and sources, for example traditional word of mouth, online or offline advertising or social media, and these channels create a ‘portfolio of touchpoints’ providing hedonic or utilitarian value (Bolton, 2016). The touchpoints that resonate for each customer will depend on their own goals and situation, and their experience will be embedded in a ‘rich context’ at any point in time, so managing these information flows to complement the CE customer journey is a challenging and complex task for any organisation.

6. Engaging customers with CE through visual communication at the touchpoints

An organisation sends out messaging at the touchpoints through elements and signals such as its design, pricing, corporate strategy, guarantee, use of language and imagery and brand – the perception of which drive customer behaviour and can strengthen or weaken relationships. The information provided helps people structure their environment, make decisions or interpretations, ascribe meanings and take actions, and thus a focus on the communication at these points of interaction is key (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998). Material inefficiencies and waste occur for many reasons, a major one being because a product’s affordances (Norman, 2013) provide information as to its usage but not its end-of-life scenarios (e.g. how or where customers should return or resell them). Therefore the signifiers that communicate the operation, purpose and future potential of the item (Norman, 2013) and the actions that a customer should take at the various interaction points are crucial. For example, in the
UK a lack of well-designed information as to the importance of retaining fire-retardancy labels on sofas leads to thousands ending up in landfill every year (The Great Recovery, 2015).

Products, of course, can define a brand. But for services and product service systems the touchpoints themselves make an important contribution to the brand experience, as it is these which allow the organisation to interact and maintain an ongoing relationship with the customer. And it is the combined information available to customers at the touchpoints – such as the websites or marketing materials they have come across, sales people and media articles, their previous experience, the look of an item itself, – that creates a ‘system image’ and conceptual model (Norman, 2013), and informs their understanding of how the CE product system or flow of materials should work.

In an increasingly digitalised world where many of the touchpoints (websites, social media, signage) will not involve sales personnel, the design and presentation of visual communications during these customer interactions is particularly important. According to Bruce Brown there are three modes of visual communication: persuasion, explanation and identification (Boag, 2017), and the brand must use all three to identify and promote itself and explain where the customer is in their journey. The design of the content, layout, language and interaction features for example can impact the whole customer journey from start to finish (Boag, 2017). As with advertising, even though the communications at these touchpoints exist at the periphery of the receiver’s awareness, they have the ability to attract attention and create positive (or otherwise) associations (Cook, 2001).

Creating visual communications that will engage customers with CE behaviours at the touchpoints can be more of a craft than a science. Visual languages employed in information design, as in advertising, are shaped by historical, aesthetic and cultural codes and conventions which are constantly in flux and contingent on the societies and users who sustain and adapt them (Cook, 2001; Kostelnick, 2017). New digital tools for instance can both perpetuate and recreate established conventions, whilst people’s previous experience of genres provides the context for their interpretation of new texts. Meaning is not so much transmitted by a company but created by the customer according to complex interplays of semiotic codes and conventions that they are often unaware of (Chandler, 1994), and people can be so familiar with a medium that they are anaesthetised to the effect of its mediation. By engaging with it, however, they ‘both act and are acted upon, use and are used’ (p10, Chandler 1994).

Information design may aim to persuade the reader or viewer, though it takes on elements of explanation and identification as well. Obvious attempts at persuasion can be controversial, and therefore blending it with explanation – as in advertorials – can increase credibility and participation (Boag, 2017). Good information design is more likely to get the reader to act on the message, it increases a company’s perceived value and facilitates interaction between organisation and user – and has also been shown to increase trust in the brand, customer satisfaction and efficiency, and reduce confusion and malpractice – for instance in healthcare.

