

Article

From Virality to Value: A Bibliometric and Thematic Analysis of Engagement Metrics in Brand Storytelling on Social Media

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Abstract

The advent of social media has transformed brand communication to put storytelling at the center of building engagement and awareness. But the role of long-term brand value in virality is an essential challenge. This paper conducts a bibliometric and thematic analysis from the fields of marketing, psychology, and media studies published between 2015 and 2025, examining the correlation between narrative design and audience response, separating short-term popularity and long-term consumer appeal. The analysis was based on a structured literature review and qualitative methodological framework, using the literature sourced through Scopus, Web of Science, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar published between 2015 and 2025. Thematic coding searched for emotional tones, devices used in the narration, types of metrics, and contextual factors in inclusion and exclusion criteria. The findings indicate a divide in quantitative measures, such as likes and shares, and qualitative measures, such as sentiment and resonance stories. Story elements such as authenticity, the depth of the characters, and video-based content had a major effect on the two types of engagement. Storytelling effectiveness was also mediated by influencer participation, algorithmic interactions, and audience demographics. The results confirm that meaningful storytelling with hybrid metrics contributes to stronger brand–consumer relationships. Future studies ought to shift to predictive modeling and focus on the ability of AI to dictate personalized brand stories in diverse cultures.

Keywords: storytelling; engagement; virality; brand value; social media marketing

1. Introduction

The era of hyperconnectivity has envisioned the digital world through the lens of social media platforms that have transformed digital communication and brand–consumer relations. Chat apps, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) are no longer on the edges but at the center of how brands engage with audiences and tell the stories of their brand identities. These sites provide a playground of quick content virality and user interactions within cycles of algorithmic feedback (Roring, 2024; Dzreke & Dzreke, 2025). Since storytelling is one of the core approaches in digital branding, marketers are paying more and more attention to implementing narrative forms to humanize their brands, evoke emotions in consumers, and stand out in crowded marketplaces (Georgakopoulou et al., 2020). Running parallel with these narrative mechanics is the outcropping of microlevel measures of interactions, likes, comments, shares, click-throughs, and watch time that provide instantaneous responses. Although such metrics make it possible to look at speedy development and performance testing, they tend to provide a distorted picture of success. Artificial surface-level measures may conceal the ineffectiveness of the story or the depth



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of the emotional appeal. This overemphasizes the virality of content, which is its capacity to spread quickly, over increased brand engagement (Tellis et al., 2019; Lei, 2024).

The appeal of virality to marketers is that it implies visibility and distribution. But going viral is not always of value. Viral content is possible without building brand credibility or loyalty. In one example, meme-based marketing could lead to pervasive facilitation, yet it could find its way out of synchronization with brand ethos; therefore, it becomes demographically incapable of creating a relationship of faith or interest in the consumer (Kim & Kim, 2024). On the other hand, an emotion-filled, slower campaign based on authentic storytelling might have less shares but increased user affinity. This dilemma of short-term popularity versus long-term equity is a strategic issue. Instead of focusing on what creates meaning, brands resort to paying attention to what is shared (Pentina et al., 2018). In addition, simpler measures, like impressions or followers, cannot include the depth of audience engagement, like the way a user feels, thinks, or expresses regarding brand stories (Seo et al., 2018). The disparity between measurement and significance calls for a more complex assessment approach.

In this study, the work is clearly defined as a bibliometric and thematic analysis of the peer-reviewed literature that has been published in the period 2015–2025. The timeframe selected is based on the fact that it encompasses the growth of key social media platforms, the emergence of influencers, and the institutionalization of algorithmic engagement. The 2015–2025 years show the prevailing practices and research interests in the field of brand storytelling in the present. This review is an attempt to bring together the results of the research conducted in the fields of marketing, psychology, and media studies and clarify how virality and value have been conceptualized and measured in recent scholarship.

