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Brand Storytelling In The Digital Age: A Systematic Literature Review Of Consumer Engagement And Brand Attachment

Mahesh Luthia[1]*, Wiwin Riski Windarsari[2], Abdul Halid Latif[3]
Chetana's Institute of Management & Research, India
Universitas Negeri Makassar, Indonesia
Universitas Muhammadiyah Enrekang, Indonesia
E-mail: [1*)]Mahesh.luthia@cimr.in

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Abstract

Brand storytelling has become a central tactic for building relationships with consumers on social media, streaming platforms, and brand-owned channels, yet evidence on how stories translate into engagement and lasting emotional bonds remains scattered across marketing, psychology, and communication research. This article presents a systematic literature review that synthesizes conceptual and empirical work on digital brand storytelling, consumer engagement, and brand attachment. Following PRISMA-informed procedures, the review searched major bibliographic databases, screened records against explicit eligibility criteria, and analysed the retained studies through thematic synthesis. Four findings emerge. First, narrative processing, particularly transportation and identification, is the main psychological route through which stories influence consumers. Second, engagement acts as an affective and behavioural bridge between exposure to stories and brand attachment. Third, digital affordances shift storytelling from firm-controlled messaging to co-authored narratives in which consumers are active participants. Fourth, these effects depend on authenticity, story–brand fit, platform, and consumer involvement. The review proposes an integrative framework, identifies gaps concerning longitudinal evidence, cross-cultural contexts, and emerging technologies, and offers an agenda for future research and practice.

Keywords: *Brand attachment; Brand storytelling; Consumer engagement; Digital marketing; Narrative transportation*

INTRODUCTION

Consumers rarely meet brands through product specifications alone. They meet them through short videos, founder narratives, customer testimonies, campaign hashtags, and the everyday posts of communities that gather around a brand. In this environment, storytelling has moved from a creative choice to a strategic capability. A brand story links characters, events, and meaning in a way that helps people understand what a brand stands for and why it should matter to them. Digital platforms have amplified this logic because they lower the cost of publishing, enable constant interaction, and allow audiences to retell and reshape stories in public (Gensler et al., 2013; Kietzmann et al., 2011).

The appeal of storytelling is grounded in how people process information. Narrative thought organises experience into sequences that are easy to remember and emotionally involving, and narrative advertising can therefore build connections between consumers and brands that argument-based appeals often do not (Escalas, 2004). Yet research on this topic is fragmented. Studies of narrative persuasion focus on transportation and attitude change (Green & Brock, 2000; van Laer et al., 2014), studies of engagement focus on the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural investment consumers make in brand interactions (Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014), and studies of attachment examine the emotional bond that links a brand to the self (Park et al., 2010; Thomson et al., 2005). These streams seldom speak to one

another, and the digital context, in which stories circulate through algorithms and are co-created by users, is often treated as a backdrop rather than as a condition that changes how stories work.

The problem is practical as well as theoretical. Managers routinely track likes, shares, and comments as evidence that a story is working, but the literature suggests that durable value lies in attachment, which predicts committed behaviour more strongly than attitude strength does (Park et al., 2010). Without an integrated account of how storytelling leads from engagement to attachment, brands risk investing in content that attracts attention but does not build relationships. This article addresses that gap through a systematic literature review guided by three research questions:

- RQ1: Through which psychological mechanisms does digital brand storytelling influence consumer engagement?
- RQ2: How does consumer engagement contribute to the formation of brand attachment?
- RQ3: Which contextual conditions and research gaps shape the effectiveness of brand storytelling in digital environments?

The review contributes in three ways. It consolidates dispersed findings into a single integrative framework, it clarifies the role of engagement as a mediating process rather than an end in itself, and it sets out a research agenda for a field that is changing quickly as platforms, formats, and technologies evolve. The remainder of the article presents the theoretical background, the review method, the synthesis of findings, and the conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Brand Storytelling and Narrative Processing

Brand storytelling can be understood as the deliberate use of narrative structure, with characters, a sequence of events, and a point of meaning, to communicate brand identity and values. It differs from conventional advertising in the mode of processing it invites. Analytical processing evaluates claims and weighs evidence, whereas narrative processing involves following a story, imagining its events, and relating them to one's own experience. Escalas (2004) showed that narrative processing of advertisements fosters self–brand connections, because consumers integrate the story into their own autobiographical thinking.

