

Narratology in social media branding

Qian Zhang, Jing Chen*

Lijiang Culture and Tourism College, Lijiang, Yunnan, 674100, China

Keywords: Social Media; Brand Building; Narratology; Video Content; Classic Revival

Abstract: With the continuous iteration of digital technology, social media has become deeply embedded in people's daily lives. By virtue of its extensive reach and powerful interactivity, it has exerted a profound social impact. Consequently, leveraging the advantages of these platforms for brand building has become a widely accepted consensus. However, in an ocean of information, how can a brand stand out? The key lies in the emotional appeal of its content. Against this backdrop, narratology provides a critical pathway for brands to establish deep emotional connections with their users. Taking the core elements of narratology—story structure, character development, spatiotemporal context, and audience participation—as an analytical framework, this paper explores how brands construct narrative systems with strong communicative power and a sense of identity on social platforms such as Weibo, Douyin (TikTok), and Xiaohongshu (RED). The study reveals that successful social media brand narratives often employ a creative reconstruction strategy of "putting new wine in old bottles." In video content creation, brands tend to borrow well-known classic stories or traditional characters (e.g., mythological figures or cinematic classics) as narrative vehicles to lower users' cognitive thresholds and evoke collective memory. On this basis, creators deconstruct and reorganize traditional content by integrating modern internet slang and humorous expressions, rendering originally serious or distant classic images highly relatable and approachable. This grounded narrative style not only bridges the gap between brands and users but also stimulates users' desire for entertainment and sharing through the appeal of "contrast cuteness." Ultimately, brand information is effectively conveyed in a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Problem Statement

In the industrial era, brands were often regarded as quality commitments or identity symbols, and their communication relied on the one-way broadcasting model of mass media including newspapers, radio and television. In that communication paradigm, enterprises controlled the whole discourse power of brand stories. Audiences were passive receivers, and brand meaning was pre-set and transmitted to the public in a linear way. However, with the popularization of mobile internet technology, social media has become the infrastructure of human life. In this new media ecology, consumers are no longer passive targets receiving information; instead, they have become active content producers and meaning interpreters. As indicated in the literature on "the characteristics of

digital brand communication in the network environment," brand communication in the digital era exhibits significant nonlinear, interactive, and community-driven features. Users can comment, repost, remix and even parody brand content freely, rewriting and reconstructing brand connotation in the process of participation.

Against this backdrop, while traditional marketing theories have not become obsolete, they are no longer sufficient to explain how brands gain vitality within complex social networks. Classic marketing theories such as 4P, STM focus more on product, price, channel and positioning, which cannot fully interpret the dynamic generation of brand meaning in participatory media environments. Brands require a more inclusive theoretical framework capable of accommodating diverse voices to guide practice. Narratology, as a discipline studying narrative structure, function, and meaning, has timely entered the field of marketing. From Shen Dan's (2005)[11] comparative study of narratology in China and the West, to Bu Diyou's (2018)[2] exploration of the multimodal construction of online brand discourse, academia has begun to realize that a brand is a story, and social media serves as a hypertext where this story can be infinitely extended, mutated, and co-constructed by brands and audiences.

However, existing research mostly focuses on the superficial application of narrative techniques, lacking an exploration that combines the specific ontological characteristics of social media with deep narratological theories. Many existing studies only summarize practical experience of brand storytelling, simply advising brands to "tell good stories", without analyzing how social media's interactivity, multimodality and database logic reshape narrative rules. For example, when brand stories are deconstructed into short videos, memes, user comments, and algorithmic recommendation feeds, does the classic "cause-process-result" linear structure remain effective? Linear narrative, which dominates traditional films and TV advertisements, often cannot adapt to users' fragmented browsing habits on social media. In a cross-cultural global market, how can brands utilize narratives to overcome cultural discount? Cultural discount means audiences from different cultural backgrounds may misunderstand or lose interest in narrative content rooted in local culture, which creates obstacles for Chinese brands going global. Based on this, this paper aims to answer the following core questions: In the context of social media, how does narratology reconstruct the paradigm of brand communication? How can brands rebuild the integrity of meaning in a fragmented digital space through multimodal, participatory, and cross-cultural narrative strategies?

1.2 Research Significance

Theoretically, this paper introduces narratology from the ivory tower of literary studies into the practical arena of commercial communication, expanding the research boundaries of post-classical narratology. Traditional narratology mainly focuses on literary texts such as novels, dramas and epics. With the rise of post-classical narratology, scholars gradually shift research objects to non-literary texts including advertisements, images and digital media. By introducing concepts such as "multimodality," "transmedia," and "database narrative," it enriches the theoretical foundation of digital marketing. It also tries to build an analytical framework combining post-classical narratology and social media branding, offering a new theoretical perspective for subsequent relevant academic research.

