

The persuasive power of narratives:

Qualitative research into creative agencies and their use of
storytelling for customer engagement



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THE PERSUASIVE POWER OF NARRATIVES: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH INTO CREATIVE AGENCIES AND THEIR USE OF STORYTELLING FOR CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the strategic use of storytelling as mediated by creative agencies to engage the customers. Although storytelling and the overall use of narratives have been researched in relation to the marketing and PR field before, there is a visible gap in understanding how are those practices used strategically by the agencies when they work for and represent brands or other organizations. Moreover, this study aims to understand what are the implications these narrative practices have on engaging the audiences. Some previous studies explore the link between customer behaviour and deliberate use of compelling narratives; however, this study adds to the existing research by translating practical steps done by agency practitioners into a more structured theory. Customer engagement can happen on an emotional, cognitive, and behavioural level, and the goal of this research is to map out the elements and strategic, multifaceted uses of stories that contribute to and further establish those dimensions of engagement. In this sense, this study has been led by the main research question: *How are creative agencies using storytelling as a strategic communication practice to engage their client's customers?*

The data was obtained by conducting 11 in-depth, semi-structured interviews both online and in-person, with professionals working in marketing, PR, and similar communication-based agencies. The questions were designed to inquire about the strategic and engagement practices and narratives used by the agency whilst working on campaigns or projects for their clients. The collected data were further processed by using thematic analysis with 3 stages of coding that helped to re-organize and structure the information into further categories and overarching themes.

This analysis led to the conceptualization of 4 main themes and 15 subthemes which all describe the use of narratives strategically. The data shows that storytelling is highly embedded in planning and strategizing exhibited by the agencies and they use it namely to provide content optimization, communicate the value proposition, help brands establish their position in the industry, and reinforce relevance both for and customers. In this sense, the findings explored that storytelling can serve various purposes its application highly depends on the inner practices of the agency, the personal approach of the practitioners, the nature of a brand and the goals that were raised at the beginning of the client-agency cooperation. Nevertheless, this research provides an in-depth understanding of created narratives in strategic plans, campaigns, and projects prepared for the clients and their effect on three different dimensions of customer engagement.

KEYWORDS: *Storytelling, creative agencies, marketing and PR, strategic communication practice, customer engagement*

PREFACE

Dear reader,

You are now looking at the Master's thesis "The persuasive power of narratives: Qualitative research into creative agencies and their use of storytelling for customer engagement", which has been written as the final product of my Master's degree in Media & Creative Industries at Erasmus University Rotterdam. Although we were tasked with preparing the proposal quite some months ago, it is safe to say that getting into the final stage has been an intense process, especially in the past weeks. I have not done such extensive research before, therefore did not fully know what to expect (and let's be honest, our expectations do not always match the reality, correct?) The idea that one day I will submit the thesis felt so distant but it has been proven to me yet once again that two months can somehow feel like two days.

Similarly, my whole year at Erasmus flew by faster than I have imagined, and that is why the writing process of this thesis has been rather bittersweet. As much as there were days when I felt like I "needed" to do million other activities before sitting down and focusing on the approaching deadlines, I also low-key enjoyed every day of going to the library or being on campus. I tried to soak in the last bits of the student atmosphere without anyone or anything robbing me of my precious slow and late mornings (I am looking at you, future full-time job). Although I am ready to be out in the world, exploring, gaining experiences and working again, I very much appreciated being a student after a two-year break. I allowed myself to follow a path in a field that feels like the perfect match for me and I have to say that the whole year gave me more than I dared to ask for. I feel incredibly lucky and grateful to have studied in the MCI program at this university.

Now, when handing in the thesis I cannot help myself but reflect on the progress I have made. From choosing a topic that felt like something worth exploring toward moulding it into proper, feasible research, I grew more passionate about storytelling and its unexpected versatility. My favourite part was undeniably conducting the interviews, as I have learned so much from them and I was able to get a sneak peek into what I would like to call my workplace soon.

With that being said, I would like to thank my interviewees dearly, as none of this would be possible without them. The time, insights, and perspectives they shared with me form the very essence of this research and I am extremely happy that I got to talk to those inspirational, yet humble and highly experienced professionals – what a pleasure it was!

However, the biggest gratitude belongs to the best supervisor that ever existed, Dr Mijke Slot. Mijke, a sole thank you cannot possibly justify all the guidance, support, and insights you have provided me with during the past months. Not only you are an excellent scholar but also an absolute gem of a human who patiently listened to my rant and worries about gazillion things and answered all of my queries without hesitation. It means more than you can imagine and for all that, I am

immensely grateful.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my dear friends, partner, and family, all of who were the biggest emotional support ever (as listeners, snack-providers, procrastination buddies and consultants as I forcibly asked for their feedback too) – you gave me motivation to continue writing, learning and working towards my goals.

Now enough of this sentiment and let's indulge in this academic narrative!

I hope you enjoy your reading and learn something new (that's the whole point am I right?)!

Viktória Vargová

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Vargová' in a cursive script.

Rotterdam, June 21, 2022

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1 INTRODUCTION

Stories are essentially embedded in our very being, without us realizing it or not. The practices of storytelling have been present in our lives since childhood – whether we think of fairy tales we watched on TV, stories told by our family members, those we have exchanged with our friends, or those that we otherwise consumed by interacting with others in person, through various platforms or just as bystanders. The unstoppable pace of technological development profoundly changed the way how we communicate and receive stories, and it is mainly the targeted practices of content creation that deliberately turn people into consumers of these stories (Lazauskas & Snow, 2018). Especially in the marketing world, engagement is highly dependent on a story – a narrative with a concise logical structure of the beginning, middle, and end. The idea of the story is clear: evoke a response and make your audience feel something. The goal is not just persuasion to buy a product, it is to sell a story (Greenhill, 2011). Successful storytelling is then becoming equivalent to a marathon, not a sprint. If carried out properly, it can influence customer attitudes and strengthen the engagement they have with the brands in question (Chiu, Hsieh, & Kuo, 2012; Gambetti et al., 2016). That is why storytelling is increasingly becoming a key element in marketing initiatives, pushing companies into setting up special “storyteller” positions or employing external experts (Pullizi, 2012).

1. 1 Research problem & research question

Nowadays, it is a standard practice for businesses to look for representative agencies that can help them prepare a strategic communication campaign. Customer-brand engagement is therefore becoming dependent on the quality of the output produced by the agency. The ability to craft a well-developed story is one of the key skills in a marketing-related environment, impacting brands’ visibility, popularity and profit (Da Costa, 2019).

However, there is a catch. Although telling a brand’s story seems like an effortless thing to do, that is not the case. Instead, marketing agencies can run into several problems – including creating inconsistent stories, campaigns detached from reality, confusing messages, or unclear strategic goals (Beylkin, 2018). The culture of immediacy, along with an oversaturated market and increasing competition make it more difficult to tell a story that stands out and sticks (Holt, 2016). Moreover, the lack of a cooperative attitude and different expectations in the client-agency relationship can have a detrimental effect on the quality of storytelling (Jayasimha, 2022).

Constructing a good story despite all pitfalls means knowing how to contextualize storytelling as a communication strategy. That is why this study aims to answer the following research question: *How are creative agencies using storytelling as a strategic communication practice to engage their client’s customers?*

1. 2 Academic relevance

From an academic perspective, this study aims to contribute to the previous research not only

by pointing out the unexpected complex nature of storytelling from a marketing perspective but also by exploring storytelling as a strategic communication practice carried out by creative agencies. So far, the research has been mainly focused on brand-consumer storytelling (e.g. Woodside, 2010; Lundqvist et al., 2013; Kim, 2020), or the effects and impact of storytelling (e.g. Gilliam & Flaherty, 2015; Kaufman, 2003), yet there is a visible lack of academic sources that would clearly and structurally explain how storytelling is utilized as a strategic communication practice by agencies. Moreover, practitioners are oftentimes using expertise that they have obtained by putting marketing and managerial concepts into practice, therefore shaping and reframing these theoretical implications as presented in academia. By reporting on these changes and by trying to translate the shared practical experiences into a well-rounded theoretical approach, this research aims to enrich the current academic comprehension of storytelling in the marketing-related industry.

1. 3 Practical relevance

The practical contribution of this study lies in presenting various elements and dimensions of strategic storytelling. Understanding them and their impact on consumers can maximize the efficacy of storytelling as a communicative (Delgado-Ballester & Fernández-Sabiote, 2016) and a persuasive tool, which can be beneficial for organizations or other stakeholders that would like to improve the efficiency of their storytelling techniques and initiatives. Creative agencies that are tasked with tailoring campaigns and projects already realize the power of stories that can enhance both the internal and external reputation of their client, and simultaneously reflect the agency's expertise and position within the market. Therefore, knowing how to tell a client's story clearly and concisely not only for their customers but also for people working for the represented company or brand is a key element for staying relevant and authentic (Lazauskas & Snow, 2018). After all, stories in their essence are an inevitable part of every workplace and making sure that their power is harnessed properly is easier said than done.

From a client's perspective, comprehending the practices done by the agency and allowing the content preparation and structuralization help improve both product adoption and consumers' engagement (McDougal et al., 2021). Moreover, by understanding the power of persuasive stories that emerge in the process of researching the customer base, the clients can learn about the benefits of engaging in an enriching dialogue with their audiences. Providing engaging content for the audiences can impact the overall opinion about the brand or a company and lead toward more positive brand equity. The stories carry social and emotional connotations that resonate with the audiences, and creating such resonating content makes customers more engaged (Bange et al., 2019).

1. 4 Thesis structure

This research paper is structured as follows: The introduction has provided an overview of the topic and its position in the academic field of existing research. The research question has been raised as a central and leading part of this study, alongside the expected practical and academic

implications of this research. Subsequently, the theoretical framework provides a deep dive into the relevant concepts and tries to explain current trends and background that help us to proceed with appropriate analysis. After that, the next chapter focuses on explaining the methods that have been used. This chapter includes a detailed description of how the research had been conducted, an overview of participants, and the following data analysis. Each stage of the analysis and coding is thoroughly explained for the sake of transparency. Afterwards, the result section will be presented with supporting quotes and other relevant information that has surfaced as a response to the research question. In the conclusion and discussion chapter, the research question will be answered, alongside a comparison with the theory, further theoretical contributions and practical suggestions that have been examined as a result of the study. Last but not least, possible limitations of the study and suggestions for further research are also going to be explored.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework section aims to further explain the three main concepts of this study: storytelling, strategic communication practice and consumer engagement. Contrarily to the majority of existing research that has covered these concepts separately (e.g. Brodie et al., 2011; Burgelman et al., 2018; Hallahan et al., 2007; Pulizzi, 2012), this study aims to research them conjointly under the practices of creative, marketing and PR agencies. From new emergent perspectives, strategy is not defined just as a set of rational and linear actions that the actors exhibit, but rather as a result of new opportunities, trials, errors, and simultaneous learning. Strategic communication is therefore used to identify a (both conscious and subconscious) approach toward the communicative practices of an entity (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). Each organization creates its content strategically, and those decision-making practices have an impact on how the stories are told, what is shared by them, and why they are created in the first place.

In this way, creative agencies come into play by creatively turning marketing challenges into communication strategies to achieve the desired outcome (Sasser et al., 2013). They might have different ways of achieving their goals; nevertheless, their purpose is the same: providing services to their clients by creating deliverables that reflect the clients' requirements and their desire to communicate specific messages to their target audiences (Stuhlfaut & Windels, 2019). Unlike marketing practices done by the companies themselves (in-house marketing departments), partner creative, marketing and PR agencies focus on selling the story, not just the product itself. They know how to utilize stories' ability to include elements that make brands more relatable. In such a manner, these deliberate tactics displayed by agencies allow consumers to make profound connections with the clients in question (Eriksen, 2014).

2. 1 Strategic communication practice

Although solely mapping out the elements of storytelling and subsequently pinpointing them for the analysis would tell us *what* is being communicated, this step would omit an important part of understanding *why* are certain narratives created. With the research question in mind, we can create an analogy with the theory of *The Golden Circle*, which has been proposed as an alternative to the standard ways of communication. This theory can be applied to the overall communication patterns exhibited by leaders and companies and essentially, it is built on the question of Why as its centrepiece, closely followed by How and What as the outer part of the circle (Sinek, 2009). This theory, therefore, implies the use of storytelling for certain reasons, turning narrative creation into a purposeful strategic communication practice.

Strategic communication as a discipline is focused on the central position of an entity and its calculated practices towards achieving concrete goals via communication that takes into account limited resources or uncertainty about the outcome (Zerfass et al., 2018). Strategic communication

can be also defined as a deliberate use of communication by an organization to advance and accomplish its mission (Hallahan et al., 2007). Oftentimes it is used as an umbrella term to cover various goal-oriented communication services that are strategically planned by the organization (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015). Organizations are expected to make strategic decisions about the resources they use to fulfil their goals. The nature of these resources depends on the context in which certain organization operates – and what is the message to be communicated (Hallahan et al., 2007).

The term “strategic” further refers to the context in which an issue becomes significant for the organization’s growth, development or identity. Here lies the difference between strategic and non-strategic communication, since the latter is dealing with routine operations or well-established tactics employed by the organization. Strategic communication per se can take place in all spheres of the media ecosystem – paid, earned, owned, and shared media channels. The use of certain media spheres depends on the drivers of strategic communication. These can be, among others, resource-driven, competition-driven, risk-driven, innovation-driven or engagement-driven (Zerfass et al., 2018).

Since the main focus of this study is the use of storytelling that mediates customer engagement, understanding the drivers for innovation and engagement holds crucial importance. While innovation is becoming necessary to gain an edge over the competition and reflect the ongoing changes in the media ecosystem, engagement implies that companies must learn how to use the resources they have (Zerfass et al., 2018). However, in this context, strategy is more about what people do (their actions) rather than what the organization has (Whittington, 2006). That is why the focus of an agency’s strategic approach lies in understanding how to utilize the available resources, not merely relying on having them.

Therefore, how can storytelling become a communication strategy? Several pieces of research have drawn on their understanding of storytelling as a relevant strategic practice (e.g. Rouleau, 2010; Küpers et al., 2013; Sonenshein, 2010). For them, strategy is narrative, since it can be explained as a set of multiple discourses that are being repeated by multiple actors. These discourses are generally saturated with guiding principles that help facilitate decision-making processes. Stories with a strategic purpose are then more easily understood and beneficial for both parties. For the narrators, a strategic approach serves as guidance in understanding what needs to be communicated, and for what purpose, while for the recipients it becomes easier to comprehend the message that is being communicated (Küpers et al., 2013). Nowadays, the quality of storytelling is equal to a message strategy that allows the narrating agent to achieve specific communication objectives (Weber & Grauer, 2019). If the story that is being told is not an aligned part of a carefully tailored strategy or does not embody certain values, the audience loses interest. On the other hand, meticulous preparation and consideration of the goal and purpose of the story constitute an efficient narrative that can prompt the achievement of the chosen objectives (Barker & Gower, 2010).

