



Storytelling As A Strategic Tool In Marketing Management: Theoretical Integration Between Emotional Narratives And Brand Equity Formation To Create Long-Term Impact On Consumer Behavior

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ABSTRACT

In an increasingly competitive marketing landscape, storytelling has emerged as a powerful strategic tool that transcends traditional promotional approaches by creating deep emotional connections with consumers. This theoretical paper examines the integration of emotional narratives in brand storytelling and their impact on brand equity formation and long-term consumer behavior. Through a comprehensive literature review and theoretical framework development, this study explores how narrative structures, emotional engagement mechanisms, and brand identity elements interact to create sustainable competitive advantages. The research synthesizes existing theories from narrative psychology, consumer behavior, branding, and neuroscience to propose an integrated model of strategic storytelling in marketing management. Key findings indicate that effective brand storytelling operates through multiple pathways: (1) activation of emotional processing centers in the brain leading to enhanced memory retention and brand recall; (2) creation of perceived authenticity and brand trust through narrative consistency; (3) facilitation of consumer-brand identification through relatable characters and situations; (4) generation of word-of-mouth and social sharing behaviors; and (5) contribution to long-term brand equity through accumulated narrative capital. The paper presents a Strategic Storytelling Framework (SSF) that integrates narrative elements, emotional dimensions, brand equity components, and consumer behavioral outcomes. This framework provides actionable insights for marketing practitioners in designing, implementing, and evaluating storytelling-based marketing strategies. The study concludes with practical recommendations for brands seeking to leverage storytelling as a central component of their marketing management approach, including guidelines for narrative authenticity, emotional resonance calibration, multi-channel narrative consistency, and measurement of storytelling effectiveness.

Keywords: *Storytelling, Brand Narrative, Emotional Marketing, Brand Equity, Consumer Behavior, Strategic Marketing, Narrative Psychology*



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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background and Rationale

The contemporary marketing environment is characterized by information overload, declining attention spans, and increasing consumer skepticism toward traditional advertising messages. In this context, storytelling has emerged as a powerful strategic tool that enables brands to cut through the noise and create meaningful connections with their target audiences. Unlike conventional marketing communications that focus primarily on product features and benefits, storytelling leverages the fundamental human affinity for narratives to engage consumers on emotional, cognitive, and behavioral levels simultaneously.

The effectiveness of storytelling in marketing is grounded in both evolutionary psychology and contemporary neuroscience. Research indicates that the human brain is inherently wired to process and remember information presented in narrative form (Zak, 2015). Stories activate multiple regions of the brain, including those responsible for sensory processing, emotion, and memory consolidation, creating more robust and enduring mental representations compared to factual information alone (Berns et al., 2013). This neurological advantage translates into tangible marketing outcomes: consumers are 22 times more likely to remember information embedded in a story compared to facts presented in isolation (Patel, 2016).

From a strategic perspective, storytelling offers brands several unique advantages. First, narratives enable the communication of complex brand values and positioning in ways that are accessible and memorable to diverse audiences. Second, emotional engagement through storytelling creates psychological bonds that transcend transactional relationships, fostering brand loyalty and advocacy. Third, compelling brand stories become shareable cultural artifacts, amplifying brand reach through organic word-of-mouth and social media diffusion. Fourth, consistent narrative frameworks provide coherence across multiple touchpoints and campaigns, strengthening brand identity over time.

Despite the growing recognition of storytelling's importance in marketing practice, theoretical understanding of how narratives create value remains fragmented across multiple disciplines. While narrative psychology provides insights into story structure and comprehension, consumer behavior research illuminates emotional and cognitive responses to marketing stimuli, and branding theory explains equity formation processes, an integrated framework that synthesizes these perspectives is notably absent from the marketing literature. This theoretical gap limits both academic understanding and practical application of storytelling strategies.

