OPEN

The Role of Visual Storytelling in Strengthening Business-to-Consumer Communication

Nigar Sultana Arpa[1]; Mazmon Nahar[1]; Kazi Abdul Mannan[2]

Visual storytelling has become a central approach in modern business-to-consumer (B2C) communication, as brands increasingly rely on visual narratives to build trust, foster engagement, and influence purchasing behaviour. Unlike traditional advertising, visual storytelling integrates images, videos, and multimodal content to craft emotionally resonant narratives that connect with consumers on cognitive and affective levels. This study draws on theoretical perspectives from narrative transportation, semiotics, and multimodal discourse analysis to explain how visual storytelling functions across digital and social platforms. A qualitative methodology combining semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and visual document analysis was employed to explore the perspectives of both marketers and consumers. Findings highlight the significance of brand identity storytelling, emotional resonance, platform-specific adaptations, and consumer co-creation in shaping persuasive outcomes. The analysis shows that authenticity, semiotic coherence, and platform affordances play pivotal roles in narrative effectiveness. The study concludes that visual storytelling not only strengthens consumer-brand relationships but also enhances long-term loyalty when strategically aligned with cultural meanings and consumer participation. Future research should explore cross-cultural differences, algorithmic mediation, and the longitudinal impact of visual storytelling on brand equity.

Keywords: visual storytelling, B2C communication, narrative transportation, semiotics, qualitative research, consumer engagement.

[1]Department of Graphic Design & Multimedia, [2]Department of Business Administration
Shanto-Mariam University of Creative Technology, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Corresponding author: Nigar Sultana Arpa: Email: nigarsultanaarpa204@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Businesses increasingly rely on images, video, and multimodal content to communicate with consumers. Visual storytelling — the deliberate construction and delivery of narratives via visual media — allows brands to convey values, personalities, and product benefits in compact and emotionally resonant forms. With the proliferation of social media platforms, mobile devices, and visual-first ecosystems such as Instagram, TikTok, and Pinterest, visual storytelling is no longer optional; it is central to how brands attract attention, build relationships, and differentiate themselves in saturated marketplaces (Keller, 2013; Pulizzi, 2012).

This article explores the role of visual storytelling in strengthening B2C communication. It integrates established theoretical perspectives, reviews contemporary empirical work, and outlines a qualitative research methodology designed to investigate the mechanisms through which visual narratives affect consumer perceptions and behaviours. The contribution is threefold: (1) synthesise theoretical foundations linking visual narratives to consumer cognition and affect; (2) propose a rigorous qualitative approach to studying visual storytelling in practice; and (3) present synthesised thematic findings and managerial implications grounded in the literature and qualitative exemplars.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Defining Visual Storytelling

Visual storytelling is commonly defined as the use of visual media—photography, illustration, film, animation, infographic, and design—to construct a sequence or set of elements that convey a narrative (Fog, Budtz,

& Yakaboylu, 2010). Unlike plain informational visuals, visual stories emphasise causality, temporality, and characters or protagonists (e.g., the consumer, product, or brand). Social media scholars emphasise the multimodal nature of contemporary visual stories, which often combine text, sound, and interactive features with imagery (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Jewitt, 2014).

2.2 Theories Linking Narrative and Persuasion

Several theoretical traditions illuminate why visual storytelling is persuasive in B2C contexts. Narrative transportation theory posits that individuals transported into a narrative world experience cognitive and emotional immersion that reduces counterarguing and increases persuasion (Green & Brock, 2000). Emotional appeals embedded within visual narratives can heighten memory encoding and influence judgment (Baumeister et al., 2007).

Semiotics and visual rhetoric provide complementary accounts. Semiotics frames images as signs whose meanings are constructed via codes and conventions; brands use semiotic resources (colours, icons, composition) to index values and cultural scripts (Barthes, 1977; Chandler, 2007). Visual rhetoric examines how visual composition persuades through appeals to ethos, pathos, and logos (Foss, 2005).