1.1. Problem Statement

Even when the volume of digital data at hand is massive, there is still a gap between pointless or shallow engagement and actual influence on the audience. The brands are mostly pursuing numerical success without realizing the emotional or psychological impact of their storytelling (Kumar & Singh, 2022). Subsequently, likes and views are certainly not synonymous with positive attitude, trust, and loyalty. In addition, the methods of narrative structure are often neglected or done ineffectively. Brands can follow the trend of using emotion or creating visual stories without building a consistent story where the brand can be supported. Such fragmentation leads to the creation of aesthetically pleasing campaigns, but these campaigns are strategically empty. Consequently, content can go viral while not converting to long-lasting consumer relationships (Isibor et al., 2021; Munaro et al., 2021).

This research therefore positions attitude, trust, and loyalty as central to the discussion of engagement, treating them as key informers of value in digital storytelling. The research argues that attitudes shape how brand audiences internalize the presented narratives, trust signifies perceived credibility, and loyalty is sustained through narrative coherence. Embedding these emotional constructs effectively informs the relationship between narrative design, storytelling effectiveness, and sustained consumer–brand relationships. Importantly, this study does not produce original empirical data, but instead draws on the peer-reviewed literature from 2015 to 2025 to illustrate the way these constructs have been conceptualized and measured. The analysis takes the form of a bibliometric and thematic review, demonstrating the focus of previous scholarship on narrative design, effectiveness of storytelling, and maintenance of consumer–brand relationships.

1.2. Research Aim

This study attempts to fill in this research gap by examining the human relationship between brand storytelling and engagement on social media. The driving objective is to

analyze the various ways in which narrative frames, e.g., plot lines, character growth, emotional clues, and truthfulness, are formed and influenced by dissimilar kinds of engagement signifiers. By doing so, the study looks beyond *vanity metrics* to *value metrics* of engagement, namely promoting a model through which organizations can leverage length and intensity of engagement (Han et al., 2020, Liu-Thompkins et al., 2020). Engagement, as proposed by the study, would consider long-term behavioral intentions, the richness of its semantics, as well as its emotional impact, by bringing into the picture the points of view of marketing analytics, consumer psychology, and narrative studies.

1.3. Research Questions

To realize this aim, the study is guided by the following questions:

1. What types of engagement metrics are used to measure virality and value in brand storytelling?
2. How do storytelling elements such as emotional tone, authenticity, and narrative design influence these metrics?
3. How can brands transition from focusing on vanity metrics to fostering meaningful, measurable engagement?

1.4. Literature Review

To understand the concept of digital storytelling through different engagement metrics and how virality can be transformed to value, this literature review synthesizes key research in brand narration and audience engagement. The review will trace the evolution of storytelling practices in digital branding, examine the concept of virality as a key component in online narratives, explore how different engagement metrics can be transformed from virality to value, and inform how brands can create values in narratives. After these components have been explored, the literature review will point out the existing gaps in scholarship in understanding digital storytelling and engagement analytics. This approach will offer a conceptual foundation for the rest of the research.

1.4.1. Evolution of Brand Storytelling on Social Media

Brand stories on social media have seen a shift in messages going past the basic lines of advertising campaigns to experiential storytelling. At the initial stages, a focus was mainly put on product specifications and marketing discounts, sometimes without a story or credibility. Nonetheless, as digital saturation continued and consumers grew skeptical towards brands, more relational forms of communication by brands started taking place (Isibor et al., 2021). Nowadays, storytelling involves emotional appeal, character structure, and mood triggers to build greater audience trust and prolonged engagement. These trends can be related to a larger acknowledgement of the fact that consumers seek more authentic brand voicing and storytelling that resonates with their personal experiences and values (Georgakopoulou et al., 2020; Mukhopadhyay & Jha, 2025).

1.4.2. Concept of Virality in Digital Culture

The digital ecosystem has been characterized by virality, which has been fueled by extremely fast content dissemination networks through shares, reposts, and algorithmic stimulation. Emotional arousal, giving informational usefulness, and social currency are core features of virality, increasing the chances of users using and sharing material (Tellis et al., 2019). Social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram have formalized virality, rewarding fast interactions within a limited timeframe (Lei, 2024). Moreover, memes and trends are another instrument of participatory culture, which further confirms the speed and extent of online sharing (Kim & Kim, 2024). Nevertheless, virality can be quicker

than deliberate and is therefore questionable in terms of sustainability and the value of interactions (Roring, 2024; Sangiorgio et al., 2025).

