

Brand Storytelling in the Age of Short Attention Spans: Strategies for Effective Communication

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Storytelling theory,
Brand storytelling,
Communication strategies,
Purchase intention,
Customer

Received

20 December 2022

Received in revised form

3 June 2023

Accepted

11 June 2023

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Storytelling is found as a mechanism of creating, developing and communicating the message. Storytelling is an effective marketing tool. This study focuses upon the tendencies in messages comprehension and changes within communication strategies for brand storytelling in the age of short attention spans. The research objective presents the certain research tasks oriented towards the identification of effective communication strategies and explanation of their application to enhance brand engagement. The research applies qualitative and qualitative methodology. Initially, the qualitative methods were used to explain the storytelling theory in marketing, peculiarities of brand storytelling in advertising, the images a brand delivers to the audience, and to describe short attention spans as a growing phenomenon. The survey applied quantitative methods to outline the contribution of brand storytelling as a communication technique, to reveal the effect of short attention spans upon brand communication, and to identify the most effective communication strategies for brand storytelling in the age of short attention spans. The survey data were collected through interviews among 158 individual customers between July-August, 2023. The results showed that effective communication strategies for brand storytelling are divided into direct and indirect. Direct strategies include narrative plot, intrigue, authenticity, surprise, visual image, audio background, obstacle, emotions, conflict and tension, small details, orientation towards future improvements. Indirect strategies involve mode of message transfer, pricing, frequency of transfer, time duration, sequence of brand stories, and personal appeal. The results may be implied by enterprises while generating brand storytelling and by psychologists studying consumers' behaviour.

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How to cite this article:

Rodinova, N., Balyk, U., Korobko, Y. et al. (2023). Brand Storytelling in the Age of Short Attention Spans: Strategies for Effective Communication. *Marketing and Branding Research*, 10(1), 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.32038/mbr.2023.10.01.01>

Currently, storytelling has become a popular tool to evoke the emotional triggers in advertisement, engage the audience and inspire them to take action. According to the Narrative Paradigm proposed by Walter Fisher (Morris et al., 2019), humans are storytelling animals and tend to make decisions based on the stories that influence their emotions. Therefore, a number of findings show the effectiveness of storytelling in an advertising context (Gross et al., 2023; Joshi et al., 2022) since it stimulates consumers' emotional feelings through inducing empathy (Kato, 2023) or combining the stories with their own experience (Kang et al., 2020) and then results in favourable attitude towards the advertisement (Ben Aicha & Bouzaabia, 2023).

As we know, storytelling means using a narrative to communicate a message or information. Storytelling, or conveying advertising messages to consumers (Grigsby & Mellema, 2020), is increasingly popular advertising strategy due to its positive impact upon purchasing behaviour (Kang et al., 2020) and increase in purchase intentions (Tilaar et al., 2023). Stories can possess different forms and content; they can be educational, encouraging, influential, tragic, comic, or increase in efforts, energy, determination and perseverance (Teraiya et al., 2023). Stories help create connections, focus and direct attention (Barbosa et al., 2022).

Nowadays, attention spans have become shorter whereby this requires a particularly strong and lasting impression on the audience (Joshi et al., 2022). At the same time, advertisers actively use stories to build the brand identity and cultivate a deeper relationship between brand and consumer (Dessart & Pitardi, 2019).

Storytelling is considered an important means of crafting corporate images (Nyagadza et al., 2022). Presently, storytelling is employed by many large corporations to build the successful brand stories (Nyagadza et al., 2020) as well as by some political candidates to present the inspiring life narrative (Grusell & Nord, 2023). All this makes brand storytelling an important instrument of marketing affecting economies, enterprises, or just an individual company or person. Effective brand storytelling stands in the very center of marketing because it can foster brand communication (Pachucki et al., 2022) and hence it emerged as a popular research topic in the field of advertising and branding.

This study focuses upon the tendencies in messages comprehension and changes within communication strategies for brand storytelling in the age of short attention spans that defines and outline the research objective. The research objective clearly presents the certain research tasks oriented towards the identification of effective communication strategies and explanation of their application by enterprises to enhance brand engagement.