Practically, this paper provides brand managers with a systematic narrative toolkit. In an era where the dividend of traffic is peaking, simple buying traffic and hard advertising can no longer bring stable brand growth. It helps brands achieve long-term growth through content cultivation and relationship building, rather than short-term conversion. Particularly in the context of Chinese brands going global, as mentioned by Lv Yanfang (2006)[8] in Chinese Brand Development in a

Global Context, utilizing narratological principles to tell "Chinese stories" well and transform them into "global brand equity" holds strong practical guiding significance. Many Chinese brands have high-quality products, yet fail in overseas markets because their brand narrative cannot cross cultural barriers. A mature narrative strategy can help brands convey cultural connotation softly, reduce cultural discount, and realize emotional recognition among overseas consumers

2. Theoretical Foundation: From Classical Narratology to Digital Brand Narratives

2.1 Ontological Turn of Narratology and Brand Metaphors

Classical narratology is deeply influenced by structuralism, dedicated to finding the universal deep grammar behind all narrative works, such as Propp's (1968)[10] functions and Greimas's (1987)[4] actantial model. Propp extracts 31 narrative functions from Russian folk tales, arguing that all folktales follow fixed structural rules; Greimas simplifies narrative roles into six actants to analyze the relationship between narrative subjects and objects. From this perspective, brand advertising is often viewed as a closed text, with its meaning preset by the sender (the brand) and intended to be instilled in the receiver. In this model, the audience is a passive recipient whose task is to accept the meaning delivered by the text. However, this static structural analysis cannot explain the dynamic flow of brand meaning on social media. Once brand content is released online, users can interpret it in diverse ways, and even subvert the original meaning designed by brands.

Post-classical narratology breaks through this limitation by expanding the research scope to cognition, rhetoric, feminism, and transmedia. It abandons the single pursuit of fixed narrative grammar and pays more attention to readers' cognitive participation, cultural context and the production of meaning in communication. Shen Dan (2005)[11] points out in *Narratology Studies in China and the West* that Western narratology places more emphasis on cognitive and rhetorical dimensions, highlighting the active role of readers (audiences) in meaning generation. This theoretical shift provides crucial insights for brand research: a brand story is no longer a fixed object but a "process." A brand as narrative refers not only to the stories told by the brand but also to the life stories woven jointly by consumers during their interactions with the brand. Brand meaning is not pre-finished, but continuously generated in the dialogue between brands and users.

2.2 Ontological Characteristics of Social Media as a "Narrative Space"

To understand brand narratives on social media, one must first comprehend the ontological characteristics of social media as a medium. Different from traditional mass media which serve as simple information channels, social media itself shapes the way narratives are produced, spread and interpreted. The literature *Research on Characteristics of Digital Brand Communication in Network Environment* (Fu, S. B., 2010)[3] points out that digital communication exhibits significant "decentralization" and "node-based" features. Each user becomes an independent node on the network, capable of releasing, forwarding and commenting information. The whole communication network has no absolute central controller. This fundamental media attribute reshapes every link of brand narrative.

2.2.1 Interactivity and Dialogism

Unlike the one-way transmission of traditional media, social media is a massive dialogic network. Bakhtin's (1984) "polyphonic theory" is perfectly validated here[1]. Bakhtin believes that polyphonic text contains multiple independent voices, and every voice has equal value rather than being dominated by a single narrator. The brand's voice is just one among many; it must engage in

dialogue with consumers' comments, reposts, and even parodies. Users' reposts, funny comments and secondary creation all become part of brand narrative. This dialogism requires brand narratives to possess "unfinalizability," leaving blanks for the audience to fill. If a brand tells a fully closed story with fixed endings, users will lack space for participation and discussion, making it difficult to trigger viral communication. Leaving narrative blankness invites audiences to supplement plots, put forward interpretations and create derivative content, which continuously enriches the brand story world.