The central psychological construct in this stream is narrative transportation, a state in which attention, imagery, and emotion converge on the story world. Green and Brock (2000) found that highly transported readers held beliefs more consistent with the story and detected fewer flaws in it. A later meta-analysis by van Laer et al. (2014) confirmed that transportation is associated with story-consistent attitudes and intentions and identified features such as imagery and plot as important antecedents. In marketing settings, firm-originated stories have been shown to enrich brand experience and related evaluations (Lundqvist et al., 2013), although their effect depends on how well the story fits the product category (Chiu et al., 2012). Brand experience itself, understood as sensations, feelings, thoughts, and behavioural responses evoked by brand-related stimuli, is a recognised driver of satisfaction and loyalty (Brakus et al., 2009), which positions stories as one of the ways in which experience is created and remembered.

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Consumer Engagement in Digital Environments

Engagement is conceptualised as a psychological state that arises from interactive, co-creative experiences with a brand (Brodie et al., 2011). It is widely treated as multidimensional. Hollebeek et al. (2014) identified cognitive processing, affection, and activation as the dimensions of consumer brand engagement in social media and showed that engagement is linked to self–brand connection and brand usage intent. Dessart et al. (2015) similarly described cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions in online brand communities and distinguished engagement directed at the brand from engagement directed at the community.

Two points matter for storytelling. First, engagement is not equivalent to a behavioural metric. A like or a share is an observable trace, but the underlying state may range from superficial attention to deep emotional involvement. Second, digital engagement is relational and social: consumers interact with the brand and with one another, and these interactions have been linked to stronger consumer–brand relationships across national contexts (Hudson et al., 2016). Storytelling is therefore not only a message but an invitation to participate.

Brand Attachment and Brand Relationships

The relational view of brands holds that consumers form bonds with brands that resemble interpersonal relationships and that these bonds vary in quality and strength (Fournier, 1998). Brand attachment refines this idea by specifying an emotional bond that connects the brand with the self. Park et al. (2010) conceptualised attachment as the combination of self–brand connection and brand prominence, the ease with which brand-related thoughts and feelings come to mind, and demonstrated that attachment predicts brand-supportive behaviour, such as repeat purchase and share of wallet, better than attitude strength does. Thomson et al. (2005) measured attachment through affection, passion, and connection and linked it to commitment and willingness to make sacrifices for the brand. Brand love, which integrates elements such as self–brand integration, positive emotional connection, and long-term commitment, represents a closely related and highly valued outcome (Batra et al., 2012).

Research Gap

Taken together, these streams suggest a plausible chain from stories to narrative processing, from narrative processing to engagement, and from engagement to attachment. However, the chain is rarely examined as a whole, evidence for the digital context is dispersed across disciplines, and the role of consumers as co-authors of brand stories is rarely integrated with the psychology of narrative processing. This review addresses these gaps by synthesizing the literature along the full pathway from digital storytelling to engagement and attachment.

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METHOD

This study uses a systematic literature review (SLR) because the aim is to synthesize a fragmented body of work in a transparent and reproducible way. The procedure follows the evidence-informed approach proposed by Tranfield et al. (2003) for management research and is reported in line with the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021). Because the included studies differ widely in design, constructs, and measures, a qualitative thematic synthesis was chosen over statistical pooling (Snyder, 2019).