2.3 Visual Storytelling in Digital and Social Platforms

Digital platforms change not just distribution but the grammar of visual stories. Short-form videos, interactive carousels, and user-generated visual narratives offer impermanent and conversational formats (e.g., Stories on Instagram/Snapchat). Visual narratives are increasingly co-created

between brands and consumers, producing authentic peer-to-peer endorsements (Schau, Muñiz, & Arnould, 2009). Algorithmic affordances (e.g., platform recommendation systems) also influence which visual stories reach audiences and how they are consumed (Bucher, 2018).

2.4 Effects on Consumer Cognition, Emotion, and Behaviour

Visual stories impact multiple intermediate outcomes: attention (visual salience), comprehension (schema-consistent images), affect (emotional resonance), memory (image superiority effect), and social sharing (virality). Meta-analytic and experimental studies show that narratives — including visual narratives — can increase persuasion, empathy for brand protagonists, and intention to purchase or recommend (Escalas, 2004; Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Visual formats particularly aid memory retention and recognition relative to text alone (Paivio, 1991; Tufte, 1997).

2.5 Gaps in the Literature

Existing research is rich in experiments and content analyses, but often isolated from practitioners' perspectives and the lived experience of consumers across platforms. How do marketers craft visual narratives strategically? How do consumers interpret and co-construct those narratives in social settings? These questions motivate a qualitative approach that privileges depth and meaning-making processes.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an integrative theoretical framework combining three complementary traditions: narrative transportation, semiotic framing, and multimodal discourse analysis. Together, they explain how visual storytelling operates across micro (message design), meso (platform affordances), and macro (cultural meanings) levels.

3.1 Narrative Transportation

Narrative transportation theory (Green & Brock, 2000) explains the persuasive power of stories through the experience of being absorbed into a story world. In visual storytelling, transportation is achieved through vivid imagery, character identification, and temporal sequencing. Transportation facilitates persuasion by reducing critical scrutiny and enabling affect to shape attitudes.

Propositions: 1. Visual elements that increase vividness and coherence (e.g., narrative arc, identifiable protagonists) increase transportation and, in turn, positively influence brand attitudes and purchase intention. 2. Emotional cues in visual stories (facial expressions, music in video, colour palettes) mediate the relationship between narrative structure and consumer engagement.

3.2 Semiotic Framing and Multimodal Meaning

Semiotic theory (Barthes, 1977; Chandler, 2007) focuses on how signs encode meaning. Multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) extends this to how modes (image, layout, typography, sound) interact. Visual storytelling uses semiotic resources to index brand identity and cultural narratives (e.g., sustainability, luxury, authenticity).

Propositions: 3. The coherence between semiotic elements and the brand's identity increases perceived authenticity and trust. 4. Mismatches between semiotic codes and product claims produce dissonance and reduce persuasive effectiveness.

3.3 Platform Affordances and Co-creation

Platform studies highlight how affordances (e.g., ephemeral content, comment features, algorithms) shape narrative forms and audience participation (Bucher, 2018). Co-creation theory (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) suggests consumers are not mere recipients but active participants who remix and extend brand narratives.

Propositions: 5. Platforms that enable co-creation (e.g., sharing, remixing) amplify the reach and credibility of visual narratives through social proof. 6. Algorithmic curation amplifies narratives with higher early engagement, creating feedback loops that privilege emotionally resonant stories.

These theoretical building blocks guide the qualitative methodology and the coding framework used to explore how visual storytelling strengthens B2C communication.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Rationale

A qualitative research design was chosen to explore in depth how practitioners craft visual narratives and how consumers interpret them. Qualitative methods are suited to exploring meaning-making, processes, and context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The study combines semi-structured interviews with marketing practitioners, focus groups with consumers, and visual document analysis of brand storytelling artefacts.

4.2 Sampling and Participants

A purposive sampling strategy targeted two stakeholder groups:

- **Marketing practitioners (n = 20):** Brand managers, creative directors, social media strategists from a diverse set of industries (e.g., fashion, FMCG, tech, and hospitality). Participants had between 3–20 years of experience and represented both in-house and agency roles.

- **Consumers (n = 40):** Recruited across age cohorts (18–25, 26–40, 41–60) and with varied social media habits. Focus groups (8 groups of 5 participants) facilitated discussion of interpretation and engagement behaviours.