1.2. Research Objectives

This paper addresses this gap by developing an integrated theoretical framework that explains how storytelling functions as a strategic tool in marketing management. Specifically, the research objectives are:

1. To synthesize existing theoretical perspectives on storytelling, emotional marketing, and brand equity formation into a coherent conceptual framework
2. To identify the key mechanisms through which brand narratives influence consumer emotions, cognition, and behavior
3. To examine the relationship between narrative elements and long-term brand equity development
4. To propose a Strategic Storytelling Framework (SSF) that integrates narrative design, emotional engagement, and brand equity outcomes
5. To provide evidence-based guidelines for marketing practitioners seeking to implement storytelling-based strategies

1.3. Significance of the Study

This research makes several important contributions to both marketing theory and practice. Theoretically, it advances understanding of storytelling as a strategic marketing tool by integrating insights from narrative psychology, neuroscience, consumer behavior, and branding into a unified framework. This interdisciplinary synthesis addresses the fragmentation that has characterized

previous research on marketing narratives. The proposed Strategic Storytelling Framework (SSF) provides a systematic basis for future empirical investigation of storytelling effectiveness across different contexts, media, and consumer segments.

From a practical standpoint, the framework offers marketing managers actionable insights for designing and implementing storytelling-based strategies. The identification of specific narrative elements, emotional mechanisms, and equity outcomes enables more systematic and measurable approaches to brand storytelling. Furthermore, the paper's emphasis on long-term impact addresses a critical limitation of much marketing practice, which often prioritizes short-term metrics over sustained brand building. By demonstrating how narratives contribute to enduring competitive advantages through accumulated narrative capital, this research provides justification for strategic investments in storytelling capabilities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1. Storytelling in Marketing: Evolution and Definitions

Storytelling in marketing represents a paradigm shift from traditional feature-benefit communication to narrative-based engagement. Fog, Budtz, and Yakaboylu (2005) define brand storytelling as "the strategic use of narrative structures to communicate brand values, create emotional connections, and differentiate products in competitive markets." This definition emphasizes three critical elements: strategic intentionality, narrative structure, and differentiation objectives.

The evolution of storytelling in marketing can be traced through several distinct phases. The first phase (1950s-1970s) featured simple narrative elements embedded within traditional advertising, primarily focusing on problem-solution storylines. The second phase (1980s-1990s) saw the emergence of character-driven brand narratives, exemplified by campaigns like Marlboro Man and Nike's athlete endorsements. The third phase (2000s-2010s) introduced transmedia storytelling and user-generated content, leveraging digital platforms for narrative distribution and co-creation. The current phase (2020s onwards) is characterized by data-driven personalization, interactive narratives, and integration of storytelling across all customer touchpoints.

2.2. Narrative Psychology and Consumer Cognition

Narrative psychology provides crucial insights into how stories function as cognitive tools for meaning-making and memory formation. Bruner (1991) distinguished between paradigmatic thinking (logical-scientific) and narrative thinking (story-based), arguing that narratives are the primary mode through which humans understand experiences and construct reality. This cognitive preference for narrative processing has profound implications for marketing communications.

Green and Brock's (2000) transportation-imagery model explains how narratives engage consumers by transporting them into story worlds, temporarily suspending critical evaluation and increasing message persuasiveness. Transportation occurs when individuals become absorbed in a narrative, experiencing the events vicariously through characters and becoming emotionally invested in outcomes. This mental immersion creates conditions conducive to attitude formation and behavioral intentions that persist beyond the immediate consumption experience.

2.3. Emotional Engagement and Neurological Responses

The neurological basis of storytelling effectiveness has been extensively documented through neuroimaging studies. Zak (2015) demonstrated that compelling narratives trigger oxytocin release, a neurochemical associated with empathy, trust, and social bonding. This biological response to stories explains why narrative-based marketing can create deeper emotional connections than rational appeals.

Research by Berns et al. (2013) using fMRI technology revealed that reading narratives activates not only language processing areas but also regions associated with physical sensation and movement when the story describes such experiences. This neural coupling, termed "embodied cognition," means that well-crafted brand stories can create vicarious sensory experiences that enhance memory encoding and brand associations.

Table 1: Theoretical Perspectives on Storytelling in Marketing

Theoretical Framework	Key Concepts	Marketing Application	Source
Narrative Transportation Theory	Mental immersion, reduced counterarguing, emotional involvement	Creating engaging brand stories that transport consumers	Green & Brock (2000)
Narrative Paradigm Theory	Narrative coherence, narrative fidelity, story logic	Ensuring brand stories are internally consistent and believable	Fisher (1984)
Emotional Contagion Theory	Empathy, emotional mimicry, affective transfer	Designing characters and situations that elicit target emotions	Hatfield et al. (1993)
Self-Determination Theory	Autonomy, competence, relatedness needs	Creating stories that fulfill psychological needs	Deci & Ryan (2000)
Social Identity Theory	In-group identification, self-categorization, collective identity	Building community through shared brand narratives	Tajfel & Turner (1979)
Cognitive Appraisal Theory	Primary appraisal, secondary appraisal, coping responses	Structuring narratives to shape emotional interpretations	Lazarus (1991)
Associative Network Theory	Memory nodes, spreading activation, associative links	Creating rich narrative networks in consumer memory	Anderson (1983)

