



## Brand Storytelling on Instagram: How Do Pictures Travel to Millennial Consumers' Minds?

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**Purposes/Rationale:** Creating and sharing a brand's stories is a manifest trend in brand communication, especially on social media. A prominent phenomenon in social media communication is the rise of information exchanges in an imagery form (e.g., Instagram and Pinterest), predominately for millennial consumers (Clasen, 2015). Marketers agree that a picture is worth much more than a thousand words in this age (Connor, 2014). However, previous studies on narrative transportation tended to focus on stories as oral or written narratives (e.g., Dunlop, 2010) rather than in pictorial form. Thus, this study examines how a brand story in a pictorial form only creates mental stimulation and travels in a viewer's psychological mechanism. Specifically, through experimental manipulation, this study examines how different types of pictorial narratives (i.e., story-focused vs. product-focused) influence transportation of a brand story, which, then, enhances attitudinal and relational outcomes on Instagram.

**Conceptual Framework/Hypotheses Development:** Referring to the degree to which a person immerses into a story (Escalas, 2004), narrative transportation has been widely studied in the literature of marketing communication. The concept of transportation focuses not on characters or viewers' relationship with the characters but intensely on stories (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2008). Previous studies have investigated how verbal and non-verbal forms of information are transported to consumers' mind in brand advertising (e.g., Bilandzic & Busselle 2008; Chang, 2013; Megehee & Woodside 2010). Researchers contend that verbal and non-verbal cues involve distinct psychological mechanisms (Laer et al., 2013; Megehee & Woodside, 2010). According to the dual processing theory, visual stimuli evoke imagery information processing, while verbal stimuli induce discursive information processing (Kim & Shannon, 2008). In turn, imagery processing is likely to evoke emotional responses more than discursive processing (MacInnis & Price, 1987). As the oldest form of storytelling, visual narrative mediums such as paintings and photographs offer a tangible, holistic, and emotional experience to viewers (Schindler & Holbrook, 2003). In addition, a visual medium accesses an individual's hidden thoughts that help them visualize what they think and feel unconsciously. Escalas (2004) argues that stories in the advertisement evoke mental simulation that enables receivers to enter into other people's feelings and experiences. Thus, this study proposes that story-telling pictures on Instagram increase viewers' mental simulation more than product-focused pictures, thus leading to a higher level of transportation (H1). The sense of being transported enhances attitudes toward ads (Chang, 2011) and behavioral intention by reducing cognitive elaboration and increasing emotional responses (Escalas 2004). In addition, being transported in to a brand story creates a meaning, that is, self-brand connection (Escalas, 2003). Thus, in this study context, we hypothesize that narrative transportation will enhance attitude toward a brand's Instagram (H2a), brand evaluation (H2b),

and self-brand connection (H2c), and these relationships are mediated by positive emotional responses (H3).

**Research Design/Procedure:** College students from a Southeastern University were randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions, story-focused (n=41) or product-focused (n=41) Instagram account of an athletic brand. Based on a pilot study of twelve athletic brands' official Instagram accounts, two separate Instagram accounts from the brand Adidas (i.e., Adidas and Adidas UK) were selected as the study's stimuli because they best represented i) images that portray a narration/story (i.e., Adidas), and ii) images that portray a product focus (i.e., Adidas UK). Following exposure to the stimulus, participants responded to measures for transportation, emotional response, brand evaluation, attitude towards the Instagram, self-brand connection and demographic variables. All measures were developed based on previous research and were measured on 7-point likert scales. The manipulation check was measured through a text analysis based on respondents' pictorial image recall.

**Findings:** ANOVA results demonstrated that respondents who were exposed to the story-focused images had greater levels of transportation ( $M=4.837$ ) than those exposed to the product-focused images ( $M=4.122$ ) ( $F=6.808, p=.001^*$ ). Thus, H1 was supported. Regression and mediation analysis (Hayes, 2013) was used to hypotheses H2 and H3. Results demonstrate that transportation influences attitude toward a brand's Instagram ( $R^2=.050, \beta=.223, F=4.200, p=.044^*$ ), brand evaluation ( $R^2=.060, \beta=.268, F=6.184, p=.015^*$ ), and self-brand connection ( $R^2=.268, \beta=.518, F=29.265, p=.000^{***}$ ). Thus, H2a-c were supported. Lastly, PROCESS (model 4) mediation analysis revealed an indirect effect of transportation on attitude toward a brand's Instagram via positive emotion (effect = .173,  $SE=.095, 95\% CI = .032, .402$ ). An indirect effect of transportation on brand evaluation via positive emotion was also found (effect = .1913,  $SE=.083, 95\% CI = .060, .388$ ). There was also an indirect effect of transportation on self-brand connection via positive emotion (effect = .353,  $SE=.088, 95\% CI = .194, .533$ ). These results confirm H3 that positive emotion mediates the relationship between transportation and attitude towards an Instagram account, brand evaluation, and self-brand connection.

**Discussion:** Findings from this study highlights the importance of imagery information among millennial consumers, which might be attributed to the advance of mobile devices which provides a limited space to display information and the culture of instant gratification which requests speedy responses. As a result, consumers have become used to receiving and processing imagery information instead of exchanging articulate and lengthy verbal information. Findings from this study help marketers understand consumers' psychological mechanism for proceeding visual narrative mediums in a social media setting. Future studies are recommended to examine joint effects of verbal and non-verbal cues in stimuli on social media platforms. The literature in cognitive psychology elucidates that imagery and text information obstruct each other because of one's limited cognitive resources. Thus, investigating a simultaneous effect of imagery and text information in a brand's social media platforms is expected to generate insightful findings.

**References available upon request**