Thus, we explore three research questions:

RQ1: Does storytelling as a communication technique between company and consumers contribute to the brand development and promotion?

RQ2: How does short attention spans affect brand communication?

RQ3: What communication strategies are effective for brand storytelling?

While brand storytelling is of undoubted scientific interest, there is a lack of understanding how it works in the age of short attention spans. Our study, therefore, contributes to explanation of strategies for effective communication and helps create a very fascinating story within advertising campaign.

Literature review

Storytelling theory in marketing

Storytelling is a mechanism of creating, developing and communicating the message (McDougal et al., 2021). According to Dias and Cavalheiro (2022) can be defined as conveying information and sharing accumulated knowledge to help the audience navigate and orient quickly in the environment. Storytelling is an effective marketing tool (Ben Aicha & Bouzaabia, 2023) as it is be used by marketers to impact consumers' cognitive activities, attitudes, beliefs, preferences, and intentions (Kemp et al., 2021).

Stories convey messages in an emotionally powerful manner; they are unforgettable and bring the audience to something familiar (Dhote & Kumar, 2019). Within the storytelling theory researchers distinguish commercial stories and non-commercial or nonprofit stories (Pachucki et al., 2022). Commercial stories are designed by a company to realize marketing objectives, while non-commercial stories are far from this and are oriented towards gaining some support, grants, donations, or media attention.

At the same time, commercial stories are classified into brand stories establishing brand image and story advertisements presenting information about a product or a company in the format of a story (Ryu et al., 2019). In addition, Xie (2021) states that all the brand stories are divided into factual and fictional.

Belova (2021) claims that more than 90% of consumers prefer to get the message in the form of a story so storytelling is one of the best strategies to engage consumers. Effective story can help to increase the value of the object mentioned almost by 20 times.

Accordingly, there are five basic statements that make storytelling theory essential to marketing (Dias & Cavalheiro, 2022). They are the following: (1) people tend to think narratively (Belova, 2021; Kang et al., 2020; Rahmanian, 2021); (2) stories are able to strengthen memorization (Dhote & Kumar, 2019; Legendre et al., 2020); (3) stories grab attention, evoke interest and bring admiration (Kamleitner et al., 2019); (4) through stories products appeal to psychological archetypes (Dewalska-Opitek et al., 2023); (5) stories give ease and clarity with which the narrator explains difficult notions (Vaziri et al., 2023).

Some findings show that storytelling is a powerful instrument to gain people's attention in both emotional and intellectual way (Joubert et al., 2019; Kang et al., 2020). According to recent research, storytelling has become a significant aspect of marketing due to the technological advancements and market-driven digital transformations like the increase of social media and the spread of online commerce (Ben Aicha & Bouzaabia, 2023; Fauziah & Fachira, 2021). Obviously, storytelling is not the only important part of marketing and advertising but it plays a particularly important role enhancing engagement between a brand and its consumers.

Brand storytelling for advertising

Storytelling is one of the brand communication tools when a brand story is used to clarify brand value to audience (Fauziah & Fachira, 2021). Brand storytelling is not the same as organizing marketing campaigns or creating content on social media. Brand storytelling concerns establishment of the framework where brand identity is defined using effecting narratives (Houghton, 2021). Moreover, brand storytelling means development and delivering specific messages throughout the market to explain brand philosophy, vision statement, and brand history (Huang et al., 2022; Ryu et al., 2019); bridging the gaps between what the sellers and

buyers through encouraging stories (Dias & Cavalheiro, 2022). According to brand storytelling is explained as a marketing instrument that helps promote product uniqueness to the audience (Korzh & Estima, 2022).