Source: Synthesized by author from literature review

2.4. Brand Equity Formation Through Storytelling

Brand equity, defined by Aaker (1991) as "a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name and symbol, that add to or subtract from the value provided by a product or service," is fundamentally enhanced through effective storytelling. Keller's (1993) Customer-Based Brand Equity (CBBE) model identifies four key components that storytelling directly influences: brand awareness, brand associations, perceived quality, and brand loyalty.

Storytelling contributes to brand awareness by creating memorable narratives that increase recall and recognition. The narrative structure provides retrieval cues that facilitate memory access, making the brand more accessible in purchase situations. Brand associations are enriched through story elements including characters, settings, conflicts, and resolutions that become linked to the brand in consumer memory. These narrative associations extend beyond functional attributes to include symbolic and emotional meanings that differentiate the brand.

Perceived quality is enhanced when narratives demonstrate craftsmanship, heritage, or innovation through storytelling. Stories about product development, material sourcing, or creator passion signal quality commitments that transcend specifications. Brand loyalty emerges from repeated narrative exposure creating familiarity and emotional bonds. Escalas (2004) demonstrated that consumers who connect brand narratives to their own self-concept show significantly higher loyalty and willingness to pay premium prices.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a conceptual-theoretical research design based on comprehensive literature review and theoretical synthesis. The methodology follows Jaakkola's (2020) framework for developing conceptual contributions in marketing, which emphasizes systematic literature analysis, theoretical integration, and framework proposition. This approach is particularly appropriate for addressing fragmented theoretical perspectives and proposing integrative models that advance both understanding and practice.

3.2. Literature Search and Selection Strategy

The literature search was conducted across multiple academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCO Business Source Complete, and Google Scholar. The search employed keyword combinations including "brand storytelling," "narrative marketing," "emotional branding," "brand equity," "consumer behavior," "narrative psychology," and "marketing communication." The

temporal scope covered publications from 1980 to 2024, with emphasis on peer-reviewed journal articles, seminal books, and highly-cited conference proceedings.

Selection criteria required that sources: (1) directly address storytelling in marketing or related constructs; (2) provide theoretical frameworks or empirical evidence; (3) appear in recognized academic outlets or highly-cited practitioner sources; (4) contribute unique insights not duplicated in other selected sources. The initial search yielded 487 potentially relevant sources. After applying inclusion criteria and removing duplicates, 156 sources were retained for detailed analysis. Of these, 89 sources formed the core literature base directly informing the theoretical framework development.

3.3. Analysis and Synthesis Approach

The analysis followed a structured approach involving: (1) thematic coding of literature to identify key concepts, mechanisms, and outcomes related to storytelling; (2) concept mapping to visualize relationships between identified themes; (3) theoretical triangulation across disciplines (psychology, neuroscience, marketing, communication); (4) identification of research gaps and areas requiring theoretical integration; (5) iterative framework development through multiple revision cycles incorporating feedback from marketing scholars and practitioners.

Table 2: Core Elements of Effective Brand Storytelling

Narrative Element	Description	Strategic Function
Character/Protagonist	Relatable individual or entity facing challenges	Creates identification and empathy
Conflict/Challenge	Problem or obstacle requiring resolution	Generates tension and engagement
Context/Setting	Time, place, and circumstances of the narrative	Establishes authenticity and relevance
Journey/Arc	Transformation process from beginning to resolution	Provides structure and meaning
Values/Theme	Core principles or messages embedded in story	Communicates brand positioning
Emotion/Tone	Affective quality and atmosphere of narrative	Drives emotional response and memory
Resolution/Outcome	Conclusion demonstrating transformation or learning	Provides satisfaction and takeaway
Authenticity/Credibility	Believability and truthfulness of narrative	Builds trust and reduces skepticism

Source: Author synthesis from Fog et al. (2005), Woodside et al. (2008), and Escalas (2004)

4. THE STRATEGIC STORYTELLING FRAMEWORK (SSF)

4.1. Framework Overview and Components

The Strategic Storytelling Framework (SSF) integrates four primary domains: (1) Narrative Construction, encompassing the design and structure of brand stories; (2) Emotional Engagement Mechanisms, explaining how stories activate psychological responses; (3) Brand Equity Formation, detailing how narratives contribute to brand value; and (4) Behavioral Outcomes, specifying the consumer actions resulting from story engagement. The framework is grounded in the premise that effective storytelling creates a cascading effect from narrative exposure through emotional processing to equity accumulation and ultimately sustained behavioral change.