1.4.3. Engagement Metrics: From Virality to Value

The use of social media is often quantified by the measure of likes, shares, and impressions, which is commonly referred to as a virality metric. Although these metrics give us a convenient overview of the appearance of content, they are inadequate in showing the nature of a specific audience or brand perception (Shin & Ognyanova, 2022). To measure the success of virality, brands need to understand how virality can translate to value. Within this context, value is conceptualized as the impact of brand narratives, which manifests through different cognitive and emotional outcomes. While virality measures the success of brand storytelling through visibility, value connects narratives to emotional resonance and long-term behavioral outcomes. This understanding aligns with modern marketing concepts that perceive value as co-created in the interactions between brands and targeted audiences. The proposal for a more multifaceted approach to the notion of engagement by considering its quantitative and qualitative components has been recently supported by the efforts of scholars. As an example, recent sentiment and comment analyses, as well as narrative resonance, have been investigated to measure emotional and cognitive involvement (Trunfio & Rossi, 2021; Liu-Thompkins et al., 2020). The shift towards value-driven metrics to measure the value of storytelling shows the greater importance of identifying the role of storytelling in brand equity and consumer loyalty (Xiao & Chen, 2025; Seo et al., 2018).

1.4.4. Value Creation Through Narrative

The stories brands are telling and the emotions they can evoke are becoming more and more powerful in shaping brand value. Cognitive engagement means that users engage with and contemplate brand messages, whereas emotional engagement refers to the emotional reactions caused by storytelling prerequisites like authenticity, relatability of characters, and emotional curves (Han et al., 2020). Narrative transportation, or the mental movements of a user into the story, has been indicated to enhance the user's responsiveness and behavioral intent (Seo et al., 2018). The combination of visual storytelling, especially through video media forms, enhances these effects even more, as it involves activation of more senses and provides an even deeper experience (García-Perdomo, 2024). In the end, emotional storytelling, ensured through the balance of the emotional engagement with brand identity, builds increased consumer levels of trust and long-term brand loyalty (Munaro et al., 2021; Mukhopadhyay & Jha, 2025).

1.4.5. Gaps in the Literature

Although social media storytelling and engagement have shown increasing interest, there are still a number of conceptual and methodological gaps. It is important to note the near lack of cases to bring together two such seemingly different worlds as the theory of storytelling and the empirical assessment of measures of engagement. The majority of the available literature only dwells upon the analysis of either narrative techniques or engagement data, without paying much attention to the interaction between the two (Georgakopoulou et al., 2020). Moreover, analytical frameworks do not utilize sufficient audience feedback, including the tone of comments, the understanding of the narrative, and the tone in which the narrative connects emotionally (Trunfio & Rossi, 2021). Also, there is a gap in the existence of interdisciplinary models that can be used to integrate knowledge about communication, marketing analytics, and media psychology and build comprehensive engagement strategies.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

The research design of this study is framed as a bibliometric and thematic review, which was conducted using a qualitative methodological framework using the literature published during 2015–2025 to understand how the engagement measures affect the results of brand storytelling on social media platforms. This 10-year timeframe is empirically motivated since this period was characterized by the maturation of major social media platforms. This period also institutionalized and perfected algorithm curation, influencer marketing, and content creation as a way of marketing. The research is aimed at drawing both conceptual and empirical information out of the available scholarly sources to realize the ways in which virality is converted into value by employing narrative strategies, emotional appeal, and platform-relevant measures. Combining current research, these are essential patterns, frameworks, and themes to digital marketing and consumer–brand interaction discovered in this study.