A number of studies on brand storytelling outline the requirements to effective advertisement campaign. Firstly, time and context setting are needed as people usually build images of a brand on the basis of time moments related to special occasions and place (Houghton, 2021; van Hulst & Ybema, 2020). Secondly, some researchers stress upon the importance of interesting plot and powerful textual or visual messages (Kühn & Boshoff, 2023). Thirdly, brand story should describe strong and brave characters who make the narrative fascinating for the audience (Dias & Cavalheiro, 2022; Mills & John, 2021). Fourthly, brand story should appeal to the appropriate values that are understandable to all the people such as happiness, health, comfort, etc. (Dhote & Kumar, 2019; Huang et al., 2022). Fifthly, effective brand story deals with authenticity and gains the audience trust using clear and accurate statements (Nyagadza et al., 2020). Sixthly, Dewalska-Opitek et al. (2023) claim that brand storytelling requires symbolic interpretation and can be interpreted through psychological archetypes.

Reviewing current research in the field of brand storytelling and effective communication strategies we found that they deliver specific messages to engage the audience (Figure 1). Most of the studies are focused upon delivering love (Dias & Cavalheiro, 2022), happiness (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2022), and joy (Joshi et al., 2022) to the consumers. A number of messages deal with describing youth (Sarmah et al., 2023), beauty (Tsai, 2020), physical strength, healthcare (Sarmah et al., 2023; Tsai, 2020), well-being, long life, happy aging, independent and productive old age (Ben Aicha & Bouzaabia, 2023). This has become particularly important in the context of spread of COVID-19 pandemic (Ribeiro et al., 2022). Also, some brand stories tell about eco-friendly products with minimal or no side effects (Dessart & Pitardi, 2019; Huang & Guo, 2021; Woodside & Fine, 2019).

Some narratives show the pictures of happy family life, house full of relative and friends that awaken positive emotions and look amazing (Hay et al., 2022; Joshi et al., 2022). Other brand stories appeal to people who seek for welfare, success, career growth, authority and social status (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2022). Digitalization and rapid technological advancement affect brand communication and deliver messages about introduction of innovations, bright future, comfort and intense use of technological devices (Belova, 2021; Korzh & Estima, 2022). Besides, some findings showed that messages delivering the images of peace, safety, confidence, heroism, and bravery (Fischbach & Guerrero, 2020) are very appealing to the audience and attract widespread interest.

At the same time, the strategy of brand storytelling is considerable affected by short attention spans (Dhote & Kumar, 2019) and those to whom a brand story is addressed form purchase intentions and create an emotional connect between with the brand on the basis of the amount of time needed for concentration.

Figure 1.*Messages delivered through effective brand story**Short attention spans as a growing phenomenon in communication*

Attention refers to the cognitive ability to select, focus, and sustain information (Wickens, 2021). Sustained attention plays an important role in human activities and allows to perform in real-world situations (Gallen et al., 2023). Findings show that sustained attention depends on the length of time during which an individual can maintain attention (Vallesi et al., 2021). In this context the notion of attention span is interpreted as the ability to sustain attention (Simon et al., 2023).

Recently, brand communication has faced a huge transformation due to progression in technology resulting in more empowering of the audience (Dhote & Kumar, 2019). Current viewers are accustomed to spending a significant amount of time online, consuming huge volumes of information (Moreno et al., 2023). This has led to their tendency to multitask, which contributed to their failure to sustain attention and, therefore, shortening their attention span (Cagnin & Nicolas, 2022).

Time is one of the essential factors when a brand story creates impact. According to psychologists, the span of keeping the audience engaged must be short (Denisova, 2023). But the time duration must not be too long or too little either (Joshi et al., 2022). The right timing is essential as the company may deliver the content and build a fascinating effect as well as evoke memories and feelings (Dias & Cavalheiro, 2022).

Usually, the time needed brand storytelling lasts between 5 and 60 seconds but presently the trend shows that a brand story is 28 or 30 seconds (Dhote & Kumar, 2019). The use of short stories suggests to show a number of advantages since the audience are able to sustain attention

for a short time. Particularly, it is good for young individuals as they prefer instant, direct, and informal messages (Joshi et al., 2022). At the same time, there some studies insist that brand stories should last between 35 and 45 seconds (Marrone, 2020). Only small amount of narrative takes over 60 seconds (Dhote & Kumar, 2019).

Short stories in the age of short attention spans are attractive to customers' emotions and help craft positive experience through direct message. Short stories look more interesting and captivating that results in brand engagement and minimization of negative thoughts.