Table 3: Strategic Storytelling Framework - Core Components and Processes

Framework Domain	Key Components	Process Mechanisms	Measurable Outcomes
Narrative Construction	Characters, plot, setting, theme, conflict, resolution	Story design, narrative coherence, authenticity creation	Story quality scores, narrative consistency metrics
Emotional Engagement	Transportation, empathy, identification, emotional arousal	Neural activation, oxytocin release, emotional contagion	Emotional intensity ratings, physiological responses, engagement duration
Cognitive Processing	Attention, comprehension, memory encoding, mental	Narrative transportation, reduced counterarguing,	Recall rates, recognition scores, attitude accessibility

	imagery	schema activation	
Brand Equity Formation	Awareness, associations, quality perception, loyalty	Memory consolidation, associative network building, self-brand connection	Brand equity metrics, NPS, CLV, brand valuation
Behavioral Outcomes	Purchase intent, WOM, social sharing, brand advocacy	Behavioral intention formation, social influence, habit formation	Conversion rates, share metrics, repeat purchase, referral rates

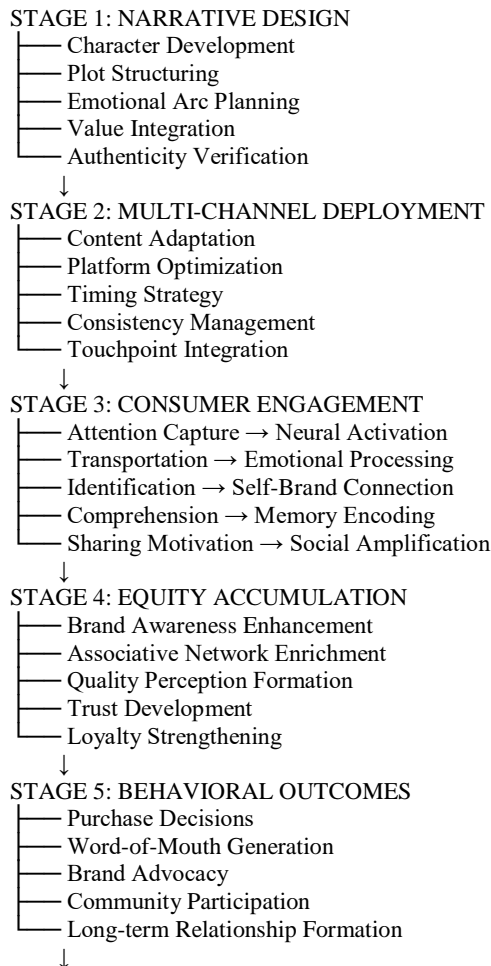
Source: Author's Strategic Storytelling Framework (SSF)

4.2. Narrative-to-Behavior Pathway Model

The Narrative-to-Behavior Pathway Model within the SSF delineates the sequential and parallel processes through which brand stories influence consumer behavior. The model identifies three primary pathways: (1) the Cognitive Pathway, operating through attention, comprehension, and memory; (2) the Emotional Pathway, functioning via empathy, transportation, and affective response; and (3) the Social Pathway, working through identification, community formation, and social influence.

These pathways are not mutually exclusive but operate synergistically. For instance, emotional engagement enhances cognitive processing by increasing attention and elaboration. Similarly, social identification strengthens emotional connections by linking narratives to self-concept. The interaction effects among pathways create multiplicative rather than merely additive impacts on behavioral outcomes.

Figure 1: Strategic Storytelling Process Workflow



Source: Author's Strategic Storytelling Framework workflow model

5. DISCUSSION AND THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1. Mechanisms of Emotional Engagement

The integration of neuroscience research with marketing theory reveals that emotional engagement through storytelling operates through multiple neurological mechanisms. First, narrative-induced oxytocin release creates a neurochemical foundation for trust and bonding (Zak, 2015). This biological response explains why story-based marketing can be more effective than rational persuasion in building brand relationships. Second, mirror neuron activation during story consumption creates vicarious experiences that generate authentic emotional responses (Keysers & Gazzola, 2009). When consumers watch or read about characters experiencing emotions, their brains simulate those emotions, creating genuine affective states that transfer to brand attitudes.