2. 1. 1 Strategy as practice

If we understand strategic communication as an overarching concept that covers how are communication channels handled by the whole organization and how is this organization presenting itself (Hallahan et al., 2007), then talking about strategic communication *practice* means narrowing our focus down to the actual practitioners. In that sense, what is meant by strategy as a practice is a focus on micro-level activities within the organization (Johnson, Melin & Whittington, 2003). This perspective is concerned with the practical competencies of the practitioners – in our case, the people working in an agency – and their interactions in the strategy-making processes (Whittington, 1996). Those activities include social and organizational practices such as routines or procedures; roles and identities of the practitioners; sense-making, narratives and communication; strategic tools or criticality in strategy work (Burgelman et al., 2018).

More specifically, we can distinguish between 3 closely related categories: (a) *practicalities* – activities such as work meetings, briefings with clients, talks and agreements; (b) *technicalities* – planning the budgets, expenditure, filling formal documents, preparing presentations and project overviews, and (c) *particularities* - brainstorming unique ideas, seizing opportunities and project planning (Whittington, 1996). Each of the agency's practitioners has different roles and multiple competencies, therefore their understanding of strategic practices might vary. We might presume that the approach towards strategic storytelling can be different from a viewpoint of i.e. a PR consultant, marketing manager, or creative director. Nonetheless, these differences do not mean that one approach is more suitable than the other; on the contrary, such variance offers a better understanding of the multidimensionality of strategic practices.

The management of strategic practices does not merely include the set of activities that are being carried out (spatial dimension) but also points to a chronological order in which these tasks are being addressed (temporal dimension) (Golsorkhi et al., 2010). The first phase regards the assessment of a situation or an issue that needs to be resolved. Secondly, practitioners are moving on to a strategic analysis where all possible opportunities and options are being considered. The last phase is the strategic implementation which shifts former planning and strategizing into a purposeful practice (Gunn & Williams, 2007).

During all three stages, certain elements need to be taken into account to tailor the best strategy that reflects the needs of their clients. The elements that should not be neglected are related to the main goals and objectives (communication planning), knowing who is the object of the campaign (target audience), what needs to be delivered (key messages), how (strategic channels of communication) and when (scheduling the deliverables) (Kesarovska, 2017).

However, developing and implementing strategies that address all of these key elements and subsequently result in better customer engagement is one of the main challenges that agency practitioners face (Morgan et al., 2019). Introducing a strategic model that breaks down each of the elements is one of the ways through which we can gain further clarification of how strategic

practices are being communicated:

Goals and objectives include identifying required outcomes, goal-setting, performance reviews or brand assessment. These should be clarified from the very beginning of the storytelling project and should convey criteria as to what the story is trying to communicate, what the values shared with the audiences are and what is expected to be achieved with the narrative (Fog et al., 2010).

Means and communication channels focus on choosing the most appropriate delivery channels, dissemination of the stories and messages, market analysis and possible collaborations (Morgan et al., 2019). Understanding and purposefully targeting all aforementioned elements allow practitioners to create stories and use storytelling techniques that are in alignment with a priori-developed strategic plan.

Audience research is the thorough analysis of the target audience for which the story is created. The analysis can be done by focusing on the demographics such as education level, age, gender, and country of residence, or by assessing their level of expertise, purchase preferences, position in the industry, or any data about their activities, qualities or behaviours (Kostelac, 2020).

Key messages are at the very centre of communication campaigns. They are the messages that the agency wishes to convey to the public about their client, and eventually, they want the public not only to know but also to accept them, take action or change the consumer behaviour. Key messages should be clear, concise and easily observable and can be communicated through text, pictures, objects, attributes or any other visuals. Their goal is to catch the attention of those who are exposed to them and alter the receiver's cognition. They are meant to bring attention to a particular situation or issue and try to communicate the client's stance or point of view (Carroll et al., 2014). They can be framed differently depending on what target group they are meant for, and therefore fortify the current level of relationships with the audiences (Pratt, 2004).

Last but not least, *timing* should be taken into consideration too, as practitioners need to allocate enough time to the development and implementation of the storytelling project. Underdevelopment or premature launch might turn into a flopped response or result in consumers' negative reactions due to insufficiently evaluated market dynamics (Delre et al., 2007).

2. 2 Storytelling

Storytelling can be defined as the use of composed narratives created by specific institutions which contain messages that are intentionally transported to produce a specific effect (König, 2020). Stories incorporate a series of events in a certain chronological order, while they also follow causality and character development. Those elements provide stimuli that are making the story look intriguing; however, there is not any generic way of telling a story and it is highly dependent on the teller's objectives and narrating purpose (Delgado-Ballester & Fernández-Sabiote, 2016).

Initially, storytelling was explored in its connection to disciplines such as literature,

linguistics, philology, semiotics and psychology. However, by understanding that stories carry meaning that can be transferred from a narrator to the hearer, storytelling was picked up as a valuable communication tool by other disciplines as well (König, 2020). The advent of digital platforms and social media has taken storytelling to a new level, where it can be used for a variety of purposes such as sharing, learning, or engagingly creating knowledge. Nowadays, over 65% of the time spent with digital media happens through the screens of our phones and the social networks we use daily (Lazauskas & Snow, 2018). Due to this new reality, companies that know how to master their storytelling practices can target their audiences more efficiently and faster than in the past, organically nurturing better engagement through shared narratives (Lazauskas & Snow, 2018).

The reason behind storytelling's popularity lies in its familiarity and persuasiveness. Firstly, we are being exposed to stories since our childhood in multiple forms (written, told, seen) and because of their natural plot development, they are easily retrieved from our memory. Secondly, if we compare them to facts, statistical information, or merely plain and disconnected arguments, they feel more persuasive and efficient (Kaufman, 2003). Reframing arguments into well-paced stories makes it easier to understand since the audience is given a relatable subject. Because of these fruitful attributes, storytelling has been used as a creative tool by marketers, advertisers or other professionals that recognize its influence on the audience (Lal et al., 2015). Stories used in the marketing and creative sphere can align companies' or brands' values with people's need for belonging and contributing (Kaufman, 2003), and thus can create emotional connections with the receivers and lead to increased comprehension and communication (Chiu et al., 2012).

Previous research has focused on the impact of storytelling by making the brand more notable by articulating levels of authenticity, conciseness, humour and reversal whilst conveying a story (Delgado-Ballester & Fernández-Sabiote, 2016; Chiu et al., 2012). It also emphasized that one of the purposes for using storytelling practices by creative agencies and in the marketing sphere is to create a brand identity that speaks directly to the audiences, influencing their attitudes and behaviours (Siegert & Hangartner, 2017).

Furthermore, a well-told story does not only convey information but also evokes the recipients' emotions and energy to make it memorable (Woodside, 2010). Following a natural development structure, firstly it gives people something they can relate to - the "normal" thing. Then comes the unexpected twist – either positive or negative, some sort of decision, a certain change. And after that change, nothing is the same and the normal is transformed into a "new" normal, something that made the agents wiser, stronger, or better (Hall, 2019). Grabbing the audience's attention happens when an intimate response is evoked, allowing the recipient to merge their imagination and the believable nature of the story (Chautard & Collin-Lachaud, 2019). In this way, storytelling can turn evidence-based marketing into a persuasive communication tool that improves product adoption and consumers' perceptions of the brand in question (McDougal et al., 2021). It can shape public opinion, and relatability to specific brands, organizations and their core values (Jenkins

et al., 2017). Knowing which elements should be an essential part of the story can contribute to our understanding of how storytelling engages audiences. This paper is also aiming to verify whether the current academic research reflects the attributes used in storytelling in practice. Whilst the existing research emphasizes elements such as humour, authenticity, and conciseness, the following analysis will most likely reveal further pivotal components of a well-tailored story that is intended to engage customers.

2. 2. 1 The agency's approach: Developing a story

The agency's know-how in developing a well-told storytelling campaign is an essential skill (Da Costa, 2019). For example, much of the content nowadays is presented in a digital form and users with enough time on their hands check their screens regularly, yet if there is a lack of storytelling, the brand content will remain unobserved (Vigneaux, 2015, as cited in van Laer et al., 2019). The inability to engage customers on an emotional level by not making them feel understood due to insufficient planning and unclear strategic objectives can have a detrimental effect on the shared deliverables (Jayasimha, 2022).

To avoid such a scenario, agencies need to acknowledge multiple dimensions of storytelling practices. Although those have not been explicitly outlined by the existing literature so far, based on the previous findings we can predict that they will be related to the following overarching categories:

- The *content* of the story – what emotions does it bring, is it relatable, relevant, personal and authentic? (Gilliam et al., 2014)
- The *reason* for the story – who is the target audience, why should it matter to them and why should they care? (König, 2020)
- The *goal* of the story – what experiences does it bring to the audience and how does it affect their consumer behaviours? (Eeman, 2019)

Content. Looking at the subject of storytelling from a marketing perspective, having a decent comprehension of what elements constitute a good story for a client can help creatives with important decisions. Those further shape customer attitudes and increase their confidence in the client. Without a doubt, a well-built story should have an internal temporality; a chronological order of the beginning, middle, and end (Delgado-Ballester & Fernández-Sabiote, 2016). The story itself comprises two components – the one of a plot (representing the content and the structure) and the other of a character (the main persona whose experiences are shared in the story). The aspect of “telling” is broader in its sense and can refer to different elements of the story design, i.e. perspective, setting, rhetoric or time (König, 2020).

For a story to be convincing and relatable, it should be first and foremost authentic, concise, humorous and include a point of reversal. Such elements are generally useful in building positive correlations with the brand and strengthening possible intentions of using the client's service or

product (Chiu et al., 2012). In the majority of cases, storytelling has been defined concerning, or as an interchangeable term for content marketing. Nowadays, content marketing comes in many forms, and stories within a commercial domain have a great potential to engage an audience (van Laer et al., 2019), especially through distribution forms such as newsletters, blogs, podcasts, videos, or any other visually appealing form in order to generate positive response or behaviour from the customer base (Pulizzi, 2012).

Reason. Whilst looking at the reason for the story, we are trying to understand where is the narrator coming from and what is the purpose or motive behind telling the story. The leading question is: What is the motivation to tell this story? (König, 2020). The reasoning can vary in the creative and organizational sphere and can include instances such as justifying or encouraging change, developing a meaning or mission, seeking increased profit, and engaging or connecting the community (Kaufman, 2003). The research by Gilliam et al. (2014), although focused on retail sales, emphasizes that the stories generated for brands are generally fueled by two proposed motivations: communicating value and establishing rapport with their audience without coming across as overly pushy. Development of a story should happen after a careful assessment of the agency's client – whether it is a company or a brand with a product or a service. Knowing the answers to essential questions about the client and understanding what is the link between the story and the client cannot be neglected, since those are the first ties to the context creation. The client's representation through a story can happen in various ways, ranging from using the story and its values as a problem-solving tool to creating an overall plotline with a central character that represents the brand's identity. Questions that could be useful in finding the right approach should focus on what tradition the company has, what is their competitor, their customer, and how is the brand represented through the story (König, 2020).

Goal. Research interests behind the goal of the story should be led by questions such as what is the desired effect and who is the story's audience? (König, 2020). Storytelling comes hand in hand with an underlying expectation that the investment of time, effort, or other hardly tangible resources aimed at consumers are going to pay off – ideally, by strengthening the psychological ties that motivate the target audience to maintain a relationship with the brand (Gilliam et al., 2014). The goal of storytelling is essentially not in the story itself, but in how the narrative can assist in achieving the goals set by the client and mediated by the agency. Goals related to customer engagement vary greatly since each brand provides different value to those who engage with it. Based on the strategically tailored plan, those goals can be, among others, improving SEO (search engine optimization) for easier accessibility and exposure, generating and converting leads, leveraging social media, or even clients reaching their customers better and participating in online conversations (Pulizzi, 2012).

Targeting those 3 spheres of storytelling helps in understanding why, how, and what is being shared with the audiences. As storytelling on its own can be seen as a rather abstract term, contextualizing it through the lenses of strategic communication helps to pinpoint the most important attributes. Strategic communication assists with clarifying and narrowing down the goal, content, and the purpose of used narratives as to (a) knowing how to achieve the goal of the story by researching the audience and using appropriate communication channels and addressing practicalities, (b) knowing the content of the story by conveying key messages based on proposed particularities that reflect the brand, (c) knowing the reason for the story by addressing technicalities and objectives proposed by the client.

2. 3 Customer engagement

Consumers are playing an important role in the overall communication chain, as a progressively networked society is marked by growing interactions among the consumers, or the consumers and the organizations, most notably through new media channels (Verhoef et al., 2010). They are the ultimate recipients of the narratives and without them, there would be no need for delivering targeted messages. Consumers form the target audiences and as the previous chapter outlined, they have a pivotal role in the agency's strategizing practices. The audiences' expectations of communications and the influence they have on media campaigns, agendas, or policies are undoubtedly important to address while crafting key messages (Pratt, 2004). Interestingly enough, a lot of brands or organizations still do not know why their customers are their customers after all, since the oversaturated market offers a lot of lookalike services or products with the same features (Sinek, 2009). That is why it is important to be mindful of the mutual or yet unconnected interests of the companies and their audiences, as it helps agencies use appropriate storytelling techniques. Using the correct communication attributes can have persuasive effects on the consumers' behaviour, in a best-case scenario turning consumers into potential customers (Pratt, 2004). From a historical perspective, the organizations that have been utilizing storytelling in their practices are the ones that have the best relationship with their customers (Lazauskas & Snow, 2018).

Whether it comes down to marketed manipulation or inspiration of the target audiences (Sinek, 2009), the process of utilizing specific techniques to speak to the target group can be explained in terms of customer engagement (CE). Customer engagement describes the exhibition of certain behaviours towards a company, brand, or service that exceeds the purchase of a product or single use of a service and reflects the value creation dynamics that happen during the interaction (Brodie et al., 2011). This engagement generally consists of multiple behaviours that are being displayed by the customers, such as word-of-mouth, providing reviews or customer ratings, recommendations, writing experience blog posts or increased response rates towards the brand or company (Verhoef et al., 2010).

Customer engagement is originally a marketing concept that has gained prominence in the

past two decades, mainly due to its promise of nurturing and growing customer satisfaction, and interactions, and being a beneficiary for the businesses. Although CE can be approached from different perspectives, it ultimately works towards the same goal: obtaining the desired customer behaviour (Lim et al., 2021). For this purpose, agencies can be tasked with not only enhancing meaning-making processes through conveying simple messages but also “...measuring behavioural outcomes that are aligned with the strategic goals of the communicative entity...” (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015, p.15). In the creative marketing and PR sphere, engagement is defined as an internal state shaped by collaborative and co-creative experiences that customers share with companies or brands they interact with (Brodie et al., 2011). Those parties try to bridge the gap between them and their audiences through attention, influence, and transformation represented in storytelling (Hall, 2019). Strategically crafted storytelling has proven to impact or at least alter the levels of engagement (Jenkins et al., 2017).