Method

Design

Research design is the framework of research methods and techniques chosen to conduct a study. The appropriate design allows to sharpen the research methods suitable for the subject matter and answer the research questions (Ebneyamini, 2022). Research design methodology is applied for both for practice-oriented and theory-oriented research objectives and it is to support qualitative and quantitative investigations (Taherdoost, 2022)

We used both qualitative and quantitative methodology since the research initially required to explain the storytelling theory in marketing, peculiarities of brand storytelling in advertising and the images a brand delivers to the audience. In addition, we focused upon theory-based description of short attention spans as a growing phenomenon in brand communication and their affect upon brand engagement.

The survey applied quantitative methods to outline the contribution of brand storytelling as a communication technique between company and consumers, to reveal the effect of short attention spans upon brand communication, and to identify the most effective communication strategies for brand storytelling in the age of short attention spans.

Participants

We collected survey data through online and face-to-face interviews among 158 individual customers who attend trading malls regularly and purchase specific company's goods between July-August, 2022. All the participants were informed about the survey and we asked their permission to conduct the interview. We investigated the participants according to their age, gender, education background, marital status, income, and frequency of shopping. Table 1 show the survey participants' profiles.

The research methods are procedures used to collect and analyze data in order to answer research questions. The instruments we chosen on the principles of reliability (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019; Taherdoost, 2022), validity (Sürücü & Maslakçı, 2020), responsiveness (Ruf et al., 2022), transfer (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019), generalizability (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019; Polman & Maglio, 2023), and objectivity (van Dongen & Sikorski, 2021) that make them important and fundamental features in the evaluation of data collected.

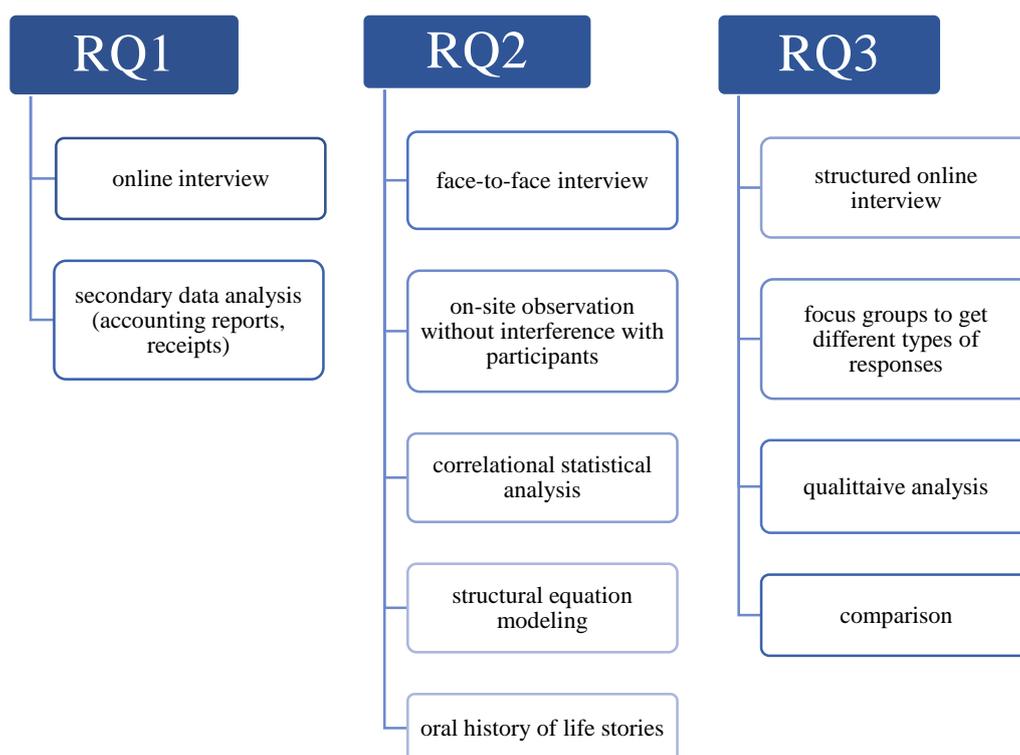
Table 1.
Survey participants profile (N=158)

