

# Brand Narratives in Social Media Communication: Implications for Consumer Sharing

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**Keywords:** *consumer sharing, narrative images, social media, text-image relationships*

**Description:** *In this study, we analyze narrative images and their effect on consumer sharing. We identify three aspects (person, text within the image, caption complexity) of social media posts which attenuate the positive effect of narrative images on consumer sharing.*

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

### Research Question

What visual elements in brand messages generate a compelling narrative and, in turn, trigger consumer sharing on social media? Images that tell a compelling narrative are more important than ever to engage consumers with brand messages, especially on social media. Over 40 billion images have been shared to date and 95 million images are shared daily on Instagram (Hootsuite 2018). A study on the effectiveness of brand messages in social media has shown that images failing to tell a compelling narrative to consumers are accountable for a 40% disengagement rate (Quintly 2016), meaning that the inclusion *per se* of any image in brand messages does not lead to greater consumer sharing (SocialQuant 2017).

This research investigates what visual elements generate compelling narratives and how these elements interact with textual elements (caption, text within the image) in affecting consumer sharing.

### Method and Data

We collected 7,681 posts from two leading social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter. The data set includes posts by eight brands across different industries.

Our dependent variable, consumer message sharing, was operationalized as the number of retweets or shares on Facebook (Gong et al. 2017).

Our independent variables were coded using Upwork. We hired image annotation specialists who coded the images in narrative or conceptual, whether there was a person in the image, or text within the image. Caption complexity was measured with the Flesh Reading Ease index (Berger and Milkman 2012).

As control variables, we included message positivity, presence of questions, the number of words in the text, whether the post appeared on the weekend, and the number of hashtags included in the message.

We ran two separate models for the Twitter and Facebook data sets. Consumer sharing follows a negative binomial distribution, with an over-dispersed count around the mean (Heimbach and Hinz 2016). We use a lagged dependent variable (share/retweet count<sub>-1</sub>) in the predictor set, so that the model can account for carryover effects from one share/tweet to the next (Franses and van Oest 2007).

### Summary of Findings

First, our results show that consumers share significantly more narrative images than conceptual ones. This effect is consistent across Twitter and Facebook. Second, images showcasing a person result in weaker consumer sharing when combined with narrative images. This effect is consistent across Twitter and Facebook. Third, we find partial sup-

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port for our prediction regarding the interaction between text within the image and narrative images. Text within the image has a negative effect on consumer sharing when combined with narrative images only for Twitter but not for Facebook. Fourth, complex captions have a negative effect on consumer sharing when combined with narrative images (compared to conceptual images) both for Twitter and for Facebook.

### **Key Contributions**

The findings of our study provide insight into the role of images in social media conversations by making at least three important contributions. In line with past research (Escalas 2004), this study demonstrates that narrative images are shared more by consumers than nonnarrative images. This effect is observed on real posts across two social media platforms, i.e., Twitter and Facebook, asserting the generalizability of the role of narrative structures beyond restricted empirical contexts, such as laboratory experiments. Second, in considering the specific story component of personified actors (Banerjee and Greene 2012), this research shows that, in a social media context, including a person in the narrative has a negative effect on consumer sharing (Farace et al. 2017). Third, we advance knowledge on consumer sharing of brand messages by analyzing how

text within narrative images affect consumer sharing. Our findings show that including text within images, negatively affect consumer sharing of brand messages for Twitter but not for Facebook. Fourth, we leverage literature on text-image relationships (Bateman 2014) by showing that the complexity of captions in social media posts has a negative on consumer sharing of brand messages.

This study provides straightforward and actionable implications for brand managers dealing with social media content. Although we demonstrate that narrative images are a powerful communication tool that should be used on social media platforms, this study highlights at least three aspects (person, text within the image, and caption complexity) that decreases consumer sharing of brand messages when narrative images are included. Our findings highlight that content composition of brand messages requires a careful evaluation from practitioners. Using multimodal social media posts can be a powerful tool for brand communication. However, it is crucial for managers to understand that modes have different purposes and limitations and, therefore, need careful consideration when combined to create engaging narratives for consumers to be shared on social media platforms.

*References are available on request.*