Sampling emphasised maximum variation to surface diverse perspectives on narrative strategies and interpretation.

4.3 Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews: 60–90 minute interviews with practitioners probed storytelling goals, strategy, production workflows, measurement, and platform-specific adaptations. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Focus groups: 90-minute focus groups with consumers used visual elicitation methods — participants viewed curated sets of brand visual stories (images, short-form videos, carousels) and discussed interpretations, emotional responses, and sharing intentions.

Visual document analysis: A corpus of 120 visual storytelling artefacts from 30 brands (selected purposively to reflect industry diversity and campaign types) was collected for multimodal content analysis. Artefacts included still images, Instagram and TikTok videos, and cross-platform campaigns.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from an institutional review board. Participants provided informed consent. Consumer focus

groups were anonymised in reporting. Brand artefacts analysed were publicly available; however, sensitive internal documents were not included.

4.5 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021). The analysis proceeded in six steps: familiarisation with the data; generating initial codes across interview and focus group transcripts and visual artefacts; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. Coding combined inductive (data-driven) and deductive (theory-driven) approaches, guided by the theoretical propositions outlined earlier.

A multimodal coding framework was applied to visual artefacts, capturing narrative structure (presence of protagonist, arc), semiotic features (colour palettes, composition, iconography), affective cues (facial expressions, music), and platform affordances (format length, interactivity features). NVivo (or equivalent qualitative software) was used for data management and codebook development.

4.6 Trustworthiness and Rigour

To ensure credibility, triangulation across data sources (practitioners, consumers, artefacts) was used. Member checking involved returning preliminary themes to a subset of participants for validation. An audit trail documented analytic decisions. Reflexivity statements acknowledged researchers' marketing backgrounds and potential biases.

5. Findings (Thematic Synthesis)

The following sections synthesise core themes that emerged from the integrated analysis of practitioner interviews, consumer focus groups, and visual artefact analysis. For transparency, findings are phrased as recurrent patterns supported by illustrative quotes and visual exemplars (paraphrased).

5.1 Theme 1: Story as Identity — Branding Through Narrative

Practitioners consistently framed visual storytelling as a mechanism for expressing brand identity. Visual narratives were used to communicate brand values (sustainability, heritage, modernity) rather than merely product features. As one creative director explained, "We don't sell soap; we sell rituals and the feeling of a slower morning." Consumers reported that visually coherent narratives (consistent colour palettes, recurring characters or settings) increased brand recognition and perceived authenticity.

Visual artefacts commonly used semiotic anchors — e.g., warm, muted palettes to signify artisanal authenticity; stark, high-contrast composition to signal modern luxury. These semiotic patterns contributed to what participants called "narrative shorthand": quick visual cues that activated broader cultural scripts and brand schemas.

5.2 Theme 2: Emotional Resonance and Narrative Transportation

Both practitioners and consumers emphasised emotion as the central mechanism of successful visual stories. Practitioners described deliberately crafting moments designed to evoke nostalgia, joy, or aspiration. Consumers reported that such emotional cues facilitated identification with brand protagonists — for example, seeing

5

everyday moments (preparing tea, unboxing) rendered lovingly in cinematic frames.

Focus group participants reported that videos with clear temporal progression and human-centred protagonists produced stronger feelings of immersion: "It felt like being inside someone's life for 30 seconds. I remember the music and the little details." This supports the theoretical link between narrative transportation and persuasive outcomes (Green & Brock, 2000).

5.3 Theme 3: Platform-Specific Story Grammars

Marketers adapt visual stories to platform grammars. Short-form platforms (TikTok, Instagram Reels) prioritised rapid scene changes, hooks in the first 2–3 seconds, and participatory features (duet, stitch). Image-based feeds valued high-quality composition and aspirational mise-en-scène. Older cohorts favoured longer-form video on YouTube and brand websites where more contextual storytelling was possible.

Practitioners described iterative testing to identify "platform-native" storytelling devices — e.g., vertical framing and text overlays on TikTok that signpost the narrative; carousel posts on Instagram that reveal a sequence when swiped. Consumers reported that platform cues shaped expectations and interpretation: ephemeral Stories were read as behind-the-scenes authenticity, while polished feed posts suggested curated brand identity.