Characteristics	Quantity	Characteristics	Quantity
<i>Age</i>		<i>Marital status</i>	
Below 20	36	Married	63
20-29	44	Divorced	43
30-39	58	Single	20
40-59	12	<i>Income</i>	
60 and over	8	Low	24
<i>Gender</i>		Middle	97
Male	65	High	37
Female	93	<i>Frequency of shopping</i>	
<i>Education</i>		Every day	16
Secondary school	32	Some times a week	65
Bachelor's degree	89	Once a week	58
Master's degree	33	Some times a month	19
PhD	3		
Post-Doctorate	1		

Instruments

Figure 2 shows the research instruments used to answer the research questions. We correlated the research instruments with research objective, population, research design. The use of research instruments contributed to data analysis, interpretation of results, and testing theories. Moreover, the methods helped identify the strength of the research and reveal a relationship between variable elements.

Figure 2.
Research instruments



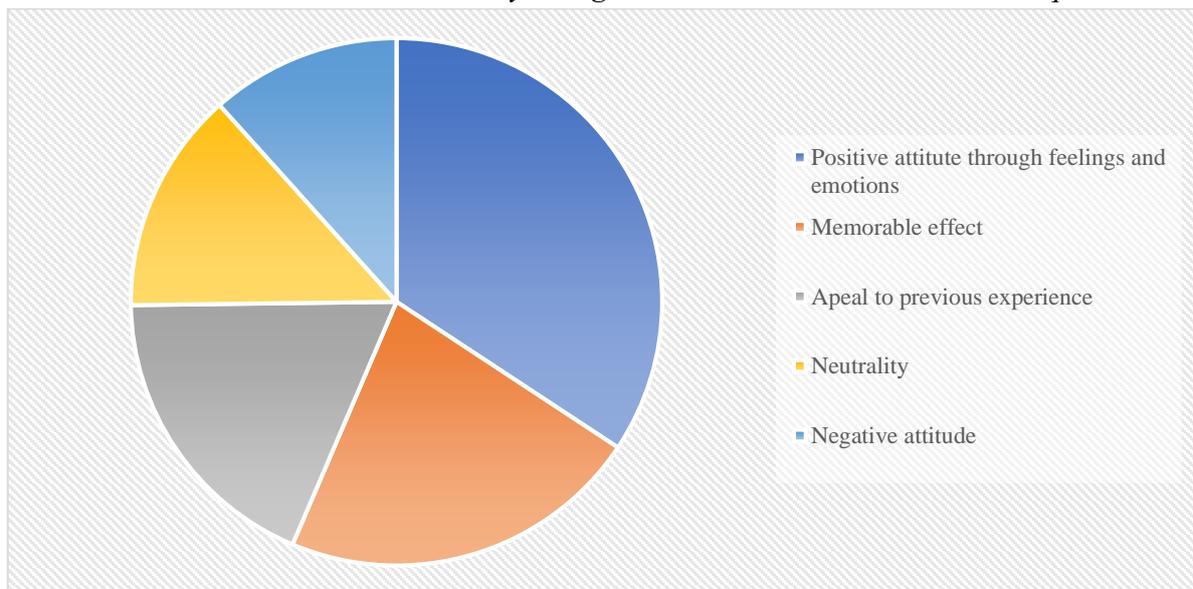
Data analysis and results

Contribution of brand storytelling as a communication technique between company and consumers

The survey conducted among the participants showed that brand storytelling significantly contributes to brand communication as a form of interaction between company and consumers. We found that 34,32% of individuals have positive attitude through their personal feeling and emotions evoked by brand image in the story. 22,08% of respondents admit they have memorable effect through a brand story whereas characters, place, plot and occasion usually bring their attention to brand image and provoke to change purchase intention. 18,4% of consumers state that a brand story affects their emotions and change purchasing behaviour when it appeals to their previous personal experience like childhood, school years, party time, specific event, etc. At the same time, the results showed that 13,6% of individuals stay neutral after having received a message and a brand story does not impact their usual activity. And 11,6 % of consumers explain that they have negative attitude when they learnt more details in brand story. Figure 3 shows the consumers' attitudes towards brand storytelling as a brand communication technique.