Customer engagement can be represented by multiple dimensions. The customers’ engagement activity can then be observed as manifesting in three different spheres: emotional, behavioural, and cognitive (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Vivek et al., 2012).

Emotional engagement is characterized by affectionate, sentiment-oriented practices and can include emotions such as interest, desire, joy, trust or excitement. The consumer is therefore primarily motivated by these emotions, either consciously or subconsciously (Lim et al., 2021). Companies that are trying to engage customers thus have an opportunity to create satisfying interactions and increasingly stronger trust levels. This affective commitment towards a brand reflects a psychological bond that leads the customers to voluntarily and genuinely remain in a relationship with the company since they have a feeling that they are heard out and cared for (Vivek et al., 2012).

Behavioural engagement manifests through intended or real actions, e.g. attending or participating in the activities organized by the company or a brand, either in an online or offline market space. It can include behaviours such as commenting or liking social media posts, purchasing products or attending related events (Lim et al., 2021). From a behavioural perspective, the focus is on customers’ engagement, once it becomes more frequent and more intense. It does not manifest itself only in form of higher sales but also in exhibiting other useful engagement behaviours that might be, from a company’s perspective, worth nurturing and pursuing (van Doorn et al., 2010). Behavioural engagement is most strongly associated with the active role of a consumer (behavioural manifestation) in a process of consumption, highlighting activities bordering with loyalty – e.g. spreading a positive WoM about the company, or taking part in the brand’s co-creation (Javornik & Mandelli, 2012).

Cognitive engagement comes in a form of thoughts or consumer opinions about the entity in question and can be associated with practices of concentration, self-regulation, self-awareness or strategizing (Lim et al., 2021). Cognitive engagement is closely linked to the sensory experiences

that are created to make an impression on the customer. If the customer has been positively impacted by these stimuli, they are more likely to create positive feelings that help them recognize the brand or pay elevated attention to it. This type of engagement could be also displayed by a set of specific cognitive behaviours, e.g. thinking of a brand while using its products or services, feeling compelled to learn more about the brand, or being curious about the brand's mission based on their presented deliverables (Ahn & Back, 2018).

Both cognitive and emotional engagement can influence the behavioural form of engagement, which later on repeats vice versa – new behaviours further affect the cognitive and emotional investment. CE is therefore becoming circular, yet highly nuanced and tied to specific consumer experiences (Lim et al., 2021). Regarding the customer experiences and behaviours, Guillet and Tasci (2010) explored that consumers' perceptions and interpretations of the brand are dependent on a hardly alterable set of factors as well - their background and demographics, such as education, country of residence, income or age. The individualistic aspects of culture can also affect the efficiency of brand strategy that is being distributed to its customer base, which can be perceived differently, for instance, in Europe or Asia. These factors can present a great asset and be beneficial while crafting the stories for customers - if they are not omitted but instead addressed accordingly.

Regarding CE within this study, it is important to mention that the aim here is to address the aforementioned concepts from the producers' perspective – more specifically, how are these dimensions of engagement translated into narratives used by creative agencies, or if they are even targeted so thoroughly. While understanding the consumer perspective might be an interesting approach for future research, it is not the goal of this paper to elaborate on the views and opinions that the customers have about the agency's clients.

2. 3. 1 The intersection of engagement and co-creation

As was already outlined above, due to the rise of social media, online communities and digital platforms, customer engagement is rapidly changing (Dessart et al., 2015), with customers moving from the recipient end to the participative centre of a brand co-creation (Gambetti et al., 2016). One of the main reasons is consumers' relatively newly-gained proficiency in using digital communication platforms and participating in online interactions with companies or brands. Those new technological and digital developments change the role of organizations as storytellers since their customers can co-create the brand's story by sharing their opinions and experiences faster and with greater outreach (Fog et al., 2010). Taking this shift into account, agencies should reflect on it when using storytelling practices for engagement, as knowing the target audience (its position, activities, needs, thoughts and preferences) is one of the first steps in giving stories a strategic purpose. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult in the complex media ecosystem that consumers participate in (Rasool et al., 2020).

This unprecedented expansion of social media channels and platforms re-shaped how

customers engage with the brands (agency's clients) and the access they have to the brand co-creation, mainly through the means of feedback and suggestions the customers deliver (Hatch & Schultz, 2010). The brand-consumer interaction is no longer passive since the market development allowed for enhanced consumer interactions and co-creation of the content that is being produced. Co-creation changes not only how a brand is being created but also how consumers feel about it, thus having strategic importance for consumer engagement (Bange et al., 2019). This active consumer role then changes former boundaries between brands and consumers – they are becoming blurrier and no longer exist on separate spectra. The strategic communication developed by brands is therefore shifting from storytelling for consumers to a shared co-creation of the stories with them. In this way, consumers are moving from the end to the central position of the value chain creation, simultaneously re-shaping the development, perception and distribution of the brand's narrative (Pongsakornrungsilp & Schroeder, 2011). Brand co-creation then goes hand in hand with individual and collective storytelling, which can transform the brand's image (Bange et al., 2019).

That is why efficient storytelling can make a difference and allow the brands to stand out among their competitors. Establishing a strong brand image on the market helps to differentiate a product or a service from those provided by the competition, but more importantly, it also helps to create emotional bonds with the consumers. Consumers can make sense of themselves through the narratives created for the brand by the agency and further nurture the client-customer relationship (Bange et al., 2019).

All things considered, this chapter offers a profound explanation of the concepts that are relevant for further analysis. Concerning strategic communication practice and its importance for this research, the focus is on mapping out the overall tactics for creating narratives: the agency's structuralization of key messages, and objectives, and targeting audiences through appropriate communication channels. Strategy as a practice also seeks to look at the practical, technical and individual sides of any given project and highlights a micro-level approach rather than a holistic one.

As for storytelling, this research aims to practically map out the presence of certain elements in narratives that have been emphasized in theory before – such as chronology, authenticity, relatability and conciseness. Agencies are using storytelling to develop a brand's identity by taking into account the content, goal and reason for the story. Understanding the purpose of narratives created by the agency, who the audience is and what effects are being desired is going to be examined during the expert interviews and subsequent analysis.

Similarly, customer engagement in this research's context means realizing the pivotal role of customers during the agency's strategizing practices. CE eventually leads to one goal: obtaining the desired customer response. This can materialize through the means of emotional, behavioural or cognitive engagement that is being assessed from a producer's perspective. This study also takes into account contemporary technological and digital developments that lead to a growing influence and

strategic importance of co-creation that customers hold while engaging with the narratives.

The operationalization table in the next chapter further elaborates on how these concepts are contextualized and targeted for the data gathering stage.

3 METHODS

A qualitative research design has been chosen as the leading method for this study. Unlike quantitative methods that help researchers make sense of larger, predominantly numeric data, qualitative research focuses on smaller-scale, purposively chosen datasets (Hennink et al., 2020). The qualitative analysis segregates the obtained information into smaller parts and subsequently allows reassembling it into categories and themes with certain patterns that are relevant to our research question. This type of method is chosen if the researcher tries to comprehend contextualized beliefs, behaviours or motivations expressed by the subjects in the sample (Boeije, 2010). As the strategic and engagement implications of storytelling present relatively abstract concepts, the qualitative study presents a more suitable fit for the research question that has been chosen. With that in mind, the quantitative method could have been useful for studies trying to understand e.g. the frequency with which are certain elements used in narratives, or compare different outcomes based on specific storytelling styles; nonetheless, that is not the case in this particular research.

3.1 Qualitative research method: In-depth interviews

As for the specific qualitative method, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted. In-depth interviews allow the researcher to analyse and understand the concepts on a more profound level, especially when discussing one's personal experiences, insights, ideas or motivations. These factors cannot be detected to such an extent by the means of surveys or focus groups (Johnson, 2001). Semi-structured interviews are generally led by an interview guide with questions regarding the researched phenomena, yet it also follows the natural development of the interview. Participants are directed to certain areas of the inquiry but can answer the open-ended questions however they prefer, with the researcher flexibly navigating the rest of the interview (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). As this study seeks to understand how the creative agencies transform storytelling into a strategic communication practice, the subjects of our interviews are people working for the marketing, PR and communication agencies and directly dealing with the processes of turning a communication challenge into a communication campaign or strategy – such as content managers, strategy directors, communication and client coordinators, consultants or other highly experienced creatives.

It is critical to note that qualitative research that works with a smaller sample does not allow for much generalizability and the future findings should not be understood as applicable to all cases, especially without a prior context of the research. However, generalizability is normally not the main focus of a qualitative study and it is still possible to produce reliable and valid results by keeping the process of analysis transparent (Silverman, 2011). Moreover, reliability and validity can be enhanced through the means of methodological coherence, sample appropriateness, concurrent collection and analysis of the data and constant comparison with the existing theory (Morse et al., 2002). To indicate the validity of this research, the congruence of the research question and the adequacy of the

chosen methodology (in-depth interviews) and subsequent analysis (thematic analysis) were assessed accordingly, along with choosing a sample of communication experts who could thoroughly discuss the relevant concepts. Moreover, to establish reliability, the data collected by the interviews were constantly compared and continuously assessed by incorporating and reflecting on more detailed matters that the interviewees brought up. The same strategy was applied during the analysis when each segment of the data has been compared to the existing literature and other responses provided by the interviewees. To keep the process transparent, the exact details regarding each step of the research are addressed in the following sections.

3. 2 Sampling strategy and data collection

The non-probability, snowball method of sampling (Etikan & Bala, 2017) was used for this study, with the first leads chosen from the personal networks. Another general call for participants was posted on LinkedIn, along with directly approaching personal contacts and other practitioners they have subsequently recommended. These leads helped to identify other participants who would be suitable for the following interviews, leading to an extensive network of professionals with diverse marketing, PR, and creative backgrounds. The initially expected number of participants was around 12 – 14. However, as finding experts and executives with highly demanding and time-consuming agency jobs is more challenging than approaching e.g. regular media users or other people on the customer side, the final sample size consisted of 11 respondents. Nevertheless, all of the interviewees were highly experienced individuals who have provided countless insights and their takes on the topic that reflected years or even multiple decades of working in this industry.

The whole list of interviewees is presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1: The list of interviewees participating in this research (alongside their work occupation)

Pseudonyms	Gender	Work occupation
Respondent 1	<i>Male</i>	Chief Strategy Officer
Respondent 2	<i>Female</i>	Senior PR Consultant for B2C and B2B
Respondent 3	<i>Female</i>	Brand Consultant, former Head of Content and Entertainment
Respondent 4	<i>Male</i>	B2B Account Director
Respondent 5	<i>Female</i>	PR, Communication, and Content Advisor for B2C
Respondent 6	<i>Female</i>	B2B Marketer, Brand strategy, Visual selling & CRM Specialist
Respondent 7	<i>Male</i>	B2B Communication Strategy Director
Respondent 8	<i>Female</i>	B2C Marketing Manager, former Brand Development Manager
Respondent 9	<i>Female</i>	Content Marketer and Marketing Strategist
Respondent 10	<i>Male</i>	Creative Director & Copywriter
Respondent 11	<i>Male</i>	Managing Director and PR Agency Co-Founder

Due to logistical and scheduling reasons, 8 interviews have been conducted online over Zoom and the other 3 took place in person in Rotterdam. 10 of the respondents are currently based in the Netherlands and 1 works in the US. Having the majority of the interviews online did not have any detrimental effect on the quality of the interviews. On the contrary, all of the participants were eager to share their screens to show the examples and materials they were referring to.

Moreover, all of the respondents were provided with an informed consent form to establish trust and ensure them that the information shared would be used for the research only. They were informed that this study would not share their names or further personal details and pseudonyms would be used instead. They could have read about their rights, general research ethics and overall interview procedure in the full version of the consent form, which can be found in *Appendix A*.

The exact topic guide was created after full immersion in the existing theory and can be found in *Appendix B*. The topic guide was based on the operationalization of the theoretical concepts presented below and partially inspired by the structure outlined by Gunn & Williams (2007)¹. Yet to ensure that the questions were more relatable and logical for the interviewees (not purely academic since the focus was on understanding these concepts *in practice*) they were divided as follows: First, a short introductory part was presented to get to know the respondent, their responsibilities and information about their project(s) that involved storytelling. Subsequently, three subsections regarding different steps of approaching projects in practice were discussed – from the initial, strategic planning through the implementation of the campaigns and decision-making, towards the engagement implications and goals that were established at the very beginning. In the end, the interviewees were encouraged to share their overall ideas and final remarks.

It is important to mention that as the interviews were semi-structured, the organic development of questions and their order differed from interview to interview. The main goal was to follow the respondent's train of thought while pointing them in the direction of topics that needed to be tackled. All of the respondents have used real-life examples or shared materials (that were promised to be kept confidential) regarding the projects they have worked on to illustrate their reasoning.

The initial operationalization of the examined concepts is outlined in Table 2 below:

¹ The description of this structure can be found on page 11 of this study under the „strategy as practice“ subchapter.

Table 2: The operationalization of the theoretical concepts that helped with the interview guide and enabled a more efficient categorization of data for further analysis

Concept	Differentiation of the concepts' levels/elements	Examples
Storytelling: the strategic use of narratives with intentional messages to produce a specific effect (König, 2020; Küpers et al., 2013; Lazauskas & Snow, 2018; Fog et al., 2010)	The content of the story (what) (Chiu et al., 2012; Delgado-Ballester & Fernández-Sabiote, 2016)	Focusing on specific elements that the story entails - the plot, scenario, characters – is the very core of the shared narrative
	The reason for the story (why) (Sinek, 2009; Gilliam et al., 2014)	Considering the reasons why the story should be created, looking at the roots and origins of the story (inputs)
	The goal of the story (how to achieve) (Pullizi, 2012; König, 2020)	Wanting to meet the desired KPIs, looking at the impact of the story (outputs)
Strategic communication practice: the deliberate use of communication by an organization to advance and accomplish its mission and goals (Hallahan et al., 2007; Zerfass et al., 2018; Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015)	Preparing a communication plan/ strategy with clear objectives (Morgan et al., 2019)	Linked to the goal of the story, a set of steps or a to-do list that helps to understand what needs to be done to achieve the main objective
	Considering and researching the target audience (Kostelac, 2020)	Researching the target customers, their expectations, passions, what do they like and who they are as individuals
	Sharing key messages in the story (Carroll et al., 2014)	Finding the right way of telling and positioning the narrative, making sure that it fits with the proposed goal and concisely communicates the message to the customers
	Touchpoints of the story (multiple communication-sharing channels) (Morgan et al., 2019)	Using various online and offline channels to tell the story of the brand/ agency's client
Customer engagement: multidimensional internal state defined by collaborative and co-creative experiences that	Cognitive engagement: sensory experiences, customers' thoughts and opinions (Ahn & Back, 2018)	Creating memorable, informative or experimental campaigns, allowing customers to make long-lasting cognitive links with the brand or product

customers share with organizations or brands they interact with (Brodie et al., 2011; Verhoef et al., 2010; Hollebeek et al., 2014).	Emotional engagement: affectionate, sentiment-oriented practices (Lim et al., 2021; Vivek et al., 2012)	Engaging and triggering the emotional side of target audiences, such as feelings of happiness, empathy, or nostalgia
	Behavioural engagement: customers' actions and active process of consumption (Javornik & Mandelli, 2012)	Giving customers reasons and cues to purchase the product or use a service

3. 3 Data analysis

To fully understand the data we have collected, a thematic analysis was conducted. This type of analysis identifies, examines, and reports themes found in the sample in an organized manner (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It is especially useful for analyzing abstract concepts such as perceptions, opinions and experiences that our subjects consider important, along with their attitudes towards the topic in question (Herzog et al., 2019). Due to the great amount of data, the qualitative data research software Atlas.ti was used to make the analysis clear, comprehensible and organized.