7. Visual Rhetoric

The study of rhetoric is the investigation of patterns of language usage considered to stand out in terms of their phrase, form or style, and used ‘for exerting particular effects on hearers or readers’ (Bateman, 2014). Originally a term to describe public speaking in the Classical world, in the 20th century Barthes started to apply the principles of these Classical tropes to non-verbal semiotic systems, and other researchers to explore how the way in which a message is expressed influences its effect on an audience (Bateman, 2014). The growing importance of visual media compared with linguistics in more recent times has added to the significance of visual rhetoric, as the design of a text (including pictorial or illustrative aspects and its structure and style) can function to influence the reader’s processing of information and even a fleeting glance can provide enough information to turn the viewer off or peak their interest (Moys, 2017). Rhetoric can be understood as persuasion, and visual rhetoric uses graphical design to present and share meaning, facilitate engagement with information and visually articulate relationships and support interpretation. Its persuasive powers have made it particularly important for conventional advertising.
marketing and social campaigns, though even modes focused on usability such as maps and signage will also comprise visual rhetoric (Moys, 2017).

According to MacDonald-Ross and Waller, ‘good graphic design allows one to say in words and illustrations what could not be said in either form alone’ (quoted in Moys, 2017). Related to a text’s presentation or graphical design, people may make rhetorical judgements for example about the credibility or accessibility of the content, the intention of the organisation or the value of the service (Moys, 2017), and thus certain symbols or signs can be employed to convey some intangible aspects of the customer experience, like reliability (Bolton, 2016). Moys (2017) suggests that ‘semantic simplicity’ should be the aim, and that space, typography, type weights and colour can be used to enhance legibility, graphic elements, structure and impression—even though different users and contexts will have different preferences. Exaggerated stylistic differences for instance can be seen as sensational or superficial (as in tabloid newspapers) whilst the most credible layouts are orderly, evenly spaced and use rules or boxes or weighting as necessary to indicate authority. Some organisations try to use graphical features to create ‘sticky’ websites or environments that will differentiate them from competitors, tempt shoppers in (Bolton, 2016) and then retain or get them to return again and again.

As well as straightforward credibility or authority, rhetorical devices can also provide a so-called ‘artful deviation’ (Corbett and Connors ’98, quoted in (Cook, 2001)) by shaping and drawing attention to a message for its memorability or persuasiveness. Rhetorical features such as rhyme, anaphora, parison, antimetabole, hyperbole, metonym, metaphor, syllepsis, antanaclasis and paradox may be employed through linguistic or illustrative means, such that the receiver of the message has to ‘work’ to interpret or engage with it, their involvement is increased and persuasiveness and memorability are heightened (Bateman, 2014). Puzzling messages that involve the understanding and processing of clever arrangements of signs give the reader a feeling of pleasure or reward and are more likely to prompt a discussion which can then lead to a change in social norms and behaviours (Jansen, 2017). These techniques have been utilised both in healthcare communications (Jansen, 2017) and also in conventional advertising, where the concept of ‘code play’ refers to the innovative use of language through rhythm, sound, grammar and meaning in order to attract attention, play with expectations and provide pleasure to the viewer. Rather than referencing the desired behaviour directly, for instance, it is the riddle-like or lateral thinking aspects of the adverts that give satisfaction and make an impression on the audience when they are able to decipher them (Cook, 2001).

Some companies that already endorse circular economy-type business models or promote circular customer behaviours have shown that visual rhetoric techniques such as these can be effective. For example, Patagonia’s 2011 Black Friday advertisement exhorts consumers not to buy their jacket (see Figure 2). In what Adweek termed the ‘most potent environmental appeal of the season’ (Nudd, 2011) it uses counterintuitive messaging as a stunt to grab the viewer’s attention and get them to consider the potential hypocrisy involved in consuming fashion whilst professing care for the environment. Rather than persuading customers just to purchase a product, and indeed it almost certainly harmed sales in the short term (Nudd, 2011), it entices them to buy into the Patagonia brand for the long term, thus creating a loyal community of people who are more likely to change their behaviour by buying things that last and participating in activities like repair, reuse and recycling (Allchin, 2013).
8. **Narrative**

The medium of narrative, or storytelling, is also an effective model for communication and one that has been used by brands over many years to create connections and build relationships with their customer groups. Stories inform life. People use them to make sense of reality and create meaning, to organise and share human experience, convey moral truths and bring order to disorder (Brown, 2017). Stories promote understanding through empathy and a basis in real life (Nussbaum, 1998), they can fuel the imagination, make data human and even act as a tool for persuasion by helping people to grasp new concepts (Quesenbery & Brooks, 2010). Just as the real world provides a template for fiction, so fiction can influence the attitudes and behaviours of real people (Cook, 2001). According to Don Norman,