The search covered Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, Emerald Insight, and SAGE Journals, complemented by Google Scholar and backward and forward citation chaining to capture foundational works. The search string combined three concept groups: ("brand storytelling" OR "brand story" OR "narrative advertising" OR "digital storytelling") AND ("consumer engagement" OR "brand engagement" OR "social media engagement") AND ("brand attachment" OR "self-brand connection" OR "brand love" OR "brand relationship"). Records published between 2000 and 2025 were considered, with earlier foundational works admitted through citation chaining. The eligibility criteria are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Eligibility criteria for study selection

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication type	Peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and seminal books	Editorials, news items, theses, and non-scholarly sources
Topic	Brand storytelling or narrative communication linked to engagement, attachment, or related relational outcomes	Storytelling studies with no consumer or brand outcome
Context	Digital or social media settings, or foundational narrative and relationship theory	Purely offline contexts without theoretical relevance to digital settings
Language	English	Other languages
Period	2000–2025, plus foundational works identified through citation chaining	Earlier works not cited as foundations

Selection proceeded in four stages: identification, screening of titles and abstracts, full-text eligibility assessment, and final inclusion. The search identified records; after removal of duplicates, records were screened, full texts were assessed, and studies were retained for synthesis. Two reviewers screened records independently, and disagreements were resolved through discussion. Methodological quality was appraised using the transparency of design, the adequacy of measures, and the credibility of the publication outlet. For each retained study, information on context, theoretical lens, platform, research design, constructs, and principal findings was extracted into a coding sheet. Codes were then grouped iteratively into themes, which structure the next section.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic synthesis produced four themes: narrative processing as the entry mechanism, engagement as the bridge to attachment, digital affordances and co-creation, and boundary conditions. These themes are integrated into the conceptual framework shown in Image 1 and discussed in the subsections below.

Theoretical Anchors and Representative Studies

The literature rests on a small set of anchoring theories. Narrative persuasion theories explain how stories change beliefs and attitudes, engagement theories explain how consumers invest in brand interactions, and attachment theories explain how brands become emotionally significant to the self. Service-dominant logic provides an additional lens by treating consumers as co-creators of value rather than recipients of messages (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Table 2 summarises representative studies that illustrate these anchors and the design choices typical of each stream. Experimental work dominates the narrative-processing stream, whereas the engagement and digital co-creation streams rely more on conceptual, qualitative, and survey-based approaches.

Table 2. Representative studies in the reviewed literature

Source	Design / context	Key insight
Green & Brock (2000)	Experiments; narrative transportation	Absorption in a story reduces counter-arguing and aligns beliefs with the story.
Escalas (2004)	Experiments; narrative advertising	Narrative processing builds self–brand connections.
Chiu et al. (2012)	Experimental; brand stories and products	The fit between story and product shapes persuasion.
Lundqvist et al. (2013)	Experimental; firm-originated story	A brand story enriches brand experience and related evaluations.
van Laer et al. (2014)	Meta-analysis; narrative transportation	Transportation is linked to story-consistent attitudes and intentions; imagery and plot are key antecedents.
Hollebeek et al. (2014)	Scale development; social media	Engagement comprises cognitive processing, affection, and activation, and relates to self–brand connection and usage intent.
Dessart et al. (2015)	Qualitative study; online brand communities	Engagement is multidimensional and may focus on the brand or the community.
Gensler et al. (2013)	Conceptual; social media	Consumers co-author brand stories, reducing firm control.
Singh & Sonnenburg (2012)	Conceptual; social media	Brand stories operate as participatory performances.
Park et al. (2010)	Empirical studies; attachment	Attachment predicts brand-supportive behaviour better than attitude strength.
Hudson et al. (2016)	Survey; three countries	Social media interactions are associated with stronger brand relationship quality.

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Narrative Processing as the Entry Mechanism

Across the reviewed work, narrative processing emerges as the most consistently documented route from story to consumer response. Transportation reduces counter-arguing and aligns beliefs with the story (Green & Brock, 2000), and narrative processing builds self–brand connections because consumers weave brand stories into their own identity narratives (Escalas, 2004). This helps to explain why storytelling often outperforms informational appeals in generating affective responses. For digital brands, the implication is that the unit of analysis should be the story experience rather than the single post: a sequence of short videos, comments, and replies can function as one extended narrative if it sustains imagery, plot, and emotional resonance.

An important nuance is that transportation is not guaranteed. It depends on narrative quality, on the consumer's motivation to engage, and on the viewing context. Digital feeds are characterised by interruption and fast scrolling, conditions that may limit deep absorption. Brands therefore tend to rely on compact formats with strong visual imagery, serialised content, or interactive features that prolong attention. Whether such formats produce transportation comparable to longer narratives remains insufficiently tested.