The initial step in the analysis was to get a total immersion in the data, which was already happening when transcribing the interviews and by writing down additional summaries of each interview to capture the most important thoughts and ideas. After that, each interview was read again after uploading all the transcripts to Atlas.ti. By the means of immersion and re-reading, the goal was to search for meanings, patterns and possible themes that have been discussed and have been touching upon the theories covered in the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Afterwards, the 3-step coding as indicated by Boeije (2010) was applied:

Firstly, the open coding. This stage of coding allows the coder to divide all collected data into fragments (which mostly consist of paragraphs or separate sentences or even specific phrases, depending on the content) that are constantly compared among each other; they were all given a code. This coding contributes to a clearer organization of the data that will lead to a coding scheme (Boeije, 2010). Initially, there were a lot of codes generated since each of the participants covered specific details that were not mentioned before. However, the further we went with coding, the more repetition within the information was detected, which is why similar fragments were given the same codes (Boeije, 2010). This effect started to be more visible around the fifth interview, where many segments were coded with already created codes. After all 11 interviews were coded, the number of open codes was 501. The majority of the codes were already given a prefix suggesting which part of the theoretical framework was being discussed (e.g. agency, story elements, engagement, strategy) to keep the coding process as structured as possible despite the amount of information. Some of the

codes were touching upon the same topic, yet from a different angle – but since this was the first stage of coding, more freedom was given to the description of segments. The reason was to keep the meaning and all nuances unchanged.

The second step of coding was the axial coding. In this step, the initial codes were grouped back together in categories (Code groups in Atlas.ti), but in ways that are reflecting the connections between them. In this stage, the researcher can start deciding if certain categories can be merged, or on the other hand, expanded into multiple categories. This step helps to understand which are the dominant themes and which are less important. Sensitizing concepts are becoming clearer during axial coding, as their content explains how they are used by the interviewees (Boeije, 2010). This stage of coding is presented in *Appendix C*, which illustrates the codes assigned to Code groups. The already existing prefixes helped to smoothen this process, but some of the codes were assigned to different code groups than those that were initially planned (e.g. codes with prefixes “customers” and “target audience” were put under the same code group). All codes were assigned to one of the 13 code groups, while codes in each group were reviewed again and merged into bigger categories based on their attributes (e.g. if one code talked about “being authentic” and another about “keeping it real is essential”, they were merged under “authenticity”). This resulted in narrowing the number of codes down to 157 (*Appendix C*). As Atlas.ti allows the coder to see how many times have certain codes applied, this step revealed which topics started emerging as the main ones, while others have turned out to be of minor importance. At this point, the codes started turning more abstract to include bigger fragments of information to understand how they intertwine and affect each other.

The third step was selective coding. This type of coding tries to establish connections between the categories to create umbrella-like themes. The selective coding helps to build up and support the initial theoretical framework by establishing which themes lie at the core of the research. It shows us which themes occur the most and allows us to compare our findings with the existing literature. Each of the themes should be supported by the factual information from the data set, which in the case of interviews can be direct quotes of the participants. The relationship between the concepts should be determined, verified, and assessed in how it helps us to answer the research question (Boeije, 2010).

Going towards this last step of coding, all the (already merged) 157 codes have been reviewed again and those that have been in the different code groups but addressed the same issue, just from a different angle, were merged. This step resulted in 44 descriptive categories that were written down and subsequently rearranged in order so that the ones that were dealing with the same concepts would become part of one bigger theme (*Appendix D*). After a thorough assessment of the categories and their fit with the umbrella-like concepts, the findings have been put together into 4 main themes. In the next chapter, the results of the whole analysis are presented and clarified, along with supporting quotes from the interviews.

4 RESULTS

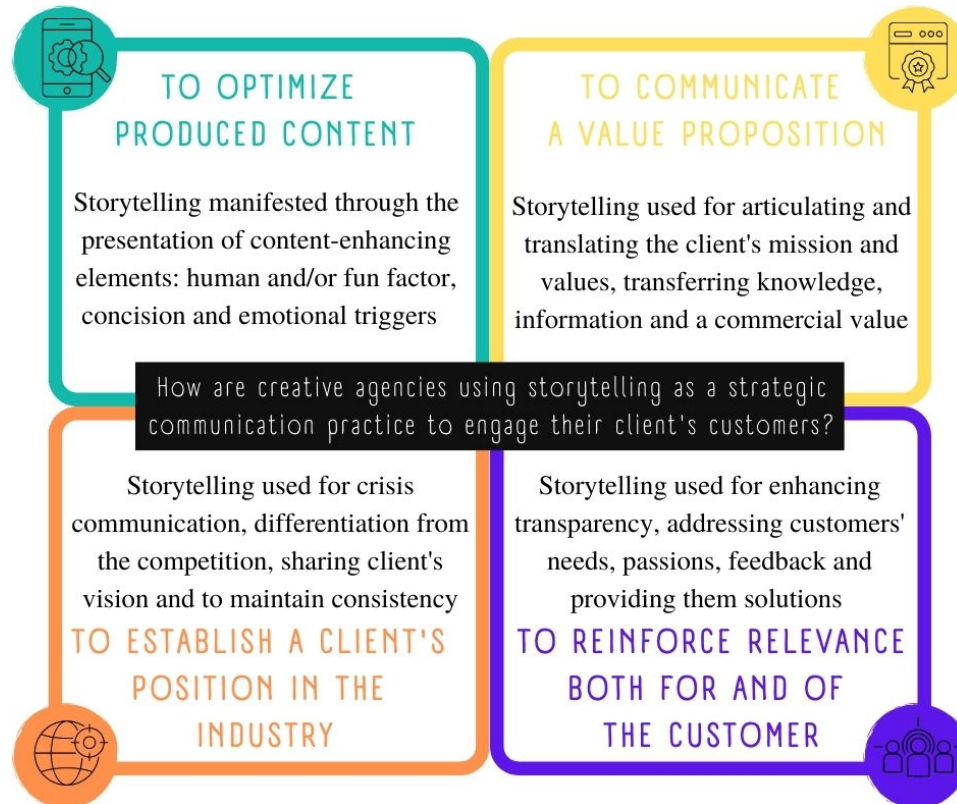
After conducting the thematic analysis that was following the research question of how creative agencies use storytelling as a strategic communication practice to engage customers, four main themes have emerged, supported by 15 sub-themes. Those themes show that storytelling can be applied in various scenarios and its versatility was aptly captured by Respondent 10 (male, Creative Director & Copywriter), whose initial thoughts about storytelling were challenged when preparing a presentation on the same subject within the agency: “What the fuck is storytelling? Nobody knew. (...) That's not very interesting. But what's really interesting is story-starting.” As such, the results have shown that storytelling plays a critical role in the planning and strategizing practices within the agencies. Respondents have compared it to a core value or a norm that should be emphasized greatly in their work, as it allows their clients to create connections with customers on a profound level. Moreover, the narrative should be clear and consistent for everyone in the agency and the client's workplace. It can take up any form, from the written word through various visuals and designs to interactive experiences – depending on what the client wants to achieve with it.

The interviewees noted that in the future, storytelling will most likely keep its importance, as it will become a blueprint for brands. All respondents agreed that the most important factors are knowing who the audience is, what the narrative tries to communicate and what the goals are. Surprisingly, the majority of interviewees stated that customer engagement should be given more importance by their clients and there is certainly room for improvement. For many of them, engagement translated into a long-term relationship with the audiences, to which they claimed that not every brand was looking for that. Regardless of that, they stated that they always wanted to give the customers something relatable based on the previously conducted audience research. The interviews explored that many practitioners see the agency's role as a guiding entity that helps their clients accentuate, improve and enhance their (sometimes already existing) narratives through strategically tailored storytelling.

In line with such thinking, we have to understand that while storytelling can take on multiple forms, its use as a strategic communication practice for engagement goes back to its start, as highlighted by the Respondent 10 above - why was the story created in the first place, and what is its purpose. By tracking these *whys*, this chapter aims to provide an overview of the 4 emerged themes, along with the 15 subcategories, supported by the illustrative quotes in which respondents share their insights and views about the discussed topic. The implications and suggestions stemming from the themes are going to be further addressed in the discussion chapter.

For the beginning, the following figure presents a clear overview of the themes that emerged from the analysis. All details about the themes and sub-themes are explained right after:

Figure 1: The overview of the four main themes and their explanation



4. 1 Storytelling as providing content optimization

Firstly and most frequently, storytelling is being used purposely for improving the quality and strategic targeting of the content produced for the client (instances such as promotional materials, websites, videos, photographs, or other supporting visuals and anything that comes out to be delivered to the target audiences). In this case, the agency uses storytelling as a powerful content-optimization tool that can change how a brand or organization is perceived by the audiences, mainly by creating conciseness and adding human, fun and emotional elements that make the content more appealing to the customers. This theme is in close interplay with emotional engagement as the most profound goal of content optimization is to emotionally trigger customers and allow them to easily comprehend the “spirit” of the client’s brand and become more affectionate and involved with it due to the addition of the following elements:

4. 1. 1 By adding a human element (story’s driving characters)

An essential thing that was echoed by all interviewees was to create a story as relatable as possible. In the practitioners' experiences, this aspect is oftentimes manifested by adding a driving character, or a protagonist who is giving the narrative a more “human” face and acts as a link between the brand and the audience. This can be represented in various ways, but the respondents emphasized certain practices that are being used to elevate this attribute. Especially in the field of PR, agency practitioners use collaborations with celebrities or influences who are acting as a face of

a brand or a company when promoting a product or a service. By doing so, they are making the experience more relatable, as one of the respondents noted:

So for instance, if you are talking about building up a relationship with influencers, we do see that it helps to create like kind of brand ambassadors for the long term. So you really create a kind of team for your clients and your brands. So I think in a few ways that's valuable for your brand because it is reliable (...). So it's not a one-off, it's more of a longer and deeper relationship. And what we try to do is also make it a really personal relationship (Respondent 5, female, PR, Communication & Content Advisor).

On a similar note, another respondent emphasized that a story's driving character can act as a reflection of a real customer and their potential journey, and it feels more interesting than creating an abstract story:

So we try to think like that person. Indeed, that's how we came up with well, if we just put a person in the video, it was not a real person, but an animated person. Yeah. So we made an animation when you literally followed someone from the beginning to the end throughout the whole process. So that's also a way of telling a story (Respondent 9, female, Content Marketer & Marketing Strategist).

The practitioners suggested that the presence of the main protagonist should not be omitted, as it can create deeper connections with the target audience. Agencies tend to incorporate human elements frequently due to their ability to emotionally engage customers: "I think that this human factor in those stories is super important. So, you know, you usually need to have this human story so people can connect" (Respondent 3, female, Brand Consultant).

4. 1. 2 By adding an entertainment element

Nowadays, the amount of content that is produced might feel overwhelming and hardly relatable for customers. In response to that, 5 interviewees emphasized that it might be a good idea to enrich the content with some fun narratives. As simple as it goes: "And what you want to do, you know, is to entertain people. Entertain means you've got a fun factor" (Respondent 1, male, Chief Strategy Officer).

It is important to note that creating something entertaining should not come at the expense of the quality of the content. Although adding entertainment elements to the content that the agency produces for their clients might be useful, it should be also appropriate for the brand or a company. Many of the practitioners have been in the industry long enough to understand the subtle art of fitting in humorous aspects, and they are not shying away from advising brand ambassadors or influencers who help with the content creation, especially through social media. As Respondent 5 (female, PR, Communication & Content Advisor) put it: "So I think if you're a really good content creator, even though you get paid for it, you must do it in a fun way. So it's fun to watch, you know, it's just fun to see."

Using humour or producing otherwise fun content can have huge benefits if used well. Respondent 11 pointed out that for brands that already have a strong customer base, adding a fun twist (whether we are talking about videos, campaigns, or even simple lines on their socials) can be of great advantage: “Especially with fans, if you have a large community, maybe (use) a sense of humour as well to make that connection that's strong” (male, Managing Director). These frequent mentions examined what seems to be a common agency’s practice of optimizing the content for their clients by creating something that makes the audience laugh or entertain in any way. This might enhance the feeling of relatability and lightness, which present fascinating factors for the audience (Lazauskas & Snow, 2018).

4. 1. 3 By simplifying the content; making it clear, concise, and comprehensible

According to the information that was shared by the majority of interviewees, agencies are also vehemently focused on making the communication with the target audience as clear as possible, making the key messages simple and easy to pick up. The overall idea was neatly summed up by Respondent 8:

So I've learned that no matter what piece of communication you are looking at, when you are creating a piece of communication, it doesn't matter if you are talking about an email, you are talking about a page in a PowerPoint, a Word document or a key visual or TVC (television commercial). You need to ask yourself if this piece of communication lands on the other side of the world at somebody, you know, and somebody is going to read it or watch it, that has no clue about anything that I'm doing here. Will they get the message? (female, Marketing Manager)

The other interviewee identified another key area as knowing how to extract the most important message from the piece of information the client wishes to share with their customers. If there is a lot to digest within the content, the agency tries to optimize the narrative by making it more concise for the receiver. She noted: “Everyone is scrolling to a page and they don't take minutes to think about it. So in one split second, you have to know what I mean” (Respondent 9, female, Content Marketer).

Furthermore, it is important to understand who the target audiences are and then adjust the content appropriately. Especially in B2B marketing, it is typical that the client needs to communicate news about their product or service to a multitude of people, depending on the industry. That is when the agency steps in, knowing how to provide different pieces of the same message to the target audience, so they concisely get the message. While presenting an example of a client from the medical industry who did not know how to successfully communicate the benefits of their new medical device, Respondent 7 explained:

It's much, much broader, and you have to peel your message like an onion because everyone needs another part of the message. (...) That's it. And then a surgeon will want to know how does it work surgically? Production people or buyers will want to know how does it work

technically, distributors would want to know who should I address this with? And of course, let's say the more outgoing surgeons want to know about the innovation part of it because the same goes with surgeons. You have different thinking styles anyway (male, Communication Strategy Director).

Therefore, the agency is helping with optimizing the content to be comprehensible for the target customer. If the client struggles with this aspect, the agency adjusts the message for the right target groups, so that it stays clear, concise and thus easier to engage with.