2.2. Search Strategy

The articles were collected by making specific queries in four leading scholarly databases: Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and PsycINFO. Such databases have been chosen due to interdisciplinary scope and a combination of high-quality research connected with media studies, marketing, psychology, and digital communications. The search queries related keywords such as combinations of the following terms: *virality*, *engagement metrics*, *brand storytelling*, *social media marketing*, and *digital narrative analytics*. Phrase matching and the use of Boolean operators were used to narrow the results of searches. The bibliometric approach of this study is reflected in this systematic search strategy, which aims to capture the peer-reviewed scholarship that is relevant to narrative design and engagement metrics.

2.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Relevant inclusion and exclusion criteria were created to provide credibility and relevance of the literature. The selection of the studies was based on their contribution to conceptual and analytical knowledge on the use of social media marketing, especially those focusing on the measurement of engagement and use of narrative-driven branding. A special focus was assigned to the studies that introduced the interaction between content strategy and platform analytics. The filtering of sources using the exclusion criteria narrowed down the dataset to allow a narrow and deep thematic analysis. Within the parameters of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the research utilized 24 peer-reviewed articles, a sample that reflects both the breadth and depth of virality and value. The specific parameters under inclusion and exclusion criteria used in the selection exercise are presented below in Table 1. These criteria further reinforce the methodological rigor in the bibliometric and thematic analysis process and provide a comprehensive and focused synthesis.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria for the literature selection exercise.

Criteria Type	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles	Technical reports, conference abstracts, editorials, and non-reviewed content
Language	English publications	Non-English publications
Publication Years	Articles published during 2015–2025	Articles published before 2015

Table 1. *Cont.*

Criteria Type	Inclusion	Exclusion
Topical Focus	Studies focusing on social media marketing, engagement metrics, and brand storytelling	Studies without discussion of branding, storytelling, or audience engagement
Data Relevance	Articles using conceptual, empirical, or analytical insights related to virality and value	Articles with purely technical, algorithmic, or unrelated focuses

2.4. Data Extraction and Thematic Coding

After the selection, the data were extracted from the full texts of the incorporated studies. Among the major variables of concern were narrative devices employed in brand storytelling, the mood presented in the material, the types of engagement metrics reported, and the value indicators attributed to them. A bibliometric and thematic coding approach was used to determine common concepts, typologies, and relationships of the studies. The thematic coding process used in this study utilized an iterative and inductive approach. The initial coding process identified the recurring concepts which were further grouped and refined into different categories through constant comparison to ensure conceptual clarity. To ensure methodological rigor, the process developed a transparent codebook with definitions and examples. This process ensured clarity, consistency, and alignment with the coded themes. The methodological rigor was evaluated by verifying the alignment of the themes with the research questions and research aim for credibility, confirmability, and dependability. The themes were then tabulated into analytic categories in order to assist with the comparative synthesis and conceptual integration. As part of the review design, Table 2 summarizes the basic thematic categories along with the dimensions applied.

Table 2. Analytical dimensions in the study of social media engagement and storytelling.

Theme	Subcategories
Narrative Devices	Story arcs, personalization, character voice, and plot sequencing
Emotional Tone	Empathy, humor, controversy, nostalgia, and urgency
Engagement Metrics	Likes, shares, comments, watch time, click-through rate, and reposts
Value Indicators	Brand recall, consumer trust, loyalty, emotional resonance, and behavioral actions
Content Format	Static posts, short-form videos, memes, carousels, and interactive features
Platform Context	Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter)

The above table shows thematic categories extracted from the reviewed literature to analyze the relationship between virality and brand value in social media storytelling.

2.5. Quality Assessment

The chosen research papers have been critiqued in terms of methodological rigor and contribution to the study's interest. The evaluation factors were the strength of the research design, the heterogeneity and applicability of the sample groups, the validity and understandability of the metrics of engagement, and the openness to sources and methods of data analysis. Those studies suggest the same theoretical or empirical support with regard to the interpretation of a relationship between engagement metrics, storytelling, and brand outcomes, which were subject to earning greater analytical value. This spread across the literature made the final synthesis plausible and pertinent to the contemporary issues in

digital marketing. This quality assessment helps to validate the results of the bibliometric and thematic review, helping to maintain the plausibility and relevance of the synthesis to current issues in digital marketing.