> ‘People are innately disposed to look for causes of events, to form explanations and stories. That is one reason storytelling is such a persuasive medium. Stories resonate with our experiences and provide examples of new instances. From our experiences and the stories of others we tend to form generalisations about the way people behave and things work.’ (Norman, 2013)

Stories have a beginning, middle and end, are connected by a plot, raise questions or conflict and then provide resolution, and generally make use of perspective, characters, imagery and language (Hinyard & Kreuter, 2007). Like services, stories deliver value through a form of experience. Both emerge from the interactions between people, places and objects, and stories are even used in service design to develop concepts and services based on users’ needs, for example as with story mapping (Lichaw, 2016). According to Berger, narratives are ‘stories that take place in time’ (quoted in Bateman, 2014). They can be carried by written or spoken language, gestures, fixed or moving images or a mixture of these, and are transcultural, transhistorical and international (Barthes, quoted in Brown, 2017). The narrative turn has seen a growth of awareness about narrative as a metaphor for social practice and sensemaking, and it has been shown for example that linking new technological transformations to national narratives can facilitate their success (Malone et al, 2017).

When it comes to the introduction of new behaviours such as those required of consumers and users by the more servitized models of a circular economy, taking a narrative approach at the touchpoints may prove more effective than traditional advertising or transactional messaging. People often resist perceived pressures for behavioural change as they prefer to determine their own course of action, but the Entertainment Overcoming Resistance Model (EORM) suggests that immersion in a narrative through transportation, identification and parasocial interaction may be an important means for audiences to adopt behaviours consistent with the story (Jansen, 2017). The viewer may be absorbed by the narrative, imagine themselves as a specific character or experience a seeming relationship with one. ‘Being swept into the story makes them less aware of its persuasive intent’, according to Jansen (2017), and they are less likely to be resistant to the message. In the healthcare sector narratives have been shown to be particularly effective as a form of communication, for instance fotonovelas used in the Americas have been effective in changing behaviours, as the narratives portrayed are more culturally relevant to an individual’s situation (Jansen, 2017). For cancer patients narrative communication was shown to be more realistic, personal, memorable and believable than other forms of communication as they could overcome resistance, facilitate information processing, provide surrogate social connections and address emotional and existential issues (Kreuter et al., 2007).

Likewise Narrative Transportation Theory has shown that people may be immersed in the things they watch or read and transported through a combination of attention, imagery and feelings. They see themselves involved in the action, forget the world around them and imagine themselves to be the characters (Van Den Hende & Schoormans, 2012). This has been used during new product evaluations, where customers’ imaginations can be guided by narratives about a protagonist who is shown to use the new product in various situations and actions. Reader-protagonist similarity is helpful and visual imagery makes the story more self-relevant, but readers can also be transported through explicit instructions as long as the information given has a coherent narrative with a context, meaning and story (as opposed to a list of bullet points for example, which lack the ‘self
emplacement’ that comes with this narrative structure) (Van Den Hende, Dahl, Schoormans, & Snelders, 2012). The more a new product narrative can transport the customer, the more likely they are to experience a new product as a replacement. Marketing literature shows that transportation leads to more positive evaluations of advertisements and new products, as a vicarious experience of use reduces uncertainties and negative preferences (Van Den Hende et al., 2012). Narratives with drawn images can provide a vivid experience of using the product and compensate for a lack of realism, but images without narration are shown to be not enough to transport the reader. This mental visualisation helps customers to learn about new products that they cannot compare to existing ones, and predicts later preferences after use; a more vivid narrative experience contributes to more positive attitudes to the product. ‘Interaction, ease of use and aesthetic evaluations will be more positive for technology applications presented in a narrative form than for product applications presented without narration’ (Van Den Hende & Schoormans, 2012).