Engagement as the Bridge to Attachment

The second theme positions engagement as a mediating process. Stories that are processed narratively stimulate cognitive effort, emotional response, and activation, which are the core dimensions of engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Engagement then enables the repeated, interactive episodes through which attachment develops. Park et al. (2010) argue that attachment combines a strong self–brand connection with prominent brand memories; repeated engagement with a brand's stories can plausibly supply both, because each interaction links the brand to the consumer's own experience and strengthens its accessibility in memory.

The review also highlights a measurement problem. Practitioner dashboards emphasise behavioural engagement, such as reactions and shares, but behavioural traces say little about cognitive and affective depth (Dessart et al., 2015). Attachment-oriented outcomes such as affection, passion, and connection (Thomson et al., 2005) or brand love (Batra et al., 2012) require psychometric measurement. A story that attracts many reactions but little emotional involvement may inflate engagement metrics without building attachment. This distinction explains why high-reach campaigns do not always translate into loyalty, and it supports the argument that attachment, rather than engagement volume, should be the strategic target.

Digital Affordances and the Co-Creation of Brand Stories

The third theme concerns what is distinctive about the digital age. Social media have changed the locus of storytelling, because consumers now share, reinterpret, and sometimes contest brand narratives, and brand stories are increasingly co-authored rather than controlled by the firm (Gensler et al., 2013). The functional building blocks of social media, including sharing, conversations, relationships, and groups, shape how stories spread and how communities form around them (Kietzmann et al., 2011). Singh and Sonnenburg (2012) describe brand stories on social media as participatory performances in which audiences take part in an unfolding narrative, which is consistent with the service-dominant view of value co-creation (Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

These affordances create both opportunities and risks. Participation can deepen identification, since consumers who contribute to a story see themselves as part of it, and communities can sustain engagement

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beyond the life of a campaign. At the same time, co-authorship reduces managerial control, and consumer-generated narratives may diverge from the intended brand meaning. Evidence from destination branding indicates that social media storytelling can enrich brand narratives through visitor contributions, but also that coherence requires deliberate curation (Lund et al., 2018). Brands that succeed in this environment appear to act as facilitators of stories rather than sole authors.

Boundary Conditions: Authenticity, Fit, and Context

The fourth theme shows that storytelling effects are contingent. Fit between the story and the product matters, as stories that do not match the offering may fail to persuade (Chiu et al., 2012). Authenticity, understood as the perceived sincerity and consistency of the narrative with the brand's actions, is repeatedly discussed as a condition for trust, although it is rarely measured directly in experimental designs. Platform characteristics, such as video-centred versus text-centred environments, shape the type of narrative that can be told and the form of participation it invites. Individual differences, including involvement and the tendency to engage in narrative thinking, also condition responses, and cultural context may alter which story themes resonate. The cross-national findings of Hudson et al. (2016) suggest that social media relationships with brands are not uniform across countries, which cautions against generalising results from Western samples.

An Integrative Framework

Integrating the four themes, the review proposes the framework shown in Image 1. Digital storytelling inputs, including brand narrative, authenticity, story–brand fit, and user-generated stories, activate narrative processing through transportation, identification, and imagery. Narrative processing stimulates cognitive, affective, and behavioural engagement. Sustained engagement fosters brand attachment, expressed as self–brand connection, brand prominence, and emotional bond, which in turn supports loyalty, advocacy, and brand love. Moderating conditions influence the strength of these links, and a feedback loop captures the fact that engaged and attached consumers re-share and co-author the brand story, thereby generating new inputs.