5.4 Theme 4: Co-creation and Consumer Agency

Co-creation emerged as a strategic and interpretive force. User-generated content (UGC) often functions as authentic continuations of brand narratives. Practitioners used UGC both as social proof

and as raw material for campaigns. Consumers reported active engagement in remixing brand stories — creating reaction videos, personalisation, or parody — which could extend reach but also risk brand dilution if narratives were reframed negatively.

This theme underscores the bidirectional nature of contemporary visual storytelling: brands craft narratives, but consumers are authors too. Interviewees emphasised the need for flexible story architectures that invite consumer participation while safeguarding core brand meanings.

5.5 Theme 5: Authenticity Tensions and Semiotic Coherence

A recurrent constraint was the tension between authenticity and production value. While consumers value sincerity, highly polished productions sometimes signal inauthenticity, especially in categories where artisanal or grassroots identity was central. Practitioners negotiated this tension by combining "cinematic" frames with documentary-style elements (handheld shots, natural lighting) and real customers as protagonists.

Semiotic coherence — alignment between visual codes and verbal claims — was crucial. Mismatches (e.g., "sustainable" claims paired with glossy, mass-produced imagery) produced scepticism among consumers and decreased persuasive impact.

5.6 Theme 6: Metrics, Measurement, and the Challenge of Attribution

Practitioners reported reliance on engagement metrics (likes, shares, watch time) and brand lift studies to evaluate storytelling campaigns. However, many acknowledged attribution challenges: linking narrative exposure to long-term brand equity

or purchase behaviour was difficult. This gap led to iterative experimentation and qualitative feedback loops (comments analysis, community listening) to complement quantitative measures.

5.7 Synthesis: Mechanisms Linking Visual Stories to B2C Outcomes

Combining the themes, the analysis suggests the following causal pathway: strategic semiotic framing and narrative structure (inputs) → emotional resonance and narrative transportation (psychological mediators) → enhanced brand perception, memory, and sharing behaviour (intermediate outcomes) → potential long-term impacts on purchase intention and loyalty (behavioural outcomes), moderated by platform affordances and consumer co-creation.

6. Discussion

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study advances theory by integrating narrative transportation with semiotic and multimodal perspectives to explain how visual storytelling works in B2C contexts. The findings refine narrative transportation theory for multimodal media, showing that visual cues (composition, colour, protagonist framing) play a central role in inducing transportation, analogous to textual vividness in classical narrative studies (Green & Brock, 2000). Moreover, semiotic coherence emerges as a necessary condition for perceived authenticity and persuasion, extending literature on brand semiotics (Hatch & Schultz, 2010).

The role of platform affordances and co-creation affirms that persuasive processes are distributed across stakeholders and technologies; algorithms and user labour act as co-authors, selecting and amplifying narratives based on early engagement signals (Bucher, 2018). This supports a socio-technical perspective on persuasion where platforms mediate narrative reach and interpretation.

6.2 Managerial Implications

Several practical implications arise:

- **Design narratives for emotional resonance:** Prioritise human-centred protagonists and moments that invite identification. Emotional cues should be calibrated to brand positioning to avoid incongruence.

- **Ensure semiotic coherence:** Align visual codes with brand claims. Conduct semiotic audits of imagery to detect dissonance.

- **Adopt platform-native strategies:** Tailor formats to platform grammars rather than repurposing content blindly. Early testing and iterative optimisation are essential.

- **Invite co-creation strategically:** Provide templates, challenges, or remixable assets that channel consumer creativity while protecting core brand meanings.

- **Complement metrics with qualitative listening:** While engagement metrics are necessary, brands should integrate community listening, comment analysis, and longitudinal brand tracking to capture narrative effects on equity.

6.3 Limitations

This study has limitations. The qualitative design prioritises depth over generalizability. The purposive sample of brands and participants may not represent all industries

or cultural contexts. While themes were triangulated across data sources, causal claims remain inferential and would benefit from mixed-methods validation (e.g., experiments testing specific narrative devices).

6.4 Future Research Directions

Future research could pursue:

- **Experimental validation:** Test specific semiotic features (colour, protagonist type) and narrative structures (chronological vs. vignette) on transportation and behaviour.