Figure 3.

Consumers' attitudes towards brand storytelling as a brand communication technique



Effect of short attention spans upon brand communication

Figure 4 shows the measurements through the process of making purchasing decision and their dependence on the time duration. In the figure x axis shows the number of seconds a brand story lasts and, consequently, y axis explains the size of consumers' interest in points. The points were measured by the following formula:

$$I_c = T \times A \times E_p$$

where I_c means consumers' interest index, T – time duration which a brand story lasts in seconds, A – attention focus towards a brand story and ability to maintain sustainable attention, and E_p – positive emotions assessment.

To measure consumers' interest index, we developed the five-point scale which was interpreted as follows:

0-5 points relate critically low interest among consumers and they have negative attitudes towards a brand story;

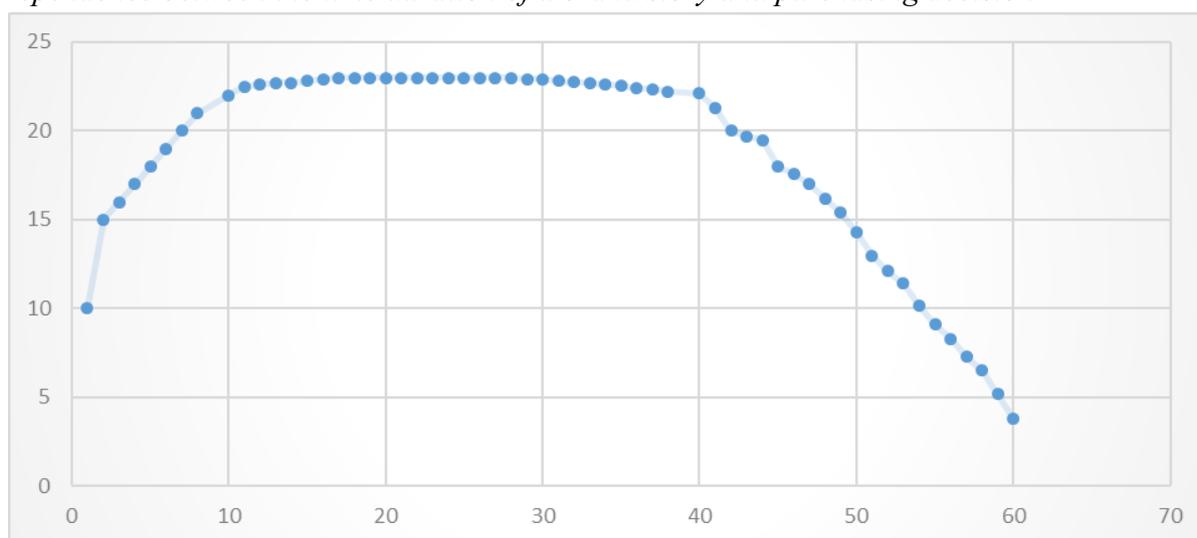
6-11 points mean low interest;

12-17 points say that consumers have middle interest;

18-23 points relate to high interest and suggest that consumers tend to make purchasing decision and they have definitely positive attitudes towards a brand story.

Figure 4.

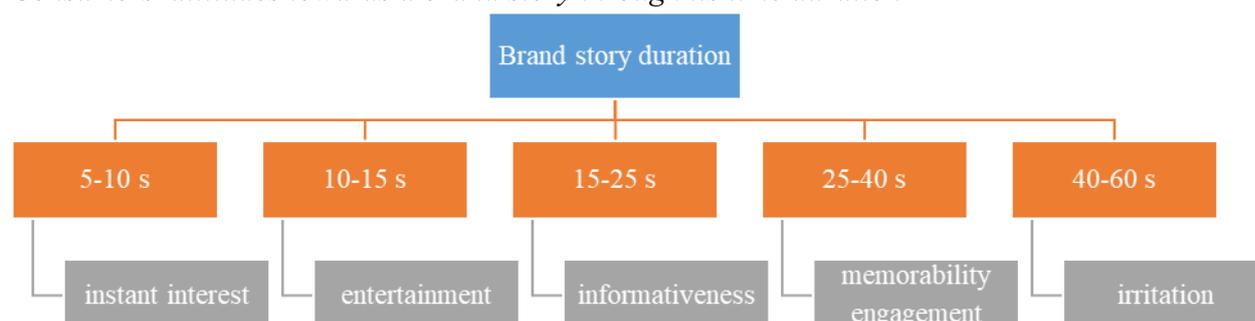
Dependence between the time duration of a brand story and purchasing decision