4. 1. 4 By making the content touching and emotional

It does not come as a big surprise that whenever we feel invested in a story - if it makes us emotional or touched in any way - we will remember it better than a sum of facts or plain advertisement. However, it might be demanding for a client to infuse the story just enough with touching elements, so it does not come across as overly preposterous or dramatic. On the other hand, agencies seem to have vast experiences with re-writing the narrative (or coming up with a new one) that will represent the client well while adding up a bit of an emotional play. According to Respondent 2, having this element is pivotal for emotionally engaging the audience: "I remember organizations with their stories and the stories like you can relate to or touch your heart like those are the companies that you understand. And if they keep adding to that same story and its logic, then you remember it, you accept it and you embrace it." (female, Senior PR Consultant).

Another interviewee agreed that having touching stories is a needed practice that is widely used in the public relations field:

So if you're talking about good storytelling in PR, I think really try to touch people now. To get to their emotions. That's the key to storytelling. Don't be too factual, but really try to search for something that touches people maybe in a happy way or maybe a sad way. (...)

They (the audience) need to be triggered and they need to be triggered in a kind of emotional way. They are kind of engaged with that, and that should help (Respondent 5, female, Content Advisor).

The presence of emotional triggers seemed to be vocalized as important by other respondents as well. When discussing the deliberate creation of emotional narratives, while Respondent 8 (female, Marketing Manager) referred to this practice as "playing with emotions is a well-known fact" when it comes to the marketing field, Respondent 11 (male, Managing Director) highlighted the underlying reason for that: "It adds drama. It adds plots, conflict, and every story needs that."

4. 2 Storytelling as communicating a value proposition

If the first step is content optimization, the next one is the use of storytelling to communicate

additional value. Unlike content optimization which regards primarily targeted improvements of presented content, communicating the value proposition means creating narratives that skillfully propose or introduce an intrinsic value, benefits, or other advantages that the brand provides. Communicating value proposition is expected to have the biggest impact on cognitive engagement since it allows the customer to have better insights about what the brand or company offers. This type of storytelling was found to be used for the presentation of the client's mission and values, for transferring knowledge and information and for communicating the commercial value of a product or service.

4. 2. 1 By translating the client's mission and values

Each client has a different purpose, depending on its niche and the values that it wishes to communicate to the outside world, as Respondent 1 (male, Chief Strategy Officer) summarized: "What's the story you want to tell? What is the objective? What is the reason to be there?" However, finding the right answers is not an easy process, as oftentimes the client might not know how to translate them efficiently. To get this story straight, each agency has its model that helps them to understand the identity of the brand first, but the goal is the same: "And I help them define, okay, what are our values? What are our brand values? And then we look at how do we communicate that creatively on the website and all of the like, the usual design stuff" (Respondent 6, female, B2B Marketer & Brand strategy and CRM Specialist). Another respondent emphasized that they are trying to figure out what personality the brand has, so they can incorporate the essence well in the story:

Because if you are, let's say, for instance, a very down-to-earth person as a brand, we cannot make a very new, innovative or hipster brand. Yeah, that's impossible, because that's not what the brand is about. But it's also very important to make sure how do you creatively translate it into the right story in words that we use. (...) Then we think of what is the actual message you're trying to sell? We translate it (Respondent 7, male, Communication Strategy Director).

In this way, the agency is trying to understand the current story that the client articulates but intends to ensure that the client's/brand's values are translated into a compelling narrative, so whoever interacts with the brand gets their values and the mission. Respondent 4 has explained that this process involves a thorough, methodological assessment of the client where they try to challenge them and the message that the brand wants to get across:

So if they talk about quality or about getting the best, we place them in the blue square - It's all about being logical. And if they tell us, well, we are so good for our clients, we'll do anything for them. And we're all about customer intimacy, then we place them in the red spot. So we always explain this theory and everybody can resonate with it because it's quite

simple and we use it for quick modelling of the propositions of everything people tell us. (...) Then we ask them to make a claim which is very hard for them. And we're not looking for the perfect claim. But we are looking for what's happening after they are trying to make a claim because they are always trying to explain what they want to say and then we get the real jewels of the day (male, Account Director).

By challenging the client's views about themselves, the agency is trying to improve the storytelling by eliminating possible discrepancies or other obstacles that could compromise the value that is being proposed by the narrative.

4. 2. 2 By providing/transferring knowledge and information

Another way of using storytelling to communicate a value proposition is when a client's goal is to solely provide information or knowledge to their target audience. The difference from the previous sub-theme lies in understanding that a brand's mission and values do not always equal providing knowledge or information. If this is the case, the agency works on creating narratives that would emphasize the role of a brand as an information or knowledge provider. When this value can be translated into a cohesive story, it works better than a list of facts about the brand's experience. As Respondent 1 puts it:

I was talking about VR, for instance, with one of my clients, I think we had to explain why VR was useful, you know, like, why games were useful. And I said, well, there's, there's a way of, how do you transfer knowledge? You transfer knowledge in a way you can read about it, see it, or you can interact with it. And if you can interact with it, that's a much better way of gaining knowledge than when you just read about it or somebody tells you, or somebody writes it on a board and that kind of stuff (male, Strategy Chief Officer).

Furthermore, when discussing the issues arising with changing the story when the agency tries to improve it, Respondent 2 claimed that it does not equal changing the whole narrative completely, as the brand's expertise should be still reflected: "And they can use that (new narrative) within their new products as well because they really have that expertise and they can really get that message across just based on their expertise." Therefore, knowing how to share information engagingly is crucial since finding information has never been easier than in this digital age. That is the reason why brands and organizations seek help from agencies, as they can assist with transforming factual information into a compelling story that promotes knowledge and information sharing.

4. 2. 3 By communicating a commercial value

Although some clients could be tentative when it comes to sharing their true intention of monetary gain, it is still a goal to be achieved. However, audiences are becoming smarter and they would hardly go after a product if the brand just plainly proclaimed "Buy it, it's the best!" As

Respondent 8 (female, Marketing Manager) stated when addressing why brands cannot go on with the old advertising styles anymore: “I think consumers feel it. Yeah. Like this, this is bullshit.” In those scenarios, storytelling can serve as a useful instrument that allows brands to communicate their (commercial) intentions more subtly. Respondent 9 said that the agency helps them to rather find a narrative with a unique twist:

What you see most of the time is that they (the client) did the thing that everybody does. So they're like, what can we do to just give it a bit of a twist so that it makes an impact? And that's where we come in as a creative agency to think about ways that we.. Yeah, ways that we can attract a certain audience or a certain project. (female, Content Marketer)

Moreover, Respondent 7 shared that their agency focuses on researching certain brain learning processes of the consumers. With the right story, they can influence their buying behaviours:

So the learning process is interesting because the learning process is almost the same as the buying process in the way that the brains process the information. So if I know how you're thinking, your preferable thinking style and the way that you process information in your brain, I'm also quite good in predicting what you're buying behaviour is going to be (male, Strategy Director).

The practitioners are aware that a good story can translate a commercial value into something more meaningful, as it gives their client depth and the ability to enrich a story beyond the simple selling goal. Respondent 8 shared why she thinks that value-based narratives can persuade customers better than any plain advertising: “Say why is this good for you and create from scratch products that are benefiting the world. And that is, that is going to, to help to sell them instead of pushing them” (female, Marketing Manager).

4. 3 Storytelling as establishing a client’s position in the industry

If the content has been optimized and the value has been proposed, storytelling can further serve as a tool to establish or emphasize the position of the client in their industry. The agency does so by articulating the client’s attributes that make it stand out, narrating the vision and development and also preparing the client for potential pitfalls by creating future communication strategies – all this while retaining fluency across all channels. These practices impact predominantly the cognitive engagement by making the customers understand the client’s unique communication styles and their positioning in comparison to the competitors. The client’s position can be established through storytelling in the following ways:

4. 3. 1 By retaining fluency and consistency across all channels

If the client (a brand or a company) wants to be a respected player in the market, the agency keeps an eye on the consistency of information that is being shared, as it hugely affects the client’s

overall credibility. 10 out of 11 respondents shared their thoughts about the importance of having consistent stories across all channels, and how they should be still linked to a bigger narrative rather than positing fragmented information. If the client does not know how to keep the narratives fluent, the agency steps in, as one of the interviewees explained:

What we do is that we create stories within campaigns that link to the biggest story of the organization. (...) And I think that most organizations are still struggling to get their story straight across all their channels. So I think that's the first step if I have a brand image on like Facebook, it should be the same on Instagram. It should be the same on LinkedIn, and I think a lot of organizations are struggling with that. (Respondent 2, female, Senior PR Consultant).

The consistency of the story should be present not only on the social channels or other public touchpoints with the customers but also internally within the organization. Respondent 4 (male, Account Director) shared that “everybody in your company should tell it in the same way consistently and consequently”, later on adding:

And we want them (the client) to keep on telling that story in a compelling way, not just to stop with one brochure or just one website or one presentation. They have to keep on making that brand bigger, bigger and bigger, and keep on adding more stories to it. But most of the companies, customers of ours are not able to do that themselves.

Likewise, another respondent shared her view as to how she nudges the clients in a consistence-driven direction. In her practice, she is guiding the clients by tracking their progress of being consistent and rewarding them if they do well: “So they get points for like creating content on a consistent basis, three articles a week, creating videos on a consistent basis, and three videos a week, getting 10,000 or more organic visitors to the website is also one of the measurements” (Respondent 6, female, B2B Marketer & Brand Strategist). Respondent 7 (male, Strategy Director) has a similar approach when it comes to giving his clients advice on consistency: “Don't go and change your messaging. (...) So in storytelling, it's very important to keep on saying the same thing over and over.” And why this is the case was well summarized by Respondent 10, who explained that being consistent in both content production and communication style leaves a very different impression than having conflicting approaches: “But it's exactly how people communicate with each other. If you're very angry and then suddenly very nice to people, it's confusing, of course. Who are you? Tell me” (male, Creative Director & Copywriter). Therefore, if the produced narrative has high levels of consistency, it has more potential to keep customers engaged genuinely longer and on a wider scope.

4. 3. 2 By differentiating the client from the competition

An excellent example of being differentiated from other brands or companies providing the same services or products is having a story that will stand out. Although the clients might not be aware of all of the competitors in the field, on the contrary, the agencies are trying to thoroughly

assess other actors on the market to fuel the narrative that cannot be claimed by any other entity other than their client. Respondent 4 (male, Account Director) stated: “The second stage we do with them (clients) is fighting the competition. (...) What’s truly distinctive, what cannot be claimed by your competitors or what are they claiming? (...) we check all the stories and all claims of the competitors.” Similarly, Respondent 5 (female, PR & Content Advisor) explained: “There are a lot of stories already out there. So we first want to see, okay, what are the competitors doing?”

When discussing the competition, it is mainly to map out the stories that already have been used by other competitors. However, as Respondent 6 (female, B2B Marketer & Brand Strategist) pointed out, the competitors should not be determining the narrative the brand uses in response: “So the reasoning is the way people or the way companies will look at their website and all of their communications is they're always looking at their competition. So they're letting their competition influence what they are talking about on their website.” This practice could have a detrimental effect on the brand; that is why the agency’s practitioners always try to emphasise how crucial it is to have a unique story, positioning and communication style. In such a manner, it is much easier for them to follow up with other projects or campaigns for the client. Respondent 2 commented:

That was the start of any campaign or at least any PR plan we created, because if you don't have a story if you can't tell me what your USP (unique selling point) is, then I can't get that much message across. (...) and you do not get recognizable. People don't remember you because it changes every time and you really have to choose your positioning really carefully. Um, yeah, because you want to stand out and you want to be successful. So that's all part of the story you're going to tell (female, Senior PR Consultant).

4. 3. 3 By articulating the client’s vision and development

Articulating a client’s vision through a story can engage the customers more, as they are more likely to be interested in the brand if they know why it started and what is the vision for the future. It is noteworthy to mention that the brand’s transitions, developments and future vision are not the same as the brand’s mission. While mission suggests more of a direction on how to achieve the proposed goal and it is rather short-term, vision sets out where is the brand headed (Bowen, 2018). For efficiently assessing that in the story, Respondent 10 talked about an approach adopted by Bill Bernbach, a renewed advertising agency founder, whose idea of tracking back the roots and history of a company is still used by the agency where Respondent 10 works now: “So there's a close connection between story and history. And I think he (Bill) also worked from the perspective of digging the history of branch... and then come up with with a sort of truth about the brand and then start telling a story about it.” Upon further thought, he continued: “So if you build on history, you have the future. That's a nice way of calling it” (male, Creative Director & Copywriter).

On a similar note, Respondent 3 shared her expertise in helping brands understand what they want to

tell in their story by utilizing a so-called BHAG technique:

The BHAG is the big, hairy, audacious goal. It means, like, what is your vision like 20 years from now? What is your company look like? What are you doing at that point? How big are you? Where do you work? All of that. So we make them formulate BHAG first. Then once they're in that future state of mind, we tell them, okay, now we're going to find what is the character that you have currently? Like you're your authentic character at the moment, but also looking forward to the future. Where do you want to be? (female, B2B Marketer & Brand Strategist)

Those examples illustrate how the agencies help their clients with brainstorming ideas (or even preparing communication plans) based on their history, development or vision they wish to share with the audiences. Storytelling then becomes a tool that better positions the client's intentions and allows the customers to recognize the brand's unique nature.

4. 3. 4 By responding to challenges (crisis communication)

The emergence of this sub-theme gained importance when half of the interviewees (mainly those with a public relations background) explained that one of the main points of establishing their client's unique position regards crisis communication – creating future narratives as a swift response to possible challenges the brand might face. Respondent 11 explained:

We need to guide the brands towards the right direction. And that has to be a very solid story there attached to that direction. So we're thinking with our clients about predictable surprises. So if we did a session with legal and we just ask them, okay, what are possible crises that you can get yourself into? For example, a child could die from Lego. Okay. Wow. Of course, a child could choke on a (Lego) brick, for example. Do you have something ready if that's happened? (male, Managing Director)

Crisis communication is also about handling challenges and knowing how to aptly respond to current affairs if they happen since presenting such a narrative says a lot about the brand and how they deal with such scenarios. Agencies are more skilled in understanding the complex media ecosystem, but the interviewees shared that this is sometimes hard to evaluate by their clients, especially when the in-house management looks at the situation through different lenses. Respondent 5 mentioned: “But a lot of clients are also sometimes under pressure, you know, from their boss and they need to get out of this message. And yeah, sometimes we do advise them not to do this, but they choose differently. And yeah, that is something that could backfire, you know” (female, PR & Content Advisor).

Although the scope of the help that the client receives with their story depends on the contract details with the agency, Respondent 1 described the cooperation in response to market challenges as follows: “Like if say you're cooking a meal, we are the pantry to you being the cook, you know, like maybe, ingredients in your closets” (male, Chief Strategy Officer).