3. Results

3.1. Typology of Engagement Metrics

Social media storytelling engagement measurement may be classified on a broad scale as quantitative and qualitative. A combination of the quantitative measures, including likes, shares, views, and follower counts, still forms the basis of performance measurement as they are easily accessible and instantly interpretable (Sangiorgio et al., 2025; Shin & Ognyanova, 2022). Such measures are only proxies of visibility and reach, with only surface-level data on audience attention. Nevertheless, the sentiment in comments, depth of narrative interaction, and audience resonance are examples of qualitative indicators that are increasingly acknowledged to indicate emotional and cognitive engagement (Seo et al., 2018; Liu-Thompkins et al., 2020; Trunfio & Rossi, 2021). In particular, Georgakopoulou et al. (2020) highlighted how these two aspects are combined in quantified storytelling by stating that increased interaction of the audience with the narrative could frequently be an effect of receiving significant cues about the narrative. This is because, as emphasized by Xiao and Chen (2025), such measurements preserve meaning-rich user–brand interactions by adopting analytical models, such as information entropy, to derive meaning out of an interaction. In order to demonstrate the two-fold aspect of the engagement evaluation, the comparative classification of quantitative and qualitative measures is frequently applied to brand storytelling on social media platforms. The reviewed literature, therefore, shows that there is a two-fold aspect of the evaluation of engagement and that, more often than not, the comparative classification of quantitative and qualitative measures can be applied to summarize brand storytelling on social media platforms, as summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Classification of engagement metrics in social media storytelling.

Type of Metric	Examples	Purpose	Interpretive Depth
Quantitative Metrics	Likes, shares, views, retweets, and impressions	Measure surface-level visibility and spread	Low
Qualitative Metrics	Sentiment in comments, narrative identification, and UGC	Capture emotional resonance and meaning	High

This classification helps delineate how storytelling success on social platforms should be evaluated not solely by volume-driven indicators, but by depth-oriented signals that reflect meaningful audience engagement and narrative effectiveness.

3.2. Storytelling Techniques and Engagement

Storytelling is an essential part of user engagement on any platform. Storytelling methods, which include emotional hooks, character development, and plotlines, are consistently identified in the reviewed literature and considerably augment viewer responses (Kim & Kim, 2024; Lei, 2024). The aspect of emotional storytelling creates a psychological process that is known as narrative transportation, which pursues immersion in the content by the users and raises the chances of interaction (Seo et al., 2018). Authenticity has become a predictable factor of engagement. Studies of consumer behavior trends and the authenticity of influencers have proven that realistic and relatable stories are more efficient than scripted and promotional content (Han et al., 2020; Munaro et al., 2021). Visual storytelling formats, especially video, are highly effective, because with a moving A/V element, the engagement

is increased by multimodal stimulation (García-Perdomo, 2024; Sundaram et al., 2020). All in all, brand-consistent storytelling that also creates emotional involvement has a way of maximizing the number of users involved (Tellis et al., 2019; Mukhopadhyay & Jha, 2025). To summarize these thematic patterns, Table 4 presents an overview of the key storytelling tools identified in the reviewed studies and their corresponding engagement outcomes.

Table 4. Storytelling techniques and associated engagement outcomes.

Storytelling Technique	Engagement Outcome	Platform Strength
Emotional Hooks (e.g., empathy, humor)	Higher comment activity and longer viewing duration	Instagram Reels, TikTok, and Facebook
Authentic Narratives	Increased trust, relatability, and brand affinity	YouTube, Instagram, and podcasts
Visual Storytelling (video/reels)	Higher shares, improved message retention, and repeat engagement	TikTok and YouTube Shorts
Relatable Characters and Real Plots	Stronger narrative immersion and brand loyalty	Facebook Stories, YouTube, and Threads

This synthesis affirms that emotionally resonant, visually rich, and authentic narrative strategies are central to fostering sustained user interaction and enhancing the value of digital storytelling in brand engagement.