Third, the narrative transportation process temporarily suppresses critical evaluation, allowing brand messages to bypass psychological defenses (Green & Brock, 2000). This mechanism is particularly valuable in markets characterized by high consumer skepticism or advertising avoidance. Fourth, emotional arousal during story consumption enhances memory consolidation through amygdala activation, making brand associations more durable and accessible (Cahill & McGaugh, 1998). These neurological mechanisms collectively explain why emotionally engaging stories create stronger and more persistent marketing effects compared to non-narrative communications.

Table 4: Emotional Dimensions in Brand Storytelling and Their Effects

Emotional Dimension	Narrative Triggers	Neurological Response	Marketing Outcome
Joy/Happiness	Achievement, success, reunion	Dopamine release, reward system activation	Positive brand associations, sharing behavior
Sadness/Empathy	Loss, struggle, sacrifice	Oxytocin release, empathy activation	Deep emotional connection, brand loyalty
Fear/Anxiety	Threat, uncertainty, risk	Amygdala activation, heightened attention	Increased ad recall, urgency in action
Surprise/Wonder	Unexpected turns, revelation	Novelty detection, curiosity arousal	Enhanced engagement, memorability
Inspiration/Hope	Transformation, possibility, aspiration	Prefrontal cortex activation, goal-setting	Brand admiration, self-improvement motivation
Nostalgia	Past references, heritage, tradition	Memory retrieval, emotional warmth	Brand heritage value, authenticity perception
Pride/Achievement	Success, overcoming odds, mastery	Self-esteem elevation, competence feeling	Self-brand connection, status association

Source: Synthesized from Zak (2015), Plutchik (1980), and marketing literature

5.2. Brand Equity Accumulation Through Narrative Capital

The concept of "narrative capital" extends traditional brand equity theory by recognizing that brand stories accumulate value over time through repeated telling, social sharing, and cultural integration. Unlike physical or financial capital that may depreciate, narrative capital can appreciate as stories become embedded in consumer culture and collective memory. This appreciation occurs through several mechanisms: (1) cultural resonance, where stories align with or shape cultural narratives; (2) transmedia expansion, where core narratives extend across platforms and formats; (3) community co-creation, where consumers elaborate and personalize brand stories; and (4) temporal deepening, where narrative histories add heritage value.

The accumulation of narrative capital directly contributes to each component of brand equity. Brand awareness benefits from story memorability and shareability, with compelling narratives achieving organic reach far exceeding paid media. Brand associations are enriched as narrative elements create dense semantic networks linking brands to emotions, values, characters, and situations. Perceived quality is enhanced through stories demonstrating craftsmanship, innovation, or

care. Brand loyalty strengthens as ongoing narrative engagement creates psychological investment and community belonging.

6. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR MARKETING MANAGEMENT

6.1. Strategic Guidelines for Storytelling Implementation

Based on the theoretical framework, several actionable guidelines emerge for marketing practitioners. First, brands should invest in developing a coherent narrative universe rather than isolated campaign stories. This narrative universe includes consistent characters, themes, values, and story worlds that can be explored across multiple campaigns and touchpoints. Consistency in narrative elements strengthens associative networks and builds narrative capital over time.

Second, emotional authenticity should take precedence over production values. Consumers possess sophisticated capabilities for detecting manufactured or inauthentic emotions. Stories grounded in genuine brand experiences, real customer narratives, or truthful brand origins generate stronger engagement than fictional narratives that feel contrived. Authenticity can be enhanced through employee stories, founder narratives, customer testimonials, and transparent communication about challenges overcome.

Third, brands should design narratives with participatory elements that invite consumer co-creation and personalization. Open narrative structures with deliberate gaps or multiple interpretation possibilities encourage consumers to complete stories with their own experiences, strengthening self-brand connections. User-generated content campaigns, interactive storytelling platforms, and community-driven narrative extensions leverage consumers' natural desire to contribute to meaningful narratives.