4. 4 Storytelling as reinforcing relevance both for and of the customer

Last but not least, agencies also use storytelling to emphasize the role of the customer who gets into a more prominent, central position in the client-customer relationship. This theme is therefore focused on the agency's efforts to create or use storytelling that have first and foremost high relevance for the customers, and is predominantly customer-oriented rather than brand-oriented (which can be reflected in the writing style used in these narratives, which would be talking directly to the customer -e.g. not "our customers matter" but "you matter to us"). In this way, the stories can have the strongest impact on the behavioural engagement of the consumers, as they are trying to engage them by the following means:

4. 4. 1 By enhancing authenticity, transparency, and honesty

The most prominent aspect that reinforces relevance for the customers which was praised by all interviewees was essentially a call to keep the narrative real, authentic and truthful. The agency always tries to remind the client that they should not be spreading messages that are fabricated, as customers can always tell the difference. As Respondent 2 said: "Like focus on what you are and take that and not be something that you're not (...) and that's all that we tell our clients anyway - never lie." She continued with an example of how a claim about sustainability by a flight company would not come across as authentic:

For example, if I am like KLM, and if I'm saying we are really sustainable and really honest and everything, people are not going to believe that. And you can say we are the most sustainable flight organization. You can tell them that you are that, but you can't say sustainable because no one will believe you. So you have to change your message to what your audience will accept. (female, Senior PR Consultant)

Being authentic helps to increase credibility, which can attract more customers who are willing to engage with entities that are not pretentious. Respondent 8 mentioned: "I think authenticity plays a big role in differentiating yourself. Yes. Of course, the big companies learned how to stand out from the crowd, but still, authenticity will always help" (female, Marketing Manager). Likewise, Respondent 5 (female, PR and Content Advisor) mentioned that the agency always nudges the collaboration in a way that "motivate(s) them to do it as authentic as possible." On a similar note, Respondent 7 (male, Strategy Director) shared that the agency also cannot create a story based on misleading claims, therefore it is something they are trying to be very straight-forward about with the clients, often reminding them of the importance of honesty: "So also your storytelling, if it's not true, if it's not different, if it's not something to shout about, and if it's not relevant to me as a customer - those four questions that we ask - then it's useless."

4. 4. 2 By addressing customers' passions and needs

This type of storytelling puts the major emphasis on creating narratives that are so relevant to the customers that they want to engage with them organically. Having certain values that the client

wishes to communicate is one thing (as addressed in the previous theme) but knowing how to deliver value that resonates with the customer's needs and passions is one step further. Agencies are taking their time to properly research the audience so they know what type of narrative would fit the best. As Respondent 5 (female, PR & Content Advisor) described: "We do some research about the audience. What do they love? What do they like?" Correspondingly, Respondent 9 (female, Content Marketer) echoed this claim: "And you also have to think about for who are you doing this? What is the audience you want to target?" When discussing the relevance of customers' needs with Respondent 1 (male, Chief Strategy Officer), he highlighted the necessity of thinking of the recipient end as well: "If I've got an audience in the end, it's again the audience that you want to reach and that audience to do something with that piece of information, you know? So that's very important."

Customers can engage with a brand or piece of content due to various, oftentimes highly personalized reasons, but that is exactly the point that the practitioners try to incorporate into the narratives. According to Respondent 3, targeting those passions meant having a story straight away:

I would say that in X (the agency where the interviewee worked), everything was embedded in stories because we were always using customers' passions. So by default, it involves stories, right. So, it's always, you know, connecting. If you're tapping into consumers' passions, it means you have to tell a story because you need to get to what makes people excited" (female, Brand Consultant).

Knowing what the target audiences need is a part of a strategy that the agencies undertake to better tailor the narratives. This process could be lengthy yet fruitful, and Respondent 9 described the reason in a very simple, fitting way: "So we were looking into the people's needs and then identifying what would be the need and try to create a story out of that" (female, Marketing Manager).

4. 4. 3 By responding to customers' feedback and queries

This research has brought up an unexpected outcome: Almost all interviewees shared their observations claiming that their clients are not interacting with the customers as much as they should. They said that although customer happiness is very much relevant for clients, they often forget to further nurture the communication exchange with their audiences. Respondent 2 stated that this could be quite costly if the brand does not do otherwise:

I think a lot of brands aren't really focused on starting with engaging with their audience. They're all like sending, not receiving. So if you don't interact and just focus on yourself and like, this is the message I want to get across, and then you, you lose it in the end, I guess. (female, Senior PR Consultant)

Similarly, Respondent 6 (B2B Marketer & Brand Strategist) shared that is why they need to guide their clients towards deeper interactions: "A lot of times my clients forget to look at their customers. (...) so (I have to ask) what are the things that your customers are actually asking?" To figure this

out, agencies are trying to make sure they take the customer feedback and questions into account. Respondent 7 (male, Strategy Director) shared that they even contact the client's customers to hear out their opinions: "Then we go to their (client's) customers. They (the clients) give us a couple of names and telephone, phone numbers and we'll check whatever they have said to us, how their customers think about that - if it's true. And we challenge their proposition."

Trying to talk to customers to improve the client's story for the future seemed to be a common routine for the practitioners. Trying to understand the consumer's point of view could change how would be the products or services marketed, described and promoted in the future. As Respondent 8 shared:

So we would basically do a focus group where we were going to ask a lot of questions. We are going to showcase a product and we are going to allow also people to tell the story, to tell the stories, like what is the story that they see within that product? (...) So it was always a kind of a reality check back to the story that we as marketers created it and it was a reality check... (female, Marketing Manager).

4. 4. 4 By providing solutions and helping customers out

Another level of using storytelling to enhance relevance is producing narratives that reflect what the customers ask for and address the issues they might have. Furthermore, it also means giving them more agency and self-control in the whole brand-customer chain. This type of engagement can support loyalty among the customers, as it would give them a feeling of not falling prey to marketing attempts; contrarily, the brand would produce narratives that incorporate solutions and empower the customers. Respondent 6 (B2B Marketer & Brand Strategist) shared her views on how she's helping the brands create stories that would serve the customers first with a witty *Star Wars* analogy:

So I showed them (clients) a picture of Yoda and Luke as a Jedi. And I said in this story, You guys are the Yoda, and Luke is your customer. Luke is constantly fighting the bad guys. He's constantly having all kinds of problems and trouble (...) And Yoda is a teacher. So, can we be the teachers in our field, in our like in our branch, in our industry? Can we be the teachers of our industry? Can we make sure that our website is the Wikipedia of whatever that thing is that you're selling? And then automatically the Lukes will come to you? (...) I want them to constantly think like, am I writing this for Luke? Yeah, is Luke going to be helped with this content? Is my customer going to be helped and make the right decision?

Another interviewee pointed out that to provide solutions, the first step is to set the insights straight and know what the customer wants:

And we just touched upon research and insights, understanding the audience, if you start there. And then if that exercise, researching the audience, provides you with a certain insight which you could use with the story and maybe emphasize more the product, or more this product does this and this and this for you (Respondent 11, male, Managing Director).

Telling a narrative about a helpful product or service is great, but according to Respondent 5, the customers value another thing too – trying to be better as a brand in general. She referred to that as “just looking further than only your company, you know?”, while another respondent emphasized the element of elevated customer experience, not just a provision of one generic solution: “And then like if you keep on thinking that, like, if you do an experience, you start with, what's the meaning of what you want to give the customer in the end. So you want to give them a product that enriches their life” (Respondent 1, male, Chief Strategy Officer). And although he said that this might not be the case for all the brands, this theme clearly shows that producing narratives that have relevance to the customer (while simultaneously retaining the relevance of the customer) is one of the main areas of strategic cooperation between agencies and their clients.

The findings have revealed that the strategic use of storytelling takes place through 4 types of practices: content optimization, value proposition, client establishment and customer relevance reinforcement. Further implications stemming from the 4 presented themes, along with their comparison with the existing literature and practical suggestions are thoroughly assessed in the next chapter.

5 CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

The main aim of this research was to understand the strategic use of storytelling in the creative field, more precisely led by the research question: How are creative agencies using storytelling as a strategic communication practice to engage their client's customers?

The research revealed that storytelling holds crucial importance in the communication strategies executed by the agencies for customer engagement. Although the application of narratives varies depending on the proposed goals (that is why the interviewees also claimed that there is normally no standardized way of measuring customer engagement) the explored themes reflect 4 distinct areas for using storytelling: content optimization, value proposition, brand's position establishment and reinforcement of customers' relevance.

To maintain clarity, the differences between the proposed themes should be outlined first, as this categorization also implies what is their unique connection to the research question of this study. Therefore, when we are discussing the content optimization, we tackle *how* the agencies create and make the content better (which allows retaining the attention of the audiences); when we are addressing the value proposition function, we address the *what* within storytelling – what the brands offer, what is the value they try to communicate with the help of agencies (which builds upon the audience's awareness about the brand). When it comes to the use of storytelling for the brand positioning on the market, we focus on *who* and *why* – who is the brand in its very essence, why are they different from their competition and coming down to understanding the unique position of the actor that is being marketed (which supports the potential acquisition by the audiences). And last but not least, with the fourth theme of emphasizing the relevance for and of the customer, the implication is understanding *for whom* is the story created. Therefore, all of these parts are essentially describing different segments of the research question as to how is storytelling used as a strategic communication practice by answering underlying questions of how, what, why and for whom. Answering the question “for whom” has a very straightforward implication for the audience and their engagement – but in other cases, it is equally important, since if the agency wants to communicate *for* someone, first of all, they have to set the narratives about “who, what and why” straight. Following this reasoning, we can see that the effort for engaging audiences is always present, although in various degrees. Ultimately, it is not only about the agency offering something to the client's customers to make them engaged, but also what is offered, how is it offered, and why – all those questions matter greatly.

Summarizing and reflecting on the results in more depth, the research revealed that agencies use storytelling as a content optimization tool to increase the quality of the content that brands use in their communication with the target audiences. As higher quality means more reasons for engagement, agencies are contributing to this use of storytelling by adding or creating new content with specific elements, namely a human factor (or the story's main protagonist) and an entertaining

factor. Moreover, they are trying to simplify the content and deliver clear and comprehensive key messages to the audience and in doing so, they are also crafting the story emotionally and touchingly, as the audiences seem to respond better when emotionally triggered.

Secondly, storytelling practices are used by the agencies when they help brands communicate their value proposition. This can either mean helping them successfully translate the brand's values and mission into a compelling story, or transferring knowledge and information through narratives instead of a mere presentation of facts and figures. On top of that, communicating value propositions sometimes means commercial value intending to sell or promote certain products. In this way, agencies step in to craft a story that would be fitting with the commercial product rather than "shouting out" about the quality without any further context.

Thirdly, agencies use storytelling to establish or reinforce a brand's position in the industry. This implementation is the most common when it comes to responding to challenges or preparing crisis communication materials for the brand. The agency also does so by upholding the levels of consistency and fluency across all channels, reminding their clients that the story shared by the brand with their target audiences should be the same on each communication channel. Reinforcing a brand's position in the market also means creating narratives that set the brand apart from its competitors by focusing on the unique attributes that cannot be claimed by any other party. Moreover, agencies also help the clients out by generating stories about the clients' development and vision for the future, allowing the audiences to fully realize who the brand in question is and thus create more space for predominantly cognitive engagement.

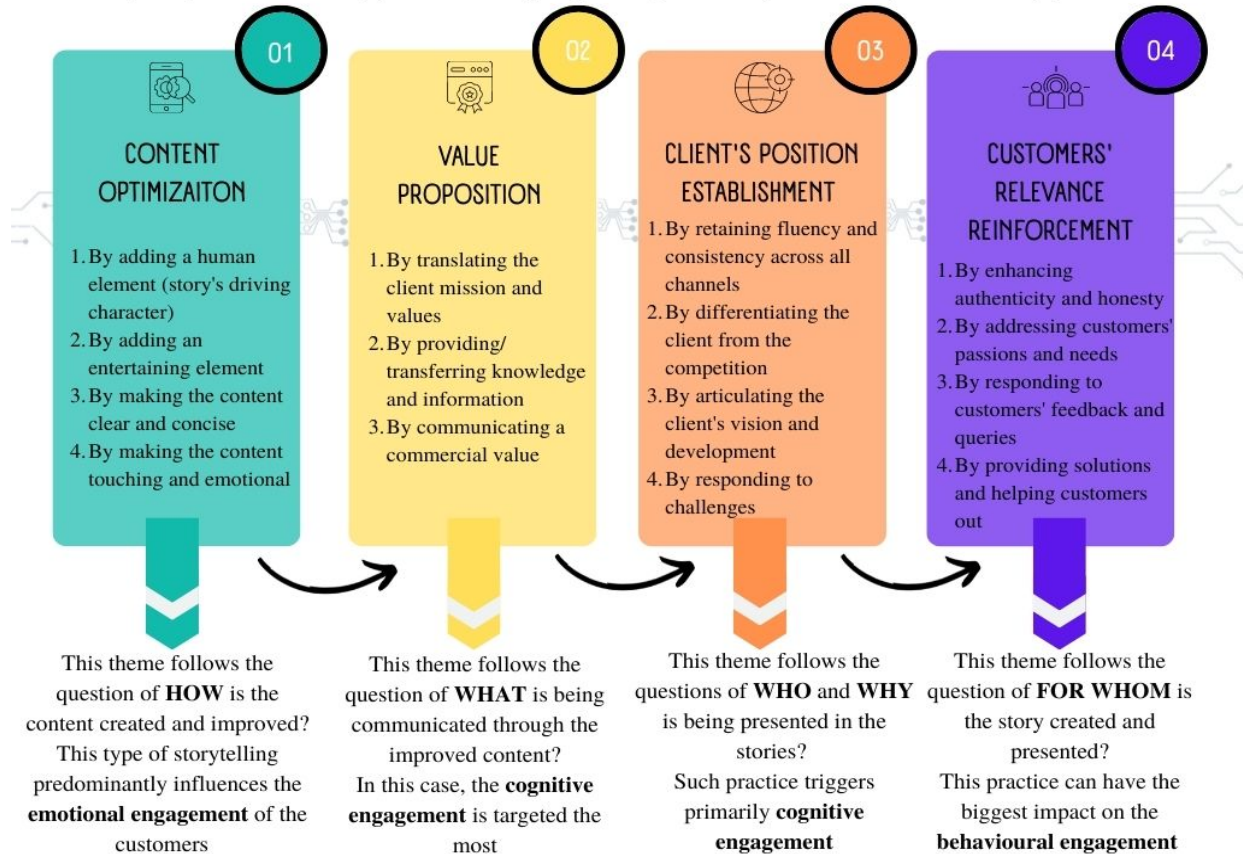
Last but not least, another strategic use of storytelling lies in creating relevance for a customer by giving them the central position in the client's story. This is being executed by narratives that enhance authenticity, honesty and truth, so the customers feel cared for. Moreover, crafting stories that address the customers' needs and passions, along with taking into account the feedback and questions the customers have towards the client. Stories are being used as solution providers so the customers become keener on choosing the client that helped them before, which has the biggest impact on the customers' behavioural patterns.