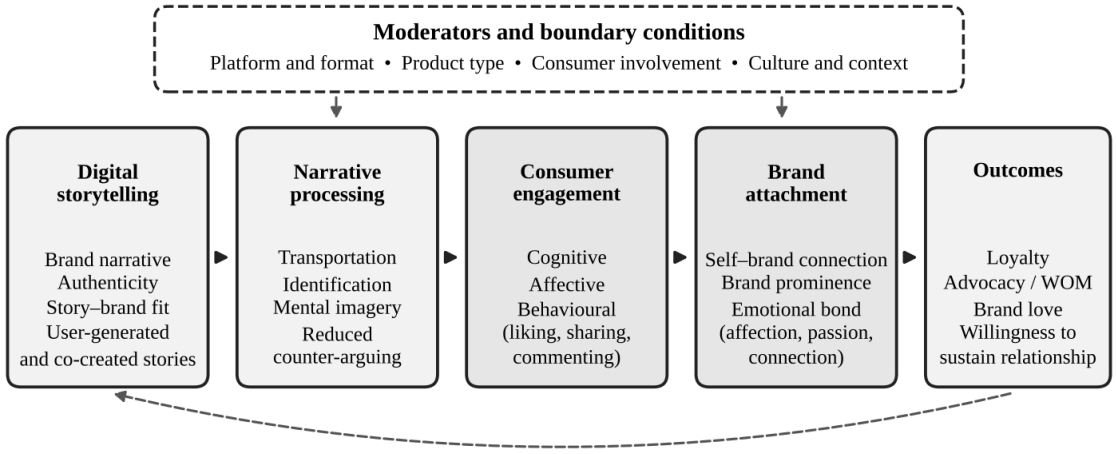

Image 1. Conceptual framework of digital brand storytelling, consumer engagement, and brand attachment (source: authors' synthesis)

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Research Gaps and Future Directions

The synthesis points to several priorities for future research.

- **Longitudinal and causal evidence.** Most studies are cross-sectional or rely on single exposures, whereas attachment develops over time. Longitudinal designs and field experiments could trace how repeated story exposure and participation change attachment.
- **Measurement integration.** Engagement and attachment are often studied with different instruments and in different studies. Research that measures narrative processing, engagement, and attachment in the same sample would test the full pathway proposed here.
- **Cultural and regional diversity.** Evidence is concentrated in Western contexts. Emerging markets, including Southeast Asia, combine high social media use with distinct cultural narratives, collective values, and platform ecosystems, and warrant dedicated investigation.
- **Emerging technologies.** Generative AI, immersive media, and personalised recommendation systems raise new questions about authenticity, disclosure, and the boundary between consumer and machine authorship of brand stories.
- **Ethical and negative outcomes.** The literature focuses on positive effects. Research is needed on manipulation, over-engagement, backlash against inauthentic stories, and the consequences of attachment when brands fail to meet expectations.
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Implications for Practice

For practitioners, the review suggests four principles. First, design stories for narrative processing, with clear characters, imagery, and emotional stakes, rather than for message recall. Second, treat engagement as a pathway and evaluate it with measures of emotional depth alongside behavioural metrics. Third, invite and curate consumer contributions so that the brand story remains coherent while community participation grows. Fourth, protect authenticity by ensuring that the brand's actions are consistent with the stories it tells, since inconsistency undermines the trust on which attachment depends.

Limitations

As with any review, the findings depend on the search terms, databases, and eligibility criteria used. Restricting the corpus to English-language publications may under-represent regional scholarship, and the thematic synthesis involves interpretive judgement despite the use of independent screening. The conceptual framework is derived from the literature and has not been tested empirically.

CONCLUSION

This review set out to clarify how digital brand storytelling shapes consumer engagement and brand attachment. The synthesis indicates that stories work primarily by inviting narrative processing, that engagement is the interactive process through which story exposure becomes emotional involvement, and that attachment, rather than engagement volume, is the outcome that distinguishes lasting brand relationships from transient attention. Digital platforms add a further layer by turning audiences into co-authors, which expands the reach of brand stories while reducing the brand's control over them. These effects are contingent on authenticity, story–brand fit, platform, and consumer characteristics.

The integrative framework offered here provides a basis for future empirical testing, and the research agenda highlights the need for longitudinal designs, integrated measurement, culturally diverse samples, and attention to emerging technologies and ethical risks. For brands, the main lesson is that

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storytelling is a relational strategy: its value lies not in producing content that is noticed, but in sustaining narratives that consumers adopt, retell, and integrate into their own identities.

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