2.2.2 Multimodality

Bu Diyou (2018)[2] in *Multimodal Construction of Online Brand Discourse* emphasizes the synergistic effect of various symbolic resources—visual, auditory, and textual—in meaning construction. Traditional brand narrative mainly relies on text or static pictures. On Douyin, Xiaohongshu, or Instagram, a brand story is often not composed of pure text but is a "multimodal discourse" formed by filters, background music, editing rhythm, emojis, and hyperlinks. In this context, color is not merely an aesthetic choice but a narrative element; BGM is not just background but the tone-setter for emotional undertones. For example, warm soft color palette and gentle acoustic music can construct a warm, healing brand narrative, while high contrast colors and fast-paced electronic music build a narrative atmosphere of vitality and rebellion. All these symbolic modes cooperate together to transmit brand meaning, which is more immersive than single text narrative.

2.2.3 Database Logic and Fragmentation

Lev Manovich's (2001)[9] concept of "database narrative" is vividly reflected in social media branding. Manovich argues that new media replaces linear narrative with database logic. Brands no longer rely solely on a single linear TV commercial but establish a vast repository of materials (images, videos, hashtags). When browsing, users randomly extract these fragments through algorithmic recommendations and personal interests, reassembling their perception of the brand in their minds. Users do not watch brand content in the preset order designed by brands. A user may first see a short clip of brand product test, then encounter a UGC sharing post, and later browse brand behind-the-scenes footage. This non-linear narrative experience requires brands to maintain consistency in core values while allowing high fragmentation in presentation. The core value, character setting and emotional tone of the brand must remain unified across all fragmented materials, so that users can still form coherent brand cognition after recombining scattered narrative fragments.

3. Textual Construction of Social Media Brand Narratives: Multimodality and Micro-Rhetoric

3.1 Visual Rhetoric and Emotional Mobilization

In the era of image reading, visual symbols assume the primary narrative function. The speed of information reception of images is far higher than text, which fits the fast browsing habit of social media users. Li Man's (2011)[6] case study on the branding of Mountain Dew is highly representative. As a functional beverage, Mountain Dew's brand narrative does not focus on ingredients (quenching thirst, refreshing) but constructs a cultural symbol of "rebellion, vitality, and extremity" through visually striking imagery—extreme sports, video games, and cyberpunk-style animations. On social media, this visual rhetoric further evolves into "memes." Memes, as replicable visual templates, are the most popular micro-narrative carrier in social media. By creating

or borrowing popular visual templates, brands embed brand information into the mass entertainment carnival. This micro-rhetorical strategy detaches brand narratives from serious preaching, turning them into social currency that users are willing to forward and share.

The core of visual narrative lies in "emotional mobilization," which captures attention by evoking audience emotional resonance through intense sensory stimulation in a very short time. For short videos on Douyin, the first three seconds determine whether users will continue watching. Brands often use powerful visual impact to arouse emotions such as surprise, warmth, cuteness or nostalgia. The "classic revival" strategy mentioned in the abstract also relies heavily on visual reconstruction: remodelling familiar mythological figures or classic movie roles with modern visual style. The contrast between classic archetype and modern aesthetic creates "contrast cuteness", quickly activating collective memory and stimulating emotional resonance. However, visual rhetoric also has potential risks. Excessively exaggerated visual effects may make audiences feel superficial, and over-reliance on hot meme templates may lead to homogenization of brand content, weakening unique brand identity.

3.2 Language Style and Persona Construction

Besides visuals, language style is another crucial dimension of brand narrative. Language is the direct carrier of dialogue between brands and users. Yang Liuyi (2007)[14] in *A Preliminary Study on Marketing Communication Strategies in Element Branding* explores the importance of communication strategies. On social media, the personification of brands is key to narrative success. A brand is no longer a cold logo but a flesh-and-blood "person." The construction of this persona relies on specific language varieties. Personified brand persona gives the brand stable character traits, enabling users to establish interpersonal-like emotional connection with the brand.

For example, certain beauty brands on Xiaohongshu adopt a "bestie tone," using numerous modal particles, exclamation marks, and affectionate terms to build a private, trusting narrative atmosphere; while some tech brands may use geeky, rational, and concise language to project a professional, hardcore narrative image. The choice of language style is essentially a brand performing "code-switching" with specific circles to signal "I am one of you." Code-switching here refers to brands adjusting their discourse mode according to the community characteristics of target audiences. When communicating with young Gen Z groups, brands adopt internet slang and playful expressions; when facing professional audiences, they switch to rigorous and objective academic-style discourse. Appropriate language persona shortens social distance; mismatched language style will make users feel awkward and produce a sense of commercial alienation. It should be noted that brand language persona needs long-term consistency. Frequent switching of speaking styles will confuse audiences and damage the stability of brand narrative.