All in all, with the use of storytelling, agencies help their clients to adjust the key messages they want to communicate to their audiences by making them appropriate for the right target groups, allowing the brands to stay on the track and efficiently communicate their propositions so that customers understand the value and feel compelled to further engage with the client's brand or company. The use of storytelling can either happen simultaneously in relation to all 4 themes or can be present only in those areas that require improvement as requested by the client or deemed by the agency. Similarly, each practice targets predominantly a specific dimension of engagement, but that does not mean that the other ones cannot be triggered too. However, such nuances are greatly dependent on particular projects and individual perceptions of customers, hence are hard to take for granted in general. To better illustrate the overall effects and connections, the following figure

provides an overview of the themes and their implications:

Figure 2: Detailed explanation of the findings and their implications

Storytelling that mediates engagement is strategically used by creative agencies through the following practices:



5. 1 Theoretical reflection and theoretical contributions

Looking at the previous research and its comparison with the results of the study, we can draw upon some interesting findings that further contribute to the existing research. For instance, when we look at the first theme of content optimization, we see that the importance of emotional triggers, concise structure and the addition of humorous aspects have been emphasized in the previous research too (Chiu et al., 2012), along with elements supporting relatability and authenticity (Gilliam et al., 2014; Hall, 2019). The role of the central character that acts as the story's protagonist has been explored only as an integrated part of the story (König, 2020), while its representation by real people (influences or celebrities) on a premise of collaboration with the clients has not been mentioned before. The findings presented in the first theme align with the ideas proposed by Carroll et al. (2014) who highlighted the importance of sharing clear key messages that are meant to catch the attention of the customer and as explained by Pratt (2004), even alter the level of audience engagement. Overall, this theme has the closest connection with emotional engagement, as the goal of this type of storytelling is to create an affectionate bond between the customers and the brand

(Vivek et al., 2012; Woodside, 2010).

The second theme concerning value proposition surprisingly echoed the findings by Gilliam et al. (2014), who explored value transfer through storytelling within retail sales. However, the incorporation of knowledge and information sharing has not been researched in such depth, therefore it presents an intriguing contribution to value-sharing processes in the marketing field. Another interesting aspect is seeing that there was a prediction for storytelling as a bridge between a brand's values and customers' need for belonging (Kaufmann, 2003), yet the previous research did not explicitly mention the use of narratives for solely sharing client's mission and values. The value proposition can improve consumer's perceptions about the client and shape cognitive engagement and public opinion (Jenkins et al., 2017; McDougal et al., 2021)

Brands have been using storytelling practices to claim their position or share their origins with the public (Zerfass et al., 2018) or establish their identity (Siegert & Hangartner, 2017). However, the agency has the most notable contribution exactly in this case. By helping brands out with narratives that could be used in case of future issues or crises, and by bringing attention to the importance of consistency across all communication channels, they upgrade the quality of storytelling for their clients. Likewise, having an external ally who helps the brands to find their unique place and voice in a complex ecosystem of markets, along with letting them reconnect to their roots and vision for the future has not been extensively discussed in the existing literature – yet presents a great significance. In such a manner, this use of storytelling touches upon the cognitive dimension of engagement, as the underlying goal is to make an impression on the customer. If the client's deliverables are presented in a consistent, comprehensible manner, it sets them apart from the competition and the customers are more likely to be compelled to explore the brand further (Küpers et al., 2013; Ahn & Back, 2018).

Speaking of the customers, the fourth theme and its focus on the audience cast more light on the relevance of putting the recipients into a more central position – an occurrence that has been explored by Gambetti et al. (2016). By allowing the customers to retain more control, incorporating their feedback and providing answers and solutions to their queries, the agencies are aiming at improving the behavioural engagement of the target groups. Behavioural manifestation (active role of the customer) has been addressed in the previous research (Javornik & Mandelli, 2012) but not in the context of offering practical steps that should be done if a brand wishes to retain this approach. This theme can be understood better from the strategic perspective that looks more into targeting and including the audiences in a practice of co-creation, rather than seeing them as mere recipients of the message (Hatch & Schultz, 2010), so the client-customer relationship can be improved (Bange et al., 2019).

The results of this study have shown the interplay in a triangle of participating actors – the agency, their clients and the customers. The goal was to shed the light on strategic practices that are taking place within the agencies when they try to assist their clients with the communication

blueprints. The main theoretical contribution has been bridging the gap between the research that has been conducted on storytelling, strategic communication and customer engagement separately by presenting how are those concepts intertwined in real life. While academia has contributed to these topics in an extensive manner (e.g. Zerfass et al., 2018; Hallahan et al., 2007; König, 2020; Lazauskas & Snow, 2018; Brodie et al., 2011; Hollebeek et al., 2014), there has been a visible gap when it came to the sphere of influence those three parties have on each other. The reason for that might be based on the fact that hiring partner agencies to improve storytelling has been exponentially growing only in the past years, that is why this study aimed to bring more contemporary practices into the academic field.

Moreover, the study is offering a conceptualization of strategic practices that are used by the agencies daily within a bigger picture. The findings propose 4 distinct areas in which storytelling takes place, pointing out various reasons for its use. The research sheds more light on understanding these reasons and thoroughly explaining how the agency turns them into compelling stories based on what the client wants to achieve with the narrative. As strategic storytelling has not been researched through the lenses of a creative agency yet, this study provides an intriguing addition to the existing research. Future studies that would like to research or work on a case study about this topic more in-depth should take into account the type of a brand the agency represents, what services the agency provides and also the level of engagement that wants to be achieved.

5. 2 Practical contributions and implications

On another note, the practicality of this research lies in a clear categorization and targeting of areas where storytelling is strategically used by the agencies. This study, therefore, offers a clarification of the relationship that the brands have with the creative agencies, and the impact this cooperation has on the target audiences.

Such information can be utilized by the agencies in their future practices. First of all, agencies who wish to improve the services they offer to their clients have a chance to review the elements that could elevate the quality of their storytelling practices. The proposed categorization could serve as a blueprint for agencies to check whether the narratives they create for the clients cover all necessary areas. They could reevaluate if their storytelling is enriched with relatable elements such as fun or human factor, if it's clear and concise and find ways to trigger the customers' emotions accordingly.

Moreover, if the agencies know where is storytelling used, how, and for what reasons, this information will allow them to improve the strategic planning of projects, campaigns and content production alongside their clients. By being transparent and aware of the power of created narratives, they can reinforce trust and balance the expectations of their clients (and subsequently, the customers' trust as well). As this research shows that storytelling can be used for different purposes

(content optimization, value proposition, brand position establishment and customer relevance reinforcement), agencies can better target those areas and the elements they should address before starting a new project or campaign. The agencies that are still hesitant as to how to create well-told stories for their clients should not try to push narratives that are just “trendy”; instead, they should adequately reflect their client’s vision, mission and origin. As the role of customers in this chain becomes more central, the agencies should emphasize the importance of including customers’ feedback, needs and passions in future stories that the client wants to share. They should not neglect the fact that the client is an equal partner who probably knows the brand better, yet the agencies have more experience with translating those values to audiences. For the most efficient storytelling, both sides should be honest about this fact and listen to each other thoroughly.

Agencies should also keep in mind that the in-house marketing department of a brand might not have enough insights into the planned storytelling and strategizing, therefore the agencies should try to organize a sufficient number of meetings to monitor, share and evaluate the progress of created narratives with the clients.

Furthermore, it has been explored that both the brands and agencies should look beyond the expected and normalized behaviours such as the number of visitors on the website, and the number of likes or followers, since those activities do not always reflect the depth of customer engagement. Instead, they should try to nurture long-term, more profound relationships with their audiences, namely by transparently addressing their questions, incorporating their feedback and queries and providing authentic, solution-based content.

5. 3. Limitations

Regarding the methodological part of this study, it is important to address certain aspects that could have posed a limitation to this research. Although the non-probability, snowball sampling method is well-used among researchers, it does not allow for too much generalization (Silverman, 2011). Other aspects that can contribute to a limited general application of the results are the size of the sample and the international background. To be more specific, it might be precarious to assume that the responses provided by 11 people unquestionably reflect practices shared by the rest of the practitioners working in other agencies. However, the results of this study are based on the frequent similarities in responses that were echoed by the interviewees independently from one another, which implies a possibility of shared practices in the field.

Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that 10 out of 11 respondents are based in the Netherlands, so it would be appropriate to assume that the results might reflect the methods typical for the Dutch market. However, some of the agencies are internationally based and/or serve international clients, therefore the differences compared to the industry’s practices in other countries might be minor.

Another thing that needs to be addressed was the underestimation of limited accessibility

when it came to finding the respondents. As this research required interviews with experts, not the opinions of the customers, it was significantly more difficult to find the right people who would be free to talk within the proposed timeframe of the data-gathering stage of this study. Moreover, since all of the interviewees work for different clients and have different backgrounds in the field of communications, marketing and PR, they sometimes do not oversee every aspect of the client-customer relationship happening within the agency (as there are always multiple departments dealing with different stages of this relationship). This fact should have been taken into better consideration as it could have impacted the depth and scope of information discussed in the interviews – for instance, respondents might have assumed how other departments in their agency deal with certain issues instead of sharing the actual procedures. In the future, this issue could be resolved by consulting multiple practitioners from different departments of the same agencies.

Finally, it is noteworthy to mention that while conducting interviews, many practitioners shared a lot of interesting information about other elements (e.g. the impacts of budgets or positive effects of stable partner agencies in long-term cooperation) or those that are intertwined in storytelling practices that unfortunately could not be elaborated on in more depth, since they were not directly linked to the implications for customer engagement. Therefore, had the research question been formulated in a slightly different manner, more information could have been incorporated into this study. The proposed research question still holds great significance as it allowed us to narrow down the scope of information. However, with the benefit of hindsight, the proposed analysis could have included more emphasis on understanding the reasons for the use of storytelling in general, outside of customer engagement.

5. 4 Suggestions for future research

This research introduces multiple opportunities for broadening the comprehension of the use of storytelling in the creative field. Concerning the limitations that have been outlined in the previous section, it would be interesting to see the outcome of this research if it were conducted with a larger sample of practitioners across different countries. The extended scope of such potential research could determine the nuances within the international context or on the contrary further reinforce the findings of this study.

In addition, within a longer timeframe, it would be interesting to compare B2C and B2B agencies based on what is their primal focus to understand the differences/ similarities and possible spill-overs among those. Moreover, trying to understand the different approaches of PR agencies and marketing agencies would be also intriguing since all of them are focused on a different delivery angle when working for a client. While here the “criterium” was a communication agency that works for a client, further research could be concerned with those nuances in the delivery process. Related to the aspect of different agencies exhibiting various practices, another interesting suggestion would be to study the overall use of storytelling by the agencies for reasons other than customer

engagement. An area that has been addressed multiple times by the respondents is leaning more toward the understanding of the impact that corporate storytelling has on the integrity of the organizations and the loyalty levels of the employees.

Lastly, some interviewees also pointed in the direction of creating more immersive storytelling experiences at the intersection of the creative and technological fields, intending to mediate more profound engagement with the audiences. This idea presents an interesting opportunity to explore the current progress and overall situation of those immersive experiences (mainly by incorporating the use of AI or VR) and how they differ from more traditional ways of storytelling, along with the implication of what those developments mean for customer engagement. One way or another, storytelling is not going anywhere - and since the importance of stories in our society cannot be omitted, it opens up many exciting possibilities for researching this field even further.

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Appendix A

Consent request for participating in research

FOR QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, CONTACT:

Viktória Vargová – email address: **615417vv@student.eur.nl** or **victoria.vargova@gmail.com**

DESCRIPTION

You are invited to participate in research about how marketing and PR agencies use storytelling in their projects, campaigns, and stunts. The purpose of the study is to understand a practitioner's approach toward their projects, audiences, storytelling practices, and strategies that are being used in their work.

Your acceptance to participate in this study means that you accept to be interviewed. In general terms, my questions will be related to your insights as an agency's practitioner, sharing your experiences with approaching campaigns, projects, or PR stunts, and your opinion on storytelling as a tool for engaging audiences.

Unless you prefer that no recordings are made, I will make an audio recording of the interview (recording over Zoom/Teams if conducted online).

I will use the material from the interview and my observations exclusively for academic work, in particular as a source of data for further research for my Master's thesis.

RISKS AND BENEFITS

None of your personal information would be disclosed to any third parties or processed/used in any other way except for academic purposes. Participants in the study will only be referred to by pseudonyms, and its terms of characteristics needed for the study e.g. their work role.

With that in mind, you can indicate if you agree with disclosing the name of your workplace and your birth year. This data would be used for a general description of the respondents' sample and their fields of expertise within the marketing/PR sphere.

Do you agree with sharing the name of your workplace? YES/NO

○ In case you agree, please specify here:

Do you agree with sharing your birth year? YES/ NO

○ In case you agree, please specify here:

Moreover, you are always free not to answer any particular question, and/or stop participating at any point.

TIME INVOLVEMENT

Your participation in this study will take approximately 45 – 60 minutes. You may interrupt your participation at any time.

PAYMENTS

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation.

PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

If you have decided to accept to participate in this project, please understand your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. If you prefer, your identity will be made known in all written data resulting from the study. Otherwise, your privacy will be maintained in all published and written data resulting from the study.

CONTACTS AND QUESTIONS

If you have questions about your rights as a study participant or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, you may contact – anonymously, if you wish – the thesis supervisor, Dr Mijke Slot at slot@eshcc.eur.nl.

SIGNING THE CONSENT FORM

Unless having an oral consent preference, you can consent to participation in the study by signing/ inserting your digital signature below:

I give consent to participate and be recorded in this study.

Name:

Date:

Signature:

Thank you for your time!

Appendix B

MA Thesis Interviews: Topic Guide

Warm-up

- Can you tell me more about your current position in the company? How long have you been working in this field?
- What are your responsibilities within this function?
- Can you briefly describe the current projects you work on or who are your clients?
- Can you pick one project that you're the proudest of that involves storytelling?

Storytelling

- What is storytelling for you? How would you define storytelling?
- What role does storytelling play in the agency you work for?
- How important is storytelling for the clients you work for?
- How important is storytelling to reach an audience in your line of work?
- Have you worked on projects that involved storytelling?
- Let's go back to your example. Now we can discuss various elements, such as storytelling elements, engagement, and strategic implications.

Pre-campaign:

- How are you trying to translate your client's values, mission, or image into a campaign?
- How are those elements reflected in the campaign?
- How do you constitute a story based on these elements? Where does it all begin?
- Do you have a strategic plan that you follow before working on a project? Some sort of to-do list?
- What helps you to understand your client's expectations and the audience they want to target?
- What is the role that the target audience plays in the preparation of a campaign?
- What factors do you need to consider when you try to map your target audience? Are things like the demographics or their e.g. daily routines important?