Besides we studied the consumers' attitudes towards a brand story through its time duration. The results showed that an individual feels instant interest between 5 and 10 seconds, then a consumer is entertained and focuses his/her attention towards a narrative. The period between 15 and 25 seconds usually bring informativeness to consumers and increase brand engagement. Afterwards, a person is widely engaged within brand communication and considers a product to be a memorable thing. When a brand story lasts over 40 seconds, a consumer has negative attitudes towards a brand story caused with short attention span and feels irritation.

Figure 5.

Consumers' attitudes towards a brand story through its time duration



Effective communication strategies for brand storytelling

The study of effective communication strategies for brand storytelling showed that consumers divide all the strategies into direct and indirect ones. Direct communication strategies concern use of verbal or non-verbal tools that are used to transfer a message to the audience. Direct communication strategies include narrative plot with interesting beginning and logical ending, intrigue, authenticity, surprise, visual image, audio background, obstacle, emotions, conflict and tension, small details, orientation towards future improvements. Indirect communication strategies involve mode of message transfer, pricing, frequency of transfer, time duration, sequence of brand stories, and personal appeal.

Table 2 shows the communication strategies preferred by consumers for brand storytelling. We found that most individuals (64) choose narrative plot with interesting beginning, culmination and logical ending. In such case, customers recognize characters and follow their life story. Also, many respondents prefer visual image while receiving a message (45), and orientation towards future improvements in customers' life by the example of a brand story (32). Studying indirect communication strategies, we may state that most brand stories are transferred through company website (68). In addition, time duration and pricing are the most important factors for change of purchasing intentions.

The survey results enable us to move on to the identification of effective communication strategies for brand storytelling.

Table 2.

Communication strategies for brand storytelling

Communication strategies		Quantity	Communication strategies		Quantity
Direct communication strategies	Narrative plot with interesting beginning and logical ending	64	Indirect communication strategies	TV	42
	Intrigue	21		Website	68
	Authenticity	17		e-mail dissemination	24
	Involvement	23		Pricing	72
	Surprise	25		Frequency	17
	Visual image	45		Time duration	88
	Audio background	19		Sequence	19
	Obstacle	5		Personal appeal	41
	Emotions	57			
	Conflict and tension	43			
	Small details	8			
	Orientation towards future improvements	32			

Discussion

The study on brand storytelling in the age of short attention spans allowed us to identify the strategies for effective communication that can be implied by companies to increase brand engagement. They are the following:

Narrative plot with interesting beginning and logical ending. Narrative in brand storytelling is the practice of sharing connected stories to evoke consumers' interest and reinforce beneficial image of a product (Fischer-Appelt & Dernbach, 2022). Narrative should include interesting beginning, culminative middle, and logical ending (resolution). Narrative as a communication strategy describe the multiple events over a passage of time represented by common elements like characters or place. Effective technique for narrative is self-story which is told in the first person. Such strategy helps consumers follow the events and keeps them waiting for the next series where brand is mentioned.

Intrigue. Intriguing strategy related to intriguing story that is thought-provoking, innovative, informative, interesting, or entertaining for the audience (Fauziah & Fachira, 2021). Brand stories with intrigues contain visual or textual identity that attract the audience and stay in their mind. Also, intrigue helps to form a support image of the proposed product and bring a resolution to the mystery in a brand image (Voorveld, 2019). Moreover, intrigue contributes to optimization of message creativity and innovation as well as it enhances customers' imagination.