3.3. Virality vs. Value

In this research, virality refers to the quantifiable factors in online engagement, such as likes, shares, views, and follower count. Through virality, brands can easily determine the reach and accessibility of their products and services. In isolation, however, virality cannot capture the emotional responses embedded within the virality metrics. Though virality is perceived to be synonymous with marketing success, the reviewed literature shows that not all viral content results in brand value or loyalty (Roring, 2024; Kennedy et al., 2021). Iconic viral posts with high engagement, created in combination with humor or controversy, have the power to attract temporary attention but lack plot content, effectively having little effect on brand equity (Dzreke & Dzreke, 2025; Sashi et al., 2019). On the other hand, a slow-burn storytelling tactic, which is gradual and focused on providing a theme throughout, is more effective in terms of long-term attraction and retention of customers (Isibor et al., 2021; Kumar & Singh, 2022). These methods emphasize that relational foundation by narrative continuity leads to the development of trust, emotional commitment, and a perception of brand–user closeness. Previous research has repeatedly found that campaigns combining short-term virality with long-term storytelling have the highest relevance reach (Han et al., 2020; Liu-Thompkins et al., 2020).

3.4. Influencing Factors

The effectiveness of social media storytelling is determined by a number of contextual and structural variables. The algorithms of platforms are especially powerful, stipulating the placement and circulation of the content according to the user activity and the speed of engagement (Sangiorgio et al., 2025; Shin & Ognyanova, 2022). As an example, TikTok rewards quick interaction in small timeframes, which makes content format and timing vital. The demographics of the audiences, such as their age, digital literacy, and values, determine their interpretation of the content and their sharing patterns. Meme-filled and visually

intensive content will appeal to younger viewers, whereas traditional or management-focused information should captivate older audiences (Kennedy et al., 2021; Pentina et al., 2018). Even the material format is crucial, whether in static or video formats; videos are found to be more effective in emotional attractiveness and message retention compared to posts that are not moving (Munaro et al., 2021; García-Perdomo, 2024). Another dominant force is influencer involvement. The role of influencers is to work as a story carrier, turning brand messages into an understandable form for peers. They establish their credibility and authenticity and urge people to realize the relatability of the brand story (Mukhopadhyay & Jha, 2025). Investigations, such as one conducted by Tellis et al. (2019) and another by Kim and Kim (2024), confirm that in addition to reach, influencers promote emotional responses, which are crucial to narrative-based campaigns. Table 5 presents the main involved factors, as taken from the literature.

Table 5. Influencing factors affecting storytelling engagement.

Factor	Influence on Engagement	Example Platforms/Contexts
Platform Algorithms	Determines reach, timing sensitivity, and content virality	TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube
Audience Demographics	Affects content relevance, interpretation, and sharing behavior	Meme culture (gen Z) and infographics (millennials)
Content Format	Videos lead to higher retention and emotional engagement vs. static	Reels, YouTube Shorts, and stories
Influencer Involvement	Boosts credibility, emotional resonance, and peer relatability	Influencer campaigns on Instagram and Threads

These factors collectively shape the visibility, relatability, and emotional impact of brand narratives, making them essential considerations for effective storytelling strategies in dynamic digital environments.

4. Discussion

These findings accurately and comprehensively address the three research questions that formed the foundation of the study. Firstly, the research clearly identifies the different engagement metrics that brands can use to measure virality and value, further highlighting their roles. Secondly, the results reveal that different elements in narration such as emotional tone, authenticity, and narrative design influence these metrics, especially in shaping audience engagement. Finally, the research accurately informs how brands can move from overly focusing on virality metrics to fostering meaningful and measurable engagement that point toward value.

The results of this research provide a multilateral interpretation of the process of storytelling interaction with engagement indicators in the digital marketing environment. Beneath it all, there lies a difference between virality at the surface level and connection with the audience in the long term. The use of quantitative attributes (likes, shares, views, etc.) remains the primary way in which brands measure campaign performance levels. Yet these indicators can merely be a token of interest and not of important participation. On the one hand, as we can see in the findings, quantitative indicators are easy to retrieve and popular in the language of platform algorithms; on the other hand, they cannot be used

to estimate cognitive and emotional investment in the audience (Sangiorgio et al., 2025; Shin & Ognyanova, 2022).