Creating the campaign:

- What are the most important elements of the narrative you are creating for your campaign? Do you try to use some e.g. humorous aspects or something that will make the campaign relatable?
- Can you show me in one of your campaigns how you were the engaging audience?
- How are you trying to represent the client through the campaign/ story?
- How are you sharing the campaign with the audience? What are the channels?
- Are you monitoring the consistency of the created narratives across all used channels/ platforms?
- Do you have some strategy for approaching the campaign creation – what are the decisions you need to take?

During/ post-campaign

- How would you define customer engagement?

- Do you have a standardized way of defining or measuring engagement in your agency?
- What is the importance of audience engagement for your agency?
- Is there any way that allows you to observe customers' engagement activity or their impressions after a campaign?
- Are there any channels or tools that enable you to map the levels of customer engagement?
- Could you observe any changes in customer behaviours after a campaign after the project X, Y, Z was released?
- What is the role that the audiences play in the campaign co-creation?
- What do you think is the most engaging project you have been working on?

Appendix C

The second stage of coding (axial) presents 157 codes that were created by a merger of the original 501 codes. Moreover, this step shows that each of the codes has been assigned to the Code Group for better orientation and comprehension.
















Code Report – Grouped by: Code Groups

All (157) codes in (13) code groups



Agency-brand(client) relationship

25 Codes:

-  ○ agency helps to manage client's expectations
-  ○ Agency as an equal partner in story creation
-  ○ agency as holding the client accountable
-  ○ agency as upgrading the client's quality level
-  ○ agency has to keep their reputation
-  ○ agency helping the client to reconnect to their core values
-  ○ agency helping to shape responses to customers
-  ○ Agency optimizing content for different channels
-  ○ Agency translating the brand into a strategic story/ desired output
-  ○ agency trying to understand the characteristics of the brand
-  ○ agency understanding different buying and thinking behaviours
-  ○ agency wants the client to be more customer-oriented
-  ○ agency: diving into the ins and outs of the brand
-  ○ agency: helps the client to navigate the complex media system
-  ○ agency: tailoring the content creation

- ◊ ○ Goal: educating and helping out clients
 - ◊ ○ Goal: meet the targets
 - ◊ ○ Goal: meeting certain KPIs
 - ◊ ○ Goal: monetary reward
 - ◊ ○ Goal: selling the company in the future
 - ◊ ○ improvements: steady tempo, no rushing
 - ◊ ○ knowing if the agency-client is a match
 - ◊ ○ Narratives are regulated by the agency
 - ◊ ○ Planning: thorough research to get the brand's soul
 - ◊ ○ Symbiotic relationship of the agency and the client
-



Brand's position

20 Codes:

- ◊ ○ Brand: as a teacher, not a seller
- ◊ ○ Brand: as the mind and soul while agency as the heart
- ◊ ○ Brand: be responsive if that is the role
- ◊ ○ Brand: can be sometimes lost in their story
- ◊ ○ Brand: caring for their audiences
- ◊ ○ Brand: collabs with influencers - acting as brand ambassadors
- ◊ ○ Brand: connected to its roots
- ◊ ○ Brand: creating a storytelling experience is a necessity
- ◊ ○ Brand: finding sustainable business models

- ◊ ○ Brand: finding what separates them from the other brands
 - ◊ ○ Brand: getting to the mind of consumers
 - ◊ ○ Brand: giving empty promises
 - ◊ ○ Brand: knowing what is relevant for the customer
 - ◊ ○ Brand: knowing what values they want to communicate to customers
 - ◊ ○ Brand: knowing what you are proudest of
 - ◊ ○ Brand: knowing WHO is your audience
 - ◊ ○ Brand: looking for new employees
 - ◊ ○ Brand: not having experience with marketing themselves
 - ◊ ○ Brand: Owning their story and knowing their whys and whats
 - ◊ ○ Brand: understanding the right communication style and channel
-



Elements of importance

24 Codes:

- ◊ ○ Agency as a communications' service provider
- ◊ ○ brand as a personality
- Elements
- ◊ ○ Elements: authenticity
- ◊ ○ Elements: bring value to consumers
- ◊ ○ Elements: Chronology
- ◊ ○ Elements: clarity and straight bigger picture
- ◊ ○ Elements: consistency










- ◊ ○ Elements: creating something relatable
 - ◊ ○ Elements: drama/ problem/resolution
 - ◊ ○ Elements: empathy
 - ◊ ○ Elements: entertainment
 - ◊ ○ Elements: flexibility
 - ◊ ○ Elements: human connections and driving characters
 - ◊ ○ Elements: revoking memories
 - ◊ ○ Elements: story should stick and be easy to remember
 - ◊ ○ Elements: touching and emotional
 - ◊ ○ Insights: urgent topic
 - ◊ ○ Planning: technical and logical
 - ◊ ○ recognisability
 - Supporting elements
 - ◊ ○ Supporting elements: Engaging every sense - touch, viewing, voice, hearing
 - ◊ ○ Supporting elements: Visuals that embody the spirit of the brand/ product
 - ◊ ○ Supporting elements: writing style - as if the company wrote it
-



Engagement of the customers

14 Codes:









- ◊ ○ Engagement: asking for customer feedback before story creation
- ◊ ○ Engagement: based on emotional triggers
- ◊ ○ Engagement: based on the brand sharing the same values with the customer

-  ○ Engagement: Being relevant and convenient for the customer
 -  ○ Engagement: creative to retain the visibility
 -  ○ Engagement: depends on technical delivery
 -  ○ Engagement: hard to measure
 -  ○ Engagement: a mere reflection of the quality of content
 -  ○ Engagement: more difficult with wide audiences
 -  ○ Engagement: not a priority of every brand
 -  ○ Engagement: sharing WoM and experiences
 -  ○ Engagement: simultaneously through multiple channels
 -  ○ Engagement: taking the customer's opinion into account
 -  ○ Engagement: there must be a reason to engage - depth and relevancy
-



Future suggestions and improvements

9 Codes:

-  ○ Improvement: better understanding the audience
-  ○ Improvement: genuine, clear and concise content
-  ○ Improvement: intensify the client-agency cooperation
-  ○ Improvement: knowing how to translate the value internationally
-  ○ Improvement: making the customer the hero of the story
-  ○ Improvement: merging teams into one revenue team
-  ○ Improvement: stable partner agencies
-  ○ Improvement: steady tempo, no rushing

- ◊ ◊ Improvement: stricter market policies
-

Independent codes

5 Codes:

- ◊ ◊ Building a story is a difficult process
 - ◊ ◊ Easier to create a new story if the audience doesn't know the brand well
 - ◊ ◊ Examples: Lego movie
 - ◊ ◊ Impact: customers/ clients
 - ◊ ◊ Mediating interactive experiences
-

Measuring CE

4 Codes:

- ◊ ◊ Measuring CE: behaviour analysis
 - ◊ ◊ Measuring CE: CRM or marketing automation metrics
 - ◊ ◊ Measuring CE: emotional tracking
 - ◊ ◊ Measuring CE: no universal approach
-

Negatives and pitfalls

7 Codes:

- ◊ ◊ Impact: Limiting budgets
- ◊ ◊ Negatives: Not knowing how to respond to challenges and changing market
- ◊ ◊ Negatives: Not knowing the brand and what to share

- ◊ ◦ Negatives: Questionable personal approach of brand's practitioners
 - ◊ ◦ Negatives: The involvement of too many external parties
 - ◊ ◦ Reason: Sharing information about the brand
 - ◊ ◦ Target audience: Neglecting the needs of customers
-

Reasons for storytelling

4 Codes:

- ◊ ◦ Reason: Addressing certain issues
 - ◊ ◦ Reason: Communicating value to the audience
 - ◊ ◦ Reason: depends on the goal
 - ◊ ◦ Reason: Sharing information about the brand
-

Storytelling and its role

30 Codes:









- ◊ ◦ story as a brand's character bridging presence and future
- ◊ ◦ Story as good as its elements
- ◊ ◦ Story: as a link between brand and perceptions about it
- ◊ ◦ Story: as a means to handle crisis communication
- ◊ ◦ Story: connected to its history
- ◊ ◦ Story: differentiating the brand from others
- ◊ ◦ Story: differently shaped for different audiences
- ◊ ◦ Story: empowering tool

- ◊ ○ Story: having a human factor
- ◊ ○ Story: incorporating the feedback from customers into it
- ◊ ○ Story: reflects the brand's promise and integrity - improving customer's trust
- ◊ ○ Story: reflects the customer's passions, needs and memories
- ◊ ○ Story: should be clear for and comprehensible for everyone
- ◊ ○ Story: should resonate with the audiences
- ◊ ○ Story: to make a brand successful
- ◊ ○ Story: transferring knowledge
- ◊ ○ Story: translating the brands values/mission
- ◊ ○ storytelling as a blueprint
- ◊ ○ Storytelling as a flexible medium that gives the customer freedom
- ◊ ○ Storytelling as a funnel
- ◊ ○ Storytelling as a reflection of the transformation
- ◊ ○ Storytelling as a set of calculated actions
- ◊ ○ Storytelling as a tool to convey results
- ◊ ○ Storytelling as a way of naturally capturing the audience
- ◊ ○ Storytelling as an addition to the customer's everyday journey, not just the buying journey
- ◊ ○ Storytelling as an immersive experience
- ◊ ○ Storytelling as building long-term impact
- ◊ ○ Storytelling as communicating the value proposition
- ◊ ○ storytelling is hard to understand
- ◊ ○ Storytelling is something that makes people excited



Strategy and planning






8 Codes:

-  ○ Articulating change
-  ○ Creating fluency and consistency across all channels
-  ○ Optimizing strategy based on a goal
-  ○ Planning: Comparison with competitors
-  ○ Planning: Creating chronology
-  ○ Planning: shared power of multiple departments
-  ○ Planning: understanding the brand - who, why, for what
-  ○ Understanding the customer journey



Target audience

5 Codes:

-  ○ Customer: Keeping up with smarter and more assertive customers
-  ○ Customer: Retaining the customers' attention
-  ○ Incorporating customer feedback and improving their experience
-  ○ Researching the target audience and their needs
-  ○ Target audience: Giving the customer something valuable and useful



Tools

2 Codes:

- ◊ Tools that optimize the presented content
- ◊ Using a tool to mediate customer engagement with the client

Appendix D

Towards the selective coding, 157 codes as presented above have been merged again if they touched upon the same issue, just from a different angle. This step led to the creation of 44 broader, and more abstract codes.

1	To make the content clear and comprehensible + concise
2	To translate the brand's values/ mission into deliverables
3	To put the customer into the spotlight – a more customer-oriented
4	To make the content more authentic and relatable
5	To optimize the content delivery and narrative + shape for audiences
6	To target customers' needs + passions - knowing what they want
7	To give customers something valuable and useful
8	To reflect consumers' interactions and involvement with the brand
9	To nudge customers into desired behaviours
10	To create fluency and consistency across all channels (touchpoints)
11	To respond to crises and challenges, address issues and urgent topics
12	To establish chronology + logical development
13	To reflect the customer journey - their expectations and experiences
14	To communicate the brand's attributes - who, what, for whom
15	To bring value to the audience/ communicate value
16	To emotionally trigger the audiences
17	To deepen the brand-customer relationship/ shared values
18	To bring and show the brand's relevance to the customer
19	To improve the content based on customer feedback
20	To make the content recognizable and easy to stick
21	To enhance key message by supporting visuals - engaging senses
22	To make the story touching and emotional
23	To portray human factor/ connectedness/ story's protagonists
24	To make the content authentic - organically capture the audiences
25	To keep the audience entertained (twist, plot, change)
26	To understand the consumers better – to provide help and assistance
27	To keep the consumers interested in the brand
28	To differentiate the brand from the competitors
29	To respond to customer's queries and doubts - clear the hesitancy
30	To communicate the brand's values to the audience
31	To understand who are the target audiences/ customers
32	To establish certain distinctive communication styles
33	To show that the brand owns the story
34	To meet the desired outcome - KPIs, targets, monetary values
35	To navigate a complex media ecosystem better
36	To upgrade/ optimize the client's (brands) communication styles
37	To reflect different thinking, selling and eventually buying behaviours
38	To build long-term impact and profound relations with the audience
39	To transfer knowledge and information
40	To make the client look more authentic
41	To deepen the customer experience - e.g. immersion
42	To inform the customers about the vision + plans for the future
43	To allow the brand to resonate - creating relatability

Subsequently, those 44 codes have been reviewed again and reassigned together based on the overall topic they addressed. This table summarizes the coding step that led to the creation of the final themes and subthemes.

To make the content clear and comprehensible + concise	All of these codes imply the use of storytelling for improving the content that the agency produces (or helps to produce) for their client; it frequently emphasizes the importance of human and entertaining factors, clarity, relatability, authenticity and real emotions
To make the content more authentic and relatable	
To optimize the content delivery and narrative + shape for audiences	
To emotionally trigger the audiences	
To make the content recognizable and easy to stick	
To make the story touching and emotional	
To portray human factor/ connectedness/ story's protagonists	
To make the content authentic - organically capture the audiences	
To keep the audience entertained (twist, plot, change)	
To make the client look more authentic	
To allow the brand to resonate - creating relatability	
To enhance key message by supporting visuals - engaging senses	
To upgrade/ optimize the client's (brands) communication styles	These codes are related to the use of storytelling for creating something valuable, offering some additional value, and presenting the attributes of the agency's client that clearly state the brand's mission
To translate the brand's values/ mission into deliverables	
To give customers something valuable and useful	
To communicate the brand's attributes - who, what, for whom	
To bring value to the audience/ communicate value	
To deepen the brand-customer relationship/ shared values	
To communicate the brand's values to the audience	
To show that the brand owns the story	
To transfer knowledge and information	These codes present the use of storytelling for differentiating the client from other brands – to help establish their unique position in the market by enhancing consistency and specific communication styles that make the client stand out against all competitors
To create fluency and consistency across all channels (touchpoints)	
To respond to crises and challenges, address issues and urgent topics	
To establish chronology + logical development	
To differentiate the brand from the competitors	
To navigate a complex media ecosystem better	
To establish certain distinctive communication styles	
To inform the customers about the vision + plans for the future	
To reflect different thinking, selling, and eventually buying behaviours	
To improve customer's trust and experience (brand's promise)	
To meet the desired outcome - KPIs, targets, monetary values	All of these codes present the use of storytelling to emphasize the importance of great customer experience and use narratives that make the customer the “hero” of the whole journey – a very customer-centred style of storytelling that translates the customers' needs, feedback, and expectations into better services/help
To put the customer into the spotlight – a more customer-oriented	
To target customers' needs + passions - knowing what they want	
To reflect consumers' interactions and involvement with the brand	
To nudge customers into desired behaviours	
To reflect the customer journey - their expectations and experiences	
To bring and show the brand's relevance to the customer	
To improve the content based on customer feedback	
To respond to customer's queries and doubts – clear up the hesitancy	
To understand who are the target audiences/ customers	
To understand the consumers better – to provide help and assistance	
To keep the consumers interested in the brand	

To build long-term impact and profound relations with the audience	
To deepen the customer experience - e.g. immersion	