Authenticity. Authentical communication bring real thoughts, characters, settings, feelings, challenges, and experiences within a brand story. Message is honest and direct resulting in focusing customers' attention towards a brand and make them feel more confident when they make purchasing decision (Ebben & Bull, 2023).

Surprise is a marketing technique that attracts potential and current clients as it offers positive experiences and unexpected event. Surprise in brand storytelling helps increase customers' motivation and interest (Nhedzi et al., 2023). Unexpected details suggest that a brand story offers excitement over a sudden discovery and develops the desire to follow a brand story among the audience.

Visual image. Visualizing is considered a significant element of a brand story in the age of short attention spans as it helps to minimize time duration as it transmits the information and ideas using symbols and imagery. In brand storytelling visual image enhances consumer's interest, improves memory and has a positive impact upon brand image (Günay, 2021). Also, it helps create appropriate content for better description of story characters, objects, place and occasion.

Audio background. Sounds like voices or music contribute to image recalling and retention. An individual is able to understand the message better through additional techniques like audio background.

Obstacle or challenge as a direct element communication strategy is related to a problem that should be resolved in a brand story. According to some findings the challenge in brand storytelling should be actual and based on facts (Fauziah & Fachira, 2021). The best plot development is when the story main character overcomes the obstacle and becomes a winner in the end of narrative.

Emotions. Showing emotions and empathy in a brand story is one of the most effective communication strategies as they help to transform a regular story into empathic narrative (Dennison, 2023) where characters are called to stimulate customers' the same emotions that described in a brand story.

Conflict and tension create a customer's emotional involvement and provoke an individual to follow the development of the plot.

Small details. Brand story to be more effective must contain a number of small details like clothes, symbol, colour, etc. Such details enhance the authenticity of a brand story and provoke customers to pay attention to the whole message (Fauziah & Fachira, 2021) awaiting when the details will be showed.

Orientation towards future improvements. Bright future, improvements in future create positive attitudes towards a brand story (Nhedzi et al., 2023). The image of innovation and a dream-come-true explains that a product will bring to positive changes and improve the personal story of a customer.

Conclusion

Storytelling is a mechanism of creating, developing and communicating the message. Stories convey messages in an emotionally powerful manner; they are unforgettable and bring the audience to something familiar. Commercial stories are classified into brand stories establishing brand image and story advertisements presenting information about a product or a company in the format of a story. In addition, all the brand stories are divided into factual and fictional. Storytelling is a powerful instrument to gain people's attention in both emotional and intellectual way and it has become a significant aspect of marketing due to the technological advancements and market-driven digital transformations like the increase of social media and the spread of online commerce.

The requirements to effective advertisement campaign include time and context setting, interesting plot, strong and brave characters, appeal to the appropriate values, authenticity, and symbolic interpretation. Recently, brand communication has faced a huge transformation due to progression in technology resulting in more empowering of the audience. Time is one of the essential factors when a brand story creates impact and the span of keeping the audience engaged must be short. Short stories in the age of short attention spans are attractive to customers' emotions and help craft positive experience through direct message. They look more interesting and captivating and result in brand engagement and minimization of negative thoughts.

All the communication strategies in brand storytelling are divided into direct and indirect ones. Direct communication strategies concern use of verbal or non-verbal tools that are used to transfer a message to the audience. Direct communication strategies include narrative plot with interesting beginning and logical ending, intrigue, authenticity, surprise, visual image, audio background, obstacle, emotions, conflict and tension, small details, orientation towards future improvements. Indirect communication strategies involve mode of message transfer, pricing, frequency of transfer, time duration, sequence of brand stories, and personal appeal.

The results may be implied by enterprises while generating brand storytelling. Also, the findings are important for psychologists studying consumers' behaviour.

At the same time the research contains some limitations. They refer to the fact that to identify the effective communication strategies for brand storytelling we used the survey among customers and assess their purchase interest. But we think that the analysis of company branding will help to understand communication strategies better and outline their weaknesses.

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Declarations

Acknowledgements

Not applicable.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding Acknowledgements

Not applicable.

Ethics Approval

Not applicable.

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