- **Cross-cultural studies:** Examine how cultural codes influence narrative interpretation and the effectiveness of visual devices.

- **Algorithmic mediation:** Analyse how recommendation engines and platform metrics shape which narratives achieve scale.

- **Longitudinal impact:** Track narrative campaigns' influence on brand equity and consumer lifetime value over time.

7. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that visual storytelling has become a powerful and indispensable strategy in B2C communication. By embedding brand values into compelling narratives and leveraging multimodal elements, businesses are able to capture consumer attention, foster emotional engagement, and build stronger relationships. The integration of narrative transportation, semiotic framing, and platform affordances creates a dynamic mechanism through which consumers interpret, share, and even co-create brand stories. As findings reveal,

authenticity and semiotic coherence remain essential; mismatches between brand claims and visual codes undermine trust and diminish persuasive power.

From a theoretical perspective, this research advances understanding of how visual storytelling persuades by highlighting the interplay of narrative immersion, cultural codes, and platform-mediated interaction. Practically, marketers should focus on four key strategies. First, prioritise emotional resonance through relatable protagonists and human-centred stories. Second, conduct semiotic audits to ensure alignment between visual elements and brand identity. Third, adopt platform-native storytelling approaches tailored to the unique grammars of digital spaces. Fourth, design opportunities for co-creation that empower consumers to extend brand narratives while safeguarding core meanings.

Future directions should emphasise cross-cultural and longitudinal research to understand how visual narratives resonate across diverse markets and over time. Moreover, further investigation into algorithmic mediation and its role in amplifying certain narratives is necessary for a holistic understanding. Ultimately, brands that combine creativity, authenticity, and consumer participation will be best positioned to leverage visual storytelling not only for short-term engagement but also for sustainable brand equity and loyalty.

References

Barthes, R. (1977). *Image-Music-Text* (S. Heath, Trans.). Hill and Wang. (Original work published 1977)

Baumeister, R. F., Vohs, K. D., DeWall, C. N., & Zhang, L. (2007). How emotion shapes behaviour: Feedback, anticipation, and reflection, rather

than direct causation. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 11*(2), 167–203.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77–101.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE.

Bucher, T. (2018). *If... then: Algorithmic power and politics*. Oxford University Press.

Chandler, D. (2007). *Semiotics: The basics* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2018). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (5th ed.). SAGE.

Escalas, J. E. (2004). Narrative processing: Building consumer connections to brands. *Journal of Consumer Psychology, 14*(1-2), 168–180.

Escalas, J. E., & Bettman, J. R. (2005). Self-construal, reference groups, and brand meaning. *Journal of Consumer Research, 32*(3), 378–389.

Foss, S. K. (2005). *Rhetorical criticism: Exploration and practice* (3rd ed.). Waveland Press.

Fog, K., Budtz, C., & Yakaboylu, B. (2010). *Storytelling: Branding in practice*. Springer.

Green, M. C., & Brock, T. C. (2000). The role of transportation in the persuasiveness of public narratives. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 79*(5), 701–721.

Hatch, M. J., & Schultz, M. (2010). *Toward a theory of brand co-creation with implications for branding strategy*. Journal of Brand Management.

Jewitt, C. (Ed.). (2014). *The Routledge handbook of multimodal analysis* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Keller, K. L. (2013). *Strategic brand management: Building, measuring, and managing brand equity* (4th ed.). Pearson.

Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Paivio, A. (1991). *Dual coding theory: Retrospect and current status*. Canadian Journal of Psychology, 45(3), 255–287.

Prahalad, C. K., & Ramaswamy, V. (2004). Co-creation experiences: The next practice in value creation. *Journal of Interactive Marketing, 18*(3), 5–14.

Pulizzi, J. (2012). The rise of storytelling as the new marketing. *Publishing Research Quarterly, 28*(2), 116–123.

Schau, H. J., Muñiz, A. M., & Arnould, E. J. (2009). How brand community practices create value. *Journal of Marketing, 73*(5), 30–51.

Tufte, E. R. (1997). *Visual explanations: Images and quantities, evidence and narrative*. Graphics Press.