There do not seem to be many examples of CE businesses using narrative communications to engage with customers, though the Norwegian second hand clothing brand Fretex does use some narratives to accustom them to the idea of clothing reuse (see Figure 3). Messaging at key touchpoints evokes a story of clothes that are actively helping to alleviate poverty (‘klaer som hjelper’), whilst a video series called ‘Mannen som levde pa Fretex’ uses narrative transportation techniques and humour to overcome customers’ resistance and draw them in to new reuse behaviours by presenting them with these as social norms.

![Figure 3, Fretex’s ‘Klaer som hjelper’ (clothes that help) (Fretex, 2018) and ‘Mannen som levde pa Fretex’ (the man who lived by Fretex) (Fretex, 2016)](image)

9. Discussion

Rather than merely being a way of representing the world, we can see that communication is also a means to galvanise action and make things happen (Franceschini & Pansera, 2015). Of course, advertisers have used visual rhetoric and narrative techniques successfully for many years to draw customers in to traditional, linear modes of consumption and use, and it should be noted that previous attempts to use communication to influence customer behaviour towards less environmentally harmful options have often been deemed a failure. Green marketing, and especially environmental labelling programmes, suffer from a confusing array of options that have neglected to take people’s biases, norms and behaviours into account, and have therefore been viewed with mistrust and disregard (Peattie and Crane, 2005; Boks, 2006; Rex and Baumann, 2007), and many brands have also been accused of greenwashing. But a green label or symbol on a product represents a lone signifier at one moment in time, rather than a narrative that engages customers through different touchpoints along a customer journey. Narrative transportation has been proved to facilitate both positive behavioural shifts in healthcare and the adoption of radically new products and technologies for example, although the consumption of new products is unlikely to fit within the material-efficient models of CE.

Nevertheless, for customers the CE is likely to involve both behavioural changes or shifts, such as moving from outright purchase or ownership to ‘rent’ or ‘rebuy’ models, and the take up of entirely new activities, such as the ‘return’ or ‘resale’ of items to third parties at their end of life (it should be noted that rental or return are already familiar in some sectors and cultures, for instance the ‘pant’ system in Norway, but they remain an exception for most). The new behaviours and extended
relationships required are likely to increase the importance of the communication techniques that facilitate them. The customer journey of a CE or service business can be seen as a kind of metaphor for narrative, as it evolves over time, includes many characters and relationships, and conveys experience. As has been shown with the examples of Fretex and Patagonia, visual rhetoric and narrative techniques are already used by some circular-type organisations, but it is important to draw attention to the theory behind and potential impact of these techniques as enablers in the adoption of such new consumption and use models as are implied by CE.

It remains unclear whether entirely new forms of communication are necessary in order to engage customers with CE behaviours. However, it has been shown that visual rhetoric and narrative can play an important role in engaging people with new behaviours and consumption activities, through methods such as linguistic tropes, code play and narrative transportation. The service design notion of touchpoints also represent a useful model for demonstrating the many interaction points at which these engagements may take place.

10. Future research

This paper has explored the relevance of visual rhetoric and narrative communication in engaging customers with service-based circular economy businesses. However, it has taken a purely conceptual and theoretical perspective, and thus empirical studies will be necessary to confirm and gauge the relevance of these types of communication for circular economy organisations, and their effect on the engagement and behaviour of different customer groups. For instance, narrative and non-narrative communications can be designed for touchpoints of the same brand, and customers then asked for their preferences. The question of whether CE requires radically different forms of communication to effectively engage with customers also remains for future study.

11. Conclusions

If we are to shift the behaviours of customers towards those more compatible with a CE, we will need to use communications that can effectively engage them with such activities as the 7Rs. The increased emphasis on enhanced customer relationships in service businesses and the service design concepts of a customer journey and touchpoints are useful models for mapping the amplified interaction between organisation and customer that CE is likely to entail. Visual rhetoric and narrative techniques also represent effective potential methods for engaging customers in new circular behaviours, through code play and tropes and narrative transportation, and it is suggested that this will have important implications for organisations that adopt CE models.

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