This drawback paves the way for qualitative metrics (sentiment analysis, narrative resonance, and depth of comments) to fill that gap and represent a more natural measure of audience effect. These findings are in line with previous theoretical frameworks on narrative transportation, which state that greater emotional involvement elicits the desire to have an increased user–brand relationship (Seo et al., 2018; Xiao & Chen, 2025). The elements of storytelling, i.e., emotional hooks, plot development, and character relatability, are critical to the motivation of such immersive experiences. It is a reification of the previous studies explaining why emotional authenticity (implemented into the building of brand characters) would promote trust and consumer willingness to respond to it substantially (Han et al., 2020; Munaro et al., 2021).

On this basis, the study has credible theoretical implications in studying communication and media. Quantified storytelling (Georgakopoulou et al., 2020) is especially applicable in this respect, as it provides two different perspectives on stories, with one of them being the narrative vehicle and the other being the metric-based product. Such stories are not independent of each other but are selectively edited, re-edited, and co-created in the moment in time by viewers as theories of participatory media support (Liu-Thompkins et al., 2020). These findings indicate that exposure to the content is not the only important element of engagement, and that consistent meaning-making occurs between several brands and consumers.

The findings, however, are in practical terms that promote the idea of reframing the measurement of engagement. Marketers must not base their analyses on hard data but use soft evaluation measures in their frameworks. Patterns of sentiment, depth in narrative, and user-generated commentary provide critical levels of perception, which are subsequently not captured by conventional analytics (Trunfio & Rossi, 2021; Kennedy et al., 2021). It requires the introduction of hybrid dashboards that include both performance indicators and qualitative indicators based on social listening tools. Organizations can use such systems to track real-time changes in perceptions by the audience and act accordingly.

Furthermore, the evidence presents the strategic value of long-form and serial storytelling in the efforts to achieve prolonged consumer attention. In contrast to the ephemeral viral content, series-based narratives develop anticipation, build emotional lines, and allow accretive investment through time (Lei, 2024; Mukhopadhyay & Jha, 2025). The findings on long-form and serial storytelling inform how continuous and impactful storytelling leads to sustained engagement. Platforms such as Instagram Reels and YouTube Shorts provide the best settings to present this type of a multi-part storytelling. However, brands must structure and deliver the narratives based on algorithmic structures to ensure that the intended emotional resonance is triggered in the most relevant and interested audiences. Additionally, brands should acknowledge that consistent meaning-making stems from a developed and observed relationship between audience interpretation of the narratives and emotional resonance to the narratives. Brands which consider this model have greater chances to support brand loyalty among the audience, especially when the story aligns with the main sense of the brand.

Concomitantly, the inclusion of real-time feedback schemes enables real-world reiteration of content construction. Marketers can gain an advantage by evaluating the audience reaction to the stories during their telling to create adaptive storytelling that demonstrates awareness of user tone that improves relevance (Han et al., 2020). This given feedback loop turns consumers into active contributors in storytelling, enhancing the storytelling experience and promoting brand closeness.

But there is a crucial conflict between the logistics of speed and the art of deep involvement required by the platform and the narrative form. Algorithms have developed a tendency to favor content that triggers instant responses while penalizing content that must be ingested slowly and followed by consideration or contemplation (Sangiorgio et al., 2025). The consequence of this is the creation of punchy, superficial material at the cost of effective interaction. However, as justified by this research and other studies (Roring, 2024) less instantaneously viral content still has the power to build more long-term relationships with the audience and brand equity, even with slower, value-led storytelling (Shin & Ognyanova, 2022).

In total, the paper highlights an evolutionary approach to the way the process of storytelling and engagement must be perceived in the context of social media marketing. Engagement is not just an output anymore, but a bi-dimensional process.