3.3 Transmedia Storytelling and Expansion of the Story World

Henry Jenkins's (2006) "transmedia storytelling"[5] represents the advanced form of social media branding. Transmedia storytelling means that a story spreads across multiple media platforms, and each platform releases unique narrative fragments, jointly building a complete story world. It requires brand stories to flow across different platforms, with each platform contributing unique narrative value. Different social media platforms have different media attributes and user groups, so they undertake different narrative tasks.

For instance, a fashion brand might publish in-depth designer interviews on WeChat Official Accounts (background story), launch styling challenges on Weibo (interactive plot), release behind-the-scenes documentaries on Bilibili (authenticity construction), and conduct new product beta tests in private domain communities (exclusive experience). These scattered pieces of content

collectively constitute a grand "brand story world." To piece together the complete story experience, consumers actively migrate across platforms, significantly increasing brand stickiness and exposure. Wang Yue's (2023)[13] research on Purchasing Factors of Museum Co-branded Products Based on Emotional Value Mediation Effect indirectly corroborates this: when a brand collaborates with a museum, it essentially borrows the museum's profound historical and cultural narrative, grafting it onto modern consumer goods to achieve cross-domain integration of narrative resources. The museum provides mature cultural narrative archetypes, and the brand endows these cultural narratives with modern consumption scenarios. Such cross-domain narrative cooperation reduces the difficulty of brand story construction and brings cultural credibility to commercial brands.

Nevertheless, transmedia narrative puts forward higher requirements for brand management. Each platform's content must maintain the unity of core story setting. If the plot or character setting released on different platforms conflicts with each other, the whole brand story world will collapse. Meanwhile, continuous transmedia content creation brings higher labour and time costs, which is a challenge for small and medium-sized brands with limited resources.

4. Audience Dimension: Participatory Culture and the Ceding of Narrative Power

4.1 From "Audience" to "Prosumers"

In the social media era, Alvin Toffler's (1980)[12] prophecy of the "prosumer" has become a reality. Prosumer, the combination of producer and consumer, describes users who consume content and also produce content. Li Zhilin's (2022)[7] research, *Research of Branding and Identity Design for Rural Communities from the Perspective of Branding Narrative Theory*, although focused on rural areas, reveals principles equally applicable to commercial brands: local residents (or consumers) are not only listeners to the story but also its tellers. The power of brand narrative has undergone a fundamental shift.

In the past, brands held the final interpretation of the story; now, this interpretive power is dispersed among every user who likes, comments, and creates secondary content. Users can put forward new understandings of brand stories, make derivative videos and write fan fictions. This "ceding of narrative power" may seem dangerous, because users' secondary creation may deviate from the original expectation of the brand and even produce negative narrative content. But it is actually a necessary path for brands to gain vitality. When users spontaneously create fan art, write jokes, or even produce parody videos for a brand, the brand truly enters the daily life narratives of its users. At this moment, the brand is no longer an external commercial advertisement, but a cultural element embedded in users' daily communication and entertainment.

4.2 UGC as an Organic Component of Brand Narratives

User-generated content (UGC) is no longer a supplement to official brand content but a core component. In the branding of agricultural products driven by e-commerce, farmers' livestreams and authentic feedback from buyer reviews are often more persuasive than polished official promotional videos. This is because UGC carries an aura of "authenticity," filling in the inevitable commercial embellishment found in official narratives. Official content is naturally marked with commercial purposes, so audiences often hold a defensive attitude. UGC, created by ordinary users, is regarded as real personal experience by other audiences and possesses stronger credibility.

Smart brands know how to plan "narrative baits" to guide users to produce content that aligns with the brand tone. For example, by launching hashtag-specific challenges or providing easily remixable material packs, brands are essentially building a "narrative scaffold." Narrative scaffold does not stipulate fixed plots, but provides basic themes, visual templates and core emotional

orientation. On this scaffold, users fill in the bricks with their own life experiences, ultimately building a collective brand edifice. This participatory narrative greatly enhances users' sense of belonging and loyalty. Users who participate in UGC creation will form stronger emotional identity with the brand, because they have become co-creators of the brand story. But brand managers need to monitor UGC ecology. Extreme or deviant user creation may distort brand image, requiring brands to set proper guidance boundaries while leaving creative space.

4.3 Narrative Distribution and Echo Chamber Effects Mediated by Algorithms

It is worth noting that audience participation on social media is not entirely free but is profoundly mediated by algorithms. Algorithms are the underlying rule of social media content distribution. Algorithms determine who sees what stories and whose voices are amplified, leading to "narrative cocoons" or "echo chamber effects." Users only receive narrative content matching their existing preferences, and different user groups are trapped in separated narrative spaces. Groups on two sides of the echo chamber may receive completely different brand narratives and form opposite impressions of the same brand.