Table 5: Storytelling Implementation Checklist for Marketing Managers

Implementation Phase	Key Actions	Success Indicators
Discovery & Strategy	Brand story audit, audience insight gathering, competitive narrative analysis	Clear narrative positioning, identified story gaps, audience persona profiles
Narrative Development	Core story crafting, character creation, emotional arc design, authenticity verification	Compelling brand narrative, resonant characters, coherent story universe
Creative Execution	Multi-format content production, visual identity alignment, tone consistency	High-quality story assets, platform-appropriate formats, consistent brand voice
Channel Deployment	Touchpoint mapping, platform optimization, timing strategy, integration planning	Omnichannel presence, optimized content delivery, coordinated launches
Engagement Activation	Audience targeting, influencer partnerships, community building, participation mechanisms	Growing audience engagement, social sharing, community formation
Performance Measurement	Metrics tracking, emotional response testing, equity monitoring, ROI analysis	Data-driven insights, performance benchmarks, optimization opportunities
Iteration & Refinement	Feedback integration, narrative evolution, content optimization, A/B testing	Improved performance metrics, stronger audience connection, refined narratives
Scaling & Extension	Transmedia expansion, franchise development, partnership integration, archive building	Expanded narrative universe, increased reach, sustained engagement

Source: Author synthesis for practitioner implementation

6.2. Measuring Storytelling Effectiveness

Measuring storytelling effectiveness requires multi-dimensional metrics spanning awareness, engagement, equity, and behavior. Awareness metrics include story reach, impressions, and recall rates. Engagement metrics encompass time spent with content, completion rates for video narratives,

emotional response indicators (likes, emotional reactions), and sharing behaviors. Equity metrics involve brand association strength, brand sentiment scores, Net Promoter Score (NPS), and customer lifetime value (CLV). Behavioral metrics include conversion rates, purchase frequency, category penetration, and customer retention.

Advanced measurement approaches include neurological testing (EEG, fMRI) to assess emotional activation patterns, implicit association testing to measure subconscious brand connections, and longitudinal tracking of brand equity indicators. Qualitative methods such as narrative analysis of consumer-generated content, depth interviews exploring story meaning-making, and ethnographic observation of brand story integration into consumer lives provide rich insights complementing quantitative metrics.

7. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has developed an integrated theoretical framework explaining how storytelling functions as a strategic tool in marketing management. The Strategic Storytelling Framework (SSF) synthesizes insights from narrative psychology, neuroscience, consumer behavior, and branding theory to explain the mechanisms through which brand narratives create emotional engagement and build long-term brand equity. The framework identifies specific pathways from narrative construction through emotional processing to brand equity formation and behavioral outcomes.

Key theoretical contributions include: (1) articulation of the narrative capital concept as an appreciating intangible asset; (2) integration of neurological mechanisms with psychological and behavioral outcomes; (3) specification of the interaction effects among cognitive, emotional, and social pathways; (4) extension of traditional brand equity theory to incorporate narrative dimensions; and (5) development of a comprehensive process model linking story design to consumer behavior.

From a practical perspective, the framework provides marketing managers with actionable guidance for implementing storytelling strategies. The emphasis on authenticity, emotional resonance, participatory design, and multi-channel consistency offers clear principles for narrative development and deployment. The measurement framework spanning awareness, engagement, equity, and behavior enables systematic evaluation of storytelling investments.

7.1. Limitations and Future Research Directions

As a conceptual-theoretical paper, this study does not include primary empirical testing of the proposed framework. Future research should empirically validate the SSF across different product categories, consumer segments, and cultural contexts. Experimental designs could test specific propositions about narrative elements and their effects on emotional responses and equity outcomes. Longitudinal studies could track narrative capital accumulation over extended periods, examining how stories appreciate or depreciate based on various factors.

Additionally, research is needed on storytelling effectiveness variations across digital versus traditional media, individual versus community narratives, and firm-generated versus user-generated content. The role of artificial intelligence in narrative generation and personalization represents an emerging area requiring theoretical and empirical investigation. Cross-cultural studies examining narrative structure preferences and emotional response patterns would enhance framework generalizability.

Finally, the long-term sustainability of storytelling as a competitive strategy merits examination. As storytelling becomes ubiquitous in marketing practice, questions arise about potential saturation effects, consumer adaptation, and the continued ability of narratives to differentiate brands. Research addressing these questions will ensure the framework remains relevant as marketing practices and consumer behaviors evolve.

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