5. Conclusions

This paper confirms that virality, though it is heralded by faster spread and increased visibility, is not necessarily synonymous with brand value in the long run. The explosion in likes, shares, and views may be a sign of momentary attention, but they do not show deeper reactions of the audience or emotional involvement. Comparatively, the storytelling approach that makes use of emotionally evocative content and expresses genuine brand principles is proven to be able to build trust and loyalty, as well as maintain a relationship with the consumer more easily. These results highlight the clear strategic approach to storytelling, which involves using meaningful measures to measure success rather than shallow numbers that do not count. With the help of a strategic approach to storytelling, brands can connect with their audience on a deeper level. Story forms that give more weight to the growth of the character, the growth of emotions, and the coherence of the theme result in a more immersive experience and a more engaged user behavior response. Essentially, value-driven storytelling is a more lasting substitute for the short-lived fad of virality, thus representing one of the structural pillars of the recently emerging digital marketing. Concluding on the results, it can be seen that a combined method of assessing storytelling performance involving both quantitative and qualitative measures of engagement will represent more exact measurements. The research proposes that brands should focus on works in long form and in series, utilize instant audience responses, and redesign their success measurement tools to echo the emotional address and structural richness. This is a bibliometric and thematic review that aims to show the conceptualization of virality and value in the literature of the past decade (2015–2025), and provides a structure for further empirical testing.

5.1. Implications

To marketers, the significance of the study is that the conscious knowledge and understanding of emotional improvisation are more critical than algorithm optimization. Though faster-fire material based on the response of quick hits might benefit faster-acting algorithms, the emotionally compelling narratives produce resonant bonds that bridge longer than one campaign cycle. To brand strategists, it is obvious that they should instill a culture of storytelling within the organizational environment. This entails going beyond being campaign-centered to building coherent narrative identity with values, missions, and dreams of consumers that represent the brand. The implication of the study to academic researchers refers to the necessity of establishing interdisciplinary models, which combine media studies, data science, and narrative theory. These integrative models will allow us to have a much better understanding of the nuances of digital connection, thus giving us more information about the changing face of brand–consumer relationships.

Academic researchers may regard this review as a valuable reminder of the need for interdisciplinary frameworks that integrate media studies, data science, and narrative theory to better understand the complexities of digital connectivity and brand–consumer relationships.

5.2. Limitations

This study, as grounded as its scope is, does not lack limitations. The first limitation is an issue of publication bias, since the reviewed literature used in the research had a tendency to over-represent successful publications or positive results. The thematic synthesis also has some elements of subjectivity, because the acquisition of interpretations was based on qualitative coding and conceptual analysis. Also, the proprietary platform-level data were not available, which acted as a drawback to the present study. It would have been interesting to more carefully explore engagement patterns and effects of algorithms by having access to backend analytics of platforms, including Instagram or TikTok. Due to this, some of the claims were forced to adhere to publicly available measures or interpretation of secondary data.

A critical consideration this research ignored was the role of lurkers who consume content without directly engaging with it. This group, even while inactive, can significantly influence the emotional resonance to brands and thus influence purchasing behavior. Excluding this group limits the research to only the observable engagement metrics while ignoring the power other unseen ones have. These restrictions are common for bibliometric/thematic reviews, which are based on published research and secondary information, as opposed to proprietary company data.

5.3. Future Research Directions

The use of quantitative models determining the level of narrative success on different platforms and the range of content can be beneficial to future research. Through statistical analysis of the elements of storytelling associated with continued engagement or conversion, researchers can provide practitioners with evidence-based suggestions. The other avenue of research is in terms of cross-cultural research on effectiveness of storytelling. Since social media reaches a global audience, the behavior of various cultures regarding narrative preference and engagement can further enhance brand strategy in many ways. Further, the growing impact of artificial intelligence in the development and examination of content creates new possibilities. By helping to identify characters in a generative storytelling app, by monitoring facial expressions as part of an emotion-detecting algorithm, and so on, AI can complement as well as disrupt traditional story marketing. The study of its influence on authenticity, user trust, and coherence of stories will be essential in the subsequent wave of research in digital branding. Finally, future research should capture the role of passive engagement through lurkers to ensure a comprehensive understanding of brand–audience responses. Additionally, future empirical investigations can extend and test the identified frameworks by cross-cultural, AI-driven, and passive-engagement views.

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