When conducting narrative communication, brands must understand algorithmic logic. On the one hand, they should utilize the algorithm's tag-matching mechanism to precisely reach target audiences; set keywords, emotional tags and scene tags in narrative content, so that the algorithm can push the brand story to users with matching interests. On the other hand, they must be vigilant against narrative homogenization caused by over-catering to algorithms. Algorithm tends to amplify content with high instant interaction rate, such as sensational, low-threshold and funny clips. If a brand only produces "feel-good" content favored by algorithms, it may lose its depth and uniqueness. Brands will keep repeating similar narrative routines to chase traffic hotspots, and eventually become indistinguishable from other commercial accounts. Therefore, finding a balance between algorithmic discipline and narrative innovation is a major challenge for contemporary brands. Brands need to satisfy the basic distribution logic of algorithms while retaining unique narrative characteristics and cultural depth, avoiding being swallowed by traffic-oriented content production.

5. Conclusion

This paper takes narratology as the core theoretical framework to discuss brand narrative construction in social media environment, from the transformation of narrative theory, the media attribute of social media, multimodal text construction to audience participatory narrative. The research shows that social media subverts the closed linear narrative mode of traditional brand communication. Brand narrative evolves from a single preset story told by enterprises to an open, co-constructed narrative system. The unique media characteristics of social media including dialogism, multimodality and database logic reshape the whole production and dissemination logic of brand stories.

In content practice, the strategy of "putting new wine in old bottles", namely reconstructing classic cultural archetypes with modern internet discourse, is an effective narrative path for social media brand video content. By borrowing familiar classic characters and stories, brands reduce users' cognitive cost and awaken collective memory; through humorous modern re-interpretation, classic images gain affinity, realizing implicit transmission of brand information. In this multimodal narrative system, visual rhetoric, linguistic persona and transmedia storyworld jointly build brand meaning. Meanwhile, audience transforms from passive recipients into prosumers. UGC becomes core part of brand narrative, and narrative power is decentralized to user groups. However, algorithmic distribution brings echo chamber risk and the temptation of homogenized traffic content,

which brands must respond to carefully.

The limitations of this paper lie in that it mainly adopts theoretical deduction and qualitative summary of typical cases, without quantitative data analysis of large-scale brand samples. Future research can combine quantitative content analysis of brand short videos, questionnaire survey of audience perception, to further test the effect of different narrative strategies. In addition, cross-cultural brand narrative for Chinese brands going global deserves deeper exploration. With the acceleration of Chinese brand internationalization, how narratology helps brand stories cross cultural discount will become an important research direction.

References

- [1] Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics* (C. Emerson, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1929)
- [2] Bu, D. Y. (2018). *Multimodal construction of online brand discourse: Developing profitable customer relationships* [Master's thesis]. Guangdong University of Foreign Studies.
- [3] Fu, S. B. (2010). *Research on characteristics of digital brand communication in network environment* [Master's thesis]. Hunan University.
- [4] Greimas, A. J. (1987). *On meaning: Selected writings in semiotic theory* (P. J. Perron & F. H. Collins, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1970)
- [5] Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. New York: New York University Press.
- [6] Li, M. (2011). *Branding of Mountain Dew from the perspective of culture* [Master's thesis]. Northeast University of Finance and Economics.
- [7] Li, Z. L. (2022). *Research of branding and identity design for rural communities from the perspective of branding narrative theory: A case study of the branding and identity design for Zhuquanyu Village* [Master's thesis]. Shandong University of Arts & Design.
- [8] Lv, Y. F. (2006). *Chinese brand development in a global context* [Master's thesis]. Northeast University of Finance and Economics.
- [9] Manovich, L. (2001). *The language of new media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- [10] Propp, V. (1968). *Morphology of the folktale* (2nd ed., L. Scott, Trans.). Austin: University of Texas Press. (Original work published 1928)
- [11] Shen, D. (2005). Narratology studies in China and the West. *Foreign Literatures*, (4), 110-111.
- [12] Toffler, A. (1980). *The third wave*. New York: Bantam Books.
- [13] Wang, Y. (2023). *Research on purchasing factors of museum co-branded products based on emotional value mediation effect* [Master's thesis]. Shenzhen University.
- [14] Yang, L. Y. (2007). *A preliminary study on marketing communication strategies in element branding*. *Marketing Communication Forum*, (3), 34.